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# Cassirer and Left-Kantianism

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## Abstract

After a brief overview of Cassirer's symbolic form argument, the discussion turns to one question: does Cassirer offer a lucid normative position in politics? My core argument is that he does not. Three arguments providing potential insights into his moral and political sensibilities are contested: the first concerns his *The Myth of the State* text; the second, the Bildung tradition; and third, his arguments on the contract and natural rights tradition. The latter argument, in particular, underpins the claim that Cassirer was sympathetic to liberalism. The concept of left-Kantianism is then examined in the context of the German socialist tradition.

**Keywords:** Cassirer; Left-Kantianism; liberalism; socialism; Marxism; symbolic form

Given Ernst Cassirer's close relation to the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism and more particularly to the philosophy of Hermann Cohen, amongst others, it could be assumed that he shared many of the left-Kantian or democratic socialist beliefs of his Marburg colleagues. However, the core aim of this paper is to critically analyse this claim. Cassirer was neither overtly politically left nor was he even straightforwardly neo-Kantian. Furthermore, it is far from clear that we should view him necessarily as an exponent of a lucid moral or political philosophy, except possibly by historical happenchance. The main theme of the paper focuses on the political dimension of Cassirer's work in the light of the historical milieu of Germany.[1]

The paper begins with a brief overview of the symbolic form argument, largely because it overshadows the discussion of both morality and politics. A primary underlying argument here is that there is tension within Cassirer's symbolic form argument, which interlaces – not always comfortably – contextual historical, genealogical, and hermeneutic themes with normative universalist claims concerning practical reason. The tension is largely between, on the one hand, an epistemic plurality of irreducible symbolic forms, each having a credibility and autonomy, and, on the other hand, a belief, variously expressed, that there is a deep-rooted a priori teleology of reason leading to modernity, natural science, and moral universalism. Commentators have placed differing emphases on this tension. Some are more or less

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content with an epistemic pluralism and play down any pressing tension with an overarching telos. Others take a more negative view of this same pluralism. The American philosopher and contemporary of Cassirer, Brand Blanshard, remarked in a review that Cassirer presents "a feast marked more by richness than by order" (Blanshard 1945, 510).[2] Others have played down the pluralism problem and give more prominence to a unifying teleological theme of progressive cultural self-liberation (Matherne 2021).[3] Others again place a much heavier stress on a symbiotic coalescence of the two dimensions. Widmer, for example, entitles Cassirer's position here as "contingent universalism" (Widmer 2024b, 466, also see Truwant 2015, 135ff). The argument of this paper is, however, that the tension remains unresolved throughout Cassirer's work.

The above multifaceted tension resurfaces, somewhat uneasily, in the accounts of both politics and morality. In terms of Cassirer's normative perspective, three arguments that try to provide some ballast for Cassirer's normative sensibilities in relation to politics are critically reviewed. The first argument concerns the substance of Cassirer's last book, *The Myth of the State*; the second argument examines the place of the German *Bildung* tradition in Cassirer's work; and the third argument examines Cassirer's Rectorial speech in Hamburg University in 1928, defending the Weimar constitution, which invoked the spirit of the European contract and natural rights tradition. The latter argument also assesses the allied claim that Cassirer was supportive of a form of political liberalism in Germany. All three arguments are considered deficient for making a solid case for Cassirer's political and moral susceptibilities. The discussion then turns directly to the core idea of "left-Kantianism." It first considers the consistency of the term "Kantianism" itself, and second, whether any specific political character should attach to it. The discussion then moves to the concept of the "left/socialism" in Germany, prior to and during the Weimar period, and whether left-Kantianism had any decisive place in this German socialist tradition up to 1930. The conclusion denies any such role. Finally, the discussion raises additional doubts concerning the whole idea of left-Kantianism itself, in terms of the role and place of academic argument in German political life during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and whether a cultural and philosophical sensitivity was intrinsically, for many, including Cassirer (before 1940), simply a self-consciously professional apolitical activity.

## The symbolic form argument

For Cassirer, one central facet of Kant's epistemic originality was that humans are not just receptors to external stimuli; we also act spontaneously and shape the world. We are epistemic world builders.[4] This forming or shaping process is achieved via symbolic thinking, particularly in language – Wilhelm von Humboldt being a key influence. Symbols, in Cassirer, largely do much of the legwork for Kant's transcendental idealist method. Symbols are not part of a physical world; they rather dwell in "meanings" (understood functionally), which are distinct from metaphysically orientated notions of "being" or "nature" (understood as substance). For Cassirer, even the most basic physical sensation, we experience embodies a structuring symbolic component (Cassirer 1970, 39). Cassirer notes here that these elements have often been confused, that is, functional meaning and symbol become

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erroneously embodied in being and natural substance claims.[5] There is a strong Cohenian influence here in Cassirer's thinking.

As indicated above, underpinning this use of symbol is essentially a reading of Kant's transcendental idealism. The sensible immediacy of experience is never for Cassirer grasped in itself; it is always mediated via symbols (Cassirer 1996, 50). Symbols organise and give form to sensible intuitions and appearances. In this setting, the environment in which humans find themselves, natural or cultural, is not the terminus ad quem or end of the matter; it is rather a point of departure, that is, a terminus a quo. We cannot detach ourselves from the experienced sensible environment, but we are not confined by it. As Cassirer comments, "as little as the mind can ever in reality alienate itself from its basic form, so neither is it on the other hand ever completely bound to this basic form; it is not confined to this as by prison walls" (Cassirer 1996, 50).

This latter point connects to what, for Cassirer, differentiates humans from other animals. Animals have signals to communicate, humans use symbols, and such symbols embody functional meanings. Signals are incitements prompting a learned reaction; symbols are much more indirect. They generate, as Cassirer puts it, a reflective "pause." Animals do not have this world of symbolic meanings. The distinction in practice is not quite as tight as this; there is more of a gradual movement from signals to symbols and thought, but nonetheless for Cassirer, it is the symbolic capacity which truly differentiates the human world (Cassirer 1970, 35). Cassirer's thoughts, on this latter point, developed ideas from his Hamburg colleague Jacob von Uexküll – a theoretical biologist (see Cassirer 1970, 24). There is thus a difference between organic reactions and uniquely human responses. In the first case, a direct and immediate reaction is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case, the answer is delayed for a moment. It is interrupted and framed by symbolic form (Cassirer 1970, 24). The symbolic system is characterised by what Cassirer termed (as indicated) "a pause" in which we shape its significance. One important consequence is that "man constantly converses with himself via symbols, particularly in linguistic forms. He lives in the midst of imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, in illusions and disillusions, in his fantasies and dreams" (Cassirer 1996, 28; Cassirer 1970, 25). Thus, humans are not so much rational animals as animale symbolicum.

Symbolic thought in humans is varied and labile. Furthermore, none of the symbolic structures are reducible to others. There is, therefore, an embedded functional pluralism of forms. Such multifarious forms lay at the heart of the philosophy of symbolic form.[6] It is worth underlining this latter point since there remains an unresolved debate (referred to in the introduction) at the heart of Cassirer scholarship between, on the one hand, the above epistemic avowal of a plurality of mutually irreducible symbolic forms, and, on the other hand, a unifying belief in a teleological or development hierarchy culminating in, what appears to be, the highest symbolic form of modern natural science.[7] This tension will reappear in different shapes within the current discussion.

