

Theology and Politics: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger before, in and after the Davos Debate

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In December 1923, nearly six years before the debate that brought them face to face in Davos, Switzerland in 1929, Ernst Cassirer invited the young Martin Heidegger, who at the time was extraordinary Professor at the University of Marburg, to give a talk before the Kant-Society (*Kant-Gesellschaft*) in Hamburg where Cassirer taught. During his stay in Hamburg, which lasted several days, Heidegger spoke on the theme, “The Task and the Ways of Phenomenological Research” (“Aufgabe und Wege der phänomenologischen Forschung”). In a still unpublished letter that Heidegger wrote to his wife Elfride, dated December 19th 1923, which was not included among the published collection of letters between Heidegger and his wife, he wrote that he was a guest in the home of the psychologist William Stern, Professor at the University of Hamburg and father of Günther Stern (Günther Anders), the future husband of Hannah Arendt. “My talk went well”, Heidegger wrote,

“[before] a large audience [...] The city is wonderful [...] Cassirer and other professors who attended my lecture would like to invite me for a talk next year at the Warburg library [...]. The Sterns are extremely nice and would like me to prolong my stay until Friday morning. They haven't left me for a moment.”¹

Several years later, Heidegger referred to this first encounter with Cassirer in Hamburg in a footnote found in section § 12 of *Sein und Zeit*, entitled, “Existential Analytics and the Interpretation of Primitive *Dasein*” [*Die existenziale Analytik und die Interpretation des primitiven Daseins*]. In this reference Heidegger notes a certain agreement, an “*Übereinstimmung*”, he reached with Cassirer during the discussion following the talk concerning the need to elaborate an “existential analytic”.²

In spite of this statement of their accord in Hamburg, it would be difficult to imagine two more divergent personalities and philosophical orientations. Later in Davos, it is above all this discordance that came to light. The different points of their disagreement have recently become a topic of detailed analysis and my purpose here will not be to consider the different interpretations of this debate. In the brief space of this talk, my aim, rather, will be to revisit the Davos debate in order to place it in a somewhat unusual perspective.

The angle of approach I will adopt was suggested to me by a critical appraisal of Heidegger's

¹ “*Mein Vortrag ist gut abgelaufen [...] grosser Zuhörerkreis [...] Die Stadt ist Herrlich [...] Cassirer und andere Professoren die in meinem Vortrag waren, wollen mich im nächsten Herbst für eine Vorlesung in der Bibliothek Warburg haben [...] Sterns sind äusserst nett und wollen dass ich noch bis Freitag früh bleibe [...] [Sie] lassen mich nicht los.*” Martin Heidegger to Elfride Heidegger, 19 December 1923, unpublished. I am grateful to Thomas Meyer for this information. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Since the pagination of the German edition of *Sein und Zeit* is indicated in the English translation of this work and in the Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe*, I indicate only the pagination of the original German edition.

² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), p. 51.

philosophy that Cassirer presented in Davos on the evening before the first debate in a preliminary talk, the “Heidegger-lecture” (“*Heidegger-Vorlesung*”). This lecture remained unpublished until it appeared in 2014 among the previously unpublished works in the framework of Cassirer’s collected works.³ In this lecture, Cassirer identified what he took to be the deep sources of Heidegger’s philosophy of existence, arising from presuppositions of an essentially *theological* order. Oddly enough, however, Cassirer never reexamined this interpretation, neither in his debate with Heidegger at Davos, nor in later writings. In my present effort, I will scrutinize Cassirer’s reference to theological presuppositions that animated Heidegger’s orientation. According to the argument I will develop, an examination of Cassirer’s and Heidegger’s divergent attitudes toward theology permits us to set their respective philosophical positions in a novel light. And, as I will attempt to illustrate in the concluding sections of my talk, analysis of their respective attitudes toward theology reveals at the same time an important source of the political philosophy that Cassirer elaborated in the decades following the debate in Davos.

I

We do not know today if the theme of theology arose in the discussions that took place between Cassirer and Heidegger in 1923 during Heidegger’s brief sojourn in Hamburg. Perhaps Cassirer was able to discern the importance of this topic for Heidegger’s philosophical orientation in this period preceding the publication of *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger had taken a certain distance from the Catholic tradition in which he had been brought up and with which he had been closely affiliated during the period of his studies at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. Following his marriage in 1917 with a Protestant woman, Elfride Petri, and his intensive study of the writings of Martin Luther, themes related to Protestant theology began to have a profound impact on his thought, as witnessed by the courses he taught as a young *Privatdozent* at Freiburg during the years following World War I that are collected in volume 60 of his *Complete Works* (*Gesamtausgabe*) under the title *Philosophy of Religious Life* (*Philosophie des religiösen Lebens*). In regard to Luther and Christian religiosity, Heidegger wrote the following lines to his wife in a letter he sent her in September 1919:

