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Hans Blumenberg's Anthropology of Instrumental Reason
Culture, Modernity, and Self-Preservation

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Abstract:

This thesis argues that a notion of biological self-preservation is central to the philosophical anthropology of Hans Blumenberg. It shows how Blumenberg adopts an understanding of the human being developed in early 20th century German Philosophical Anthropology, particularly in the naturalistic variant proposed by Arnold Gehlen. This theory of the human argues that the unique biological make-up of the human being should be the central consideration in the interpretation of human life and its production (culture). Against the backdrop of an archaic experience of the power of nature that he calls ‘the absolutism of reality’, Blumenberg adopts this ‘anthropobiological’ paradigm and uses it as the basis for a functional interpretation of culture centred on human self-preservation.

The thesis demonstrates that this philosophical anthropology is not only descriptive, but also has normative and critical aspects. Blumenberg proposes an unsurpassable limit in the possible transformations of the human relationship to nature, denying the possibility of a receptive opening to nature that would break with instrumental mastery. This anthropological limit is formulated in critical dialogue with Martin Heidegger’s work and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, both of which look forward to a reconciled relationship between the human and non-human.

It then argues that Blumenberg’s interpretation and defence of modernity is also grounded in his philosophical anthropology. His account of modernity through the category of ‘self-assertion’ functions as a complete reversal of the critique of instrumental reason in Heidegger and Critical Theory. Blumenberg celebrates the modern intensification of the instrumental relationship to nature as the moment in which humanity first properly recognised and accepted its true relation to nature. Only by reading Blumenberg in dialogue with the critique of instrumental reason can these implications of his anthropological position and account of modernity be brought to the surface.

Declaration:

This is to certify that:

- (i) The thesis comprises only my original work toward the PhD.
- (ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.
- (iii) The thesis is fewer than 100, 000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, and appendices.

Francis Plagne

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List of abbreviations

Works by Hans Blumenberg:

AAR: ‘An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric’. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. In *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, edited by Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, 429-58. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987.

AM: *Arbeit am Mythos*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979.

ÄMS: *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*. Edited by Anselm Haverkamp. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001.

BM: *Beschreibung des Menschen*. Edited by Manfred Sommer. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006.

BTB: Hans Blumenberg and Jacob Taubes. *Briefwechsel 1961-1981*. Edited by Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Martin Treml. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013.

GCW: *The Genesis of the Copernican World*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987.

LMA: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1983.

PM: *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Translated by Robert Savage. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

PNC: ‘Prospect for a Theory of Non-Conceptuality,’ in *Shipwreck With Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Translated by Steven Rendall, 81-102. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997.

WM: *Work on Myth*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985.

Works by other authors:

BT: Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.

BW: Martin Heidegger. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper Collins, 1977.

DE: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

ER: Max Horkheimer. *Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.

Note on Translations

All alterations to published translations have been noted, with two exceptions: I have removed the unnecessary capitalisation of 'Being' in texts by and about Martin Heidegger and italicised all foreign words (including *Dasein*). Where a translation and original German text are cited in one note, they are separated by a forward slash (/).

Introduction

The work of Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) embraces a wide variety of topics that bridge philosophy and intellectual history. In a series of major books, he analysed the emergence of modernity and the modern sciences, focusing in particular on the development and consequences of Copernican astronomy.¹ He theorised the genesis and reception of myth and metaphor, often by means of histories of the reception and reconfiguration of particular myths (primarily drawn from Greek mythology)² and metaphors (such as the Platonic exit from the cave,³ the book of nature,⁴ and light as a figure for truth).⁵ These historical and philological studies were accompanied by works of what Anselm Haverkamp calls ‘more pointed theory construction’,⁶ particularly in the form of essays that directly addressed the philosophical anthropology at play across much of Blumenberg’s discussion of myth and metaphor.⁷

The intentions behind many of Blumenberg’s historical and philological investigations can sometimes be obscure, as they do not always betray a clear relationship to an overarching philosophical agenda. In many of his writings on particular historical and philosophical topics, Blumenberg makes a contribution to understanding those topics without necessarily articulating a broader philosophical insight. His writings can be disorienting in their digressiveness, at times seemingly impelled only by the desire to exhaustively transmit his enormously wide reading. The fragmented and anecdotal nature of some of his later

¹ See *GCW*, *LMA*, and the earlier studies collected in Hans Blumenberg, *Die kopernikanische Wende* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965).

² See the long account of the reception of the myth of Prometheus in *WM*, 299-636.

³ Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

⁴ Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981).

⁵ Blumenberg, ‘Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stages of Philosophical Concept Formation’, trans. Joel Anderson, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30-62.

⁶ Anselm Haverkamp, ‘Die Technik der Rhetorik: Blumenbergs Projekt’, in *ÄMS*, 435.

⁷ The most important of these are *AAR* (originally published in 1971) and *PNC* (originally published in 1979).

books,⁸ composed of sometimes tenuous thematic groupings of short pieces (often originally published in the feuilleton pages of newspapers such as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) seems fitting for a thinker who is said to have prepared for writing by collecting quotations on index cards. These cards were then worked through one by one and marked as ‘used’ when they had been integrated into the finished text.⁹ As Angus Nicholls writes, Blumenberg’s work is ‘materialist’ in the sense that his ideas and theoretical reflections are usually developed in the course of in-depth commentaries on historical materials, rather than being presented as the result of theoretical speculation.¹⁰

This thesis does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of Blumenberg’s work.¹¹ Instead, it is a study of his philosophical anthropology that argues for the centrality of the notion of *self-preservation* to the theory of the human presented in Blumenberg’s work.¹² In this interpretation, I draw primarily on Blumenberg’s anthropological writings of the 1970s (which culminate in *Work on Myth*, originally published in 1979) and the interpretation of modernity developed in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (originally published in 1966, then expanded across three volume in a second edition published in 1974) and other related

⁸ See, for example, Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁹ See Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Such a work is needed in English. The existing English monographs on Blumenberg treat specific topics of his thought. Elizabeth Brient’s *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001) is narrowly concerned with the argument of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, of which it gives one of the best analyses. Much of Brient’s book is dedicated to a critique and rectification of what she sees as Blumenberg’s flawed reading of Nicholas of Cusa. Angus Nicholls’ *Myth and the Human Sciences*, although more directly engaged with Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology and broader in its approach, is primarily concerned with Blumenberg as a theorist of myth, developing an interpretation of Blumenberg’s position on myth in relation to the experience and aftermath of National Socialism. In addition to a number of studies of particular facets of his work, there exists in German a general overview of Blumenberg’s work, but at an introductory level: Franz Josef Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg: zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2004). A comprehensive listing of major literature on Blumenberg can be found in Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 34-35.

¹² I use the gender-neutral designations ‘human being’ and ‘humanity’ whenever possible, but when directly paraphrasing Blumenberg, Gehlen, or Heidegger, I occasionally use the word ‘man’ to translate *der Mensch*.

writings on modern science and technology. In the course of developing this argument, I engage at length with Blumenberg's readings of cultural forms (such as myth, dogma, and magic) and his historical narrative of the emergence of modernity. However, I am less concerned with evaluating his approaches to these topics in their own right than in articulating the role they play in clarifying the presuppositions and ramifications of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology. I approach Blumenberg as proposing a philosophical image of the human being that intertwines descriptive and prescriptive moments and provides the foundation for his analyses of a host of cultural-historical phenomena.

My argument can be summarised in three steps. First, I show how Blumenberg adopts an understanding of the human being developed in early 20th century German Philosophical Anthropology, particularly in the naturalistic variant proposed by the right-wing philosopher and sociologist Arnold Gehlen. This theory of the human is, to use Gehlen's terminology, 'anthropobiological', as it argues that the unique biological make-up of the human being should be the central consideration in the interpretation of human life and its production (culture). Against the backdrop of an archaic experience of the power of nature that he calls 'the absolutism of reality', Blumenberg adopts this anthropobiological paradigm and uses it as the basis for a functional interpretation of culture centred on the exigency of human self-preservation.

Second, I demonstrate that this philosophical anthropology is not only descriptive, but also has normative and critical aspects. Blumenberg postulates a perpetual antagonism between nature and humanity, defining human culture as exhibiting a need to gain distance from and mastery over nature. He thereby proposes an unsurpassable limit in the possible transformations of the human relationship to nature, denying the possibility of a receptive opening to nature that would break with instrumental mastery. This anthropological limit, I

argue, is formulated in critical dialogue with Martin Heidegger's work and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, both of which look forward to a reconciled relationship between the human and non-human.

Third, I argue that Blumenberg's interpretation and defence of modernity is also grounded in his philosophical anthropology. His account of modernity through the category of 'self-assertion' – *Selbstbehauptung*, a term also used by Heidegger, importantly, to characterise the excesses of modern subjectivism¹³ – functions as a complete reversal of the critique of instrumental reason in Heidegger and Critical Theory.¹⁴ He not only positions the instrumental relation to nature lamented by these authors as inescapable (thereby reducing images of human reconciliation with nature to mere fantasy); Blumenberg in fact celebrates the modern intensification of this instrumental relationship as the moment in which humanity first properly recognised and accepted its true relation to nature. Only by reading Blumenberg in dialogue with the critique of instrumental reason in Heidegger and Critical Theory, I argue, can these implications of his anthropological position and account of modernity be brought to the surface.

In order to demonstrate the importance of a philosophical anthropology centred on self-preservation in Blumenberg's work, I devote the opening chapter to a detailed discussion of the Philosophical Anthropology of Max Scheler and Arnold Gehlen, who propose a theory of the human being as defined by its weakness of instinct. These thinkers are a key influence on Blumenberg and, in the second chapter, I show how he essentially adopts the more naturalistic variant of this argument proposed by Gehlen and its corresponding interpretation

¹³ In the 1946 'Letter on Humanism', Heidegger writes of modern subjectivity's 'unconditional self-assertion' [*unbedingte Selbstbehauptung*]. See *BW*, 245 / *Über den Humanismus*, 10th ed. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 33-34.

¹⁴ Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'Critical Theory' and 'Frankfurt School' to refer only to the work of the first generation Frankfurt School (specifically Horkheimer and Adorno), not to the later reconstruction of this tradition in the work of Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and Axel Honneth.

of human culture as enabling an otherwise impossible survival of the human animal. On the basis of Gehlen's work, Blumenberg develop a functional interpretation of culture, the centrepiece of which is his idea of the 'work of myth'. Blumenberg interprets myth functionally, as a repertoire of techniques for dealing with humanity's uneasy relation to nature, which he describes through the semi-fictitious scenario of an archaic confrontation of the hominoid creature with the 'absolutism of reality'. Against the backdrop of this primordial experience of an unfriendly nature to which the human animal is uniquely biologically unadapted, myth constructs an orderly and meaningful world in which humans can live. Blumenberg interprets scientific rationality as performing a functionally similar role through different means, thereby questioning the traditional paradigm of a progression from *mythos* to *logos*. Against commentators (such as Angus Nicholls and Eva Geulen) who have argued for the merely provisional status of Blumenberg's scenario of an archaic confrontation with the superior power of nature, I stress the centrality to Blumenberg's work, as a whole, of its anthropological focus on self-preservation.

The third chapter argues that Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology should be seen as proposing an image of the human being as 'active' or 'constructive' in relation to its reality. This is directed against a contrasting image focused around receptivity, articulated by Heidegger. This contrast is discussed initially through the divergence between the two authors' respective accounts of the notion of 'significance', which I use to point to a more fundamental contest between two anthropological images. Blumenberg's emphasis on the human's construction of its reality counters the radically passive notion of man as 'shepherd of being' developed particularly in the later Heidegger. Alongside his account of 'the work of myth', the other key category through which Blumenberg formulates the human construction of reality is metaphor, which he interprets as a form through which human beings give meaning to their world.

Deepening this initial confrontation between Heidegger and Blumenberg, the fourth chapter explores Blumenberg's use of his anthropology as a critical tool that is directed, particularly, against tendencies he sees exemplified by Heidegger, Adorno, and the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. It begins by turning to a stringently critical essay by Jacob Taubes that accuses Blumenberg and his contemporary Odo Marquard of a regression to myth, a renunciation of the project of enlightenment that results in an irrational defence of existing institutions. Although dependant on questionable eschatological-revolutionary rhetoric, this critique is useful for illuminating precisely the sort of position that Blumenberg uses his anthropological theses to argue against. In *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg rejects calls for radical change – whether by means of enlightened critique or through the romantic return to a lost paradise – and develops an evolutionary defence of the legitimacy of existing institutions. He proposes a series of categories – including dogma, utopia, and imagination – through which to understand the excesses of critique, posing against such radicalism the 'realism' of his focus on self-preservation. In this rejection of hopes for radical change and appeals to transcendent alterity, Adorno emerges alongside Heidegger as the chief object of Blumenberg's critique.

The fifth and sixth chapters then propose a more detailed reading of Blumenberg's work in dialogue with Heidegger and Adorno. Chapter 5 develops a close comparison between Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic on Enlightenment*, tracking the parallels and divergences between the two texts. Proximities are demonstrated between the naturalistic anthropological positions and functional interpretations of myth in the two texts, both of which unsettle the distinction between myth and scientific rationality. These parallels only bring into sharper relief the fundamental divergence between the normative-prescriptive horizons of the two works, which I approach through an analysis of their contrasting interpretation of magic and language. Where Blumenberg interprets

magic and language purely in instrumental terms, for Horkheimer and Adorno they contain a mimetic excess that promises reconciliation with nature. Blumenberg's reduction of these forms to their instrumental function demonstrates his denial of the possibility of reconciliation with nature, thereby strengthening his thesis of an unsurpassable antagonism between the human being and nature.

The sixth chapter turns to Blumenberg's account of modernity, arguing that the narrative that Blumenberg presents under the rubric of 'self-assertion' shares its key elements with the apocalyptic representation of modernity, present in both Adorno and Heidegger, in which it is defined through the intensification of the instrumental domination of nature. Heidegger, Adorno, and Blumenberg all present primarily philosophical accounts of modernity that emphasise a fundamental epistemological transformation affecting the nature of the theoretical attitude (now active rather than contemplative), the goal of thought (no longer understood as the adequation between thought and thing), and the understanding of external nature (now reduced to a meaningless material substrate of human activity). Beyond its explicitly formulated concern with the debate over secularisation, I propose that Blumenberg's defence of the 'legitimacy' of the modern age ultimately defends the very epistemological transformation lamented by the critics of modern instrumental reason.

In the final chapter, I turn to a crucial passage in which Blumenberg distinguishes self-assertion, the key category of his account of modernity, from self-preservation, which I position as the central concern of his philosophical anthropology. Demonstrating how the sharp distinction between these two concepts unravels, I use this overlap between self-preservation and self-assertion to highlight the anthropological dimension of his defence of modernity. Blumenberg ultimately argues that the intensified instrumental domination of nature in modernity (self-assertion) is the recognition and acknowledgment of the fraught relationship between humanity and nature and thus a fulfilment of intrinsic human

possibilities. This is the final outcome of Blumenberg's radical reversal of the critique of instrumental reason: an anthropology of instrumental reason that ties human activity inseparably to the necessities of self-preservation. Having formulated the extreme outcomes of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, I then turn to some of its limitations, and consider how Blumenberg overemphasises the functional dimension of human life. This results in a one-sided anthropological account that is unable to adequately understand two aspects of human existence: the aesthetic and the social.

In much of the anglophone reception of Blumenberg's work, it has been approached with an eye to its usefulness, whether in offering a method for the study of myth or metaphor,¹⁵ or in articulating a position that resolves the antithesis between hermeneutic traditionalism and enlightenment rationalism.¹⁶ My approach here is different. I approach Blumenberg's work neither as offering useful tools nor as resolving particular philosophical questions, but rather as developing a fascinating but deeply problematic position. In emphasising the crucial, almost systematic role, played by self-preservation in Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, I wish to draw attention to an often overlooked dimension that allows for a more convincing and sophisticated interpretation of the normative horizon of his

¹⁵ Nicholls, for example, argues that Blumenberg's theory of myth has a 'viable future as a mode of thinking about culture'. Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 24. For approaches to Blumenberg's work that highlight its usefulness for discussing specific issues, see Alison Ross, 'Moral Metaphorics, or Kant after Blumenberg: Towards an Analysis of the Aesthetic Settings of Morality', *Thesis Eleven*, 104, no. 1 (2011): 40-58, which uses Blumenberg's analysis of metaphor to examine the pre-theoretical underpinnings of morality; Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 141-169, which uses Blumenberg's metaphorology to interpret Warburg's *Mnemosyne*; Florian P. Kühn, 'Afghanistan and the 'Graveyard of Empires': Blumenberg, Under-complex Analogy and Basic Myths in International Politics', in *Myth and Narrative in International Politics: Interpretative Approaches to the Study of IR*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevera (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 147-172, which uses Blumenberg's theory of myth to discuss aspects of Afghan politics after 2001; and Austin Harrington, 'Theological History and the Legitimacy of the Modern Social Sciences: Considerations on the Work of Hans Blumenberg', *Thesis Eleven* 94, no. 1 (2008): 6-28, which uses Blumenberg's work on myth and modernity to interpret the relation of the modern social sciences to religious concepts.

¹⁶ See Robert M. Wallace, 'Blumenberg's Third Way: Between Habermas and Gadamer', in *Dialectic and Narrative*, ed. Thomas R. Flynn and Dalia Judovitz (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 185-196.

work; I pose this against an approach that emphasises Blumenberg's commitment to the provisional and open-ended.¹⁷ Despite its limitations, Blumenberg's work generates a fascinating critique of the romanticism of Adorno and Heidegger, one that complements the Habermasian critique that pairs these two thinkers by seeing them as indicative of the dangers of the totalising critique of reason. Instead of being primarily concerned with the dark socio-political potentials of the radical critique of Western reason in Adorno and Heidegger, Blumenberg questions their work anthropologically, debating the very possibility of the alternative models of the relation between humanity and nature they propose. Blumenberg, I argue, goes too far in his critique of instrumental reason, ultimately offering a reductive and limited account of human life narrowly focused around self-preservation. But this failing is, in itself, fascinating and timely. At a historical moment when, principally through neuroscience and genetics, stress is increasingly being placed on the biological determinants of human life, it is instructive to take seriously the achievements and limitations of a thinker who extended a biologically grounded approach to the human being into a philosophical theory of human life and culture centred on the exigencies of self-preservation.¹⁸

¹⁷ See chapter 2.5 below.

¹⁸ On the problematic consequences of biologicistic understandings of the human being, particular in terms of subjectivity, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister, Max Pensky and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003). Phillip Honenberger presents the currency of naturalistic discourses as a rationale for renewed analysis of the tradition of Philosophical Anthropology, from which Blumenberg's position derives. See his 'Introduction', in *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology: Nature, Life, and the Human between Transcendental and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Phillip Honenberger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-26.

Chapter 1: Central Themes of Philosophical Anthropology

Beginning with his earliest work, Blumenberg makes his interest in the philosophical treatment of the human being clear. In his doctoral thesis of 1947 (on the ‘problem of the originality of mediaeval-scholastic ontology’), he remarks that ‘in all questions, man can only question himself in his own understanding’.¹ In 1961 he writes that all of the seemingly distinct strands of philosophical research are really expressions of ‘the one will to this one matter: to bring to language what is human and what manifests itself in the human’.² Jürgen Goldstein speaks of Blumenberg ‘making anthropology the centre of gravity of all philosophical questions’³ and Vida Pavesich has pointed to the importance of an anthropological ‘optic’ through which Blumenberg tends to view his material.⁴ Blumenberg’s project can be seen as philosophical anthropology in the ‘narrower sense’ defined by Herbert Schnädelbach, ‘where the theory of man acquires a fundamental significance or a key-role for the whole of philosophical activity’.⁵

Beyond this anthropological ‘optic’ or attitude, Blumenberg draws directly from the paradigm of ‘Philosophical Anthropology’ established in the first half of the 20th century by Max Scheler and developed by thinkers such as Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.⁶ Blumenberg develops an account of the human being that agrees with and extends the account offered by the Philosophical Anthropology movement, particularly in the version

¹ Cited in Jürgen Goldstein, ‘Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg’, trans. Robert Savage, *Thesis Eleven* 104, no.1 (2011): 7.

² This passage comes from a 1961 article, ‘Die Bedeutung der Philosophie für unsere Zukunft’, cited in Goldstein, ‘Work on significance’, 8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Vida Pavesich, ‘Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology: After Heidegger and Cassirer’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (2008): 431.

⁵ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1931*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 226.

⁶ On Scheler as the founder of modern Philosophical Anthropology see Arnold Gehlen, ‘Philosophische Anthropologie’, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, *Philosophische Anthropologie und Handlungslehre*, ed. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 237. See also, in the same volume, ‘Rückblick auf die Anthropologie Max Schelers’, 247.

articulated by Arnold Gehlen. Substantial continuities exist between the anthropological works of Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen, such that Philosophical Anthropology should be seen not simply as outlining an area of research but also as offering a ‘distinct theoretical program’.⁷ We can isolate three important elements, shared by the major authors of Philosophical Anthropology, that Blumenberg integrates into his own ‘late contribution to philosophical anthropology’:⁸ (1) the human being is understood as simultaneously embedded in its biological existence and as unique among living beings; (2) this uniqueness is articulated through a comparison between the relation of the animal to its environment and the human to its world; (3) a central role is played in this comparison by the thesis of a weakening of instinctual behaviour in the human being.

In order to understand how Blumenberg draws on this paradigm, this chapter will give an account of how these themes enter into the work of the original exponents of Philosophical Anthropology. The next chapter then turns to Blumenberg’s own variation on this paradigm, which I expound in relation to its precedent in the work of Gehlen. Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology forms the basis of a functional interpretation of culture, the centrepiece of which is his account of myth. He distinguishes a number of key techniques operative in myth, the most important of which is its ability to generate ‘significance’. This

⁷ Joachim Fischer, ‘Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen’, trans. Christina Harrison, *Iris* 1, no. 1 (2009): 169. I adopt Fischer’s use of capitalisation to distinguish between the general area of research (philosophical anthropology) and the historically and conceptually distinct paradigm (Philosophical Anthropology). *Ibid.*, 153, n. 4. On Philosophical Anthropology as a distinct paradigm and tradition, see also Phillip Honenberger, ‘Introduction’, in *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology*, 4-15. In what follows, I focus my discussion on the work of Scheler and Gehlen, leaving Plessner aside. Scheler and Gehlen represent opposed extremes (idealist and naturalistic, respectively) of Philosophical Anthropology, while Plessner’s work articulates a position somewhere between the two. Scheler’s work is the essential backdrop for understanding Gehlen’s position, of which, as I will argue in the next chapter, Blumenberg adopts several important aspects. It is also worth noting that while references to Scheler and Gehlen are found throughout Blumenberg’s work, his discussion of Plessner in the works that concern me here is restricted to a single reference (see *BM*, 681). For a summary of Plessner’s contribution to Philosophical Anthropology, see Phillip Honenberger, ‘Animality, Sociality, and Historicity in Helmuth Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 23, no. 5 (2015): 707-729.

⁸ Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 92.

functional interpretation of myth allows Blumenberg to posit a continuity between myth and scientific rationality as two forms of *logos*, interpreted in terms of their usefulness for human life. Against commentators who have stressed the provisional nature of Blumenberg's anthropology, I argue that it is foundational for his work.

1.1. Max Scheler: Human World-Openness

As Herbert Schnädelbach has noted, Philosophical Anthropology is a product of a period in German philosophy marked by the 'collapse of Idealism'⁹ and the ascent of materialist and positivist attitudes grounded in the physical sciences. Scheler, whose work of the 1920s introduces the paradigm, frames his turn to philosophical anthropology as necessitated by the perplexities of an epoch in which 'man finds himself completely and utterly "problematical"' because the existing variations on commonly accepted understandings of the nature of the human being (theological, as creature of God; philosophical, as rational being; and naturalistic, as animal) all appear 'untenable'.¹⁰

In attempting to find an answer to this dilemma, Scheler and Gehlen both situate their theories of the human being between the poles of, on the one hand, the idealist and rationalist identification of the human essence with a non-physical spirit or reason, and, on the other, forms of naturalism and biologism that deny any essential difference between the human being and other forms of life. Philosophical Anthropology attempts to integrate the findings of contemporary biology into its account of the human being, using the human being's physical nature to intensify, rather than deny, its uniqueness among living beings. However, although this uniqueness is in every case articulated through a comparison between the

⁹ Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1931*, 220.

¹⁰ Max Scheler, 'Man and History', in *Philosophical Perspectives*, trans. Oscar A. Haac (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 65, 76. See also the introductory remarks in Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 4.

relation of the animal to its environment and the human to its world – a comparison in which the relative lack of instinctual behaviour in the human being plays an essential role – Scheler and Gehlen in particular disagree on the source of this uniqueness.

