

DOI: 10.26319/5812

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## Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism

### Abstract:

The various efforts to put the idea of humanity on a secure ethical, political, and social base have not succeeded. The various post-humanist and transhumanist programs are inadequate. Our deep-seated suspicion of our deepest selves and motives is understandable in light of the barbarity of the twentieth century, but humanism is not to blame. The thought of Ernst Cassirer holds a framework for a new humanism, once it is rid of certain colonialist, triumphalist, and Eurocentric ideas that distorted Cassirer's understanding of the European role in creating the problems of civilization, especially its mistake of thinking that science was a progressive symbolic form of culture. I set out the basis of a new humanism based upon not the problem of knowledge, but the problem of genuine self-situating sociality, a personalist point of view.

### Keywords:

Cassirer, post-humanism, humanism, culture, symbolic form, genocide, science, pragmatism, personalism

My title is a direct response to the assessment of Edward Skidelsky's intellectual biography of Ernst Cassirer, bearing the subtitle "The Last Philosopher of Culture."<sup>1</sup> Skidelsky chooses this subtitle with no apparent sense of irony. If Cassirer was the last philosopher of culture, I suppose that is bad news, still undelivered, for many philosophers after Cassirer, from Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille to Bruno Latour and Jürgen Habermas. If these are not philosophers of culture, what are they? But there is a sense to Skidelsky's provocative subtitle.

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1) Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

His work was the first book-length intellectual biography of Cassirer in English. There have been specialized studies by David R. Lipton, for example, regarding the years leading up to Cassirer's departure from Germany,<sup>2</sup> and the monumental and important works by Michael Friedman and Peter Gordon on the Davos debate and its implications,<sup>3</sup> as well as Jonas Hansson's excellent book documenting Cassirer's years in Sweden.<sup>4</sup> Normally a full intellectual biography would be a welcome addition, but this one is designed also to be the last such work on Cassirer – it is not so much a rehearsal of Cassirer's life and thought as a 200-page epitaph for all that Cassirer did and all that he was. It is an often gentle and admiring epitaph, but it comes to bury him with praise rather than to heap scorn or wistfully scatter his ashes.

Taken together with Friedman's *A Parting of the Ways*, these interpreters aim to add only the coda to the judgment of history: there is no place for a progressive, optimistic humanism like Cassirer's in the post-holocaust and post-colonial world. Both Friedman and Skidelsky offer this assessment somewhat ruefully, since they believe that Cassirer was the finest, most praiseworthy, thorough, and learned representative of his philosophical school. But in the end, his perspective (and all perspectives similar to his) were doomed to the dustbin of history. How, after all, can liberal humanism be separated from colonialism, eurocentrism, and the very causes of the big wars of the twentieth century?

Skidelsky, in a tone of regret that seems to me undergirded with feigned and inappropriate pity, writes that:

...the grand design of Cassirer's philosophy [was] to restore equilibrium to human culture, to heal a fractured world. Seldom can an enterprise so splendidly conceived have met with such failure. Cassirer's call for reconciliation found no echo in an ideologically embittered Europe. On all sides, he was dismissed as a benign irrelevance. Carnap found him "rather pastoral," Isaiah Berlin "serenely innocent," Adorno "totally gaga."<sup>5</sup>

But it is fair to acknowledge, with Skidelsky, that these assessments of Cassirer himself, and of his philosophy did reflect a near consensus on all sides, during the aftermath of the Second World War and the worst days of the Cold War (however myopic the consensus may have been). Cassirer's enormous efforts in creating a philosophical system that could accommodate both the new revolutionary science (and here I mean both Einstein and Bohr), along with the rapid developments in technology and communication, but without giving in to ideology – this effort barely out-lived Cassirer himself. Cassirer did not live to see Germany surrender, and he was spared the shock of the discovery of the true extent of the Camps and the use of the atomic bomb. Karl Jaspers, however, did a fair job of saying what a liberal humanist had to say.<sup>6</sup>

In a way, it might have been better had Cassirer lived, since his untimely departure from this life deprived us of what was bound to be an imminently sober and wise assessment of where our hopes stood and why our fears should not control us. Along with Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, and Leszek Kołakowski, a number of other chastened intellectual survivors from that era provided important assessments. Others who lived through the Second

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2) David R. Lipton, *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany, 1914–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

3) Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, Heidegger* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2000); Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

4) Jonas Hansson, *Ernst Cassirer: The Swedish Years* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

5) Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 125.

6) For a fine and convincing account of how Jaspers wove a defense of humanist politics from the same sources as Cassirer (e.g., Dilthey and Simmel) in the post-war humanist vein, see: Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

World War were ruined, intellectually, by the shock of our inhumanity to each other. Their distrust of human nature led them to refuse to face the question of what we are and why we are as we are. They became horrified of metaphysics, and especially of God. I would include all critical philosophy of that generation (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, etc.), and also the post-modern suspicion of metanarratives (Jean-Francois Lyotard and his imitators). These bad habits in philosophizing are a symptom of our horror of ourselves, and under the circumstances both understandable and forgivable. I think it is proper to call this collection the true posthumanists, and also the precursors of Jean Baudrillard, Bruno Latour, Edith Wyschogrod, Judith Butler, and others of the next generation who would more normally be given that label. There were already in that first generation, however, *humanistic* posthumanists, prominently Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty, who pressed forward as humanists *without* the triumphal narratives of European-ness but also without the horror of “man.”<sup>7</sup> I do not know whether Skidelsky would allow that these various groups were philosophers of culture, but if they were not, as I said, it is unclear to me what they were doing.

I aim to defend a new humanism, and it will not be naïve or gaga, and it is informed by and in keeping with Cassirer’s humanism, and with the wise humanists I have mentioned who survived the Second World War – Jaspers, Arendt, Kołakowski – since it is informed by a metaphysics and a philosophical anthropology that dares to ask what human nature really is. This essay comes in three parts. First, I want to review the failure of humanism. It is far worse than Skidelsky suggests. Second, I want to isolate Cassirer’s true weakness relative to that failure. Third, I want to retrieve the counter-enlightenment thread that explains why both failures (Europeanism generally, and Cassirer’s philosophy of culture specifically) are not the end of either humanism or the philosophy of culture. There is a path through this material that allows us to adjust Cassirer’s philosophy in two ways, providing a viable, chastened, humanistic path forward. It is a kind of tragic optimism which is free of the principal illusions (of the past) about our human prospects, and even our struggle with our “human nature” (if we may be allowed to use such an offensive phrase in this suspicious and anti-essentialist age).

### How Bad Was It?

I will say, summarily, some fairly shocking things in this brief section. But let me begin with this from Spike Lee’s depiction of Malcolm X:

Brothers and sisters, I’m here to tell you that I charge the White man. I charge the White man with being the greatest murderer on earth. I charge the White man with being the greatest kidnapper on earth. There is no place in this world that that man can go and say he created peace and harmony. Everywhere he’s gone he’s created havoc. Everywhere he’s gone he’s created destruction. So I charge him. I charge him with being the greatest kidnapper on this earth. I charge him with being the greatest murderer on this earth. I charge him with being the greatest robber and enslaver on this earth. I charge the White man with being the greatest swine-eater on this earth, the greatest drunkard on earth. He can’t deny the charges. You can’t deny the charges. We’re the living proof of those charges. You and I are the proof.<sup>8</sup>

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7) Cary Wolfe’s book *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) addresses these questions in detail.

