

## CONDUCT AND CULTURE: DEWEY AND CASSIRER

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Two of the most widely read philosophical books in the twentieth century have been Ernst Cassirer's *An Essay on Man* (1944) and John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). Although Cassirer's *Essay* appeared more than two decades after Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, it is a summary and restatement of the views Cassirer developed in the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published in Germany in the 1920's. Cassirer quotes a long passage from *Human Nature and Conduct* in his chapter on "The Definition of Man in Terms of Human Culture." He agrees with Dewey's view that it is a mistake to analyze human being into various instincts and reduce human nature to the actions of one or more of them (*EM*,67;*HN*,131). Like Dewey, Cassirer sees this as a revival in modern terms of scholasticism or "faculty-psychology."

Cassirer also quotes a long passage from *Experience and Nature* regarding the importance of "feeling -qualities" as basic elements of human reality. He says: "The best and clearest statement of this problem has to my mind been given by John Dewey" (*EM*,78). Cassirer agrees with Dewey that the way in which things are felt, as poignant, beautiful, annoying, harsh, fearful, etc., are traits in experience as fundamental as colors, sounds, smells, tastes, etc. Cassirer regards these feeling-qualities as the content of mythical perception that is at the basis of human culture.

What can be learned by putting together these two very vital accounts of human nature, society, and culture? What might such a union imply for a concept of human education?

### **Dewey and Cassirer on Human Nature**

*An Essay on Man and Human Nature and Conduct* are two sides of a coin. Cassirer and Dewey are different thinkers but they have

more in common, at least in these two works, than in disagreement. They both are attempting to work their way forward from the turn of the century developments of Kantian and Hegelian idealism and in so doing to come to grips with the new achievements in biology and the social sciences. Both books in their sub-titles purport to be an introduction to a new field of thought: (Cassirer) "An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture" and (Dewey) "An Introduction to Social Psychology"; however, Dewey makes clear in his preface to the first edition that his work does not purport to be a comprehensive treatment of social psychology but only to show that an understanding of habit is the key to such investigation and Cassirer says it is not his intention to impose a ready-made theory on his readers.

Cassirer differs from Dewey in that he never moved from his modification of idealism into a symptom of cultural forms to a pragmatic viewpoint. Dewey differs from Cassirer in that he did not develop within his standpoint of "pragmatic naturalism" (as Morris Eames has called it) a full theory of the symbol or symbolic form, although he comes close to this especially in *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry*. There are many specific differences but my purpose is to consider the connections of these two works. They have both been so widely read not only by professional philosophers but also by students and persons in other fields because they offer us a way to see the human individual, society and culture as elements of a whole.

Both Cassirer and Dewey begin their conceptions of human nature from the Aristotelian definitions of the human being as a rational and a social animal. Both Cassirer and Dewey see the human being as a certain kind of animal that differs from other organisms in degree and kind. But the human being is truly part of the biological world and must be approached in these terms. It is not language as such that distinguishes humans from other animals, nor is it sociality or social order. Other animals exhibit linguistic behavior and comprehension, although neither Cassirer nor Dewey could have been aware in their time of the extent to which this has been shown in recent research. Human beings are social animals but social order is

not an exclusive feature of human life. Various other organisms relate to each other in social terms and form societies. Distinctive to human beings for Cassirer is what he calls culture which is based on the uniquely human grasp of symbols.

Dewey employs the word “culture” widely in his writings but in *Human Nature and Conduct* he focuses on the eighteenth-century conception of “morals.” Morals in this sense was the study of distinctively human activities. It was the study of those activities in which human beings attempt to explore and confront their own humanity. Dewey refers to Hume as having this purpose in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and other writings in which he was seeking a science of custom. Cassirer takes his title from Pope’s “An Essay on Man” and from his line that “the proper study of mankind is Man.” Both Dewey and Cassirer regard human life as distinctively involved in the phenomenon of freedom. Cassirer says at the end of his Essay: “Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man’s progressive self-liberation” (*EM*,228). The final part of Dewey’s *Human Nature* concerns morality and freedom. Dewey says: “Intelligence is the key to freedom” (*HN*,304) and “Freedom is the ‘truth of necessity’ only when we use one ‘necessity’ to alter another” (*HN*,312).

