



Jürgen
Habermas

The Liberating
Power of Symbols

Philosophical Essays

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Jürgen Habermas

Translated by Peter Dews

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Preface</i> | vi |
| 1 The Liberating Power of Symbols <i>Ernst Cassirer's Humanistic Legacy and the Warburg Library</i> | 1 |
| 2 The Conflict of Beliefs <i>Karl Jaspers on the Clash of Cultures</i> | 30 |
| 3 Between Traditions <i>A Laudatio for Georg Henrik von Wright</i> | 46 |
| 4 Tracing the Other of History in History <i>On Gershom Scholem's Sabbatai Şevi</i> | 57 |
| 5 A Master Builder with Hermeneutic Tact <i>The Path of the Philosopher Karl-Otto Apel</i> | 66 |
| 6 Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong? <i>Johann Baptist Metz on Unity amidst Multicultural Plurality</i> | 78 |
| 7 Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology <i>Questions for Michael Theunissen</i> | 90 |
| 8 The Useful Mole who Ruins the Beautiful Lawn <i>The Lessing Prize for Alexander Kluge</i> | 112 |
| <i>Sources</i> | 123 |
| <i>Index</i> | 125 |

Preface

This volume brings together essays and speeches which were written for various occasions. But the themes I addressed as these different opportunities arose may be of more general interest.

In comparison with other philosophers of their generation, the works of Ernst Cassirer and Karl Jaspers have not yet found the echo amongst younger thinkers which they deserve. In the first two chapters I investigate the underlying concerns which gave rise to their philosophies as a whole, with the aim of bringing out the contemporary relevance of their thought. By contrast, memories of the spontaneity of the great story-teller Gershom Scholem are still so vivid that only now are his writings beginning to emerge from the shadow of his unique personality. The central motif of his thinking is closely intertwined with the shimmering figure of the false prophet Sabbatai Şevi.

In the remaining essays, I engage with friends and colleagues. Here, too, my conversations are more with the work than with the individual. They can be read as fragments of a history of contemporary philosophy. Alexander Kluge, the great theorizer among writers and film-makers, will forgive me for including him with philosophers, and even theologians.

J.H.

Starnberg, March 1996

1

The Liberating Power of Symbols

Ernst Cassirer's Humanistic Legacy and the Warburg Library

*For John Michael Krois, to whose
admonition I shall seek to respond*

I

When the University of Hamburg was founded after the First World War, Aby Warburg was able to carry out the plan he had long cherished of making his private library accessible to the public. The library became the focal point of an institute for interdisciplinary research in the human and cultural sciences, where students and visitors were able to work, and where university seminars and public lectures were held. For a small circle of scholars concerned with the study of religion it became an 'organon of humanistic research', as Cassirer was later to put it. In fact, Ernst Cassirer was one of the first to give a lecture there. The following entry can be found in the annual report of the Warburg Library for 1921, written by Fritz Saxl:

This lecture was delivered on 20 April 1995 at the University of Hamburg. The dual occasion was the dedication of the restored Warburg Library building, and the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Ernst Cassirer (who died in New York on 13 April 1945).

Professors Cassirer, Reinhardt, Ritter, Wolff, Junker, and Dr. Panofsky, are now constant users and patrons of the Library. It has even transpired that Prof. Cassirer, in a lecture to the Hamburg Society for the Study of Religion (of which Prof. Warburg was a founder), has taken up ideas which were earlier quite foreign to him, but which he found himself developing as a result of his use of the Library. Prof. Cassirer intends to expand on these ideas in a major work.¹

The first volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* did indeed appear two years later. However, the word of thanks to the Library that appears in the preface to the second volume, which is devoted to mythical thought, has a rather different emphasis:

The first drafts and other preliminary work for this volume were already far advanced when through my call to Hamburg I came into close contact with the Warburg Library. Here I found abundant and almost incomparable material in the field of mythology and general history of religion, and in its arrangement and selection, in the special intellectual stamp which Warburg gave it, it revolved around a unitary central problem related to the basic problem of my own work.²

