



# CASSIRER AND HEIDEGGER IN DAVOS

Simon Truwant



## Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos

The 1929 encounter between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger in Davos, Switzerland is considered one of the most important intellectual debates of the twentieth century and a founding moment of continental philosophy. At the same time, many commentators have questioned the philosophical profundity and coherence of the actual debate. In this book, the first comprehensive philosophical analysis of the Davos debate, Simon Truwant challenges these critiques. He argues that Cassirer and Heidegger's disagreement about the meaning of Kant's philosophy is motivated by their different views about the human condition, which in turn are motivated by their opposing conceptions of what the task of philosophy ultimately should be. Truwant shows that Cassirer and Heidegger share a grand philosophical concern: to comprehend and aid the human being's capacity to orient itself in and towards the world.

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*The Philosophical Arguments*

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Simon Truwant

*KU Leuven*



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This monograph is the result of many years of wrestling with two profound thinkers who defended radically different worldviews by means of very distinct argumentation and writing styles. I have tried to do justice to both of these views without succumbing to the corresponding styles. As such, *Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos* is also the outcome of a long struggle to find my own philosophical perspective and voice. I am truly grateful to everyone who has guided me, in one way or another, during these struggles. They have been real.

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- Chapter 5 – ‘Cassirer’s Functional Conception of the Human Being’, in: *Idealistic Studies*, 45/2, 2015, 169–189.
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- Chapter 8 – ‘The Concept of “Function” in Cassirer’s Historical, Systematic, and Ethical Writings’, in: Gerald Hartung and Sebastian Luft (eds.), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, 289–312.

## Introduction

### *What Is at Stake in the Davos Debate?*

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Five years after Thomas Mann situated *The Magic Mountain*, his famous novel about Hans Castorp's intellectual coming of age, in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps town Davos, this place hosted a debate that would form the minds of multiple generations of philosophers. On 2 April 1929, two major figures of early twentieth-century philosophy, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, faced each other during the second meeting of the *Internationale Davoser Hochschulkurse*. Taking place in a time of deep cultural and philosophical crisis, this annual conference had the explicit goal to reunite thinkers from a variety of nations and backgrounds. Yet, ideas like reconciliation or intellectual cross-pollination are entirely absent from the collective memory of the Davos debate between Cassirer and Heidegger. While the transcript of their discussion shows an animated debate between two thinkers who both alternated stronger with weaker moments, its eyewitnesses unanimously reported that the older Cassirer was in fact no match for Heidegger, who seemed to embody the sentiments of a new era.<sup>1</sup> Most famously, a young Emmanuel Levinas claimed that attending the Davos debate was 'like witnessing the end of the world and the creation of a new one'.<sup>2</sup>

One cannot deny that history proved Levinas right in this regard. Since the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, Heidegger's philosophy has never ceased to be popular. Even though he soon abandoned the existentialist approach to the question of being that marks his *magnum opus*, and despite several scandals concerning his Nazism and anti-Semitism,<sup>3</sup> both Heidegger's early and later philosophy have continued to inspire philosophers until this

<sup>1</sup> Toni Cassirer, Ernst Cassirer's wife who attended the debate, later wrote that "the large majority of the students considered Heidegger as the victor, because he approached the *Zeitgeist* much better than Ernst" (*Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2003, 188 – my translation).

<sup>2</sup> François Poiré, *Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous?*, Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987, 78. Other first-hand testimonies from Otto Friedrich Bollnow ('Gespräche in Davos', in: *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, hrsg. von Günther Neske, Pfullingen, 1977, 25–29) and the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Abendblatt 22 April 1929) offer almost identical assessments of the Davos debate.

<sup>3</sup> On the extent of Heidegger's Nazi sympathies and its influence on his accounts of Dasein, world, and history, see Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press,

day. In comparison, Cassirer's legacy endured a much harder fate. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Cassirer was a highly respected intellectual as both the spokesman of the then dominant philosophical movement of Neo-Kantianism and the author of an impressive series on the history of thought.<sup>4</sup> The events in Davos severely damaged this reputation: in the eyes of the next generation of European intelligentsia – Levinas, Eugen Fink, Leon Brunschvicg, Jean Cavaillès, Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Marcuse, among others – Heidegger outshone Cassirer in a philosophical, sociocultural, as well as a personal way. For one, Heidegger challenged Cassirer's allegiance to the system-oriented schools of Neo-Kantianism, whose dominant position in European philosophy would soon give way to more existentially motivated movements such as *Lebensphilosophie* and, of course, existentialism.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Heidegger also exposed Cassirer's untimely support of Enlightenment ideals that had lost all credibility after the First World War, such as the belief in the power of reason and the inevitability of progress.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the apparent difference between Heidegger's charismatic personality and Cassirer's erudite yet uninspiring appearance in Davos reportedly contributed to the popularity of the former and the rapidly declining interest in the latter's thought.<sup>7</sup>

1987; and Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: L'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie. Autour des séminaires inédits de 1933–1935*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2005. On Heidegger's recently exposed conception of 'World-Judaism' and his firm anti-semitism in light of the 'tragedy of the history of being', consult Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Welverschwörung*, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Long before developing his systematic 'philosophy of symbolic forms' and becoming known as a philosopher of culture, Cassirer had made name as a brilliant historian of philosophy thanks to his habilitation on Leibniz (1902) and the first three volumes of *The Problem of Knowledge* (1906, 1907, 1919).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the philosophical, historical, and political reasons for the decline of Neo-Kantianism after 1930, consult Rudolf A. Makkreel and Sebastian Luft (ed.), *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 6–9; and Frederick Beiser, 'Weimar Philosophy and the Fate of Neo-Kantianism', in: Peter Eli Gordon and John P. McCormick (ed.), *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013, 115–132. With regard to Cassirer's thought in particular, see also Enno Rudolph, *Ernst Cassirer im Kontext. Kulturphilosophie zwischen Metaphysik und Historismus*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 1–5.

<sup>6</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Entretien Avec Roger-Pol', in: *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, ed. Pierre Hayat, Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994, 203–210; Dominic Kaegi and Enno Rudolph (hrsg.), *Cassirer-Heidegger. 70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, in: *Cassirer-Forschungen*, Band 9, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2002, v–viii; and Sebastian Luft's review of the latter book in *Journal Phänomenologie*, 19, 2003, 91–94.