Freedom for both Cassirer and Dewey depends upon our ability to alter the conditions of life and to alter the conditions of our own making. Cassirer strongly emphasizes the human power to form the world through the symbol as allowing distance from the immediacy of existence. We can separate ourselves from the world. Dewey insists on our ability to stand apart from existing laws and customs, from the necessity they impose upon us, and to envision and act in terms of ideals that support our power of choice.

### **Cassirer’s Conception of Symbolic Form**

The key idea for a philosophy of culture for Cassirer is *symbol*. The key idea for a social psychology for Dewey is *habit*. What does Cassirer mean by *symbol*? What does Dewey mean by *habit*? And,

what is the connection between them? Cassirer defines man as a symbolizing animal: “instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*. By so doing we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand the new way open to man — the way to civilization” (EM,26). In connecting rationality to symbolization Cassirer is seeking to ground reason in the medium or cultural phenomenon that makes human culture possible. Cassirer claims that there is a “crisis in man’s knowledge of himself.” In past ages the question of “what is man?” has been investigated in terms of an established context such as reason in the ancient world or religion and faith in the Middle Ages. In the modern world the theory of man has lost its intellectual center: “Nietzsche proclaims the will to power, Freud signalizes the sexual instinct, Marx enthrones the economic instinct. Each theory becomes a Procrustean bed on which the empirical facts are stretched to fit a preconceived pattern” (EM,21).

There is no one field of inquiry that provides primary access to the human: “Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, ethnologists, economists all approached the problem from their own viewpoints” (EM,21). Cassirer holds that “self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry” (EM,1). He regards each of the areas of human cultural activity as a framework of self-knowledge, a form in which the self realizes an aspect of its own nature. The key for the definition of man that does not reduce the human to some particular instinct or drive and that does not give priority to some one field of inquiry is to define man as the whole of human cultural activity.

Cassirer sees culture as composed of symbolic forms. One form of cultural life is not more “symbolic” than is another; all are orders of experience based on symbols. Cassirer uses an example of a *Linienzug*, a graph-like line drawing to demonstrate what he means by symbolic form and how it is rooted in our apprehension of any object. He says we can perceive the line first as experience of a feeling-quality responding to it in terms of its tension, its sense move-

ment or stasis. We can shift perspective and grasp it in theoretical terms or a mathematical object, a geometrical shape. We can pass to seeing it as a mythical-magical sign and further we can come to see it as an aesthetic ornament, something with purely artistic significance. In each of these perspectives the object before us taken up into a system of symbols having its own logic or "inner form."

These modes of symbolic formation are manifest in the general arena of human cultural activity. The symbolic forms that Cassirer lists and that emerge as the chapter titles of his *Essay* are myth and religion, language, art, history, and science. He also mentions the possibility of symbolic forms of technology, economics, law, and morality. The task of the philosopher for Cassirer is to understand the particular logic of each symbolic form and to grasp how they interconnected to form a whole of culture. This philosophical task includes showing the harmony of all the symbolic forms while preserving the "tonality" of each. Philosophy as a cultural force acts against the tendency for any one form of culture to dominate the others in a given age. This ideal of harmony is tied to the power of human freedom to pursue culture as an act of self-knowledge.

Cassirer explains the presence of the power to form experience through symbols in terms of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll's conception of the organism. On Uexküll's view each organism has its own world: "In the world of a fly, says Uexküll, we find only 'fly things'; in the world of a sea urchin we find only 'sea urchin things'" (*EM*,23). Each organism from the lowest and most simple to the highest and most complex exists in a *functional circle*. Each organism according to its anatomical structure possesses a *receptor system* whereby it responds passively to the world or takes in its experience and an *effector system* whereby it acts toward the world, takes action in relation to the stimuli it receives.

