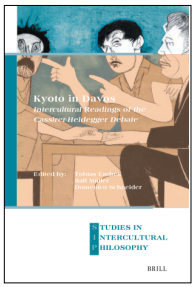
## Book Symposium

# T. Endres, R. Müller, D. Schneider, eds., *Kyoto in Davos*

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# Understanding Dissent

## Replies to the Commentaries on Kyoto in Davos

> In seeing water, there are beings that see it as a jeweled necklace. This does not mean, however, that they see a jeweled necklace as water. How, then, do we see what they consider water? Their jeweled necklace is what we see as water. Some see water as marvelous flowers, though this does not mean that they use flowers as water. Ghosts see water as raging flames or see it as pus and blood. Dragons and fish see it as a palace or see it as a tower. Some see it as the *mani* jewel and the seven treasures, or see it as woods and walls, or see it as the pure, liberated dharma nature, or see it as the true human body, or see it as the physical marks and mental nature. Humans see these as water. They are the causes and conditions that kill it and give it life.[1]

We are grateful for the efforts of our contributors and would particularly like to thank our critics for the thoughtful insights they offered in their engagement with *Kyoto in Davos*. In addition, as this Symposium brings Kyoto in Davos to a close, we dedicate it with gratitude to Fujita Masakatsu 藤田正勝 and Uehara Mayuko 上原麻有子, whose philosophical insights helped create its original conception.

### A parting of the ways, east and west

Our book project was greatly inspired by Michael Friedman's analysis of the continental divide in *A Parting of the Ways* (2000). In essence, Friedman's work positions the Davos debate not just as a historical curios-

1. Dōgen 2023, 407–8. Dōgen is a particularly suitable interlocutor if one wants to question the human from a non-anthropocentric point of view. At this point, reference can be made to Müller's monograph *Dōgens Sprachdenken* (2013), which analyses Dōgen's approach to language through the lens of Ernst Cassirer's symbol theory. Müller shows how Cassirer's concept of symbolic forms—language as a medium of understanding the world—opens up new levels of interpretation for Dōgen's multifaceted use of language. This approach is further developed in *Kyoto in Davos*, where Cassirer helps to overcome the Heidegger bias in the German-Japanese history of philosophy.

ity but as an unresolved challenge that continues to shape—and limit—philosophy's capacity to address 21st-century problems. However, we think that this unresolved challenge comes more clearly to the fore when broadening the scope beyond the continental divide and beyond the confines of North-American and European geography. Hence the title of our book: *Kyoto in Davos*.

Friedman's book centers on the 1929 Davos debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, with Rudolf Carnap playing a crucial role as an intellectual witness. Friedman frames this encounter as a symbolic rupture that crystallized the split between analytic philosophy (associated with Carnap's logical empiricism) and continental philosophy (linked to Heidegger's existential hermeneutics). He explains the divide in terms of diverging epistemologies and the split of science vs. metaphysics.

The debate occurred amid the collapse of the Weimar Republic, reflecting broader cultural tensions between Enlightenment optimism (Cassirer) and existential crisis (Heidegger). Friedman traces how these philosophical divergences hardened into institutionalized traditions post-WWII. He argues that reconciling these traditions is vital for addressing dual crises: scientific reductionism, on the one hand, and anti-rationalism, on the other. Regarding the former, the analytic tradition's narrow focus on logic risks alienating philosophy from humanistic questions of meaning, ethics, and historical consciousness. And regarding the latter, continental critiques of Enlightenment reason, while valuable, often lapse into relativism or obscurantism, undermining philosophy's role in public discourse.

By recovering the shared Kantian roots of both traditions—particularly the tension between finitude and rational spontaneity—Friedman suggests a path toward dialogue. This synthesis could empower philosophy to bridge STEM disciplines and the humanities, tackling issues like AI ethics or ecological crisis without sacrificing rigor or existential depth.

In our book, we propose moving beyond the confines of Western discourse and encourage authors to use the Davos debate as a springboard for engaging with parallel discussions in Japan. These Japanese debates are, in part, well-informed by ongoing conversations dominated by the Neo-Kantians, while also seeking alternatives outside these frameworks—without sacrificing philosophical rigor.

Translating philosophical discourse into a Japanese context prompts a re-

examination of many self-conceptions and brings to light issues that have remained dormant within the Western history of philosophy.[2] These range from the tension between tradition and systematic thinking to the question of how the concepts of Western thinkers can be rendered in a language that has historically not been shaped by philosophical discourse.

*Nishida's synthesis of East and West*

While, in abstract terms, our approach could have been even more radical by broadening the scope further—starting with Japanese contemporaries such as Nishida Kitarō—our project instead focuses on the dual structure of history and system in order to remain as concrete as possible. Let us, then, introduce our book more closely from the perspective of Nishida. The question at heart is how we shift our understanding of the fundamental issues discussed at the Davos meeting such as the question of man, the Kantian duality of the sensible and the intelligible and the task of philosophy once we pass beyond the limitations of the German-German encounter?

In his analysis, Michael Friedman positions Ernst Cassirer as a mediator between Martin Heidegger's existential-hermeneutic philosophy and Rudolf Carnap's logical empiricism, proposing a 'middle path' that bridges their divergent methodologies. In our view, Nishida adopts a stance toward the Davos debate that closely aligns with Cassirer's position.

However, Nishida assumes a dual role in this context: he not only attempts to mediate between positions such as those represented by Carnap and Heidegger. He also aims to synthesize Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, although explicit references to Eastern traditions are rare and appear chiefly in his later works, correspondence, and interviews. The motivation to pursue a synthesis of East and West is, at least in part, aligned with a reluctance to follow exclusively in the footsteps of either Heidegger or Carnap. Their convergence between Cassirer and Nishida lies in a shared commitment to relationality over dualism and pluralistic approach rather than parochialism. Both offer a framework for rethinking philosophy's role in a globalized world.

Nishida bridges science, metaphysics, and anti-rationalism through the following approaches:

2. Cf. Müller, Calderon, Wenzel 2024.

1. Integration of Experience Beyond Rationalism and Empiricism: From his early works onward, Nishida advocated for the inclusion of emotions and will in philosophical inquiry. Though influenced by both rationalist and empiricist traditions, he criticized them as overly detached from lived experience. By transcending the rigid conceptual systems of rationalist "philosophies of reason" and empiricist theories of knowledge, he prioritized proximity to direct experience. Within this framework, feelings, moods, and aspirations assume central roles.

2. Expanding Logic to Encompass Objective Spirit: Nishida developed his own logical framework while expanding the scope of objective spirit to encompass art, morality, and religion. His aim was to illuminate the historical-cultural reality of spirit, achieved through a focus on the linguistic and symbolic articulation of conceptual relations. This approach relativized the theoretical constraints of rationalist and empiricist traditions, grounding philosophy in the dynamism of cultural expression.

3. Philosophy Rooted in Everyday Life: A hallmark of Nishida's thought is its expansion beyond science to include art, morality, religion, and crucially everyday life as the foundation of human engagement with logic and existence. Rather than narrowing philosophy's gaze to scientific conceptualization, he encompassed the totality of human existence, positioning daily life as both the source and common ground of philosophical inquiry. We can see this already in his maiden work『善の研究』(*Study of the Good* 1911) in which Nishida posits a pre-reflective, unified/unifying "pure experience" (j. *junsui keiken*) as the basis of reality, drawing from William James and Zen.

