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CRISIS, CULTURE AND CREATION

Ernesto De Martino's Ethos of Transcendence beyond Cassirer and Heidegger

ABSTRACT: This article examines how Ernesto De Martino's *ethos of transcendence* carves out a moral path beyond the apparent impasse between Martin Heidegger's emphasis on human finitude and Ernst Cassirer's focus on the constructive power of symbolic forms. In the wake of two World Wars and Europe's collapse into crisis, De Martino recognized that modern culture itself could disintegrate—what he termed the “risk of losing presence.” Drawing on anthropology, history, and philosophy, he argued that ritual, myth, and collective decision-making can continually renew shared horizons of meaning. By analyzing De Martino's critical engagements with both Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and Heidegger's ontology of *thrownness*, the article demonstrates how De Martino forges an ethos of transcendence that underscores the ethical imperative to rebuild communal worlds whenever they threaten to collapse. This perspective provides a powerful lens for addressing contemporary challenges—from environmental degradation to social fragmentation—where the “end of the world” looms large. Rather than endorsing naive rationalism or surrendering to existential despair, De Martino urges moral agency: a renewed duty to be in the world, forging cultural frameworks that sustain our collective stories in moments of acute crisis.

KEYWORDS: Ernesto De Martino, Presence; Ethos of Transcendence; Crisis of Meaning; Modernity.

Few philosophical encounters have so vividly dramatized the fractures running through twentieth century thought as the clash between Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).¹ At stake was the destiny of modern reason and the fate of Western culture amid the wreckage of a post–World War I order. Heidegger argued

¹ Cassirer and Heidegger maintained professional relations over many years. Their first meeting took place in 1923, when Cassirer invited his young and not well-known colleague to lecture at the Kant society in Hamburg. Their last encounter took place in Freiburg in 1932, this time it was Heidegger inviting Cassirer to present a paper on Rousseau. While their philosophical exchange would last many years more in the form of books and articles—reaching all the way to Cassirer's posthumously published *Myth of the State*—the most important moment of their relationship was without a doubt the debate of 1929 in Davos, Switzerland. For other discussions of the Davos debate, see (Garin 1973; Krois 2005)

that modernity had lost sight of being, urging a raw return to finitude and anxiety; Cassirer championed Enlightenment culture, insisting that symbolic frameworks save us from barbarism. In their famous 1929 encounter at Davos (Garin 1973; Krois 2005; Friedman 2000; Gordon 2010), each saw modernity perched on an abyss. Ernesto De Martino entered this debate by highlighting not only individual mortality but also the danger of shared worlds collapsing — what he called “the risk of losing presence” (*presenza*)² and “the end of the world” (*la fine del mondo*).³

De Martino emerged intellectually in dialogue not only with Heidegger and Cassirer but also within a broader Italian philosophical milieu that grappled intensely with the crisis of modernity. Particularly important was Antonio Banfi’s (1886-1957) Milanese circle,⁴ which, by the late 1930s, introduced existentialist thought, phenomenology, and *Lebensphilosophie* into Italy — challenging the dominance of Benedetto Croce’s (1866-1952) Italian historicism.⁵ This ‘Banfi school,’ including figures like Remo Cantoni (1914-1978) and Enzo Paci (1911-1976), as well as the thought of Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990), significantly influenced De Martino by providing early models for integrating existential philosophy with historicist perspectives. De Martino’s own path

² De Martino uses *presenza* to denote the fragile yet fundamental state of a person’s being “here” in a culturally grounded world. It signals not just individual consciousness but the lived, practical awareness that one’s self and environment cohere. In times of intense crisis—psychic or cultural—this sense of “presence” can fray, thrusting the individual into chaos. In one of my methodological articles, I have taken De Martino’s work on the presence as a starting point to propose a 7E model of the human mind by drawing on the cognitive paradigm in religious studies (CSR), see (Geisshuesler 2019b).

³ I am not the first scholar to explore this theme. Many years ago, Sandro Barbera argued that “the journey leading from *Naturalism and Historicism* (1941) to *The World of Magic* (1948) was punctuated by the encounter of De Martino with Cassirer and Heidegger” (Barbera 1990, 106). Giordana Charuty has argued that the writings of De Martino’s final years—particularly *The End of the World* (1977) and *The Philosophical Writings* (2005)—can be regarded as an “Italian version” of the dispute between Heidegger and Cassirer (Charuty 2016, 370). Charuty is rather vague about why this tension is relevant in De Martino’s work. She only says that it is marked by a “tension to substituting the transcendental with the symbolic.” Nonetheless, what’s clear is that it can be said that his philosophical reflections span the entirety of his work. For scholarship on De Martino and Cassirer, see (Mancini 2003, 475–89; Berardini 2013, 71–83; Sasso 2001, 187–203; Imbruglia 1990a; 1990b; Barbera 1990; Giarrizzo 1995, 155–57). For scholarship on De Martino and Heidegger, see (Galasso 1968, 260; Cherchi and Cherchi 1987, 190–91; Cherchi 1994; 2010, 510; Mustè 2006; Barbera 1990; Massenzio 1995, 20–26).