Beginning from a vitalist metaphysics, Scheler argues for a basic homogeneity of plant, animal, and human life,¹¹ in all of which is present the same vital impulse (toward ‘reproduction and death’).¹² Yet Scheler draws an essential distinction between animal and human modes of relating to externality, captured in the terminological distinction between the animal ‘environment’ (*Umwelt*) and the human ‘world’ (*Welt*). Scheler pictures animal life as an immersion in an environment composed only of stimuli relevant to instinctual behaviours in which ‘what does not interest the instinct or drive is not given’.¹³ Each animal exists within a species-specific feedback loop of instinctually driven activity and the resistance, or lack of resistance, in the environment according to which this activity is modified. The animal’s instinctual behaviour is motivated by a ‘physiological condition of the nervous system’ rather than conscious awareness of its environment, in which it remains ‘ecstatically immersed’.¹⁴

In this conception of animal life, Scheler demonstrates his proximity to the contemporaneous biological research of Jakob von Uexküll, with whose ideas Plessner and Gehlen both directly engage.¹⁵ Uexküll’s famous example of the tick crystallises the understanding of animal life held by all of the major figures of Philosophical Anthropology. The environment of the tick consists of only three stimuli: light, the smell of butyric acid, and the temperature of 37 degrees centigrade. Sensitivity to these three stimuli allows the tick to climb up a branch and then drop onto a warm-blooded mammal to drink its blood; nothing

¹¹ See Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, 9-34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹⁵ On the importance of Uexküll’s biology for Philosophical Anthropology, see Fischer, ‘Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology’, 164-5; David J. Levy, *Political Order: Philosophical Anthropology, Modernity, and the Challenge of Ideology* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 52-55; and Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 82-83.

else that human beings can perceive in the world surrounding the tick enters into its environment. ‘The whole rich world surrounding the tick is constricted and transformed into an impoverished structure that, most importantly of all, consists only of three features and three effect marks – the tick’s environment’.¹⁶ The tick’s ‘certainty of action’ depends on the ‘poverty of this environment’: only those stimuli that need to be perceived in order for the tick to discharge its instinctive functions enter into its perception; everything else remains undifferentiated (and thus far less likely to trigger a mistaken performance of its instinctive behaviour).¹⁷

Philosophical Anthropology agrees with Uexküll that this essentially symbiotic relationship to environmental stimuli – in which, to use Plessner’s striking phrase, the ‘organism is...only half of its actual life’¹⁸ – defines all animal life, even in its more advanced forms. As Scheler writes: ‘The structure of the environment is precisely adapted to the physiological peculiarities of the animal...and to its instincts and sensory structure, which form a strictly functional unity’.¹⁹ Uexküll, however, did not fundamentally distinguish the animal relation to externality from the human. He found a structure similar to the multiplicity of species-specific animal environments in the differing relationships to their shared reality humans form based on their typical modes of interaction with it: the forest, for instance, is something very different for the hunter, the forester, the child, and the poet.²⁰ For Scheler,

¹⁶ Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans with A Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 51.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cited in Fischer, ‘Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology’, 164.

¹⁹ Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, 38.

²⁰ Michael Landmann, *Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. David J. Parent (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 196-197. Gehlen, who praises Uexküll’s theory of the animal environment as a ‘spark of genius’ that ‘convinces us that the world of animals is not our own’, criticises his application of the same logic to the differing human relationships to the world: ‘In doing this, a distinction of great importance is lost. The original, truly instinctive behaviour patterns of animals, which are tied to specific natural environments, are confused with an *acquired* specialisation of behaviour in man which is his response to a finely structured cultural sphere’. Gehlen argues that this error derives from Uexküll’s neglect of the role of instinct in animal life. Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His*

however, this picture of the animal's immersion in its environment is simply the background against which the characteristic human relation to reality is outlined.

Where the animal is immersed in its environment, the human being is unique among living things in being 'open to the world'.²¹ Rather than existing in a feedback loop with instinctually relevant stimuli, the human being encounters external objects within a world, understood as a spatio-temporal horizon 'capable of unlimited expansion'.²² This *Weltoffenheit* (world-openness) exposes the human being equally to all manner of stimuli, including those that are irrelevant to its survival. This creates the 'detachment and distance' from phenomena that allows them to be encountered as objects or things in their own right, rather than simply triggers for instinctual behaviour.²³ As Michael Landmann neatly phrases this point, the realm of objectivity encountered by humans is 'life-neutral', in the sense that it is composed of externalities with no necessary relation to the fulfilment of human drives.²⁴ This 'objectification' of external stimuli is, for Scheler, the fundamental operation of the human spirit.²⁵

What makes this openness to the world possible? As Joachim Fischer has noted, Scheler and Gehlen both offer variants on the same response to this question, by identifying a 'rupture and new mediation of the [animal] biocycle, which establishes a new space for man's encounter with his environment'.²⁶ In Scheler's account, this rupture occurs through the human being's ability to 'suppress and repress his own vital drives'.²⁷ Through its ability to choose whether or not to perform behaviours grounded in instinctual drives, the human

Nature and Place in the World, trans. Clare McMilan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 68-70.

²¹ Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 39. On the uniqueness of human spatio-temporality, see *ibid.*, 44-46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39, 43.

²⁴ Landmann, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 190.

²⁵ Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, 39-40.

²⁶ Fischer, 'Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology', 165.

²⁷ Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, 54.

being breaks the cycle of stimulus and response, making it possible to encounter dimensions of phenomena outside their relationship to instinctual behaviour. In animal life, ‘drives and senses belong together’,²⁸ because only what is relevant for instinctual behaviour enters into the animal’s sensory perception. This weakening of the influence of the drives thus corresponds to a weakening of the power of the senses: the suppression of instinctual behaviour is also a negation of the efficacy of the corresponding sensory triggers. The human being thereby introduces a distance between sense and behaviour that does not exist in the animal. This allows it to synthesise a manifold of sensory impressions into consciousness of an independently existing object or thing and, beyond this, to abstract from sensory experience to the realm of ideas about objects; for example by perceiving the membership of an object within a conceptual class (i.e. as a dog, pear, or painting). Ultimately, this distance from sensory experience allows the human being to acquire knowledge of the essences, both metaphysical and ethical, that underlie concrete reality.²⁹

For Scheler, ‘to be human means to oppose this reality with an emphatic “No”’:³⁰ the human being is the ‘ascetic of life’, able to suspend the fulfillment of instinctual drives and thereby negate and transcend the ‘accidental qualities’ that appear to its senses in order to experience (and act in relation to) a realm of essences.³¹ The important differences between Scheler’s and Gehlen’s respective positions emerge from Scheler’s attempt to locate the source of this human aptitude to negate its instincts and sensory impressions. Scheler rejects as incomplete a naturalistic explanation of this ability that would see the weakening of instinct as the result merely of ‘defective organic adaptation’ of the human to its environment, subsequently compensated for by the development of intellectual and

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 49-51. For Scheler’s views on how the human spirit, in addition to being able to intuit metaphysical essences, opens on to a ‘realm of values’ with a corresponding essential validity, see Scheler, ‘Man and History’, 89.

³⁰ Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

technological abilities.³² Such naturalistic theories (which Scheler calls ‘negative’ because they propose a lack or deficiency as central to the human constitution) fail, on his reading, to offer a cogent account of why this failure of adaptation has occurred, thus leaving the most fundamental question still to be answered: ‘What is it that represses instincts?’³³

For Scheler, the negation of drives is possible because the human being participates in an order higher than physical reality, an order he refers to as ‘spirit’. The distinctive qualities of the human being cannot be found in its ‘intelligence’, which Scheler defines as a capacity to respond ‘meaningfully’ to a new situation without trial and error, and also finds present in higher animals.³⁴ Intelligence is a fundamentally ‘worldly’ capacity, exhausted in practical problem solving, whereas the higher dimension of human life (spirit), as we have seen, is evident in its negation of instinctual drives and sensory reality. This higher realm of spirit is not a ‘product’ of the negation of drives; rather, the negation of drives is the ‘means for manifesting the spirit in man’.³⁵ As a ‘principle opposed to life as such’,³⁶ spirit cannot be part of ‘this world’, cannot be ‘located in space or in time: it can only be located in the highest Ground of Being itself’.³⁷ Thus the human being is defined for Scheler through its participation in an extra-worldly, metaphysical reality, which allows it negate its biological instincts and redirects their energies to spiritual pursuits (namely, knowledge of essences and purely ethical conduct).

³² Ibid., 58-59.

³³ Ibid., 61.

³⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁵ Ibid., 56.

³⁶ Ibid., 36.

³⁷ Ibid., 47.

1.2. Arnold Gehlen's Anthropobiology

Although he acknowledges and develops Scheler's theory of the intrinsic connection between the weakening of instinctual behaviour and *Weltoffenheit* in the human being,³⁸ Gehlen rejects Scheler's identification of what is specifically human with an extra-worldly 'spiritual' principle. For Gehlen, Scheler's anthropology unwittingly restates the hierarchical scheme of traditional rationalist anthropology (from whose rigid dualism of spirit and life Scheler sees himself as escaping)³⁹ and views the human being as an animal blessed with an additional spiritual dimension. For Gehlen, this view is unscientific and cannot be empirically substantiated. More importantly, it also fails to tell us what is specific to the human being, presenting an account in which much of the structure of human life is shared with animals, and the defining transcendent surplus is itself understood as a metaphysical ground essentially independent from the human being.⁴⁰ Against this *mélange* of animal and extra-worldly (divine) properties, Gehlen poses his own attempt to 'develop an understanding of man's nature that would make use of very specific concepts, applicable only to the subject of man'.⁴¹ Gehlen's work demonstrates a more purely 'anthropological' approach than Scheler's, in that it removes any mention of an objectively existing metaphysical order in its analysis of the forms of human life.⁴²

³⁸ Gehlen views Scheler's distinction between the closed animal environment and the world-openness of the human being as an essential part of an 'epochal' (*epochemachend*) new approach to the question of the human being. See Gehlen, 'Zur Geschichte der Anthropologie', in *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 4, 152-153.

³⁹ Scheler sees himself as escaping this dualism through his argument that spirit depends on sublimating vital energies in order to appropriate their power. See Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, 66-68. See also the commentary on this aspect of Scheler's desire to achieve a 'non-dualistic base' to his anthropology in Fischer, 'Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology', 159-160.

⁴⁰ Gehlen, *Man*, 14-17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² See David Levy's comparison between Scheler's metaphysics and Gehlen's 'pure anthropological approach' in *Political Order*, 58-79. A similar distinction is made in Beth Cykowski, 'In Pursuit of Something "Essential" About Man: Heidegger and Philosophical Anthropology', in *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology*, 40.

Gehlen's anthropology attempts to disclose an 'all-pervasive structural law' distinguishing humans from other forms of life.⁴³ In accordance with his understanding of his own work as 'empirical philosophy',⁴⁴ Gehlen finds this structural principle in a physical fact: the unique biological make-up of the human, which is determinative for the totality of human life, including in its most advanced cultural forms and intellectual products. The 'higher functions' must be 'seen in relation to the organically unique position of man'.⁴⁵ He thus refers to his approach as 'anthropobiological',⁴⁶ a term that should be understood in a double sense: first, as signifying the fundamental importance of the human biological make-up for understanding everything in human life; and second, as indicating that this biological make-up is entirely specific to the human being.

Developing a line of thought he finds presaged in the work of Herder and Nietzsche, Gehlen defines the human constitution as follows:

In terms of morphology man is, in contrast to all other higher mammals, primarily characterised by deficiencies, which, in an exact, biological sense, qualify as a lack of adaptation, lack of specialisation, primitive states, and failure to develop, and which are therefore essentially negative features.⁴⁷

Insofar as he sees this peculiar morphology as determinative for the entirety of human life, Gehlen presents an extreme version of the naturalistic, 'negative' theory of the human constitution rejected by Scheler. Yet, despite the increased emphasis on the biological dimension of the human in Gehlen's work, his position is situated at a comparable midway

⁴³ Gehlen, *Man*, 16.

⁴⁴ Arnold Gehlen, 'An Anthropological Model', trans. Gerald Onn, *The Human Context* 1, no. 1 (1968): 16.

⁴⁵ Gehlen, *Man*, 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

point between idealist rationalism and reductive biologism. Gehlen wants to avoid both the unscientific and explanatorily limited identification of the human being with a non-physical spirit and a position that erases any distinction between humans and animals. He directs his critique of the latter particularly against the view that human beings are directly descended from animals and thus that the forms and structures of human life can be explained by the selection mechanisms of Darwinian evolutionary theory. In presenting a universal explanatory framework that erases any essential distinction between human and animal life, such a view claims to be entirely 'biological'.⁴⁸ But in Gehlen's view this reductive form of biologism both contradicts the logic of Darwinian evolution and occludes the most important aspects of the human biological makeup.

The process of evolution enhances physiological traits that allow organisms to survive in their environments through specialisation (teeth and a digestive system suited to the available food, for instance). While Gehlen does not deny that human beings are closely related to apes, he draws on the work of the Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk to argue that compared to apes, human beings are 'primitive' in the sense that their organs betray an 'obvious absence of specialisation' to their environment.⁴⁹ According to Gehlen, a development from highly specialised to unspecialised is inexplicable in Darwinian terms, and this causes a 'fundamental difficulty with the theory of evolution when applied to man'.⁵⁰ The theory that the evolutionary process somehow moves from physical to mental adaptation in the human being, thereby explaining the hypertrophy of intellectual functions in the human compared to the ape, is either mere confusion or a Sophistic attempt to paper over the problems with applying the classic Darwinian schema to the development of the human

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

being. It is not clear, Gehlen writes, how ‘language and thought offered man a selective advantage’ over animals equipped with instinctual behaviour and highly specialised traits.⁵¹

For Gehlen, the human being must be understood as the moment at which nature has ‘pursued a unique, hitherto untrodden path of development’.⁵² When compared to any other animal, the human being is a ‘deficient being’ (*Mängelwesen*), bereft of instincts, without specialised adaptation to any environment, and cursed with a remarkably long and particularly helpless infancy.⁵³ Gehlen combines this notion of human deficiency, which he derives from Herder,⁵⁴ with Nietzsche’s characterisation of the human being as ‘undetermined’.⁵⁵ For Gehlen, these are one and the same: precisely because the human being is insufficiently provided for biologically and is thus deficient, its mode of existence is not dictated by nature and is left to its own determination; uniquely among living beings, the human being can thus look upon its very survival as its own ‘accomplishment’.⁵⁶ The central question of Gehlen’s anthropobiological approach thus becomes that of how this accomplishment is possible: ‘how can such a vulnerable, needy, exposed being possibly manage to survive?’⁵⁷

Gehlen’s answer to this question takes the form of a theory of human culture in which the ‘higher functions’ of language, conceptual thought, behavioural norms, and cultural formations are all conceived of as ‘necessary for survival’.⁵⁸ Here we can again see the distance that opens up between Gehlen and Scheler. Gehlen adopts Scheler’s idea of a world-openness that is inseparable from a human deficiency of the instincts that define the animal’s

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 111.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵³ Gehlen refers to Bolk’s theory that human morphology is defined by the retention of infantile traits (neoteny) to explain this peculiar biological deficiency (see *ibid.*, 93-109).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

relation to its environment. Like Scheler, he emphasises the role played by the weakness of instinct in the human ability to encounter externally existing objects within a world defined by its infinity.⁵⁹ But where Scheler sees the freedom from instinctual drive as the *manifestation* of a spiritual power transcending the human that allows the human being to perceive objectively existing essences, Gehlen pictures the human relation to the world in a more active and constructive way.⁶⁰ Without the filter of instinctual relevance to structure the perception of the environment, the human being is delivered over to a ‘chaos of overwhelming stimulation’,⁶¹ an ‘impressionability to any number of sense-data, even when these are biologically irrelevant or, indeed, positively harmful’.⁶² Faced with this stimulus overload, which exerts an unbearable ‘pressure’ on the senses, the human being must develop ways of ordering and giving meaning to its experience.⁶³ This is the work of culture, a category that for Gehlen encompasses the totality of human experience, from language and the basic concepts of experience to technology and social institutions.⁶⁴ Gehlen’s understanding of culture consciously unites theoretical and practical aspects of human life, seeing both as involved in the human being ‘actively transforming the world to suit his own needs’.⁶⁵

Gehlen formulates his theory of culture through two primary categories. The first is ‘relief’ or ‘unburdening’ (*Entlastung*), which describes the way cultural forms allow the human being to release itself from the need to respond immediately to the stimuli that flood

⁵⁹ On the animal’s inability to perceive ‘objective things’, see *ibid.*, 112. On the ‘open’ and ‘unrestricted’ nature of the human world, see *ibid.*, 230-231. Gehlen in fact defines *Weltoffenheit*, a term he acknowledges derives from Scheler, as the human being’s ‘lack of animal adaptation to a specific environment’ (*ibid.*, 27).

⁶⁰ Gehlen himself presents his difference from Scheler in similar terms, pointing to the centrality of ‘action’ in his anthropology as the mark of a move away from Scheler towards a position closer to American Pragmatism. See Gehlen, ‘An Anthropological Model’, 16.

⁶¹ Gehlen, *Man*, 43.

⁶² Gehlen, ‘An Anthropological Model’, 16. See also the similar passage in Gehlen, *Man*, 30.

⁶³ Gehlen, *Man*, 43, 230.

⁶⁴ See Gehlen, ‘An Anthropological Model’, 16.

⁶⁵ Gehlen, *Man*, 29. On the ‘common root’ of the (theoretical) ‘orientation in the world’ and the (practical) ‘control of actions’, see *ibid.*, 34-35.

its senses.⁶⁶ The development of cultural forms obeys what Gehlen calls ‘the law of relief’, whereby they facilitate an increasingly indirect relation to reality.⁶⁷ Language provides his clearest example: naming develops conceptual categorisations that group together stimuli under one word, thus relieving us of the burden of attending to each instance of a concept as a totally unique phenomenon.⁶⁸ As language develops, it becomes increasingly ‘relieved’ by growing more abstract, allowing the human being to live in a world of meanings remote from the pressure exerted by immediate, uncategorised sensation. From the perspective of ‘relief’, the aim of culture is to give the world an ‘acquired neutrality’: to transform reality into a harmless backdrop, each element of which can safely be overlooked until it becomes relevant to a particular human need.⁶⁹ In this, Gehlen believes that language and other higher functions of human life build on aspects of relief already present in human sensorimotor development (in the ability to control motor functions by placing them ‘at rest until they are needed for a desired end’, for instance).⁷⁰ By demonstrating the link between sensorimotor development and intellectual abstraction through their shared role in coping with stimulus overload, relief becomes ‘a key concept of anthropology, for it teaches us to view man’s greatest achievements in relation to his physical structure and his basic requirements for survival’.⁷¹

The second category, closely related, is that of ‘institutions’, which in Gehlen’s usage refers both to habitual patterns of thought and behaviour and to large-scale structures of social organisation. Such institutions provide relief from the chaos of stimulus overload and the multiplicity of possible responses to it by functioning as ‘performed and customary

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28: ‘man must find *relief* from the burden of overwhelming stimulation’.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 54-64.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 230-231.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁷¹ Ibid., 57.

decisions'.⁷² The conceptual apparatus of language, for instance, can be viewed as an 'institution' in Gehlen's sense because its role in our consciousness and social interactions directs our attentions to the qualities shared by things of the same category, rather than the manifold particularities that threaten to overwhelm us.⁷³ Similarly, ethical systems, customs and social hierarchies all reduce the field of acceptable behaviour in a given society, thus providing 'relief' from the paralysing plurality of possible actions.⁷⁴ Like 'relief', Gehlen uses the concept of the institution to demonstrate the link between the most complex forms of human behaviour (religious beliefs, for example) and the exigencies of survival; institutions 'serve to equip the human being for survival' by functioning as antidotes to 'powerlessness' and 'resignation' in the face of stimulus overload.⁷⁵

Human beings live in a world characterised by the achievements of relief, institutional habit and direct control over nature through technology; our most basic interaction with objects is already 'the result of human activity' because we see them in terms of their possible use in human life.⁷⁶ We rarely react directly to 'acute impressions', but rather 'act in a world that has been completely restructured' by our higher functions.⁷⁷ This restructuring is intrinsic to human survival, because it creates the world in which human beings are able to overcome the paralysis that stems from stimulus overload and act. As we have seen, culture is the form in which this restructuring occurs, and this connection allows Gehlen to propose an account of culture entirely in accord with his 'anthropobiological' premises. The human being is a 'cultural being by nature' because the cultural restructuring of reality belongs 'to

⁷² Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, trans. Patricia Lipscomb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 77.

⁷³ On language as institution, see Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, 'Arnold Gehlen and the Theory of Institutions', *Social Research* 32, No. 1 (1965): 110-115, particularly 112.

⁷⁴ On the institutional role of formalised social hierarchies in particular, see Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, 86.

⁷⁵ Gehlen, *Man*, 380.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 286.

the *natural* requirements of man's life'.⁷⁸ The peculiarly deficient biological constitution of the human being necessitates culture, which must be understood as a repertoire of techniques and practices for making survival possible. As David Levy has noted, even in his interpretation of the most advanced cultural activity, the 'struggle for survival is the ultimate datum of Gehlen's anthropology'.⁷⁹

For Gehlen, human beings can have no strictly 'natural' existence, as they depend on the inventions of culture for their very survival: thus 'the cultural world is the human world'.⁸⁰ Culture is the key category of Gehlen's anthropology, and, as we have seen, he interprets it chiefly in relation to the exigencies of survival. Human life as a whole is thereby primarily understood through the category of survival. In other words, the forms of human life are understood as answers to the question of how the survival of this biologically deficient being is possible. In a fashion entirely opposed to the doctrine of spirit in Scheler's thought, Gehlen follows through on the totalising ambition Scheler announces for his philosophical anthropology, that of furnishing 'an ultimate philosophical basis' to all reflections on 'the object, "man"'.⁸¹ Gehlen's anthropobiological paradigm is a hermeneutic that allows for the manifold phenomena of human life to be interpreted in terms of the phenomena's role in allowing for the survival of the human being. Thus the unique biological

⁷⁸ Ibid., 108, 72. Italics in original. Formulations such as these occur frequently throughout Gehlen's work. See for example *Moral und Hypermoral: Eine pluralistische Ethik* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1969), 9 and his summary of his own arguments in 'Philosophische Anthropologie', in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, 240.

⁷⁹ Levy, *Political Order*, 75. Richard Schacht has similarly pointed to the centrality of the idea of survival in Gehlen's anthropology, a theme he relates to Nietzsche. See Schacht, 'Gehlen, Nietzsche, and the Project of a Philosophical Anthropology', in *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology*, 62-63.

⁸⁰ *Man*, 29.

⁸¹ Scheler, 'Man and History', 65. On the totalising ambition of Philosophical Anthropology, see also Heidegger's commentary in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 142-145. For Heidegger, Philosophical Anthropology exemplifies a 'fundamental tendency' in the 'present-day position of man in relation to himself and in the totality of beings' according to which 'something is known and understood only when it has found an anthropological explanation'.

position of the human being resounds throughout his interpretation of the entirety of the human world.

The emphasis Gehlen's anthropology places on the bare survival of the human being is also determinative for the normative and critical direction in which he develops his thought. Gehlen sees modernity as marked by an ever-increasing subjectivism corresponding to a decline in the respect for traditional institutions. This 'new subjectivism', fostered by the Enlightenment's ideal of individual autonomy, results in a 'revolt against institutions' by individual subjects.⁸² Gehlen recognises that a degree of tension has always existed between subjective and institutional imperatives. He writes of an alienation of the subject, which finds itself 'caught up in a culture' that seems rigidly and externally imposed.⁸³ But such alienation is necessary, and the subject who 'commits himself "body and soul"' and lets 'himself be consumed by the appropriate institution' possesses a 'dignity which our time...thoroughly lacks'.⁸⁴ However, not only dignity is at stake here. Weakening the power of institutions threatens the very survival of the human, a 'constitutionally "endangered" being' dependent on institutions to relieve it from the chaos of its de-specialised sensory experience.⁸⁵

Accordingly, in his late, highly polemical interventions into ethics, Gehlen attacks an ethical position founded on the two pillars of 'humanitarian' universalism and the Enlightenment's ideal of autonomous self-realisation. This nearly ubiquitous moral perspective fails to recognise that the conservation of institutions is an independently existing

⁸² For Gehlen's diagnosis of the 'new subjectivism', see *Man in the Age of Technology*, 159-161. For the 'revolt against institutions' see Arnold Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (Bonn: Vittorio Klostermann, 1956), 233.

⁸³ Gehlen, 'An Anthropological Model', 20. See also the similar arguments in Gehlen, 'Über die Geburt der Freiheit aus der Entfremdung', in *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 4, 366-379. The link between alienation and freedom is reiterated in Gehlen, *Moral und Hypermoral*, 74-75.

⁸⁴ Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, 233.

⁸⁵ Gehlen, 'An Anthropological Model', 20.

ethical imperative, founded on the biological need for survival.⁸⁶ Thus in his social criticism and ethical thought, Gehlen reasserts the centrality of the notion of survival for his anthropobiological position, attacking as pathological tendencies that appear to weaken the institutional foundations on which alone the survival of the constitutionally endangered human being is possible.

⁸⁶ For Gehlen's critique of humanitarianism see *Moral und Hypermoral*, 79-93; on the institutional ethic, see *ibid.*, 95-102. On Gehlen's postulation of multiple and conflicting ethical imperatives, see Habermas' critical commentary in 'Arnold Gehlen: Imitation Substantiality', in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), 111-128. See also Axel Honneth, 'Problems of Ethical Pluralism: Arnold Gehlen's Anthropological Ethics', trans. Joseph Ganahl, *Iris* 1, no. 1 (2009): 187-194.

Chapter 2: Wrestling Significance from the *Status Naturalis*

2.1. Blumenberg's Anthropogenetic Scenario

Blumenberg's work presents an account of the human being that adopts the essential aspects of the paradigm of Philosophical Anthropology outlined in the previous chapter. ¹As I will demonstrate below, the three key elements of the anthropological program shared by Scheler and Gehlen are present in Blumenberg: he (1) understands the human being as an embodied living being, but one unique in nature; (2) articulates this uniqueness through an implicit comparison between the human relation to the world and the animal relation to an environment; and (3) emphasises the importance of the weakness of instinctual behaviour in the human, as compared to the animal. The direction in which he develops this basic paradigm is very much that of Gehlen, rather than Scheler. Rejecting the anthropology of the human being as a 'rich creature' in possession of a 'transcendent "surplus"', ² like Gehlen, Blumenberg presents the human being fundamentally as a 'creature of deficiency'. Just as for Gehlen, the question of how this deficient creature is able to survive is fundamental for Blumenberg, and, I wish to show, forms the basis of his functional interpretation of human culture.