8) Spike Lee, “I Have a Nightmare,” Prologue to the film *Malcolm X* (1992); see <https://genius.com/Malcolm-x-i-have-a-nightmare-i-charge-the-white-man-annotated#note-3888648> Accessed May 16, 2018. The historical Malcolm X did not make this speech, but many people believe he did. Nevertheless, Lee captures in a short discourse the essence of things X said many times.

While Malcolm X never spoke these exact words, the essence of the charges were made eloquently and repeatedly, by him and by ten million others from the fifteenth century to the present. R. G. Collingwood, in pointing out that in truth human sensation is always charged with emotion remarks that we can learn to ignore the emotional meaning of what is in our senses, especially as assisted by culture. He adds (in 1938) that this capacity to ignore the emotional meaning of what is in our senses is “most developed in Europeans, and in men more than women, and in artists is undeveloped.”<sup>9</sup> That may sound like typical European triumphalism, but Collingwood regards it as a pathology of European (and especially male) consciousness that, fortunately, in artists (I would include Spike Lee) is undeveloped. In short, artists see and grasp the emotional meaning of what is in their senses.

Did Europe fall ill during the long rise of its so-called civilization? It did. I think it is undeniable, although the reasons are complicated. That sickness was passed from generation to generation until the world was filled with dangerously genocidal Europeans from one end to the other. Morally decent people had nowhere to hide from the tide of genocidal nation states that emerged from the Plague years. The decent people fought the greed and the genocide and they lost, over and over. And the traditional peoples and indigenous peoples who tried to resist were wiped out or assimilated. Why did all the decent people lose? Superior technology held by the greedy and ravenous? Or was it just an unwillingness to match the wicked among Europeans in their depravity and inhumanity? Many writers have puzzled over the question.<sup>10</sup> That 400 years of this pathology should have culminated in two world wars, during which the Europeans finally annihilated one another, and a Cold War, during which the two ideologies born of European pathologies faced off in ten thousand genocidal proxy wars, with the looming prospect of world-annihilation always on the near horizon – well, that this was the outcome of our inhumanity surprises no one but naïve and innocent Europeans. Cassirer was neither.

While we Europeans (and I aim to include all those of European descent who were carrying out this genocidal work around the globe, including in the Americas and Australia) were annihilating hundreds of millions of human souls, and finally one another, we spoke a shared language about what we were doing, which early on came to be called “humanism.” Humanism was a multi-pronged approach to treating European achievements as evidence of a superior development in intellect, culture, and even soul; in reality it was justifying greed, lust for power, pathological fear and paranoia, desperate militarism, and finally a deception so deep that it could not be discovered by those who purveyed it: that the “effort” we called civilization was nothing short of Satanic, of Satan’s reign over the world, of the coming to earth of the most horrible and nightmarish operation to torture and murder human beings, and eventually the planet itself, that could possibly exist. In short, the “effort” we call humanism was wicked beyond all imagining, and it destroyed the world. You and I live among the ruins made by our European foreparents. Everyone knows this truth except Europeans, and Europeans are finally learning it.<sup>11</sup>

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9) R.G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 162.

10) Among thousands, Frantz Fanon stands out as having put a special point on the problem. See: *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

11) I do not want it believed that because I describe the crimes of Europeans so vividly that I am insensible to the crimes of other civilizations. In particular it is important to remember that between the seventh and the seventeenth centuries, the spread of Islam across North Africa and into Europe significantly formed the European mindset, and there probably has not been a single day of real peace between Islam and Christendom in 1400 years. Somewhere every day for that lengthy stretch of centuries, Muslims and Christians were killing each other. Indigenous people with no stake in the fight were mowed down whenever they got in the path. Similar observations may be made about China, Japan, and every other population that modernized. So I do not wish to convey the idea that the Europeans were alone in their descent into hellish behavior. But their hell brought on the world wars and the Cold War, and it gave us Auschwitz.

The idea that the Germans did something special and horrible in the Second World War is justified only by the efficiency, speed, and conscious purpose with which they did it. The Germans had been non-participants in the enslaving and complete rape of the world undertaken by the British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgians, Turks, and eventually, Russians, Americans, Japanese, and Italians. Also not participating (in any organized way) were the Slavs of Central and Eastern Europe, and the Scandinavians. So, not all Europeans are equally implicated. The Germans were late-comers to the diabolical party and were completely disinclined to enslave anyone – they staunchly resisted slavery in the US, during its struggle over this abomination before the Lord and affront to all things holy and sacred. But, as Collingwood indicated, this capacity for ignoring the emotion that is in the very sensation you experience is peculiarly developed among European men, if not quite all of them. Still, as Skidelsky rightly surmises, those who were still defending the European adventure in Cassirer's generation really were the last who could do so with any sincerity.

Today, in light of what we have learned, often at gunpoint, it really looks impossible to separate these deaths, hundreds of millions if not into the billions (as is probable), from the philosophical viewpoint that accompanied it and often justified it. I do not think we could say with any credibility that humanism *caused* this genocidal destruction of the world, but I think we must remain sober about the significant contribution that humanistic philosophy made to the overall "effort." Our philosophers consistently told us that night was day, death was life, ignorance was learning, greed was charity, folly was wisdom, war was peace, and the profane was sacred. Very few of them could be convicted of being people of ill will. They were, as was Eichmann, "doing their jobs." The philosophers did this job well enough, from Francis Bacon and Descartes to Cassirer and Alfred North Whitehead, to place them beyond defending, after Auschwitz and a thousand proxy wars in the misnamed Cold War.

What were the principal tenets of this philosophy that accompanied the torture, murder and rape of the human and natural world? Its main ideas were individualism (a perversion of the quest for Socratic self-knowledge), scientific knowing, the primacy of analysis, and the myth of the progress of civilization. These ideas took over as a secular substitute for religious proselytizing and endowed the European mind with the most offensive idea ever conceived: that the measure of humanness (and therefore value) was rightly to be determined by proximity to European ideas and their enactment. Such a demonic idea led to an evangelical quest to remake every culture and every individual after the model of the kind of human being who was in fact the most devilish, insane, unclean, and inhumane type of human being. Cassirer cannot be absolved of advocating a philosophy (and a total approach to human nature) which implicates him in this project. His good intentions are beside the point.

