

ERNST CASSIRER, MARTIN HEIDEGGER,
AND THE LEGACY OF DAVOS

CONTINENTAL DIVIDE: HEIDEGGER, CASSIRER, DAVOS. By Peter E. Gordon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 448.

ABSTRACT

In 1929 Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger participated in a momentous debate in Davos, Switzerland, which is widely held to have marked an important division in twentieth-century European thought. Peter E. Gordon's recent book, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, centers on this debate between these two philosophical adversaries. In his book Gordon examines the background of the debate, the issues that distinguished the respective positions of Cassirer and Heidegger, and the legacy of the debate for later decades. Throughout the work, Gordon concisely portrays the source of disagreement between the two adversaries in terms of a difference between Cassirer's philosophy of *spontaneity* and Heidegger's philosophy of *receptivity*, or of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), into a situation that finite human beings can never hope to master. Although it recognizes that this work provides an important contribution to our understanding of the Davos debate and to twentieth-century European thought, this review essay subjects Gordon's manner of interpreting the distinction between Cassirer and Heidegger to critical scrutiny. Its purpose is to examine the possibility that important aspects of the debate, which do not conform to the grid imposed by Gordon's interpretation, might have been set aside in the context of his analysis.

Keywords: Davos debate, Heidegger, Cassirer, decisionism, relativism, symbolic forms, philosophy of existence, history of Being

In a letter sent from Marburg in June of 1925 to his student Karl Löwith, Martin Heidegger mentioned that he had just received Ernst Cassirer's work *Mythical Thought*, the second volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which he planned to review for the journal *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*. Heidegger then proceeded to give his preliminary judgment of the work: "The same schema as in volume one, but presumably somewhat better. I was only able to probe certain parts. He [Cassirer] fails everywhere in his positive analysis of primary phenomena and sees everything that he scrutinizes—which is, in part, not negligible—through the hierarchy of Kantian concepts. A third volume on art will necessarily follow. The whole does have a certain substance."¹

1. "Von Cassirer ist Bd. II, *Das mythische Denken* erschienen.—ich werde ihn in der *Deutschen Literatur Zeitung* besprechen. Dasselbe Schema wie Bd. I aber vermutlich etwas besser—ich konnte nur Stichproben machen. Er versagt überall bei der positiven Analyse der primären Phänomene und sieht alles, was er sieht und das ist z. T. nicht geringes, aus der Höhenstufe der Kantischen Begriffe. Zwangsläufig wird jetzt Band III die Kunst folgen. Das Ganze hat doch eine gewisse Substanz." Letter from Martin Heidegger to Karl Löwith, June 30, 1925, Karl Löwith Nachlass, unpublished. I

Particularly noteworthy in this passage is Heidegger's opinion that the philosophical analysis Cassirer had developed in his book *Mythical Thought* was weakened by its Kantian orientation. And this negative evaluation is only reinforced by Heidegger's comment that the third volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* that was to follow would necessarily focus on art. The assumption that the volumes of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* would repeat the very order of the works of Kant's critical philosophy, in which the critique of aesthetic judgment constituted one of the culminating points, only highlights the extent to which, in Heidegger's eyes, Cassirer's intellectual enterprise represented a rewarmed version of Kant's original heritage.

In subsequent years Heidegger reiterated and amplified this judgment of Cassirer's work in his course lectures at the University of Freiburg, in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) and, above all, during the momentous debate that brought him face to face with Ernst Cassirer in 1929 in Davos, Switzerland. In these years the full brunt of Heidegger's critique of his formidable intellectual adversary centered on what Heidegger took to be Cassirer's subservience to earlier intellectual traditions and, above all, to the Kantian heritage as well as to the neo-Kantian movement that, through Cassirer's mentor Herman Cohen, had inspired Cassirer's thought.

In this oft repeated judgment, Heidegger evinced little appreciation for the originality of Cassirer's philosophical contribution and for the fact that Cassirer's overall project, if it never renounced the inspiration of the Kantian and neo-Kantian legacy, set out on an independent path, which diverged in important ways from the Kantian and neo-Kantian orientations. He set as his primary task the renowned aim to revise the critique of reason in terms of a broad philosophy of human culture. In the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* elaborated between 1923 and 1929, Cassirer's philosophy of human culture burst beyond the confines of Kantian critical philosophy with its focus on theoretical rationality, on rational principles of morals, and on aesthetic and teleological judgment, and it reached beyond the scope of investigation of the foundations of scientific rationality typical of the neo-Kantian schools in Marburg and in southwest Germany, which respectively focused on the methodological basis of the mathematical and physical sciences and of the cultural-historical sciences. Beyond the investigation of methodology and of the principles of scientific rationality, the originality of Cassirer's conception of human culture may be identified through the concept he employed to interpret cultural phenomena in general: symbolic forms. In the *Critique of Judgment*, indeed, Kant had restricted the scope of the symbol to representation in sensuous form of what cannot be directly presented to sensuous perception (such as the lamb as a symbol for Christ, the flag as a symbol for a nation). Cassirer broadened the scope of the symbol by