Overall, Cassirer used the term "symbolic pregnance" to denote the saturation of human perception with symbolic forms. The main generic symbolic forms indicated by Cassirer are myth, religion, language, art, and natural science; the existence of more forms in, for example, history, politics, morality, or technology remains a

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question in Cassirer scholarship. In the Symbolic Form volumes, he refers to forms as the concrete production of *Geist* or the *Energie des Geistes*.[8]

It is worth noting here that for Cassirer, philosophy itself is not seen as a symbolic form, it rather establishes, examines, and elucidates the transcendental conditions of symbolic forms and enunciates the different modalities of such forms. Whether Cassirer gave a clear account of the nature of philosophy remains again an open question.[9] Cassirer's motif here is his creative extension of a transcendental method. The Kantian accent indicates that claims to objectivity in knowing are neither "ontological" nor "factual but . . . methodological" (Cassirer 1969, 11). To claim ontological or substance, objectivity is to move back into classical metaphysics. To see such claims as methodological is accordingly to think in terms of a functional objectivity of meaning. The philosophy of symbolic form, as Cassirer put it, thus starts from the "presupposition that, if there is any definition of the nature or 'essence' of man, this definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one. We cannot define man by any inherent principle which constitutes his metaphysical essence" (Cassirer 1970, 68). Functional objectivity, in this context, is defined via "relations, of operations, and actions" (Cassirer 1979, 71).[10] Objectivity thus subsists functionally with reference to symbolic forms.

A key question asked here is to what extent does this (above) characterisation of philosophical method in Cassirer – as important as it is – logically give rise to any overt normative moral or political considerations? It is important to underline here the point that the core task of philosophical thinking, in the above context, is about persistently trying to grasp the conditions in which cultural symbols arise, function, and take shape. For Cassirer, this process implies a robust and comprehensive account of the history of ideas. In point, it is difficult to think of any work by Cassirer where ideas are not set within in a wide-ranging historical narrative. Philosophy must, therefore, "attempt to comprehend this existence [of symbolic form] as soon as it becomes present in the special disciplines in their richest abundance" (Cassirer 1979, 56). For Cassirer, Kant is the philosopher, par excellence, who shines the strongest light on this understanding of philosophy.[11] The Kantian method, in Cassirer's reading, always "wants to lead us back into the depths of our own reason and wants to teach us to know and to grasp its presuppositions and its basic strengths" (Cassirer 1979, 54-5).[12]

The important point to underline here is that, for Cassirer, if politics and morality are understood in the context of symbolic forms, then they are shaped by historically located cultural forces which need to be painstakingly excavated to understand their diverse presuppositions – almost in terms of a phenomenology of spirit. In itself, this more Hegelian and/or hermeneutically orientated approach – which underpins one important reading of the philosophy of symbolic form – makes it much harder (although not impossible) to invoke overtly prescriptive universalist accounts of ethics or politics. Philosophy is rather focused, in terms of method, on understanding genealogically the development of what is the case rather than what ought to be. The latter argument – entrenched in historical unravelling of symbolic forms – accentuates, once more, the deep tension in Cassirer's argument, that is, between a plurality of irreducible symbolic forms (as historically revealed), set against a teleological or progressive hierarchy of forms culminating in modernity. This tension impacts on the understanding of both morality and politics.

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## Three arguments

The discussion now turns to three arguments that offer some potential guidance on Cassirer's political and moral thought. Each argument is shown to be misleading or uncertain with regard to any clear account of political beliefs. The question of their relation to the philosophy of symbolic form argumentation will be raised within each discussion and shown to be affected by the underlying tension referred to earlier. The first argument is the most obvious and focuses on the text – *The Myth of the State* – which has often been considered to be a more overt normative account of his views on politics. The second argument examines the question of classical German humanism and its implications. The third argument focuses on Cassirer's use of the natural law and contract tradition in defending the Weimar Republic.

## The Myth of the State

Aside from a comparatively small number of articles and lectures, one iconic political work stands out in Cassirer's oeuvres. This is his posthumously published *The Myth of the State*. There are standard readings of this text. One prevalent one is that whilst in the USA, in the early 1940s, Cassirer was frequently asked by colleagues to explain what had happened culturally in Germany under National Socialism. Other German emigres such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Voegelin, Arendt, or Reich had already begun to offer their own accounts in the same period. In the few years before he died in 1945, Cassirer worked on the Myth text. For some critics, it is questionable as to whether it was fully finished or polished; Cassirer died a couple of days after the first draft of the MS was written, and he never saw it through to revision or publication.

The gist of the more standard interpretation of the Myth text was, in essence, Cassirer trying to explain both to himself and others what exactly was happening in Germany under National Socialism. A difference of view here concerns whether the text embodied a break in Cassirer's overall perspective, or whether it was continuous with his earlier work. One key reason for this difference of opinion lies in a tension with regard to the way in which the concept of myth is deployed. This refers back to the point discussed earlier. The core of the tension concerns the idea that there is, on the one hand, a teleological development from myth, via religion, towards modernity, that is, an evolution of human language and expression towards science, enlightenment and a universal morality. In this context, myth was envisaged as a meaningful, but earlier stage in human maturation. Hence, the symbolic realm of modernity is viewed as an augmentation of human understanding. In sum, this interpretation invokes a symbolic hierarchy of forms. This argument also envisages the teleological advance of practical reason and ethics into the modern era. Thus, as Elisabeth Widmer has recently argued, in *The Myth of the State*, "Cassirer adopts a normatively engaged stance, aiming to critique cultural theories that contributed to the rise of fascism. He does not simply retrospectively analyze cultural progress, but actively condemns theories that paved the way for fascist ideologies." (Widmer 2024b, 465). Kantian ethics is, therefore, envisaged as the advanced expression of a universal ethical consciousness, superseding earlier ethical beliefs in the hierarchy of forms.

The alternative reading of the text – which initiates the tension – is that Cassirer seems, at points, to posit the approximate equivalent epistemic status of myth,

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religion, and science as symbolic modes of human understanding. This latter argument lies at the centre of Cassirer's subsequent reputation for "epistemic pluralism."[13] One aspect of this latter reading concerns the way we interpret Cassirer's conspicuous acknowledgment of the potent credibility and irreducibility of myth as a mode of understanding and not simply dismissing it as an intrinsically primitive or earlier mode of thought. Mythic symbols, therefore, exemplified another valid mode of functional meaning. In other words, apart from the fact for Cassirer that there is no given or real metaphysical substance, there is also no obvious symbolic hierarchy leading to modernity; conversely, there are simply paradigmatic historical changes in symbolic observance and usage. Mythical consciousness is simply one of these.

One critic of this latter dimension, Jürgen Habermas, consequently argued that each symbolic form proposes a truth from its own perspective, consequently, "science forfeits its privileged claim to truth." For Habermas, philosophy in Cassirer had consequently reflexively limited all claims to truth. Such a position, he contends, proved lethal because Cassirer could not theorise his own discursive position (Habermas 1996, 6-7). Even apart from this discursive lethality, this ostensive position in Cassirer is further undercut by the curious interwoven status of myth and rational modernity in *The Myth of the State* text – particularly in the closing sections of the book.

Yet, even within the frame of "epistemic pluralism," it is still possible to argue that there is a difference between myth and rational modernity, in that mythical thought is, quite literally, a mode of seeing and perceiving the world. Yet, mythical thought, per se, never senses itself as a "mode of seeing." The "seeing" of myth's character is rather a function of modernity and critical rationalism. In effect, critical rationality can be aware of the way symbols function, that is, via systematic functionalisation of all symbolic action. However, as plausible as this counter-argument is it still invokes, in a slightly different format, an assumption of a "symbolic hierarchy," that is raising once again the first reading of the paradoxical tension; in this latter account, rationality and modernity claim a pre-eminence over, for example, myth as a form of understanding.

The above apparent tension over myth was unwittingly and puzzlingly highlighted in Cassirer's recognition, by the later 1930s that mythical thought had returned reinvigorated in the midst of European modernity.[14] For example, he comments in the Myth text, "Perhaps the most important and alarming feature . . . of modern political thought is the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought," and further, "the preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our political systems." Such novel mythical thinking in fact seemed to be gaining the upper hand in Germany in the 1930s. Rational thought, in this context, was now being (in Cassirer's words) "deranged" by myth, although he also says that in modern myth, we have incongruously a rational manipulation of the irrational – an ominous blending of modern rationality with myth – vis-à-vis National Socialism (see Cassirer 1969, 3). This incongruous blending of rationality with irrationality both undermines the idea of a symbolic progressive and/or teleological hierarchy, as well as the argument for the ostensible irreducibility of forms, exemplified in epistemic pluralism.

