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A Bakhtinian Perspective: Polyphonic Character of Ernst Cassirer's Philosophical Writing

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Abstract. The study examines Ernst Cassirer's writing style in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. The term "polyphony" refers to various writing styles and literary genres that share the same structural traits. It is characterized by the absence of a single dominant standpoint, the plurality of perspectives on a given subject, the dialogical interaction of independent ideas and the equal status of voices involved in dialogue. Drawing on these polyphonic qualities as described by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the study shows that Cassirer's philosophical texts are organized according to a similar principle. Despite their monological form, Cassirer's writings progress as a multi-voiced conversation rather than a monological system. He develops a unique method of speaking through others. His texts employ the characteristics Bakhtin counts essential to Socratic dialogue. The research shows that Cassirer creates a performance of "living ideas", allowing them to advance through dialogic movement. He reveals the "dialogue of an epoch" that brings into dialogue diverse thinkers such as Mach, Koffka, Klages, and Husserl, as well as figures from different historical periods, such as Galileo. Moreover, his philosophical world contains elements that Bakhtin describes as carnivalistic. These include conceptual ambivalence, freedom from the dogmatism of classical logic, a functional approach and an openness to paradox. I demonstrate the polyphonic and carnivalistic dimensions of Cassirer's philosophy by analyzing *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. To illustrate how these polyphonic features function in Cassirer's argumentation, the discussion turns to his treatment of a philosophical issue that was central to the Marburg School: the critique of the sensualist theory. This process brings Cassirer's text toward a position that can be interpreted as a performative acting of paradox.

Keywords: Neo-Kantianism, Marburg School, polyphony, dialogism, philosophical style, Socratic dialogue, theory of meaning, sensualism, carnivalesque, pluralism

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Statement about data availability. All the data obtained during the study is included in the article being published.

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В Бахтинском ракурсе: полифонический характер философского письма Эрнста Кассирера

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Аннотация. Рассматривается стиль философского письма Эрнста Кассирера сквозь призму его собственных идей и в сопоставлении с концепцией полифонии, разработанной Михаилом Бахтиным. Показывается, что тексты Кассирера могут быть интерпретированы через бахтинское понятие полифонии, поскольку их структура обнаруживает родство с теми принципами, которые Бахтин выделял в анализе полифонического романа. Полифония, как ее понимает Бахтин, относится к различным стилям письма и литературным жанрам, которые разделяют общие философские позиции и структурные особенности. Она характеризуется отсутствием единой авторитетной истины, множественностью перспектив на заданный предмет, диалогическим взаимодействием независимых идей и равноправием голосов, участвующих в диалоге. Опираясь на эти качества, описанные Бахтиным в работе «Проблемы поэтики Достоевского», исследование показывает, что тексты Кассирера организованы по сходному принципу. Несмотря на внешне монологическую форму, его труды разворачиваются как многоголосый разговор, а не как монологическая система. Кассирер развивает своеобразный метод «говорения через других; в его текстах используются характеристики, которые Бахтин считает существенными для сократического диалога. Показано, что Кассирер создает перформанс «живых идей», позволяя им разворачиваться в динамическом движении. Его тексты формируют «диалог эпохи», который вовлекает в дискуссию таких мыслителей, как Мах, Коффка, Клагес и Гуссерль, а также фигуры из иных исторических периодов, как, например, Галилей. Более того, философский мир Кассирера содержит элементы, которые Бахтин связывал с карнавальным началом: концептуальную амбивалентность, свободу от догматизма классической логики, функциональный подход и открытость парадоксу. Демонстрируется полифоническое и карнавальное измерение философии Кассирера на примере анализа «Философии символических форм». Чтобы показать, как эти черты функционируют в его аргументации, исследование обращается к его трактовке философской проблемы, занимавшей центральное место в Марбургской школе: критике сенсуалистской теории. Прослеживая развитие этой критики, можно увидеть, как текст Кассирера приходит к позиции, которую можно интерпретировать как перформативное разыгрывание парадокса.