4. Countering Subject-Object Dichotomy: Nishida's key concept field (場所, *basho*) emerged as a direct response to the subject-object dichotomy he perceived in Marburg Neo-Kantianism, particularly the Southwest School's rigid separation of form and content, logic and life. Nishida rejected both materialism (substance) and idealism (subjectivity), framing *basho* as a logically prior space that underlies all being and knowing. Nishida drew from Western sources (Hegel, Bergson, Neo-Kantianism) and Buddhist concepts (Prajñāpāramitā's emptiness) to construct *basho* as a cross-cultural framework. From there, he transitions to later concepts such as acting-intuition (行為的直観), describing it as a dynamic process in which individuals engage with the historical world through embodied practice.

*A perspectival shift to the East*

What, then, is the bridge he spans between East and West? This can be delineated from within the context raised by the Davos debate. Nishida engages with the philosophies of Scheler and Heidegger. As is well known, a key term in Nishida's work is j. *mu* 無 "nothing" or "nothingness," which—at least in part, as a concept of systematic value—co-emerges with his founding concept of *basho* [場所]. In this way, Nishida draws upon Japanese, Sino-Japanese, and broader Asian-Buddhist resources as a corrective to what he perceives as prevalent and ubiquitous tendencies in the Western tradition.

To be more precise, he explicitly sets himself apart from two reference points of the Davos debate: Scheler and Heidegger. Nishida states:

> There are those such as Scheler who speak of it [nothingness] as impotence (*Ohnmacht*) [無力]. He tried to gesture towards it by using this unique word. However, while he has much to say about the negating "im-" [無, i.e. "non-"] of impotence, he has neglected to speak much about "potency" [力, i.e. "power"]. However, nothingness possesses the element of power, and so we must dedicate more attention to discussing its living potency. Therefore, the nothingness I speak of is, of course, not nothing at all. Rather, we need to conceive of it as working within history, as something that is pulsating within the field [場所] of our experience. Heidegger similarly speaks of "nothingness" in his *What is Metaphysics?*. He descends from the world of being, alights on the field [場所] of anxiety and, again, proceeds down towards nothingness. From there, he takes a route back up to the surface again. Yet true "nothingness" must be grasped at once in the field [場所] of true existence. We must always seek to behold it within this field [場所] where it truly exists.[3]

Nishida's critique of Max Scheler centers on the latter's analysis of *Ohnmacht* (無力, "impotence"). Scheler, in *Ressentiment* (1912), describes impotence as a psychological state where suppressed negative emotions poison moral judgment, leading to nihilistic devaluation of higher values. While Scheler acknowledges the "negating" 'im-' in impotence, Nishida argues he neglects the "potency" inherent in nothingness itself. For Scheler, impotence arises from a discrepancy between aspiration and ability, fostering resentment toward unattainable ideals. Nishida, however, interprets this as

3. NKZ 24: 51.

a failure to recognize nothingness's active role in overcoming such limitations. Where Scheler's *Ohnmacht* remains trapped in a dialectic of lack and envy, Nishida's nothingness is the very condition for transcending ressentiment by dissolving the ego's fixation on static identities. By focusing on impotence as a pathology, Scheler overlooks how nothingness—as the field of pure experience—enables individuals to return to the creative source of value formation.

Nishida's engagement with Heidegger is more ambivalent. He acknowledges Heidegger's exploration of nothingness in *What Is Metaphysics?* but critiques his method as a "detour" through anxiety. Heidegger describes nothingness as revealed in the mood of anxiety (*Angst*), where beings as a whole slip away, leaving *Dasein* confronted with the "nothing". For Heidegger, this encounter with nothingness illuminates being's fundamental questionability, prompting a return to authenticity.

Nishida rejects this circular trajectory, arguing that Heidegger "descends from the world of being, alights on the field of anxiety, and proceeds down towards nothingness" only to "return to the surface again". This critique hinges on two points:

1. Temporal vs. Spatial Orientation: Heidegger's nothingness remains tied to temporality as the horizon for being's meaning. Nishida, conversely, locates nothingness in the *basho*–a spatial-metaphysical field where being and non-being coexist without opposition.

2. Anxiety as a Limited Portal: By privileging anxiety, Heidegger confines nothingness to a mood that disrupts everydayness. For Nishida, nothingness is not a disruptive void but the ever-present context of "true existence" (真の存在), accessible through direct intuition rather than affective states.

Nishida thus accuses Heidegger of objectifying nothingness as a tool for existential analysis rather than recognizing it as the immanent ground of reality itself.

For Nishida, nothingness is not a negation of being but the 'groundless ground' from which all determinate realities emerge. Unlike Western metaphysical traditions that privilege "being" as the ultimate category, Nishida's 絶対無, "absolute nothingness," serves as the existential and epistemological foundation for consciousness, objects, and historical processes. This nothingness transcends the binary of being/non-being, instead functioning as

a dynamic field (*basho*) that allows phenomena to self-determine through mutual negation and affirmation.

Nishida distinguishes his view from nihilistic conceptions by emphasizing nothingness's creative potency. He writes that nothingness "possesses the element of power" and "pulsates within the field of our experience". This aligns with his earlier notion of pure experience—a pre-reflective state prior to subject-object divisions–where reality manifests as an undifferentiated unity. By the 1930s, Nishida expanded this idea into a "logic of place" (場所の論理), positioning nothingness as the ultimate context enabling all relational determinations.

Working out a logic of place enhances and supports the experiential roots of his philosophical engagement. Referring to the Asian tradition and alluding to the Buddhist scriptures can then be seen as a symbolic form that moves between logic and experience and enriches both sides in a dialectical way.[4]

*Resources for ample inter-locutions*

The 1929 Davos debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger centered on divergent interpretations of Kantian philosophy, human finitude, and the role of culture. Cassirer emphasized the mediating power of symbolic forms (e.g., language, myth, science) as expressions of human freedom and cultural progress, while Heidegger stressed the primacy of existential finitude and the ontological question of Being. As many of the contributors to our book amply show, Japanese philosophers, particularly Nishida Kitarō and members of the Kyoto School, offer alternatives that transcend this binary by integrating Eastern philosophical insights with Western thought.

In short, we dare say that Japanese philosophers offer a third way beyond Cassirer's cultural optimism and Heidegger's existential pessimism. By grounding human experience in non-dual nothingness, dialectical historicity, and embodied praxis, they reconfigure the central themes of the Davos debate. Their intercultural approach challenge Eurocentric metaphysics by emphasizing relationality, creativity, and the transformative potential of technology. They thus offer a holistic framework that bridges symbolic mediation and existential finitude.

However, they also challenge the dualism of nature and culture and thus

4. Cf. Müller, 2023.

present us with the task of navigating between the naïve exoticisation of non-European thinkers as the Other and their politically charged rejection based on premature and judgmental conclusions.

## Adjusting perspectives: a reply to jens heise

We would like to begin by sincerely thanking Jens Heise for his thoughtful and philosophically rich response to *Kyoto in Davos*. Heise's reply most clearly lays out the overarching ambition of the anthology: to explore the philosophical question of the human being across traditions, not through the reiteration of fixed oppositions, but by attending to movements of translation, convergence, and *adjustment*. His comments allow us to clarify several key aspects of the project, especially concerning the role of Max Scheler, the status of Cassirer's "naturalism," the place of the body in his anthropology, and the relation between dualism, embodiment, and progress.

### *The role of Scheler at Davos*

Heise opens his response by stating that Heidegger and Cassirer kept a certain distance from Scheler's philosophical anthropology, and that Scheler "does not play a significant role in Davos." While this may seem accurate when looking solely at the so-called disputation that took place on March 26, 1929, it is not the case from Cassirer's side. Latest since the publication of Cassirer's *Nachlass* material related to Davos in *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte Vol. 17* (2014), we know that Scheler in fact occupied a central place in Cassirer's own framing of the Davos debate. In his three-part lecture at Davos (March 18, 19 & 25, 1929), nowadays referred to as the *Heidegger-Vorlesung*, Cassirer explicitly identifies Heidegger *and* Scheler as the two thinkers who most sharply and vividly embody the contemporary philosophical problem of anthropology:

> We organize it [anthropology as a problem of contemporary philosophy] around a systematic opposition—and at the same time, we place at the center two thinkers who perhaps embody this problem today in the sharpest and most vivid way: Scheler's and Heidegger's conception of philosophical anthropology.