“Since my reading of Luther’s commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans*, many things that were previously troubling and opaque have become clear, and are a source of liberation for me. I understand the Middle Ages and the development of Christian religiosity in a fully different light. And this has opened completely new perspectives in regard to the philosophy of religion”.⁴

³ Ernst Cassirer, *Davoser Vorträge. Vorträge über Hermann Cohen. Mit einem Anhang : Briefe Hermann und Martha Cohens an Ernst und Toni Cassirer, 1901-1929, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 17, ed. Jörn Bohr (Hamburg: Meiner, 2014), p. 3-76.

⁴ “Seit ich Luthers Römerbriefkommentar gelesen, ist mir vieles vordem Quälende und Dunkle hell und Befreiend geworden – ich verstehe das Mittelalter und die Entwicklung der christlichen Religiosität ganz neu; und es haben sich mir ganz neue Perspektiven der religionsphilosophischen Problematik ergeben.” Martin Heidegger to Elfride Heidegger, 9 September, 1919, “Mein liebes Seelchen!”. *Briefe Martin Heideggers an seine Frau Elfride. 1915-1970* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2005), p. 100.

Heidegger maintained his strong interest in theology, above all in the writings of Martin Luther, during the period of his teaching at the University of Marburg after 1923. During his four years at Marburg, Heidegger collaborated with the Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann. In 1927, the year in which *Sein und Zeit* appeared, he wrote to Bultmann that “Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard are philosophically essential for the formation of a radical comprehension of *Dasein*”.⁵ And, in the introduction to *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger asserted that theologians, in light of a renewal of interest in Luther’s writings, had begun to formulate more original questions.⁶ Moreover, the reflections proposed throughout this work on Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard illustrate their profound significance for his philosophical analyses.

If we bear in mind this role of theology for the elaboration of Heidegger’s ontological standpoint, it is curious that this theme was never directly mentioned in his commentary on Cassirer’s philosophy. In his book *Mythical Thought*, the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* which appeared in 1925, Cassirer dealt in detail with Christian theological themes in the more general context of analysis of the distinction between myth and religion. Following the publication of this work, Heidegger wrote a review in which he examined Cassirer’s theory of myth, without however paying any attention to Cassirer’s conception of the phenomenon of religion and, more specifically, of the Christian religion. Not only in this review, but also in subsequent remarks on Cassirer’s philosophy, whether in his contemporary Freiburg courses, in *Sein und Zeit* or later at Davos, Heidegger never mentioned this theme. It is as if the topic of religion, considered from their respective viewpoints, were too present, too close, perhaps too troubling, to be evoked in a direct confrontation.

Be this as it may, the criticism Heidegger elaborated of the epistemological foundations of Cassirer’s theory of myth clearly challenged his manner of historical reflection on myth, and did so in a way that touches at least indirectly on his conception of religion. It is therefore to Heidegger’s oblique critique of Cassirer’s conception of religion that I will now turn in order to set in relief the counter-critique Cassirer developed at Davos and during the years that followed.

The manner of historical reflection that Cassirer adopted in his interpretation of myth and of its relation to religion owed a good deal to the inspiration of his mentor Hermann Cohen. For Cohen, as for Cassirer, Jewish monotheism, above all as represented by the prophets, as well as Christian monotheism each contributed to a general movement elaborated over the course of history: Judaism and Christianity, through faith in a unique transcendent God, surmounted the rudimentary forms of mythical thought that had identified its deities with occult forces deployed by things in the immanent world. The great contribution of the Jewish prophets, which was reaffirmed in another sense by early Christianity and reinforced by the Protestant Reformation, lay in a firm rejection of an alleged magical potency deployed by idols and other worldly objects. Over the course of their historical development, the great monotheistic religions reinterpreted the sense of religious faith in directing it toward divine transcendence beyond the tangible things of this world. In situating the specific contribution of Christianity, which the Protestant Reformation raised to its fullest Christian expression,

⁵ “Augustin, Luther, Kierkegaard sind philosophisch wesentlich für die Ausbildung eines radikalen Daseinsverständnisses.” Martin Heidegger to Rudolf Bultmann, 31 December 1927, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel, 1925-1975* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, Tübingen : Mohr/Siebeck, 2009), p. 48.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 10.