⁴ Ginzburg 1991, 40–41; De Martino and Boccassino 1996, 10.

⁵ As David Roberts summarizes their relationship, existentialists criticized Croce for neglecting individual subjectivity in favor of an of a positive and optimistic “faith in the overarching rationality of history,” while Croce belittled the existentialists for “dwelling on anxiety,” arguing that it leads to “morbid self-preoccupation as opposed to [...] responsible, history-making action.” (Roberts, *Nothing but History*, 100). See also, Runcini 1960, 2182–83; Hughes 1979, 229; Roberts 1987, 319–230; Rubini 2015, 147–57). Unsurprisingly, Croce retorted voraciously to existentialism and the Milanese group. See, for instance, Croce 1941; 1945.

was shaped by this broader philosophical turning, paving the way for his distinctive synthesis.

In what follows, this Italian lineage remains a constant interlocutor as we first outline the modern crisis as understood by Heidegger and Cassirer, noting each approach's strengths and limits. We then turn to De Martino's project, showing how he draws on both thinkers while forging something new: a call for moral agency grounded in history, anthropology, and a shared "duty-to-be-in-the-world." Ultimately, I suggest that De Martino's "ethos of transcendence" enriches our understanding of how societies endure catastrophe — real or imagined — and how human beings can choose, again and again, to re-establish a common horizon of meaning. It is a call to decision that is particularly relevant as our world faces ecological peril, pandemics, and political strife: through communal labor — in the form of stories and practices — societies like ours can push beyond existential breakdown and reassert a viable horizon of values.

Crisis on All Fronts: Modernity's Dislocated Worlds

The early twentieth century was marked by upheaval on a staggering scale—two World Wars, collapsing empires, and new ideologies — creating a sense that "the world" itself stood in question. Philosophers, psychologists, and historians of religion tried to explain the pervasive feeling that modern humanity was "dislocated." In *The Life and Work of Ernesto De Martino* (2021), I have shown how "crisis" became both an intellectual category and an emotional motif, as if philosophy's task was to make sense of a fundamentally disjointed time.⁶ The devastation of 1914-1918 shattered Europe's certainties, ushering in a civilizational crisis. De Martino observed a "sharp awareness of the end," severed from cyclical or palingenetic visions that once made catastrophe a prelude to renewal. Instead, what remained was an *apocalisse senza eschaton*, "a naked and desperate catastrophe" bereft of salvific horizons (De Martino 1977, 468).

While Enlightenment pillars of freedom, rationality, and progress wavered, fascist regimes rose in Italy and Germany, which many took as a "mythic regression" — archaic energies harnessed by propaganda in a climate of disenchantment. Ernesto De Martino himself briefly flirted with a nostalgic "return," as shown in his early review of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918), sharing an interwar fascination with civilizational crisis (De Martino 1929).⁷

⁶ For more on this "rising anxiety about meaning," see Fussell 1975; Herman 1997; Eksteins 2000; MacMillan 2003.

⁷ For this frequently overlooked chapter of De Martino's life, see the first few chapters of my monograph, Geishhuesler 2021.

At Davos: Heidegger, Cassirer, and the Destiny of Modern Thought

Heidegger's existential ontology and Cassirer's cultural-symbolic framework stake out profoundly different paths for addressing Europe's post-World War I crisis. The Davos debate laid bare key tensions: is the modern predicament best met through confronting our mortal thrownness head-on, or through deepening our capacity for symbolic meaning-making? By sketching each thinker's ideas before delving into their famous confrontation, we set the stage for appreciating how these tensions would, in turn, inform later philosophical projects — most notably the work of Ernesto De Martino.

Similar to De Martino, for Heidegger, modernity signified “a sense of loss,” which stemmed particularly from the “eclipse of the traditional religion” (Bambach 1995, 193–202; Roberts 1995, 113–14). The modern period, for him, was “an era of decline, disintegration, and destruction” (Bambach 1995, 271). Convinced that Western civilization had drifted into fragmentation, he set out to reawaken the primordial question: *What does it mean to be?* His seminal work, *Being and Time* (1927), calls for a turning-away from worn metaphysical systems toward an engagement with “the things themselves” as we experience them (Heidegger 2010). The human being — *Dasein* — is no isolated subject: we find ourselves irreversibly “thrown” into a world dense with meanings, institutions, and cultural norms we did not choose (Guignon and Heidegger 1983; Kisiel and Heidegger 1995; Dreyfus 2006).⁸

Heidegger sees this “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*, *gettatezza*) laid bare most starkly when we confront our mortality. In moments of *Angst*, the fragility of life and the impending certainty of death dissolve the everyday routines that lull us into conformity with “the they” (*das Man*) (Polt 1999; Capobianco and Richardson 2010). Only by facing death directly, argues Heidegger, can we break from shallow conventions and choose our possibilities authentically. Even so, his later writings shift toward what he calls “letting be” (*Gelassenheit*), emphasizing a more receptive, poetic mode of dwelling (Caputo 1986; Young 2006; Sallis 2011). Though some readers see this as a quietist retreat, Heidegger maintains that such openness to Being might allow for a different kind of meaningful existence in an age of disruption. Either way, his path is clear: modern crisis demands a radical questioning that begins with human finitude.

