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## Reflective Judgment and Symbolic Functions: On the Possibility of a Phenomenology of Person

### Abstract:

The following paper seeks to examine whether, from the standpoint of a transcendental idealist, it is possible to have a phenomenology that can adequately disclose the nature and activity of person. First I establish that symbols are intuitive concretizations of the activity of person/*Geist*, and thus symbols are available to phenomenological description. Then I raise the question of whether reflective judgment can be understood as a part of a possible phenomenology. I come to the conclusion that yes, the process of reflective judgment is phenomenologically available; reflective judgment offers an experience of “what it is like to be a person” (meaning a transcendental process of symbol creation). However, it is clear that reflective judgment must borrow a rule from phenomenal/determinate experience in order to imaginatively analogize the transcendental creativity of person. Thus, all that is available to phenomenology is an analogy of being person, and not person itself.

### Keywords:

Cassirer, Kant, reflective judgment, personalism, phenomenology, transcendental anthropology

The following paper seeks to examine whether, from the standpoint of a transcendental idealist, it is possible to have a phenomenology that can adequately disclose the nature and activity of person (which for the transcendental idealist we can call *Geist*: the process of symbolic creation that is the mysterious heart of experience, and is regarded as possessing fundamental moral value). First I establish that symbols are intuitive concretizations of the activity of person/*Geist*, and thus symbols are available to phenomenological description. Then

I raise the question of whether reflective judgment (as understood by Kant and expanded upon by Cassirer and others) can be understood as a part of a possible phenomenology. I come to the conclusion that yes, the process of reflective judgment is phenomenologically available. So not only are the symbols created by person available to phenomenology, but also reflective judgment offers a phenomenologically available experience of “what it is like to be a person” (meaning a transcendental process of symbol creation). However, I will argue that reflective judgment must borrow a rule from phenomenal/determinate experience in order to imaginatively analogize the transcendental creativity of person. Thus, all that is available to phenomenology is an analogy of being person. In the end, I conclude that person/*Geist* must remain a mystery that is not available to phenomenology, although phenomenology can perform the useful service of helping us to experience the mystery of personal transcendental creativity, even if that experience is a phenomenal analogy for a transcendental mystery that can never be fully determined by phenomenology.

### Part 1: A Denial of the Possibility of a Phenomenology of Person from the Standpoint of Transcendental Philosophical Anthropology

In what follows, I will consider “person,” as understood in light of Ernst Cassirer’s transcendental philosophical anthropology, primarily found in his three volume *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.<sup>1</sup> On my reading of Cassirer, the only viable definition we can provide for the concept of “person” is as a symbolic agent acting in a way that is capable of “transforming the passive world of mere impressions, in which the spirit seems at first imprisoned, into a world that is pure expression.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, true “persons,” as moral or intellectual agents, are *geistig*—they are an active “process” of world-horizon creating and shaping.<sup>3</sup> The person is “*Homo Symbolicum*,” humanity as the symbolizing animal—*Geist*. This is both a methodological presupposition and a hypothesis of such a transcendental philosophical anthropology.

Following Cassirer, we find that “man” lives in, and exclusively experiences, a cultural world created by this symbolic activity.<sup>4</sup> Since the cultural world is always already transformed into expressive symbols, philosophical anthropology must provide a “functional” account of the essence of the human and give up the quest for a “substantial” essence (if by substance we mean an insight into the essence of humanity unclouded by our own epistemological involvement). Humanity can only be understood through its symbolic activity, as a func-

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1) A number of Cassirer’s unpublished materials were later published as Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume Four: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). In what follows, I will only consider the three volumes as published by Cassirer during his lifetime.

2) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume One: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 80–81. Hereafter *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* will be referred to as PSF, followed by the number of the volume, as in: *PSF1*. All references are to the Yale edition, translated by Manheim. The PSF was originally published in 1923, 1925, and 1929.

3) Cassirer himself does not tend to use “person” in this sense, tending to “man” or “humanity” or “*Geist*.” My reasons for using “person” here, rather than confining myself to simply “symbolic agent” or the broader “humanity” are two-fold. First, I am attempting to discuss Cassirer in light of a “personalist” tradition, so using “person” makes this connection clear. Secondly (and this is connected to the first), using “person” adds a moral dimension to the discussion that might be ignored in the case of the other terms. While Personalism as a term was not common in Cassirer’s day, Kant has often been retroactively considered a foundational figure for many strains of Personalism. In that context, I do not think it is misleading to apply the term “person” to Cassirer’s extension of Kant’s transcendental philosophical anthropology.