Where Scheler, and especially Gehlen, present their accounts of the human being through extensive engagements with the findings of empirical science, Blumenberg grounds his anthropology in an anthropogenetic 'scenario'³, an 'initial situation' that, he writes, 'serves the purpose of the old *status naturalis* of philosophical theories of culture and the state'.⁴ As Nicholls has noted, Blumenberg's reference to the Hobbesian *status naturalis* to

¹ For a general summary of the influence of Philosophical Anthropology on Blumenberg's work see Wayne Hudson, 'After Blumenberg: Historicism and Philosophical Anthropology', *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 4 (1993): 110-112.

² *AAR*, 429, 433.

³ *WM*, 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

clarify the status of the pre-historical hypothesis he proposes suggests that his is an ‘openly speculative account’ of anthropogenesis.⁵ More specifically, we can explain the analogy as follows: where in Hobbes the general condition of war of all against all is less important as an actually existing state than as a constant threat which explains the necessity of political order,⁶ in Blumenberg the hypothesis of an archaic confrontation with what he calls the ‘absolutism of reality’ is presented less as a historical reality accessible to knowledge than as a threat against which all human activity is posed.⁷ It functions only as a ‘limit concept’, a narrative hypostatisation of a dark possibility inherent in human life, which facilitates an interpretation of the forms of human life in terms of their role in ‘overcoming’ this possibility.⁸ I will return later in this chapter to the question of the peculiar status of Blumenberg’s theory of anthropogenesis, but for now it should be noted that his reflections on this status present a certain ambiguity. Alongside this analogy between his hypothesis and the functional role played by the *status naturalis*, he also asserts that his use of this limit concept is justified by its agreement with the ‘common core of all currently respected theories on the subject of anthropogenesis’.⁹ As I will show later, Blumenberg’s commitment to the understanding of the human expressed through his hypothetical scenario is, in fact, absolute. On these grounds, I will thus dispute Angus Nicholls’ interpretation, according to which Blumenberg’s emphasis on the hypothetical nature of his anthropogenetic scenario means that it is self-consciously ‘provisional’, non-definitive, and non-totalising.¹⁰

⁵ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 16.

⁶ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 187-8.

⁷ In this regard, see also Blumenberg’s remark that his ‘primal scene’ is without any ‘historical pretension’ (*BM*, 301).

⁸ *WM*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.* Elsewhere he situates his scenario within the orbit of a ‘foundational transformation of our image of the evolution of the human’: see the posthumously published fragment ‘Politische Theologie III’, in Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt, *Briefwechsel 1971-1978*, ed. Alexander Schmitz and Marcel Lepper (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 171.

¹⁰ This claim runs throughout Nicholls’s book, but see especially Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 117-118, 245.

Like the anthropological speculations of Scheler and Gehlen, Blumenberg's *status naturalis* scenario narrates how the human being first became able to encounter reality outside of the animal environment. He repeats the fundamental gesture of Philosophical Anthropology, through which this encounter is made possible by the weakness of instinct in the human being. The terms of Blumenberg's narrative clearly situate his understanding of the human being within the framework of biology and evolutionary theories, demonstrating a commitment to a broadly 'naturalistic' understanding of human life.

His narrative begins at the moment the 'prehuman creature' was compelled to leave the 'shrinking rainforest for the savanna',¹¹ thereby leaving behind the 'protection of a more hidden form of life, and an adapted one' for an environment to which it was not adapted and which threatened danger from every direction.¹² This proto-human did not successfully manage to adapt biologically to its new environment by developing new instinctual behaviours suitable to its newly 'widened horizon'.¹³ Rather, this creature – and the human being that eventually followed it – remained 'left in the lurch by nature'.¹⁴ Having 'fallen back out of the ordered arrangements that nature has accomplished,' it was left with a 'deficiency of pre-given, prepared structure to fit into'.¹⁵ This 'sudden lack of adaptation' ruptures the symbiotic relation of the animal to its environment, in which only those stimuli that are 'relevant' to instinctual behaviour enter into perception.¹⁶ When the hominoid creature's responses to given stimuli are removed from the realm of instinct (that is, when

¹¹ Blumenberg derives this element of his anthropogenesis narrative from Paul Alsberg's *Das Menschheitsrätsel: Versuch einer prinzipiellen Lösung* (Dresden: Sibyllen-Verlag, 1922), another important early text of Philosophical Anthropology. For Alsberg's influence on Blumenberg's narrative, see Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 108-116. The use to which Blumenberg's puts this hypothesis is consistent with Gehlen's anthropobiology, stressing the proto-human's lack of biological adaption to this new environment. Gehlen himself refers positively to Alsberg's work: see Gehlen, 'Philosophische Anthropologie', in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, 238.

¹² *WM*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Blumenberg uses this phrase in two different texts: *AAR*, 429, and *WM*, 329.

¹⁵ *AAR*, 433.

¹⁶ *WM*, 5, 7.

stimulus and response are no longer ‘bracketed together’),¹⁷ and become marked by ‘indeterminateness’,¹⁸ the structuring of the environment in terms of pre-determined relevance is cancelled, and this transforms it from an environment into a undifferentiated ‘continuum of the pre-given’,¹⁹ an ‘unarticulated field of data’.²⁰

Blumenberg’s account intensifies the affective dimension that is already present in Gehlen’s description of the reality opened up through the weakening of the environmental structure of pre-determined instinctual relevance as an ‘chaos of overwhelming stimulation’.²¹ In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the central claim of Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology is that this confrontation of the human being with a non-environmental world is something unbearable for it. For Blumenberg, it is precisely the flight from this original situation and its ‘covering up’²² that define human life. The breakdown of intuitive behaviours and pre-determined relevance discloses the world as something to be feared, because the removal of environmental-instinctive relevance from it reveals it to be indifferent to the possibility and continuation of human life: human life is revealed to be a contingent fact and thus in no sense ‘catered for’ by the world itself. The horizontal whole of experience is thus not, in its original form, neutrally experiential, but affective: removed from the ‘habitual adaptive system’ the human being develops an affective attention to the world²³ as ‘the totality of the directions from which “it can come at

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ AAR, 433.

¹⁹ WM, 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Gehlen, *Man*, 43. At points Blumenberg simply mimics Gehlen’s language. See for example GCW, 648, on optical perception: ‘Man continually unburdens himself [*entlastet sich*] from the overload [*von der Überflutung*] of what would be optically possible – he always ‘directs’ his gaze first at objects that are equipped with other qualities beside optical ones and that make claims on him’. Robert Wallace points to Blumenberg’s adoption of Gehlen’s terminology here, noting the connection between ‘overload’ (*Überflutung*) and Gehlen’s use of *Reizüberflutung* (stimulus overload), and Blumenberg’s adoption of one of Gehlen’s key concepts, ‘unburdening’. See GCW, 707, note a.

²² WM, 8.

²³ Ibid., 21.

one.”²⁴ The original affective expression of this confrontation with the world as such is ‘anxiety’ (*Angst*);²⁵ in its ‘maximal magnitude’ it is ‘existential anxiety’ (*Lebensangst*).²⁶

In a formulation that he admits is paradoxical, Blumenberg defines this *Angst* as ‘the intentionality of consciousness without an object’.²⁷ This definition is indeed paradoxical, if we remind ourselves of how, in Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, ‘intentionality’ refers precisely to the fact that every act of consciousness has its correlate in an object. We can begin to elucidate it, however, by noting how Blumenberg adopts Heidegger’s distinction between *Furcht* (fear), which is a ‘shrinking back’ from a specific ‘detrimental inner-worldly being’, and *Angst*.²⁸ As opposed to specific fear (and with a logical priority to it),²⁹ *Angst* discloses the ‘world as such’ or the ‘world as world’: ‘*that about which Angst is anxious is being-in-the-world itself*’.³⁰ *Angst* as the ‘intentionality of consciousness without an object’ is prior to the intentional conscious of specific objects; it is the affective ‘attention’ of consciousness towards the world as such as a horizon of possible threat to human life.³¹ When Blumenberg argues that intentionality in the technical sense, as the ‘coordination of parts into a whole, of qualities into an object, of things into a world’ by consciousness, can be understood as the “‘cooled-off” aggregate condition of the early accomplishment of consciousness’ that is *Angst*’s affective attention to the world,³² he makes clear the priority of this affective opening to the world over cognitive experience of specific objects, but also shows that the distinction between the two is not absolute, but only qualitative. Because the

²⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ *BT*, 174. Blumenberg clearly makes use of this distinction when he writes, for example, that ‘anxiety must again and again be rationalised into fear’ (*WM*, 5).

²⁹ *BT*, 174: ‘*Angst... first makes fear possible*’. Italics in original.

³⁰ Ibid., 175. Italics in original.

³¹ *WM*, 21. This definition of *Angst* is very much like the one given by Scheler: ‘the correlate of reality as such is “pure” anxiety, an anxiety without object’. Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, 54.

³² *WM*, 21.

intentional structure of consciousness that allows for the cognitive experience of specific objects takes up and develops the affective attention to reality as such in *Angst*, we can begin to see here how Blumenberg's *status naturalis* becomes an absolute point of reference for understanding all human phenomena.

The 'absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with the situational leap' from instinctually structured environment to the anxiety inducing encounter with unstructured reality.³³ Blumenberg defines it as that situation in which the human being 'believed he simply lacked control' over 'the conditions of his existence'.³⁴ The 'absolutism of reality' names the experience of the absolute contingency of the human being's existence in a world defined by a lack of environmental structure and a resulting indifference to human survival.³⁵ Alone among living beings, the human being is the 'being that could have failed and can still fail',³⁶ the being whose very survival is a 'biological inconsistency of evolution'.³⁷ At its most extreme, this contingency is experienced as utter helplessness in the face of reality, as an 'archaic resignation' to the 'absolute inhospitability of nature'.³⁸ It survives in a milder form as the 'overall tinge of undefined unfriendliness that originally adheres to the world'.³⁹ However, just as the confrontation with this absolutism can never be definitively left behind, neither can it be experienced purely: 'whatever starting point one might choose, work on the reduction of the absolutism of reality would already have begun'.⁴⁰ This means not only that historical evidence could never reach back far enough to show us the pure form of the 'absolutism of reality'; it also alerts us to the fact that even in *Angst* itself, which is precisely

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁵ See *BM*, 511, where Blumenberg formulates the 'contingency of man' as follows: 'he need not be and he need not be the way he is'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 524.

³⁷ Blumenberg, 'Politische Theologie III', 171.

³⁸ *WM*, 9; 'Politische Theologie III', 171.

³⁹ *WM*, 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

an affective experience of the absolutism of reality, the reduction of this absolutism has already begun. As a state of ‘indefinite anticipation’,⁴¹ *Angst* is itself already not simply a total surrender to the world, but a way of steeling oneself against it, preparedness as a form of defence.

Precisely such forms of defence against the absolutism of reality form the main objects of Blumenberg’s analysis. The human being experiences a pressing need to reduce the contingency of existence, impose structure and regularity on the world and refuse the ‘arbitrariness’ (*Willkür*, which also has political resonances of ‘despotism’)⁴² of reality *qua* superior power. This is achieved through a multiplicity of cultural techniques that address the specific features of this initial situation precisely to cover them up and allow us to believe them surpassed; only in this way can human life be possible.⁴³ Culture provides us with an ‘art of living’,⁴⁴ and the distinctive trait of human life is that it – distinctly from all other forms of life – is only possible on the basis of this ‘art’, which it itself invents. From the raw stuff of the undifferentiated absolutism of reality, the human being must, through its cultural techniques, form a world in which it can live: ‘to have a world is always the result of an art’.⁴⁵

It is clear here how closely Blumenberg follows Gehlen’s arguments. On the basis of the interpretation of the human being as biologically deficient, Gehlen answers the ‘question of what are the necessary conditions for man’s existence’ with a theory of culture, in which culture appears, therefore, as belonging ‘to the *natural* requirements of man’s life’.⁴⁶ Blumenberg similarly writes that the ‘first proposition of an anthropology’ must be that ‘it

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² *WM*, 42 / *AM*, 50.

⁴³ *WM*, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ *WM*, 7.

⁴⁶ Gehlen, *Man*, 72.

cannot be taken for granted that man is able to exist'⁴⁷ and endorses the view (which he identifies with Sophism) that 'culture is a necessity of nature itself'.⁴⁸ In terms essentially identical to Gehlen, Blumenberg understands culture as an 'emergency program' to compensate for biological deficiency,⁴⁹ and this provides the basic orientation for a universal interpretation of human culture. Because he reads human activity in relation to the overcoming of the experience of the absolutism of reality that results directly from its biological deficiency, Blumenberg's position can also be accurately characterised as 'anthropobiological'. As Vida Pavesich has insightfully noted, and as will become increasingly clear once we turn to the normative and critical direction in which Blumenberg develop his anthropology, the notion of human self-preservation or survival is – just as it is for Gehlen – essential to Blumenberg's understanding of the human being and the cultural forms it creates.⁵⁰

2.2. The Work of Myth

Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology thus closely follows the paradigm of Philosophical Anthropology, particularly in the 'anthropobiological' direction in which Gehlen develops the core theme of human de-specialisation. His functional understanding of culture essentially repeats Gehlen's, and as we will see in chapter 4.4, like Gehlen, Blumenberg uses his anthropobiological paradigm to argue against what he sees as the destructive critique of existing institutions. But where Gehlen's analysis of the 'cultural world' encompasses an

⁴⁷ *AAR*, 438.

⁴⁸ *WM*, 329.

⁴⁹ *BM*, 552. See also *ibid.*, 520, where culture is defined with regard to its role in the human 'struggle for existence'. Also relevant here is the definition of reason given at the end of *GCW* (683): reason is 'a risky way around a lack of adaptation; a substitute adaptation; a makeshift agency to deal with the failure of previously reassuring functional arrangements and long-term constant specialisations for stable environments'.

⁵⁰ Vida Pavesich, 'Blumenberg and the Ethics of Consolation', in *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology*, 76-77.

enormous range of human phenomena, from the development of motor control in the infant to the structures of social life, Blumenberg's analysis is almost exclusively limited to forms of 'high culture': philosophy, science, literature, art, myth, religion and theology.

Blumenberg's interpretation of myth in *Work on Myth* is the centrepiece of his functional interpretation of cultural forms with regard to the role they play in making human life possible. In Blumenberg's account, mythical narratives evince a form of archaic rationality, which he calls the 'work of myth' and distinguishes from the 'work on myth', the process of continual retelling, rewriting, and reinterpretation that characterises the reception history of individual myths. The phrase the 'work of myth' essentially functions as shorthand for Blumenberg's anthropobiological interpretation of culture: with this phrase, he designates the process by means of which human culture distances itself from the experience of its biological deficiency (in the absolutism of reality). Myth becomes the key category through which Blumenberg develops his theory of culture both because it is the most archaic stratum of cultural production⁵¹ and because, when compared to scientific rationality, it appears less invested in the acquisition of knowledge about the external world. As we will see, this interpretation of the 'rationality' of myth then provides Blumenberg with the foundations for an interpretation of science in which construction takes priority over reception. By presenting mythical and scientific rationality as functionally similar, Blumenberg is able to present scientific-theoretical knowledge about the world in terms that fit within his anthropobiological paradigm: as forms through which the human being constructs a liveable world by distancing itself from the absolutism of reality.

⁵¹ As Philip Rose notes, Blumenberg presents myth as 'humanity's first successful response to the absolutism of reality'. Rose, 'Philosophy, Myth, and the 'Significance' of Speculative Thought', *Metaphilosophy* 38, no. 5 (2007): 635.

Blumenberg frequently refers to the disconcerting or alienating quality of the world (its *Befremdlichkeit*)⁵² and its uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*).⁵³ Myth's primary function is to produce 'distance from the quality of uncanniness':⁵⁴ 'what the man who listens to myth needs' is 'to be at home in the world [*in der Welt heimisch zu sein*]'.⁵⁵ We can isolate within Blumenberg's account four main techniques through which the work of myth attempts to bring about this distance from uncanniness and allows us to believe in 'man's security in the world':⁵⁶ (1) the establishment of temporal distance from the original situation of helplessness in the face of the absolutism of reality; (2) the reduction of reality qua absolutely superior power through its division into multiple, conflicting powers; (3) the determination of reality and its elements through naming, which allows the world to take on the quality of 'familiarity' and means that the superior powers can be addressed; (4) the positing of 'significance' (*Bedeutsamkeit*). As we will see, the fourth category, 'significance', is the most important and complex, and functions simultaneously as a description of a specific technique of myth and as a characterisation of the overall achievement of the work of myth.

In Blumenberg's reading, myth always places the period of greatest terror in the past: the mythical narrative always 'says that some monsters have already disappeared from the world, monsters that were even worse than those that lie behind what is present'.⁵⁷ In Greek myth, the movement from theriomorphic to anthropomorphic gods⁵⁸ and generational scheme of the Titanomachy, which replaces one of the 'fearsome generations' before Zeus with this relatively 'friendly' and 'mild' ruler, demonstrate a 'change of forms in the direction of

⁵² For example, *WM*, 14 / *AM*, 21.

⁵³ For example, *WM*, 119 / *AM*, 134-5.

⁵⁴ *WM*, 117.

⁵⁵ *WM*, 113 / *AM*, 127.

⁵⁶ *WM*, 135.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117, 130-131.

human ones'.⁵⁹ The era that was most unsuited to human life and in which the most terrifying powers reigned must always belong to a distant past. For this reason, Hesiod's *Theogony* is equally as important to Blumenberg's general understanding of myth as the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*: the form of the genealogy of the gods, each generation – no matter how frightening it may be in its own terms – representing one further step away from originary Chaos, communicates a progress away from this initial situation and appears to place it definitively in a long since vanished past.⁶⁰

Blumenberg strongly dismisses any reading of myth that would see its narratives as 'fossils embodying the history of the human race'.⁶¹ Rejecting the 'realism' of Nietzsche's argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the genealogy of the gods records actual historical changes in Greek religious practice, he writes that it is 'immaterial' whether the 'fearsome generations before Zeus' were 'simply invented or combined in the myth in order to bring into relief, against that background, the mildness and friendliness to the world of the last member of the dynastic sequence [i.e. Zeus]' or if 'phases that have already been lived through' are 'reflected in the mythical genealogy'.⁶² Rather, what is 'decisive for the function of myth' is the distance interposed between the present and a terrifying, archaic situation.⁶³ However, it is worth noting that the distinction Blumenberg draws between his own position and that of 'mythical realists' is not as clear-cut as he makes it out to be. The distinction appears to be between a realism of mythical *content* (as in Nietzsche's reading of Greek theogony as reflecting the history of Greek religion) and what we might call a realism of mythical *form*. For, although the theogony and its related narratives do not in any sense represent historical events, the form of theogony itself represents what myth has actually

⁵⁹ Ibid., 114-5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁶¹ Ibid., 15-6.

⁶² Ibid., 113-114.

⁶³ Ibid.

accomplished and must continually accomplish: the gaining of distance from a primordial situation (represented in the Greek theogony by Chaos).⁶⁴

The theogonical form also effects a reduction of the absolutism of reality by refusing the absolute and unsurpassable status of any superior power. The threat of an ‘archaic resignation’ to reality qua absolute power, which is inscribed in the ‘initial situation’ and thus in the human approach to reality as such, is lessened by the dynastic and generational succession of gods, because this lineage reveals ‘every current dominion as not necessarily the final, the only possible, and the unsurpassable one’.⁶⁵ What such generational narratives achieve diachronically is achieved synchronically by what Blumenberg calls the ‘division of powers’. The multiplicity of gods and the narratives of their intrigues with one another distribute a ‘block of opaque powerfulness, which stood against man and opposite him, among many powers that are played off against one another, or even cancel one another out’.⁶⁶ Whatever the specific characters and actions of the gods, ‘the separation of powers is already cause for merriment’⁶⁷ because no power, even that of a dominant god, can appear to be an ‘absolutely threatening agency’ if it is also ‘capable of being threatened’ by another power or god.⁶⁸ That the gods are chiefly concerned with intrigues and in-fighting amongst themselves is, for Blumenberg, another way in which the possibility for human security in the world is asserted. Paradoxically, it is precisely because ‘myth is not anthropocentric’ that it allows for the hope of a secure human existence: because the gods are not primarily concerned with humanity, humans can develop the hope that they may be left peacefully

⁶⁴ Blumenberg himself gestures towards such a ‘formally’ realistic understanding of myth when he writes that ‘the historical power of myth is not founded in the origin of its contents...but rather in the fact that, in its procedure and its “form”, it is *no longer* something else...There is room for discussion of Edvard Lehmann’s formula that myth was destined to be overcome...But it will be incomparably more important to describe myth itself as already the manifestation of an overcoming, of the gaining of distance’ (ibid., 16). Italics in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 121.

alone by superior powers.⁶⁹ This aspect of the division of powers is closely related to the mythical structure that Blumenberg calls *Umständlichkeit*.⁷⁰ While the translation that Robert M. Wallace gives of this term as ‘circumstantiality’⁷¹ is correct, it becomes less opaque if we note that *umständlich* can be used adverbially, of the asking of a question for instance, to mean ‘indirectly’ or ‘in a roundabout way’. That the mythical gods operate ‘circumstantially’ means that, unlike the God of late scholastic theology, they cannot act directly;⁷² their power is always beholden to circumstance, never absolute, and this expresses the ‘wish that the superior power might hold still, remain occupied with itself or...operate with delays’.⁷³

The operation of theogony, as the distribution of the ‘block of opaque powerfulness’ that confronts the human being in the absolutism of reality into multiple and conflicting powers and their generational succession, is effectively carried out where even the most skeletal narrative fails to appear and the only testament we have to a god’s existence is a name. Diachronically, the multiplicity of names that are ‘not attested to in any story’ in myth in themselves succeed in ‘filling up the empty time’ that has passed since the initial situation and making this distance palpable.⁷⁴ On a more fundamental level, Blumenberg interprets the appearance of completion that mythical catalogues of names carry as an early expression of the ‘fact that the world could be mastered’.⁷⁵ This can only be the case because, for Blumenberg, naming is not simply a neutral designation of a pre-existing referent (or a Heideggerian saying of being). If reality is first confronted as a singular, *Angst*-inducing opacity, then even the personalisation of this pure otherness, its transformation from *das Andere* (neuter) to *der Andere* (masculine, i.e. personal), is a decisive step beyond archaic

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ See *AM*, 159.

⁷¹ *WM*, 142.

⁷² For the comparison of the God of theological absolutism to the gods of myth in terms of a contrast between direct and indirect exercises of power, see *ibid.*, 244-6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

resignation.⁷⁶ Naming the superior power makes it something that can be addressed, and this holds out the possibility of negotiation with or even influence over it.⁷⁷

For Blumenberg, naming is thus intertwined with the ‘irrefutable assumption’ on which ‘mankind supports itself’ of being able to influence reality (which, on Blumenberg’s reading, is demonstrated in its most extreme form in magic).⁷⁸ However, this expectation of the possibility of influence over reality through negotiation with superior powers is itself dependent on naming in an even more fundamental capacity; that is, as determination.⁷⁹ For Blumenberg the process of ‘the nameless being given names’ and ‘the formless receiving form’ are almost synonymous.⁸⁰ Naming is the ‘delimitation of directions and figures out of the continuum of the pre-given’; to ‘equip the world with names means to divide up and classify the undivided, to make the intangible tangible [*greifbar*, which Blumenberg distinguishes from conceptualising the world and making it ‘comprehensible’, *begreifbar*].’⁸¹ This determination or delimitation is also a securing, which makes the named thing reliable: naming assumes or produces the (relative) substantiality of the named thing. Blumenberg gives a speculative account of the development of naming – one that, interestingly, seems to go against the grain of his emphasis on the primacy of the confrontation with a formless and ‘undivided’ reality⁸² – as embedded in a ‘life-world that is characterised by nature’.⁸³ Natural

⁷⁶ *WM*, 22 / *AM*, 28. See also the similar passage in *GCW*, 8, referring to the achievements of Greek myth: ‘the prodigious work of myth had transformed the terrors of the faceless superior powers into gods having human form’.

⁷⁷ *WM*, 16, 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12. Comparing the basic tenets of Gnosticism to those of magic, Blumenberg defines the fundamental operation of magic as ‘depreciation of what is actual as a legitimation of disregarding it in favour of one’s own will’ (*ibid.*, 123). On Blumenberg’s interpretation of magic, see chapter 5.5 below.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 630.

⁸¹ *WM*, 42 / *AM*, 49.

⁸² The difficulty lies in the fact that, in Blumenberg’s account, the life-world that is characterised by human dealings with natural phenomena does not merely deliver itself over to the receptive faculties of the human being (intuition, in the Kantian sense). Rather, this livable world, in which the distinctness of natural types appears, must first be wrested from the radical formlessness of the absolutism of reality, which occurs through the determination and naming of this reality as absolute

phenomena (such as plants and animals) display a high degree of similarity amongst individual examples of a species. This ‘trueness to type’ makes ‘the most modest demands in terms of the construction of concepts’, and thus also in naming.⁸⁴ For Blumenberg, the conceptualising and naming of a superior power aims at the same level of determinacy and reliability as the naming of natural phenomena. We can see here how, in Blumenberg’s account, naming appears as central to myth’s function of establishing ‘man’s security in the world’.⁸⁵ By transforming the indeterminate threat faced in the absolutism of reality into ‘typical gods’ who display a ‘sameness in kind of characteristics and effects’,⁸⁶ mythical naming creates constancy and reliability in the world qua superior power. It is for this reason that Blumenberg writes that ‘all trust in the world begins with names’.⁸⁷

‘What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity’.⁸⁸ Naming is thus a making-familiar, a movement away from that ‘uncanniness’ which defines the initial disclosure of reality in *Angst*. For Blumenberg, naming is an ‘act’⁸⁹ that negates the otherness of what it names by subsuming it within a system of concepts developed precisely to achieve this end. This familiarisation is thus a ‘humanisation’ of the sort Blumenberg refers to when he argues that we must understand ‘humanisation as myth’ or myth as humanisation.⁹⁰ The fundamental operation of naming is this transference of something human onto an originally terrifying reality, a transference that allows it to become familiar to us. Naming thus provides a key example of what Blumenberg conceptualises as the

power. In suggesting that an ‘impression’ of natural types pre-exists or exists alongside their constitution through naming, Blumenberg provides one of the few instances in his work of giving any weight to the ‘receptive’ moment of experience or cognition. See *ibid.*, 131.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121. This formulation occurs in the context of a critique of the philological thesis that it is possible to demonstrate a gradual and historical ‘humanisation of myth’.

