

The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The *Xici* and Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

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Abstract

This paper, unlike scholars who ascribe to it a copy theory of meaning, argues that the logic of the *Xici* is best described through “philosophy’s linguistic turn,” specifically Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer’s concept of the symbol as a pluralistic, constitutive, and functional yet concrete and observable *form*, is comparable to the symbolic system in the *Xici* 系辭: *xiang* 象, *gua* 卦, *yao* 爻, and *yi* 易. Their similarity is due to a shared philosophical orientation: humanism. The characteristics of the *Xici*—the part-whole (structuralist) relationship typical of correlative cosmology, the simultaneously sensuous and conceptual nature of its symbols, the stress on order as opposed to unity, and the importance of symbols per se—for Cassirer are characteristics that were only possible in European intellectual history after a substance ontology was replaced by a functional one. For Cassirer, a functional ontology is closely associated with a humanism that celebrates creations (i.e., language) of the human mind in determining reality. This humanism is coherent with the intellectual context—Confucian humanism—contemporary with the period of the *Xici*’s composition. It would thus be inconsistent to concede this humanism to the *Xici* without also conceding that its understanding of the symbols is akin to that of the linguistic turn. Finally, even regardless of this comparative framework, the *Xici* runs into a paradox if we read it through a copy theory of meaning, paradoxes that immediately dissolve if we read it through the paradigm of the linguistic turn.

Keywords

Ernst Cassirer – humanism – linguistic turn – philosophy of language – philosophy of symbolic forms – symbol – *Xici* – *Yijing*

1 Introduction

Through a comparative look at Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms (henceforth, PSF) and the genealogy of the PSF, we will see, first, that the Cassirean subject/the sage in the *Xici* 系辭 is a functional subject that orders phenomena into coherence through symbols of its own creation. The phenomena, the subject, and the symbol are brought into a mutually dependent relationship. Second, the symbols (hexagrams) are not copies of a preexisting world; like the understanding of language under the linguistic turn, they are informed by the existing world but essentially determined by human beings. Third, these symbols allow the world to take on meaning, value, order—that is, specifically *human* experience. The symbol as the enabling condition of human experience is thus the enabling condition of human freedom. Fourth, the symbols function through a part/whole structuralism: in the *Xici*, the hexagram and the *yao* 爻 lines have meaning only in relation to the whole.

For Mark Edward Lewis, Willard Peterson, and Michael Puett, the *Xici* describes a process in which sages passively duplicated existing cosmic laws into the hexagrams. This is a copy theory of meaning, and I believe that reading the *Xici* under this paradigm is mistaken. My claim has three levels. First, the text runs into a paradox if we read it under a copy theory of meaning—paradoxes that are resolved if read through the logic¹ of a linguistic turn. Second, if the *Xici* is viewed in comparison with Cassirer's PSF and the philosophical genealogy of the PSF, it is implausible for it to have the philosophical characteristics usually attributed to it (functionality, part-whole structuralism, *xiang* 象 as both sensuous and conceptual, pluralism and becoming), without its symbolic system (*xiang*, *gua* 卦, *yao*, and *yi* 易—henceforth, “symbolic system”) operating under the logic of a linguistic turn and the sage having a constitutive role in the creation of the symbols. Third, Cassirer is one of the European tradition's greatest humanists;² he has a rare ability to take culture seriously as a philosophical topic and is arguably singular in the systematic attention

1 I do not use the word “logic” in the sense of any formal system of logic. I use the word in its more generic sense, as principles or the rationale that underlies a way of thinking.

2 By which I mean a secular humanism in which humans are recognized as the creators of their own values. The best way I can think of to describe Cassirer's humanism (other than saying that humanism permeates all his works, even in his most technical contributions to epistemology and mathematical theory) is to quote this satire of his famous 1929 encounter with Heidegger at Davos. A young Emmanuel Levinas, who was present at the occasion, parodied him as intoning: “Humboldt, culture, Humboldt, culture” (*Les imprévues de l'histoire* [Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1994], 210). Humboldt refers to Wilhelm von Humboldt, a philosopher, statesman, and pioneer of the modern university. Culture refers to the ideal, shared by educated nineteenth-century Germans that self-realization is the goal of life

he gave to culture. Cassirer could take culture seriously for the same reason that the linguistic turn took place. The enabling condition of both phenomena is overcoming substance ontology (associated with Aristotelian scholasticism) through a functional ontology (associated with the rise of humanism). Given the humanism of Confucianism at the time of the *Xici*'s composition and the correlative (i.e., functional) system, it does not make sense for the *Xici* to celebrate the hexagrams, identified with the beginning of human culture, through a theory of language characteristic of a substance ontology, which stressed the passivity of man in an already determined order. Let us first look at how the *Xici* does not make sense unless we presume that the symbols created by the sages were constitutive of reality.

2 The *Xici*

This section shows that, at least in the passages cited, the sages needed the hexagrams before they could understand reality; the appended phrases [*ci* 辭], *Changes* [*yí*], and *shu* 數 affect reality; and human beings are needed for completion of the universe.

Xici 1.10 reads, "It is by means of the *Changes* that the sages plumb [*ji* 極] the utmost profundity and dig [*yan* 研] into the very incipience [*ji* 幾] of things."³ In saying that the *Changes* were necessary for understanding the world, the *Xici* is saying that hermeneutic signs are constitutive of original meaning. If the sages merely passively copied the phenomenal laws that they witnessed, then they would not need the *Changes* before they could investigate or understand phenomena. Similarly, *Xici* 2.2 says that Fuxi 伏羲 "made the eight trigrams in order to become thoroughly conversant [*tong* 通] with the virtues inherent in the numinous and the bright and to classify the myriad things in terms of their true, innate natures [*qing* 情]."⁴ In *Xici* 1.7, Confucius says, "The *Changes*, how perfect it is! It was by means of the *Changes* that the sages exalted their virtues and broadened their undertakings."⁵ Again, if the sages already had access to the laws of reality, why would they need the *Changes* before they could broaden their understanding? I think the best way to understand what is happening in these four passages is to liken the sage's

and that we realize ourselves by embracing the world, as opposed to sinking into introspection, as in German pietism.

3 Richard J. Lynn, *The Classic of the Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Annotated by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 63.

4 *Ibid.*, 77.

5 *Ibid.*, 56.

creation of the hexagrams to technological creations like that of a telescope. The sages needed to have a grasp of the laws of physics to invent such an instrument, but the production of a telescope also required a human mind to synthesize these laws and put them to creative use. After this telescope was invented, the sages could return to the laws of phenomena embodied in this invention, but they were now better placed to observe those original phenomena.⁶ At the end of this section, I will offer my interpretation of how we should understand the triadic relationship in the *Xici* between the sage, his inventions (hexagrams), and the phenomenal world.

