

Diminished Expectations

Heidegger and Cassirer at Davos and the Present State of Philosophy

Conference at the occasion of the annual meeting of the American Friends of Marbach 2015, May 9, Yale University

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Last May the Friends of the *Deutsches Literatur Archiv* in Marbach organized a symposium at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book Library. That Cassirer should have been the focus was to be expected, given that the Beinecke is the custodian of the Cassirer archive. And to be expected also was that Heidegger should have become a secondary focus, given that the *Literatur Archiv* in Marbach is the custodian of the Heidegger archive.

The constellation of these two names, Cassirer and Heidegger, at that time and in this place, filled me with both sadness and with nostalgia. It is of course impossible not to think of the historical context, especially of the year 1933, which caused Heidegger to join the Nazi party and to assume the rectorship of the university of Freiburg, while Cassirer, who had served as rector of the university of Hamburg with such distinction, was forced to leave Germany, never to return. In this connection it is also difficult not to think back to the much discussed Davos Disputation in the spring of 1929, where much more than two profoundly different philosophical positions collided, and especially the younger generation was on the whole — was it altogether misguided? — more impressed by Heidegger than by Cassirer. I am struck by how seriously philosophy was then being taken! It was hoped that it could cast some light into a world shadowed by the disaster that was World War One. That hope was of course disappointed. Did the disaster that followed have anything to do with the failure of the two protagonists to resolve their differences?

The Davos meeting has been cited as a precursor of today's symposia, but can we imagine a similar event today, born of similar hopes, generating a similar excitement? Professors and students, representatives of different nationalities, especially from Germany and France were to come together in a genuine conversation. Are we today still able to take philosophy that seriously? Does the world still look to philosophy to cast

light into a world shadowed today by the environmental crisis, by ideological and religious conflicts, and by the homogenizing power of quantitative thinking? Our media give rather little space to philosophy. This reflects the fact that our world seems to have no great need for philosophy. And is this something to be regretted. Just what does philosophy have to contribute? Must what Hegel said about art in its highest sense, that it had no place in the modern world, not also be said of philosophy?

Philosophical problems, as Wittgenstein suggested, have the form I have lost my way. And in 1929, the year of Cassirer and Heidegger's Davos Disputation, Germany certainly had lost its way: more than one world had collapsed. The old political order had been destroyed; religion had become peripheral; competing ideologies relied on brute force more than on reason. Not only the university community looked to philosophy to provide needed orientation. But, as subsequent events seemed to show, was it not even then a vain expectation? What did philosophy have to offer? And what does it have to offer us today? Should we today expect such orientation from philosophy?

I said that the constellation of these two names, Cassirer and Heidegger, fills me with both sadness and a certain nostalgia. The sadness is easy to understand. One only needs to think of all that has happened since 1929, and more specifically of the very different ways in which these two philosophers coped with and responded to very difficult times. And I think of the failure of the two to engage in a genuine dialogue.

But why nostalgia? That has to do with the way philosophy has evolved since then. I was thinking of the way the all-encompassing, historically based philosophy Cassirer and Heidegger both represent, if in so very different ways, today seems strangely besides the point. To be sure, many remain interested in their work, although, in the United States at least, mostly outside the leading philosophy departments. There are of course active Cassirer and Heidegger associations, such as the International Ernst Cassirer Society and the American Heidegger Circle. But in today's philosophy world they hardly have a central position. The leading departments in the United States would seem to represent a very different understanding of philosophy. And not just in the United States. Even in Heidegger's Freiburg.

To give just one example: Last spring I was asked to sign a letter protesting the plan of the University of Freiburg to eliminate the chair once held by Husserl and

Heidegger and to replace it with an assistant professorship in logic and analytical philosophy of language. There could be no clearer sign of the diminishing importance of philosophy to the business of the university. One full professorship and an assistant professorship were to be replaced with a single assistant professorship. Even more questionable seems the university's decision to turn its back on a tradition Husserl and Heidegger so impressively represented and which continues to draw countless students and scholars to Freiburg. The plan seems suicidal: whatever international reputation philosophy at Freiburg may have today would seem to be still inseparably connected with the names of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. No doubt these two philosophers will continue to draw countless visitors, philosophical tourists, so to speak, to Freiburg. But is the proper place of Husserl and Heidegger, and also of Cassirer, today in some philosophical museum, watched over by a small group of dedicated curators?