would like to express my gratitude to the late Ada Löwith for her kind permission to read the correspondence between Heidegger and her husband, and also to Klaus Stichweh, who was responsible for Löwith's literary estate. I would also like to thank the directors of the Klostermann Verlag, who possess the rights to the Heidegger *Nachlass*, for permission to quote from this correspondence in the present article. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

applying it to the field of sensuous experience itself. According to this approach, the elementary forms of experience such as space, time, number, or cause, far from being fixed structures, lend it order by organizing it symbolically at the level of sensuous perception. The primary mode of symbolic organization, according to the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *Language*, is that of language, which, in the field of human interaction and development, provides a dynamic ordering principle closely interwoven with other symbolic forms constituting human culture such as myth, religion, science, or art. In their dynamic interrelation, the different symbolic forms account for the essentially historical character of human culture through which its general tendencies may be interpreted.

Heidegger's philosophy, as his works of the 1920s and his statements at Davos amply illustrate, left little room for the symbolic elaboration of human culture, for his fundamental concern focused on the question of Being. And, as Hans Blumenberg has aptly stated in referring to the debate between the two philosophers at Davos: "He who is able to pose the question of the 'sense of Being,' will not think much of symbols."² In this perspective, it is hardly surprising that Heidegger had little sympathy for Cassirer's principal contribution to philosophy. Heidegger's negative assessment of Cassirer as a neo-Kantian belonging to an outmoded philosophical tradition was, however, also widely shared in this period among members of the younger generation, and it would convince many members of the generations that followed. This was in part due to Heidegger's enormous prestige in the final years of the Weimar Republic and again in the decades immediately following the Second World War, and also to the conviction of Cassirer's weakness, not only among Heidegger's students and disciples, but even among thinkers who contested his general orientation. One recalls here the most famous examples: the young Leo Strauss, who completed his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Cassirer at Hamburg, considered him to be no philosopher at all and Heidegger, whose philosophical orientation Strauss rejected, to be the greatest contemporary speculative thinker;³ Emmanuel Levinas, who attended the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos, expressed his clear preference for Heidegger's philosophy in the years before Heidegger's adhesion to the Nazi party in 1933, and he continued to refer to Cassirer in not entirely favorable terms in the postwar period as "a neo-Kantian and a glorious disciple of Hermann Cohen . . . in continuity with the rationalism, the aesthetics, and the political ideas of the nineteenth century";⁴ Jürgen Habermas, a generation younger than Levinas, considered that Cassirer had "lost" the Davos debate because of his adhesion to a worn-out orientation inspired by Kant and the German Enlightenment and reaching back to ancient Greece, which, in comparison to the Jewish sources of Cassirer's own tradition, could not marshal

2. "Wer nach dem 'Sinn von Sein' fragen kann, wird von Symbolen nicht viel halten" (Hans Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000], 78).

3. Leo Strauss, "Kurt Riezler," in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 245-246.

4. Emmanuel Levinas and François Poiré, *Essai et entretiens* (Paris: Actes sud, 1996), 80-81.

the force necessary to combat Heidegger's influence;⁵ finally, Hans Blumenberg, as much as he admired Cassirer, considered that at Davos Cassirer had suffered a "spectacular defeat."⁶

After decades during which interest in Cassirer's philosophy had declined, a renewed concern for his thought has emerged in recent years, both in Europe and in the United States. This revival has also led to a reexamination of his relation to his principal adversary, Martin Heidegger, above all as it came to expression before, during, and after the momentous debate that brought them together at Davos. Scholarship in this area has at the same time benefited from the publication over the past four decades of Heidegger's collected works (*Gesamtausgabe*), in which a large number of his heretofore unpublished course lectures have appeared; it has profited, above all, from the recent Hamburg edition of Cassirer's collected writings, directed by Birgit Recki, and also from the edition of his previously unpublished papers in the *Nachlass* edition under the responsibility of the late John Michael Krois. In recent years, numerous monographs and collections of essays on Cassirer's philosophy, many of which have dealt with Cassirer's relation to Heidegger and to their exchanges at Davos, have appeared in Europe and in the United States.⁷

I

Peter Gordon's recently published full-length study of the encounter at Davos reflects the wider renewal of interest not only in the thought of Cassirer and in his relation to Heidegger, but in the fundamental philosophical *issues* that concerned them at Davos. As a work of intellectual history, it presents a detailed reconstruction of the different contexts in which the ideas of each of these thinkers emerged, of the debate itself, and of its reception in later years. Gordon's work provides an important contribution to the study, not only of Cassirer or Heidegger, but of twentieth-century thought in general.

In his reconstruction of the respective contexts in which the thought of these two philosophers developed, and his reexamination of the philosophical issues that divided them, Gordon points out that their controversy took place on a ground of shared assumptions. Each of them rejected, above all, the limitation of the task of philosophy to an exposition of scientific methods and each of them

5. Jürgen Habermas, "Der deutsche Idealismus der jüdischen Philosophie" (1961), in *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 52-54.

6. Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Lebenswelt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), 21.