A statement about the symbolic system effecting change in the world is in *Xici* 1.4: “The *Changes* is a paradigm of Heaven and Earth, and so it shows how one can fill in and pull together the Dao of Heaven and Earth.”⁷ Similarly, *Xici* 1.12 says that “the stimulation of everything under Heaven to movement depends upon the phrases.”⁸ Likewise, in its treatment of numbers, the *Xici* often posits that numbers cause change in the world. Because in Chinese, numbers have their own characters, “Fu Xi’s invention of writing already includes numbers.”⁹ Numbers, like the *Changes* and the phrases, are symbolic inventions of the sages that effect change in the world. Under a framework of metaphysical dualism, the idea that signs affect reality is a logical fallacy: the copy cannot affect the original. The *Xici* thus does not operate under a metaphysical dualism, nor does this passage operate under a “mythic consciousness” that believes the sign has literal power to affect reality. What is happening in these two passages is more sophisticated than a mythic consciousness talking about magical signs; what is happening instead is the logic of the linguistic turn. The phrases stimulate everything under Heaven to move, because the symbolic language that the sages created outlines the boundaries of meaningful experience. The phrases cannot literally change the world; they can only change our

6 Only in the twentieth century did Western philosophy begin to think philosophically about technology. The ancient view that art and technology were imitative no longer held sway at a time when technologies were invented that had no prototype in nature, i.e., unmovable wings. For Cassirer, no product of human beings can be irretrievably alienated from its creator. All creations of the human spirit, managed in the correct way, allow greater freedom of the human spirit. For the same reason, I believe that only Confucians (who wrote the *Xici*)—contra the Mohists, who saw merely a utilitarian value in technology, and the Daoists, who saw in technology only a teleological utilitarianism injurious to organic spontaneity and fullness—could see the spiritual value of technology.

7 Lynn, *The Classic of the Changes*, 51.

8 極天下之賾者存乎卦，鼓天下之動者存乎辭。Lin Zhiman 林之滿, *Zhouyi quanjie* 周易全解 [*Explanation of the Book of Changes*] (Harbin: Heilongjiang kexue jishu chubanshe, 2012), 132.

9 Levinas, *Les imprévues de l'histoire*, 201.

representations of the world, which, for someone who accepts that meaning, is essentially dependent upon language/symbolic system, and this is the totality of our (meaningful) world.¹⁰ The *Changes* fills in and pulls together the Dao of Heaven and Earth, because it makes them more meaningful for the human subject than it would be otherwise. Edward Shaughnessy has argued that in making an argument (see below) that forms a part of *Xici* 1.12,¹¹ “the author of ... the *Xici* was participating in a debate about the nature of language and writing that, based on the evidence currently available, seems to have emerged within a decade or so of 300 BCE and then became quite ubiquitous by the middle of the following century.”¹² Shaughnessy goes on to call this movement, in which the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the *Mencius* 孟子 participated, “the linguistic turn of the third century BCE”.¹³ The portion of *Xici* 1.12 to which Shaughnessy specifically refers is the following:

The Master said: “Writing does not fully express speech, and speech does not fully express thought.”

“This being so, then how can the thoughts of the sages be seen?”

The Master said, “The sages established images in order to express fully their ideas, and set up hexagrams in order to express fully the characteristics [of things], appended statements to them in order to express fully their words, [alternated and penetrated] caused them to change in order to fully express their benefit, and drummed them and danced them in order to express fully their spirit.”¹⁴

10 We have sensations, of course, but pure sensations are not meaningful (in the sense of an enduring, more than passing, significance). For Cassirer, we are *animal symbolicum*. The animal lives in a world of immediate sensations and biological needs, whereas humans can achieve a certain degree of freedom/distance from a physical stimulus-response loop, through our ability to organize/give meaning to experience through symbols of our own creation.

11 In his description of the linguistic turn, Shaughnessy refers to the same passage that I cited (the dialogue between the Daoist and Confucius) (“The Writing of the *Xici* Zhuan and the Making of the *Yijing*,” in *Measuring Historical Heat: Event, Performance and Impact in China and the West*, November 4, 2001, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/conf/symposium2.pdf>). I think his claim about the linguistic turn encompasses the *Xici* 1.12 passage that I cited on the previous page, however (which occurs before the dialogue between the Daoist and Confucius), because its content is repeated in the passage that Shaughnessy cited. Both passages have the suggestion that the sages’ symbolic system affects reality (although the idea is more ambiguous in the passage cited by Shaughnessy).

12 Ibid., 208.

13 Ibid., 211.

14 Ibid., 208. I use Shaughnessy’s translation, as Lynn took the hexagrams as expressing the sages’ meaning—which is disputable. I have amended the Shaughnessy translation at one

The kind of skepticism about language in this passage is echoed in many passages in the *Zhuangzi*. In *Zhuangzi* 14.7, for example, Laozi ridicules Confucius's pride in his familiarity with the six classics by declaring them nothing but footprints [jī 跡] of former kings. According to the *Zhuangzi*, footprints are ossified residuals of an original dynamism; in this instance, shoes [lǚ 履] and the act of stepping that went with it. For the *Zhuangzi*, human freedom does not lie in the human creation of order/form. For the Daoists, order is an existing aspect of the natural world, and the human ability to partake of order lies in our receptivity and sensitivity to the natural order.¹⁵

For Mark Edward Lewis¹⁶ and Peterson,¹⁷ the way in which the Master (Confucius) avoids the charge of linguistic skepticism and thereby rescues the legitimacy of culture is to say that the *xiang*, hexagrams, and appended phrases capture everything that the sages intended to communicate. The reason that this symbolic system captures reality is that it is more sophisticated than "mere verbiage."¹⁸ The hexagrams are "directly rooted in the patterns of the cosmos and hence not translatable into ordinary speech."¹⁹ The sages passively replicated these cosmic patterns (*xiang*), which are "independent of any human observer; they are 'out there,' whether or not we look."²⁰ Similarly, for Michael Puett, the sage's creation of the hexagrams is described "in purely passive terms: they did nothing but imitate and pattern themselves on what the natural processes had generated."²¹ This interpretation has two problems.

point. The original read: "This being so, then how can the thoughts of the sages not be seen?"—perhaps "not" is a typographical error.

15 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, "Waipian tianyun 外篇·天運," in *Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi* 莊子今注今譯 [*Modern Commentary and Translation on Zhuangzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 389.

16 For Mark Edward Lewis, "Here a system of visual signs and natural referents formed by the images, hexagrams, and appended phrases figured as an alternative to conventional speech. This fullness of meaning offered by the *Yi* is possible because it is directly rooted in the patterns of the cosmos, and hence is not translatable into ordinary language. It remains the province of the sages and those who imitate them" (*Writing and Authority in Early China* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1999], 254-55).

17 For Willard J. Peterson, "The 'commentary' anticipates the objection that words surely are an inadequate means of conveying the sages' understanding of the complexities of change" by arguing that "The *Change* is a text with words, but it includes much that is not susceptible of verbalization; it cannot be dismissed as mere verbiage" ("Making Connections: 'Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations' of the *Book of Change*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 1 [1982]: 98-99).

18 Ibid., 99.

19 Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 254-55.