### Cassirer and Philosophical Anthropology

If we have rehearsed (albeit inadequately) the full scope of the 500-year holocaust inflicted on the rest of humanity by the European type of human being, let us ask what genuinely might be said about Cassirer in his time and place. It is well to remember that Cassirer didn't have the opportunity to read Frantz Fanon or hear Malcolm X speak. The greatest part of the education of European humanity by non-European humanity was accomplished after Cassirer was too far along in his thinking to be expected to hear. Could he have listened to Gandhi, for example? Or to Marcus Garvey? In principle, yes, but it would have been extra-ordinary for him to have grasped the importance of what those people were saying. Nothing in his education or background would have prepared him to hear their voices. He was shaken by the First World War and knew that Lenin and others had interpreted it as an "imperialist war," but having rejected the (very European) ontology of Marx and his followers, Cassirer sought other alternatives that were more empirical and open, or at least they seemed open to his way of thinking. His major project in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was aimed at placing philoso-

phers in a position to mediate conflicts among fundamental modes of acting in and appropriating the world. That was hopeful, on his part.

There were voices, from Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, perhaps Eduard von Hartmann, through the more moderate Nietzsche and Royce, who were seeing the tragedy of Western humanity for what it was, at least in part. There were prophets like Spengler who set it in context. But Cassirer believed in the Socratic project, and he believed in freedom and he believed in the individual, and he believed in progress in our knowing. I can almost support Skidelsky when he writes:

“It is all in vain,” said Cassirer to [his wife] Toni on hearing the news of Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor. “I shall never write a word again.” It is a curious comment. Could Cassirer really have believed that a series of abstruse works in the philosophy of science, language, and culture might have helped prevent the collapse of democracy in Germany? If so, he was more than usually deluded.<sup>12</sup>

It sounds cruel, of course. Skidelsky is, after all, a modern European male in the sense Collingwood lamented, indeed a superior instance of the type, with the expansive sympathies born of type of lofty condescension that Russell perfected and passed to his followers (among whom Skidelsky must be counted). Skidelsky continues:

Yet his remark can be understood in another more sympathetic sense. Although not directly political, Cassirer’s philosophy has as its *ultimate* goal the *preservation* of what might be called liberal civilization *in Germany*. It champions the *freely developing personality* against all technocratic narrowness, mystical self-surrender, and ideological stupidity. (my emphasis – RA)<sup>13</sup>

Skidelsky is more on target than he can possibly realize. He has, in these two passages (and quite unconsciously I am certain) placed his finger on the very problem, and its solution. I have placed in italics the operative terms and I will return to them in the last section.

The final results of the Second World War, however they are interpreted, were, in many ways, foreseeable by about 1922, and Cassirer certainly understood the dangers. Along with other humanists, such as John Dewey, Cassirer wasted no time in developing the intellectual tools for reconstruction and reconciliation. After the First World War, however, plenty of younger European philosophers, although they had been trained as neo-Kantian humanists, were more than pleased, as Skidelsky notes, to be rid of any of debt to the past. They believed humanism and Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel were among the casualties of that first terrible war. These young philosophers set out to begin philosophy over, whether by destroying the history of ontology as Martin Heidegger did, or by analyzing into meaningless oblivion all metaphysics, as the logical positivists did.<sup>14</sup> Obviously we can now see that both of these paths (Heidegger and Carnap) were really just more of the same logic of domination and exclusion, only taken to ridiculous extremes and in opposite directions (the total rejection of formal logic versus its mindless and total embrace). The destruction of the history of ontology was the ultimate metaphysics of presence, as Derrida showed,<sup>15</sup> and it is not as if Heidegger emerged from the Second World War as a champion of the oppressed.

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12) Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 220.

13) Ibid.

14) This neo-Kantian heritage and break is the particular focus of the first chapters of Friedman’s *A Parting of the Ways*, which contains the clearest and most concise account I have seen of the various neo-Kantian groups in Germany from 1900 to 1929.

15) See: Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Meanwhile, analytic philosophy wore the veneer of scientific progress, but we now understand (thanks to Rorty and his near kin) its pretense to value free objectivity as the very essence of the problem with the Euro-American pathology.<sup>16</sup> So we have in the alternatives to Cassirer's effort, the thin and apolitical humanism of a Carnap or a Russell, as against the destining of being and poetic prophesying of the post-Nazi apologists of Heidegger. These are not better alternatives to Cassirer. And he was not as naïve as Skidelsky kept repeating. Peter Gordon (whose research is far more in-depth than Skidelsky's) said this in summing up his magisterial work:

Cassirer understood that in the intervening years [from Davos in 1929 to his writing of *An Essay on Man* in 1944] the crisis had grown far more acute and had assumed truly civilizational proportions: the anarchy in rival conceptions of the human being was not merely a "theoretical problem," Cassirer warned, it represented "an imminent threat to the whole extent of our ethical and cultural life."<sup>17</sup>

It is not sad to see European hypocrisy exposed to the light of day, as has happened with those alternatives (Carnap and Heidegger), but at least Cassirer was sincere about self-knowledge and the project. The third choice is endless critique and boundless suspicion of our own tendency to think we *know* something or *are* something other than the depraved and worthless destroyers of everything. Against the self-destruction of the two alternatives Friedman so cogently described, Cassirer's well-intentioned naïvety is looking like the best available choice, as soon as one tires of posthumanist handwringing.<sup>18</sup>

The shock of the First World War was, to the more moderate Cassirer, a wake-up call: *for* humanism, to become its tireless advocate, not to declare an end to its mission. Progressive, liberal politics, the humanist push for international and cross-cultural sympathy, for universal education, had failed to rein in the spirit of greed and conquest, had done nothing, yet, to quell the urge to employ the nation state as an ideological instrument of militarism and power. Cassirer went desperately to work on reframing humanism, even while the war was still in progress. He reframed the Romantic era with an important book intended to instruct the German public what people like Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller really meant by *freed*.<sup>19</sup> The further work involved bringing science and its accompanying technologies under the sway of a humanistic form of reflective judgment, without compromising the autonomy of our deep-seated practice of objectivation,

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16) For an account of the internal, academic politics associated with the ducking of political responsibility by analytic philosophers in the US, see: John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001). For the story of the European decline into fractured ideology, see: Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate that Changed Our Understanding of Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

17) Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 372. The quotes are from *An Essay on Man*.

18) Some will point out that I am discounting transhumanism. I suppose I am. Even though Nick Bostrom has given the basic idea a history of which it is not worthy (saving it, perhaps, from the flakey following of FM2030 and the fans of novelist Dan Brown's *Inferno*), it currently lacks a developed or defensible viewpoint. See: Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no. 1 (April 2005): 1–25; rev. ed. <https://nickbostrom.com/papers/history.pdf>, accessed July 8, 2018. I do not see it as having a viable basis for future development. Transhumanism is just overly optimistic, elitist, technologized humanism, and very little among its dreams and nightmares is likely to unfold as transhumanists foresee. I addressed this issue to the extent it needs to be addressed in "Whitehead and the Revolution in (Higher) Education," in *Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Toward a Philosophy of Higher Education*, eds. Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), 217–259. See also my review of Dan Brown's *Inferno* here: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17212231-inferno>, where I have offered my own definition of transhumanism.

