



# Simon Truwant, "Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos: The Philosophical Arguments"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Simon Truwant.** *Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos: The Philosophical Arguments.* Cambridge University Press 2022. 288 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover 9781316519882)

On April 2, 1929, in Davos (Switzerland) during the *Internationaler Davoser Hochschulkurse* two of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, namely Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, gave birth to a lively debate characterized – besides the question of the human condition and the task of philosophy – by a dispute about the Kantian legacy. Heidegger that same year would release *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* and at the turn of 1927-1928 had given a course in Marburg on the phenomenological interpretation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, while Cassirer – an eminent neo-Kantian linked to the Marburg School of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp – could already claim, among his rich scientific production, the editing of Kant’s works and an extensive monograph on the Königsberg thinker (*Kants Leben und Lehre*). At the Davos meeting, Heidegger and Cassirer – albeit politely and seriously – hurled heavy criticism at each other regarding the interpretation of Kant, even though, to be honest, it would be rather reductive to flatten that ‘debate’ to the ‘Kantian question’ alone. Much more was at stake, namely, two profoundly different conceptions of philosophy and its role, two proper ‘worlds’ from which sprang problems that, in a sense, are still our own. By 1929 Heidegger and Cassirer had already achieved a certain notoriety, the former with the publication of *Sein und Zeit* in 1927 and Cassirer with his monumental *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (3 vols. 1923-1929), works that certainly constituted the background of their respective philosophical options.

The recent volume of Simon Truwant, FWO Postdoctoral Fellow at KU Leuven and careful scholar of Cassirer’s works, has reconstructed the history of the legendary Davos debate, attempting to dissect its philosophical arguments. The basic thesis of Truwant’s volume is that both Heidegger and Cassirer, starting from two different conceptions of the task of philosophy, did not limit themselves to a simple dispute over the Kantian legacy, but also engaged in an analysis of the human condition. As Truwant himself points out in his ‘Introduction,’ these three aspects are in a hierarchical position: ‘Cassirer and Heidegger’s disagreement about the meaning of Kant’s philosophy is motivated by their different views on the human condition, which in turn are motivated by their opposing conceptions of the task of philosophy’ (8). The philosophical analysis of these three issues constitutes the subject of the first chapter, entitled ‘Reconstructing the Davos Debate.’ As is well known, the starting point of the dispute between Heidegger and Cassirer concerned their interpretation of Kant’s philosophy. Heidegger’s hermeneutical proposal stands in sharp contrast to that provided by the Marburg School, whose interpretation of Kant’s philosophy is regarded by Heidegger as a mere expression of the theory of knowledge.

This is explained by the fact that Heidegger criticizes the naturalistic and objectivistic attitude of science, which claims to fix and crystallize the multifaceted concreteness and meaningfulness of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) into concepts, categories, and judgments. Instead, Heidegger traces the central aspect of the first *Critique* back not so much to the problem of knowledge, but to the foundation of metaphysics: ‘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’



(20). In other words, making use of the traditional distinction between *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis* – where the former is the science of being *qua* being and the latter the analysis of the preeminent regions of being (rational psychology, rational cosmology, rational theology) – Heidegger holds that the task of the *Critique of Pure Reason* lies in the foundation of a general ontology. Of course, there is no need to show how this reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* done by Heidegger is arbitrary and hermeneutically violent. But in reality, the starting point for an appropriate understanding of the 'dispute' over the Kantian legacy is the question of the role Heidegger and Cassirer attributed to schematism and transcendental imagination.

As Truwant writes, 'Cassirer and Heidegger both focus on this faculty because it undercuts a sharp distinction between sensibility and understanding, receptivity and spontaneity, or the concrete and the universal, and, as such, establishes our initial relation to the world' (24). In Heidegger's view, the transcendental imagination constitutes the real common root of both the theoretical and practical use of reason, while Cassirer downplays the role Heidegger attributed to the transcendental imagination, arguing that in fact Kant limited the importance of the transcendental imagination to theoretical philosophy alone, that is, to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Therefore, as Truwant sums up, Heidegger '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' (26). The way in which Cassirer and Heidegger appropriate Kantian thought is explored by Truwant in greater depth in Chapter 2 ('Cassirer's Transformation of the Critique of Reason into a Critique of Culture') and Chapter 3 ('Heidegger's Reading of Transcendental Philosophy as Phenomenological Ontology') of the first part of the volume ('The Lasting Meaning of Kant's Thought'), through which Truwant explains the reasons behind these two diametrically opposed interpretations. In Chapter 4 ('Spontaneity or Receptivity: Two Readings of the First *Critique*'), however, Truwant addresses in detail Heidegger's ontological interpretation and Cassirer's epistemological interpretation, which the latter, in a sense, inherits to a certain degree from Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp.

