

Making Life Explicit

The Symbolic Pregnancy of Religious Experience

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The title of this article uses a phrase brought to philosophic significance by Robert Brandom, when 10 years ago he published his opus magnum *Making it Explicit*.¹ This impressive book is widely regarded as an important achievement in analytic philosophy for the masterly manner in which it spells out in detail a comprehensive framework for understanding language and thereby our relationship to the world. But Brandom stretches the realm of analytic philosophy by explicitly claiming the relevance of all this for our conception of man. «In making it explicit», he points out in the very last paragraph of his great book, «we make ourselves explicit».² And indeed: a certainly plausible way of reading *Making it Explicit* focuses on the manner, in which Brandom unveils the logical powers of language as so many constituents of our specifically human way to live our lives. For Brandom, human beings are beings that can be characterized by their ability to make explicit linguistically what is implicit in our interactions with the natural world and the other members of our species.

And here is where finally the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer enters the picture, together with my first thesis: Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, so I will argue, can aptly be seen as both a convincing anticipation and a critique of Brandom's idea to structure the anthropological field by the use of two parallelized pairs of

terms: implicit/explicit and action/language. Brandom's ladder of ascent from just doing something to explicitly spelling out its meaning consists of well-described rungs, and a closer consideration of those rungs will be highly instructive not only for the understanding of Cassirer's philosophical anthropology, but also for the assessment of his impact on theories of religious experience. In order to accomplish the latter, I will suggest a concept of religious experience and its structural components along the lines of Brandom's scheme of explication, and use it to point towards some shortcomings in Cassirer's theory — and also, though this is not the main topic of this article, in Brandom's.

Brandom's theory of expressive rationality focuses on the linguistic power to make explicit the inferential connections between those implicit suppositions on which our interactions with the world rest. Thus, the first rung of Brandom's ladder consists in the implicit normativity of things that are done. In the conceptual framework of a theory of religious experience, this step might be linked to its qualitative aspect, the lived experience prior to its semantization. Second comes the use of ordinary language in order to weave the inferential network, in which a particular action/situation is embedded. Here, the parallel lies in the process of articulation, of finding the right words — or nonverbal symbols — that might do justice to the meaningfulness of lived experience by transforming it into concrete meaning. The next and third rung is marked by explicit reasoning, by the use of logical categories in order to spell out the logical structure of the material propositions produced on the

¹ Robert B. Brandom, *Making it Explicit. Reason, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994).

² Brandom, 650.

second rung. With regard to religious experience, this could be seen as the phase of codification, of explicating the interdependencies and normative hierarchies between the narratives of step two. And the fourth step, finally, is reached when reason reasons upon reason, when the whole comprehensive structure is made explicit in philosophical reflection. Theories of religious experience, quite detached from lived experience as they necessarily are, should be located on this fourth and last level. As I would like to assert, this formal structure of Brandom's ladder is a helpful tool when it comes to understand the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and furthermore the structure of religious experience in general. But it can be and has to be detached from Brandom's own specific vision of language, which I regard as misleading insofar as it focuses entirely on propositions and offers no help for understanding the place of emotions, the important role of expressivity in the personal sense of the word and anyway the multiplicity of expressive media as distinguished from propositional language.

Brandom's focus on «making it explicit» belittles his general project by leaving *us* implicit: the whole holistic structure of lifeworldly convictions, emotions and values, composed not out of mere propositions, but of an inextricable variety of symbolic media. And Cassirer's comprehensive idea of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I shall argue, should be seen as a conceptual alternative, sharing with Brandom's concept the dynamics of mind as explicating what is first of all acted out, but managing to pay tribute to the full-fledged scale of human expressivity.

The process of explication, of shaping our interactions with the world by making explicit its emotional, cognitive and practical implications, is what distinguishes the human form of life. But, as Cassirer can teach us, if we read him as anticipating a critical assessment of Brandom's focus on propositional language, the concept of explication implies no inbuilt hierarchical order between the several irreducible symbolic media. To the contrary: at the heart of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* I see a fierce attack against the philosophical conception that semantic meaning terminates in the reflexive, propositional and detached use of language. Pro-

positional language is indeed special insofar as it must be seen as the medium of meta-reflexivity, the medium in which we spell out the irreducible coloring, the specific structure of each symbolic form. But this important function should not be confused with the misleading idea that each case of semantic meaning can be brought into a propositional form. For Cassirer, the very idea of symbolic pregnancy implies that it constitutes an internal relationship between the specific meaning of a given utterance and some intrinsic properties of the chosen medium. When it comes to matters of religion, this is a very important insight, because it protects us against the common philosophical temptation to isolate some set of propositions concerning the nature of the divine as the hard core of the phenomenon, thus losing sight of the fact that any vital religious life incorporates a multitude of symbolic practices over the full-fledged expressive scale from bodily movements to elaborated reflexive language.