‘metaphoricity’ of human experience (discussed in more detail in chapter 3.3 below): naming forms part of the existentially necessary process of substituting a realm of human meanings for the terror of the absolutism of reality.

2.3. Significance

Blumenberg directly addresses the role played by myth in constituting meaning in his analysis of ‘significance’ (*Bedeutsamkeit*). When he first begins to discuss the term, he identifies it as that ‘quality’ of myth that explains how myth nonetheless appears to have ‘something to offer that – even with reduced claims to reliability, certainty, faith, realism, and intersubjectivity – still constitutes satisfaction of intelligent expectations’.⁹¹ Significance thus initially appears to name the quality that certain mythical ‘configurations’ (such as the Faust or Prometheus myths) possess that guarantees they will be perennially received and reworked anew.⁹² But it quickly becomes clear that the category concerns not only the reception history of myths (the ‘work on myth’), but in fact touches on the core of what myth achieves in relation to the absolutism of reality: the constitution of a meaningful world.

If myth appears to us as significant and thus possesses a peculiar ‘valence’ or ability to connect with our experience and interpretation of a whole manifold of phenomena,⁹³ including our own lives, this is precisely because myth itself contains and develops a whole catalogue of ‘means of operation with which significance “works”’.⁹⁴ An incomplete list of the interrelated ‘means of operation’ that are most ‘common’ and ‘effective’ includes the following: simultaneity, latent identity, the ‘closed-circle pattern’, repetition, and isolation of

⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

⁹² Ibid., 69-70.

⁹³ Ibid., 68.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 70.

a thing or action.⁹⁵ In his discussion of these structures of significance, Blumenberg appears to make no distinction between how they appear in mythical narratives or in Goethe's memoirs, in modern historiography or in everyday experience. Of course, Blumenberg has no intention of circumscribing the work of myth or limiting it to a specific mythical sphere,⁹⁶ but more than any other theme in Blumenberg's work, significance demonstrates how those structures developed by the work of myth to reduce and oppose the absolutism of reality are not limited to mythical narratives and institutions but are rather constitutive of human experience as such. Blumenberg thus ends the chapter dedicated to the analysis of significance by characterising his investigations as attempting to develop a general 'phenomenology of significance as an "apotropaic" quality with respect to the stupefaction that is delivered over to the "absolutism of reality"'.⁹⁷

After noting that the term derives from Wilhelm Dilthey, Blumenberg makes reference to Erich Rothacker's 'principle of significance', which refers to the distinction between the neutral and objective world of objects studied by the exact sciences and the subjective values which are attached to 'cultural things'.⁹⁸ Although, as we will see in the following section, significance plays an important part in Blumenberg's account of how in some circumstances 'science works against elementary needs' of the life-world,⁹⁹ it is not the distinction with scientific objectivity that is constitutive of significance for Blumenberg. Rather, it is its response to the 'initial situation' of the absolutism of reality, particularly as this appears with three interrelated qualities: as contingent, as meaningless, and as the 'indifference of space

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ This refusal to circumscribe the work of myth appears most often in historical terms, as the warning against associating myth too narrowly with its own 'primeval epoch' (see for example, *ibid.*, 67). It is implied in the general argument that the work of myth on the absolutism of reality makes human life possible that this 'work' cannot thus be restricted to its own special domain, especially insofar as it founds the possibility of other domains (such as, as we have seen, scientific theory).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

and time'. Significance is a 'flight from contingency'¹⁰⁰ which has to be 'wrung from the indifference of space and time'¹⁰¹ and is 'set up...over against the disappearance of strict meanings' that results from the human being's exit from the closed circle of the animal's instinctual environment.¹⁰²

It is clear that these characterisations of the situation against which significance is posited develop directly out of the basic premises of Blumenberg's anthropology. The human world's lack of environmental structure removes pre-given relevance (meaning) from encountered phenomena, confronting the human being with reality as a superior power indifferent to its survival (rather than an environment arranged around those stimuli essential for the fulfilment of the animal's drives), thus disclosing the contingency of human existence and breaking open the environmental feedback loop into a spatiotemporal horizon 'indifferent' to those moments and things it envelops. Against this primary situation in which the human being finds itself, the operations of significance are attempts to introduce meaning and qualitative differentiation into the world.¹⁰³

All the techniques of significance lift the phenomena to which they apply out of the indifferent spatiotemporal continuum and 'charge' them.¹⁰⁴ To perceive one event as a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰² Ibid., 169.

¹⁰³ In associating 'significance' with the meaningfulness of reality as a whole, Blumenberg remains close to Dilthey's usage, in which *Bedeutsamkeit* describes not individual instances of meaning or signification (in words or symbols), but the reciprocity between part and whole in experience. On Dilthey's use of the term, see H. A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1944), 20. Although Blumenberg rejects Heidegger's ontological interpretation of the concept, his use of *Bedeutsamkeit* to capture an experience of a meaningful order of the world is also close to Heidegger's use in *Being and Time* (see chapter 3.1 below). For a brief account of the concept that encompasses Dilthey, Heidegger, and Rothacker, see Dieter Sinn, 'Bedeutsamkeit', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co Verlag, 1971), 1:758. Philip Rose gives a good definition of Blumenberg's use of the concept that emphasises the whole over individual parts: significance is 'a framework of valences in which the world is charged with a deep sense of meaningfulness' (Rose, 'Philosophy, Myth, and the 'Significance of Speculative Thought', 638).

¹⁰⁴ *WM*, 68.

repetition of another, for example, isolates it from surrounding events and, by making it repeat a ‘mythical prototype’, removes it from the realm of the purely contingent.¹⁰⁵ The construction of an historical event as occurring simultaneously with a notable natural or cosmological event (as, for example in the tradition of marking the day on which Rome is said to have been founded with a solar eclipse)¹⁰⁶ fulfils the ‘desire that reality should...contain signs drawing attention to important things’ and thus makes it appear as if reality were not indifferent to human history.¹⁰⁷ Odysseus’ successful return home lifts what he has encountered in the interim out of indifference and gives it a meaningful place in the process of the ‘closing’ of the ‘circle’ of his odyssey; the closed-circle structure is a refusal to understand what occurs as contingent, an assertion of the ‘reliability of each path and of each life’¹⁰⁸ that redeems otherwise contingent events by inscribing them within a teleological ‘order’.¹⁰⁹

Significance is ‘related to finitude’ because it develops techniques to deal with the fact that the human being cannot attend to everything in its reality (which, unlike the animal environment, does not appear as having its relevance to the human being pre-determined) and must make choices about what to direct itself to: significance ‘arises out of the imposed requirement that one renounce the “Vogliamo tutto” [I want everything]’.¹¹⁰ Similarly to how Gehlen sees institutions as reducing the arbitrary multiplicity of possible behaviours by

¹⁰⁵ See the manuscript written at the same time as *Work on Myth* and published under the title *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos*, ed. Angus Nicholls and Felix Heidenreich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2014), which treats ‘prefiguration’ as a structure of significance, discussing it primarily through Hitler’s delusions of having been prefigured by Napoleon and Frederick the Great, just as Napoleon had seen his Egyptian campaign as guaranteed by its ‘mythical repetition’ of the archetype of Alexander the Great (on which, see also *WM*, 46-47). Angus Nicholls discusses this text in *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 231-236. See also Blumenberg’s discussion of the consciousness of ‘heightened repetition’ and its relation to significance in Goethe and Mann in Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 24-28.

¹⁰⁶ See *WM*, 103.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

functioning as ‘preformed decisions’, the ‘means of operation’ by which significance is experienced can be seen as a ‘reservoir of the elimination of free choice’; specifically, in our choice of phenomena to attend to and isolate as ‘meaningful’.¹¹¹ This can be demonstrated most clearly through one of Blumenberg’s examples: the ‘appearance of meaningful things in reality as a product of physical processes is improbable’ and thus ‘improbably distinctly marked forms’ in nature, such as those displaying clear symmetries, appear to isolate themselves from other natural forms and direct our attention towards them as ‘significant’.¹¹²

Blumenberg sees the ability to experience certain phenomena as significant as one of human culture’s major achievements in reducing the absolutism of reality and moving away from the ‘initial situation’, thereby making human life possible. Rather than originating in any qualities of phenomena themselves that would exist even in the absence of their discovery, significance is something constituted by the archaic cultural techniques of the work of myth: in its confrontation with the ‘continuum of the pre-given’, the ‘hominoid creatures...begins to posit [*zu setzen*] “significances” over against the disappearance of strict meaning’.¹¹³ We can see how even the relatively simple case of the appearance of natural phenomena as significant could be seen to depend on a human perspective, which singles out more symmetrical natural forms, for example. However, because the constitution of significance is a technique to deny the lack of differentiation within reality and refuse its non-relation to the human being, it can only function if it appears to have an ‘objective foundation’, ‘a basis that has the status of reality’; ‘as a valence that was “thought up”, significance would have to break down’.¹¹⁴ That is, if I become aware that it is only my own criteria and structures of thought that allow a certain phenomena to appear significant, the phenomena will cease to appear in this way. Thus the modern judgment of aesthetic taste

¹¹¹ Ibid., 45.

¹¹² Ibid., 74.

¹¹³ *WM*, 168-9 / *AM*, 187. Translation modified.

¹¹⁴ *WM*, 68.

‘goes beyond the limit’ of the experience of significance, because it tends toward pure subjectivism.¹¹⁵ Similarly, events in fictional narratives can never appear truly significant, because, knowing as we usually do exactly who authored them, they cannot but appear as mere inventions lacking any objective basis.¹¹⁶ This is in contradistinction to myths, which, although certainly ‘made up’,¹¹⁷ are always anonymous and associated with the most archaic depths of the past, thus exuding an objective quality inaccessible to fictional narrative, which allows them to become significant.¹¹⁸

Angus Nicholls has suggested that significance is ‘perhaps *the* central concept’ of Blumenberg's theory of myth.¹¹⁹ Nicholls discusses the concept of significance chiefly in terms of its role in the reception history of myth. Here ‘significance’ names the appeal of particular mythical narratives and characters to their audience, which ‘varies according to historical and cultural needs and circumstances’.¹²⁰ In pointing to the centrality in Blumenberg’s account of myth of the way the perceived significance or meaning of a particular myth varies according to historical context – Prometheus is the example to which Blumenberg devotes the most attention – Nicholls finds in ‘significance’ a key piece of evidence for his interpretation of Blumenberg's theory of myth and its underlying philosophical anthropology as ‘non-essentialist and historicist’.¹²¹

As will become clear throughout this study, I believe that Nicholls overemphasises the degree of historical mutability in Blumenberg’s account of the human being and underemphasises its claim to definitiveness. In my reading, Blumenberg supposes a relative

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 67-8.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 266.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 75, 266. For further discussion of the ‘objective’ quality of myth (and other long-standing institutions) and Blumenberg's explanation of how it comes about, see chapter 4.4 below.

¹¹⁹ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 76. Nicholls repeats this claim a number of times: see 21, 153.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹²¹ Ibid., 23.

constancy in the human condition that exists alongside all historical change. This constancy consists in an insuperable antagonism between the human being and external reality (nature); a ‘permanent problem for human beings’.¹²² To use David Levy’s characterisation of what it means to posit a fixed ‘human nature’, this constancy is, in my reading of Blumenberg’s position, the basis of a claim about the ‘fixed repertoire of possibilities inherent in the species’.¹²³ Accordingly, although I believe Nicholls is correct to point to the centrality of significance in Blumenberg’s anthropological account of myth, I have emphasised a different dimension to the concept. Beyond the specific techniques I have discussed above, significance essentially names the result effected by human culture: the constitution of a world of human meanings, distanced from the terrifying indifference of the absolutism of reality.

Two aspects of this constitution of meaning should be emphasised. First, that it is an activity and achievement of the human being rather than a reception of pre-existing meanings that inhere in things. Like naming, significance can be understood as ‘metaphorical’ in Blumenberg’s expanded sense, as it involves the human being substituting a world of meaning in place of the absolutism of reality (even if it must hide this ‘invented’ aspect in order to be successful). Second, in demonstrating how cultural techniques work to respond to the necessity of escaping the absolutism of reality, significance enters into a clear relationship to the basic premises of Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology; premises that, by analogy with Gehlen’s position, I have called ‘anthropobiological’. Significance is, in the words of a passage I cited earlier, ‘an “apotropaic” quality with respect to the stupefaction that is delivered over to the “absolutism of reality”’;¹²⁴ that is, the constitution of significance wards off the state of unmanageable anxiety and inability to act brought about by direct contact with

¹²² Wayne Hudson, ‘After Blumenberg’, 113.

¹²³ David Levy, *Political Order*, 2.

¹²⁴ *WM*, 110.

the lack of human meaning in reality as it exists in itself. Although the rhetoric is unique, the spirit of this statement is indistinguishable from the basic premises of Gehlen's anthropology: without instinctual adaptation, the human being is faced with an overload of as-yet meaningless stimuli, without instinctual knowledge of what within this stimuli it should attend to or how it should act. The escape route from this paralysing situation lies in the constitution of a realm of human meaning through culture, which thus becomes a necessity of survival. 'Significance' is the key concept within a functional conception of culture as a series of techniques designed to overcome the instinctual deficiency of the human being (manifested through its unsustainable confrontation with the absolutism of reality), a conception of culture that ties it to the biological life of the human animal.

2.4. Mythical and Scientific *Logos*

On the basis of this interpretation of the 'work of myth' in relation to his anthropological premises, Blumenberg posits a functional continuity between myth and scientific rationality.¹²⁵ He poses this against the 'disinformation' contained in the 'formula "from *mythos* to *logos*"',¹²⁶ according to which myth and scientific rationality are fundamentally opposed and the ascendancy of science is necessarily accompanied by the destruction of myth. Blumenberg objects to this characteristically enlightenment view of the relationship

¹²⁵ Although Blumenberg is critical of the ahistoricism of Levi-Strauss' structuralist approach to myth (see *ibid.*, 271-272), in postulating this kinship between myth and science he comes close to Levi-Strauss, who undoes the distinction between 'primitive' and scientific thought through an analysis of the invariant structures evident in all human thought. Where Blumenberg traces the similarity between myth and science back to their shared function in overcoming the constitutive deficiency of the human being in relation to reality, Levi-Strauss more straightforwardly postulates a universal structure of the human mind (for which he entertains a neurological basis). For a brief statement of Levi-Strauss' commitment to invariant structures of the human mind, see Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Scope of Anthropology*, trans. Sherry Ortner Paul and Robert A. Paul (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 40-41. Similarities between Blumenberg and Levi-Strauss are noted in Christoph Jamme, "*Gott an hat ein Gewand*": *Grenzen und Perspektiven philosophischer Mythos-Theorien der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 105; and Odo Marquard, 'In Praise of Polytheism', in *Farewell to Matters of Principle*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 89.

¹²⁶ *WM*, 27.

between myth and science with two main arguments. First, the postulated opposition between myth and *logos* obscures what is, for Blumenberg, myth's most important aspect: its achievements in relation to the absolutism of reality. The 'boundary line between myth and *logos* is imaginary', because reconstructing the role played by the work of myth in overcoming the absolutism of reality demonstrates the '*logos* of myth'.¹²⁷ If reason or *logos* 'just means being able to deal with something – in the limiting case with the world', then myth and science have an equal claim to rationality.¹²⁸ Second, Blumenberg does not believe the replacement of myth by science postulated by the enlightenment paradigm to have, in fact, occurred: mythical figures continue to exert an influence on human life.¹²⁹

However, Blumenberg does not collapse the distinction between myth and science. Rather, for Blumenberg, science builds on the achievements of myth. In practices such as taxonomy, for example, science 'repeats' the structure of mythic naming as familiarity, aiming at 'the success, achieved once and for all, of acquaintance with everything on all sides'; the modern age especially has 'become the epoch that finally found a name for everything'.¹³⁰ Scientific explanation aims at the same reduction of the uncanniness of reality as do the techniques of myth: thus myth defines the 'standards of achievement' for science as a form of *logos* that attempts to 'deal with' the world'.¹³¹ Myth and science both have the 'same interest' and aim at the same achievement, to 'overcome anxiety relating to what is unknown or even still unnamed'.¹³² Thus a basic functional similarity exists between myth and science despite the 'fundamentally different means' by which they fulfil this function.¹³³

¹²⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹²⁹ Blumenberg makes this point numerous times: see, for example, *ibid.*, 274, 632.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹³¹ Ibid., 27.

¹³² Ibid., 163.

¹³³ Ibid., 27.

This difference in means explains the continuing existence of myth in the era of science. In Blumenberg, the postulate of functional similarity is not accompanied by an understanding of myth as a proto-scientific form of explanation. To understand myth merely as proto-science prevents one from understanding the specificity of the mythical mode of ‘working up’ reality,¹³⁴ which must be seen as ‘one of the modes of accomplishment of rationality’¹³⁵ with ‘its own legitimacy’.¹³⁶ If myth and science simply offered competing explanations of phenomena, then the surviving appeal of myth would appear as something utterly incomprehensible because myth would have been disposed of when ‘science, with its increasing powers of accomplishment, made its entrance’.¹³⁷ Although myth and science fulfil essentially the same function, they are not ‘rivals’¹³⁸ because myth does not actually offer explanation, but rather posits stories, images and names that take the place of explanations (and prevent them from arising).¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 274.

¹³⁸ See Robert Pippin, ‘Modern Mythic Meaning: Blumenberg Contra Nietzsche’, in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 306.

¹³⁹ Blumenberg makes this point many times. See, for example, *WM*, 257: ‘Myth lets inquiry run up against the rampart of its images and stories: One can ask for the next story – that is, for what happens next, if anything happens next. Otherwise, it starts over again from the beginning’. For similar formulations see *ibid.*, 127, 184, 234 and especially 197: ‘Myth does not need to answer questions; it makes something up, before the question becomes acute and so that it does not become acute’. It is clear from these passages that Pippin’s critique of Blumenberg for giving no more ‘positive’ an account of the ‘modality involved in holding or invoking a myth’ than that of ‘not believing, not explaining with it, and so on’ (Pippin, ‘Modern Mythic Meaning’, 293, n. 9) is inaccurate. Despite his frequent cautions against understanding myth as explanatory and proto-scientific, Blumenberg does not conceptualise the work of myth as merely an absence of explanation. Rather, the posited images and stories have a positive existence that blocks the need for explanation: myth ‘covers up the lack of reliability in...[the] world by projecting images’. The failure to recognise that such images and stories can have a positive, reassuring function analogous to, but entirely distinct from, explanation (and thus not merely consisting of the lack or refusal of explanation) is what Blumenberg seems to be addressing himself to when he writes that it is only a ‘late prejudice’ which claims that telling stories ‘does not produce anything satisfying’ (*WM*, 127).

In treating myth as a form ‘assumed by man’s understanding of the world’ comparable to scientific rationality,¹⁴⁰ Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is clearly a precursor and inspiration for Blumenberg’s account of myth. Blumenberg praises Cassirer for expanding the domain of philosophical enquiry beyond the narrow Neo-Kantian concern with the conditions of scientific knowledge.¹⁴¹ By viewing myth as a ‘symbolic form’, Blumenberg writes, Cassirer extended the notion of rationality and rejected the fiction of a totally ‘pre-logical’ primitive life.¹⁴² In so doing, Cassirer’s ‘theory of symbolic forms allows one for the first time to correlate the expressive means of myth with those of science’.¹⁴³ Yet, for Blumenberg, Cassirer does not fulfil the promise contained in the concept of the symbolic form, because in his ‘overall conception’ he remains committed to the paradigm of an irreversible progression from myth to *logos*.¹⁴⁴ Blumenberg perceives a dissonance (*Unstimmigkeit*) in Cassirer’s work between an approach that stresses the autonomous value (*Eigenwertigkeit*) of the various symbolic forms, and this overarching narrative of progress,¹⁴⁵ which places myth and science in a ‘historically irreversible relationship...with the unrelinquishable presupposition of science as the *terminus ad quem* [goal toward which the process is directed]’.¹⁴⁶ Cassirer’s understanding of the conceptual order of modern science as the ‘final system of symbolic forms’¹⁴⁷ is accompanied by a conception of myth as offering proto-scientific causal explanations, which necessarily fade away with the advent of the

¹⁴⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 13.

¹⁴¹ On Cassirer’s expansion of the domain of philosophical enquiry, see the commentaries in Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7-11; and John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 33-71.

¹⁴² Blumenberg, ‘Ernst Cassirers gedenkend bei Entgegennahme des Kuno-Fischer-Preises der Universität Heidelberg 1974,’ in *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben: Aufsätze und eine Rede* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), 165.

¹⁴³ *WM*, 50.

¹⁴⁴ Blumenberg, ‘Ernst Cassirers gedenkend’, 168.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴⁶ *WM*, 50.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

superior explanatory power of scientific thought.¹⁴⁸ For Blumenberg, this proto-scientific understanding of myth inscribes it within a teleology that weakens Cassirer's otherwise salutary attempt to see myth as a symbolic form possessing its own autonomous logic and value. Furthermore, the overall scheme of irreversible progress towards the final symbolic order of science leaves Cassirer, like the Enlighteners of the 18th century, unable to account for the continuing existence and appeal of mythical modes of thought: when Cassirer, in his final work, *The Myth of the State*, turns to the resurgence of mythical thought in fascist politics, he confronts a 'domain for which the philosophy of symbolic forms had least of all made provisions', which he is only unable to understand as a 'unique Romantic regression', an aberration that stands outside the central logic of historical progress.¹⁴⁹

Against Cassirer, Blumenberg's denial of the proto-scientific character of myth introduces the possibility of entirely disarming the tension between science and myth by replacing competition and historical supersession with functional collaboration in achieving the human being's fundamental goal of being at home in the world.¹⁵⁰ The paradigm of a historical progress from myth to *logos* understands myth through the lens of science, as a 'preliminary' form of scientific explanation, of interest primarily for containing within itself the seed of 'what first becomes possible when it is suspended'.¹⁵¹ Conversely, Blumenberg's understanding of the functional continuity between mythical and scientific rationality is grounded in a view of science through the lens of the 'work of myth'. For Blumenberg,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 128. Blumenberg refers here to a passage from Cassirer in which myth is said to express 'a kind of hypertrophy...of a need for causal explanation'. See Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 48. Cassirer at times strongly expresses his belief in the destruction of the mythical world brought about by the rise of science. See, for instance, Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 77: 'In the new light of science mythical perception has to fade away'.

¹⁴⁹ *WM*, 51.

¹⁵⁰ Pippin interprets Blumenberg as making such an argument. See Pippin, 'Modern Mythic Meaning', 301-307. However, as I will make clear in what follows, to deny *any* tension or rivalry between scientific and mythic *logos*, as Pippin does, it to overstate the case and miss some of the subtleties of Blumenberg's account.

¹⁵¹ *WM*, 168.

science as such presupposes the work of myth: ‘leisure and dispassion in viewing the world, which theory presupposes, are already results of that millenniums-long work of myth itself, which told of the monstrous as something that is far in the past’.¹⁵² The possibility of neutral scientific observation of the world is founded in the familiarisation of reality and reduction of its *Angst*-inducing aspect accomplished by myth. Through creating the possibility of a neutralised engagement with reality, myth founds the possibility of science, which then goes on to carry out the familiarising ‘work of myth’ by other means. This primacy of myth appears in Blumenberg’s work as both historical and logical, because the mythic reduction of the absolutism of reality both precedes, and, through its ‘setting free of the world observer’, provides the condition of possibility for science’s functionally similar activity.

Yet, despite this functional continuity, scientific rationality develops according to an autonomous logic that ultimately brings it into conflict with the work of myth. This conflict enters most clearly into Blumenberg’s account with regard to the role of ‘significance’ in the understanding of the historical past.

