

# **KANT AND MODERNITY BETWEEN GNOSTICISM AND RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT: THE DAVOS DEBATE BETWEEN CASSIRER AND HEIDEGGER**

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## **Abstract**

The Davos debate held in 1929 around the relevance of Kant's oeuvre can be understood as the confrontation around the possible destiny of the Enlightenment movement itself. We will try to show that Heidegger's interpretation of critical finitude as the expansion of self-affection of consciousness to the whole of Experience can be understood as a radical weakening of the self-determination duty of the modern Man and the definitive invalidation of the modern emancipatory project through the instrumentalization of the work of its main figure, Kant. By contrast, the radicalisation of the Kantian interrogation "*Was ist Mensch?*" and its expansion throughout a multiplication of aprioristic symbolic horizons by Cassirer corresponds to a drastic attempt to fulfil the critical project. The vital dynamics of form-giving in all its complexity and richness must correspond to the actualization of the Kantian project, allowing to conceive the application of the transcendental to contemporary topics, such as expression, the body (*Leib*), political irrationalism or the ante-categorical representation.

Thesis: The confrontation in Davos in 1929 between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger on the actuality and interpretation of Kant's legacy is interpreted here as a turning point in the history of philosophy and thought in general.

## **Keywords**

Cassirer, Enlightenment, Finitude, Gnosticism, Heidegger, Man

The Davos debate took place in 1929, in a stylish resort in Switzerland, where philosophers from both Germany and France met in order to try to think together, almost 10 years after the massive slaughter of the Great War. For most interpreters, what was supposed to be an attempt to offer the possibility to reconcile the intellectuals from both side of the trenches ended up to be an omen of the coming horror. One episode incarnated this: paradoxically, the confrontation took place between two German philosophers, separated by generation, references, categories and intentions; the French intellectuals were reduced to be merely spectators of the exposition of the core of the conflict which would dilacerate the entire world, a few years later. The debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger became, *volens nolens*, a paradigm, and incarnates the core of the violent opposition of the epoch.

But the traditional interpretation of the debate gave a quite distorted vision of the *enjeu*, of what was really at stake in the attempt to measure the relevance of Kant's oeuvre for contemporaneity. On one hand, the representative of a refined, bourgeois old-school world, the last survivor of the Enlightenment sadly crushed in the field of Verdun, kind but obsolete. On the other hand, the *enfant terrible* of the new tendency in philosophy, the heir of the phenomenological school founded by Husserl, ready to take by storm the modern world he so deeply despises and to tumble down the whole metaphysical tradition in the way of a new, radical, starting over. Various elements contributed to the perpetuation of this caricature. First of all, the constant propaganda machine Heidegger developed during his whole life: from his special-made *völkisch* leather costume prepared for Davos or his escapades skiing while the congress took place, to his staging of the authentic thinker in his *Hütte*, an apparently modest stronghold against the rage of nihilistic modernity. Then, the very fate of all the resistance against nazi madness, from death to exile, sometimes in dreadful conditions, like Cassirer crossing the northern Atlantic on the last ship, miraculously spared by sea mines and U-Boats. Most of them never could make it back to Europe, to pursue their work of resistance and understanding of the irrational dark forces which devastated the old world. Paradoxically, it was rather the chancellor of the University of Freiburg in 1933 who provided the concepts to think the events, and had an overwhelming influence on the new French generation

of thinkers, beginning with his seminal *Letter on Humanism*.<sup>1</sup> Finally, while the translation and the teaching of the mage of Freiburg determined the whole post-war academic and intellectual life of Latin Europe, Cassirer was destined to oblivion, his major work, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, being translated into French only in the seventies, as an act of resistance of Pierre Bourdieu against the overwhelming influence of Heidegger in the university and the book market.

Nevertheless, the Davos debate must now, with distance, be interpreted not as the confrontation of characters, but as the moment of decision between two radical philosophical choices which could help us understand our very position in the modern epoch we are facing. The discussion focused on Kant is not a coincidence. From the fate of the critical heritage, the most radical foundation of modernity, depends our contemporary destiny. In this sense, the main and decisive attack on modern conscience by Heidegger was not fundamentally aimed at Descartes, confined to a substantial reduction of the world and the thought to a manipulating purpose.<sup>2</sup> Since Kant definitely dismissed metaphysics so as to recentre the realm of thought in the one of representation and experience, the critical undertaking was the absolute opponent to a radical journey back to ontology. In this sense, the interpretation of Heidegger began from the very core of the Copernican revolution, from a manipulation of the concept of finitude, locking up the whole Kantian consciousness into the net of temporal relativity.

