

Cassirer's approach to symbolic mediation differs in some important ways from currently prevailing approaches to meaning and signification such as semiology and its more recent poststructuralist varieties. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms offers a theory of symbols that does not amount to a sign theory or semiology. It sketches out, rather, a dynamic and nonrepresentational framework in which an alternative notion of difference takes centre stage. In order to make the original features of Cassirer's approach stand out, I will compare it with the approach of the perhaps most influential differential thinker of our day, Jacques Derrida. The philosophy of symbolic forms explicitly prefigures a great many of the insights and concerns of poststructuralism. Yet, there are some critical differences. Rather than rejecting the concepts of objectivity, identity, and truth on the premises established by traditional metaphysics, Cassirer chooses to redefine these concepts through a radical conceptual reframing. The result is a doctrine that—in Derridean parlance—neither jumps beyond the oppositions of metaphysics, nor tries to resolve them in a Hegelian synthesis—a doctrine, that is, that even though it appeals to origins, cannot so easily be dismissed as yet another instantiation of the metaphysics of presence.