

Symbolic Animals

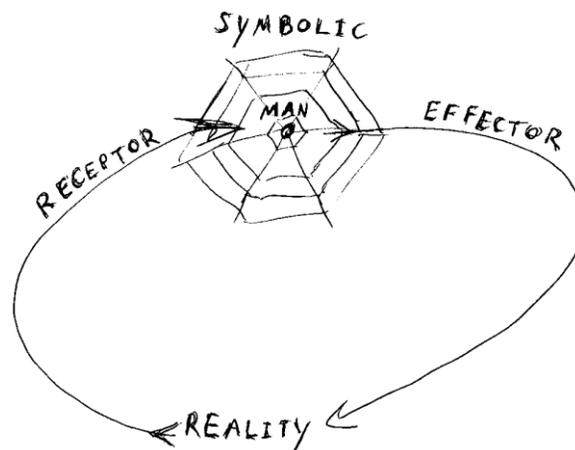
Roi Wagner

1. Ernst Cassirer entangles us in a symbolic web

“The great thinkers who have defined man as an *animal rationale*,” writes Ernst Cassirer, “were not empiricists, nor did they ever intend to give an empirical account of human nature. By this definition they were expressing rather a fundamental moral imperative. Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man’s cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as *animal symbolicum*” (Cassirer 1974, 25-26).

Cassirer wrote this statement in exile, in the early forties, at a time when what he saw as rationality had little to do with human existence. This was the statement of a philosopher whose hopes and faith – the enlightenment’s hopes and faith that had become anachronistic even before his own birth – had succumbed to the reality of World Wars. Rationality became too utopian an ideal. Symbolic forms were the next best thing.

For Cassirer the function of symbolic forms was to mediate between man and reality. “Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a *third link* which we may describe as the symbolic system ... No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. *Language, art, and religion* are the parts of this universe. They *are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web* of human experience. All human *progress* in thought and experience *refines upon and strengthens this net*. No longer can man confront reality immediately, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances” (Cassirer 1974, 24-25, emphases mine).



Cassirer’s model (my diagram)

To characterize “man” is something I’d rather not do, for reasons that will become clear later. But given *his* view of man, it is reasonable to characterize *this* bitter and disappointed man, Ernst Cassirer, as a man busy with “enclosing” himself in a “symbolic net,” a neo-Kantian scheme that will keep the senseless, painful, noumenal reality at bay.

The evolution of symbolic forms (language, myth, religion, art and science) from primitive (according to Cassirer: African, American Indian, etc.) to the most highly developed (Indo-Germanic, of course) runs from concrete to abstract, from singular to general, and from substantial to relational. Progress therefore consists in strengthening the abstractive, generalizing and relational symbolism that shields us from a reality that has, for Cassirer, become unbearable. This had already been Cassirer’s attitude early on, which earned him the mockery of the student audience in his Davos debate with Heidegger – an audience that portrayed Cassirer as a dusty relic mumbling about culture. But given his interpretation (in the *Myth of the State*) of fascism as a regression to a mythical symbolic form, thickening our symbolic web became for Cassirer, in his later years, an even more urgent and compelling task.

Cassirer is part of an important philosophical tradition that thinks it most essentially human to dwell under the authority of what man constructs to separate men from reality (and, I guess, separate women too, who are also often forced to live in the worlds that men construct, even when, as in Cassirer’s work, they are hardly ever mentioned). I find this trend admirable, compelling, reprehensible and haunting. This is what I would like to dwell on here.

2. Charles Peirce turns us into symbols striving for reality

Cassirer’s “third link” stems from a Kantian tradition (although Cassirer’s version is much more flexible and man-made than the schematic link that Kant had allowed). But there’s nothing essentially neo-Kantian in thinking of subjecting human essence to the authority of signs. And so I’d like to move on to Charles Peirce, a 19th century American scholar, the father of the still dominant (at least in the U.S.) pragmatist school of thought (or, as Peirce preferred, pragmaticist – a word so ugly, he hoped, that no one would take it away from him to abuse it).

According to Peirce: “the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign ... That is to say, the man and the ... sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought” (Peirce 1991, "Some consequences of four incapacities," 84).