Cohen recognized in Luther's work a continuation of the movement inaugurated by the Hebrew prophets. In Cohen's words:

“As the Prophets struggled against sacrifice, so Luther opposed faith to works, above all works in the sense of the Church [...] The works of the Church are like ancient sacrifice, transformed into mystery”.⁷

In Cohen's eyes, this contribution of Jewish and Christian monotheism was reinforced by the rationalism of the ancient Greek heritage, above all through the Platonic and neo-Platonic legacy which, from the Hellenistic period onwards, had a decisive impact on the two religions.⁸ Ancient Greek rationalism and Judeo-Christian monotheism each progressively set in motion the historical movement that led to the subduing of the most rudimentary forms of myth, and subsequently to the overcoming of the remnants of mythical-magical belief still at work in Christianity. In this manner, each also brought an essential contribution to the *ethical* development of humanity. Indeed, over the course of human history, the progressive challenge directed against the assumption that human destiny is ruled by occult forces opened the way to the idea of individual liberty as the source of moral responsibility.

While Ernst Cassirer reaffirmed the broad outlines of Cohen's interpretation of human history, his philosophy of symbolic forms modified it in an essential way. According to Cassirer's original perspective, myth and religion, science and art, like the words and signs through which they are articulated, are so many symbolic forms in terms of which humans make sense of reality. It is through the historical elaboration of symbolic forms for Cassirer that human awareness of the spiritual character of religious symbols emerged, enabling humanity over the course of history to overcome the mythico-magical belief in their occult power. At the same time, the spiritualization of symbols reinforced the redirection of religious faith toward transcendence.

Even more firmly than Cohen, Cassirer underlined the significance of Plato and of the Platonic heritage which, to his mind, represented a decisive turning-point that led to the overcoming of the mythical-magical world image, since Plato accorded a preeminent role to the autonomous power of reason in its capacity to reveal sovereign goodness that is not conditioned by the things of the sensuous world, but reigns from a realm of pure transcendence beyond their purview. In this sense, according to Plato's celebrated words in *The Republic*, the Good is “beyond being or essence” (*epekeina tês ousias*).⁹ On this basis, Cassirer rejoined Cohen's interpretation in reaffirming the contribution of the respective doctrines of divine transcendence in Judaism and of Christianity to the liberation of the human spirit, and in emphasizing the role of Martin Luther in his struggle against what he took to be the vestiges of idolatry in the rites of the Catholic Church. Cassirer wrote in this

⁷ “Wie die Propheten das Opfer bekämpften, so bekämpft Luther mit seinem Glauben die Werke, nämlich die Werke der Kirche [...] Die Werke der Kirche sind das alte Opfer, das sich hier in ein Mysterium verwandelt hat”. Hermann Cohen, “Luther”, *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1921), p. 303.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 509b (Cambridge, Mass: 1980), p. 107; Ernst Cassirer, *Das Mythische Denken, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), p. 300.

regard:

“The entire history of dogma, in its evolution from the most primitive forms until Luther and Zwingli, shows us in an immediate way the perpetual combat that opposes the archaic and historical sense of symbols, their meaning as ‘sacraments’ and ‘mysteries’, and their derivative, purely ‘spiritual’ sense. There, too, the ‘ideal’ wrests itself only very slowly from the sphere of material things, from effective reality”.¹⁰

Like the Platonic heritage, the monotheistic religions reinforced this conviction concerning the spiritual significance of symbols and, in this manner, for Cassirer as for Cohen, religion, in leading toward the gradual liberation from the hold of beliefs in magical forces, contributed to the development of the conviction of human ethical responsibility.

While Cassirer was in agreement with Hermann Cohen’s conception of the ethical role of the monotheistic religions, he nonetheless evaluated the historical significance of religion in a way that essentially differed from the ideas of his former mentor. This difference appears in its sharpest form in relation to Cohen’s late work, *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism (Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums)*. In this book Cohen stressed, more strongly than ever before, the uniqueness of Judaism as a religious faith and the specific role of Jewish messianism for the orientation of human history, which he distinguished in this context from Christian eschatology. Whereas Christian eschatology maintains a sharp distinction between the transcendent realm and the sociopolitical world, Jewish messianism aims to realize a universal ideal in the world itself and conceives this task as the ultimate goal of its faith.¹¹ Cassirer’s symbolic interpretation of religion, however, led him in a different direction. Indeed, as we glean from the final part of *Mythical Thought*, Cassirer interpreted the history of the monotheistic religions in terms of what he saw as their tendency to come ever closer to the domain of aesthetics. Even if religion can never fully divest itself of its mythical foundations, the more it is able to free itself from the trammels of mythical belief in magical forces and to conceive of itself in spiritual and symbolic terms, the closer it approaches the domain of art. Whereas religion, in its historical development, is continually condemned to face the problem raised by the ultimate *reality* of its objects, this problem disappears, and religious consciousness is “calmed” (*beruhigt*) and “placated” (*beschwichtigt*), as soon as it beholds itself in the perspective of art. As Cassirer wrote on the final page of the *Mythical Thought*:

“Myth always sees in the image a fragment of substantial reality, a part of the world of things endowed with forces that are equal or superior to those of the world. The religious conception strives forward from this initial magical aim to an ever purer spiritualization. And yet, even here

¹⁰ “Die gesamte Entwicklung der Dogmengeschichte, von ihren ersten Anfängen bis zu Luther und Zwingli hin, zeigt uns sodann den ständigen Kampf zwischen dem geschichtlichen Ursinn der ‘Symbole’, nach dem sie noch ganz als ‘Sakramente’ und ‘Mysterien’ erscheinen und ihrem abgeleiteten, rein ‘geistigen’ Sinn. Auch hier arbeitet sich das ‘Ideelle’ nur ganz allmählich aus der Sphäre des Dinglichen, des Real-Wirklichen heraus”. Ernst Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2, p. 297.

¹¹ Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums. Eine jüdische Religionsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1929), p. 341-368.

it finds that it is continually led to a point where the question of its meaning and truth is converted into that of the reality of its objects, a point at which, in a hard and sudden way, the problem of 'existence' arises. Only with aesthetic consciousness is this problem truly left behind".¹²

II

During the early period of teaching at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau between 1919 and 1921, several years before the publication of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, Heidegger elaborated a sharp critique of the method of investigation in philosophy and in the human sciences which sought to understand the phenomenon of religion in terms of its historical manifestations. This, indeed, was the kind of historical investigation that inspired Cassirer's research. Like the advocates of neo-orthodox theology, notably Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, or Friedrich Gogarten, Heidegger challenged the liberal theology that had predominated before World War I; the orientation of theologians like Adolf von Harnack or Ernst Troeltsch who, in a Protestant perspective, had underlined the historical role of Protestantism and its importance for the emergence of modern culture. This method had clear affinities with that adopted by Hermann Cohen in the period of publication of his work *Ethics of Pure Will* (*Ethik des reinen Willens*, 1904). Indeed, even if during these years prior to World War I Hermann Cohen and Ernst Troeltsch engaged in an intense debate concerning the role of Judaism in the history of religions, both of them, like Ernst Cassirer at a later point, agreed that the meaning of religion is to be sought in the domain of its *historical* development. And, in his early lectures on the phenomenology of religion, Heidegger railed against this method. In his eyes, the search for objective continuities linking together the different epochs of history, capable of revealing historical meaning beyond the transformations of history, was nothing more than a modern expression of the Platonic quest for transcendence beyond the flux of living experience.¹³

Animated by this conviction, Heidegger placed in relief a very different aspect of Luther's teaching than that which had been advanced by Hermann Cohen or Ernst Cassirer. From his standpoint, Heidegger stressed, not Luther's reproof of mythico-magical vestiges in the Catholic faith and possible affinities between this aspect of Luther's doctrine and the Platonic quest for super-sensuous truth but, on the contrary, a wholly different viewpoint: Luther's radical *critique* of modes of conceptualization bequeathed by the ancient Greek metaphysical tradition, above all by the Platonic heritage. In its traditional role as the metaphysical model for the self-interpretation of Christian spirituality, Greek philosophy, for Heidegger, had deformed (*verunstaltet*) Christian

¹² "Der Mythos sieht im Bilde immer zugleich ein Stück substanzieller Wirklichkeit, einen Teil der Dingwelt selbst der mit gleichen oder höheren Kräften wie diese ausgestattet ist. Die religiöse Auffassung strebt von dieser ersten magischen Absicht zu immer reinerer Vergeistigung fort. Und doch sieht auch sie sich immer wieder an einen Punkt geführt an dem, die Frage nach ihren Sinn- und Wahrheitsgehalt in die Frage nach der Wirklichkeit ihrer Gegenstände umschlägt, an dem sich, hart und schroff, das Problem der 'Existenz' vor ihr aufrichtet. Das ästhetische Bewusstsein erst lässt dieses Problem wahrhaft hinter sich". *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Einleitung in die phänomenologie der Religion (1920-21)*, *Philosophie des religiösen Lebens, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 60 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995), p. 39-50; see in this regard chapter four of my book, *Marin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (New York: Fordham, 2004), p. 132-156.

