

# 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First, Heidegger commented on Cassirer's work four times prior to 1929, namely in a footnote in *Being and Time*, an unpublished letter to Karl Jaspers, a brief historical overview of Marburg Neo-Kantianism, and most importantly a review of the second volume of the *Philosophy of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.

famously concerns the question whether transcendental philosophy should be understood as ontology (Heidegger) or epistemology (Cassirer). Because the debate addresses Kant's account of transcendental imagination in particular, it is also often considered a discussion about the receptive (Heidegger) or spontaneous (Cassirer) character of Kant's conception of transcendental subjectivity. However, as the conversation proceeds, it becomes clear that they are actually debating the finite (Heidegger) or infinite (Cassirer) character of the human condition as such. In hindsight, this second theme of the Davos debate, the human condition, motivated the first one, the proper interpretation of Kant's thought. However, Cassirer and Heidegger's positions with regard to the second issue are in turn propelled by a third and final disagreement concerning the task of philosophy: they ultimately debate whether philosophy is supposed to enlighten the human being (Cassirer), or can only have a 'therapeutic' function (Heidegger). Deliberately or not, this issue set the stakes for the entire Davos debate – as Heidegger also indicates towards the end:

I would like once more to place our entire discussion in terms of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and to fix once more the question of what the human being is as the central question. [This question] only makes sense and is only justifiable insofar as it derives its motivation from philosophy's central problematic itself, which leads the human being back beyond itself and into the totality of beings. (DD 291)

### 1.2.1 Two Readings of the Critique of Pure Reason

The public debate between Cassirer and Heidegger commences as a discussion on the proper reading of Kant's thought: Cassirer starts off this public encounter by asking two questions: "What does Heidegger understand by Neo-Kantianism? Who is the opponent to whom Heidegger has addressed himself?" (DD 274). These questions clearly do not arise out of thin air: they directly react to Heidegger's lectures from the days leading up to the debate. Claiming that the *Critique of Pure Reason* offers a novel foundation for metaphysics, Heidegger had rejected the Neo-Kantian reading of this work as a theory of knowledge in general and of mathematical or physical knowledge more particularly:

These lectures are to demonstrate the thesis: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is a, or rather the first, express ground-laying for metaphysics. (Negatively, and in opposition to the traditional interpretation of Neo-Kantianism, that means: it is no theory of mathematical, natural-scientific knowledge – it is not a theory of knowledge at all.) (KPM:III 271)

Heidegger repeats this claim when responding to Cassirer's first question. First, he holds that what unites the Neo-Kantian movement is its search for

the epistemological task that is left for philosophy by the end of the nineteenth century, given the success of both the natural and cultural sciences: “We can only understand what is common to Neo-Kantianism on the basis of its origin. [Its] genesis lies in the predicament of philosophy concerning the question of what properly remains of it in the whole of knowledge” (*DD* 274). Then, Heidegger rephrases his twofold thesis that the first *Critique* is in essence neither concerned with the natural sciences, nor even with a theory of knowledge as such:

I understand by Neo-Kantianism that conception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* which explains, with reference to natural science, the part of pure reason that leads up to the Transcendental Dialectic as theory of knowledge. For me, what matters is to show that what came to be extracted here as theory of science was nonessential for Kant. Kant did not want to give any sort of theory of natural science, but rather wanted to point out the problematic of metaphysics, which is to say, the problematic of ontology. (275)

For Heidegger, the Transcendental Analytic does not explain how we can acquire scientific knowledge of objects, but rather how we can have access to other beings at all: “What I want to point out is that the analytic is [. . .] a general ontology, a critical, well-established *metaphysica generalis*” (279).

Cassirer clearly does not feel addressed by this critique. It is well known that his philosophy of culture programmatically transcends the focus on the natural sciences that is commonly ascribed to the Marburg Neo-Kantians: Cassirer aims to account not only for our scientific understanding of the world, but he investigates with equal interest our mythological, linguistic, religious, artistic, and political apprehension thereof. The philosophy of symbolic forms affirms, then, only the methodological primacy of the natural sciences, whose reliance on hypotheses and experiments most clearly reveals that objective meaning is grounded in the structure of human subjectivity. In response to Heidegger, Cassirer holds that the latter view is, in fact, consistent with Marburg Neo-Kantianism:

One only understands Cohen correctly if one understands him historically, not merely as an epistemologist. I do not conceive of my own development as a defection from Cohen. Naturally, in the course of my work much else has emerged, and, indeed, above all I recognized the position of mathematical natural science. However, this can only serve as a paradigm and not as the whole of the problem. And the same goes for Natorp.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *DD* 275. Cassirer’s teachers and founders of the *Marburger Schule*, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, were indeed also interested in much more than just the natural sciences: Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871) is the first volume of a trilogy completed by *Die Begründung der Ethik* (1877) and *Die Begründung der Aesthetik* (1889), and Natorp’s late research resulted in the publication of *Philosophische Systematik* (1923) and *Vorlesungen über praktische Philosophie* (1925). Cassirer repeatedly praises Cohen’s pioneering focus on the transcendental method in

The real core of Neo-Kantianism lies, then, not in its interest in scientific knowledge but in its validation of Kant's transcendental method, namely to investigate the subjective conditions of possibility of our ways of understanding of the world: "The term 'Neo-Kantianism' must be determined functionally rather than substantially. It is not a matter of the kind of philosophy as dogmatic doctrinal system; rather, it is a matter of a direction taken in questioning".<sup>10</sup> Hence, according to Cassirer, Heidegger's claims about the dominant role of the natural sciences in Neo-Kantian thought must be severely nuanced. On the basis of his 'functional definition', he even characterizes Heidegger's independent lectures as Neo-Kantian in spirit: "Contrary to what I expected, I must confess that I here found a Neo-Kantian in Heidegger".<sup>11</sup>

Although Heidegger would eventually become annoyed by such attempts at reconciliation – which, as we now know, did not win the audience over either – this early in the debate, he still politely answers Cassirer's questions. The list of thinkers that he, in response to Cassirer's second question, identifies as his Neo-Kantian opponents is however quite remarkable. On the one hand, besides the inevitable Cohen and the now largely forgotten thinkers Benno Erdmann and Alois Riehl, Heidegger also lists some of his own teachers, namely Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert from the *Südwest-Deutsche* Neo-Kantian school that competed with the *Marburger Schule*, and his mentor Edmund Husserl (274–275). This means that Heidegger considers all these thinkers to support a flawed, epistemological reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the other hand, he mentions neither Natorp nor Cassirer. This is surprising, for one, because most commentators take Heidegger to have mainly

'Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie' (*ECW*:9 122, 138), 'Hermann Cohen, Worte und seinem Grabe' (493), 'Zur Lehre Hermann Cohens' (494), and 'Hermann Cohen' (503–504). Following Cohen and Natorp, Cassirer also identifies this method as the systematic core of Kant's philosophy (*KLT* 3; *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik. Historische und systematische Studien zum Kausalproblem*, in: *ECW*:19 6). Rather unexpectedly, then, he admits towards the end of the Davos debate that Cohen did not realize the independence of this method from the activity of the mathematical sciences of nature after all (*DD* 294–295; see also 'Von Hermann Cohens geistigem Erbe', in: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften 1922–1926, ECW*:16 482–484).

<sup>10</sup> *DD* 274. Cassirer's functional definition of Neo-Kantianism as a method rather than a doctrine allows him to identify as a Neo-Kantian while severely disagreeing with other members of this philosophical school ('Was ist 'Subjektivismus'?', in: *ECW*:22 169). It must be said, however, that Cassirer's suggestion of methodological affinity was mostly rejected by his acclaimed fellow Neo-Kantians – Cohen publicly expressed his regret about the way in which Cassirer, already in *Substance and Function*, digressed from the Neo-Kantian tradition. For an overview of the discussion of this topic in secondary literature, see Sebastian Luft, 'Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Between Reason and Relativism; a Critical Appraisal', in: *Idealistic Studies*, 34/1, 2004, 46.