Of course, men, unlike most signs, have emotions and consciousness, but these Peirce attributes to the animal part of man. The essentially human, that is, the train of thought, is a material train of signs; whatever is unthinkable is essentially removed from humanity for Peirce.

So, as with Cassirer, the essentially human remain under the authority of the symbolic. But how do signs and reality relate for Peirce? “The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. . . . those two series of cognitions – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied” (Peirce 1991, "Some consequences of four incapacities," 82). Everything other than that which the community will eventually continually reaffirm might as well be left outside our notion of reality.

This form of realism descended from the scientific world view of the early modern period, the time when scientific truth was formed in the image of Boyle’s ideal of a community of peers observing together and arguing toward consent – an ideal closely related to the political parliamentary ideal (see Shapin and Schaffer’s *Leviathan and the Air-pump*). Instead of putting symbols between man and reality, as did Cassirer, this form of realism equates man with symbols, and views reality as those symbols that will remain. This was a form of realism that young Peirce, a full member in the symbolic world of academic discourse, could easily endorse.

But as Peirce grew older he found himself cast out of the world of symbolic academic debate (partly due to his style of reasoning and partly due to his relationship with his future wife while separated, but not yet divorced, from his former wife). The bitterness directed by the older Peirce at the symbolic intellectual world was explicit:

“Some years ago I wrote a book entitled ‘New Elements of Mathematics’. It was such a book as a man with considerable natural aptitude for logic and mathematics, who had devoted the best of his time for forty years to the study of the former . . . was able to write by devoting a year exclusively to it. If the author had been a German . . . it would have been in print long ago. . . . [But a] publisher who was so well versed in the elements of mathematics [as to have published a book claiming mathematical results which are well known to be false] was not convinced by it . . . even though he took the book home with him and glanced at it during the evening. A writer on the logic of mathematics in America must meet American requirements. . . . The modern book . . . in order to be approved, must be approved by a densely stupid and unspeakably indolent young lady as

she skims its pages while looking out of the window to be admired. In order to be put into such a shape that it cannot fail to be apprehended by her ... not the smallest step shall be left to her own intellectual activity” (Peirce 1998, “New Elements,” 300-301) (to avoid portraying Peirce as too misogynistic, note his subsequent lashing at “overfed and logy” schoolboys and at their typical teacher “who knows nothing about logical structures”).

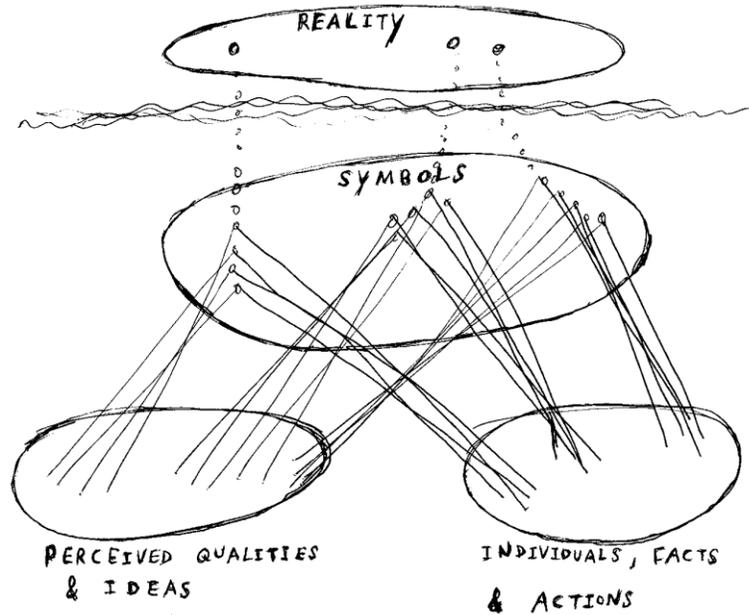
The experience of this older, bitter Peirce affects his attitude toward reality as well. If for the younger Peirce reality was the eventual course of the human=symbolic reasoning, for the older Peirce, as for Cassirer, the symbolic becomes something that stands between man and a further and further removed reality.

