

THE THING IN ITSELF AND THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT: ON CASSIRER'S INTERPRETATION OF CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract. This paper analyses Cassirer's characterization of critical philosophy as the philosophy of freedom. This amounts to a claim not only regarding morality but concerning the theory of knowledge in the first place. Even though Cassirer insists on the close relation that holds between his philosophy and Kantian idealism, Cassirer's viewpoint is not so easily compatible with Kant's doctrine. In this paper, I will show that Cassirer's stance is in fact based on a deep criticism of the Kantian distinction between sensibility, understanding and reason, which is revealed by Cassirer's account of the Kantian concept of the thing in itself.

Keywords: Cassirer; freedom; Kant; reason; sensibility; thing in itself; understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The most pregnant definition of Kantian philosophy provided by Cassirer may probably be the following: "Die kritische Philosophie ist die Philosophie der *Freiheit*"². This statement seems uncontroversial at first sight, since the crucial role played by the concept of freedom in critical philosophy is explicitly underlined by Kant himself. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that the concept of freedom is no less than the "cornerstone" for the whole building of the system of pure reason.³ As it is well known, according to Kant's doctrine of the practical use of reason, the law of practical reason proves the reality of freedom and the further analysis of the conditions of possibility of

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² ECW 3, 637.

³ KpV AA V, 3–4.

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the highest good establishes the objective reality of the ideas of God and the immortality of the soul. Thus, the objective reality of freedom, revealed by the moral law, is the basis upon which the objective reality of the other transcendental ideas finally rests.

However, Cassirer's claim goes far beyond an assertion regarding practical reason: it rather concerns theoretical knowledge in the first place⁴. In this sense, critical philosophy is the philosophy of reason's freedom *in cognition*. In the context of the theoretical use of reason, freedom means that the truth value of knowledge, just as the content of morality, follows from the autonomous law of self-consciousness and may not be ascribed to any external instance nor be grounded in any relation to the latter.⁵ This doctrine of the freedom of thought implies that the spontaneity of understanding cannot be simply opposed to the receptivity of the senses. The given is not to be conceived as an *element* of cognition, independent of any relation to spontaneity, but as a *moment* of knowledge, which stands in a reciprocal connection to thought. Accordingly, for Cassirer critical philosophy is the philosophy of freedom because its final goal is the reduction of the given to the pure functions of knowledge⁶.

Even though Cassirer insists on the close relation that holds between his position and Kantian philosophy, Cassirer's viewpoint on the freedom of thought is not so easily compatible with Kant's doctrine. In this paper I will show that Cassirer's stance is in fact based on a deep criticism of the Kantian distinction between sensibility, understanding and reason, which is revealed by Cassirer's account of the Kantian thing in itself⁷. Cassirer distinguishes three different moments in the development of this concept, that correspond to the three main parts of the critical investigation: the transcendental aesthetic, the transcendental analytic and the transcendental dialectic. The concept of the thing in itself acquires a meaning in the framework of the analysis of sensibility, a different one in the discussion of the understanding and finally a third one in the study of the principles of reason. In each case, a peculiar aspect of the freedom of thought is highlighted.

1. THE TRANSCENDENTAL AESTHETIC AND THE AFFECTING THING IN ITSELF

Cassirer claims that the concept of the thing in itself demands a critical "deduction" that justifies its necessary transcendental role⁸. The proper transcendental func-

⁴ ECW 3, 532.

⁵ ECW 3, 637.

⁶ ECW 3, 638. The emphasis that Cassirer puts into the concept of freedom has often been overlooked by the scholars. See B. Recki: "Zwischen Kantischem Kompatibilismus und Naturalismus. Ernst Cassirers Begriff der Freiheit", *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie* 2010, vol. 1, pp. 88 – 103; „Eine Philosophie der Freiheit – Ernst Cassirer in Hamburg“, in Rainer Nicolaysen (Hg.), *Das Hauptgebäude der Universität Hamburg als Gedächtnisort. Mit sieben Porträts in der NS-Zeit vertriebener Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler*, Hamburg, Hamburg University Press, 2011, pp. 57–80.

⁷ Cassirer's interpretation of this concept has received renewed attention lately. See S. Matherne, *Cassirer*, New York, Routledge, 2021.

⁸ "Der Gedanke des 'Dinges an sich' muß als ein notwendiger Gedanke eingesehen werden können, wenn anders er überhaupt im System der kritischen Philosophie geduldet werden soll." ECW 3, 620.

tion of this concept is to indicate the limits of experience and Kant demarcates these limits progressively in the doctrines of sensibility, understanding and reason. Accordingly, the first step of this demarcation process is taken by the transcendental aesthetic.

The transcendental aesthetic states the passivity of our sensibility⁹. This means that sensation (the matter of empirical intuition) is not spontaneously produced, but merely received by the subject. By means of sensibility, objects are *given* to us. Kant claims that an object can be given only if it affects the mind in a certain way. Thus, the receptivity of our sensibility leads us to the need of considering a non-sensible, unknown cause of empirical intuitions¹⁰. This cause is the affecting thing in itself. Cassirer argues that the concept of the affecting thing in itself is introduced *just* to indicate this receptive character of our sensibility. The reference to a non-sensible cause of the sensible does not aim at indicating an absolute difference between our representation and something beyond it, but rather a difference that we recognize within the very representation. For Cassirer, the concept of the thing in itself is not a means to *explain* the relation between sensation and its cause, but rather a way to *designate* that element of our representations that cognition simply has to accept, without being able to trace it back to its origin¹¹. By claiming that our sensations have a cause, we do not attempt to gain knowledge of an affecting thing in itself, but just indicate an internal quality of our representations: the fact that the matter of empirical intuition cannot be accounted for by merely considering the structure of the knowing subject.

The doctrine of the transcendental aesthetic not only introduces the concept of the thing in itself as an affecting object, but also as a *noumenon*, i.e., as a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as an intelligible object¹². Kant distinguishes between the noumenon in the *negative* and in the *positive* sense. A noumenon in the negative sense is a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition. On the contrary, a noumenon in the positive sense is a thing insofar as it is an object of a non-sensible intuition.