### **1. Self-affection and phenomenological weakening of conscience überhaupt<sup>3</sup>**

One of the fulcral points of the Heideggerian critique of Kant is without a doubt the one aiming at self-affection. The priority Heidegger gives to time subordinates the question of objectivity – one of the main problems of

<sup>1</sup> On the massive influence of Heidegger on the post-war generation in France, see the reference work of D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, 2 Volumes, Paris, Albin Michel, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes in Holzwege*, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is a synthesis of an analysis developed in the chapter “De Marburg a Davos, ou o outro colóquio da última Ceia” in O. Feron, *O intervalo de Contingência – Hans Blumenberg e outros modernos*, Lisboa, Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2011, pp. 117–127.

critical philosophy – to the pure form of inner sensibility. The finitude of the subject is measured by its sensible constitution, and this one, widened to the whole experience; that makes the sensible receptivity represent the originary fundamental dimension of any experience. If Cassirer agrees that the sensible moment is an essential moment of our relation with the world, the break with Heidegger comes when the latter reduces the unity of conscience to a temporal product, or when Heidegger operates

(...) a double shift; from the objectivity in general to the Being in its difference with the being, from timeless ego to the temporal ex-tatic Dasein. In Kant, the *Etwas überhaupt* means the objectivity of any object, as a correlate of pure conscience. Turning the latter one temporal, Heidegger is obviously lead to also turn the former one into something temporal.<sup>4</sup>

The consequence of such a broadening focuses on the radical temporal character of the *Dasein* in its relation with itself. If the pure form of time establishes itself as the condition of each and every position in general, the original intentional aim of conscience, as pure, inclines towards time itself. In this case, pure conscience, being temporal, aims itself as temporally affected by itself. Time is here what affects itself originally and, simultaneously, establishes the whole field of the aimed. Caught in this movement that exceeds it and makes it possible, conscience, which is fully temporal, finds itself determined by the same determinations as time itself: its passivity.

It is only as founded on this kind of ipseity that the finite being can be what it is aimed to be a being submitted to receptivity.<sup>5</sup>

Crossing conscience completely, time undoes the distance that Kant maintained between the sensible dimension, that is labile, of conscience and the consistency through which it perceives its own modifications. In one

<sup>4</sup> D. Giovannangeli, *La passion de l'origine* (A paixão da origem), Paris, Galilée, 1995, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> "This pure intuition solicits itself through (the object) that is object of intuition, forming it without the help of experience. Time, by nature, is self-affection of itself. Even more, it is precisely what forms (the aimed) that, going out of itself, aims-towards... [so etwas wie das "Von-sich-aus-hin-zu-auf..."], in such a way that the aimed, formed like this, emerges and flows back on this aimed". M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1973, § 34, p. 183.

word, what Heidegger suggests is to reduce the analytical unity of apperception to the sole synthetic unity. The consequence of this deed is, based on the Copernican revolution, that the whole experience is reduced to the sensible character, and therefore passive, receptive of the ek-static temporal conscience. In spite of the heterodoxical character of his interpretation, Heidegger can claim an authentically Kantian position (a position in front of which Kant, frightened, would have stepped back... unlike Heidegger himself, of course), in so far as he intends to conclude the critical undertaking, founding philosophy itself on the soil of finitude. Kant, according to him, would have remained trapped in the snare of this last manifestation of metaphysics which is its modern metamorphosis, science, and would have sacrificed finitude to the ambition of the universality of scientific objectivity.