For the older Peirce signs exist through their actual replicas (Peirce 1998, “New Elements,” 321) (spoken words, written marks, etc.). But this phenomenal existence “is for an instance and it is gone. Let it be no more and it is absolutely nothing.” An enduring reality, therefore “only exists as an element of the regularity,” where regularity here means anything from a self controlled habit to a law of nature. “And the regularity is the symbol. Reality, therefore, can only be regarded as the limit of the endless series of symbols” – a necessarily unbounded series of controlled interpretation that must, according to Peirce, eventually “have a limit” (Peirce 1998, “New Elements,” 323). Now Peirce’s definition of limit is crucial here: “an object which comes *after* all the objects of that series ...” (Peirce 1998, 538, emphasis mine). Reality is delayed from what was formerly described as “a time sufficiently future” to the limit beyond all future.

A careful reading would show that the differences between Peirce’s earlier and later forms of realism are more nuanced than I portrayed them here. But the later tone gives much more weight to reality as deferred, as that which here and now is only beginning to emerge: “It is in the nature of the sign to be an individual replica and to be in that replica ... an embryonic reality endowed with the power of growth into the very truth, the very entelechy of reality” (Peirce 1998, “New Elements,” 324).

Moreover, while reality is being deferred, the symbolic realm that stands between us and reality becomes ever thicker (as Cassirer would indeed like it to be). The ontology of the older Peirce consists of a universe of regularities (symbols), a universe of perceived qualities or unactualized ideas, and a universe of worldly individuals, actions and facts. The world of man is the world of symbolic regularities that relate perceived qualities to worldly actions (like Cassirer’s symbols that mediate the receptor-effector system). And this world, the world of man that is not yet reality, grows exponentially thicker. For the younger Peirce signs were divided into 3 kinds. But later, each sign was analyzed according to 3 dimensions each divided into 3 kinds, yielding altogether $3^3=27$ kinds (only 10 of which Peirce deemed possible) (Peirce 1998, “Nomenclature and divisions of

triadic relations, as far as they are determined," 296). Then the number of dimensions grew to 10, yielding $3^{10}=59,049$ (Peirce 1998, "from letters to William James," 501) kinds of signs, whose classification Peirce could only barely embark on in the few years he had left to live.



Peirce's model (my diagram)

3. Me, trying to get away

Let's recapitulate. So far I've told a story of two thinkers, who saw the essence of man in the symbolic. The first, Cassirer, put the symbolic between man and reality, apparently to distance himself from reality's gruesome vicissitudes. The second, Peirce, attempted to reduce reality to the eventual course of symbolic reasoning, but, rejected by his contemporary world of academic discourse, came to think of reality as further and further removed, and of the symbolic as an ever thicker infinite path *after* which reality would come.

This story, a three-penny psychology of philosophers, doesn't live up to the demands of historians' methodology. To meet the demands of academic historians I would have to delve into diaries and letters, and, by means of comparison with other relevant philosophers, set apart the impact of Cassirer's and Peirce's intellectual influences from the impact of their own social and psychological course. But I'm not a historian. I am not telling this story as a historian. I'm telling it as a philosopher. And as a philosopher, I do not need these stories to be historically true, I only need to make them thinkable. And if I

want to be an interesting or relevant philosopher, I need to make them interestingly or relevantly thinkable.

Now the interest or relevance of this story to what's going on here and now is easy to demonstrate: this story is a projection of my own predicament on two dead white men. The person who is really concerned here about his entanglement in worlds subjected to the authority of symbols is, of course, me. As I do my academic reading and writing, taking a Facebook or email break every 50 or 15 or 5 minutes, reading reports about how everything around is going to hell, I feel as if my research (as Cassirer might claim) is an autonomous symbolic web that comes between me and reality; or at best, I feel (like Peirce might) that my work is something that would only become a reality after traversing an infinitely long and exponentially exploding path. On the other hand, if I drag myself away from my desk into the supposed "real world," I am again surrounded by symbols: the signs and slogans of demonstrations, symbolic acts of resistance, an entirely symbolic politics that even when we call it "direct action" seems to be removed from reality in at least one crucial sense: the sense of being able to change it.