Nothing nearly so dramatic is happening here at Yale. The philosophy department is once again flourishing, rated among the country's top departments. But today's department hardly has the significance in the life of university as a whole, and especially in the undergraduate curriculum, that it did for many years following Cassirer's first arrival in New Haven in 1941. And if the University of Freiburg seems ready to turn its back on Heidegger and phenomenology, Yale's philosophy department seems to have little use for Cassirer. To be sure, his portrait hangs in our departmental lounge; a complete set of his works graces it, but it is rarely touched. **Both honor the most distinguished philosopher to have taught at our university.**

At Yale Cassirer did find a congenial environment. Not only did the then chairman Charles W. Hendel become a close friend, who selflessly worked to assure that Cassirer's work would be translated and published; there were also colleagues such as Filmer C. Northrop, Hajo Holborn, and Henry Margenau who made Cassirer feel welcome. How much he appreciated what Yale offered him is demonstrated by the establishment of the Cassirer Publication Fund, supported by royalties from his publications, to be jointly administered by the Director of the Yale Press and the Chairman of the Philosophy Department. Among other things it financed the Cassirer Lectures, inaugurated in 1974 with Leszek Kolakowski's *Husserl and the Search for*

Certitude. But that was then. Neither Cassirer nor that fund figure in any prominent way in the present department's activities.

How different was the department that, led by Hendel, with the support of president Seymour and Dean De Vane, brought Cassirer to Yale, convinced that his coming would have a profound impact, not just on the philosophy department and on the university, but on the country. That philosophy deserved a place at the very center of the university was taken for granted. And taken for granted, too, was that philosophy could not be done well without a solid grounding in the history of philosophy. As Hendel tells us in his Foreword to Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*, the department was convinced that in a strong department of philosophy the history of philosophy had also to be strongly represented. In Cassirer Hendel and his colleagues saw first of all the most distinguished historian of philosophy around. As he put it: "We were on the lookout for that kind of scholarship, as something very much needed in philosophy today, and so we paid more attention to it than to those other qualifications of mind and learning that were soon to be clearly revealed in the teaching and conversation of Professor Cassirer when he was actually working amongst us as a colleague."¹

Having begun my graduate studies when Hendel was in his last year of teaching, this conviction that philosophy cannot be done well without a solid understanding of the history of philosophy, and indeed of history, has remained with me. But it has made me increasingly a bit of an outsider in today's philosophy world, a kind of philosophical dinosaur, although I like to think of myself as a dinosaur in the avant-garde. But that may betray an unwarranted optimism. I have to recognize: times have changed.

How much they have changed is suggested by the comments of a fellow graduate student, Ruth Garrett Millikan, now a distinguished philosopher of biology, who in her Dewey lecture described well what was then expected of us aspiring philosophers: "Current friends find it hard to believe, but it really is true that I was never assigned a single current journal article during my study at Yale (though Sellars did give me some of his papers that were in press). My dissertation had cited only classical texts and some

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *Myth of the State* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1974), viii.

Wittgenstein.”² Today’s dissertations, like today’s philosophy world, have a very different cast, even when they deal with classical texts. That difference is apparent in the distinction Nicholas Rescher drew in 1992 between philosophy teachers and genuine philosophers.³ The latter he defined as philosophers who are “active contributors to the intellectual resource of the discipline” and he observed that due to the “growing professionalism based on more rigorous formal training and a ‘publish or perish’ ethics in the academy,”⁴ the former, the philosophy teachers, are gradually disappearing. Rescher seemed not unhappy with this professionalization of philosophy. “Considering the quantity of philosophical writing that sees the light of print, its overall quality is respectably high — that is if one’s standard gives weight to the technical dimension (Depth of insight is another matter). At any rate the day of the philosopher as isolated thinker — the talented amateur with an idiosyncratic message — is effectively gone. For better or for worse, an outsider along the lines of a Spinoza or a Nietzsche would find it near to impossible to get a hearing in the North American philosophy world today.”⁵ Peer review and genuine originality are difficult to reconcile.

In the twenty years since Rescher made these observations, the professionalization of philosophy has become only more extreme. I can only share Ruth Garrett Millikan’s concern about this development. “The pressures that have been building up over the last thirty years, due to misguided calls for accountability, financial pressures, the narrow business-model increasingly adopted by administrations in our colleges and universities, resulting losses of effective faculty governance, the unabashed attitude that the primary goal of an educational institution is to win competitions for prestige – these pressures, resulting in the demand for teachers to be committed, first, to helping with PR by publishing early and lots, are extremely dangerous to philosophy. I very much fear that this serious accident in academia could be fatal for philosophy as we have known it. There are other disciplines that these policies, indifferent to the

² <http://philosophy.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/365/2014/02/Accidents-APA-John-Dewey-Lecture.pdf>

³ Cf. Karsten Harries, “Philosophy in Search of Itself,” *What is Philosophy?*, ed. C. P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 50-54.