7. To name only recent works that are concerned with the Davos encounter: *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Barash (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Massimo Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer, Dalla scuola di Marburgo alla filosofia della cultura* (Florence: Olschki, 1996); Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000); *Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies: Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Culture*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin and John Michael Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); D. Kaegi and Enno Rudolph, *Cassirer—Heidegger: 70 Jahre Davoser Disputation* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002); Thomas Meyer, *Ernst Cassirer* (Hamburg: Ellert und Richter, 2006); Birgit Recki, *Kultur als Praxis: Eine Einführung in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Akademie, 2004); Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

also refused to reformulate this task in terms of philosophical anthropology, even if they underscored the importance for philosophy of the study of human modes of comprehending the natural and the social domains. This common ground that Cassirer and Heidegger shared only sets in sharper relief the fundamental difference that separated them. In the pages that follow, I will focus on Gordon's interpretation of this difference, less for the purpose of criticizing his important effort, than of indicating how, in my opinion, he might go farther in delineating its precise contours.

How might one best characterize the divergence between the philosophical positions of Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, which came most clearly to expression in the 1929 Davos debate? At the beginning of his book, Gordon qualifies this difference in the following way: where Heidegger's philosophy of finite human being posits a "special sort of receptivity," which Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, termed "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), Cassirer conceived of humans in terms of their capacity for "spontaneity" in the meaningful constitution the world they inhabit (7). Where Heidegger emphasized the essential finitude of human being as *Dasein*, which finds itself "thrown into conditions it did not create" and can never hope to master, Cassirer emphasized the spontaneous creativity of human beings who confer meaningful order on reality in the different realms of symbolic forms. Throughout his work (for example, 7, 33, 63, 82, 86, 188, 211), and up until its concluding paragraph (364), Gordon employs this dichotomy, for "economy's sake" (7), as a *leitmotiv* to qualify the fundamental distinctions between their two philosophies: "Where Heidegger embraced thrownness," as Gordon succinctly states (86), "Cassirer cleaved to spontaneity."

In loose terms, this distinction between "spontaneity" and "thrownness" does correspond to a dichotomy in the thought of Cassirer and of Heidegger that came to the fore both in their respective writings and at Davos. In the first two volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which appeared before the debate, Cassirer underlined the role of human spontaneity in the symbolic formation of the different realms of experience. All meaningful experience depends upon this activity. The earlier stages of human development are characterized by an incapacity to recognize this spontaneity as the source of meaningful interaction in the world. Things encountered in the world may be invested with independent power, a magical force inhering in their substantial texture. Human historical development beyond this rudimentary mythical-magical world-image is achieved through the development of rational tendencies already implicit in all human thought. If Cassirer acknowledged that humans never definitively supplanted myth, which persists in manifold ways in the most elaborate forms of human society,⁸ he nonetheless believed that the development of rationality corresponded to the gradual overcoming of the persuasion of the mythical-magical world-image that things possess occult inner powers and, later, of the metaphysical belief that the human intellect is capable of grasping the ultimate substantial reality of things in themselves. This led to the emergence of understanding that language and other symbolic forms, far from possessing an independent force or reflecting the

8. Ernst Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, vol. 2: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 19.

ultimate structure of reality, are themselves primordial expressions of human spiritual energies. This movement was of decisive importance for the emergence of insight into personal freedom from magical and mythical forces required for the development of individual moral autonomy.

In his review of *Mythical Thought*, Heidegger sharply contested Cassirer's fundamental persuasion.⁹ And Gordon is right to point out that, in this context, Heidegger advanced the counterargument that *Dasein*, however far its rational powers might have developed and however radically it might question the rudimentary forms of the mythical-magical world-image, never escapes its fundamental finitude, the fact that it is thrown into the world of environing things and of other *Dasein* with which it engages in everyday preoccupations comprising its being-in-the-world. Whether *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world is revealed through mythical-magical expression or in terms of a rationalized scientific theory, it is to *Dasein* as a *finite* being that all possibilities of being are revealed. In this perspective, Heidegger insisted not on *Dasein*'s movement beyond the primitive world-image, but on the finite condition that no historical progress could overcome.

If Gordon's choice of the *leitmotiv* of spontaneity vs. thrownness to highlight the difference between the respective orientations of Cassirer and Heidegger does correspond to a dichotomy in their respective positions, this choice also raises questions: is the distinction between these two elements, indeed, adequate to the task of bringing the *full* scope of the divergence in their positions to the fore? Might there not be other aspects of this divergence that do not conform to the grid that this *leitmotiv* imposes, and that risk being set aside in the investigation that it orients?

II

As Gordon notes, the Davos debate between Cassirer and Heidegger did not focus directly on their specific philosophical orientations, but on the different ways in which they comprehended Kant and the Kantian legacy. Their divergent ways of interpreting Kant, as Gordon stipulates, also revealed essential differences in their respective philosophies. At the heart of the debate concerning Kant's philosophy we face the dichotomy between "receptivity" and "spontaneity," both in the interpretation of Kant and in the controversy surrounding the philosophical differences that separated Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it will be recalled, Kant had theorized that human understanding depends upon two closely interrelated functions: the capacity for reception of sense data to which consciousness lends spatio-temporal structure and the spontaneous ability to set this sensuous manifold in conceptual form, which then serves as the basis for rational ideation. Given that all experience, both of self and of world, transpires in time, Kant emphasized the structuring activity of human consciousness in its capacity to lend temporal form to a chaos of sensuous contents prior to their spontaneous ordering by concepts of