19) Cassirer's important work from this time was a series of five extended essays published as *Freiheit und Form* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916, rev. ed., 1918). It was most definitely a statement about misguided German nationalism, but was undertaken in the spirit of having a reasonable conversation about the meaning of the rise of the German nation and its ideals.

of creating by symbolic activity whatever object we sought to know. While Cassirer was at work on this project, other humanists, such as Henri Bergson, attempted to realize Kant's vision of a league of nations and to work peacefully toward the inevitable world government.<sup>20</sup>

Cassirer's great work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, probably succeeded in creating the intellectual framework for a "new humanism," and (since both fundamental ontology and the linguistic turn have now morphed into dead and dying artifacts of a dead or dying university system), Cassirer's ideas remain a genuine alternative to the other main alternatives: the postmodern bourgeois liberalism of Rorty, or the hermeneutics of suspicion and the endless dialectical self-undermining of what we now call critical theory. These approaches are political stone soup at best, and wherever they seem to have real ingredients, they were contributed by some source beyond the bearer of the stone.

Thus, I think Skidelsky is partly right when he says that "Cassirer sought ... not to *eliminate* the irrational but rather to *incorporate* it in a symbolic structure encompassing reason as well. Only thus, it seemed, could it be brought under some sort of control."<sup>21</sup> But by "irrationalism" Skidelsky means not only the forces of greed and racism and nationalism that Cassirer was worried about, i.e., the same forces so suddenly on full display in the First World War. Skidelsky also means by "irrationalism" every philosophical viewpoint that departs from the general framework for the twentieth century thought provided by Bertrand Russell. In short, Skidelsky thinks that all Continental philosophy, all phenomenology, and probably all pragmatism (which he does not deign to mention) is relativistic, irrationalist, and together with ordinary human failings, such "bad philosophy" is responsible for the Second World War and the Holocaust (because it either encouraged irrationalism, or failed to stop the growth of irrationalism). Skidelsky makes no secret of his fondness for Russell and his disdain for Continental thought.

Here I believe Skidelsky errs greatly. He is advocating a philosophy, the Euro-logic of domination, as much implicated in the genocidal activities of the Europeans as anything Cassirer ever propounded. Indeed, between Skidelsky and Cassirer, it seems clear to me that the naïve member of that pair is the biographer, not his subject. Skidelsky is, as far as I can tell, largely innocent of any understanding of Kant (apart from what one might read in an introductory textbook written by an analytic philosopher). For all his reading in neo-Kantianism, Skidelsky seems not to have read Kant's *Critique of Judgment* or any of the popular writings, and he is not familiar with Cassirer's major lines of interpreting Kant. If he had actually read Cassirer's works on Kant, he would know that the views he reports as Kant's do not even resemble Cassirer's understanding. And if Skidelsky has so much as opened the cover of a book by Bergson or Heidegger, I would be surprised. That does not prevent the man from reporting other people's (Adorno, Berlin, and Carnap have been mentioned, but the favorite is Bertrand Russell) ill-informed conclusions about Heidegger and Bergson as though they were obvious facts. I believe, based on the text, Skidelsky has only lightly read (or lightly understood) Cassirer's work on Kant, if that, and has not read with any understanding the philosophers he blames for all that went wrong in philosophy in the twentieth century. I feel odd defending Heidegger, I must admit. But one must at least read his books.

Skidelsky's obtuseness regarding basic divergences in interpretation thus does much to undercut what would otherwise be a valuable contribution to our understanding of Cassirer's influences and concerns. For example, his grasp of Cassirer's relation to the works of Hermann Cohen is valuable, and his is the first serious

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20) As Canales (see above) and others have pointed out, Bergson's handling of the cultural branch of the League was not beyond reproach. But it seems fair to say that the die was cast about the League's prospects when the US petty infighting led the US not to join the League. Also, there was no reason to believe, given Bergson's history, that he would be a capable diplomat or administrator. Philosophers rarely are.

21) Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 132.



assessment in English of the role played by Goethe's thought in Cassirer's philosophy. I do not intend to sweep the whole book aside, but it is not a historically informed treatment of anything, least of all the genuine situation of intellectuals relative to the World Wars. Still there is valuable information and analysis mixed with these uninformed excrescences. Unhappily the result is misinformation about Cassirer and humanism. Cassirer's kind of humanism is a delicate creature, born of hope and of confidence in our creative powers of objectivation – of creating for ourselves the freedom we wished to have, through the responsible and yes, *humane* employment of our powers of symbolization.

Thus, much of this good work is spoiled by Skidelsky's presuppositions and judgments about the twentieth century as a whole and about philosophy in that century. As a curious sort of contemporary professional posthumanist poking around in the rubble of the twentieth century thought, Skidelsky seems to have stumbled upon Cassirer and for just a moment thought to himself "well, this man is not an idiot like all the others." Then, upon further investigation, he discovered that quite possibly Cassirer was the most balanced and incisive thinker of his generation. Then, being pulled back into the professionalized barbarism that just is present day (dying) academic philosophy, there was the quiet conclusion drawn: if something were not terribly wrong with Cassirer's thought, he certainly would not be utterly forgotten today in the academies. Thus, Skidelsky began to feel something like pity for poor, naïve Cassirer. He says that we must admit today, much as it pains us, that "Cassirer, for all his decency – indeed, because of his decency – did not see what Heidegger and so many others saw so clearly: that the secular idols of humanity and progress were dead."<sup>22</sup>

Skidelsky is not a scholar and this is no well-rounded presentation of his humanism or the fate of the ideas he worked so hard to articulate with such fairness, and indeed, decency. The mistake was not that Cassirer failed to get on board the train of scientism, so ably conducted by the analysts. The trouble was that Cassirer did get on that train and took it to the farthest stations. Cassirer's confidence in science – as a symbolic form – was so complete that it eclipses the narrow and frankly silly scientism of the less adroit (analytic) critics, such as Russell and his followers.

### The Real Problem

Cassirer's actual mistake was not what Skidelsky says repeatedly, it lay in what Skidelsky said unconsciously. The most important mistake Cassirer made was in thinking that science is a *progressive* symbolic form of culture. Cassirer rightly recognized that art and language are progressive forms, changing more quickly than culture can absorb and forever on the leading edge of our most radical hopes and dreams for our future freedom. But it is difficult to confine art and language to the institutions, such as universities, that stamp their approval and provide the resources for experimental activity. Science is expensive. It always was. That makes it vulnerable. Cassirer was right to see the myth/religion complex, along with history (and I would add law and education) as (in most cases) profoundly conservative symbolic forms of culture. But the story Cassirer tells about the relation between the objectivating process whereby the object of knowledge is created by the knower, and the cultural practice of science, is deeply erroneous.

Apart from expense, and all the problems that go with it, science is (as Cassirer should have known) the inheritor of all of the problems that *magic* had before it. Science is neither progressive nor conservative, in and of itself; it is about the relation between our deepest desires and our ability to fulfill them – by way of *control*. Unhappily, such desires are usually more akin the greed, power, and security than to charity, peace, and human care. There can be humanitarian scientists, but there is nothing in the objectivating process of the knowledge

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22) Ibid., 8.

game that assures such values. And, when science comes under the sway of education, it becomes (due to the inherent conservatism of the educative process) narrow, dogmatic, ideological, self-interested, and the source of the perpetuation of errors through its priesthood among the academies.