By means of the concept of noumenon in the negative sense, the claims of sensibility are limited, since a thing that cannot be intuited is nevertheless thought by the mere understanding. However, this completely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible

⁹ “Die Fähigkeit (Receptivität), Vorstellungen durch die Art, wie wir von Gegenständen afficiert werden, zu bekommen, heißt *Sinnlichkeit*. (...) Die Wirkung eines Gegenstandes auf die Vorstellungsfähigkeit, sofern wir von demselben afficiert werden, ist *Empfindung*.“ A19 = B33 / A20 = B34.

¹⁰ “Das sinnliche Anschauungsvermögen ist eigentlich nur eine Receptivität, auf gewisse Weise mit Vorstellungen afficiert zu werden, deren Verhältniß zu einander eine reine Anschauung des Raumes und der Zeit ist [...] und welche, so fern sie in diesem Verhältnisse (dem Raume und der Zeit) nach Gesetzen der Einheit der Erfahrung verknüpft und bestimmbar sind, *Gegenstände* heißen. Die nichtsinnliche Ursache dieser Vorstellungen ist uns gänzlich unbekannt, und diese können wir daher nicht als Object anschauen; denn dergleichen Gegenstand würde weder im Raume, noch der Zeit (als bloßen Bedingungen der sinnlichen Vorstellung) vorgestellt werden müssen, ohne welche Bedingungen wir uns gar keine Anschauung denken können. Indessen können wir die bloß intelligible Ursache der Erscheinungen überhaupt, das transscendentale Object nennen, bloß, damit wir etwas haben, was der Sinnlichkeit als einer Receptivität correspondirt.” A494 = B522.

¹¹ ECW 3, 622.

¹² “[ein Ding], welches gar nicht als Gegenstand der Sinne, sondern als ein Ding an sich selbst (lediglich durch einen reinen Verstand) gedacht werden soll”. A254 = B310.

being beyond the limits of sensibility should not be taken for the *determinate* concept of an object that we may know by the understanding solely, as a noumenon in the positive sense. The problematic extension of understanding beyond the realm of appearances cannot be transformed into an assertoric use because our only intuition is sensible. The mere thought of an object remains an empty form until it is applied to the data of the senses. The doctrine of the sensibility, Kant claims, is at the same time the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense¹³.

The transcendental aesthetic methodologically isolates the sensibility and therefore cannot account for the objectivity of our representations, since the objective character of them depends on the functions of the understanding. Accordingly, Cassirer underlines that the definitive critical formulation of the problem of objectivity is not achieved in the transcendental aesthetic yet. But if the concept of “object of experience” is still not established with precision, the concept of its absolute counterpart cannot be determined in a fully satisfactory way either. Whereas in the transcendental aesthetic this counterpart is the *affecting* thing in itself, the transcendental logic establishes the critical notion of objectivity by means of the consideration of the task fulfilled by the synthesis of understanding. This leads us to further meanings of the concept of the thing in itself, which account for different aspects of the limits of knowledge, now assessed from the viewpoint of the concept of synthesis. Different aspects of the synthesis will correspond to the new meanings of the thing in itself, which will be introduced in the transcendental analytic and in the transcendental dialectic.

2. THE TRANSCENDENTAL ANALYTIC AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT

Sensibility on its own does not provide us with objects, but only with representations of merely subjective validity. Kant states that “appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded in themselves, in the same way, as objects (outside the power of representation)”¹⁴. Therefore, the problem of the objective reference of these representations arises¹⁵.

Since we cannot go beyond the limits of our knowledge to reach something that we may set over against this knowledge as corresponding to it, the object of the sensible representation will be thought only as “something in general = X”¹⁶. Objective cognition has the peculiar character that the manifold that it contains is not arbitrarily juxtaposed, but is unified in a necessary way, according to a rule. A necessary connec-

¹³ B 307.

¹⁴ “Wir haben oben gesagt, daß Erscheinungen selbst nichts als sinnliche Vorstellungen sind, die an sich in eben derselben Art nicht als Gegenstände (außer der Vorstellungskraft) müssen angesehen werden.” A104. All translations are taken from Kant (1998).

¹⁵ Kant asks: “Was versteht man denn, wenn man von einem der Erkenntniß correspondierenden, mithin auch davon unterschiedenen Gegenstände redet?” A 104.

¹⁶ A 104.

tion into a unity makes the difference between objective knowledge and a collection of merely subjective representations. This connection is not given by sensibility but is rather a product of the synthetic activity of understanding. The unity of the manifold in objective knowledge, Kant argues, is nothing but the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the sensible manifold. Thus, Kant concludes that “we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition.”¹⁷ The specific contribution of understanding to cognition is to carry out the reference of sensible representations to objects, which sensibility cannot achieve. This reference is not given in our receptivity, but it is produced by the spontaneity of the I, that synthesizes the sensible manifold into a unity.

At this point, where the critical concept of object is finally introduced, a new meaning of the concept of thing in itself comes into play. This concept arises if we hypostatize the synthetic connection produced by the understanding and conceive the representation of “something in general = X” as a particular factual content, which should be cognized as such.¹⁸ Although this “non-empirical, transcendental object = X”¹⁹ cannot be intuited, this is not because the object is something unknown and subsisting by itself, that remains hidden behind our representations. Rather, the “X” just means the logical form of unity that the understanding brings about on the intuitive manifold given by sensibility and does not have any separate and concrete existence. In Cassirer’s terms, if we take the concept of a *relation* (the connection produced by the intellectual synthesis) for the concept of an absolute *thing*, we will erroneously take the concept of something in general = X for the concept of a being in itself, which lays beyond the limits of sensibility.

According to Kant, synthesis is the action of putting different representations together and comprehending this *manifold* in *one cognition*²⁰. The transcendental object, which is nothing but the correlative term of the unity of apperception for the synthetic unity of the sensible manifold, is taken for a thing in itself when the *unity* contained in the concept of the synthesis is hypostatized and isolated from the *manifold* to which it is related. Therefore, Cassirer underlines, from the perspective of the synthesis of cognition, the representation of an object as a thing in general, without any sensible determination, is not merely insufficient but even *contradictory*, as Kant himself claims²¹.

Just as we are led to the representation of a being beyond cognition (the affecting thing in itself) when the sensible manifold is conceived as isolated from the intellectual unity in the transcendental aesthetic, in the transcendental analytic we are led to the concept of an incognizable object (the transcendental object as a thing in itself) when the representation of the intellectual unity is isolated from that of the sensible manifold. In both cases, Cassirer argues, the concept of thing in itself results from the dissolution of the fundamental correlation contained in the concept of synthesis.

