Symbolic forms and public reason: Cassirer and the problem of the antinomy of culture as a theoretical-pragmatic problem

Formas simbólicas e razão pública: Cassirer e o problema da antinomia da cultura como um problema teórico-pragmático

Gabriel Ferreira
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2255-5173 – E-mail: gabrielferreira@unisinos.br

ABSTRACT

One of the problems faced by Cassirer's project in *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is the problem of the antinomy of culture, that is, that each dimension or sphere of culture tends to present itself and represent itself not only as part of human production in view of meaning but has pretensions of universality. As is evident in Cassirer's thought, the problem of antinomy is at the heart of the concept of culture since it must be not only an empirical and historical description of human spiritual products, but it is intended to be equally normative, insofar as a philosophically adequate conception of culture must provide a certain set of rules by which all cultural spheres must be able to articulate themselves in order to preserve the existence and certain validity of culture. each of them, without them mutually excluding or nullifying their particular validities. However, beyond the essentially theoretical dimension of the problem, the effects of the antinomy of culture are perceptible at the pragmatic level of real human interaction that occurs precisely through the plural articulation of these spheres. In other words, human agents decide based on the privilege granted to this or that sphere or cultural dimension in relation to the others. In the practical world of human actions, this means that resolving certain social or political problems involves the philosophical problem of how to exercise a meta-evaluation of the different postulations of importance or relevance of certain cultural spheres in the face of particular contexts or problems. Thus, the problem of the antinomy of culture is also included in the scope of the problems of public rationality. This article aims, therefore, to explain the problem of the antinomy of culture as a theoretical-pragmatic problem that is at the origin of

both practical problems - social, ethical and political – and the metaphilosophical problem about the role and contribution of philosophy.

Keywords: Cassirer. Symbolic forms. Culture. Public Reason.

RESUMO

Um dos problemas enfrentados pelo projeto de Cassirer em Filosofia das Formas Simbólicas é o problema da antinomia da cultura, ou seja, que cada dimensão ou esfera da cultura tende a apresentar-se e representar-se não apenas como parte da produção humana em vista do significado, mas tem pretensões de universalidade. Como fica evidente no pensamento de Cassirer, o problema da antinomia está no cerne do conceito de cultura, uma vez que esta deve ser não apenas uma descrição empírica e histórica dos produtos espirituais humanos, mas também pretende ser igualmente normativa, na medida em que uma concepção filosoficamente adequada da cultura deve fornecer um certo conjunto de regras pelas quais todas as esferas culturais devem ser capazes de se articular, a fim de preservar a existência e certa validade da cultura, cada uma delas, sem que se excluam mutuamente ou anulem as suas validades particulares. No entanto, para além da dimensão essencialmente teórica do problema, os efeitos da antinomia da cultura são perceptíveis ao nível pragmático da interação humana real que ocorre precisamente através da articulação plural destas esferas. Por outras palavras, os agentes humanos decidem com base no privilégio concedido a esta ou aquela esfera ou dimensão cultural em relação às outras. No mundo prático das ações humanas, isso significa que resolver certos problemas sociais ou políticos envolve o problema filosófico de como exercer uma meta-avaliação das diferentes postulações de importância ou relevância de certas esferas culturais diante de contextos ou problemas específicos. Assim, o problema da antinomia da cultura também está incluído no âmbito dos problemas da racionalidade pública. Este artigo visa, portanto, explicar o problema da antinomia da cultura como um problema teórico-pragmático que está na origem tanto dos problemas práticos — sociais, éticos e políticos — quanto do problema metafilosófico sobre o papel e a contribuição da filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Cassirer. Formas simbólicas. Cultura. Razão Pública.

1 Introduction

If we look back, almost a century after Cassirer's main productions on the subject, it does not seem to us philosophically justifiable that the problems proper to what the early twentieth century called "philosophy of culture" have been relegated to the background on the horizon of the main questions of contemporary philosophy. It is true that the history of philosophy is also the history of the emergence and decline – or, at least, of the different emphases – of themes and problems. As Windelband has already pointed out (cf. Windelband, 1923, p. 21), a certain "discontinuity" in the history of philosophical problems is a mark of its specificity in relation to other areas of knowledge, since what should be the most relevant problems at a given historical moment is itself the object of philosophical discussion. However, if on the one hand the general theoretical framework of Neo-Kantianism, as well as its fundamental reasons for a "return to

Kant" may today sound dated, the background of the questions that were a condition of possibility for the development of philosophy at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century has not only not been dissolved, but it is defensible to say that it has intensified. Either by the perception that, as Natorp explains, philosophy must find its role and its epistemological contribution between the "critique of metaphysical incursions" and the "critique of lawless empiricism that evades the law" (Natorp, 2015, p. 182, my translation), or because of the way in which the advancement of the natural sciences helped to drag philosophy into landscape of philosophy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not radically alter the state of the question that made a philosophy of culture urgent[1].

However, in addition to the aforementioned relevance of the philosophy of culture as a field of investigation *per se*, some of its problems, as treated by Marburg's neo-Kantianism and, more specifically, by Ernst Cassirer, ended up developing in an even more pressing way throughout the twentieth century and in the first decades of the twenty-first century. I refer here specifically to the problem that Cassirer calls the "antinomy of culture" which, not only imposes itself as an epistemic problem, in the midst of the coexistence and articulation of the elements of culture as human spiritual manifestations, but which should also be seen as having a direct impact on the scope of debate and public rationality, configuring itself as a problem of a pragmatic nature in the way in which the various symbolic expressions are coordinated, alter, and structure themselves in human society.

In this paper, then, I propose, after a brief reconstruction of the essential impulse of a philosophy of culture for Cassirer, to present his understanding of the problem of the antinomy of culture in order to, finally, explain and analyze its theoretical-pragmatic dimension in its relations with the theme of public reason, developed as such in the tradition of issues originally pointed out by Rawls and some of his interpreters and interlocutors. Hence, the main objective of this article is not only to undertake an exegesis of Cassirer's thought, but above all to indicate the relevance and importance of his thought for central problems for part of contemporary moral and political philosophy.

