

Rudolf Steiner, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Piaget

A Sketch of Possible Parallels¹

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Two decisive events in 1917 - the entry of the United States into the Great War and the Russian Revolution – marked the final demise of the Europe-centred world order, the “world of yesterday” (Stefan Zweig). New developments were set in motion, which continue to shape modern life in ways that we still do not fully understand. It was in the year of this historical watershed that Ernst Cassirer, perhaps the last “Renaissance man” of Europe, as well-versed in mathematics and science as in philosophy, art and cultural history, conceived his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*². The idea came to him in a flash as he was boarding a tram in Berlin. In the same year, and in the same city, Rudolf Steiner wrote *The Riddles of the Soul*, his main work on the theory of knowledge. So far there is nothing to suggest that either of these two paid any heed to each other. It is unlikely that they ever met. Yet in a spiritual sense they were closely akin. This is immediately apparent in the fact that both were pioneers in the fundamental re-appraisal of *Goethe's* works that has been going on for a number of years, especially in connection with his phenomenological approach to science and the form of language associated with it. The Cassirer scholar, John Michael Krois (1943-2010) regards the central idea of the philosophy of symbolic forms as “a further development of Goethe’s concept of the symbol” (Krois, 1995, p. 307). “In Cassirer’s life’s work,” he maintains, “Goethe may be seen as the hub of all his key ideas.” (*ibid.* p. 320). This is also, according to Krois, what makes him so inaccessible. Could the same not be said of Steiner?

In remarkably similar ways both Rudolf Steiner and Ernst Cassirer sought for answers to a question which was urgent in their day, and still is. Namely, how the narrowing of the scientific horizon to explanations based exclusively upon sense-perception and analytical causality could be overcome. Both arrived in the process at phenomena at the limits of scientific thinking and the associated question of how forms of knowledge that had been marginalised or rendered taboo with the advent of the scientific revolution in the 17th century could be rehabilitated. Cassirer shows that all the ways in which human consciousness has sought actively to come to terms with the world, all “symbolic forms”, must be taken seriously if culture and civilization are to be comprehensively understood and capable of further development. The first blooming of human consciousness he sees in *expressive phenomena*, from which language and myth, religion and art, ritual and technology all developed in the course of time, with modern object-consciousness not arising until very much later. “The ‘apprehension of expression’”, as he writes in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, “comes considerably earlier than the ‘knowledge of things’.” (Cassirer, 1982, p. 74).

If Cassirer had a remarkable “feel” for the aesthetic aspect of knowledge acquisition which, combined with a concern for the degeneration, indeed the wholesale loss of non-rational ways of knowing, drove him to

1. See also: Johannes Kiersch, Brücken bauen – Rudolf Steiners pädagogische Menschenkunde und die Kulturanthropologie Ernst Cassirers, in *Erziehungskunst* 1/2004, pp. 41-47.

2. See Ernst Cassirer: *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur*. (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1990).

develop a theoretical understanding of pre-rational forms of consciousness, Rudolf Steiner, from childhood on, had had personal, undeniably real experience of what he later came to call the “super-sensible”, and this created in him a basic need to find the language that would make these experiences comprehensible to others. All his early philosophical works turn around this problem, even though he never addresses it explicitly. For a time, grappling with Kant, Schelling and Fichte gives him a certain respite. But the real preparation for the subsequent discovery of rational ways of saying what had been previously unsayable are the years of intense study of Goethe’s works and his use of language. Becoming acquainted with the circle of theosophists around Marie Lang in Vienna, and especially also with Friedrich Eckstein opens up helpful insights into the thought-world of traditional esotericism (Schmidt, 2010), but still provides no convincing solution to the central problem of his life. Nor does his meditative pre-occupation, beginning in 1887, with the images of Goethe’s fairytales, which only later bore such important fruit (Kiersch, 2011). Then in 1911, in his famous lecture to the International Philosophical Congress in Bologna, Steiner first manages to provide a (for him) convincing way of rendering super-sensible perception *thinkable*.³ But it is not until the previously mentioned book “The Riddles of the Soul” of 1917 that he shows, in a highly concentrated train of thinking, how modern object-consciousness, the mentality in which we are unquestioningly at home nowadays, can be understood as a special, historically conditioned variety of natural, but suppressed, super-sensible awareness. In the terminology developed by Steiner from 1905 on, it can also be described as arising from mutual effects of *imagination*, *inspiration* and *intuition*. A key concept here is that of “deadening”, by which Steiner seeks to express the changing of an originally flowing, active mental life into the rigidly circumscribed images of modern object-consciousness and their ultimate fixation in abstract concepts. Where object-consciousness encounters riddles that are not susceptible to logic – at the “boundaries of cognition” – the thing is to patiently make the effort to lead the “deadened” mind back to the lost world of super-sensible perception. Through “contemplative experience of the boundaries of cognition” the human being has, as Goethe says, the ability to develop new *organs* for this realm, without having to relinquish either the rationality gained from object-consciousness nor individual awareness in the process.