<sup>11</sup> *DD* 274; translation modified.

targeted Natorp's version of Neo-Kantianism.<sup>12</sup> Further, his refusal to identify Cassirer as a Neo-Kantian here is rather unhelpful for the debate. Ironically, it leads to a situation in which Cassirer identifies Heidegger as a Neo-Kantian, but not the other way around.

It is, therefore, quite clear that Cassirer and Heidegger so far try to remain gentle with regard to each other: Cassirer tries to bridge their positions, while Heidegger refrains from specifically criticizing his conversation partner. Cassirer takes this as an opportunity to leave aside the differences among the Neo-Kantians and instead focus on the "basic systematic problem" of Kant's thought that interests both him and Heidegger: "On one point we agree, in that for me as well the productive power of imagination appears in fact to have a central meaning for Kant" (275–276). In his independent lectures, Heidegger had indeed presented this faculty as the "unknown root" of sensibility and the understanding, and thus as a "third basic source of mind" (*KPM:III* 272–273). During the public encounter, Cassirer in turn holds that the "extraordinary significance of the schematism [of transcendental imagination] cannot be overestimated" (*DD* 276–277). It is remarkable how two thinkers who seem to hold such opposed views on the original message of Kant's philosophy, nevertheless both consider a then mostly overlooked passage from his writings as the key to his thought.

Kant invokes the power of transcendental imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to mediate between the two sources of knowledge: sensibility and the understanding. Having defined the former as a receptive faculty that provides the concrete, empirical, material for our judgements, and the latter as a spontaneous faculty that alone can account for their intelligible and universal validity, the question arises how there can be any affinity and

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger's 1927 lecture on the history of Marburg Neo-Kantianism may help us understand why he does not list Natorp as a Neo-Kantian during the Davos debate. Here, Heidegger speaks positively of Natorp's later thought, claiming that the latter saw "the essential gaps and one-sided aspects of" Cohen's systematic philosophy and brought it "to a more originally grounded, independent level of development". In particular, Natorp's revision of Cohen's thought allowed for "the positive evaluation of the fundamental meaning of a phenomenological categorical analysis of 'subjective' and 'objective' spirit" (*KPM:VI* 307–309). Several scholars have confirmed that Heidegger and Natorp's weekly meetings during their shared Marburg period revealed or established substantial parallels between their philosophies. Most importantly, both thinkers aimed at a conception of 'being' that precedes the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. Consult, in this regard, Christoph von Wolzogen, *Die autonome Relation. Zum Problem der Beziehung im Spätwerk Paul Natorps. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Theorien der Relation*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1984, 144–163; Éric Dufour, *Paul Natorp, de la Psychologie générale à la Systématique philosophique*, Paris: Vrin, 2010, 236–237; and Sebastian Luft's introduction to Natorp's *Allgemeine Philosophie nach kritischer Methode*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013, xxxiii–xxxv. Massimo Ferrari further suggests that Natorp's presence in Davos could have been fruitful for exposing the shared ground between Cassirer and Heidegger – Natorp died, however, in 1924 ('Paul Natorp. 'The Missing Link' in der Davoser Debatte', in: *70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, 215–233).



cooperation between these faculties.<sup>13</sup> At this point, Kant calls upon the transcendental power of imagination: by producing ‘transcendental schemata’ that are sensible and intellectual at once, this faculty accomplishes the unity between intuitions and pure concepts that Kant deems necessary for objective experience (*CPR* A139–141/B177–180).

In 1929, there was little support left for either Kant’s discourse on the faculties of the human mind or the dualisms that it entails. For the Neo-Kantians, the oppositions between sensibility and the understanding, or receptivity and spontaneity, are remnants of pre-critical metaphysics. The phenomenological movement, on the other hand, rejects the language of faculties as a characteristic of psychologism. Both movements thus recognize in Kant’s account of the faculties a feature of their own philosophical adversary. Given this philosophical climate, it seems surprising that Cassirer and Heidegger positively value Kant’s account of transcendental imagination as the heart of his Transcendental Analytic. They do so, however, because they interpret it as a modest attempt to distort, rather than consolidate, the discourse of faculties, thus suggesting a new framework for explaining our understanding of objects.

In order to conceive of our cultural world in terms of symbolic forms, Cassirer posits that human beings instantaneously and continuously perceive intellectual meaning in empirical data because they are capable of ‘symbolic imagination’. Accordingly, Cassirer transforms Kant’s notion of the ‘schemata’ into the idea of ‘symbols of consciousness’ that likewise consist of inseparable sensible and intelligible components but that moreover recur in each cultural domain. Hence, in Davos he holds that

one cannot unravel the symbolic without referring it to the faculty of the productive power of imagination. The power of imagination is the connection of all thought to the intuition. Kant calls the power of imagination *synthesis speciosa*. Synthesis is the basic power of pure thinking [...] but the problem of the species leads into the core of the concept of image, the concept of symbol. (*DD* 276; *ECW*:17 198)

In his independent lectures, Heidegger in turn argues that transcendental imagination is not an auxiliary faculty that mediates between sensibility and the understanding, but rather constitutes their common root:

The ground for the possibility of a priori synthetic knowledge is the transcendental power of imagination. In the course of the ground-laying, Kant introduced a third basic source of the mind, contrary to the operative point of departure. This does not lie ‘between’ both of the previously cited stems, but rather is their root. This is indicated by

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in: *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A19/B33; A51/B75 – hereafter indicated as ‘*CPR*’.

the fact that pure sensibility and pure understanding lead back to the power of imagination. (*KPM:III* 273)

Heidegger does not repeat this claim during the debate with Cassirer, but it would become the central argument of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*: through a meticulous reading of the *Transcendental Analytic*, he there argues that transcendental imagination, if properly understood as “the original unity of receptivity and spontaneity”, constitutes “the ground of the possibility of ontological knowledge” (*KPM* 153, 88). Hence, Cassirer and Heidegger both focus on this faculty because it undercuts a sharp distinction between sensibility and the understanding, receptivity and spontaneity, or the concrete and the universal, and, as such, establishes our initial relation to the world.

Yet, as soon as this agreement is established, Cassirer points out to Heidegger that the importance of transcendental imagination is limited to Kant’s theoretical philosophy. As said, Kant invokes this faculty in order to unite the empirical and intelligible realm and thus acquire theoretical knowledge of objects. The possibility of moral behavior, on the other hand, coincides for Kant with that of *pure* practical reason, or with the possibility to act according to motives that are completely independent from the empirical world. Hence, the sensible or receptive moment that is crucial to Kant’s account of theoretical cognition is rigorously excluded from his foundation of ethics: he conceives of the categorical imperative as a law that the rational being gives to itself, and accordingly describes the ethical subject as gifted with pure practical spontaneity or autonomy. Cassirer concludes from this that there is no role left for transcendental imagination in Kant’s practical metaphysics: “In the ethical, however, [Kant] forbids the schematism. There he says: our concepts of freedom, etc. are insights (not bits of knowledge) that no longer permit schematizing. There is a schematism of theoretical knowledge, but not of practical reason” (*DD* 277).

Cassirer finds this limited function of the power of imagination important because he regards the possibility of practical freedom as the main problem of Kant’s philosophy (276). Kant indeed indicates, in both the first and second *Critique*, that his interest in metaphysical problems like that of freedom made him turn away from the theoretical towards the practical sphere.<sup>14</sup> This means, according to Cassirer, that the schematism marks the starting point but not the goal of Kant’s thought:

It is necessary to understand that one cannot proceed if one does not give up the schematism here. For Kant, the schematism is also the *terminus a quo*, but not the

<sup>14</sup> See *CPR* Bxxv, Bxxx, A799–800/B827–828; and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, in: *Practical Philosophy*, tr. by Mary J. Gregor in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 5:119–121.