existence, and the only way to retrieve a pristine Christian religiosity was by liberating it from the spell of Greek conceptual presuppositions.¹⁴ Here the uniqueness of religious experience for human existence had to be made palpable independently of the conceptual paradigms to which it had traditionally been assimilated, in accord with which modern adaptations of Platonic assumptions identified it with one among many incarnations of a superior truth, the expressions of a trans-historical continuity beyond its historical manifestations. In taking as his model what he described as the authentic “factual life-experience” (*faktische Lebenserfahrung*) of the primitive Christian community, Heidegger sought to underscore the unique existential significance of a religiosity that was in no way commensurable with schema of historical development or extraneous categories of analysis. Foremost among these was the Platonic and neo-Platonic valorization of *aesthetic* qualities, designating them, like religious phenomena, as touchstones of a superior, transcendent truth manifested in the immanent realm.¹⁵ In interpreting Luther’s Heidelberg *Disputatio* of 1518 in his early Freiburg course lectures, Heidegger emphasized that the Reformer’s rejection of ancient Greek metaphysical concepts equated them with mere forms of idolatry that *aesthetically* glorify what are seen to be the wonders of the created world.¹⁶ From Heidegger’s standpoint, authentic religious experience, far from an ongoing incarnation of a trans-historical idea of truth comparable to the perdurable luster of aesthetic phenomena in the immanent realm, could serve as a source of philosophical insight into the illegitimacy of such expressions of the Greek metaphysical tradition. All such forms of Greek metaphysics, as he exclaimed in this and other contexts, must be resolutely deconstructed – “*abgebaut*”, submitted to phenomenological *Destruktion*.¹⁷ In Heidegger’s eyes, the inspiration above all of Paul, Luther, and Kierkegaard serves to guide the attempt to retrieve the original sense of religious experience. They, above all, give insight into the significance of human finitude as it is faced with the necessity of choosing a mode of existence in the light of future death. Here Heidegger’s understanding of Luther and Kierkegaard presents a striking anticipation of his interpretation of the finitude of human existence elaborated in *Sein und Zeit*. In a lecture presented in 1924 in the seminar of Rudolf Bultmann in Marburg on “The Problem of Sin in Luther”, Heidegger paraphrased Kierkegaard as follows:

“The principle of Protestantism embraces a particular presupposition: [that of] the anguished man who sits in the face of death in a state of fear and trembling before a harsh trial”.¹⁸

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Philosophie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks* (1920), *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 59 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993), p. 91.

¹⁵ According to Heidegger’s early Freiburg lectures of 1921, “Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus”, even Augustine, who had been a principal source of Luther’s theology, fell prey to the enticements of neo-Platonic metaphysics, as may be seen nowhere more distinctly than in his aesthetic viewpoint, which took worldly beauty to be an emanation from an absolute transcendent source. Martin Heidegger, “Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus”, *Philosophie des religiösen Lebens*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 60, p. 284.

¹⁶ Heidegger, “Einleitung in die phänomenologie der Religion”, *Philosophie des religiösen Lebens*, Anhang II, p. 282

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus”, *Philosophie des religiösen Lebens*, Anhang I, p. 247; Martin Heidegger, “Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation” (1922), *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003), p. 32-35.

¹⁸ “Das Prinzip des Protestantismus hat eine besondere Voraussetzung : ein Mensch der in Todesangst da sitzt

III

In view of Heidegger's philosophical and theological orientation, it comes as no surprise that he sharply contested Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms and, with it, his conception of myth. Where Cassirer in *Mythical Thought*, as we have seen, interpreted myth, religion, and aesthetics as so many symbolic forms, Heidegger, well before Davos, identified a chasm separating primordial Christian religiosity from any other form of experience. Where Cassirer presupposed the historical articulation of symbolic forms leading to an ongoing spiritualization of the mythical components of religion and suggested that the problem posed by their ultimate reality might be attenuated through appreciation of their quality as aesthetic symbols, Heidegger sharply questioned the assimilation of religious and aesthetic experience to the same conceptual schema of explanation in an ongoing process of historical development. In a course lecture presented in 1925, the year of publication of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought* and of his review of this work, Heidegger signaled what was to his eyes the inappropriateness of Cassirer's methodology in that it indifferently subjects aesthetic, mythical, or religious phenomena to the same "formal models" (*formale Leitfäden*), since "what proves to be a suitable approach in aesthetics may impede elucidation and interpretation of other phenomena." On this basis, Heidegger qualified as "inadequate" Cassirer's general conception of symbolic forms.¹⁹

In his review of *Mythical Thought*, Heidegger's critique of Cassirer centered above all on the developmental schema in terms of which Cassirer interpreted the historical articulation of the symbolic forms. If Heidegger did not specifically allude here to Cassirer's interpretation of Christianity, he radically rejected Cassirer's idea of a fundamental historical *progression* of modernity beyond the mythical world-image. Indeed, at the fundamental level, all human existence – whether mythico-magical or modern – is marked by the same finitude. And finite existence necessarily comprehends itself in light of the facticity of a being thrown into the world, preoccupied by unavoidable everyday concerns in the world, and faced with the inevitability of future death. No historical progression can overcome this universal existential situation.

