HANS BLUMENBERG

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Hans Blumenberg (Lübeck, 13 July 1920 – Altenberge, 28 March 1996), persecuted during the Nazi regime, studied at the theological faculties of Padernborn and Frankfurt (1939-1941), and, after 1945, Philosophy, Germanistics and Classical Philology at the University of Hamburg. He graduated in 1947 at the University of Kiel with a thesis on The *Origin of the Ontology of the Middle Ages*. He then took his habilitation in 1950 with a thesis titled *The Ontological Distance, an Inquiry into the Crisis of Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, under the supervision of Ludwig Landgrebe. He became associate professor in Hamburg (1958) and full professor of philosophy at the Justus Liebig University in Gießen (1960), then he worked in Bochum and Münster (1970, emeritus in 1985). Member of the Academy of Sciences and Literature (Mainz, 1960) and the Senate of the German Research Foundation (DFG), he took part in the Commission for the History of Concepts chaired by Hans Georg Gadamer and was co-founder of the research group "Poetics and Hermeneutics" (1963).

As Anselm Haverkamp remarked, Blumenberg's production on aesthetics and metaphorology is concentrated in the two decades 1950 and 1960 (Haverkamp 2001), though there are later developments (e.g. in his monograph on myth, as well as in many posthumous publications), and the interest in aesthetics (and more broadly in philosophical reflection on forms of artistic expression, especially literature) runs throughout, and cross-directs, much of his work. His specific contribution to aesthetics revolves around the problem of the plurivocity of the aesthetic object. The essays on Paul Valéry (1964-1966) discuss how the aesthetic object should no longer force the viewer's (reader's, listener's etc.) choice of interpretive standpoint, but should rather leave it open, condensing it into a new degree of reality: in addition to the perspective of an aesthetic plurality of historical order, it remains to conceive of a simultaneous plurality of the relationship with the aesthetic object (Blumenberg 2020: 400-465). Reflections on the novel (1964) and on the relationship between imitation of nature and the history of the idea of creative man (1957) are also intertwined with the theme of access to different conceptions of reality (Blumenberg 2020: 316-357, 499-524). Blumenberg focuses his analysis on a hybrid concept of reality that encompasses such phenomena as the novel and the dream, the genesis of the modern concept of reality and its differences from the ancient, the absolutism of reality and the ambiguity of realism, mimesis, the anthropological attitude to the depiction of the *homo pictor*, simulation, falsification and

fiction in the construction of reality – all themes that have something to do with the tension between the opposite terms of de-realization and the instance of reality, with a strong emphasis on the pole of possibility.

MAIN WORKS

1. In 1960 Blumenberg published in the "Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte" the study *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* and in 1971 further developed his metaphorology in *An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric*, to which in 1979 he gave the form of a *Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality* (Blumenberg 2020: 129-297). By metaphorology Blumenberg means a theory of the linguistic images that humans fabricate to represent their existence and the world. Blumenberg wonders what function they take on as they function within the historical process.

Among the various metaphorics, Blumenberg investigates in detail light and nakedness as metaphors for truth, navigation as a metaphor for the course of human life, and the clock and the machine as metaphors for reality. He distinguishes three functions of metaphor. The first one as flashy lighting effects used to embellish and highlight what is said and written, a kind of devaluation that makes metaphor a remnant to be replaced with something else. To this function, secondly, Blumenberg opposes an appreciation of metaphor as an irreducible form of thought, often possessing an autonomous meaning that cannot be transcended. Thirdly, metaphors are more than ornaments when they possess an autonomous content of meaning and function as the primary elements of philosophical language for which expressions other than metaphors are not available. These are called "absolute metaphors" to designate linguistic images that embrace semantic content that escapes the expressive force of the conceptual and objectifying language of philosophy and science. There is a dimension of the metaphoric nonconceptual that cannot be translated into the conceptual logical. Absolute metaphors stand in correspondence with those questions considered naïve, unanswerable, but not eliminable by principle. Such questions are already posed in the very constitution of existence, and are divided into: unifying theoretical questions, which provide us with a concrete intuition of the unconscious totality of reality, substituting itself for it (as, for example, polis, living being, theater or clockwork mechanism); pragmatic orienting questions, which make possible certain attitudes, expectations, actions, omissions, aspirations and illusions.