⁴ Nicholas Rescher, “American Philosophy Today,” *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (4) 721.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 723.

differences among fields, have damaged, but philosophy may be the most fragile. I think that our very first priority at the moment should be to join forces against these pressures. Philosophy is not a field in which piles of small findings later help to secure fundamental advances. Little philosophical puzzles do not usually need to be solved but rather dissolved by examining the wider framework within which they occur. This often involves determinedly seeking out and exposing deeply entrenched underlying assumptions, working out what their diverse and far-ranging effects have been, constructing and evaluating alternatives, trying to foresee distant implications. It often involves trying to view quite large areas in new ways, ways that may cut across usual distinctions, both within philosophy and outside and that may require a broad knowledge across disciplines. Add that to acquire the flexibility of mind and the feel for the possibility of fundamental change in outlook that may be needed, a serious immersion for a considerable time in the history of philosophy is a near necessity.”⁶ Today philosophy, and especially my own department, desperately needs a Cassirer or a Heidegger.

2

In his Foreword to *The Myth of the State* Hendel mentions that the department came to recognize only gradually how much more than his historical knowledge Cassirer had to offer the department and the university. World War II was then still raging. European culture seemed to have lost its way. The problems of the present seemed more pressing than the philosophical past. And so, as Hendel reports, “Some of those who were close to him, ventured to ask: ‘Won’t you tell the meaning of what is happening *today*, instead of writing about past history, science, and culture? You have so much knowledge and wisdom – we who are working with you know that so well — but you could give others, too, the benefit of it.’”⁷ Cassirer responded to the request by writing the *Myth of the State*, preceded by a much abbreviated and more sharply focused article that appeared in *Fortune* magazine. The history of political theory is here told as a continuing struggle against myth. Cassirer’s fundamental message is simple enough and clearly stated in the concluding paragraph, which invokes the Babylonian creation legend,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Myth of the State*, x.

which tells of the victory of the god Marduk over the serpent Tiamat and the forces of darkness.

The world of human culture may be described by this Babylonian legend. It could not arise until the darkness of myth was fought and overcome. But the mythical monsters were not entirely destroyed. They were used for the creation of a new universe, and they still survive in this universe. The powers of myth were checked and subdued by superior forces. As long as these forces, intellectual, ethical, and artistic, are in full strength, myth is tamed and subdued. But once they begin to lose their strength chaos is come again. Mythical thought then starts to rise anew and to pervade the whole of man's cultural and social life.⁸

The university, he thought, has a special responsibility to strengthen these intellectual, ethical, and artistic forces, to prevent the return of chaos.

But why did these forces lose their strength in a seemingly so advanced country as Germany? And did philosophy, instead of resisting, somehow contribute to that collapse? Cassirer's answer was affirmative and here he singled out Oswald Spengler and especially Martin Heidegger, as a thinker who, by refusing to admit "that there is something like 'eternal' truth, a Platonic 'realm of ideas,'"⁹ opened the door to a return of myth. It is a charge we should not simply dismiss. Cassirer did not claim a direct connection between Heidegger's thought and the rise of National Socialism. "But the new philosophy did enfeeble and slowly undermine the forces that could have resisted the modern political myths. A philosophy of history that consists in somber predictions of the decline and inevitable destruction of our civilization [here Cassirer was referring to Spengler] and a theory that sees in the *Geworfenheit* of man one of his principle characters have given up all hopes of an active share in the construction and reconstruction of man's cultural life."¹⁰ In the *Spiegel* interview Heidegger was to renounce such hope quite explicitly.

⁸ *Myth of the State*, 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Cassirer here picked up a theme that was prominent already in the Davos Disputation. Heidegger's insistence in *Being and Time* on the finitude of Dasein does indeed prevent him from recognizing anything like necessary eternal truth. Cassirer then had asked: "Is Heidegger willing to renounce all objectivity, this form of absoluteness, which Kant represented in the ethical realm, in the theoretical realm, and in the *Critique of Judgment*? Is he willing to retreat completely to the finite essence, or, if not, where for him is the breakthrough to this sphere?"¹¹ Cassirer's question touched on what I, too, take to be a central problem of *Being and Time*, and more generally of Heidegger's thinking as a whole. Eternal truths are indeed explicitly denied by Heidegger, who argues that to lay claim to such truths we would have to prove first that there always will be human beings. And, given that death of God pronounced by Nietzsche, his argument is difficult to resist. Let me explain:

How do we usually understand the meaning of "truth"? Is that understanding indeed stunted, as Heidegger claims?