The construction and interpretation of the past through historiography appears as a privileged site for understanding the operations of significance. If significance can be defined as a ‘resistance to the tendency towards conditions of higher probability, of diffusion, of erosion, of entropy’,¹⁵³ then the very fact of a history of which humans are conscious must be understood as in itself already significant: history ‘works against the tendency of a situation to be increasingly determined by probability, against the “death instinct” as the point toward which the levelling-off process converges’.¹⁵⁴ Consciousness of the historical dimension of human life grants a meaningful ‘density’ to originally ‘empty’ time by filling it with events

¹⁵² Ibid., 26.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

that resist its tendency to erode the specificity of moments into the homogeneity of the continuum.¹⁵⁵

The memorialising and interpretation of historical events in historiography thus has its fundamental ‘motivation in the life-world’,¹⁵⁶ understood as that world of meanings and structures (in Blumenberg’s account integrally related to the work of myth) which is developed in the ‘functional context of self-preservation’ against the absolutism of reality.¹⁵⁷ However, historiography is also a scientific practice with its own ‘obligatory rationality’,¹⁵⁸ which comes into conflict with the ‘elemental need to find significance in history’.¹⁵⁹ Historical understanding grounded in the life-world gives ‘outlines to the homogeneous flow

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵⁷ See Blumenberg, ‘The Life-World and the Concept of Reality’, trans. Theodore Kisiel, in *Life-World and Consciousness: Essays for Aaron Gurwitsch*, ed. Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 438. Blumenberg derives the concept of the life-world from Husserl, who uses this term to name a pre-theoretical and pre-scientific realm of ‘original self-evidences’ that provides the unacknowledged foundations for all scientific and theoretical conceptions of reality. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 127-128. Two elements of Husserl’s conception are crucial for understanding Blumenberg’s use of the term. First, the term names, and proposes the possibility of analysing, an orientation to reality that precedes scientific and philosophical theories. Second, this orientation to reality, although usually experienced as neutrally ‘given’, is in fact constituted by the subject. As Husserl writes, the life-world ‘has only the ontic meaning given to it by our experiencings, our thoughts, our valuations’; it is our ‘meaning-giving achievement’ (Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences*, 49, 105). In Blumenberg, the establishment of meaning in the life-world is primarily understood as the attainment of distance from the absolutism of reality: the life-world is ‘world that serves life’ by covering over ‘the real itself’ (Blumenberg, ‘The Life-World and the Concept of Reality’, 438). Pavesich gives a good account of Blumenberg’s use of the term, defining it as a ‘livable world’. However, I would question her assertion that Blumenberg’s use of the term is comparable to Habermas’: Blumenberg shows no interest in the social dimension of the establishment of life-world meanings or their role in intersubjective communication. See Pavesich, ‘Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology’, 435-436. An account of Blumenberg’s use of the term can be found in Felix Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne bei Hans Blumenberg* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), 106-124. As I will show in the next chapter’s account of Blumenberg’s theory of the irreducible role of metaphor in the human orientation to reality, Blumenberg should be seen as formulating what Dallmayr calls a ‘strong’ conception of the life-world. To use Dallmayr’s terms, the pre-theoretical construction of reality is for Blumenberg ‘not a mere precursor of reason... but emerges as an integral dimension of thought’. See Fred R. Dallmayr, ‘Life-World: Variations on a Theme’, in *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity: Essays in Honor of Fred R. Dallmayr*, ed. Stephen K. White (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 26.

¹⁵⁸ *WM*, 99.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 264.

of time' by isolating certain moments as decisive and significant.¹⁶⁰ For Blumenberg, in modernity the most important structure that accomplishes historical significance is that of the epochal break.¹⁶¹ Positing epochal breaks is closely related to 'humanisation': to isolate a particular action (the storming of the Bastille, Luther's nailing-up of *The Ninety-Five Theses*) or figure (Caesar, Descartes) as inaugurating a decisive and usually irreversible qualitative shift in history is precisely to assert that history is 'made' by human beings.¹⁶² These general schemas of historical change also allow one to orient and understand oneself with regards to the historical past by 'keeping the totality comprehensible'.¹⁶³ But the rationality of scientific historiography is opposed to the concept of epoch and must continually reduce such decisive breaks to a merely 'nominal' status,¹⁶⁴ because the more detailed its knowledge of the past becomes, the more it must deny that history is 'made' in epochal moments (or by epochal figures), and must rather assert that these great events are really 'the side effect of changing conditions or of a causal chain that bypasses these events'.¹⁶⁵ By uncovering long-term processes in place of epochal moments, scientific history must continually 'reduce' events to what preceded them; in a dramatic leap of argument, Blumenberg writes that it then becomes 'just as natural to suppose that history then becomes a process in nature' that cannot satisfy the 'elementary need' to find significance in it.¹⁶⁶

The importance of this problem can be appreciated if we turn to the methodological reflections on historiography contained in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in which Blumenberg had defended the 'real' rather than 'merely nominal validity of the epochal

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹⁶¹ On modernity as the 'epoch of the concept of epoch', see *LMA*, 462.

¹⁶² *WM*, 102.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 266.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

concepts'.¹⁶⁷ There he had rejected a historicism that continually reduced epochal breaks to what preceded them and 'continually produced new transitions and levellings off, quite automatically and without any plan'.¹⁶⁸ Although he also rejected the historical self-consciousness of the modern age, typified in Descartes, which saw itself as the beginning *ex nihilo* of a new epoch in a 'black-and-white delineation' with the past,¹⁶⁹ he attempted to defend a historical schema in which there really are 'deep radical changes, revaluations, turnings which affect the entire structure of life'.¹⁷⁰ In *Work on Myth*, on the other hand, the rationalisation of historiography is understood as synonymous with the reduction of epochal breaks to divisions of merely heuristic value. While historiography 'cannot abandon the concept of epochs', these have become 'nominal artefacts in the service of the methodical processing of the material'.¹⁷¹ Where, in the earlier book, Blumenberg saw only a deficient historicism coming into conflict with the notion of epoch, in his later writing, the very rationality of historiography militates against this notion: 'great historiographical errors may have resulted from yielding to significance'.¹⁷²

Blumenberg, in this way, outlines an aporia in historical understanding. While finding significance in history is an important element in constituting the human life-world and thereby providing distance from the absolutism of reality (a perpetual and 'elemental' need), the more we actually learn about history, the less we can find significance in it. The more we know about the past, the less it provides us with what we need from it. This tension would be disarmed if the structures for finding significance in history, such as the epochal break, could be admitted as merely 'nominal' and still perform their function. However, the implication of Blumenberg's argument is that this is not the case: if significance is only possible if it appears

¹⁶⁷ *LMA*, 461.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 463, 470.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁷¹ *WM*, 100.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 110.

to have an ‘objective foundation’, then the continued use of structures of significance in historiography with the simple caveat that these structures are invoked only heuristically and are in the final analysis not ‘really’ applicable becomes pointless, because consciously posited significance no longer creates the effect of significance.

This aporia in historical understanding is part of a broader tension between scientific knowledge and the need for significance located in the life-world. In Blumenberg’s view, modern scientific rationality can only be achieved through the renunciation of claims to know the totality of what exists, to ‘grasp the truth of the world as a whole, its *ratio*, its *forma* or *figura*’.¹⁷³ Historiography must give up the postulate of an overall meaning to history to abide by empirical standards; astronomy renounces the comforting belief that the fragment of the universe given to the senses exhausts the whole; more broadly, the teleological model of knowledge, in which the true ends and purposes of things appear to be definitively known, is rejected in favour of a new, pragmatic model of knowledge. I will return later to the logic of renunciation Blumenberg sees as essential for the development of modern science.¹⁷⁴ For now, let us simply note that in each of these developments, the rationality of modern science renounces an achievement of significance (an achievement paradigmatic of how scientific rationality performs a function continuous with that of myth): a world that betrays a visible and knowable order and is thereby infinitely distanced from the experience of the ‘absolutism of reality’. As Blumenberg writes, the scientifically necessary ‘abandonment of the claim to totality’ is precisely the renunciation of the ‘kind of truth that people once thought they could expect from totality’.¹⁷⁵

Blumenberg describes the resulting tension between the need for significance grounded in the life-world and the autonomous development of scientific rationality as resulting in a

¹⁷³ *GCW*, 312.

¹⁷⁴ See chapters 5.4 and 6.5 below.

¹⁷⁵ *WM*, 175.

splitting of the modern subject: ‘The theoretical subject is only able to strive for indifference because it is not identical with the individual subject and its finitude, but has developed forms of integration that have an open temporal horizon’.¹⁷⁶ Here Blumenberg draws on his reading of the modern concept of scientific method as a process of scientific achievement in which the individual can understand itself as forming part of a tradition (the progress of knowledge) that transcends its own finite existence: ‘man...in his theoretical interests, lives beyond himself and the finite duration of his existence and, by creating and securing tradition, makes humanity itself into the bearer of an effort that surpasses the capacity and the actual possessions of the individual, an effort that is internally homogenous by virtue of “method”’.¹⁷⁷ While the theoretical subject can negate its finitude, leaving aside the need for significance in the form of a comprehensible totality, the finitude of the individual subject is something ‘simply unsurpassable’.¹⁷⁸ The unfulfilled needs of the individual subject express themselves in a perpetually recurring perversion of the immanent norms of scientific research, whereby scientific theory becomes the vessel for attempts to comprehend the totality. Blumenberg sees these attempts as ‘regression to myth’ because they attempt to ‘equal myth in the production of totality’:¹⁷⁹ producing grand schemes that account for everything, they strip reality of its contingency and thereby attempt to grant it significance. The history of 20th century thought is filled with such attempts: Freud’s death-drive (a ‘total myth’,¹⁸⁰ simultaneously ‘natural history and cultural history, cosmology and anthropology’),¹⁸¹ Heidegger’s history of being (an inscription of history into an overarching eschatological narrative).¹⁸² Such attempts necessarily fail: in their overextension, they

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷⁷ *LMA*, 554.

¹⁷⁸ *WM*, 233.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 91-94.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁸² See *LMA*, 192.

renounce their scientific rationality, at the same time failing, as merely ‘thought-up’ systems, to achieve the significance of myth.

Blumenberg wants to deny the teleological movement from myth to science in which myth is necessarily left behind and to replace it with an anthropologically grounded functional interpretation of both myth and science, in which the division of labour between the two (myth providing stories and images, science providing explanations) explains the possibility of their co-existence and collaboration in fulfilling human need. Yet, as I have shown, he also points to a logic within scientific rationality that works against the consolation offered by mythical significance, positing an essential conflict between the demands of theoretical rationality and the needs of the life-world. Attempts to sublimate this opposition in the form of rational-theoretical accounts of the totality fail, providing neither scientific rationality nor significance. This tension appears to pose something of a problem for Blumenberg’s account, as it pivots on a dimension of scientific rationality that, precisely because it comes into conflict with anthropological need, appears to transcend his understanding of scientific rationality as continuing the anthropological function of the work of myth by providing techniques through which the human beings ‘deals with’ its deficient biological make-up.

Yet Blumenberg’s account of modern science ultimately remains comprehensible within the terms of his anthropobiological approach. As I will show in detail in chapter 6, while it is true that in Blumenberg’s account the development of modern scientific rationality comes into conflict with the anthropological need for a comprehensible and meaningful reality, the epistemological revolution with which Blumenberg essentially identifies the modern age can be seen as offering a consolation of another order – one that also fulfils the human need for a secure reality distanced from the absolutism of reality, but by different means than those employed by myth. As I will show, modern science does this by promising

the direct instrumental control over external reality, reduced to a malleable substrate of humanity's demiurgic will: forgoing the significance offered by myth, modern science aspires to the omnipotence promised by magic. By interpreting modern science (and, in fact, the modern age as a whole) in these terms, Blumenberg reasserts the centrality of the anthropological dimension in his work. The increased knowledge of the external world offered by modern science is secondary in his interpretation of modernity, which instead focuses on the function performed by science for human life.

2.5. The Status of Blumenberg's Anthropology

It is precisely the centrality of this anthropological paradigm throughout Blumenberg's work that I wish to demonstrate in this study. As I have shown in this chapter, the exigencies brought about by the unique biological position of the human being – central to what, following Gehlen's terminology, I have called Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm – provide the foundations for Blumenberg's functional interpretation of culture (including of the achievements of scientific modernity). As I will show in what follows, this anthropobiological perspective also forms the horizon within which Blumenberg develops his thought in a normative and critical direction and generates his critique of tendencies found in Heidegger and the Frankfurt School.

This stress on the unsurpassable centrality of the anthropobiological paradigm for understanding Blumenberg's work brings my position into conflict with commentators who have stressed the heuristic and provisional status of Blumenberg's anthropological thought. The issue here firstly concerns the status of Blumenberg's anthropological theses, framed as a question of the degree of seriousness with which they are proposed; secondly, it is the question of the extent of the influence or pressure that they exert over other aspects of his

work (intellectual history, the interpretation of modernity, criticisms of other thinkers, statements concerning ethics and politics). Taking very seriously Blumenberg's analogy between his anthropogenetic scenario and the Hobbesian *status naturalis*, both Eva Geulen and Angus Nicholls have argued that Blumenberg refuses to definitively commit himself to a particular account of the nature of the human being. As I have indicated above, Nicholls reads Blumenberg's anthropology as 'non-essentialist and historicist',¹⁸³ interpreting the speculative nature of Blumenberg's anthropogenesis narrative as evidence that he uses the Gehlenian image of the human being as a deficient creature 'strategically...because it displays functional efficacy in explaining the origins of culture'.¹⁸⁴ This merely functional status then implies that Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology is non-essentialist and pluralising: 'no single story about hominisation will be able to provide an absolute foundation upon which a theory of the human could be erected'.¹⁸⁵

Both Geulen and Nicholls point to a passage in the 1971 essay 'An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric' in which Blumenberg proposes that a single pair of opposed terms dominate the 'countless...attempted definitions' of the human being:

Man can be viewed as either as a poor or as a rich creature. The fact that man is not fixed, biologically, to a specific environment can be understood either as a fundamental lack of proper equipment for self-preservation or as openness to the fullness of a world that is no longer accentuated only in terms of vital necessities. Man is made creative either by the urgency of his needs *or* by playful dealings with his surplus talents...Man is defined by what he lacks *or* by the creative symbolism

¹⁸³ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 23.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

with which he makes himself at home in worlds of his own...Man contains in himself the stored-up harvest of all of physical reality, *or* he is a creature of deficiencies, left in the lurch by nature, plagued by residues of instincts that he does not understand and that have lost their functions.¹⁸⁶

This antithesis corresponds ('unambiguously', Blumenberg stresses) to two opposed understandings of rhetoric: 'Rhetoric has either to do with the consequences of possessing the truth or with the difficulties that result from the impossibility of obtaining the truth'. Where 'man as a rich creature exercises his disposition over the truth that he possesses with the aid of the rhetorical *ornatus* [ornament]', conceived of as a 'poor creature', man 'needs rhetoric as the art of appearance, which helps him to deal with his lack of truth'.¹⁸⁷ Geulen claims that Blumenberg 'forgoes any decision' between these two alternatives because he recognises that there is 'no sufficient evidence to decide between the alternatives of anthropology (deficiency versus gift), no sufficient reason for deciding between the alternatives of rhetoric (possession versus lack of truth)'.¹⁸⁸ Nicholls similarly believes that Blumenberg 'sidesteps' the decision between rich and poor images of the human being, replacing 'all ideological claims about what the human being "naturally" is' with 'an answer to the *functional* question as to how the human being is *possible*'.¹⁸⁹ Geulen and Nicholls derive similar conclusions from this

¹⁸⁶ AAR 429. Italics in original.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 429-430.

¹⁸⁸ Eva Geulen, 'Passion in Prose', trans. Catharine Diehl, *Telos* 158 (Spring 2012): 13-14.

¹⁸⁹ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 110. Nicholls seems unaware of the similarity between this question and the central question of Gehlen's anthropology: 'how can such a vulnerable, needy, exposed being possibly manage to survive?' (Gehlen, *Man*, 12). Attempting to distance Blumenberg from Gehlen's naturalism, he appears blind to the fundamental similarity between how Gehlen and Blumenberg think through the question of 'human nature': for both, the denial of a fixed human nature simply means that the human is by nature unnatural, that is, dependent on culture for its very survival. The question of how human life is possible (answered by both Gehlen and Blumenberg with a theory of culture) does not imply a merely 'functional' attitude, refusing any substantial commitments as to the nature of the human being; in fact, in both Gehlen and Blumenberg it assumes a specific understanding of the human being, as a creature deficient in natural instinct (and in that

supposed refusal of decision, opposing Blumenberg's functional or 'provisional' use of certain anthropological hypotheses to Gehlen's attempt to grasp the anthropobiological essence of human life.¹⁹⁰

Contrary to such interpretations, I wish to argue that Blumenberg does in fact associate his own position with the image of the human being as 'poor creature'.¹⁹¹ In the essay in question, he introduces an opposition between Platonic metaphysics and Sophistic rhetoric that is clearly intended as a rehabilitation of the legacy of the latter. The 'anthropological importance' of Sophistic rhetoric becomes clearest when it is contrasted with Platonic metaphysics ('dominant since antiquity'),¹⁹² which, Blumenberg claims, has no specific doctrine of the human being. The human being in Platonic metaphysics, as a living being with access to the metaphysical order of Ideas, is certainly 'privileged' in its position, but it is conceived as merely 'a compound'; an animal body with thoughts that could also be those of a god'. 'In short, the metaphysical tradition at bottom has had nothing special to say about man, with his asserted uniqueness'.¹⁹³ In contrast, Sophistic rhetoric 'starts from, and only from, the respect in which man is unique', namely his 'specific difficulty'.¹⁹⁴ When Blumenberg turns to the nature of this 'difficulty' it becomes evident that it refers to what I have been presenting as the essential postulates of his anthropobiological position: 'a deficiency of pre-given, prepared structures to fit into', a fall from the 'ordered arrangements

specific sense without a 'nature') and thereby in need of culture to survive. If the human being is not conceived as 'deficient', the question of its survival does not arise, as it is provided for naturally.

¹⁹⁰ For Nicholls' attempts to distance Blumenberg from Gehlen, see *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 115, 153, 195. For Geulen, Odo Marquard appears as the true inheritor of Gehlen's position, and Blumenberg is distanced from him both in terms of the skeptical attention he supposedly brings to the possibility of deciding on an account of the human being and with regard to Marquard's political conservatism (which, according to Geulen, Blumenberg does not share). See Geulen, 'Passion in Prose', 11-14. Against such interpretations, Christoph Jamme has emphasised Blumenberg's mostly unspoken reliance on Gehlen. See Jamme, "*Gott an hat ein Gewand*", 101-102.

¹⁹¹ A similar argument is made in Robert Savage, 'Aporias of Origin: Hans Blumenberg's Primal Scene of Hominization', in *Erinnerung an das Humane: Beiträge zur phänomenologischen Anthropologie Hans Blumenbergs*, ed. Michael Moxter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 62-63.

¹⁹² *AAR*, 432.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

that nature has accomplished'.¹⁹⁵ Rhetoric answers this difficulty because it conceives of language as a tool for the production of consensus, thereby producing 'accords' that take the place of the 'regulatory processes' that, in any other creature, are grounded in instinctual behaviour. That is, using Gehlen's terminology: 'Rhetoric creates institutions where evident truths are lacking'.¹⁹⁶

Acceptance of the paradigm of Sophistic rhetoric is accompanied by what Blumenberg calls a 'skeptical destruction' of the metaphysical understandings of truth and language.¹⁹⁷ In place of transparent linguistic designation of the universally valid realm of Ideas,¹⁹⁸ 'rhetoric' designates a pragmatic response to the lack of indisputably evident truths; rhetoric is itself a 'syndrome of skeptical assumptions'.¹⁹⁹ After centuries of its 'repression by metaphysics', the anthropological understanding represented by rhetoric 'has become especially urgent' under the conditions of modernity, where we can no longer believe in an order of eternal truths, access to which is for man teleologically vouchsafed.²⁰⁰ Blumenberg gestures towards the recovery of a history of skeptical (or 'rhetorical') anthropology that stretches from the Sophists to Montaigne to Kant, implying that his own project is to be understood as part of this lineage.²⁰¹

Against the interpretations of Geulen and Nicholls, I believe that Blumenberg definitively adopts a particular image of the human being and its condition, and one that can be identified with the image of the human being as 'poor creature'. Skepticism, rhetoric, and the anthropological image of the 'poor creature' are bound together by a chain of associations and identifications: skepticism about the possibility of access to unambiguous truths is

¹⁹⁵ *AAR*, 433.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁹⁸ Blumenberg calls this the 'semantic' model of language and truth in metaphysics, as opposed to the 'pragmatic' model found in rhetoric. See *ibid.*, 431.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 435.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 433-434.

reflected in the ‘negative’ understanding of rhetoric, which corresponds to the image of the human as deficient creature and should be grasped as part of the answer this being has developed to its ‘specific difficulty’. Contrary to what Geulen and Nicholls argue, Blumenberg’s skepticism does not lead to a refusal to commit to any particular anthropology (and, corresponding to this, any particular understanding of rhetoric); rather, skepticism and its corresponding understanding of rhetoric are inseparable from the acceptance of a specific image of the human being. This image, as I have shown throughout this chapter, is deeply influenced by Gehlen and takes as its central postulate the failure of human instinct and the resulting antagonism in the relation between the human being and external reality.

My point here is not simply to point to what appears as an inaccurate reading of Blumenberg’s essay on rhetoric. Rather, the wider problem concerns how Nicholls and Geulen understand the consequences of Blumenberg’s supposed refusal to commit to a specific anthropological image. For both of these commentators, as I have indicated, this refusal means that Blumenberg’s anthropology is merely functional and provisional, and thus, at least in principle, indefinite and open to other images of the human being (if these happen to be more functionally effective for a given purpose). Of course, as we have seen, Blumenberg himself characterises his speculative narrative of anthropogenesis in these terms through the analogy of the *status naturalis*.²⁰² However, as I will demonstrate in a more

²⁰² However, he also attempts to substantiate his narrative of hominisation by pointing to its accord with contemporary scientific beliefs. Among the key passages here are *WM*, 4, where Blumenberg justifies his hypothetical scenario by declaring that it agrees with ‘the common core of all currently respected theories on the subject of anthropogenesis’; *AAR*, 433, in which his characterisation of the human deficiency of instinct is presented as agreeing with the ‘language of modern biological anthropology’; and ‘Politische Theologie III’, 171, where he suggests that a ‘foundational transformation of our image of the evolution of the human’ in fact provides the basis for his narrative about the confrontation with the absolutism of reality. Nicholls recognises that these invocations of scientific knowledge problematise the understanding of Blumenberg’s anthropology as purely functional and without ‘realist’ commitment; he distances himself from Geulen for this reason (see *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 92-93). Nicholls’ own attempted solution to this problem is to assume that with these phrases Blumenberg refers primarily to the work of Paul Alsborg, who Nicholls believes to himself regard his speculations on anthropogenesis as merely hypothetical and functional (*Myth and the Human Sciences*, 110-116). There is certainly an ambiguity in Blumenberg’s

substantiated fashion in the following chapters, these commentators take him too closely at his word. For, although Blumenberg clearly understands that his anthropology must remain speculative – in the sense that it proposes an account of an inaccessibly distant past – it is not true that this leads to any plurality or openness in the possible images of the human being in his work. In fact, the specific Gehlenian anthropological image, of man as deficient creature, is foundational for many aspects of his work and its echoes are heard in its most disparate areas. It is difficult to see what the merely functional status of Blumenberg's anthropology would mean once it is recognised that the image of the human as deficient creature is reflected – as I will show in the following chapters – in his political comments, in his opposition to Heidegger and the Frankfurt School, and in his interpretation of modernity. The broadness of its presence refutes the claim that Blumenberg's image of the human being is merely functional, or merely a provisional tool. In order to develop this understanding of Blumenberg's anthropology and its foundational position in his work, I will now turn to a dimension of this anthropological image that has remained in the background of my account so far: the human being as the active producer of its world.

presentation of his anthropology here, but I do not believe Nicholls' attempt to resolve it is adequate. In these passages, Blumenberg wants the reader to know that other thinkers have arrived at speculations similar to his, that they are generally accepted in the scientific community, and thus not entirely arbitrary. Keeping in mind the enormous importance of Blumenberg's anthropological thesis for his work as a whole, these turns of phrase appear to ground it objectively in scientific opinion, thus contributing to the sense that he is committed to the view of the human being that results from his speculations on anthropogenesis in a way that goes beyond the merely functional. Despite acknowledging through his analogy with the *status naturalis* that this image of human being is grounded in empirically inaccessible phenomena, he believes it to be true.

Chapter 3: Constructive and Receptive Anthropologies

Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology presents an image of the human as actively constructing the world in which it lives. This chapter argues that this anthropological image is found throughout Blumenberg's work and is posed against a contrasting image focused on receptivity and passivity. In the first section, I return to the concept of 'significance', central to Blumenberg's theory of culture. I discuss Blumenberg's critique of Heidegger's use of the same concept, pointing to how Blumenberg emphasises the role of human activity in the constitution of significance, whereas Heidegger presents significance as an ontological characteristic of the world in which *Dasein* lives. However, Blumenberg's critique of Heidegger is not restricted to the account of significance given in *Being and Time*; I thus turn to a more general account of Heidegger's thought, in order to demonstrate how the focus on receptivity evident in his account of significance is indicative of a broader tendency of his work as a whole. In the second section, I formulate Blumenberg and Heidegger's contrasting images of the human being through the distinction between activity and passivity (or receptivity). In the third section, I turn to Blumenberg's theories of metaphor and 'non-conceptuality' to demonstrate how these emphasise the active role played by human beings in their experience of reality and rely on the philosophical anthropology introduced in the previous chapter.

3.1. Against Heidegger

Blumenberg formulates the concept of significance in critical dialogue with Heidegger. Attending to the terms in which Blumenberg distances his own use of the concept from Heidegger's provides an important point of access to the anthropological image underlying Blumenberg's theory of culture. Although it is a concept of only secondary importance in

Heidegger's existential analytic, Blumenberg's critique of Heidegger's account of significance illuminates a more fundamental disagreement between the two thinkers about the nature of the human being and its relation to reality.