*terminus ad quem*. New problems arise in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and Kant indeed always adheres to this point of departure in the schematism, but it is also expanded upon. (277)

Cassirer finds this relevant to the Davos debate, further, because it “ties in with Heidegger’s arguments” (*DD* 276) from his independent lectures. The final notes of these lectures after all mention that “theoretical *and* practical reason in their separateness and their unity [...] lead back to the power of imagination” (*KPM:III* 273). For Heidegger, transcendental imagination thus not only constitutes the ‘common root’ of the two stems of theoretical knowledge, but also of the theoretical and practical uses of reason. On Cassirer’s view, Heidegger hereby lends too much weight to what is merely the point of departure of Kant’s thought. He thus objects to Heidegger’s assertion of a practical function of transcendental imagination by saying that “Kant certainly always maintained the starting point of the schematism, but also broadened it. Kant started from Heidegger’s problem, but expanded upon this sphere”.<sup>15</sup>

One could object here that Kant expands upon Cassirer’s problem as well. The philosophy of symbolic forms after all considers symbolic imagination as the constitutive power of *all* our cultural domains, and thus not as a starting point that needs to be overcome. There is for Cassirer no sphere of human culture in which the human subject achieves complete autonomy. Hence, his attempt to downplay the role of transcendental imagination seems inconsistent with the way he values it in his own written work. However, Cassirer invokes Kant’s practical philosophy here not in order to contrast it with Kant’s theoretical philosophy, but rather to reveal their common ‘direction of question-posing’, a direction that they moreover share with his own philosophy of culture. Cassirer’s interest in both transcendental imagination and the moral law is motivated, then, by the idea of a ‘breakthrough’ (*Durchbruch*) or a ‘transition’ (*Übergang*) to the *mundus intelligibilis* (276). Accordingly, he asks if

Heidegger wants to renounce this entire sphere of objectivity, this form of absoluteness that Kant advocated in the ethical and the theoretical, as well as in the *Critique of Judgment*? Does he want to withdraw completely to the finite creature or, if not, where for him is the breakthrough to this sphere? (278)

This passage is revealing in another way as well. It is commonly accepted that neither Cassirer nor Heidegger truly maintains the ‘neutral’ conception of the power of transcendental imagination, but in the end emphasize its respective spontaneous or receptive moment after all.<sup>16</sup> In *Kant and the Problem of*

<sup>15</sup> *DD* 277; translation modified.

<sup>16</sup> Consult, in this regard, Jeffrey Andrew Barash’s extensive assessment of Gordon’s *Continental Divide* in ‘Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, and the Legacy of Davos’.

*Metaphysics*, Heidegger indeed advocates the primarily receptive nature of transcendental imagination. Cassirer's writings, on the other hand, time and again emphasize the spontaneous character of symbolic imagination when explaining our capacity to bring forth a variety of cultural expressions. His turn towards Kant's account of pure practical reason would confirm this interest. However, *in Davos*, Heidegger only once suggests that Kant's account of transcendental imagination reveals "a dependency on a receptivity" (280), while Cassirer at no point explicitly favors its spontaneous moment. Furthermore, as we just saw, the Kantian language of receptivity and spontaneity quickly gives way to the broader terms 'finitude' and 'infinity', and their comments on Kant's thought become interlaced with more general claims about the human being or 'Dasein'. Hence, as the Davos debate proceeds, it becomes more and more clear that Kant's philosophy is not really Cassirer and Heidegger's main concern. Cassirer's turn to Kant's ethics does not so much serve a discussion of the correct reading of his oeuvre, as it aims to articulate a view of the human condition as such.

### 1.2.2 *The (In)finite Character of the Human Condition*

In line with the general theme of the 1929 *Davoser Hochschulkurse* – 'What is the human being?' – Cassirer's independent lectures address 'the problem of philosophical anthropology'. After a brief historical introduction, he focuses on the two contemporary thinkers whom he considers to represent this problem most sharply: he reflects on Heidegger's accounts of space, language, and death from *Being and Time* in the three lectures prior to their public encounter, and discusses Scheler's thought on the day after. These lectures not only set the stage for the second topic of the Davos debate, the human condition, but as such also motivated the earlier discussion on Kant's thought.

Cassirer's 'Heidegger lectures' follow a clear pattern: they first summarize Heidegger's analyses of the aforementioned issues and then each time conclude that, although we should not reject his position as such, he merely lays down a philosophical problem without indicating a solution to it. Thus, after considering Heidegger's conception of space as "the sphere of what is ready-to-hand, what we are concerned with", Cassirer challenges the primacy of this "pragmatic space" over a symbolic one: "We do not deny this point of departure as such – we only maintain that the anthropological space in which the human being lives, is first captured if one leaves and *overcomes* this point of departure" (*ECN:17* 15). Cassirer, likewise, counters Heidegger's account of 'idle talk' as a "lapse, Fall of man, deficiency" and as an "uprooted mode of understanding existence", asking if the achievement of natural language "is not rather the beginning of all *true spiritual* behavior" (37, 51). With regard to the phenomenon of death, finally, he holds that Heidegger "once again designates only the point of departure, the *terminus a quo* but not the *terminus ad quem*."

Not our fear for death as such, but our overcoming of this fear [. . .] characterizes the Dasein of human beings” (71). In sum, Cassirer challenges the idea that a philosophical anthropology can rest content with the analysis of Dasein developed by *Being and Time*:

We grant Heidegger this ‘analysis of worldliness [. . .], but we ask: can we *stick to this beginning* – or is not rather the ‘transcendence’ beyond it, [. . .] the move from the ‘ready-to-hand’ towards the ‘present-at-hand’, the real *problem*? Does the capacity to ‘turn towards the idea’ not reveal the ‘essence’ of the human being [. . .] rather than indicating a decline from its original nature? (29)

With these rhetorical questions, Cassirer suggests that Heidegger’s existential analytic advocates a view of the human being that deprives it of its characteristic humanity and reduces it to its biological condition.

Cassirer perceives the same structural problem in Heidegger’s independent lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Analogous to the emphasis that *Being and Time* puts on Dasein’s temporal nature as the ultimate precondition for its understanding of being, these lectures proclaim that Kant’s philosophical project presupposes the finitude of human reason:

To understand the carrying-through of the ground-laying [of metaphysics], it is crucial to make clear that and how the purely *human*, i.e., *finite* reason, alone delimits the sphere of the problematic in advance. To this end, it is necessary to emphasize the essence of finite knowledge in general and the basic character of finitude as such. (*KPM:III* 272)

After summarizing this position, Cassirer concludes that “here the whole problem erupts once again” (*DD* 277). On his view, Heidegger once more manages to pinpoint the crucial philosophical problem but then fails to recognize it as such: rather than denoting Kant’s definitive insight, Cassirer holds, the finitude of human reason is merely the problematic starting point that Kant wishes to overcome. He counters that Kant’s entire philosophical endeavor precisely aims to show that the finite human reason is nevertheless capable of achieving infinite truths:

For Kant, the problem was precisely this: despite the finitude that he had himself exhibited, how can there nevertheless be necessary and universal truths? How are synthetic, a priori judgments possible – judgments that are not simply finite in their content, but which are necessarily universal? [. . .] How does this finite creature come to a determination of objects that as such are not bound to finitude?<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Cassirer understands the Kantian question ‘How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?’ as ‘How can a finite being nevertheless gain access to the intelligible realm?’ As the capacity to synthesize sensible intuitions under the universally valid concepts of the understanding, the power of transcendental

<sup>17</sup> *DD* 277–278; translation modified.

imagination plays a crucial role in answering this central question of the first *Critique* – and thus in establishing a transition to the *mundus intelligibilis*. In Kant’s practical philosophy, this transition is of course enacted, in a more radical manner, through the moral law, which secures the possibility of a ‘kingdom of ends’. Cassirer explains that

the categorical imperative must exist in such a condition that the law is not valid by chance just for human beings, but for all rational entities in general. Here suddenly is this remarkable transition. The restrictedness to a determinate sphere suddenly falls away. The ethical as such leads beyond the world of appearances. [...] In the ethical a point is reached which is no longer relative to the finitude of the knowing creature. Rather, an absolute has now been set in place. [...] The problem of freedom has been posed in this way, that it breaks through the original sphere. (276)

On Cassirer’s view, Kant’s account of the moral law then provides the answer to the question: ‘How can the sensible human being nevertheless act in a purely rational – and therefore good – manner?’ Hence, the lasting insight of Kant’s thought, whether in his theoretical or practical philosophy, lies in his attempt to account for the breakthrough to a rational sphere.