2 Critique of reason as critique of culture

It is no exaggeration to say that in Cassirer's work what we call the philosophy of culture of the early twentieth century found its apex. And this for two main reasons: no other philosopher has dedicated himself so thoroughly to facing the problems of the "*faktum*" of culture in so many of its dimensions, that is, in its epistemological conditions of possibility and in its articulations from its historically determined expressions, but also because the treatment of such problems constituted the highest point of Cassirer's production. His main philosophical contributions – especially what became the hallmark of his work, the concept of symbolic forms – took place within his concerns with the philosophy of culture.

It is not my aim here to go back exhaustively to the genesis of the philosophy of culture in Marburg's Neo-Kantianism, nor to its distinctions in the thought of its main representatives. Even so, although Cohen, Natorp and Cassirer differ on neuralgic points, it is possible to say that

---

[1]   Not even the kind of argument Heidegger, in his summer seminar of 1919, that the concept of culture "is not brought to scientific definiteness, much less to philosophical evidence; rather, the concept of *culture* functions in a vague and multivalent ferment of ideas to guide all general reflection *[Besinnung]* on the totality of particular life-regions and on life as such" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 101) It seems to me sufficient to overcome the importance of the problems. On the contrary, it is precisely the plurivocity of its content that attests to the emergence of countless questions.

they all share a certain background of certain problems, as well as the same theoretical horizon for the treatment of these same problems. As mentioned above, the panorama of philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century is marked by two matrices of events that directly determine the course of contemporary philosophy, one of internal nature and logic, the other of a more contextual and general character; on the one hand, the decline of Hegelian idealism and the consequent deflation of a foundationalist view of philosophy, motivated especially by *the logische Frage* from Trendelenburg onwards, and, on the other hand, the advancement and increasing independence of the natural sciences. As is clear, the two elements feed each other, since the refusal of a conception of philosophy that should be able to provide the logical-ontological foundations of the natural sciences fosters and is fostered by the growing epistemological success of the paths followed by the *Naturwissenschaften*[2]. Thus, whether by the naturalized return, of psychophysiological bias, to Kant, of names like Helmholtz or the young Cohen, or by the fundamentally anti-subjectivist turn of Cohen of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, and the reactions to Lange's psychologizing interpretations of Kant and the solidification of the transcendental method as a philosophical perspective par excellence by Natorp, all these movements are, each in their own way, facing the universe of problems indicated above. The question about the place and epistemic role of philosophy, which should now be redefined in the space between metaphysical dogmatism and its dissolution in the empirical sciences, was then decisive for the multiple facets of Neo-Kantianism[3].

It is for no other reason that Michael Friedman, in his now classic book, points to Cassirer's philosophy of culture as the last moment, or perhaps the last obstacle, against what he calls "*parting of ways*" (Friedman, 2000, p. 151). In this way, Cassirer's philosophy of culture is not just a simple, more or less arbitrary option to broaden the field of objects to which the transcendental method should be applied – from the "special forms of logical, scientific, ethical, or aesthetical thought" to "all the other forms of thinking, judging, knowing, understanding, and even of feeling by which the human mind attempts to conceive the universe as a whole" (Cassirer, 1979, p. 70-71) – but a response, at the same time, to the *faktum* of the sciences in their guise and state of the question historically determined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to the threat of a radical empiricism and even a nihilism that would empty the others of meaning and pretension of objective validity *facta* of culture[4].

In fact, the question of the objective value of the various forms of spiritual expressions occupies the center of Cassirer's concerns with culture and, at the same time, justifies the transcendental method as a privileged form of philosophical reflection. This is because, if we remember the fundamental notes of the transcendental method as expounded by Natorp, it is characterized by two great essential logical-epistemological movements, namely, the verification of the various facts, and the recognition of the need to investigate the conditions of transcendental possibility of these same facts. Such constituents rightly guarantee that the method "does not conflict with the experimental point of view" nor does it fall into the "rarefied

---

[2]   For an overview of the Logical Question and its developments, see (Vilkko, 2009). For an overview of Trendelenburg's philosophy, see (Fugali, 2002). For a closer analysis of Trendelenburg's argument against Hegel's logic, see (Ferreira, 2013).

[3]   The interpretative bibliography on the origins of neo-Kantianism is vast. Still, it is worth pointing out Köhnke's classic (Köhnke, 2011) and Beiser's work, more recent (Beiser, 2015).

[4]   On the philosophy of the culture of Neo-Kantianism as a response to such problems, see (Krijnen, 2015). On the distinctions between Cassirer's and Cohen's primary objectives, see (Renz, 2005). On a critique of philosophy's interpretation of symbolic forms as an "enlargement" of scope, see chapter 2 of (Porta, 2011). In my view, although Porta brings fundamental elements for a better understanding of Cassirer's project, it does not seem to me completely unjustified to think of his enterprise also under the sign of an expansion of the scope of objects of Kantian critical philosophy, even if this does not exhaust his characterization. Quotations such as the one mentioned on the previous page show Cassirer himself establishing this type of relationship.

air space of pure thought" (Natorp, 2015, p. 182). It is the perception of this bundle of characteristics that makes Cassirer, in his 1936 lecture at the Warburg Institute, even identify his perspective of critical idealism with his project of a philosophy of culture (Cassirer, 1979). Thus, at the same time that what Cassirer calls critical idealism preserves the state and history of the development of the empirical sciences, it makes explicit the presence of normative elements that spring from the logical-transcendental structure of our reason. That is why Cassirer points out, in Kant's characterization of the term "idea" in Plato, the fact that no possible experience or representation can be identified with his idea, since it not only does not come from by abstraction[5] but, on the contrary, it determines the former.

