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by Susanne K. LANGER

The most original of Ernst Cassirer's contributions to philosophy, and perhaps the most important as well, is his treatment of the different forms of symbolic presentation and representation which underlie the peculiarly human mental functions of imagination, conceptual formulation, speech, and — from very primitive beginnings — the logical intuitions that are gradually elaborated into discursive reasoning. The study of language and verbal symbolism is old, but the notion of non-verbal symbolic forms, other than picture-writing, sign language, i.e. : codes replacing words, is essentially a product of the present century. For philosophers it is associated chiefly with the name of Ernst Cassirer ; for psychologists, particularly psychiatrists, and for the general educated public, with that of Sigmund Freud.

It would be hard to find two thinkers more unlike each other than these two. They were both creative and learned men, whose contributions cannot be briefly summarized ; some knowledge of their ideas has to be assumed here. A reader with this background, however, may find it odd, at first, that they should be compared at all. Cassirer was a philosopher, an epistemologist and metaphysician, whose basic orientation stemmed from Immanuel Kant ; Freud was a practicing doctor of medicine, whose interest in mental phenomena had arisen from clinical observations. Yet each in his own way came upon their common fundamental insight — the realization that all human experience is pervaded with symbolic values and all thinking mediated by symbolization, much of which goes on below the level of consciousness.

The discovery of unconscious symbol formation and symbol using, however, presented very different problems to those two investigators, who consequently were of little if any help to each other. Freud believed that his analysis of the motivations underlying neurotic behavior and suffering, which often revealed very primitive, instinctive attitudes and morally reprehensible desires as the meanings of the symbolic images unconsciously formed and presented particularly in dreams, was unmasking true "human nature," going back to evolutionary beginnings. Social life, he found, had spread a veneer of apparent rationality and moral aims over each individual's life of animal needs and impulses ; but those impulses, mainly sexual and aggressive, though repressed by firmly established standards of decency and duty, were none the less active, exerting a constant influence on the system of ideas, intentions and emotions which operated at the conscious level of mental life. Perhaps the fact that those forces were masked by the moral order society has set up in their place, so they seem "deeper" than the overlying cultural strata, made Freud feel that they were "more real" than the values we consciously pursue. They are hereditary, perpetual, biological compulsions.

His venture into the prehistory of human society, the substance of his *Totem und Tabu* (1913), is based on the premise that the "Oedipus complex," the basic jealousy every young child feels toward the parent of its own sex with regard to the parent of opposite sex, is inherent in the structure of family life ; a structure that is inevitable because of man's extraordinarily long infancy, which makes the period of maternal care for one child overlap the birth of the next. From the subjective situation the family pattern engenders in the children he derived the elaborate customs of totemism found in Australian, Melanesian and North American tribal organizations. The schizophrenic syndrome commonly found in members of civilized societies, he held, presents a throw-back to the primitive source of all the rules and rites humanity has gradually built up to obviate the ever-lurking family conflicts.

Cassirer, meanwhile, found a different set of issues arising from the discovery that symbolic forms are made by unconscious men-

tal work, and come to awareness as spontaneous, complete images or dreams that are not recognized as symbols. He was intrigued by the epistemic problems of the origin and function of such symbolism, which served poorly if at all for the chief purpose of recognized symbols, such as words — communication. His concern was not so much with the specific meanings of these products of imagination, as with the peculiar mode in which they incorporated and conveyed meanings of any sort. Freud had found them to be always concrete presentations ; Cassirer noted, further, that they functioned essentially like metaphors, addressed directly to the intellectual responses of intuition, however precarious and incomplete that peculiarly human activity might be ; very appropriately be called them “metaphorical symbols”.

The first stage of semantic insight seems to be no more than a sense of significance, making the unspecified conceptual content appear as a quality rather than a meaning ; the subjective aspect is a strong emotional feeling toward the expressive form, the proto-symbol. That feeling is best designated as awe, and the quality as holiness. Here is the beginning of religion, of myth-making, magical thinking and ritual practices : the setting up of the first symbolic entities and actions, to evoke, center and hold conceptions far beyond the range of anyone’s thinking — perhaps before verbal thinking, that is, before speech ; the earliest phase of intellection, a close forerunner and source of speech.

So far, Cassirer certainly agreed with Freud’s treatment of phantasies as products of unconscious thought processes, and both thinkers were struck by the fact that the metaphorical symbols were most commonly taken not as expressive forms, but simply as actual objects, true stories, efficacious rites. Yet their ideas never met and fitted together, because they came to their similar insights through such widely disparate avenues of thought. Consequently they headed in different directions : Freud, having discovered how the avowed moral values of civilized (or even savage) life repressed and masked people’s unavowed, amoral, instinctive impulses and feelings, pursued the downward course from the various psychiatric symptoms which beset his patients to the deep strata of animal needs and reactions — aggressive, sexual, voracious — which seemed to be the substance of unadorned, “real” human nature ; Cassirer, coming from his

epistemological studies in the logic of science, mathematics and verbal communication, sought to follow the upward course of mental evolution from its lowliest beginnings to its highest reaches so far attained. If one compares Freud's *Totem and Taboo* with Cassirer's *Language and Myth, Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*, and above all the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, it certainly appears at first as if Freud were digging down to the very roots of culture, below the level of even the lowest moral ideal to the "Id," the organic structure of human cerebral action, unconscious as our physiological activities of metabolism, circulation and gas exchanges — down to our animal inheritance ; while Cassirer dealt with intellect, rational judgment, moral principles, and all those consciously held ideas and admitted motives which Freud considered surface phenomena masking the unacceptable facts of brute nature.