In *Being and Time*, the concept of significance is introduced in relation to the 'worldliness of the world'. Prior to the theoretical encounter with things in the world as 'merely present "world-stuff"',¹ these things in the world are encountered as 'relevant' to *Dasein*, in their usefulness or uselessness for certain ends.² The relevance of ready to hand things always refers to other relevant things: 'For example, the thing at hand which we call a hammer has to do with hammering, the hammering has to do with fastening something, fastening something has to do with protection against bad weather' and so on.³ This totality of relations of relevance is itself "earlier" than any single useful thing'⁴ and ultimately leads back to *Dasein* 'as the real and unique for-the-sake-of-which'.⁵ Heidegger calls the specific relation in which relevant things refer to *Dasein* 'signifying'.⁶ *Dasein* is in its very being 'primordially familiar' with these relations of relevance to itself, and thus in these relations (implicitly) understands its specific nature as a being-in-the-world.⁷ Heidegger uses the term 'significance' to designate the totality of all of these relations of relevance that signify their relevance to *Dasein* and thus move it to an understanding of itself as being-in-the-world.⁸

Because *Dasein* always finds itself within this totality of relations of relevance and signification, Heidegger writes that significance is 'what constitutes the structure of the world, of that in which *Da-sein* as such always already is'.⁹ He can thus closely relate

¹ *BT*, 84.

² *Ibid.*, 82.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

worldliness to significance and even speak of ‘worldliness as significance’;¹⁰ that is, he uses the term significance to refer to how the world that is disclosed to *Dasein* and in which it is, is a world with which *Dasein* is always already familiar, because the worldliness of this world is identical to its status as a ‘system of relations’ in which *Dasein* must always find itself to be the final reference point, the ‘unique for-the-sake-of-which’. The relevance of things in the world to *Dasein* (in their specific ‘innerworldly handiness’)¹¹ is what shows that *Dasein* is not a subject distinct from external objects but is rather a being-in-the-world, and that *Dasein* must thus be ‘primordially familiar’ with a world that is equally primordially ‘significant’ for it.

For Blumenberg, Heidegger’s analysis of significance is a phenomenology not of the most primordial encounter with reality but rather of the world constructed by culture. *Dasein*’s being within a significant world is a ‘foreground appearance’ that, in being presented as an analysis of the most primordial way of being-in-the-world, ‘disguises something that one is not supposed to become aware of’; namely, that this familiar world is an achievement of the human being.¹² The familiarity of significance is a ‘quality of the world as it would not originally have been for men’, the human world as it appears after its successful reconfiguration through a ‘long history’ of cultural work on reality.¹³ If significance is not seen as ‘the form in which the background of nothing, as that which produces anxiety, has been put at a distance’ then its function ‘remains uncomprehended’.¹⁴ Significance cannot be identified with ‘worldliness’ in its most primary disclosure. Rather, it must be seen as belonging to a cultural world that distances the human being from the most primary disclosure of reality as an insignificant opacity. If we bear in mind the previously

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Ibid., 84.

¹² *WM*, 110. This has been noted in Pavesich, ‘Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology’, 433-434.

¹³ *WM*, 110.

¹⁴ Ibid.

indicated relation between the world as a totality of relevance and its ‘significance’ for *Dasein*, then we can see that it is precisely Heidegger’s statement that the ‘totality of relevance [always already] previously discovered contains an *ontological* relation to the world’ with which Blumenberg fundamentally disagrees.¹⁵ For Blumenberg, significance tells us nothing about being and how it reveals itself; rather, it demonstrates the enormous achievements of a human culture dedicated to overcoming reality as it is primordially experienced in ‘the absolutism of reality’.

Even as it is articulated within the confines of the critique of Heidegger’s concept of significance, this distinction has important implications for Blumenberg’s conception of the human being and the relation to reality proper to it. As we have seen, both Heidegger and Blumenberg associate the fundamental mode of the world’s disclosure with *Angst*. In Heidegger, because *Angst*, unlike fear, is not directed at particular innerworldly things, it negates their importance and significance (they ‘sink away’).¹⁶ But this negation of particularity does not mean that *Angst* is ‘really nothing’.¹⁷ Rather, the inability to specify a particular innerworldly cause of *Angst* is the sign that what occurs in *Angst* is a ‘disclosedness of the world in general’, of the very ‘worldliness of the world’.¹⁸ This ‘world in general’ is precisely the world in which *Dasein* finds itself, and thus *Angst* is also a disclosure of ‘being-in-the-world itself’.¹⁹ Negating its specific everyday entanglements, *Angst* gives *Dasein* the experience of its ‘authentic potentiality-for-being-in-the-world’, thereby showing *Dasein* what is most authentic (*eigentlich*) in it, what is most proper to it.²⁰ Beyond any specific dealings with innerworldly beings, the ‘ownmost possibility’ of *Dasein*

¹⁵ *BT*, 84. My italics.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

revealed in *Angst* is its ‘disclosedness to being, to the world as a whole and as such’, its *Seinkönnen* (potential to be).²¹

There is an element of paradox here. Heidegger characterises *Angst* precisely through the negation of significance in particular innerworldly things, going so far as to say that in *Angst*, ‘the world has the character of complete insignificance’.²² However, if *Dasein* grasps its ability to be-in-the-world in *Angst* and thus has the worldliness of the world disclosed to it, then this authentic disclosure must also be a disclosure of significance; because, as we have seen, Heidegger thinks ‘worldliness as significance’. Thus although *Angst* exists beyond any specific innerworldly significance, the authentic possibility it discloses to *Dasein* is to be in a world characterised by significance. *Dasein* does not know its truth if it thinks of itself as a subject opposed to a field of neutral objectivity into which it would have to ‘inject’ significance, but only if it thinks and thereby ‘appropriates’ its being as a being in a significant world.²³ The world in which *Dasein* always already finds itself is precisely the world with which *Dasein* is ‘primordially familiar’. There is thus no possible distinction between the world as such and the world as ‘significant’ for *Dasein*.

For Blumenberg, Heidegger is here attempting an impossible ‘suppression of the separation of subject and object’,²⁴ a denial of what he refers to elsewhere as the ‘distance to the thing’ that for him defines the human ‘relation to the world’.²⁵ Where for Heidegger, we could say, there is a primordial interconnectedness between the human being and its world, for Blumenberg there is an equally primordial distinction, separation, and antagonism between human and world. For Blumenberg, significance is something that the human being develops in order to reduce the absolutism of reality that terrifies and paralyses it in the

²¹ See Miguel de Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger: Displacements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 28-29.

²² *BT*, 180.

²³ Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger*, 23.

²⁴ *WM*, 109.

²⁵ Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 14.

‘initial situation’. The primary way the world discloses itself is precisely as insignificant, indifferent, and opaque, and the human being cannot ‘live with’ this ‘naked truth’ as to the nature of reality.²⁶ Where the later Heidegger can, building on the idea of *Dasein*’s primordial familiarity with the world, write of man’s ‘dwelling’ in the ‘homeland’ of being (and understand the epochal task that lies ahead as a ‘homecoming’ to this truth),²⁷ for Blumenberg, as we have seen, the determining aspect of reality in relation to man is its ‘quality of uncanniness’.²⁸ The relation posed between the process of anthropogenesis and the development of the work of myth (which is always a movement away from the initial situation of uncanniness) demonstrates that for Blumenberg what is most ‘proper’ for the human is precisely *not* to come to terms with and attune itself to the primary way in which the world is disclosed (what he calls the ‘summons’ of a ‘terrifying authenticity’),²⁹ but rather to cover over of this primary mode of appearance and strip it of its power: ‘Nothing wants to go back to the beginning that is the point towards which the lines of what we are speaking of here converge’.³⁰

The dimension of Heidegger’s thought that Blumenberg criticises here and uses as a backdrop against which to develop his own account of the achievement of significance as a constructive labour of human culture is not restricted to the existential analytic of *Being and Time*. What Blumenberg calls the ‘suppression of the separation of subject and object’ within Heidegger’s account of significance, with its resulting denial of the constructive activity of the human being, is radically intensified in Heidegger’s later attempt to sketch what he calls ‘this other thinking that abandons subjectivity’.³¹ In *Being and Time*, the substitution of

²⁶ *WM*, 110.

²⁷ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in *BW*, 223, 241.

²⁸ *WM*, 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, 231. In assuming a continuity between the earlier and later Heidegger, I side here with those commentators who downplay the importance of the ‘turn’ (*die*

Dasein for the transcendental subject of Husserlian phenomenology already implies a fundamental transformation in the image of the human, one in which the human is no longer understood, in the Kantian sense, as the site of the spontaneity of the understanding; rather, it is understood on the basis of its potential for being-in-the-world. Deepening this understanding of the human and tracking its implications, Heidegger's later work defines man through the concept of 'ek-sistence', the standing out in being that is 'proper only to man' and in fact defines his essence: 'man occurs essentially in such a way that he is the "there" [*das "Da"*], that is, the clearing of being'.³²

Such a human capacity to encounter a world outside of the environment structured by biological needs forms an essential part of the paradigm of Philosophical Anthropology that Blumenberg adopts. Heidegger's use of an apparently similar picture of the human being sharply contrasts with Philosophical Anthropology, because it does not conceive this 'ek-sistence' as, properly speaking, a capacity that belongs to the human being. Rather, if his essence as ek-sistence means that man is able to enter into relation with being and thereby think it, then 'thinking brings this relation to being solely as something handed over to it from being'.³³ It is not an achievement of man but a 'relation that being destines for itself'.³⁴ In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger still understood *Dasein* in terms that transpose the structure of Kantian transcendental subjectivity into an ontological register,

Kehre) in Heidegger's work after *Being and Time* formalised by William Richardson in the distinction between 'Heidegger I and Heidegger II' in *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967). More specifically, in presenting certain themes within *Being and Time* as prefiguring the radical anti-subjectivism of Heidegger's later work, I follow the hermeneutic strategy of Reiner Schürmann, in which Heidegger's work is read 'backwards' (using the late works as the key to understanding the earlier writings) in order to bring out its most radical implications. See Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12-18.

³² Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', 228-229.

³³ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

conceiving of man as the locus of an ontological horizon in which beings could appear.³⁵ In the later writings, this horizon appears as merely ‘the side facing us of an opening that surrounds us’, which does not owe its openness to our looking at it and exceeds our relation to it.³⁶ The openness in which man constitutively stands is not his own achievement, an ability rooted in his spontaneity; instead it is being’s relation to itself, an openness that man is gifted or assigned because he ‘belongs’ to being.³⁷ It is only because he belongs to being, only because in his very essence he is simply the ‘clearing’ where being appears, that man is able to experience being, to respond to the ‘claim’ of its ‘soundless voice’.³⁸

Man is defined essentially through this openness to the self-disclosure of being, which Heidegger calls a ‘receiving’ or ‘conception’ in the sense of becoming pregnant (*Empfängnis*).³⁹ Heidegger generates a series of terms to express the proper mode of man’s relation to being, all of which emphasise its passive and receptive nature:⁴⁰ ‘meditative thinking’,⁴¹ ‘waiting’,⁴² ‘non-willing’,⁴³ ‘releasement toward things and openness to the mystery’.⁴⁴ Although the prominence of the notion of ‘authenticity’ recedes in Heidegger’s

³⁵ See the discussion of the ontological horizon or ‘look’ (*Anblick*) in Heidegger’s interpretation of the schematism in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 63-65.

³⁶ Heidegger, ‘Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking’, in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 64-66.

³⁷ See for example, ‘Conversation on a Country Path’, 73: man is ‘released to’ being ‘insofar as he originally belongs to it’. Or in the ‘Letter on Humanism’, 262: ‘Only so far as man, ek-sisting into the truth of being, belongs to being can there come from being itself the assignment of those directives that must become rule and law for man’.

³⁸ Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 77.

³⁹ Heidegger, ‘Conversation on a Country Path’, 81 / ‘Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit: Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken’, in Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 13: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910 – 1976*, ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 64.

⁴⁰ Martin Jay accurately captures this central dimension of Heidegger’s thought when he refers to its ‘essentially passive notion of “letting-be”’. Jay, ‘Fin-de-siècle Socialism’, in *Fin-de-siècle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 3.

⁴¹ Heidegger, ‘Memorial Address’, in *Discourse on Thinking*, 46.

⁴² Heidegger, ‘Conversation on a Country Path’, 68.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, ‘Memorial Address’, 55. Although, referring this particular instance to ‘releasement’, Heidegger places his terms for the proper relation of man to being ‘beyond the distinction between activity and passivity’, this is in fact because he sees this distinction as too closely related to the ‘domain of the will’, that is, of what man can achieve of his own volition (Heidegger, ‘Conversation

writing after *Being and Time*, these terms attempt to capture something of the authentic and proper relation that man can have to being in a non-subjective, post-metaphysical ‘thinking’.⁴⁵ Against this meditative thinking, Heidegger poses the errant relation to being in modern science and technology, a subject-centred form of ‘calculative thinking’ that acts as an ‘instrument of domination over beings’.⁴⁶ While modern man ‘exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth’, his proper role is to ‘receive the blessing of the earth and to become at home in the law of this reception in order to shepherd the mystery of being’.⁴⁷

Rather than imposing structures on phenomena that ‘challenge’ them into producing value determined in relation to the subject (instrumental use, knowability), for Heidegger the essential task of man’s relation to the matter of thought is that of ‘learning from it while questioning it, that is, of letting it say something to us’.⁴⁸ Importantly, this ‘respon-
dence structure’ of thinking still holds for the categories of calculative thought,⁴⁹ which are understood falsely (and within the terms of subjective metaphysics) if they are seen as the creation of the spontaneity of the subject, as a pure form of ‘subjectivity’s unconditioned self-

on a Country Path’, 61). Heidegger distances his own use of the term ‘releasement’ (*Gelassenheit*) from its origin in the mystical Christianity of Meister Eckhart on these grounds (*ibid.*, 62). Thus, far from complicating a characterisation of Heidegger’s anthropology through the image of receptivity or passivity, this placement of ‘releasement’ beyond the distinction between activity and passivity actually signals the radical quality of its passive and receptive nature: this is an essential receptivity that cannot be achieved by man alone (through meditative or mystical technique), but exists only as a possibility itself received from being. In this regard, Heidegger’s thought resembles the structure of Christian revelation as it is formulated within the radical fringes of Protestant theology (Kierkegaard, the early Barth). For Blumenberg’s analysis of the similarity between Heidegger and certain structures of dogmatic theology, see chapter 4.3 below.

⁴⁵ Schürmann makes a similar point: ‘In Heidegger’s writings subsequent to the existential analytic, “thinking” takes over the role of *Dasein* as the locus of possible inauthenticity or authenticity’.

Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 227.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, 223.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, trans. William Lovitt, in *BW*, 332; Heidegger, ‘Overcoming Metaphysics’, trans. Joan Stambaugh, in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 89.

⁴⁸ Heidegger, ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’, trans. Joan Stambaugh, in *BW*, 443. For the analysis of the relation of modern technology to being as a ‘challenging’, see ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, *passim*. On the reduction of entities into their value for ‘knowability’ in modern science, see ‘Overcoming Metaphysics’, 70.

⁴⁹ Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 227.

assertion'.⁵⁰ Even in the most extreme cases of 'imposing conditions of human origin upon being',⁵¹ man is never able to 'encounter only himself' in these phenomena.⁵² Man is nothing other than the clearing where being appears. Hence, even in attempting to master being through instrumental rationality, he only responds to its claim: man is always 'the one spoken to' by the primordial event of the opening of being.⁵³ The technological 'enframing' by means of which man attempts to reduce being to a mere reserve of energy for his needs is itself a mode of knowing and revealing phenomena. Thus this seeming triumph of human subjectivity is in actuality a way in which being appropriates man for its disclosure, for the 'safekeeping of the essence of truth'.⁵⁴ This is the coup de grace of Heidegger's weakening of the constructive activity of the subject: even when modern subjectivism believes that it dictates to reality the terms on which man will experience it, in truth it only receives and responds to being's claim. Believing himself the master of being, man is really being 'played by' being, is really only an element within the 'autonomous play of the world'.⁵⁵

As Cornelius Castoriadis has argued, for Heidegger man 'can create nothing'.⁵⁶ He can only receive what being discloses to him, and this essentially passive and receptive nature dictates his proper role as shepherd, rather than master, of being. For Castoriadis, Heidegger's anthropology fails to recognise the creative (and self-creative) essence of the human being.⁵⁷ In presenting a critique of Heidegger's ontological interpretation of significance that works to reemphasise the constructive achievements of human culture in the

⁵⁰ Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', 245.

⁵¹ Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 508.

⁵² Heidegger, 'Question Concerning Technology', 332.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁵⁵ Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 211, 225.

⁵⁶ See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 198-199.

⁵⁷ For Castoriadis' opposition to Heidegger in these terms, see the passage from *The Imaginary Institution of Society* cited above and 'Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of *Anthropos*', in *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-20.

constitution of the life-world, Blumenberg comes into agreement with Castoriadis' judgment on Heidegger's work and signals his thoroughgoing opposition to Heidegger's anthropology.⁵⁸ As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, Blumenberg not only believes that Heidegger misunderstands the relation of the human being to reality that has existed up until now, he also rejects the possibility of a radical future change in this relation of the kind envisioned by Heidegger as the 'awakening' of man to his own essence as shepherd of being.⁵⁹ Blumenberg's thought opposes all of the key moments of the Heideggerian anthropology I have outlined here. For Blumenberg, the authenticity of the human being does not consist in a receptive opening to reality, but rather in the cultural reconstruction of this reality, which alone makes human life possible. Thought does not arise from a primordial 'passion to remain close to what is as such and to be beset by it',⁶⁰ but rather fulfils the anthropobiological imperative to interpose a distance between human beings and the reality in which they live. Finally, instrumental mastery over non-human nature is not seen as a pathological symptom of man's alienation from his essence as the shepherd of being; rather, it appears inescapable and necessary, and – as I will argue in the sixth chapter – Blumenberg will go so far as to present the modern creation of a new human image premised on instrumental mastery as an authentic fulfilment of intrinsic human possibilities.

⁵⁸ Castoriadis' emphasis on humanity's creative essence is far more extreme than Blumenberg's and linked to an emancipatory political project entirely antithetical to Blumenberg. Blumenberg's functional interpretation of culture through the lens of human survival would be an exemplary instance of what Castoriadis rejects in his stress on the creative excess of the 'defunctionalised' human imagination, his insistence that no 'logical, biological, or logical factors can account' for human creations such as 'language, customs, norms, and techniques'. See Castoriadis, 'Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads', in *Figures on the Thinkable*, 72-74. Nonetheless, further analysis of the comparable aspects of Blumenberg and Castoriadis' anthropological thought on this point would be fruitful for the understanding of both thinkers.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', 436-437.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, 'The Self-Assertion of the German University', trans. William S. Lewis, in *The Heidegger Controversy*, 31.

3.2. Contrasting Images of the Human Being

Thus, these two conceptions of the ontological status of the ‘significance’ constitutive of lived experience are indicative of a broader opposition between Blumenberg and Heidegger’s respective accounts of the human being. In order to further characterise this opposition, I would like to draw on Peter E. Gordon’s work on the famous 1929 encounter between Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos.⁶¹ In his interpretation of the debate and its aftermath, Gordon presents Cassirer and Heidegger as assuming and developing essentially conflicting ideas of the human being. For Cassirer, on the one hand, the human being is defined by its ‘spontaneity and productivity’, its ability to ‘create in complete freedom whole worlds of meaning’.⁶² For Heidegger, on the other hand, to be human ‘is to be gifted with a special sort of *receptivity*, or openness to the world’.⁶³ While he also emphasises the shared presuppositions that make their encounter possible,⁶⁴ Gordon views the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger as a ‘fundamental contest between two normative images of humanity’.⁶⁵ As Gordon uses it, the concept of a ‘normative image’ has two distinct moments: first, such images provide an intuitive or pre-reflective ‘basic picture’ of the human being and its relation to the world, which orients specifically philosophical argument;⁶⁶ second, such a picture also ‘motivates and inspires’ a sense of what the human relation to the world ‘*should be like*’.⁶⁷ Thus Heidegger and Cassirer’s opposed images of the human being

⁶¹ Nicholls and Pavesich have also used the Davos encounter as a backdrop against which to understand Blumenberg’s position, although in slightly different terms from those I use here. See Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 93-103 and Pavesich, ‘Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology’, 421-427.

⁶² Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 6, 361.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7. Italics in original.

⁶⁴ On their shared expansion of philosophy beyond the ‘science paradigm’ of Neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology, see *ibid.*, 9-11. Gordon also stresses the transcendental dimension of Heidegger’s early thought, bringing him into closer contact with Cassirer’s unique brand of Kantianism (*ibid.*, 28-29, 237-243).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6. Italics in original.

are more than simply descriptive; they open onto conflicting philosophies of history and ideas of the conduct proper to the human being, including in the political realm.

In terms of the basic image of the human being he develops, Blumenberg's account is similar to Cassirer's in emphasising the active and constructive nature of the human relationship to reality over the receptivity that Heidegger privileges. As we have already seen, his emphasis on this constructive activity of the human being (embodied in the cultural techniques of myth) is developed through a critique of the receptive or passive understanding of the significance of the human world in Heidegger's thought. As I will explain in the following chapters, his emphasis on the necessity of this activity also provides the basis for his rejection of all proposals for a radically new and different relationship to non-human reality (including, in addition to how this theme is played out in Heidegger, in Horkheimer and Adorno's hope for a 'mimetic reconciliation' with nature).⁶⁸ Blumenberg's adoption of the Gehlenian picture of the human being as a 'creature of deficiencies' means that he must reject Cassirer's idealistic understanding of this activity as a realm of free spontaneity; nonetheless, he remains committed to Cassirer's project of analysing cultural forms as embodying structures and frameworks for experience through which the human begin constructs its world. The extra-philosophical ramifications of their conceptions of the human being also unite Blumenberg and Cassirer against Heidegger; despite his important differences from Cassirer, Blumenberg wishes to endorse the modernist and humanitarian

⁶⁸ I borrow the succinct formulation 'mimetic reconciliation' from Seyla Benhabib, who uses it to capture Horkheimer and Adorno's hope for a non-dominating relationship to internal and external nature that would be achieved through mimesis. See Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 186-223. On this aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's thought, see chapter 5.5 below.

ramifications of Cassirer's work against the romantic archaism of Heidegger and other critics of modernity.⁶⁹

Rather than being simply analogous to the debate between Heidegger and Cassirer, Blumenberg's critical relation to Heidegger is a continuation of the same debate between two positions grounded in conflicting images of the human being: as active or receptive. As is the case in Cassirer and Heidegger's thought, Blumenberg's explicitly formulated position on this issue is a part of a broader normative image of humanity, which influences his interpretation of historical achievements and his understanding of what is possible and desirable in human life.

3.3. Shaping Reality Though Metaphor

A number of major themes in Blumenberg's work develop the thought of the active and constructive nature of the human being's relation to its reality. First, as we have seen, in Blumenberg's analysis, the work of myth consists in shaping non-human reality into the life-world that makes human existence possible by partly covering over the trauma of the archaic exposure to the absolutism of reality. Second, in the idea of the 'concept of reality' (*Wirklichkeitsbegriff*), as Anselm Haverkamp has noted,⁷⁰ Blumenberg offers a counter-paradigm to Heidegger's 'history of being' that emphasises the cognitive activity of the human being. Like Heidegger, Blumenberg, postulates historical variability at the most fundamental level of the human being's orientation to reality. But where Heidegger's later work historicises being itself, Blumenberg sees this changing 'attitude to the world' as the result of changes in the human concept of an essentially invariable reality. (I will return to

⁶⁹ See Blumenberg's account of the political stakes of the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger, in which he unambiguously sides with Cassirer: Blumenberg, 'Affinitäten und Dominanzen', in *Ein mögliches Selbstverständnis: Aus dem Nachlaß* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996), 161-168.

⁷⁰ Anselm Haverkamp, 'Die Technik der Rhetorik: Blumenbergs Projekt', in *AMS*, 436, n. 2.

this in chapter 6.4). Third, beginning with some of his earliest writings, Blumenberg develops a theory of the vital importance of metaphor for the human relation to reality. As I will demonstrate here, this aspect of Blumenberg's work (presented first under the rubric of 'metaphorology' and then reformulated as a theory of 'non-conceptuality') provides a unique insight into his constructivist understanding of the human relation to reality.

Blumenberg first presented analyses of metaphors in the context of studies in the history of ideas published in the 1950s, most notably in the 1957 essay on 'Light as a Metaphor for Truth'. He then addressed the question of the role of metaphor within human thought in general terms and presented a number of additional studies of specific metaphors in his first monograph, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, published in 1960. Rather than offering only a philological study of metaphorical language or an attempt to define the semantic structure of metaphor, Blumenberg's text inscribes metaphor into his nascent philosophical anthropology by viewing metaphor as a key dimension of the human relation to reality. For Blumenberg, metaphor is determinative of historically variable 'horizons of meaning and ways of seeing'.⁷¹

The central concept of this analysis is that of 'absolute metaphor'. Against a powerful philosophical tradition stretching from Plato to Logical Positivism, in which metaphorical language is seen as rhetorical ornamentation incapable of presenting anything that could not be more precisely formulated in conceptual language,⁷² Blumenberg argues for the existence and importance of 'absolute' metaphors that 'cannot be dissolved into conceptuality'.⁷³ Blumenberg explains the necessity and function of such metaphors in explicitly Kantian terms. He accepts the Kantian delimitation of the realm of the conceptual: a concept is that to

⁷¹ *PM*, 5.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

which a sensory intuition can potentially correspond.⁷⁴ For Kant, our experience cannot be understood solely through such concepts. Beyond the possibility of any sensory intuition, reason must step in with its orienting ideas to unify our experience, make it amenable to systemisation, and provide moral orientation. Empirical examples correspond to concepts; only a ‘symbol’ can correspond to an idea of reason. Blumenberg states that Kant’s use of the term ‘symbol’ ‘corresponds fairly exactly’ to his idea of absolute metaphor⁷⁵ and the shared presuppositions are readily apparent. Like the Kantian idea, absolute metaphor functions beyond the bounds of sense, where concepts no longer apply: it ‘springs into a nonconceptualisable, conceptually unfillable gap and lacuna to express itself in its own way’.⁷⁶ Furthermore, just as in Kant, this non-empirical realm is of vital importance for human beings; only absolute metaphor can answer questions, posed in the very ‘ground of our existence’,⁷⁷ about the nature of reality as a whole (totality), the essence of truth, and the place of the human being within nature.