It is precisely this aspect of the determination of human experiences, which the transcendental conditions of possibility deliver, that opens the way for one of the basic affirmations of the Cassirer's project of a philosophy of culture. When dealing with the various symbolic expressions such as art, myth and religion, Cassirer states that "None of them can be described as a mere copy of what is given in the data of the senses. All these forms not only shine with reflected light; they have a light of their own" (Cassirer, 1979, p. 71)[6]. It is, therefore, that the so-called broadening or expansion of scope that Cassirer makes in relation to Kant is not merely the result of a discretionary choice but is the corollary of the understanding that the transcendental conditions of the human spirit manifest themselves equally in all their expressions.

> This spontaneity and productivity is the very center of all human activities. It is man's highest power and it designates at the same time the natural boundary of our human world. In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe – a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience (Cassirer, 2010, p. 220-221).

The famous statement that "the critique of reason is thus transformed into the critique of culture" (Cassirer, 2019, I, p. 80) must therefore be understood as a consequence of the investigation into the transcendental method and not as a presupposition or axiom *a priori*. Therefore, if the philosophy of symbolic forms, whose genesis dates back to Cassirer's early works (see especially the first chapter of Schubbach, 2022), is his best treatment of the problems of a philosophy of culture, it should also be seen as a critique of culture in the midst of the development I have explained above.

3 The problem of the antinomy of culture

Already at the beginning of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer points to a phenomenon that not only has internal ramifications to his philosophy of culture but as will be seen, entails problems when seen from the perspective of its concrete manifestations:

> Throughout its history philosophy has been more or less aware of the need for such an analysis and critique of the particular forms of culture; but it has directly undertaken

---

[5]   Recall here Cassirer's critique of abstraction in *Substance and Function* (Cassirer, 1980).

[6]   In the same way, "Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic in common with cognition: it does not merely copy but rather embodies an original, formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite 'meaning' a particular ideational content" (Cassirer, 2019, I, p. 78).

only parts of this task, and then usually more with a negative than a positive intention. The purpose of this critique was often not so much to describe and explain the positive achievements of each particular form, as to refute false claims. Since the days of the Greek Sophists there has been a skeptical critique of language, as well as of myths and of rational knowledge. This essentially negative attitude becomes understandable when we consider that in the course of its development every basic cultural form tends to represent itself not as a part but as the whole, laying claim to an absolute and not merely relative validity, not contenting itself with its special sphere, but seeking to imprint its own characteristic stamp on the whole realm of being and the whole life of the spirit. From this striving toward the absolute inherent in each special sphere arise the conflicts of culture and the antinomies within the concept of culture (Cassirer, 2019, vol. I, p. 81).

For Cassirer, symbolic forms "[...] are not different modes in which an independent reality manifests itself to the human spirit but roads by which the spirit proceeds towards its objectivization, i.e., its self-revelation" (Cassirer, 2019, vol. I, p. 78). Therefore, each of them has its own character and independence from the others, which means that "none of these forms can simply be reduced to, or derived from, the others; each of them designates a particular approach, in which and through which it constitutes its own aspect of 'reality'" (Cassirer, 2019, vol. I, p. 78). It is from this panorama that the problem that Cassirer calls the "antinomy of culture" emerges, namely, the fact that simultaneously each symbolic form is a partial form of expression and self-realization of the human spirit, which, however, due to its independence and irreducibility to the others, tends to a position of unconditioned and, therefore, with absolute validity. The result of this is that "the particular cultural trends do not move peacefully side by side, seeking to complement one another; each becomes what it is only by demonstrating its own peculiar power against the others and in battle with the others" (Cassirer, vol. I, 2019, p. 82).

The problem of the antinomy of culture then unfolds into two main problems, one of a more general nature and the other more internal to Cassirer's thought. The first of them concerns how to understand the relationship between the different symbolic forms in their cohabitation in the sphere of culture. Given the intrinsic legitimacy of each of the symbolic forms, even in the course of human history the different forms remain present as equally valid expressions of the human spirit – see, for example, the ineluctable presence of myth in contemporaneity pointed out by Cassirer in *The Myth of the State* – each with its own internal norms of validity, it is not equally obvious how they should coexist in the domain of human culture. This is reflected in the second problem, which even inaugurates a hermeneutic problem regarding the cohesion of Cassirer's philosophy, about the relative epistemic status of symbolic forms. At certain moments, as in the passage mentioned above, Cassirer seems to sustain an irreducible pluralism between the symbolic forms of language, myth, art, and sciences. Thereby

> In defining the distinctive character of any spiritual form, it is essential to measure it by its own standards. The criteria by which we judge it and appraise its achievement, must not be drawn from outside, but must be taken from its own fundamental law of formation (Cassirer, 2019, vol. I, p. 177).

However, the philosopher also seems to maintain that the historical unfolding of human culture obeys a certain teleology, so that the symbolic forms through which the human spirit expresses itself seem to have to be organized according to a certain hierarchy ordered by the progressive symbolic formalization that is gradually purified of any sensible correlate in order to, in the science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reach its apex in the abstraction of mathematical formalism. This is what leads Cassirer to state that "science is the

last step in man's mental development and it may be regarded as the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture" (Cassirer, 2010, p. 207).

The problem of the antinomy of culture is also a problem about the tension of the transcendental epistemic value of symbolic forms in the panorama of Cassirer's philosophy of culture. Such a tension, in fact, constitutes a *tópos* already classic in the philosopher's interpretive literature and a problem to which I do not intend to offer an answer here (see Friedman, 2000; Truwant, 2014; Luft, 2015; Ferrari, 2021; Matherne, 2021; Kinzel, 2023, 2024). However, as will be seen, the approach to the problem of antinomy from the pragmatic perspective ends up offering elements that contribute to a certain conciliation between pluralism and Cassirer's objectivism/teleology, especially from the background of the proximity of the epistemological and ethical dimensions of this tension[7].