Ernst Cassirer, a Neo-Kantian influenced by Aby Warburg's extraordinary library in Hamburg, turned to the many ways humans create meaning through symbolic forms — language, myth, art, religion, and science. In his trilogy *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), he famously argued that humans are “symbolic animals,” forging coherent

⁸ Enzo Paci, one of Italy's most important existentialist and phenomenological philosophers, translates *Dasein* as “*esser presente*.” It has been suggested that De Martino developed his term *presenza* based on this association (Paci 1943, 30).

worlds from raw experience (Cassirer 1945, 26).⁹ Far from leaving myth behind, Cassirer insisted that mythic energies can return in times of social upheaval, as demonstrated in *The Myth of the State* (1946), where fascist regimes harness archaic fantasies. Yet he remained hopeful: humanity could recognize these impulses without discarding the Enlightenment aspiration toward reason (Krois 1987; Skidelsky 2008).

In 1929, Heidegger and Cassirer met at the Davos Disputation, an encounter that epitomized a broader rift in European thought. Although both recognized the postwar crisis, their diagnoses diverged: Heidegger saw the cause in a “forgetting” of Being, arguing that only by confronting Dasein’s finitude could one rediscover authenticity; Cassirer emphasized humanity’s creative capacity for forging symbolic forms — myth, science, language, art — and warned that crisis emerges when these structures fail to acknowledge their mythic roots, thus leaving room for totalitarian impulses. The debate yielded no neat reconciliation; instead, it laid bare two sharply contrasting routes for redeeming modernity from nihilism — Heidegger’s “ontological descent” and Cassirer’s “symbolic ascent.” This confrontation shaped subsequent philosophical and anthropological discussions, posing the urgent question of how to salvage meaning when civilization’s old certainties have collapsed.

De Martino’s Synthesis: Bridging Cassirer’s Creativity and Heidegger’s Finitude

Ernesto De Martino turned to Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger to tackle Europe’s twentieth-century crisis, which threatened not only individual psyches but entire shared worlds. Although Cassirer’s Neo-Kantian rationalism and Heidegger’s existential ontology often appear opposed, De Martino saw each grappling with modernity’s precariousness from different angles. Where Cassirer stressed humanity’s symbolic creativity, Heidegger emphasized thrownness, urging a direct confrontation with mortality. By integrating these insights, De Martino concluded that the crisis ultimately revolved around the fragility — and potential renewal — of the “presence” underpinning communal life.

As De Martino surveyed the interwar era’s philosophical battles, he came to see the Cassirer–Heidegger split less as a clash over “subjective spontaneity” versus “thrownness” and more as a question of how to preserve or regenerate a *world*. In *The World of Magic* (1948), he pinpoints the core threat as “the risk of losing presence” — a

⁹ Particularly the second volume, *Mythical Thought*, was premised on the idea that the earliest human symbolic activity can be found in myth. In locating mythical thinking at the origin of a process of cultural development that would move on to religion, reason, and science, Cassirer embraced both Romantic and Hegelian motives that moved him well beyond the orbit of Kant and his Neo-Kantian colleagues at Marburg.

cultural-psychological breakdown in which both self and world dissolve in times of intense crisis. Cassirer's emphasis on how myth, language, art, and science construct a stable cultural cosmos seemed indispensable for preventing such dissolution; Heidegger's revelation of finite *being-there* (Dasein) underscored how precarious that cosmos remains if it ignores mortality and anxiety. For De Martino, speaking of "two terrors," each philosopher's path reveals part of a larger truth: the world can be remade by cultural reason yet also threaten us with radical ungrounding.

The one of "losing the world" and the one of "being lost in the world." On the one hand, one fears losing, not through death but during the course of one's life, the splendor and the joy of worldly life, the energy that pushes us towards communal projects of civil life, towards technology and science, towards moral solidarity and social justice, towards poetry and philosophy. On the other hand, one considers the world as danger that threatens the authenticity of human destiny and thus as temptation from which one has to protect oneself. (De Martino 1977, 475)

This dual perspective, he suggests, echoes both Cassirer's dread of mythic regression and Heidegger's fear of "unworlding" (*Entweltlichung*). Rather than dismiss either philosopher as misguided, De Martino sees each capturing part of the crisis afflicting modern man. The *world*, he insists, is neither purely "constructed" nor purely "disclosed"; it is *made and unmade* in moments of upheaval.