Now, interestingly, economics is a progressive symbolic form, and frighteningly so; and scientific activity freed of the narrow rewards and prestige games of *academic* science will tend to take on a progressive function when left under the sway of money-making. That does not mean science will acquire humane values and propagate them; quite the contrary. Science will serve whatever values economics places before it as ends. Science is thus not progressive, it is an updated and more reliable magic lurking on the fringes of any other symbolic form that will give it shelter. It will adhere wherever magic would adhere in earlier times, and that includes almost every horizon of culture.

If we look to science as the spring of our progress, it can only hand us idiosyncratic individuals who become cultural heroes, and not always for their genuine accomplishments. Einstein and Newton are really prime examples. But assuming we may treat economics as progressive, relative to the aims of culture, if it has any such aims (see below), science does contribute. But in association with education, social status, privilege, and creature comforts, science becomes not only conservative, it becomes a *preservative*, the word Skidelsky presciently chose for Cassirer's aims relative to Germany. When coupled with liberal ideas about individuality and freedom, scientism becomes an emotionless trap that no one really survives. I conclude that Cassirer is not naïve, he is scientistic. John Michael Krois's valiant effort to save Cassirer from this failed, in my opinion.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Cassirer's commitment to science and to the individual as "objectivating" knower are the real marks against him in the present debate over humanism. More could be said, but I will rest my case on the backs of these two tropes – scientism and individualism. Cassirer's thought is difficult to extricate from these two deeply problematic ideas. These are the unsustainable aspects of Cassirer's thought for the needed reform: for the new humanism. Having an "ultimate" goal, to return to Skidelsky's language, the "preservation" of a "German" viewpoint is telling and (these days) unacceptable – having *ultimate* goals of any kind, for the *preservation* of anything, liberal democracy included, in *Germany* or any other nation state, is at the heart of the problem. It is not the solution, preserving anything of the ill-gotten gains of European empire building, including bourgeois liberalism and its associated forms of individualism, is the very situation to be surpassed. Relying on science to save us is no better than expecting magic to make us morally better. People who would use magic to improve themselves morally do not seem to understand what moral growth really is. There are no short-cuts.

## The New Humanism

So, where does that leave us, sitting here with our tomes of Cassirer and wanting sincerely to offer them as prescriptions for the ills of our day? There really is wisdom in these texts, isn't there? There is so much learning, so much insight, so much sincere good will for humanity ... surely we need not throw it all in the bin, as Skidelsky does. But how to retrieve from the brave heart of this corpus the parts not sullied by the quest for a truly European man – and I do mean "man"? Well, as one European man once said, where grows the danger, there also is the saving power. I see no reason to believe this epigram unconditionally. At best it is sometimes true. It may be disastrously false as well. Seeing Cassirer himself struggle at the end of *The Myth of the State* over how we might address the re-emergence of rationalized and technologized myth, the best he could do was to recommend what amounts to a more humane humanism, one that does not leave reason behind, but that organizes it so that symbol and

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23) See: John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), and the review of the same by Randall E. Auxier, in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 159–165.

thing symbolized are kept at a safe distance, so that the space for culture is kept open. If the collapsed symbols of rationalized myth are the danger, then the saving power lies in doing our best to keep our symbols and the lived and living realities they mediate at a distance, Cassirer argues. But that tension and distance cannot be so great as to break the dynamic bond between symbol and world. We cannot allow our symbols to become mere abstractions and to leave us in an impersonal and detached world of pure signs.<sup>24</sup> There is a balance defined by those two limits: no collapse of the symbols, no detachment of the symbols.

I find that solution more plausible than Heidegger's borrowed epigram. The tension of symbol and thing symbolized requires a humanism of creativity and dynamic change, and of stability and conservation of the good. Knowing which of our symbolizing activities tends to the one pole or the other is a path to balance and sustainable progress. But it is no guarantee we will behave *morally*, even within the balance. Our symbols make it *possible* for us to behave morally toward each other, but they do not and never could compel such behavior. The symbols, when they are in balance, free us for moral paths while they also permit (and even define) the most monstrous among our free actions. A cruel symbol user retains all the cruelty of his pre-symbolic physical capacity, but adds also a capacity for imagining new and twisted ways to be cruel within the domain of the mediated and symbolic world. Mere animal behavior toward one another we can recognize by its honest barbarism, its unmediated unreason. But the perverse possibilities within the mediated world, ones unimaginable to most until an Auschwitz is actually planned and built stands before us as a product of human imagination and effort. Is Auschwitz not also a symbol? *Arbeit macht Frei*? Can anyone bear *those* symbols?

The bad news is that Auschwitz, and every other cruelty of the colonial adventure, only makes sense within the domain of *human* values and human possibilities. These atrocities were not carried out by beasts and they certainly were not the doings of angels. These humans did them for human motives and aimed at advantages and ends only comprehensible to human beings. We cannot abdicate the quest for a genuine understanding of our own nature and still expect to avoid such cruelties in the future. The same values that make us value criticism and make us suspicious of meta-narratives are the values that motivate both our highest behavior and our lowest. A posthumanist is a humanist with no answers for the question "why?" when it comes to the way these atrocities belong *with* the saintliest acts. I speak here not of great deed we might do, but of actual deed we have done and which we would like to own as being part of our nature and our prospects. The new humanism need not be utopian, it need only claim what is best in us, actually, alongside what is worst, and insist upon both, simultaneously. That very insistence is what creates the tension that holds apart the symbol, "human" and what it symbolizes, namely us, in all our concrete desperation.

Thus, there are not two kinds of humans, the benignant and the monsters. It is understandable that, in light of the horrors, we want to point at Nazis and Khmer Rouge and Sudanese Warlords and scream "monsters!"<sup>25</sup> But it was and is that very power we possess to point and scream that *collapses* the symbol. We refuse identification with the perpetrators of the crimes, even though the crimes are interpretable as the unbal-

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24) I have in mind something like Umberto Eco's idea of "unlimited semiosis," which can be interpreted from an underlying and presupposed "encyclopedia," but cannot be anchored to any coordinates or moored to any peer in the sea of language. See my "Eco, Peirce, and the Pragmatic Theory of Signs," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, symposium on Eco and Pragmatism, ed. Claudio Paolucci, 10, no. 1 (2018), forthcoming; <https://journals.openedition.org/ejppap/1029>, accessed July 6, 2018.

