

DEWEY AND CASSIRER: A POSTSCRIPT

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In the editor's preface to *Educational Change* (Spring 2000) Professor Anthony Roda raises several very interesting points concerning the connections and differences between Dewey's conception of habits and Cassirer's conception of symbolic forms that arise from my essay in that issue, "Conduct and Culture: Dewey and Cassirer." Professor Roda raises the question of the ontological status of Cassirer's symbolic forms: whether symbolic forms designate patterns that occur in all cultures. He asks to what extent Dewey's habits are parallel to Cassirer's symbolic forms in regard to the fact that habits change over time and habits can cease to fulfill their intended consequences. He points out that a better understanding of these issues is crucial for the understanding of the principles of general education.

A full treatment of these important issues would require a book-length study. They begin where the analysis of social psychology and human culture in my essay leaves off. What I can attempt in these remarks is to suggest the kind of metaphysics that underlies Dewey's theory of conduct as based in habit and Cassirer's theory of culture as based on the symbol. The central work of Dewey's metaphysics is *Experience and Nature*, first published in 1925 (2d ed. 1929). In this work Dewey says: "Human learning and habit-forming present thereby an integration of organic-environmental connections so vastly superior to those of animals without language that its experience appears to be super-organic."¹ This is very close to the view of the speech act that Cassirer describes in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* (the manuscript of 1928). Cassirer says: "The speech act is never in this sense an act of mere assimilation; rather, it is, in however small a way, a creative act, an act of shaping and reshaping."²

For both Cassirer and Dewey language holds the key to understanding what human nature is. Cassirer sets the power of language in the wider context of the distinctively human power to transform what is felt and sensed into a world of symbols, language being a fundamental type of symbol along with mythic-aesthetic symbols and the mathematical use of numbers and formulas. Cassirer understands the human being as an organism as understood in the biology of Jacob von Uexküll that holds every organism to be composed of a reactor and an effector system. Between these two poles of organic existence Cassirer places a “symbol system” that occurs only in the human organism.³ This symbol system allows the human organism to transpose its immediate reactions to its environment (*Umwelt*) into the various symbolic forms of culture, notably language, and from this position to formulate and create the effects it desires on its surroundings. Cassirer’s model is biological but also “intellectualistic.” Dewey’s emphasis on habit, and language as arising from habit that also becomes the basis for new habits, is biological-psychological. Both Cassirer and Dewey are transforming the Aristotelian definition of man as *animal rationale* into modern terms. The question for both Cassirer and Dewey is on what does the human animal’s power of *ratio* rest? Cassirer reformulates the definition into *animal symbolicum*. Dewey, we might say, does so in terms of animal “*habitudinum*.”

Although habits can exist in isolation and as such tend to shape behavior in terms of monotonous regularity, Dewey holds that habits also tend to form dynamic systems of behavior. He says: “Communication not only increases the number and variety of habits, but tends to link them subtly together, and eventually to subject habit-forming in a particular case to the habit of recognizing that new modes of association will exact a new use of it. Thus habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily.”⁴ This conception of habits as interactive regards habits as flexible and changing according to the conditions that influence behavior. Habit in this sense can be self-modifying. Cassirer in parallel fashion holds that speech acts are not isolated events. He says: “We have here instead

an interaction of forces, of impulses of movement. Every use, no matter how transient and temporary, of a linguistic form is such an impulse, which does not leave the world of linguistic forms in the same condition in which it had found it, but which affects it as a whole, which it changes, however imperceptibly, and makes receptive for future new formations.”⁵ Although Cassirer does not bring this out, speech acts are a kind of behavior that function in terms of habitual patterns. The meanings of such acts are bound up with and in turn direct patterns of human behavior.

Both Dewey and Cassirer have a process-based rather than a substance-based metaphysics of human nature and human being. The *being* of human being is defined by those forms of activity that are distinctive to the human organism. In *Logic, The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) Dewey grounds logical thinking in habit. He says: “every inferential conclusion that is drawn involves a habit (either by way of expressing it or initiating it) in the *organic* sense of habit, since life is impossible without ways of action sufficiently general to be properly named habits. At the onset, the habit that operates in an inference is purely biological. It operates without our being aware of it.”⁶ Logical inference, upon which inquiry depends, is based on our ability to connect what is otherwise diverse in experience through habit. Dewey says: “Any habit is a way or manner of action, not a particular act or deed. When it is formulated it becomes, as far as it is accepted, a rule, or more generally, a principle or ‘law’ of action.”⁷ Dewey claims there are undeniably habits of inference that may be stated as rules or principles. This would mean, for example, that *modus ponens* is a rule of inference that originally arises from habit.

