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Challenges for the Study of the Phenomenon–Thing-in-Itself Distinction in Kant – Revisited through Cassirer

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Abstract: *This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Immanuel Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon (the "thing-in-itself") and Ernst Cassirer's reinterpretation of this distinction. Focusing on how each thinker delineates the limits of human knowledge, it examines Kant's epistemological boundary between appearances and things-in-themselves and then explores Cassirer's transformation of that boundary through his philosophy of symbolic forms. The analysis highlights how Cassirer, as a Neo-Kantian, extends Kant's critical philosophy into the cultural domain, mediating the noumenon via symbols and cultural meaning. The implications of this comparison are far-reaching: the concept of freedom is reframed by situating human autonomy either in a noumenal realm (for Kant) or in the creative spontaneity of culture (for Cassirer); the understanding of modernity and technology is enriched by considering Kant's critical limits alongside Cassirer's view of science and technology as symbolic constructions; a more pluralistic cross-cultural philosophy emerges from Cassirer's vision of multiple symbolic worlds, complementing Kant's universalism; and the human sciences gain a philosophical foundation by Cassirer's integration of cultural forms with Kantian rigor. In conclusion, the paper argues that Kant's Critical philosophy and Cassirer's philosophy of culture are not opposed but complementary: Kant provides the necessary critical boundaries for knowledge and morality, while Cassirer expands this framework to include the richness of cultural life and symbolic mediation, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of human experience.*

Keywords: *phenomenon; noumenon (the "thing-in-itself"); comparative analysis; Kant; Cassirer.*

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Introduction

Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena – between the world as it appears to us and the world "in itself" – has long been a cornerstone of his critical philosophy. It sets a limit to human knowledge, asserting that we only know things as they appear under the conditions of our sensibility and understanding, not as they are in themselves beyond possible experience (Kant, 1969). This epistemological boundary was Kant's answer to the excesses of earlier metaphysics: by confining knowledge to phenomena, Kant aimed to secure the "possibility or impossibility of metaphysics" as a science (Kant, 1969). At the same time, the noumenon (or *Ding an sich*, "thing-in-itself") remained as a *limit-concept*, indicating that there is a reality independent of our cognition that we cannot know directly, but which thought can at least *think* as a beyond to appearances (Kant, 1969). Kant considers objects of experience to be "mere representations and not things in themselves," with space and time being "only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations of objects as things in themselves." As a result, objects as appearances must conform to our knowledge – this is what makes a priori cognition (knowledge independent of experience) possible (Kant, 1969). In brief, our cognitive faculties impose form and order on the data of sense, and what lies outside those forms (the noumenal reality) is inaccessible to us.

Ernst Cassirer, a leading Neo-Kantian of the Marburg School, offers a fascinating response to this Kantian framework. Cassirer takes Kant's critical insight – that the mind actively shapes experience – and extends it from the realm of natural science to the whole realm of culture (Cassirer, 2008). In his major work *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), Cassirer argues that human beings do not relate to the world solely through theoretical knowledge (as Kant's first Critique emphasizes), but through a variety of symbolic forms: not only science, but also language, myth, art, religion, and other cultural domains are formative structures of experience (Cassirer, 2008). He effectively transforms Kant's critique of reason into a critique of culture, maintaining Kant's commitment to the active role of form in experience, but pluralizing and contextualizing those forms across different cultural activities (Cassirer, 2008). In doing so, Cassirer addresses a limitation in Kant: whereas Kant tended to privilege the universal and necessary structures of the mind, Cassirer highlights the diversity of ways humans generate meaning. The noumenon, from Cassirer's perspective, is no longer a single, utterly unknowable entity lurking behind appearances; rather, it becomes translated into the symbolic process itself – an *idea* of an

unconditioned reality that each cultural form approaches in its own way. All knowledge, for Cassirer, is symbolically mediated; there is no direct access to a thing-in-itself, only a continual process of the mind liberating itself through cultural creation (Cassirer, 1994, p15–16).

This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 explicates Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena and its significance for his critical project. Section 2 then examines Cassirer's transformation of this distinction through the philosophy of symbolic forms, emphasizing how Cassirer reinterprets the thing-in-itself and the conditions of knowledge in a cultural key. Section 3 considers the implications and applications of these ideas in four areas: (3.1) the concept of freedom, (3.2) the challenges of modernity and technology, (3.3) the pursuit of cross-cultural philosophy, and (3.4) the grounding of the human sciences. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes how Kant's and Cassirer's approaches together offer a more complete understanding of the limits and possibilities of human understanding – suggesting that Kant's critical boundaries and Cassirer's cultural expansion are mutually illuminating and philosophically complementary.

Kant's distinction: phenomena and noumena

Kant's critical philosophy centers on the distinction between phenomena (the appearances of things, as structured by our sensibility and understanding) and noumena (things as they are in themselves, independent of our perception). This distinction is introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to mark the epistemological boundary of human cognition. Phenomena are the only objects we can *know*: they are the world as it is constituted by the forms of our intuition (space and time) and the categories of our understanding (such as causality, substance, etc.). Noumena, by contrast, are defined negatively as "not an object of sensible intuition" – they are what mind-independent reality might be, *if* it were to be considered apart from the conditions of experience (Kant also calls this an "intelligible object") (Kant, 1969). However, Kant insists that we have no theoretical knowledge of noumena: the concept of a "thing-in-itself" plays a *regulative* role, signalling that our knowledge has limits, rather than serving as a positive object we can investigate (Cassirer, 1994).

In the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first Critique, Kant famously argues that space and time are forms of our sensible intuition, not properties of things-in-themselves. Whatever we intuit in space and time is an appearance, and Kant states that appearances are "to be sure, representations only, not things in themselves" (in original: *nicht Dinge an sich selbst sondern bloße Vorstellungen*) (Kant, 1969). Similarly, the *Transcendental Analytic* shows that our

understanding can know objects only by applying its a priori concepts (categories) to the data of sense; if we try to apply our concepts beyond possible experience, we fall into error. Thus, any object we can experience must conform to the conditions of possible experience – we can know a priori certain features of objects (e.g. that they will obey causality) because those features come from our own cognitive framework (Kant, 1969). Meanwhile, the thing-in-itself remains "beyond" those conditions: we can think that it exists, but we cannot know *what* it is like, since knowing it would require us to step outside our own finite mode of cognition.

Kant uses the term "noumenon" chiefly in a limiting sense. In one formulation, *noumenon* is a merely "problematic" concept – a way of saying that there could be things that are not objects of our senses, but without asserting anything positive about them. The function of the concept, as Cassirer later emphasizes in his analysis of Kant, is *critical*: it "indicates the limits of experience", reminding us that our knowledge is not absolute but conditioned by our faculties (Cassirer, 1994). Indeed, Kant *demarcates these limits progressively* in the structure of the *Critique*: first at the level of sensibility (we must admit an "affecting" thing-in-itself as the unknown cause of our sensations, since our sensibility is receptive (Kant, 1969)), then at the level of understanding (if we *hypostatize* the subjective synthesis of experience, we mistakenly think of it as an object in itself (Kant, 1969)), and finally at the level of reason (the transcendental ideas of reason – the soul, the world as a whole, and God – are *noumenal* in the sense that they cannot be given in experience, though reason regulatively uses them to unify empirical knowledge). In each case, the "thing-in-itself" signifies something that thought must posit but cannot cognize, corresponding to the perspective of a "complete" or unconditioned knowledge that we finite knowers do not possess (Kant, 1969). As Kant puts it, *"we cannot penetrate into the inner nature of things"* – what things are in themselves is not revealable to us, only what they are as phenomena is accessible.