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Aside from the essentially descriptive and explanatory features of the Myth text, in terms of a general history of political thought, another important question arises here. Was Cassirer actually presenting the reader with any clear normative set of political beliefs, which might be related to his neo-Kantianism, as some have indeed argued (see Widmer 2024b)? One can undoubtedly sense intellectual and moral discomfort with certain ideas and events, but surely nothing approaching a clearly articulated and systematic normative argument. This absence was something that Leo Strauss – notably a profound admirer of Cohen – also pointed out forcibly in his critical review of Cassirer's text (Strauss 1947, 127-8). We thus have from one perspective – in Cassirer's Myth text – a somewhat loosely configured history of Western political ideas, which underpin certain conceptions of the state and politics, some of which, for example, Gobineau, Carlyle, and Spengler, later in the text, appear to underwrite the backdrop to National Socialism.

Thus, in spite of the historical and cognitive utility of the book as a study of certain political thinkers, does this tell us directly anything definite about Cassirer's neo-Kantian moral or political understanding? Even if we accepted the idea of an underlying Kantian-inspired moral critique of National Socialism, as argued for example by Widmer (2024b), it would still be hard to pin down such a sophisticated ethics in the text. My conclusion, therefore, is that the Myth text does not provide us with any such worked-out moral or political understanding. Cassirer's sophisticated neo-Kantian philosophy of symbolic form thus appears, from one perspective, disjointed, or minimally, in tension with any overt normative consideration of politics.[15] At most, the Myth text provides a prolonged expository account of the historical development of certain political forms and their idiosyncratic manifestations. This is precisely the point made by some Cassirer scholars, namely, it is a mistake to think of Cassirer as a normatively grounded political philosopher.[16] Thus, unless prepared to engage in speculative interpretation of the Myth text, all one is actually left with, aside from the final perplexing sections of the book, is a series of genealogical and historical reflections on political ideas since the ancient Greeks.

## Classical German humanism

A second argument focuses on classical German humanism; this can be condensed into one term, *Bildung*, something which forms a complex backdrop to Cassirer's work. *Bildung* is a wide-ranging concept with strong literary, poetic, and artistic connotations, which also relates closely to the work of Cassirer's cultural hero Goethe (see Cassirer 1963). Schiller, Lessing, Herder, Hegel, and Humboldt likewise all facilitated the wider dissemination of this idea, particularly in relation to the development of the human and historical sciences (Humboldt 1969). Hence, *Bildung* also formed a part of the groundwork for the opulent tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*. It was in all essentials the conceptual medium in which the cultural sciences flourished in German literature, philosophy, and historical scholarship. For Herder, for example, it connoted the progressive growth of human capacities and abilities through culture. As Hans-Georg Gadamer remarked, "more than anyone," it was Herder who developed the "new ideal of 'cultivating the human' (*Bildung zum Menschen*) and thus prepared the ground for the growth of the historical sciences in the nineteenth century. The concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation

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(*Bildung*), which became supremely important at the time, was perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is this concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences of the nineteenth century" (Gadamer 2004, 8). *Kultur* and *Bildung* thus formed an interlaced inheritance. It is this classic humanism, integral with *Bildung* that constitutes the general philosophic medium within which Cassirer develops his philosophy of historically evolving symbolic forms.

The nature of *Bildung* in both Cassirer and German thought is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is important to underline certain facets of it within Cassirer's work (see Cassirer 1966, 22-4). Thus, the character of philosophy itself for Cassirer and the associated understanding of history exemplify aspects of *Bildung*, that is, denoting a development of culture. It is even feasible to characterise the whole sequence of Cassirer's symbolic forms, from myth and religion to modern rationality and science, as a gradual historical *Bildung*. The important point to underline here is that the key task of philosophical thinking is then about persistently trying to grasp the historical conditions within which such cultural symbols arise and take shape within myths, religious systems, and the like. In itself, this is not an overtly normative enterprise per se. It is, conversely, rather more of a hermeneutic process attentive to the historical disclosure of cultural symbolic forms. Such a position is consistent, for example, with an epistemic pluralism of forms.

There are, however, aspects of this latter process, which have potential normative attributes. Cassirer, for example, argued that the "pause" (discussed earlier), whereby the human subject gains a subtle distance, prior to giving symbolic form or shape to experience, also entails a certain understanding of freedom – although again Cassirer's never systematically developed this view. Accordingly, we are free in the sense that we can become self-aware that we are in a process of symbolic formation.[17] This argument is linked to one aspect of Kantian practical reason. Despite equating practical reason with a conception of freedom, such freedom does not connect straightforwardly with morality, particularly from the epistemic pluralist perspective. Thus, the Kantian direct equation of morality with freedom is not so obviously articulated in Cassirer's symbolic work. As one scholar puts it, freedom in Cassirer basically results from a "greater lucidity" concerning our cultural location (see Pollok 2021, 24). Henceforth, each act of symbolic forming is made within a "normative space" (see Gregory 2021, 168). This space remains an accessible "possibility," that is, an openness without any necessary normative content. Hence, the argument on freedom or self-liberation focuses on our self-awareness of our symbolic capacities. Hence, we can liberate ourselves from certain symbols via fresh symbolic action.

Cassirer's argument here likewise embodies his rejection of Heidegger's existential philosophy. The central feature of this latter philosophy, for Cassirer, is that humans are "thrown" (Geworfenheit) existentially into the inevitabilities of finitude, anxiety, history, temporality, and ultimately death. All such Heideggerian existential assertions, for Cassirer, are conversely adjustable via our rational symbolic capacity, and we are indeed fundamentally free to do this. Hence "existence," per se, can only be grasped in symbolic terms, implying then a "normative space." Thus, Heidegger's finitude, for Cassirer, does not imply any finality or closure; moreover, the infinite is not constrained by finitude.[18] Freedom, in this latter argument, is an open-ended task, neither a metaphysical state of being nor a morally directed concept (see Gregory 2021 175, Matherne 2021, 38-9). Cassirer summarised the gist of this argument in the

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final paragraph of his *Essay on Man*, "Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases of this process. In all of them, man discovers and proves a new power – the power to build up a world of his own, an 'ideal' world" (Cassirer 1970, 228). One of these ideal worlds could be a moral world.

As indicated, therefore, one implication of this evolving *Bildung* argument is a potential appeal to morality. There are, however, problems here not least that Cassirer never developed a full systematic account of ethics. Furthermore, as already argued, there is a tension in Cassirer's symbolic argument that remains unresolved. Thus, on one count, some critics have suggested that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic form has no place for any explicitly normative account of ethics; if anything the approach to ethics is always genealogical and hermeneutical (see Kuhn 1945, Blanshard 1945 or Strauss 1947). Ethical consciousness, in this context, it seen to mutate historically. Ethical modification is concomitant with symbolic cultural change. Furthermore, Cassirer clearly denies that there is any metaphysical or substantive dimension to ethics as such. Ethics fulfils a cultural function. In myth, for example, there is no overt place for ethical deliberation as such. Right conduct is simply encased within the immediate presence of the symbolic mythic framework (see Cassirer 1955b, 235). In religious symbolism, ethics is wholly entwined with the acceptance of, or conscious submission to, theological or metaphysical symbols of God(s) or spirit(s). In modernity, Cassirer sees, minimally, the possibility of a more unified rational grasp of ethics, although still understood as a symbolic cultural function. In sum there is an historically or anthropologically relativistic grain to Cassirer's understanding of morality as part of a *Bildung* of cultures and symbolic forms. Ethics cannot be understood apart from the intrinsically human symbolic ability, namely, the ability to create distinct moral worlds at different moments of history. Some critics have consequently found Cassirer's views here challenging in terms of their potential moral contingency, epistemic pluralism, and scepticism concerning claims to moral universalism.