There is a parallel to Dewey’s conception of the basis of inference in the phenomenon of habit in Cassirer’s interpretation of the “concept of group.” The concept of group is originally a mathematical concept that can be defined “as the totality of unique operations \underline{a} , \underline{b} , \underline{c} , . . . so that from the combination of any two operations \underline{a} and \underline{b} there results an operation \underline{c} which also belongs to the totality.”⁸ Put in general terms this means “a group is a set of operations having the

property that when two operations are carried out in succession the result is one that would be reached by a simple operation of the set.”⁹ Cassirer sees in this a principle that runs through the formal structures of human knowledge from mathematics to the physical sciences and that also is the key to the psychology of perception. It is the principle of “perceptual constancy” that shows the inner form of the sameness of the objects we perceive in our surroundings.¹⁰ The factor \underline{c} accounts for the consistency we experience in the world of objects made from the combination of \underline{a} and \underline{b} . This consistency, or to use a Deweyan term, “felt regularity” in experience allows for habit. Habit presupposes this consistency and makes it a principle of action. *Modus ponens* can only function if its terms remain constant. Habit in turn influences perception. They are aspects of a totality of process.

Cassirer’s main metaphysical distinction is between life (*Leben*) and spirit (*Geist*). Cassirer takes this distinction from the idealist tradition, most specifically from his reading of Hegel. A version of it is to be found in Dewey which is not surprising given Dewey’s familiarity with Hegelian philosophy. Cassirer says: “the opposition between ‘Leben’ and ‘Geist’ is the hub of this metaphysics.”¹¹ Life as a metaphysical principle is a continual flux without pause but it is not simply universal force. It has a duality within itself; its tendency to universality is offset by a tendency toward concrete particularity. Immanent in life is its self-transcendence as form. The opposition between life and spirit is functional, that is, when life generates itself as spirit, its movement becomes that of the self-developing forms of spirit. This conception of spirit as self-moving is Cassirer’s version of Hegelian dialectic. Life and spirit are two aspects of the general organic process that underlies the symbolic forms of human culture.

Dewey says: “As life is a character of events in a peculiar condition of organization, and ‘feeling’ is a quality of life-forms marked by complexly mobile and discriminating responses, so ‘mind’ is an added property assumed by a feeling creature, when it reaches that organized interaction with other living creatures which is language

communication.”¹² What Dewey designates as “mind” is what Cassirer means by “Geist” (“mind” being in fact another way to translate Geist into English). Of mind Dewey says: “But the whole history of science, art, and morals proves that the mind that appears in individuals is not as such individual mind.”¹³ Mind for Dewey is as Geist is for Cassirer, writ large in culture. Dewey builds his metaphysical account of mind on the biology and psychology of the organism. Cassirer’s metaphysics is driven most directly by his epistemology.

Cassirer gives a phenomenological grounding for his metaphysics in his essay on “Basis Phenomena” (c.1940). Cassirer describes these phenomena in various ways but in general they are I, act, and the work.¹⁴ The “I” is the locus of life in the human self, the “monad.” “Act” is the phenomenon of will or action in relation to an other. It is the basis of ethical experience. The “work” (*das Werk*) is a lasting cultural product, something made by the I in its action that becomes a part of culture. Cassirer says, “every work is as such not that of an individual, but proceeds from cooperative correlative action. It bears witness to ‘social’ action.”¹⁵ Culture is itself a work that is made up of works, the ultimate forms of which are symbolic forms such as myth, religion, language, art, history, law, technology, politics, science. For Cassirer the basis phenomena are not derived from anything. They are the fundamental elements of human existence. When the I interacts with the other to produce a work, human culture is the result in all of its basic forms.

Cassirer’s symbolic forms are universals of human culture. Wherever one finds a particular human culture these forms are present, although their particular modalities vary from one culture to another. Thus the art of one culture will vary from the art of another; their languages will differ; they will each have different histories, laws, systems of politics, etc. But every culture will have language, art, etc. This is true also of science. A given culture may not have science developed in a theoretical-mathematical form such as is familiar to us, but every culture will have forms of empirical-practical knowledge. New symbolic forms do not arise. All of them are always present

in any actual culture in an explicit, articulate manner or in a proto-manner. Any given culture may develop one form over others even to the detriment of the others. Thus there can be a strongly scientific and technological culture or a strongly aesthetically oriented culture or a culture that is predominately legalistic and historical. The dominance or balance of these symbolic forms can shift at different periods of a particular culture's life.