25) See Bruce Wilshire, *Get 'em All, Kill 'em!: Genocide, Terrorism, and Righteous Communities* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Lexington Books, 2004). I do not endorse Wilshire's general account of genocide, especially since he insists that the origins of genocide are not in our human nature (and I insist it must be understood that way), but I do think that his account of the clash of symbols has a great effect on our human willingness to become part of a genocidal process. Also in this context, it is not a bad idea to review Rod Serling's classic script "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street." (Also it is easy to find the actual show on-line.) <https://ccms.buncombeschools.org/common/pages/UserFile.aspx?fileId=3313039>, accessed July 8, 2018.

anced pursuit of goals that are intelligible *only* on human terms.<sup>26</sup> But such identification can never be refused without a depersonalization of self and other, and such is the result of the collapse of the symbol. The world ceases to be a person and becomes a thing. Thus, we really have no genuinely humane alternative to acknowledging that the perpetrators wanted *some* of what humans want, and they have sought it at the expense of other human beings.<sup>27</sup> It was ever thus.

But there is worse news. Although many of the perpetrators did so, I do not believe the human beings who perpetrated these crimes *needed* to collapse the symbols with which they interpreted the world in order to do what they did (for five-hundred years of European exterminations and genocidal invasions, and finally their attempted self-extermination in the twentieth century). Not all genocide was the Nazi-style genocide. Most of it was carried out by people who knew very well that other *human beings* were the subjects of enslavement, rape, pillage, murder, theft, oppression, and the full litany of crimes that have characterized European behavior, and non-European imitations, for the entire modern era. I am implying that we must own this behavior as genuinely *human* behavior undertaken to achieve *human* ends, especially wealth and power, but sometimes security and continued existence as well. It is not hysteria. The collapsing of the symbol can be, but need not be, a hysterical act. But further, genocidal activity is consistent with not collapsing their own symbols at all. Hysterical killing would be very hard to sustain for long enough to get more than a pogrom or a lynch mob going. Genocide requires fully developed reflective thinking and occurs from a context of calm rationality.

Part of the reason that we must have a new humanism is that in many cases, especially those which are different from the Nazi genocide, and which are less efficient, carried out over centuries (as in the case of the North American native genocide), and also capable of being carried out by groups and individuals who are very different from one another, and when such murder is almost always undertaken without hysteria of any kind on either side – the exterminated and the exterminating humans. The reason is that genocide is a *symbolic* act as well as a natural act. Understanding it fully, as belonging to the sphere of the human, requires that we recognize that the perpetrators *murder symbols*, and that this aspect is more important than the concomitant *killing of humans*. One can find killing throughout the natural world, and humans are among the best at killing. But genocide requires murder, and while one can kill without symbolizing, one cannot murder without symbolizing. Murder cannot occur outside of culture (specifically, outside of law), and that means that when one murders another, one murders a symbol, while also killing a being.

Genocide is not just mass killing, it is mass murder. The only collapse that has to occur, for the perpetrator is the collapse of the victim into a pure symbol. The symbol we humans murder need not be a threatening one. Inconvenience is sufficient. Being in the way of our realization of some plan is sufficient, from manifest destiny to clearing the rainforest. This collapse of the other into a pure symbol is still a collapse of the symbol, but it is also an act of interpretation. We first refuse to interpret our victims as being more than their symbolic meaning for ourselves (i.e., we deny all transcendence to them, but not to ourselves) and then we extinguish

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26) For the full account of this important idea of “identification,” which is no simple, logical identity, see: Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: George Brazziler, 1950), esp. 328–333, which is the end of the book. This idea has generated a huge literature and is beyond my present scope, but I think Burke belongs with the heroes of humanism and his thought is easily adapted to the new humanism.

27) The operative term “acknowledgement” is here taken from the philosophy of Royce, in which he argues that to have meaningful ideas, persons must “acknowledge” both a “world of truth” by which he means the “social present” and a “world of the past.” He first makes out this idea in “Kant’s Relation to Modern Philosophical Progress,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 15 (1881): 365–377, and it continues to play an important role in his thought throughout his entire career. I have explained and interpreted this idea of “acknowledgement” in my *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), esp. 60–62, and 131–150.

that meaning, along with its horizon. Thus, in murdering that symbol we have actively created (indeed, often co-created with the victim), we also extinguish a world. That world we extinguish must be acknowledged in order for our acts of genocide to be murders. Otherwise, we have only animals killing animals.

The reason, then, that we need Cassirer's theory for the new humanism is that we must retain our sense of the function, even the *dominance* of the symbolizing power in our most bestial acts. I believe it is possible for a human being to murder a non-human animal, but that animal would generally need to be a part of the murderer's symbolic world (consider, for instance, Poe's "The Black Cat"). If we do not struggle with the relation between our power of symbolization and our worst deed, we end up with symbols in collapse on our own side, and we point and scream "monster!" But if we do hold our own feet to the fire and acknowledge that murder is interpretation, we need an account of interpretation that is rich enough to support a robust account of what we are. I maintain that the *world* extinguished in genocidal actions is the actual person murdered when we consider the human atrocities that accompany war. The same applies to acts of rape and pillage, and this kind of action is as old as culture. The world extinguished is the proper victim, which the individuals and families are the symbols of that world. This relation of symbol to person, i.e., of individual to world is thoroughly interpretive.<sup>28</sup>

The great beasts of history are, therefore, just as human as you or I. They are not unlike us, they *are* us, at our worst. When you see an Eichmann or a Mengele or a Charles Manson, it is not fit to say "there but for the grace of God go I." You must at least begin your path to a new humanism with "there go I." No modification, no qualification, no justification, no excuses, no exceptions, just "there go I, a person."<sup>29</sup> Of course, you also know that it also *is not* you, and there lies the secret. Appropriating yourself not just as a human being among human beings, but as a person among persons, begins with owning all of your fellow human beings not only as fully human, but as persons (not monsters). Personalizing the world is the symbol that must characterize the whole.<sup>30</sup> The human is the biological being most able to create this symbol, yet the symbol encompasses not just the biological humans, but the world itself, *as person*.<sup>31</sup> How, then, do we bring the humans not just to the deep and mutual identification with one another as persons, but to the personhood of the world, to the mediated world *as person*? The question is too large for our present scope, but we may address that part of the question that bears on Cassirer's relevance for the new humanism.

### Cassirer as New Humanist

Consider what Skidelsky pointed out, as quoted above: Cassirer's philosophy "champions the *freely developing personality* against all technocratic narrowness, mystical self-surrender, and ideological stupidity." (my emphasis) Yes, that is true; Cassirer does do that. And Skidelsky also rightly says that "Cassirer sought ... not to *eliminate* the irrational but rather to *incorporate* it in a symbolic structure encompassing reason as well. Only

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28) The ideas expressed in these paragraphs are very much a blending of Royce's and Peirce's theories of signs and interpretation with Cassirer's ideas about symbolization. I have written extensively elsewhere on these topics, much of it cited in these notes, and cannot pursue the topic further here. I can, however, indicate that this relation was the main focus of my dissertation, "Signs and Symbols: An Analogical Theory of Metaphysical Language" (Emory University, 1992).

29) Again, this act of identification is as described by Kenneth Burke.