> (Wir gruppieren sie [Anthropologie als Problematik der Philosophie der Gegenwart] um einen systematischen Gegensatz—und wir stellen zugleich zwei Denker in den Mittelpunkt, die die Problematik heute vielleicht am schärfsten und am lebendigsten verkörpern—Schelers und Heideggers Plan der philosophischen Anthropologie.)[5]

Moreover, Cassirer gave a fourth, largely overlooked lecture at Davos on March 27, 1929, dedicated explicitly to Scheler. This became the basis for the only publication Cassirer himself produced from the Davos material: his article "'Geist' und 'Leben' in der Philosophie der Gegenwart."[6] Here, Cassirer takes issue with the foundational premise of Scheler's anthropology: that spirit (*Geist*) is fundamentally in conflict with life. While Scheler denies any continuity from nature to spirit, arguing instead that spirit represents a *break* with natural evolution—the human as the ascetic of life, "the being that can say no"—Cassirer questions the metaphysical implications of this claim. If spirit has no causative power of its own, as Scheler maintains, how can it exercise control over life? Is this not a return to the unresolved metaphysical problems of Aristotelian dualism, including the mind-body relation and the problem of how immaterial causes operate within the natural world?

Cassirer's critique is not merely critical but constructive. He proposes a more nuanced approach in which spirit does not stand outside or above life, but constitutes itself in distinction from it—not as ascetic denial, but as formal autonomy. Spirit, in this view, gives form to life without negating it. This is the point at which Cassirer articulates his own concept of *Ausgleich*,[7] of

5. Cassirer 2014 (ECN 17), 13; our translation.

6. Cassirer 2004b.

7. Although the term *Ausgleich* plays a recurrent role in Cassirer's writings, it has not yet been systematically examined by researchers. Just two quotations will suffice to illustrate his understanding of the term. He uses it in a negative sense when reproaching Georg Simmel for the fact that life-philosophy, unfortunately, is not concerned with achieving such adjustments:

> Die tiefe Fremdheit oder Feindschaft, die zwischen dem Lebens- und Schaffensprozeß der Seele auf der einen Seite, seinen Inhalten und Erzeugnissen auf der anderen Seite besteht, duldet *keinen Ausgleich und keine Versöhnung*. (Cassirer 2007 [ECW 24], 465)

He emphasizes its positive function when explaining for instance the structure of knowledge:

> Der Bestand der ewigen Wahrheiten wird zum Mittel, im Gebiet der Veränderung selbst Fuß zu fassen. Das Veränderliche wird betrachtet, als ob es dauernd wäre, indem wir versuchen, es als Ergebnis allgemeiner theoretischer Gesetze zu verstehen. Sowenig der Unter-

philosophical adjustment: not the overcoming of difference by force or transcendence, but its transformation through form. In this light, his philosophy of culture, and especially of symbolic form, offers an alternative both to Scheler's "metaphysical" anthropology and to Heidegger's *Daseinsontologie*. As some have argued in our anthology, Cassirer's position is ultimately less metaphysical and more phenomenological than life-philosophy, because it does not treat the poles of life and spirit as ontological antagonists, but as functional differentiations within symbolic mediation. The ability of spirit to "say no" is, for Cassirer, not an external refusal of life, but an internal possibility of shaping and affirming it.

*Cassirer's minimal naturalism and the question of the body*

Heise's main objection to Endres's interpretation of Cassirer's "minimal naturalism" is that Cassirer, despite this term, does not speak much of the body—and that it thus remains unclear what the animal in *animal symbolicum* actually refers to. We would like to take this opportunity to respond by drawing on Endres's *Ernst Cassirers Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung* (2020) and Schneider's *Dynamik des Verstehens – Eine phänomenologische Untersuchung der Dynamik bildschematischer Strukturen* (2017), in which this issue is explicitly, though from different angles, addressed.

Cassirer's philosophy may indeed focus on culture, but it does not do so at the expense of nature or embodiment. The natural side of the human being, including the body, is present most significantly in Cassirer's theory of perception. As Endres's book argues, perception is the shared experiential ground between animals and humans. It is the common world-connection that unites both, even though only in humans does this connection become symbolic. In *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen III*, Cassirer writes:

> If we were to reserve the concept of 'consciousness' for designating the reflexive acts of knowledge on the one hand, and objective intuition on the other, we would risk not only casting doubt on the very possibility of animal consciousness, but also forgetting—and in a sense denying—a vast domain, indeed an entire province, of human consciousness.

schied der beiden Faktoren sich daher jemals völlig zum Verschwinden bringen läßt: so besteht doch in dem beständigen *Ausgleich, der sich von einem zum andern hin vollzieht, die gesamte Bewegung der Erkenntnis."* (Cassirer 2000 [ECW 6], 349)

> (Würden wir den Begriff des ‚Bewußtseins' für die Bezeichnung der reflexiven Akte des Wissens auf der einen Seite, für die gegenständliche Anschauung auf der anderen Seite vorbehalten, so gerieten wir damit in Gefahr, nicht nur die Möglichkeit des tierischen Bewußtseins anzuzweifeln, sondern auch ein großes Gebiet und sozusagen eine ganze Provinz des menschlichen Bewußtseins zu vergessen und zu verleugnen.)[8]

This passage makes it clear that Cassirer does not reserve experience for the rational or self-conscious subject alone. On the contrary, the pre-reflective, embodied nature of perception is a necessary condition for symbolization. It is in this sense that Cassirer's *animal symbolicum* is indeed an animal—one whose bodily relation to the world is expressive and open, not merely mechanical.

As Endres furthermore and in particular has shown throughout the discussions with John Maraldo (see their respective articles in *Kyoto in Davos*), Cassirer discusses the continuity between human and animal perception through Jakob von Uexküll's functional circle. He shows that in animals, the connection between receptor and effector systems is genetically fixed. In humans, by contrast, this link is loosened, enabling symbolic detachment, mediation, and meaning. The rupture in the organic unity of stimulus and reaction is not a metaphysical break, but a functional differentiation that allows symbolic forms to emerge. In this respect, the human body is not absent from Cassirer's philosophy—it is tacitly present as the ground from which culture arises.

Schneider's work, in turn, provides a clear answer to how the dynamics of understanding through linguistic metaphors can be grounded in physical and thus natural processes. This is achieved through an examination of the embodiment-based and psycholinguistic framework developed by Lakoff and Johnson. In this view, the living and understanding body—as part of an organismic and natural reality—forms the foundation for recurring structures of understanding across various domains of human experience, including thought, bodily interaction, sensory perception, and language.

These cross-modal structures—so-called image schemas (e.g., path schema, balance schema, force schema)—can only stabilize through ontogenetic bodily development. In humans, all mediated understanding of sym-

8. Cassirer 2002 (ECW 13), 71; our translation.

bols, as well as sensory experience, must be seen as mental-bodily activities shaped by a network of such recurring, bodily grounded image schemas. It should be emphasized from the outset that this perspective does not promote psychologistic reductionism. Rather, it aims to show that central structures of mind—though not all aspects of human culture—can be traced back to a bodily basis.

*Davos and Kyoto: Dualism, embodiment, and connection*

In his fourth section, Heise highlights embodiment and the critique of dualism as distinguishing features of the Kyoto School. These are indeed central elements in the thought of Nishida, Watsuji, and Miki. However, we would like to offer a gentle correction to what appears to be an overstated contrast with the historical Davos debate.