Brandom locates the anthropological impact of our expressive powers in our ability to make explicit the inferential structure of our linguistic relation to the world. Against this background, Cassirer's concept of various symbolic forms with specific modes of symbolic pregnancy reminds us of the fact, that expressivity as the distinguishing anthropological feature operates along criteria that vary in accordance with the specific symbolic form. Thus the project of «making *it* explicit» in the propositional sense is transformed into the idea of «making *life* explicit», of spelling out the meaning of our interactions with the world by using the full scale of expressive media. «Jedes Merkmal unserer Erfahrung und unseres Erlebens», as Cassirer puts it in his «Essay on Man», «hat Anspruch auf Wirklichkeit».³ And thus we cannot lead our lives, as he underlines in the concluding remarks of this essay, without expressing it. Inspired by the linguistic theory of Wilhelm von Humboldt with its focus on language as articulation and by the German tradition of «Lebensphilosophie», Cassirer develops a picture of our symbolic act-

³ Ernst Cassirer, *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1996), 124.

ivities as closely interconnected with our everyday experience. Leading our lives interacting with our social and natural environment, we are constantly involved in the process of making explicit what actually is meant by what we do — the process of semantic explication — and the reverse activity, which we might call «pragmatic implication». Strictly spoken, experience forms a hermeneutic circle between action and semantic understanding: lived experience is semantically determined in its meaning and vice versa does semantic meaning guide actions which lead to different experiences etc. To be sure, the aspect of action, the necessity to move up *and* down on the ladder of explication is not very prominent in Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. But his latest work, the *Essay on Man*, shows a significant approximation towards pragmatic positions, so now and then I will take the freedom to read him as an emerging pragmatist.

Having developed the idea of making life explicit by the use of a variety of mutually irreducible symbolic media, we can now turn to the distinguishing properties of religious experience. Along the sketched lines we might say that religious experience emerges when not only this or that aspect of life, but its meaning in general is made explicit by the use of symbolical means. If we look at it this way, we can see that talking about this special type of experience presupposes at least three structural components: (1) an experience that is acted or lived out («Erleben»), (2) the symbolic media available in a given culture, and (3) the attempt to bring those two aspects together by articulating the meaning of lived experience symbolically.

For the remainder of my article I will try to clarify this structure using Cassirer's concept of symbolic pregnancy. And I will do so by focusing on the intricate relation between feeling and symbolic form, because this will enable us to see the systematic benefits and the shortcomings of his concept at the same time.

I shall begin with a closer consideration of the basic idea, the concept of symbolic pregnancy. The most elaborate definition can be found in the third volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: «Unter «symbolischer Prägung» soll also die Art verstanden werden, in der ein Wahrnehmungserlebnis, als «sinnliches» Er-

lebnis, zugleich einen bestimmten nicht-anschaulichen Sinn in sich faßt und zur unmittelbaren Darstellung bringt.» It is «die Wahrnehmung selbst, die kraft ihrer immanenten Gliederung eine Art von geistiger «Artikulation» gewinnt».⁴ The German term «Prägung», chosen with care by Cassirer, combines the two aspects of *conciseness* on the one hand and *density*, meaning-ladenness on the other. Both aspects are important: conciseness enables us to individuate our experiences by articulating them as having dealt with this and not with that, and thus inevitably produces distinctions and dividing lines. For the concept of religious experience, the second aspect is even more important: saturatedness with meaning. I suggest to distinguish between two facets of this term, as closely related as the two sides of a coin, but marking a very important difference. Meaning-ladenness can be understood both as semantic density and as experiential content. As semantic density, the emphasis lies on the rich and manifold manners in which a given coined phrase is interwoven with its semantic context, providing new inferential connections between hitherto unconnected aspects.