30) See: the recent dissertation by Jared Kemling, "Creative Fidelity as a Personalized Symbolic Form of Culture," Southern Illinois University Carbondale (2017).

31) For a fuller account of how the world can be a "person," see my *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, chapters 7–8. A number of thinkers have held that the "world" is "person," including Schelling, Peirce, Scheler, and Brightman. To explore this fully is beyond my present scope, but I take myself to be in a line of philosophers who defend that view.

thus, it seemed, could it be brought under some sort of control.” I think that is precisely what a good believer in Euro-western reason would think. And Cassirer was certainly one. For the problematic Western triumphalist, irrationality must be *made into reason* for the protection of all our ill-gotten gains, since they *and* their philosophy are what make us, the Euro-westerners, *rational*. And there you have the scientism and hyper-rational individualism that is Cassirer’s Achilles’ heel.

For the new humanism, personhood, i.e., freely developing personality, includes *both* the rational and the irrational, and it does *not* try to remake the one into the other; it tries to make things intelligible, if not on the ground of rationality, then on the ground of their very human irrationality. The truth that Euro-westerners continually ignore is the fact that we humans have the power to make sense of irrational things (such as emotion) and to value them without transforming them into *rational* things. This is just the pathology pointed out by Collingwood, and please do recall that the non-Europeans, and especially the artists (European and non-European), *do not* drain their sensation of its emotional tinge. Rather, they make sense of it by making symbols.

But does “freely developing personality” mean *that*? Yes, it does include art, at the progressive edge of symbolization. But this process is, for Cassirer, something requiring what he calls “spontaneity.” It is like an art of the self, and that self can be de-centered, I believe, so I am not speaking of “the modern subject.” That point brings us finally around to the gist of Collingwood’s provocative statement about how artists (unlike peculiarly European males) *resist* the urge to empty their sensation of emotion. Cassirer acknowledges this point, but he wants to go further.<sup>32</sup> He says:

Through his characters *and actions*, the comic and the tragic poet reveals his view of human life as a whole, of its greatness and weakness, its sublimity and its absurdity... It may be objected that all this applies to the artist but not to ourselves, the spectators and auditors. But such an objection would imply a misunderstanding of the artistic process. Like the process of speech the artistic process is dialogical and dialectic one. Not even the spectator is left to a merely passive role.<sup>33</sup>

Cassirer makes it clear that the spontaneity he defends is not peculiar to art and artists, it is at least as broad as speech. The wise person is the one who sees the evil as well as the good in us, and who knows how to use the symbolizing power to bring the better forward and tame the worse. The wise person knows that truth and lies reside within the same context of possibility, and that interest and the pressure to act can be indifferent to truth, unless there is something beyond interest that lures our action to the one rather than the other. There is an education, a *paideia*, for that lure as well, but it is the opposite of repetition and coercion. It is the path to seeing the world as Person, moral education, and it also teaches that the world is *depersonalized* by merely animal action while it is *impersonalized* by collapsing finite symbols with their living hosts. This, then, is the heart of the new humanism: the mediated world is Person.

The question is how does the new education respond to that lure, the selection of that which develops personality freely over that which stifles it (“technocratic narrowness, mystical self-surrender, and ideological stupidity” – Skidelsky’s list is excellent)? And what is the ground and character of the lure to freely developing personality? Here, I think we now have reason to return to our treasured volumes of Cassirer without fear of repeating his small handful of mistakes (those which implicated him in the 500-year holocaust), if only as one who did not see that the press to objectivating knowledge was part and parcel of the impersonalization of the world.

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32) See: Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 182.

33) *Ibid.*, 187, 190–191.

Somewhat surprisingly, given his devotion to scientific rationality, Cassirer seemed to realize that objectivating processes came at a severe cost to our forms of consciousness and community, a cost uncountable and inestimable during his lifetime, but clearer in ours. There is nothing to compare with living under the continual threat of Mutually Assured Destruction and the annihilation of the world (not the earth, necessarily, but the world) to prompt people to a broader consciousness of the truth that the world is a person. There is nothing like watching the human race leave the surface of the earth and take *the world* beyond the earth, to look back from the Moon and to see that the earth is not the same as the world, since the world now includes the Moon. These genuinely historical events have clarified our capacity for recognizing that the world is a Person, and is not identical with the earth, but it is identical with *us*.

### Signs of Hope

Ironically, at a 2010 congress of the Associazione Pragma of Italy, at the University of Milan, Joseph Margolis, one of the senior interpreters of the twentieth century American philosophy, announced his “prophecy” that Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms will be the future of pragmatic philosophy, as the worldwide growth of pragmatism continues. Margolis holds (and has since published the view<sup>34</sup>) that as pragmatism moves more and more beyond the American context, in which it was for half a century confined and ailing, the central thesis of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is the one upon which it will alight. The pragmatism Margolis defends is a chastened humanism. He is among the last surviving thinkers who actually fought in the Second World War (born 1924), and has been in a position to experience the entire cycle of humanism’s decline and its coming re-emergence. In short, humanism did not die in the Second World War, rather, the awful conflict made us aware of how difficult the work of humanism really is, how contingent, how susceptible to set-backs, how fragile is its progress.

What Margolis was thinking about at that event, was, I believe, a hybrid of the old humanism with newer ideas, chastened ideas, of the sort I have set forward. Since Margolis fought that war personally, and then lived through the clarification I have described in this paper, I take his standpoint very seriously – when a good philosopher in his ninth decade notices what Cassirer and says, “yes, that’s what we need.” Thus, I think Skidelsky was dead wrong. Cassirer was, if Margolis is right, really the first philosopher of culture, where the task of culture is the creation of the world and the cultivation of the lures for freely developing personality. The task of culture is not conquest, not civilization, not economic development, not even the betterment of the human condition. It is not quite the self-liberation project Cassirer announced in *An Essay on Man*, although it is close to that. The task of culture is the creation of the world, and the pursuit of freely developing personality between our actual condition and our ideal world.

Joseph Margolis, standing in Milan, or here, as living history, is providing either the recommendation of someone who cannot possibly see the future because he is too old, or of someone who cannot help seeing the future because he is so old; such is the fruit of a personality freely developed. Having lived the final conflagration of the 500-year holocaust, and having seen first-hand its full consequences for our thinking about ourselves, and having done so as a Jew in the shadow of the Nazi Holocaust (he saw Dachau days after its liberation), Margolis says “we should really look at Cassirer.” I do not have the standing to presume equality of wisdom, but for what it’s worth, I agree.

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34) See: Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism Ascendant: A Yard of Narrative, a Touch of Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). This work has to be taken together with *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Towards a Philosophical Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and *Pragmatism’s Advantage: American and European Philosophy at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

We may also call this “touch of prophecy” (to use the phrase of Margolis) the “new humanism,” and we may do so without irony and without apology. The future of human thought does not belong to those who are so disillusioned with the human capacity for evil as to be shocked by the Nazi Holocaust and the century of genocide that was the twentieth, Cold War included. The four centuries before taught us what we were capable of, but we did not pay the fullest attention until we turned on one another. Yet, the twentieth century taught us that the world was not just the earth, and that the earth might endure when the world has been destroyed. I therefore assert: The truly naïve thinkers are those who have had the audacity to suppose that no humanists foresaw or understood this evil.