Nevertheless, another dimension of the implicit tension (discussed earlier) developed in the later 1930s. Thus, in 1935 – shortly after escaping Germany – in giving his inaugural professorial address at Göteborg University in Sweden, Cassirer focused uncharacteristically on the question of ethics, in the context of reflecting upon the work of the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström (see Cassirer 2005). He clearly begins to develop a more overt teleological conception of ethics which utilises a Kantian-orientated idea of practical reason. There are (as argued) glimmerings of this perspective in the idea of a "symbolic hierarchy" of forms. Reason thus develops, more or less consistently, through different forms culminating ultimately in modernity and universalism.[19] This "self-renewing work" of reason is envisaged as rooted in a conception of an evolving teleological understanding.

Consequently, by the 1940s, Cassirer is arguing that this developmental understanding of reason culminates in a form of universal moral order. This argument is largely a richer rearticulation of the symbolic hierarchy argument, expressed via the medium of a universalistic ethics. This is not a religious or metaphysical conception but is conversely a secular expression of the telos of practical reason itself. Natural law, in this setting, establishes a functional objectivity – neither a substantive nor metaphysical objectivity – which emerges out of rational

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language usage (see Krois 1987, 156-7). Such moral norms are then seen as universally valid via the apparent canons of practical reasoning. The universal human capacity for practical reasoning is seen to lay a continuous active responsibility upon humanity. This latter argument builds upon Kant's conception of reason, morality, and freedom blended within an overarching universal "empire of ends." Cassirer came to believe, certainly by the 1940s, and following the lead in this case of Albert Schweitzer, that philosophy as a discipline of reason now had a universal moral duty to humanity to highlight and articulate this cosmopolitan task (see Cassirer 1979, 59). Cassirer came to believe that philosophy overall, in the academy, had become far too cloistered, inward-looking, and precious about its academic status and had neglected its moral and educative duty to humanity.[20]

As mentioned earlier, Elisabeth Widmer, using Cassirer's work on Hägerström, has argued that we should in fact, combine Cassirer's symbolic functional focus on the diversity of contingent historical facts with his a priori Kantian universalism. Hence, she argues that Cassirer's ethical position can be efficaciously described as "contingent universalism." Contingent universalism argues that "ethical deliberation involves an evaluative a priori universality"; however, such a priori universality "relies on a historically informed concept relative to changing standards of truth." Ethical objectivity thus comprises both "an a priori universality, enabling objective ethical evaluations of developments and belief systems, and culturally relative moral truth standards, underscoring the teleological development of various conceptualizations of universality over time." (Widmer 2024b, 457). As powerful and attractive as this argument is, I am still not convinced that it does justice to the depth of the epistemic tensions within Cassirer's overall argumentation.

Essentially, therefore, ethics, in Cassirer's work, can be viewed in two different modes, a duality which embodies the same underlying tension of the symbolic form argument. The first is the genealogical and historical format with its attendant contingency anxieties. This reflects one reading of the hermeneutic dynamic of the symbolic form argument. The arguments of epistemic pluralism and the epistemic equivalence of symbolic forms can also be comfortably embedded here. The alternative, more Kantian inflection, envisions an evolving symbolic hierarchy and a slow inexorable teleological advancement towards reason, science, enlightenment, and moral universalism. In sum, the *Bildung* argument contains a number of possible renderings of the symbolic form argument and consequent understandings of both freedom and morality.

Finally, despite being an immensely productive and rich idea, *Bildung* is almost too productive. Thus, as to how much precise guidance it provides for grasping Cassirer's political or moral views remains unclear. At a more general level, its invocation in relation to freedom, ethics, and politics might even be described as philosophically promiscuous. Early *Bildung* ideas tied in closely with the aesthetic, cultural, and emotive development of the individual, as in the *Bildungsromans* literary tradition of Goethe, amongst later writers. In Humboldt, *Bildung* connects with a more aesthetically orientated and somewhat unexpected libertarian individualism. In Herder, it subsists within an initially innocuous but nascent cultural nationalism. In Hegel, the pivotal *Bildung* would be that of Absolute Spirit, which entails the metaphysical annulment of the singular human individual. One might even characterise Marx's conception of both history, freedom, and the eventual maturity

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of humanity in communism as a materialistically orientated *Bildung*. Thus, exactly how useful it is for understanding Cassirer's precise political or moral perspective remains a moot point.

## Contract, rights, and the Weimar Republic

The third argument takes up the theme of natural law and rights and is a more focused articulation of the symbolic hierarchy perspective. Thus, in responding to Weimar critics who viewed liberal and democratic constitutionalism as an alien import, Cassirer analyses the origin of these purportedly "alien" ideas showing them, in effect, to be wholly native to German moral and political traditions (see Cassirer 1969, 168). Such a tradition, he argues can be traced back to Leibniz, Wolff and most importantly Kant. It was thus no coincidence for Cassirer that the publications of Kant's first and second Critiques (in 1781 and 1788, respectively), were followed by the August 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. For Cassirer, such events and ideas can be "connected to each other through their inner meaning, through the order of ideas" (Cassirer 2018, 4). Bringing together a number of German-related literary and philosophical sources and placing a heavy emphasis on Georg Jellinek's juristic constitutionalist work, Cassirer argues that such thoughts can clearly be found within the German philosophical, political, and legal traditions (Cassirer 1979, 221-2). He looks back, for example, to Leibniz's belief in the inalienable rights of man (Cassirer 2018, 7-8; see also Cassirer 1951, ch.VI). Similar intellectual motifs are identified with Christian Wolff. In a broad perspective, Cassirer argues that ideas, such as the inalienable rights of man, appear virtually simultaneously in French, American, British, and German political and legal traditions. This constitutes, in large measure, what was referred to in the previous section as the emergent teleology of practical reason. For Cassirer, all those who partook at the time "were convinced that these principles are in a sense as old as the world. The knowledge of the indefeasible rights of man was regarded as a 'common notion'" (Cassirer 1979, 221, Cassirer 1969, 79). It might almost be considered an Axial moment of sorts. He calls this, for example, "a remarkable migration and transformation of ideas" (Cassirer 2018, 11). Furthermore, it is humanity as a whole that is both the functional originator and beneficiary of such ideas, moving beyond any idea of national borders.

For Cassirer, such ideas did take on slightly different shapes in different political settings. In Kant, they focused on a rationalist commitment to a republican constitution and a unique version of cosmopolitanism. Cassirer likewise describes contractualism as part of a process of rational demythologisation (Cassirer 1969, 306). Kant, for Cassirer, thus moves the whole debate on contract and rights into a largely demythologised realm. Hence, underlying the melee of empirical-historical detail of the American and French revolutions, Cassirer claims that Kant identified a core of significant ideas, which embodied the evolving moral tendencies of practical reason within humanity (Cassirer 2018, 15). Cassirer quotes Kant from *Der Streit der Fakultäten (1789)* suggesting that the French Revolution "uncovered a mechanism and capacity in human nature that strives for betterment" (see Cassirer 2018, 16). Cassirer notes that such sentences "present the purest, clearest of that kind of symbolic observation that characterize the... philosophical idealist Kant." Cassirer concludes with the observation that "the idea of a republican constitution... is in no way a foreigner,

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less to say an external invader in German intellectual history, but that it in fact grew from its own soil and was nourished . . . through the strength of idealist philosophy" (see Cassirer 2018, 16). This, he argued, is not just an abstract philosophical conclusion, it also provides an intellectual ballast and moral support for the political structures of the Weimar Republic. Thus, the philosophy of symbolic form seemingly provided for Cassirer an optimistic imprimatur to the Weimar Republic, its liberal constitutionalist arrangements and its basic values (see Coskun 2007, 153).