<sup>7</sup> The picture of Cassirer and Heidegger's radically different personalities, the former distinguished but almost boring, the latter unconventional but attractive, is confirmed by Pierre Aubenque ('Philosophie und Politik: Die Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger in der Retrospektive', in: *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 2, 1992, 290–312), Rudolf Carnap (Archives for Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh Libraries, ASP RC 025-73-03, 30 March 1929), Ludwig Englert ('Als Student bei den zweiten Davoser Hochschulkursen', in: *Nachlese zu Heidegger: Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken*, hrsg. von Guido Schneeberger, Bern: Private Edition, 1962, 4), Karl Jaspers ('Letter

Cassirer never got the chance to restore his image, as he emigrated – like most Jewish intellectuals – from Germany in 1933 and died in the United States, on the Columbia University campus, shortly before the Second World War ended. As a consequence, for many years Cassirer was mainly remembered – if at all – as an exceptional historian of philosophy who could, however, not match the profundity of Heidegger’s thinking.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, the transcript of the Davos debate has long held the status of a mere historical document, recording a large shift in twentieth-century thinking rather than a profound philosophical *Auseinandersetzung*. Throughout the past century, commentators on the Davos debate have defended this view in mainly two manners.

The most radically dismissive position with regard to the Davos debate is found in the recurring suggestions that no real discussion took place between Cassirer and Heidegger in 1929 at all. Besides our protagonists, one other person took the word during the public debate: around halfway through the discussion, the Dutch linguist Henrik Pos remarked that “both men speak a completely different language”, and doubted whether their most important concepts “would allow for translation into the other language”.<sup>9</sup> Possibly inspired by this critical comment, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 10 April 1929, reported about the Davos debate in the following way: “Instead of being witness to the clash of two worlds, one at best enjoyed the scene of a very polite man [Cassirer] and a very intense man who also made an exceptional

[to Heidegger] 24, 21 July 1925”, in: *Briefwechsel, 1920–1963*, hrsg. von Walter Biemel und Hans Saner, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1990, 51–52), Hendrik Pos (‘Recollections of Ernst Cassirer’, in: *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp, La Salle: Open Court, 1949, 67–69), Leo Strauss, ‘Kurt Riezler (1882–1955)’, in: *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959, 246), and arguably even Cassirer’s late colleague, publisher, and admirer Charles W. Hendel (*The Myth of the State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, viii).

<sup>8</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas et François Poiré, *Essai et entretiens*, Paris: Actes Sud, 1996, 80–81; Jürgen Habermas, ‘Der Deutsche Idealismus der jüdischen Philosophie’, in: *Philosophisch-politische Profile*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981, 52–54; and Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010, 21. Edward Skidelsky recently held that, measured by today’s standards, Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is “no longer obviously philosophy at all”. The only reason to still “bother with Cassirer” is, then, “for the good reason that he was the twentieth century’s most accomplished defender of the Humboldtian ideal”. According to Skidelsky, Cassirer’s thought thus remains historically relevant because of the view of culture that it represents, but should no longer be considered as philosophical (*Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, 5–6, 209).

<sup>9</sup> The transcript of the Davos debate is included in the latest editions of Heidegger’s *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, which was written immediately following this debate: ‘Davos Disputation between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger’, in: Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, tr. by Richard Taft, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, 287 (193–207). Pos reiterates his assessment of the debate sixteen years later, at a memorial service for Cassirer’s death (‘Recollections of Ernst Cassirer’, 67).

effort to be polite [Heidegger], holding monologues. Nevertheless, all listeners were moved and told each other how fortunate they were for having been there".<sup>10</sup> Much more recently, according to Dominic Kaegi and Enno Rudolph, the transcript of the Davos debate betrays that neither thinker really wanted to be there, that they only sought confirmation for their prejudices about the other, and that they thus left without gaining any new insight. Kaegi and Rudolph even add that it is only thanks to the mutual criticisms that Cassirer and Heidegger uttered elsewhere, that we now pay attention to this debate at all.<sup>11</sup>

Heidegger confirmed this view of the Davos debate as a missed opportunity for profound philosophical discussion, but put the blame on the format of the debate and on Cassirer's compliance therewith. In a letter to Elisabeth Blochmann (12 April 1929), he complains that he gained nothing in terms of philosophical content from the entire *Davoser Hochschulkurse*. On the one hand, Heidegger holds that the philosophical issues at hand were far too complex for a public debate, and that the entire seminar therefore gained an increasingly sensationalist focus on the personalities of its central participants. In light of this, he regrets that the lectures that Cassirer gave in Davos prior to their debate concentrated on *Being and Time*, thus manoeuvring Heidegger's position into the centre of their discussion. On the other hand, he reproaches Cassirer's reconciliatory attitude: "During the discussion, Cassirer was extremely gentlemanly and almost too obliging. I therefore met with too little opposition, which prevented the problems from gaining the necessary sharpness of formulation".<sup>12</sup>

Although Heidegger's aversion to philosophical conferences is generally known, it is especially Cassirer's reluctance or, worse, incapacity to challenge

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Howald, 'Betrachtungen zu den Davoser Hochschulkursen', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10 April 1929, Morgenausgabe, 1. We find the same assessment in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* two weeks later: "Unfortunately, one must say that a somewhat too far-reaching generosity of both opponents ultimately did not allow the oppositions between them to be seen in its full sharpness" (Hermann Herrigel, 'Denken dieser Zeit: Fakultäten und Nationen treffen sich in Davos', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 22 April 1929, Hochschulblatt, 4); and in the report of Franz Josef Brecht, a student of Heidegger and attendee of the *Davoser Hochschulkurse*: "For here stood the greatest representatives of the two, last, fundamental positions in philosophy, for whom mutual discussion was logically no longer possible" ('Die Situation der gegenwärtigen Philosophie', *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung*, 6(1), 1930, 42). All three translations stem from Peter Gordon (cf. *infra*).

