

BETWEEN TERMINI

HEIDEGGER, CASSIRER, AND THE TWO TERMS OF TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD

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The debate between Heidegger and Cassirer at Davos, though relatively short, turns out to be wide-ranging one. As the debate progresses it seems less and less clear that there is a common language between the two disputants, making it hard to identify the exact point of contention between them. Nevertheless, I think there is on both sides, though perhaps more on Cassirer's, an attempt to find some common ground, if only to make the differences between them clearer. In the course of the debate Heidegger takes up a distinction Cassirer introduces early on between the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of their respective philosophical positions. In what follows, I want to explore this notion of the two termini as a guide to thinking about the criticisms raised by each side in the debate. But as well I will argue that it leads us to see a certain commonality in their conception of the task of a transcendental philosophy, one that gives weight to the multiplicity and autonomy of factual forms of life and objective spirit, even at the price of a certain systematicity.

First, a clarification of the terms. In the first place the notion of two termini is used by Cassirer to designate the two ends of the process of constitution, the constituted as the endpoint of the process, and the constituting subject as its point of origin. But the figure of the two termini also doubles for him as a way of characterizing the distinctively neo-Kantian conception of transcendental research as a reconstruction of this process of constitution. Transcendental research is a Copernican turn by which we turn back from the constituted to its conditions of possibility in the constituting subject, thus a return from the *terminus ad quem* to the *terminus a quo*. Early in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* we find Cassirer using this distinction to characterize Natorp's psy-

chology. Describing the problem that the object of psychology is no ordinary object, that "We can never lay bare the immediate life and being of consciousness as such,"¹ Cassirer characterizes Natorp's approach to study of consciousness as one that explores the "unhalting process of objectivization in a twofold direction: from *terminus a quo* to *terminus ad quem* and back again." "In Natorp's opinion," Cassirer continues, "it is only by a continuous back and forth, by this twofold direction of method that the object of psychology can be made visible as such. It comes to light only when a new reconstructive effort is opposed to the constructive effort of mathematics and natural science, and of ethics and aesthetics as well."² For Cassirer, then, the two termini signify the key neo-Kantian methodological stricture that consciousness can only be reconstructed as the formal transcendental conditions of the constituted objective world, and cannot be directly studied through any form of intuitive self-consciousness. But note also the emphasis on the idea of transcendental philosophy as an ongoing back and forth between the two termini, rather than a one-way ticket from constituted to constituting. This implies that a turn back to the factual, to the realm of the constituted in its factual and historical multiplicity, provides a critical check on the success of the initial transcendental turn from the constituted to the constituting.

At the Davos debate, Cassirer uses the contrast between the two termini in a similar fashion to characterize the contested place of the schematism in Kant's thought. Agreeing with Heidegger on the importance of the schematism to Kant's analysis of theoretical knowledge, he points out that Kant nevertheless forbids the schematism in the ethical sphere, saying, "For Kant, the Schematism is . . . the *terminus a quo*, but not the *terminus*

ad quem.”³ Cassirer’s criticism, then, is that Heidegger has overlooked the *terminus ad quem* of Kant’s philosophy: the sphere of the infinite, the sphere of an objectivity that one finds in Kant’s understanding of the theoretical, the ethical, and the aesthetic.

Heidegger’s response to Cassirer on this point is well known: the finite subject’s access to the objective is not a transcendence of its finitude but rather the seal of it. God, the metaphysically infinite being, needs no ontology nor is he subject to an ethical imperative, a moral law.⁴ Interestingly enough, however, Heidegger concedes that, “As a finite creature the human being has a certain infinitude in the ontological.” But then he immediately qualifies this saying, “human being is never infinite and absolute in the creating of the being itself; rather, it is infinite in the understanding of Being . . . this infinitude of the ontological is bound essentially to ontic experience.”⁵ Asked in turn by Heidegger to explain how man participates in the infinite, Cassirer for his part accepts a certain inescapable finitude that nevertheless does not exclude an access to an immanent infinitude. For Cassirer, the simple answer to Heidegger’s question is that it is through the medium of form that humans participate in the infinite: “Man cannot make the leap from his own proper finitude into a realistic infinitude. He can and must have, however, the metabasis which leads him from the immediacy of existence into the region of pure form. And he possesses infinity solely in this form.”⁶ This capacity and indeed necessity of humans to transform themselves into some objective shape, and so create an objective spiritual world, is for Cassirer the seal of human infinitude.