How accurate is Cassirer's reading of German thought and practice in terms of this contract argument? Weimar-based constitutionalist liberalism was, in fact, quite contrary to Cassirer's reading (as outlined above) and quite unlike its European counterparts. It was predominantly an idiosyncratic state-based liberalism and markedly different to both Britain and the USA (Leonard 2019, 82-3). In effect, in this argument, politics entailed the state. The idea of a minimal or limited state understanding of the political – often associated with certain classic readings of liberalism – did not really figure much at all in mainstream nineteenth century German political or legal thought. The state entailed a centralised powerful executive, embedded for many jurists within monarchy. Despite any constitutionalist trimmings, the reality of state power was embodied in a centralised *Kaiserreich*, until of course, its abrupt collapse in 1918. Neither democratic parliamentary oversight nor constitutionalist liberal beliefs significantly affected this centralised power dynamic.[21] Policy, in this context, was largely directed and legitimated via this central executive power, particularly with regard to Bismarck.[22] Parliament was thus far less effective in terms of real political power, certainly up to 1918. Hence, the parliamentary system of England, for example, was frequently regarded with either contempt or mistrust by many German jurists as potentially undermining the necessary centralised state power of the *Kaiserreich*.[23]

The same general theme underpinned the German *Rechtstaat* tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The rule of law, in this setting, was seen as created and maintained by the state itself, the state understood as a centralised executive power providing the necessary cohesion for civil society. Law was accordingly always an emanation from the state, something inherently inimical to the natural law and natural rights tradition. If there was to be a limitation on the state – as Cassirer's favoured jurist Georg Jellinek argued – it had to be self-instituted by the state itself, that is, via auto-limitation (see Koskenniemi 2004, 204-6, also Jellinek 1901). The state, in Jellinek's argument, was even envisaged as Kantian fictive person controlling its own inclinations via reasoned auto-limitation. Rights were necessarily part of this auto-limitation thesis. Rights against a state, for Jellinek, could therefore only be those legitimised by the state. This state-centrism percolated into other important juristic concepts. Sovereignty was again largely embodied in the state executive and the authority and capacity to make decisions. Even for a more liberal-inclined theorist, such as Jellinek, sovereignty entailed the state's own capacity for self-limitation. Thus, any right-based limitation on sovereignty had to be self-defined via sovereignty.[24] Hence, the sovereignty of the state, for many German jurists, stood above or outside political parties and ideological factions. Consequently, neither democracy nor parliament impinged on the real authority, power and sovereignty of the state. In fact, the distrust for Parliaments, liberalism, and democracy, which

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plagued German politics up to and beyond the Weimar period, had its roots in this very same juristic state tradition.

Consequently, Cassirer's idiosyncratic appeal to the wider European (in fact, cosmopolitan) natural rights, natural law, and contract tradition looks totally out of kilter with actual German political and legal thought of his time, certainly up to 1945. Thus, Cassirer, in his Hamburg address on the Weimar constitution, illicitly metamorphosed the complexities of German history into a buoyant, largely imaginary, history of German philosophy, culminating in Kant. However, the Weimar Republic, contrary to Cassirer, was more of a transient hiatus in an otherwise continuous juristic tradition. Rights and laws, in this German context, had to be formulated, instituted and maintained within the frame of the legal science of the state.[25] Hence, Cassirer's defence of Weimar, via the contract and natural law tradition, looks noticeably alien to the German historical, legal, and political landscape of the time.[26]

One further related question, concerning Cassirer's commitment to contractualism and natural rights, needs to be briefly considered. Were contractualism and natural rights necessarily linked to the wider European liberal tradition, and further did such contractualism provide any insight into Cassirer's political beliefs? If there were such a link to liberalism what would this have meant in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Germany? Liberalism in Germany during this period embodied divergent perspectives. As a political movement, in the German states of the time, liberalism dates approximately from the 1830s and it took a number of ideological shapes. This was particularly the case after the 1848 European revolutions (Leonard 2019, 90). However, subsequently the massive traumas of German nation-state-building in the 1860s and 1870s, Bismarck's subtle but forceful authoritarian stance, accelerated industrial expansion, the convoluted intense debates over German imperial enlargement, the rise of extreme Völkisch nationalism, the later challenge of war in 1914, defeat, Versailles, and then the formation of the Weimar Republic in 1918, did not exactly settle liberal beliefs. These diverse social ruptures produced different liberal factions.

Two significant liberal factions were national liberalism and a progressive liberalism (Leonard 2019, 83). The latter was the precursor of the *Deutsche Demokratia* Partei that Cassirer (from hearsay evidence) may well have supported in the Weimar period. The national liberal faction was much more deeply grounded in what, at the time, was referred to as a Manchester liberalism (Manchesterliberalismus), a more trenchant laissez-faire form of liberal political economy, which was oddly far more inclined to work with Bismarck's authoritarianism. It was likewise deeply uncomfortable with any social reform policies (the social question), other than those fostered by Bismarck for strategic motives, namely, to sideline the SPD, trades unions, and social reform movements. However, German liberalism, between 1870 and 1914, remained in large measure squeezed between, on the one hand, the Marxist-orientated SPD (which incongruously had embraced representational democracy much more systemically than liberalism), and, on the other hand, the largely anti-democratic, conservative, nationalist, authoritarian, militaristically inclined forces of the Prussian Junkerdom, combined with the owners of heavy industry. This scenario has consequently led some commentators to remark on the deep endemic weakness of German liberalism at the time, comparative to other European societies, or more generally, what one German

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historian refers to as the virtual "absence of a strong tradition of liberal political thought" (see Vorländer 1996, 102). The liberalism that existed in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Germany was thus embedded in a broadly illiberal politics (see Sheehan 1978).

Finally, one domain which is propitious for understanding something of Cassirer's thought in the 1920s is the ideological compound of social liberalism (or liberal socialism), something that was present in France, Italy, and Britain in the same period up to 1914 (see Freeden 1978; Vincent and Plant 1984; Simhony and Weinstein 2001). In Germany, it glimmered somewhat forlornly during the early years of the Weimar Republic amongst a grouping of progressive liberals. However, it is also worth noting that this form of social liberalism was atypical and opposed by others within German national liberalism (see Leonard 2019, 88). The social liberal compound also has some potential affinities with the way social democracy developed in Germany in the post-1945 era.

Social liberalism, very roughly stated, is the adjustment of more classical liberal motifs with themes drawn from democratic socialism.[27] The term social liberal might also be a useful compound to speak of, for example, Hermann Cohen or even Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein's own revisionism was, for example, given ideological heft via his direct contact in London with the British Fabian socialists and Edwardian social liberals in the late 1890s. Furthermore, as Widmer has noted, some of Marburg writers, such as Lange, began their own careers as progressive liberals (Widmer 2024a, 120). Furthermore, Cohen may well have been sympathetic to a progressive social liberalism.[28] My general conclusion here would, therefore, be that if there is a glimmer of an ideological dimension to Cassirer's neo-Kantian political thought, the most likely candidate is the compound of social liberalism, although its political impact was minimal.

## Left-Kantianism

The discussion now turns briefly to the idea of left-Kantianism. However, before investigating this issue, the term Kantianism itself needs a very brief explication: was there for Cassirer, or is there, even today, a consistent or clear set of philosophical beliefs constituting Kantianism? In a late retrospective essay, Cassirer had his own explicit answer to this question, remarking that the "back to Kant" movement largely coincided with his student years in Berlin. Yet, he continues, the movement nonetheless contained "the germs of radical dissension." Cassirer continues "Nearly all the philosophical schools referred to Kant and appealed to his authority, but there was never a clear and unambiguous way of interpreting his fundamental doctrines. There was an empiristic view of the Kantian system side by side with a rationalistic view; there was a metaphysical conception by side with a strict phenomenalism, nay a strict scepticism; there was 'realistic' explanation in contradistinction seemed to another that seemed to lead to mere 'subjective idealism'. It was extremely difficult to find one's bearing in this mass of opposite interpretations" (Cassirer 1943, 221; see also Cassirer 2006). This is not dissimilar to today – *plus ça change*. Finally, it was unexpectedly the lectures of the maverick sociological theorist, Georg Simmel, which pointed Cassirer towards Kant and indeed Cohen's work. Although Cohen himself, as

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Cassirer noted, was hardly conventionally Kantian (Cassirer 1943, 225-6). Yet again, what is conventional Kantianism?