Ключевые слова: неокантианство, Марбургская школа, полифония, диалогизм, философский стиль, сократический диалог, теория значения, сенсуализм, карнавал, плюрализм

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Introduction

Ernst Cassirer's texts are far from simple. Scholars note that understanding Cassirer's thought remains a difficult task [1. P. 78; 2. P. 47]. Neimann assumes that Cassirer's style manifests characteristics typically associated with literary writing and poetic expression. His texts are performative. Cassirer attempts to present philosophical ideas not as rigid, abstract entities, but as forces that act and live. This approach he applies both to his own ideas and to those of others. Neimann states that this character of writing is expressed in Cassirer's unique method of speaking through the texts of other thinkers. It is one of the specific traits of Cassirer's rhetoric that he speaks through the terminology of others. Their own words develop his thesis. One may in this recognize again the flexibility of his thought, but also the dialectics of appropriation, which allows the other text to keep its own properties and yet steals whatever may already be in the service of something else [1. P. 91].

This traits of writing makes it difficult to distinguish Cassirer's own thought from that of the thinkers he invokes. Solmitz makes a similar observation in the article "Cassirer on Galileo: an Example of Cassirer's Way of Thought." There, Solmitz describes the complex relation of Cassirer to Galileo's thought in "Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance." Solmitz shows that Cassirer never offers a clear statement about Galileo's ideas. He sometimes agrees with, and sometimes confronts, Galileo [3. P. 736–737]. In his conversation with Galileo, Cassirer plays two or more roles, thus, the distinction between their positions becomes blurred. The author concludes that: "... either Cassirer agrees with Galileo and then speaks 'through' Galileo, somewhat like dramatist speaks through a historical character; or else he disagrees with him and then he makes Galileo the object of his comprehensive and extremely liberal understanding..." [3. P. 755].

While these scholars identify the peculiarities of Cassirer's style, they leave open the question of how such a style can be systematically understood. The aim of this paper is to extend Neiman's and Solmitz views on Cassirer's literary style. My thesis is that Cassirer's writing is best understood through the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony. The term "polyphonic" is employed here in accordance with

Bakhtin's account of the polyphonic novel, as developed in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963).

The relationship between Cassirer and Bakhtin remains a challenging question. Scholars engaged in the work of both thinkers note the significant impact that Cassirer had on Bakhtin. Brandist shows the influence of Cassirer's work on Bakhtin's theory of the novel [4]. Poole emphasizes the evidence of Cassirer's influence on Bakhtin's theory of carnival laughter in *Rabelais and His World*. He even points out direct citations taken from Cassirer that appear in Bakhtin's text. The fact that Bakhtin does not cite Cassirer even in cases of direct quotation provides Poole with grounds to question the originality of Bakhtin's work [5. P. 543]. A partial response to this claim is offered by Mnich. He suggests that Bakhtin's view about unimportance of citing sources helps explain why his texts contain accurate quotations presented without attribution [6. P. 567]¹. Another perspective on this issue is proposed by Lofts who suggested that it is "not so much the degree of influence Cassirer may have exerted on the work of the later Bakhtin, as the uncanny intellectual harmony of their thinking right from the beginning..." [7. P. 73].

I am inclined to suggest that Bakhtin's engagement with Cassirer's ideas may resemble that of Erwin Panofsky, who grounded many of his art-historical ideas on Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, or also that of Gershom Scholem, who likewise drew on Cassirer's concepts of symbol in his investigations of Kabbalah's symbols. In an analogous way, Bakhtin may have built his concepts on history of literary genres upon Cassirer's theoretical foundations.

Nevertheless, Bakhtin's literary legacy and Cassirer's influence on him are not the aim of this article; rather, its aim is to elucidate the originality of Cassirer's philosophical writing through its relation to Bakhtin's ideas. In this regard, Poole's observation that Bakhtin's "assimilation of everything into his own context effectively recreated all the materials he took from others" [5. P. 568] proves particularly illuminating. Bakhtin further development and application of Cassirer's ideas make this very theoretical thoughts more concrete and vivid. Therefore, in this article, Bakhtin's theory is chosen as a tool for investigating the originality of Cassirer's philosophical style. The argument of the article may seem circular, since Bakhtin himself was influenced by Cassirer's philosophical worldview. However, what matters here is not the direction of intellectual borrowing or the degree of influence, but the strong conceptual affinity between their ideas, which allows the thought of one to be articulated through the other. My aim is therefore to draw on Bakhtin's concepts in order to elucidate the polyphonic, dialogical, and carnivalistic aspects of Cassirer's philosophical writing.

