

Cassirer, Ernst

b. 28 July 1874, Breslau (Silesia), Germany

d. 13 April 1945, New York, USA

### Life and Work

Cassirer was born into a well-to-do Jewish family in Breslau. His study of philosophy with Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) in Marburg soon led Cassirer to have intense discussions on the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's analyses of consciousness, human acting and artistic taste led Cassirer to work historically and publish about the roots of Kantian thought (Descartes, Leibniz, the Enlightenment, the ideal of knowledge in philosophy and science, British empiricism). Cassirer became a professor of philosophy in Hamburg in 1919 but had to flee in the 1930s. First to England (Oxford), then to Sweden (Gothenburg) and later to the United States (New Haven and New York). Cassirer's linguistic work centers around his Philosophy of symbolic forms, which developed from the criticism of knowledge which he formulated in 1910 in his work Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff, a systematic account of the notions of substance and function. The discussion between the adherents of an ontological basis of language and those who started off with a conceptual system that underlies the structure and use of language became a serious problem in philosophy, psychology and linguistics. According to Cassirer there is no reality which coincides with linguistic forms but this reality is a theoretical construction formed in their cultural or scientific development. By means of symbols, i.e. objectivations of our conceptual grasping of "reality", we pretend to be able to represent a reality. But these symbols or concepts cannot be but interrelated

linguistic forms. This point of view is embedded in German linguistic thought of the 18th and 19th centuries (Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt) and on Cassirer's understanding of scientific research (physics, chemistry). The activity of the mind creates different systems of sensuous symbols which are used in scientific research. These systems, however, should be interpreted critically in specific branches of experience like linguistics, psychology, science or philosophy. Therefore, in his philosophy of symbolic forms, Cassirer analyses different levels of abstraction in language, religion, myth and knowledge just to make his point clear that the meaningfulness of symbols (words, pictures, gestures, imitations, representations etc.) is linked to the context of their interpretation.

In his later philosophy of culture, published as an Essay on Man (1944), Cassirer tries to overcome the crisis in anthropology by re-stating the cultural achievements of man by his symbolic activity. This activity frees mankind from a historical "essence" which is re-phrased in his cultural activities and forms of expression.

### Major Works

(1906-1957) Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Berlin (4 vols.; repr. of former editions, 1994, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft).

(1923-1929) Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Berlin (3 vols.; 2nd ed., 1973-1975, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; repr. of the 1st ed.).

(1944) An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture, New Haven: Yale University Press

## Further Reading

Braun, H.-J., H. Holzhey, E.W. Orth (eds. 1988), Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Frede, D., R. Schmücker (eds. 1997), Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung. Kultur und Philosophie, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Graeser, Andreas (1994), Ernst Cassirer, München: Beck.

Kaegi, Dominic (1996), "Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945)", in: T. Borsche (ed.), Klassiker der Sprachphilosophie. Von Platon bis Noam Chomsky. München: Beck, 347-363.

Orth, E.W. (ed. 1993), Ernst Cassirer - Geist und Leben. Schriften, Leipzig: Reclam.

Paetzold, Heinz (1994), Die Realität der symbolischen Formen. Die Kulturphilosophie Ernst Cassirers im Kontext, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Paetzold, Heinz (1995), Ernst Cassirer - von Marburg nach New York. Eine philosophische Biographie, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

F. Vonk

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