## 2. The gnostic conviction of Man

This revolution concerning the conception of the temporality of conscience has tremendous consequences on the anthropological reflexion inspired by the main Kantian interrogation: *Was ist Mensch* ? The reduction of conscience to a fundamental passivity – through the instrumentalization of time as operator of this movement – extracts from man the very possibility of self-determination (*Selbstbehauptung*) which was the main purpose of the Enlightenment, or, as Kant put it, the possibility of autonomy. As a consequence, Man is condemned to a condition of incompatibility, of restlessness that transforms the pure Husserlian intentionality into an emotional drift and removes any possibility of dwelling in his own life. As a sentimental castaway, the human being (*Mensch*) is sentenced by Heidegger to be an in-authentic generalization, a *Verfallen*; therefore, he opts for an alleged authenticity of the individuality that appears sporadically in the temporality of the instant (*Augenblick*), but without any possibility for man to take part in the process. As such, the drifter into existence is condemned to a cruel fate which appears like an open jail with no possibility of escape. Unlike Christian metaphysics, there is no perspective of salvation or redemption here; not even the Augustinian *Qui voluit* threw Man in such an abyss of helplessness.

Cassirer denounces here a religious inspiration in Heidegger's comprehension of temporality not as *Werden* but as an experience of the spiritual



basic phenomenon of anxiety/care (*Sorge*).<sup>6</sup> This rejection of any kind of universality around the Kantian *Mensch*, which is nothing less than a repetition of the gesture already launched by Feuerbach and the left Hegelians (*sic*) in the name of a greater authenticity, throws back the *Dasein* into an insurmountable loneliness, only exceeded through “a fundamental event (*Grundgeschehen*) of the internal dynamic of the metaphysics of *Dasein*”.<sup>7</sup>

The definition of the *Dasein* as an event, and not as a structure or the dynamics of determinations, matches with the Heideggerian analysis of Kant’s schematism and its originarity, determined as “‘exhibition’, an exhibition of presentation (*Darstellung*), of the free ‘giving itself’, which contains a necessary relation to a ‘receiving’ (*Hinnehmen*)”.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger’s insistence on the receptive character of conscience, at the most intimate and native level, always aims at the reduction of any possible free determination of its re-presentations, defined as inauthentic or/and insufficiently native (this authentic-inauthentic duality works here systematically as a term of disqualification of Cassirer’s philosophy of representation – i.e. symbolic. A pure receptivity is hence a promise of authenticity).

<sup>6</sup> “Für Heidegger, der nicht von der *Biologie*, sondern von der *Religionsphilosophie* herkommt, – dessen Anschauung von der “Existenz” u. von der “Zeitlichkeit” nicht wie diejenige Bergsons durch die Betrachtung des *Lebensphaenomens*, des Phänomens des natürlichen “Werdens” und “Vergehens” bestimmt wird – sondern dem alle Zeitlichkeit im “Augenblick” (religiös gesehen) wurzelt – dem sie durch die “Sorge” konstituiert wird und durch das religiöse Urphaenomen des Todes – und der Angst (vgl. Kierkegaard)”. E. Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der Symbolischen Formen*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1995, p. 219. This fragmentary analysis is drawn from the manuscript of the fourth volume of Cassirer’s main work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, unpublished until 1995; however, it was written during 1928, directly in the wake of the discovery of *Time and Being*.

<sup>7</sup> *Davoser Disputation* in M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1991, p. 285. It should be noted that the transcription of the Davos debate has hardly been available as an independent publication, since Heidegger’s heirs – and will executors – were against its publication outside Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*. On the other hand, Tony Bondi, Cassirer’s widow, always authorized the publication, as an independent book, of the discussion transcriptions between her husband and Heidegger. This incomprehensible ban on the part of Heidegger’s clan even led to the withdrawal of the French edition (Paris, Beauchesne, 1972), reinforcing the absence of discussion on the topic and extending Cassirer’s exile from the philosophical discussion.

<sup>8</sup> *Davoser Disputation* in M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

In so doing, Heidegger breaks up with the Kantian tradition, a rupture expressed by his reduction of Man to his very peculiar understanding of finitude. It was easy for Cassirer to remember him of the infinite dimension developed by man, particularly in the practical realm of Reason.<sup>9</sup> Not only Cassirer is undeniably in line with of Kantian philosophy, but he also performs an inversion of the Heideggerian pretension of developing a practical philosophy, thus breaking with the theoretical tradition of metaphysics assimilated to its last avatar, science, and whose ultimate representative was his old master Husserl.<sup>10</sup> The practical result here is that Man finds himself in a situation in which it is impossible to develop a project of self-determination; on the contrary, he must be submitted to an emotional passiveness facing an inauthentic world which awakes the only emotional disposition promising authenticity: anxiety (*Angst*).

