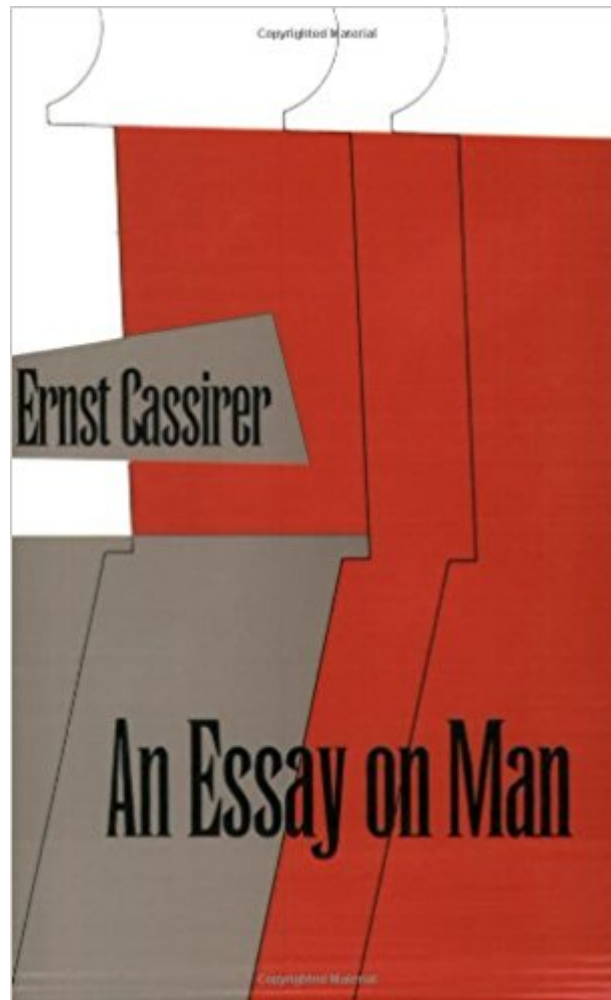


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An Essay On Man: An Introduction To A Philosophy Of Human Culture



Synopsis

One of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers presents the results of his lifetime study of man's cultural achievements. *An Essay on Man* is an original synthesis of contemporary knowledge, a unique interpretation of the intellectual crisis of our time, and a brilliant vindication of man's ability to resolve human problems by the courageous use of his mind. What the thinkers of the past have thought of the human race, what can be said of its art, language, and capacities for good and evil in the light of modern knowledge are discussed by a great philosopher who had a profound experience of the past and of his own time. Ernst Cassirer had a long standing international reputation in philosophy. This suggestive volume now makes available the substance of his point of view. --Irwin Edman, New York Herald Tribune "The best and most mature expression of his thought." •Journal of Philosophy

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Customer Reviews

Mentioning Ernest Cassirer the first thing comes to our mind is 'symbolic form'. This concept has been widely quoted and variously explained, particular after publication of Professor Wood's translation of Panofsky's essay on perspective. However the concept of symbolic form remains illusive. Very few had the courage to tackle Cassirer's three volume treatise. This little gem, an essay on man, is quite readable and give a wonderful introduction to Cassirer's philosophy.

Very good. An important book.

Thanks. A very good classic to read.

Excellent

Cassirer born in Breslau on July 28, 1874 graduated from the University of Berlin and studied at Marburg. He taught at Berlin and Hamburg until the Nazis prompted his departure from Germany in 1932. He taught at Oxford and then at Yale, and finished his career at Columbia. He began his work in the field of Epistemology, writing 'The Problem of Knowledge' and then 'Substance and Function'. These preceded the work he is most known for: the three-volume 'Philosophy of Symbolic Forms'. 'The Essay on Man' was the major work of the last period of his life. It is in a sense a summary and précis of his earlier monumental work. In it he asks the question which is first and fundamental to Philosophy as he sees it, the question of 'What is Man?' His concluding words give the flavor of the whole. They show how he tries to comprehend all major areas of human endeavor in one unified philosophical structure. "Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in the process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world. But it does not confound this unity with simplicity. It does not overlook the tensions and frictions, the strong contrasts, and deep conflicts between the various powers of man. These cannot be reduced to a common denominator. They tend in different directions and obey different principles. But this multiplicity and disparateness do not denote discord or disharmony. All these functions complete and complement one another. Each one opens a new horizon and shows us a new aspect of humanity. The dissonant is in harmony with itself; the contraries are not mutually exclusive but interdependent: "harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre". Here is a philosophy pervaded by faith in Man and the human future, a future still to be shaped by our own creative symbol-making power.

Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) was a German Idealist philosopher. He wrote other books such as 'The Philosophy of the Enlightenment', 'Language and Myth', 'The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History Since Hegel', 'The Myth of the State', 'The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language, etc.' [NOTE: page numbers below refer to the 261-page paperback edition.] He wrote in the Preface of this 1944 book, "The first impulse for the writing

of this book came from my English and American friends who repeatedly and urgently asked me to publish an English translation of my *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. After the first tentative steps I found it impracticable and unjustifiable to reproduce the former book in its entirety. I decided to make a fresh start and to write an entirely new book. This book had to be much shorter than the first one. I have tried in this present book to concentrate upon a few points that seemed to me to be of special philosophical importance and to express my thoughts as briefly and succinctly as possible. I did not mean to write a popular book. On the other hand this book is not destined for scholars alone. He wrote in the first chapter, "There is, therefore, only one approach to the secret of human nature: that of religion. Religion shows us that there is a double man---the man before and after the fall. Man was destined for the highest goal, but he forfeited his position. By the fall he lost his power, and his reason and will were perverted...What is given here is not meant to be a theoretical solution of the problem of man. Religion cannot offer such a solution...Religion cannot be clear and rational. What it relates is an obscure and somber story: the story of the sin and the fall of man. It reveals a fact of which no rational explanation is possible. We cannot account for the sin of man; for it is not produced or necessitated by any natural cause. Nor can we account for man's salvation; for this salvation depends on so inscrutable act of divine grace. It is freely given and freely denied; there is no human action and no human merit that can deserve it. Religion, therefore, never pretends to clarify the mystery of man. It confirms and deepens this mystery. The God of whom it speaks is...a hidden God." (Pg. 13-14) He states, "Here we touch upon the crucial point in our whole problem. The difference between propositional language and emotional language is the first real landmark between the human and the animal world. All the theories and observations concerning animal language are wide of the mark if they fail to recognize this fundamental difference...The logical analysis of human speech always leads us to an element of prime importance which has no parallel in the animal world. The general theory of evolution in no sense stands in the way of the acknowledgement of this fact. Even in the field of the phenomena of organic nature we have learned that evolution does not exclude a sort of original creation." (Pg. 32-33) He suggests, "Myth combines a theoretical element and an element of artistic creation. What first strikes us is its close kinship with poetry...But in spite of this genetic connection we cannot fail to recognize the specific difference

between myth and art...In mythical imagination there is always implied an act of BELIEF. Without the belief in the reality of its object, myth would lose its ground. (Pg. 82-83) He observes, "Art gives us the motions of the human soul in all their depth and variety. But the form, the measure and rhythm, of these motions is not comparable to any single state of emotion. What we feel in art is not a simple or single emotional quality. It is the dynamic process of life itself---the continuous oscillation between opposite poles, between joy and grief, hope and fear, exaltation and despair. To give authentic form to our passions is to transform them into a free and active state. In the work of the artist the power of passion itself has been made into a formative power." (Pg. 165) Later, he adds, "To the extent that human language can express everything, the lowest and the highest things, art can embrace and pervade the whole sphere of human experience." (Pg. 175) He states, "So long as we live in the world of sense impressions alone we merely touch the surface of reality. Awareness of the depth of things always requires an effort on the part of our active and constructive energies. But since these energies do not move in the same direction, and do not tend toward the same end, they cannot give us the same aspect of reality. There is a conceptual depth as well as a purely visual depth. The first is discovered by science; the second is revealed in art. The first aids us in understanding the reasons of things; the second in seeing their forms. In science we try to trace phenomena back to their first causes, and to general laws and principles. In art we are absorbed in their immediate appearance...The two views of truth are in contrast with one another, but not in conflict or contradiction. Since art and science move in entirely different planes they cannot contradict or thwart one another." (Pg. 187-188) He states, "A philosophy of history, in the traditional sense of the term, is a speculative and constructive theory of the historical process itself. An analysis of human culture need not enter upon this speculative question. It sets up for itself a more simple and modest task. It seeks to determine the place of historical knowledge in the organism of human civilization. We cannot doubt that without history we should miss an essential link in the evolution of this organism. Art and history are the most powerful instruments of our inquiry into human nature." (Pg. 228) Idealist philosophy is not really "in vogue" much any more; but Cassirer was one of its best exponents from the 20th century, and this book will probably interest those who are looking for metaphysical philosophy, and the philosophy of art.

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