**Cassirer, Ernst (1874-1945)**

Ernst Alfred Cassirer was a philosopher and intellectual historian. The central concept of Cassirer’s system is that of symbolic form. Because of Cassirer’s affiliations with Hermann Cohen (1848-1918) and the Marburg School, the concept is generally taken to be extension of Kant’s notion of the categories. There is some truth to the claim: Cassirer does maintain that human knowledge depends on our ability to give form to experience and that we use symbolic forms to give experience its shape. Neo-Kantians (among whom Cassirer is often counted) believed that sensation provides the material of experience, while the faculty they usually called 'understanding' imposes form on the material of sensation to produce experience. However, the concept goes well beyond Kant’s ideas on the categories or their neo-Kantian extensions. Heinrich Hertz’s (1857-1894) *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik* (1894), especially its concept of ‘pictures’, which linked concepts to intuition, transformed Cassirer’s Kantianism. Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s (1807–1887) Heglian-inspired *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* (3 vols., 1846–57), endowed the concept with an idealist cast—indeed, a broader influence was the notion of the Idea in the German absolute idealism. Cassirer traced the development of symbolic form through myth (Cassirer was influenced by Aby Warburg [1866-1929] and his Bibliothek Warburg), art, mathematics, science and philosophy, identifying the stages of development as mimetic, analogical and the symbolic expression. He expounded his conception of symbolic form in the magisterial three-volume work, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen (1923-1929; *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*).

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**List of works**

Cassirer, E. (1923–29) *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 3 vols; trans. R. Manheim as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955-57, 3 vols. (Cassirer’s expansive exposition of his philosophical system. Each of the three volumes deals with, respectively, *Language* [vol. 1], *Mythical Thought* [vol. 2] and *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* [vol. 3].)

**References and further reading**

Hertz, H. (1894) *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik* *in neuem Zusammenhang dargestellt*, Leipzig: Barth. (This work gives one insight into the way science and philosophy were understood in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century and explains why Cassirer’s philosophy, which had deep roots science, today can seem dated.)

Krois, J. M. (1987*) Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press. (Still the most thorough and systematic treatment of Cassirer’s work in epistemology and in intellectual history.)

Skidelsky, Edward. (2008) *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. (A beautifully written intellectual biography of Ernst Cassirer and his era, of impressive scope and penetrating insights, it is nonetheless curiously unsympathetic to Cassirer, largely because of its *nunc-pro-tunc* treatment of the nineteenth-century science that had such an important role in shaping Cassirer’s world-view)