

PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY:
ERNST CASSIRER, MAX SCHELER AND THOMÉ H. FANG

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The Problematic

Both Cassirer and Scheler attempt to answer the same call for a clear, consistent and unified philosophical anthropology. Yet each adopts a different way: the functional approach for Cassirer and the metaphysical approach for Scheler. Scheler advances the metaphysical as unifying the three traditional views: theological, philosophical and scientific. According to Scheler, we are a co-worker with God, a locus and focus where Life and Spirit intercept, the ontic entity of actions, a cultural being. According to Cassirer, we are symbolic animals, the unity of the symbolic functions accounts for the unity of all human cultural phenomena. He openly and deliberately abandons the so-called metaphysical approach and places the emphasis on work.

Here we are confronted with two apparently antagonistic views which present a dialectical tension or even conflict, as Cassirer might call it. Were such a tension to remain, we would lack a clear, consistent and unified concept of human nature for neither of the alternative theories could claim to have completed the circle. For the present writers a dialectical synthesis of the Cassirerian and Schelerian views is both feasible and possible. Yet it is necessary to clarify and reinterpret certain key terms involved. Suffice it to say at the moment that at least the terms metaphysics and cultural are apparently not taken in the same light by Cassirer and Scheler. Let us first present Cassirer, then Scheler, then Fang.

The Cassirerian Approach

The only valid view of human nature approved and adopted by Cassirer is a functional one. For Cassirer:

Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature—but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of "humanity." Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A "philosophy of man" would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole.

What is this common bond whereby all human activities, achievements, experiences, in its entirety, can be held together, unified and understood as an organic whole? Cassirer tells us it is a functional unity. Given that we are viewed in terms of work and cultural achievements, the clue to human nature is in the secret of the symbol. The symbol is the open sesame, as Cassirer has repeatedly stressed. To put it explicitly and correctly, human nature resides in the subtle distinction between the symbol and the sign. In contrast to the sign or signal, a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning. Whereas a signal is a part of the world of being. For Cassirer:

Signals are “operators”; symbols are “designators.” Signals, even when understood and used as such, have nevertheless a sort of physical₂ or substantial being; symbols have only a functional value.

A sign or signal is related to that to which it refers in a fixed way, whereas a symbol, on the contrary, is not characterized by its uniformity but by its versatility. It is neither rigid nor inflexible, it is mobile. Cassirer has not merely presented an infinite vista of the world of human culture but undercut all the theories of conditioning from Pavlov to Skinner. They are misinformed in saying that there is no essential difference between animal and human psychology. Reducing human responses to mere animal reactions is canine.

With Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms the use of the symbol is not for its own sake, it is for the sake of the creation of meaning, significance and value. The philosophy of symbolic forms turns out to be a philosophy of symbolic meanings in disguise. Pertinent questions that naturally arise are: what is Cassirer’s attitude toward metaphysics? Is there any significant difference between a symbolic, cultural animal and Scheler’s concept of a cultural being?

The Schelerian Approach

Like Cassirer, Scheler comes from the tradition of German idealism but unlike Cassirer, he is a strange mixture of intellectual conflicts such as: Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergson, Dilthey, Freud, Marx, Husserl, Goethe, Spinoza (Pantheism) and Chinese thought. His study of human nature includes: the realm of values; the realm of society, history and culture; the realm of philosophical anthropology, our place in the nature of things. By philosophical anthropology he means a study of the nature of human beings in relation to biological, psychological, ideological, social and spiritual development. Scheler widened the use of the phenomenological method and applied it to ethics, religion, psychology and sociology.

Like Cassirer, Scheler is a philosopher of culture, his vision includes language, technology, the state, the arts, myth, religion, science, history and communal life. Unlike Cassirer, Scheler looks beyond the scope of the European or Western tradition, speaking as a comparative philosopher of culture from a world view. He lists three types of culture corresponding to three types of knowledge: the Judeo-Christian and Indian culture representing knowledge of salvation; the Greek and Chinese culture representing knowledge of humanities; the modern European culture representing knowledge of work and technology. He advocates that these three types of culture and knowledge be arranged in a hierarchy of values, moving from the bottom upward. Knowledge of work and technology are at the service of the humanities. Knowledge of the humanities is at the service of the Divine. Scheler then advances the thesis of self-realization as self-deification and adopts the view of God as Becoming.