How slight and stunted our knowledge of the nature of truth is, is shown by the laxity we permit ourselves in using this basic word. By truth is usually meant this or that particular truth. That means: something true. A cognition articulated in a proposition can be of this sort. However, we call not only a proposition true, but also a thing: true gold in contrast to sham gold. True here means genuine, real gold. What does the expression "real" mean here? To us it is what is in truth. The true is what corresponds to the real, and the real is what is in truth. The circle has closed again.¹²

Consider the circle that Heidegger here points out: A proposition or thought is true if it corresponds to the way things really are, to the way they are in truth. The truth of propositions may thus be said to have its measure in the truth of things. But how is this latter truth, the truth of things, to be understood?

¹¹ "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), 278.

¹² Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), 36. Trans. by Albert Hofstadter, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 50.

The tradition had a ready answer. Consider Aquinas' definition of truth as "the adequation of the thing and the understanding": *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*.¹³ Quite in keeping with our everyday understanding, the definition claims that there can be no truth where there is no understanding. But can there be understanding without human beings? Does truth then not depend on human beings? This is indeed suggested by Heidegger when in *Being and Time* he makes Being and with it truth dependent on Dasein, i.e. on human beings. This would imply that there can be no eternal truths, unless human beings will be forever.

But must we not dismiss that implication? When I claim some assertion, say $2+2=4$, to be true, I would seem to claim it, not just subjectively, here and now, but for all time. That seems to be part of the very meaning of "truth." To be sure, the proposition "Today the sun is shining" may not be true tomorrow or in some other place; but that does not mean that the state of affairs expressed in the assertion is not true *sub specie aeternitatis* and can be restated in language that removes the relativities.

But does the definition of truth as the adequation of the thing and the intellect allow for such an understanding of truth? Is human life here on earth more than an insignificant cosmic episode, as Schopenhauer, and following him Nietzsche insisted, calling attention to the disproportion between the human claim to eternal truths and our peripheral location in the cosmos and the ephemeral nature of our being. Must the time not come, when there will no longer be human beings, when there will be no understanding, and hence no truth?

Thomas Aquinas, to be sure, like any believer in the Biblical God, would have had no difficulty answering Nietzsche. His understanding of God left no room for thoughts of a cosmos from which understanding would be absent. His was a theocentric understanding of truth where we should note that the definition of truth as "the adequation of the thing and the understanding" invites two readings: *veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, "truth is the adequation of the understanding to the thing" and *veritas est adaequatio rei ad intellectum*, "truth is the adequation of the thing to the

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, qu. 1, art. 1. See Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung, Gesamtausgabe*, vol.17 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994), 162-194.

understanding.” And is the second not presupposed by the first? Is there not a sense in which the truth of our assertions presupposes the truth of things? — as Heidegger, who knew his medieval philosophers so well, insists. If we are to measure the truth of an assertion by the thing asserted, that thing must disclose itself to us as it really is, as it is in truth. But what could “truth” now mean? Certainly not an adequation of the thing to our finite, perspective-bound understanding: that would substitute appearances for the things themselves.

A philosophy bound by faith once had a ready answer: every created thing necessarily corresponds to the idea in the mind of its creator and in this sense cannot but be true. The truth of things, understood as the adequation of the thing (to be created) to the (divine) understanding [*adaequatio rei (creandae) ad intellectum (divinum)*] secures truth understood as the “adequation of the (human) understanding to the created thing” [*adaequatio intellectus (humani) ad rem (creatam)*].¹⁴ Human knowing here is given its measure in the divinely created order of the cosmos. And such talk of the truth of things does accord with the way we sometimes use the words “truth” and “true”: e.g., when we call something we have drawn “a true circle” we declare it to be in accord with our understanding of what a circle is. What we have put down on paper accords with an idea in our intellect. Here the truth of things is understood as the adequation of the thing (to be created) to the (human) understanding.

