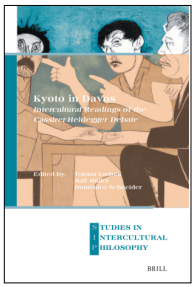
Book Symposium

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



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"Anthropological Perspectives on Davos and Kyoto with an Eye on Max Scheler," Jens Heise *360*

"Intercultural Philosophy and the Mirroring of Basic Phenomena: Some Remarks on the Second Chapter of *Kyoto in Davos*," Niels Weidtmann *370*

"Facing Nothingness with the Kyoto School," Gregory S. Moss *381*

"Bringing Historical Materialism to Davos (and Kyoto)," Raji C. Steineck *394*

"Understanding Dissent: Replies to the Commentaries on Kyoto in Davos" Tobias Endres, Ralf Müller, Domenico Schneider 407

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Niels Weidtmann

Intercultural Philosophy and the Mirroring of Basic Phenomena
Some Remarks on the Second Chapter of Kyoto in Davos

The idea of confronting the Davos debate between Cassirer and Heidegger with the philosophy of the Kyoto School is convincing for several reasons. Not only does it reveal some limitations of the debate that have so far remained unseen in the extensive discussion of it, but it sheds light on Kant's question, "What is the human?" from an intercultural perspective. However, just like Cassirer and Heidegger did not stay with Kant exegesis, but developed their own thinking starting off from Kant, so the intercultural reflection of the debate must not stop at exegesis either, i.e. it must not be content with a comparison of philosophies but must itself negotiate the issue at stake in the intercultural dimension. What is decisive is not how different philosophies answer the question of the human being, but what it means for the question of the human being that it is answered differently interculturally, how it changes as a result and possibly receives answers that none of the philosophies could have given for themselves.

Using the philosophy of the Kyoto School for this intercultural discussion makes sense for historical reasons in the first place. Both Cassirer and Heidegger had students from Japan, and both were influential in the development of the philosophy of the Kyoto School; although this is somewhat more obvious in Heidegger's case,[1] Cassirer was also important through his connection to Neo-Kantianism. In terms of content, the choice of the philosophy of the Kyoto School as a discussion partner for Davos is particularly exciting, because Kyoto school philosophy deals with the question of the human being in a dimension that, as with Cassirer and Heidegger, goes far beyond anthropocentric approaches. Moreover, it brings a new perspective into play by consistently thinking of the human in terms of the *in-between*

1. As early as 1924, Tanabe Hajime reported on the "new turn" that Heidegger was pursuing in phenomenology.

and even, as Nishida explicitly says, as an element of the world shaping itself.[2] Incidentally, it is striking that the authors of the second part of *Kyoto in Davos* on which I comment in more detail, except for Dennis Stromback, who discusses Nishitani and Miki, all refer to Nishida, but not to Tanabe, Watsuji, Nishitani, Miki and others.

In the following I will first discuss the papers of the second part of the book and then come back to the question of how bringing the philosophy of Kyoto school into the Davos discussion changes our understanding of the human being.

I

Francesca Greco considers how Nishida's word of the "contradictory self-identity" could help to mediate the debate, both in its confrontational form and in its philosophical positions. However, comparing the debate with the model of medieval disputations threatens to obscure rather than illuminate the situation. The medieval *disputatio* is only possible because of a shared ontological framework. But that is missing in the Davos debate not only because Heidegger poses the question of "Being" and ultimately also accuses Cassirer of forgetting Being but just as much because Cassirer is arguing for a functional understanding of ontology. In philosophical terms, mediation is sought on the question of the relationship between finitude and infinity in relation to human beings. With Kant, Cassirer sees a realm of moral and rational action that transcends human finitude. Heidegger, on the other hand, emphasizes human's inescapable finitude, which the human cannot transcend; on the contrary, even infinite Being exists in the finitude of *Dasein* alone. Regarding this philosophical difference between Cassirer and Heidegger, Greco also suggests using Nishida as a mediator as Nishida, in the concept of contradictory self-identity, does not think of finitude and infinity as separate from each other, but rather as intertwined. Even though I do not believe that Nishida's philosophy is capable of reconciling Cassirer and Heidegger on this point, Nishida provides an answer to the question of the relationship between finitude and infinity that goes beyond that of the two opponents in Davos. Greco

2. Cf. NMT 11.

nicely shows that Nishida thinks of the world as producing itself, in such a way that it remains what it is precisely because it transcends and transforms itself. This idea, however, does not mediate between Cassirer's and Heidegger's conceptions; rather, it is able to draw attention to truncations and ambiguities in both.