But as long as we focus on this aspect exclusively, we are never forced to leave the linguistic level. And indeed I see a tendency in Cassirer to conceptualize pregnancy in a manner that emphasizes the inferential structure only — not in the Brandonian, but in the enriched sense of multiple symbolic media —, namely the internal relation between symbolic forms and symbolic pregnancy. But in order to see the impact of his thought on the concept of religious experience, we have to concentrate on the second sense of meaning-ladenness: relatedness to first-person-experience. What does that mean exactly? It means that semantic density in symbolic forms is underdetermined if seen on the linguistic level alone and must be embedded within a theory of lifeworldly experience. If we focus on the performative or pragmatic aspect, we see that symbolic pregnancy emerges only when people use

4 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen, Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1954), 235.

language or other symbolic media in order to articulate the meaning of their experiences. As William James has shown in his famous essay on the *Will to Believe*,⁵ symbolic density or pregnancy alone will never produce meaningfulness in the sense of guiding action or expressing experience. Only if a given instance of symbolic pregnancy is, as James puts it, «live enough to tempt our will»,⁶ only if we regard it as a possible expression for some personal experience, it becomes meaningful in the unrestricted sense of the word. Thus, the horizontal aspect of rich inferential interconnectedness has to be supplemented by the, so to speak, vertical aspect of expressivity for first-person-experience.

This leads us to the threefold structure of experience mentioned above. Symbolic pregnancy cannot be explained on the level of mediality alone, it emerges when semantically dense symbols are seen in relation to personal experience, either as its appropriate expression or as the appropriate means to induce, to make possible, some lived, first-person-experience. The concept of symbolic pregnancy should in my eyes be located precisely in the middle of those intercrossing horizontal and vertical lines. In the process of «making life explicit» it designates the point where two aspects come together and something new emerges: the personal attempt to articulate the meaning of an experience which first of all is lived through or acted out on the one side and the social objectivity of semantic meaning on the other.

The decisive point here is to realize that Cassirer's concept of symbolic pregnancy aims at overcoming the idea of symbolization as mirroring, as the representation of presemantic thoughts or sensual impressions. Producing and understanding semantic symbols — primary and secondary articulation — should both be understood as cases of, as one might say, «bounded creativity», as creative interpretations of situated experience. In his marvelous essay on «Qualitative Thought»,⁷ John Dewey has worked out in detail the nature of this process of

explication as an intrinsic element of action, which leads from some «single pervasive quality»,⁸ from which a given cycle of experience starts, to some explicit formulation, to the kind of pregnancy Cassirer sees as characteristic of our cultural world. As Dewey puts it, the qualitative situation is present as «that of which whatever is explicitly stated or propounded is a distinction», but «to call it <implicit> does not signify that it is implied».⁹ The anthropological idea of making life explicit, taken from an enlarged Brandomian setting and applied to Cassirer's concept of symbolic pregnancy, rejects the idea of presemantic meaning implied in semantic expressions, but emphatically embraces the concept of implicit meaningfulness, experienced in qualitative situations and brought to explicit formulation in a creative process that transforms situative concrete possibilities into symbolic pregnancy. Thus, the difference between implied and implicit meaning is by no means a minor one: for it introduces the possibility of what Charles Taylor calls «the exploration of order through personal resonance».¹⁰ If symbolic meaning were already implied in presemantic action and/or perception, its symbolic formulation would entirely be a matter of adequate representation. Consequently, in religious matters, pluralism had to be conceptualized in terms of cognitive or morally deficient deviations from the one and only true religion. But if we substitute the idea of isomorphic representation by the idea of symbolic pregnancy as an internal component of qualitative experience, we are enabled to accept pluralism without having to embrace the anything-goes-attitude. The implicit guides explication and hence the production of symbolic pregnancy not by providing some primordial meaning independent from our symbolizing faculties, but by delivering the

⁷ John Dewey, «Qualitative Thought», in *The essential Dewey, vol. 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* (ed. by L. Hickman & Th. M. Alexander; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 195-205.

⁸ Dewey, 198.

⁹ Dewey, 197.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 511.

⁵ William James, *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Human Immortality*, both books bound as one (New York: Dover, 1956).

⁶ James, 29.

background of a qualitative unity without which the process of semantization would never get of the ground.