Beyond the hermeneutic question, specific to Cassirer's thought, what interests me here is how the first problem I pointed out, about the coexistence and role of each of them in the panorama of culture, can present itself as a problem of very important pragmatic contours. When we focus on the problem of the antinomy of culture from the standpoint of the way in which the various forms not only dispute a place of epistemic primacy *per se*, but they are candidates as parameters for decisions within the scope of discussions in the culture understood as a space for public and social deliberations and debates, the problem now is not reduced only to the measurement of the scope and the claim of unconditionality of each of the symbolic forms, but is manifested in the way in which each of them presents itself as a distinct origin and source of norms for the organization of human life and how each of them carries out *actual* movements in the public space. If we take, for instance, myth, religion, systems of moral reflection and the natural sciences, each of these forms is positioned with regard to the problems of how we should live, organize society, legislate and, finally, how we should construct a vision of the world, each intending, in its own way, to offer itself as a potentially unconditional solution to each of these problems. If, as Cassirer stated in 1936, the goal of culture is the creation of a "*koinón kósmon*", a common universe in which all forms develop and form a unity of thought and meaning (see Cassirer, 1979a, p. 72), the dynamics of the public clash between the different symbolic forms as different ways of understanding and organizing social life seems to be a severe obstacle to this objective.

4 The problem of the antinomy of culture as a theoretical-pragmatic problem: symbolic forms and public reason

From what I have explained above, it seems obvious on the one hand to say that Cassirer glimpsed the problem of the antinomy of culture also from a certain practical aspect; the very mention of "cultural conflicts" in the above quotation seems to indicate it. However, the consequences of the problem of the antinomy of culture did not seem to be part of their fundamental concerns insofar as they interact with each other, disputing the role of precedence over issues in what we usually call the public sphere. In other words, if it is true that Cassirer is interested in the epistemological role and in the claim to universal and unconditional validity of each of the various forms of cultural expressions *per se,* on the other hand, he does not seem to be equally concerned with the epistemic functions that the different symbolic forms could come to play in the public debate of ideas and positions. It is clear that Cassirer sees the ethical

---

7   In general terms, closer to the positions by Truwant (2014) and Kinzel (2024).

problems central to the twentieth century, especially in his approach consigned to *The Myth of the State*. However, my focus here is reasonably different[8]. In the sphere that I privilege here, the problem is not so much in the claims of universality of each of the symbolic forms, but in the role and function that each of them plays as *players* in the debate of positions on well-defined cultural problems. The problem to which I am drawing attention here, or rather the understanding of the problem of the antinomy of culture as a theoretical-pragmatic problem, is the problem of the understanding different functions, roles, and importance of each of the symbolic forms in the public debate under the aegis of what has developed in the tradition under the name of public reason. From this point of view, the problem lies not so much in the fact that each symbolic form, however partial as such, claims to have universal validity over the totality of the human spiritual expression, but in how certain forms claim to derogate from others in the field of public justification and thus establish themselves as the cultural form that overrides all others in the function of arbiter in matters of public, social, and political interest.

In the inflection that I give here to the problem of the antinomy of culture, there are, therefore, two points to be highlighted:

a. the problem of antinomy as expounded by Cassirer, which was originally characterized as the problem of the attempt to impose each symbolic form unconditionally on the others, here becomes the problem of the exclusivity of objective validity in the realm of practical problems and public reason and, consequently, of the derogation of the validity of the others in the same sphere;

b. In the same way, the problem of the antinomy of culture, as consisting in the diminution of the importance and validity, at the same time transcendental, epistemological and empirical, of this or that symbolic form, becomes, in the pragmatic sphere of public affairs, the problem of the emptying of rationality and of the capacity to bring value to the various forms of human spiritual expression. It is also clear that, in the end, the objective of culture as the formation of a "common cosmos", or of a unity of human experience bundled by *lógos*, is fundamentally compromised to the extent that the various symbolic forms are incapable of coordinating with each other for the resolution of the practical problems of human society.

From this point of view, therefore, Cassirer's problem of the antinomy of culture is close to the discussion of public reason which, although it has its origin in Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant, was shaped more contemporaneously from the inflections given by Rawls and his later interpretative tradition.

4.1 A brief reconstruction of the problem of public reason

Although the problem of a public reason as the problem of the rational justification of positions in the public sphere can be said to be as old as philosophy itself, emerging from the fundamental problems of epistemology already in ancient philosophy, the contemporary version of the problem can be traced back to the work of John Rawls and, in particular, his

---

[8] In the *An Essay on Man* Cassirer unequivocally points out that the problems of culture are not only theoretical, but also practical (see Cassirer, 2010, p. 21-22). However, as the analysis in *The Myth of the State* demonstrates, the line of problems pursued is different from here I focus here.

seminal text of 1993 (Rawls, 2005)[9]. As is well known, the lecture VI of his *Political Liberalism* it is devoted to the exposition of the concept, scope, and applications of public reason. There, Rawls' central problem is that of justifying decision-making that concerns, in his words, the "constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice" (Rawls, 2005, p. 214). Since pluralism of moral perspectives is a cultural and historical fact that will not dissipate (cf. Rawls, 2005, p. 216-217), the practical question that arises is "when may citizens by their vote properly exercise their coercive political power over one another when fundamental questions are at stake?" (Rawls, 2005, p. 217). The now classic answer, which articulates the general spectrum of Rawls' notion of public reason, is, then: "our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational" (Rawls, 2005, p. 217). This is what, at the end of the same passage, Rawls calls the "principle of liberal legitimacy". Thus, public reason is public reason for three reasons: (a) because it is the reason of citizens in the public sphere; (b) because its object is the public good and matters of fundamental justice and, finally, (c) it is directed by public principles of political justice (see Rawls, 2005, p. 213). In short, the Rawlsian conception of public reason is an answer to the problem of how citizens with different philosophical, moral, and religious perspectives can enter into a mutual game of common justifications regarding the arrangement of the society in which they live (see Waldron, 2015, p. 114).