If this whole configuration appears to be as anti-modern as it can be, it can now be understood why the confrontation with critical philosophy, through its last and most innovative representative, was so crucial to Heidegger. But if Cassirer perfectly identified countless elements borrowed from the religious determination of Man (particularly from Augustine and Luther), he also perfectly points out that the determination of Man as *Angst* cannot in any case be answered by a religious calming down:

He [Heidegger] does not allow anxiety, as mankind's basic state of mind, to be pacified through either theological metaphysics nor a religious Gospel of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See *Davoser Disputation* in M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–7

<sup>10</sup> See the profound analysis of J. Taminiaux on the differences between Heidegger and Hannah Arendt in *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, Paris, Payot, 1992, where he establishes the Heidegger's reduction of the Aristotelian *Theorein* to his own practical definition of reappropriation by the *Dasein*. "... le temps dans lequel le passé et l'avenir comptent autant que le présent est la temporalité finie du *Dasein*. (...) Heidegger s'accorde encore avec Aristote et Platon pour attribuer au *biôs theôrêtikos* le statut de possibilité la plus haute du *Dasein*, de l'exister. Mais il en diverge du tout au tout lorsqu'il change l'orientation de la *Theôria*. Au lieu de considérer l'être perpétuel de la *physis*, la *theôria* de l'ontologie fondamentale heideggérienne n'a de regard que pour l'être mortel du *Dasein*. Dès lors, au lieu de se séparer de la *phronesis*, la *sophia* au sens heideggérien lui est intimement associée." *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> E. Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der Symbolischen Formen*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

Here is probably the moment when Cassirer identifies the core of Heidegger's existential nihilism. As the author of *Being and Time* countless said, his philosophy is not religious, in the sense that it would be one more philosophical interpretation of Christianity. But the inspiration he found in Christian tradition is here decisive. And it was an ancient student of Heidegger who identified the actual root of his inspiration: Hans Jonas.

### **3. Jonas' identification of gnostic structures in Heidegger's radical ontology**

Jonas will undertake the task of interpreting the profound inspiration of Heidegger's thought where Cassirer had to leave it: the total absence of possible relief for the anxious living being named Man. His vast studies and knowledge of the gnostic nebula led Jonas to switch his methodological assumption that Gnosticism as an ancient form of nihilism could be fruitfully interpreted through the categories of nowadays existentialism.<sup>12</sup> But, soon enough, Jonas realized that he should invert his method and use gnostic categories to understand current nihilism, even with all the hermeneutical resources he should use. The result is that Jonas gives a conceptual form to the intuition Cassirer had, when he identified the total absence of an horizon of salvation in Heidegger's description of the inauthentic life of man.

In a cosmos absolutely deserted by the Gods and deprived of any possibility to inhabit a world described as cruelly indifferent to human life, Jonas is going to draw the portrait of a gnostic existentialism in its structure, even if Heidegger never would admit such an approximation. The analysis of Jonas gives us a coherent structure of characteristics shared by Gnosticism and Heideggerian existentialism:

- Both refuse any kind of universality in this world (critique of the *nomoi*);
- The gnostic good is the absolute Other (without any possibility of thinking it through the means of this world), such is the Being of Heidegger: *nihil* instead of *ens*, refusal of any universal law of thought

<sup>12</sup> H. Jonas, "Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism" in *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1958 (1970); cited here from *La religion gnostique*, trad. L. Évrard, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, pp. 417–442.



that could be embedded in a rational enunciation;

— Man has no *nomos*: it is impossible to have a being of man, rather he is thrown into an indifferent world, which is hostile to him: life is thrown into the world of darkness; for the gnostic this is the *Geworfenheit* of *Dasein*;

— Original violence of this fall into the world, which reduces existence to a dynamic of a temporal throwing, a casting without existentials but only contingency. There is no meaning in such an existence;

— This cold and indifferent world induces a despise for nature and its vital inner principle;

— This leads to a thought of absolute atrocious dualism, a dualism without metaphysics.