20 Peterson, "Making Connections," 80.

21 Michael Puett refers to sections 1.11 and 2.2 in particular and adds: "By claiming that the sage, in creating the trigrams, has simply replicated the patterns he has observed in

First, as we have seen, it is by no means conclusive that the sages passively replicated independently existing phenomena. Second, if the *Xici*, as Lewis and Shaughnessy write, was part of a challenge to “proto-Daoist texts” arguing for the legitimacy of “writing and the scholastic”²²—culture [*wen* 文], in short—then this copy theory of meaning would be a weak response to the Daoists. I do not think that Lewis²³ and Peterson’s²⁴ explanations of this passage—that Confucians were arguing that *this* symbolic system captures reality more than language does—would convince a hardcore skeptic. Why would the Daoists concede that this system of symbolic representation captures reality when they have already laughed off the possibility of another representational system’s (language) ability to do so? If the world is posited as a prior reality upon which human culture is merely a secondary appendix, culture will of necessity be despised as that which stands between us and a prior reality—as in Plato’s banishing of the poets (the copy makers) from his Republic. What we find in the *Xici*, however, is an ebullient, almost hyperbolic celebration of culture and the tools that enabled culture. The only possibility remaining to convince the Daoist that symbols capture reality is to ground it in a transcendent authority. Either the sage in the *Xici* was a human messenger receiving divine revelation, à la Parmenides and Mohammed, or the messenger is himself divine, à la Empedocles and Jesus. Grounding the symbolic system in a transcendent authority has the advantage of explaining how the symbolic system affects reality, as we saw above in *Xici* 1.4, 1.12, and 1.10. If a symbolic system is grounded in the divine, then the symbolic system, as in “mythic consciousness,” *can* literally claim magical powers. But this resort to transcendental authority is against the humanist spirit of the *Xici* (as well as Confucianism). The *Xici* is replete with the idea that human beings and human values affect the world or bring to completion the work of the world. For example, *Xici* 1.5 says, “That which allows the Dao to continue to operate is human goodness [*shan* 善], and that which allows it to bring things to completion is human nature [*xing* 性].”²⁵ *Xici* 1.4 says, “his [the sage’s] Dao brings help to all under Heaven.”²⁶ *Xici* 2.10 reads, “The *Changes* is something which is broad and great, complete in every way. There is the Dao of Heaven in it, the Dao of Man in it, and the Dao of Earth

the natural world, the author denies the connotations of artifice” (*The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], 87).

22 Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 241.

23 Ibid., 254–55.

24 Peterson, “Making Connections,” 98–99.

25 Lynn, *The Classic of the Changes*, 53.

26 Ibid., 52.

in it.”²⁷ Furthermore, the *Xici* has a concept for that which the *Changes* do not understand—*shen* 神—which Richard John Lynn has translated it as “the numinous.” *Xici* 1.5 reads, “What the *yin* and the *yang* do not allow us to plumb we call ‘the numinous.’”²⁸ The *Xici* evidently does not claim to know anything about the workings of the ultimate *au-delà*.²⁹ *Shen* thus functions like Kant’s use of noumena: it is meant to draw a boundary beyond which human experience can no longer meaningfully discuss.

The best riposte to the Daoist skeptic in *Xici* 1.12, and the only way to reconcile these seeming paradoxes, is to say that symbolic systems such as language are adequate for capturing reality, or what amounts to the same thing, the reality of one’s meaning, because they are the “transcendental conditions”³⁰ of that meaning. They are transcendental conditions in the sense that they are necessary for constituting our experience of reality. What I reject in Lewis and Peterson and Puett’s interpretations is that the *Xici* operated in metaphysical realism. Their interpretation and its implications go something like this: There is an independently existing reality. The sages were beings who had access to this reality and reproduced this reality in symbols that human beings could understand. The reason that we must be respectful, as opposed to hermeneutically suspicious about these symbols, is that the sages who created them were either divine or had access to the divine, but we are not divine and so do not have this access. The symbols are thus magical and affect empirical reality. Because the symbols are our guide for accessing an eternal, unchanging, independently existing reality, and because the sages no longer exist, the symbols are sacrosanct and cannot be changed. I believe that none of these five interpretations is appropriate in describing the *Xici*.

However, my interpretation of the *Xici* does not replace this paradigm with metaphysical idealism. I think the authors of the *Xici* recognized that “the

27 Ibid., 92.

28 Ibid., 54.

29 *Gu hanyu changyongzi zidian* 古漢語常用字字典 [*Ancient Chinese Dictionary*], 4th ed. (Beijing: Shangwu yingshu guan, 2011), agrees with my argument here. It has four definitions for *shen*. One of which is “that which is especially elevated and mysterious,” and cites *Xici* 1.5 (as above) as an example; (2) natural laws, as in *Xunzi* 17.3: “That which is accomplished without [anyone’s] doing it and which is obtained without [anyone’s] seeking it is called the work of *shen*”; (3) spiritedness [*jingshen* 精神]; (4) spirit/soul [*shenling* 神靈]. The *Gu hanyu changyongzi zidian* thus takes *Shen* in *Xici* 1.5 not to refer to natural laws, but that which lies beyond natural laws: the ultimate *au-delà*.

30 In the sense that they are the *a priori* forms necessary for thought. In Kant, these *a priori* or transcendental conditions are merely cognitive. Cassirer’s “transcendental conditions” are phenomenal and historical, they are the cultural forms necessary for thought and experience, such as language.

individual mind cannot create reality”—that “Man is surrounded by a reality that he did not make, that he has to accept as ultimate fact. But it is for him to interpret reality, to make it coherent, understandable, intelligible.” Through symbolic forms, “man proves to be not only the passive recipient of an external world; he is active and creative. But what he creates is not a new substantial thing; it is a representation, an objective³¹ description of the empirical world.”³² This new freedom won for the human spirit, through our ability to be fully human because we created the means/terms for our freedom, is what the *Xici* celebrates. But our freedom is not to the detriment of the natural world. Nature is not, as in the magical rituals of a mythic consciousness, “merely repressed by desiring and imagining. Rather, its own independent being is acknowledged.” The sage’s ability to give order to nature, thereby enabling human freedom, is “only achieved through obedience to it.”³³ The best way I can show how this relationship works is through *Xici* 1.4, where *yi* can be understood as either the “sage,” with “his numinous intelligence,”³⁴ or “the technique of the *Changes*”:³⁵

As *Yi* [i.e., the sage/*Changes*] resembles Heaven and Earth, he/it does not go against them. As his/its knowledge is complete in respect to the myriad things and as his/its *Dao* brings help to all under Heaven, he/it commits no transgression. Such a one extends himself/itself in all directions yet does not allow himself/itself to be swept away.... He/it perfectly emulates the transformations of Heaven and Earth and so does not transgress them. He/it follows every twist and turn of the myriad things and so

31 By “objective,” Ernst Cassirer is not making a realist claim. We should interpret his idea of “objective” in the sense that uses in talking about “true” here: “We call a proposition ‘true,’ not because it agrees with a fixed reality beyond all thought and all possibility of thought, but because it is verified in the process of thought and leads to new and fruitful consequences” (*Substance and Function & Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* [New York: Dover, 1953], 318). For Cassirer, furthermore, the entirety of experience is the measure of truth. Truth is available as a measure only in terms of the relationship between the part and the whole (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Philip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], 4:117). Cassirer subscribes to what can be called a coherence model of truth.

32 Ernst Cassirer, “Language and Art II,” in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 195.

33 Ernst Cassirer, “Form and Technology,” in *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Aud Sissel Hoel and Ingvald Folkvord (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 29.