Thus the concept of symbolic pregnance with its emphasis on the internal relation between semantic meaning and qualitative experience can be seen as connecting the hermeneutical insight that understanding presupposes an unthematized horizon of meaningfulness with Dewey's contention, that qualitative situations provide the unobjectifiable background of every explicit formulation. In my eyes, it is above all this constitutive tension between the semantic and the pragmatic aspects of density in symbolic pregnance that contributes to the richness of Cassirer's conception and establishes its importance for the concept of religious experience.

By giving two examples, I hope to elaborate this central point further: *first*, I will deal with Cassirer's important distinction between mythical thought and religion, and *second*, I will use his concept to argue against two counter-productive dichotomies in our field: collective vs. individual and active vs. passive.

In the second volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer explores mythical thought as a specific way of interaction with reality. Right from the beginning he combines a diachronic with a synchronic perspective: mythical thought is seen both as an early phase in the development of culture and as an anthropological constant. And throughout the text, Cassirer's focus is not on material content, but on structural unity. In his eyes, mythological consciousness as such can be characterized through the interdependence of two aspects: semiotically by a complete fusion between meaning and sign — Cassirer talks about «Konkreszenz»¹¹ — leaving no room for reflexive distance, and anthropologically by the physiognomic stance, that is the attitude to interpret all experience in terms of its emotional coloring, its importance for the well-being of the self and its social group. By the second aspect, mythical consciousness is closely connected to a basic feature of life-worldly-, first-person-experience in general: its

qualitative character, which, in John Dewey's words, is due to its «care or concern for human destiny».¹² I would even go one step farther and insist, that it is precisely this aspect of qualitative thought that enables Cassirer to conceptualize mythical consciousness as, so to say, a symbolic form that is here to stay: the physiognomic stance of ordinary, nonscientific experience is not prone to cultural rationalization and can be preserved when then mythical mode of symbolization is overcome by the discovery of the semiotic difference between sign and meaning.

And this is precisely what happens when we move from myth to religion. As Michael Moxter has shown recently,¹³ Cassirer construes the development to the latter as a gain in semiotic rationality: in general, this amounts to the discovery of signs as signs which stand for something that eludes its symbolization, in religious terms we talk about the discovery of transcendence. Mythological pregnance is guided by the logic of *presence* in which experiential content is semantic meaning and vice versa. In contrast, religious pregnance is guided by the logic of representation in which semantic density is taken to refer to a reality transcending its symbolization.

This process of semiotic rationalization, as reconstructed by Cassirer, exhibits very interesting parallels with the historico-sociological debate about the discovery of transcendence in the so-called Axial Age, started by Karl Jaspers and currently associated above all with the name of Shmuel Eisenstadt. Instead of going into the details of this ramified debate, I will pick out one point of special importance: the relation of transcendence and experience. According to Moxter's reading of Cassirer, it is the semiotic switch from presence to representation that distinguishes religion from mythical consciousness. But in my eyes, the emergence of transcendent categories introduced yet another semiotic difference that has influenced the history of religion and of interreligious dialogue ever since: the difference between representation — in the

¹² Dewey 201.

¹³ Michael Moxter, *Kultur als Lebenswelt. Studien zum Problem einer Kulturtheologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 139–142.

¹¹ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen, Zweiter Teil: das mythische Denken* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 82.

platonian sense of prefiguration and image — and *articulation*. Following the logic of representation, we will no longer be tempted to confuse meaning and sign, but we may still hold the conviction that a given symbolism — say: the dogmatic framework of some religion — is the only valid expression of the transcendent truth, all intolerant consequences included. Jan Assmann's books on the «mosaic distinction»¹⁴ underlines this problematic point strongly, but it never contemplates another possible long-term effect: for the idea, that the divine transcends our semantic categories, may also enhance the role of human experience: a divine, that eludes any attempt to capture it in adequate symbols calls for yet another move on the semiotic ladder of explication: the move from representing some pre-given divine order to articulating the human experience of the divine. The latter attempt goes beyond the logic of presence *and* of isomorphic representation, and I suggest that Cassirer's account of the transition from myth to religion should be read in this light, in line with his general conception of experience.

