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Antoine Mooij's Phenomenology of Symbolization: Synthesizing Lacan and Cassirer

Review: Antoine Mooij, *Lacan and Cassirer: An Essay on Symbolisation*,
translated by Peter van Nieuwkoop
(Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 256 pages.¹
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*Lacan and Cassirer: An Essay on Symbolisation*² “aims to present an image of man as a symbolising being that is able to interpret itself and is thus endowed with the capacity of self-determination” (LC, 1). As one would expect, given the title, Mooij presents an understanding of man as *animal symbolicum* by making use of the work of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) and Jacques Lacan (1901–1981).

While noting that “Cassirer and Lacan at first glance seem to have very little in common,” (LC, 1) Mooij points out a number of relevant connections between these two thinkers. Lacan was directly influenced by thinkers in the German Idealist tradition, especially Kant and Hegel (LC, 98), and he was also familiar with Cassirer's own work (LC, 97). Additionally, Lacan was influenced indirectly by the German Idealist tradition through the work of Freud and Sartre: both of whom were important for Lacan (especially Freud), and were themselves at least loosely descendants of the Kantian tradition. More important than any question of intellectual heritage, however, is the point that both Cassirer and Lacan make the problem of *symbolization* central to their work (LC, 2).

1) This is an English translation (with revision) of: Antoine Mooij, *In de greep van de taal. Symbolisering en betekenisgeving: Lacan en Cassirer* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Sijbolet, 2015, 2017).

2) Hereafter this book will be cited in the main text as LC followed by page number.

The central argument of *Lacan and Cassirer: An Essay on Symbolisation* is that each thinker approaches the problem of symbolization in a way that ultimately complements the other; “that their opposing views are in fact mutually complementary, indeed correcting each other in essential ways” (LC, 4). Mooij argues that Cassirer, “gives primacy to meaning, to signification” (LC, 3), whereas Lacan, “draws attention... to the symbolising ‘signifiers’ even before a meaning has been established” (LC, 4). In other words, while both are concerned with symbolization, Cassirer emphasizes the signification (the meaning) whereas Lacan gives primacy to the signifier (the sign/symbol itself, rather than the meaning it signifies). Mooij believes that these two views can and should be integrated into what he calls a “third theory of representation” (LC, 4), that synthesizes these two complementary approaches. Mooij will later christen this third theory that he seeks to develop as a “phenomenology of symbolization” (LC, 173).

The book is organized into 4 chapters. The first, entitled “An Outline of the Human Condition” is based on some of Mooij’s earlier work, and “offers an outline of the human condition in hermeneutical terms: man as a creature that interprets itself and the world” (LC, 4). Mooij’s hermeneutic system has three layers, each of which corresponds to a level of the “human condition”. To briefly summarize: man, as an interpreting (symbolizing) creature explains the world at three levels of abstraction. These layers are the layers of: intentionality, the world, and language (as well as culture, Mooij adds, but only as a dependent on language). Indeed, while each of these layers seems to play an important role in the process of symbolization process for Mooij, he admits that language plays a “unique role” (LC, 10), in this hermeneutic system. Mooij makes the German idealistic roots of this system explicit when he notes that the system, “could be called dialectic, with the opposition between subject pole and object pole being mediated by a third figure: language” (LC, 11). Thus, the major change to note here is that culture (or to take the more appropriate term: *Geist*), has been replaced with “language”.

To correspond with these three layers of human symbolic experience, Mooij identifies three different hermeneutic traditions, each of which he argues has focused on the corresponding level of experience. The first he identifies as the “hermeneutics of the signification”, and he identifies phenomenology as being a primary example of this type of hermeneutics: i.e. a hermeneutics that focuses on the intentional level of experience. The second layer of hermeneutics he dubs “hermeneutics of the situation”, which deals with the facticity, thrownness, otherness, or absurdity of the world: this tradition he associates especially with Heidegger, but by extension with “existentialisms” of various kinds. The final type of hermeneutics is labelled “hermeneutics of the signifier” and is associated with structuralism.

Thus, the chapter traces a genealogy of various post-Kantian philosophies as inheritors of the problem of symbolization, and therefore as variations of “hermeneutics”. Momentarily disregarding whether thinkers from these traditions would willingly embrace the label of “hermeneutics”, I agree in large part with Mooij’s point that these traditions all share at least a family resemblance and an orientation around the problem of man’s attempts at meaning-making. Mooij ends the chapter with a brief discussion of how this three-layered hermeneutic system might be useful in a psychopathological context.