From the late 1930s onward, De Martino immersed himself in Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), especially the second volume *Mythical Thought* (1925), which explores the "emotional unity" of archaic consciousness. In letters to Adolfo Omodeo,¹⁰ De Martino praised Cassirer for showing how myth is not irrational chaos but a coherent, affect-laden mode of world-making (Cassirer 1960, 103–4). Citing him in his first monograph (De Martino [1941] 1997, 108–9), De Martino sent a copy to the Marburgian philosopher even before *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia* was published in 1941.¹¹ In his response, written from exile in Goteborg on October 12 1940, Cassirer thanks his Italian colleague and assures him that he "will study the book with the greatest of interests because already a first glance showed him how close it stands to [his] own philosophical and scientific interest" (Angelini 1989, 204). By citing such insights

¹⁰ In an undated letter to Pettazzoni, likely from fall 1940, De Martino proposed an "explanatory and critical article on the second volume of Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*," praising its novel contributions to the philosophy of mythology and history of religions (De Martino [1941] 1997, 254). By 1942, he had added Cassirer's book to the Purple Series translation list (De Martino and Pavese 1991, 56–57). A letter from Ernesto Bozzano described him as "a reader of Cassirer and a student of myth" (Angelini 1989, 174). In his article "Religious Anthropology and Historicism," De Martino hailed Cassirer's "first attempt to highlight the magical *Weltanschauung*," emphasizing the "remarkable keywords and fruitful stimulation" it provided for historians of magic (De Martino 1942, 196). Despite Pettazzoni's warning that citing the Jewish German philosopher might draw negative reactions in *Paideuma*, De Martino proceeded nonetheless.

¹¹ The letter seems to have been lost.

in *The World of Magic*, De Martino highlighted “magic” as a practical labor of orientation — cultural frameworks that stave off the existential threat of “losing presence” (De Martino [1941] 1997, 108–9). Where Heidegger stresses the power of finitude to shake us awake, Cassirer reveals the symbolic energies that hold our everyday reality together. De Martino fuses both, viewing myth and ritual as indispensable techniques for preserving communal life.

Cassirer’s notions of *crisis* in cultural evolution also appealed to De Martino. Where Cassirer traced transformations from magical to religious to rational forms, each turning point implied a *break* or *choice* — which De Martino recasts as a moral or anthropological decision. Indeed, “the historian of magic,” he writes, “can find in Cassirer’s studies remarkable keywords and fruitful stimulation” for understanding how mythic “points of selection” shape entire ages (De Martino 1942, 196).¹²

For Cassirer, culture was the realm of freedom as the human consciousness’ capacity for creating images and symbols allowed for an increasing liberation from the limitations set by our physical conditions. During the *Streitgespräch* at Davos, Cassirer argued that these symbolic forms “make possible communication between humans and are thus the guarantee of an enlightened rationalism and a responsible humanism” (Bernet 2009, 51). As Edward Skidelsky concludes, “for Cassirer, [...] man’s exile from organic nature is simultaneously his passport to the world of culture. He does not remain in a state of stunned self-awareness, brooding over himself, but seeks expression in the universal forms of religion, art, and science” (Skidelsky 2008, 211). In the notes of *The End of the World*, De Martino not only repeatedly emphasizes the importance of culture as the realm of intersubjectivity, but he also argues that this conception of culture makes it into a space of freedom. He writes:

The oblivion of acts (*atti*) in facts (*fatti*), the conserving of acts in the automatism of habits, in the physics of things, in the anonymity of the social—the “one does like this”—all of this constitutes the great liberating power of the economic: it allows us to be with the labor of others and of the past, infinitely beyond the present consciousness that we can have of it. It enables us to remain available as present consciousness without starting over every time from the top, on every front of the use of life, without falling back to the point of nothing (*punto zero*), which, for the individual, marks its death (or its insanity). [...] When we speak of the inaugural character of the economic as a communal project of the usable we have to call to mind—amongst other things—the liberating conditioning force of the “forgetting oneself” in the world. (De Martino 1977, 644)

Parallel to his appropriation of Cassirer, De Martino grew increasingly fascinated by Martin Heidegger — initially through Italian mediators like Enzo Paci (Cherchi and

¹² In a letter to Pettazzoni, written in January 1939, he proposed to examine how “the functions of the cultivated mind are gradually liberated and consolidated” from a “mythic-magical consciousness” (Ginzburg 1988, 402).

Cherchi 1987),¹³ besides Croce likely the most important philosophical figure in De Martino's life (Sasso 2001, 363).¹⁴ In *Death and Ritual Weeping* (1958), for instance, he openly credits Heidegger's *being-towards-death* as illuminating why communities develop elaborate funerary rites to guard against psychic disintegration. Rather than remain a private phenomenon, death becomes a shared event that "unifies the group and reaffirms a horizon of collective meaning" (De Martino [1958] 2002, 73–74). This being said, already in *The World of Magic*, De Martino credits "existentialism" for having "identified an unclear point, an unresolved problem of modern rationalism: the individual as given" (De Martino [1948] 2012, 160). Such remarks show that, for De Martino, Heidegger's fundamental move — treating the "world" not as a creation of reason but as something in which Dasein is primordially immersed — was revelatory. Where Cassirer pressed the constructive power of the subject, Heidegger stressed how we "wake up" in a world that can never be fully commanded.