My second point is closely connected to Cassirer's emphasis on symbolic pregnance as the centerpiece of a creative process, in which lived experience is transformed into semantic meaning, and semantic meaning vice versa structures the way in which we act and experience the world qualitatively. This focus on symbolic experience as *energeia*, not as *ergon* — if I may borrow Wilhelm von Humboldt's distinction — allows him to overcome some deeply entrenched dichotomies, above all those between activity and passivity and between collectivity and individuality. If we move, with Cassirer, from the idea of representation to the concept of articulation, the mirror-metaphor no longer leads us astray in suggesting that the validity of our convictions and values depends on passive impressions. The basic fact about consciousness, then, is that it is not content with impressions, «sondern daß es jeden Eindruck mit einer freien Tätigkeit des Ausdrucks verknüpft und durch-

dringt».¹⁵ The active/passive-dichotomy is thereby transformed into aspectual differences within the active process of experience. Following Cassirer, the question: is the content of religious experience received or produced by its subject? makes no sense at all. A cycle of experience may have started with the subject's attraction to some unifying quality perceived as just being there, but the process of semantization, of delineating the content and fixing its inferential connections, inevitably involves creative and formative activities. And without symbolic pregnance, not even the experiencing self would know what his or her experience was all about.

This leads me to the other futile dichotomy, the one between collective and individual experience. Ever since the classical theories of Durkheim and James, theorizing in our field has been torn between those two polar aspects. Durkheim emphasizes strongly the social character of religion and defines it as a solidly united system of convictions and practices,¹⁶ whereas James, in his famous lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, focuses on personal religion only and announces straightaway to «ignore the institutional branch entirely».¹⁷ Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* offers a mediating position: following the idea of symbolic pregnance we can realize, that — on the one hand — personal, lived experience in its qualitative-emotional dimension remains dumb and has no power to transform behavior as long as it is not articulated symbolically, and — on the other hand — that any system of convictions and practices, that from the first-person-point of view is no longer seen as expressive for qualitative experience, becomes increasingly obsolete. The officially so-called scientific world-view of socialism in the last years of the GDR offers a

¹⁴ Jan Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter: Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (München/Wien: Hanser, 1998); *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis der Monotheismus* (München/Wien: Hanser, 2003).

¹⁵ Ernst Cassirer, «Der Begriff der symbolischen Formen im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften», 169–230 in *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956), 175.

¹⁶ Cf. Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1960), 65.

¹⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 34.

good example for the latter collapse of symbolic experience, the corresponding failure on the other side being what Robert Bellah called the religion of Sheilatism.¹⁸ inferentially unarticulated lingering on emotional qualities without any normative consequences. Symbolic pregnancy in its unrestricted sense — both as semantic and as pragmatic density — can thus be interpreted as a mediating term between the cultural objectivity of symbolic forms and personal experience. And this line of thought can once again be connected with the development from mythical consciousness to religion: as Cassirer points out in part III of his book on mythical thought, it is the very process of mythical articulation itself, that triggers a process leading from undifferentiated mythological collectivity to the idea of a reciprocal relation between the self and the community: «Indem jede neue Stellung, die das Ich sich gegenüber der Gemeinschaft gibt, ihrem Ausdruck im mythischen Bewußtsein findet, indem sie sich vor allem in der Form des Seelenglaubens mythisch objektiviert, wird die Entwicklung des Seelenbegriffs nicht nur zur Darstellung, sondern zu einem geistigen Werkzeug für den Akt der <Subjektivierung>, für die Gewinnung und Erfassung des individuellen Selbst».¹⁹

This process, as Cassirer points out, is guided by what he calls the physiognomic stance — his idiosyncratic way to evoke the central role of emotions in mythical as well as in everyday-experience. My critical assessment of Cassirer is centered around this point. As I see it, Cassirer realizes the intimate connection between qualitative experience and symbolic pregnancy, but his conceptual framework produces some significant distortions and keeps him from fully appreciating the role of emotional qualities. The first limitation seems to be that, by bringing together mythical consciousness, emotional qualities and physiognomic experience, Cassirer overemphasizes the parallels between perception and emotion. His model is our human ability to «read» facial expressions of emotional qualities