4) Cassirer tended to use the term “man” in contexts in which we today would prefer the non-gendered “human being.” I will avoid the gendered language in my own writing, as long as it is understood that when I use the non-gendered “human” or “humanity,” my usage is meant to coincide with what Cassirer described as “man,” which is perhaps better understood, in my view, as *Geist*.

tional organic whole constituted by that activity.<sup>5</sup> We cannot reach a world that has not been transformed into expressive symbols, but we might be able to trace back from those symbols into an “understanding” (although not, as we shall see, a determinate understanding) of the kind of being (person) who is responsible for this expressive world-horizon. It is important that this symbolic activity (that we call person) constitutes a whole (even if such a whole is functional and not substantial).<sup>6</sup> Philosophy, as Cassirer understands it, should pursue an ultimate unity of *Geist* rather than being content with a plurality of sensuous manifestations:

If we approach spiritual life, not as the static contemplation of being, but as functions and energies of formation, we shall find certain common and typical principles of formation, diverse and dissimilar as the forms may be. If the philosophy of culture succeeds in apprehending and elucidating such basic principles, it will have fulfilled, in a new sense, its task of demonstrating the unity of the spirit as opposed to the multiplicity of its manifestations—for the clearest evidence of this unity is precisely that the diversity of the products of the human spirit does not impair the unity of its productive process, but rather sustains and confirms it.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the ultimate aim of a philosophy of culture would be to outline a general logic of symbol formation, which then provides a way of grasping the symbolic agent responsible for those cultural symbols.

As Cassirer says, “the highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Cassirer utilizes a cultural phenomenology to describe and discern the forms present in our culture (understood as a horizon of meaning created by a variety of human work). Culture is thus the resulting form (or residue) of the action of cultivating our own human possibilities, insofar as those possibilities make us intelligible to ourselves. For Cassirer, it is only on the basis of such a cultural phenomenology that we can articulate a robust philosophical anthropology. Cassirer will outline three primary symbolic activities (workings) which contribute to a functional understanding of man: language, myth, and objectivating knowledge.

For a transcendental philosophy such as Cassirer’s, the only way to establish an answer to the question “what does it mean to be a person?” is through what Kant referred to as “reflective judgment”—person is the symbolic agent who acts as the fundamental (transcendental) ground of experience. This grounding act cannot be understood “determinately” as an object or substance (because it is a transcendental act, and thus non-phenomenal), but only reflectively as a process, an acting. So, the person, for the transcendental philosopher, is a process of symbolic creation in the Kantian sense, a creative universal that we construct from within phenomenal experience when we encounter an experience that cannot be subsumed wholly under a concept by our judgment.<sup>9</sup>

In that case it seems (perhaps problematically) that from the standpoint of a critical (or transcendental) philosophy such as Cassirer’s, another person might never be fully given in our experience. We cannot even

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5) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 67–68.

6) For Cassirer’s full analysis of the metaphysics of function over substance, see: Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function, and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity*, trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (New York: Dover Publications, 1953).

7) Cassirer, *PSFI*, 114.

8) *Ibid.*, 111.

9) This understanding of the Kantian symbol will be explored in more detail in what follows. For more on this, see: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), §59.

directly experience our own “*geistige*” humanity (*Menschheit*) except by reflectively abducting from our cultural works whatever functional *geistige* activities we can, in order to determine the circle of our own functional agency.<sup>10</sup> A “person” is a functional unity that must be reflectively constructed symbolically—there is no way for such a “person” to be presented directly in experience as “given,” because “person” transcends phenomenal experience—person grounds the phenomenon (a condition for the possibility of the phenomenon), and is thus not present among the phenomena. This palpable absence is true of not only “my own” personhood, but also of the personhood of any other potential persons.

If person can only be experienced as a transcendent symbol that must be reflectively created, we seem to deny the possibility of a “phenomenology of person,” but if (and only if) by phenomenology we mean a method restricted entirely to describing the structures of phenomena, and disallowing any non-descriptive component in the method.<sup>11</sup> It is my position, following Cassirer, that person cannot simply be described in light of its phenomenal manifestations—it must be created (and importantly: only analogically) out of phenomena through an act of reflective judgment. In other words, person cannot be explained without phenomenology, but it also cannot be explained entirely by phenomenology alone. Person is a symbolizing process, and while symbols are always manifest in phenomenal experience, they always expand beyond the limits of the phenomena. Thus we come to the central argument of this article: person is not something that can be encountered in “pure” phenomenological description—only phenomenology in conjunction with an accompanying reflective judgment can supply a functional experience of person. However, even if we allow for a phenomenology that includes reflective judgment, it will still be the case that person evades the grasp of phenomenology (at least, in a strict sense). In what follows I will explore this position in further detail.

## Part 2: An Exploration of the Stated Position

We are now in a better position to seek a more comprehensive understanding of Cassirer’s transcendental philosophical anthropology, as it appears in statements such as:

We can arrive at a system of the manifold manifestations of the mind only by pursuing the different directions taken by its original imaginative power. In them we see reflected the essential nature of the human spirit—for it can only disclose itself to us by shaping sensible matter.<sup>12</sup>

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10) Abduction, a term that I am borrowing from Charles Sanders Peirce (also called retroduction by Peirce, based upon the Aristotelian *apagōgē*), here means loosely the logical movement in which “The surprising fact C is observed, But if A were true, C would be a matter of course; Hence there is reason to suspect that A is true” CP 5.189, taken from: Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols., ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958). CP 5.189 indicates the 189th paragraph of volume 5, in the collected papers.