Both Cassirer and Heidegger were already engaged in a critical negotiation with dualism. Heidegger's rejection of Cartesian substance metaphysics and Cassirer's functional concept of form both move away from static oppositions of mind and body, spirit and nature. It was precisely because of this shared concern that we found it fruitful to stage an intercultural encounter between Davos and Kyoto in our anthology. The point was not to reinforce the "legend" of Davos—of Heidegger as the revolutionary and Cassirer as the representative of an exhausted idealism—but to move beyond this opposition by tracing convergences.

The critique of dualism and the emphasis on embodiment are not exclusively "Kyoto" themes; they are also at work in the very tensions of the Davos exchange. Heidegger's notion of *Befindlichkeit* (attunement) and his discussion of *Dasein*'s thrownness already presuppose a non-Cartesian account of embodiment. Likewise, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic expression is grounded in the expressive life of the body, especially in his analyses of myth, gesture, and perception. As we show throughout *Kyoto in Davos*, these themes are not simply opposed across cultures, but can be refracted through one another in new ways.

*Adjustment and progress: A dialectical view*

In his concluding remarks, Heise returns to the idea of adjustment (*Ausgleich*)—a concept drawn both from Scheler's philosophy of modernity and implicitly from our own volume. He poses a timely question: *are we living in*

*an era of adjustment*? Answering with "hard to say," Heise proposes that we should rather focus on the term adjustment than on that of progress.

We would like to respond by suggesting a dialectical reading: adjustment and progress should not be seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, one of the underlying theses of our anthology is that adjustment is not the opposite of progress, but its condition. Only through processes of negotiation, mediation, and reinterpretation—what Cassirer calls the functional articulation of spirit—does anything like progress become possible. The symbolic mediation of opposites is itself a dynamic principle: it allows human culture to maintain continuity through change, and unity through difference.

This dialectical understanding of *Ausgleich* is central not only to Cassirer's critique of Scheler, but also to the philosophical structure of our anthology. To think anthropology interculturally is to think adjustment as a creative form—not compromise in the weak sense, but a mode of transformation. Just as intercultural philosophy happens "in between" the dynamics of cultures, the self is not static, but always already situated *between*: between body and spirit, between tradition and innovation, between natural life and symbolic form. In this light, to "adjust" is not to halt the will to progress and to contemplate on it, but to make it possible in the first place.

Heise's reply offers a precise and generous reading of *Kyoto in Davos*. His engagement with the volume allowed us to bring forward key features that might have otherwise remained implicit: the presence of Scheler at Davos; the bodily foundation of Cassirer's anthropology; the shared critique of dualism in Heidegger and Cassirer; and the dialectical relation of adjustment and progress. In all of this, Heise not only contributes to the ongoing interpretation of the Davos debate and its legacies, but exemplifies the very philosophical gesture we hoped to promote with this anthology: the careful, critical, and open-ended practice of *Ausgleich*.

### Intercultural philosophy and basic phenomena: a reply to niels weidtmann

Niels Weidtmann's contribution to the intercultural examination of the Davos debate offers a sophisticated perspective on the transformation of the question of the human being through intercultural confrontation. His reflections emphasize the necessity of moving beyond mere philosophi-

cal comparison toward a dynamic negotiation of meaning across cultures. Central to Weidtmann's approach is his critique of Ernst Cassirer's concept of "basis phenomena," which he proposes to replace with Eugen Fink's "basic phenomena." Weidtmann argues that Cassirer's basis phenomena remain world-less and isolated, whereas a phenomenological perspective demands relational, historically mediated structures. In proposing Fink's model, which emphasizes phenomena like death, love, work, ruling, and play, Weidtmann seeks a dynamic foundation for intercultural philosophy. He further elaborates on the foundational role of world and Being, suggesting that both are not merely thematized objects but intrinsic conditions of manifestation, basic phenomena. Lastly, through Nishida's concept of pure experience and absolute nothingness, he develops the notion of "discontinuous continuity" to describe the relationship between world-character and the suspension of the world.

*Dialectical horizons: Revisiting mediation through Nishida*

Turning to a first comment regarding Francesca Greco's paper, Weidtmann asserts, and that is crucial in his comment, that Nishida actually cannot and does not mediate between Cassirer and Heidegger. However, a closer examination suggests the opposite: Nishida's idea of a world producing itself introduces a dynamic relation between finitude and infinity, and thus naturally raises the problem of dialectics and mediation. Several contributors to *Kyoto in Davos* have already explored dialectical dimensions in Cassirer, Heidegger, and Kyoto School thinkers and beyond, highlighting structural continuities that Weidtmann may underestimate. Michel Dalissier pointed out that Heidegger found dialectics philosophically unproductive because the process of negation hinders us from directly grasping Being itself.[9] Against this background, Hans Peter Liederbach argued that Kyoto School thinkers such as Tanabe Hajime, but also Kuki Shūzō, Miki Kiyoshi, and Watsuji Tetsurō, saw Heidegger's failure to overcome the Cartesian paradigm as rooted precisely in his underestimation of the dialectical entanglement of Dasein and the world.[10] Tobias Endres, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of dialectical thinking in Cassirer both in

9. Cf. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 48.
10. Cf. Ibid., 460, 465.

establishing relational thinking as functional thinking[11] and in analyzing the diremption of life and spirit[12]—an aspect that might still be relevant even to embodied thinking, as emphasized by Takushi Odagiri[13]—and to the development of spirit.[14] Lastly, there is also the dialectics of the social world, which Francesca Greco analyzes[15] and which Dennis Stromback[16] and Steve Lofts[17] develop at length as a dialectics of logos and pathos. Hence, we can say that bringing Nishida to Davos perfectly illustrates what was missing when Cassirer and Heidegger exchanged their different stances on finitude and infinity—and that their diverging attitudes could have been mediated, had they treated these issues in a more dialectical, Nishidaian manner.

*Basis phenomena reconsidered: Foundations of phenomenology*

A further concern for the editors—despite the appreciated praise in his response paper for the idea of bringing Kyoto to Davos—is Weidtmann's objection that Cassirer's basis phenomena are phenomenologically untenable due to their alleged resistance to explanation, a view he derives from a quotation in Ingmar Meland's article on basis phenomena.[18] However, this reading seems exegetically problematic, since Cassirer—not without nuance—states that the basis phenomena, here the first phenomenon, the I-phenomenon understood as pure experience, remains un*known*. Cassirer's basis phenomena do not conform to the status of knowing; they are not further explainable because they are not objects of epistemological justification. Rather, they are phenomenological foundations lying in the background of all knowledge. Rather than presenting a deficit, this renders them deeply compatible with a critical phenomenology as well as Nishida's thought. Moreover, Fink's basic phenomena, while dynamic, seem to lack an ultimate grounding themselves and coincide significantly with what Cassirer

11. Cf. Ibid., 142.
12. Cf. Ibid., 147.
13. Cf. Ibid., 440–1.
14. Cf. Ibid., 155.
15. Cf. Ibid., 200.
16. Cf. Ibid., 320.
17. Cf. Ibid., 394.
18. Cf. Ibid., 304.

elsewhere describes as originary phenomena (*Urphänomene*). Among these, Cassirer emphasizes death, life, the body-mind-relation, the person, language, time, and especially expression and expressive perception.[19] Cassirer's pursuit of basis phenomena aims at establishing a metaphysical grounding for his anthropology of the *animal symbolicum*, the human that is *capax formae*.