¹⁷ “wir erkennen den Gegenstand, wenn wir in dem Mannigfaltigen der Anschauung synthetische Einheit bewirkt haben”. A 105.

¹⁸ ECW 3, 627.

¹⁹ A109.

²⁰ A77 = B103.

²¹ A279 = B335.

3. THE TRANSCENDENTAL DIALECTIC AND THE OBJECT IN THE IDEA

Once we have reached the critical standpoint regarding objectivity, according to which the empirical manifold provided by sensibility acquires objective validity only by means of the synthesis of understanding, a further aspect of the problem of knowledge arises. Cassirer stresses that experience is a steadily progressing process of determination. The object of experience is not something intrinsically determined that would be present and submitted to this process from the beginning²². Therefore, the thorough integrity of the objective synthesis of understanding has now to be considered as a new aspect of experience and its limits. For Kant, reason is the faculty in charge of finding the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding²³. The transcendental dialectic will accordingly introduce a further meaning of the concept of the thing in itself to tackle this problem. The absolute totality of the synthesis of understanding lies beyond the limits of experience, but its concept will nevertheless turn out to be necessary for empirical knowledge. More precisely, Cassirer stresses that the concept of the absolute regains a thoroughly positive meaning, when it is understood as a maxim for the formation of empirical concepts²⁴.

The discussion of the concept of synthesis carried out by the transcendental analytic explains the possibility of knowledge by justifying the reference of pure concepts of understanding to sensible objects *in general* but does not account for the formation of *empirical* concepts referring to *empirically determined* appearances. This issue remains open, and it is not dealt with until the appendix to the transcendental dialectic.

While the subsumption of appearances under categories makes the transcendental truth of our knowledge first possible, the empirical truth is only reached by means of the subsumption of appearances under empirical concepts in a thoroughly connected experience. This *systematic* unity of experience is not the unity of the manifold of sensible intuitions, produced by the understanding, but that of the manifold of cognitions of understanding, accomplished by reason. The systematic unity must be sought because the empirical truth of our knowledge depends on it²⁵. In this regard, Kant claims that the systematic unity of understanding's cognitions is the touchstone of truth for its rules²⁶. This search for systematic unity is necessary, because otherwise there would be no coherent use of understanding and, lacking that, no sufficient mark of empirical truth²⁷.

For this coherent use of understanding to be possible, a homogeneity of appearances regarding their content is needed, so that the understanding may find certain common marks in the appearances and can form empirical concepts from these fea-

²² ECW 3, 628.

²³ A 307 = B 364.

²⁴ ECW 3, 632.

²⁵ See Thöle (2000), 130 ff.

²⁶ A647 = B675.

²⁷ A651 = B679.

tures, under which to subsume the sensible objects²⁸. Without the homogeneity of appearances regarding their content, Kant argues, no empirical concept and therefore no experience would be possible²⁹.

While the homogeneity of appearances is necessary for the formation of empirical concepts, the fact that this sameness of the kind of the appearances obtains is contingent, because it concerns that aspect of appearances which can only be determined a posteriori. In that situation, Kant claims that reason “prepares the field for the understanding”³⁰ by *presupposing* this homogeneity as a subjective condition for the use of the understanding. Such a presupposition consists in the representation of nature *as if* appearances (regarding their content) were homogeneous enough to enable the formation of empirical concepts. Along with the principle of homogeneity, the principles of specification and continuity of forms are presupposed as well, in order for a *system* of *empirical* concepts to be possible³¹.

The law to seek the systematic unity of nature is not a mere logical principle for the economy of reason, but a transcendental one. As transcendental, this principle implies a presupposition about the object and not just about the cognitive subject. This reference to the object is necessary since otherwise reason would set as its goal an idea that entirely contradicts the arrangement of nature³². The principle is thus objectively valid³³. However, this transcendental presupposition does not *determine* nature as a system but only represents nature *as if* it had a systematic structure, in order to guide the cognitive activity of the subject by means such representation. The principle is not a constitutive but a regulative principle of experience.

Once it has been established that the principle of the systematic unity of nature is objectively valid as a regulative one, we immediately face a new problem. This is that of the *application* of the principle. *How* is the systematic unity of nature to be sought? On

²⁸ On this issue, Kant claims: “Wäre unter der Erscheinungen, die sich uns darbieten, eine so große Verschiedenheit, ich will nicht sagen der Form (denn darin mögen sie einander ähnlich sein), sondern dem Inhalte, d.i. der Mannigfaltigkeit existirender Wesen nach, daß auch der allerschärfste menschliche Verstand durch Vergleichung der einen mit der anderen nicht die mindeste Ähnlichkeit ausfindig machen könnte (ein Fall, der sich wohl denken läßt), so würde das logische Gesetz der Gattungen ganz und gar nicht stattfinden; und es würde selbst kein Begriff von Gattung oder irgend ein allgemeiner Begriff, ja sogar kein Verstand stattfinden, als der es lediglich mit solchen zu tun hat.” A 653 = B 681 / A 654 = B 682.

²⁹ A 654 = B 682.

³⁰ A 657 = B 685.

³¹ A 657 = B 685.

³² “In der That ist auch nicht abzusehen, wie ein logisches Prinzip der Vernunfteinheit der Regeln stattfinden könne, wenn nicht ein transzendentales vorausgesetzt würde, durch welches eine solche systematische Einheit, als den Objekten selbst anhängend, *a priori* als nothwendig angenommen wird. Denn mit welcher Befugniß kann die Vernunft im logischen Gebrauche verlangen, die Mannigfaltigkeit der Kräfte, welche uns die Natur zu erkennen gibt, als eine bloß versteckte Einheit zu behandeln, und sie aus irgend einer Grundkraft, so viel an ihr ist, abzuleiten, wenn es ihr freistände zuzugeben, daß es eben so wohl möglich sei, alle Kräfte wären ungleichartig, und die systematische Einheit ihrer Ableitung der Natur nicht gemäß? Denn alsdann würde sie gerade wider ihre Bestimmung verfahren, indem sie sich eine Idee zum Ziele setzte, die der Natureinrichtung ganz widerspräche.” A 650–A 651 = B 678–B 679.