It would seem then that here Heidegger and Cassirer have found at least a common framework for thinking about the differences between them. Both accept that human being is characterized by both an infinitude and a finitude, that the process of constitution is constrained by the finitude of its origins in the individual, but, nevertheless, through the process of objectification realizes some kind of infinitude. Heidegger, however, takes this finitude to be the more significant fact, while Cassirer emphasizes

the aspect of infinitude. Here we can use the figure of the two termini to characterize both this commonality and difference of emphasis. For Heidegger, objectification always remains marked and circumscribed by the finitude of its origins, its *terminus a quo*. For Cassirer, this objectification of the subject’s experience is a true transformation of its being into a kind of objectivity and infinitude of its own, thus, as with Kant, the *terminus ad quem* is a sphere of objectivity.

Heidegger seems to recognize this common framework when he expressly takes up the figure of the two termini to characterize the difference between himself and Cassirer. While the *terminus ad quem* of Cassirer’s philosophy is clear enough—a philosophy of culture in the sense of an elucidation of the forms of shaping consciousness—Heidegger claims that his *terminus a quo* remains utterly problematical.⁷ He then characterizes his own position as the reverse. The *terminus a quo* is his central problematic; and here we can understand him to be referring to his analytic of Dasein. The rhetorical question he then poses himself is what is the *terminus ad quem* of his philosophy and whether it is as clear. Heidegger says that his *terminus ad quem* is not a philosophy of culture but rather the question of Being.⁸ He does not, however, directly respond to the question of whether he has adequately determined this *terminus ad quem* of his thought.

In what follows I want briefly to outline what I take to be the force of Heidegger’s criticism of Cassirer here—that he has left the *terminus a quo* inadequately determined. Following that, however, I want to suggest that the question which Heidegger leaves hanging—that is, whether he has clearly determined the *terminus ad quem* of his own thought—also has some force.

Heidegger’s Critique of Cassirer

The substance of Heidegger’s criticism—that Cassirer has left the nature of the constituting subject inadequately determined—is echoed in Heidegger’s more focused treatment of Cassirer’s work in his review of the second volume of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which is to say, the volume on mythic

thought.⁹ Heidegger has quite positive things to say about Cassirer's account of myth. In particular, he praises two things: one, that Cassirer treats myth as an autonomous form of thought and not simply as a deficient mode of scientific thought. Two, the analyses of key mythic structures such as *mana* and totemism; despite their richness of ethnological detail Cassirer does not reduce these phenomena to a naturalistic (ethnological, sociological) explanation but rather sees them within the "anticipatory specification of myth as an autonomously legislative form of the functioning of spirit."¹⁰ In other words, Cassirer understands them within a critical transcendental perspective. Heidegger's criticism, then, does not question this project as such nor the value of its results and general approach. It does, however, question whether the possibility of such a transcendental critique of myth has been made clear. Heidegger notes that such a study of myth shows that Cassirer has moved beyond the restriction of the Kantian critique to the realm of the mathematical natural sciences. Yet he questions whether in expanding the range of the critique Cassirer has advanced any further in uncovering the underlying possibility of such a critical project.¹¹ Thus he criticizes the way in which Cassirer unproblematically approaches myth with categories that are simply taken over from the study of scientific consciousness. Myth is defined as a kind of object-consciousness and is divided into a mode of mythic intuition and mythic thought. Though both are traced back to the mythic "form of life," the "explicit and systematic elucidation of the origin of the forms of thought and intuition out of the 'form of life' is not carried through."¹² Heidegger further remarks that the "problem of the intrinsic possible connection of form of life, form of intuition and form of thought is not posed." In short then, Heidegger's criticism is that while recognizing the need to expand the critical project beyond the study of nature as disclosed by the mathematical sciences, Cassirer, like the other neo-Kantians, has not penetrated to the basic foundations of Kant's critical project generally. Instead, a variety of terms like "consciousness," "life,"

"spirit," and "reason" are used without a fundamental clarification of what is at stake. Obviously, Heidegger is thinking of his own analytic of Dasein as the proper clarification of this possibility.