¹ I assume that this absence of attribution can be explained by the strict censorship imposed on publishers during Bakhtin's time, which prevented Bakhtin from identifying Cassirer as the source.

Bakhtin's Theory of Polyphony

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin shows that the artistic form of the polyphonic novel is inseparable from a specific philosophical worldview and a conception of truth. Some writers assume that only one idea about a given subject can be necessarily true. Such authors operate within a monologic worldview, positioning themselves as the sole ideological authority in their works. Therein, the world is presented from a single, unified perspective, and the voices of the characters are subordinated to the author's ideological position. [8. P. 79–80]. This is the world of one idea, expressed usually by the main characters. Alternative perspectives are rejected; no other true ideas are possible. Bakhtin classifies novels written by authors with such a worldview as monologic.

It can also be observed that such a worldview appears not only in literature but also in philosophical discourse, even when such texts are framed as dialogues. One may find a clear illustration of this in Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding*, a philosophical work in which Leibniz responds to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Leibniz presents his arguments through the conversation between two characters: one representing his own position and the other representing Locke's. Although this work appears to be a dialogue, Leibniz merely refutes the ideas of his empiricist opponent. The dialogue serves as a vehicle for his critique rather than as an open exchange of arguments. Following Bakhtin's definitions, this is an example of what would be considered a philosophy of a single voice.

Unlike literature written from a single perspective, there are artistic works which reveal the world as a turbulent sea of ideas. They discover a world animated by diverse, and even opposing, thoughts and voices. In this world, many ideas coexist, though they often confront and challenge one another. It is like an orchestra, in which every instrument plays independently yet simultaneously. This is the kind of literature Bakhtin values most, the kind that resists a single, unifying viewpoint and preserves the plurality of voices. As Gardiner characterizes Bakhtin's position:

"Bakhtin consistently strives to protect multiplicity (discursive and otherwise) against the forces of unification, prioritizes the phenomenon of alterity over the isolated, self-sufficient monad, and champions 'radical difference' in opposition to an enforced homogeneity" [9. P. 45].

Bakhtin identified this desired heterogeneous structure in the polyphonic novel, that is the literary genre he associated with the novels of Dostoevsky². Bakhtin's concept of polyphony can be extended to philosophical genres as well: it can be associated with a philosophical writing style in which various voices maintain their autonomy and equipollence. Polyphony creates a music of ideas that, in their very multiplicity, expresses what Bakhtin calls the dialogue of an epoch. Imagine, for instance, bringing together thinkers such as Locke, Leibniz, Voltaire,

² Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* [10] for a very different position regarding Dostoevsky novels.

and Hume in the same salon and urging them to develop their ideas through direct engagement with opponents who hold different views. Such an encounter would dismantle the monologic voice of a single philosopher and create the dialogue of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European thinkers. This equipollent dialogue, if described by an objective observer, would reveal the central questions, problems, and paradoxes that were alive and contested at that time. In every historical period, numerous ideas circulate in the “air” of living conversations: in academic lectures, salons, newspapers, and articles. These ideas emerge from reality itself, and artists with extraordinary gifts, as Bakhtin says in relation to Dostoevsky, can hear them [8. P. 102].