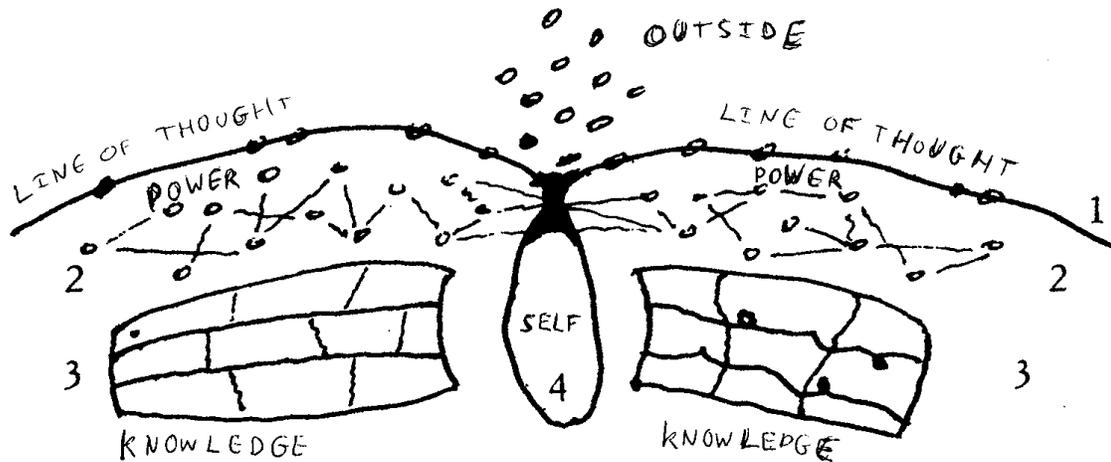
I have no nostalgia for a direct grasp of reality without symbols. I might not be as old as Cassirer and Peirce, but I am already old enough to view attempts to break through the symbolic and reach into reality "itself" as bad remakes of Hollywood movies of *The Matrix* sort. But I'm still not happy with the current state of the symbolic, the authority of which is essential, if not to man in general, than to working philosophers – an essential authority that comes between philosophy and what it constructs as reality.

4. Foucault-by-Deleuze releases us from the symbolic web, but ties a noose around our necks

So let's make one more philosophical attempt, one that might help us go beyond an entanglement under the authority of symbols into a livelier notion of humanity. This notion comes from Deleuze's reinterpretation of Foucault (to be sure, if you happen to know Foucault and don't recognize anything Foucauldian in what I present below, it's not your fault – it's Deleuze; he allows himself quite a bit of philosophical license in his interpretations).

Like Peirce, Foucault-interpreted-by-Deleuze also offers us a triple ontology: knowledge, power and self (Deleuze 1988, 114). The world of knowledge is comparable to Peirce's symbolic: it is the stratified, repetitive, habitual tying together of singular entities. The next world, that of power, is comparable to Peirce's world of individuals, action and facts: it's a world of the power relations between singular entities, that is, the ways they restrict each other's possibilities. The third world, the world of self, like Peirce's world of

perceived qualities and ideas, is a “subjective” world; but it would stretch the analogy much too far to tie Peirce’s and Foucault’s “subjective” worlds together. Indeed, for Peirce this is a passive world, and for Foucault-by-Deleuze this is the reflexive world par excellence.



1. Line of the outside
2. Strategic zone
3. Strata
4. Fold (zone of subjectivation)

Foucault-by-Deleuze’s model (Deleuze’s diagram, my annotations)

For Foucault-by-Deleuze the self is not a bunch of perceived qualities and vague ideas, but a constellation of forces: it is a space of forces acting on themselves. Foucault gave us some examples that make this notion of self more concrete. Foucault’s first example of a self is the classical aristocratic Greek form of governing one’s diet, one’s economy and one’s sexuality in order to be able to govern others. Then Foucault elaborated the Christian self that controls one’s own desires in order to submit oneself to God (and its church). And then Foucault died, but he did leave us enough hints about modernity to reconstruct at least the early modern self as a reflexive application of disciplinary forces. And here, in our post-modern world, we can speculate about the reflexive application of consumerist forces and the selves that are constituted through them.

There are several reasons why I bring you this model. First, it fits the story that I’ve just projected on Cassirer and Peirce: Deleuze insists that it was Foucault’s disappointment with political struggles in the 1970s that led him to go from an inquiry of knowledge

(parallel to Peirce's and Cassirer's symbolic) to an investigation of the self. So here too philosophy may be a result of a crisis of the philosopher's own world view.