The two main sources of Scheler's thought and method are the philosophy of life in the fashion of Nietzsche, Bergson and Dilthey and the method of phenomenology. He was first to criticize Husserl's method of reduction recognizing that it is included and surpassed by Buddha's.³ Throughout his life he was torn apart from within by the metaphysical dualism of Life and Spirit, though on the problem of body and soul he adopts monism or psychological parallelism. With philosophical anthropology Scheler openly declares the metaphysical as superior. For Scheler we are a cultural being, a co-worker with God, the locus and focus where Life and Spirit intercept. All this is in relation to the meaning of culture. For Scheler:

If there is a philosophical task for which our era demands a solution with unique urgency, it is that of philosophical anthropology. I am referring to a basic science which investigates the *essence* and *essential constitution* of man, his relationship to the realms of nature (organic, plant, and animal life) as well as to the source of all things, man's metaphysical origin as well as his physical, psychic, and spiritual origins in the world, the forces and powers which move man and which he moves, the fundamental trends and laws of his biological, psychic, cultural, and social evolution, along with their essential capabilities and realities.⁴

Scheler's philosophical anthropology is grounded in his philosophy of culture as a category of being and coupled with what Nicolai Hartmann calls axiological teleology or axiological idealism. His difference from Cassirer, by comparison is so obvious that not much is lacking for clarity. These two philosophers differ in approach, in conception of culture and in attitude toward metaphysics. For Cassirer, metaphysics is a name for thought inherited from a crude and unenlightened past. For Scheler, metaphysics is

taken in the Aristotelian sense as the first philosophy. For Cassirer, the concept of being has been transformed into that of becoming; the concept of essence into that of relation; the concept of substance into that of function. For Scheler, these traditional concepts retain their classic flavor. For Cassirer, culture is understood in terms of work, the sum total of creative activities. For Scheler, it is a category of being.

Cassirer is a monist committed to the principle of functional unity. Whereas Scheler is haunted by the metaphysical dualism of Life and Spirit. He desperately looks for their merger in the Absolute Being Itself whereby the passions of life are spiritualized and the spirit becomes alive. This dilemma, one of his own making, remains unsolved in his own system. Despite the obvious differences between these two philosophers, can we locate where they are similar? One place to look would be in the fundamental creative development which Scheler calls culture. Another would be in asking if Cassirer could be a metaphysician?

If taken in the traditional sense, the reply is decidedly not! If Cassirer has deliberately disassociated himself from the metaphysical it is primarily, if not purely, since he is profoundly dissatisfied with traditional metaphysics. Metaphysics in the traditional sense is defined as knowledge of Being and Reality and is shot through with dualism: existence and essence, subject and object, inner and outer, mind and body, phenomenon and noumenon, nature and spirit, transcendent and immanent, beginning with the substance/attribute ontology. It is no surprise that for Cassirer metaphysics is a name for unfortunate intellectual tendencies which disappear in critical philosophy. For Cassirer the objects of knowledge are relations not things with self-existent nature.

When taken in a truly Kantian sense, Cassirer may well be called a meta-metaphysician in that, the criticism of metaphysics contains the metaphysics of metaphysics.⁵ With relations substituting for the objects of knowledge and functions for substance, this itself would qualify Cassirer as a metaphysician of relation or function. Cassirer well deserves the title as a metaphysician, against his will perhaps!

Despite differences in detail, Cassirer's and Scheler's respective systems can be merged and synthesized into a broader theoretical framework. This we find in Thomé Fang's Scheme which represents, in the main, the Chinese view of Unity. Yet it is not confined to the Chinese. Scheler's affinity with the Chinese thought is already well established. Whereas for Cassirer the proof is indirect. It can be found in his relationship with Goethe, Leibniz and Kant.