9. Martin Heidegger, "Ernst Cassirer: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. 2ter Teil," in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, *Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter *GA*) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), III, 266-267.

the understanding. According to Kant's celebrated theory, this act of pure temporal formation of sensuous contents, required for their conceptual ordering, is accomplished by the transcendental imagination. At Davos, Heidegger criticized the neo-Kantian movement that, due to what he took to be its one-sided emphasis on scientific rationality, had downplayed the role of pure forms of sensuous experience, notably the act of lending it temporal form through the transcendental imagination. Indeed, Cohen entirely subordinated its operation to the work of conceptual ordering and rational ideation. In light of the interpretation developed in *Being and Time*, Heidegger sought to reverse this tendency through his claim concerning the *primacy* of the pure act of temporal structuring both as a precondition for the reception of the manifold of sensuous data and also as the *basis* for conceptual and rational thought.

Cassirer by no means contested Heidegger's charge that the neo-Kantian movement had underestimated the importance of the transcendental imagination; he nonetheless questioned the fundamental role that Heidegger accorded to it. As Gordon points out, he unequivocally distinguished between the work of transcendental imagination in Kant's theory as it gives temporal structure to experience and the spontaneity of understanding and reason in the constitution of meaningful reality. If, in Kant's perspective, sense data, to which the transcendental imagination lends temporal form, provide material for conceptual understanding and rational ideation, reason nonetheless, by virtue of its spontaneity, arises from an autonomous source, independent of the senses and of the spatio-temporal forms to which they are bound. For Cassirer, following Kant, this was the basis both of critical insight into the *limits* of human knowledge beyond sense experience and into the validity of moral imperatives, the truth of which is in no way dependent on the fluctuations of sensuous experience. And, as Cassirer pointed out at Davos and in a later review of Heidegger's work *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*,¹⁰ this was more than a merely academic question concerning the best way to interpret Kantian philosophy. Time, for Kant, was indeed *relative* to human modes of apprehension; as such, it could claim no validity beyond the anthropological realm. Reason, however, possessed *intrinsic* validity for any being endowed with rationality. And, this idea of the intrinsic validity of rational truth would only be compromised by Heidegger's reinterpretation, since it would bring into question the autonomy of reason, not only in the domain of scientific theory, but also as a source of moral law. The validity of the rational imperative essential to all morality: "Treat human beings as possessors of intrinsic worth and therefore as ends in themselves; never reduce them to the simple means to an end" cannot be made relative to merely human modes of temporal perception, since it possesses absolute validity for all beings endowed with reason. One of the principal merits of Gordon's analysis of the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger lies in his clear exposition of the problem of relativism and anthropologism standing at

10. Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation," in Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, GA III, 271-303; Ernst Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bemerkungen zu Heideggers Kant-Interpretation (1931)," in *Gesammelte Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. 17, *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften, 1927-1931*, ed. Tobias Berben (Hamburg: Meiner, 2004), 221-252.

the heart of Cassirer's critique of Heidegger's Kant interpretation at Davos and of his philosophical orientation more generally. Heidegger, however, as Gordon notes, firmly rejected this accusation. He never directly addressed the questions of scientific and ethical truth, since they concerned secondary "ontic" matters and they depended, according to him, upon a prior elucidation of the question of being itself.¹¹ Nonetheless, he denied that the interpretation proposed in *Being and Time*, and reiterated at Davos, would lead to a relativistic anthropologism. This, however, raises a thorny problem, which Cassirer continually evoked: had Heidegger not claimed, in the chapter of *Being and Time* dealing with truth, that all truth is relative to the "being" of *Dasein*? And, on the basis of this conception of truth, had he not placed in question all traditional assertions concerning truth's eternal and absolute foundations?¹²

In responding to Cassirer at Davos, Heidegger reiterated the central argument of *Being and Time* according to which the finite being of *Dasein* is by no means to be equated with an anthropological being, nor is truth to be limited to the particularity of a merely "human" perspective, since, for Heidegger, *Dasein*'s finite modes of temporal being are concerned with the sense of being itself. And here we reach the heart of the debate between Heidegger and Cassirer at Davos: we are faced with Heidegger's highly paradoxical conception of truth revealed through *Dasein*'s finite being, which elicited Cassirer's critical reflection. The interpretation of this conception of truth, however, depends on a closer scrutiny of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*'s temporal finitude in relation to which the Davos debate was engaged. It is here that we begin to perceive the limits of Gordon's *leitmotiv*, above all, his interpretation of "thrownness" in his elucidation of Heidegger's position.

In *Being and Time*, indeed, "thrownness" is never presented as an isolated element. It always presupposes a connection with two other co-constitutive moments or "existentialia" with which it is interwoven. Illuminated by "care" (*Sorge*), comprising the being of *Dasein*, these other two existentialia are "fallenness" (*Verfallenheit*) and "existence" (*Existenz*). If at different points in his commentary Gordon refers to these existentialia in passing, his insistence on the

11. When he faced the problem of defining the authentic foundations of science in *Being and Time*, Heidegger succinctly begged the issue, stating that: "The origin of science in authentic existence is not to be pursued farther here" (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 363). Since the pagination of the German original is included in the margins of the English translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Heidegger, *Being and Time* [New York: Harper and Row, 1962]), only the pages of the German original are indicated here.

