

Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger: The Davos Disputation and Twentieth-Century Philosophy

Four Lectures by

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One of the central facts of intellectual life since the second half of the twentieth century has been a fundamental divergence or split between the “analytic” philosophical tradition that has dominated the English speaking world and the “continental” philosophical tradition that has dominated the European scene. This divergence has been an expression within the world of professional philosophy of the much more general split C. P. Snow famously identified between his opposing (and mutually uncomprehending) “two cultures”—that of the scientifically minded and that of the “literary intellectuals.” Moreover, the divergence between analytic and continental traditions was intimately connected, in turn, with a celebrated defining episode in early twentieth-century philosophical thought, the famous Davos disputation between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer in 1929. The lectures examine the analytic-continental divide through the lens of this defining episode—which also centrally involved Rudolf Carnap, a leading representative of the Vienna Circle of logical empiricists—and explore how we might now move beyond the opposing “two cultures” by better understanding the nature and character of the split that first opened up in the philosophical world in the wake of the encounter at Davos.

Lecture 1 Encounter at Davos: A Parting of the Ways

It is now well known that the Davos disputation between Heidegger and Cassirer was a defining episode in twentieth-century thought—after which, in particular, Heidegger assumed Edmund Husserl’s chair at Freiburg and became the undisputed leader of what we now call the continental tradition. It is less well known, however, that Carnap attended the disputation at Davos and became seriously interested in Heidegger’s philosophy (and in *Being and Time*) in the years immediately following. Indeed, Carnap’s sharp attack on Heidegger in his paper “Overcoming Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language” (1931/2), grew directly out of his experience at Davos in 1929. After discussing the relationship between Heidegger and Cassirer in the years

before and after 1929, the lecture explores the wider social, cultural, and political context of both the Davos disputation and the ensuing exchange between Carnap and Heidegger during the extraordinarily uneasy period surrounding the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

Lecture 2

Overcoming Metaphysics: Carnap and Heidegger

This lecture explores the philosophical context of the exchange between Carnap and Heidegger (and the Davos disputation between Heidegger and Cassirer) in two important neo-Kantian traditions which exerted a powerful influence over early twentieth-century German philosophy: the Marburg School founded by Hermann Cohen and then continued by Paul Natorp and Cassirer, and the Southwest (or Baden) School founded by Wilhelm Windelband and then continued by Heinrich Rickert (and others). The two schools differed, in particular, over how to continue the critical philosophy (and Kant's "Copernican revolution") after Kant's original version—based on the "transcendental synthesis of the imagination" and the "schematism of the understanding"—was no longer acceptable. This led, in turn, to two different ways of reconfiguring the relationship between formal and "transcendental" logic, and thus to two different estimations of the philosophical importance and centrality of logic and the exact sciences. Carnap can be seen as continuing—and radicalizing—the Marburg view, while Heidegger responds to deep problems afflicting the Southwest School in eventually rejecting the entire neo-Kantian problematic (and the "Copernican revolution").

Lecture 3

Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy of Culture

Although Cassirer's earlier, properly scientific works remained squarely within the tradition of Marburg neo-Kantianism, he also undertook a radical transformation of this tradition in the 1920s—which resulted in the three volumes of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: volume one, on language, in 1923; volume two, on mythical thought, in 1925; and volume three, on the phenomenology of knowledge, in 1929. Cassirer thereby reached an accommodation of sorts with the *Lebensphilosophie* of Georg Simmel, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Scheler (and Heidegger) whereby the "purely significative" symbolic meaning characteristic of modern logic, mathematics, and mathematical physics is now seen as grounded in the more primitive forms of symbolic meaning found both in ordinary language and perceptual experience and in mythical thought. On this basis,

Cassirer articulated a general “transcendental” theory of culture and its development, from the point of view of which he then attempted to find an intermediate position between the two more extreme positions represented by Heidegger and Carnap. Whether or not Cassirer’s position is ultimately satisfactory, it is well worth considering it seriously if we now want to move beyond the analytic/continental divide.

Lecture 4 **A New Way Forward: The Dynamics of Reason**

I myself do not want to follow Cassirer in attempting a general “transcendental” theory of human culture. I do want, however, to follow his lead in developing an integrated historical account of both the development of modern philosophy and the evolution of modern science which concentrates, in particular, on the deep and pervasive interactions between them. This account—which I call the dynamics of reason—thereby shows how aspects of the “two cultures” (scientific and humanistic) are inextricably entangled with one another and so cannot be intellectually separated from a properly philosophical point of view. I also argue, in addition, that this same kind of inextricable entanglement characterizes the relationship between the more abstract realms of modern science and philosophy and the more concrete domains of ordinary human experience and social and cultural life. Indeed, there is no way properly to understand the birth of modern science and philosophy in the first place without appreciating their deep involvement with the social, political, cultural, and spiritual world of the European Reformation and Counter Reformation—from which they emerged in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This perspective, I suggest, represents a promising new way forward for overcoming both the split between C. P. Snow’s “two cultures” and the analytic/continental divide.