The Fangian Approach

For Fang, ontological enquiries are grounded in philosophical anthropology, “The Chinese sense of Being is centred around essential human nature and is always existential in its philosophical import.”⁶ Like Cassirer, Fang is a philosopher of culture. Like Scheler, he is both a metaphysician and a philosopher of comparative culture. Fang encompasses four traditions: Ancient Greece, Modern Europe, China and India and four fields of discipline: science, philosophy, religion and art. He is recognized as the greatest philosophic mind China has produced in the last 500 years since Wang Yang-ming. He advocates a World Philosophical Confederacy. The Scheme, attached herewith, Fang first presented in 1969. It considers a philosophical anthropology of the past, present and future:

(Insert Scheme here)

For Fang, “Anthropologically, the concept of *man* should be taken in its multifarious significations.”⁸ In this Scheme one can recognize strains of thought derived from both Cassirer and Scheler, integrated into a seamless whole. It is a crystallization of insights distilled from the four traditions mentioned above. Apart from the Cassirerian expressions of *homo symbolicum* and the Schelerian expressions of *homo faber*, *homo sapiens* and *homo religiosus*, the East and West are perfectly fused into a whole sphere. From Plato to Plotinus, Spinoza, Hegel, Leibniz, Bergson, Whitehead, Jaspers and Teilhard de Chardin in the West; Buddha and the Mahayanaist in India, Confucius, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu in China, to mention just a few, all share in this contribution. It presents a comprehensive harmony beyond Plato’s scheme of the Four Divided Line; beyond the Neo-Platonist Plotinus’ structure of Four *Hypo-stases* (strata) in the doctrine of emanation; beyond Hegel’s all-inclusive structure of the philosophy of the Absolute Spirit as differentiated into the realm of Objective Spirit (Nature) and the realm of Subjective Spirit (Reason). An adept architect in coherence and comprehensiveness, Fang has made skillful use of: the concept of Creativity (God-Head as Creativity Itself); the principles of Continuity and of Interpenetration; the Whiteheadian idea of ingression and super-subjective aims as counterparts of the Mahayanaic concepts of the upward and downward dual-track operation of the Cosmos. This correlative structure of the natural and cultural orders, by virtue of Continuity and Interpenetration, solves Scheler’s dilemma of Life and Spirit! In religious sentiment and position it is Panentheism which implies and is implied by, the Philosophy of Creativity. According to this philosophy we are a creative agent, a co-worker with Heaven and Earth (Spirit and Nature), participating in the Cosmic process of Creative Advance, moving toward what Teilhard de Chardin calls the Omega-Point of Cosmic Life. The fountainhead of this philosophy is the *Book of Change*. It embodies two important doctrines: continuation of Creative Goodness for fulfillment of Life (Nature);

completion of Cosmic Process through Human Cultural Achievement as Creative Development. For the present writers this is a duet of the Cassirerian and Schelerian themes in tenor! The more one is familiar with World Philosophy, the more one sees in Fang's Scheme:

The integral universe, adequately depicted, is the concern of universal ontology which, encompassing Being as such in the abstract, divides itself into regional ontologies dealing with specific beings in the concrete, for the enrichment of human understanding. Formal ontology should be transformed into material ontology. This differentiation of the world into various orders necessitates at the same time that the enlightened self, for cosmic identification in his intellectual orientation, must live through the variegated experiences of different types of men, if the world is not to be impoverished and if man is not to be alienated from many precious values.

Notes

- 1) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 68.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 3) Cf. Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble, foreword August Brunner (Hamden: Archon Books, 1972), p. 92; *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Manfred S. Frings, ed., intro. Kenneth W. Stickers (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 140; *Man's Place in Nature*, trans., intro. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974), pp. 49-50; James Collins, *Crossroads in Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962), p. 115.
- 4) Max Scheler, *Philosophical Perspectives*, trans. Oscar A. Haac (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 65.
- 5) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology? and Other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 136.
- 6) Thomé H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 82.
- 7) Thomé H. Fang, "The Alienation of Man in Philosophy, Religion, and Philosophical Anthropology", Proceedings of the Fifth East-West

Philosophers' Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1969; (Taipei: The Chinese Bureau of Cultural Affairs, 1970).

- 8) Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
- 9) *Book of Change*, the original critical text of Yuan Yuan, ed., exegeses, commentaries on the Thirteen Classics (Chiangsi: Nan-chang Academy, 1815).
- 10) Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

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