A closer analysis then shows that Cassirer had already anticipated Heidegger's critique from the Davos debate during his work on the *Phenomenology of Cognition* (Volume 3 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*). The concern that the *terminus a quo*—the starting point—of a philosophy of symbolization would be unclear was recognized by Cassirer himself. His engagement with philosophical anthropology and philosophy of life was framed within the broader project of a metaphysics of the symbolic, even though, in his published works, the term "metaphysics" is consistently subjected to transcendental critique and rarely made explicit. Nevertheless, the materials for such a metaphysics are present in the *Nachlass*, but also in his published writings.[20] Cassirer consistently draws on Goethe's concept of originary phenomena to anchor his philosophical approach. The originary phenomenon of expression holds a central place in the *Phenomenology of Cognition*, functioning as an attempt to ground the processes of symbolization within the structure of perceptual consciousness itself.

In his later *Nachlass* writings, Cassirer extends the concept of the originary phenomena by incorporating Rudolf Carnap's notion of a basis from *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928). He develops the idea of three basis phenomena: "I, action, and work," which form a teleological circular structure. This circularity reveals the structure of all cognition of reality, not as an external postulate but as an inner dynamic of experience. Importantly, these basis phenomena do not transcend experience; rather, they ground it from within. All this appears quite compatible with Nishida's approach. They are phenomenologically uncovered, irreducible, and resistant to skeptical doubt. Cassirer further aligns these basis phenomena terminologically with the triads of "self, other, world" and "life, other minds, objective reality". In doing so, he discloses them as the living experiential sources from which symbolic forms arise. Their structure underpins the symbolic activity through which

19. Cf. Cassirer 1995 (ecn 1), 306.
20. Cf. Endres 2025.

reality is constituted. Seen in this light, Cassirer's basis phenomena do precisely what Weidtmann wishes for: they structure the human's being-in-the-world and offer a deeper grounding than Fink's enumeration. If Fink's basic phenomena are integrated as expressions of Cassirer's originary phenomena, no contradiction arises, but Cassirer's framework provides greater systematic depth.

*Rethinking the world: From horizon to resonance*

Finally, a reflection on Weidtmann's use of the concept of world is necessary. He describes world as a "feature" of phenomena, but in phenomenological tradition, especially in Husserl, the world is better conceived as a horizon rather than a feature. A horizon conditions appearance without appearing itself as an object among others. The difference is crucial: to treat the world as a feature, risks reifying it, collapsing the open-endedness intrinsic to phenomenological experience. This view leads Weidtmann to an ontologization of the world concept, reminiscent of Heidegger's move, but ultimately regressive when compared to the dialectical potentials opened through Nishida and Cassirer. Rather than grounding experience externally in an ontologized world (and pure experience in nothingness), the relational structure between experience and world itself suffices to ground it internally. Here, the relational, dynamic mediation already achieves what metaphysics still can achieve without falling back into substance ontology and it seems sufficient to point out the "inter" in the interplay of experience and world to grasp the in-between of cultures that opens up the possibility of intercultural philosophy.

Keeping this in mind, we can now introduce the world—not as a feature of every phenomenon, and ultimately perhaps not even as a horizon. Following Weidtmann's invitation, we do not wish to content ourselves with exegetical questions, but rather "negotiate the issue at stake in the intercultural dimension." Conceiving the world as a feature, risks reifying something that is not a thing, even if this is clearly not Weidtmann's intention. The metaphor of the horizon, in turn, seems inadequate because it lacks the ability to give feedback to experience: since everything vanishes into nothing at the horizon, it cannot adequately capture the idea of being *in* the world. The relational and dialectical structure between experience and world—or even between pure experience of nothingness and the absolute nothingness, to

put it with Nishida—might best be described as a phenomenon of resonance, which we can, at least in part, derive from Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance[21]: the activities of experiencing consciousness resonate in the world, and the world resonates in consciousness. The experience–world relation resonates dynamically and dialectically, without requiring world or experience to be posited as prior substances. Yet, against Rosa's notion of resonance, which is conceived primarily for intersubjective relations, the worldly structure goes deeper: it allows for a dialectical movement between experience and world, involving opposition, obstacles, and transformation, without the need to hypothesize an absolute ground. Thus, a better form of intercultural mediation emerges: understanding the relational structure between experience and world as dynamic and self-transformative accommodates Cassirer, Nishida, and even Heidegger, while avoiding the pitfalls of static ontology. It represents a form of critical metaphysics that preserves the dynamism of symbolic and experiential life. In conclusion, the figure of the identity of world and nothingness that Weidtmann takes from Nishida does not necessarily need to be interpreted as a constitutive contradiction, as Weidtmann does, but can instead be presented exactly as the continuous, dynamic activity of relational structures that is *in discontinuity*—an endless yet broken movement, marked by experiences of resistance, transformation, and renewal.

## Despair, nothingness, and interpretation: a reply to Gregory S. Moss

We are grateful to Gregory S. Moss for his close and thought-provoking engagement with several chapters of our anthology *Kyoto in Davos*. His critical reflections, particularly on the philosophical positioning of Heidegger and Cassirer in relation to the Kyoto School, offer an opportunity to further clarify both the interpretive aims and the methodological horizon of our volume.

### *Beyond influence: Interpreting the Kyoto School between Cassirer and Heidegger*

Let us begin by addressing what we take to be a general misunderstand-

21. Cf. Rosa 2016.

ing that frames Moss's introduction. Nowhere in our volume do we claim that Cassirer is the more important philosopher than Heidegger for understanding the Kyoto School. Indeed, it is a central aim of the anthology to complicate the habitual tendency to judge the Davos encounter in terms of a philosophical "winner" or "loser." Esther O. Pedersen's contribution[22] explicitly cautions against the interpretive framing that casts Heidegger as the triumphant figure in Davos. As editors, our goal is not to invert this narrative by casting Cassirer in Heidegger's role, but to open new comparative and intercultural pathways by reconfiguring the questions posed at Davos in light of Kyoto School thought.

This is particularly important in view of what Ralf Müller identifies in his introduction as a pervasive "Japan and Heidegger bias" in twentieth-century philosophy.[23] That bias often presents Heidegger as the more "natural" interlocutor for Japanese philosophy. However, this impression requires correction—not only because Cassirer, like Heidegger, had Japanese doctoral students prior to World War II and corresponded with Japanese thinkers, but also because his forced exile severely limited his influence on postwar philosophical reception in Europe, Japan, and even in the United States, where he died shortly before the end of the war. More importantly, Cassirer and Heidegger share a number of philosophical concerns and conceptual affinities that are too often neglected.[24] One of them, as Tatsuya Higaki's chapter suggests, is the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), which serves as a pivotal notion in both Kyoto School philosophy and post-Kantian European thought.

This brings us directly to Moss's engagement with Higaki's chapter on Tanabe and Miki. Moss suggests that Higaki too easily associates Tanabe with Cassirer, particularly in claiming that both Tanabe and Miki "lean toward Cassirer as opposed to Heidegger."[25] Yet this claim is neither simplistic nor unsupported. Higaki's interpretation, while nuanced, rests on a specific philosophical and textual analysis of how Tanabe and Miki engage the Kantian notion of *Einbildungskraft* in ways that resonate more closely with

22. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 71–91.
23. Ibid., 8–16.
24. Cf. Endres 2021a, 299; cf. Endres 2021b, 309.
25. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 361.

Cassirer's symbolic theory than with Heidegger's radical ontologization of the imagination. Their interpretations are, in this regard, more 'Kantian' in spirit and resist the metaphysical transformation Heidegger imposes on the notion. Higaki is careful to stress that such philosophical resonances do not imply direct influence or greater importance, but rather help to uncover overlooked dimensions of Kyoto School thought when viewed through a broader lens.