34 Zhu Xi takes this interpretation (Lynn, *The Classic of the Changes*, 70, n11).

35 Willard J. Peterson accepts this interpretation (“Making Connections,” 102-104).

deals with them without omission.... Thus the numinous is not restricted to place, and *Yi* [i.e., sage/*Changes*] is without substance.³⁶

As Richard John Lynn writes, this passage may be *deliberately* amalgamating the sage, whose power is commensurate with that of Heaven and Earth, with the “technique of the *Changes*” and the power of Heaven and Earth per se.³⁷ I think this amalgamation belies a significant philosophical assumption: the sage (as a functional subject) is identified with the functional, hermeneutic law of the *Changes*.³⁸ Cassirer’s concept of the symbol (and of the subject) is like a sage providing a correlative point in organizing disparate phenomena. Cassirer’s concept of the symbol is based on his understanding of symbolic logic. For Cassirer, the rule of relation *F* that binds the elements of the series *F* (*a, b, c ...*) together is present in each item in the series, but it is not itself a new item in the series, and so cannot be abstracted as an item or “substantial thing.” The function is “a representation, an objective description” (see above):

We must recognize first of all that the order in a certain “bunch” [*Schar*] of elements never adheres to the individual elements themselves nor is given with them as a fixed, finished characteristic, but rather that it is first defined through the generating relation [*erzeugende Relation*] out of which the individual members proceed.³⁹

The function and the series are inextricable: each derives its respective meaning and, therefore, existence by its dependence on the other; but they should not be conflated with each other, for they belong “to different dimensions.”⁴⁰ The sage/*Changes* and these existing elements, as in Cassirer’s concept of function, are integrally dependent upon each other for their existence, to the point that, as in a mathematical function, they exist simultaneously or not at all. The functional relation in the mathematical series, when applied to every field of

36 Lynn, *The Classic of the Changes*, 52-53.

37 Ibid., 70, n11.

38 The evidence for identifying the *yi* in this passage with the sage is this: “Looking up, we use it [*yi*] to observe the configurations of Heaven, and, looking down, we use it to examine the patterns of Earth” [*yangyi guan yu tianwen fuyi chayu dili* 仰以觀於天文，俯以察於地理] is structurally very similar to *Xici* 2.2, in which Baoxi “looked upward and observed the images in heaven and looked downward and observed the models that the earth provided” [*yang ze guanxiang yu tian, fu ze guanfa yu di* 仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地].

39 Ernst Cassirer, “Kant und die moderne Mathematik,” in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Birgit Recki (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2001), 9:45.

40 Cassirer, *Substance and Function & Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, 26.

knowledge acquisition, becomes the cultural-historical subject, represented by its hermeneutic tool—the symbolic form: the symbol form is the name that Cassirer gave to any historically evolving function that orders the phenomenal manifold: “For each of these contexts, language as well as scientific cognition, art as well as myth, possesses its own constitutive principle which sets its stamp, as it were, on all the particular forms within it.”⁴¹ Cassirer’s concept of the functional, generative hermeneutic law (the symbol) is ultimately his interpretation of the Kantian claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”⁴² Cassirer only ever speaks of the human subject in terms of symbolizing capacities: he equates the subject with our hermeneutic (symbolic) forms. Cassirer thus abnegates an individual-mentalist understanding of the subject: the self, like the sage in the *Xici*, is functional. The sage exists (“perfectly”) inasmuch as he can “emulate the transformations of Heaven and Earth”—that is, respect the innate tendencies of things, but he does not completely disappear or get “swept away” because he is that which allowed for the possibility that meaning could be exhaustively obtained. He can bring to fruition the work of Heaven because he provides a correlative point that organizes an existing but otherwise disparate bunch of elements. No matter how much potential, innate tendency these existing elements possess, without an external, generating relation provided by the human subject/the hermeneutic law of the human subject, these elements could not have gained meaningful coherence: they would have slumbered in dormancy.

3 Leibniz, Goethe, and Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

In this second part of the paper, through a comparative look at Cassirer’s interpretation of European intellectual history, I show that it would be implausible for *The Book of Changes* [*Yijing* 易經] and the *Xici* to have the philosophical characteristics usually attributed to them (functionality, part-whole structuralism, *xiang* as both sensuous and conceptual, pluralism and becoming), unless its symbolic system is placed under the logic of a linguistic turn and the sage has a constitutive role in the creation of the symbols. The *Yijing*, as its name suggests, is based on a processual metaphysics that assumes the constancy of

41 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955), 1:97.

42 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 107.

change and becoming. Furthermore, its hexagrams operate through a structuralism in which the meaning of each one is manifested by contrasting its own configuration (of *yao* lines) with all other possible configurations. As such, meaning is derived through relationality (or a part-whole structuralism), as opposed to “copying” the properties of substances. For Cassirer, these characteristics are simultaneous with a “linguistic view” of language, as opposed to a naïve realist, copy theory of meaning (that of Lewis, Peterson, and Puett).

For Cassirer, as for the Confucians, the possibility of freedom lies with people: order can only be the product of the human spirit. Appeals to order at the level of nature (Daoists) or a transcendent authority (Mohists) surrender our only means of humanity. Similarly, Cassirer would argue against the *Lebensphilosophie* in vogue at his time—that idea of “nature” as an absolute prior condition to all mediation or a pure “life” prior to its distortion in culture, is a (dualistic) chimera. Like the concept of substance, it is a metaphysical assertion. Cassirer’s own PSF is, in part, an attempt to resolve the persistent dualisms in the history of Western philosophy: realism/idealism, particular/universal, being/becoming, freedom/necessity. His concept of a symbolic form is, simply put, an extension of the principles of the linguistic turn to all aspects of cultural forms. Meaning, values, experience, and the objects of our experience are essentially dependent on an interpenetrating matrix of “symbolic forms,” which are created by human beings. “Truth” is not “independent of any human observer” nor is it “‘out there,’ whether or not we look,” as Peterson attributes to the *Xici*. For Cassirer, truth is available only as a measure in terms of the relationship between a part of representation and the entirety of representation made available by the symbolic forms.⁴³ Crucially, Cassirer’s PSF is not a kind of idealism; the world exists independently, but it is up to the human being to understand it. As in the sage’s invention of the hexagrams in the *Xici*, Cassirer’s PSF can be described as neither metaphysical realism nor metaphysical idealism: it overcomes this dualism.

One of the most effective ways to understand Cassirer’s concept of symbolic forms, especially in relation to the *Xici*, is through its intellectual genealogy, notably that of Goethe and Leibniz. For Cassirer, as a historical thinker, new realms of philosophical possibility were opened up by Leibniz’s *Monadology*, and he traces a historical line of descent from Leibniz to Goethe. Cassirer was a “Goethean”; and “the ultimate goal of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is to give philosophical form to the feeling of liberation which Goethe’s

43 These symbolic forms include but are not limited to, language, myth, science, art, religion, technology (Cassirer, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic*, 117).

works inspired in him.”⁴⁴ This feeling of liberation is Goethe’s discovery in both his poetry and his philosophy of metamorphosis that only in the human giving form to experience and phenomena do we perceive the whole (or Dao). The symbolic form is a relationship in which the whole imbues the (empirical) particular with meaning, but the whole can be perceived only through the (empirical) particular: the symbol is symbolic of the whole (i.e., it works through a part-whole structuralism). Furthermore, a symbolic form is like the Goethean concept of form in that it is not a *forma substantialis*. Like the Cassirean symbol, the Goethean form can be identified by its process and the concept of form can therefore be interpreted as the becoming of form.⁴⁵ Lastly, this symbolic form is not a pre-existing, determined fact of the world; it must be created [*tun*] by forming the powers of the human spirit. We can comprehend the world and ourselves only through our own creations [*Gebilde*].