11) Any definition of phenomenology (whether called “transcendental phenomenology” or otherwise) that allows a reflective (and therefore, in my view, and Cassirer’s, “creative”) moment as proper to phenomenology would therefore be excluded from the above position. Thus, I am only directing my argument toward those understandings of phenomenology as purely “descriptive” method. For the sake of time and clarity of purpose I will not here attempt to outline varieties of phenomenology and classify them as either “reflective” or “descriptive.” If the reader has in mind a phenomenology that does not meet the above description, I am happy to exclude that position from my constructive account, in full awareness that it must be accommodated eventually. Briefly put, Hegelian phenomenology may be of the reflective type, and Husserl in *Ideas I* (and arguably thereafter) might also fall under this category. To my mind, the phenomenology of Marcel is sufficiently reflective, as is Cassirer’s, as well as diverse others, depending largely on how one interprets their positions. See the bibliography for appropriate references.

12) Cassirer, *PSFI*, 88.

This anthropology seeks to outline those “original imaginative powers” that make up *Geist*; and yet, we can only see these functional powers “reflected” (a choice of terminology that will become important shortly) off of our sensible experience. In other words, we must reconstruct the expressive imaginative act on the basis of the resulting expression.

In defending a transcendental philosophical anthropology (i.e., the position that person is a transcendental symbolizing process that is not exhaustively described by phenomenological analysis), the primary concern that we must address is the question many ask of transcendental idealism—is something vital lost by presenting the activity of *Geist* as “transcendental”? Even having clarified that transcendental here means the spiritual function(s) that guides the formation of our symbolic worlds, the fear is that all of this speculation (of functions) will remain only and ever abstract, and never reach the truly concrete level that someone can identify in his or her experience, let alone act upon. If Cassirer intends language, myth and the other symbolic functions to be transcendental functions that form the conditions for the possibility of the way in which we experience our subjective/objective world (and thus activities proper to persons), can we say anything meaningful about those functions? Or will we be stuck with entirely abstract speculative principles?<sup>13</sup>

After all, the above critique will likely be voiced by proponents of (some kinds of) phenomenology against a transcendental philosophical anthropology. To use the classical language, the critique can be understood as follows: “If person cannot be described by phenomenology, we are forced to resign it to the transcendental (and thus, noumenal) realm. The result is that nothing can be known about person.” In other words, proponents of (certain kinds of) phenomenology are apt to dismiss anything non-phenomenal as unknowable and our speculations are thus ultimately useless. Is this critique fair? If person is a transcendental symbolic process, have we essentially given up on saying anything of value about person? I can grasp (experientially) what it means to act as an ego, or as a body—but do I have an experience that I can point to of “spiritual activity”? Is spiritual activity “concrete” in any sense? If so, what is that sense? If spiritual activity is in fact concrete, does that imply that it is possible that such spiritual activity could be adequately described by phenomenology, contrary to the position I have advanced?

Cassirer certainly does not consider himself to be dealing with abstract and unknowable phantoms. In what follows, then, I will attempt to articulate whether, and in what sense, a person (as a functional nexus of spiritual activities that Cassirer calls “symbolic functions”) can be transcendental and still concrete. Cassirer urges us to “start not with abstract postulates but from the concrete basic form of spiritual life.”<sup>14</sup> Significantly, it is the form of our spiritual life, our spiritual activity, that Cassirer considers to be concrete—in other words, our “ideal” symbolic experience is concrete, but not necessarily the transcendental/symbolic function itself (as he does not specify). While it is possible that Cassirer means “form” in a non-technical sense here, it is more likely that he means this statement in the technical sense.<sup>15</sup> Cassirer makes similar points elsewhere, for example

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13) And what are we to make of Cassirer’s statement that: “Unity, in other words, appears not as the foundation but as another expression of this same determination of form, which it must be possible to apprehend as purely immanent, in its immanent significance, without inquiring into its foundations, whether transcendent or empirical.” Cassirer, PSF2, 13. In what sense can a symbolic form have “immanent significance”? To understand this note, we must remember that the direction of inquiry is not the same as the direction of explanation.

14) Cassirer, *PSFI*, 110–111.

15) For a discussion of Cassirer’s use of form as contrasted to other accounts, see for example: Randall Auxier, “Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer,” in *A Handbook of Whiteheadian Process Thought*, vol. 2, eds. Michel Weber and Will Desmond (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008), 552–570. For a discussion of the relation between form and function in Cassirer see Ernst Cassirer, “Form and Technique,” translated by John Michael Krois and Wilson McClelland Dunlavy, in *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Aud Sissel Hoel and Ingvild Folkvord (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

when he says that “it can be shown that precisely the pure function of the spirit itself must seek its concrete fulfillment in the sensory world.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the route to concretion for the symbolic function(s) passes through sensation (*Empfindung*); correspondingly, considered in itself as a pure function (spiritual energy), the symbolic is therefore abstract. From this, we can assume that Cassirer is using the term “concrete” to mean “sensory”—the symbolic world of sensory experience is concrete, on this understanding, and we can assume that concepts or ideas without a required sensory (and in fact: sensible) referent (the ideas of reason, for example) would be correspondingly understood as abstract (or pure in the Kantian sense).