As was to be expected, Heidegger is not startled by this rather traditional presentation of Kant’s philosophy. During the Davos debate and in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, he continues to develop an alternative reading of Kant that is more in line with his own existentialist interests. With regard to Kant’s theoretical philosophy, Heidegger holds in his independent lectures that “because the intuition of human beings is finite, it requires thinking, which as such is finite through and through” (*KPM:III* 272). On his view, the reliance of the understanding on receptive or finite sensibility significantly downplays its spontaneous character. In the debate with Cassirer, Heidegger therefore argues that the account of transcendental imagination precisely signals the unsurpassable finite nature of the thinking human subject:

Kant describes the power of imagination of the schematism as *exhibito originara*. But this originality is an *exhibitio*, an *exhibitio* of the presentation of the free self-giving in which lies a dependency upon a receptivity. So in a certain sense this originality is indeed there as creative faculty. As a finite creature, the human being has a certain infinitude in the ontological. But the human being is never infinite and absolute in the creating of the being itself; rather, it is infinite in the sense of the understanding of being. But as Kant says, provided that the ontological understanding of being is only possible within the inner experience of beings, this infinitude of the ontological is bound essentially to ontic experience so that we must say the reverse: this infinitude which breaks out in the power of imagination is precisely the strongest argument for finitude, for ontology is an index of finitude. God does not have it. And the fact that the human being has the *exhibitio* is the strongest argument for its finitude, for only a finite creature requires ontology.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *DD* 280; translation modified.

In the same spirit, Heidegger counters Cassirer's assessment of Kant's account of the moral law. On this issue as well, Cassirer and Heidegger demonstrate a clear interest in the same moment of Kant's thought, but nevertheless interpret it in radically diverse ways. Where Cassirer focuses on the purely rational sphere that Kant postulates in order to metaphysically found the possibility of ethical behavior, Heidegger reflects on the existential meaning of the moral law by focusing on Kant's corresponding account of our respect for it. On his view, the human being appears not so much as the author of the moral law but rather 'finds itself under it', experiencing this law as imposed from without. Only from this perspective, Heidegger holds, does it make sense to speak of an imperative: "In the categorical imperative we have something that goes beyond the finite creature. But precisely the concept of the imperative as such shows the inner reference to a finite creature" (279). For Heidegger, Kant's philosophy thus remains a story of the human being's limits even after its turn towards practical reason:

Cassirer wants to show that finitude becomes transcendent in the ethical writings. [But] this transcendence too still remains within the sphere of finitude. [...] We proceed mistakenly in the interpretation of Kantian ethics if we first orient ourselves to that to which ethical action conforms and if we see too little of the inner function of the law itself for Dasein. We cannot discuss the problem of the finitude of the ethical creature if we do not pose the question: what does law mean here, and how is the lawfulness itself constitutive for Dasein and for the personality? (279–280)

Based on these reports about Kant's philosophy, the Davos debate seems to make no progress at all, and one could indeed wonder if Cassirer and Heidegger are not just talking past each other, as Hendrik Pos at one point suggests (287). However, they subsequently also address each other directly, thus rendering the exchange more personal. Cassirer explains that his digression about Kant was necessary because of the following problem: "Heidegger has emphasized that our power of knowledge is finite. It is relative and it is fixed. But then the question arises: how does such a finite creature in general come to have knowledge, to have reason, to have truth?" (277). We have further seen that he wonders, after defending the 'breakthrough' at stake in both Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, if "Heidegger wants to renounce this entire sphere of objectivity". Heidegger also concludes his interpretation of the moral law with a question: "It is not to be denied that something that goes beyond sensibility lies before the law. But the question is: How is the inner structure of Dasein itself, is it finite or infinite? (280). Later on, he raises two more 'questions for Cassirer': "1. What path does the human being have to infinitude? And what is the manner in which the human being can participate in infinity? 2. Is infinitude to be attained as privative determination of finitude, or is infinitude a region in its own right?" (285). For a significant amount of time, one-third of the debate, Cassirer and Heidegger

thus discuss the human condition; more precisely, the question if and how the human being can transcend its finite nature.

We find a first attempt to answer this question in Cassirer's 'Heidegger lectures'. There, Cassirer somewhat vaguely explains that the human being overcomes its finite nature simply by becoming aware of this finitude, and as such taking a certain reflective distance to it. When discussing Heidegger's account of space, he holds that

it is precisely this phenomenon of '*knowing* the limit' that first arises in the human world. The human being is that being which does not just, like all others, *has* limits, but that arrives at an *awareness* of these limits – that even lays down this limits for itself. For this reason, the human *Lebensraum* is also distinct from every animalistic space. This space has its own specific 'objectivity' in that it is not just lived, but at the same time also 'objectified'. (*ECN:17 21*)

Hence, Cassirer continues, our action radius transforms into a spiritual horizon or 'symbolic space' merely by a change of perspective (23). With regard to the phenomenon of death, he likewise maintains that "the human being is the finite being that *knows* about its finitude and that, through this knowing, overcomes its finitude and becomes aware of its infinity" (73).

During the public debate, Cassirer further specifies what kind of infinity is hereby established. Addressing Heidegger's first question, he explains that when the human being

transposes everything that is lived experience into some objective shape in which it is objectified [...] it does not thereby become radically free from the finitude of the point of departure (for this is still connected to his particular finitude). Rather, while it arises from finitude, it leads finitude out into something new. And that is immanent infinitude. [...] The spiritual realm is not a metaphysical spiritual realm; the true spiritual realm is just the spiritual world created from itself. That the human being could create it is the seal of its infinitude. (*DD 286*)

In response to Heidegger's second question, Cassirer adds that such "infinitude does not just constitute an opposition to finitude". Instead, "it is the totality, the fulfillment of finitude itself. [...] As finitude goes in all directions, it steps out into infinitude. This is the opposite of privation, it is the perfect filling-out of finitude itself".<sup>19</sup> This 'going out in all directions' assumedly refers to the variety of cultural expressions through which the human being constitutes its particular 'symbolic universe'. The philosophy of symbolic forms elaborates on these different ways of establishing a breakthrough to an objective realm in the cultural domains of myth, art, language, science, etc. At one point, Cassirer's 'Heidegger lectures' indeed hold that "the medium that leads us from the world of mere ready-to-hand to that of presence-at-hand, from mere

<sup>19</sup> *DD 286*; translation modified.



‘equipment’ to real ‘objectivity’” is generally speaking “the world of symbolic forms” (*ECN:17* 33). Cassirer maintains this transcendental viewpoint during the debate with Heidegger, when he claims that the ‘path to infinitude’ can take us “no way other than through the medium of form” (*DD* 286). He therefore posits that the human being must possess a ‘metabasis’ – the power of symbolic imagination – that “leads it from the immediacy of its existence into the region of pure form”.

Cassirer’s ‘Scheler lecture’, finally, explains the breakthrough to an infinite sphere in yet another, more anthropological, manner. For one, Cassirer here repeats that

language and art, myth and theoretical knowledge [...] all contribute, each according to its own constitutive laws, to this process of the spiritual distantiation: they are the important stages on the road that leads from the space of labor, in which the animal lives and to which it is condemned, to the space of perception and thought, or to a spiritual ‘horizon’. (*ECW:17* 200)

He further describes the capacity to mediate between ourselves and our environment as the *differentia specifica* of the human species. While animal behaviour can be explained according to a stimulus–response model, human behaviour is uniquely marked by the capacity to take a distance from the world (197), see the possible in the real (198), or ask questions (203). The resulting “intermediate realm of symbolic forms in between the human being and reality” (200) indicates our spontaneity or freedom. Cassirer would develop this way of explaining the *Sonderstatus* of the human being in his late lectures on anthropology and in *An Essay on Man* (1944).