To solve the problem of how absolute metaphors might acquire credibility and plausibility today, Blumenberg evokes a "principle of insufficient reason" to indicate the admissibility of that which is only plausible and persuasive, that which allows itself to be supported by more or less convincing arguments that can never have the quality of definitive insights or incontestable demonstrations. Metaphorology has the task to re-attract the substructure of thought, the nurturing solution of systematic crystallizations, it transforms myth, religion and metaphysics into metaphorics, and highlights the changing ways of seeing and historical horizons of meaning by tracing the historical developments of absolute metaphors.

2. Central to *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966, revised and expanded edition 1988) is that the theological absolutism of the late Middle Ages authorizes and imposes as an answer the human self-

assertion of the Modern Age. A world at the mercy of the actions of an arbitrary omnipotent God is characterized by a lack of intelligible order. In pre-Christian Antiquity, the cosmos counted as the ultimate explication of what is generally possible. From Augustine to Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, the creator God was in his power to decide whether the world was to be or not, but not what form it was to take. With the Modern Age, these basic assertions became problematic: the visible world now reveals only a small fraction of what was in the power of God, who at any given moment is able to give his creation a different appearance. The nominalistic God is a hidden, superfluous God and can be replaced by chance. Knowledge of the world and care for salvation thus became opposing concepts, and the rehabilitation of theoretical curiosity became possible at the moment when human beings saw themselves remitted to their own and abandoned to an uncaring nature. Decisive was the effort from Augustine all the way to High Scholasticism to recover the world as a creation from the negativity of its demiurgical origin and to rescue its ancient dignity as a cosmos by transferring it into the Christian system. At the same time, Augustine introduced the element of fragility that would undermine its stability to the point of necessitating a new overcoming of Gnosticism, namely, the attribution to human beings of the origin of evil in the world.

To understand the shift from the "necessity of self-preservation" to the "versatility of self-assertion", it is necessary to reject the constant reference to technicality as the original anthropological characteristic. The continuity of history across the threshold between two epochs is not in fact assured by the survival of ideal substances, but by the hypothecation of problems that one imposes on the other. In agreement with his "historical functionalism", Blumenberg characterizes the system used by humans to interpret themselves and their world as a set of correlated place-functions in which determinate places are stabilized where functional equivalents operate. New places may be added, others be abolished or remain vacant and capable of exerting a binding inertial pressure on the knowledge programs of different epochs, a coercion to respond that compels replacement and reoccupation, as an implication of the minimum of identity that must be found, or at least presupposed, and sought even in the most eventful movement of history.

The distinction between substance and function (Cassirer), with its corresponding system of positions-questions-answers-occupations-reoccupations, does not, however, authorize the hypostatization of any fixed canon of "big questions" that throughout history would occupy with constant urgency the human desire for knowledge and motivate the aspiration for the interpretation of the self and the world. Blumenberg has traced the epochal coordinates of an inexorable disappointment of expectations of meaning, but in the absence of resignation. Our insoluble questions must be preserved in the lingering of "pensiveness": even if "must be certain that for this question there will be no answers to formulate, and formulated answers will not prevail", this does not mean that we will be easily "moved to renounce them" (1980, Blumenberg 2020, 525-530).