According to Bakhtin, the roots of the polyphonic novel reach back to ancient literary forms, especially the genre known as the “Socratic dialogue”. This genre characterizes Plato’s early dialogues, where Socrates engages with his interlocutors. In Bakhtin’s view, the defining feature of this genre is not only its dialogical form, but also a particular attitude toward the idea. In Socratic dialogue, the idea begins to live, to take shape, to develop, and to generate new ideas by entering in relations with other ideas. Dialogue is performance which creates a living contact among ideas. In this performance, the idea exists in the thought of the interlocutor; in this sense, all ideas are true expressions of people’s ways of thinking. The Socratic dialogue shows that the nature of the idea is dialogical, and it is already moving toward polyphony³. Yet Bakhtin notes that such dialogue cannot yet be called polyphonic — it is only its ancestor. Socrates, through his conversations, sought the truth and deliberately led his interlocutors into paradox to reveal the limits or inconsistencies in their ideas. Whereas in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel the dialogue itself becomes the goal. Bakhtin points out that Socratic dialogue gave rise to several genres that subsequently developed and later contributed to the emergence of the polyphonic novel.

According to Bakhtin, the Socratic dialogue has a carnival dimension; that is, it belongs to a type of literature permeated by a worldview he calls the “carnival sense of the world” [карнавальное мироощущение] [8. P. 121, 148]. In general, the carnivalistic worldview is described by Bakhtin as a form of rebellion against prohibitions, orders, and hierarchical structures. It expresses a desire to overturn established norms and social hierarchies, to laugh at the seemingly solid structure of the world. The carnivalistic sense thus undermines the fixed forms of world. It shows the joyful relativity of every system, order, authority, and hierarchy. Kristeva notes that this carnivalistic impulse also manifests in discourse, which breaks away from conventional linguistic rules and becomes a form of social and political defiance [12. P. 428]. From this attitude arises ambivalence — an essential

³ This interpretation is not accepted by all scholars of Plato’s writings. Some researchers argue that, even in the early dialogues, Plato already held a monological metaphysical worldview which he goes on to elaborate in his later writings. I agree with the claim of Alen that Socratic dialectic in early dialogues “proceeds on the basis of [metaphysical] assumptions about the essence or nature of things which regulate its work” [11. P. 67].

component of the carnivalistic vision. The splendor of kings, the sacredness of temples, and the sanctity of divine may be at any moment turn into the ridiculous. As Bakhtin describes it:

“Вольное фамиллярное отношение распространяется на все: на все ценности, мысли, явления и вещи. В карнавалы контакты и сочетания вступает все то, что было замкнуто, разъединено, удалено друг от друга внекарнавальным иерархическим мировоззрением. Карнавал сближает, объединяет, обручает и сочетает священное с профанным, высокое с низким, великое с ничтожным, мудрое с глупым и т. п.” [8. P. 139].

In what follows, I show that several central features Bakhtin attributes to the polyphonic novel as well as carnivalistic aspects are likewise present in Cassirer's texts.⁴ Although Cassirer does not adopt a dialogical form of writing and avoids direct polemics, he develops a method of introducing other thinkers into his texts and engaging them in implicit conversations and debates. His texts employ several of the characteristics Bakhtin considers essential to Socratic dialogue: the dialogical nature of idea, which avoids ready-made truth, and the two basic devices: syncrisis (the juxtaposition of various perspectives on a single object) and anacrisis (provoking an interlocutor's word) [8. P. 125].

This article demonstrates that Cassirer creates a performance of “living ideas”, allowing them to unfold through dialogic movement. He reveals the “dialogue of an epoch”: a confrontation of ideas that defines the intellectual spectrum of a period. Moreover, it argues that Cassirer's philosophy is saturated with a carnivalistic vision of the world. This is manifested in his ambivalent attitude toward concepts and theories, as well as in the blurring of conceptual boundaries established by philosophical tradition. To see how these polyphonic features function in Cassirer's argumentation, the discussion turns to Cassirer's treatment of a philosophical issue that was central to the Marburg School: the critique of the so-called sensualist theories.

The Dialogue in Cassirer's Text

Ernst Mach, the 19th-century physicist and philosopher, was a primary intellectual opponent of Cassirer. The debate with Mach's position Cassirer starts in the introduction to the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms III* titled *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* [13]. According to Mach, perceptive knowledge begins with simple, elementary components called sense-data. He and his followers maintained that we acquire knowledge by combining discrete, formless sensations received through the senses. Cassirer often refers to this position as a sensualist theory.