³³ A 651 = B 679.

this issue, Kant claims that for the principle of the systematic unity of experience to be applied, an example of perfect systematic unity is needed³⁴. This would provide the understanding with the necessary indications of how to seek that unity. But such an example cannot be obtained from experience. Rather, it may only be given by reason itself. Kant argues that the objects of the three transcendental ideas are precisely these examples of perfect systematic unity: the soul, the world and God. These objects are not given to reason *absolutely*, but only as objects *in the idea*³⁵. This means that my concepts do not go as far as determining the object. An object in the idea is not an object to be known, but rather it is only a means to represent other objects to us, in accordance with their systematic unity. This is achieved by means of a symbolic analogy, i.e., through an indirect exhibition in intuition. Thus, for example, if I consider the things in the world *as if* they were creations of God, the idea of God is only a heuristic, not an ostensive concept. By means of this symbolic analogy, no knowledge of God is gained, but rather it is shown how to seek after the systematic unity of the objects of experience³⁶.

The transcendental ideas play a mediating role, like that of the schemata of imagination. While the schemata give an answer to the question of how the pure concepts of understanding are to be applied to sensible appearances and thus *how* the unity of experience is to be established, the ideas give an answer to the question of how the principle of reason is to be applied to the cognitions of understanding and thus *how* the *systematic* unity of experience is to be gained. Therefore, Cassirer argues that the concept of the thing in itself, in the final definitive meaning it acquires within the sphere of theoretical consideration, is nothing other than the schema of the regulative principle of the systematic unity of experience³⁷. The unconditioned, represented by the three transcendental ideas of reason, is not merely an unknowable thing in itself, as the object *of* the idea, but rather, as the object *in* the idea, a constant and productive motive of knowledge.

In sum, Cassirer underlines that the concept of the thing in itself acquires different meanings at the same time as the transcendental investigation progresses³⁸. This evolution of the concept of the thing in itself reflects the gradual dissolution of the given into the pure functions of cognition. The first stage in this process corresponds to the concept

³⁴ “Die Vernunft kann aber diese systematische Einheit nicht anders denken, als daß sie ihrer Idee zugleich einen Gegenstand gibt, der aber durch keine Erfahrung gegeben werden kann; denn Erfahrung gibt niemals ein Beispiel vollkommener systematischer Einheit. Dieses Vernunftwesen (ens rationis ratiocinatae) ist nun zwar eine bloße Idee, und wird also nicht schlechthin und *an sich selbst* als etwas Wirkliches angenommen, sondern nur problematisch zum Grunde gelegt (weil wir es durch keine Verstandesbegriffe erreichen können), um alle Verknüpfung der Dinge der Sinnenwelt so anzusehen, *als ob* sie in diesem Vernunftwesen ihren Grund hätten, lediglich aber in der Absicht, um darauf die systematische Einheit zu gründen, die der Vernunft unentbehrlich, der empirischen Verstandeserkenntnis aber auf alle Weise beförderlich und ihr gleichwohl niemals hinderlich sein kann.” A681 = B709.

³⁵ A679 = B698.

³⁶ A670 = B698 / A 671 = B699.

³⁷ ECW 3, 633. See A 682 = B 710.

³⁸ “So kann er [der Begriff des »Dinges an sich«] zunächst als Korrelat für die »Passivität« der Sinnlichkeit auftreten, um sodann zum Gegenbild der objektivierenden Funktion des reinen Verstandesbegriffs und schließlich zum Schema des regulativen Prinzips der Vernunft zu werden.” ECW 3, 635.

of an affecting thing in itself, introduced by the transcendental aesthetic. As we have seen, this concept should not be understood as a means to *explain*, but rather to *point out* a certain problem: that of the origin of sensation. Sensation is the only *element* in our representations, which cognition has only to accept without being able to analyze it further and trace it back to its origin³⁹. Sensation just constitutes a certain immanent aspect of cognition, that does not contain any reference to a metaphysical transcendent reality.

A second stage in the development of the concept of the thing in itself takes place in the transcendental analytic, when the critical concept of objectivity is established. The objective reference of the sensible manifold is now finally justified. Although Kant does make use of the concepts of eighteenth century faculty psychology, Cassirer argues that sensibility and understanding are not to be conceived as *psychic faculties* which in their cooperation brings forth experience as their product. Cassirer maintains that if this were the case, the understanding would appear like a sorcerer and necromancer, who animates the dead sensation and awakens it to the life of consciousness⁴⁰. While for Kant the problem is the articulation between two different elements of knowledge (the intellectual and the sensible), originated in two irreducible cognitive faculties, Cassirer insists that each of these “opposites” implies the other, so that the isolated universal and the isolated particular are nothing but logical abstractions. From the standpoint of the synthesis, the given and the spontaneous in cognition are moments of a relation, which require each other. The transcendental object is just the counterpart of the synthesis of understanding, and not an absolute, separate, and merely intelligible being.

Finally, the transcendental dialectic, after having rejected any rational science of the soul, the world or God, establishes that the representations of these objects beyond the limits of possible experience play nevertheless a necessary role in empirical knowledge. Through the regulative function of these ideas, reason takes the last step in the dissolution of the given into the pure functions of cognition. The transcendental ideas enable the application of the principle of the systematic unity of nature. This principle requires that appearances, regarding their *empirical content*, be so conceived that our understanding find them suitable for its coherent use. In order to achieve this result, that element of our representations, the origin of which the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental analytic left undetermined, is now conceived by us *as if* it originated in a transcendent reality. By considering the things in the world *as if* they had obtained their existence from a supreme intelligence, we assume their *determinability* (regarding their empirical content) by our understanding.

Whereas in the transcendental aesthetic appearances are still conceived as given independently of spontaneity, the transcendental analytic establishes that appearances would be nothing for us if abstraction were made from their determination by the understanding. But the transcendental analytic also states that this determination by pure concepts does not fully solve the problem of the relation between the universal and the particular in cognition. It is the transcendental dialectic that elucidates how the a posteriorio-

³⁹ ECW 3, 632.

⁴⁰ ECW 13, 223.

ri given is to be conceived for their subsumption under *empirical* concepts to be possible. By resorting to the transcendental ideas, which originate in reason itself, the solution to this problem is found without invoking any transcendent reality. With the analysis of the regulative role of the ideas, the Kantian doctrine of knowledge finds its culmination.