3. According to Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* (1979), one cannot order the relationship of myth to reason following a teleological and evolutionary succession *from* myth *to* logos, as is still the case in the Neo-Kantianism of Wilhelm Nestle and even more in Cassirer. The antithesis between myth and reason is a late

and baleful invention since it fails to see the function of myth, which is to overcome the archaic foreignness of the world. It is also wrong to think of myth in the past tense as incompatible with developments in scientific rationality since myth is not prelogical, not an archaic and outmoded form of the human spirit that would later be replaced by the precise forms of philosophy and science, but rather a piece of unparalleled work of the logos.

Myth operates a performance of distancing, in contrast to the absolutism of reality, i.e. the fact that human beings are unable to control the conditions of their own existence. The work of myth is the abatement of such absolutism. Myths surmount the world's silence by telling stories that clothe the world with names and dispel its indifference and randomness, identifying frightening nature with anthropomorphic gods, so as to break the world's unique power by apportioning it among multiple powers. Myths are then attempts to banish and abolish the terrifying namelessness of that which has no form, the menacing overpower of that which is unavailable, and the distressing lack of confidence with the stranger.

"Work on myth" means work on, in and for myth, it means situating oneself in the continuity of a reworking, already forever derived, without the need to reach an origin. Against any metaphysics of origin, Blumenberg reconstructs the process of myth reception in its historical development by studying the transformation of mythologems. As with Lévi-Strauss, all versions of a myth are of equal value for analysis, but unlike the structuralist approach, Blumenberg refuses to convert the impossibility of attaining temporal depth into a cognitive ideal. Nor can myth be said to find an end. The idea of an entirely conceptual or formalized thought is in Blumenberg's eyes, but also in those of Horkheimer and Adorno, nothing more than a myth. The many versions of the myth of the end of myths work in a similar way.

Blumenberg harks back to Erich Rothacker's "principle of meaningfulness", derived from Dilthey and according to which "it finds access in my world that which concerns me". In the cultural world, things have a different value for attention and vital distance than in the objective world defined by the exact sciences. The need for meaningfulness is based on the indifference of space and time, and myth responds to it by breaking down their homogeneity, making it possible to distinguish places and ascribe to them a history, to distinguish different moments in time and associate with them a history, a meaning of human significance. Meaningfulness implies polysemy, ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, and implies for myth the uncertainty concerning its meaning, indefinitely interpretable. This is a plurivocity that invests not only the seemingly inexhaustible potential of myth but also the variety of theories about its origin and actual meaning. This openness to elaboration and interpretation constitutes an underlying character of myth that leads it to ask questions that necessarily remain unanswered but cannot be avoided, such as those about the efficacy of human culture, the essential limits of action, mortality and so on. Myth does not answer questions, but rather makes them "unanswerable", as opposed to the consequentiality of answers that derive from a dogma. Instead of eliciting answers that stabilize in a thesis, myth reacts by creating "complication". The narrative complication, itineraries and digressions of myth follow a pleasure principle, not the shortest path between two points. Cunning, disguise, transformation, wandering and error constitute the favored plots of myths. As in all forms of action by proxy and by substitution, an

indirect, circumstantial, delayed, selective, and metaphorical relationship with reality takes shape in myth. Indirect access to the object and deflection, typical features of metaphor and rhetoric, relate the complications of the narrative to digressions of more general anthropological scope.

DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARIES

After Blumenberg's polemical claim, contained in the first edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, of an autonomous legitimacy of the modern age against the dependence in the form of secularization of its main acquisitions from previous epochs, a heated controversy developed that included, among others, interventions by Hans Georg Gadamer (who wrote about the "legitimate hermeneutic function" of the "hidden dimension of meaning" detected by the concept of secularization), Carl Schmitt (who pointed to the misunderstanding of the notion of "legitimacy" with that of "legality"), and Karl Löwith, (in controversy with whom Blumenberg had argued that the secularization theorem is a "special case of historical substantialism", in that in it theoretical success is made dependent on the demonstration of constants in history). Hans Jonas played an essential role in describing this movement through history, as his interpretation of Gnosis offered Blumenberg a model for comparing the ages.