<sup>11</sup> Kaegi/Rudolph, *70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, vi-vii. Luft counters this assessment: he admits that the transcript of the Davos debate does indeed not evince a sharp discussion, but also rejects the idea that Cassirer and Heidegger were just talking past one another (*Journal Phänomenologie* 19, 92). I share his conviction that, by acquainting ourselves with the philosophical context of the debate and Cassirer and Heidegger's presuppositions, we will find that a thorough philosophical debate *did* take place.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim W. Storck, *Martin Heidegger – Elisabeth Blochmann, Briefwechsel 1919–1969*, Marbach am Neckar, 1989, 29–30.

him that was retained by the collective recollection of the Davos debate. The descriptions of Cassirer and Heidegger's contrasting personalities often lead to an assessment of their equally different philosophical profundity. The clearest example of this comes from Leo Strauss, who was not present at Davos, yet in 1956 he writes that "as soon as [Heidegger] appeared on the scene, he stood in its center and he began to dominate it. His domination grew almost continuously in extent and in intensity. He gave adequate expression to the prevailing unrest and dissatisfaction because he had clarity and certainty, if not about the whole way, at least about the first and decisive steps". Cassirer, Strauss continues, on the other hand "represented the established academic position. He was a distinguished professor of philosophy but he was no philosopher. He was erudite but had no passion. He was a clear writer but his clarity and placidity were not equaled by his sensitivity to problems".<sup>13</sup>

John Michael Krois, one of the pioneers of the renewed interest in Cassirer's thought beginning in the 1980s, also agrees about the absence of a real debate between Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos: "Whoever reads the protocol of the Davos debate today will get the impression that no debate took place, but that two ships rather passed each other in the night. Only declarations were made, whereby Cassirer seemed to evade everything".<sup>14</sup> However, Krois points to the political, anti-Jewish context in Germany at that time in order to explain this turn of events, thus countering the dismissive picture of Cassirer's performance in Davos. On his view, due to a series of anti-Semitic attacks on the Marburg Neo-Kantians, Hermann Cohen in particular, in the years and weeks prior to the Davos debate, Cassirer was more invested in defending his former teacher than in challenging Heidegger's philosophical critique of Neo-Kantianism on his own terms – even though, Krois adds, he had proven at other moments that he could easily do so. Cassirer indeed commences the Davos debate by calling Neo-Kantianism "the scapegoat of modern philosophy" and by asking Heidegger to explicate his view on this movement.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 246.

<sup>14</sup> John Michael Krois, 'Warum fand keine Davoser Debatte zwischen Cassirer und Heidegger statt?', in: *70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, 234; see also 'Why Did Cassirer and Heidegger Not Debate at Davos?', in: *Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies. Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Culture*, ed. by Cyrus Hamlin and John Michael Krois, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 244–262.

<sup>15</sup> *DD* 274. On the influence of the politically charged context of the Davos debate, in particular the anti-Semitic attacks on Neo-Kantianism and Heidegger's alleged sympathy therewith, consult Krois, 'Warum fand keine Davoser Debatte statt?', 238–244, and Toni Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, 188. Michael Friedman, however, holds that "it would be a mistake to read back a dramatic political conflict into the encounter at Davos in 1929, or into the relationship between Heidegger and Cassirer more generally". He lends more weight to the immediate reports by Pierre Aubenque and Ludwig Englert than to the post-war recollections of Toni Cassirer and Hendrik Pos, thus emphasizing "an atmosphere of extraordinarily friendly

Krois' take on the Davos debate points us to the second trend in its general reception, which takes for granted the lack of philosophical depth to this debate but asserts its value in terms of political, cultural, religious, or sociological oppositions. Perhaps precisely because Cassirer and Heidegger's positions evinced little common ground, their dispute became paradigmatic for some of the ideological clashes that marked twentieth-century politics and sociology: between the Weimar Republic and *Third Reich*, Jewish cosmopolitanism and Catholic provincialism, pacifism and radicalism, optimism and pessimism, and between modern and postmodern thinking.<sup>16</sup> With each additional opposition, the disagreement became more and more unsurpassable.

Apart from these non-philosophical assessments – which I will not evaluate – recent scholarship has advocated the philosophical-historical importance of the encounter between Cassirer and Heidegger. The two most famous monographs on the Davos debate, Michael Friedman's *A Parting of the Ways* (2000) and Peter Gordon's *Continental Divide* (2010), follow this trend. Both works have been highly significant for the rekindled fame of this debate – and for the revived interest in Cassirer's thought as such – and Gordon's book is a magnificent reference work for the entire Cassirer–Heidegger dispute to which I am highly indebted. It is nevertheless worth noting that Friedman and Gordon are ultimately not concerned with the Davos debate *per se*, but rather

collegiality". To Friedman, then, "it is clear (at least before 1933) that no social or political differences interfered with the equally obvious admiration and respect with which they regarded one another" (*A Parting of the Ways. Cassirer, Heidegger, Carnap*, La Salle: Open Court, 2000, 5–7). The strongest indication of this respect is the reported fact that, when Cassirer fell ill during the first week of the convention, Heidegger visited his hotel room to inform him about his ongoing lectures at Davos (Karlfried Gründer's 'Cassirer und Heidegger in Davos 1929', in: *Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, hrsg. von Hans-Jürg Braun, Helmut Holzhey, und Ernst Wolfgang Orth, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988, 293; and Englert, *Nachlese zu Heidegger*, 3). Peter Gordon likewise finds it "important to note that [the Davos debate] was primarily a philosophical conversation and not a struggle between bitter adversaries" (*Continental Divide. Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, 37). He even dedicates an entire chapter of his monumental *Continental Divide* to the way in which the Davos debate became the subject of a plethora of *Hineininterpretierungen*: Gordon insists that there are absolutely no indications that anyone present in 1929 conceived of this debate in political terms, that the 'political dramatization' however originated in the very first recollections, and that it crystalized once Heidegger's Nazi sympathies became common knowledge and once again after Cassirer died in 1945 (135, 329–338). Friedman and Gordon thus contend that the Davos debate may have been a clash of personalities, but not a personal or political clash.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Daniel Maier-Katkin, *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and, Forgiveness*, New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010, 75–76; Emily J. Levine, 'Cassirer's Cosmopolitan Nationalism', in: *Dreamland of Humanists. Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 213–217; and Sebastian Luft and Fabien Capeillères, 'Neo-Kantianism in Germany and France', in: *The History of Continental Philosophy*, volume 3: *The New Century: Bergsonism, Phenomenology, and Responses to Modern Science*, ed. by Keith-Ansell Pearson and Aland D. Schrifft, London/New York: Routledge, 2010, 61.

