

Introduction

What Is at Stake in the Davos Debate?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 246.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁸ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 324–325.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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