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8/28/2012--(The following are notes for a presentation I will be making in a Law and Religion class this fall at Duquesne Law School)

As the term is usually used in philosophy, "Davos" refers to a debate that took place in March, 1929, at Davos Switzerland, between the two leading philosophers in Germany at that time, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. The debate was part of a larger Conference, known as the Davos Conference that was held to promote international understanding in the years 1928-1931. Cassirer and Heidegger gave independent lectures at Davos as well as engaging in what was referred to not as a debate, but as a seminar together.

The debate between the two philosophers took place on several levels. Perhaps most directly, the exchange and prior exchanges and future commentaries, (Heidegger published *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* in late summer 1929 and, in 1931, Cassirer published a lengthy, critical review of it), were all about the most fruitful way of understanding the philosophical legacy of Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, who, since the late nineteenth century, had come to dominate German and continental philosophy under the rubric, "Back to Kant." Cassirer spoke for what had been the traditional way of reading Kant, known as various forms of neo-Kantianism. Though Cassirer differed in some ways from other neo-Kantians, in particular in his interest in knowledge of cultural symbolic forms, such as myth, art and ethics, all neo-Kantians regarded the *Critique of Pure Reason* to be a theory of knowledge—an attempted justification of the objectivity of human knowing of the world against the skepticism of David Hume in terms of the a priori conditions of human consciousness that make knowing possible. This was Kant's transcendental method.

Heidegger did not dispute this as a plausible understanding of Kant's own intention. But he disputed that this was what Kant accomplished. Prior to any mathematical/scientific understanding of an object is the nature of the existing human being (*dasein*) to receive the being of a being. Scientific knowledge is derivative on this knowledge of *dasein* and is not therefore objective in the sense claimed. It is dependent on the nature of *dasein*. Without *dasein* there is no truth. Thus Heidegger says that Kant brought us to the study of *dasein*'s capability of knowing being, though Kant may have drawn back.

On another, and related level, the debate concerned philosophical anthropology and its implications for the way to be of a human being. For Cassirer, the human being is capable of going beyond finitude through symbolic systems that enter into eternity and perhaps is obligated to do so. The human being is a world former. For Heidegger, this kind of philosophy constituted an evasion of what philosophy is. The human being is constituted through finitude, thrownness and radical dependence.

On yet another level, again related to the prior point, the debate was about the relationship of philosophy and theology. Cassirer represented the attempt by some neo-Kantians (many of whom were Jewish), to banish the themes of theology from philosophical study as a form of mysticism. This effort bore an uneasy relationship to Kant's overall goals, which included making room for faith. The neo-Kantians emphasized religion under the bounds of reason alone. Heidegger was accused by Cassirer of bringing religion back into the realm of philosophy.

The Davos debate, aside from its content, also represented a symbol of fundamental change in European life. By 1933, four years after Davos, Heidegger would be a member of the Nazi Party and Cassirer would have gone into exile. Thus, the debate assumed a mythic status, symbolizing the passing of a generational guard and the end of the enlightenment understood as a support for cosmopolitan, liberal humanity enjoying progress through scientific advance. Heidegger clearly threw all this into some kind of questionable status.

Despite this, neither Davos, nor the subsequent interchanges with Cassirer, support any clam of anti-Semitism against Heidegger. There are negative references to Jews in some of Heidegger's private writings, but Heidegger, when confronted, expressly and angrily denied any anti-Semitic attitudes. The significance of such denials at the time is that in the early 1930's in Germany, anti-Semites made no bones about it. They were only too happy to engage in anti-Jewish activities. So, while Heidegger's short and early involvement with the Nazi Party is certainly an embarrassment to him and perhaps to his philosophical insights, it does not taint them with anti-Semitism and, as far as I know, Cassirer never claimed that it did. (His wife, Toni, did make such a claim in her memoir).