A closely related issue concerns the political complexion of neo-Kantianism in Germany. In the more recent Anglo-American setting, certainly since the 1970s, neo-Kantianism has been commonly associated – seemingly unproblematically – with some form of liberalism. Yet Kant's relation to liberalism remains at best ambiguous. Liberalism was not a political stance in Europe until minimally the early 1800s (in fact post-1812) and not in Germany till the post-1830s period.[29] Kant's own overt commitment was ideally to a form of republicanism and although this is a separate debate, republicanism itself has been, and still is in many quarters, explicitly hostile to both liberalism and indeed socialism. Furthermore, there were clearly German neo-Kantians with what might loosely be described as conservative, nationalist, or rightward ideological leanings, such as Hermann von Helmholtz, Bona Meyer, Wilhelm Windelband, Alois Riehl or, more palpably, Bruno Bauch. Bauch, up to 1916, was a central neo-Kantian figure and editor of the premier journal *Kant Studien*. Both Cohen and Cassirer had come into open dispute with him over his antisemitism, although Bauch was certainly not alone here amongst neo-Kantians. Post-1933 Bauch, still claiming to be a Kantian, openly supported the National Socialists, and it was no surprise that he signed the Hitler loyalty oath for the German professoriate. In these conservative-orientated neo-Kantians, there was no sympathy whatsoever for liberalism, democracy, or socialism in any shape. This loose grouping of neo-Kantians rather exhibited a deeply traditionalist and nationalist demeanour that fitted quite comfortably in the context of the time, far more so than constitutionalist liberalism or democratic socialism.

Finally, in basic biographical terms, what do we actually know of Cassirer's own political beliefs? Unlike Lange, Cohen, Natorp or Vörlander, there are no systematic books or articles from Cassirer declaring any precise normative political commitments such that we could attach the label "Left-Kantian." The evidence here unfortunately is sketchy. Yet, several commentators, almost en passant, refer to Cassirer as liberal, particularly in relation to his expressed sympathy for the contract and natural rights tradition (Gordon 2010, 306).[30] This view echoes a slightly older text, by David Lipton, entitled *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany 1914-1933*. As indicated earlier, there is some sparce evidence to the effect that in the 1920s, Cassirer supported the progressive liberal *Deutsche Demokratia Partei*, which might loosely be described as a left-liberal or social liberal party in the early Weimar Republic. This party was, however, in serious electoral decline by the 1928 election.[31]

Turning finally to the concept of the "left" in Germany. To speak of a body of ideas as "left" – as in left-Kantianism – implies some degree of ideological clarity as to what the term "left" denotes in actual political practice. It is not enough to simply outline a philosophical idea and *say* it is left (or socialist) unless there is some broader ideological and historical context underpinning the claim. As in Cassirer's arguments on contractualism and natural rights, philosophical arguments cannot simply be morphed into ideological or political realities. The ideological concept "left" in fact opens a veritable pandora's box. If we just focus on the Marburg grouping of Cohen, Lange, Natorp and Stammler, even here, as has been emphasised, there was no single coherent socialist or left belief system present in this group, more a loose

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agglomeration of concerns (Widmer 2024a, 22). Widmer also records that Marburg's concern with "ethical socialism" was atypical at the time in Germany (Widmer 2024a, 6). Finally, regarding Cassirer, there is unequivocal written evidence of his critical views on socialism, with the important proviso that socialism here denoted Marxism (see Cassirer 1979, 236). Socialism, at the time, was, however, a multi-voiced creature in nineteenth century Germany, as elsewhere, and dealing with the complex range of materials goes way beyond this present context. Thus, some very brief observations will have to suffice.

Initially, after the founding of Ferdinand Lassalle's *German Worker's Association* [ADAV] (1863), the more prevalent aspect of German socialism was Marxism, in various formats, particularly after the formation of the *Social Democratic Workers Party* in 1869 and reinforced in the Gotha Programme of 1875 (see Miller and Potthoff 1986, 18ff).[32] The latter party became the *Social Democratic Party of Germany* [SPD] at Erfurt in 1891. Marxism, at Erfurt, became the overt theoretical foundation, particularly via the theoretical work of Karl Kautsky (the so-called Pope of Marxism) and, at this early point, Eduard Bernstein, that is, before his later advocacy of Revisionist socialism. Other forms of socialism persisted, such as Cooperative, Christian socialism and ethical socialism, but Marxism gained, for a time, a preeminence, certainly up to the 1930s. Thus, when Cassirer retrospectively criticised early twentieth century socialism in Germany, his primary target was always Marxism and its doctrine of economic determinism (Cassirer 1979, 236ff). Hence, in speaking of the problems of Weimar politics, Cassirer noted that many of the key Weimar political actors on the left (presumably in the SPD and KPD) were Marxist-orientated socialists who remained, he claims, not only unaware of the power of political myth, but also who spoke largely in terms of empirically-orientated economic claims – a critique which echoes Cohen's own earlier judgement of Marxism (Widmer 2024a, 123). Hence, Cassirer suggests that socialists were "convinced that economy is the mainspring of political life and the solution of all social problems. Following this theory they missed the real pointed issue . . . Undoubtedly economic conditions had a share in the development and rapid growth of the National Socialist movement. But the deepest and most influential causes are not to be sought in the economic crisis which Germany had to endure. They belong to another field which in a sense was inaccessible to the socialistic leaders" (Cassirer 1979, 236).

Of course, both Marx and Engels had their own quite clear views on both Kant and ethics. Kant is described in the *German Ideology* (1970) as a hapless spokesman for the "impotence, depression and wretchedness" of the German bourgeoisie and their petty interests (Marx and Engels 1970, 97-9). Kantian moral ideas, as such, tell us very little about historical political practice. Communism essentially abolishes religion and morality. As Marx and Engels commented "Law, morality, religion, are . . . so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests." (Marx and Engels 1967, 92). Moral theorising as conducted by neo-Kantians is, therefore, always illusory, constituted largely by an ideological inability to see its own material class basis (Marx and Engels 1968, 182-3). Such critical doctrines later became orthodox and dominated much of the theoretical output of the Second International up to 1914. Even Karl Kautsky's more balanced *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* (1906), which arose during the revisionist debates, was prepared to discuss ethics; nonetheless, he still adopts views of Kant largely in line with Marx

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and Engels negative judgements. Marx, in general, found the whole moral scenario of socialism irksome. He considered the moral ideas of fellow socialists repellent, pouring scorn on Saint Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, Owenites, and Christian Socialists, amongst others.

There were notable later exceptions to the above argument that raised significant questions about the whole philosophical character of materialism and/or historical materialism in relation to Kantian thought. The sophisticated Austro-Kantian Marxists are an excellent case in point.[33] Theorists such as Karl Renner, Otto Bauer, and Max Adler, amongst others, provided an alternative perspective on this whole question. Exactly how much impact they made on the German SPD is difficult to ascertain. Eduard Bernstein's revisionism, whose work on evolutionary socialism contained the thin appendix "Kant not Cant," was much better known in SPD circles in Germany and his rather vaguely articulated sympathy for Kant was vilified by mainstream Marxist theorising of the SPD, with the likes of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, August Bebel, and Wilhelm Liebknecht (see Miller and Potthoff 1986, 50ff).

Despite this orthodoxy, German Marxism was still a very different creature to Russian Marxism, particularly post-1917. Even those Marxists, such as Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who split, on ideological grounds as well as disagreements over the 1914-18 war, from the SPD to form initially the Spartacus League and then the Communist Party of Germany, still retained an underlying acceptance of a constitutional state, democratic parties, majority decision-making, the right to strike, and basic rights to freedom of the individual, freedom of expression and respect for human dignity. Thus, Marxism in Germany, despite its overt commitment to economistic materialism and the theory of catastrophic capitalist collapse, largely still implied a socialist society as one without exploitation and oppression that would emerge after the socialisation of the means of production, a position which again still largely concurs with aspects of the Marburg view, but notably without *any* overt ethical undergirding.[34] In this sense, in summary, one can see clearly here why Cassirer would not have wanted to be viewed as a "left" or "socialist," a label that would have made little sense for him as largely symptomatic of variants of Marxism (Cassirer 1979, 236ff).