Based on Kant's philosophy of mathematics, Rossella Lupacchini examines the significance of mathematics for Cassirer and Nishida starting with the reception of Cusanian philosophy. Cassirer recognizes Cusanus as a forerunner of modernity, who attempts to describe the infinity of God through mathematical thought experiments. In fact, the functional structure of symbolic forms is already laid down in Cusanus' relational thinking. Nishida, on the other hand, takes up the aspect of nothingness, which is encountered in Cusanus' notion of God as "non aliud." Also, both Cassirer and Nishida refer to Dedekind and his definition of real numbers. The relationship between rational and irrational numbers corresponds to the difference between discrete units and the number continuum; this is, on the one hand, a further confirmation of relational thinking, in which relata cannot be thought of in isolation from the relations in which they stand to other relata, and, on the other hand, an indication of the contradictory self-identity of all reality. The full consequences of relational thinking and the concept of function are finally taken up in the theory of relativity. In it, space and time are no longer presupposed as underlying unitary forms, but are transformed into the force field of space-time, which itself changes with the events taking place in it. This corresponds to Nishida's logic of place. "Basho" (place) is the field in which the self and the world belong together without it having its own existence. Lupacchini's remarks are very interesting and indicate a decisive commonality in the thinking not only of Cassirer and Nishida, but also Heidegger, whom Lupacchini herself does not mention. All three thinkers turn against substantialist thinking. This would also be the point at which Cassirer and Heidegger could be brought into further dialogue with each other; above all, however, the attempt to break up rigid ontological thinking makes it clear how important intercultural exchange is for philosophy today. Without the experience of "absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu*), of which Nishida speaks, the ontological thinking will repeatedly fall into the trap of self-absolutization.

In his contribution, John W. M. Krummel shows how both Heidegger

and Nishida are influenced by Emil Lask. Lask belongs to the school of Neo-Kantianism and plays an important role in the transition from Kant to Husserl's phenomenology. Krummel makes this clear above all by the fact that Lask opposes anchoring the categories (transcendental concepts of understanding) in the transcendental subject and instead describes them as belonging to the objects in the world. They are form-giving and thus represent, as they were, structures in the world. They themselves can be objectified under categories of a higher order, so that Lask posits a dimensional order of categories, the highest of which he describes simply as "validity." Both Heidegger and Nishida find important inspiration in Lask's considerations. The categories belonging to the world represent, as it were, the structures in which the human sees herself placed and from which things in the world gain meaning for her. However, while Heidegger criticizes the one-sided focus on the world and corrects it in the structure of "being-in-the-world," Nishida emphasizes that the form-giving categorical dimensions are based in themselves and do not owe their meaning to pure validity as the category of all categories.

Tak-Lap Yeung's contribution is an exciting extension of the intercultural exchange between Davos and Kyoto. He compares Nishida's reception of Kant with that of Mou Zongsan, who translated Kant's critiques into Chinese and worked on a connection between Chinese and Kantian thought. While Yeung sees a close connection between Nishida and Heidegger regarding their criticism of Kant's dualism of finite knowledge and infinite freedom, he brings Cassirer and Mou Zongsan together on the other side. Both adhere to the dualistic structure but, unlike Kant, do not relegate human participation in the infinite to the realm of pure reason, which is separate from experience, but see it realized in the structure of symbolic forms and the possibility of infinite wisdom of the "heart-mind," which encompasses both finite and infinite perspectives, respectively. Mou sees this as a way of correcting the naturalistic thinking of Western modernity without having to give up Kant's critical demonstration of the limits of human experience. Mou shares Nishida's view that intellectual contemplation is a real possibility. While Mou distinguishes infinite wisdom from finite knowledge and describes both as aspects of the heart-mind, Nishida sees intellectual perception as an underlying dimension from which finite

knowledge first emerges through conscious reflection and the associated separation of consciousness and the world.