For Cassirer, this way of thinking about the relationship between the part and whole, neither in terms of the deductive and inductive relationship of a part to a whole nor in terms of a dialectic that cancels each of the particular stages on its way to truth, was sparked by the Copernican-Kepler revolution, found mature articulation in Leibniz’s *Monadology*, and was consummated by Goethe. As we shall also see, it is not only Cassirer who saw Leibniz as a revolutionary figure in European intellectual history. Joseph Needham similarly credits Leibniz with the origins of this part-whole paradigm in European philosophy, a relationship that he regards as typical of Chinese “correlative” thinking. As Chang Tung-sun 張東蓀 (1886-1973), one of the first scholars to describe Chinese thought as “correlative,” writes, this correlative thinking is best exemplified by the *Yijing*. As we shall see below, for Cassirer, this part-whole structuralism is inextricable from the logic of the linguistic turn in which language *creates* meaning. The same insight should apply to our understanding of the *Xici*: the part-whole structuralism that characterizes it is inextricable from a linguistic turn understanding of language.

44 John Michael Krois, “Die Goethischen Elemente in Cassirers Philosophie,” in *Cassirer und Goethe: Neue Aspekte einer philosophischen-literarischen Wahlverwandschaft*, ed. Barbara Naumann and Birgit Recki (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), 172.

45 Massimo Ferrari, “Was wären wir ohne Goethe? Motive der frühen Goethe-Rezeption bei Ernst Cassirer,” in *Cassirer und Goethe: Neue Aspekte einer philosophischen literarischen Wahlverwandschaft*, ed. Barbara Naumann and Birgit Recki (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), 180.

4 Six Outcomes of the Copernican Revolution

The ordering of the world through functional laws as the precondition for the liberation of the human mind and human subjectivity is a recurring point of emphasis in Cassirer's entire *oeuvre*. For Cassirer, the European Renaissance liberated the human subject and the human mind from the "reactionary and restrictive element"⁴⁶ of the Aristotelian concept of substance [*ousia*]. In the medieval "harmony of the spheres"—which took its theoretical foundations from Aristotelian and neo-Platonic ontology—a hierarchical, fixed order of being steadily led from the most imperfect to the most perfect (Being), through which all limited and dependent being was fixed in an eternal order. As a result of the Copernican-Kepler revolution, the harmony of the world is no longer a substantial, spatial reality. Instead of partaking in the whole through the fixed order of being, the harmony of the whole can now be obtained through the mind's ability to grasp/form the relational principles of the natural order. For Cassirer, what the Copernican-Kepler revolution achieved against the medieval harmony of the spheres is paralleled by what modern symbolic logic achieved against traditional syllogistic logic and what the linguistic turn achieved against a copy theory of truth. For Cassirer, the linguistic turn is a result of the European tradition's overcoming of Aristotelian substance ontology. In other words, for Cassirer an inseparable relationship exists between naive realism or substance ontology and the copy theory of meaning and, conversely, between a "functional" ontology and the linguistic turn, in which language creates meaning.

The Copernican-Kepler revolution against Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic metaphysics had six mutually conditioning outcomes, which I believe also characterize the philosophy of the *Xici*. Furthermore, all these characteristics revolve around the issue of language.

First, relations are not already existing objects in the world that one copies in a symbolic medium. Relations are only a creation of the human mind.

Second, functionality presupposes and allows for a deeper relationship between the part and the whole—one could say "structuralism"—in the sense that a particular no longer has essential meaning; rather, it gains meaning in connection with laws that only result from the whole.

Third, functionality gives a philosophical place to particularity, becoming, and pluralism. As we see in the philosophy of Parmenides,⁴⁷ taking Being or a

46 Cassirer, "Kant und die moderne Mathematik," 42.

47 Cf. Cassirer's discussion of Parmenides' monism in "Mythic, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space": "absolute identity, unity, and uniformity alone constitute the basic logical

substance ontology as a metaphysical a priori necessarily entails homogeneity (wholeness and indivisibility) as well as timelessness. Being must be whole and indivisible, as divisibility entails change and therefore time. The things of the phenomenal world undergo change, and so are non-Beings, thus illusory, and cannot be thought about. A metaphysics of Being thus logically entails monism and timelessness. The intellectual revolution against a metaphysics of substance results in elevated status for the power of the human mind in constituting reality, for this reality is now a system of relations that is constituted and organized by the human mind and the symbols of its creation. Put another way, after we substitute a functional description of the world with a substantial one, it is more conceivable that a plurality of ways exists to describe the same phenomena. In a functional description, the relations of things are constructions of pure thought, unlike a description under substance ontology, so there is no claim there we are ontologically describing the nature of the thing in itself. In a functional description, an atom, for example, can be understood as both waves and electrons, and these two descriptions can be complementary.

Fourth, a philosophy operating under metaphysical dualisms always faces the problem of how the universal in the form of the concept can be combined with the sense impression of the particular. In the Platonic framework, for example, the *Chora* fulfilled this function. When this paradigm began to lose its grip in the Renaissance, it was no longer necessary to think of the sensuous, particular content as separate from the universal form. One could begin to think of language (as a sensuous particularity) as constructing meaning. Language, as the uniting representation, or the synthetic medium in which the intellectual and the sensuous are brought together, is the clearest example of the reconciliation between the fundamental antagonisms of metaphysics. In Cassirer's view, therefore, Humboldt and the swathe of post-Kantian philosophers who turned to language did so because language achieves the "true synthesis and genuine reconciliation of the great fundamental antagonisms of metaphysics": "the finite with the infinite, the particularity of spiritual being with the universality of spiritual life and spiritual signification."⁴⁸

character of being. Being cannot transform its nature without denying and losing it in this transformation, without falling victim to its opposite—non-being" (Ernst Cassirer, trans. Donald Philip Verene and Lerke Holzwarth Foster, "Mythic, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space," *Man and World* 2, no. 1 [1969]: 7-8).

- 48 Ernst Cassirer, "The Kantian Element in Wilhelm von Humboldt's Philosophy of Language (1923)," in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 115.

Fifth, functionality or relationality is simultaneous with an elevated status for the human mind/subject: the formative powers of the mind are needed to establish these relations.

Sixth, the establishment of these functional laws requires symbols through which we can represent these functional relations.

I explore these six interconnecting points below in relation to language.