Heidegger had famously warned of "unworlding" (*Entweltlichung*), an inauthentic condition in which everydayness or "the They" threatens to neutralize Dasein's interpretive engagement, leaving us "lost in the world." But where Heidegger saw *forgetfulness* or *fallenness*, De Martino recognized a cultural *achievement*:

Being lost in the world, *Weltverlorenheit*, the world of facts oblivious of themselves: This being lost appears like something "negative" from which we have to be delivered. Phenomenology suggests the *Weltvernichtung*, the epoché, as the "path" for this redemption. Yet, in reality, this "negative" is a positive, and this oblivion holds liberation. "The oblivion of the world" is a necessary moment of the "communal project of the usable," a project which includes amongst other things the salutary possibility of forgetting. (De Martino 1977, 644)

In both of his posthumously published collections of notes, De Martino returns repeatedly to the example of the body and its "techniques" to show to what extent the forgotten dimension of human existence is not only imbued in our experience but also valuable. He particularly likes the example of our ability to walk, describing it as a "happy

¹³ Enzo Paci, also a student of Antonio Banfi at Milan, was another one of those thinkers dominated by a desire to integrate new philosophical influences—in his particular case existentialist philosophy—with the Italian historicist philosophy of Benedetto Croce. See (Vigorelli 1987)

¹⁴ The most abundant reflections on Paci are to be found throughout De Martino's *Philosophical Writings*, but there are also some references in *The End of the World*. (De Martino 1977, 444, 642ff.) The relationship between the two thinkers deepened through editorial collaboration at Alberto Mondadori's *Il Saggiatore* and, late in De Martino's life, Paci was among his closest philosophical interlocutors. Tellingly, on his deathbed in 1965, De Martino requested Paci's journal, *Aut Aut*—the leading Italian forum for existentialist studies — symbolizing just how pivotal Paci's existential orientation was in De Martino's final reflections. (De Martino 2004, 29). Unsurprisingly, when De Martino died, Paci was amongst the first voices of commemoration to be heard on the radio. The transmission took place in 1965, shortly after De Martino's death. Enzo Paci was the moderator and Carlo Levi, Diego Carpitella, and Giovanni Jervis the commentators. See, (Paci et al. 2002).

oblivion,” which allows us to walk in an upright position without having to exert any effort (De Martino 1977, 644).

Let us better analyze the development of the use of the body in terms of walking in an upright position. This development includes—in the manner of such an obvious “ability” that it does not require concentration of conscious attention—a complex personal and human history, namely the effort of us infants when we learned to walk and the slow conquest of the upright position of the hominids. In this sense, we are never walking “alone,” but with all the personal and human history of this particular technique of the body that is the knowledge of walking. In walking, we are accompanied and sustained by this history and by the efforts, by the research, by the inventions, and by the learning that it entails. Certainly, adult humans have no need, in order to walk, to learn this history in its particulars: he walks and that is it. (De Martino 2005, 127–28)

De Martino reverses Heidegger’s entire argument: inauthentic is not the “publicness” (*Öffentlichkeit*) (Heidegger 2010, 119), but the loss of “being-with-one-another” (*essere assieme, Miteinandersein*) within a shared cultural horizon. Instead of being a simple fact of human existence — as in Heidegger’s “thrownness” — for De Martino “being thrown” is something negative as it marks the isolation from the community. Ever broad in his cultural interests, he illustrates this point through the experience of the schizophrenic:

This world only exists for him, not for the others. This is why the schizophrenic has his authentic existence no longer by staying with others, he finds himself thrown out of the being-with (*gettato fuori dell'essere-con*) into isolation and incommunicable privatization. Expelled from his *Miteinander*, the patient finds himself in a new type of mode of existence, without substance. For him, life has lost its substance and its roots, his being always returns to itself in all the transformations and modifications. (De Martino 1977, 44)

“The presence is at risk,” De Martino writes in another instance in his final notes, “when it loses the cultured (*culturalizzato*) horizon beyond which it cannot go and within which it consumes its operational ‘beyond’ (*oltre*): that is to say, when it is exposed to the nothing” (De Martino 1977, 480). This same reversal is also apparent in his discussion of anxiety, which is no longer cause for the recovery of authenticity but the indication of the risk of losing the self. While Heidegger’s solution to inauthenticity involved resolute “being-towards-death,” De Martino suggests that “anxiety signals an attack towards the very roots of the presence. It indicates the alienation of the self from the self, the precipitation of cultural life into vitality without formal horizon. Anxiety underlines the risk of losing the distinction between subject and object, between thought and action, between form and matter” (De Martino [1958] 2002, 31).

In both Cassirer’s cultural logic and Heidegger’s existential unveiling, De Martino spots a *shared concern for crisis*:

- Mythic or “primitive” layers: Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought* parallels Heidegger’s interest in “original phenomena” or “primitive Dasein,” each unveiling modes of space, time, and self-prior to advanced conceptualization.¹⁵

- Existential or emotional unity: Cassirer’s “emotional totality” in myth (Cassirer 1960, 163) is akin to Heidegger’s (Heidegger 2010, 356) claim that *Stimmung* (mood) pervades our being-in-the-world. Both see “affect” or “feeling” as integral to how a world is disclosed.