Cassirer was no child. He may have been subject to the optimism that flowed from his own moral decency, but he was a student of history, as well as being a specialist in the type of philosophical thought that wrestled with radical evil. When confronted with the cold reality of human barbarity in the First World War, rather than casting off his former efforts in dismay (as he was tempted to do and as Skidelsky reports), or instead of retreating into a cocoon of analyzing propositions or wringing his hands about Heidegger’s misbehavior at Davos, the man stepped forward into the breach and said that *never* was a personalizing influence more needed than after the carnage of the First World War and the hate that it bred. He set about writing it for others to see. The outcome was *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

Rather than to cast off history and lazily sink into the fantasies of reflection and self-undermining dialectic that just *are* today’s irrelevant analytic and continental philosophy, Cassirer insisted that we must be brave, that philosophers must confront and mediate and moderate what is monstrous in ourselves, and that above all, we must not allow our fascination with the work of our own hands to blind us to the temptation to treat the possession of the *symbols* of things as equivalent to the possession of the things themselves. Human he may be, and thus enslave-able, oppress-able, robbable, murderable as your neighbor is, in his condition, still, you do not possess his or her soul, only symbols of it, and you *ought* to share a spirit, which is to say the ideals that develop personality freely.

The possession of the slave is not the possession of the person. The possession of the office is not the possession of the power. The possession of the wealth is not the possession of the value (remembering that Georg Simmel was among Cassirer’s teachers). In short, the possession of the culture, which we cannot give up, is not the possession of the progress of freely developing personality itself. The latter is the stable possibility, the ideal, and the possession of the symbols is only the *condition* that we bring to the task of culture. We live in a world we never made, but we also live in the presence of genuine ideals it is our task to realize.

Today we have come to a place and time, after almost three quarters of a century of irrelevant hand-wringing or arrogantly ignoring the task of culture, when philosophy must again take up its responsibility for attempting to mediate and personalize. We must remind everyone that while the symbol is not the thing symbolized, it is also not nothing at all. The symbol is our condition. The symbol is an unfinished thought in our midst, and it calls. The symbol provides a vocation to something more than our mere *human* condition, as Arendt so aptly designated it. We are called to be transported beyond our condition, but not without limitation. And I want to close with some words on our limitations.

Throughout this essay I have been drawing on the distinction between condition and person. I did not make it up, of course. I learned about it while reading Cassirer. Alluding to a distinction made by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schiller said:

When abstraction mounts as high as it possibly can, it arrives at two final concepts, at which it must halt and recognize its limits. It distinguishes in Man something that endures and something that perpetually alters. The enduring it calls his person, the changing his condition... Since in Man,



as finite being, person and condition are distinct, neither can the condition be derived from the person, nor the person from the condition.<sup>35</sup>

I do not think Skidelsky realized it, but when he said that Cassirer's philosophy champions "freely developing personality," he was pointing to Person as the symbol that develops *between* our human condition and the symbol we create in order to liberate ourselves. As the task of culture progressively creates the freedom we wish to possess, from the materials of our condition, our condition changes. The material changes by themselves do not educate us to our Person, and if anything may distract us from the task. The new materialists are actually making material existence into a new concept of culture, although they seem unaware that by matter they mean inherited culture. But I do not see in their pedagogy anything but a rear-guard action against the inhumanity chasing us from our history. And they will point back into the mess we made and say "there, there is Cassirer, with the rest of them, sanctioning colonialism and European supremacy right along with the rest of them."

To their accusation, I must nod in reluctant agreement. Cassirer was indeed among those who did not see, and as I have said, he mistook science for a progressive symbolic form of culture when he also knew that objectivating knowledge, the process of creating the increasingly abstract objects we know by means of measurement, tended to blind us to all but the techniques they enabled us to introduce into the world. He did know this. He saw the pathologies of symbolic consciousness begotten of pure significance. He knew that abstraction was costly to us as persons.

But Cassirer was most closely wed to the thinkers who populated Germany during Goethe's long lifetime. Among these a new philosophy grew up which came to be called "personalism," which was one response to the *Atheismusstreit* which pulled Fichte down.<sup>36</sup> There were many, including all of Cassirer's heroes, who took a very moderate line toward Fichte's (sometimes intemperate but always profound) stance about matters of divinity. The sentence that got Fichte in trouble was: "The living and efficaciously acting moral order is itself God. We require no other God, nor can we grasp any other."<sup>37</sup> Apart from *identifying* the moral order with God, the view is the same as Kant's, and of pretty much everyone else we still read from that time period. I think the time has come when we can safely identify the moral order with God, if by "identify" we understand identifying ourselves as in possession of the same moral make-up as the monsters, and yet are not compelled thereby to *become* monsters.

People began in the day of Schiller and Schelling, and then Immanuel Hermann Fichte and Rudolf Hermann Lotze, to draw the line not between humanity and divinity, but between our condition and our ideal of person.<sup>38</sup> The idea spread and became the philosophy of Royce, Bowne, Brightman, and then of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of John Paul II. It has been the single most important and genuinely moralizing collection of ideas available in the last 200 years, and it has stood for non-violence, the dignity of all persons, the dignity of nature, and the ideal of the world as Person. When we develop personalities freely, we also serve what is divine so far as we can understand it. That was all that Fichte meant.

I have used the word personality, and some may be tempted to interpret it psychologically. The point about personality is not psychological, it is ontological, or, in Cassirer's terms, a matter of spirit. I doubt we

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35) Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963), 60–61.

36) For the definitive account of this development, see Jan Olof Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

37) Johann Gottlob Fichte, "On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance".

38) See: Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism*. This is a summary of the narrative he documents in great detail.

can rescue that word “spirit” from the ashes, but since Cassirer chose it, we must not pretend it is not on the table. This, then, is a process philosophy; personality is a process, not a thing; it is the relation between condition and Person, between what is changing and what is stable, or, as Cassirer later characterizes it, between *forma formans*, the changing order, and *forma formata*, which holds a stable place in what has been made or created and what could be achieved. In short, our symbols are made from our condition and are contributed to a permanent order which is both our history and our destiny. *Herkunft ist Zukunft*, as the German saying goes. If we want the freedom, we really do have to create it.

I close with a passage from Emerson, which I have stumbled across from a colleague’s unpublished work:

The motive of science was the extension of man, on all sides, into nature, till his hands should touch the stars, his eyes see through the earth, his ears understand the language of beast and bird, and the sense of the wind; and, through his sympathy, heaven and earth should talk with him. *But that is not our science.* These geologies, chemistries, astronomies, seem to make wise, but they leave us where they found us. The invention is of use to the inventor, of questionable help to any other. The formulas of science are like the papers in your pocket-book, of no value to any but the owner. (“Beauty,” *W* 6:284; emphasis mine).

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