Thanks to the "theory of nonconceptuality" (1979), the metaphorical is no longer regarded primarily as a preliminary sphere of concept formation. Rather, it is seen as referring to connections to the background of the life-world, and as a constant motivational support for all theory. Blumenberg thus distances himself from the outcomes of the History of Concepts – a project in which he had at first taken part – as they had come to be shaped by the exclusion of metaphors from the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*. In the preface to this latter work (1971), Joachim Ritter wrote that, although Blumenberg had shown how precisely metaphors that resist resolving themselves into concepts have a history in a more radical sense than concepts, the editors had declined to include metaphors and their history in the vocabulary alongside terms and concepts.

Following Blumenberg, myth is not the becoming true in history of an alleged archetype, but the particular mode in which an originless tale unfolds and endures in history in a shared form, and its variants must be read as continuations. On this basis, a convergence of interests between Blumenberg and the School of Konstanz and the dialogue with Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception emerges. This convergence is one of the reasons that gave rise to the meetings of the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* group, where Blumenberg played the role of leading philosopher and one of the founders, from 1963 to the early 1970s. Despite the fact that Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) have often been characterized as a "book of forgetting" and a "book of remembering" respectively, there are many points of convergence between them: they both recognize the rational and self-assertive value of myth, they both see myth as a response to primal fear concerning the forces of nature and they both derive their notions of instrumental reason and conceptual thinking from Nietzsche (Nicholls 2014, 196-199).

CRITICAL DEBATE

The reception of Blumenberg's work has been conditioned by Odo Marquard's unitary interpretation of it in the form of "exoneration from the absolute" (Marquard in Timm and Wetz 1999, 17-27) and the development proposed by his disciple Franz-Joseph Wetz on the basis of a bipartite idea underlying the entire work of the Lübeck philosopher, namely, the relationship between the absolutism of reality and the exonerating and compensatory performance of distance (Wetz 2020). Even the last works published by Blumenberg, such as *Lifetime and World Time* (1986) and *Cave Exits* (1989), can be read this way: the former opposing the boundless extension of world time in relation to the finiteness of life; the latter contrasting the foreign, inhospitable and uncomfortable world outside the cave and the homely and protective "caves", especially culture.

Between the late 1990s and the turn of the century, a number of studies have highlighted the anthropological orientation that has been a long-term inspiration for Blumenberg's research. At the heart of Blumenberg's enterprise, also thanks to his interpretation of Simmel as a potential anthropologist, lies an insurmountable "anthropological antinomy", a paradoxical co-presence in what is most proper to human beings which outlines an anthropological instance and requires a phenomenological definition (Borsari 1999, 2020). In contrast to Wetz's interpretation, an attempt is made to show that Blumenberg's thought is an "anthropologically grounded cultural theory which observes the recastings, metaphor changes and myth receptions with Darwinian composure, even coldness" (Heidenreich 2005, 21). On the other hand, it is clarified the extent to which Blumenberg's philosophy draws on philosophical anthropology, especially Cassirer and Gehlen - which requires careful reconstruction of Blumenberg's thinking (Müller 2005).

In the last twenty years, thanks to the posthumous publication of the materials of the *Description of Human Being* (Blumenberg 2006) and other texts in the Husserlian perspective, the phenomenological reading of Blumenbergian anthropology has been accentuated. Also thanks to the availability of numerous unpublished works from archives, hitherto ignored aspects of his research, such as work on technique and science (Fragio 2015, Zambon 2017), political implications (Heidenreich 2020), and the focus on literature have also emerged more clearly (Blumenberg 2017, see also collections and interventions on Goethe, Fontane, Carossa, Kafka, Valéry, Th. Mann etc.). A broad instrumentation that is systematizing access to the philosopher's work through lexicons, handbooks (Buch and Weidner 2014, Müller and Zill 2024) and overview reconstructions (Flasch 2017, Goldstein 2020, Zill 2020) has finally become available.

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