⁴ It fits with Kristeva's observation that, for Bakhtin, what looks like a monologue often contains an internal dialogue, while something presented as a dialogue may in fact function as a single, voice [12. P. 430–431].

The philosophers of the Marburg School reject this theory. Cassirer, representing this school, also argued that sense-data cannot serve as the foundation of knowledge. According to Marburgian thesis, knowledge arises from elements that are already meaningful; it cannot emerge from chaotic impressions. Thus, even the simplest perception is always structured by or saturated with meaning⁵. The following analysis presents the ongoing dialogue between the two ideas: the former (sensualism) and the latter (a priori meaning principle).

The idea of a priori meaning returns throughout Cassirer's work in various contexts. However, he never presents his position as a ready-made or finalized truth. As a prelude to his discourse with sensualist theory, Cassirer examines its historical roots. He shows how the debate between priority of meaning / spirit / concept and matter / body / empirical impressions reappears under different names in the work of different philosophers, from in Greek antiquity till contemporary thought.

Cassirer usually does not deny the ideas he opposes as such. Instead, he examines why particular ideas do or do not fit a particular philosophical system and evaluates the logical consequences of such alignment or its absence. By investigating how a philosopher's idea addresses specific problems, Cassirer demonstrates that an idea never exists in isolation; it is always an integral component of a thinker's systematic worldview. This approach becomes evident when Cassirer examines sensualist theory within the context of Kant's thought. In this epistemological framework, the traditional opposition between "matter" and "spirit" is reconfigured as a distinction between two branches of knowledge: sensation and understanding [13. P. 6–10]. After analyzing various aspects of Kant's system, Cassirer concludes that in Kant's philosophy: "there cannot be any such thing as an isolated, 'merely sensory' consciousness — that is, a consciousness remaining outside of any determination by the theoretical functions of signification and preceding them as an independent datum" [13. P. 8]. Thus, Kant cannot accept sensualist theories, as they are incompatible with his philosophical system.

Accordingly, Cassirer demonstrates the impossibility of a "senseless" sensation within his philosophy. Considering the forms of both language and myth, it is impossible to isolate a "naked sensation" [13. P. 14–15]. Every simple impression must be structured by form and, consequently, is never discreet. Thus, rather than dismissing sensualism as merely "wrong", Cassirer critiques it by exposing its incompatibility with the broader requirements of his philosophical system.

Cassirer avoids direct criticism of other thinkers, and in his discussions with Mach, his principal opponent on this question, he does not attack Mach's position directly; nevertheless, his disagreement with Mach becomes clearly visible in the course of the discussion. Cassirer deals with Mach's positions according to the

⁵ This idea is often associated with the rationalist tradition, since it emphasizes the priority of meaning over empirical perception. However, I avoid calling this position "rationalism" and prefer to call it as the a priori meaning principle, because the meaning referred to here is not limited to rational concepts; it extends beyond the scope of classical rationalism.

general pattern described above. He examines Mach's views from different angles. By placing himself inside Mach's theoretical position, Cassirer examines the problems Mach sought to solve. In this way, Mach becomes a living interlocutor. Cassirer points out that the serious problem for Mach is the separation of psychology as the "inner world" and physics as the "outer world." By entering Mach's position, Cassirer shows that sense data, as the basic building block of perception, help bridge the gap between physics and psychology. An idea, therefore, is not an occasional thought but is rooted in a philosopher's system, always serves specific goals, and has multiple levels.