Second, this model allows the symbolic an important place, but does not over-privilege its authority with respect to other phenomena. In a world of knowledge (symbolic regularities), which depend on coalitions of active powers and reflexive self making, there's enough ontological variety not to get too caught up in symbols. Here symbols are simply sediments of real forces, as opposed to Cassirer's symbols that come between reality and ourselves.

Third, the ontology of this model is more amenable to change. Since everything here depends on regularities and coalitions between fleeting singular forces, the formations we encounter of knowledge, power and self are subject to undirected historic variation, as opposed to Peirce's convergence toward an ultimate eternal reality.

But all these nice aspects of this model come with a price (or, perhaps, bring an additional boon): this model demotes the human. The human, according to Foucault, is not an eternal essence, symbolic or otherwise. The human is a specific constellation of powers, only some 300 years old and already on the verge of extinction. According to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, the human, as of the 18th century, no longer has an ideal essence, but is a specific reflexive application of the forces that make our labor, language, and life finite. The human emerges as nothing but a highly limited form of work, speech and organism. But labor, language and life can change dramatically as we change our means of production, channels of communication and modes of survival; and humans will transform even more radically if the reflexive application of forces that constitute our selves end up revolving around elements other than labor, language and life.

For Foucault-by-Deleuze all this is highly subject to change, because at bottom our thought, which is our vehicle for making our selves, is not so much Peirce's rational train of signs, but "a dice-throw. What the dice-throw represents is that thinking always comes from the outside" (Deleuze 1988, 117). This outside is the outside of chance encounters with changing singular forces that can weave new relations of power, new formations of knowledge and new reflexive applications of selves. All this makes the question of the human and of the authorities that regulate it a temporary question, a passing one, no longer a fateful and permanent question that would inevitably hold us down – a question we needn't dwell on so much and so seriously.

But in order to give up the human, Foucault-by-Deleuze sets up the self as a center of inquiry. At this center, "at the place of the fissure [the reflexive self] the line [of thought] forms a Law, the 'center of the cyclone, where one can live and in fact where Life exists

par excellence'. ... This is the central chamber, which one need no longer fear is empty since one fills it with oneself" (Deleuze 1988, 122-123). This statement is perhaps too sketchy and obscure to work with, but I find that Deleuze's ontological diagram (see above) suggests, more than anything else, a noose hanging over a gallows with its trapdoor open. Foucault-by-Deleuze may have rid us of the symbolically confined man of Cassirer and Peirce, but in return he offers another form of enclosure.

5. Martin Buber makes a cameo appearance to point a way out

To counter this predicament, I will bring up, deus-ex-machina, the person under the sign of whose name I was paid, among other things, for giving this talk. Two small remarks, not necessarily central to Buber's thought, and not presuming to reflect his system as a whole, but remarks that will help us loosen the noose of self making. The first remark concerns a request from the mathematician Brouwer that Buber contribute to a new univocal dictionary of scientific terms. Buber refused. He explained that "it is not the univocity of a word but its plurivocity that constitutes living language. The plurivocity creates the problematic of speech and it creates its conquest in an understanding that is not an assimilation but a fruitfulness" (Buber 1965, 180, translation adapted from Maurice Friedman's translation). In other words, if we want to change the layers of symbols that we're entangled in, that is, while remaining under the authority of signs to get away from the human, we don't need a noose of reflexive boundaries around our selves; we need a dialogue with people who use words differently than we do.

The second remark concerns what asking about the human entails. Buber writes: "you cannot invoke the root of one entity among others unless you first separate the existence of this entity from the existence of another known entity." And it is "Nature alone that serves us in this act of separation – nature, which indeed includes man too; but as we penetrate and reach into the uniqueness of man, nature must loosen its bindings and allow us to enslave this unruly creature ... to our specialized investigation" (Buber 1965, 117, my translation).

If asking about the human forces us to first *isolate* the human, to abstract it away from natural reality, and only at a second stage bring it back into a relation with this reality, then perhaps the question of the human, viewed either as a permanent essence or as a changing contingency, is not a very good question. Perhaps asking about the human necessarily entangles us into the authority of symbolic webs or puts nooses around our philosophical necks. Perhaps we should give away the assumption that the human is so damn special, and, without pretending thereby to subvert the authority of the symbols that we make to rule our lives, try to set the question of humanity aside, and think ourselves in solidarity with a more animalistic and self-less world.

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