12. In his preliminary lectures at Davos on philosophical anthropology ("Grundprobleme der philosophischen Anthropologie") Cassirer unequivocally formulated this objection in relation to theoretical truth as follows: "The individual self is thrown back (*zurückgeworfen*) upon itself *alone*—and here the illusions of an absolute truth, of an intrinsically valid theoretical objectivity, also disappear"; "Heidegger-Vorlesung," unpublished, Ernst Cassirer Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Gen Mss 98, Box 42, folder 839; this manuscript is currently being prepared by Jörn Bohr for publication as volume 17 of the Cassirer *Nachlass* edition, *Davoser Vorträge: Vorträge über Hermann Cohen* (Meiner Verlag, Hamburg). I would like to thank the editor of the *Nachlass* edition, the late John Michael Krois, and also Gerald Hartung and Christian Möckel for their kind permission to consult this lecture and Jörn Bohr for helpful editorial information. In regard to Kant and the problem of ethical truth, see Cassirer's remarks during the Davos exchange, contained in Cassirer and Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation," in Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 276.

role of “thrownness” leads him to overlook the *systematic* role that they play throughout *Being and Time*. In this work, Heidegger continually called attention to their systematic interrelation, which he succinctly resumed in a letter to Karl Löwith during the months following the publication of *Being and Time*: “Directly stated, I have constantly, and almost to the point of monotony, insisted on the equiprimordiality of existence, thrownness, and fallenness, and I have developed, in correspondence with this, the being of *Dasein* as care.”¹³

The full implications of Heidegger’s triple conception of the constitution of the being of *Dasein* (*Seinsverfassung des Daseins*), revealed through “care” (*Sorge*), come to light in his analysis of the theme of time in the second part of *Being and Time*, “*Dasein* and Temporality.” Where Gordon somewhat problematically refers to time in Heidegger as “a condition for all mental activity even though it is not itself a source or achievement of mental action” (147), Heidegger is concerned not with the conditions of mental activity, but with the modes of temporalization underlying *Dasein*’s understanding of being per se. Time, in this perspective, is neither a state nor a “condition.” Moreover, Heidegger characterizes it in *Being and Time* neither in terms of receptivity nor of spontaneity, but as “temporalization” (*Zeitigung*), “displacement” (*Entrückung*), and a horizon of “standing-out” (*Ekstasis*).¹⁴ If, indeed, Heidegger credited Kant in his course lectures and at Davos with having elaborated a radical theory of time that remained unsurpassed in the history of philosophy, the model of consciousness in terms of which this theory was elaborated only obscured the fundamental question of being; it therefore remained dependent upon a philosophical tradition that Heidegger aimed to overcome. At Davos, Heidegger therefore restricted the terms “receptivity” and “spontaneity” to his interpretation of Kant’s philosophy, while specifically referring, for his own “transcendental-ontological determination of time,” to the “constitution of the being of *Dasein*” (*Seinsverfassung*) that he had elaborated in detail in *Being and Time*.¹⁵ If in *Being and Time* or in the Davos debate, Heidegger at times referred to thrownness independently of the other existentialia that accompany it, thrownness always draws its significance from the triple structure of the ontological constitution of *Dasein* in which it is comprised. It is only in relation to the full structure of *Dasein*’s constitution that the originality of Heidegger’s concept of temporality in relation to being may be comprehended.

According to Heidegger’s interpretation in *Being in Time*, temporal synthesis is achieved through the primordial *unity* of the three *existentialia*, each of which privileges a specific temporal orientation: “thrownness” toward the past, “fallenness” toward the present, “existenz” in light of the future.¹⁶ These modes of temporalization in *Being and Time* orient *Dasein*’s ongoing existential *decision*,

13. “Zunächst habe ich gerade ständig, fast bis zur Eintönigkeit, betont: die Gleichursprünglichkeit von Existenz, Geworfenheit und Verfallen und dementsprechend das Sein des Daseins als Sorge entwickelt”; letter from Martin Heidegger to Karl Löwith, August 20, 1927, Karl Löwith *Nachlass*, unpublished; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 221, 277, 284-289.

14. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 350.

15. Cassirer and Heidegger, “Davoser Disputation,” in Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 282, 288, 290.

16. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 335-350.

for it is on the basis of this tripartite *temporal* structure that *Dasein*, through its choice of a way of being, makes sense of being. Where it absorbs itself in the everyday immediacy of present preoccupations, this choice is inauthentic, for it overlooks the finitude of its own being and also possibilities that, in light of the finite future, the past might reveal. Authenticity depends on resistance to the immediacy of the present in order, on the basis of past possibilities, to exist in view of the finite future and of nothingness (*das Nichts*) that it confronts. Here we glimpse in outline the temporal basis for what Heidegger, beyond any merely anthropological capacity, took to be the “universal” status of his ontology and for the conception of truth it elaborated, for it is in light of its temporal finitude that *Dasein* *universally*—if for the most part implicitly—chooses a way of being through which being is accorded a sense.¹⁷ And, from the perspective of its ontological finitude, *Dasein*’s quest to interpret its being in light of the continuity of tradition, the certitudes of religious dogma, or the purported eternal validity of rational truth, are so many signs of its tendency to dissimulate its finite being in the face of nothingness, and to seek assurance in what it takes to be the permanent structures of the surrounding environment and the social world.