In view of the role that Cassirer attributed in *Mythical Thought* to the development of a capacity for aesthetic appreciation of mythical and religious symbols as the mark of historical progression beyond the more rudimentary forms of belief, Heidegger's sarcastic reproof of the universal schema elaborated by what he termed "aesthetes" at the Davos debate, in a comment made in its aftermath, takes on a curious significance. A few months following his encounter with Cassirer at Davos, in a letter addressed to Karl Löwith on September 4th 1929 – which remains unpublished – Heidegger lauded younger members of the audience, who showed signs of "resolution of a singular, effective Dasein", and he contrasted their attitude with what he characterized as the:

"[...] Olympic and pretentious world-encompassing objectivity, which, for aesthetes of the insti-

in *Furcht und Zittern und viel Anfechtung*"; Martin Heidegger, "Das Problem der Sünde bei Luther", Appendix, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel, 1925-1975*, p. 271.

¹⁹ "Was für ästhetische Phänomene angemessener Ansatz sein kann, kann für andere Phänomene gerade das Gegenteil einer Aufklärung und Interpretation bewirken." Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1979), p. 276-77.

tution, becomes an obscure and ephemeral form of enjoyment.”²⁰

In view of the aestheticized interpretation of the general schema of historical development of symbolic forms that Cassirer proposed in *Mythical Thought*, was he not, in the context of Davos, the most likely target of this critique?

IV

Following his initial reading of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, Ernst Cassirer began to elaborate an analysis of this work and, as early as 1928, he wrote a critical commentary on it in the text ‘*Geist und Leben*’ (Spirit and Life), which he never completed and which, in its preliminary form, was posthumously published. In this text Cassirer began to reflect on the theological sources of Heidegger’s philosophy,²¹ and it is this theme that he would treat in greater depth in the *Heidegger-Vorlesung* written some months later and presented in Davos on the eve of his first debate with Heidegger.

What is immediately striking in Cassirer’s *Heidegger-Vorlesung* is not only that he examined the theme of the theological sources of *Sein und Zeit* that nowhere was evoked in the debate itself; more remarkable still was the manner in which Cassirer, in function of his critique of Heidegger, modified his appraisal of Luther in relation to his earlier interpretation of the Reformer in *Mythical Thought*. In his portrayal of Luther in this work Cassirer, we have seen, underlined what he identified as his contribution to a long historical process of desacralization of sensuous things in the world. According to Cassirer, this long process of “spiritualization of the sensuous” (“*Vergeistigung des Sinnlichen*”) flowed from the double source of Platonic philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the *Heidegger-Vorlesung*, however, Cassirer presented a wholly different side of Luther: here the Luther of “fear and trembling” appeared in a guise prefiguring the analytic of *Dasein*. In this lecture, Luther poses the radical problem of human finitude, for he recalls the impending demise that no one can avoid. In the face of death any quest for stability and security collapses; the search for an ideal order beyond human finitude and the contingencies of this world proves futile. Cassirer develops his analysis in relation to Luther’s *Eight Sermons* (“*Acht Sermone*”), professed at Wittenberg in 1523. Luther there proclaimed:

“We all must die and no one can die for another [...] Each one must seek his own rampart and engage his own struggle against the enemies that are the devil and death. At that moment I will not be with you, nor you with me.”²²

²⁰ “*Entschiedenheit des wirklichen, einzelnen Daseins*”; “[...] *olympische und aufgeplusterte Allerweltsobjektivität, [die] schattenhaft und ein flüchtiger Genuss für die Aestheten des Betriebs [wird].*” Martin Heidegger to Karl Löwith, 3 September 1929. Martin Heidegger, Karl Löwith, *Briefwechsel*, unpublished. I am grateful to the late widow of Karl Löwith, Ada Löwith, and to the publishing house Vittorio Klostermann, which possesses the rights to Heidegger’s works, for permission to quote these passages from the correspondence between Heidegger and Karl Löwith.

²¹ Ernst Cassirer, ‘*Geist und Leben*’, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ed. John Michael Krois, Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), p. 219-224.