But what right do we have to think that we can bridge the abyss that separates God’s infinite creative knowledge or the truth of things so understood from our finite human understanding? Nietzsche was to insist that there is no such bridge. If we were to seize the truth, he claims in “On Truth and Lie,” our designations would have to be congruent with things, i.e. we would have to be God. Nietzsche here understands truth as, not just a correspondence, but as the congruence of designation and thing: pure truth, according to Nietzsche, thus would be nothing other than the thing itself.¹⁵ This still

¹⁴ See Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*. vol. 9, 178-182).

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," *Kritische Studienausgabe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), vol. 1, p. 879. "On Truth and Lie in an Unmoral Sense," *Philosophy and Truth*. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands:

recalls the traditional view that gives human discourse its measure in divine discourse: God's creative word is nothing other than the truth of things. Here, too, our speaking is thought to have its measure in the identity of word (*logos*) and being. But in this strong sense, truth is of course denied to us finite knowers. Heidegger would have agreed. And if, we accept Nietzsche's claim that God is dead, truth in that strong sense must also be discarded as a fiction. This at least is Heidegger's claim. And this is what Cassirer was unwilling to accept and thought to have contributed to the rise of National Socialism. Should we then think the rise of National Socialism a consequence of the death of God?

3

But is Heidegger right to claim that the finitude of human being leaves no room for the kind of eternal truths on which Cassirer insisted in the Davos Disputation? Cassirer, in support of his position, could appeal to Kant. Cassirer does not deny the essential finitude of us human knowers. But the human being, he insists, is able to raise himself above his finitude: the key to this is the human ability to give objective expression to what he experiences. This does not mean that he ceases to be grounded in the finite, but the objectification of what more immediately presents itself lets something new emerge: Cassirer speaks of an "immanent infinity." While the human being is "unable to leap from his own finitude into a real infinity," as spirit he is able to raise himself above the immediacy of his existence, up to the region of pure form. "And only in this form does he possess his infinity."¹⁶ The human power of self-transcendence in reflection that generates the idea of a transcendental subject needs to be considered in this connection. Does Heidegger do justice to this power? Heidegger's position is clear, even as it invites question: "Because the kind of Being that is essential to truth is of the character of Dasein, all truth is relative to Dasein's Being."¹⁷ Both absolute truth and the

Humanities Press, 1979), p. 82. Cf. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 24.

¹⁶ "Davoser Disputation," 286.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit, Gesamtausgabe*, vol.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994), 300; *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Rohinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 270.

absolute subject are declared to be rests of Christian theology that after the death of God philosophy ought to have left behind:

The idea of a 'pure "I"' and of a 'consciousness in general' are so far from including the *a priori* character of actual subjectivity that the ontological characters of Dasein's facticity and its state of Being are either passed over or not seen at all. Rejection of a 'consciousness in general' does not signify that the *a priori* is negated, any more than the positing of an idealized subject guarantees that Dasein has an *a priori* character grounded upon fact.

Both the contention that there are 'eternal truths' and the jumbling together of Dasein's phenomenally grounded 'ideality' with an idealized absolute subject, belong to those residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as yet been radically extruded.¹⁸

Challenging Heidegger and more especially Heidegger's Kant interpretation, Cassirer had invoked Kant as a thinker who in the ethical realm, in the theoretical realm, and in the *Critique of Judgment* held on to a timeless objective truth. To be sure, if we understand truth as the correspondence of our judgments and things in themselves, understood as noumena, another term that names the truth of things, then the truth is not available to us for Kant either. But Kant does not conclude as Heidegger does, and Cassirer follows Kant in this, that therefore we cannot give a transcendental justification of the human pursuit of truth. The pursuit of objective knowledge is not in vain. To be sure, theory cannot penetrate beyond phenomena; things as they are in themselves are beyond the reach of what we can objectively know. But this does not mean that the truth pursued by science is therefore no more than a subjective illusion. The truth of phenomena provides sufficient ground for science and its pursuit of truth. Key to our understanding of that truth is this thought: to understand that what we experience is only an appearance, bound by a particular perspective, is to be already on the road towards a more adequate, and that means here first of all a less perspective-bound and in this sense freer understanding. The pursuit of truth demands a movement of self-transcendence

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol.2, 303; trans., 272.

that, by leading us to understand subjective appearances for what they are, opens a path towards an ever more adequate, ever more objective understanding. The pursuit of truth, so understood, demands objectivity. Cassirer was right to insist that we must recognize the legitimacy of this demand if we are to do justice to our science and that is to say of our technology, and that is to say of the legitimacy of the world we live in.