and the propensity of mythical consciousness to «physiognomisation» of reality in general. The importance of the physiognomic stance has recently been supported with massive empirical evidence by Paul Ekman,²⁰ and Cassirer has a strong point here. But it is deeply misleading to conceive of emotional qualities in general along this line of thought. Interestingly, in the chapter on «myth and religion» in his *Essay on Man*, Cassirer elaborates this point with a lengthy quotation on qualitative thought, taken from John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. He praises Dewey for having pointed out the importance of emotional qualities, but it seems to escape his attention, that Dewey rejects the perceptual conception, allows emotions to be semantically elaborated and sees the qualitative aspect as indispensable even for scientific thought. As Dewey shows in his essay on *Qualitative Thought*, every cycle of experience starts with some emotionally experienced «underlying and pervasive quality»,²¹ in which the meaning-ladenness of a situation is contained and from which the articulation of meaning has to start. But during this process of semantization, the emotional aspect remains alive, and semantic meaning fuses inextricably with emotional coloring, thereby structuring the content of forthcoming experience. Primary emotions, in other words, are capable of semantic refinement and of evaluations by second-order emotions, commonly called values. Cassirer's conception of emotion doesn't capture this decisive point because it focuses on the reciprocity of physiognomic impression vs. mimetic expression: «Der sinnlich-affektive Zustand geht, indem er sich geradezu in den mimischen Ausdruck umsetzt, in diesem letzterem auch gleichsam unter; er entläßt sich in ihm und findet darin sein Ende».²² And even though Cassirer underlines that higher symbolic functions emerge precisely when this discharging is

¹⁸ Cf. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: California UP, 1996).

¹⁹ Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, 210.

²⁰ Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed. Understanding Faces and Feeling* (London: Weldenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

²¹ Dewey, 197.

²² Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 21953), 134.

inhibited and finally substituted by linguistic articulation, emotional qualities seem to lose all importance when it comes to climb the higher rungs of the ladder of explication, namely «Darstellung» and «Bedeutung». Thus, two important features of emotional qualities get lost: their thoroughgoing importance in even the most sophisticated forms of symbolic experience, and their plasticity, their capability of being transformed by processes of articulation.

In matters of religious experience, these are important points, since every adequate reconstruction of its inner form will have to refer to some emotional unifying quality which guides the attempt of semantically fixing its meaning. And here we have another example illustrating the impact of the discovery of transcendent categories: for the emotional quality detaches itself from the mythological-physiognomic point of view when, in axial religion and in accordance with the «Bilderverbot», the face of God is conceived of as invisible. Yet the intensity and importance of emotional qualities remains, albeit transformed into higher-order emotional attitudes. The specific symbolic pregnance of religious experience is shaped by the articulation of those value-laden attitudes. But if the procreation of symbolic pregnance, as I have suggested, is to be seen as the mediating term in the triangular structure of symbolic experience, the other terms being qualitative experience and socially available semantic systems, we realize that pregnance is always precarious. Since it articulates experience, it always incorporates an indissoluble tension between what is meant and what is said, between the qualitative unity of lived experience and semantically articulated meaning. From Cassirer's idea of symbolic pregnance we can learn that experience itself collapses and loses all relevance for the guidance of life when presemantic qualities are confused with the semantic content that is produced only by the endeavor of articulation. But the symbolic forms of culture, and the semantic universes of religious worldviews are also prone to the opposite danger, namely experiential lifelessness.

And here we can begin to see the full cultural importance of religious experience, conceived of as the transcendence-conscious attempt to achieve an expressive relationship between ar-

ticulation and qualitative experience. The semiotic rationalization from myth to religion, as Cassirer, followed by Moxter, saw realized in Jewish prophecy with its Bilderverbot, must anthropologically be seen as placing an hitherto unimaginable emphasis on personal experience. Thinking in categories of transcendence and the conscious attempt to articulate experience mutually reinforce each other, and it would definitely be very rewarding to investigate this intimate connection more closely. The process of cultural symbolization, the life of the symbolic forms, gains an unprecedented dynamics when fueled by the ever elusive difference between qualitative intensity and symbolic pregnance. And transcendent categories can be seen as the conceptual placeholders of this chasm, whose existence protects us from confusing the world of semantic meaning with reality.

Having come thus far, we can finally close the circle and return to my reading of Cassirer as anticipating a semiotic critique of Brandom's ladder of explication. Religious Experience, released to its full meaning by the discovery of transcendence, can not only be valued as an important step in semiotic rationalization in comparison to mythical consciousness; it can also safeguard us against the debasement of personal experience implicit in propositionalistic views of our relation to the world. Without doing justice to the transcendence implicit — though not implied — in the chasm between the qualitative and the symbolic aspects of experience, we will leave ourselves implicit even though we might move around with ease and competence in the space of reason.