Now, of course, it is not quite true to say Cassirer never develops a theory of the structure of symbolic subjectivity that penetrates beyond the classification of modes of thought, intuition, and life. As is well known, Cassirer develops a threefold characterization of the basic modes of symbolic formation, three fundamental symbolic functions: Expression (*Ausdruck*), Representation (*Repräsentation* or *Darstellung*), and Signification (*reine Bedeutung*). In each of the three major symbolic forms, one of these symbolic functions dominates: expression dominates myth, representation, language, and signification, the scientific realm. But on the subjective side there are also three corresponding symbolic comportments: perception (*Wahrnehmung*), intuition (*Anschauung*), and cognition (*Erkenntnis*). One could even go so far as to note a structural similarity between the three just mentioned modes of symbolic comportment and Heidegger's threefold characterization of the fundamental modes of Care (*Sorge*), that is to say, Disposition (*Befindlichkeit*), Discourse (*Rede*), and Understanding (*Verstehen*).¹³ If Cassirer has analyzed the comportmental character of symbolic life in a way that bears comparison with Heidegger's analysis of Care in *Being and Time*, does this disarm the criticism that Cassirer has left the *terminus a quo*, the subjective origins of symbolic formation, unclear? In fact, this structural similarity serves to identify exactly what it is that Heidegger misses in Cassirer. For *Being and Time* does not stop with the threefold characterization of Care, but rather goes on to trace the structure of Care back to the unifying structure of Dasein's self-temporalization and it's threefold ecstases. In Cassirer, we find little more than a reference of his three moments of symbolic comportment back to consciousness, spirit, or reason. Of course, one does not have to agree with Heidegger's temporal analysis, yet I think we can recognize that his claim to have gone further than Cassirer in

determining the *terminus a quo* of transcendental consciousness has some plausibility.

Heidegger's Termini and the Problem of the Multiplicity of Meanings of Being

But if Heidegger's criticism of Cassirer regarding the *terminus a quo* has some merit, can we now turn the tables and ask whether there is a corresponding weakness in Heidegger regarding the *terminus ad quem* of his philosophy? As we have said, Heidegger is clear that he posits a different *terminus ad quem* for himself. While he characterizes Cassirer's *ad quem* as a philosophy of culture in the sense of an elucidation of the forms of shaping consciousness, Heidegger points to his own question of Being as his *terminus ad quem*. Here too, Heidegger suggests that he has penetrated further than Cassirer, in that the multiplicity of objective forms of spirit has not been given any deeper unifying foundation. And indeed, Cassirer himself seems quite content with the formal notion of objectivity in general as the proper response to the question of the meaning of Being.

But while the question of the meaning of Being in general, the unity of the meaning of Being as such, is clearly the *terminus ad quem* of Heidegger's thought and a topic he devotes great attention to, it is not clear how we should think about the multiplicity of determinate meanings of Being, about the relation of Being in general to the regionality of Being, to the sort of multiplicity of forms that Cassirer thinks of as the *terminus ad quem* of his thought. Cassirer, who starts from and returns to this actual multiplicity, as the reconstructive method of neo-Kantianism demands, can never have this problem, whatever other difficulties one can point to.

Towards the end of the debate Heidegger himself seems to admit to a difficulty of this sort,

It turns out that Being itself has been dispersed in a multiplicity and that a central problem exists therein, namely, to attain the foundation in order to understand the

inner multiplicity of the ways of Being based on the idea of Being. For my part, I am anxious to establish this sense of Being in general as central. Accordingly the only trouble for my investigations has been judged to be [the need] to attain the horizon for the question concerning Being, its structure and its multiplicity.¹⁴

This statement comes as response to Cassirer's reflections on the importance of the question of Being in which he emphasizes that with Kant's Copernican turn,

there is no longer one single such structure of Being, but that instead we have completely different ones. Every new structure of Being has its new a priori presuppositions. . . . For this reason, a completely new multiplicity enters into the problem of the object in general. . . . Being in the new metaphysics is, in my language, no longer the Being of a substance, but rather the Being which starts from a variety of functional determinations and meanings. And the essential point which distinguishes my position from Heidegger seems to me to lie here.¹⁵

Once we see this problem in respect of the multiplicity of objective forms, the *terminus ad quem*, we can further raise the question whether Heidegger is capable of giving any account of the multiplicity of forms of life, the multiplicity of subjective determinations that corresponds to the multiplicity of symbolic forms: to take the simplest example, the mythic form of life and thought. In other words, although perhaps finding a unifying ground of the *terminus a quo* of constitution in Dasein's existence, Heidegger leaves unclear how this primitive unity transforms itself into a multiplicity of objective forms, he fails to address the metabasis of subjective life into objective forms that is central for Cassirer.

In sum, then, while Heidegger claims plausibly to have pushed back further than Cassirer in the determination of the *terminus a quo* of constitution and perhaps also its *ter-*

minus ad quem (at least in the sense of the meaning of Being in general), it seems he has trouble returning to the manifold modes of factual comportment and the corresponding manifold of objectivities. It is not just that Heidegger does not carry through a detailed analysis of this sort, more that he gives no real account of how such a task could even be undertaken.