with its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Friedman revisits the events at Davos in order to reconsider the current gap between continental and analytic philosophy. He is concerned, thus, not so much with the structure or key issues of the Davos debate – of which he discusses only a few fragments – as with its symbolic meaning for the further course of twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy. His somewhat speculative thesis is that Cassirer’s philosophy of culture offered the last attempt to prevent the impending ‘parting of the ways’ of continental and analytic philosophy – exemplified by Heidegger and Carnap, respectively – and that we must therefore revisit their dialogue if we wish to reconcile these traditions.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Friedman, Gordon thoroughly analyses the transcript of the Davos debate in light of Cassirer and Heidegger’s multiple other encounters, but he too does so in order to defend a broad thesis about the history of philosophy. By distinguishing between the historical facts and the different recollections of the Davos debate, Gordon tries to show that the nature of continental philosophy is such that “philosophical meaning cannot be easily disentangled from cultural and political memory. Philosophy partakes of common memory the moment it begins to ramify into the broader narrative of human affairs”.<sup>18</sup> In this context, he retraces how a surprisingly broad range of first-class and second-class thinkers from the past century – Erich Przywara, Joachim Ritter, Paul Tillich, Strauss, Levinas, Hans Blumenberg, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jürgen Habermas – contributed to the rapidly developing idea that the events in Davos carry a symbolic meaning for the history and future of philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

I will not attempt to repeat Gordon’s formidable research. Instead, this book aims to narrow down the discussion about the Davos debate to its purely philosophical content, and to retrieve the coherence of Cassirer and Heidegger’s interaction from that perspective. This is not to deny that their public debate, as a non-scripted discussion, is much less coherent than some of their responses to each other’s thought in other publications. There are indeed moments in Davos when Cassirer and Heidegger seem caught off guard by the claims that their discussion partner utters, and fail to properly address them. In spite of this, this book will consider the Davos debate as a fruitful departure point for investigating the overall philosophical relation between Cassirer and Heidegger, and this for three reasons.

<sup>17</sup> Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*, 154–159. William Blattner likewise holds that Heidegger and Cassirer discussion about Kant’s thought “was really a stalking horse for a larger debate, one that lies at the center of the contemporary division in philosophy between the so-called Continental and self-styled analytic philosophy” (*Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time’*, London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, 173).

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 324–325.

<sup>19</sup> See the final chapter of *Continental Divide*, titled ‘Philosophy and Memory’ (329–357).

First, I hold that the Davos debate hinges on the same philosophical issues that also structure Cassirer and Heidegger's entire conversation, which lasted from 1923 until 1946. Concretely, I identify three core topics in their dispute: the lasting meaning of Kant's thought, the human condition, and the task of philosophy – the other issues that were mentioned in 1929 either fall under one of these topics, or have little impact on Cassirer and Heidegger's mutual engagement. Their insights on these topics also constitute key motivations for their own philosophical projects, that is, Cassirer's lifelong attempt to develop a transcendental philosophy of culture and Heidegger's early attempt to revive ontology by means of an existential phenomenology.

Second, I maintain that the development of the Davos debate foreshadows – as well as contributes to – the evolution from agreement to disagreement that characterizes their overall dispute. This is the case, I will argue, because the three aforementioned topics stand in a 'hierarchical' relationship with regard to each other: Cassirer and Heidegger's disagreement about the meaning of Kant's philosophy is motivated by their different views on the human condition, which in turn are motivated by their opposing conceptions of the task of philosophy. Hence, these three issues cannot fully be understood apart from each other, and the true, philosophical stakes of Cassirer and Heidegger's conflict only comes to light as their conversation proceeds.

Third, despite their eventual animosity, it can be argued that Cassirer and the early Heidegger largely remained in agreement about philosophy's relevance for human life and how to thematize it. Both thinkers are fundamentally concerned with the human being's capacity to orient itself in and towards the world, and both believe that this capacity can only be properly addressed if one abandons the duality of subject and world. This shared concern may explain why they engaged with each other's thought for such an extended period of time.

On these grounds, I will consider the Davos debate as a thoughtful dialogue between two philosophical equals, giving as much consideration to Cassirer as to Heidegger.<sup>20</sup> In this way, I try to find a middle ground between the previous attempts to offer an exhaustive overview of the various topics that were brought up during the Davos debate, and the many recent articles that single out just one of them. In my view, the former investigations show too much respect for the chronology and variety of these topics to grasp the overall argumentative thread of the debate, and hence do not capture the mutual

<sup>20</sup> According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger once referred to Cassirer as "the only thinker worth publicly responding to" (Dominic Kaegi, 'Davos und davor – Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Heidegger und Cassirer', in: Kaegi/Rudolph, *70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, 72).

dependence between its *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*.<sup>21</sup> The latter, although often highly illuminating, naturally also miss out on this internal coherence.<sup>22</sup> Hence, although recent scholarship has re-established the relevance of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, the Davos debate has become worth revisiting, and Heidegger's *philosophical* victory is no longer taken for granted, a thorough philosophical account of the stakes and the coherence of this memorable encounter is still lacking. This book aims to rectify this lack.

This attempt of course has its own limitations. First, as already mentioned, I will not engage with the broader historical and sociocultural context, presuppositions, and implications of the dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger. While this would add an interesting dimension to my undertaking, it falls

<sup>21</sup> Gordon aims at a complete overview of the topics treated in Davos and dissects the transcripts into ten rather artificial segments: 'Cohen's legacy', 'transcendental imagination', 'ethics and objectivity', '*terminus a quo, terminus ad quem*', 'ontology and angels', 'God, finitude, truth', 'anxiety, culture, freedom', 'finitude and infinity', 'translation, aporia, difference', and 'the final exchange' (*Continental Divide*, 136–214). Gary Ronald Brown's dissertation, in turn, reads the Davos debate as a sequence of four relatively independent exchanges between Cassirer and Heidegger, concerning 'the question frame of each thinker', 'whether the being of human beings is infinite or finite', 'what each thinker's ontological commitments are', and 'how these commitments affect their relation to Kant's so-called Copernican revolution' (*The 1929 Davos Disputation Revisited*, Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2010, 5). In contrast to Gordon, my more selective approach aims to single out the few core themes that determine the philosophical stakes of both the Davos debate and the entire dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger. Since their public debate moves back and forth between these issues, I also find that Brown's linear reading of the transcript misses the mark. With regard to both, then, I deem my approach better suited for revealing the connection between the most fundamental disagreements between Cassirer and Heidegger, and for offering a coherent view of their famous encounter.