This broader hermeneutic lens also helps respond to Moss's philologically framed objection that "Cassirer is never mentioned" in *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1945), while Heidegger is. It is important to underscore that our volume is not driven by citation analysis or a positivist tallying of references. It operates instead within a reflective framework that deliberately opens with a counter-factual question: What if the Kyoto School had been present in Davos? The spirit of this question is interpretive and philosophical rather than historical or documentary. The absence of Cassirer's name in Tanabe's texts is therefore not an argument against drawing constructive or critical connections—just as Heidegger's frequent appearance is not in itself proof of philosophical proximity.

In fact, Higaki addresses this very issue directly. He notes that while Kyoto School thinkers "paid tribute to some extent to Heidegger's interpretation in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*,"[26] they did not follow him into his ontology but rather tried "to escape his powerful magnetism in their own unique ways."[27] What enabled this, according to Higaki, was the strong Neo-Kantian foundation within the Kyoto School—especially derived from Nishida—which allowed figures like Tanabe and Miki to engage Heidegger critically and to develop distinct trajectories. This is not a matter of historical detail alone: it is a key philosophical positioning. While Tanabe, for example, certainly draws on Heidegger in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, he also explicitly critiques Heidegger's reading of Kant already in *The Logic of Species and the World Schema* (1935). His project to articulate a *Welt-Schema*, as opposed to Heidegger's *Zeit-Schema*, and his emphasis on imagination and schematism, demonstrates a clear effort to move beyond

26. Ibid., 361.
27. Ibid., 361.

Heidegger along a path marked by Kantian and post-Kantian (including Cassirerian) concerns.

Moss is right to point out the significance of Hegel's influence on Tanabe. But again, Higaki does not deny this. Rather, he highlights how that influence is mediated and transformed by engagements with other traditions, including Bergson and the Neo-Kantian reception of Kant. Tanabe's use of the term "dialectic," like Nishida's, diverges from Hegelian logic in important ways. It encompasses a broader cultural and existential function, especially in Tanabe's later works, where dialectic becomes inseparable from notions of conversion (*metanoia*) and absolute nothingness. Even the term "nothingness," as used by Tanabe, may owe more to Nishida's unique transformation of the concept—as tied to "place" and the "eternal now"—than to Heidegger's ontological vocabulary.

Finally, with regard to the criticism that Higaki fails to elaborate Bergson's influence on Tanabe: we would like to point out that Tanabe references Bergson repeatedly in *The Logic of Social Being* (1934), one of the earliest articulations of the logic of species. While Tanabe criticizes the immediate continuity of life philosophy, a key feature of Bergson's thought, this critique serves as the starting point for Tanabe's own dialectical project. The notion of a "vital species" is itself a transformation of Bergsonian vocabulary. Moreover, Tanabe's engagement with *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) shows his awareness of Bergson's attempt to reconceive society from a vitalist standpoint—a concern that remains integral to Tanabe's logic of species and its emphasis on historical-spatial mediation.

In short, we believe that Higaki's reading is philosophically grounded and textually supported. It neither diminishes Heidegger's influence nor simplistically privileges Cassirer, but rather opens a space in which Kyoto School thought can be interpreted through multiple philosophical trajectories—some of which resonate more strongly with symbolic and Neo-Kantian frameworks than with Heidegger's existential ontology.

### *Responding to despair: Contextualizing intellectual honesty and metaphysical commitments*

We would also like to offer a brief response to Gregory Moss's remarks on Sebastian Hüsch's contribution, "From Despair to Authentic Existence." Moss raises four critical points.

1. He questions the choice of Søren Kierkegaard as a central figure for the discussion of despair, arguing that Kierkegaard's Protestantism reflects too narrow a version of Christianity other.
2. He suggests that Hüsch does not provide clear criteria for evaluating the intellectual honesty of a theistic versus a non-theistic position, and questions why one should be preferred over the other.
3. He sees a contradiction in the claim that Nishitani's approach to despair does not rely on strong metaphysical assertions, while simultaneously presenting a number of such assertions in *Religion and Nothingness*.
4. He claims that Nishitani could easily be substituted with Dōgen, since Nishitani is said to simply follow the logic of Zen.

We appreciate the spirit of engagement in Moss's response. At the same time, we must note that none of the four points engages directly with the actual subject of Hüsch's article—namely, the concept of despair itself. Moss structures his critique around broader philosophical or theological considerations, often detached from the internal logic and central theses of Hüsch's analysis. While these observations may enrich the debate as additional commentary, they do not engage the core argumentative focus of the article.

Regarding point (1): Moss begins with the critique that Kierkegaard's Protestantism is too limited a frame to properly assess the question of despair. He introduces instead the mystical theology of the medieval Catholic thinker Meister Eckhart via a lengthy quotation from *Religion and Nothingness*, thereby redirecting the discussion to the cosmopolitan scope of Nishitani's philosophy. This shift appears rather abrupt and, crucially, does not directly engage the issue of despair as Hüsch formulates it. Hüsch never denies that Nishitani's thinking is shaped by a wide range of intercultural influences—including Buddhist, Christian, and Western philosophical traditions. Thus, Moss's emphasis on the cosmopolitan character of *Religion and Nothingness* does not contradict Hüsch's analysis in any way. More importantly, the transition from Kierkegaard's Protestantism to Catholic mysticism in Moss's reply remains underdeveloped and might have benefitted from a more rigorous conceptual link.

There would, in fact, have been a productive opportunity here for Moss to deepen the discussion on despair by tracing a more substantive line of argument. For instance, he might have drawn a connection between Eckhart's "imageless" conception of God and Nishitani's abyss of nihility, or between the soul's ground (*Seelengrund*) in Eckhart and the existential dimension of nothingness in Nishitani. Such a comparison could have opened fruitful dialogue with Tugendhat's notion of "peace of mind" (*Seelenfrieden*). Unfortunately, Moss does not pursue this line of argument.

Regarding point (2) and the question of intellectual honesty, it is important to note that Hüsch draws this concept not from Kierkegaard or Nishitani, but from Ernst Tugendhat. Tugendhat thus enters the discussion as a third, mediating figure. While Tugendhat's understanding of intellectual honesty is indeed critical of religion in a narrow sense, Hüsch shows that a broader interpretation of religiosity remains possible within that framework. The central question, then, is not whether a theistic or nontheistic form of transcendence provides a superior solution to despair, but rather how different frameworks cope with the human experience of contingency. In this context, both Kierkegaard and Nishitani offer complementary insights. Intellectual honesty, as Tugendhat conceives it, may lead to a rejection of traditional religious belief—but it also opens a path to alternative forms of existential authenticity. Hüsch's exploration of this path is not inconsistent with either Kierkegaard's or Nishitani's thought, but seeks to put them in dialogue through a shared concern with how individuals confront and respond to the unbearable openness of contingency.

Points (3) and (4) can be addressed together. It is certainly true that *Religion and Nothingness* includes many statements that could be interpreted as metaphysical in nature—if metaphysics is understood as a system that posits determinate claims about reality independent of subjective experience. However, this observation does not bear directly on the question Hüsch's article aims to address: how despair is to be understood and overcome. In tackling that issue, Nishitani draws upon diverse sources, including Zen, but also existential ontology—particularly as shaped by Heidegger's concept of authenticity. Hüsch demonstrates (p. 375) that Nishitani's engagement with Heidegger's distinction between *Eigentlichkeit* and *Uneigentlichkeit* plays a decisive role in articulating an authentic relation to one's finitude. This line of thinking clearly resonates with Kierkegaard's conception of individual

responsibility and the demand for a meaningful life—an influence that deeply informed Heidegger himself.

For these reasons, Moss's claim that Nishitani could simply be replaced by Dōgen, yielding the same result, misses the mark. While Zen plays a crucial role in Nishitani's thought, the synthesis Hüsch examines—combining Heideggerian ontology, Kierkegaardian responsibility, and Zen Buddhist insight—cannot be reduced to any one of these sources. The complexity of Nishitani's response to despair arises precisely from this web of intercultural and inter-philosophical influences, and it is this constellation that Hüsch's article seeks to explore.