Truth as light, the physical world as a cave, the social world as a stage: such images, Blumenberg argues, influence our attitude to life in three fundamental ways. Epistemologically, ‘the images we select...“channel” what can offer itself for experience in the first place’.⁷⁸ Affectively, each absolute metaphor expresses and reinforces a ‘particular feeling about the world’.⁷⁹ Pragmatically, absolute metaphors affect our behaviour toward reality and how we understand our dealings with it. Where organic metaphors of totality, for example, often encourage a passive attitude toward reality, mechanical metaphors facilitate a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 80.

‘demiurgic’ intervention into and control of natural forces.⁸⁰ Thus, for Blumenberg, when we ‘burrow down’ to the grounds of our relation to reality, we find not Heidegger’s ‘self-showing’ of being,⁸¹ but an ‘ontological surmise’.⁸² Blumenberg is unequivocal that this metaphorical construction of reality comes from the side of the subject, involving only the degree of intuitive apprehension assumed by Kantian epistemology. In a voluntaristic language he would later avoid, Blumenberg refers to absolute metaphor as rooted in the imagination and ‘conjecture’.⁸³ The aim of metaphorology is to ‘show with what “courage” the mind preempts itself in its images’,⁸⁴ to demonstrate how the ‘substructure’ of conceptual thought is to be found in the projection of metaphorical representations in place of the ‘nonobjectifiable, nonapprehensible totality of being’.⁸⁵

Tim-Florian Goslar has perceptively connected Blumenberg’s metaphorology with Dilthey’s hermeneutic life-philosophy. Like Dilthey, Blumenberg attempts to recover a submerged dimension of experience within the intellectual and aesthetic products he studies, to ‘disclose human spaces of immanence [*Immanenzräume*] in their historical conditionality’.⁸⁶ Blumenberg’s metaphorological interpretations ‘burrow down’ beneath the explicit argumentation of texts to reach their foundation in particular experiences of reality, asking what function their metaphors perform in relation to such experiences.

⁸⁰ See the chapter ‘Organic and Mechanical Background Metaphorics’ (ibid., 62-76) and the earlier comments on organic metaphors (ibid., 59). See also the analysis of the metaphor of the ‘unfinished universe’, which, with specific reference to Friedrich Schlegel’s formulations, Blumenberg presents as possessing the ‘practical force’ of legitimating ‘the demiurgic will of mankind’ (ibid., 57-58).

⁸¹ See the passage on the concept of the phenomenon in *BT*, 27-30.

⁸² *PM*, 39.

⁸³ Ibid., 3-5. On the role of imagination, see also ibid., 78.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 5, 58.

⁸⁶ Tim-Florian Goslar, ‘On the Culturalization of Philosophical Historiography: Hermeneutics and Philosophical Historiography in Feuerbach, Dilthey and Blumenberg’, in *From Hegel to Windelband: Historiography of Philosophy in the 19th Century*, ed. Gerald Hartung and Valentin Pluder (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 234.

The hermeneutic aims of Blumenberg's approach to metaphor become more explicit when, in a text published in 1979, he broadens his metaphorology into a 'theory of non-conceptuality'. Where metaphorology was 'directed mainly toward the constitution of conceptuality', Blumenberg writes, his new paradigm emphasises 'connections with the life-world as the constantly motivating support (though one that cannot be constantly kept in view) of all theory'.⁸⁷ This rare moment of self-reflection on the development of his thought has inspired some commentators to overemphasise the break between Blumenberg's early and late writings on metaphor. David Adams presents *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* as a scientific critique of metaphor that contains an 'implicit devaluation of metaphor in relation to concept' reversed in Blumenberg's later work.⁸⁸ In fact, the earlier text already speaks of the absolute necessity of the images of 'what the world really is' provided by absolute metaphor,⁸⁹ of their 'vital function',⁹⁰ of the 'vital orientation' that 'preserves genuine thinkers from the crabbed scholasticism of their imitators'.⁹¹

The real distinction between metaphorology and the theory of non-conceptuality consists in a slight change of emphasis accompanied by a broadening of perspective. The earlier work primarily analyses the role of absolute metaphor in specific instances of conceptual and theoretical thought, demonstrating that 'what the historian of science...takes for a rational and methodical foundation...shoots up from an underground of impulses formed on images, impulses that draw both their force and their direction from representations of a metaphorical kind'.⁹² The later writings on metaphor accord with *Work On Myth* in placing theoretical thought within a continuum of techniques for establishing

⁸⁷ *PNC*, 81.

⁸⁸ David Adams, 'Metaphors for Mankind: The Development of Hans Blumenberg's Anthropological Metaphorology', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 1 (1991): 156-157.

⁸⁹ *PM*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 111.

meaning within the life-world. It is less the metaphorical content of specific theories that interests Blumenberg in these writings than how the overarching ‘stimulation and expectation of truth’ and meaning in theory figures into the world of a human being that has a constitutively ‘metaphorical’ relation to reality.⁹³ The primary object of study is thus no longer absolute metaphors, but metaphor in general – or rather, the role of ‘metaphoricity’ in the constitution of the life-world. As I will show below, the transformation of metaphorology into the theory of non-conceptuality further emphasises the active role played by the human being in its experience of reality.

Metaphor is an essential technique in constituting the life-world. Referring to the famous metaphor of the ‘laughing meadow’ found in Quintilian, Blumenberg writes that it functions by ‘assigning the meadow to the inventory of a human life-world in which not only words and signs but also things themselves have “meanings”’.⁹⁴ Laughter, a phenomenon of human life, is attributed to a non-human natural phenomenon, thereby lifting it out of the indifference of mere externality and granting it ‘significance’; Montaigne’s metaphor of ‘the world’s face’, Blumenberg suggests, provides a sort of schematic representation of this ‘meaning content of metaphor’.⁹⁵ This operation is not limited to instances of specifically metaphorical language, but in fact marks all human experience: man ‘masters the reality that is originally lethal for him by letting it be represented; he looks away from what is uncanny or uncomfortable for him and toward what is familiar’.⁹⁶ In granting any given thing a meaningful role in the life-world, human beings perform a ‘metaphorical’ substitution (or ‘carrying over’)⁹⁷ in which the opaque, uncanny thing in itself is replaced by a phenomenon invested with significance. The human relation to reality is ‘indirect’ and ‘above all

⁹³ *PNC*, 82; *AAR*, 439.

⁹⁴ *PNC* 84.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁶ *AAR* 440.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 451.

“metaphorical”⁹⁸ because human beings substitute a meaningful life-world for the terrifying absolutism of reality.

Blumenberg unambiguously presents this substitution as an activity and achievement of the human being. Metaphor is a ‘projective principle’, an ‘underlying giving of meaning in the life-world’ (*zugrundeliegenden lebensweltlichen Sinngebungen*) that exists prior to the neutrality of the theoretical attitude and alone makes it possible.⁹⁹ Blumenberg’s use of the Husserlian term *Sinngebung* (meaning-giving or sense-giving), associated with the most Idealist elements of his phenomenology, serves to emphasise the importance he places on the activity of the human being in constituting its experience. However, Blumenberg does not conceive of this activity as free spontaneity, as Husserl and Cassirer, in different ways, both do. The assignation of meaning to phenomena (in, for example, the choice of metaphors) is not arbitrary but is in fact compelled by human need.¹⁰⁰ Rather than resulting from an overflow of innate creativity, the human being’s metaphorical relation to reality expresses its constitutive inability to face reality head-on. Metaphor’s substitution of the familiar for the uncanny is a ‘certificate of poverty’,¹⁰¹ the technique for survival of a creature deserted by the ordered, ‘meaningful’ environment of instinct and forced to construct its own world of meaning. Understanding the role of metaphor in human life thus involves ‘supplementing the consideration of what we should do to fulfil the intentionality of consciousness, with a – more anthropological – consideration of what we can afford in the way of fulfilments’.¹⁰² That is, it is less important to ask about the accuracy or inaccuracy of the images human beings form of their reality than to understand the function these images perform in generating the life-world necessary for human survival. The choice of images, metaphors, and world-views is

⁹⁸ Ibid., 439.

⁹⁹ *PNC* 86 / ‘Ausblick auf eine Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit’, in *ÄMS*, 197. Translation modified.

¹⁰⁰ See *AAR* 449, 452.

¹⁰¹ *AAR*, 452.

¹⁰² *PNC*, 96.

ultimately determined not by truth but by anthropological criteria: which give order and meaning to our experience, and with which can we live?

The metaphorical construction of reality is an inescapable necessity for the human being, as the human cannot sustain its life solely in relation to reality in itself, knowable only in terror. As Blumenberg argues in a later text, the ‘distance to the “thing”’ is an inescapable feature of the human ‘relation to the world’ that brings with it a fundamental dissatisfaction, expressed by the ‘enticements of realism’, the promise to close this gap and know things as they really are.¹⁰³ However, the familiar desire to get ‘back to the things themselves’ can only be met with disappointment: ‘If reality could be seen and dealt with “realistically”, it would have been seen and dealt with that way all along’.¹⁰⁴ The impossibility of such a direct relation to reality is ironically demonstrated in the very attempts to attain it. Such attempts, Blumenberg argues, cannot help but substitute something else for the reality humans wish to grasp: ‘much more than with the reality that it promises, the attitude of the *retour au réel* [return to the real] has to concern itself with the explanations of the illusions, deceptions, and seductions that have to be disposed of in connection with it’.¹⁰⁵

Heidegger’s fundamental ontology provides an exemplary instance of this inability. By answering the question of being not by ‘looking to its object’ but through outlining the existential analytic of *Dasein*, Heidegger proceeds by ‘making use of a substitution’ that, in Blumenberg’s reading, strictly obeys the logic of metaphor; Heidegger substitutes the familiar world of the human being for the unknowable reality of being.¹⁰⁶ In *Dasein*, Heidegger generates a ‘symbol for being’;¹⁰⁷ even fundamental ontology cannot escape the

¹⁰³ Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 13-15.

¹⁰⁴ *AAR*, 455.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* In this passage, Blumenberg points to the Platonic allegory of the cave as a model for this logic.

¹⁰⁶ *PNC*, 98-99.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

constitutive human inability to know reality in itself, rather than the concepts and images we put in its place in order to constitute the life-world.

The necessity of the human construction of the life-world and the impossibility of a direct relation to reality are fundamental to Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology. This conception of the human relation to reality is deeply rooted in the 'basic scenario' sketched in the first part of his chapter; it is precisely to escape the 'absolutism of reality' that the human being must use metaphor and the techniques of myth to generate a life-world marked by significance. The desire for an unmediated relation to reality, in which the human being would abandon its constructive cognitive labour in order to become passive and receptive, cannot be satisfied and involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the human relation to reality. In his fundamental opposition to such a possibility, Blumenberg offers an anthropological paradigm sharply opposed to Heidegger, who conceptualises the 'essence of man' precisely as the clearing in which being appears.

Blumenberg's active image of the human being is not merely descriptive. It shapes the contours of his interventions into questions about what relationships to external reality are possible and desirable for the human being. His philosophical anthropology is the foundation for an argument against the possibility of any human relationship to nature radically different from that which currently exists. In the next chapter, I will turn to the details of how Blumenberg uses his philosophical anthropology as a basis on which to reject such possibilities. In these critical interventions, the idea of self-preservation emerges as the underlying normative basis of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology.

Chapter 4: Dogma and Utopia

Blumenberg uses his anthropobiological paradigm as a basis from which to critique philosophical positions that posit the existence of a dimension of experience outside the struggle between humanity and nature. This chapter highlights four concepts around which Blumenberg articulates the critical aspects of his philosophical anthropology: romanticism, Idealism, dogma, and utopia. I position Blumenberg's approach to these concepts as deeply interrelated. In each of these tendencies, Blumenberg finds and rejects a postulated 'outside', whether this is figured as a relation to nature that moves beyond struggle or as a transcendent otherness radically distant from the existing conditions of human life. In all of these critical interventions, Blumenberg aims to weaken the foundations of the radical critique of existing conditions, whether these are understood socially or, in more philosophical terms, as consisting in the dominant mode of humanity's relation to nature. Against such radical critique, Blumenberg poses an evolutionary defence of the rationality of existing institutions, through which the political dimension of his anthropological thought comes to the surface.

This chapter begins by giving an account of a critique of Blumenberg's work formulated by the Austrian-born philosopher of religion Jacob Taubes, a colleague of Blumenberg in the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* research group.¹ This critique will form a point of departure for my reading of Blumenberg insofar as it concerns precisely the political dimension of his thought. Although Taubes' critique is exaggerated, it contributes to an

¹ On the relationship between Taubes and Blumenberg, see two texts by Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink: 'Between Terror and Play: The Intellectual Encounter of Hans Blumenberg and Jacob Taubes', *Telos* 158 (Spring 2012): 119-134 and 'Affinitäten, Dissonanzen: Die Korrespondenz zwischen Hans Blumenberg und Jacob Taubes', in *BTB*, 295-336. *Poetik und Hermeneutik* was an interdisciplinary research group founded by Blumenberg and Hans Robert Jauss in 1961. Blumenberg first presented his research on myth to a meeting of this group in 1968 (proceedings of which were published as Manfred Fuhrmann, ed., *Terror und Spiel: Probleme der Mythenrezeption* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971]).

understanding of Blumenberg's work by dramatically illuminating the political stakes of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, which Taubes presents as an irrational apology for existing conditions. However, Blumenberg's thought here is more complex than the polemical terms of Taubes' critique suggest. In order to arrive at a more sympathetic understanding of how Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology provides the foundations for a defence of existing institutions, the second and third sections analyse the vocabulary of critical concepts Blumenberg develops to reject paradigms of radical critique. I demonstrate how, in his critical approaches to romanticism, Idealism, dogma, and utopia, Blumenberg draws on the presuppositions of his philosophical anthropology. In my account of Blumenberg's critique of utopia, I look closely at a passage in which he groups together the work of Adorno, Heidegger, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann. The fourth section then turns to the terms of Blumenberg's defence of existing institutions, which he frames as an evolutionary account of culture; here I demonstrate how these arguments affirm the centrality of self-preservation to his anthropology. A final section then reflects on the arguments through which Blumenberg uses his philosophical anthropology to dismiss ideas of radical change.

4.1. Jacob Taubes' Critique of Blumenberg

In 1983, Jacob Taubes published an essay that dramatically raises the question of the political ramifications of Blumenberg's anthropological account of myth. Taubes' essay is useful for deepening an understanding of the critical dimensions and political ramifications of Blumenberg's thought for two reasons. First, in associating Blumenberg's work with that of the philosopher Odo Marquard – also a member of the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* group and

one of Blumenberg's most sympathetic contemporaries² – Taubes presents Blumenberg's anthropology as reflecting and reinforcing a deep conservatism, which Taubes sees expressed in Blumenberg's anthropological defence of existing institutions against the demands of critical rationality. Second, the position from which Taubes articulates this criticism, which combines an appeal to radical alterity with a faith in emancipatory social criticism, provides an almost caricatured example of the tendencies that Blumenberg uses his philosophical anthropology to argue against. A detour through Taubes' critique thus illuminates the political and anthropological stakes of Blumenberg's critical rejection of romantic and radical discourse and helps us to understand the connection between the seemingly disparate positions that Blumenberg attacks through the ideas of romanticism, Idealism, dogma, and utopia.

Taubes' essay is directed against an understanding of myth he believed to have been introduced by Blumenberg and 'matured into a program' by Marquard.³ Taubes draws a connection between the positions articulated by Blumenberg and Marquard with regard to myth and polytheism and 'the path of the entire "skeptical generation" that is now in charge – intellectually and ideologically'.⁴ In connecting Blumenberg and Marquard's arguments to the worldviews of dominant groups within contemporary society, Taubes attempts to critically evaluate the 'consequences' of these arguments and draw out their 'secret connection to politics'.⁵ Where many readers of *Work on Myth* had seen only the absence of

² See Marquard's sympathetic account of Blumenberg's work and personality in Odo Marquard, 'Entlastung vom Absoluten', in *Die Kunst des Überlebens: Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg*, ed. Franz Josef Wetz and Hermann Timm (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 17-27.

³ Jacob Taubes, 'On the Current State of Polytheism', trans. Charlotte Fonrobert, Amir Engel, and William Rauscher, in *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Amir Engel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 313.

⁴ Ibid. Taubes here alludes to Marquard's own characterisation of himself as belonging to a 'skeptical generation'. See Odo Marquard, 'Farewell to Matters of Principle (Another Autobiographical Introduction)', in *Farewell to Matters of Principle*, 4-8.

⁵ Taubes, 'On the Current State of Polytheism', 313-314.

an account of ‘political myth’,⁶ Taubes finds a philosophical anthropology with profound and problematic political implications. For Taubes, Blumenberg and Marquard’s position results in a destructive relativism that abandons the enlightenment goals of individual autonomy and historical emancipation and acts as a philosophical apology for a world in which neither autonomy nor emancipation has been achieved. Summarising his argument in a characteristically allusive style, he writes: ‘The work on myth in mythology and literature has now put us into a mythogenic intellectual situation’.⁷

With the 1979 publication of Marquard’s essay ‘In Praise of Polytheism’, Taubes was, in his words, ‘provoked to articulate my refusal to Odo Marquard and implicitly to Hans Blumenberg’.⁸ Marquard’s essay repeats many of the arguments present in his other writings of the 1970s, placing them under the rubric of a polemical opposition between ‘monomythical’ and ‘polymythical’ thinking. Although these arguments demonstrate substantial overlap with Blumenberg’s work and in some cases derive from it, Marquard moves them in a polemically prescriptive direction quite foreign to Blumenberg’s manner of expression. But precisely because in Marquard’s work, and Taubes’ critical response to it, a position close to Blumenberg is expressed as a normative prescription, a reading of Marquard provides an important perspective from which to examine the anthropological-political ramifications of Blumenberg’s thought.

I will turn, then, to the opening moves of Marquard’s discussion of myth, which follow Blumenberg closely. He begins by attacking the characterisation of the course of world history as a journey from *mythos* to *logos*. Rejecting both the positive ‘enlightenment’ evaluation of this process and the negative ‘romantic’ evaluation, he points to a third

⁶ See Nicholls’ discussion of several reviewers of *Work on Myth* who found it lacking in this regard in *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 199-200.

⁷ Taubes, ‘On the Current State of Polytheism’, 303.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

interpretation of the relation between myth and enlightenment, advocated, he writes, by Blumenberg, Levi-Strauss, and Kolakowski.⁹ These authors all hold that ‘we do not get along without myths’;¹⁰ hence the need for myth cannot be surpassed by the triumph of a non-mythical rationality. In order to explain the persistence of myth, Marquard provides a functional account of myth with anthropological presuppositions. Like Blumenberg, he rejects the understanding of myth as proto-scientific, because it is unable to account for the persistence of myth. Myths do not disappear when scientific explanations appear, because what they offer to human beings is something distinct from the truths offered by scientific thought: ‘the mythical technique – the telling of stories – is something essentially different – namely, the art of bringing available truth within the reach of what we are equipped to handle in life’.¹¹ The truths of the exact sciences are too abstract, and existential truths (namely, the fact of death) too ‘unlivably awful’, to be integrated directly into the texture of the life-world.¹² Myth, Marquard suggests, narrativises such truths and thereby humanises them, making them amenable to appropriation by the life-world; myth provides ‘a modus vivendi with the truth’.¹³ Thus, despite the distance that separates Marquard’s rough sketch from Blumenberg’s detailed phenomenology of mythical ‘significance’, Marquard essentially follows Blumenberg’s understanding of myth as an anthropologically necessary technique for building a meaningful human life-world.¹⁴

Recognition of the ineradicable function of myth in human life actually provides the proper criteria for the critique of myth: the distinction between ‘wholesome’ myths and those that are ‘harmful’ to human life. It is here that Marquard introduces the distinction between

⁹ Marquard, ‘In Praise of Polytheism’, in *Farewell to Matters of Principle*, 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91. Marquard adds his own characteristically paradoxical twist when he argues that because the function of myth is to transform truth into narrative, it is in fact truth that first creates the necessity for myth.

harmful ‘monomyth’ and wholesome ‘polymyths’.¹⁵ This distinction essentially corresponds to two others Marquard makes elsewhere: between ‘universal history’ and ‘multiversal history’, and between ‘singularising’ hermeneutics and ‘pluralising’ hermeneutics.¹⁶ All of these distinctions allow Marquard to reiterate the same set of arguments. Polymyth, pluralising hermeneutics, and multiversal history are all related to freedom through the ‘separation of powers’. Rather than being absorbed entirely by one story or interpretation, the free individual makes use of a plurality of stories and interpretations, which relativise one another’s claim to absoluteness. In having their lives informed by a plurality of ideas and narratives, human beings mark out a space of idiosyncratic individuality.¹⁷ The alternative, allowing a single myth to dominate one’s life, is a deprivation of liberty (the freedom to choose between different myths and stories) and individuality (the idiosyncratic manifold of myths one chooses as one’s own).

In extending this analysis to the notion of truth, Marquard develops an explicit defence of relativism. We must be ‘able to think now one thing about a subject and now another, to let this person think...one thing and that person something else’. To the criticism that this attitude ‘means relativism – with the well-known paradoxes and fallacies that go with it’, Marquard only answers: ‘I like fallacy’.¹⁸

Marquard sees his defence of the ‘polymyth’ as a defence of a particular version of modernity, which he calls the ‘sober’, bourgeois enlightenment,¹⁹ and associates with

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ See Marquard, ‘The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer?’, in *Farewell to Matters of Principle*, 111-137 and Marquard, ‘Universal History and Multiversal History’, in *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford, 1991), 50-70.

¹⁷ Marquard, ‘In Praise of Polytheism’, 94. The point is reiterated in ‘Universal History and Multiversal History’, 66-67.

¹⁸ Marquard, ‘In Praise of Polytheism’, 105.

¹⁹ Marquard, ‘The Age of Unworldliness? A Contribution to the Analysis of the Present’, in *In Defense of the Accidental*, 88-89. It is in relation to this version of modernity, as opposed to its

multiple forms of pluralisation: in the political division of powers, in federalism, in the plurality of market forces, theories, worldviews, and values.²⁰ In Marquard's reflections on history, hermeneutics, and myth, he opposes this image of pluralisation to 'the myth of the inexorable progress of world history toward freedom, in the form of history based on the idea of revolutionary emancipation'.²¹ Following Reinhart Koselleck, Marquard locates a moment in the 18th century in which the plural histories of different cultures, nations, and peoples come to be understood as part of a singular history of the human race.²² This history is 'universal because it turns all histories, all stories into one, the unique story of mankind's progress and perfection'.²³ This universal history exists in countless variations, from the gradual progress of the 18th century Enlightenment to the ideology of the revolutionary vanguard, but in every case it provides a 'total orientation' that 'prohibits the plurality of stories, because it now permits only one single story: the monomyth constituted by the revolution story outside of which salvation is declared to be impossible'.²⁴ Like all monomyths, universal history works against the freedom of liberal pluralism by subordinating all ideas and narratives to that of the progressive or revolutionary perfection of the human race, sacrificing the real freedom of pluralism in the name of a chimerical future freedom.

Marquard expands this critique of universal history into a critique of the very belief in progress itself, directed not only against political philosophy, but also at what he considers to be the 'dominant view' in the contemporary Western world more generally: 'everything can

revolutionary and progressivist images, that Marquard calls himself a 'traditionalist of modernity'. See Marquard, 'Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy', 13.

²⁰ Marquard, 'In Praise of Polytheism', 102.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²² For Koselleck's arguments about the 18th century origins of the modern historical consciousness captured terminologically by the 'collective singular *Geschichte*', see Reinhart Koselleck, 'History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures', in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 93-104.

²³ Marquard, 'Universal History and Multiversal History', 53.

²⁴ Marquard, 'In Praise of Polytheism', 97-98.

and must be changed, and change is always improvement'.²⁵ It is precisely against the possibility and desirability of radical change, seen as a general orientation in the contemporary world expressed on a grand scale by the 'emancipatory philosophy of history', that Marquard mobilises his philosophical anthropology.²⁶ As we shall see later in this chapter, Blumenberg uses strikingly similar arguments.

In a move he sees as intrinsic to the history of philosophical anthropology since Herder, Marquard opposes the adulation of change in the emancipatory philosophy of history to an anthropological stress on human constancy.²⁷ The key to Marquard's anthropology is the concept of finitude, from which he teases out two primary meanings. First, human beings are finite in the sense that they are 'beings toward death'.²⁸ Human life is of a finite duration, and this limits the possibilities of each individual life. Second, human beings are finite in the sense that they cannot make an absolute beginning. Reality is always already there in all its complexity when an individual is born, and thus all human beings must 'live with prior givens over which they have no power of disposition'.²⁹ Human beings necessarily 'link up' with traditions, institutions, and conventions that pre-exist their birth; because our lives are of limited durations, we can never hope to entirely rid ourselves of such 'prior givens' through rational decision. In Marquard's picture of the human condition, there simply is never enough time for a human being to make a rational choice about every already given aspect of life: 'we human beings are always more our accidents than our choices'.³⁰

²⁵ Marquard, 'The End of Fate?', in *Farewell to Matters of Principle*, 68-69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁷ On Marquard's interpretation of philosophical anthropology as a response to the philosophy of history, see his 'Zur Geschichte des philosophischen Begriffs "Anthropologie" seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie: Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 122-144. Similar arguments are made in 'Unburdenings', 23-24 and 'Universal History and Multiversal History', 60-61.

²⁸ Marquard explicitly adopts Heidegger's phrase: see 'Farewell to Matters of Principle', 14.