Dewey's conception of habit as connected to patterns of learning and language is a human universal. All human beings create patterns of conduct through habit, as do animals. But unlike animals, human habit formation is connected to culture. Dewey says: "Language in its widest sense - that is, including all means of communication such as, for example, monuments, rituals, and formalized arts - is the medium in which culture exists and through which it is transmitted."¹⁶ Where Dewey uses the term "language," Cassirer uses the wider term "symbol," language being for Cassirer one form of symbol-use. Since the period in which Dewey and Cassirer were forming their views, it has become increasingly evident that there are examples of patterns of language-use, communication, tool-use, and societal behavior in the animal world that are not as different in kind from those of the human world as Dewey and Cassirer believed. But their general point still holds that only human beings create a total world of culture that involves the productions of works of art, histories, science, etc. The key to human culture and the patterns of human life for both Dewey and Cassirer is that human activity and human life are self-modifying. For Dewey this means that habits are themselves flexible and can also be modified by judgment. For Cassirer this means that the power to symbolize includes the power to develop systems of symbols that create their own worlds of meaning.

The human world for both Dewey and Cassirer is a world of freedom because it is a world of self-determination. There is a positive and negative side to both habit and symbolic form. The positive side is typified by the above-mentioned positive powers of each. The

negative side of habit is that we can become entrenched in rote ways of accomplishing things. Judgment must play a role in modifying these ways in relation to changing conditions. The negative side of symbolic forms is that one form of symbolism may come to dominate over the others. This can occur for Cassirer in times of social crisis such as when mythic images take over political processes to the detriment of reason and social analysis.

Cassirer's and Dewey's metaphysics of human experience differ in "tonality" but they share a common vision that is significant for human education. I expressed views on the implications of their positions for education in my previous essay. But several more remarks can be made that follow from Dewey's and Cassirer's metaphysics. What I am calling their common vision is that human culture is at base the manifestation of human freedom. Human culture for Dewey and Cassirer is not alienation, although individuals can become alienated from culture and understandably so when systems of injustice prevail. But culture in itself is not a process of alienation. Rightly understood it is a process of self-determination, a process wherein the human self can realize its own nature in all of its aspects. In times of social crisis and injustice it is this sense of self-determination that must be asserted and reaffirmed. The power of self-determination is at the basis of human being, that out of which all human cultures originally arise.

How can this sense of freedom as self-determination be taught? There does not appear to be a method or simple formula to accomplish such a sense of things. Teaching and education must be done in terms of an ideal, otherwise learning is simply rote learning of a subject matter. If the teacher has this ideal actively in mind, it will come out in various ways to the student. An ideal is a force in the mind that will always effect an orientation and make itself known. An ideal to be anything must first be understood in its own terms and these include how it is part of human reality. To understand what Dewey and Cassirer have said is crucial to grasping their common ideal of human freedom. Any teacher could use their work as a basis of indi-

vidual study to grasp more fully this ideal. But if one were to proceed more pragmatically, one could imagine programs, workshops, seminars, and discussions in which this ideal could be considered in the concrete, that is, in relation to particular courses and subject matters. There is no general formula. A powerful ideal can only take root in the particular situation and become part of the rapport and communication between student and teacher. In the end this ideal has to enter the distinctively human relationship that is at the basis of the educational process.¹⁷

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END NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), p.280.
2. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p.16.
See also my commentary on this work, Thora Ilin Bayer, *Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms: A Philosophical Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
3. Cassirer, *PSF*, 4, pp.43-45.
4. Dewey, *EN*, p.281.
5. Cassirer, *PSF*, 4, p.17.
6. John Dewey, *Logic, The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, 1938), p.12.
7. *Ibid.*, p.13.
8. Ernst Cassirer, "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception (1945)," in *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), p.274. These "reflections" derive from Cassirer's essay: "The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," trans. Aron Gurwitsch, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5 (1944): 1-35; originally pub. in French: "Le concept de groupe et la théorie de la perception," *Journal de Psychologie*

(July-Dec., 1938): 368-414.

9. Ibid., pp.274-75.
10. Ibid., pp.286-87.
11. Cassirer, *PSF*, 4, p.8. See Bayer, ch.1.
12. Dewey, *EN*, p.258.
13. Ibid., p.219.
14. See Bayer, pt.2.
15. Cassirer, *PSF*, 4, p.159.
16. Dewey, *Logic*, p.20.
17. I thank my students at Xavier University of Louisiana for discussions and conversations we have had concerning some of this ideal of education. My thinking has benefited much from the points of view they have contributed.