Ingmar Meland develops his arguments mainly from the lectures Cassirer gave in Davos besides the dispute with Heidegger. Following the structure of *Being and Time*, Cassirer in these lectures first critically addresses the question of space and spatiality, then the question of language and speech, and finally the meaning of death. In the fourth lecture, Cassirer concludes his argument and interprets space, language, and death as belonging to the sphere of the spirit, which he understands, following Scheler, as the characteristic dimension of the human being. These considerations also play a role in Cassirer's dispute with Heidegger, especially in the question of the relationship between finitude and infinity. While Heidegger accuses Cassirer of blocking the way of *Dasein* to itself through the symbolic forms that create culture, Cassirer assumes a residue of substantiality in Heidegger's concept of Being and, in contrast, brings the pure functionality of symbolic forms into play. In them the human finds objectivity, or, as Cassirer himself puts it more pointedly, the symbolic forms represent the world of the "objective spirit."[3] After discussing the differences between Cassirer and Heidegger, Meland turns to what Cassirer, with reference to Goethe's "Urphänomene," calls the "basis phenomena." These are, first, life or flowing consciousness, i.e. the ego; second, action, by which the human always transcends herself and thus becomes a social and ethically oriented being; and third, working and the oeuvres, by which we are measured and remembered. According to Cassirer, these basis phenomena can neither be further reduced nor be explained and understood in more detail, but they represent something like the basic conditions of human existence. Now, Meland argues that the concept of basis phenomena might help to mediate not only Cassirer's and Heidegger's but also Nishida's philosophy. Though I disagree with Cassirer's take on basis phenomena as being closed off to further phenomenological analysis, I nevertheless think that differentiating levels of phenomena might be helpful in intercultural philosophy. I will come back to this in the second part of my paper.

The essay by Dennis Stromback, which concludes the second part of the book, introduces two other representatives of Kyoto School philosophy into

3. Heidegger 1997, 205.

the discussion alongside Nishida. Nishitani Keiji and Miki Kiyoshi are students of Nishida; Stromback takes the philosophies of these two thinkers as exemplary for a splitting of Nishida's legacy into two different directions. While Nishitani understands self-awareness in the sense of Nishida, i.e. as a regression from the intertwining of the ego in the world to the non-distinction of subject and object and to the experience of emptiness, and deepens this movement through Zen Buddhist references, Miki emphasizes the social constitution of the human being and attempts to relate the religious dimension of the human, which Nishida and Nishitani aim at, to the material conditionality of human existence, for which he refers to Marx. Miki is not opposed to religion, but he emphasizes its social relevance. This lies above all in the critical humanistic stance that religion takes towards the often-misanthropic reality of life. Miki expressly advocates the creation of myths that help to humanize reality. In line with this socio-philosophical orientation, Miki emphasizes the original togetherness and interdependence of "I" and "You." Humans are socially constituted, and so humans can only achieve their own freedom by taking responsibility for others. Miki's thinking brings up a socio-philosophical and political aspect that has received little attention both in the Davos debate and in the first generation of the Kyoto School. This is reminiscent of developments in French-language phenomenology, which take a critical look at Heidegger's fixation on the ontological dimension and emphasize responsibility towards others and society.

II

Both Cassirer and Heidegger are interesting figures for intercultural philosophy. Cassirer's understanding of the human being as an *animal symbolicum* opens the view to historically and culturally different forms of human existence. Heidegger's demonstration that human beings and the world are inextricably linked in the structure of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world overcomes thinking in worldviews and thus breaks through into a dimension which allows for intercultural thinking going beyond historically contingent differences.