4. CASSIRER'S CRITICAL IDEALISM

According to Cassirer's account of the Kantian concept of the thing in itself, this concept expresses the limits that theoretical reason imposes to herself. These limits do not result from any external coercion, but only from reason's self-recognition of its own authority. Thought is autonomous, just like the will. The objectivity of the will is not grounded in an existing object, given independently of the will, but on the pure form of the will itself, disregarding all matter of what is willed. To Cassirer, the same holds where the logical fundamental value of "truth" is concerned⁴¹. Therefore, as already indicated, Kant's critical philosophy is to be characterized as the philosophy of freedom⁴².

Cassirer's own version of critical idealism, developed in his philosophy of symbolic forms, is in this very sense a philosophy of freedom as well, or better a philosophy of *liberation*⁴³. In this connection, Cassirer claims that "human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation".⁴⁴ In myth, religion, language, art, history or science, the fundamental phenomenon of the spirit takes shape: our consciousness is never satisfied with merely receiving impressions, but links and penetrates them with a free activity of expression⁴⁵.

This free activity of the spirit is present in every symbolic form, but it is paradigmatically deployed in science. "Science", Cassirer argues, "is the last step in man's mental development and it may be regarded as the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture. [...] There is no second power in our modern world which may be compared to that of scientific thought. It is held to be the summit and consummation of all our human activities, the last chapter in the history of mankind and the most important subject of a philosophy of man"⁴⁶. In science, the free act of symbolization achieves its ultimate result in reducing the empirically given to the spontaneous activity of the spirit.

Despite Cassirer's attempt to highlight similarities between his *neo-Kantian* position and the Kantian one⁴⁷, Cassirer's critical philosophy carries out a deep modification of the Kantian idealism. While for Kant the core of the problem of cognition is the articu-

⁴¹ ECW 7, 166.

⁴² "So endet Kants theoretische Philosophie mit genau demselben Ergebnis, mit welchem seine ethische Lehre beginnt. Der Gedanke der Autonomie, die Forderung der Selbstgesetzgebung der Erkenntnis und des Willens bildet das Grundthema, das beide vereint und zusammenschließt." ECW 7, 176.

⁴³ See Recki (2010) and Recki (2011).

⁴⁴ ECW 23, 244.

⁴⁵ ECW 16, 79.

⁴⁶ ECW 23, 223.

⁴⁷ This neo-Kantian interpretation of the Kantian concept of freedom is clearly developed in the third chapter of Cassirer's *Freiheit und Form* (ECW 7, pp. 149–180).

lation between intuitions and concepts, representations originated in two irreducible cognitive faculties (sensibility and understanding), Cassirer insists that each of these “opposites” implies the other, so that the isolated universal (the concept) and the isolated particular (the intuition) are nothing but logical abstractions. The universal and the particular in cognition relate to each other rather like a serial principle and a member of a series. Cassirer develops a functional theory of the concept and puts forward a theory of scientific knowledge based on series construction. According to this theory, both mathematical and physical manifolds, i.e., pure and empirical manifolds, are constructed from serial principles⁴⁸. The paradigmatic example of such functional concept is the concept of number. Following Dedekind, Cassirer states that the number is just a position in a progression⁴⁹. A certain position is determined only by the relations it bears to any other position⁵⁰. For Cassirer, the crucial point is that numbers gain their whole being first in and with the relations which are predicated of them⁵¹. The relata do not preexist their relation. Rather, the relation is logically prior to them. Numbers are terms of a relation whose continuous application *generates* them. Therefore, the concept of number does not presuppose any given (albeit pure) manifold, as the Kantian doctrine maintains⁵². Number is rather the product of mere thought, that by means of a generating relation produces an ordered manifold. While for Kant, the matter ordered under the representation of number (the schema of magnitude) was the pure temporal manifold given by sensibility, for Cassirer it is pure thought which generates its own content, by producing the manifold of positions in a progression. In numeration, the presupposed “material” [Stoff] is not to be thought of as outwardly given, but as arising through free construction⁵³.

The construction of pure manifolds is the first logical stage in knowledge, that corresponds to mathematical cognition. The second stage is the construction of empirical manifolds, which corresponds to mathematical natural science. Kant maintains that the distinction between *empirical* and *pure* is a metaphysical one which rests on the different *origin* of the representations⁵⁴. The matter of knowledge, sensation, is empirical, as the

⁴⁸ See H. Pringe, “Cohen's Logik der reinen Erkenntnis and Cassirer's Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff”, in *Kant Yearbook*, 2020, pp. 137–168.

⁴⁹ For an interpretation of Dedekind's theory from the viewpoint of Cassirer's philosophy, see A. Yap, “Dedekind and Cassirer on mathematical concept formation”, in *Philosophia Mathematica*, 2017, pp. 369–389.

⁵⁰ Dedekind states: “If in the consideration of a simply infinite system N set in order by a transformation [*Abbildung*] Φ we entirely neglect the special character of the elements; simply retaining their distinguishability and taking into account only the relations to one another in which they are placed by the order-setting transformation Φ , then are these elements called *natural numbers* or *ordinal numbers* or simply *numbers*, and the base-element 1 is called the *base-number* of the *number series* N .” R. Dedekind, *Essays on the Theory of Numbers*, New York, 1963, p. 68.

⁵¹ ECW 6, 36.

⁵² “Selbst die Anschauung der reinen *Zeit*, auf die Kant den Zahlbegriff gründet, ist hier zunächst noch nicht erfordert” ECW 6, 40.

⁵³ ECW 6, 67.

⁵⁴ “Man sieht wohl beym Unterschiede des empiricus und purus kommt es auf den Ursprung des Begriffes an, und ist dieses also schon eine metaphysische Untersuchung” *V-Lo/Wiener*, AA 24: 905.

effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it⁵⁵. The form of knowledge is pure, because it has its origin in our cognitive capacity, either in our sensibility or our understanding. In contradistinction, Cassirer rejects the possibility of separating the “matter” of knowledge from its “form” by referring each of them to a different origin in absolute being, as we do, for example, when we seek the origin of one factor in ‘things,’ and the other in the unity of consciousness⁵⁶. The difference between pure and empirical manifolds does not involve any reference to a transcendent reality⁵⁷. Rather, it is grounded on an immanent feature of cognition: while mathematical construction reaches a fixed end, empirical construction is in principle incapable of completion⁵⁸. The empirical character of physical manifolds does not consist in its being passively received but in its always being under construction. Both in pure mathematics and in physics or chemistry, the concept formation has a genetic character. However, in pure mathematics this genesis is categorical, while in physics it may be said to be hypothetical.⁵⁹ In other words, “mathematical concepts are closed while empirical ones are open: the implicit definition of a point in Euclidean geometry fixes the meaning of this concept once and for all while the key concepts of empirical science have a ‘serial form’ in that their meaning is not fixed by a single theoretical framework. Rather, it emerges in a series of theoretical stages in the ongoing evolution of scientific knowledge”⁶⁰.