At the beginning of that first lecture in the Library, Cassirer had already spoken in similar terms:

The questions with which I would like to deal . . . had already concerned me over a long period, but now it seemed as though they stood embodied before me. I had an overwhelming feeling that . . . this was not merely a collection of books, but a collection of problems. It was not the material of the Library which impressed me in this way; stronger than the impact of the material itself was that made by principles of its organization.³

The works which Warburg had collected belonged to many different disciplines, but, in Cassirer's view, they were 'connected to an ideal middle point'. Cassirer rightly emphasizes the independence of his own philosophical development. But the interest which Warburg and Cassirer shared in the

symbolic medium of the human mind's forms of expression was the basis of their intellectual affinity.

The books were divided into four sections; and users of the Library were evidently expected to regard the hidden principle of this organization as an invitation to decipher the theory which it implicitly embodied. Viewed in this way, the ordering of the Library encouraged readers to reflect on the theory of symbolization. Indeed, the description of the present state of the Library, which, since 1958, has been housed in Woburn Square in London in an arrangement modelled on the Hamburg original, reads as though inspired by Cassirer's philosophy of the development of symbolic forms. The world of symbolic forms extends from pictorial representation, via verbal expression, to forms of orienting knowledge, which in turn pave the way for practice: 'The library was to lead from the visual image, as the first stage in man's awareness, to language and hence to religion, science and philosophy, all of them products of man's search for orientation, which influence his patterns of behaviour and his actions, the subject matter of history.'⁴

Cassirer also had other reasons to feel at home in the Library. For it was quite astonishingly congenial to his interests and basic approach. (1) Cassirer could not help but be pleased by the role allotted to philosophy; (2) the collection articulated a notion of culture which interested Cassirer from the epistemological angle; (3) furthermore, Cassirer discovered here in all its breadth and variety the literature of the Renaissance, a literature on whose philosophical currents he had worked; (4) and finally, it was not hard for Cassirer to discern a vital motif of his own thinking in the nature of Warburg's interest in the survival of antiquity in modernity.

(1) As Raymond Klibansky reports, the philosophical material in the Library is far from being structured so as to reflect the status of a First Science; rather, philosophy is treated as a discipline amongst others, or is assigned to other disciplines in a foundational role.⁵ So, for example, aesthetics is assigned to the history of art, ethics to jurisprudence, and the philosophy of nature to scientific cosmology.

Cassirer could not help but recognize his own conception of philosophy and his own way of working here. The last twentieth-century individual possessed of a universal culture, the author of books on Kant, Goethe and Einstein, Cassirer had acquired expertise in logic and mathematics, the natural and human sciences, and the history of literature, art and religion. He knew that philosophy could only retain its influence through participation in the specialized knowledge of the individual disciplines and through co-operation with them on an equal footing. Cassirer wanted to learn from the sciences. His style was far from that of the transcendental philosopher in search of ultimate foundations, who imagines himself to be always one step ahead of all empirical knowledge. Cassirer mistrusted the imperious attitude of great philosophy, which imagines it has a universal key, despises mundane knowledge, and obstinately burrows into the depths from its narrow patch of ground. Far more than with Heidegger, he agreed with Hegel, who believed that the depths of spirit are only as deep as 'its willingness to expand and immerse itself in interpretation'.⁶