Cassirer's central move against Mach is taken from psychology. His point is that Mach's idea of sensory elements as basis of perception does not accord with new findings in psychology. It fails to account for the wholeness of the psychological process. To further demonstrate this point, Cassirer later in his text turns to psychological research that directly challenges the sensualist model. He brings into the discussion Kurt Koffka [13. P. 60], one of the founders of Gestalt psychology, a major psychological school of the 20th century. The central claim of this school is that perception is meaningful structure and cannot be reduced to senseless elements; it always carries meaning. Cassirer cites Koffka to clarify the limits of sensualist theories. Its explanatory framework cannot be reconciled with the findings of Gestalt psychology, and this gap becomes evident in phenomena such as infant perception and the perception of expressive gestures. According to observations of Koffka, an infant does not perceive isolated impressions of colors and shapes; rather, he apprehends expression: the smile of parents, the gestures of affection, or of anger. Similarly, in every encounter between people, each person immediately perceives the other's expression, and this perception is an essential part of any interaction and dialogue. An expressive gesture is not perceived as a sum of separate elements but as a primary meaning. Therefore, the sensualist theory cannot justify expressions. This is, claims Cassirer, the main argument of gestalt psychology set against sensualist theory. Gestalt psychology, thus, introduces a psychological perspective on the limitations of sensualist theory that is different from the philosophical one. In this way, Cassirer develops multiple perspectives on a single problem — a method that named *synkrisis*.

Cassirer goes further with a priori meaning principle. He claims that every perception carries expressive meaning, that is, a primary integration of sense-data with meaning. In other words, perception of sense-data (sensory perception) expresses meaning, and the separation of these two levels is impossible. To provide support for this argument and to open another perspective to the objection of sensualism Cassirer invites into the discussion Tito Vignoli, a 19th-century Italian philosopher of science [13. P. 81]. Vignoli developed a theory of cognition grounded, as Cassirer points out, in a pure positivism, according to which the foundation of knowledge is animation. From his observations of infants and animals, Vignoli reached a surprising conclusion:

Apprehension is the act, both in animals and in man, by which the spontaneous and immediate animation of things and of phenomena is accomplished. [14. P. 116].

Cassirer enters Vignoli's world, and the reader suddenly finds himself inside a fascinating realm of organic and mythical forms of life. In his dialogue with Vignoli, Cassirer agrees that animals perceive objects through expressive characteristics, which supports his theory of the primacy of expressive meaning. However, he doubts that animals are capable of perceiving these characteristics as a "person".

All the theories considered up to this point were formulated by thinkers of a rationalist orientation. In addition to them, Cassirer introduces to this dialogue of epochs a philosopher of a completely different kind: Ludvig Klages. Klages is very irrational, mystical life philosopher [*Lebensphilosoph*] whose ideas in many aspects stand in direct contradiction to those of Cassirer⁶. However, Cassirer brings him to support his claim about expressive nature of every perception. Klages argues that human knowledge is rooted in the expressive movement [*Ausdrucksbewegung*] of living creatures. He defines the expressive movement as an expression that "carries its meaning within itself" [*trägt ihren Sinn in sich selbst*] [16. P. 7]. This Klages's arguments become further support for the principle of a priori meaning.

Up to this point, Cassirer has directed his critique toward the most fundamental position of the sensualists: their thesis regarding the possibility of a sense-data perception devoid of meaning. Cassirer has presented his own arguments alongside psychologists and philosophers who reject this possibility. They all claim that perception is inherently meaningful. At its most basic level, this meaningful perception manifests as "expressive perception" (*Ausdruckswahrnehmung*).

Later in *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, Cassirer addresses the problem of overcoming sensualism from the perspective of another philosophical system: phenomenology. Edmund Husserl, the founder of this school, introduced new lines of concepts. Within his system, the notions of "sense" and "meaningfulness" take on a different significance from the previously discussed theories. Nevertheless, Husserl also seeks to explain the emergence of meaning and likewise engaging in a debate with the sensualists.