It is crucial to note that Rawls defines the scope of public reason in contrast to a type of reason considered "non-public" that is, reason operating in everyday civil society (see Rawls, 2005, p. 213). This non-public reason operates essentially in the field of what Rawls calls "comprehensive views", which we could understand in terms of *Weltanschauungen* and they contain and articulate the elements and values that regulate the lives and decisions of individuals in the different social groups in the background of public decisions. Such a universe is called by Rawls precisely "background culture":

> Keep in mind that this background culture contains comprehensive doctrines of all kinds that are taught, explained, debated one against another, and argued about-indefinitely without end as long as society has vitality and spirit. It is the culture of the social, not of the publicly political. It is the culture of daily life with its many associations: its universities and churches, learned and scientific societies; endless political discussions of ideas and doctrines are commonplace everywhere (Rawls, 2005, p. 383).

The central problem of political liberalism can be understood as the problem faced by members of a society with different views on what constitutes good and evil, true and false, who must nevertheless reasonably decide which impositions will be accepted on others. However, given the plurality of forms contained in this *background culture* and the consequent lack of agreement on which should be established as a paradigm over the others, none of them can, as such, be the candidate to offer the ultimate justifications for all the others. Like this

> Since justification is addressed to others, it proceeds from what is, or can be, held in common; and so we begin from shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture in the hope of developing from them a political conception that can gain free and reasoned agreement in judgment (Rawls, 2005, p. 100-101).

---

[9] Although the theme of public reason is already in germ in (Rawls, 1999), is in your *Political Liberalism* that the author introduces it in a more explicit and robust way (see Rawls, 2005, xlv). See also (Rawls, 1997).

Although it is not the purpose of this article to analyze the history of the reception of the concepts of *background culture* and *public reason* in Rawls, as well as the subsequent debates, some observations about this process may be of interest here:

a. Significant part of the changes in Rawls' position between A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism was due to the understanding that the original program ends up having to face the problem of the legitimacy and stability of society due precisely to the fact of "reasonable pluralism" (see Rawls, 2005, p. xlii; p. 137);

b. The central thesis developed by Rawls about how people with different understanding views can agree on general normative decisions, the famous overlapping consensus, aims precisely to face the problem of the stability of society over time. In short, overlapping consensus is the thesis that citizens can agree on a certain set of laws for different reasons.

c. It is important to note that Rawls states that people, when voting, should be prepared to justify their votes (see Rawls, 2005, p. 215). In other words, "what public reason asks is that citizens be able to explain their votes to one another in terms of a reasonable balance of public political values" (Rawls, 2005, p. 243);

d. The set of these problems and their considerations gave rise to a debate of positions that are subdivided to the point that it is virtually impossible to map the totality of answers. This is because the precise meaning of what it means to hold positions based on terms that can be publicly justified is far from clear and unambiguous. This makes the bibliography very vast (for instance D'Agostino, 1996; Enoch, 2013, 2015; Gaus; Vallier, 2009; Habermas, 1995, 2006; Kelbley, 2017; Turner; Gaus, 2018; Vallier, 2010, 2011, 2016; Weithman, 2002, 2016). In general terms, there are those who argue that public justification should be given by some kind of consensus on the reasons that support this or that decision, others by a convergence, which would maintain at the same time the agreement and plurality and particularity of the reasons adduced to a given decision. Such positions orbit, in general, on the problem of the role and legitimacy of religious justifications;

e. Therefore, for what interests me here, it is enough to point out that the relations between background cu*lture* and *political culture*, as well as between public and non-public reason, allow us to see how the problem of the antinomy of culture also manifests itself as a pragmatic problem in the struggle for legitimacy in the field of public justification. And the fact that the perspective opened up by Rawls is not itself capable of establishing a consensual solution, in my view, points to the possible contributions that can be derived from the Cassirer approach to human culture[10].

---

[10] Paul Weithman's diagnosis is quite accurate: "Rawls's work on public reason has generated a great deal of discussion. Most of this discussion concerns the reasonability or fairness of requiring citizens to supplement arguments drawn from comprehensive doctrine. Surprisingly, little of it has been devoted to teasing out just what public reasons are and exactly how Rawls defends the claim that citizens must be prepared to appeal to them. The dispatch with which commentators have moved to the implications of Rawls's view for the use of arguments drawn from comprehensive doctrine suggests that they share one of two unspoken assumptions. They may assume that Rawls's view of public reason is clear enough as it stands – that his central concepts are well defined, his distinctions perspicuous, his premises innocuous or self-evident, and his inferences not just sound but obviously so. Or they may assume that Rawls should simply be granted his definitions and distinctions, his premises and inferences, because the real interest of his view lies in the implications rather than the arguments" (Weithman, 2002, p. 181).

4.2 Cassirer *versus* Rawls

If it is true that, as stated above, the problem of reason in culture as a public sphere of interactions and debates is not one of Cassirer's main concerns, it is correct to say that the philosophy of Cassirer's culture is a reflection on the place and role of human rationality also considered in its intersubjective dimension.

Although, as also mentioned, there is an internal tension in Cassirer's thought between, on the one hand, the irreducibility of symbolic forms to each other and, on the other, his teleological vision in relation to the natural sciences, it is certain that Cassirer advocates a pluralism in relation to the various human spiritual expressions. It also follows from the very nature of Cassirer's concept of reason as spontaneity determined by a certain transcendental structure that traverses and, in a certain way, confers a rational unity not merely to its products, but to its very functioning, that the various symbolic forms are *eo ipso* rational manifestations[11]. It is precisely for this reason that the phenomenon of the antinomy of culture presents itself as a problem; were it not all of them expressions of reason, the inclination to present each of them in a horizon of unconditioned totality would not offer any difficulty, and it would be enough to eliminate the non-rational ones from consideration within the culture to dissolve the problem, at least in its public and inter-subjective dimension.