In the wake of *Being and Time*, however, there are some indications that Heidegger recognized and attempted to address this problem.¹⁶ In particular, in his summer 1928 lecture series, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger will talk about the task of a metontology which follows fundamental ontology.¹⁷ Metontology, it seems, embraces two tasks: First, the anthropology of Dasein in its concrete determinations. In this context Heidegger will refer to such topics as spatiality, ethics, and bodiliness.¹⁸ Second, metontology is also directed at the concrete multiplicity of determinations of Being, thus, in effect, at the problem of the regionality of ontology, of the multiple regions of objectivity that correspond to the multiplicity of Dasein's forms of life.¹⁹ Yet the metontology outlined here is never carried through in any detail, and, as far as I know, Heidegger never even uses the term again.

This abortive notion of metontology then only seems to confirm that Heidegger recognizes a problem here, yet is unable to progress very far with it. Why is this? An adequate answer to this question would require a longer consideration than I can entertain here, but let me try to at least indicate in a general way the source of the problem. Heidegger claims that his project of fundamental ontology has penetrated to the ground of the meaning of Being in general. It achieves this through an analysis of Dasein's existential-temporalizing mode of Being as the ground of the understanding of Being. Yet this ground, as Heidegger never tires of telling us, is devoid of determinate, objective characteristics, it is a nothingness, and, in that sense, an abyss. It is, in effect, a ground which offers no foundation in the classic modern sense, a foundation for the systematic investigation of the multiplicity of re-

gional ontologies. Rather, it points only to what Heidegger himself calls a "dispersion" (*Zerstreuung*) of Being into a multiplicity of determinate meanings of Being, both regionally and historically.²⁰ The turn to Dasein as the foundation of the ontological problematic proves to be a dead-end. The return to the factual, demanded by Heidegger's own hermeneutic conception of philosophy, is in a sense made necessary by this dead-end, yet this dead-end also means that this return requires a break from the project of fundamental ontology. In short, it is the sort of turn Heidegger conceives under the rubric of the *Kehre*.²¹ Ironically, Heidegger is thus forced to return to the *terminus ad quem* in Cassirer's sense—the multiplicity of actual historical forms of objectivity—not because the ontological can only be approached reconstructively, but because precisely the direct phenomenological investigation of Dasein as the ground of ontology shows it to be incapable of providing a systematic foundation.

Briefly, we might note in support of this suggestion that some of the investigations Heidegger conducts after the period of *Being and Time*, have a strikingly Cassirerian character, at least methodologically speaking. We have, for example, the rather free-standing analysis of the art-work, in which the talk of authenticity is all but absent and the focus is on the work of the art-work, or, we might say, the world-disclosing function of the art-work. It is, in effect, a question about the regional ontology of art and the symbolic, in the sense of world-disclosing, function (or "work") of the art-work.

Now it is true that Cassirer's approach with its emphasis on the facticity and multiplicity of symbolic forms also has problems with the notion of systematicity. Many a reader has wondered about the exact genetic relation between, say, myth and science. While Cassirer says he is undertaking a phenomenology of objective spirit in the Hegelian sense, he does not develop a Hegelian teleology which would see all symbolic forms gradually sublated into one universal, absolute symbolic form. Equally, one can wonder about the actual identification of the regions of the various symbolic forms. While myth,

science, and art all seem fairly uncontroversial as candidates for autonomous symbolic forms, the classification of language as its own symbolic form has puzzled many. And something else we never find in Cassirer is any attempt to offer a definitive list of symbolic forms, nor even an account of how such could be given. Yet perhaps we expect a systematicity here from Cassirer that it is not his goal to provide, and perhaps here we mistakenly see as a weakness what in fact is a strength. Can we not best understand Cassirer as engaged in an ongoing transcendental critique of symbolic forms that does not exclude the emergence and identification of ever new and ever more symbolic forms? Does not Cassirer positively and deliberately allow for the possibility of a reconception of the range and inter-relation of the various symbolic forms, as they are subjected to ever-closer description and critique and ever-new phenomena are uncovered? Though necessarily starting with a certain conception of the region governed by a certain symbolic form, the transcendental turn to its conditions of possibility allows for an ongoing reconception of the very nature and bounds of that region and its relation to other regions. And perhaps it is for this reason, then, that Cassirer is quite happy, despite Heidegger's criticisms, to leave the *terminus a quo* and *ad quem* in a state of formal generality and indeterminacy, precisely to allow leeway for ongoing research into the factual multiplicity of symbolic forms. A premature claim to have definitely determined those two terms, risks exceeding the critical project to a metaphysics which loses touch with the things themselves, with the facticity of symbolic forms, ultimately, with the factum of an objective, intersubjective communicability. Cassirer's conception of philosophy, as we saw in his characterization of Natorp's psychology, is of an ongoing

coursing back and forth between the two termini, never resting content with any uncritical naturalistic definition of the regions and essential character of phenomena comprised thereby, nor claiming to have discovered any definitive metaphysical overview of the same.