We should note how close this Kantian understanding of truth remains to the Thomistic view. Consider once more: according to the latter things are in truth the way they are known by God. To God's understanding all is transparent. He is the perfect knower. Something of this traditional understanding that every being (*ens*) is true (*verum*) because of necessity transparent to the divine mind is preserved by Kant with his understanding of the transcendental subject and the transcendental object. They provide our human pursuit of truth with the regulative ideal of a knowing that is not distorted by any perspective.

Heidegger cannot appeal to God, nor is he convinced by Kant's transcendental justification of the pursuit of objective truth. In *Being and Time*, as we saw, he thus dismisses appeals to some ideal subject as drawing illegitimately on the traditional understanding of God. But must we not question such a dismissal? Regardless of whether God exists or not, human beings have been able to think Him as an ideal knower. Any adequate account of human being has to make room at least for this possibility. The mere thought of God as a perfect knower testifies to the ability of finite human knowers to transcend themselves as beings bound by some particular perspective. Emphasizing the finitude of Dasein, as he does, Heidegger fails to do justice to the way the pursuit of truth, as ordinarily understood, from the very beginning, has presupposed as a regulative ideal something very much like that understanding of truth as the correspondence of our judgments with the objects that Kant suggests should be presupposed and taken for granted. Our ordinary understanding of truth supports what Cassirer calls "immanent infinity." Heidegger thus fails to develop a convincing account of the legitimacy of this understanding of truth, i.e. of the truth that presides over science.

5

Heidegger is right to point out that the idealized absolute subject of philosophy looks back to the medieval conception of God, but he fails to do justice to the fact that the way medieval theologians were able to think God as the ground of truth testifies to the human power of self-transcendence. Cassirer is right to insist that the very progress of our science and technology makes it impossible for us to surrender the claim to objectivity and eternal truths. To do so is to lose our place in our modern world.

But in the Davos Disputation Cassirer, invoking Kant, moves too quickly from the theoretical to the ethical and aesthetic realms. In *The Myth of the State* he is forced to admit that that the strict logical method of philosophic thought, which has so impressively born fruit in the natural sciences could not claim similar success in the moral and political sphere. How are we to understand this?

Of special interest here is a comment Cassirer makes there about Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*: "He began with analyzing the structure of natural science; he went from astronomy to physics, from physics to chemistry; from chemistry to biology. But according to Comte natural science is only a first step. His real aim and highest ambition was to become the founder of a new social science and to introduce into this science the same exact way of reasoning, the same inductive and deductive method, as we find in physics or chemistry. In politics we have not yet found firm and reliable ground."¹⁹ Cassirer remains confident that such ground could and eventually would be found, despite the way mythical thinking had then just overwhelmed reason in Europe with such disastrous results. "The sudden rise of the political myths in the twentieth century has shown us that these hopes of Comte and his pupils and adherents were premature." Premature, Cassirer admits, but not vain. His commitment to the Enlightenment remained unshaken. "Politics is still far from being a positive science, let alone an exact science. I have no doubt that later generations will look back at many of our political systems with the same feeling as a modern astronomer studies an astrological book or a modern chemist an alchemist treatise."²⁰ No doubt Cassirer's Yale colleagues welcomed such optimism. But can such confidence be justified? Can or

¹⁹ *Myth of the State*, 295.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

should politics ever become an exact science? The analogy invoked by Cassirer with reference to Comte must be questioned. Suppose politics were to develop as Cassirer here envisions and reason would allow us to master human affairs as scientific method has rendered us the masters and possessors of nature? Would human beings not have to become material to be mastered and organized in ways that would do violence to that freedom so dear to Cassirer? As Cassirer points out in the Davos Disputation, freedom has no place in the world picture projected by natural science. “This for me was always at bottom Kant’s main problem. How is freedom possible? Kant says, in this form the question cannot be comprehended. We comprehend only the incomprehensibility of freedom.”²¹ But what is to bind this incomprehensible freedom? Here, too, Cassirer follows Kant: “The categorical imperative must be such that the law, that is posited, must have validity not just for human beings, but for all rational beings whatsoever. Here suddenly we have this strange transition. Our being limited to a definite sphere suddenly falls away. The moral as such leads beyond the world of appearances. That only at this point is there a breakthrough, isn’t that what is decisively metaphysical?”²² But so understood is the metaphysical character of freedom not a reef on which the project of a science of man in the image of natural science must inevitably suffer shipwreck?