This functional doctrine of the concept explains the possibility of a mathematical science of nature in a straightforward manner⁶¹. Pure mathematics may be applied to nature because this application is not the imposition of a structure of thought on a being independent of it. Rather, the mathematization of nature is the construction of nature according to a rational order, in a never-ending process⁶². This infinite process is what we call experience⁶³. The correlativity of sensibility and understanding is now translated into that between pure mathematics and physics. Pure mathematics is a condition of physics, insofar as the empirical manifolds are constructed according to serial princi-

⁵⁵ *KrV*, A19–20/B34.

⁵⁶ ECW 6, 335.

⁵⁷ The empirical in our scientific knowledge just means, “daß es zum Aufbau der Erfahrung und zur Konstituierung ihres Objekts nicht genügt, bei allgemeinen Regeln der Verknüpfung, bei universellen Gleichungen des Naturgeschehens stehenzubleiben” ECW 6, 336.

⁵⁸ “Gegenüber dem mathematischen Begriff aber zeigt sich jetzt der charakteristische Unterschied, daß der Aufbau, der innerhalb der Mathematik zu einen festen Ende gelangt, innerhalb der Erfahrung prinzipiell *unabschließbar* bleibt”, ECW 6, 274.

⁵⁹ ECW 13, 514.

⁶⁰ T. Mormann, “Idealization in Cassirer’s Philosophy of Mathematics”, in *Philosophia Mathematica (III)*, no. 16, 2008, pp. 151–181, p. 163.

⁶¹ On the problem of the applicability of mathematical concepts to nature from Cassirer’s viewpoint, see Ihmig, *Grundzüge einer Philosophie der Wissenschaften bei Ernst Cassirer*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001, pp. 194 ff.

⁶² “Sie [die Zahl] steht vielmehr am Anfang einer Reihe von Beziehungen, die, weiterverfolgt und immer konkreter gefaßt, zuletzt auf die Bestimmung des ‘Wirklichen’ hinführen und sich in ihr zusammenfassen sollen.” ECW 5, 75.

⁶³ ECW 13, 487.

ples provided by pure mathematics. But physics is a condition of mathematics as well, since only by means of this application to experience as an infinite process of determination may mathematics achieve objective validity⁶⁴.

Cassirer's functional theory of the concept provides, in the first place, an answer to the problem posed by the *affecting* thing in itself. In this regard, Cassirer calls the attention to a passage of the transcendental logic, where Kant does not define the given in cognition in the way he did in the transcendental aesthetic, as a passively received element, but rather as a task to be fulfilled⁶⁵. In this passage, Kant claims:

To give an object, if this is not again meant only mediately, but it is rather to be exhibited immediately in intuition, is nothing other than to relate its representation to experience (whether this be actual or still possible).⁶⁶

According to this definition, the given is the goal towards which the intellectual synthesis aims and not the first and absolute "datum" in cognition⁶⁷. As we have seen, Cassirer argues that the concept of an affecting thing in itself is introduced by Kant only to point out the receptive character of sensibility. But, in Cassirer's theory, the given character of empirical manifolds does not consist in its being passively received. Rather, physical manifolds are empirical because they are always under construction. Therefore, the concept of an affecting thing in itself does not play any role and may be completely abandoned.

In the second place, the doctrine of concepts as serial principles does not leave room for the notion of the thing in itself as a transcendental object either. In the Kantian doctrine, the concept of the transcendental object as the counterpart of the transcendental synthesis of understanding depends on conceiving this synthesis as being exercised on an independently given manifold. In such a case, the intellectual synthesis may be isolated from the sensible manifold and then hypostatized into a thing. But from Cassirer's viewpoint, the concept is the serial principle which generates the intuitive manifold. Therefore, the intellectual and the sensible are inextricable and they must always be conceived of as referred to each other. In this connection, Cassirer criticizes the Kantian doctrine of schematism, which seems to offer only an external mediation between sensibility and understanding. In doing this, the schematism, far from resolving the essential heterogeneity between concepts and intuitions, exacerbates it. At this point, Cassirer puts into question not only the alleged independence of sensibility from understanding, but also, reciprocally, of concepts from intuitions. The isolated position that schematism, albeit

⁶⁴ ECW 4, 357 footnote 112.

⁶⁵ Cassirer claims that the transcendental logic brings a "necessary complement and rectification" of the results of the transcendental aesthetic to accommodate them to the radical change in Kant's doctrine of knowledge. ECW 3, 572.

⁶⁶ A155 = B 194–A156 = B 195.

⁶⁷ Experience is given as an (infinite) task: "So besagt auch die »Gegebenheit« in diesem Zusammenhange nichts anderes als den immer wieder eingeschränkten Gedanken, daß die Erfahrung das Endziel all unserer reinen Begriffe bilden muß und die einheitliche Aufgabe, die ihnen von Anfang an gestellt ist." ECW 3, 580.

problematically, attributes to the pure concepts of understanding corresponds for Cassirer to the pre-critical standpoint of the *Dissertatio*. The “restriction”⁶⁸ that sensibility imposes on understanding regarding the application of the categories amounts to an external coercion and does not do justice to the critical doctrine of objectivity⁶⁹.