With this idea of “contemplative experience of the boundaries of cognition” Steiner touches upon the “apprehension of expression”, the pre-rational sphere which Cassirer regarded as the source of all “symbolic forms”. And if Steiner begins by attempting to formulate the content of his super-sensible experience largely in abstract concepts in conformity with the object-related mentality of modern science, he soon changes over in addition to using other means of expression – the symbolic forms of *the arts*.⁴ He discovers the gestural language of *eurythmy*; in the colours and forms of the first *Goetheanum* he creates a composite work of art in which all the visual arts are combined in expressing the super-sensible; and by means of the special technique of blackboard drawing he used in illustrating his late lectures he demonstrates for his listeners that it is possible to learn how to prepare the mind for direct perception of the living world of super-sensible reality through “contemplative experience of the boundaries of cognition”. Thus, guided all the way by reason, he makes use of the whole spectrum of Ernst Cassirer’s *symbolic forms* and in so doing comes to a solution of the central problem of his life: to render the “spiritual world” *thinkable*, and thus to free all spheres of human culture from the thrall of an object-consciousness grown too powerful.

What is disturbing about all this for the modern mind is the notion – which does not appear in this form in Cassirer’s work – that acquiring knowledge in this way could be understood as *mental development*. This is the notion of *transmutation*, which the cultural historian, Antoine Faivre, has found in all the great esoteric traditions in human history.⁵ This is a very old idea. Walter Burkert (2003) sees it as the driving force behind the mystery centres of Antiquity. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk (1999) has identified it in the esotericism of the Enlightenment as the concept of “higher reason”. Just at the time when he was working his way into the theosophical teachings of H. P. Blavatsky, Steiner gave an enthusiastic speech on this idea to the

3. Die psychologischen Grundlagen und die erkenntnistheoretische Stellung der Theosophie. Now in CW 35, pp. 111-144. Recently edited with notes by Andreas Neider under the title: Das gespiegelte Ich. Dornach, Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 2007.

4. On Steiner’s main inspiration for doing this, see: Schmidt – Rudolf Steiner, Skizze seines Lebens. (Dornach, Verlag am Goetheanum 2011), pp. 93-94.

5. See chapter entitled: Die Komponenten der abendländischen Esoterik als Denkform in Antoine Faivre, Esoterik im Überblick. (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2001), pp. 24-34.

Monists Union of Berlin. In it he said that hitherto human development had been taken care of by natural evolution, but from now on it is the task of free human beings to advance evolution out of their own “self-motivated power of intuition”.⁶ Thus *transmutation* in Faivre’s sense, the individual knower’s autonomous and rationally directed transformation, becomes the prime mover of all progress.

Although Cassirer’s works, only now available in a complete edition, are replete with implications as to the historical circumstances in which the symbolic forms he describes first appeared, he provides no summary presentation showing their developmental sequence. In this area modern historical research is more advanced. Numerous studies on the *history of mentalities*, emanating from the *Annales* school of French historians, have pointed out the *unconscious modes of behaviour* behind the more easily described phenomena in the history of ideas and in socio-cultural history. Already in 1991 the Canadian neuro-scientist and cultural historian, Merlin Donald, put forward the bold thesis that in pre-historical times there may well have been a fully-fledged *culture without language*, a culture of mime and gesture, of dance and ritual that had not yet found their way into words. Since then the same author (2001) has produced another book containing a comprehensive account of distinct stages in the development of our modern object-consciousness. What clues does this give us to the possible historical unfolding of Cassirer’s symbolic forms?

Technology and *ritual* may be regarded as the oldest forms, involving the making of tools and adornments, together with all that belongs to a culture of bodily expression in the way of mime, gesture and forms of social interaction. With *language*, the symbolic form that developed out of all this, the door is opened to *mythic thinking*, as described in thorough detail by Cassirer, to *religion* and to the symbolic forms of *the arts*. In the sequence so far, then, *logical thinking* can be thought of as coming last, arising as it did in ancient Greece and finally arriving, via the philosophy of medieval Europe and the Renaissance, at the computer technology of today. Merlin Donald, not wishing to push the boundaries of collective, scientific cognition (in Fleck, 1980), avoids the question that naturally arises here as to whether this so clearly distinguishable sequence of symbolic forms will be extended in the near or distant future. Cassirer also shies away from such a question. But is that any reason not to ask it?