In this way, the pluralism of rational forms of human expression as thought by Cassirer can be contrasted with a certain monism – notwithstanding the declared pluralism – to which Rawls' general position of public rationality is committed. From Cassirer's point of view, there would therefore be two types of tension with Rawls' positions:

a. To derogate from the public rationality of morals, philosophy, and religions on the grounds that they present reasons that cannot be made public in a certain given sense, manifests an extremely deflated view of rationality. Conversely, the concept of rationality that emerges from the philosophical anthropology presupposed by the philosophy of culture is much more robust and much more suited to the faktum of human culture. Rawls seems to purposely equivocate the term "reason" in order to treat it as the human faculty on the one hand, and as a justification acceptable to all members of the culture, on the other. The important thing is that even from the point of view of a strong concept of justification, that is, as being able to offer reasons that support a given belief, denying the rationality of justification of positions supported by "background culture" via the argument of the logical (public) extension of justification seems indefensible. In this way, the qualifier "non public" juxtaposed to "reason" does not simply change the scope of justification, but impacts the Rawlsian conception of the human faculty, by unjustifiably merging the two meanings. This is especially curious because, although the starting point of the construction of the problem of public rationality is the recognition of the "fact" of a pluralism of "reasonable" positions within democratic societies (cf. Rawls, 1997, p. 765-766), as far as the pragmatics of the

---

[11] In fact, such conditioning occurs even on the functioning of sensibility, which ratifies Cassirer's idealism: "The act of 'symbolic ideation' is no secondary and as it were accidental factor, by which vision is for the first time being partly determined, but first constitutes vision. For there is no seeing and nothing visible which does not stand in some mode of spiritual vision, of ideation. A seeing and a thing-seen outside of this 'sight', a 'bare' sensation preceding all information, is an empty abstraction. The 'given' must always be taken in a definite aspect that first lends it meaning. This meaning is to be understood neither as secondary and conceptual nor as an associative addition: rather, it is the simple meaning of the original intuition itself. There is creation in the very act of seeing, and this applies not only to the scientifically determined or the artistically formed intuition, but to simple empirical intuition as well" (Cassirer, 2019, III, p. 134).

use of reason is concerned, only its public use, understood in a specially determined and restricted sense, is truly worthy of the name. Now, but what is the sense of calling "rational" a set of beliefs C that cannot claim to perform any inferential function – that is, to be a premise or conclusion or, even, to prevent a certain inference – in the public debate? By restricting the set of "acceptable reasons", Rawls is also affecting the very concept of reason. As Gaus and Vallier point out, "Even Rawls' permissive view as expressed in his 'proviso' is too restrictive: the legitimacy of appealing to religious reasons in the public arena in support of L does not require that 'in due course' a 'proper' public reason that all citizens can share is introduced to support L" (Gaus; Vallier, 2009, p. 61)[12]. In short, there is still an insurmountable gap between the reasonableness of the comprehensive views and the public reason;

b. If the first contrast is found in different notions of rationality, the second is by the very concept of culture, insofar as the understanding of the first necessarily occurs in its intersection with the fact of its expression in the second. That is why, for Cassirer, "[...] the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture"; precisely because "it seeks to understand and to show how every content of culture, in so far as it is more than a mere isolated content, in so far as it is grounded in a universal principle of form, presupposes an original act of the human spirit" (Cassirer, 2019, I, p. 80). It is the fact that there is a relationship of mutual determination between the concept of rationality and that of culture for Cassirer that makes it possible to understand both the constituent elements of culture and interrelated by their common "universal principle of form", that is, symbolic rationality, just as rationality only allows itself to be understood in all its expression and functions phenomenologically by the history of human culture. The split made by Rawls between "public" and "non public" rationality also mirrors and is mirrored by the separation between "political culture" and "background culture". From Cassirer's point of view, if there is the possibility of a "public universe", the "koinon kosmon" (see Cassirer, 1979, p. 72-73), it cannot admit sim*pliciter* the type of fragmentation proposed by Rawls.

Thus, we can say that, although Cassirer's analysis of the problem of the antinomy of culture is not under the pragmatic focus of the clash in the public sphere, its first fundamental contribution to this perspective is to ensure a more adequate understanding of the terms that constitute it. Symbolic forms provide both a better description and a more interesting perspective to the problem of pluralism than Rawls's path. But Cassirer provides yet another especially important insight that applies both to the deficiency of the Rawlsian conception and, internally to his thought, to the antinomic clash of symbolic forms in the realm of culture as public debate. In a lecture given at Princeton in 1945, whose title is similar to that of the last section of *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer analyzes the role of myth in contemporary society and politics. Even though it has undergone mutations over time, for the philosopher myth continues to play a preponderant role in culture:

---

[12] In Rawls (1997), the philosopher formulates his expanded version of the proviso: "Now we consider what I call the wide view of public political culture and discuss two aspects of it. The first is that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons-and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines-are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support" (Rawls, 1997, p. 783-784).

> The organism of human culture does not eliminate the mythical elements root and branch, but it learns to control them. It develops new constructive powers of logical and scientific thought, new ethical forces and new creative energies of artistic imagination. By the appearance of these new forces myth is not entirely vanquished, but it is counter-balanced and brought under control. It is true that this equilibrium is rather a labile than a static equilibrium; it is not firmly established but liable to all sorts of disturbances (Cassirer, 1986, p. 246).