Cassirer's interpretation of the history of language thus follows the same paradigm of a gradual liberation from a substance ontology: the copy theory of meaning is a manifestation of traditional (Aristotelian) logic that was replaced by a functional understanding of language. According to traditional logic, the mind forms concepts by abstracting common properties from a certain number of objects: the concept is that which presents the shared essential properties. The formulation of concepts under traditional logic thus presupposes the existence of definite, fixed properties, which objectively are present: language merely reproduces the essential nature of things. In the view of this substance or "copy theory of knowledge," or "pictorialism,"⁴⁹ *truth* is explained in terms of the object; a representation is true if it manages to mirror the properties of the object. In this framework, the mind is literally passive. After the Copernican-Kepler revolution, the removal of the fixed hierarchy of being, and the attendant elevated status afforded to the mind of the subject, the copy theory of meaning runs into problems (as in the first condition above). If relations (as opposed to objective properties) are not always already in the world, which the mind passively mirrors, then we cannot explain how the finished world of concepts and ideas was originally determined before their reproduction in language. For Cassirer, the philosophy of language before Johann Herder (1744-1803) was limited to this copy theory of meaning: merely reproducing the "finished world of concepts and ideas [*Vorstellungen*]" of either externally received cognitive data or internally derived ideas.⁵⁰ So Cassirer would agree that if by "linguistic philosophy" and "philosophy's linguistic turn" we mean that "thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language" and that "meaning consists in the use of words," then the linguistic turn must be traced to a series of German thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "including Herder, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hegel."⁵¹ In this new view of language, language does not

49 Ernst Cassirer, *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics: Historical and Systematic Studies of the Problem of Causality*, trans. Otto Theodor Benfey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 151.

50 Cassirer, "The Kantian Element," 110.

51 Michael Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

merely mechanically reproduce given determinations; rather, it has autonomy and spontaneity—like the power of the mind in the Copernican-Kepler revolution—which *create* those determinations. Language thus renders inadequate the dualism of the Kantian system, which keeps the objectivity of freedom from the objectivity of being: the creative autonomy of language creates this (dualistic) determination. Nothing is given *a priori* before their manifestation in language.

The linguistic turn was completed for Cassirer by the linguistic structuralism of the twentieth century, whose principles, for Cassirer, are indebted to those of von Humboldt and, in turn, Goethe and Leibniz. As mentioned in the second condition above, one of the outcomes of the Copernican-Kepler revolution is a structuralist relationship between the part and the whole. For Cassirer, this part-whole structuralism can be described as an organic relationship between the part and whole first made possible in European intellectual history by Leibniz. In “Structuralism in Modern Linguistics,” Cassirer quotes Viggo Brøndal (1887-1942)—one of the pioneers of linguistic structuralism: “I am in agreement with the universalism demonstrated and practised a hundred years ago by the great master of general linguistics who was Wilhelm von Humboldt.”⁵² Cassirer goes on to say that the “program of structuralism developed by Brøndal is, indeed, very near to Humboldt’s ideas.”⁵³ For Cassirer, it is not an accident either that structuralism is indebted to Humboldt or that it resembles the “morphological idealism” found in Goethe’s *Metamorphosis of Plants*.⁵⁴ In Cassirer’s eyes, Humboldt “transferred Goethe’s idea ... of organic types” to “linguistic types.”⁵⁵ For Cassirer, the “holism or organicism” of “morphological idealism” found in Goethe’s *Metamorphosis of Plants* “bears a close relationship to linguistic structuralism”⁵⁶ in that neither “consist[s] of detached, isolated, segregated facts”—as in a physicalist/mechanical view; rather, they form “a coherent whole in which all parts are interdependent upon each other.”⁵⁷ In both Goethe’s “morphological idealism” and linguistic structuralism, the individual parts are mutually interrelated, and no part can change without changing the whole, leading to a relationship in which the whole is manifested in the part. Thus, for Cassirer, structuralism is “no isolated phenomenon”; rather, it is “the expression of a general tendency of

52 Cassirer, “Structuralism in Modern Linguistics,” *Word* 1, no. 2 (1945).

53 *Ibid.*, 117.

54 *Ibid.*, 109.

55 *Ibid.*, 116.

56 *Ibid.*, 109.

57 *Ibid.*, 110.

thought”⁵⁸—a tendency of thought that was enabled by Leibniz and came to fruition in Goethe.⁵⁹

For Cassirer, Goethe’s idea of “morphological idealism” was enabled in a formative way by Leibniz,⁶⁰ because, for Cassirer, the *Monadology* eliminated all dualistic separation between the particular and the whole. In the *Monadology*, individuals and the universe are not related quantitatively, as in a mechanical-physical conception—in which individuals are merely next to one another and make up the sum of the parts—but, instead, qualitatively. In this qualitative relation, the whole can be conceived only through the particular, and the particular can be determined and defined only in relation to the whole. What allowed the *Monadology* to provide this reconciliation, as opposed to the mechanistic-physical naturalism of Baruch Spinoza, was the organicist worldview that it entailed. Spinoza’s pantheism was built on a mechanical naturalism that, like medieval (Aristotelian) metaphysics, related the finite particular to the infinite through an abnegation of the finite particular, that is, the particular partakes of the infinite inasmuch as it disavows its particularity. In Leibniz’s *Monadology*, however, one component of the system depends on the others and relates to them by a functional rule. The sum of the parts is not a substantial whole, but the *law* of the whole that (reciprocally) governs all the parts. This integral relationship between the part and the whole is the organic world: “Life [*Der Lebensprozeß*]’ is more than the sum of individual, organic formations [*Bildungen*]; and it is this ‘more’ which points beyond the mere extension of matter in Cartesian physics.”⁶¹ Furthermore, and this is the point made in the third condition above, this part-whole structuralism is inherently more pluralistic—all particulars can be dignified because the (functional) law of the whole is not a preexisting (substantial) *a priori*; it derives from the totality of the particulars and thus changes with any change in the parts. “As the concept of being is correlated with unity, ... so there is an analogous correlation between multiplicity and order.” When, for Leibniz, “the point of gravity in thought shifts from the

58 Ibid., 120.

59 In the foreword to *Freiheit und Form*, Cassirer writes that in Goethe’s worldview [*Weltanschauung*] we can see the clearest example of the particular in the universal, in which every course [*Zug*] can be interpreted as simultaneously completely individual and completely typical (*Freiheit und Form* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961], xiv).

60 Massimo Ferrari, comments: “Cassirer saw a most intimate relationship [*innigste Verwandtschaft*] between Goethe and Leibniz due to the great diversity of Goethe’s living forms, its continuity, its inexhaustible interweaving and their inner dynamic could not be possible without the Leibnizian background” (“Was wären wir ohne Goethe?” 181). Cassirer’s view of this connection is preceded by the work of Wilhelm Windelband, Rudolf Eucken, Georg Simmel, Karl Vorländer, Dietrich Mahnke, and Bruno Bauch.

61 Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form*, 38.

pole of being to the pole of order in the total theoretical view of reality” then, of necessity, “a victory of pluralism over abstract monism, of a multiplicity of forms over a single form, is established.”⁶² Therefore, for Cassirer, when Leibniz replaced the concept of substance with that of relations, an entire swath of metaphysical problems was thereby resolved.⁶³

Like Cassirer, Joseph Needham thinks that Leibniz was the first to overcome the metaphysical dualism of the part and the whole in European intellectual history. The “part played by Leibniz in the history of philosophy was that of a bridge-builder. The antagonistic viewpoints of theological idealism on the one hand and of atomic materialism on the other hand had been an antinomy which European thought had never succeeded in solving”⁶⁴—until Leibniz’s *Monadology*. Similarly, for Needham, the key to Leibniz’s “bridge-building” was the organicist philosophy of a reciprocal part-whole relationship. “The key-word in Chinese thought” for Needham, “is *Order* and above all *Pattern* (and, if I may whisper it for the first time, *Organism*)”⁶⁵—all of which characterize Leibniz’s *Monadology*. In contrast to Western-style “subordinative [i.e., Aristotelian] thinking,” which relates classes of things through substance and emphasizes mechanical causation, in the kind of organicist Chinese philosophy that Needham calls *correlative thinking*, “conceptions are not subsumed under one another [i.e., Aristotelian, genus-species] but placed side by side in a *pattern*.”⁶⁶ “If they did not behave in those particular ways they would lose their relational positions in the whole (which made them what they were), and turn into something other than themselves. They were thus parts in existential dependence upon the whole world-organism.”⁶⁷ Needham’s point about the relationship between the part and the whole in Leibnizian metaphysics, as opposed to the “subordinative thinking” of its predecessors, thus parallels Cassirer’s assessment of Leibniz’s organicist system and its philosophical characteristics, in contrast to the Aristotelian one that it replaced.