In the third place, Cassirer’s theory of the concept implies a departure from the doctrine of the regulative use of the ideas of reason, which Kant opposes to the constitutive use of the categories of understanding. Kant distinguishes the necessary task of three different cognitive faculties, which cooperate in knowledge: sensibility, understanding and reason. Sensibility provides us with intuitions. Understanding synthesizes these intuitions by means of concepts and thereby refers them to an object. Reason brings about the systematic unity of such objective cognitions. “Thus”, Kant declares, “all human knowledge begins with intuitions, proceeds from thence to concepts, and ends with ideas.”⁷⁰

From this viewpoint, the subsumption of spatio-temporal objects under concepts is the problem that the theory of schematism deals with. Schemata are precisely those representations that enable the spatio-temporal objects *given* by sensible intuitions to be *thought* by the concepts of understanding. Cassirer, in contradistinction to Kant, does not pose the problem in terms of cognitive faculties, since in that way the danger of psychologism seems unavoidable. The problem of the coordination between concepts and spatio-temporal objects is not that of the heterogeneity between *intellectual* concepts and *sensible* appearances. As already said, according to Cassirer, the clear distinction between sensibility and understanding that Kant introduces in the transcendental aesthetic is a residue of the *Dissertatio*, which, in view of the results of the transcendental logic, cannot be maintained any longer⁷¹. Rather, Cassirer assumes a transcendental perspective from which in scientific knowledge there is just *one single* function of series construction⁷². The transcendental task of each Kantian faculty is thereby reinterpreted as a different moment of its fulfillment. In the case of physics, Cassirer distinguishes between statements of measurement results, statements of laws and statements of principles. The statements of measurement results provide us with spatio-temporal data that are to be brought under rules expressed by statements of laws, the unity of which is attained by statements of principles⁷³. The Kantian triad intuition-concept-idea is therefore replaced by these three different kinds of statements⁷⁴.

⁶⁸ A146 = B186.

⁶⁹ ECW 4, 10 – 11.

⁷⁰ *KrV*, B730.

⁷¹ Cassirer argues: “Fassen wir den Verstand nicht lediglich als ein Vermögen der abstrakten Gattungsbegriffe, sondern, wie wir es nach der transzendentalen Deduktion der Kategorien tun müssen, als das „Vermögen der Regeln“ auf, so hört er in der Tat auf, der Anschauung völlig „ungleichartig“ zu sein.” ECW 3, 599. On this issue, see M. Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 2000, p. 89f.

⁷² For an account of this function from the viewpoint of a theory of the invariants of experience, see K-N Ihmig, *Cassirers Invariantentheorie der Erfahrung und seine Rezeption des “Erlangers Programms”*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1997.

⁷³ Schmitz-Rigal maintains that the three types of statements are imaginary focal points for our orientation in experience, although they are questionable and alterable in accordance with new empirical data (see C.

Cassirer claims that in all scientific knowledge laws precede objects, so that no object is *given* to us other than through laws⁷⁵. Thus, the Kantian distinction between the sensible conditions under which objects are given in intuition and the intellectual conditions under which objects are thought by means of laws cannot be maintained any more. The data for objective knowledge, the “statements of the first level,” cannot be isolated from statements of higher order as if we could remove the higher layers of scientific knowledge without destroying the bottom layer or even altering it essentially. To the contrary, following Goethe, Cassirer argues that “everything factual is already theory”⁷⁶.

This implies that the strict Kantian distinction between the unity of experience and the unity of reason must be abandoned. Kant carefully distinguishes between the unity imposed by understanding to the sensible manifold, which provides this manifold with objective validity, and the unity imposed by reason to the multiplicity of cognitions of understanding, which brings about their systematic unity.⁷⁷ The unity of experience is achieved by the application of the constitutive principles of understanding, while the systematic unity of nature is searched for in accordance with the regulative principles of reason. Thereby, Kant differentiates the conditions of the objectivity of experience from those of its systematic unity. In contradistinction to this, for Cassirer there is rather just one single objectifying and systematizing function in scientific knowledge.

Cassirer’s neo-Kantian modification of the Kantian constitutive-regulative distinction is exemplified in Cassirer’s philosophical analysis of special relativity⁷⁸. Cassirer argues that in relativity theory the demand of systematic unity of nature imposes new conditions to the statements of measurement results, which in turn imply a modification of the notion of objectivity. New physical concepts of measurements, expressing the demands of systematicity in a new way, determine a novel concept of objective knowledge. To maintain the unity of electromagnetism and mechanics, Cassirer claims, “the theory of relativity renounces the unity of the values of spatial and temporal magnitudes in different systems. It surrenders the assumption that the temporal interval between events is a magnitude fixed once for all independently of the state of motion of the reference body and that in the same way the spatial distance between two points of a rigid body is independent of the state of motion of the reference body. [...] *But these “relativizations” are not in contradiction with the doctrine of the constancy and unity of nature; they are rather demanded and worked out in the name of this very unity*”⁷⁹. The principle of relativity

Schmitz-Rigal, *Die Kunst des offenen Wissens: Cassirers Epistemologie und Deutung der modernen Physik*, Hamburg, Meiner, 2002, p. 82).

⁷⁴ See H. Pringe, “The Principle of Causality and the Coordination of Concepts and Spatio-Temporal Objects in Cassirer’s Philosophy”, *Idealistic Studies* vol. 44, no. 1, 2014, pp. 51–66.

⁷⁵ ECW 19, 173.

⁷⁶ ECW 19, 45.

⁷⁷ “Vernunftseinheit ist also nicht Einheit einer möglichen Erfahrung, sondern von dieser, als der Verstandeseinheit, wesentlich unterschieden.” A307 = B 363.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of Cassirer’s account of relativity theory, see T. Ryckman, *The Reign of Relativity: Philosophy in Physics 1915–1925*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁷⁹ ECW 10, 28. Translation taken from E. Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity*, translated by W. Curtis Swabey, and M. Collins Swabey, Chicago and London, Open Court, 1923, p. 374. My emphasis.

ty claims that the same laws of electrodynamics and optics will be valid for all frames of reference for which the equations of mechanics hold good. The demand of unity of physical knowledge thereby expressed is a statement of principle, that cannot be fulfilled unless the concepts of space and time are modified. These concepts are in turn conditions of the statement of measurement results, which are thus shown to depend on space and time not as “given forms” but as methods spontaneously adopted to gain systematic unity in cognition. The laws of mechanics, as statements of laws, must consider this modification of the concepts of space and time as well. The substitution of the classical notions of space and time for the relativistic notion of space-time requires to modify the laws of dynamics in order that they obey the principle of relativity under Lorentz transformations.