This atrocious condition of man is utterly expressed by Hans Blumenberg:

The analytical description of “existence” neither replaced nor renewed the old “sinner”; it created another guilty [or: indebted, *Schuldigen*] person of unequally more horrible insolvency. For this person, not only is there factually no redemption; there can be none.<sup>13</sup>

Facing this terrifying condition, Jonas will later develop his famous reflection on the basic phenomenon of Life, as a unique possibility to survive nihilism, and to inhabit a world where the respect of life itself should be counted as the foundation of any practical reflection, any ethic, any inspired *phrônesis*. Paradoxically, Jonas’ separation from his old teacher goes in the very same way chosen by Cassirer 50 years sooner. In their despise for an indifferent world both will oppose a determined bet on the immanence of life *within* the world.

In the case of Cassirer, we could say that, if Newtonian physics functioned as a paradigm for Kant, the phenomenon of life became for the philosopher of Hamburg the *Urphänomen*, the Basic Phenomenon from which all the various manifestations of meaning spread: the symbolical world. Updating the Kantian epokhè of any ontology, Cassirer will develop a thought of pure immanence in the realm of representation, which is to say: within the realm of

<sup>13</sup> Hans Blumenberg, , Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987; *Care crosses the river*, trad. P. Fleming, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 47.

meaning. Life itself is enabled for man through his active participation in the dynamic, ever renewed creation of significations through the multiple symbolic forms that draw the territory of *Mensch*. There is no remote possibility to “jump” out of the symbolic horizon that defines human existence. This is the radicalism we can recognize in the Cassirerian position: *finitude* must be understood as the acknowledgment of the impossibility to do without the symbolic forms. Widening and updating the Kantian concept of experience to forge the multiple dynamic of the symbolic worlds (i.e. universes of representation), Cassirer carries out a work of modernization of the critical undertaking. This finitude is obviously unacceptable to Heidegger. And paradoxically, this is the last argument that Cassirer opposes to Heidegger in Davos, when it is absolutely evident for this conciliatory man that Heidegger was there to “destroy” the logos, reason and culture, opposing himself to Kant:

In this sense, Kant was lead by his radicalism to a position where he could not do anything but throw back.

This position means: destruction (*Zerstörung*) of what have been the founding principles of the western metaphysic (Spirit, Logos, Reason).<sup>14</sup>

Even when they absolutely disagree with each other, Cassirer points out that there is language, as a symbolic form, which is the condition of possibility of the discussion in Davos. This argument is not circumstantial, but radically transcendental in the strongest critical way. When Heidegger refuses pure mediation (*das blosse Vermitteln*) as non-productive – or rather: inauthentic – Cassirer sees in the functional multiplicity of mediation the productive possibility of meaning. There is no possibility to come before or out of the realm of symbols because they establish the conditions of existence of man as a symbolical animal: there is a relation of reciprocity between man and symbol. The very existence of man is within the pulse of symbolic creation and recreation. Symbols are not theoretical, but products of the life within sense.

If we define the world of Geist by means of this totality [totality of possible ways of giving form or meaning], then the “Archimedean point” of certitude that we are seeking can never be given to us from outside of it, but always

<sup>14</sup> *Davoser Disputation in M. Heidegger, Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik, op. cit., p. 272.*

be sought within it. The mind cannot peel off, like snakeskins, the forms in which it lives and exists, in which it not only thinks but also feels and perceives, sees and gives shape to things.<sup>15</sup>

This is the answer Kant gives, through the words of his heir, to the radicalism of Heidegger's desperate nihilism: there is no salvation neither out of the symbolic horizon nor through a return to the cosmological desperation the Gnostics first elaborated. In this sense, Cassirer anticipates in Davos the further path that Jonas will follow, years later, to overcome nihilism and restore the ethical commitment inherited by the Enlightenment: the obligation to protect life through the multiple, inexhaustible process of creation of meaning. The multiplicity of the different modes of representing, understanding, feeling and seeing is here not just a theoretical approach to the human ability to create symbols. It also means to underline the very ethical possibility of recognition of diversity. The symbolic *praxis* is a vital and never ending exercise of modern *phrônesis*, an Hadrian wall against all kind of inhumanity.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der Symbolischen Formen*, *op. cit.*, p. 47–8.