Chapter 2, with the to-the-point title of “Cassirer” outlines Cassirer’s philosophical system, with primary emphasis on his crowning three-volume work *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*). Mooij begins the chapter with some brief biographical notes on Cassirer and a discussion of his influences (e.g. Kant, Hegel, and the Marburg school) and those he influenced (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, Suzanne Langer, and American Pragmatism). Mooij gives a brief outline of the fall of Cassirer’s influence after World War Two and the recent renewed interest in his work (and the publication of his complete works in Germany, finished in 2008).

Mooij discusses Cassirer’s indebtedness to Kant, as well as the ways in which Cassirer expands on Kant. He then discusses the relationship between Cassirer and Heidegger (that is, the famous Davos Debate of

1929). The rest of the chapter is devoted to an outline of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. This includes a discussion of Cassirer's three stages of the symbolic function: expression, objectification, and pure meaning (*Ausdruck, Darstellung, reine Bedeutung*), as well as an overview of the major three symbolic forms Cassirer discusses (myth, language, and science) and a brief discussion of some of the other potential symbolic forms (e.g. art or politics).

Chapter 3 ("Lacan") provides an overview of Lacan's philosophical and psychoanalytical system. Mooij briefly discusses Lacan's influences (e.g. Freud, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, and Hegel) and gives an overview of Lacan's success and growing influence. Mooij then outlines a distinction between Lacan's "classical period" (1956–1973) which itself has two subdivisions, and the period of the "later Lacan" (1973–1980). Mooij then goes on to present an overview of Lacan's theory of symbolization, which as Mooij notes does not exhaust Lacan's thought, but does, "constitute its core" (LC, 105). Mooij outlines the three layers of Lacan's "symbolic order" (language, kinship relations, and social institutions).

Mooij then discusses Lacan's dialectics of desire and a range of his central concepts: "the lack/void" (*la Chose, das Ding*), *Jouissance*, the "object a," the drive (*Trieb*), the "name-of-the-father," the phantasm, anxiety, the unary trait, the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Mooij then discusses the difference between the "classical" and "later" Lacan, describing Lacan's use of James Joyce in his later work. Mooij ends the chapter by comparing and contrasting Lacan and Cassirer's theories of symbolization. Comparisons between the two are made where appropriate throughout the second and third chapter, but this is the longest sustained comparison of the two in the book.

In comparing the two thinkers, Mooij notes that it is the "very concept of a caesura that both connects and separates them" (LC, 166). Both Cassirer and Lacan agree that humanity lives in an inescapably symbolic world: that access to "reality" (whatever that may be) will always be mediated by symbols and meanings of our own creation. Briefly put, Lacan sees this as a necessary evil, a primordial lack that introduces all kinds of pathologies and neuroses. Cassirer, however, is more optimistic, choosing instead to emphasize the productive and positive aspect of this process as a means of self-and-cultural creation in which humanity becomes itself.

At the end of Chapter 3, Mooij introduces the name "phenomenology of symbolization" for the method that he seeks to develop by synthesizing Cassirer and Lacan. This method is discussed in a bit more detail in Chapter 4 "Variations on the Theme of Symbolization," and amounts to a somewhat re-interpreted version of the dialectic outlined in chapter 1. The "three domains of the real" (the immediacy of life/*immanence vitale*, the static real/*le réel*, and the primordial Other/*la Chose*) are transformed by the symbolic functions into the three levels of the human condition (intentionality, world, language, as discussed in Chapter 1). Each level of the human condition contains its own dialectic by which the symbolic function plays out: through the expressive/imaginary, objectifying/symbolic, and formalizing modes of the symbolic function (i.e. roughly following Cassirer's system).

However, the formal presentation of the "phenomenology of symbolization" only occupies the first few pages of Chapter 4. The rest of the chapter is occupied with addressing three broad issues Mooij believes the phenomenology of symbolization faces: 1) the validity of the idea of symbolic mediation itself, 2) the empirical grounding of this system, and 3) the scope of normative concerns raised by the project. Mooij notes that "the range of themes addressed in this chapter is substantial, whereas the extent of the discussion is limited.... It will be made up of little more than fragments, initial steps" (LC, 177).

And that, with the addition of a one-page "Annex" which provides a schematic for Mooij's symbolic system, comprises the extent of the book. I will now take a moment to provide a few broad comments about the book. In general, I found the book to be thoughtfully organized, well written, and fully researched. Mooij does an admirable job of providing relatively brief overviews of dense topics: Cassirer's work, Lacan's work, and his own. Mooij asserts that "prior knowledge of Lacan or Cassirer is not presupposed" (LC, 5), and while I agree

that this is probably true, I think that a reader would need at least a strong foundation in dialectical German Idealism (or one of its inheritors) to fully grasp Mooij's project.