Heidegger could not respond to these final thoughts, which Cassirer uttered after their public debate. He does, however, object to Cassirer’s initial claim that the human being reaches a certain infinity by becoming aware of its own finitude: “It does not say much [to] simply formally argue: as soon as I make assertions about the finite and as soon as I want to determine the finite as finite, I must already have an idea of infinitude” (*DD* 280). In contrast to this ‘formal’ conception of infinity, he proposes an existentialist conception of transcendence, thereby explicitly addressing Cassirer’s question about the infinity that is reached by attaining truth. Heidegger distinguishes between a rational notion of truth as validity – which he ascribes to Cassirer – and the phenomenological idea of being-delivered-to being. Echoing *Being and Time*, he thus argues that, more fundamental than the phenomenon of truth as correspondence, the “trans-subjectivity of truth, the breaking-out of the truth concerning the particulars themselves, as being-in-truth, already means to be at the mercy of the being itself” (281–282). On this basis, Heidegger develops an alternative idea of transcendence that does not point towards a purely intelligible realm, but is rather grounded in time itself.

We can conclude from this that, even while Cassirer and Heidegger continue to discuss Kant's philosophy, the Davos debate in fact revolves around the issue of the infinite or finite character of the human condition as such. Here as well, Cassirer and Heidegger may seem to meet each other halfway in so far as they revert to terms like 'immanent infinitude' and 'inner transcendence of time itself', yet it is clear that they interpret the human being's 'finite infinitude' in radically different manners. In fact, Heidegger remarks that Cassirer seems to have completely misunderstood "the proper kernel of intent" of *Being and Time* (284). He admits that, if one simply takes this work as a treatise on the human condition and subsequently inquires how this work explains our capacity to bring forth culture, his *magnum opus* would indeed have little to offer. However, he holds, such a question is completely "inadequate with respect to my central problem". What interests Heidegger is "not a philosophical anthropology", but "a metaphysics of Dasein that has the ground for its determination in the problem of winning the foundation for the problem of the possibility of metaphysics". To this goal, his existential analytic aims to demonstrate the temporality of Dasein, and Heidegger stresses that it is only within this context that his analyses of death and anxiety can be understood (283). In this way, Cassirer and Heidegger's discussion about the human condition also appears to be motivated by an even broader issue of contention, namely the task of philosophy. As Heidegger puts it, "the question of what the human being is must be answered not so much in the sense of an anthropological system, but instead it must first be properly clarified with regard to the perspective from within which it wants to be posed" (288).

### 1.2.3 *The Davos Debate as a Dispute on the Task of Philosophy*

In the end, Cassirer and Heidegger's disagreement about the finite or infinite human condition reveals a fundamental difference between their philosophical attitudes: while Heidegger sets out to show the true depth of certain philosophical problems, Cassirer searches for ways to solve and overcome them. This becomes especially clear in relation to the issue of anxiety. Picking up on Cassirer's lectures, Heidegger raised one more question to Cassirer: "3. To what extent does philosophy have as its task to let become free from anxiety? Does it not rather have as its task to surrender the human being, even radically, to anxiety?"<sup>20</sup>

As Cassirer's lectures imply, he considers it the task of philosophy to help us overcome the boundaries that are set by nature, be they of a physical (spatial or temporal), communicative, or psychological kind. Cassirer thus views

<sup>20</sup> *DD* 286; translation modified.

anxiety as a biological phenomenon that we, as rational beings, can and must surpass: 'Philosophy should allow the human being to become as free as he possibly could. In so far as it does this, I believe that it in any case frees the human being in a certain radical sense from anxiety as a mere mood'.<sup>21</sup> For Heidegger, by contrast, the *raison d'être* of philosophy is not to change our natural condition, but to help us come to terms with the peculiar finitude of our Dasein: "This setting-free of the Dasein in the human being must be the sole and central thing that philosophy can perform" (285). On Heidegger's view, our anxiety is not a psychological state, but one of the most radical expressions of our ontological attunement to being. Philosophy, he holds, should aim to further radicalize this transcendence of Dasein:

The freeing of the inner transcendence of Dasein is the fundamental character of philosophizing itself. [The] authentic sense of this freeing is not to be found in becoming free to a certain extent for the forming images of consciousness and for the realm of form. Rather, it is to be found in becoming free for the finitude of Dasein. (289)

Hence, whereas Cassirer maintains that philosophy should aim to free us *from* anxiety, for Heidegger it must attempt to free us *for* it. In other words, while Cassirer considers it the task of philosophy to enlighten the human being in the sense of liberating it through its own power of reason, Heidegger argues that philosophy can only have reconcile us with our ineradicable shortcomings. One could call this a 'therapeutic' function of philosophy, if this is understood in the psychoanalytic sense, and not as bearing affinity with Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as therapy.

Heidegger confirms that he and Cassirer look at the human being's (in)finite nature from two opposed perspectives, or that they take an interest in the human condition for entirely different reasons. He sketches this difference in the following way:

In the first lecture, Cassirer used the expressions *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*. One could say that for Cassirer the *terminus ad quem* is the whole of a philosophy of culture in the sense of an elucidation of the wholeness of the forms of the shaping consciousness. For Cassirer, the *terminus a quo* is utterly problematical. My position is the reverse: The *terminus a quo* is my central problematic, the one I develop. The question is: Is the *terminus ad quem* as clear for me? For me, this occurs not in the whole of a philosophy of culture, but rather in the question: what in general is called being? For me, it was from this question that the problematic of a metaphysics of Dasein arose. (288)

According to this picture, the goal of Cassirer's philosophy is to explain the objective sphere of cultural meaning, while its starting point or basic assumption is a conception of the human being as a 'rational animal'. Heidegger finds

<sup>21</sup> *DD* 287; translation modified.

this conception problematic, however, because he considers it “not at all self-evident to start from a concept of *logos*” (288). Although his own philosophical project also starts from the human being, for him it lies “in the essence of philosophy itself that it has a *terminus a quo* that must be made into a problem” (289). Hence, Heidegger conceives this starting point in a completely different manner as ‘the Dasein in the human being’. As such, it must first be unearthed by means of an existential analytic or ‘metaphysics of Dasein’, the famous ‘preliminary investigation’ in Heidegger’s retrieval of the meaning of being that ended up being the central topic of *Being and Time*. Only on this basis, he explains, can we strive towards the goal of philosophy, namely “to win a foundation for the basic problem of metaphysics” (285, 288).

This means that Heidegger conceives of his ground-laying of metaphysics as more than just an alternative project to Cassirer’s philosophy of culture. In his independent lectures, he asserts the priority of his own endeavor: “A metaphysics of Dasein directed at the possibility of metaphysics as such, [poses] the question concerning the essence of human beings in a way that is prior to all philosophical anthropology and cultural philosophy” (*KPM:III* 273). During the public debate, he further holds that their projects are mutually exclusive: if one were to start from Cassirer’s philosophy, there would be no way to ever arrive at ‘the central question of philosophy’ (*DD* 290). On this basis, Heidegger in the end calls Cassirer’s philosophy of culture ‘shallow’ (*faul*) because it deals with a mere surface phenomenon of human existence: its *Geist* rather than its Dasein (289). True philosophy, he holds, “has the task of throwing man back, so to speak, into the hardness of his fate, from the shallow aspect of a man who merely uses the work of the spirit” (291). This fate is not found in our cultural life, but in those rare, limit experiences in which we truly face – rather than just reflect upon – the finitude of our Dasein, like anxiety or the advent of our death:

The highest form of the existence of Dasein is only allowed to lead back to very few and rare glimpses of Dasein’s duration between living and death. [It is] so accidental that man exists only in very few glimpses of the pinnacle of his own possibility, but otherwise moves in the midst of his beings. (290)