(2) The Warburg Library also encouraged Cassirer's interests in the sense that it represented the object domains which are especially challenging for an epistemology in the Kantian tradition. *The Critique of Pure Reason* was of course intended to explain how natural-scientific knowledge is possible. The historical sciences of culture only developed later, in the course of the nineteenth century. Cassirer realized that transcendental philosophy could not react to this 'fact of the human sciences' in the same way that Kant, in his time, reacted to the fact of Newtonian physics. From a transcendental standpoint, nature is constituted for us at the same time as the object domain of the natural sciences. But the human sciences are concerned with cultural structures, which they find already to hand as pre-scientifically constituted objects. The concept of culture itself can no longer be adequately explained in terms of the constitution of a corresponding domain of scientific objects. Rather, the human sciences are themselves cultural constructs, which they are able to turn

back and reflect on self-referentially, for example, in the form of the history of science. For this reason Cassirer's aim is not that of Dilthey, namely to expand the critique of 'pure' reason into a critique of 'historical' reason. A philosophy of culture is to take the place of a mere expansion of the scope of the theory of knowledge. Passing via the interpretive achievements of the cultural sciences, such a philosophy will reach out to grasp the practical 'understanding of the world', the 'conception of the world' and 'forming of the world' implicit in cultural practice itself, thereby throwing light on the symbolic generation of culture:

Logic finds itself confronted with entirely new problems, as soon as it tries to look beyond the pure forms of knowledge towards the totality of spiritual forms in which a conception of the world is articulated. Each of them – such as language and myth, religion and art – now reveals itself to be a distinctive organ for the understanding of the world, and also for the creation of ideal worlds, an organ which retains its peculiar rights alongside and over against theoretically elaborated scientific knowledge.⁷

(3) Right from the beginnings of his scholarly career, Cassirer had embedded epistemological questions in historically specific cultural contexts. Above all, starting with Nicholas of Cusa, he had followed the emergence of the modern conception of nature in the Renaissance. In 1906, in the preface to the first volume of *The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophy and Science of the Modern Age*, he had declared that the new conception of natural-scientific knowledge had emerged from the confluence of 'a variety of intellectual and cultural forces'; individual philosophical systems should always be related to the 'currents and forces of general intellectual culture'.⁸ It was only twenty years later that this programme came to full fruition, when Cassirer approached more or less the same period and the same authors from a somewhat different angle, in order to develop the thesis that it was a new ethical self-conception and a new dynamic feeling for the world which were the

decisive driving forces behind the new conception of nature embodied in modern physics: 'Anyone unable to sense within himself the heroic feeling of self-assertion and of limitless self-expansion will remain blind to the cosmos and its infinity.'⁹ This enquiry into *The Individual and the Cosmos in the Renaissance* is dedicated to Aby Warburg on his sixtieth birthday. Here it becomes clear what Cassirer owed to his new environment: not so much the content of his theses as the nature and range of the historical material which supports them. For now the constellations begin to speak. Cassirer derives philosophical thoughts from allegories – changes in the philosophical concept of freedom, for example, from the transformations of the symbol of Fortuna: 'Fortuna with the wheel which seizes hold of man and spins him around, sometimes raising him high, sometimes plunging him into the depths, becomes Fortuna with the sail – and it is no longer she alone who steers the ship, but rather man himself who (now) sits at the rudder.'¹⁰

(4) But above all, in the reflecting mirror of the assembled books, Cassirer encountered the lifelong concerns of the learned collector himself. Like many of his contemporaries, who had also been influenced by Nietzsche, Warburg was interested in the return of the archaic in modernity. He too was concerned with that constellation which proved such a stimulus for the avant-garde in painting and literature, psychology and philosophy – Picasso and Braque, Bataille and Leiris, Freud and Jung, Benjamin and Adorno. Like Benjamin's 'Arcades Project', Warburg's plan for an atlas which would trace the lines of collective memory remained unfulfilled. Under the keyword 'Mnemosyne' Warburg wanted to use an ingenious montage of pictorial material to illustrate the continuing heritage of expressive gestures passed down from antiquity. In these passionate gestures, tinged with something phobic and yet aesthetically restrained, he deciphered archaic impulses. The Renaissance interested him as the stage on which the drama of the re-awakening of pagan antiquity, an antiquity now purged of its demons, was played out.