The noteworthy point for what interests us here is the assertion that myth is not suppressed but can be counterbalanced by other forces coming from other symbolic forms, such as science, or from ethical reflection. This means that the claims of universality of one symbolic form can be "brought under control" by others, both epistemologically, because of the limits imposed by the internal validity of the norms by which they present their own perspectives, and from moral demands, which come from ethical deliberation. Although in the fragment Cassirer is referring specifically to myth, it is entirely possible to think that other forms – including the sciences – must be open to correction and limitation by virtue of the demand of other forms. In the practical dimension of the clash of symbolic forms in the midst of the cultural dispute for epistemic and decision-making primacy, the mutual openness to a reciprocal system of "checks and balances" imposes an ethical solution to the problem of the antinomy of culture[13]. Such a system of balancing between forms, proposed by Cassirer, allows the different expressions of human rationality to function as Nemesis of each other, which is vetoed in Rawls' view. In other words, only Cassirer's vision allows us to see the totality of culture as the realm of the self-realization of the human spiritual dimension and, therefore, the maintenance of the legitimacy of the pluralism of symbolic forms in public life, that is, the legitimacy of the presence, now in Rawlsian terms, of the elements of non-public reason and "background culture" *qua* themselves in public debate and public reason is a condition for the possibility of a properly human sense of culture. Thus, Cassirer's approach is an improvement over that of Rawls precisely because only the former allows us to see that the problem of pluralism in public debate is also a problem of culture. Even if sometimes the debate takes place between two positions from within the same symbolic form, as two religions, we are still dealing with the problem of forms proper to human spiritual expression that compete for their unconditional validity. From Rawls' perspective, if the components of "background culture" are to be excluded as such – or rather "translated" – by definition of "political culture", the characterization of the problem of public justification is no longer properly a problem of the world of culture but simply a problem of institutional instances. In fact, because of this, the problem of public debate, as we said above, is no longer even a problem of plurality of reasons, insofar as now what counts as rational in the public sphere is formal and, at times, materially distinct from the components of comprehensive views.

Finally, Cassirer's perspective also establishes, already in *Substance and Function*, the task of philosophy as a promoter of the dynamics that I have called "checks and balances":

> It is the task of systematic philosophy, which extends far beyond the theory of knowledge, to free the idea of the world from [any] one-sidedness. It has to grasp the *whole system* of symbolic forms, the application of which produces for us the concept of an ordered reality [...] Each particular form would be "relativized" with regard to the others, but since this

---

[13] Almost ten years earlier, in the conference entitled "Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture", Cassirer had already stressed that culture, because it should be understood in terms of freedom and not of necessity, should be understood in ethical and not metaphysical terms. Culture thus rests on the essentially moral – and, it must be said, profoundly Kantianian – problem of the autonomy of reason (cf. Cassirer, 1979a, p. 83-84).

> "relativization" is throughout reciprocal and since no single form but only the systematic totality can serve as the expression of "truth" and "reality" the limit that results appears as a thoroughly immanent limit, as one that is removed as soon as we again relate the individual to the system of the whole (Cassirer, 1980, p. 447).

What Cassirer determines as the role and function of philosophical reflection, as having to deflate each of the symbolic forms by virtue of the partial validity of each of them as a legitimate expression of the spiritual faculty of search for meaning, is, therefore, the understanding of culture as a "system of the whole". And here we arrive at a central impasse: from here, the task of philosophy for Cassirer seems to insert it, according to Rawls, into the universe of non-public rationality. We then have the paradox that the spiritual expressions that make up the life's world (*Lebenswelt*) and a worldview (*Weltanschauung*), that is, in Rawls' own words, "comprehensive doctrines of all kinds – religious, philosophical, and moral" (Rawls, 2005, p. 14) they must necessarily be left out as such or before a "translation", from considerations of public issues in the strong sense. In other words, what for Cassirer constitutes a synoptic view of human rational activity is, for Rawls, in the realm of "what should be silenced" as not properly rational and public. It is equally curious to note that, from Rawls' point of view, the distinction between public and non-public reason dissolves the problem of the antinomy of culture as Cassirer sees it, even though the very notion of overlapping consensus presupposes, precisely, that different actors in the game of giving and asking for reasons in society have different reasons from each other.

Final remarks

The focus on Cassirer's problem of the antinomy of culture as a pragmatic problem has as its main objective to shed another light on the problem, this one more fundamental, of rationality in culture when it is understood, from the apt expression by Sellars, as a kind of *logical space of reasons* (see Sellars, 1997, §36). Since culture is also a logical space of distinct but simultaneous hermeneutical and semantic perspectives about the world, the problem arises of equating the different reasons coming from each of its forms when they clash. What I intended to show here is that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms offers a more fruitful panorama of analysis – both for its descriptive quality of the different phenomena of human culture, and for the possibilities of answers – than a certain tradition, supported by Rawls, which only takes the pluralism of worldviews at face value as a simple component of the problem of public justification. Obviously, it is not a matter of affirming that Cassirer offers an answer to each and every one of the problems faced by the problem of public reason in the liberal tradition. However, to consider that the problem of public justification and rationality must be inserted in the horizon of a deeper philosophical consideration of the essential features and importance of the expressions of human culture is, without a doubt, a gain brought by Cassirer's philosophy that we cannot ignore.

References

BEISER, F. C. *After Hegel:* German Philosophy, 1840-1900. Princeton: Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

BEISER, F. C. *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism, 1796-1880.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

CASSIRER, E. *An essay on man:* an introduction to a philosophy of human culture. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010.

CASSIRER, E. Critical idealism as a philosophy of culture. *In*: *Symbol, myth, and culture:* essays and lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. p. 64-94.

CASSIRER, E. *Substance and Function & Einstein's Theory of Relativity.* [*S.l.*]: Dover, 1980.

CASSIRER, E. *The myth of the state.* 24. [print.] ed. New Haven London: Yale Univ. Press, 1986.

CASSIRER, E. *The philosophy of symbolic forms.* Translation: Steve G. Lofts. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

D'AGOSTINO, F. *Free public reason:* making it up as we go. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

ENOCH, D. Against public reason. *SSRN Electronic Journal,* [*s. l.*], 2015. Available at: http://www.ssrn.com/abstract=2601187. Accessed on: 4 set. 2024.

ENOCH, D. The disorder of public reason. *Ethics*, v. 124, n. 1, p. 141-176, 2013.

FERRARI, M. Science as a symbolic form: Ernst Cassirer's culture of reason. *In*: TRUWANT, S. (Ed.). *Interpreting Cassirer:* Critical Essays. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. p. 72-88.

FERREIRA, G. Kierkegaard descends to the Underworld: some remarks on the Kierkegaardian appropriation of an argument by F. A. Trendelenburg. *Cognitio: Journal of Philosophy,* v. 14, n. 2, p. 235-246, 2013.