Cassirer’s comeback may not be as sharp, but is meant as an equally devastating critique: it implies that the *terminus ad quem* of Heidegger’s philosophy is a completely outdated conception of being. The philosophy of symbolic forms sets out to continue the critical message of Kant’s philosophy by implementing the ‘Copernican revolution’ in all cultural domains alike (294). Cassirer’s entire thought relies, then, on the conviction that being can no longer be thought of as something that persists independently from us. Instead, it is the product of our symbolic understanding of the world: “Being in ancient metaphysics was substance, what forms a ground. Being in the new

metaphysics is, in my language, no longer the being of a substance, but rather the being that starts from a variety of functional determinations and meanings” (294). Hence, when Heidegger holds that “the problematic of the metaphysics of Dasein arose from the question what in general is called being?”, Cassirer views this as a retreat to traditional, pre-critical, metaphysics. Whereas Heidegger rejected Cassirer’s overly rationalistic conception of the human being, Cassirer now dismisses Heidegger’s idea that the human condition must be examined on the basis of a pre-given idea of ‘being in general’. For Cassirer, only the human subject determines what being is – in various forms – and not also the other way around. In retrospect, these different conceptions of being may explain Cassirer and Heidegger’s disagreement on the respective epistemological or ontological nature of Kant’s thought. More importantly, however, these conceptions also guide their entire philosophical enterprises: Cassirer holds that here lies “the essential point that distinguishes my position from Heidegger’s”.

With this impasse, the Davos debate inevitably comes to an end. While Cassirer and Heidegger initially seemed to find some common ground with regard to Kant’s account of transcendental imagination, and soon engaged in a lively discussion on the predominant character of the human condition, their final takes on the task of philosophy reveal two irreconcilable philosophical interests. At this point, according to Cassirer the discussion with Heidegger has in fact surpassed the level of logical argumentation:

I believe that where the disagreement lies has already become clearer. It is not fruitful, however, to highlight this disagreement again and again. We maintain a position where little is to be accomplished through arguments that are merely logical. Nobody can be compelled to take up this position, and no such purely logical compulsion can force someone to begin with the position that appears to me to be the essential one. (292)

Yet, Cassirer also holds that in light of such fundamental difference in viewpoint, one should still try to “see not only oneself but the other as well”. The only way to do this is, however, through the shared media of science (293), art (295), and especially language. In this way, Cassirer reaffirms the validity of his philosophy of symbolic forms as the only way to overcome the relativism of individual standpoints:

Each of us speaks his own language, and it is unthinkable that the language of one of us is carried over into the language of the other. And yet, we understand ourselves through the medium of language. Hence, there is something like *the* language. And hence there is something like a unity that is higher than the infinitude of the various ways of speaking. Therein lies what is for me the decisive point. And it is for that reason that I start from the objectivity of the symbolic form. (292–293)

Heidegger, in turn, affirms that “authentic activity takes place only where there is opposition” (291), and that “mere mediating will never amount to anything productive” (295). Concluding the debate, he subsequently addresses the audience

directly, asking each member to “not orient yourselves to the variety of positions of philosophizing human beings, and not occupy yourselves with Cassirer and Heidegger” (296). Instead, he expresses the hope that “you have felt that we are on the way toward once again getting down to business with the central question of metaphysics”. Heidegger thus invites everyone to assess the philosophical confrontation with Cassirer solely on the basis of how well it answered the question of being as such. In this way, the Davos debate results in a complete deadlock.

### 1.3 The Cassirer–Heidegger Dispute: An Echo of the Davos Debate

This reading of the Davos debate as a philosophical, coherent debate – despite its occasional hiccups – is corroborated by the development of the entire Cassirer–Heidegger dispute. Most importantly, the three key themes of Cassirer and Heidegger’s public debate – Kant’s thought, the human condition, and the task of philosophy – also structure, in more or less the same order, the other moments of this decade-long dispute. Furthermore, the overall conversation likewise quickly abandons initial suggestions of philosophical agreement to evolve into an unsurpassable conflict.

#### 1.3.1 Before Davos: Heidegger’s First Criticism (1923–1928)

Based on a footnote in *Being and Time*, we can trace back the relationship between Cassirer and Heidegger to 1923:

In a conversation that I was able to have with Cassirer on the occasion of a lecture before the Hamburg section of the *Kantgesellschaft* in December 1923 on ‘Tasks and Pathways of Phenomenological Research’, it was already apparent that we agreed in demanding an existential analytic such as it was sketched in that lecture. (*BT* 51)

This remark gives the impression that Heidegger held Cassirer in high regard prior to the Davos debate. For one, it looks like he considered it beneficial to the reception of *Being and Time*, the monograph that was meant to cement his fame, to mention an endorsement by Cassirer. More importantly, he here also expresses his appreciation for the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1925), which Cassirer dedicated to mythical thinking or, as Heidegger takes it, to “the mythical Dasein”. Heidegger supports Cassirer’s efforts in this work to show the philosophical importance of ethnology, and applauds his phenomenological approach to the mythical human being. However, he also expresses a concern about Cassirer’s reliance on the architectonics of Kant’s philosophy, a framework that he does not deem fit for this task.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In an unpublished letter to Karl Löwith from 30 June 1925, Heidegger makes the same assessment of Cassirer’s account of mythical thinking: “The same schema as in Volume I,

Heidegger voices the same appreciation *and* critical reservation in his 1928 review of Cassirer’s volume on mythology. After summarizing Cassirer’s account of ‘mythical thinking’, he proposes three ways to assess it:

Our approach to the philosophy of myth outlined here must pursue three points. First, it must be asked: What does this interpretation achieve for the grounding and guiding of the positive sciences of mythical Dasein (ethnology and the history of religion)? Then it becomes necessary to examine the foundations and methodological principles that support the philosophical analysis of the essence of myth. And finally, the basic question arises concerning the constitutive function of myth in human Dasein and in the totality of beings as such. (*KPM:II* 264)

In light of the first criterion, Heidegger positively values Cassirer’s research: his earlier summary already emphasized that Cassirer successfully establishes mythical thinking as “an original possibility of human Dasein that has its own proper truth” (255). In so far as the immediate, concrete, and praxis-oriented *Lebensform* of the mythical worldview resembles Dasein’s primordial way of ‘being-in-the-world’, Heidegger even implies that the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* considers “the elementary Dasein-relations of the human to its world” (262) that are also the topic of *Being and Time*. He therefore concludes that Cassirer’s account of mythical thinking provides a ‘secure guideline’ for “the initial appropriation and interpretation of newly discovered material as well as for the elaboration and exploration of already established results” in the field of ethnology (264).

Heidegger is less enthusiastic about the second criterion: he questions whether “the predetermination of myth as a functional form of creative consciousness [is] adequately grounded on its own terms”, where “the foundations for such an admittedly unavoidable grounding [are] to be found”, and whether these foundations are “themselves sufficiently secured and elaborated” (264–265). Cassirer clearly relies on Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ for this, arguing that “all ‘reality’ is to be considered as a formation of productive consciousness” (265). However, according to Heidegger it is unclear what this means, since Cassirer alternatively describes this consciousness as ‘life’, ‘spirit’, and ‘reason’. Before any attempt to broaden Kant’s critical approach to other domains of culture, Cassirer should thus have first clarified the nature of his starting point: on Heidegger’s account, “the interpretation of the essence of myth as a possibility of human Dasein remains random and directionless as

although probably a bit better – I could only read it diagonally. Cassirer especially fails when it comes to the positive analysis of the primary phenomena, and he perceives everything that he considers, which is often not little, from the high ground of Kant’s concepts”. In his 1927 address on the history of Marburg Neo-Kantianism, Heidegger however distinguishes, albeit without any further explanation, between Natorp’s interest “in the universal categorial founding of a system” and Cassirer’s search for “the concrete interpretation of the individual ‘symbols’ of spirit” (*KPM:VI* 310).

long as it cannot be grounded in a radical ontology of Dasein in light of the problem of being in general” (265).

