

## Ernst Cassirer on the part and the whole

### From "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms", Volume I, Introduction III

Every "simple" quality of consciousness only has a certain content insofar as it is simultaneously grasped in continuous unity with others and in continuous separation from others. The function of this unity and this separation cannot be separated from the content of consciousness, but represents one of its essential conditions. Accordingly, there is no "something" in consciousness without an "other" and a series of others being set eo ipso and without further mediation. For each individual being of consciousness only has its definiteness through the fact that in it the whole of consciousness is simultaneously posited and represented in some form. Only in this representation and through it does that which we call the givenness and "presence" of the content become possible. This immediately becomes clear when we consider even the simplest case of this "presence", when we consider the temporal relationship and the temporal "presence". Nothing seems more certain than that everything that is truly given directly in consciousness relates to a single point in time, to a certain "now", and is resolved in it. The past is "no longer" present in consciousness, the future is "not yet" present in it: Both thus seem not to belong to its concrete reality, its actual actuality at all, but to merge into mere mental abstractions. And yet, on the other hand, the content that we call the "now" is nothing but the eternally flowing boundary that separates the past from the future. This boundary cannot be set at all, independently of what is bounded by it: it exists only in the act of separation itself, not as something that could be conceived before this act and detached from it. The individual temporal moment, insofar as it is to be defined as temporal, cannot be grasped as a rigid, substantial existence, but only as the floating transition from the past to the future, from nothing more to nothing yet. Where the now is taken differently, where it is taken absolutely, it is in truth no longer the element, but the negation of time. Temporal movement then appears to be halted in it and thus destroyed. For a way of thinking that, like the thinking of the Eleatics, merely aims at absolute being and strives to remain in it, the flying arrow comes to rest - because in every indivisible "now" it is only ever assigned a single, clearly determined and indivisible "position". If, on the other hand, the temporal moment is to be conceived as belonging to the temporal movement, if it is to be truly placed within it instead of being lifted out of it and set against it, then this is only possible by simultaneously conceiving the process as a whole within the moment as a single entity and by both moment and process merging into a perfect unity for consciousness. The form of time itself cannot be "given" to us in any other way than by the fact that in the time element the time series represents itself forwards and backwards. If we think of a single cross-section of consciousness, we can only grasp it as such by not merely dwelling on it, but by going beyond it in the various directions of relationship by virtue of certain spatial, temporal or qualitative ordering functions. Because in this way we are able to hold on to a non-being in the actual being of consciousness, a non-given in the given - this alone gives us that unity which we call on the one hand the subjective unity of consciousness, and on the other hand the objective unity of the object.

The psychological and epistemological analysis of spatial consciousness also leads back to the same primal function of representation. For first of all, all comprehension of a spatial "whole" presupposes the formation of temporal sequences: the "simultaneous" synthesis of consciousness, although it constitutes a distinct and original trait of its nature, can only ever be completed and represented on the basis of successive synthesis. If certain elements are to be united into a spatial whole, they must first be passed through in the succession of consciousness and related to one another according to a certain rule. Neither the sensualistic psychology of the English nor the metaphysical psychology of Herbart has, of course, been able to explain how the consciousness of the temporal connection gives rise to that of the spatial - how the consciousness of the "together" is formed from the mere sequence

of sensations of sight, touch and muscle or from a complex of simple series of ideas. But one thing is unanimously recognized in these theories, which come from quite different starting points, namely that space in its concrete form and structure is not "given" to the soul as a finished possession, but that it only comes into being for us in the process of consciousness and, as it were, in its overall movement. However, this very process itself would break down for us into isolated, unrelated details and would therefore not allow us to summarize it into one result if it were not for the general possibility of grasping the whole already in the element, like the element in the whole. The "expression of the many in the one", the *multorum in uno expressio*, as which Leibniz characterizes consciousness in general, thus also emerges decisively here. We only arrive at the perception of certain spatial formations by, on the one hand, uniting groups of sensory perceptions, which mutually displace each other in the immediate sensory experience, in one conception and, on the other hand, by allowing this unity to diverge again into the diversity of its individual components. It is in such an interplay of concentration and analysis that spatial consciousness is built up. The form appears here as a possible movement, just as the movement appears as a possible form.

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If we think of the sensory basis for the construction of the concept of space as given in certain sensations of sight, movement and touch, then the sum of these sensations contains nothing of that characteristic unified form which we call "space". Rather, this only expresses itself in such an allocation that we can move from each of these individual qualities to their totality. In this way, we think that each element, insofar as we define it as spatial, already contains an infinity of possible directions, and it is the totality of these directions that constitutes the whole of spatial perception. The spatial "picture" that we have of a single empirical object, such as a house, only comes about by expanding a single, relatively limited perspective view in this sense; by using it only as a starting point and stimulus in order to build up a very complex whole of spatial relations from it. Understood in this sense, space is nothing less than a dormant vessel and container into which the "things", as equally finished, enter; rather, it represents an epitome of ideal functions that complement and determine each other to form the unity of a result. Just as we found the earlier and later, i.e. the basic directions of temporal progression, expressed in the simple "now" of time, we already place a "there" and a "there" in every "here". The individual place is not given before the system of places, but only with regard to it and in correlative relation to it.