While we may differ on certain interpretive points, we deeply value Moss's critical engagement, which—true to the spirit of world philosophy that animates both the Kyoto School and our volume—helps carry the conversation forward across traditions, perspectives, and horizons.

## Historical materialism and the symbolic: a reply to Raji C. Steineck

We are grateful to Raji C. Steineck for his thoughtful and stimulating intervention, which opens up the possibility of reading the Davos encounter—and our anthology on its intercultural extension—not just through the lens of intercultural philosophy, but through the materialist critique of idealism and ideology. His proposal to revisit the legacy of historical materialism in this context does valuable critical work.

In response, we wish to restate why we ascribe central importance to Ernst Cassirer's philosophy as a bridge between classical Neo-Kantianism, modern philosophy of language, and a humanistic philosophy of culture. Against materialist reductionism, we follow Habermas, who highlights Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as an innovative development of Kant's transcendental philosophy: Cassirer transforms Kant's theory of knowledge by understanding symbolic mediation—especially through language, myth, art, and science—as constitutive for human understanding of the world.

Steineck's intervention also creates an opportunity to correct two common misconceptions about Ernst Cassirer: first, that his philosophical idealism amounts to a Platonism of timeless essences rather than to a "fac-

ticity-dependent Platonism"[28]; and second, that he never seriously engaged with Marxism or historical materialism. We begin with the latter and then—in a last step—comment on the general restrictions Steineck sees in bringing Kyoto to Davos.

*Bringing historical materialism to Cassirer*

It is true that a cursory reading of Cassirer's late works, particularly *An Essay on Man* (1944) and *The Myth of the State* (1946), may leave the impression that Cassirer saw little philosophical value in Marx. Famously, in the opening chapter of *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer criticizes Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud alike for reducing human life to a single "master-faculty" and for a wrong understanding of empiricism in which supposedly brute facts are constructed in order to match with the theoretical schema. He writes: "Each individual thinker gives us his own picture of human nature. All these philosophers are determined empiricists: they would show us the facts and nothing but the facts. But their interpretation of the empirical evidence contains from the very outset an arbitrary assumption.... Nietzsche proclaims the will to power, Freud signalizes the sexual instinct, Marx enthrones the economic instinct. Each theory becomes a Procrustean bed on which the empirical facts are stretched to fit a preconceived pattern."[29]

Similarly, *The Myth of the State* contains a passage in which Cassirer distances himself from the dialectical materialist reception of Hegel, emphasizing that Hegel "would surely have rejected most of the consequences drawn from the premises of his political theory"[30] by Marx and Lenin.

What such readings could not have taken into account, however, is that Cassirer's engagement with Marx and historical materialism was more substantial than these brief remarks imply. In his Yale seminar on Hegel from 1941/2, Cassirer dedicated an entire session to Marx. He considered the possibility of a Hegelian Left and Right of philosophically indicative and made it a priority to explain how Hegel's philosophy could give rise to such fundamentally divergent posthumous interpretations. While the content of that

28. Hogrebe 2006, 235; our translation.
29. Cassirer 2006 (ecw 23), 26.
30. Cassirer 2007 (ecw 25), 248.

session is unfortunately lost,[31] the gesture alone indicates that Cassirer did not treat Marx as marginal to the history of philosophy, but as a thinker whose relation to Hegel—and to the problems of modernity—demanded serious philosophical attention.

More concrete traces of Cassirer's engagement with Marx can be found in his 1930 essay *Form and Technology* and in his 1932 encyclopedia entry on *Kant* in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. In the former, Cassirer explicitly invokes Marx's notion of the 'emancipation of the organic barrier' and diagnoses the social costs of modern capitalist industrialization with striking clarity. He speaks of "completely soulless and mechanized labor,"[32] of "unrestrained ambition and meaningless consumerism,"[33] and of a cultural condition marked by "a never-ending vertigo that moves from desire to consumption, from consumption to desire."[34] These are not idealist abstractions—they are social realities that a Marxist analysis would recognize.

Although he prefers to cite Walther Rathenau rather than Marx, Cassirer clearly articulates problems central to Marxist critique. Furthermore, in his encyclopedia article on Kant, he identifies the 'social question' as a manifestation of Kantian ethics and aligns himself with "non-Marxian socialist thinkers,"[35] following the Marburg School's concept of 'social idealism.'

We may therefore conclude that Cassirer's critique of Marx targets the deterministic and mechanistic underpinnings of historical materialism rather than its social concerns. This opens a path to respond to Steineck's wise reminder that symbolic forms require material reproduction and are conditioned by finite resources. Yet this insight does not undermine Cassirer's inquiry into the internal development of symbolic forms. For Cassirer, such development is contingent, vulnerable to regression, and far from teleological. Still, it is oriented toward an expansion of freedom through increasing symbolic mediation and detachment from immediate material constraint.

Steineck's call to bring historical materialism into the conversation is

31. Cassirer 2013 (ECN 16), 214.
32. Cassirer 2014 (ECW 17), 313.
33. Ibid. (ECW 17), 314.
34. Ibid., (ECW 17), 314.
35. Ibid. (ECW 18), 448.

welcome and urgent. Yet it remains a task for philosophy to think through these limits without collapsing the symbolic into the material—just as it is a task for historical materialism to resist becoming a new "Procrustean bed" for the critique of culture.

*On deduction, symbolicity, and materiality*

One of the most original and thought-provoking aspects of Raji C. Steineck's reply lies in his "internal critique" of Cassirer's "deduction" of the symbol. Steineck accuses Cassirer of failing to draw the consequences of his deduction of the concept of the symbol in the introduction to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. At its core, this accusation suggests that the contents of symbolic worlds cannot be conceived independently of their conditions of production. Steineck traces this deficiency to what he sees as an improperly executed deduction on Cassirer's part—one that merely distinguishes between form and content in a methodological sense, without reflecting on the material dependence of content upon form. Put succinctly, Steineck charges Cassirer with reducing the problem of the materiality of symbols to a purely semantic issue—that is, to a problem concerning the meaning of symbols alone.

Let us examine this more closely. In the fourth part of the introduction to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer states that he had previously undertaken "a kind of epistemo-critical 'deduction'; a grounding and justification of the concept of representation."[36] We agree with Steineck that "representation" in this context also designates the "symbol": symbols allow for "the presentation of one content in and through another,"[37] which ultimately entails that no specific presence in consciousness is possible without representation. However, it is precisely at this juncture that our interpretation diverges from Steineck's. He appears to read Cassirer as claiming that no representation is possible without presence: that is, that a thought must first be actualized in practice in order to exist; that a Large Hadron Collider, for instance, must be physically constructed, operated, and maintained before the thought of the Higgs particle can gen-

36. Cassirer 2001/2021 (ECW 11), 38/39; Lofts translation.
37. Ibid. (ECW 11), 38/39; Lofts translation.

uinely arise. What follows aims to demonstrate that, for good reasons, this is not Cassirer's position.

In the aforementioned "deduction," Cassirer argues that individual contents of consciousness cannot be individuated as such unless the whole of consciousness is posited alongside them. "We see, then, that to characterize a determinate form of relation in its concrete application and signification, not only is the description of its qualitative constitution as such required but so is an indication of the complete system in which it stands."[38] The more precisely one seeks to articulate a given thought, the more essential it becomes to reflect upon the broader context in which that thought is situated. And it is from this idea that the central problem facing the philosophy of symbolic forms arises: how can the unity of spirit be preserved in a world where the totality of our understanding has become so differentiated that we confront a multiplicity of valid modes of knowledge—modes that are neither reducible to one another, nor translatable into one another, and that in part even contradict one another? "The result is an extraordinary manifold of form-relationships, whose richness and inner entanglements, however, can be surveyed only through a rigorous analysis of each individual total-form."[39] It seems to us that Steineck misinterprets Cassirer's hypothesis—"It belongs to the nature of consciousness itself that no content can be posited in it without, through this simple act of positing, a total complex of other content being already co-posited"[40]—as if Cassirer were claiming that the meaning of a content is constituted solely on an ideal basis.