The implications of this doctrine for Kant's philosophy are profound. First, it enforces a kind of epistemic humility sometimes called "*Kantian humility*" in contemporary terms (Langton, 1998): we must refrain from dogmatic speculation about ultimate reality beyond experience. Metaphysical disputes about the soul's substance or the existence of God, for example, cannot be resolved by theoretical reason – these objects, if they exist, are noumenal and thus unknowable by speculative science. However, Kant does not eliminate these ideas; instead, he assigns them a *practical or regulative role*. This is especially evident in the case of freedom, which we will explore in Section 3.1. Briefly, Kant argues that although everything within the world of

phenomena is bound by deterministic causality (every event has a cause in nature), we are entitled – indeed, required – to *think* of ourselves as free in the noumenal realm (Langton, 1998). The distinction between the phenomenal and the intelligible worlds allows Kant to resolve the apparent antinomy between causal determinism and free will: in the world of appearances, our actions are part of the natural chain of causes and effects, but in the world of things-in-themselves (the intelligible world), our will can be regarded as originating action spontaneously, independent of natural determinism (Kant, 2003). Thus, morality presupposes that we, as intelligences, belong to a noumenal order where freedom is possible, even though that order is "incomprehensible" to theoretical knowledge (Kant, 2003).

Kant's phenomenon/noumenon distinction also set the stage for subsequent philosophy by clearly delineating the scope and limits of natural science. By arguing that science deals only with phenomena (how things *appear under laws of nature*), Kant both validated the objectivity of science and prevented it from making unwarranted metaphysical claims. Scientific knowledge achieves certainty by restricting itself to the empirical realm structured by human intuition and understanding – a point later Neo-Kantians like Hermann Cohen stressed when they described Kant as establishing the "conditions of the possibility of natural science" (Kant, 1969). At the same time, Kant's insistence on a reality beyond scientific grasp left room for faith and morality: practical reason can postulate God, freedom, and immortality as noumenal matters, since they lie outside the domain of empirical knowledge (these postulates are needed to make sense of our moral experience, according to the *Critique of Practical Reason*). In short, Kant's critical distinction performs a delicate balancing act – it limits knowledge to make room for faith (in Kant's famous phrase), and it secures the laws of nature while preserving human freedom by placing the latter in the noumenal sphere.

Despite its elegance, the phenomenon–noumenon framework was not without challenges. Kant himself acknowledged that the concept of a thing-in-itself is a necessary, yet problematic notion: necessary to prevent us from thinking that appearances are all of reality (thus avoiding empirical idealism), but problematic because it can easily lead to misunderstanding if taken as a knowable thing or cause. Over the centuries, commentators have debated whether Kant's noumenal realm is a shadowy *placeholder* for "something real" we just can't know, or whether it is simply a *boundary-concept* with no content at all. This ambiguity of the noumenon opened the door for later thinkers to modify or reinterpret the distinction. One such thinker was Ernst Cassirer, who, while remaining deeply influenced by Kant, rethought

the role of the thing-in-itself within a broader theory of human culture and meaning. How Cassirer transforms Kant's distinction is the subject of the next section.

Cassirer's transformation: the noumenon in the symbolic forms

Ernst Cassirer approaches Kant's legacy with both great admiration and constructive criticism. As a Neo-Kantian, Cassirer accepts Kant's basic insight that we do not find an independent reality unmediated – we *constitute* it through form and thought. However, Cassirer departs from Kant's specific architectonic in two major ways. First, he abandons the fixed table of pure concepts (the categories) that Kant derived (like quantity, quality, cause, substance), and instead introduces a more fluid concept: the symbolic form (Truwant, 2022). Second, he extends the scope of critical philosophy beyond the strict confines of theoretical reason (science) and practical reason (morality) into all domains of culture – including areas that Kant touched only briefly, such as art and myth, as well as areas Kant largely ignored, such as language, religion, and the historical sciences (Truwant, 2022). In short, Cassirer converts the Kantian critique into a "critique of culture": every cultural activity is seen as a mode in which the human mind shapes experience according to certain organizing principles, much as Kant saw the mind structuring experience through categories and forms of intuition (Truwant, 2022).

For Cassirer, human beings are best defined not as *animal rationale (rational animal) but as animal symbolicum* (the symbol-making animal) (Cassirer, 1994). This shift in definition encapsulates his transformation of Kant's distinction. Whereas Kant emphasized reason's role in cognizing phenomena and limiting itself vis-à-vis noumena, Cassirer emphasizes that our entire reality is essentially a symbolic construct. We no longer live in a merely physical universe; we live in a "symbolic universe" of language, myths, art, and science (Cassirer, 1994). As Cassirer vividly writes, *"Man no longer lives in a purely physical universe, but in a universe of symbols."* All the elements of culture – "language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the different strands which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience." (Cassirer, 1994) In other words, everything that Kant would regard as a phenomenon (an object of experience) is always already shaped by some symbolic form or other. There is no "pure appearance" accessible to us outside of these form-giving activities of mind. Language, for instance, doesn't just label a ready-made world; it carves the world into meaningful units and imbues it with a structure. Myth and religious imagination project a world of powerful forces and sacred meanings,

structuring experience very differently from the way theoretical science does. Each of these spheres – the linguistic, the mythical, the aesthetic, the scientific, etc. – has its own *inner form* or logic, its own way of organizing the raw material of experience.

How, then, does Cassirer reconceive the noumenon or thing-in-itself? In Kant's system, the noumenon was a *boundary* – the unknowable X that affects our senses or that underlies appearances. Cassirer's move is essentially to internalize that boundary within the process of knowledge itself. He agrees that we never know a thing as it is independent of any form; we only know what our symbolic forms let us know. But rather than positing a static "thing-in-itself" lurking unknowably behind appearances, Cassirer interprets the concept dynamically: it becomes the idea of a limit or totality that reason is always aiming for but never reaching. In Cassirer's view, the concept of the thing-in-itself serves to express "the limits that theoretical reason imposes on itself" – not limits set by some external reality, but those arising from reason's own recognition of its form-giving activity (Cassirer, 1994). We impose limits on knowledge not because something outside is stopping us, but because we understand that knowledge is always from a certain perspective or symbolic form. In *Cassirer's critical idealism*, as one commentator puts it, thought is autonomous and self-limiting, just as the will is autonomous in Kant's ethics (Cassirer, 1994). This means the boundary between phenomenon and noumenon is a self-recognized one: reason knows it cannot objectively seize the unconditioned, yet it postulates it as a *regulative goal*.

Cassirer's analysis of Kant led him to conclude that the "thing-in-itself" had multiple meanings in the *Critique*, corresponding to the stages of Kant's argument (sensibility, understanding, reason) (Cassirer, 1994). By the final stage, Cassirer argued, the thing-in-itself is essentially "the schema of the regulative principle of the systematic unity of experience."(Kant, 1969) In plainer terms, by the time we reach Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic*, the only content left for the noumenon is as an *Idea of Reason* – the idea that all phenomena can be understood as if they were grounded in an absolute unity (like an idea of a complete world or ultimate being), which we strive toward in scientific and philosophical inquiry, but can never empirically attain. Cassirer whole-heartedly embraces this regulative vision. He removes any need for a noumenon as an *explanatory cause* of sensations (he sees Kant's "affecting object" in the Transcendental Aesthetic as a vestige of pre-critical thinking that Kant included only to indicate the passivity of sensibility (Cassirer, 1994)). For Cassirer, the given (sensory input) offers no resistance that requires a thing-in-itself to cause it; the "given" is from the start intertwined with form.