At Davos and in his review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Cassirer never directly examined Heidegger’s claim to have elaborated a “universal ontology.” Yet, as I have noted, Cassirer could find no point at which Heidegger’s purported ontology might resist a thoroughgoing relativization of truth. In his preliminary lecture at Davos on philosophical anthropology, Cassirer hardly confined his critique of Heidegger to the theme of “thrownness,” for here it was also a question of Heidegger’s analysis of death and of “resolute choice in the face of death.” He traced the sources of this theme to Protestant theology, above all to Martin Luther’s evocation of the religious significance of the anticipation of death that inspired Heidegger’s philosophical reflection.¹⁸ Here Heidegger retrieved what Cassirer termed Luther’s “religious individualism,” while he deprecated any “objective form of religion.”¹⁹ Cassirer contrasted Heidegger’s position to the Platonic-Stoic tradition, which, in reaching beyond the finite perspective of the mortal individual, emphasized the significance of an ultimate order of the universe and of the human social world within it. Unfortunately, Cassirer did not develop this theme at Davos, nor did he examine the ethico-political implications of Heidegger’s radicalization of Luther’s “religious individualism” in the years that followed. Independently from Cassirer’s reflections, this task was undertaken by Karl Löwith, who investigated Heidegger’s affiliation with Protestant theology, above all with Luther and Kierkegaard, and the path that led

17. On the task of philosophy as “universale phänomenologische Ontologie,” see Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 38, 436; Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (summer semester 1927), *GA* (Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1975), XX, 16.

18. Cassirer, “Heidegger-Vorlesung,” 15. Gordon refers to the arguments presented in this lecture on the basis of accounts published in 1929 in the journal, *Davoser Revue* (116). He also presents a similar but somewhat later attempt by Cassirer, in his posthumously published manuscript *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, to trace a source of Heidegger’s existential thought to Luther, whose “individualistic” tendencies, according to Cassirer, Heidegger extended and deprived of their transcendent foundation (286).

19. Cassirer, “Heidegger-Vorlesung,” 16.

him toward finite choice in the face of nothingness and to the deconstruction of belief in eternal truths that had traditionally inspired the Christian faith. Löwith was the first to qualify Heidegger's position as one of political decisionism. In this, he linked Heidegger's philosophy to the political theory of Carl Schmitt.²⁰ In striking analogy to Heidegger's position, Schmitt radically questioned both the traditional and rational basis of norms, specifying that all norms are founded on absolute sovereign decisions that surge "out of nothingness" (*aus einem Nichts*).²¹ In 1933, both Heidegger and Schmitt, who were in contact with each other at the time, joined the Nazi party and pledged allegiance to the Hitler regime.

Toward the end of his book, Gordon takes Löwith to task for having in his opinion exaggerated the role of resolute decision in Heidegger's philosophy: "one's resolution," Gordon admonishes, "occurs *only in the midst of thrownness*" (343). This emphasis on "thrownness," however, should not lead us to overlook the central place of *decision* in Heidegger's thinking and its role, in conjunction with the call to a radical deconstruction of tradition and of the ideal of autonomous rational truth, in breaking down the barriers that stood in the way of the kind of political decision he made in 1933. It is the language of resolute decision in the interpretation of authentic existence in *Being and Time*, exempted from the weight of tradition and from rational constraints, that Heidegger later mobilized in his political declarations after 1933. Heidegger underscored this central role of decision in his address as Rector of the University of Freiburg at the beginning of the winter semester 1933–34: "The Führer himself and he alone *is* the present and future German reality and its law. Learn to know ever more profoundly: from now onward each matter requires decision (*Entscheidung*) and all action responsibility. Heil Hitler!"²²

III

Although after Davos Cassirer never elaborated on what he understood to be the sources of Heidegger's thought in Luther's "religious individualism," he nonetheless took up the theme concerning the political implications of this Lutheran heritage, and he above all focused on what he considered to be the danger it represented for ethico-political life in general. Indeed, during the years between Davos and Hitler's rise to power, this became a central theme of Cassirer's investigations. Although in this final phase of the Weimar Republic, Cassirer omitted all reference to Heidegger, his political theory focused on the antinomy between the "religious individualism" of Luther and the Platonic-Stoic tradition that he had evoked in his critique of Heidegger at Davos. In works such as *The Platonic Renaissance in England and the Cambridge School* (1932) and *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), Cassirer defended the Platonic-Stoic tradition

20. Karl Löwith, "Der Okkasionale Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt," in *Heidegger—Denker in dürftiger Zeit, Werke* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), VIII, 40–70.

21. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1922), 42.