Classical mechanics grounded the distinction between the objective and the subjective in physical cognition in the fact that the objective properties are Galilean invariants. But, in order to satisfy the demand of the systematic unity of nature regarding electro-dynamical, optical and mechanical phenomena, this classical distinction between objective and subjective moments of physical knowledge had to be abandoned in favor of the relativistic one, grounded in the Lorentz transformations. Classical “objective” properties, like the length of a measuring rod, are now “subjective” as far as they are not invariant anymore. Classical mechanics is thereby not simply abandoned, but it remains valid for velocities much smaller than the velocity of light, since in this limit the Lorentz transformations reduce to the Galilean transformations. However, this shows how the objective validity of cognitions depends on the systematic unity of experience. The objectivity of cognitions now amounts to their invariance under Lorentz transformations, which are assumed only to satisfy the demand of systematic unity of physical knowledge.

Cassirer’s philosophical account of relativity theory exhibits in a concrete example how the statements of measurement results, the statements of laws and the statements of principles are so interwoven that physics “is to be compared not to a pyramid, but insofar as we regard any spatial symbol as adequate and permissible, to the *well-rounded sphere* with which Parmenides described his *universe*”⁸⁰. This neo-Kantian general modification of the Kantian doctrine implies in particular a new determination of the causality principle⁸¹. According to Cassirer, this principle is not a statement about objects but about our empirical knowledge of objects and, thus, it is a transcendental claim. The causality principle declares that the statements of measurement results, the statements of laws and the statements of principles “can be so related and combined with one another that from this combination there results a system of physical knowledge and not a mere aggregate of isolated observations”⁸². In other words, the causality principle states that the conversion

⁸⁰ ECW 19, 45. Translation taken from E. Cassirer, *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, translated by T. Benfey, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1956, p. 35.

⁸¹ For a discussion of Cassirer’s stance on causality, from the viewpoint of a structuralist interpretation of quantum theory, see A. Cei and S. French, “On the Transposition of the Substantial into the Functional: Bringing Cassirer’s Philosophy of Quantum Mechanics into the Twenty-First Century”, in M. Bitbol, P. Kerszberg, J. Petitot (eds.), *Constituting Objectivity. Transcendental Perspectives on Modern Physics*, New York, Springer, 2009, pp. 95–115.

⁸² ECW 19, 75. Translation taken from Cassirer (1956), p. 60.

of sensible data into measurement results, their ordering according to laws and the unification of the multiplicity of these laws under principles is always possible. Even though such a process of systematization can never be considered as complete, its achievement should be sought as if an ultimate system were possible, by assuming that natural phenomena do not resist being systematically ordered. Therefore, Cassirer understands the causality principle in a transcendental sense, as a condition of the possibility of scientific knowledge, but he ascribes to it a meaning that does not coincide with the Kantian one. According to Kant, the causality principle is constitutive for the possibility of experience, in so far as it makes the distinction between the subjective series of perceptions and the objective series of experience first possible. Instead, for Cassirer, the causality principle guides our understanding towards the systematic unity of experience⁸³. However, this heuristic character of causality does not mean that such a principle is regulative exactly in Kant's terms, as a concept or principle of pure reason. For Kant, the regulative principles of reason guide the systematical ordering of the understanding cognitions, once the constitutive principles of understanding have determined these cognitions as objective in the first place. But Cassirer's views on causality presuppose a different interpretation of the problem of empirical knowledge. As we have seen, Cassirer conceives of experience as an infinite task of series construction, in which, in Kant's words, the constitutive role of understanding is not independent from the regulative role of reason. The principle of causality claims that the series construction can and must be always carried out. Therefore, Cassirer argues that if we still want to use Kantian terminology, causality is rather a "postulate of empirical thought": it expresses the supreme principle that the construction of experience is always possible without limitations⁸⁴.

CONCLUSIONS

As it is well known, Cassirer's philosophy is firmly based on the neo-Kantian framework established by his teachers Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp⁸⁵. In this regard, it has lately been argued that one of the key notions that Cassirer took from them is precisely their reading of the Kantian thing in itself, and that therefore for Cassirer "the only value the thing in itself has is as a regulative demand"⁸⁶. To the

⁸³ On the constitutive-regulative distinction in Cassirer's philosophy, see D. Pätzold, "Cassirers Symbol-Formen: konstitutives oder regulatives Apriori der Repräsentation?", in Plümacher, M. and Schürmann, V. (eds.), *Einheit des Geistes: Probleme ihrer Grundlegung in der Philosophie Ernst Cassirers*. Frankfurt am Main, Lang, pp. 187–203; Friedman (2000), p. 117 and Matherne (2021), pp. 104ff.

⁸⁴ ECW 19, 74.

⁸⁵ On this issue, see K. Marx, "Cassirers Symboltheorie als Entwicklung und Kritik der Neukantianischen Grundlagen einer Theorie des Denkens und Erkennens. Überlegungen zur Struktur transzendentaler Logik als Wissenschaftstheorie", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1975, vol. 57, pp. 188–206 and 304–339.

⁸⁶ See Matherne (2021), p. 43. For a discussion of Cohen's interpretation of the thing in itself and its relation to the readings proposed by Bauch, Riehl and Wundt, see W. Ritzel: "Die Ding-an-sich-Theorie Hermann Cohens", *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* no. 6, 1951, pp. 426–434 and *Studien zum Wandel der Kantauffassung*, Meisenheim/Glan, Anton Hain, 1952.

contrary, we have seen that Cassirer's account of this concept is much more complex, since he identifies not just one but three different meanings of this notion in Kant's theoretical philosophy. The analysis of Cassirer's account of the thing in itself reveals his attempt to eliminate any instance external to knowledge, in relation to which knowledge may be grounded. The concept of the thing in itself as an object in the idea, as a transcendental object and even as an affecting object express just the internal boundaries of knowledge and obtain their justification only in view of this demarcation task. Rooted on this interpretation of Kant, Cassirer's *neo-Kantian* stance puts forward a kind of idealism that deeply modifies the Kantian one. The functional theory of the concept eliminates the concept of affection, reinterprets the Kantian distinction between sensibility and understanding and blurs the contrast between constitutive and regulative principles. This leads Cassirer to claim that critical philosophy is the philosophy of freedom, thereby maintaining a concept of freedom that would nevertheless not be called critical from a strictly Kantian viewpoint. With this result, we expect to have provided some elements for a response to an important issue raised in the debate on Cassirer's philosophy: "In der philosophischen Geschichtsschreibung ist Ernst Cassirer als Theoretiker der Freiheit noch nicht 'angekommen'"⁸⁷.

⁸⁷ Recki (2010), 95. See also: Pringe (2021).