<sup>22</sup> A non-exhaustive list of contributions that have formed my understanding of the Davos debate should at least mention Jeffrey Andrew Barash's, 'Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, and the Legacy of Davos' (*History and Theory*, 51/3, 2012, 436–450); all essays in Kaegi/Rudolph's *70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*; Peter Eli Gordon's 'Myth and Modernity: Cassirer's Critique of Heidegger' (*New German Critique*, 94: *Secularization and Disenchantment*, 2005, 127–168) and 'Heidegger, Neo-Kantianism, and Cassirer', in: *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Francois Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, 143–149; Dustin Peone's 'Ernst Cassirer's Essential Critique of Heidegger and *Verfallenheit*' (*Idealistic Studies*, 42(2/3), 2013, 119–130); Birgit Recki's *Cassirer*, in: *Grundwissen Philosophie*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013, 81–85; Michael Roubach's 'The Limits of Order. Cassirer and Heidegger on Finitude and Infinity', in: *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Barash, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, 104–114; Frank Schalow's 'Thinking at Cross Purposes with Kant: Reason, Finitude, and Truth in the Cassirer-Heidegger debate' (*Kant Studien*, 87(2), 1996, 198–217); Skidelsky's *The Last Philosopher of Culture* (204–219); and Geert van Eekert's 'Synthesis speciosa' en de taak van de filosofie. Cassirer en Heidegger voor het tribunaal van de *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Gehelen en fragmenten: De vele gezichten van de filosofie*, red. door Bart Raymaekers, Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1993, 230–234); and 'Freiheit und Endlichkeit: Cassirer, Heidegger und Kant' (*Life, Subjectivity & Art. Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bernet* ed. by Ulrich Melle and Roland Breeur, in: *Phaenomenologica* 201, Berlin: Springer, 2011, 195–216).

outside the scope of my investigations. Instead, I will approach the Davos debate from a purely philosophical angle.

Second, within these confines I also abstain from engaging with the immediate philosophical background of either Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms or Heidegger's fundamental ontology. I discuss some elements of Paul Natorp's thought in [Chapter 5](#), but otherwise leave out how Hermann Cohen, Kurt Goldstein, Goethe, or Leibniz inspired Cassirer, and how Heidegger's thought relates to Edmund Husserl, Aristotle, or the Christian tradition. Since this book already deals with the view of two major thinkers on three hefty philosophical topics, I could not do justice to the originality of these other thinkers as well and, therefore, opted to leave them undiscussed altogether. The obvious exception to this approach is Kant, who one can consider a third, silent protagonist of the Davos debate. Since the meaning of Kant's thought is an explicit topic of contention between Cassirer and Heidegger, I cannot bypass his influence on their thinking in the same way. Yet, I cannot possibly engage with the complexity of Kant's philosophy on its own account either. I will thus either exclusively deal with the ways in which Cassirer and Heidegger interpreted, appropriated, or transformed the project of transcendental philosophy, or limit my discussions of Kant's own thought to those elements that were essential to both thinkers.

Finally, my focus on the interaction between Cassirer and Heidegger means that this book will only engage with a number of Heidegger's writings from before the so-called *Kehre* in his thinking. For one, Heidegger's interest in Cassirer quickly dematerialized after 1929. Cassirer, in turn, remained concerned about Heidegger's thought while living abroad, but seemed unaware of the significant changes that it underwent from the 1930s onwards. Hence, 'the late Heidegger' was in no way part of the dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger. Furthermore, Heidegger in this period also moved away from the first two topics of their dispute: his philosophical interests shifted from Kant to Nietzsche and from Dasein to art, poetry and the history of being. For these reasons, I will limit my scope to Heidegger's early view on the third topic, the task of philosophy, as well. Cassirer's thought, on the other hand, shows no comparable turn with regard to either these topics or his attitude towards Heidegger. Therefore, I will attempt to offer an encompassing, but obviously not exhaustive, view of his entire philosophy.

**Chapter 1, Reconstructing the Davos Debate**, offers a thorough reading of all texts in which Cassirer and Heidegger explicitly engaged with each other's thought. I first sketch the philosophical context of the Davos debate, which constitutes only one moment of a dispute that started in 1923 and continued until the publication of Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* in 1946 (1.1). Second, I argue that the public debate in Davos hinges on three inter-related topics: the proper interpretation of Kant's philosophy, the human

condition, and the task of philosophy. Concretely, I show that Cassirer and Heidegger's diverging readings of Kant are motivated by their different views on the human condition, and that these views are in turn motivated by different conceptions of the task of philosophy, which I consider to be the fundamental breaking point between these two thinkers (1.2). Third, I explain that the same issues of contention also structure, in the same order and with the same increasing intensity, the entire, twenty-three-year-long Cassirer–Heidegger dispute (1.3). Taking these three issues as my lead, the remainder of this book is divided in three parts, each of which is in turn composed of three chapters.

**Part I, The Lasting Meaning of Kant's Thought**, addresses the first issue at stake in the Davos debate: the proper interpretation of Kant's philosophy. After separately considering Cassirer and Heidegger's transformations and appropriations of Kant's transcendental philosophy, I concentrate on the crucial aspects of their readings on which they explicitly or implicitly oppose each other.

**Chapter 2, Cassirer's Transformation of the Critique of Reason into a Critique of Culture**, retraces how Cassirer transforms Kant's transcendental philosophy into a philosophy of culture in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. First, Cassirer abandons Kant's notion of the category and instead models his conception of the symbol on the schema from *The Critique of Judgment* (2.1). Second, he understands such symbols as constituting not only the theoretical, practical, and aesthetic sphere, but all cultural domains, including myth, language, and the human sciences (2.2). This forces Cassirer to adopt two conceptions of objectivity: a constitutive conception that pertains to each cultural domain (or 'symbolic forms') and a regulative conception that befits human culture as a whole (2.3).