22. Heidegger, *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges, GA* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2000), XVI, 184–185.

against the radical critique inaugurated by Luther and Calvin who, due to what they took to be the fallen state of human reason, affirmed a position of religious voluntarism that, to Cassirer's mind, complemented the more radical form of political absolutism later defended by Hobbes.²³ Here the ideal of the intrinsic validity of truth, discernible through reason, was compromised, since the criteria of justice depended only on the decision of the sovereign as the earthly representative of absolute Divine authority. Therefore, in spite of all other differences, the sixteenth-century reformers and the seventeenth-century theorist of absolutism shared a common assumption: "The possessor of the supreme power of the State," as Cassirer summed it up, "is subjected to no legal conditions or limits."²⁴ Against political voluntarism, Cassirer advanced the argument of Hugo Grotius, who, drawing on Platonic-Stoic sources, asserted the principle of the *intrinsic* rational validity of truth that depended neither on the will of God nor of man, for neither God nor the sovereign could transform what is intrinsically good into evil nor evil into goodness. As Cassirer pointed out, Kant, on the basis of his critical philosophy, made this insight the cornerstone of his ethico-political orientation. Kant opposed any conception of politics in which laws are made *relative* to the arbitrary will of the sovereign, and here Kant's philosophy inspired Cassirer's response to the problem of relativism in a manner that developed the political implications of his philosophical reflections at Davos. Even if Cassirer did not explicitly refer to the contemporary political situation in Germany, marked by mounting radicalization and the first significant electoral victories scored by the Nazis, the implications of this critique in regard to the growing influence of political decisionism were abundantly clear.

This brief consideration of the political outlines of Cassirer's reflection in the early 1930s raises a question concerning the concept of "spontaneity" in his thought as Gordon has presented it. Cassirer's reflection on religious individualism at Davos and, during the years following his encounter with Heidegger, on the political voluntarism it had favored, invites us to place this concept in a more comprehensive light. Cassirer did, indeed, elaborate a philosophy of "spontaneity," if we take this to signify that all meaning that humans may grasp arises through spontaneous acts of symbolic formation. Here, however, there is an essential difference between Cassirer's early affirmation in *Substance and Function*, to which Gordon alludes (17), according to which "spontaneity of thought is the necessary correlate of 'objectivity' which can only be reached by means of it" and the essentially different assumption, which Gordon evokes at different points in his analysis, that "pure and absolutely unconditioned mental spontaneity [is] the constitutive force behind all objective order" (18, 241). Here we must avoid a possible misunderstanding. In the introduction to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer referred to "spiritual life" as a "pattern of inner

23. Ernst Cassirer, *Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1932), 53f.; Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932), 321f.; English translation: *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, transl. F. Koelln and James Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 238-241.

24. Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 321f.

necessity and objectivity,”²⁵ yet this necessity and objectivity that are revealed in the process of symbolic elaboration are not simply *produced* by human creativity nor are they dependent on human will. At one moment in his analysis of the Davos debate, Gordon comes close to stating this point, for he specifies that the overcoming of the “anthropocentrism of different subjectivities” depends for Cassirer on “something like a common and objective world” (203). And yet here we must go further: as it is revealed by human spontaneity in the course of symbolic elaboration, this common and objective world also imposes *limits* on human spontaneity. According to Cassirer, indeed, it points toward a source of truth emanating from beyond the sphere of human representation and of human will, a transcendent source of the Good that, over and again, Cassirer qualified in Platonic terms as a “truth beyond being” (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας).²⁶ It is this conviction concerning the transcendent source of truth, one that does not derive from human spontaneity but is the basis of the rationally discernible truths it discovers, that enabled Cassirer to distinguish his position from all forms of anthropologism.

IV

In the years after Davos, Heidegger’s orientation underwent a radical transformation. His claim in *Being and Time* to have developed a “universal ontology” distinct from the project of philosophical anthropology met with a series of trenchant critiques, advanced not only by philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer or Edmund Husserl, but also by contemporary theologians. In the perspective of Protestant theology, as Löwith explained in a seminal article, his deconstruction of the claim to eternal truth all too readily reinforced the skeptical claims of anthropology, and was therefore incompatible with the fundamental convictions of the Christian faith.²⁷ After responding to this theological critique in a long footnote to the essay “On the Essence of Foundation” (“Vom Wesen des Grundes,” 1929),²⁸ and after his detailed rebuttal at Davos of the charge that he had elaborated nothing more than a variety of philosophical anthropology, Heidegger began to acknowledge the problematic character of the ontological claim of *Being and Time*. He admitted, indeed, that *Being and Time* had not gone far enough in its distinction of the “question of being” from the being of the human questioner.

25. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 1, *Die Sprache* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 48.

26. Cassirer, *Das Mythische Denken*, 300; Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 319f.; I have developed this argument in greater detail in my essay “Der Ort der Religion bei Ernst Cassirer,” in *Die Gegenwartigkeit deutsch-jüdischen Denkens: Festschrift für Paul Mendes-Flohr*, ed. Ashraf Noor and Julia Matveev (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 383-394.

27. Karl Löwith, “Grundzüge der Entwicklung der Phänomenologie zur Philosophie und ihr Verhältnis zur protestantischen Theologie,” in *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis, Sämtliche Schriften* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), III, 33-95; on the topic of anthropology in the Davos debate and its relation to the change in Heidegger’s philosophical orientation during the 1930s, see Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (New York: Fordham, 2003), 191-208.