²² “*Wir sind alle zum Tode gefordert und wird keiner für den anderen sterben [...] es muss ein jeglicher auf seine*

Cassirer labeled Luther's doctrine "religious individualism" – a characteristic, according to him, that also emerged in the Catholic tradition in the writings of Pascal. Religious individualism challenges every "objective form" of religion. Heidegger interprets death in an analogous way: in his eyes, finite existence, when relying only on itself, dissolves all illusory ties, whether physical or social. According to Cassirer's paraphrase of Heidegger, death obliges each individual to turn away from the inauthentic world of anonymous, everyday existence. This critique of the objective forms of religion, in Luther as in Heidegger, places in question the certitudes of the metaphysical tradition. Luther had emphasized the inscrutability of the Divine will and, in light of human fallibility and mortality, he contested the role accorded by the Platonic and Stoic-Christian tradition to the quest for an ideal order of the universe and to the intelligibility of "eternal certitudes" in this order beyond existence in its radical finitude.²³ In a novel 20th century perspective, Heidegger presented an analogous challenge to the Platonic and Stoic presupposition concerning the fundamental status of an autonomous cosmic order, beyond the finitude of mortal perspectives. It is here that Cassirer broached the principal theme of his lecture: Heidegger drew from the interpretation of human finitude the conclusion that all truth is relative to the finite beings that we are.²⁴ And Cassirer opposed to this conclusion the Platonic-Stoic idea of an unconditioned ethical truth, the intrinsic validity of which in no way depends on the finite mode of existence of the one who affirms it. This conviction, as Cassirer emphasized, was a source of inspiration for a broad intellectual tradition in the West. It also served to orient Kant's transcendental idealism, independently of the critique he directed against traditional metaphysics. As we recall, on the day following Cassirer's lecture this topic stood at the center of his debate with Heidegger.

V

During the years after the Davos debate, Cassirer did not pursue the interpretation he proposed in the *Heidegger-Vorlesung* of the theological sources of Heidegger's philosophy of existence. Nonetheless, if we examine for a moment the development of his thinking in the years following Davos, one aspect of his orientation is particularly noteworthy for our present analysis. Indeed, in the framework of his thoughts on politics which, in the early 1930s, became an ever more central topic of his reflection, Cassirer resumed his critique of the Lutheran heritage in a manner which bore a striking affinity with the topic of his lecture on Heidegger at Davos. Independently of the question of Heidegger who, in any case, had at that time not yet announced his political position, Cassirer began to turn his attention to theologico-political topics, and he deepened his investigation of the theological sources of the challenge launched by Luther and Calvin against the Platonic-Stoic

Schanze selbst sehen und sich mit den Feinden, mit dem Teufel und Tode selbst einlegen und allein im Kampf liegen. Ich werde dann nicht bei Dir sein noch Du bei mir". Martin Luther, *Acht Sermonen*, quoted in Ernst Cassirer, "Heidegger-Vorlesung", *Davoser Vorträge. Vorträge über Hermann Cohen. Mit einem Anhang: Briefe Hermann und Martha Cohens an Ernst und Toni Cassirer, 1901-1929*, p. 55-57.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 65-67.

²⁴ Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation", Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Anhang (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1973), p. 253-54.

tradition.

Cassirer's most detailed analyses of theologico-political topics in this period are found in two books published in 1932: in *The Platonic Renaissance in England and the Cambridge School* and in *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*. These were the last works Cassirer published in Germany. Several months after the printing of *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, Hitler rose to power and Cassirer left Germany for Sweden.

In view of the dire political situation in Germany in the early thirties, Cassirer presented much more in this work than a simple history of eighteenth-century European thought. Rather, the book's theme and content represent a plea in favor of the aspect of the European intellectual heritage that it was in his eyes particularly important to defend.

In this context, Cassirer placed in a new perspective the antinomy he had developed at Davos between Luther and the Platonic-Stoic tradition. He underscored the contribution of the latter in examining what he considered to be the precise political implications of the radical attack directed against this tradition by Luther and Calvin. The theological doctrine concerning the fallen condition of humanity and the weakness of human reason led the Reformers to adopt positions of political voluntarism. In view of human finitude and the fallibility of human reason, both Luther and Calvin concluded that it was necessary to adopt political doctrines in favor of strict obedience to the sovereign will. Calvin and his successors, as Cassirer noted, had called for the creation of a theocracy to provide absolute orientation for the State.

The great originality of Cassirer's thought during this period lies in his identification of a curious affinity between the political voluntarism of the Reformers and the radical absolutism that Hobbes advocated later on. Hobbes, in order to contest the legitimacy of theocratic principles in politics, concluded that only absolute sovereign authority could controvert the danger posed by the claims of the theologians and thus maintain the stability of the State. Thus, on the basis of starting points that were diametrically opposed to each other, the Reformers and Hobbes drew the conclusion that only absolute sovereign authority, representing Divine authority in the temporal realm, could prevent the outbreak of civil war and the reign of chaos. Only the sovereign – either the sovereign church or the political sovereign – was authorized to establish legitimate government and to decree what is just and unjust. It is on this basis that Luther and Calvin, on one side, and Hobbes on the other, contested the ideal of an autonomous political truth endowed with intrinsic validity and intelligible in the light of human reason. In spite of all other differences between them, the 16th century Reformers and the theoretician of the absolute State of the 17th century shared this common assumption.²⁵

In opposition to political voluntarism, Cassirer invoked the argument of Hugo Grotius who, in drawing on Platonic and Stoic sources, affirmed the principle of the intrinsic rational validity of truth that depends neither on the Divine will, nor on human will, since neither God nor man can transform what is intrinsically good into evil, nor evil into good. As Cassirer stipulated, Kant, on the basis of critical theory, set this conviction as the cornerstone of his ethico-political orientation. Kant, indeed, opposed any conception of politics that would make laws depend on the arbitrary sovereign will, and it was here that Kant's philosophy had inspired the earlier response to relativism he had mobilized at

²⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen : Mohr, 1932), p. 319f.