**Chapter 3, Heidegger's Reading of Transcendental Philosophy as Phenomenological Ontology**, argues that Heidegger considers all three elements of his own view of the 'concept and method' of philosophy – ontology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics – to be at work in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. First, Heidegger's well-known 'ontological reading' of this work more specifically interprets it as a treatise on the possibility of general ontology (3.1). Further, he understands Kant's critical approach as an attempt at developing the phenomenological method that such an ontology requires (3.2). Ultimately, and most audaciously, Heidegger interprets the changes between the two editions of the first *Critique* as the result of Kant's hermeneutical reflection upon this attempt (3.3). This chapter puts forward a new reading of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (GA 3) and *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'* (GA 25), but also draws from *What Is a Thing?* (GA 41), *Logic: The Question of Truth* (GA 21), and *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (GA 27).

**Chapter 4, Spontaneity or Receptivity: Two Readings of the First Critique**, tackles the two main issues of contention between Cassirer's and Heidegger's interpretation of Kant. I first examine why Heidegger opposes his own 'ontological reading' of the first Critique to the 'epistemological reading' that he attributes to the Neo-Kantians. I clarify what this opposition entails and consider in what way it indeed applies to Cassirer (4.1). Next, I turn to Cassirer and Heidegger's more specific disagreement regarding the relevance of Kant's account of transcendental imagination. Remarkably, both thinkers not only value how this account attempts to undercut the artificial opposition between receptivity and spontaneity (4.2), but their agreement extends to the shared thesis that Kant ultimately did not succeed because he lacked a truly phenomenological method (4.3). Yet, Cassirer and Heidegger still radically part ways as soon as they evaluate why this (failed) attempt is so important: while Heidegger takes transcendental imagination as the ground of human reason's finite nature, Cassirer concludes from the primacy of this faculty to the fundamentally spontaneous character of reason (4.4).

**Part II, What Is the Human Being?**, turns to the official topic of the *Davoser Hochschulkurse* and the second key issue of the Davos debate: the human condition. In analogy with Part One, I first elaborate on Cassirer and Heidegger's respective views of the human being, and then examine the similarities and differences between their philosophical approaches and claims.

**Chapter 5, Cassirer's Functional Account of the 'Animal Symbolicum'**, argues that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms relies on an account of human subjectivity that he deliberately keeps in the background of his writings. Remarkably, even though Cassirer considers a systematic account of human subjectivity to be an essential component of a philosophy of culture, he never seems to develop one (5.1). This omission is the result of Cassirer's belief that consciousness can only be approached through the mediation of diverse cultural products (5.2). Cassirer solves this difficulty by developing a 'functional conception of human subjectivity' that forms the exact counterpart of his account of objectivity and therefore needs no separate treatment (5.3). This conception allows him to characterize the human being as an 'animal symbolicum' in *An Essay on Man* (5.4). Cassirer's posthumous text *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* then merely translates this view of the human being into the language of his contemporaries – rather than deviating from his published writings, as is usually maintained (5.5). In sum, this chapter retrieves the hidden, anthropological foundation of Cassirer's philosophy of culture.

**Chapter 6, Heidegger's Existential Analytic of 'Dasein'**, reconstructs Heidegger's well-known analysis of Dasein as analogous to his interpretation of Kant: I argue that Heidegger also views Dasein as a (pre-)ontological, phenomenological, and hermeneutic way of being. Demonstrating this requires a circular reading of the first book of *Being and Time*. Following Heidegger's

own argumentation leads us from Dasein's usual and predominant understanding of being (6.1), through the structural moments of 'being-in-the-world' that constitute its possibility (6.2), to 'care' as the foundational unity of these conditions (6.3). Once this is established, reading Heidegger's magnum opus backwards shows that Dasein *is at its core* an ontological way of being due to its concern for the being of beings, *enacts* this concern in a phenomenological manner through its 'being-in', and is thereby both *enabled and hindered* by the hermeneutic situation of its everyday understanding (6.4). By distinguishing the argumentative procedure of *Being in Time* from the resulting picture of our human condition, this chapter provides a more systematic picture of Dasein's existential constitution than Heidegger managed to display.

**Chapter 7, Infinite or Finite: The Quest for Existential Orientation**, compares Cassirer's and Heidegger's take on the human being's capacity to orient itself in the world in a meaningful way. Cassirer's theory of the functions of consciousness, the only meat to his functional conception of human subjectivity, is used to describe the diverse, cultural compasses by means of which the 'symbolic animal' navigates the human world (7.1). Heidegger's accounts of 'the they' and of owned ('authentic') existence in turn provide a theory of Dasein's capacity to orient itself within and towards its world (7.2). In view of their shared interest in orientation, I discern an important distinction for both Cassirer and Heidegger between an orienting and an oriented self. With regard to both, they ultimately disagree about the infinite (cultural) or finite (temporal) nature of the human being (7.3).

**Part III, The Task of Philosophy**, addresses the third issue at stake in the Davos debate: the task of philosophy. In line with my previous procedure, I first consider Cassirer and Heidegger's respective conceptions of philosophy, and then spell out their diverging views on its existential and ethical task.

**Chapter 8, Cassirer's Functional Conception of Philosophy** returns to Cassirer's notion of function to argue that it continuously informs his conception of philosophy. Cassirer first develops this notion in his 1910 work *Substance and Function*: the mathematical idea of a function connects disparate elements under a variable rule, establishing a unity *through* diversity (8.1). Subsequently, his early historical writings (1906–1919) invoke the idea of a functional unity in order to explain the continuity and progress in the history of thought while simultaneously acknowledging the legitimacy of each historical epoch (8.2). Cassirer's mature, systematic writings (1923–1942) reconcile the unity of human culture and the synchronic diversity of our cultural domains by means of the same idea (8.3). Finally, the ethical reflections that we find in Cassirer's latest writings (1935–1946) are also rooted in this 'functional conception of philosophy' (8.4).

**Chapter 9, Heidegger's Hermeneutic Conception of Philosophy**, explains how Heidegger's interpretation of Kant and his analysis of Dasein

relate to the primary interest of his philosophical enterprise: the retrieval of the question of being. The introduction to *Being and Time* indicates that these three projects formally presuppose one another because Heidegger weds the ontological task of philosophy to its phenomenological and hermeneutical method (9.1). At the same time, this threefold conception of philosophy – ontology, phenomenology, hermeneutics – establishes a hermeneutic situation that informed Heidegger's interpretations of Kant and Dasein (9.2). Heidegger admits to the circularity of this philosophical procedure, but defends it by distinguishing between a formal, a philosophical, and a factual 'starting point' of the 'hermeneutical circle' (9.3). At stake here is the relation between Dasein and philosophy, as well as Heidegger's contested choice to approach the meaning of being via our own existence.