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What makes an individual perception a perception, what distinguishes it as a quality of "imagination" from any other quality of a thing, is precisely its "belonging to the ego". This does not only arise in the subsequent combination of a majority of perceptions, but is already originally inherent in each individual one. A completely analogous relationship exists in the linking of the manifold "qualities" to the unity of a "thing". If we unite the sensations of the extended, the sweet, the rough, the white into the idea of "sugar" as a unified material whole, this is only possible if each of these qualities is originally conceived with regard to this whole. That the whiteness, the sweetness, etc., is not merely conceived as a state in me, but as a "property", as an objective quality - this already completely includes the sought-after function and the point of view of the "thing". In the positing of the individual, therefore, a general basic schema already prevails here, which is then, in the progressive experience of the "thing" and its "properties", only filled with ever new concrete content. Just as the point as a simple and single position is always only possible "in" space, i.e., logically speaking, under the precondition of a system of all positional determinations - just as the idea of the temporal "now" can only be determined with regard to a series of moments and to the order and sequence of succession that we call "time" - the same also applies to the relationship between thing and property. In all these relationships, the more detailed definition and dissection of which is a matter for the special theory of knowledge, the same

basic character of consciousness is evident, namely that the whole is not first obtained here from the parts, but that every positing of a part already includes the positing of the whole, not in terms of its content, but in terms of its general structure and form. Each individual here already originally belongs to a certain complex and expresses the rule of this complex in itself. Only the totality of these rules, however, constitutes the true unity of consciousness as a unity of time, space, objective connection, and so on.

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The element of consciousness does not relate to the whole of consciousness like an extensive part to the sum of its parts, but like a differential to its integral. Just as the differential equation of a movement expresses the movement itself according to its course and its general law, so we must think of the general structural laws of consciousness as already given in each of its elements, in each cross-section of it - but not given in the sense of its own and independent content, but of tendencies and directions that are already inherent in the sensory individual. All "existence" in consciousness consists precisely in this and is only through the fact that it immediately goes beyond itself in such different directions of synthesis. Just as the consciousness of the moment already includes the reference to the time series, the consciousness of a single spatial location already includes the reference to "the" space as the epitome and totality of the possible determinations of position, so in general a wealth of relationships prevails through which the form of the whole is simultaneously expressed in the consciousness of the individual. The "integral" of consciousness is not built up from the sum of its sensory elements (a, b, c, d ...), but from the totality of its differential relations and forms (dr1, dr2, dr3 ...). The full actuality of consciousness only unfolds that which, according to "potency" and general possibility, is already resolved in each of its special moments. Only with this is the most general critical solution reached to Kant's question as to how it is to be thought that, because "something" is, it must at the same time be an "other", completely different from it. The relation, which, viewed from the standpoint of absolute being, must appear all the more paradoxical the more sharply it is considered and analyzed, is the necessary one, the one that is immediately comprehensible in itself, if it is seen from the standpoint of consciousness. For here, from the very beginning, there is no abstract "One", which is confronted by an "Other" in equally abstract separation and detachment, but the One is here "in" the Many, just as the Many is "in" the One: in the sense that both are mutually dependent and mutually represent each other.

[From "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms", Volume III, Part II, Chapter III](#)

It is precisely in this respect, however, that the conception of the various "geometries" and the formation of the concept of space on which each of them is based only continues a process that is already laid out and prefigured in the formation of empirical space, the space of our sensory experience. For this, too, only comes about through the fact that a multiplicity of phenomena, of individual optical "images", are combined into groups, and that these groups are taken as representations of one and the same "object". The changing individual phenomena henceforth form only the periphery for us; and from each point of these, spikes emanate, as it were, which guide our observation in a certain direction - always leading it back to the same unit of things, as the center. And here too - although not to the same extent and degree as in the structure of the purely geometric symbolic space - it is possible to set these center points differently. The reference point itself can be shifted; the nature of the relationship can change: and each time such a change occurs, the appearance not only acquires a different abstract meaning, but also a different concrete-visual meaning and content. This change in the visual sense of spatial forms is particularly evident in the well-known phenomena that are usually summarized under the title of "optical inversion". One and the same optical complex can sometimes be transformed into this, sometimes into that spatial object, can now be "seen" as this, now as another object. Such inversions are, as has been rightly emphasized, neither

illusions of judgment to which we are subject, nor mere "ideas" that we "make" for ourselves, but genuine perceptual experiences. In all of this we see anew how the change of "view" also immediately transforms what we see into something perceptually different; how every shift in the point of view also reshapes what we see, purely in its phenomenal content. The further consciousness progresses in its formation and organization, and the more its individual contents become "meaningful", i.e. the more they gain the power to "point to" others, the more the freedom grows with which it can, through a change of "view", transform one form into another.

It has already been shown that this act of concentration, as an act of center formation and center creation, goes back to a productive basic mental function, and that it can therefore never be fully explained by merely reproductive processes.

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