Part II of the volume, on the other hand, deals with what Truwant rightly considers the second central issue of the Davos debate, namely the question 'what is the human being?'. As Truwant states, 'an account of the human condition constitutes the beating heart of both Cassirer's overall philosophy of culture and Heidegger's early thought – even if their ultimate interests lie elsewhere' (153). According to Cassirer, it is in the vast universe of symbolic forms that it is possible to grasp the *differentia specifica* that connotes man, where the latter is conceived not so much as an *animal rationale* but as an *animal symbolicum*, thus emphasizing the need to free his definition from any artificial form of metaphysical essentialism. It is in the *Essay on Man* that the question of man appears to be dominant, where Cassirer – in the light of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* – exposes a wide-ranging perspective, in which disciplinary fields such as history, biology, art or religion find themselves immersed in a dense web of functional nexuses, which go to make up the whole reservoir of energies of the spirit, in which art, language or religion also take on an objective meaning as themselves modes of objectification, but without thereby lapsing into banal cultural relativism or more or less arbitrary forms of reductionism. Clearly, the fundamental purpose of the philosophy of

symbolic forms is to provide a theory of the different spheres of cultural orientation, namely ‘how we can orient ourselves in mythical, linguistic, artistic, religious, scientific, or political “thinking”’ (154).

Heidegger’s basic philosophical stance concerning the human condition finds its most comprehensive expression in his 1927 masterpiece *Sein und Zeit*. The treatment of the question of the meaning of being, in terms that are completely renewed with respect to Western metaphysics, allows Heidegger to establish a central distinction within the reflection of *Sein und Zeit*, namely that between ‘ontic’ and ‘ontological.’ In other words, the distinction between being and entity is of a pre-ontological nature, since even if we do not have an explicit concept of being, it is already given in latent form in the existence of *Dasein*. For these reasons, Heidegger deemed necessary – preliminarily – an analytic of *Dasein*; on the other hand, things could not be otherwise, all the more so when one considers that the entity which poses the question about the meaning of being is precisely man himself [*Dasein*], which is why Heidegger gives *Dasein* an ontic-ontological preeminence. It follows that a mode of access must be found by which this entity can show in itself and from itself. Such a mode, according to Heidegger, will have to show the *Dasein* as it is at first and for the most part, in its everydayness.

Another essential point of the existential analytics carried out by Heidegger concerns the way in which *Dasein* is understood, namely, not from a purely static point of view, but in its dynamism, in its simple ability-to-being [*sein-können*]. It is in this aspect that lies, so to speak, the essence of man and that for the *Meßkirch* thinker is nothing other than existence itself. By existence the author of *Sein und Zeit* means, as we have already seen, *ek-sistere*, i.e., coming-to-be and thus openness to the glade of being; this means that man – that is, each of us – is always an ability-to-being, which is why existence precedes essence. Within this dynamic conception, *Dasein*, therefore, is always faced with choices and which Heidegger delineates in terms of authenticity and inauthenticity [*Eigentlichkeit-Uneigentlichkeit*].

These two conceptions, according to Truwant, give rise to two diametrically opposed conceptions of the nature of the human condition – where Cassirer ‘consistently emphasizes the formative, spontaneous or – in the terminology used at Davos – infinite character of symbolic imagination’ (173); while Heidegger ‘clearly portrays *Dasein* as a fundamentally finite condition’ (175), and also to two radically different concepts of the task of philosophy. This aspect is addressed in detail by Truwant in Part III of his volume, entitled precisely ‘The Task of Philosophy.’ He explains this by resorting to their different ways of understanding the starting point (*terminus a quo*) and goal (*terminus ad quem*) of philosophy. In the case of Cassirer Truwant states that the starting point of his philosophy is ‘his conception of the human being as an ‘*animal symbolicum*,’ and its goal (*terminus ad quem*) is the objective, liberating, realm of cultural meaning’ (246). Instead, according to Truwant, Heidegger ‘deems human culture an at best secondary, and at worst obstructive, topic of philosophical inquiry’ (247). Of course, for Truwant one has to be careful about this distinction since both Cassirer and Heidegger understood, for example, the function of the *terminus a quo* differently. Indeed, Truwant states, ‘the human condition does not *in the same sense* function as the *terminus a quo* of Cassirer and Heidegger’s thought: understood as a ‘starting point,’ this *terminus* is either the

facts of culture or Dasein's pre-ontological understanding of being, whereas conceived as a 'foundation,' it is either symbolic consciousness or the question of being' (247). Despite their different philosophical options and their radical differences about the interpretation of Kant's philosophy and the human condition, for Truwant both Cassirer and Heidegger give equal importance to the problem of orientation, which is why Truwant concludes his volume this way: 'In so far as Cassirer and Heidegger are interested in the respective possibilities to orient ourselves *in* and *to* the meaningful world that we inhabit, or in our capacity and need for existential orientation, their philosophical projects can be taken as two complementary variations on the same philosophical theme' (248).

In conclusion, this volume by Truwant has the merit – compared to other publications on the Davos debate – not only of placing more attention on the purely philosophical issues, but also of highlighting the points of contact between Cassirer's and Heidegger's reflections, which basically condenses in their common attempt to direct human life toward its success.

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