Cassirer develops his dialogue with Husserl during formulating his concept of symbolic pregnance [*Symbolische Prägnanz*] [13. P. 196–202]. While expression constitutes the unity of sensation and meaning, symbolic pregnance is the functional moment within perception where meaning and sensory experience become united. Cassirer notes that the central problem for rationalist philosophers, including himself, is to explain this unity of sense-data and meaning without presupposing the primary existence of a "naked" sensory impression. To this discussion, Cassirer introduces Husserl's phenomenological framework regarding the perception of things. The phenomenological structure of perception described by Husserl consists of two distinct layers: the act of consciousness and the stream of things' aspects. These two layers are phenomenological components of lived experience [*Erlebnis*],

⁶ See Cassirer's lecture given in Davos conference [15. P. 859].

neither of which is reduced to empirical experience. The act of consciousness is a meaning-giving act, called the intentional act [Intentionalitätsakt]. The stream of aspects contains the sensory contents and, according to Husserl, constitutes the *hylē*, that is the sensuous stream. Perception is “filled” with the flowing and changing *hylē* and the intentional act shapes this stream into a meaningful experience [17. P. 210]. In his typical manner, Cassirer engages in a direct dialogue with Husserl, posing challenging questions to the phenomenological system and then providing answers from within the internal logic of this system.

Cassirer emphasizes that the separation between the *hylē* and the act of meaning-giving is of fundamental importance for Husserl, as it enables him to distance himself from sensualist theory. The distinction between these layers refutes the claim that meaning is composed of sense-data. For example, “this table” is a stream of changing aspects perceived by eyes and simultaneously an object given in its full unity. The unity of the thing transcends the sensory aspects that appear in lived experience; but these aspects remain distinct from the meaning. Thus, the way of Husserl to overcome sensualism goes in different direction of meaningful perception theories mentioned above. While adopters of these theories assume that meaning and senses are united in expression, Husserl denies that meaning and senses ever meeting. Both, however, confronts the sensualist argument that meaning is composed from naked sense-data. By presenting these broad specters of contemporary thought, gestalt psychologists, Klages, Husserl — and more other names, Cassirer creates the philosophical dialogue of epoch. All the involved by Cassirer thinkers open the peculiar angel to approaching the problem: the place of sense-data and meaning in the structure of perception.

After providing Husserl’s answer to the issue discussed, Cassirer provokingly challenges Husserl. He argues that phenomenology does not fully succeed in overcoming the ideas of sensualism [13. P. 198]. Cassirer points out that the *hylē* — sensuous stream — insofar as it lacks meaning, remains foreign to the meaning itself. The *hylē* is both an essential component of the act of meaning and, at the same time, fundamentally different from it. Drawing attention to this, Cassirer asks Husserl how it is possible for such different layers as meaning acts of consciousness and meaningless stream to form a meaningful perception. Moreover, he asks whether this unification presupposes that meaningless flow of sense data somehow becomes meaningful [13. P. 199]. That, however, is the main thesis of sensualism, which Husserl seeks to overcome. Sensualists argue that senseless impressions can be organized into meaning. In this discussion, Cassirer again employs the method defined by Bakhtin as *anacrisis*: bringing the interlocutor to the inner paradox within his own system.

At this point, however, Cassirer suddenly makes very unexpected move. After his critique of Husserl, Cassirer nevertheless brings sufficient reason to agree with him. Cassirer points out that there is a justification for distinguishing between meaning and sensuous stream [13. P. 199–200]. He states that the justification for this separation is the modality of meaning. This modality enables the sensuous

material and meaning to remain the independent variables. This independence makes possible a variety of connections between meaning and sense-data. After this unexpected acceptance of Husserl's point, Cassirer continues to develop the idea of modality of meaning in context of the philosophy of symbolic forms. For Cassirer this modality lies at the center of his philosophical conceptions. It constitutes the possibility for the various frameworks of meaning, that he called the symbolic forms. Thus, Cassirer clarifies and develops his ideas through the dialogue with Husserl.

But the most paradoxical situation here is that Cassirer made *anacrisis* on his own system. He supports the position about separation of sense-data and meaning, that is position which characterizes sensualist theory, repeatedly criticized by him during all his texts! Does he try to say that he also cannot overcome sensualism, despite all his efforts? Does he confirm that without sensualist separation he cannot build cultural philosophy which presumes different ways of construction the world?

Cassirer does not properly explain this paradox in this text. It remains a performance of paradox: if meaning and sense-data are united, they cannot stand in relation as independent variables. However, they must be perceived as separated to explain the variety of ways in which what is perceived can be understood. But without their unification it is impossible to explain the whole phenomenon of perception.

