

Jean Lassègue:

Cassirer's Transformation: From a Transcendental to a Semiotic Philosophy of Forms

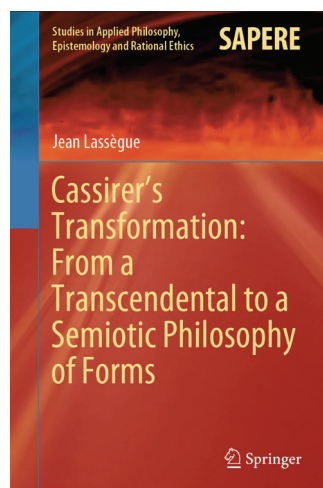
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The overarching aim of Lassègue's book is to develop what he calls a "Semiotic Philosophy of Forms." He explains it in the introduction as follows: "[My purpose] is to clarify the status Ernst Cassirer ascribed the transcendental point of view, understood in the sense of the conditions of possibility enabling to account for the diversity of types of knowledge" (p. vii). Broadly speaking, the book examines the transcendental conditions at work within cultural symbols along two main lines of inquiry. First, it offers a critical account of the historical conditions that made the emergence of the natural sciences possible. Second, it develops an assessment of the cultural forms of "myth," "language," "science," and "technology" as cultural symbols. To this end, Lassègue divides his study into two parts: Epistemology (pp. 5 – 94) and Semiotics (pp. 94 – 182).

The first part advances two broad arguments. First, according to Lassègue, a significant portion of Cassirer's work is devoted to examining the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, but not from a purely philosophical standpoint; rather, he approaches them historically. In this section, Lassègue assesses the findings of Cassirer's historical studies, particularly those devoted



to the Renaissance, and shows that the overarching aim of these investigations is to develop a systematic account of how natural language is transformed into mathematical and physical formulations.

Through a careful examination of Cassirer's historical studies, Lassègue shows that their central outcome is the postulation of a "symbolic institution of the [physical and mathematical] signs" (p. 72). Yet this achievement gives rise to the first major problem: "if mathematics indeed plays a constitutive role in the deployment of the symbolic forms specific to the natural sciences... it does not however bear an *organic* relation with what presents as objects in other symbolic forms" (p. 72). As is well known, according to the central thesis of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, although each symbolic form develops independently, and therefore according to its own internal law, all symbols coexist harmoniously but, at the same time, hierarchically within the cultural system.

However, Lassègue points out that this apparent divergence between science – in its mathematical and physical forms – and the other symbolic forms makes it possible to formulate Cassirer's most important argument for coherence of the symbolic forms, namely, that the relation that unifies cultural expressions is neither a serial relation nor a mathematical function, but rather the meaning of signs and the process through which they are constituted. From this perspective, the fundamental question formulated by Kant – how is knowledge possible? – could no longer be answered by reference to any particular form or activity. Instead, the question must be approached by examining how cultural manifestations constitute their own signs and meanings.

In the section devoted to Semiotics, Lassègue draws on these previous findings to assess the cultural forms of myth, language, science, and technology. The first task he undertakes, following Cassirer, is to clarify what knowledge is. His answer locates the relation between symbolic forms and signs at the center of the question. To illustrate this point, he explains that, in myth, the sign presents the thing as an immediate reality, whereas science recognizes that its formulations establish a mediation between the given and reality. In other words, the determination of knowledge depends on the role of the sign as a mediator of reality. In this context, the task of philosophy would be to assess all symbolic forms while taking the mediation performed by signs as the distinguishing criterion for determining the kind of knowledge each contributes to the larger system.

The second step consists in defining what a symbolic form is – and what it is not. As for its negative delimitation, Lassègue avoids presenting it as a "conceptual framework (like Darwinism or formalism) or a methodological

tool (like differential calculus of perspective" (p. 103). Instead, symbolic forms are presented as "modes of knowledge...which distinguish themselves by their greater or lesser proximity with respect to the fundamental genre of signifying activity" (p. 109). Once again, philosophical knowledge is emphasized as the means through which the relation each symbol bears to the other forms within the cultural sphere can be delineated. Thus, for Lassègue, "it is then a matter of thinking about symbolic forms as being effects of transcategorical operations ensuring in a same movement the transformation of significations and the transformation of the interpretive frameworks which make them possible" (p. 116).

The third and final step (Chapter 5) examines the relations among the three semiotic operators corresponding to each of the selected symbolic forms – myth, language, science, and technology – within the framework of the progression proposed by Cassirer in his major work: expression, evocation, and objectification. Although this progression is developed in Cassirer's *Phenomenology of Cognition*, Lassègue emphasizes that expression cannot be reduced to myth and its rituals, or to language and its expressions; it also emerges in technical and scientific forms since both seek to resolve and reconcile what is diverse within unified expressions.

Regarding "Evocation," Lassègue recalls that this stage is characterized by the search for coherence in the operations of symbolic forms, without sacrificing the flexibility that allows each symbol to operate across different contexts. Thus, myth is characterized by the organization of perception through the classification of the environment into regions or affective intensities, enabling members of a community to distinguish or identify a phenomenon as either belonging or being external to a given principle. In language, the constitution of concepts occurs either through the deduction of generalities or through induction based on exemplarity. In science, evocation operates through the concept of the group since the understanding of the individual derives from its possible membership in the criterion that constitutes the group itself. Finally, evocation in the technical form takes on a normative character, since it manifests itself in the production of tools designed for particular purposes, thereby specifying the scope of their application.

The semiotic operator "Objectification" concerns the pure comprehension of signs. In the case of myth, this comprehensive dimension invokes the idea of order or cosmic destiny as its interpretive axis. What matters is no longer the appearance of things, as was the case in the expressive stage, but rather the meaning that a sign bears in relation to a particular destiny or design. In

language, the problem of idiomaticity, rather than representing a constraint imposed on languages by their own grammar or semantics, reveals that every language seeks, on its own terms, to construct objects of knowledge through its particular linguistic resources. Science, for its part, seeks to conceptualize nature through its own signs, ensuring that these signs function as a pure and comprehending mediation of the phenomena they represent. Finally, in the technical form, the creation of tools is oriented toward proposing solutions for interacting with nature.

In the conclusion, Lassègue highlights the value of symbols as rational resources through which it becomes possible to address the Kantian question concerning the possibility of knowledge. Each form and its signs constitute in themselves a means of understanding the Kantian relation between understanding and sensibility. For Cassirer, this synthesis always takes place within the framework of symbolic activity, but above all within the context of the particular rules governing each modality. Thus, philosophical inquiry would not merely provide an interpretive resource for investigating how knowledge operates in myth or science, for instance; it would also establish the limits proper to each form and determine how those limits should be constrained or redirected by another form.

In short, Lassègue's project is twofold. On the one hand, he offers a comprehensive study of Cassirer's work, demonstrating the unity and coherence that persist even across the author's most diverse writings and, in doing so, underscoring the importance of approaching his complete work as a coherent whole. On the other hand, his project is explicitly oriented toward examining this totality through what he calls a "semiotic philosophy of forms," as the title suggests. Ultimately, this amounts to a novel interpretive proposal that offers new interpretive insights into Cassirer's thought.

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