Thus, concrete is used here as an epistemological region (i.e. sensory or nonsensory) that we must be careful to distinguish from an ontological region (physical/mental or real/ideal). Cassirer does not seem to be using concrete/abstract as logical categories in which concreteness implies particularity and abstraction implies generality—often on the assumption that generality arises out of particulars by ignoring or “abstracting” those qualities that make the experience particular (i.e. Locke’s third activity of the mind).<sup>17</sup> If Cassirer is not utilizing the logical sense of abstraction, a general concept that has a corresponding intuition could thus be described as concrete, we assume (although this is not explicitly stated)—this point will become important momentarily. While these three senses of concrete (epistemological, logical, and ontological) are very closely related and can be hard to disentangle, it is important that we try to do so.

The reasons to keep these senses separate are numerous. For example: if the symbolic forms are concrete epistemologically because they are sensory, do we also assume that they are particular (i.e., logically concrete) or “physical” (ontologically concrete) or both? Although we have already set aside appeals to ontological categories, the logical difference remains unclear. Would the form be particular, or merely the sensory objects it “enforms”? If the form is particular, what does that mean? Must we then assume that the form is epistemologically concrete, but not logically concrete?

And while Cassirer doesn’t explicitly say so in the above quote, the implication of his statement is that symbolic functions are not epistemologically concrete because they are the grounds for sensation, and are not sensory themselves. But does that also entail that the symbolic functions are logically abstract (i.e., general)? To the contrary, let us hypothetically assert that a symbolic function is, in fact, concrete epistemologically, while at the same time being abstract logically. In other words, the symbolic functions are sensory generals, or concrete generals (concrete epistemologically, logical generals). How could this be possible? While it may seem strange at first, we have actually already made this distinction above. When Cassirer demands that the concrete be sensory, he is making the epistemological claim that to be concrete is to be experienceable. However, we must not automatically reduce experience (*Empfindung*), which can be of intuitions or concepts, to merely intuition

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16) Cassirer, *PSF1*, 87. See also *PSF3*, 281 where abstraction is identified with concepts divorced from intuitions of particulars.

17) John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) Book II, Chapter 11. Or for an example from Kant, see: *Lectures on Logic*, trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 202/Ak. 24:253. “The concept of every species and genera of things that strikes our senses is a *conceptus abstractus* [,] e.g., of horses[,] sheep, etc.: if I say a horse, then this is a concept given *per experientiam*. But the universality of the representations arose through abstraction. The universality of all concepts through experience arises through abstraction from individual concepts and images[,] the representation itself arises through experience, however. Here the matter itself lies in experience, but the form of universality lies in abstraction. Through abstraction not the least cognition arises; rather, universality arises through abstraction. The first origin of our cognition is thus experience. Concepts of experience are thus ones that were given through experience and became universal through abstraction. Therefore all concepts of experience are abstracted concepts. Pure concepts of reason, however, are not given through experience by means of abstraction, but instead through pure reason, and in this way they differ from concepts of experience. The concept of right and wrong is in this way a pure concept of reason. These concepts remain constant even granted that no experience occurs.”

(*Anschauung*) which is only of particulars. In other words, Cassirer would assert that we do in fact experience generals/concepts, and even general concepts such as whiteness or tallness are rooted in sensation (*Empfindung*). Kant refers to these concepts that are rooted in sensation as concepts of experience.<sup>18</sup> To reduce experience to merely intuition is precisely to efface the difference between epistemological and logical abstraction, which we have already warned against.

It is often assumed that a logically abstract entity (i.e., whiteness, tallness) can only be experienced/sensory (*Empfindung*) to the extent that it is “present in” or “subsumes” a particular intuitive object (some white object, some tall object). That is a mistake: whiteness can already be experienced as such. However, it cannot be sensible (i.e., intuited through *Sinnlichkeit*) without being linked to a particular. On this account, the general (as general) is conceptual, not intuitive—I can conceptualize whiteness in general with the understanding, but never intuit whiteness in general with sensibility alone (to take the Kantian terminology), only in the “presence” of this white particular. In other words: we intuit particulars, and we conceptualize generals, and that is the way it is (one supposes): everything is nice and tidy. This logical division does not, however, necessitate that a general (as logically abstract) cannot be experienced (and thus epistemologically concrete), only that it cannot be intuitively experienced—we can have an experience of whiteness, for example, even if we cannot intuit it (since it has been abstracted out of the structures of space and time).

So then, we have established that it is possible to be epistemologically concrete and logically abstract at the same time. However, what would it mean to claim that a symbolic function falls under this description? A symbolic function is very different from “whiteness,” after all—is it not? I have already claimed that symbolic functions are non-experienceable to the extent that experience means phenomenal (and thus sensory) experience—as the ground for sensory experience, they are not themselves experienceable, whether as an intuition or a concept. Thus, a symbolic function (an act of person) cannot be concrete in the epistemological sense and we should, seemingly, give up in our pursuit of the concrete (sensory) function. However, let us navigate through this difficulty for a while longer before we abandon the quest.