Cassirer says that in the functional system of the human organism we find what can be described as a third system, a *symbol system*. This lets the human being live in a totally new dimension of

reality, one in which it constructs a kind of second nature or culture beyond the natural forces to which it responds and which it affects. Once in possession of the power of the symbol to transform immediate experience into meanings, symbols can be used to generate meanings from other symbols. This is as far as Cassirer goes here in grounding his conception of the human being as *animal symbolicum* in the organic world. In so doing he suggests a biological basis for his theory of knowledge and culture but he does not offer a social psychology that would stand between this biology and his cultural epistemology. For this one must turn to Dewey. Cassirer does not have a theory of human conduct to underlie his theory of human culture.

### Dewey's Conception of Habit

Dewey and Cassirer both understand human nature in functional not substantial terms. This is to say that man is not a particular substance with an essence such that a metaphysical grasp of this would allow us to determine what man is. Instead for Dewey and Cassirer the nature of human beings can be known by what human beings do. From this perspective human beings acting in terms of and against the forces and necessities of nature that bear down upon them make their own nature through their unique abilities. Human beings realize themselves as human through their own conduct and their culture that depends upon it. To have culture in Cassirer's terms requires society. To make human society as Dewey shows requires human habit, character, custom, intelligence, and morality.

As Cassirer builds his conception of culture on the symbol, Dewey builds his conception of society on habit. Society is not a rational contractual association among individuals. The individual is born into society from the beginning. Human life and nature are social from the start. An organism cannot survive without habits. Dewey says: "Habits may be profitably compared to physiological functions, like breathing, digesting" (*HN*,14). Physiological functions are involuntary but develop as necessary requirements to the social environment. We cannot choose not to have habits. Dewey

says: "All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self" (*HN*,25). The self is a system of habits. Dewey says: "Character is the interpretation of habits. . . . A man can give himself away in a look or a gesture. Character can be real through the medium of individual acts" (*HN*,38).

Our ability to modify habits is not only crucial to our survival but it is the basis of the moral situation. From habit Dewey can derive custom because customs are habits collectively enacted: "To a considerable extent customs, or widespread uniformities of habit, exist because individuals face the same situation and react in like fashion" (*HN*,58). Habit does not itself yield intelligence. The functions of mind that are crucial to intelligence require the connection of impulse with habit. Dewey says: "A certain delicate combination of habit and impulse is requisite for observation, memory and judgment" (*HN*,177). To be intelligent is to develop the ability to allow impulse both to play against habit and to allow habit to form or incorporate what occurs by impulse. The unintelligent mind is simply impulsive or tenacious, holding on only to what it already has.

Dewey describes reason in terms much like Cassirer's notion of a harmony between the symbolic forms of culture. Dewey says: "Rationality, once more, is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires." These desires in Cassirer's terms would be manifest within various symbolic forms. Dewey continues: "'Reason' as a noun signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, explanation, experimentation, frankness, pursuit - to follow things through - circumspection, to look about at the context, etc., etc." (*HN*,196). The fact that we as human beings have this power of holding together in a single self this multitude of dispositions makes feasible the claim that we can grasp and pursue culture as a whole rather than as a field of fragmented activities.

Dewey's conception of human conduct based in his analysis of habit provides us with a picture of the self as grounded in social pro-

cess that is required for Cassirer's conception of human culture that tends always toward the theory of knowledge without a theory of society to underpin it. The two books go nicely together and provide a basis for thinking through questions of knowledge in relation to questions of psychology and in relation to biology.

### **Implications for Human Knowledge**

What might be the implications of this way of thinking for human education? Dewey's philosophy of education is a topic in its own right. It has not only been the most written about aspect of his philosophy, it has been the most influential. In fact Dewey's ideas on education have had more impact on modern American society than the ideas on any subject by any other modern philosopher. Philosophy has rarely been such a force in its time. My aim here is not to examine or re-examine Dewey's philosophy of education, but only to suggest a perspective on education that emerges from the combination of Cassirer's conception of culture and Dewey's social psychology of conduct.