Hence, he famously stated that in his own philosophy of symbolic forms "the concept of an affecting thing in itself does not play any role and may be dispensed with." (Cassirer, 1994) The noumenon, in the sense of a *Ding an sich* that produces our perceptions, is a concept Cassirer feels the critical philosophy can safely set aside. What remains of the noumenon is its *critical function*: it denotes that our knowledge, in any domain, is not absolute but is an approximation, a construction that can be made ever more coherent and complete but never reaches a "God's-eye view" of reality.

However, Cassirer does not conclude from this that truth or objectivity are illusory. On the contrary, he develops a nuanced account of objectivity within each symbolic form. In science, for example, objectivity lies in the coherence and systematic unity of the laws that describe phenomena – and here the Idea of the noumenal unity of nature serves as a guiding ideal (we proceed *as if* nature were a completely ordered whole). In mythical thinking, objectivity is of a different sort: it might be the inner consistency of a mythic world-view for a culture, or the power of symbolic representation to express emotional truth. Each domain has what Cassirer calls a "constitutive" form of objectivity specific to it, and a regulative ideal of unity that culture as a whole strives toward (Truwant, 2022). Thus, Cassirer retains a two-tier conception akin to Kant's *phenomenal vs. noumenal*, but relocates it: now the *constitutive* level is the particular symbolic form (yielding, say, physical objects for science or meaningful symbols for religion), and the *regulative noumenal* level is the Idea of an ideal limit (like the complete systematic knowledge of nature, or the ultimate meaning of the world) towards which each form tends (Truwant, 2022). This move allows Cassirer to claim that human knowledge is progressing in a process of self-liberation – each cultural form is a way the mind liberates itself from the prison of immediacy and chaos by imposing form, and all together, human culture "taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation" (in original: *"der Prozeß der fortschreitenden Selbstbefreiung des Menschen"*) (Cassirer, 1994).

To illustrate Cassirer's view, consider the example of mythical thinking versus scientific thinking. A Kantian might say: both a mythic story and a scientific theory are phenomena in human experience, but only the scientific theory, adhering to the categories of the understanding, counts as knowledge, whereas the myth is an "appearance" of a more confused, pre-rational sort. Cassirer, by contrast, treats myth as its own mode of world-construction. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, he analyses how early human cultures did not think in abstract concepts but in vivid images and personifications (Cassirer, 1994). For the "first peoples,"

reality presented itself as a living drama of powers and agents, not as a mechanical system of objects (Cassirer, 1994). This doesn't mean early humans had *no* access to reality—rather, they accessed it symbolically through myth. Their consciousness imbued every object with life and meaning, following the "principle of personification" (Cassirer, 1994). Such mythic consciousness cannot be dismissed as mere nonsense; it is a genuine form of life and thought, with its own inner structure (for example, the logic of totemism or the universality of certain archetypal symbols). Cassirer's point is that each form (mythic, linguistic, artistic, scientific) is a projection of human understanding onto the world, and each reveal something about reality in a way appropriate to human needs and interests, while also concealing something (since no form grasps reality in its totality). The noumenon – reality in itself – recedes from any particular grasp, but in the myriad symbolic forms we continually approach it from different angles. In a sense, Cassirer dissolves the noumenon into the endless activity of symbolization: reality is not a single block behind appearances, but a horizon that advances as our cultural world expands.

In summary, Cassirer preserves the spirit of Kant's critical distinction but alters its letter. He agrees that we never know things except under our human modes of interpretation, and thus upholds a form of transcendental idealism (often calling his philosophy *"critical idealism"* in homage to Kant). But instead of a stark two-world contrast (phenomenal world vs. noumenal world), Cassirer envisions a plurality of symbolically constructed "worlds" (the worlds of science, of myth, of art, etc.), each bounded by its form yet each capable of growth and self-correction as the human spirit strives for greater coherence and freedom. The thing-in-itself in Cassirer's framework is not an alien beyond – it is the ideal of an intelligible unity and truth that motivates cultural creation but is never fully attained. We could say that, for Cassirer, the noumenon has been transformed from a *limiting object into a limit of meaning*: it is the ever-receding unity that our various symbolic endeavours seek. By making this shift, Cassirer manages to integrate Kant's insight with a recognition of cultural diversity and historical development. Knowledge is not static and given once for all (as a set of a priori categories); it is an ongoing, dynamic process in which the human mind liberates itself from constraints – not the metaphysical constraint of a "thing-in-itself" it can't reach, but the self-imposed constraints of any one perspective by venturing into new symbolic forms.

Cassirer's reinterpretation, of course, invites its own questions and critiques. Does this symbolic pluralism relativize truth or objectivity too much? Cassirer would answer that it does not, because the idea of truth

remains as a regulative ideal guiding each form – especially in science, which for Cassirer is the highest expression of the symbolic capacity for objective knowledge (Cassirer, 1994). Science, in his words, is *"the last step in man's mental development and may be regarded as the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture"* (Cassirer, 1994). Yet, even science should not claim a view from nowhere; it remains a human enterprise, and its concepts (even in mathematics and physics) are symbolic schemata that have evolved (Cassirer famously analysed the development of the concept of number and of Einstein's theory of relativity to show how scientific concepts change while still referring to objective structures (Cassirer, 1994)). In Cassirer's eyes, acknowledging the symbolic nature of all knowledge does not weaken our grasp on reality – instead, it deepens our appreciation of the creative freedom at the heart of human cognition and the multiple ways we can uncover truth.

Having outlined Cassirer's transformation of Kant's phenomenon/noumenon distinction, we can now consider how this transformation plays out in several key philosophical and practical contexts. In the next section, we will explore how Kant's and Cassirer's perspectives differ or converge regarding the idea of human freedom, the character of modernity and technology, the possibility of a cross-cultural philosophy, and the role of this debate for the human sciences.

Implications and applications

Freedom

The concept of freedom provides a revealing point of comparison between Kant and Cassirer, as it lies at the heart of Kant's critical system and is also pivotal in Cassirer's reinterpretation. Kant himself described the idea of freedom as the "keystone" (Grundstein) of the whole architecture of reason (Kant, 2003). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he declares that the reality of freedom – established by the fact of the moral law – is the condition that makes the systematic unity of all of reason possible. Freedom, for Kant, has a very specific significance: it is the ability of the will to begin a new causal chain independently of natural determination, which is another way of saying it belongs to the noumenal realm (the *intelligible world* of things-in-themselves) (Kant, 2003). In the empirical world of appearances, every event (including human actions as observable behaviors) is governed by causality and thus not free. But as rational agents, Kant argues, we must regard ourselves from a different standpoint – a standpoint in which the moral law (a law of reason) tells us what we ought to do, implying that we can do it. This practical standpoint presupposes that we are not mere links in

nature's chain, but originate actions from ourselves. Kant thus famously says we "belong to two worlds": the sensible world (where our bodies and actions appear and are determined) and the intelligible world (where our true self, as a noumenal agent, is free) (Kant, 2003).

This Kantian solution to the free will problem depends on the strict phenomenon/noumenon distinction. The boundary between the two realms enables an internally consistent view: science can proceed with deterministic laws in the phenomenal realm, while ethics can proceed with the postulate of free will in the noumenal realm, without the two coming into logical conflict (Kant, 2003). Indeed, Kant explicitly calls the idea of freedom the "ratio essendi" (ground of being) of the moral law and the moral law the "ratio cognoscendi" (ground of knowing) of freedom – we know we are free because we know we are bound by the moral law, a binding that would make no sense unless we could choose (Kant, 2003). This tight argument underlines that for Kant, freedom is not empirically observable (since any observable behaviour can be traced to prior causes) but is a necessary rational postulate grounded in our practical reason. It also shows how the noumenal is given a positive use in Kant's second Critique: unlike theoretical reason, which must abstain from affirming noumenal entities, practical reason *asserts* the existence of the noumenal self (free will) as well as God and immortality, because without these intelligible realities, the moral life would lack coherence (for instance, true moral responsibility presupposes freedom).