The “organicist” worldview that, in the view of both Cassirer and Needham, Leibniz introduced to European intellectual history had philosophical implications that pushed the European philosophic tradition closer to the characteristics of “Chinese” philosophy: “correlative thinking.” A.C. Graham, who provides

62 Cassirer, “Mythic, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space,” 8.

63 Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form*, 38.

64 Ibid., 498.

65 Ibid., 281.

66 Ibid., 280.

67 Ibid., 281.

“the most philosophically sophisticated account of correlative thinking,”⁶⁸ has written that “there is a perfect fit between correlative thinking and the ... the structuralist approach inspired by Saussure’s linguistics.”⁶⁹ In this picture painted by Graham, Needham, and Cassirer, the shared point of connection between structuralism, correlative thinking, and organicist philosophy is Leibniz. Cassirer believes that structuralism (and the organicist philosophy it presupposes) is ultimately indebted to Leibniz. Needham similarly thinks that Leibniz is the father of organicist philosophy, which is remarkably similar to correlative thinking. Finally, Graham thinks that structuralism is like correlative thinking. We can explain such remarkable “coincidences” if we grant that, following Cassirer and Needham, Leibniz introduced a new kind of ontology to Europe. This new ontology is, as we have seen, comparable to Chinese correlative thinking. All the consequences of this new ontology unsurprisingly are very similar to characteristics of the *Xici*, six of which are listed above. Chang Tung-sun also subscribed to the connection between structuralism/correlative thinking and a non-Aristotelian ontology posited by Cassirer. Chang agrees with Cassirer’s analysis that traditional “Western thought is in the last analysis confined to Aristotelian logic” before the revolution of Russell’s symbolic logic⁷⁰ and that Aristotelian logic is necessitated by a substance ontology that understands the world through a logic of identity, leading to the idea of causality. For Chang, Chinese thought is, instead, characterized by a “correlation logic” in which “one term waits for its opposite in order to complete its meaning”⁷¹ and is best exemplified by the *Yijing*.⁷² Consequently, for Chang, the idea of *xiang* in the *Xici* cannot be described through a substance-ontology.⁷³ The paradigm of language operating in the *Xici* is nondualistic, as in the fourth condition above. What needs to be stressed is that *because* this non-Aristotelian structuralism noticed by Needham, Graham, and Chang is concomitant in the European context with the stress on the necessity of the human mind to make determinations, the same should likewise apply in the Chinese case. In the *Xici*, this

68 David Hall and Roger Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 295 n22.

69 A.C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), 16.

70 Tung-sun Chang, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” *A Review of General Semantics* 9, no. 3 (1952): 211.

71 Tung-sun Chang, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” trans. Li Anzhe, 1939. http://www.vordenker.de/downloads/chang-tung-sun_thought-language_culture.pdf, 22, note 4.

72 Chang, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” 215.

73 “It must be noted that behind the *hsiang* 象 no concrete things are implied. Its significance is only concerned with human affairs” (*ibid.*, 216).

structuralist relationship between and within the hexagrams should be seen as simultaneous with the recognition that meaning is created by humans—the fifth condition mentioned above—as well as the recognition that this meaning requires humanly created signs—the sixth condition mentioned above.

Much of Cassirer's writing features a celebration of the rise of humanism against a repressive religious tutelage. For Cassirer, the rise of postmedieval humanism is enabled by and concomitant with a functionalist worldview, which gives greater power to the human mind; structuralism in which "truth" is no longer in relation to an existing "fact" in the world but in the relation between a part of the representation and the whole of the representation; the assumption that "becoming" and "pluralism" characterizes reality more than "being" and "unity;" a desire to overcome the dualism between the immanent world of the human being, with the transcendental world of concepts, ideals, forms (i.e. language, Kantian schema, and Goethe's "archetypal plant"); an elevated status for human beings, who create meaning, as opposed to just passively copying it; and the symbols of its creation in understanding the world. As we shall see in the following section, the *Xici* is usually understood to be a Confucian text, and the Confucianism at the time of the *Xici*'s composition stressed the very humanism that Cassirer celebrated and saw as the enabling condition of these intellectual revolutions—a humanism that celebrates the human beings in determining reality and their own freedom and thus a concomitant view of language as a human creation that creatively constructs meaning as opposed to merely mirroring it.

5 The Intellectual Context of the *Xici*

Although the authorship of the *Xici* has not yet been (and perhaps cannot be) conclusively established,⁷⁴ reading the parts of the text that associate the hexagrams with the beginning of language, technology, and social norms

74 I am aware of the debate between Chen Guying and Liao Mingchun as to whether the *Xici* is Confucian or Daoist. With regard to this debate, first, I think that these labels may be anachronistic; we don't know whether the writer of the *Xici* necessarily saw his allegiance in such exclusive terms. Second, I do not see how the parts of the text that associate the hexagrams with the beginning of language, technology, and social norms and celebrates this fact could be Daoist, given that Daoists explicitly denounce language and technology, i.e., human creations, as that which stands between them and the Dao. Third, *Xici* 1.12 depicts Confucius arguing with a (presumably Daoist) skeptic and winning. This part of the text in which Confucius successfully defends the objectivity of symbolic meaning is surely contrary to the spirit of Daoism.

and celebrate this beginning through a lens of Confucian philosophy is justifiable. Confucianism was the only major school in early China that saw refined culture—that is, writing [*wen*], poetry [*shi* 詩], music [*yue* 樂], and ritual norms [*li* 禮]—as key, if not foundational, in its philosophical program. The Daoist, Legalist, Mohist, and Huang-Lao schools saw culture at best as secondary, at worst as pernicious and counterproductive to their utopian vision. The fact that Confucians understood the human being as determinative in its creation of culture/civilization implies that they held the same view of language:⁷⁵ human beings supply the potential conditions for meaning. Furthermore, the fact that the contemporary and the immediately subsequent tradition evidently valued the *Xici* for its philosophical justification of culture (especially *Xici* 2.2) also means that it is reasonable to read the text against a backdrop of Confucian philosophy—the school that regarded refined culture in the sense of *wen*—most seriously, philosophically. Mark Edward Lewis has written that the priority gained by the *Yijing* was to gain in the Confucian canon was due in large part to being identified as the origin of written language.⁷⁶ Accounts in the Warring States period [476–221 BCE] and early imperial texts on the origins of writing and the trigrams were thus often conflated with each other. For example, Xu Shen's 許慎 postscript to *An Explication of Written Characters* [*Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字]⁷⁷ and the opening chapter of Liu Xie's 劉勰 *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* [*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍]⁷⁸ closely mirror the sage's invention of the hexagrams in *Xici* 2.2. Perhaps because of this identification of writing and the trigrams as the ultimate root of all culture and civilization,⁷⁹ and the *Xici* as the “most important account of Fu Xi, the origin of the hexagrams, and the beginning of writing”⁸⁰ led to the canonization of the *Yijing*. It does not make much sense to read a text associated with the beginning of language and refined culture through anything other than the school that stressed the necessity of this refined culture for the well-being of humanity: Confucianism.