Steiner, on the other hand, has no such reservations. And he offers plausible answers. One of these involves the revival of an old idea which, in correspondence with Ernst Haeckel’s (disputed) *biogenetic law*, could be designated as the *psycho-genetic law*: the repetition in individual development of particular stages in the history of human consciousness. Certain authors have maintained that Steiner took this idea straight from Herbart and his pupils, but this is by no means its only possible source. As Heiner Ullrich and others have shown⁷, an impressive series of precursors have either seriously considered or resolutely defended this idea, among them Rousseau, Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Pestalozzi, Fröbel, and in the English-speaking world Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herbert Spencer and others. The fact that this tends to be regarded by many of today’s developmental psychologists and educational theorists as nothing more than a charming speculation devoid of knowledge value is symptomatic of the scientific mainstream’s basic distrust of any view that purports to find meaning in the world. On the other hand, certain followers of Steiner, just like those notorious members of the Herbart school, have rashly capitalised upon this grand idea as a ready-made basis for curriculum design. Steiner himself was much more cautious (Kiersch, 2004). He does seem, nonetheless, to find the idea attractive. Anyone wishing to pursue this idea further would benefit greatly from looking at what the philosopher Reto Luzius Fetz (1981) has discovered about the relationship between Jean Piaget’s psychological theory of developmental phases and Ernst Cassirer’s enquiry into the genesis of symbolic forms. As Christoph Lindenberg (1981) and Heiner Barz (1984) have previously observed, Piaget’s phases, even though his descriptions are restricted to purely cognitive abilities, are very similar in many respects to Steiner’s descriptions of the stages of child development. According to Reto Fetz (1988), Piaget regarded his research in developmental psychology merely as part of a much broader project; namely, that of bringing all areas of science under the purview of genetic structuralism.

6. Wahrheit und Wissenschaft: Autoreferat eines Vortrags im Giordano-Bruno-Bund für einheitliche Weltanschauung. Berlin 7, 5, 1902. In CW 51, pp. 300-304.

7. See Heiner Ullrich, Das Kind als schöpferischer Ursprung. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 1999. Frank Müller & Martina Müller: Pädagogik und „biogenetisches Grundgesetz“. In Zeitschrift für Pädagogik 5/2001, pp. 767-785.

“The term ‘genetic structuralism’, as introduced by Piaget, thus refers to the tendency to conceive reality as the evolutionary ordering of genetically determined structures emerging one from the other in ever higher forms.” (Fetz, 1988, p. 176)⁸

The well-known stages of cognitive development in children, as discovered by Piaget, correspond in many ways to Cassirer’s scenarios of emergence. Thus – according to Fetz – the transition from sensory-motor intelligence to representational thinking corresponds to Cassirer’s step from the *presentational* to the *representational* (Cassirer, 1982, p. 332); the transition from concrete to formal operations to Cassirer’s distinction between *concrete* thinking and the *speculative* thinking that arose from it (*ibid.* p. 372). It is immediately apparent that these many points of overlap between Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and Piaget’s work in genetic structuralism could be the key to opening up the as yet little explored riches of Steiner’s ideas on the evolution of the world and its relationship to individual human development.

This is particularly relevant to the issues surrounding the idea of *genetically-based aesthetics*, as outlined elsewhere by Reto Fetz in 1982. In this context he refers in passing to a study by the art critic Suzi Gablik (1976), in which she traces the structures of individual mental development in the *history of art*. In contrast to neo-Darwinists who summarily reject any notion of direction in evolution, she sees in the realm of painting a meaningful series of steps leading towards the abstract art of the 20th century. In a similar vein Rudolf Steiner suggests to the teachers of the first Waldorf school that they think of evolution in the Goethean sense of a metamorphic series of unfolding forms culminating in the mind-endowed human being, as had been envisaged in German classicism and romanticism, above all by Herder and Novalis. In keeping with this also is a classic feature of the Waldorf curriculum. It was a stroke of genius on Steiner’s part to suggest as a worthy subject for upper school art history the transition from ancient Egyptian to ancient Greek sculpture, followed by the step in painting from Giotto to Rembrandt. According to the theory of cultural epochs upon which the teaching of history in Waldorf schools is based, the former represents the transition from the era of the *sentient soul* to that of the *rational soul*, the latter that from the rational to the *consciousness soul* era. What the study of such developmental steps in cultural history could do for the self-assurance of young people going through puberty could well be regarded as an urgent question for educational theorists to clarify (Bartoniczek, 2014). Further examples are not in short supply.

The striking parallels between Ernst Cassirer’s description of the genesis of symbolic forms in the course of human history, the stages of cognitive development in the individual child according to Jean Piaget, and Steiner’s anthroposophical account of evolution as sketched here are in need of more exact elaboration. This, of course, cannot be regarded as a solid theory. Nevertheless, the current debate on esoteric forms of knowledge, especially in relation to Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, could be given a considerable boost by an initial look into this set of relationships, however provisional it might be.

8. See Reto Luzius Fetz, Benedikt Seidenfuß, Sebastian Ullrich (Eds.): *Whitehead – Cassirer – Piaget. Unterwegs zu einem neuen Denken*. Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2010.

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