## Spiritual apathy and the non-political

There is one final reservation concerning the category of left-Kantianism in Germany, which needs to be canvassed. Thus, one offshoot of the singular character of the late nineteenth century German statist tradition (mentioned earlier) concerns the curious standing of both citizens and indeed academics. At one level, the argument is quite simple. If politics is indelibly linked to the legal science of the state, as embodied in the central executive authority, then the status of other social entities was, by definition, ambiguous. At most, the citizen was a legal servant or subject of the state. As one commentator has noted, it was not by accident that the citizen in Germany was seen as a "*Staatsbürger*" (Vorländer 1996, 104). Furthermore, there was a widespread sense that the métier of the educated intelligentsia in Germany (in universities and elsewhere) was to pursue the spiritual cultivation (*Bildung*) of their minds and keep distant from politics, unless directly involved in the activity of the state. Consequently, the realm of culture and the realm of politics were kept separate.

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In the words of Peter Gay, this German social, cultural, and political schizophrenia consequently "elevated apathy into a superior form of existence" (Gay 2001, 72; see also Stern 1960).[35] This scenario also fed into a much broader discourse, focusing on a cultural disdain for the English, American, and French interest in a degraded liberal-democratic politics and consequent lack of culture, as set against the profound spiritual cultural superiority of Germany. The 1914 war was thus perceived by many in Germany as a spiritual war of culture as much as anything else. In fact, a number of the Marburg neo-Kantian grouping, including Natorp and Cohen (although not Cassirer), fell in with this general sense of a German cultural imperial mission to the world in 1914. This exaltation of German culture was closely linked to a virtual Archimedean point of German political critique, reaching its zenith during Weimar. This was an overall disdain for rationalising liberal democratic thought, particularly as it appeared in the USA, England, and France. For Weimar writers such as Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and Moeller van den Bruck, the term "liberal" almost became a term of overall scorn. In essence, to be liberal (in any sense of the term) was to be "un-German" (see Stern 1974, xiv-xxv). Hence, Cassirer's attempt to sketch a common European-wide liberal task underpinning Weimar, dating back to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, in the words of one commentator, "went completely against the political and intellectual spirit of the times in Germany" (Krois 1987, 164). The question is how aware of this was Cassirer?

This cultured apolitical stance also had a curious effect on the academic and teaching community in Germany. The separation between the realm of mind (or culture) and the realm of politics also finds an odd echo in Cassirer's distinction, when following Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he separates out two realms of philosophy, namely, the scholastic (or *Schulbegriff*), which isolates itself in the apolitical technical problems of professional academic philosophical debate – which Cassirer admits was deeply attractive to him – as distinct from the an activist "worldview" (*Weltbegriff* or conceptus cosmicus) idea of philosophy, which had an educative moral duty to humanity (Cassirer 1979, 58-60, Kant A838/B866).

As has been noted, the apolitical stance did, in point, affect the whole nineteenth century neo-Kantian movement. As Peter Gordon summarises this ethos, "the rise of the neo-Kantianism movement was closely correlated with the rise of an academic bourgeoisie that tried to eschew ideological partisanship in favour of a strictly 'professional' ethos. Notwithstanding Hermann Cohen's particular support for German socialist principles, neo-Kantianism in general remained largely nonpolitical in character; indeed, it became the very paradigm of an ostensibly German 'unpolitical' scholarship." Gordon continues that "the neo-Kantians dedication to intellectual practice as an end in itself and their pronounced resistance to political or 'worldview' advocacy itself grew into a self-conscious and passionately defended programme. By the end of the World War I, it had hardened into a doctrine of political stoicism, articulated, for example, by Max Weber . . . in his celebrated 1919 address, 'Science as a Vocation'. The Weberian distinction between fact and value, with its bitter rejection of scholarship as value promotion, was only one example of the principled hostility to 'worldview' philosophy that typified the movement as a whole." (Gordon 2010, 58). To some extent, the apolitical expectation of the German professoriate is still rooted in their official status as civil servants (*Staatsbürger*), with the expectation of a duty to the state as a legal requirement.[36]

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This non or apolitical attitude can be found candidly glorified in Thomas Mann's volume *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (2021). There are many ripe, indeed overripe, passages in this garrulous rambling text, making it almost unrecognisable to any admirer of *Buddenbrooks* or *The Magic Mountain*.[37] Mann does, however, provide examples, in spades, of this very same cultural nonpolitical stance, accompanied by a pervading sense of lofty spiritual apathy towards politics and a ritual contempt for the English and French (see Mann 2021). Many notable German academics of the time, such as Gadamer, highly approved of Mann's book.[38] Thus, Karl Löwith – incongruously a German Jewish philosophy student of Heidegger who as a Jew had been forced out of German academic life – reported in his autobiography that "The struggle of the political parties could not interest me, as both those of the Left and those of the Right were fighting about things that were of no concern to me and therefore acted only as an irritant in my development. Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* . . . gave me a kind of justification for this attitude" (Löwith 1994, 18). This apathetic view of politics was ubiquitous across German academe at the time and the neo-Kantians, such as Cassirer, were not exempt from its subtle if widespread impact on political understanding.

## Conclusion

The answer to the question as to whether Cassirer held a clearly articulated normative view on politics or ethics, which might be characterised as left-Kantian, remains unproven and tenuous. It is questionable, in this context, as to whether we should even think of Cassirer under any systematic rubric of moral or political philosophy. The more general philosophy of symbolic form also remains equivocal on this issue and as argued there remains an unresolved tension in the symbolic form argument itself. However, as contended, there are still arguments particularly concerning his text, *The Myth of the State*, secondly, those motivated by the German *Bildung* tradition, and finally, those contained within Cassirer's invocation of the natural rights and contract traditions, which appear to give some credence to his moral and political beliefs. The latter argument often underpins the claim that Cassirer was liberal by ideological inclination. The term liberal was thus investigated within the German ideological context and found to be much more complex and unpredictable than often supposed. The argument concluded that none of these three arguments are effective in identifying any clear political or moral perspective in Cassirer. One of the background difficulties here is the very idea of "left-Kantianism" remains open-ended and lacking overall coherence, even within the Marburg group. Further, as argued in the final section of the paper, the actual status of academic thought itself, in relation to ideological and practical politics, remained idiosyncratically apolitical in German academic life. Outside of this academic grouping it is even harder to pin down exactly what socialism actually precisely meant. The discussion thus turned to a closer scrutiny of the term "left/socialist" in the ideological milieu of Germany, prior to and during the Weimar period. My argument is that forms of deterministic amoral Marxism tended to dominate left discussion from 1870s up to the 1930s, although the theory and the practice often veered apart. Ethical socialism was atypical and had very little place in such intensive debate, particularly at the hard end of policy formulation in the SPD. When it did arise tentatively in the early 1900s

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revisionist debate it was rejected by the major SPD figures of the time. The best estimate is that Cassirer found that a form of progressive social liberalism – which had a fleeting presence in German politics – had most normative appeal. However, such a position is not argued by Cassirer anywhere and it remained more of a peripheral political concern in Germany until post-1945.