28. Martin Heidegger, “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967), 58n.

It was above all during the years after 1934, subsequent to Heidegger's resignation from his position as Rector of the University of Freiburg, that his orientation underwent a thoroughgoing "reversal" or *Kehre*, which came most clearly to expression in the posthumously published *Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zu Philosophie)*, composed in the 1930s, and in the Nietzsche lectures of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Subsequent to the *Kehre*, Heidegger no longer set the question of being in the framework of "fundamental ontology" and he abandoned the attempt to found an original ontology on the metaphysics of finitude as proposed in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. It was characteristic of this change in position that he applied the term "metaphysics" exclusively to that aspect of the Western tradition that was to be overcome. In this perspective, the locus of the *Seinsfrage* shifted from the temporal and historical being of *Dasein* in its singularity to what Heidegger came to call the epochs of the history of Being, manifested in the metamorphoses in the conception of truth since Greek antiquity. According to this conception, the transformations in the comprehension of truth, from the Platonic interpretation of being to the modern Cartesian renewal of metaphysics up to the emergence of twentieth-century *Lebensphilosophie* and philosophical anthropology, corresponded to an ever more pronounced forgetfulness of Being. Anthropology was nothing more than the historical fulfillment of traditional metaphysics, which proceeded through an ever more thoroughgoing radicalization of its fundamental tendencies on a modern anthropological ground. Metaphysics presupposed that human ideas are capable of grasping Being, what truly "is." In radicalizing this presupposition, anthropology renounces all traditional speculation concerning ultimate metaphysical substance, while it extends and sets on a fully new basis the guiding assumption of metaphysics insofar as it equates what truly "is" with what can be made an object of human representation. At the moment of fulfillment of metaphysics in its passage into modern anthropology, all truth is leveled down to what can be grasped on a human scale and, in relation to the contemporary world-image, engaged in the quest for unlimited technical mastery.

In this later context of the *Kehre*, Heidegger renounced the earlier *activism* expounded in the earlier philosophy of the finitude of *Dasein*. Heidegger, as Gordon notes, in his "Letter on Humanism," composed immediately following the German defeat in World War II, once again qualified human being in terms of "thrownness" (361-362). We note here, however, that in relation to the philosophy of *Being and Time* this term acquires a wholly different significance. After the *Kehre*, it is no longer engaged in the tripartite constitution of *Dasein's* being, calling for decision in the face of nothingness. In the perspective of the history of Being, Heidegger counsels "serenity" (*Gelassenheit*) in regard to a destiny that devolves upon mankind from a realm of Being beyond the pale of any possible human representation or human influence.

This brings us to a paradoxical conclusion. Fifteen years after the Davos debate, Cassirer, at the end of the Second World War and just prior to his death, returned to the theme of Heidegger in his posthumously published work *The Myth of the State*. It is here, more directly than ever before, that Cassirer's analysis focused on "thrownness," which he described as the principal characteristic

of Heidegger's thought. Without evoking the theme of "resolute decision" in the light of death that he had touched upon in Davos, he centered his analysis on *Dasein's* inability to surmount the condition of thrownness into a world it cannot master. In this context, without referring to the concept of freedom that Heidegger proposed in *Being and Time* and reiterated in Davos, he qualified the fundamental tendency of Heidegger's philosophy as the negation of freedom. By this he understood Heidegger's denial, on the basis of *Dasein's* thrownness, that the development of modern conceptions of individual freedom and moral responsibility might lead to a transformation of humanity, and thus to fundamental progress beyond the human condition in the mythical world. In the context of this work, as Gordon notes, Cassirer sought less to elucidate Heidegger's philosophy than to understand it as a symptom of contemporary disarray. Indeed, from Cassirer's perspective in *The Myth of the State*, Heidegger's refusal to accord any fundamental importance to rational conceptions of personal autonomy indicated nothing less than his entrapment within mythical modes of thought that, in this later period, Cassirer identified as a political tendency of the modern period as a whole.

During his years of emigration, it is doubtful whether Cassirer had an inkling of the change in Heidegger's orientation since their encounter in Davos. Nonetheless, Cassirer's charge in *The Myth of the State* that "thrownness" was an expression of fatalism touched on an aspect of Heidegger's thought that became far more pronounced *after* his abandonment of the activism of his earlier orientation. In the movement of the history of Being, indeed, doubt about the significance of the rational standards governing individual autonomy and moral responsibility sprang from a novel basis. Since the movement of Being had called forth the modern world-image independently of all human action, emphasis on the value of individual human action could correspond only to a wholly illusory conviction that had gained currency with the advent of modern humanism and its radical forgetfulness of Being. But it is also perhaps here, more than ever before, that Heidegger's thought, in depicting a total account of the history of Being, and of the movement of human history Being underlies, spins out what might be qualified as a modern mythical narrative. And here too, perhaps, albeit in a way that he could not have appreciated, Cassirer's reflections on Heidegger and on the role of myth in the contemporary world acquire a new significance.

JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH

Université de Picardie