What would it mean for a general to be sensible/intuitable, and thus subject to the pure intuitions of space and time? In other words, can a concept be empirically intuited, rather than only understood? Is it possible to have an experience of a concept that is spatiotemporally situated, in the empirical sense? The first clue is given to us by Kant’s understanding of taste:

Taste also has certain universal laws, but can these laws be cognized *in abstracto a priori*? No. But in concrete; because the laws of taste are really not laws of the understanding, but universal laws of sensibility.<sup>19</sup>

According to Kant here, the universal laws of taste cannot be cognized abstractly, they must be cognized concretely, if at all. However, as universal laws, the laws of taste are general (logically abstract)—thus, Kant is here saying that we must cognize a general law (logically abstract) concretely. In what sense does he mean by this use of concrete? Certainly not logically concrete (since it would be absurd for Kant for a logical object to be both particular and general). And it seems doubtful that Kant is appealing to ontological concreteness (*i.e.*, that the laws of taste are “substantial”).

Thus, we can assume that Kant means that these laws are sensory (our final option for concrete), that they must be cognized in sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), not in the understanding (*Verstehen*). This interpretation is strength-

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18) Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, 202/Ak. 24:253. See the above note.

19) *Ibid.*, 32, Ak 24:46.

ened by his association of abstract with *a priori*, which leads us to conclude that he means abstract in the epistemological sense of an *a priori* (unadulterated by sensation/*Empfindung*). Correspondingly, “concrete” can be assumed to imply the presence of sensation in this statement. Thus, the universal laws of sensibility (or, the pure intuitions of space, time, and now taste), for Kant, are themselves sensible, or at least not without *Sinnlichkeit*. This is a stronger statement than identifying these laws as “experiential concepts” in the sense discussed above. It is not simply that these laws are rooted in experience/sensation by way of particular intuitions (but abstracted from that intuition)—these laws/concepts are themselves intuitable, without empirical abstraction.<sup>20</sup>

How could this be possible? Normally cognition involves both sensibility and the understanding unified in judgment—in order to avoid “blind” intuitions and “empty” concepts. How can judgment bring together a sensible intuition with the pure intuitions (the laws of sensibility) which themselves ground intuition? To do so would be to “impurify” the pure intuitions of space and time by admixing them with sensation. In other words, the form of space and time cannot itself be located in space and time. Yet, the cognizer is embodied and does not think without sensing. Thus, we are back to the problem of symbolic functions, having found that this problem exists in Kant as well with regard to the laws of sensibility (space, time, and perhaps taste).

In order to consider this question, we need to look back to Kant’s distinction between determinate and reflective judgments. We worry about the “abstract” nature of our symbolic functional activity precisely because such symbolic functions can be experienced only as a result of reflective judgment, and not merely by means of the determinate judgment with which we are more comfortable.<sup>21</sup> The degree to which we can establish that reflective judgments (and in turn, the “results” of reflective judgment) are “concrete” (*i.e.*, sensory and intuitable) is the degree to which we can say the same of the symbolic functions. Since this point is complicated, let me restate it as clearly as possible: our experience of a symbolic function, as I understand it, requires acts of synthesis that are reflective, embodied (require sensation), particular, concrete, and yet have universal meaning. As Kant has already demonstrated in the *Critique of Judgment*, there is a phenomenological thread that can be used to retrace the course of our reflective acts—in that case, the experience of beauty affords us the ability to feel the activity of our own formative (symbolic) powers.

In a judgment of beauty, we experience, reflectively, the laws of taste (“laws” of sensibility) expressing themselves as our own creative act. Each of Cassirer’s symbolic forms will have an analogous circumstance, in which the form of our experience “reflects” us back on our symbolic, active, selves (as it were). For example, language throws us back on the linguistic symbolic function, myth on the mythic function, and objectivation throws us back on the knowing function (in other words, the three volumes of the symbolic forms). There is a moment when we are confronted with a “named,” or “mythic,” or “objective” experience (and others) in which we realize that the forms of these symbols are not immediately linked to ready-made concepts that my judgment can apply to experience with ease—rather, these symbols must be constructed (requiring labor of the imaginative functions) in a way that schemata are not, by reflectively generating a concept under which to subsume the symbol (analogically).<sup>22</sup> When I name an object, or even encounter a named object, I am forced to acknowledge the fact

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20) Note that this development out of Kant has taken many paths, all of which might be seen as some form of a “historization of the transcendental” in which the Kantian transcendental subject is accessible to us (at least in some way) through phenomenal experience. In addition to Cassirer and other Neo-Kantians, we might also include on this list Hegel, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Husserl. In some senses, *Lebensphilosophie*, modern Hermeneutics, and Phenomenology can all be seen as developments of this issue.

21) Both reflective and determinate judgement will be discussed shortly.

22) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 227: “Hence all intuitions supplied for a priori concepts are either schemata or symbols. Schemata contain direct, symbols indirect, exhibitions of the concept. Schematic exhibition is demonstrative. Symbolic exhibition uses an analogy (for which we use empirical intuitions as well), in which judgment performs a double function: it applies the concept to the object of a sensible intuition; and then it applies the mere rule by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of



that I (or broadly: *Geist*) am responsible for this name.<sup>23</sup> I am thrown back on my own creativity, on my own active *Geist*. We should take a moment to articulate this Kantian sense of reflective judgment, since it plays a crucial role in Cassirer's anthropological project, and grounds the concrete "phenomenology" we seek.