**Chapter 10, Enlightenment or Therapy: The Cosmopolitan Task of Philosophy**, considers the implications of Cassirer and Heidegger's respective conceptions of philosophy for their views on its existential task. Cassirer asserts a hierarchy among the cultural domains based on the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness (10.1). Heidegger navigates the dialectics between disowned, average, and owned selfhood. On this basis, I address the ultimate breaking point between Cassirer and Heidegger: their respective Enlightened and 'therapeutic' conception of the task of philosophy. While for Cassirer philosophy is the caretaker of our self-liberation through culture, for Heidegger it ought to help us reconcile with our ineradicable shortcomings – the latter view is therapeutic in the psychoanalytic sense; it has no affinity with Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as therapy (10.2).

The **Conclusion** of this book, *The Terminus a Quo and Terminus ad Quem of the Davos Debate*, reconsiders the stakes of the Davos debate on the basis of my previous findings. I first summarize the established similarities and differences between Cassirer and Heidegger's philosophical projects. Next, I reinterpret their issues of contention in light of the starting point and aim (the 'terminus a quo' and 'terminus ad quem', as they put it in Davos) of their philosophies, which, I argue, Cassirer and Heidegger failed to accurately compare. In this way, I show that Cassirer's and Heidegger's thought, despite being grounded in irreconcilable ontological and methodological assumptions, can nevertheless positively incite each other. After all, they share a philosophical concern: to comprehend and aid the human being's capacity to orient itself in and towards the world. This means that the Davos debate was an elaborate disagreement about a shared interest of profound significance for human life after all, or in other words a true philosophical debate.

# 1 Reconstructing the Davos Debate

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## 1.1 Preliminary Remarks

The philosophical dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger covers much more than the public discussion, or *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, that took place on 2 April 1929, during the second meeting of the *Internationale Davoser Hochschulkurse* (17 March–6 April). Their philosophical relationship dates back to at least 1923 and only came to an end with the posthumous publication of Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* in 1946. During these twenty-three years, Cassirer and Heidegger repeatedly commented, with varying praise and scorn, on the other's philosophical project: not only their reviews of each other's works, but also a number of explicit and implicit references in (footnotes to) their own works and lectures attest to an enduring concern with regard to the other thinker. In what follows, I will refer to the whole of this interaction as the 'Cassirer-Heidegger dispute'. This dispute can be divided into three phases, of which the 1929 public 'Davos debate' thus marks only one moment.

First, Heidegger commented on Cassirer's work four times prior to 1929, namely in a footnote in *Being and Time*, an unpublished letter to Karl Jaspers, a brief historical overview of Marburg Neo-Kantianism, and most importantly a review of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.<sup>1</sup> In this phase, he values Cassirer's attempt to develop a transcendental philosophy of mythology, and suggests their shared interest in an 'existential analytics'. He wonders, however, whether Cassirer is not too loyal to the letter of Kant's texts. We here find the seeds for both Heidegger's continuing interest in and impending discontent with Cassirer's thought.

Second, during the *Davoser Hochschulkurse*, the Davos debate was preceded and followed by a series of independent lectures by Cassirer and Heidegger. I will consider these lectures in close connection to the transcript of the debate, which was composed by Cassirer and Heidegger's respective students Joachim Ritter and Otto Friedrich Bollnow. These lectures after all had the clear purpose of preparing both themselves and the audience for the

<sup>1</sup> See *BT* 51; *KPM:VI* 304–311; and *KPM:II* 255–270.

actual debate: Cassirer and Heidegger here engaged, if not directly with each other's thought, at least with each other's area of specialization.<sup>2</sup> While Cassirer was the publisher of Kant's works and widely considered as *the* Kant expert of his time, Heidegger had recently, and very quickly, become famous for his original theory of the human being and the philosophically most accurate way to analyse it. Nevertheless, Cassirer held three one-hour sessions on 'Foundational Problems of Philosophical Anthropology' and one, the day after the debate, on 'The Opposition between 'Spirit' and 'Life' in Scheler's Philosophy'.<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, in turn, spoke for four hours about 'Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the Task of a Laying of the Ground for Metaphysics'.<sup>4</sup>

This crossover of interests may have been motivated by the general theme of the *Hochschulkurse*: the relationship between philosophy and the humanities or, more generally, the question "What is the human being?" We now know, however, that the topics of Cassirer and Heidegger's independent lectures also

<sup>2</sup> According to Toni Cassirer, her husband for the first time seriously studied *Being and Time* when preparing for these lectures (*Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, 187).

<sup>3</sup> *ECN*:17 3–73; *ECW*:17 185–205.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's notes of these talks, which were first published in the *Davoser Revue* IV/7, 1929, 194–196, form another appendix to the recent editions of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (*KPM*:III 271–273). The first preface to this work informs us that Heidegger had given these lectures before, "in a four-hour lecture during the Winter Semester of 1927/1928 and later [...] at the Herder Institute in Riga in September [1928]" (*KPM* xix). Heidegger's 1928–1929 Winter Seminar *Einleitung in de Philosophie* also contains a very similar discussion of Kant's thought (*GA* 27 258–275). We may further assume that his research on Kant had already far advanced by the time he faced Cassirer in Davos: according to a letter to his wife Elfride, he managed to lecture at Davos without any manuscript ('*Mein liebes Seelchen!*'. *Briefe Martin Heideggers an seine Frau Elfride (1915–1970)*, hrsg. von Gertrud Heidegger, München: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 2005, 161), and he finished *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* merely two months after their encounter. A quick glance at the lecture notes confirms that the structure of Heidegger's *Davoser Vorträge* is almost identical to that of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. The threefold division of these notes, which assumedly refers to the topics of his three lectures, mirrors the composition of the 'Kant book'. The three steps of his argument in Davos are: "(1) the laying of the ground for metaphysics in the point of departure, (2) the laying of the ground for metaphysics in the carrying-through, (3) the laying of the ground for metaphysics in its originality" (*KPM*:III 271). These return almost verbatim in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* as the titles of its first three parts: "The Starting Point for the Laying of the Ground for Metaphysics" (3–12), "Carrying Out the Laying of the Ground for Metaphysics" (*KPM* 13–88), and "The Laying of the Ground for Metaphysics in Its Originality" (89–142). Twice, Heidegger interprets the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a treatise on the possibility and ground-laying of ontology and on the finitude of human reason, and he ultimately presents Kant's account of the power of transcendental imagination as the key to this interpretation. Further, the subchapters of the second part also correspond to a division Heidegger already makes in Davos (*KPM*:III 272–273). He announces in his notes and then develops in his 'Kant book' that in order to 'lay the ground for metaphysics', one must (a) determine the elements of pure knowledge, and explain (b) the essential unity thereof, (c) the inner possibility thereof, and (d) the ground for the possibility of ontological knowledge. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* adds a fourth part, called "The Laying of the Ground for Metaphysics in a Retrieval" (*KPM* 143–173), to Heidegger's overall investigation, and a (sub-)chapter, on the 'full essential determination of ontological knowledge', to its second part.