Davos. Even when Cassirer limited his analysis to the history of political thought without making direct reference to his contemporary period, the implications of his arguments in regard to the growing influence of new forms of political voluntarism were evident. Under the label of decisionism or of political theology, this new contemporary form of voluntarism drew on the analogy between Divine omnipotence and absolute sovereign power to legitimate the idea that political decisions cannot be limited by any established norm.²⁶

If Cassirer approached the theme of political theology in historical perspective in this period of sharp political radicalization which witnessed the first important victories of the Nazi party, he nonetheless abandoned all reference to Heidegger, not only during this period, but during his years of emigration in Sweden, from 1933 until his departure for the United States in 1941 at the beginning of World War II. It was in the United States, in his final work *The Myth of the State*, posthumously published in 1945, that he resumed his critique of Heidegger. In this context, Cassirer focused on the political implications of Heidegger's philosophical questioning of any rational or traditional order capable of claiming a fundamental status beyond the singular perspective revealed in light of human finitude, and the call to decision in the face of nothingness and of death. Nonetheless, in *The Myth of the State* it is no longer in relation to *theological* voluntarism that Cassirer developed his analysis. He no longer even suggested that there might be a link between the philosophy of Heidegger and Luther's theology, or political theology in any precise sense of the term. His attitude toward Heidegger changed in close relation to a broader transformation in his theoretical orientation: if Heidegger, according to the fundamental conviction that animates *The Myth of the State*, decided in 1933 to lend his support to the arbitrary power of a dictator who was subjected to no limit beyond his own will, this is because his philosophy is infused, less by categories of *theological* conceptualization than by a new kind of political *mythology*. In a passage of *The Myth of the State* that the American editors of the work chose not to include in the posthumously published edition, Cassirer made a remark that illustrates his position with particular clarity. Heidegger's critique of universal standards of truth in the sense of the Platonic tradition, as Cassirer noted, and his tendency to relativize the idea of truth in function of the singular finitude of *Dasein* brought him onto the ideological territory of the most arbitrary forms of twentieth century political mythology. The 16th century theology of Luther, however, shared no affinity with the novel forms of myth in the 20th century which Heidegger chose

²⁶ One need only recall in this context the decisionist political theories of the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, notably propounded by Carl Schmitt, that sought to revive and radicalize Hobbes' absolutist doctrine by seizing upon the traditional analogy between the sovereign and God to reinforce the idea of absolute sovereign power. Well beyond the limits of Hobbes's own thinking, Schmitt, in his work *Political Theology* (1922), emphasized that the sovereign's decisions can in no way be limited by natural right or any other pre-existing norms, for the norm depends, according to Schmitt's phrase, on the absolute sovereign's decision, born "out of nothingness" (*aus einem Nichts geboren*) (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* [Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1985], p. 42). Carl Schmitt's questioning of both the traditional and rational basis of norms and his insistence that decision arises in the face of nothingness anticipates in a striking manner the philosophy of existence of Heidegger. In 1933, both Heidegger and Schmitt, who were in contact with each other at the time, joined the Nazi party and pledged allegiance to the Hitler regime. Although the argument has been recently advanced that Schmitt's attitude toward the Weimar regime was ambiguous during the last years of its existence, the doctrine of political decisionism, coupled with his implacable hostility to parliamentary democracy, were hardly compatible with the fundamental principles of the Weimar Republic.

to embrace. In reference to Luther, mentioned in company with Kepler, Winckelmann and Herder, Cassirer laconically stated: “it is impossible to read the National-Socialist ideology into the entire text of German culture.”²⁷

This final development in Cassirer’s thought reveals a personal conviction engendered by the terrible experience of World War II that informs the work as a whole: in this final perspective, traditional theological categories, however radical, can in no way account for the archaic sources that animated the new forms of political and philosophical ideology which had so recently demonstrated the full range of their devastating force.

²⁷ Ernst Cassirer, “The Myth of the State. Its Origin and its Meaning. Third Part : The Myth of the Twentieth Century”, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 9, *Zu Philosophie und Politik* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2008), p. 195.