I think that the "connective tissue" tying each chapter together could be a bit expanded: in particular the first and fourth chapters are somewhat disconnected from the more historical second and third chapters. I have no interest in weighing down this response essay with discussions of technical minutiae, but a few brief comments are worth mentioning. Mooij's background is largely in Lacan (of course supplemented by work in hermeneutics, phenomenology, and other topics), and my impression is that he approaches Cassirer from that fundamental position. On the other hand, I am more familiar with Cassirer and the German tradition, while I know only the basics of Lacan. Therefore, I will not comment on Mooij's interpretation of Lacan other than to say that it was presented clearly and in line with what I understand (from my limited perspective) to be a relatively straightforward overview of Lacan's thought.

With respect to Cassirer, I found that Mooij admirably grasped Cassirer's central aims and system. In almost all cases he reports Cassirer in what I consider to be an accurate way. There were of course a few areas where I differed from him in interpretation: I believe that he overemphasizes the importance of language in Cassirer's system, reading back too much of structuralism and the linguistic turn into Cassirer. For example, his comments that "language is the gateway to reality" (LC, 65) or that "language appears to be the symbolic form par excellence" (LC, 70). I also dislike interpreting Cassirer as arguing for a "hierarchy" of the forms (LC, 69). However, these interpretive issues have as much to do with my own idiosyncrasies in reading Cassirer as anything else, and Cassirer can at times be read as affirming those positions (and indeed Mooij is not alone in reading Cassirer this way). Therefore, any debates surrounding interpretation do not detract from Mooij, but merely reflect diversity in the Cassirer-reading community.

The only substantial claim the book makes that I have yet to be sold on (again coming from the position of a Cassirer scholar) is whether the addition of the "three domains of the real" truly adds to Cassirer's system in an appreciable way. Everything else in Mooij's phenomenology of symbolization, it seems to me, can already be found relatively unchanged in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. The "three domains of the real" is the significant addition from Lacan. It is true that Cassirer is relatively cavalier about the noumenal realm. He basically says, "everything we experience is mediated by symbols and that's for the best anyway, so why waste time speculating about immediate experience?" Therefore, Mooij is right to point out that Lacan addresses this issue while Cassirer does not. However, I would need to know more to determine how the addition of the "three domains of the real" modifies Cassirer's system.

Mooij in this book lays out Lacan's approach to the "real" in the context of psychoanalysis (the psychological presence of an absence, so to speak). However, it seems to be another issue to create a robust system of symbolic forms/functions that acknowledges that symbolic functions are only creative in a positive sense through a relationship to a negative which is not symbolized. It is correct to say that Cassirer does not tend to discuss the negative, the remainder, or that which is not (or cannot be) symbolized. It may be the case that Cassirer only neglects this issue because it has been worked over so thoroughly by his post-Kantian forebears (Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and so on). However, it is for that very reason that I take it to be a conscious choice on Cassirer's part to exclude the "real", not merely an oversight to be corrected.

Of course, Mooij is not required to follow Cassirer on this issue. However, I think Cassirer's reasoning should be considered. He refrains from taking the route of integrating the noumenal into his symbolic system precisely because he is interested in a philosophical anthropology and a philosophy of culture. I think that Cassirer's engagement with (and the reasons he distanced himself from) the *Lebensphilosophen* of his day (among whom Bergson at least has an incredibly advanced concept of negation) as well as his debate with Heidegger, provide some insight into whether, and how, Cassirer would integrate *difference*/negation into his philosophy.

To include the noumenal potentially bends the system much more in the direction of speculative ontology. There's nothing wrong with that, to be sure, and I would say that might put Mooij's proposed system closer to the realms of Peirce, Whitehead, or Bergson (brilliant philosophers all, to be sure). All of this is to say that I would be interested to see where Mooij takes this project in the future, and I am particularly interested to see how he would work out bringing together Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms with a Lacanian philosophy of the "real". At present there are not enough details provided to know exactly what the phenomenology of symbolization will look like. But I would want to know: 1) why Lacan rather than any other philosopher of *difference/negation*?; 2) in what sense can one have a phenomenology that takes account of the "real"?; 3) how does the transition from immediacy to mediation work?; and 4) what are the effects of the "real" on our mediated, cultural world?

To summarize, Antoine Mooij's *Lacan and Cassirer: An Essay on Symbolisation* is an excellent book that should be of use to anyone interested in post-Kantian philosophy, especially those connected to any of the traditions centered on the problem of meaning-making, symbolization, and culture. It admirably brings together two interesting philosophers (Lacan and Cassirer) and lays the groundwork for Mooij's future system. The book might also serve as a useful starting place for those with interests in psychology to explore a system of philosophy that may be illuminating.