A determinate judgment occurs when judgment subsumes a particular intuition under an already given universal concept (i.e., Socrates is a man, white is a color, and so on).<sup>24</sup> Kant defines a reflective judgment as those judgments where "only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it."<sup>25</sup> There is no readily available experiential concept or concept of reason (or implied idea) under which to subsume the particular intuition I am confronted with. In a judgment of this type, the subject is thrown back onto itself, since judgment demands a principle (a functional universal) under which to subsume the given particular. Where will the reflecting subject find such a universal, if understanding and reason have failed? The symbolic imagination will have to provide the universal under which we can subsume the intuition. This imaginative symbolic principle does not determine the particular experience, however—after all, this is not an act of determinate judgment. Instead, this imaginative universal reflects the subject itself in the mode of feeling, as a "law" which reflective judgment gives itself in imagination, and thus comes to know itself.<sup>26</sup> In other words, I name, mythologize, or objectivate my experience (or otherwise determine it), not because the intuition demands it, but because I am the type of activity that names, mythologizes, objectivates, or otherwise determines. I find myself as person (or to avoid substantializing, the "myselfing") in my reflective judgment, not the "essence" or the "being" of the phenomena.<sup>27</sup>

The symbolic functions (language, myth, objectivating knowledge, and so on) give rise to reflective judgments—they provide speculative (or: imaginative) principles/laws which we use to explain (in other words, to account for the meanings of) our particular experiences. And it is because the universal is not given in the understanding through abstracted intuition, but must be provided by imagination, that these activities can be said to be "symbolic"—in the Kantian sense that they "exhibit" (which Kant formally calls *hypotyposis*) a concept "to which no sensible intuition can be adequate,"<sup>28</sup> namely, the concept of the active human spirit (person). Only now can we understand the full meaning of calling these functions and forms "symbolic." In subsuming life under language or myth (for example), I create a symbol of myself; I can understand myself (though only analogically) as the activity/law that subsumes in this way.

Now we see the importance of the symbolic functions for a philosophical anthropology. In the creation of these speculative rules we exhibit ourselves symbolically (to ourselves) as human persons, despite the fact that we

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which the former object is only the symbol."

23) And I/*Geist* am similarly responsible for the myth, the object, the artwork, and so on.

24) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 18–19: "Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative* (even though [in its role] as transcendental judgment it states a priori the conditions that must be met for subsumption under that universal to be possible). But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely reflective. Determinative judgment, [which operates] under universal transcendental laws given by the understanding, is only subsumptive. The law is marked out for it a priori, and hence it does not need to devise a law of its own so that it can subsume the particular in nature under the universal."

25) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 18–19.

26) All cognitive powers, for Kant, are identified and defined by their "legislative" power, but determinate judgments (made by reason and understanding) legislate to both subject and object; judgment taken alone (i.e., reflective judgment) legislates only to the subject. Thus, "law" in Kant's sense takes on two distinct meanings.

27) This is at least one meaning that could be attributed to Heidegger's term *Jemeinigkeit*, which is at least arguably Heidegger's effort to deal with the "I think" that accompanies each determinate act of *Vorstellung* (presentation or representation) in Kant.

28) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 226.

do not possess any “direct” intuition of our own humanity.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the Kantian “symbol” is exactly the concrete universal we have been searching for—it is a general “to which no sensible intuition can be adequate,”<sup>30</sup> and yet it is still exhibited in intuition. By applying our reflective judgment to an intuition in those instances where “only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it”<sup>31</sup> we take that particular and transform it into a symbol—a symbol that “stands in for” (analogically) a concept which otherwise could not be exhibited in intuition. It is “merely” an analogical form of hypotyposis, and yet the symbol still performs the work of concretizing (epistemologically, if not necessarily logically or ontologically) the general. A symbol is distinct from a concept in that symbols are subject to the pure intuitions—they exist in space and time in a way that concepts do not. Further, we can expand upon ideas (including symbols) indefinitely while concepts restrict the movement of imagination.

If our symbolic activity arises from the act of reflective judgment itself, we can understand the resulting functional universal (that we give to ourselves in the symbolic act) as the symbolic “form” itself—it is the “law” that governs the appearance of subsequent phenomena, and is the condition for the possibility, in the concrete particular, of any phenomena. When I experience a particular intuition for the first time and I name that thing (for example, or symbolize in another modality), I am providing the imaginative (but concrete) universal according to which I will from now on appropriate that particular. And in that reflective judgment (that symbolic activity) I learn something about myself; by providing the rule for my own world I determine myself as the one who provides the rule in this way. This is how we should understand Cassirer’s attempt at a functional (rather than substantial) transcendental philosophical anthropology. Stephen G. Lofts helpfully outlines the difference between cultural (reflective) concepts and other (determinate) concepts:

In the case of the sciences of culture, however, the concept can never subsume the particular under the universal “in the same way”. The particular possesses a certain “indeterminateness” that cannot be overcome... The concepts of culture thus represent a “unity of direction”, a “common task”, and not a “unity of being”. They “characterize” but do not “determine” the particular that they subsume under the universal. The aim of the sciences of culture is to establish the structure and form of this common task and activity.<sup>32</sup>

By articulating the various reflective judgments (the symbolic functions) by which the human spirit creates the rules (symbolic forms or functional universal) that structure our phenomenal experience, we can get a sense of ourselves as the organic, functional self that imposes these various meanings (universals, laws) on our particular experiences.<sup>33</sup> Therefore “person” becomes the very act of structuring the world through language, myth, and objectivating knowledge (and other possible symbolic acts).