However, in other books and later articles Cassirer offers a justification for this problematic issue. He explains the separation and unification of sense-data and meaning in perception through the functional-relational concept of the symbol. For Cassirer, the symbol is defined as the integration of sense-data with meaning, and it includes both the moment of separation and the moment of unification. Therefore, it is also called a relational concept, since relations include both moments. The two moments are perceived as one and two at the same time⁷. This answer to the problem of sense-data and meaning aligns with Cassirer's functional perspective. In the dogmatic substantive approach, sense-data and meaning must be either completely fused, as in expressive meaning, or completely separated, as in sensualism. By contrast, the functional view does not accept the existence of fixed substances and knows only roles and relations. Since a functional concept may play different roles, it may include aspects that contradict each other. For Cassirer, this functional relational approach to concepts overcomes sensualism [19. P. 116]. It allows one to argue simultaneously for both the unity and the distinction of meaning and sense-data, depending on the perspective adopted. Thus, Cassirer describes the: „Jeder Relationsbegriff ist freilich ‚eins und vieles‘, ist ‚einfach und Doppelt““ [19. P. 116].

In light of this description, Cassirer's functional worldview bestows on the world what Bakhtin would describe as the “carnival sense.” It undermines the world of fixed essences and allows plural ways of interpreting impressions. It discovers a world not as a single substantive order, but as multivocal carnival. This functional

⁷ For a more detailed explanation of this issue, see my article [18].

worldview is fluid and composed of many aspects; it reveals a worldview with many aspects; it gives rise to what Bakhtin calls “carnival ambivalence” and “joyful relativity.” This affinity of Cassirer’s functional world with carnivalistic sense is supported by Bakhtin’s own formulation, which articulates the connection between a functional-theoretical and the carnivalistic: “Карнавал, так сказать, функционален, а не субстанционален. Он ничего не абсолютизирует, а провозглашает веселую относительность всего” [8. P. 141].

Both Cassirer and Bakhtin set the functional view against a mythological, monological worldview grounded in hierarchy and dogmatism. As Lofts notes: For Bakhtin and Cassirer, culture is comprised of two antithetical but interrelated and equiprimordial forces: a “centripetal force” that seeks the conservation of the traditional status quo and a “centrifugal force” that seeks the renewal of the creative act: the former they call “mythical consciousness” and the later is termed “critical consciousness” [7. P. 80]. Despite these affinities, there remains an important difference in how Cassirer and Bakhtin position themselves in relation to the functional approach. In his early work *Substance and Function* [20], Cassirer argues that the functional worldview connected to the development of scientific concepts. For him, the shift from substantial to functional-relational thinking is a distinctly modern achievement, rooted in the transformations of modern science. Bakhtin, however, does not limit the non-substantial vision of the world to the scientific or modern functional approach. He traces its origins much further back, to ancient carnivalistic rituals that disrupted the rigid structures of mythical life through laughter and paradox.

Conclusion

My thesis is that Cassirer's writing in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is organized according to polyphonic structure. While Bakhtin uses the term “polyphony” to analyze Dostoevsky’s novels, this article applies it to Cassirer’s philosophical works. The polyphonic features described by Bakhtin show that polyphony is not limited to a writing style or a manner of presenting ideas; rather, it reflects the writer’s broader philosophical worldview. Cassirer assumes that there are many ways to interpret the world, and consequently every idea can be seen from many perspectives. His pluralistic philosophy, expressed in the polyphonic structure of his style, stands in contrast to the long tradition of monological thought. For centuries, philosophers have searched for one substance underlying the manifold of appearances. They have defined this One as God, or reason, or process, or Dasein. The “One” was preferred over the many. The best thinkers worked hard to reduce the variety of appearances to a single unifying ground. In contrast to these reduction theories, those that seek to subsume plurality under a single principle, Cassirer aimed to justify and preserve variety. Thus, Cassirer’s philosophy rejects monological reduction and affirms plurality as fundamental to the human understanding.

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