FREULER, L. *La crise de la philosophie au xixe siecle.* Paris: Librarie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1997.

FRIEDMAN, M. *A parting of the ways:* Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger. Chicago: Open Court, 2000.

FUGALI, E. *Anima and movement.* Teoria della conoscenza e psicologia in Trendelenburg. [*S.l.*]: Franco Angeli, 2002.

GAUS, G. F.; VALLIER, K. The roles of religious conviction in a publicly justified polity: The implications of convergence, asymmetry and political institutions. *Philosophy & Social Criticism,* v. 35, n. 1-2, p. 51-76, 2009.

HABERMAS, J. Reconciliation through the public use of reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism. *The Journal of Philosophy,* v. 92, n. 3, p. 109, 1995.

HABERMAS, J. Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy,* v. 14, n. 1, p. 1-25, 2006.

HEIDEGGER, M. Phenomenology and Transcendental Philosophy of Value. *In*: HEIDEGGER, M. *Towards the definition of philosophy:* with a transcript of the lecture-course "On the nature of the university and academic study" (Freiburg Lecture-Courses 1919). London: Continuum, 2008. (Continuum impacts). p. 93-152.

KELBLEY, C. A. Are there limits to constitutional change? Rawls on comprehensive doctrines, unconstitutional amendments, and the basis of equality. *In*: BROOKS, T. (Ed.). *Rawls and Law.* [*S. l.*]: Routledge, 2017. p. 55-104.

KINZEL, K. Between pluralism and objectivism: Reconsidering Ernst Cassirer's Teleology of Culture. *Journal of the History of Philosophy,* v. 62, n. 1, p. 125-147, 2024.

KINZEL, K. Unifying themes and irresolvable tensions in Cassirer's system of symbolic forms. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy,* p. 1-9, 2023.

KÖHNKE, K. C. *Surgimiento y auge del neokantismo/ Raise and growth of Neo-Kantianism:* La filosofia universitaria alemana entre el idealismo y el positivismo/ the ... Philosophy Between Idealism and Positivism. [*S.l.*]: Fondo de Cultura Económica USA, 2011.

KRIJNEN, C. Philosophy as philosophy of culture? *In*: WARREN, N. de; STAITI, A. (Ed.). *New approaches to Neo-Kantianism.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 111-126.

LUFT, S. *The space of culture:* towards a neo-Kantian philosophy of culture (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

MATHERNE, S. *Cassirer.* Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021.

NATORP, P. Kant and the Marburg School. *In*: LUFT, S. (Ed.). *The neo-Kantian reader.* London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. p. 180-197.

PORTA, M. A. G. *Neo-Kantian studies.* São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2011.

RAWLS, J. *A Theory of Justice.* 2nd editioned. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1999.

RAWLS, J. *Political Liberalism.* Expanded eded. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. (Columbia classics in philosophy).

RAWLS, J. The idea of public reason revisited. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, v. 64, n. 3, p. 765, 1997.

RENZ, U. Critical idealism and the concept of culture: Philosophy of culture in Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer. *In*: MUNK, R. (Org.). *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism.* Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2005. p. 327-353.

SCHNÄDELBACH, H. *Philosophie in Deutschland, 1831-1933.* 1. Aufled. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983. (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, v. 401).

SCHUBBACH, A. *The genesis of the symbolic:* on the beginnings of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture. Translation: D. J. Hobbs. Berlin Boston (mass.): De Gruyter, 2022. (New studies in the history and historiography of philosophy, v. volume 7).

SELLARS, W. *Empiricism and the philosophy of mind.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

TRUWANT, S. Cassirer's enlightened view on the hierarchy of the symbolic forms and the task of philosophy. *Cassirer Studies,* v. VII-VIII, p. 119-139, 2014.

TURNER, P. N.; GAUS, G. F. (Ed.). *Public reason in political philosophy:* classic sources and contemporary commentaries. New York: Routledge, 2018.

VALLIER, K. Against Public Reason Liberalism's Accessibility Requirement. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, v. 8, n. 3, p. 366-389, 2011.

VALLIER, K. *Convergence and Consensus in Public Reason.* Rochester, 2010. SSRN Scholarly Paper. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1644506. Accessed on: 23 set. 2024.

VALLIER, K. In defence of intelligible reasons in public justification. *The Philosophical Quarterly,* v. 66, n. 264, p. 596-616, 2016.

VILKKO, R. The logic question during the first half of the nineteenth century. *In*: HAAPARANTA, L. (Ed.). *The development of modern logic.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 203-221.

WALDRON, J. 3. Isolating public reasons. *In*: BROOKS, T.; NUSSBAUM, M. C. (Ed.). *Rawls's Political Liberalism.* [*S.l.*]: Columbia University Press, 2015. p. 113-138.

WEITHMAN, P. J. *Rawls, political liberalism, and reasonable faith.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

WEITHMAN, P. J. *Religion and the obligations of citizenship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

WINDELBAND, W. *An introduction to philosophy.* London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923.

Sobre o autor

Gabriel Ferreira
Doutorado em Filosofia na Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos UNISINOS (CAPES), sob orientação do Prof. Dr. Álvaro L. M. Valls, com período sanduíche no Sren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, em Copenhague (2014), sobre os desdobramentos da Ontologia de Kierkegaard. Foi Visiting Scholar na Howard and Edna Hong Kierkegaard Library, St. Olaf College EUA (2012). É professor do PPG em Filosofia da Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS) e do curso de Medicina na Escola de Saúde (UNISINOS). Foi presidente da Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos de Kierkegaard - SOBRESKI (2020-2021). Bolsista da Fulbright Commission (Junior Faculty Member Award - EUA) para estágio pós-doutoral (2021-2022) na Universidade de Pittsburgh, sob supervisão do Prof. Robert Brandom. Atualmente é Professor Permanente do PPG Filosofia Unisinos e Pesquisador da Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul – FAPERGS.