In what follows I would like to take up Meland's idea to mediate Cassirer, Heidegger, and Nishida by Cassirer's analysis of basis phenomena. Cassirer's

(and Meland's) claim, though, that basis phenomena could not be explained any further is, so to speak, phenomenologically untenable. Phenomenology draws attention to the fact that there are no isolated and seemingly worldless things or entities but everything must be seen and understood in its relation to other things and finally the world. Phenomenology therefore is interested in this inner relationality of phenomena. If the relationality were hidden though, the phenomena themselves would be hidden. Moreover, Cassirer's basis phenomena are not suitable as an interculturally shared foundation, since phenomena just like things and entities never exist in their pure form but are fundamentally interrelated with all other possible phenomena and therefore take on different historical, cultural, and situational forms. Nevertheless, I think that the concept of basis phenomena can be very helpful in intercultural philosophy, indeed. However, basis phenomena in my account do not mean the incognizable fundament of human life but rather different ways of human being's being-in-the-world. Thus, I refer to Eugen Fink's concept of "basic phenomena" to replace Cassirer's concept of basis phenomena.[4]

The basic phenomena of human existence as they are known from Fink include death, love, work, ruling, and play. According to Fink, these five basic phenomena structure the human way of being-in-the-world. For instance, the human does not simply work but working is a mode of human existence; also does the human not simply die, but is a mortal being, i.e., death is not just the end of life, but it determines life as a whole and sustains it precisely by its abysmal nature. Now it is obvious that the basic phenomena that structure human being's being-in-the-world are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the human is mortal in everything she does. And not only that, but she is also always working. Even resting only intersects work. All work on the other hand has a playful undertone, and where it loses this, it becomes alienating work, that is, a form of work that distances the human from herself, which is inhuman and therefore no longer has much to do with the basic phenomenon of work. Love is playful and finitude is erotic. The basic phenomena resonate in each other instead of excluding each other or only structuring their own areas. At the same time, they constitute those fields of meaning in which all other phenomena appear. Hence *basic phe-*

4. Cf. Fink 1979.

nomena. It is interesting to note that although the basic phenomena all interact with each other, they still open different fields of phenomena. We can tell very precisely what belongs to the realm of work and what to the realm of play, although all play has its aspect of working, and any work, as mentioned, must retain its playful character to some extent. The basic phenomena can nevertheless open different fields of phenomena, because the weighting of the basic phenomena is different in each case.

Fink mentions only five different basic phenomena. But there are many more. Language, for example, perception, belief, morality, motion, and many more. I would like to mention one more, because in the tradition of philosophy it has been regarded as crucial: the world. Not a single phenomenon, not even a basic phenomenon, can appear without the world being presupposed. What appears is in the world. What exists is in the world. And yet the world does not simply precede phenomena; rather, like all other basic phenomena, it is a fundamental feature of all phenomena, i.e., a basic phenomenon itself. However, the world is not just one of many basic phenomena, but the one that has determined philosophy from pre-Socratic times to the 20th and 21st centuries, from Heraclitus to Kant and from Schopenhauer to Cassirer and Heidegger. One might want to intervene and state that what still might be true for the phenomenon of world does not apply to Being, which is what Heidegger really is concerned about. However, taking the ontological turn of phenomenology that Heidegger introduces seriously, I think we must not separate Being from the phenomenological realm; rather we need to think of phenomenology and phenomena in an ontological way. Being, thus, can be taken to be a basic phenomenon as well. Because the awareness of Being has decisively contributed to the constitution and development of Europe, we might call Being a *foundational phenomenon*. Foundational phenomena, though, still are basic phenomena.

Now, let me turn to Nishida Kitarō and see whether his notion of absolute nothingness can be taken as a basic phenomenon as well. Already in his early work *An inquiry into the Good*, Nishida speaks of "pure experience."[5] Pure experience is initially that experience to which no intellectual moment is added, nor any reflection on the experience takes place. Such reflection only comes into play when different experiences are related to one another.