- Crisis as a turning point: Cassirer regards crisis as a stage in cultural shifts (e.g., from magic to religion or religion to science), while Heidegger sees it as a “foundational moment” prompting radical rethinking of Being (Heidegger 2010, 8). De Martino interprets magical rites or communal gestures as safeguarding the “presence” from lapsing into chaos, aligning with both philosophers’ appreciation that disruption can reveal hidden structures.

Despite these resonances, De Martino identifies a significant oversight: neither Cassirer nor Heidegger, on his reading, fully grasps how *moral agency* might consciously stave off the “end of the world.” Cassirer’s progressive narrative can downplay existential peril, while Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* might lapse into passivity. To De Martino, this lacuna demands a new approach.

The Ethos of Transcendence: De Martino’s Moral Framework for a Fragile World

De Martino’s thinking culminates in what he terms the “ethos of transcendence” (*ethos del trascendimento*) — a mode of ethical-historical action that weaves together the neo-kantian’s emphasis on symbolic culture and the existentialist’s insistence on finitude. Against Cassirer’s rational optimism, De Martino stresses the *constant threat* of losing presence: the world is never guaranteed, always “revocable” by fresh crises. Against Heidegger’s ontological unveiling, he insists the proper response is *not* simply confronting nothingness or letting Being unfold, but actively re-creating a horizon of values. The answer is *moral decision*: we must continuously re-found “the world” by harnessing cultural symbols while recognizing the abyss of human mortality.

¹⁵ Heidegger’s *Being and Time* references Cassirer to clarify how early forms of existence illuminate “everydayness” (*Alltäglichkeit*). In a 1925 seminar, *The History of the Concept of Time*, he remarks that while describing Dasein’s everydayness does not mean analyzing a “primitive stage” of being, “the consideration of primitive forms of Dasein can more readily provide directions ... in seeing and verifying certain phenomena of Dasein,” because theoretical self-interpretations have not yet obscured them. Hence, he concludes, “the fundamental analysis of Dasein is just the right presupposition for an understanding of the primitive and not the reverse” (Heidegger 1992, 155).

Here, we see another Italian influence on De Martino's thought, namely the work of Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990), "the official and most inconvenient 'outsider' of his generation," who is internationally recognized as the founder of "positive existentialism" (*esistenzialismo positivo*) (Rubini 2015, 153). This posture highlights the capacity for 'transcendence' and 'possibility' within the very fragility of human existence.¹⁶ Like Abbagnano, De Martino read Heidegger attentively yet refused to reduce crisis to a purely negative phenomenon; instead, risk becomes a catalyst for moral resolve and cultural creativity.¹⁷ If Heidegger insisted that "being-in-the-world" (*Dasein*) is fundamentally *given*, De Martino contends that what truly matters is *duty-to-be-in-the-world* (*doverci essere nel mondo*). And if Heidegger sees "thrownness" as an irreducible passivity, De Martino substitutes a notion of *pro-gettare* ("to project," "to decide," or "to plan ahead") that underscores free choice and constructive labor:

The perspective of existentialism necessarily contains the being in the world (*essere nel mondo*) in its transcendental structure. Thus, the analysis of being-there (*esserci*) establishes itself necessarily in the declination of diverse modalities of being in the world. In the perspective that we adopt, by contrast, the transcendental structure of being-there is the duty-to-be-there-in-the-world (*doverci essere nel mondo*) in the act of making itself count against the risk of not being able to be in any possible cultural world. Therefore, the catastrophe of the mundane does not appear in the analysis as a mode of being in the world, but as a permanent threat, sometimes dominated and resolved, sometimes triumphant, to which the duty-to-be-in-the-world is exposed. (De Martino 1977, 669–70)

In short, De Martino's transcendence is not simply a metaphysical "beyond" or disclosure of being; it is *moral impetus*, the *impulso etico* that reclaims the world from chaos. Through collective and historical "decision," humans anchor presence in something more stable than the fleeting revelations of anxiety. Elsewhere in his final notes, De Martino speaks of an "energia oltrepassante" that "founds humanity ... in a primordial *moral élan*," not in a reverent passivity before Being. He notes that "culture

¹⁶ Paci correctly noted that De Martino's posture was closely aligned with positive existentialism, as both of them are rooted in the recognition that the risks entailed in human existence contained within them the potential for progress, for the "transcending" of the crisis (Paci 1950, 90). See also, (Viti Cavaliere 2014, 81). More recently, Sergio Berardini—who has done more extensive research into the philosophical background of De Martino than any other interpreter—has repeated: "both positions showed man in the act of transcending himself, of emerging out of the self to return into the self, of pushing himself towards the risk, or rather towards the possibility, in order to connect this beginning to the final act of the movement in the positivity of an activity that is 'worthy' ('vale')" (Berardini 2013, 227).