In *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey says: "Education becomes the art to taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom" (*HN*,64). Cassirer in the beginning of his *Essay* points to Aristotle's view "that all human knowledge originates from a basic tendency of human nature manifesting itself in man's most elementary actions and reactions. The whole extent of the life of the senses is determined by and impregnated with this tendency" (*EM*,2). This combined Cassirerian-Deweyian view is against specialization in human education. Specialization is not bad in itself. It is the basis of professional training but it needs to be grounded in an earlier experience of general education.

Cassirer's range of symbolic forms from myth to science implies a theory of general education. Since each of these symbolic forms of cultural life is a form of self-knowledge, the individual human being must enter into all of them in order to explore fully the

dimensions of the self. We can only overcome the fragmentation of knowledge and culture that we find in the modern world by promoting an education of the whole. As Hegel says, "the true is the whole," a principle with which Cassirer agrees. A curriculum at almost any level of education could be organized around Cassirer's list of symbolic forms. The way in which the student would be taught myth or science or history, for example would vary according to the student's age and intellectual development as is done now. The important point would be to keep the student in touch with all these forms, not to allow one to dominate education any more than a given form should dominate culture itself.

There is not only a principle of general education implicit in Cassirer's view; there is also a principle of diversity. It offers a functional approach to the current interest in cultural diversity, but an approach not fully realized. Education of the student in the nature of human culture itself would uniquely equip the student to study and grasp individual cultures. In any particular culture is all of what human culture is. Without a grasp of the basic structure of human culture itself, the student has no knowledge of what to look for in studying a particular culture and thus may just fix on anything with no way to grasp it as a whole and as a part of human culture as a whole.

If we add to these views of a cultural approach to education Dewey's conceptions of habit and intelligence something more emerges. The student is not simply to be given information. Dewey's comment about education being the taking advantage of the young is a criticism of basing education in habits of rote learning and acceptance of the authority of custom. In our day the fascination with information and the acquiring of information plays the role of what Dewey is criticizing in his day. Finding information and manipulating it is not thinking. Intelligence, which involves observation, memory, and judgment, requires the combination of habit and impulse as Dewey claims. To think requires the student to be able to move from one context to another. In Cassirer's terms this is to move

from one symbolic form to another, and from one culture to another. Cassirer's formulation of Aristotle's desire to know points to the fact that there is always an impulse to go beyond what is settled in habit and custom, to go beyond information. Information is not bad in itself. It is a necessary part of education but it is not all of education.

Education must remain open to this natural activity of the impulse to know. Habit is the stability of mind that tempers impulse. What seems established in habit and custom in the student's own culture is challenged by an encounter with the habits and customs of another culture. This opposition of actual patterns of mind and life is what stimulates observation, memory, and judgment. The attempt by the student to confront this opposition as active forces not merely as additional information about something introduces the experience of moral deliberation. The world cannot be reduced to a simple viewpoint and the nature of the opposition and its relation to the whole of human culture and life must be thought through. This involves proceeding from the settled state of affairs to the formulation of ideals. Once an ideal is in mind the student begins to gain experience in the power of moral judgment. The self encounters itself as a force through which it makes its world, as the maker of knowledge and culture.

Dewey's conception of intelligence coupled with Cassirer's sense of culture becomes the basis for the process of moral education or the education of the self into its own nature and limits. With today's strong involvement in information, technology, and specialization, the education of the human self into its own nature is easily forgotten or at least slighted. Cassirer and Dewey offer us reminders of this other dimension to education and their combined conception of the human offers us a powerful perspective on how to accomplish it.

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### **End Notes**

Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944. Cited as EM.

John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt, 1922. Republished, New York: Random House Modern Library, 1930. Cited as *HN*.