In conclusion, I think we can see from all this that both Heidegger and Cassirer struggle with how to give due weight to the factual and historical multiplicity of forms of human life and world, without abandoning the critical transcendental project and lapsing into a naturalism or historicism. Each, in their own way, do this by abandoning the claim to have found a transcendental ground that would yield a definitive systematization of the multiplicity of Being. Heidegger, because he believes that a thoroughgoing phenomenological investigation shows that the ground of ontology can yield no such systematic foundation. Cassirer, more circumspectly, because his neo-Kantian method dictates that his investigations start from and constantly return to this multiplicity of objective forms, and in that sense never leave this factual basis for the metaphysical comfort of a complete system of symbolic forms. In the end, however, the differences that emerge at Davos remain. Cassirer can give up systematicity without abandoning the claim to discover in this multiplicity of forms, a genuinely transcendental field of universal objectivity. Heidegger, on the other hand, having gone beyond the reconstructive approach of Cassirer and its formality regarding both the Being of the subject and the meaning of Being in general, discovers a fundamental finitude that severs the link, not only with a systematic foundation for ontology, but also with the infinitude of the realm of objectivity so prized by Cassirer.

ENDNOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Vol. 3: *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1929), 63; *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of*

Knowledge, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p.53. Hereafter, PSF with the German pagination followed by the English.

2. PSF 63/53.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, GA 3, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 277; *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 173. Hereafter, KPM with the German pagination followed by the English.
4. KPM, 280/175.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 286/179.
7. Ibid., 288/180.
8. Ibid.
9. Martin Heidegger, "Ernst Cassirer: Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. 2. Teil: Das mythische Denken," in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 255–72; "Book Review of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*," in *The Piety of Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 32–45. Hereafter, KPM with German pagination and PT with the English pagination. One can find the same criticism made more generally in *Being and Time*, section 10, and with particular reference to Cassirer's work on myth, in section 11.
10. KPM 264/PT 40.
11. KPM 265/PT 41.
12. KPM 266 /PT 42.
13. Though I think the analogy could be made in more detail I would by no means want to suggest that these characterizations of subjective comportment are by any means the same.
14. KPM 185.
15. Ibid., 184.
16. In his attempts to clarify the preliminary and fundamental status of fundamental ontology, Heidegger will often make the general point that the study of the concrete determinations of human being belongs to the task of a philosophical anthropology that can only follow on the preliminary and general clarification of existential mode of being of Dasein (e.g., *Being and Time*, section 10; *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, section 37).
17. Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang vom Leibniz*, GA 26, ed. Klaus Held (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), 199–202; *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 156–58. Hereafter, MAL with the German pagination followed by the English.
18. MAL 173–75/138–39. In characterizing the task of philosophical anthropology in the *Kantbuch*, Heidegger will say that it extends beyond the field of empirical anthropology narrowly conceived to the issues and problems of disciplines such as ethnology, psychoanalysis and psychology. Cf. KPM 208–09/142.
19. "As a result we need a special problematic which has for its proper theme beings as a whole [*das Seiende im Ganzen*]" (MAL 199/157). Though it is clear that for Heidegger this task is not limited to simply explaining the standard system of regions but rather subjecting them to critique and even questioning the very idea of a system.
20. Cf. *ibid.*, 173–74/138–39, where Heidegger talks about a "dispersion" (*Zerstreuung*) of Dasein that characterizes its existential mode of being, a dispersion into the sort of concrete factual characteristics that would be the subject of a philosophical anthropology: spatiality, intersubjectivity, language, bodiliness, and even sexuality. This dispersion is also related to Dasein's thrownness, its always finding itself in the midst of a totality of beings. Heidegger makes the further connection that this notion of dispersion leads to "a description of the multiplication which is present in every factically dispersed Dasein as such," and the "clarification of the intrinsic possibility of multiplication" such that this multiplicity is understood not simply as a "formal plurality of determinations," but as belonging to the being of Dasein itself.
21. Cf. *ibid.*, 201–02/158, "But the temporal analysis is at the same time a turning-around [*Kehre*], where ontology expressly runs back into the metaphysical ontic in which it implicitly always remains. Through the movement of radicalizing and universalizing, the aim is to bring ontology to its latent overturning [*Umschlag*]. Here the turn-around [*Kehre*] is carried out, and it is turned over into the metontology."

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