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29) Cassirer discusses this problem in the context of language, for example, and states “Even where language has arrived at a determinate idea of the I, it must at first lend it an objective form; it must, as it were, find its designation for the I through its designation of objective things.” Cassirer, *PSF1*, 260.

30) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 226.

31) *Ibid.*, 18–19.

32) Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, translated by S. G. Lofts, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xxxvi. Stephen G. Lofts’ translator’s introduction to the text.

33) See Cassirer, *PSF2*, 206: “Thus the feeling of the determinacy of the personality does not vanish with the gradual detachment from the particularity of the activity but rather is intensified by it. The I now knows and apprehends itself—not as a mere abstraction, not as something impersonal and universal that stands above and behind all particular activities, but as a concrete unity, identical with itself, which links and binds together all the different trends of action. Over against this identical entity as the constant foundation of action the particular creation seems merely ‘accidental,’ because it is never more than a partial fulfillment of the I.”

Now we can see the way to resolving our original question: what can be said about the symbolic functions (and the person they functionally “determine”) if they are the ground of experience, and therefore not experienceable themselves? Is it possible for a rule/concept/general to be “experienced” within space and time (rather than abstracted from it)? It turns out that this is possible—rather than abstracting a concept out of an intuition, in reflective judgment we symbolize the intuition and turn that intuition into a universal—not a determinate universal, but an imaginative universal (symbol) which analogizes myself and my own activity. It might be objected that this symbolic relation is nothing other than the kind of inherence of universal in particular that we discussed above, and so we have not left the territory in which whiteness can only be intuited in a particular white object. However, as Cassirer says:

Here consciousness, in order to apprehend the whole in the particular, no longer requires the stimulus of the particular itself, which must be given as such; here consciousness creates definite concrete sensory contents as an expression for definite complexes of meaning. And because these contents which consciousness creates are entirely in its power, it can, through them, freely “evoke” all those meanings at any time.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike when we abstract to create a general (by removing the restrictions of space and time), symbolization is a process of generalization that remains within space and time, and as such, intuition. A symbol is distinct in this respect from concepts—it allows us to “apprehend the whole in the particular” as Cassirer puts it by creating “definite concrete sensory contents as an expression for definite complexes of meaning.”

The symbolic form is a symbol that remains within the intuitive world, and thus is hypothetically available to phenomenological description. However, all that we have established is that the symbolic form is experienceable as an intuitive general, and that symbolic forms analogically suggest the expressive powers which create them. This is the crux of our investigation. Are we still not in the same situation as before, where we experience the form (as a concrete universal), but cannot say anything concrete about the function itself (the movement of “formation”). In other words, the rule (borrowed from the domain of understanding or reason) is concrete, but is the process by which the rule is formed concrete? Remember, the rule is borrowed from our habitual determinate judging; the imagination is using this borrowed rule to analogize what it is like to experience the functional creativity of *Geist*.<sup>35</sup> In other words: we are using a rule borrowed from phenomenality to analogize the rule which we assume must legislate the symbol that stands before us (although our judgment cannot find an immediate rule under which to subsume this intuition). That implies not only a general but a universal (*i.e.*, *a priori*) ground. Is there a “something it is like” to symbolize, without determining?

Answer: there must be. Otherwise, there would be no “persons” in Kant’s sense. We cannot “determine” person, and yet nothing is more concrete in our experience. However, it is not clear if phenomenology can disclose this process in an immediate way. After all, the “person” that we seek is an active “process” of world-horizon creating and shaping—it is the process of shaping, itself, not the objective world-horizon thus shaped.

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34) Cassirer, *PSFI*, 106.

35) Or as Kant puts the issue at *Critique of Judgment* 227: “Symbolic exhibition uses an analogy (for which we use empirical intuitions as well), in which judgment performs a double function: it applies the concept to the object of a sensible intuition; and then it applies the mere rule by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the former object is only the symbol. Thus a monarchy ruled according to its own constitutional laws would be presented as an animate body, but a monarchy ruled by an individual absolute will would be presented as a mere machine (such as a hand mill); but in either case the presentation is only symbolic. For though there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill, there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and on how they operate [Kausalität].”

We have been inscribing tighter and tighter technical analysis upon this question, and yet we still remain, for all intents and purposes, at the beginning. We have a deeper understanding of concrete form, but not concrete function—our phenomenology has broadened to show how the phenomenal world is symbolic, which is to say that it opens up (or at least is capable of opening up) to the personal through analogy. However, all we have shown is that phenomenology can present the effects of person, which can be used by the imagination to reflectively construct a “what it must have been like” to create the symbolic meaning at hand. It has not yet given us person *per se*—person as an active agent, as a process, as a creative force.