75 In arguing that the Confucians saw cultural forms as determined partly by the human agent, I draw on the work of Kurtis Hagen, *The Philosophy of the Xunzi: A Reconstruction* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2007), in which he argues (and I agree) that the philosophical position of the *Xunzi* is not realist but best characterized as “constructivist.”

76 See Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 5–6.

77 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [*An Explication of Written Characters*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983).

78 Liu Xie 劉勰, *Wenxin diaolong zhushi* 文心雕龍注釋 [*Commentary on The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*], comm. Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1983).

79 Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 199.

80 *Ibid.*, 197.

This stress on the human agent in the creation or maintenance of cosmic order is pervasive in a range of Confucian texts from the late Warring States period to the Han dynasty [202 BCE-220].⁸¹ The *Xunzi* 荀子 says “human nature is bad” [*xing*e 性惡], in a chapter that claims an ordinary person who exerts himself over a long period can “form a triad with Heaven [*tian* 天] and Earth [*di* 地].” In the *Doctrine of the Mean* [*Zhongyong* 中庸], those who possess the most sincerity [*zhicheng* 至誠] can “assist in the transformation and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth,” thus forming a triad with them.⁸² Even non-Confucian texts, such as the (syncretic) Huang-Lao *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor* [*Huangdi sijing* 皇帝四經], say that “The activities that form a triad with *tian* and *di* are called cultural patterns [*wen*]”⁸³ and that “Forming a triad with *tian* and *di* involves uniting with the heart-mind of the common people.”⁸⁴ It is this idea that people and their activities—their work—makes a creative addition to the world/universe, and this is what I call “humanism” and what, in comparison to the European context, I argue is concomitant with certain views about language.

6 Conclusion

This paper holds that the *Xici* is a humanist text in which the sages interpreted reality to invent the hexagrams based on three arguments.

First, the *Xici* runs into paradox unless we attribute to it a copy theory of meaning in which the mind passively copies a preexisting reality.

81 Richard J. Smith has written that “one important point of affinity between the *Yijing*-related documents of the late Zhou and early Han and many other texts of that era” was a kind of correlative cosmology closely identified in the Han period with Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179-ca. 104 BCE) (*Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World: The Yijing* [I Ching, or Classic of Changes] and *Its Evolution in China* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008], 32); and “Drawing on earlier metaphysical formulations, Dong and most other intellectuals of the Han period believed that human-beings were not simply passive objects on the cosmic stage; by virtue of their powers of mind—their ‘spiritual’ agency—they were active participants in the ongoing process of generation and regeneration” (*ibid.*, 36).

82 Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1: *From the Earliest Times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 338.

83 動靜參天地調之文. Yu Mingguang 於明光, *Huangdi sijing yu huanglao sixiang* 皇帝四經與黃老思想 [*The Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor and Huang-Lao Thought*] (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1989), 257.

84 參於天地，合於民心. *Ibid.*

Second, through a comparative framework, this paper has shown that a copy theory of meaning is characteristic of a philosophical system that presupposes a substance ontology. The European philosophical tradition began to think of language as constitutive of reality and started to take it seriously, after it replaced a substance ontology with a relational one. This relational, part—whole paradigm describes Leibniz's *Monadology*, Goethe's concept of form, "linguistic structuralism," Cassirer's symbolic forms, and Chinese "correlative cosmology." The characteristics of the *Yijing* system follows closely the four of the outcomes of the Copernican-Kepler Revolution: (1) a functionalist worldview; (2) signification through a part—whole structuralism 象/卦/爻: each *yao* line only has meaning in the context of the whole hexagram 象/卦, and the entire hexagram has meaning only in relation to the other sixty-four hexagrams; (3) pluralism and becoming, pluralism in the sense that the sixty-four hexagrams can change in sixty-four ways, thereby producing a total of 4,096 situations; the ways in which one can interpret these situations, however, are endless; becoming in the sense that each line/hexagram is always about to change into its next phase; (4) a phenomenal symbol that is simultaneously and unproblematically sensuous and conceptual. The original list is six; this one omits "an elevated status for the human mind/subject" and "These symbols do not function in a copy-theory-of-truth manner." However, Lewis, Peterson, and Puett argue that the sage is passive, that his mind did not contribute to the formation of the hexagrams, and so they merely copied reality. This comparative perspective indicates that simultaneous with a relational worldview is the elevation of the human being/mind as well as the symbols they created to understand world order. It is not possible to have a relational worldview together with a celebration of symbols without a humanism that dignifies the human spirit; they are simultaneous.

Third, we examine the intellectual context at the time of the *Xici*'s composition. The Confucian humanism of the Warring States period and early Han dynasty stressed the human prerogative to produce forms of culture and civilization. This elevated status for the human spirit as well as the forms of its creation is most evident in the foundational role that culture had for the Confucians. Language and poetry were dignified in a way that stands in stark contrast to its diminished status in the Platonic system. The rise of European humanism and its dignifying of language in the linguistic turn is commensurate with the hyperbolic celebration of the creation of symbolic language in the *Xici*. It would be illogical to have such a celebration of language that is not also a celebration of the constitutive role of language in creating meaning and thus a concomitant celebration of the human spirit. At the same time, it

would be illogical to have an intellectual context that celebrates the human spirit without celebrating the human creativity of language.

Under Lewis, Puett, and Peterson's interpretation, the implications of the idea that the sages passively copied cosmic laws are that the *Xici* operated under a metaphysical realism; humans made no contribution to the creation of the hexagrams; thus, the invention of the hexagrams is ipso facto the result of a mystical revelation; and because the sages merely *passively* copied the arcane mysteries of the universe, the authority of the hexagrams does not lie with the sages but, rather, in preexisting universal laws. Under this logic, the sage is a pantheistic version of Mohammed or Moses: a spokesperson of divine laws. Interpreted in this way, culture finds its ultimate foundation in an extra-human source. This model, as I have shown in this essay, is radically at odds with the text of the *Xici*, the other philosophical characteristics displayed in the *Xici*, as well as the intellectual context in which it was composed.

Kant famously made a distinction between *quid facti* and *quid juris*. I think that Mark Edward Lewis's *Writing and Authority in Early China* and Michael Puett's *The Ambivalence of Creation* operate under the belief that one can investigate the production of culture in early China through mere *quid facti*. As Cassirer is so fond of quoting from Goethe, however, "Everything significantly factual is already theory"⁸⁵—it is impossible to separate questions of fact from questions of value. Facts are neither objective nor neutral. When people labor under a belief that they are merely or objectively dealing in facts—positivism—what often happens is that they unknowingly absorb whatever *quid juris* is currently in vogue. In Lewis and Puett's case, it is a particular view of language that has dominated the Western tradition.

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85 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen, Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, ed. Max Hercker (Weimar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907), 125.

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