Ernst Cassirer, inheriting this framework, was deeply interested in the role of freedom in Kant's system. In fact, Cassirer went so far as to say "critical philosophy is the philosophy of freedom" (Pringe, 2022). He saw the entire Kantian enterprise – not only the moral philosophy but the *theory of knowledge itself* – as rooted in an idea of freedom. How so? Cassirer interprets the Kantian turn to the subject (the idea that the mind actively shapes experience) as an expression of the mind's spontaneity, its self-determining activity. In Kant's first Critique, the understanding is described as spontaneous (in contrast to sensibility, which is receptive). Cassirer seizes on this and generalizes it: for him, the "spontaneity of the understanding" and the "autonomy of reason" in seeking truth are analogues of the autonomy of the will in ethics (Cassirer, 1994). In every domain – theoretical, aesthetic, moral – the human spirit exhibits a certain freedom by not being a mere passive registrar of stimuli but by actively imposing form or following self-given laws.

Cassirer thus extends the notion of freedom to cognition itself. He argues that critical epistemology, properly understood, shows how the mind is free in the sense that it is not dictated to by things, but gives law to nature

(through the a priori concepts and principles). To put it in Kantian language, the understanding does not derive its categories from experience; it brings them *to* experience – it legislates nature rather than waiting for nature to imprint structure upon it. For Cassirer, this autonomy of thought is central. He suggests that Kant's philosophy is essentially about the "freedom of thought" – the fact that our thinking is not determined by any alien force but follows its own rational necessities (Cassirer, 1994).

However, Cassirer also recognized a tension: while Kant highlighted the freedom of understanding, he still maintained a sharp division between sensibility and understanding (the receptive vs. spontaneous faculties) and held onto the notion of an "affection" by the thing-in-itself at the base of sensibility. Cassirer, in a critical move, challenges that strict opposition. If thought is truly free and self-active, can we really conceive a "given" element (the sensory manifold) that is entirely independent of that spontaneity? Cassirer answers: not really – at least, we need not do so. He proposes that every element of experience is informed by spontaneity to some degree. In his analysis, the "freedom of thought" implies that what Kant called the *matter* of experience (the sensory data) is not an absolute limit or brute facticity opposed to form, but something that is progressively taken up and transformed by the activities of the mind (Cassirer, 1994).

This brings Cassirer to a subtle rethinking of freedom: freedom is not a binary (free noumenal self vs. determined phenomena) as in Kant's solution, but a gradual achievement in the process of culture. Cassirer famously writes, *"human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation."* (Cassirer, 1994) In other words, as humanity develops languages, scientific theories, artistic expressions, religious ideas, etc., it is continually liberating itself – freeing itself from the constraints of immediacy, from the prison of the "here and now" and biological necessity, by building a world of ideas and meanings. Each symbolic form is an act of freedom: even myth, despite its often fearsome or fate-bound cosmologies, represents an early form of the mind's freedom to *impose meaning* on the chaos of life. Language allows us to transcend the present by talking about absent or abstract things; art allows a freedom of imagination; science the freedom of understanding lawlike structures not apparent to the senses; and morality, of course, the freedom of self-determination under rational laws.

Thus, Cassirer broadens the concept of freedom from the narrowly ethical context (Kant's focus in the second Critique) to a universal feature of the human spirit's creativity. In Cassirer's view, wherever the mind actively shapes experience, it is exercising freedom. He even describes the history of science in such terms: the advancement from one scientific paradigm to a

deeper one (e.g. from classical mechanics to relativity) can be seen as a kind of liberation from old intuitive constraints into a more adequate conceptual scheme (Cassirer, 1994). Cassirer's own mentor, Hermann Cohen, had spoken of *"the autonomy of the logical"* in a similar vein – that reason is self-governing in the pursuit of truth just as it is in the pursuit of the good. Cassirer brings this to fruition by describing his philosophy of symbolic forms as essentially a philosophy of liberation (Philosophie der Befreiung) (Cassirer, 1994). In each symbolizing activity, the self is liberating itself from being a passive spectator or a conditioned organism and becoming an autonomous world-maker.

What about the noumenal self and moral freedom in the strict Kantian sense? Cassirer does not reject Kant's practical postulate of freedom or the validity of the moral law. In fact, Cassirer held Kant's moral philosophy in high esteem and wrote about the evolution of the concept of ethical freedom. However, Cassirer's tendency is to naturalize and culturalized the notion of the noumenal self. Rather than viewing the noumenal self as a mysteriously detached pure will, Cassirer sees the moral agent as continuous with the rest of human culture. Ethical life is one "symbolic form" among others (though a critically important one). The moral law for Cassirer is an expression of the autonomy of the rational will (just as for Kant), but Cassirer also situates it in the context of cultural values and historical development.

In Cassirer's work *An Essay on Man* (1944), he discusses how ethical values can be understood through the symbolic forms framework. Notably, Cassirer does not reduce ethics to cultural relativism – he affirms that the idea of human dignity and freedom is a core achievement of our cultural self-understanding. He might say that what Kant described metaphysically (membership in an intelligible world) can be understood symbolically as the way humans have come to see each person as an end in themselves, a bearer of rights and autonomy – a view enshrined in law, art, religion, and philosophy over centuries. In this sense, Cassirer sees the Kantian ideal of freedom as progressively realized in cultural life (for instance, through the development of legal and political institutions that recognize individual freedom).

One might ask: by dissolving the noumenal self into culture, does Cassirer lose the sharpness of Kant's idea of absolute moral responsibility? This is a matter of interpretation. Cassirer would likely respond that his intention is not to dilute moral responsibility but to show how the very capacity for responsibility arises from the human faculty of symbolic thought. After all, to hold ourselves accountable to universal laws (Kant's Categorical Imperative) already requires a significant level of symbolic

abstraction – language, concepts of duty, etc. – all of which are cultural products. By emphasizing the symbolic form of ethical life, Cassirer provides a bridge between Kant's somewhat otherworldly noumenal self and the actual human being embedded in society and history.

In summary, Kant and Cassirer both champion human freedom, but on different fronts. Kant secures freedom in a metaphysical and practical sense by cordoning off a noumenal realm for the will. Cassirer secures freedom in a cultural and epistemic sense by showing our capacity to constantly remake our world through symbols. Kant's freedom is a moral postulate – a presupposition of our duty and our self-respect as rational agents. Cassirer's freedom is an ongoing achievement – seen in language, art, science, as well as moral life, as humanity's self-emancipation from natural bonds. They converge in affirming that human beings are not merely determined objects; we are also spontaneous subjects. Cassirer's reinterpretation, rather than contradicting Kant, *complements* it: we might say Kant gives the *formal* concept of freedom (the capacity for autonomous action under self-given law), while Cassirer gives it *content* by illustrating all the ways in which autonomy manifests in the human condition. Together, they offer a richer picture in which freedom is both the ground of our knowledge (our mind's spontaneity) and the goal of our culture (progressive self-liberation) (Cassirer, 1994, 68).

Modernity and technology

The modern world – characterized by rapid scientific advancement, technological power, and complex social change – provides a testing ground for philosophical ideas. Kant's critical philosophy, forged in the late 18th century, was foundational for the project of Enlightenment modernity: it set limits on knowledge that helped delineate science from pseudo-science, and it championed the dignity of persons and their rational autonomy in a way that would inspire modern liberal thought. Cassirer, writing in the first half of the 20th century, confronted more directly the fruits and perils of modernity – from the breakthroughs of modern physics to the crises of culture and politics (he lived through World War I, the rise of Nazism, and World War II). His expansion of Kant's ideas offers important insights into how we might understand modern science and technology, as well as modern cultural phenomena.

