



The Clarity of Water

Review of Ernst Cassirer
The Philosophy of the Enlightenment

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Review of Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951: Princeton University Press), trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, *English Historical Review* 68 no. 269 (October 1953), 617–19



THE LATE Professor Ernst Cassirer was a man of prodigious learning and uncommon gifts as a clear and patient expositor. He possessed, in addition, unrivalled knowledge of the methods and history of the natural sciences and of mathematics. He believed

profoundly in the value of the genetic method; and specialised in analysing and describing not merely scientific and philosophical theories and systems, but also what are nowadays called intellectual atmospheres, climates of opinion, the impalpable and imponderable elements of intellectual movements, the cement and plaster, as well as bricks and timber, of notable structures of thought.

With this special sensibility to concealed connections and affinities, for transitions and cross-currents, went a rooted distaste for sharp delineation and the drawing of firm distinctions between ideas or thinkers. Cassirer's tendency was to conciliate and appease, to see the past in the future and the future in the past, to represent the philosophy of the Renaissance (on which he wrote his masterpiece) in such a fashion that later developments – those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even of the twentieth, were all too visible, almost fully formed, in these early beginnings. He liked to think of Leibniz as a kind of early Kant and of Kant (whom he all but worshipped) as almost a modern physicist; of Descartes or Lessing or Hegel as all, in their various ways, seeking to express one large single truth. All thinkers were to him loyal fellow-workers, engaged in a vast, common enterprise; the differences between them in Cassirer's pages became relatively blurred; the harmony between them covered a multitude of ephemeral disagreements, progressively less significant as the horizon widened.

No doubt this method has its advantages, particularly in the case of inexact subjects like the history of literature or the arts; it avoids the sins of exaggerated contrasts, arid scholasticism and pedantic classification; on the other hand, like all efforts at conciliation, it can only be achieved at some sacrifice of the critical faculty. In Cassirer's even and gentle evening light all shapes are slightly hazy and melt into each other too easily; there are few frontiers and no collisions; his clarity is that of a careful impressionist, not of a photographer or of a critical analyst, an attitude of mind which suits the eighteenth century less well, perhaps, than any other age.

In this book Cassirer deals with the growth of natural science, psychology, religion, historiography, political and legal philosophy

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and aesthetics in the eighteenth century. He declares in his introduction that his method is to be not extensive but 'intensive'. He proposes to elucidate the 'inner formative forces', to give 'a phenomenology of the philosophic spirit'. And in order to do this he proposes to show how 'the Enlightenment wants philosophy to move freely and in this immanent activity to discover the fundamental form of reality'. The last sentence, with its characteristic vagueness, is symptomatic of his whole approach. Cassirer wishes to convey a general atmosphere and outlook and does so, in language which is clear, elegant, readable, above all agreeable, and intellectually not at all demanding; but the clarity is not that of dry light, but of water. Cassirer's knowledge is vast and accurate, the presentation is mild, peaceful and lulling. It is typical of him that his favourite French philosophe is d'Alembert. This eminent mathematician, scientist and editor of the Encyclopedia was politically timid; anxious not to offend either Church or state, he tended to confine his talents as a writer to relatively safer regions, and after the scandal caused by Helvétius's book, and its author's tribulations, and the attacks on Diderot, he became more than ever anxious not to say anything to offend.

To Cassirer d'Alembert's cautious commonplaces are the very heart of admirable good sense, wise moderation, even depth, as against the 'extremism' of Holbach, the 'shallowness' of Helvétius, the absurdities of La Mettrie. One is not surprised to find, therefore, that in spite of every effort, the pages devoted to, for example, Diderot's writings are a singular failure; Cassirer shows his usual skill and knowledge in tracing influences upon him, quoting appositely, pointing to fine shades of difference and similarity between him and other Encyclopedists, etc.; but no one who reads this volume could be expected to know that Diderot was a man of genius whose *obiter dicta* and casual pieces on subjects as disparate as biology, economics, psychology, literature and art criticism, sociology etc. possess a combination of wit, originality, imagination, sharpness, depth and prophetic quality to be found in no other thinker.

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Cassirer sets himself the task of explaining a ‘few great fundamental ideas expressed with strict consistency and in exact arrangement’. Also he wishes to help us to ‘revise the verdict of the Romantic movement’, which found the Enlightenment ‘shallow’. Vain hope: there is much instruction but few ideas; we learn a great deal about the views or the theories of relatively neglected writers like the Dutchmen s’Gravesende and Muschenbroeck, or Batteux, or Frederick the Great, and the like. In dealing with these secondary figures Cassirer is at his most admirable. He knows their writings through and through. He is anxious to do them justice. He perceives what is interesting, his quotations from the second- and third-rate are relevant and illuminating, he contrives to cast much steady and unfamiliar light on comparatively dark corners. But the central issues are not emphasised; we are introduced to ideas of Baumgarten and we are told that this or that disciple thought him incomparable and immortal, but not why; Lessing appears but we are not told why he is an important or original thinker. We are told instead what Goethe said about him. We are told that Diderot or Rousseau ‘changed the form of thought’; but we are left wondering what precisely this form was and how it was changed. Rousseau, in particular, is accorded treatment so conventional that his unexampled influence remains as inexplicable as before. Cassirer’s vision of the thinkers with whom he deals is always indirect. His images loom at us through a thin but by no means wholly diaphanous film of the commentaries and attitudes of later thinkers, as if nobody ever said or did anything important in itself, but only as part of a general development, and he duly subordinates (and obscures) each constituent element for the benefit of the never too clearly perceptible whole.

The book as a whole remains lucid, civilised and agreeable; if one seeks no precise information (except about the role played by the natural sciences, where Cassirer does suddenly come to life), but is content to float gently upon a smooth, flowing stream of urbane prose, carried slowly past the smiling fields and meadows of conventional eighteenth-century history, bathed in a soft,

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unvarying light, no better vehicle could be found. But anyone desiring to learn about the sharp conflicts and crises of which the age was full – the mysticism and fanaticism underneath the surface, the subversive forces, rational, sceptical, romantic–religious, of which contemporary observers were only too uneasily aware, and which were so soon destined to destroy the ‘heavenly city’ for ever – he must turn elsewhere, for there is no trace in this book of the mounting tide of pessimism, nor of its causes, or the reasons for it.

For Professor Cassirer the history of human thought, at any rate since the Renaissance, is almost cloudlessly happy; in his pages there is mention of neither indignation nor uneasiness, nor cynicism. Voltaire and Rousseau, Lessing and Maupertuis, d’Alembert and Montesquieu, even Hume, but above all Kant, appear as a band of happy fellow-workers, some ‘deeper’ than others, but with few really profound differences of principle, still less conflicts, between them – all eagerly engaged on building the great cathedral of human culture and knowledge. And for this reason the best-written and most informative section of the book is that which deals with the smoothest and most artificial of the achievements of the eighteenth century, its aesthetic theory.

Well composed, well translated and serenely innocent, this work by one of the most respected of historians of ideas brings home the need for a businesslike – that is, more ice-cutting – account of this crucial period in Western thought.

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Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 7 March 2022