Yet, paradoxically, by a closer comparison one is brought to a reassessment of their respective symbolistic studies as contributions to anthropology and evolution theory. The phenomena on which Freud based his speculations are pathological, however common they may be (the common cold afflicts us all, but that does not make it a normal or healthy state) ; they are products of social pressures that could not occur in a precultural phase of man's existence. The evil thoughts and wishes, too, which have to be repressed, can carry on their secret life only in a society ; and although they are perennial, they must have undergone development with the growth of language and concomitant powers of formulation, cognition and memory, so that unconscious psychical functions — repression, for one, but also the "mechanisms" of condensation, displacement, etc. — change somewhat in the course of evolution. Even perception is not the same from one epoch to another. A reversion to former conditions of a living stock is, therefore, never more than a superficial appearance created by the similarity of a few characteristics of the modern pathological condition and the (known or supposed) previously normal one. The feral nature revealed in the removal of repressive forces by analysis is not a former healthy human nature, but the same primitive ingredient that has been repressed in every stage of culture, and in each has provided the tension between desires and prohibitions which is the source of

human notions of good and evil. An early stage of any organism or even any function is full of potentiality ; a reversion from a developed form may mimic an immature phase, but lacks the push and power, the open-ended process of growth, that characterizes the embryonic structure and makes it a presumptive imago. The senile or pathological decadence cannot really recapitulate the genesis of normal life, personal or social.

Cassirer's study of unconscious symbol-formation led him to a different hypothesis concerning its primary function, namely, that it is the normal and healthy, immature stage of symbolization, and serves to give a first expression to ideas not otherwise expressible as yet. In times of sudden, precipitate mental growth, when new concepts fairly push each other, the creation of fantastic images and beliefs is apt to have a hey-day, until its presentations are gradually overtaken, to varying degrees, by more literal conception. To this day, any really new concept appears in more or less mythical form. (Think only of Freud's several "agencies," the Id, the Ego, the World, the Superego, battling with each other in realms of the Conscious, Preconscious, Subconscious, all fed from the Unconscious, with "energies" taken from one and given to another. His concept of mind was entirely new to his age and, of course, to him ; these were his only possible figures of thought).

The "throwback" to primitive ways of thinking and speaking in concrete, metaphorical terms, which psychiatrists often observe in schizophrenic patients, seems indeed to be a resort to an older mode of symbolism, the mode of mythical imagination which includes the personified presentation of objects, powers, causes, dangers, and other wholly heterogeneous things. It is quite in the order of nature for frustrated creatures, not only human beings, to substitute some other function in their repertoire for a lost or blocked one, and meet abnormal situations with quite abnormal behavior that will serve their purposes. That is the meaning of calling necessity "the mother of invention." But what necessity brings to birth is only invention, i.e., application of existing means to new demands ; it never creates really new potentialities ; true novelties arise only by evolutionary processes, and emerge because they are ready, not because they are needed. Even the earliest dream symbolism formed in response to repression could

have occurred only within some cultural frame, where social demands already were imposed to block direct consummation of animal impulses, sexual or other.

Cassirer's interpretation does not contradict the Freudian concept nor deny its clinical importance, and, indeed, supports Freud's findings in regard to the depth and obscurity of spontaneous symbol formation ; but it does not present that process in phylogeny, in the beginning of symbolic thinking, as motivated by moral fears of the basic Id-functions. Such fears arise only with the development of the Ego, and that means with language, i.e., within society. His backward extrapolation of psychological phases which are found today in the origination of new intellectual perspectives led him to an earlier phenomenon, the making of the metaphorical symbol as such ; he was reasoning from one normal function to another, a hypothetical primitive one, that entered into the making of thought itself. This protosymbolism, according to his view, probably appeared first in emotionally engendered ritual, which was mystical and magical, but —unlike a neurotic's compulsive ritualized practices —not subjective, personal and private, but objective and public, and with the rise of tribal organizations, morally sanctioned. It lives on through the epoch of language-making and provides the story material of communication in social intercourse, the fabric of myth and religion. It is the beginning of intellectual life. As a normal phylogenetic phenomenon it has a presumptive future, such as an *ad hoc* defense mechanism would be unlikely to have.

Now, this brings the comparison of Freud's anthropological speculations with Cassirer's to a peculiar pass : Freud thought himself to be close to the "grass roots" of human nature, whereas Cassirer was investigating those higher mental processes which the psychoanalyst viewed as deceptive "rationalizations" of irrational instinctive acts. Yet the academic philosopher was, in fact, dealing more broadly and anthropologically with the oldest form of symbolic expression ; and by tracing in reverse the rise of human mentality he probably delved deeper into its origins in metaphorical proto-symbolism than Freud by his study of the pathological resort to that same instrument where it served a counsel of despair. Cassirer's reflections on the unconscious

processes of presentation of ideas — sometimes very abstract ideas — in cryptic imagery with extraordinary emotional values gave him insight not so much into biological needs and stresses as into the phases of feeling, conception, imagination, the intuition of significance, and finally the conscious construction of formally related concepts and their expression in words, whereby man's mind has grown from lowly but human beginnings to articulate thought, the source of science, justice, social control (for good or ill), and — to the present state — the whole phenomenology of knowledge.

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