## Conclusion

At each stage of a symbolic form, we feel the forward momentum and creative force of the act of our own spiritual energy. You “know” (which is to say that you can reflectively distinguish) what it means to walk, to talk, to use language, to name the world, to create myth, to create art, and history, and science. Just like you know what it is to feel that something is beautiful. Anyone who examines themselves closely will admit to a belief in this subjective, expressive, symbolic, imaginative, functional, power. To do otherwise is to abandon our humanity, in a truly meaningful sense—to cease becoming agents in our own world, and to become passive machines.

However, these creative symbolic functions are not themselves phenomenal objects, because they are not objects or objective at all—they “structure” and “explain” our phenomenal experience. These spiritual functions can be understood on the analogy of a mathematical function which gives form to a line or a geometric shape, but is not itself the line—the line is an expression of the function. Just as a mathematician might see a geometric shape and reflectively generate the function/rule/law which produced it, so must the philosophical anthropologist see our phenomenal symbolic world and reflectively generate the “person” responsible for creating it. Person is the functional unity at the heart of our cultural symbolic horizon, the force which expands and shapes that horizon—its influence is felt universally on our phenomenal world, but we must not make the mistake of reducing person to the way it has been expressed and objectivized.

Furthermore, we also cannot reduce person to the mode of subjectivity that inhabits the objective cultural world.<sup>36</sup> A phenomenology that remains entirely within the plane of intentionality, consciousness, or primary reflection (depending on how we wish to speak of subjectivity), will never be adequate to provide a sense of the primal creativity at the heart of our experience. Indeed, person is the very creativity that opens up the subjective/objective cultural horizon and its inhabitants—it cannot be reduced even to the entirety of the primarily reflective plane. For Kant, this spiritual creativity is “transcendental subjectivity.” For Hegel it was the process of dialectic. What must be said, however, is that to the extent that a particular phenomenology lacks a reflective moment (i.e., fails to transcend the intentional plane), then that phenomenology fails to capture “person,” which must be understood as an active, creative process that simultaneously shapes our cultural horizon and our perspective on that horizon.

We are comfortable with determinate judgment, which is a mode of subjectivity oriented to and coeval with “objectivity.” The dichotomy is clear and precise, and we enjoy that. It can be difficult to peer at the wizard behind the curtain and face the mystery and uncertainty that accompanies the creation of our clearly ordered phenomenal experience. In order to say anything about those creative spiritual functions, we have to start from the concrete symbols (that enjoy a relative “clarity and distinctness”) in our experience and inscribe the spiritual activity that creates and explains them—although we are prompted to do so by the way the symbol exhibits freedom in its very concreteness.

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36) In other words, to take the Husserlian language, person is neither “noesis” nor “noema.”

A phenomenology that only describes our symbolic world without attempting to reflectively generate the functions that explain it, will not be adequate to a phenomenology of person. However, we do not need an explanation to act, or to feel the movement of our own freedom. Our theoretical reason follows on the heels of our practical reason, one step behind. So it is up to the phenomenologist (as a philosophical anthropologist) to describe the form of our symbolic, cultural experience in such a way as to reflect *Geist* back unto itself, so that we recognize ourselves in our world. We will go on acting even without this phenomenological mirror, but our world will be seen through a glass darkly, and we will be unable to recognize our own culture.

We have established that any phenomenology that lacks reflective judgment will fail to capture person (as a creative *geistige* energy). However, what about modes of phenomenology (already existing or yet to be established) that *do* include a reflective moment? The fundamental question is: can that reflective moment be properly internal to phenomenology as a method, or must it always be outside of a proper phenomenology? Certainly one can experience (within phenomenality) what it is like to reflectively create a symbol in our experience (as Kant demonstrated with the experience of aesthetic judgment). However, in the creation of that symbol, we are forced to borrow a rule from determinate judgment that can only approximate and analogize what the activity of *Geist* must be like. So we have a dilemma; the symbol is available to phenomenology as an intuitive concretization of a transcendental functional rule that must (we assume) legislate to the symbol. More than that, we can get a sense of what it must have been like to create that symbol (as an act of the creative functional rule); this sense of creativity is also available to phenomenology. And yet, we are forced to admit that the sense of creativity we experience is constructed for us by our imagination as an attempt to bring into phenomenal experience a mode of creativity that is, in itself, transcendental. As such, I can see no way around admitting that phenomenology is inadequate to disclose the creative process that structures our meaningful experience. That process, traditionally called *Geist*, corresponds (to my mind) to what is usually meant by "person" (a process which is both creative and assigned fundamental moral value). Thus, I must deny the possibility of a phenomenology of person. That is not to say that phenomenology is without value for those interested in persons; quite the opposite. However, phenomenology can only go as far as to disclose (clearly and carefully) an analogy of what it is like to be a person. Person qua person will remain a mystery; a creative energy that can be approximated and reflected upon, but never determined.

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