¹⁷ In *The Structure of Existence* (1939), which has been described as "the manifesto of Italian existentialism," Abbagnano fully embraces the German notion of "thrownness," while simultaneously emphasizing the resolutely positive, optimistic, and hopeful potential of existentialism as a philosophy of possibility (Rubini 2015, 153, 159; Abbagnano 1942).

detaches us from the laziness of nature,” replacing mindless repetition with a “primordial ethos” that guards against the “death-instinct” (De Martino 1977, 224).

The term “impulse” or “impetus” (*slancio*) — which De Martino clearly borrows from vitalist philosophy (consider Bergson’s *élan vital*)¹⁸ — is also popular in the *Philosophical Writings*, where he insists once again on the cultural, economic, and, most importantly, moral nature of this energy:

That which “gives courage” to the transcending of the vital in the usable and in the communal is neither the vital nor the usable nor the communal, but precisely this moral impulse (*slancio etico*) which pulls the individuals always anew towards the intersubjective valorization of life, towards the culturalization of nature. [...] One can never understand the culture of the Stone Age without appealing to this “courage” that utilized the stone, so that the stones already signified the effective possibility to construct a hand axe. (De Martino 2005, 22–23)

This impulse to transcend situations of crisis is a crucial element through De Martino’s entire career, and much of his focus is not on the Stone Age or on the Twentieth Century Western world, but on “the human industry of millennia lives, the usable fashionings (*plasmazioni*) that have matured over the course of eras of traditions, and finally the biography of the individual all the way up to the present situation” (De Martino 1977, 471). Here, De Martino’s ethos echoes Cassirer’s focus on culture as a realm of *freedom* — “the Copernican Revolution,” as the neo-kantian puts it, that “does not exist prior to and outside of synthetic unity but is constituted only by it” (Cassirer 1960, 29). Indeed, where Heidegger’s finitude edges toward nostalgia, passivity, or laziness, Cassirer’s (and now De Martino’s) mind actively *constructs* (and *re-constructs*) cultural worlds. Still, whereas Cassirer sometimes implied a near-automatic teleology — rational forms rising by necessity — De Martino demands *constant choice*. In a passage making direct reference to Heidegger’s philosophy, De Martino explains:

Man has to lose himself if he wants to save himself. Those who are not to some extent lost in the anonymity of the *Man*—of the impersonal “they,” of sociality, and of tradition—lack also the terrain upon which they can lift themselves for the recovery of themselves and for the personal initiative. (De Martino 1977, 683)

Most specifically, De Martino’s focus frequently rests on the societies of the global South—both in Italy and beyond; and there is no doubt that his philosophical thought gains force precisely because of anthropological and ethnographic insights stemming from those cultural areas. Already in *The World of Magic*, he concludes that magic—which he sees as emblematic of humankind’s broader ritual and mythic strategies — “must not be mistaken for a quaint relic, but recognized as the daily election of form over chaos” (De Martino, *The World of Magic*, 62). Similarly, De Martino was one of the first observers to appreciate that the phenomenon of tarantism (*tarantismo*), involving

¹⁸ For a fascinating insight into the vitalist tendencies in De Martino’s work, see (Geissguesler 2019a).

spider-bitten women in the Italian South, exorcised by means of the ritual playing of the *tarantella*— was not the result of a merely biological disease but rather a cultural phenomenon imbued with a rich symbolic horizon (De Martino 1961). Mythical narratives, combined with dance, music, and rhythmic gestures choreograph the performance of the *tarantate* to transcend their precarious status. The ritualized dance allowed them to “re-valorize” an existential disruption—the spider’s bite that symbolizes the dilemma of some of the most marginalized strata of Italian society, i.e. the women of the *Mezzogiorno* — into a shared performance that anchors the individual in a recognized cultural horizon.

Although we are world’s away from the libraries of philosophers, the existentialist themes central to De Martino’s anthropological studies, notably in *The Land of Remorse* (1961), cannot be overemphasized. In one of De Martino’s personal writings unearthed in the home of his longtime partner Vittoria de Palma, De Martino describes how he is visited by Enzo Paci. After listening to the famous *tarantella* by Luigi Stifani of Nardò, De Martino documents the inspirations that the great existentialist philosopher drew from this acoustic journey:

After listening, he [Paci] said that we are not only dealing with beautiful songs—for example, he established certain analogies between the second tarantella of Nardò and the Rite of Spring by Stravinsky—but also with a document of considerable cultural and philosophical importance. He told me that the record raises issues of various degrees, such as: why did Christianity not succeed in getting the better of Pugliese tarantism ...? What does the presence of this indigenous Voodoo—which is not only structurally and functionally, but also historically in relationship to its Haitian variant—within its own area mean for European culture? In this way, isn’t the Southern Question related to the African question; particularly in the sense that it has likewise stimulated the West to the awareness of its humanistic limits? And finally, by means of this document, couldn’t the link between existential crisis and cultural redemption be raised in dimensions and modalities that make it not only of great interest to the historian of culture but also the philosopher? (De Martino 2004, 23–24)