From Kant's perspective, one can argue that his phenomenon/noumenon distinction enabled the rise of modern science by clearly demarcating the scope of scientific inquiry. In Kant's view, science deals with phenomena – nature as it appears under universal laws. By

asserting that we can have a priori knowledge of some features of phenomena (such as the conformity of nature to mathematical law), Kant provided a philosophical justification for the success of Newtonian physics in his era (Kant, 1969). At the same time, by labelling things-in-themselves as unknowable, he effectively told scientists (and philosophers) not to waste effort on questions that cannot be answered by empirical-sensible means (such as the ultimate essence of matter or the existence of God, which are noumenal matters). This critical restraint was arguably beneficial: it guarded against dogmatic metaphysics and allowed a focus on what can be systematically known. In the 19th-century, figures like Hermann Helmholtz and other scientists invoked Kant's ideas when discussing the foundations of physics, and the Neo-Kantian movement (especially the Marburg School to which Cassirer belonged) actively interpreted modern scientific developments in a Kantian framework.

However, by the early 20th century, science itself had changed. The advent of relativity theory and quantum mechanics challenged some of Kant's a priori assumptions about space, time, and even causality. Cassirer engaged deeply with Einstein's theory of relativity; he wrote a book *Substance and Function* (1910) and later essays where he argued that Einstein's physics, far from refuting Kant, could be seen as fulfilling the critical project by replacing older "absolute" Newtonian concepts with more relational and functional concepts (like space-time, which is not an absolute container but a system of relations defined by light signals and frames of reference)(Cassirer, 1994). Cassirer suggested that what Kant considered forms of intuition (space and time) remain in some sense a priori, but they had to be reconceptualized in light of modern mathematics (non-Euclidean geometry, etc.) – something Kant couldn't have foreseen. This example shows Cassirer's approach to modern science: he treats scientific theories as themselves products of the mind's symbolic capacity, subject to revision and generalization, yet still constrained by a need for consistency and form.

In the age of advanced technology, the Kantian boundary between phenomenon and noumenon also takes on a different cast. Technology extends our experience (telescopes, microscopes, particle colliders, etc., reveal phenomena once beyond our natural faculties), but it also depends on our theoretical frameworks. For Kant, no matter how sophisticated our instruments, we are still observing appearances, not "things-in-themselves." Cassirer would agree, but he would emphasize the creative role of symbolic thought in even designing those instruments and interpreting their data. A telescope is not just a passive window, it is calibrated based on prior theories (optics, etc.), and the data it yields must be conceptually interpreted. So, the

symbolic form of science envelops technology as well. Cassirer's analysis implies that modern technology does not bring us closer to noumena per se, but it enriches the world of phenomena under the guidance of human symbolic frameworks.

One might consider the question: Does modern science approach a "limit" of knowing things-in-themselves? For instance, some might say quantum physics challenges the Kantian idea that we impose order, because at micro scales reality can appear indeterminate or bizarre. But a Kantian/Cassirerian might respond: even quantum phenomena are known through models and symbols (wave-functions, probability amplitudes) that our minds devise; the so-called "weirdness" of quantum mechanics is not a direct look at noumenal chaos, but a new symbolic form (or a new development of the scientific symbolic form) that still obeys mathematical and conceptual rules. The noumenon remains elusive – we have just updated our phenomenal laws. Cassirer's two-tiered objectivity (constitutive vs. regulative (Truwant, 2022) applies here: each time physics advances, it offers a more unified account of phenomena, getting us closer to the *regulative ideal* of a complete unity of laws, but we never surmount the need for some framework of understanding.

Cassirer also addressed modernity in terms of cultural crises and the role of myth. One of his later works, *The Myth of the State* (1946), examines how even in the modern, ostensibly rational age, mythical thinking can resurge, often with technology as its vehicle (for example, propaganda using mass media to create political myths). Cassirer, witnessing the rise of Nazi Germany, was alarmed by how a technologically advanced society could fall prey to irrational collective myths (the myth of the "Aryan" race, the Führer-cult, etc.). Here, a stark interplay between phenomenon and noumenon is at play: modern ideology can create a *false noumenon*, an illusion of some absolute reality (like a pure racial essence or destiny) which is actually a projection of mythic symbolism. Kant, writing in an earlier age, did not explicitly consider this dynamic, but his emphasis on rational autonomy and self-critical reason stands as a countermeasure to such regression. Cassirer's expansion of symbolic forms allowed him to analyse phenomena like these within a Kantian spirit: he treated the modern political myth as a symbolic form that borrows techniques from rational discourse (pseudo-science, pseudo-history) but ultimately appeals to primordial emotions and unreason. The implication for modernity is that technological progress does not automatically equate to rational progress; without critical vigilance (the very critical method Kant taught), technology can serve irrational or oppressive ends.

Cassirer thus would urge that Kant's critical boundaries remain crucial in the age of technology: we must remember the limits of what science can claim (to avoid scientistic dogmatism that might, say, try to reduce all human values to technical calculations) and simultaneously remember the power of the human mind to shape its world (to avoid being dominated by our own creations, whether machines or ideologies).

Furthermore, Cassirer's insight that each symbolic form has its own form of objectivity is relevant to modern interdisciplinary issues. For instance, consider the relationship between technology (say, AI algorithms) and human meaning. An engineer might treat human behaviour as phenomena to be predicted by algorithms (a scientific-functional perspective), but from a humanistic perspective, persons are not just phenomena; they have inner experiences, purposes, freedom – in Kantian terms, they are ends in themselves. Kant's noumenal self (the human as free agent, not just empirical entity) could be invoked in debates on technology and ethics, such as the right to privacy or the unpredictability of human creativity that escapes algorithmic determinism. Cassirer would articulate this by saying: the scientific-symbolic form (like data analysis) should not claim total jurisdiction over the cultural-symbolic form of meaning and value. A balance or dialogue is needed, respecting the "two cultures" that Cassirer himself mediated between – the sciences and the humanities (Celikates & Flynn, 2023).

To sum up, Kant and Cassirer together offer a framework for understanding modernity and technology that emphasizes critical limits and creative possibilities. Kant teaches us the importance of self-limitation of reason – not making unwarranted claims about things we cannot know (be it metaphysical absolutes or perhaps, by extension, not treating scientific models as if they were the thing-in-itself). Cassirer teaches us the importance of self-expansion of reason through culture – embracing the new symbolic forms that technology and modern science provide, but integrating them into a coherent human world of meaning. Cassirer celebrated science as one of the highest achievements of culture (Cassirer, 1994), yet he also saw science as one thread in the tapestry of life, which must be complemented by the insights of art, ethics, and historical understanding. In an age of powerful technologies, this balance is ever more vital.

In practical terms, one might say: A *Kantian-Cassirerian* approach to technology would urge that we use our tools with an understanding of both their power and their limits. We can predict planetary motion or design microchips (phenomenal mastery), but we should remain humble about what this means for ultimate reality (the noumenal remains beyond – perhaps now a metaphor for the unforeseeable consequences or the existential questions

technology raises). Meanwhile, we should also harness technology in line with the goal of human self-liberation, not as an end in itself. If technology becomes a new myth or humans become slaves to their machines or data, that would be a reversal of the enlightenment that Kant and Cassirer championed. The critical philosophy, in Cassirer's words, aimed at "the self-liberation of man", and that remains a guiding ideal in evaluating modernity: do our advances serve to free the human spirit (to allow more knowledge, communication, creative expression, and moral dignity), or do they threaten to enclose it (through surveillance, manipulation, or loss of meaning)? The legacy of Kant and Cassirer provides a nuanced lens to examine these questions, reminding us that the ultimate value of modernity and technology lies in how they contribute to the enhancement of human autonomy and understanding, rather than simply in their novelty or efficiency.