reflect their own research interests around the time of the debate. In 1929, Cassirer was working on an essay that was initially meant to conclude the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, but was first collected in 1995 in the so-called fourth volume, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. In this essay, likewise titled ‘On the metaphysics of symbolic forms’, Cassirer tries to position his philosophy of culture within the contemporary philosophical scene. To this end, he critically engages with the then popular *Lebensphilosophie* (Dilthey, Klages, Bergson, Simmel) and with new theories in philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Plessner, Uexküll, Spengler). Although Cassirer struggled to breach out of his usual transcendental approach and never published these reflections, his attempt nevertheless indicates a genuine interest in these topics.<sup>5</sup>

Heidegger, in turn, had already in *Being and Time* announced his interest in Kant’s philosophy in the context of a “destruction of the history of ontology” (*BT* 39–40). While this phrase at first sight suggests that Heidegger did not hold Kant in high esteem, his 1927/1928 Winter Seminar in Marburg, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, actually reveals a rather positive assessment of Kant’s thought. Although Heidegger eventually holds that Kant remained trapped in the discourse of traditional metaphysics, he nevertheless interprets the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the first, albeit hesitant, attempt to develop a phenomenological analysis of subjectivity that lays the ground for a new ontology. For Heidegger, then, the meeting in Davos offered an excellent opportunity to advertise his original perspective on Kant, confirm the central thesis of *Being and Time*, and end the dominance of Neo-Kantianism over the European philosophical scene in the early twentieth century.

Third, after the Davos debate especially Cassirer remained explicitly concerned with Heidegger’s thought. In the immediate aftermath of their encounter, he added a number of trying footnotes on *Being and Time* to the otherwise finished manuscript of the third volume of the *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, on the other hand, wrote *Kant and the Problem of*

<sup>5</sup> First in his seminars at Göteborg (1939/1940) and Yale (1941/1942) would Cassirer manage to develop a philosophical anthropology that supports his philosophy of culture on a transcendental basis (*ECN*:6 1–187; 189–343). The latter seminar forms the basis for *An Essay on Man* (1944), which is often considered an anthropological introduction to Cassirer’s thought for his new, English-speaking, audience. For an excellent explanation of Cassirer’s attempts to restore, after Heidegger’s critique, the possibility of philosophical anthropology by reconciling it with an idealistic philosophy of culture, see Gerald Hartung, *Das Maß des Menschen. Aporien der philosophischen Anthropologie und ihre Auflösung in der Kulturphilosophie Ernst Cassirers*, Birkach: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2003, 309–356.

<sup>6</sup> The manuscript of *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* that was published in 1929 was actually already completed in 1927, but Cassirer postponed its publication to include a “final, critical, chapter” on contemporary philosophy (*PSF*:III xvii). However, once he realized that this part

*Metaphysics*, which still criticizes the Neo-Kantian interpretation of the first *Critique* but does so in a much less prominent manner than *Phenomenological Interpretation*. Two years later, in 1931, Cassirer published a highly critical commentary on this book in *Kant-Studien*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Heidegger attempted to review *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, but he admitted to Cassirer that he could not come to grips with it.<sup>8</sup> Despite this increased animosity, Heidegger invited Cassirer to give a lecture in Freiburg in 1932, which would be the last time that these eminences of twentieth-century philosophy met. However, after almost a decade of silence following his emigration from Germany, Cassirer launched a new, ethically charged critique of Heidegger: after characterizing Heidegger's thought as founded on religious rather than philosophical motives in unpublished notes from 1928, in *The Myth of the State* (1946) he connects these motives to the rise of Nazism.

The Cassirer–Heidegger dispute is marked, then, by two evolutions. First, Cassirer and Heidegger's interest in each other's thought piqued at different moments. Prior to the Davos debate, the rising philosophical star Heidegger engaged on two important occasions with Cassirer, a leading Kant scholar and one of the most respected thinkers of the moment. After 1929, he however seemed to have lost interest in Cassirer: he never finished his review of *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, nor did he respond to Cassirer's elaborate review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Cassirer, on the other hand, acknowledged the philosophical challenges of his younger colleague only after the latter had turned out to be a serious match in Davos. From then on until his death, he commented on Heidegger's philosophy with ever-increasing (moral) disapproval. Second, the Cassirer–Heidegger dispute thus quickly abandoned initial suggestions of philosophical agreement and evolves into a seemingly unsurpassable conflict. The Davos debate played a crucial role in these evolutions, and is therefore rightfully recollected as the most famous moment of this dispute.

## 1.2 The Davos Debate: Analysis of a Coherent Discussion

The 1929 Davos debate between Cassirer and Heidegger hinges on three interrelated themes. Provoked by Heidegger's criticism of Neo-Kantianism in his independent lectures, the debate initially focuses on the proper meaning of Kant's philosophy. At this point, Cassirer and Heidegger's disagreement

would render the third volume too long, he reserved it for a separate volume – *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* – and instead added a few footnotes on the most significant works that had appeared in the meantime, including *Being and Time*.

<sup>7</sup> *KPMR* 221–250. Heidegger's notes on this review are published in *KPM:V* 297–303. See also Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 265–268, 403.

<sup>8</sup> See Toni Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, 189.