As a consequence, Cassirer’s account of mythical thinking entirely fails to meet Heidegger’s third criterion, which concerns the pathway to an account of ‘the totality of beings as such’. Since Heidegger exclusively locates this passage in an existential analytic of Dasein, he regrets Cassirer’s focus on consciousness, whether understood as reason or spirit: “The preoccupation with the Neo-Kantian problem of consciousness is of such little help that it actually prevents gaining a grasp on the central problem” (266). At the end of his review, Heidegger adds that it make no difference if Cassirer conceives of consciousness in an encompassing manner: what we need is not that “all ‘symbolic forms’ are presented, but rather above all [that] also the basic concepts of this system are thoroughly elaborated and brought back to their ultimate foundations”. As long as the finite or temporal nature of the human being is not properly addressed, “even such a rich presentation of the phenomena of spirit is not yet philosophy itself” (269–270). Ultimately, Heidegger concludes with a backhanded compliment: he holds that Cassirer’s work on mythical thought remains “a valuable starting point for a renewed philosophy of myth, even if it is not joined to his philosophy of symbolic forms” (270).

In this concluding assessment, Heidegger does identify Cassirer as a Neo-Kantian:

An orientation guided by the phenomenon of the transcendental power of imagination, and its ontological function within the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*, an orientation that admittedly would lie far from Neo-Kantianism, could have at least made it clear that an interpretation of the mythical understanding of being is much more labyrinthine and abysmal than is suggested by Cassirer’s presentation. (269)

Heidegger does not yet explain his own interest in Kant’s account of transcendental imagination here, but this remark may have motivated Cassirer to emphasize their shared appreciation for this account during the Davos debate. In any case, Heidegger’s review of the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* critiques Cassirer’s view of the mythical human condition by criticizing his understanding of Kant. Furthermore, this critique is based on a specific understanding of the ultimate task of philosophy.

### 1.3.2 After Davos: Cassirer’s Comeback (1929–1946)

After the Davos debate, Heidegger seems no longer concerned about how his philosophy relates to Cassirer’s. This may be because he no longer desired Cassirer’s support, no longer valued his thought, or simply because his own philosophical interests shifted from the early 1930s on. Either way, *Kant and*



*the Problem of Metaphysics* never refers to Cassirer,<sup>23</sup> and Heidegger abandoned his initial plan to review the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929), allegedly because he could not relate it to his own inquiries.<sup>24</sup> One exception to this silence is Heidegger's 1929–1930 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, which however only repeat his earlier critique of Cassirer's philosophy of culture. Heidegger here remarks that "it is a widespread opinion today that both culture and the human being can only be properly and philosophically comprehended through the idea of expression or symbol. We have today a philosophy of culture concerned with expression, with symbol, with symbolic forms" (*FCM* 113). As before, he expresses his doubts whether the understanding of the human being as a spirit that comes to expression in forms, is an essential one that "concerns and grips his Dasein". There is a fundamental difference, Heidegger explains, "between setting out our spiritual situation and awakening a fundamental attunement" (114), the latter being the central topic of his 1929–1930 lectures.

Cassirer, in the meantime, added four footnotes on Heidegger's investigations into the nature of space and time from *Being and Time* to said volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*.<sup>25</sup> The message of these notes is each time the same: although 'sharp' and 'profound', Heidegger's accounts of space and time as something that is lived, rather than intellectually grasped, have no affinity with the central concern of the philosophy of symbolic forms, which Cassirer here describes as the transition "from the meaning of existence to the objective meaning of the 'logos'" (*PSF:III* 163). Cassirer does not hold that his and Heidegger's views of space and time should be perceived as mutually exclusive, but rather that Heidegger halts where his own thought begins:

What distinguishes our own undertaking from that of Heidegger is above all that it does not stop at this stage of the at-hand and its mode of spatiality, but without challenging Heidegger's position goes beyond it; for we wish to follow the road leading from spatiality as a factor in the at-hand to space as the form of existence, and furthermore to show how this road leads right through the domain of symbolic formation. (149)

In Chapter 2, we find the same assessment of Heidegger's conception of time:

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms does not question the temporality that Heidegger elaborates as the original *Seinsinn des Daseins*. But our inquiry begins *beyond* this sphere, at precisely the point where a transition is effected from this existential

<sup>23</sup> While Heidegger's 1927–1928 lectures *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'* repeatedly contrast his phenomenological reading of Kant's magnum opus to the then dominant 'epistemological' one promoted by the Neo-Kantians, in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), even these references to Cassirer's philosophical kin are left out, indicating that Heidegger had entirely moved on from the conversation with Cassirer.

<sup>24</sup> Toni Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, 189. <sup>25</sup> *PSF:III* 149, 163, 173, 189.

temporality to the *form* of time. It aspires to show the conditions under which this form is possible, the conditions for the postulation of a ‘being’ that goes beyond the existentiality of ‘being-there’.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, Cassirer’s criticism of Heidegger also remains the same after their public encounter.

Moreover, Cassirer once again applies the same critique to Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant. His 1931 review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* immediately states that the central issue of this interpretation is in fact the human condition: “Heidegger designates the problem of the *finitude* of human cognition as the central theme of Kant ‘critique of reason’” (*KPMR* 226). In particular, Cassirer explains, Heidegger interprets both the reliance of the understanding on receptive sensibility and the failure of pure reason to answer its own metaphysical questions as indicative of the finitude of human reason (7). The distinction between these faculties, as well as between the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Logic, is on this account merely pedagogical, since in truth the power of the imagination is their common source. Concluding his summary of the ‘Kant book’, Cassirer therefore holds that this power forms “the actual constitutive center of the *Critique of Pure Reason*”, and that “the proof of the basic relations [between the faculties] constitutes the chief task and the actual core of Heidegger’s analysis” (8).

Like in Davos, Cassirer decides to abstain from any polemical discussions about the merits of Neo-Kantianism and Hermann Cohen in particular, but instead assesses the “systematical truthfulness” of Heidegger’s reading of Kant.<sup>27</sup> Once again, he commences by endorsing Heidegger’s emphasis on the power of imagination:

I myself can, at *this* point, only express my complete consent and principle agreement with Heidegger’s interpretation, since the doctrine of the ‘productive power of imagination’ plainly appears – albeit from a completely different systematic viewpoint – as a simply indispensable and continuously fruitful motive of Kant’s teachings and of ‘critical philosophy’ as a whole. (8–9)

<sup>26</sup> *PSF:III* 163. Remarkably, Cassirer subsequently suggests that the postponed second and third parts of *Being and Time* may move on to the sphere of symbolic forms: “Here I shall not attempt a detailed critical discussion of this analysis. Such a discussion will be possible and fruitful only when Heidegger’s work is available as a whole. For the basic problem of the ‘Philosophy of Symbolic Forms’ lies precisely in that territory which Heidegger expressly and intentionally excluded from the first volume of his book”. Obviously, neither *Being and Time* nor *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, which partly undertakes the destruction of the history of ontology that was planned for part two of *Being and Time*, gives any suggestions in this direction.

<sup>27</sup> *KPMR* 225. Heidegger’s scattered notes on Cassirer’s review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* thereupon hold that Cassirer gets lost in the letter of Kant’s texts (*KPM:V* 300). Heidegger here also continues to argue that Cassirer misjudges the role of the understanding in Kant’s theoretical philosophy (299–300).

