Editor's Introduction

This issue of *Science in Context* brings together selected, revised papers given (with the exception of Moynahan’s paper) at the International Workshop “Ernst Cassirer: Symbol, Science, and Culture,” which took place at the Cohn Institute of the History of Science and Ideas, University of Tel Aviv, and at The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in May 1998. These papers provide an introduction to Cassirer’s work and its context. Cassirer once wrote that he never found the philosopher’s practice of “hurling one’s ideas into empty space” (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, p. xvi) to be particularly fruitful. By this, he did not just mean that as a philosopher he strove to take into account the state of different fields of study. Rather, he conceived of knowledge historically, as a part of culture, as affecting and being affected by it. His four-volume work *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (vol. 1 appeared in 1906; volume 4 was completed in 1940) was entitled “The Problem of Knowledge” because it was not about “epistemology” (*Erkenntnistheorie*) in the sense of a special philosophical doctrine treating the nature of knowledge in some abstract, ahistorical sense, but a study of “the problem of knowledge in philosophy and science in the Modern Age.” In the different volumes of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* Cassirer portrayed changing conceptions of knowledge as deriving from discussions in the sciences, historical criticism, religious debate, reflections on art, as well as in different kinds of philosophy (see *Science in Context*, Summer 1996, vol. 9, no. 2 for more on *Das Erkenntnisproblem*). So too Cassirer did not think that systematic philosophy could set up a logical system into which to press reality. His philosophy of “symbolic forms” took a new approach to the traditional concerns of systematic philosophy, seeking to combine studies of concrete, culturally embedded problems with systematic thought.

The following papers offer different contextualisations of various aspects of Cassirer’s work, and they illustrate a basic feature of it all: his almost singular breadth and depth of knowledge and his ability to integrate this knowledge into a coherent whole. While these papers deal with a great variety of topics one discovers upon closer consideration that they all bear upon one another. To illustrate: Ryckman’s paper on “Einstein, Cassirer, and General Covariance — Then and Now” treats an aspect of Cassirer’s interpretation of the theory of relativity, yet he finds it necessary to refer to Cassirer’s utilization of Felix Klein’s theory of groups (Ihmig’s topic), Cassirer’s philosophical reception of Goethe (Naumann’s topic), his theory of symbolism (Krois’ topic), and of language (Dor’s topic). One can find similar overlappings in all the other articles as well. Of course, it is not surprising when different fields of knowledge overlap or that studies which all treat of one
man's work should relate to one another. But there is another dimension to these interrelationships. Cassirer's method and style of thought was transdisciplinary. He sought neither to reduce the cultural sciences to the natural sciences nor to show that science was just another aspect of culture. Rather, for Cassirer, the plurality of symbolic forms was irreducible, and so he related different fields of study to one another rather than trying to subsume them under some determining idea. In his hands, philosophy became the activity of showing the interrelations in this globus symbolicum.

For many years Cassirer's systematic thought received little close study among philosophers because his basic orientation towards the concepts of culture and symbolism ran counter to the prevailing assumption that philosophy had to regarded in abstraction from history and culture. As that situation changed, Cassirer's work has received increasing attention. According to Dor's account of Cassirer's theory of language, his concern with culture and semantics lends his approach to language new currency today. Cassirer was fortunate to have been friends with many of the figures whose works he interpreted, including Einstein. Cassirer's two letters to Kurt Goldstein published in this issue not only bring out his views of the importance of Goldstein's work on aphasia for the theory of symbolism, they also illustrate the spirit in which Cassirer approached philosophical issues, which he expressed in Goethean terms: even in the sciences everything is a matter of doing. Cassirer sought firsthand knowledge of aphasia patients' behavior because he was convinced of the necessity to conjoin philosophy and empirical research. Cassirer's theoretical ideas were developed from such reflections on concrete research.

Ihmig's study of Cassirer's reception of Felix Klein's "Erlanger Program" illustrates this in his sketch of the development of one of Cassirer's most central conceptions: his idea of a "structural system." Ihmig's essay, Naumann's essay on Cassirer's "Basis-Phenomena," and Krois' essay on Cassirer's concept of Symbolism all deal with different yet interrelated aspects of Cassirer's approach to systematic thought.

During the most productive years of his life (1920 until 1933) Cassirer made constant use of the resources at Aby Warburg's research library for cultural sciences (the "Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg") in Hamburg. When Cassirer discovered Warburg's library in 1920 and Warburg's iconological approach to culture, it marked the beginning of a new era in his work: his turn from the philosophy of science to the philosophy of "symbolic forms." Warburg's work on the theory of culture, closely examined in Schoell-Glass's article, and Warburg's library, which survives today at the Warburg Institute in London, provided the ambient and the necessary catalyst for Cassirer's philosophy of "symbolic forms," without which it would hardly have been developed. In Hamburg, Cassirer also followed closely Jacob von Uexküll's theoretical biology, which later was to play a crucial role in his philosophical anthropology. Moynahan's essay details this aspect of Cassirer's work and relates it to his thought as a whole. Cassirer's studies.
of biology, psychology and neurology (see Métraux's contribution) led to his late work on philosophical anthropology, as much as his work on mathematical theory led to his conception of a structural system or his study of Goethe to the notion of Basis Phenomena.

These papers reflect a variety of methodological viewpoints as well as a variety of topics. They conduct the reader into Cassirer's multivariated world of interests and problems. Read together, they provide not only an introduction to Cassirer's views of specific topics but also to his way of thought.

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