5. Cf. Nishida 1990.

But when we refer to an experience, we have already stepped out of it to some extent; otherwise, we could not refer to it specifically. For Nishida, therefore, a crucial characteristic of pure experience is that the subject who has this experience is completely absorbed in it and does not reflect on the experience. The subject slips completely into the experience; it belongs to it more than it would make or have the experience. But even what is experienced cannot be separated from the concrete experience. Experience does not refer to something outside of it, but concretely to what is given in the experience. What is experienced is itself a moment of experience. That is why Nishida says that pure experience means nothing. It means nothing in the sense that it does not signify anything else but stays completely within itself. Pure experience is a complete presence. Because pure experience means nothing and is based on nothing but itself, it is pure suchness that does not owe itself to any general Being but is simply what it is. Nishida sees this as a reference to the experience of absolute nothingness. Something can only be as it is without reference to anything else to which it would owe itself or which it would signify. However, the absolute nothingness that Nishida speaks of must not be thought of in contrast to Being; it is not a negation. Rather, Nishida uses it to indicate the fullness of reality of individual experience. Pure experience is real as it is, i.e. it lacks nothing, it brings reality fully to experience in its own way.

Nishida very well acknowledges the concept of the world in many of his writings, and he even points out the world-character of experience. Thus, he supports my interpretation of the world as a basic phenomenon, which means that it is a basic feature of all phenomena. Nevertheless, in his analysis of pure experience Nishida points to yet something else. As I have mentioned, pure experience is characterized by the fact that it means nothing, and this means that it does not refer to any field of experience, not even the world in general. There is a contradiction here; on the one hand, an experience can only be such if it takes place in the world and refers to a field of experience by which it becomes meaningful at all; on the other hand, it is pure precisely when it does not refer to anything else and thus means nothing. The contradiction is, in my view, a necessary one; individual experience means nothing and the whole world at the same time. With Nishida, we

could speak of a "contradictory self-identity."[6] In fact, pure experience refers to nothing else precisely because it is itself the presence of all possible other experiences. The determination to mean nothing, on the one hand, and the world-character of an experience, on the other hand, belong together in their contradictory nature. But they cannot be experienced at the same time. If an experience is experienced in its world-character, i.e. as an opening of the world, then it is meaningful and illuminates all the many contexts of meaning in which things stand. If, on the other hand, it is experienced as pure, then the world disappears completely into the particular experience, and this is experienced in the fullness of its suchness; more precisely, it experiences itself in the fullness of its suchness, because the subject that is experiencing also disappears into the very same experience; and even more: the difference inherent to saying that experience is experiencing itself is also abolished. Strictly speaking, therefore, purity cannot be stated. The experience that is experienced in its world-character, on the other hand, is nothing but an utterance of the world, a speaking out of silence, a making visible and an opening up of space.

These brief remarks hopefully make clear, first of all, that the world-character of experience is itself nothing but a basic feature of every experience. It is what Georg Stenger calls a "basic experience" and what I would like to call a basic phenomenon here.[7] In experiencing experiences as pure, however, the world is not experienced as a necessary condition. Instead, in pure experience, the world is suspended. The purity of experience thus takes the place of its world-character. And because it takes its place, it is not compatible with it. Either, or. For European philosophy at least, this is not an option, though. There cannot be an alternative to the world. What would that be? The world itself is the precondition of everything else and thus would be presupposed even in any alternative. At best, then, something like an alternative world would be conceivable. In this sense, Stenger speaks of "worlds" in the plural.[8] With regard to pure experience, however, the problem remains that it does not bring the world to experience. Speaking of different worlds is not

6. Cf. NMT 8.
7. STENGER 2006, 497–652.
8. Ibid., 882–1028.

wrong, but it describes the situation from the perspective—or, rather, the experience—of European philosophical tradition.

Perhaps we could just as well speak of a plurality of pure experiences regarding the difference between experiencing the world versus absolute nothingness? There is a gap here that is abysmal, precisely because pure experience and the world-character of experience do not simply say and mean different things but are self-experiences of the same. The contradictory experiences can no longer be mediated, because there can be nothing that mediates the world with something else. However, it is important to see that although the two basic phenomena of the world and nothingness cannot be mediated, they are by no means completely different. On the contrary, they are the same. They are neither equal nor different, but the very same precisely in their absolute difference. This enables a mutual clarification that does not follow the standard of a mediator, but only its own measure. Everything that can be found in one of the two basic phenomena must also be found in the other, but in a way that corresponds to its own structure. This, I would like to suggest, is what we can learn from Nishida's notion of contradictory self-identity.

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Abbreviation

NMT 『西田幾多郎全集』[*Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978–1980), 19 vols.

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