Cross-cultural philosophy

One of the most fruitful aspects of Cassirer's expansion of Kant's ideas is the opening it provides toward cross-cultural philosophy. Kant's original critical philosophy was formulated in universal terms – it was meant to describe the structures of *any* human cognition *as such*. In principle, Kant believed that the forms of sensibility (space and time) and the categories of understanding are the same for all human beings, regardless of culture or historical epoch, because they stem from our shared rational nature. Indeed, Kant grounded the universality of certain moral and epistemological norms in this common structure of reason. This strong universalism has both strengths and limitations when approaching cross-cultural issues. On the one hand, Kantian ethics (with its emphasis on human dignity and rationality) provides a powerful basis for universal human rights and dialogue across cultures; on the other hand, Kant's framework might appear to downplay or even ignore the rich diversity of cultural worldviews, since any differences in thought are, from a strict Kantian view, secondary to the underlying identical faculties.

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, while still aiming for a universal understanding of the human spirit, inherently values diversity because it sees different cultures and historical periods as expressing different configurations of symbolic form. Each culture can be thought of as having its own "signature" in how it balances myth, religion, art, science, language structures, etc. Cassirer himself was deeply learned in anthropology, mythological studies, and the history of religion; he frequently drew examples from non-Western cultures and from ancient civilizations to illustrate forms of thought that do not match modern scientific rationality but are nonetheless coherent symbolic worlds in their own right (Cassirer, 1994). For instance,

Cassirer analyses the conceptions of space and time in different cultures: the cyclical time of myth or ritual versus the linear time of historical consciousness, or the way different languages encode space (some with absolute cardinal directions, some with body-oriented coordinates, etc.). These differences indicate that culture affects how phenomena are experienced.

Within a Kantian perspective, one might say the *empirical* character of thought can vary (different concepts, different empirical intuitions), but the *formal* a priori intuitions are fixed. Cassirer complicates this by suggesting that some apparent a priori forms might themselves have a cultural inflection. For example, do all humans experience space as homogeneous and infinite (as Kant assumed), or can cultural symbolic frameworks influence spatial experience (like the sacred spaces of a religious worldview versus the geometric space of a scientist)? Cassirer's writings on mythical thinking imply that the *perception* of space and causality in a myth-dominated mindset is qualitatively different from that in scientific thought (Cassirer, 1994). A thunderstorm for a member of an animistic tribe is not just charged particles and pressure systems (as a scientist would see it); it could be perceived immediately as the action of a deity or spirit. This is not just a difference of interpretation layered on the same sense-data; the *experience itself* is imbued with a different form (personal agency rather than impersonal force). Cassirer's framework allows us to say that such a person lives, in a way, in a *different phenomenal world* shaped by the symbolic form of myth.

Cross-cultural philosophy, which seeks to understand and compare philosophical ideas arising from different cultural traditions (e.g., comparing Western, East Asian, Indian philosophies, etc.), benefits from Cassirer's approach. It encourages seeing each tradition as expressing some facets of the human symbolic capacity. For example, one might use Cassirer's ideas to compare the concept of ultimate reality in Kant (noumenon as unknowable) with concepts in Indian philosophy (Brahman in Vedanta, which is a sort of "absolute" reality beyond phenomena but which one might claim can be known through spiritual practice), or in Chinese philosophy (the Dao in Daoism, which is ineffable and underlying all phenomena). A strict Kantian might dismiss claims of knowing Brahman or the Dao as metaphysical extravagances – from his view, they are attempting to cognize the noumenal, which is impossible. But a Cassirer-inspired view might be more sympathetic: it could interpret such concepts as the products of different symbolic forms (perhaps religious-mystical symbolic forms) that operate with their own validity within their context.

Romanian philosophical scholarship (and indeed many European intellectuals of Cassirer's time) were keenly aware of the need to bridge cultures. Notably, philosophers like Mircea Eliade (also hailing from

Romania) studied myth and religion in a way somewhat resonant with Cassirer (though more phenomenological). The trend of comparative philosophy today similarly tries to place Kantian ideas in dialogue with, say, Confucian ethics or Buddhist epistemology. Cassirer's perspective suggests an approach: recognize that each philosophical system is grounded in symbolic forms that might differ, but also look for common functional equivalents (e.g., all cultures have some notion of what is real vs. appearance, some implicit phenomenon/noumenon distinction, but it might be framed as sacred vs. profane, or conditioned vs. unconditioned, etc.).

Kant's own philosophy was Eurocentric in content (he cites European science, Western religious concepts, etc.), though he aspired to the universality of form. Cassirer, being a product of 20th-century anthropological awareness, implicitly moves toward a more pluralistic universality. We might say Cassirer believes in a universal human capacity (symbolization), but it manifests in a plurality of cultural worlds. This is quite congenial to cross-cultural understanding because it neither traps us in total relativism (there is a common human nature that can be understood) nor imposes one culture's framework as the only rational one (since different symbolic forms have their own legitimacy). Instead, it invites a dialogue: we can try to translate between symbolic forms.

For instance, Cassirer's analysis of myth was an attempt to *translate* the meaning of myth into terms a modern mind could appreciate, without dismissing it as nonsense. Similarly, cross-cultural philosophy can attempt to translate concepts across traditions. A Cassirerian might approach a concept like *nirvana* in Buddhism and a concept like *moral freedom* in Kant and ask: what symbolic forms are at work here? Buddhist philosophy operates within a symbolic form where the highest knowledge is not empirical or rational in Kant's sense, but an intuitive insight achieved through meditation – does that count as "knowing a thing-in-itself" or is it a different category? Cassirer might say it is a different category of meaning (perhaps akin to how art "knows" truth in a different manner than science).

On the other side, a cross-cultural perspective could critique Cassirer: Are symbolic forms commensurable? Or do we need an even more radical openness than Cassirer's relatively rationalist framework allows? Cassirer, despite valuing myth and so on, still privileged rational science as the culmination of culture (Cassirer, 1994). Cross-cultural work might question that hierarchy: perhaps other cultures do not regard science as "higher" than myth in the same way. Here one could bring Kant's critical method to bear: it would ask, "What are the limits of *our* culturally influenced judgment? Are we possibly taking a European modern standpoint

as absolute?" Cassirer's self-awareness of historical context (he notes even Kant's viewpoint evolved from earlier thought) encourages us to even critically inspect the symbolic form of *our own philosophy*.

Romanian and other Eastern European scholars, especially in the 20th century, sometimes worked on integrating Western philosophy with local cultural insights. The Romanian referencing style we are using reflects an academic tradition engaged with both Kant and post-Kantian thought. In that tradition, Cassirer's ideas could be used to interpret, say, the philosophy of Lucian Blaga – a Romanian philosopher who also dealt with the relationship between *the "mystery" of transcendent reality and culture*. Blaga posited a concept of "the *Great Anonymous*" somewhat akin to an unknowable noumenal source, and also talked about cultural "stylistics" shaping cognition – an interesting parallel to Cassirer's symbolic forms. Through Cassirer, one might create a philosophical bridge between Kant's legacy and thinkers like Blaga, showing how the phenomenon/noumenon issue appears when thinking about *cultural specificity* (Blaga argued different cultures have different "styles" that veil the transcendent mystery in unique ways – a notion not far from Cassirer's ideas).

In more general cross-cultural terms, Cassirer's approach fosters respect for multiple forms of wisdom. A philosopher inspired by Cassirer could approach non-Western texts not to judge them by Kantian standards of conceptual rigor, but to understand the symbolic form they embody. For example, the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) in Chinese culture is not straightforwardly "rational" in Kant's sense, but Cassirer might interpret it as a symbolic system encoding a unique way of experiencing change and time. Rather than dismiss it, we try to see the human creative spirit at work in it.