There is no doubt that De Martino fully agreed: Such ritual stands midway between Heideggerian finitude — acknowledging the threat of fragmentation — and Cassirerian symbolic transformation — using myth and ritual to shape crisis into cultural form. De Martino calls these “techniques of presence” (*tecniche della presenza*): the group’s method of deciding how to interpret an event that might otherwise dissolve the self or the community. Finally, in *Death and Ritual Weeping* (1958), a book that won him the prestigious Viareggio Literature Prize precisely eleven years after it was awarded to none other than Gramsci for his *Prison Notebooks*, De Martino explores how codified

mourning traditions prevent the bereaved from plunging into disoriented despair.¹⁹ He writes:

The risk of not being able to transcend such a situation, of staying fixated and polarized in it—prisoners of parasitic imagination without horizon of cultural choice—constitutes the second decisive death that the mournful event can drag us into. For this reason, in the death of the loved person, we are peremptorily called to make ourselves procurers of the death of this very death; be this by allocating the sum of affects, behaviors, gratitude, hopes, and certainties that the deceased mobilized within us as long as he was alive to a new formal re-shaping; be it by appropriating, continuing, and growing the tradition of values that the deceased represented through our work. (De Martino [1958] 2002, 8)

Only moral labor, repeated and renewed, can forestall total collapse. If Heidegger's post-Kehre path sought *Gelassenheit*, De Martino proposes *transcending by deciding*, an “anti-catastrophic effort of communal designing (*progettazione*) of the workable, according to expressible and communicable values.” The ethos is ultimately future-oriented, forging a “common horizon” that wards off the world's dissolution without falling back on mythic repetition or “impossible nostalgia.”

Conclusion: Renewing the World Through De Martino's Ethos

In articulating his ethos of transcendence, Ernesto De Martino seeks neither to dwell in Cassirer's rationalist optimism nor to adopt Heidegger's passivity before Being. Instead, he urges us to recognize the precariousness of culture — its capacity to collapse under existential or historical pressures — while affirming our moral agency to rebuild communal horizons. This dialectic of finitude and creativity, crisis and renewal, remains strikingly relevant in our contemporary world.

Ultimately, De Martino's distinctive ‘third way’ owes much to the Italian intellectual climate, particularly the Milanese circle around Banfi, Cantoni, and Paci, and the hopeful existentialism of Abbagnano. These thinkers provided the philosophical vocabulary and moral seriousness that allowed De Martino to integrate Heidegger's confrontation with finitude and Cassirer's faith in symbolic creativity into a practical ethos of transcendence — one that remains urgently relevant today. As we grapple with challenges — climate change, pandemics, political polarization, and deepening social inequities — we all hear the echo the feeling of being on a precipice. In many quarters, trust in institutions has eroded, stoking fears of a new “end of the world.” Indeed, De Martino reminds us how fragile this “presence” can be, even amid modern, educated societies:

¹⁹ For contemporary examples of how the logic of transcending crisis through mythical-ritual—or, in this instance, mythical-contemplative—techniques of presence can be applied, see my research on the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen tradition (Geisshuesler 2020a; 2019c; 2020b; 2022; 2022; 2024a; 2024b).

It is necessary to briefly warn that there are, even in our civilization, “marginal situations” [...] in which these forms [of the crisis of the presence] can keep themselves vital, or rather produce themselves anew [...]: it suffices to think about the magical traditions still alive among our peasant populations, about the magic of the spiritist circles, and about [the magic] that is related to specific psychopathic states, such as psychasthenia, schizophrenia, and paranoia. [...] Moreover, also the educated and “normal” man can, in his daily life, be more or less fleetingly touched by these archaic realities. The fact that this reproduction of the magic reality is possible even for the Western, educated man, indicates how the established and guaranteed presence is a historical good, and, as such, is [...] revocable. (De Martino [1948] 2012, 129)

In other words, no culture’s symbolic edifice is immune to fragility; the crisis of presence can erupt where we least expect it, compelling us once more to reassert the ethical task of sustaining our shared world. De Martino thus offers a third way that neither overestimates reason’s power to conquer crisis nor surrenders to existential despair. In the face of pervasive dread, he insists on a moral and collective project — a duty-to-be-in-the-world — that chooses, again and again, to sustain the communal “presence” that renders life meaningful.

In this sense, the “end of the world” becomes a perpetual horizon against which we measure our commitment to the future. Whether confronting social injustice, ecological peril, or deep-seated cultural schisms, De Martino’s ethos of transcendence encourages neither naive progressivism nor paralyzing fatalism. Rather, it enjoins us to work, in community, at continually deciding to be present — to sustain, transform, and renew the worlds we share. By affirming both our symbolic power and our mortal vulnerability, we remain on the threshold of radical change, capable of forging meaning where others might see only collapse. De Martino’s insight, in short, is that in every crisis lies the moral summons to choose: we must keep building the social and cultural frameworks that allow the human story — indeed, each of our collective stories — to endure and thrive.

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