However, even though he further agrees with Heidegger that human reason does not create objects, Cassirer also once more rejects the view that this implies the finitude of our cognition. Kant’s critical philosophy, he holds, was after all never concerned with the origin of objects, but only with our mode of understanding objectivity as such (9). In this light, the understanding does “possess a thoroughly creative character within the realm of experience”: it is a synthetic and constructive capacity that serves sensibility not by following it but by subsuming and therefore guiding it (10). Cassirer concludes, then, that

the portrayal of the understanding as a ‘finite’ power of cognition concerns only *one* moment of its usage. [...] The understanding may be finite insofar as it never grasps absolute objects, let alone that it creatively produces these objects from itself – but it is ‘infinite’ insofar as the ‘absolute totality in the synthesis of conditions’ belongs to its actual and essential task. (12)

On Cassirer’s view, the understanding not only relates to finite sensibility through the power of imagination, but also partakes in the realm of infinity through its equally essential relation to pure theoretical reason, which has no direct relation to intuitions and reaches for the unconditioned. The case is then also clear with regard to the latter faculty: in theoretical reason “the spell of mere ‘receptivity’ is at last broken”. The same goes, a fortiori, for Kant’s practical philosophy, “for with the unconditional character of the idea of freedom, the move towards the purely intelligible, the extrasensory, and the eternal is henceforth definitively made” (13). As we have seen, Heidegger finds another sign of reason’s finitude in the reliance of the moral law on a feeling of respect. Cassirer now rejects this reading of the second *Critique* by claiming that “the moral law is not at all *grounded* in the feeling of respect, and the meaning of the former is not constituted by the latter. Rather, this feeling merely indicates the way in which the law, which is unconditioned, is *represented* in empirical, finite, consciousness” (14–15). In this way, he reaffirms the infinite character of the moral law.

What is at stake here is Cassirer’s renewed rejection of Heidegger’s ‘monism of the power of the imagination’ (16), that is, of the idea that all faculties of reason relate to and derive from this power. This view, he explains, does no justice to either the letter or the spirit of Kant’s thought. For one, the role of transcendental imagination is clearly limited to the topic of the Transcendental Analytic:

I am the last person to deny or diminish the systematic meaning and importance of the schematism chapter [...] However, the schematism and the doctrine of ‘transcendental imagination’ may be at the center of Kant’s *Analytic*, but are not the focal point of Kant’s *system*. This system is only fixed and completed in the Transcendental Dialectic – and further in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in the *Critique of Judgement*. (17–18)

Most importantly, Heidegger's 'monism' also overlooks the crucial Kantian distinctions between 'phenomenal' and 'noumenal', 'is' and 'ought', experience and idea, and psychology and ethics: it denies, in other words, Kant's 'radical dualism of the sensible (*mundus sensibilis*) and intelligible (*mundus intelligibilis*) world' (14, 16). According to Cassirer, while Kant is interested in our access to the latter, Heidegger's conception of Dasein remains caught in the former: "Kant's 'doctrine of human beings' [places] human beings from the outset under the 'idea of humanity', and consider them from the viewpoint of this idea. Its true goal is not the Dasein of the human being, but its 'intelligible substrate of humanity'" (18).

Hence, following Cassirer, Heidegger oddly enough reads an ontological message in the one part of Kant's thought that is not concerned with metaphysics. It is indeed remarkable how Cassirer locates the metaphysical core of Kant's philosophy in his theoretical and especially practical accounts of the traditional objects of *metaphysica specialis*: the ideas of world, freedom, and God, while Heidegger situates it in the 'Transcendental Analytic', which reconsiders the possibility of general ontology or *metaphysica generalis*. Moreover, Heidegger is said to focus on an element of the first *Critique* that deals with the problem of objectivity rather than subjectivity:

Kant's doctrine of the schematism and transcendental imagination [...] is not a part of the Kantian metaphysics, but a true and necessary moment of his *theory of experience*. It does not immediately and originally deal with the Dasein of the human being, but with the constitution, status, and conditions of empirical objects. (18, 19)

On this basis, Cassirer concludes that Heidegger's "entire problematic of the temporality of subjectivity [...] is not just factually, but principally foreign" to Kant's thought (19). Although he does not reject Heidegger's approach outright, he nevertheless firmly holds that it may not be presented as delivering Kant's actual intentions.<sup>28</sup>

The second, much shorter, part of Cassirer's review of the 'Kant book' further addresses the issue of Heidegger's style of interpretation. An outstanding feature of Heidegger's writings on Kant is that they deliberately attempt to 'understand Kant better than he himself did': based on the differences between the 1781 'A-edition' and 1787 'B-edition' of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, they claim that Kant initially grasped the significance of transcendental imagination, but later recoiled from his groundbreaking insights (20). Cassirer not only denies such inconsistency in Kant's writings (21–23), but

<sup>28</sup> *KPMR* 239: "From the point of view of his fundamental ontology, Heidegger had the right to *question* this dualism – but he should not have denied and repudiated it". In other words, Cassirer accuses Heidegger of not approaching the first *Critique* as an objective commentator, but as its 'usurper' (240).

he also deplores Heidegger's usage of a "subjective and psychological", rather than an "objective and systematic", criterion for assessing Kant's thought (21). As he sees it, this approach allows Heidegger to shroud "all of Kant's concepts [...] from the outset in an altered spiritual *atmosphere*" that bears no witness to his particular style of Enlightenment thinking: what Kant is after is the 'light of reason', not the 'abyss of human Dasein' (24). In a concluding remark that resembles that of Heidegger's earlier review, Cassirer thus thanks Heidegger for clarifying "the 'event' of Kant's foundation of philosophy", but regrets that he failed to recognize the bigger picture of Kant's transcendental idealism (25).

Cassirer's final concerns about Heidegger's thought correspond to the ultimate topic of the Davos debate. In "'Geist' and 'Life': Heidegger", scattered notes that are gathered in *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer basically repeats his 'Heidegger lectures', but frames his critique in light of the task of philosophy.<sup>29</sup> He begins by stating that Heidegger "comes from the philosophy of religion", and that this background determined the existential analytic: "For him all temporality [is] seen in a religious sense – for it is constituted through 'care' and through the basic religious phenomenon of death – and anxiety" (*PSF:IV* 201). Repeatedly comparing Heidegger to Kierkegaard and Luther, and emphasizing his view of inauthenticity as a 'Fall' as well as his insistence on the individual person, Cassirer leaves little doubt about where the fundamental difference between their thought lies: "This religious attitude toward death that reduces life as a whole to anxiety and dissolves it into care it not the only one possible – nor is it the authentically philosophical one" (207). Although we must take into account that Cassirer never published this assessment, we cannot ignore its implications: by identifying Heidegger as a religious thinker, he actually excludes the possibility of a philosophical conversation.

After his forced emigration from Germany, Cassirer turns to the specifically ethical task of philosophy. His final monograph, *The Myth of the State* (1946), discusses an age-old struggle between politics and persisting elements of mythical thinking.<sup>30</sup> According to Cassirer, these elements recur in a most dramatic form in National Socialism, partly thanks to the new technological means to advertise them. In light of this situation, Cassirer considers it the task of the philosopher to sabotage the successful but illegitimate merging of the symbolic forms of myth, politics, and technology, and to soothe the ancient fears that it arouses and thrives upon. He admits that this will require the

<sup>29</sup> See *PSF:IV* 202 on language, 203–204 on anxiety, 206 on eternal truths, and 208 on death.

<sup>30</sup> Cassirer introduces the ethical vocation of the philosophy of symbolic forms in 'The Problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau', a lecture in Freiburg in 1932 that Heidegger organized and attended – the last time they met each other (*ECW:18* 3–82).

“intellectual and moral courage [. . .] to think beyond and against [one’s] time” (*MS* 296).

Over against this active, Enlightening conception of the task of philosophy, Cassirer posits what I have called Heidegger’s ‘therapeutic idea of philosophy’, according to which ‘we can try to understand, but not change, the historical conditions of our existence’ (293). Although Heidegger’s thought may have no “direct bearing on the development of political ideas in Germany”, according to Cassirer it has been a tacit ally in the downfall of European culture: by giving up “all hopes of an active share in the construction and reconstruction of our cultural life, such philosophy renounces its own fundamental theoretical and ethical ideals and becomes a pliable instrument in the hands of the political leaders”.<sup>31</sup> Hence, by the end of his life Cassirer regards Heidegger’s thought as a failure to think truly philosophical *and* as danger to human culture.

The Cassirer–Heidegger dispute thus echoes both the content and the structure of the Davos debate. The remainder of this book will augment the stakes of the Davos debate even further by showing that its key issues – Kant, the human condition, and the task of philosophy – do not merely propel Cassirer and the early Heidegger’s direct engagement with each other, but also animate their respective philosophical projects.

<sup>31</sup> *MS* 293; translation modified.