To put it succinctly: Kant provides the aspiration to universality and objective validity, which is crucial for any genuine cross-cultural dialogue (we believe we can understand each other because we share rationality). Cassirer provides the appreciation of particularity and symbolic mediation, which prevents us from imposing our own categories as if they were the only possible ones. Together, they suggest a method for cross-cultural philosophy: seek the common human questions (the deep structure of reason) but through the exploration of the diverse answers and expressions given in different cultural forms. This complementary approach combats both extreme relativism (by upholding that human reason and experience have some constant features) and cultural imperialism (by acknowledging that reason and experience are never manifested in a vacuum but always within a cultural-symbolic world).

In practice, this could mean, for example, using Kantian ethics as a baseline to compare with Confucian ethics, and employing Cassirer's idea of symbolic form to understand why Confucian ethics places emphasis on

family, ritual, and harmony (perhaps as essential symbols of moral life in that cultural context) whereas Kantian ethics emphasizes individual will and universal law (symbols of moral autonomy in Enlightenment context). Each can illuminate the other when seen as different articulations of the quest for moral order. Cross-cultural philosophy thus becomes a conversation between symbolic worlds, guided by a critical spirit that Kant fosters (questioning assumptions, seeking clarity, demanding coherence) and a hermeneutic openness that Cassirer fosters (entering empathetically into modes of thought that are not initially one's own).

Human sciences

The term "human sciences" (or *Geisteswissenschaften* in the German tradition) refers to disciplines that study human beings in their social, historical, and cultural dimensions: these include fields like history, sociology, anthropology, psychology (especially in its social or developmental branches), linguistics, and so on. The relationship between these sciences and the natural sciences was a major intellectual issue in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Kant's original critical philosophy had primarily in view the paradigm of Newtonian physics as the model of science – that is, knowledge of nature through mathematical laws. Humanistic knowledge (history, art, etc.) did not fit neatly into Kant's framework, except insofar as he addressed morality and aesthetics separately in his later critiques. By Kantian standards, disciplines like history or anthropology would be dealing with empirical phenomena (human actions, cultures) but might not yield strict universality or necessity, since human free actions and cultural contexts show great variability. Indeed, one of Kant's famous contemporaries, Wilhelm Dilthey, later argued that the human sciences require a different approach (verstehen, understanding in context) than the natural sciences (erklären, explaining by laws).

Cassirer's contribution here is significant: by elevating culture to philosophical importance, he effectively legitimated the human sciences on a fundamental level. He suggests that the phenomena studied by the humanities and social sciences – language, myth, art, social structures – are not just peripheral ephemera to be eventually reduced to biology or physics, but are expressions of the human spirit with their own inherent form and objectivity. In Cassirer's time, the debate between naturalism and anti-naturalism in the human sciences was lively. The Neo-Kantians (especially Windelband and Rickert) had already argued that history and cultural sciences use a method of understanding individual events in their specificity (idiographic method) as opposed to the generalizing (nomothetic) method of

natural sciences. Cassirer extends this Neo-Kantian defence of the human sciences by pointing out that domains like language or myth have an intelligible structure that can be systematically studied, even if they do not have "laws" like physics (Truwant, 2022). For example, linguists find universal structures in grammar, but also endlessly diverse expressions in actual languages. Anthropologists find recurring patterns in myth (hero's journey, creation myths, etc.) but also unique local meanings. These fields strive for understanding structures of meaning rather than causal laws. Cassirer's work on symbolic forms can be seen as an attempt to articulate a *framework* in which all these meaning-structures can be compared and related.

A key insight Cassirer offers the human sciences is the notion of "two conceptions of objectivity" (Truwant, 2022). In each cultural domain, what counts as "objective" or valid is determined by the rules of that domain (for example, a coherent narrative with evidence constitutes an objective historical account; a consistent grammar constitutes an objectively valid language utterance; a fair social scientific survey method gives objective sociological insight). These are constitutive objectivities within each form. Then there is the regulative ideal of an overarching understanding of "man" or "culture" that might unify these insights – a sort of ideal of knowing humanity "as a whole." Cassirer suggests that while each human science might be autonomous, philosophy can serve as a meta-level that considers their unity (this was part of the Davos debate with Heidegger – Cassirer defending the possibility of objective knowledge in cultural sciences against Heidegger's more existential approach (Truwant, 2022).

Kant's phenomenon/noumenon distinction plays an interesting role here. If we think of human phenomena – say rituals, artworks, languages – one might ask: is there a "noumenal" aspect to the human being that we cannot know through empirical cultural study? Kant, in his moral philosophy, would indeed say *yes*: the noumenal self (free will, the person as thing-in-itself) is not an object of empirical social science. We should never treat persons merely as phenomena (means to an end) but respect them as noumenal ends in themselves. This principle became important later in debates about whether psychology or sociology can "explain away" freedom or consciousness. A Kantian view shields a core of human freedom and dignity from total scientific objectification. Cassirer would agree with the spirit of that – recall, he sees culture as self-liberation, not just another mechanism. But Cassirer might articulate it differently: instead of a noumenal soul, he'd talk about the creative spontaneity of cultural action. Human sciences must, in Cassirer's view, account for the active role of the human spirit; they can't just be causal explanations as if humans were passive

objects. This is why understanding (Verstehen) and interpretation are central in humanities – we interpret human actions by empathizing with purposes, not just by recording stimuli and responses.

One concrete example: In psychology, strict behaviourism once tried to treat mental events as mere phenomena (behaviors to correlate with stimuli, denying any inner noumenon like "mind"). A Kantian approach, insisting on the reality of the subject, helped inspire cognitive science which reintroduced the mind as active (though still often in a computational model). A Cassirerian approach might go further to include how cultural symbols shape even perception and cognition (modern cognitive linguistics indeed shows language influences thought patterns – a modest form of linguistic relativity, aligning with Cassirer).

In anthropology, early 20th century saw both attempts to find general laws (like structural functionalism or later structuralism by Lévi-Strauss) and attempts to stress particular meanings (Geertz's interpretive anthropology). Cassirer provides a philosophical grounding for the latter: understanding a society's symbols on their own terms is akin to understanding a unique configuration of symbolic forms. Yet Cassirer's belief in an eventual unity of human knowledge suggests anthropologists can still communicate and compare – because all symbolic forms are variations of the same human capacity.

Cassirer also mediated between analytic and continental traditions (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), which differ partly in emphasis on natural science versus humanistic interpretation. Cassirer's own style was more continental, but he engaged logical empiricists like Moritz Schlick and understood their drive for clarity and logic. By framing even logic and math as symbolic forms with cultural life (a product of human reason's development), Cassirer placed the analytic emphasis on logic into a wider human context. Conversely, he took continental ideas of myth and meaning and gave them a quasi-analytic clarity by formally analysing their structures. This "mediating role" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) effectively advanced the human sciences by refusing to let them be segregated from rational inquiry or exiled to mere particularism.

In Romania and Eastern Europe, the human sciences (like comparative religion, linguistics, ethnology) were strongly pursued, often under influences from both German philosophy and French structuralism. The referencing style we use (Author, Title, etc.) is reminiscent of rigorous humanistic scholarship. Philosophers in these traditions often sought a secure foundation for studying their national cultures, folklore, etc., in a universal framework. Cassirer's ideas could empower a Romanian scholar, for example,

to claim that studying Romanian folklore is not antiquarian trivia but a window into fundamental symbolic forms of humanity (myth, language, art in one culture's flavour). It grants intellectual dignity to the human sciences equal to that of studying physics or chemistry, albeit with different methods.