Cassirer's deduction involves more than an analogy between the referential character of thought and that of symbols, as Steineck maintains. What it in fact asserts is this: if we separate the content and form of knowledge so as to refer to "pure facts"—whether the immediate data of consciousness or the material substrates of symbolic production—then such facts degenerate into abstractions. Contrary to the intention, they end up signifying ideality rather than reality:

> What began as the 'all of reality,' as what should be understood as the ensemble of all reality, proves ultimately to be something that is still only a

38. Ibid. (ECW 11), 28/29; Lofts translation.
39. Ibid. (ECW 11), 28/29; Lofts translation.
40.Ibid. (ECW 11), 29/29; Lofts translation.

> moment of sheer determinability but contains in itself nothing more than an independent and positive determination.[41]

The deduction thus leads to a crucial conclusion: there is no presence that is not always already embedded in a system of representations.

From Cassirer's central hypothesis—that the contents of consciousness are inextricable from their relation to the whole of consciousness—a consequence follows for any materialist philosophy, including historical materialism: we cannot speak of "facts" that speak for themselves independently of the symbolic or conceptual frameworks in which they acquire meaning. This implies, for instance, that the material production conditions enabling knowledge through an instrument like the Large Hadron Collider say nothing in themselves about the validity of the knowledge thereby gained (or not gained). What we face here is a zone of potential category errors.

## Bringing Kyoto to Davos

To conclude our reply, we wish to clarify a number of potential misunderstandings and respond to several critical reservations articulated by Steineck. His general critique engages with several conceptual axes that are central to our anthology, in particular the issues of (European and Japanese) imperialism, the scope of interculturality, and the claim that even Cassirer cannot be exempted from the charge of reproducing Eurocentric narratives. To begin with, Steineck's concern that the anthology insufficiently integrates the material conditions underpinning symbolic formations finds an important precedent in the contributions of Fernando Wirtz and Dennis Stromback. Wirtz explicitly connects Cassirer's symbolic theory with historical materialist considerations, and Stromback advances this discussion by examining Miki Kiyoshi's complex engagement with both Marxism and religiosity. Stromback's treatment of humanism and philosophical anthropology emphasizes that freedom must be understood as something achieved through cultural and intellectual activity[42]—activity that, crucially, is always mediated symbolically and, in our view, interculturally. Wirtz similarly elaborates on the emergence of a new, emancipated concept of human-

41. Ibid., (ECW 11), 29/30; Lofts translation.

42. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 323.

ity, grounded in Miki's synthesis of Eastern humanism and Marx's critique of class structures. We believe that these contributions already anticipate and partially satisfy the kinds of material and intercultural sensitivity that Steineck rightly calls for.

However, we would like to address two broader limitations Steineck attributes to our volume. The first concerns the imperialist backdrop of the thinkers involved: Cassirer and Heidegger, representing German thought, and the Kyoto School, emerging from imperial Japan. While these historical-political affiliations are factually correct, we see a misunderstanding in using them as a primary lens through which to read the philosophical positions presented. Our aim was not to historicize or reduce these figures to their political-national affiliations, but rather to examine how their philosophies approach the question of the human—Cassirer through symbolic mediation, Heidegger through existential analysis. These are, at their core, philosophical positions. Likewise, the Kyoto School thinkers—Nishida, Tanabe, Miki, and Nishitani—are engaged with fundamental philosophical problems whose internal conceptual architecture we aimed to explore, without presupposing a reductive national-historical causal frame.

This does not mean we deny the relevance of imperial contexts. But we do not believe that a philosophical anthropology must be abandoned—or even significantly altered—merely because its authors lived in imperial nations. The contributions in our volume reflect deeply on human self-understanding across traditions and do so, we argue, with sufficient reflexivity regarding cultural situatedness. To insist that every philosophical exchange be primarily interpreted in light of imperial structures risks eclipsing the philosophical questions themselves. At the same time, we acknowledge that the history of philosophy cannot be disentangled from power relations, and we welcome continued reflection on how Eurocentric assumptions persist within such traditions. This topic, we believe, is taken up in a number of essays in the volume, even if it was not always foregrounded in the terms Steineck prefers.

Steineck's second restriction concerns the selection of Japanese thinkers: why only the Kyoto School? Why not a broader or more varied representation? We fully agree that these are legitimate questions. Indeed, our anthology was never intended as a final word but as a contribution to a larger, open-ended intercultural project. Our focus on the Kyoto School was both

philosophical and pragmatic. Philosophically, the Kyoto School's engagement with German thought—especially Neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, and German idealism—makes it a particularly relevant interlocutor for Cassirer and Heidegger. Pragmatically, limiting our scope allowed us to stage a more focused and structured dialogue. As such, the anthology operates counterfactually, imagining a richer "Davos" encounter through the lens of Kyoto School philosophy.

We welcome, and indeed invite, the expansion of this project in precisely the directions Steineck suggests—toward figures like Saigusa Hiroto, Karl Korsch, and Richard Hönigswald. These names point to fertile avenues for future comparative and intercultural exploration. Our project is best understood as a beginning rather than a closure.

Nonetheless, we would like to offer a further clarification concerning Steineck's emphasis on historical materialism, media technology, and social practice. Steineck's synthesis of historical materialism, symbolic mediation, and social practice is both valid and productive. But we would caution against pushing this synthesis into a reductionist materialism. If his position implies that symbolic innovation can be entirely explained by material conditions alone, then we must object. Even in traditions such as Gilbert Simondon or Bernard Stiegler, where technological innovation is deeply situated within a milieu, room is left for forms of creativity and invention that are not derivable from a single causal chain. Watsuji Tetsurō's concept of *fūdo* 風土 ("climatic-geographical milieu") likewise shows how environmental structures shape but do not determine symbolic forms.

Here we find a fruitful middle path—one exemplified by Oswald Schwemmer, who interprets Cassirer as a philosopher of media without neglecting his role as an innovator in the history of ideas.[43] Schwemmer has also shown how productive eclectic engagement can be, provided it is guided by a concrete phenomenon and a genuine task of thought. While critique rightly takes precedence over naïveté, a purely critical stance risks dismissing fruitful ideas and encounters.

In this sense, we advocate for a conception of symbolic activity that preserves a space for intellectual freedom and invention, even as it remains mediated by historical and material conditions. This intellectual freedom,

43. Schwemmer 2005.

exercised within and through technical media, is what we take to be a meaningful form of humanism—one that narrates a history of spirit without reducing it to idealism. Such a view includes not only material, social, and climatic structures but also the human capacity to reshape and reinterpret them. Scientific practices themselves—manifest in writing, diagrams, signs, and images—are exemplary instances of this dual character: they are materially mediated, yet they give form to genuinely new insights and values.

To return to Kyōto, the opposition between Steineck and Nishida points to fundamental differences in their understanding of philosophy: whereas Steineck adheres to a critical-analytical methodology that tests philosophical systems for logical consistency, Nishida emphasizes the need for the ongoing reconfiguration of concepts within the medium of intercultural translation. Whether these positions are ultimately irreconcilable or offer complementary perspectives remains an open question for further research.

For us—as well as for recent readers such as John Krummel and Michel Dalissier—Nishida's work provides rich resources for reading Steineck's objections not as a refutation, but as an impetus to further develop his ontologic of nothingness.

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*Abbreviations*

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