Despite all that had just happened, Cassirer remained an optimist, an optimism that his colleagues at Yale would seem to have shared. Freedom and reason were about to triumph over the dark myth that had ensnared Heidegger as it had ensnared Germany. The task of philosophy, as Cassirer understood it, was to follow wherever reason led it, even if that meant having to think “beyond and against their time,” challenging the ruling common sense. **I agree with that commitment to reason. And, a true heir of the Enlightenment, Cassirer had no doubts about what he called humanity’s “supreme goal”:** “philosophical and ethical freedom. This freedom means not only freedom from violent desires and emotions. It means freedom from false conceptions, from inadequate ideas, from all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. To get rid of all these obstacles to true

²¹ “Davoser Disputation,” 276.

²² *Ibid.*

freedom, high courage is required,²³ the courage to be, if necessary, an untimely thinker in Nietzsche's sense. Cassirer thus reaffirms the Enlightenment's *Sapere aude!*— Dare to know!

But is such faith in the power of reason to lead us to the good life justified? Does reason support it? Schopenhauer's objection to Kant's pure practical reason is not easily dismissed: Kant's unconditioned ought seemed to Schopenhauer "a scepter of wooden iron." "For in the concept ought there exists absolutely and essentially consideration of threatened punishment or promised reward, as the necessary condition, and this is not to be separated from it without abolishing the concept itself and depriving it of all meaning. Therefore an unconditioned ought is a *contradictio in adjecto*."²⁴ Is the individual who says after me the deluge, who, pursuing his own happiness, does not care about coming generations, about what happens to the earth after his death unreasonable? Or is his a different problem? That he has a heart of stone? Needed is a change of heart. But how do we change hearts?

Consider our deteriorating environment. That we all have an obligation to make sure that those natural resources on which we depend for our survival will continue to be available, not just to us, but to future generations, has become almost a cliché. Given a still rising life expectancy, a still growing population, and demands for an ever higher standard of living, the conclusion seems inevitable: the road on which the world has been traveling has to lead to disaster, or rather disasters — not only to the expected disasters, such as mass starvation, wars for land, a deteriorating environment that will make clean water, air, and soil, not to speak of relatively unspoiled nature, increasingly scarce resources, but also to moral disaster. But if we all at bottom know this, why do our responses remain so half-hearted? Is it because we are not reasonable enough? Or is it because we are too selfish? Is it evident that it is unreasonable to be so selfish?

To meet this threat of selfishness Cassirer, in his *Fortune* article, appealed to Spinoza's concept of generosity: "But it is not enough that we reach this goal for

²³ Ernst Cassirer, "The Myth of the State," *Fortune*, 29:6, June 1944, 165-167, 198, 201-202, 204, 206. <http://www.anthoniflood.com/cassirermythstate.htm>

²⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), vol. 1, 523.

ourselves. We must freely communicate the good that we have acquired for ourselves to others. And to do this we need the active passion of generosity. Fortitude and generosity are the only means to attain and secure the freedom of the individual mind and of human society. By the former we win the mastery over ourselves, by the latter we build up a social, a truly human order.”²⁵ But again the question: is it reason that demands such generosity?

That was no doubt a message that Cassirer’s New Haven colleagues expected and wanted to hear. Another Kantian, Fichte, comes to mind, who was similarly convinced that reason and the cause of freedom, despite all setbacks, were bound to progress:

No free state can reasonably suffer in its vicinity associations governed by rulers whose interests would be promoted by the subjugation of adjacent nations, and whose very existence is therefore a constant source of danger to their neighbors; a regard for their own security compels all free states to transform all around them into free states like themselves; and thus, for the sake of their own welfare, to extend the empire of culture over barbarism, of freedom over slavery...; and thus, of necessity, by reason of the existence of some few really free states, will the empire of civilization, freedom, and with it universal peace, gradually embrace the whole world.²⁶

Fichte here does not consider the problem posed by diminishing resources and rising expectations. But imagine such a world, whose coming Fichte thought inevitable: would this be a world in which everyone is finally happy? Fichte himself raises questions:

But when this end shall have been attained and humanity shall at length stand at this point, what is there then to do? Upon earth there is no higher state than this; the generation which has once reached it, can do no more than abide there, steadfastly maintain its position, die, and leave behind it

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, ed. and int .Roderick M. Chisholm (New York: Liberal Atrts Ores, 1956), 110.

descendants who shall do the like, and who will again leave behind them
descendants to follow in their footsteps.²⁷