## Notes

**1** The focus of this essay will not be on the themes which have tended to dominate the bulk of contemporary scholarship (e.g. Tyler Friedman and Luft 2015 and Truwant 2021). The scholarship has largely coalesced around issues of epistemology, science and the complexity of symbolic form argument.
**2** "It is hard not to think, as one reads a book so wealthy as this in historic and scientific erudition, but at the same time so oddly inconclusive, . . . The learning is not mobilized in the interest of any theory; the book is not so much an 'essay on man' as a series of essays, all suggestive and enlightening, which converge on-what? It is hard to say." (Blanshard 1945, 510)
**3** She remarks "Like Kant and Hegel before him, Cassirer conceives of the telos of culture in terms of the 'consciousness of freedom', and he, therefore, regards progress in culture as the progress of consciousness of freedom." (Matherne 2021, 143-4).
**4** There are parallels to Nelson Goodman and his "world-making" argument. Goodman, a little grudgingly, acknowledged this influence (Goodman 1978, 1ff).
**5** "A symbol has no actual existence as part of the physical world; it has a 'meaning'. In primitive thought it is still very difficult to differentiate between two spheres of being and meaning. They are constantly being confused . . . But in the further progress of human culture the difference between things and symbols becomes clearly felt." (Cassirer 1970, 57).
**6** "A 'philosophy of man' would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities" (Cassirer 1970, 68)
**7** "On the one hand, Cassirer describes a plurality of symbolic forms— among them myth, religion, art, language, technology, law, and science—and states that each form must be assessed by its own internal norms of validity, rather than by an external standard. On the other hand, he characterizes the symbolic forms in hierarchical terms and holds that one of them, mathematical natural science, constitutes the purest expression of symbolic consciousness and the highest achievement of culture." (Kinzel 2024a, 126)
**8** Geist in Cassirer refers to mind and consciousness, there is no Hegelian absolute Geist here.
**9** Whether the status of philosophy here is adequately explained by Cassirer will be set to the side. As Kinzel, for example, comments "Cassirer's claim that philosophy reflects on the different symbolic form without presenting its own leaves many questions unanswered. It remains unclear what characterizes the reflective mode of symbolization that is peculiar to philosophy or how the reflective task of philosophy relates to the exact sciences on the one hand, and to history on the other." (Kinzel 2024b, 1180)
**10** "reason is never a mere present; it is not so much an actual, as it is a constant and ever actualising, not a given but a task." (Cassirer 1979, 62).
**11** Although the overtly historical narrative aspect of Kant's own work is much sparser than Cassirer's.
**12** "One ought to think of neo-Kantianism in functional terms and not as a substantial entity. What matters is not philosophy as a doctrinal system but as a certain way of asking philosophical questions." (Cassirer quoted in Levine 1979, 5).
**13** As one commentator notes: "As a pluralist, [Cassirer] regards the different symbolic forms as genuinely autonomous yet mutually compatible expressions of reason, yet as an objectivist, he finds myth and science to provide conflicting, incompatible constructions of the world." (Kinzel 2024a, 128).
**14** In many ways, this neo-mythic idea has expanded in ideas such as counter-Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment or even postmodern thought. In contemporary world politics such neo-mythic consciousness has indeed, if anything, accelerated.
**15** Another German contemporary émigré reviewer of Cassirer's text, Eric Voegelin, despite his admiration for the work complained that Cassirer had not clearly grasped the fact that politics is always driven by mythical thinking. Purported rational thought on politics is yet another myth (see Voegelin 1947).

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**16** "Cassirer was not essentially a political or social philosopher. His interest in the modern period from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment focuses indirectly on the socio-political, . . . He was attracted to what he called 'that whole intellectual development through which modern philosophic thought gained its characteristic self-confidence and self-consciousness'." (Krois 1987, 208-9).

**17** "holding the world 'at a distance' and this objectification 'liberates' man from the narrowness of existence. This is a basic tenet of the philosophy of symbolic forms." (Krois 1987, 175).

**18** As Donald Levine has remarked: "This process of forming moves man out of his finitude towards infinitude, but not as an absolute other; rather, the finite is transformed into a series of infinite forms, and in this way the finite is overcome and the infinite is made accessible within the finite" (Levine 1979, 39).

**19** Reason, as such, is not seen as a given or fixed entity. Cassirer thus argued that "reason is never a mere present; it is not so much an actual, as it is a constant and ever actualising, not a given but a task . . . [thus] we can never grasp the true nature of reason in bare existence . . . Instead, we must seek it in the continual self-renewing work of spirit" (Cassirer 1979, 62).

**20** The vocation of the philosopher for Cassirer is to be 'the guide and caretaker of reason in general'. (Cassirer 1979, 60).

**21** 'The reality of power politics and the assertion of monarchy rule . . . were not conducive to liberalism.' (Vorländer 1996, 104).

**22** 'Bismarck had created a state that had no constitutional theory, its justification, he thought, was that it worked. Power thinly disguised on the one hand, and spirit emptied of all practicality on the other – these surely were two aspects of imperial Germany'. (Stern 1974, xxv).

**23** 'Often, German theorists at the beginning of the century [20th] have been regarded not only as unsympathetic to parliamentary government but also as unable to grasp its true nature, above all the role of the majority and opposition parties within parliament.' (Stirk 2006, 35).

**24** 'if the state is sovereign, the individual is a mere subject; and any claim to a right of his own as against the state is inadmissible, because it would destroy this sovereignty'. (Ruggiero 1927, 258).

**25** The demands 'put forward in France and England, on purely political grounds, for an introduction to the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man into a modern conception of the State . . . appeared no less in Germany, but formulated in the language of legal science'. (Ruggiero 1927, 261).

**26** Even Cassirer's wife Toni remarked sceptically on her husband's Hamburg address: 'After the ceremony in Hamburg City Hall, I did not meet many who had been "affected" . . . and those who were convinced remained as always the ones who wanted to be convinced. Shaking up Germany in those days required other means than those which Ernst was used to applying' (Toni Cassirer 2003, 181). She suggests that her husband was out of touch with German political realities of the time, especially German-Jewish reality.

**27** Social liberalism, in very general terms, was a more communitarian-inspired conception which was committed to a socialized understanding of the human individual; a more active, positive and interventionary vision of state action; a mixed conception of the economy, embodying both free market and regulatory action; a more positive conception of freedom as linked to conception of ethical citizenship and a sense of a common good for all citizens. (See Freeden 1978; Simhony and Weinstein 2001).

**28** Widmer comments that Cohen, like Lange, had some sympathy with progressive [social] liberalism. He had thus written to Natorp advising caution in criticizing liberals, noting that 'apart from the liberals, no one understands that the authority of the state is only a means to establish and guarantee the independence of the individual'. (Widmer 2024a, 16, n.6).

**29** 'After 1815 in Germany, for Chancellor Metternich and the German Confederation, 'liberal' largely implied revolutionary politics, as in France. It was thus that 'until the French July Revolution of 1830, the history of "liberal" in Germany was a history of interpreting the French Revolution and its consequences in the German states'. (Leonard 2019, 81).

**30** In a comparatively recent account of Cassirer at Davos, the author refers to Cassirer as a 'radiant symbol of a liberal, republican attitude' (Eilenberger 2020, 298).

**31** There was also though a more right-focused National Liberal Party, renamed People's Party post-1918. The latter liberal grouping although acquiring more votes than the *Deutsche Demokratia Partei* in 1928, was also in marked electoral decline by 1928, comparative to 1918/19. (See Sheehan 1978, 279-80).

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**32** Lassalle made a significant contribution to progressive democratic socialist politics, although stifled by Bismarck, however he died early in 1864. In 1869 Bebel and Liebknecht founded the Marxist Social Democratic Workers Party in Eisenach.
**33** Elisabeth Widmer's paper in this volume focuses on this Austrian group, particularly Max Adler.
**34** Thus, in the famous SPD Erfurt programme (1891), the theoretical aspect (written by Kautsky) was still orthodox materialist Marxist and economistic in orientation, whereas the practical aims of the programme included the increasing democratization of the state and society, the social betterment of working-class people, universal equal suffrage under a proportional representation system for the parliaments and regular elections at every level of government.
**35** 'This schizophrenia - considering real politics as fundamentally objectionable on the one hand, while simultaneously demanding the actualization of a politics deduced from the pure idea of reason on the other - has left a legacy in German liberal thought that may still be observed today.' (Vorländer 1996, 104).
**36** Such a legal requirement under the *Kaiserreich* and later National Socialist regime implied a far more invasive requirement.
**37** It has been suggested that Thomas Mann's fractious relationship with his left-inclined brother Heinrich (also a writer) may account for some of the uncharacteristically bombastic and emotive tone of the book.
**38** Incongruously, it seemed to go down well not only with the far right audience in Germany, putting Mann into the same bracket as Spengler, but also with his academic readers. Hans-Georg Gadamer reports in his autobiography that he found the Mann text 'wonderful' (Gadamer 1985, 5).

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