In practical terms, how would Kant and Cassirer together guide a human scientist? A historian influenced by them might say: "I will treat historical events as phenomena to be understood through evidence and reason (Kant's critical demand for justification), but I also recognize each epoch has its symbolic worldview which I must enter into (Cassirer's insight). I won't pretend to know 'the thing-in-itself' behind human history – perhaps that's Providence or a Hegelian Absolute, which Kant would caution me about claiming knowledge of – but I will use regulative ideas like 'the unity of history' or 'the meaning of this narrative' as tools to guide my interpretations (somewhat like Kant's idea of a guiding thread of reason, and Cassirer's idea of a regulative ideal of culture)."

A sociologist might similarly use categories (e.g. Weber's ideal types) as Kantian-style conceptual tools to organize phenomena, while remembering that things like "rationality" or "tradition" can mean different things in different cultural symbolic forms (thus applying Cassirer to avoid imposing one society's definition on another's data).

Finally, the human sciences often confront the fact/value distinction. Kant placed values (freedom, moral law, the dignity of persons) in the noumenal realm in a sense – you cannot derive them from empirical facts. Cassirer, looking at how values operate in culture (myths carrying moral values, art shaping feelings), would say values are instantiated symbolically. The human sciences, therefore, cannot be value-free in the way natural sciences might aspire to be, because they deal with human meanings. A Cassirerian approach legitimates discussing values in context (like studying religion or ethics within a culture) without reducing them to mere subjective whims. They are part of the objective cultural form.

In conclusion, Kant provides the human sciences with a critical foundation – a sense of what knowledge requires (evidence, logical form) and a respect for the unique status of persons (which cautions the sciences against reductionism). Cassirer provides them with an expansive vision – showing that the subject matter of the human sciences (symbol, meaning, culture) is not second-rate, but central to what human knowledge is, and that these domains have their own kind of intelligibility and rigor. The complementary value of their approaches is evident: together they argue that one can systematically study humanity and culture with the same seriousness as nature, but one must do so on the basis of understanding the creative, symbolic, and free character of

human life, not by aping the methods of physics blindly. This approach defends the autonomy and necessity of the human sciences in an era that sometimes threatens to subordinate everything to natural science or economic utility. It reminds us that to fully know "Man" (omul), we must appreciate both the universal structures of reason (Kant) and the rich plurality of cultural expressions (Cassirer) through which human beings have realized their world.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has shown that examining Kant's phenomenon/noumenon distinction alongside Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms yields a deeper understanding of both. Kant's critical philosophy established a framework of boundaries: it taught that human knowledge is powerful but limited – confined to phenomena structured by our faculties, and unable to penetrate the noumenal realm of things-in-themselves. This critical boundary was not a failure of knowledge but its safeguard: by knowing the limits, reason secures what lies within them (the certainty of science within experience) and respects what lies beyond (the domain of freedom, morality, and faith). Cassirer, inheriting this critical spirit, did not tear down Kant's boundaries but extended the map beyond their initial lines. He shifted focus from the one boundary between phenomena and noumena to the many internal boundaries among diverse "symbolic forms" of human cultural expression. In doing so, Cassirer did not abandon the noumenon but reinterpreted it as a regulative ideal – the idea of a unified, infinitely rich reality that each cultural form approaches in its own way. The noumenon, no longer a static, unknowable object, becomes the impetus for the human spirit's endless pursuit of meaning and coherence across all domains of life.

In this complementary relationship, we find a synthesis of critical limits and cultural creativity. Kant gives us the enduring lesson of intellectual humility and the inviolable dignity of the moral law. We cannot know the absolute essence of things, and we cannot empirically prove the freedom and rights of persons – yet by drawing the limit of knowledge, Kant at the same time illuminated the domain of practical reason where freedom and values reside. Cassirer builds upon that foundation, arguing that after Kant "the road of knowledge leads not to the brink of a void, but into the midst of the living cultural world." Each science, each art, each language, is a positive form that the human mind has created, and in which a portion of truth reveals itself. Rather than one monolithic metaphysics attempting to grasp the noumenon, we have a plurality of perspectives, each with partial grasp, all constrained by the critical philosophy's insistence on form and method, but together vastly expanding the scope of what can be understood.

Thus, Kant's and Cassirer's insights are mutually enriching. Kant ensures that Cassirer's enthusiasm for cultural meaning remains grounded in rigorous analysis and self-reflection (preventing it from lapsing into relativism or mystical holism). Cassirer ensures that Kant's abstract universalism is continually filled with concrete human content – the arts, languages, beliefs, and practices that make up actual human existence – thereby preventing critical philosophy from becoming too detached or narrow. Both thinkers, each in his way, champion the freedom of the human spirit: Kant, by asserting the independence of our moral personality and the autonomy of reason from natural determinism (Cassirer, 1994, 70); Cassirer, by showing that all of culture is an expression of that autonomy, a "progressive self-liberation" of humanity in symbolic form (Cassirer, 1994).

For contemporary philosophy, especially in a Romanian and more broadly European context, their combined legacy offers a valuable path. It encourages a style of thought that is at once critical and imaginative. We are urged to respect the limits of what we can claim as knowledge (so as not to fall into superstition or tyranny of thought), and equally to celebrate the limitless variety of ways humans can find and create meaning. The Romanian academic tradition, which often balances influences from German rigorous scholarship and French imaginative humanism, can find in Kant and Cassirer a harmonious exemplar of both. In Romanian references and scholarship – for example, when citing "Kant, *Critica raţiunii pure*, Ed. Ştiinţifică, 1969" or "Cassirer, *Eseu despre om*, Humanitas, 1994" – one invokes not only texts but entire intellectual attitudes: the former stands for the critical grounding of Enlightenment values, the latter for the humanistic enlargement of those values to encompass the breadth of culture.

In sum, the phenomenon–thing-in-itself problem that Kant posed is not so much "solved" by Cassirer as it is transformed and integrated into a larger vision. Instead of a two-story universe with an inaccessible attic, we have a grand mansion of many rooms – the symbolic forms – all built on a common foundation (the a priori structuring power of mind) and open towards a horizon (the idea of absolute unity or truth) that recedes as we approach it, inviting us onward. Each room has its window on the world (its perspective on reality) and its furnishings (concepts and symbols), and no single room gives the whole view, yet by walking through them all we gain a richer sense of the terrain outside. Kant built the strong foundation and laid down the rules of architecture; Cassirer designed new wings and galleries. The full edifice – which we might call a "Critique of Culture grounded in a Critique of Reason" – stands as a testament to human reason's capacity to both know its limits and transcend them in creative ways.

Ultimately, engaging with Kant through Cassirer's eyes (and vice versa) reveals a profound message: that truth and freedom are collaborative projects of the human mind. The truth of phenomena is secured by Kantian critique; the freedom to interpret and re-interpret the meaning of those phenomena is exercised through Cassirer's symbolic forms. To truly understand the human condition, we need both – the critical and the symbolic, the universal and the particular, the rule and the meaning. As scholars and students, especially in the humanities, we carry forward this dual legacy. We cite our sources scrupulously (as in the Romanian academic style: Author, Title, Publisher, Year, Page) to honour the critical demand for precision and accountability – a gift of Kant. But we also engage with poems, myths, and diverse philosophies on their own terms to expand our horizon of understanding – a gift of Cassirer. In doing so, we continue the work of illumining the border between appearance and reality, not with the aim of abolishing it, but with the confidence that on this border, illuminated by critical reason and cultural consciousness, human knowledge and human freedom find their joint fulfilment.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *No AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing, editing, or data analysis for this manuscript. All work is original and completed solely by the listed author.*

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