But although Fichte considers this an attainable ideal, it cannot satisfy him and so he, too, as he concludes his *Vocation of Man*, has recourse to myth to suggest that this vocation transcends time and space.²⁸ And indeed, we have wonder whether a pervasive boredom would not overtake such a culture and introduce into it a moment of unrest. The end state envisioned by Fichte suggests the last man held up by Nietzsche's Zarathustra as a counter-ideal. Nietzsche's last man is content with the shape of his world, he no longer dreams of a better future, no longer wants to challenge the prevailing common sense. This last man has no need for a philosophy that would challenge the reigning common sense. Is Nietzsche's last man where our modern age is heading? This is a question Heidegger raises in his *Black Notebooks* and with Nietzsche he mournfully wondered whether this last man might not live the longest, where Heidegger was thinking in terms of hundreds of years, a thought he found profoundly depressing.²⁹

I find it surprising that Nietzsche does not figure in Cassirer's *Myth of the State*. When Cassirer accuses "the new philosophy" of enfeebling and slowly undermining the forces that could have resisted the modern political myth, Nietzsche would seem to have been perhaps its most influential representative. But when in Part Three of *The Myth of the State* Cassirer offers something like a genealogy of the "The Myth of the Twentieth Century" he devotes chapters to Carlyle and his celebration of the heroic leader, to Gobineau's worship of race, and to Hegel's celebration of the state as the "divine Idea as it exists on earth." These did indeed contribute to what Cassirer, too, calls the *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, where he disdains to mention Alfred Rosenberg's National Socialist tract, which bore that title. But I doubt whether any of the thinkers Cassirer mentions had nearly the influence of Nietzsche. Nietzsche certainly tilled the soil on which National Socialism was to flourish.³⁰ As the poet Gottfried Benn wrote 50 years after Nietzsche's death: "At bottom everything that my generation discussed, thought and struggled with,

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Ibid., 143.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II-IV, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 94 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2014), 239.

³⁰ Cf. *The Myth of the State*, 277.

one can say suffered, one can also say expatiated upon endlessly, had already been said by and found its definitive formulation in Nietzsche. All that followed was exegesis... He was, as is showing itself ever more clearly, the far-reaching giant of the epoch after Goethe... For my generation he was the earthquake of the epoch....³¹

As Nietzsche recognized, if it was the progress of reason that demanded the death of God, reason's commitment to objectivity also had to undermine faith in reason's ability to provide human life with meaning, measure and foundation. Heidegger here is Nietzsche's heir. With this Cassirer's conviction that the task of philosophy is to follow wherever reason leads it, even if that meant having to think beyond and against its time," that philosophy should be in Nietzsche's sense untimely, challenging the governing common sense, becomes problematic.

Much here depends on how reason is understood. Cassirer was too ready to use the progress of science as a model. I find it difficult not to agree with Wittgenstein when in the *Tractatus* he insists on the limits of objectifying reason. As Schopenhauer and Nietzsche recognized, the pursuit of truth so understood entails not only what Nietzsche called the death of God; it also cannot know anything of ethical absolutes; nor, as Kant recognized, can it know anything of freedom. If we are not to surrender freedom, and the means also our humanity, to science, we must be able to show that reality may not be identified with the objects pursued by science. That is the issue at stake when Heidegger raises the question of Being. Just to be able to respond to a person as a person is to experience a reality that transcends what science can know, which is not to call science and its pursuit of objective truth into question. But recognizing the legitimacy of science we must also recognize its limits. Here a continuation of the dialogue between Heidegger and Cassirer barely begun at Davos could perhaps help us. The very success of our science raises questions, not for science, but for human beings concerned for their and the world's future. Just what room are we to give science and freedom in that world? Born of freedom, science promises to finally make us the masters and possessors of nature, including our own nature, promises us thus on one hand an unheard-of freedom, but threatens at the same time to leave that freedom so empty that it will evaporate altogether.

³¹ Gottfried Benn, "Nietzsche --nach fünfzig Jahren," *Essays. Reden. Vorträge, Gesammelte Werke*, 4 vols. ed. Dieter Wellershof (Wiesbaden, 1959) vol.1, p. 482.

Philosophical problems, Wittgenstein said, have the form I have lost my way. That loss of way in which philosophy has its origin remains very much with us. And how could this not be so: some loss of way is inseparable from having to make a genuine decision, from facing the future responsibly, that is to say, from freedom. The future is open. Just think of the possibilities and challenges posed by the digital revolution. But the more open the future the more insistently the question “Where are we to go?” should present itself. And this question leads inevitably to that other question: “where have we come from?” A humanist education needs to give the history of philosophy a central place. We still have much to learn from the Davos Disputation.

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