²⁹ Marquard, 'The End of Fate?', 73.

³⁰ Marquard, 'In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Reflections on Man', in *In Defense of the Accidental*, 118-122.

On Marquard's view, the emancipatory philosophy of history, which looks beyond the present to a future where human life will be established on rational foundations, ignores this truth of the human condition. Marquard takes his paradigm for progress from Descartes' methodical doubt, in which judgments 'are prohibited until they are permitted as a result of their absolute verification'.³¹ Marquard sees this same principle at work in the radical 18th century Enlightenment's rejection of tradition and in Habermas' discourse ethics, which, according to Marquard, holds that until discursive consensus has been reached 'all convention-guided action must be suspended and, to help make this possible, suspended'.³² Progress is made possible by the subjection of all conventions to rational critique, which allows them to be accepted, rejected, or remade according to rational criteria. For Marquard, human finitude makes progress on this model impossible because no one lives long enough to rationally remodel and justify every convention, tradition, or belief in his or her world.³³ In fact, only the background of unquestioned conventions and beliefs makes possible the rational questioning of particular conventions and beliefs,³⁴ and even when a revolutionary transformation is believed to have been effected, in reality the majority of life-world structures remain the same; thus 'even the revolutionaries...are, on the day after the revolution, at best reformists'.³⁵

Marquard believes that, with these arguments, he has demonstrated why a radical transformation of the entirety of human life cannot occur. But does that mean it should not be attempted? Marquard presents an extreme argument against radical change, claiming that 'we

³¹ Marquard, 'In Defense of the Accidental', 114.

³² Ibid.

³³ Marquard seems not to entertain the objection that, especially with regard to Descartes, it is precisely the methodical unity of research across generations that makes the progress of knowledge possible, and thus that the finitude of the individual life cannot be used as an objection to progress through methodical doubt.

³⁴ Marquard, 'The End of Fate?', 75.

³⁵ Marquard, 'The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer?', 116.

die if too much change is demanded of us'.³⁶ Marquard does not justify this claim, but it can be understood on the basis of Gehlen's theory of institutions, to which Marquard (like Blumenberg) is clearly indebted. Deserted by instincts, the human being develops habitual structures and patterns of behaviour ('institutions') in order to escape the paralysing, potentially fatal, arbitrary multiplicity of possible actions. The backdrop of taken for granted conventions and traditions unburdens the human being of its freedom of choice, thus making actions in specific areas possible by removing the need constantly to make decisions about all areas of life.³⁷ Without such stability – that is, with too much change – the arbitrariness of the human relation to the world created by its evolutionary non-specialisation returns, with dire consequences.

In view of the human condition, the prudent attitude (in defence of which Marquard cites Blumenberg)³⁸ is one in which the burden of proof is on the advocate of change. It is change, not the failure to change, that needs to be justified. The rational attitude towards conventions, traditions, ideas and all other 'institutions' is to 'presume the adequacy of what exists'.³⁹ Marquard thus defines himself as a 'usualist', that is, a defender of the 'usual' practices.⁴⁰ His philosophy becomes a plea for the recognition of the validity of existing traditions and structures, a rhetorical 'praise of inertia'.⁴¹

Marquard is quick to point out that his principle of presuming the adequacy of existing institutions does not exempt them from criticism, as the presumption of adequacy

³⁶ Marquard, 'Universal History and Multiversal History', 63. The same claim is repeated in Marquard, 'The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer?', 118.

³⁷ Marquard refers specifically to the concept of 'institutions' (in quotation marks) with regard to the idea of unburdening in 'The End of Fate?', 75. See also 'Unburdenings', 22-23.

³⁸ See Marquard, 'The End of Fate?', 74.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Marquard, 'Skeptics: A Speech of Thanks', *In Defense of the Accidental*, 5. See also Marquard, 'In Defense of the Accidental', 113-118.

⁴¹ Marquard, 'Universal History and Multiversal History', 59-64.

can be refuted.⁴² Answering the objection that ‘setting store by usual practices makes critique impossible’, he argues that critique is in fact only possible on the basis of ‘usual practices’, whereas ‘putting all usual practices up for grabs’ makes it impossible.⁴³ Marquard thus believes his position to be ‘conservative’ in an entirely neutral sense that he explains by way of an analogy with surgery. In surgery, one ‘cuts only if one has to (only if there are compelling reasons) ... and one never cuts everything’.⁴⁴ Marquard sees his conservatism as an ‘entirely unemphatic concept’, which merely stresses the importance of weighing carefully the necessity and consequences of change and bearing in mind that ‘not everything can be changed, and consequently not every failure to change can be indicted’.⁴⁵

Taubes objects primarily to two elements of Marquard’s position: relativism and the presumption of the rationality of existing conditions. Taubes interprets these elements of Marquard’s position as indications of an interrelated ‘ethical orientation and epistemological truth’.⁴⁶ He reads Marquard’s embrace of relativism as an aestheticisation of truth, in which ‘no measure of the judgment of good/evil, true/false remains calibrated’, leaving us without

⁴² Marquard, ‘The End of Fate?’, 74.

⁴³ Marquard, ‘In Defense of the Accidental’, 117-118.

⁴⁴ Marquard, ‘Farewell to Matters of Principle’, 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Eva Geulen has argued that Marquard cannot really be taken on his word with regard to the ‘neutrality’ of his conservatism. As she writes, behind his philosophical arguments stands ‘a rather great “yes” to the social status quo’; an affirmation that she, like Taubes, sees as ‘politically problematic’. Eva Geulen, ‘Passion in Prose’, 12-13. The arguments of Marquard’s philosophical anthropology should be read alongside the more explicitly political statements that occur in his writings. Notable here is the dismissive tone with which Marquard refers to all forms of social and political criticism, developing arguments to strip them of their legitimacy. See for example his explanation of the German student protest movement of the late 1960s purely in terms of what he calls ‘deferred disobedience’, in which the lack of radical opposition to the National Socialist regime later gave birth to a ‘free-floating, quasi-moral need for revolt’ that ‘directed itself, opportunistically and indiscriminately against what happened to be there’: the ‘democratic, liberal’ conditions of West Germany (Marquard, ‘Farewell to Matters of Principle’, 8-9). See also his dismissal of criticisms of contemporary society through the idea of a ‘certain quantity of adversity’ that is expected of the world by human beings, stemming from the archaic experience of their ‘natural deficiencies’. The experience of adversity is ‘a kind of anthropological possession from which humans find it difficult to separate’ even after adversities have actually been minimised. When adversity disappears but the anthropological need to experience it remains, human beings, according to Marquard, turn their sights on the very ‘cultural labours’ that have spared us from adversity: the achievements of capitalist modernity (Marquard, ‘The Age of Unworldliness?’, 84-85).

⁴⁶ Taubes, ‘On the Current State of Polytheism’, 304.

the possibility of ethical judgment.⁴⁷ Marquard's promotion of a polytheistic 'polymyth' as an alternative to the Enlightenment's universal history of progress is for Taubes a 'suspension of the ethical',⁴⁸ a renunciation of history itself in favour of a 'retreat into a Nature that remains eternally the same, and a lapse back into a mythical horizon of consciousness'.⁴⁹ For Taubes, Marquard's (and Blumenberg's) renunciation of the progressive and revolutionary images of historical emancipation is ultimately 'prejudiced' toward the form of life that currently exists, a '*posthistoire*, in which a lot happens but nothing takes place anymore'.⁵⁰

Taubes presents the counter-paradigm he opposes to Marquard and Blumenberg in the form of an 'offer': 'to advance from a philosophy of mythology to a (self-evidently!) "enlightened" philosophy of revelation'.⁵¹ For Taubes, Blumenberg and Marquard's denial of the 'from *mythos* to *logos*' paradigm is simply a failure to break out of the mythic 'horizon of consciousness'.⁵² Their doubt about the possibility of radical emancipation from the necessity of myth becomes, in Taubes' critique, their inability to do anything more than 'explain *mythos* mythically'; they remain captives of the 'mythic trope, according to which Enlightenment can achieve only episodic but not fundamental force'. Marquard's complacent satisfaction with the contemporary world is a 'reconciling' version of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one in which the intertwinement of myth and enlightenment is no longer a 'catastrophe' that motivates the hope for an emancipation from the dialectic (as it does in Horkheimer and Adorno's account) but rather a sign of the rationality of a modern, bourgeois enlightenment tailored to anthropological need (the inescapable need for mythical narratives).⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., 302-303.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 307.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 304.

⁵¹ Ibid., 310.

⁵² Ibid., 306, 309.

⁵³ Ibid., 305-6.

Mythical consciousness is under the sway of ‘a Nature that remains eternally the same’;⁵⁴ it is blinded to the possibility of historical change brought about through the freedom of the subject. Without the concept of the free subject’s responsibility for its own actions, mythical consciousness is hopelessly entrapped in a world-view determined by the idea of fate. The guilt of earlier generations determines the fate of later ones, becoming a ‘bracket that holds together the logic of what transpires between gods and humans’.⁵⁵ The ‘mythical spell’ is only broken with the emergence of the individual ego that takes responsibility for its own actions and thus cancels the cosmic nexus of fate. In its essential entwinement with the notion of responsibility, the ego is intrinsically related to the ethical; the return to a ‘pagan’ notion of fate is thus ‘a suspension of the ethical, the dissolution of the I’.⁵⁶

In Taubes’ account, the individual ego arises exclusively within monotheism. Taubes connects this to the emergence of historical consciousness, thereby clarifying his association between monotheistic revelation and enlightenment. Where mythical consciousness is defined through its blind subservience to timeless nature, the ego brought into being through monotheistic revelation is essentially historical. Taubes rigidly distinguishes polytheistic mythology from monotheistic revelation on the basis of historical consciousness; the distinction between the two ‘roughly corresponds to the common distinction between “prehistory” and “history”’.⁵⁷ This introduction of the historical dimension of reality is an essential ingredient of the ‘turn away from mythology in the biblical horizon of consciousness’, the absolute break inaugurated by monotheistic religion.⁵⁸ ‘Revelation is a predicate of history and requires its own scale’, an authentic ‘differentiation of epochs’ to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 306.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 308.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 309.

which the rational critique of revelation must necessarily be deaf.⁵⁹ Without the revealed basis for understanding the true distinction between the pre-historical and historical epochs, ‘enlightenment has enlightened itself and reveals itself as mythologeme’.⁶⁰ With this obscure formulation, Taubes suggests that by rationally questioning the bases and effects of the progressivist and emancipatory philosophy of history, thinkers like Blumenberg and Marquard have in fact renounced the project of enlightenment altogether and ‘produced’ a mythical horizon of consciousness,⁶¹ once again enslaved to nature, fate, and existing conditions.

Taubes invokes Marx in opposition to the neo-polytheistic sacrifice of the emancipatory possibilities of enlightenment, writing that the revolutionary dream of a better society must remain alive if ‘our history is not to end in total horror’.⁶² Within the terms of Taubes’ argument, the choice of Marx is in some respects puzzling, as the notion that monotheistic revelation continues to be the unique condition of possibility of history and the subject would be anathema to Marx’s critique of religion as fetish. But the invocation of Marxist revolution certainly clarifies the broader terms of Taubes’ opposition to Blumenberg and Marquard. Taubes attempts to salvage historical consciousness based on enlightenment and revolutionary ideas of progress and emancipation, declaring that the anthropological critique of these ideas in Marquard and Blumenberg represents a dangerous regression that renounces the freedom and responsibility of the subject and acts as an ideological apology for a deficient contemporary world. He leaves behind the anthropological purview (which in Marquard especially is bound up with relativism) through reference to revelation. The emancipatory philosophy of history cannot be reduced to its anthropological dimensions and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 308-9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 303.

⁶¹ Ibid., 309: ‘With the religio-historical apology for paganism and the philosophical *praise of polytheism*, a mythical horizon of consciousness is not merely indexed but also produced’.

⁶² Ibid., 314.

criticised on these grounds (as it is in both Marquard and Blumenberg), because it is actually the sign of something that exceeds the human; the revelation that opens up history and freedom. Similarly, emancipation stands outside of the relativism of human affairs as an absolute truth and goal, able to be perpetually opposed to the existing state of things. Taubes makes use of a theological idea of alterity as a principle of negation through which to ensure the legitimacy of a radical critique of the present in the name of a future emancipation. Without recognition of the qualitative distinction between profane and enlightened consciousness, we are left, he argues, with no foundation for ethical judgment, and end up in a banal and morally reprehensible celebration of the present.

Taubes' formulation of his objections to Paul Tillich's theology of divine immanence elucidates the stakes of his opposition to Marquard and Blumenberg: when thought renounces the 'negation of the mundane realm', then it no longer functions to 'unmask the conventional elements in what poses as man's perennial nature and point beyond the status quo to the ideal standard by which man may be judged'.⁶³ This ideal standard, understood theologically as redemption, politically as realised enlightenment, and philosophically as a non-antagonistic model of rationality, provides the normative foundations for radical critique.⁶⁴ In 1979, Taubes wrote to Carl Schmitt that 'the boundary between spiritual and worldly may be controversial and is always to be drawn anew...but should this separation cease, we will run

⁶³ Taubes, 'Theodicy and Theology', in *From Cult to Culture*, 177-178. Taubes levels a similar critique against Weber and Gehlen, accusing them of defending the status quo as inescapable and necessary: see Taubes, 'Culture and Ideology', in *From Cult to Culture*, 248-267.

⁶⁴ Despite Taubes' later dismissal of Adorno (see *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 74-75, 98), in these arguments he is heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School. See especially the 1956 essay 'Four Ages of Reason', dedicated to Horkheimer, which essentially paraphrases the argument of Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, ending as Horkheimer also does with a plea for an '*idea of reason* that has overcome the primacy of the *element of domination*'. Taubes, 'Four Ages of Reason', in *From Cult to Culture*, 279. Italics in original.

out of (Occidental) breath'.⁶⁵ The 'breath' he refers to here is, essentially, the possibility of radical critique as defence against the seductions of theodicy and socio-political apologetics.

Thus, in Taubes, a theological or pseudo-theological idea of transcendent alterity is intimately conjoined with a position of radical socio-political critique. It is by no means arbitrary that Taubes saw Blumenberg's anthropology of myth as antithetical to his own position. As we shall see, it is precisely against this conjunction of transcendent alterity and a posture of radical social criticism that Blumenberg mobilises the normative-critical dimensions of his anthropological thought. Because Taubes' opposition to Blumenberg is so fundamental, it helps us to articulate the overarching critical concerns of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology better than a more measured critique would. Though formulated as a polemical dismissal, Taubes' argument that Blumenberg's anthropology results in a rejection of hope for radical emancipation and a defence of existing institutions is quite accurate. By situating Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology in relation to judgments about the desirability of currently existing conditions of human life (both in terms of social conditions and, more abstractly, humanity's relation to nature), Taubes' polemical critique provides an interpretative strategy that allows us to open up in greater detail the question of the normative ramifications of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology. In order to show in more detailed (and somewhat more sympathetic) terms how Blumenberg's anthropology grounds a defence of existing institutions, I will now give an account of the terms through which Blumenberg frames his rejection of the paradigm of radical critique, emphasising how his philosophical anthropology provides the basis for his critical analyses of romanticism, Idealism, dogma, and utopia.

⁶⁵ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 112.

4.2. Romanticism and Idealism

The opening paragraph of *Work on Myth* immediately introduces the reader to the critical dimension of Blumenberg's project:

To those who are bored with this success, the mastering of reality may seem a dream that has been dreamed out, or was never worth dreaming. It is easy for the cultivation of boredom and discontent to commence when one accepts as a matter of course, and no longer takes note of, the conditions under which life experiences its difficulties in what are now only marginal problems. Cultures that have not yet achieved mastery of their reality continue to dream the dream and would snatch its realisation away from those who think they have already awakened from it.

Not only are we immediately made aware that the account of myth given in the book will exceed the scope of philology in order to encompass a philosophical anthropology, whose key concern with the mastery over reality is introduced in the very first sentence, we also see how the perspective opened up by this philosophical anthropology allows for a critical glance to be thrown on some contemporary tendencies in thought, which are dismissively traced back to a 'boredom' with the project of exerting human mastery over reality.

In the situation Blumenberg sketches, the repertoire of cultural techniques or 'arts' discussed in chapter 2 have achieved such a degree of success in their goal of mastering reality that human life no longer experiences any fundamental threats. However, the very

success of this ‘millenniums-long work of myth’⁶⁶ brings with it the danger of no longer recognising its achievements; we no longer see our relatively comfortable mastery of non-human reality as something that had to be wrested from the terror of the ‘initial situation’ of the absolutism of reality, but rather accept it as a matter of course. Forgetting the background of terror, we even begin to see the mastery of reality as undesirable (a dream that was ‘never worth dreaming’), and imagine the possibility of a fundamentally different human relation to reality and nature. The paranoid image of cultures that have not yet achieved mastery over reality and that, given the opportunity, would ‘snatch’ it away from those that have stands in somewhat indeterminately for the dangerous results of the renunciation of the project of mastering reality.

A few pages later, by way of a discussion of Ernst Jünger’s *On the Marble Cliffs*, Blumenberg returns to his analysis of contemporary discontent with the achievements of the human ‘art of living’, this time indicating the realm of desires fostered by this discontent. Jünger’s novella is a fable, an ‘art myth’, which shows that ‘everything that man gained in the way of dominion over reality...could not remove the danger of sinking back – indeed, the longing to sink back – to the level of his impotence, into archaic resignation’.⁶⁷ As we have seen in chapter 3, in Blumenberg’s anthropology, the fundamental relation of the human being to the reality it inhabits is one of active construction: ‘to have a world is always the result of an art’.⁶⁸ Those who have grown bored and discontented with the practice and achievements of this art long for a fundamentally different relationship to reality, one marked by ‘impotence’ and ‘resignation’ and thus passivity. We can hear echoes here of Heidegger’s formulation of man’s proper relation to being in passive and receptive terms.

⁶⁶ WM, 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 7.

For Blumenberg, this desire to sink back into powerlessness rests on a forgetting ‘of the terror, of the absolutism of reality’ that actually characterised the archaic situation of ‘simple surrender’.⁶⁹ This forgetting is itself an achievement of the cultural techniques that the critics of the mastery of reality wish to abandon. As we have seen, the anthropological techniques of myth banish the terrors of the initial situation of the human being from consciousness, constructing a life-world that no longer bears the traumatic marks of the absolutism of reality. The successful repression of the human being’s initial situation is the ‘necessary condition’ for the fact that the desire to return to an archaic passivity ‘does not need to be resisted and is able to penetrate to the surface of consciousness’.⁷⁰ Once the mortal terror of the archaic has been forgotten, ‘sinking back’ into it not only becomes a possible desire, it in fact becomes the ‘epitome of new desires’.⁷¹

Although Blumenberg clearly believes the delusion he attacks in these passages to be widespread, he does not specify the target of his critique with examples. However, placing these remarks in the context of other passages in *Work on Myth*, we can see how they align with Blumenberg’s critique of romanticism, which Blumenberg defines through its ‘mania for returning to origins’.⁷² While romantic thought does not always present human history as a narrative of decline, it often frames its opposition to the present through the attempt to ‘recover and renew at least something of the deteriorated and buried achievements of the early times’.⁷³ The example of attempted ‘recurrence ... of the primeval’ that Blumenberg focuses on is the hypothesis of an archaic stage of the human race, analogous to individual childhood, in which creative potential was not yet smothered by reason: the romantic artist sees himself as the vehicle of a rebirth of the human race in which these archaic potentials

⁶⁹ Ibid., 9

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 21.

⁷³ Ibid., 61.

will once again come to power.⁷⁴ Of course, for Blumenberg, this adulation of the archaic origin of the human being is only possible because the true characteristics of the original situation of the human being have been successfully covered over by the work of myth.

For Blumenberg, Heidegger's philosophy is 'another piece of Romanticism' because it too holds that 'the true future can be nothing but the true past'.⁷⁵ Heidegger's thought aims toward a 'renaissance' of 'that entirely unknown something/someone that "being" may have been before the pre-Socratics'.⁷⁶ In Blumenberg's critical encounter with Heidegger's account of 'significance', we have already seen something of the relationship between Heidegger's glorification of the ordinary and the 'impotent', passive relation to reality desired by those malcontents 'bored' with its mastery. Heidegger's error, Blumenberg argues, is to treat the significance or meaningfulness of the life-world in which the human being moves as belonging to the ontological nature of the world itself, rather than as a dimension of value added by cultural work on an originally insignificant and opaque reality.

A similar romantic logic can be found in the work of Adorno, whom, as we will see later in this chapter, Blumenberg targets alongside Heidegger in his attacks on utopianism. Like Heidegger, Adorno develops a radical critique of the instrumental mastery of nature, sketching the outlines of a non-antagonistic relation to nature in the figure of 'mimetic reconciliation', which would allow for an authentic reception of nature by the subject. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Adorno also appeals to an archaic past as evidence for the possibility of this revolution in the human relation to the world. From Blumenberg's perspective, Heidegger and Adorno both make the mistake of romanticising the reality that exists outside of the human mastery of it, indulging in a longing to 'sink back' into a passive

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 226.

relation to a world that only becomes inhabitable through millennia of active cultural exertion.

Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology posits a relative constancy in the human condition in the form of the ineliminable need to master an antagonistic reality, to effect what he calls the 'humanisation of the world'.⁷⁷ His anthropological image acts as the normative basis for his dismissal of the possibility of a romantic transformation in which the human being would be able to open itself passively to the world. It also grounds his rejection of the image of a conclusive state of total human mastery over reality, which he identifies with the German Idealist tradition and interprets through the category of 'final myth'. The 'fiction of the final myth' is that 'of a myth that fully exploits, and exhausts' the work of myth's humanisation of the world.⁷⁸ Although occurring at the opposite extreme to the romantic longing to sink back into nature, Idealism's myth of total mastery similarly proposes a relation to nature beyond the horizon of experience defined by the 'absolutism of reality' and thereby conflicts with Blumenberg's anthropology.

Blumenberg's primary example of this desire to escape into a state of completed mastery is Idealism's 'fundamental myth' of constitutive subjectivity, which, by completely abolishing the conflict between the human being and reality, makes the subject 'into the authority that is responsible for the object it knows'.⁷⁹ Idealism's constitutive subject is the 'absolute dominion of the wish, of the pleasure principle, at the opposite end of a history that must have begun with the absolute dominion of reality, of the reality principle'.⁸⁰

Like romanticism, Idealism anachronistically substitutes a humanised world for the archaic experience of the absolutism of reality. Blumenberg reads Idealism's constitutive

⁷⁷ Ibid., 388.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 269.

subject as a response to the fear of total deception in our knowledge of the world introduced by the Cartesian *genius malignus*. Idealism's myth of the identity of the subject and its world succeeds in overcoming this fear, but it is a second-order fear that 'need not disturb the subject of the life-world' and is already distanced from the lived experience of friction between the human being and its reality.⁸¹ Idealism succeeds in 'establishing a distance from a terror that is now only mental, and now strikes deep only into the theoretical subject'.⁸² This purely theoretical solution to the problem of the human relationship to reality, in which the tension between the two poles is diffused in the image of their harmony within the absolute subject, is inadequate because the original, terrifying absolutism of reality never entirely recedes: 'Man is always already on this side of the absolutism of reality, but he never entirely attains the certainty that he has reached the turning point in his history at which the relative predominance of reality over his consciousness and his fate has turned into the supremacy of the subject'.⁸³ The ultimate objection to the final myth of German Idealism arises immanently within the experience of the person who attempts to believe it, 'to whom the assurance of the world's favour, as his creation, loses credibility because of his overall experience, with his "creatures", that his being their author does not unequivocally guarantee their subservience to him'.⁸⁴

Idealism's myth of the self-constituting subject expresses a 'desire for absolute authenticity' that Blumenberg connects to the philosophical centre of Heidegger and Sartre's existentialism. Contrary to Idealism's delusions, through the concepts of thrownness and

⁸¹ Ibid., 267.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 269. For Blumenberg, the natural life of the human being sets an unsurpassable limit to its 'art of living': no matter how far rationality goes in distancing itself from the terror of its originary confrontation with reality, the fact that the subject can never control its own physical birth means that the 'oppressiveness of contingency' can never be entirely overcome. 'A subject is a result of a physical process and for that very reason does not experience its self-constitution but rather... gains access to this constitution as something heterogeneous to it' (ibid.).

facticity, existentialism emphasises that ‘contrary to his wish to have given himself existence and the conditions of existence, man finds these already present’.⁸⁵ But in its central commitment to the possibility of assuming genuine responsibility for oneself, of living an ‘authentic’ existence distinct from the superficiality of the everyday, existentialism appears as ‘the final resistance to the overwhelming presupposition that one is produced by alien, social agencies – as the desperate effort to resist this or to undo it *ex post facto*’.⁸⁶ Even in this reduced form, the desire for absolute authenticity is an impossibility, and can only be fulfilled in the aesthetic domain, where the ‘identity of conception and appearance’, the ‘infallibility of the wish as reality’, can be achieved.⁸⁷

Without subscribing to the pseudo-theological position that underpins Taubes’ critique or affirming its radical posture, we can see how a reading of the passages I have discussed here can support his argument that Blumenberg’s anthropology is antithetical to a hope for radical change. By positing the perpetual existence of a fundamental antagonism between the human being and reality, Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology allows him to dismiss as fantastical two opposed images of escape from this human condition: on the one hand, the romantic image of a renunciation of the instrumental mastery over nature in order to effect a newly receptive opening to it, on the other, the Idealist subject’s hope for an achieved state of total mastery over the conditions of its existence. From the perspective determined by this postulate of inescapable antagonism, both of these images of a radical change in the human relation to the world appear as utopian. As I will show in the following section, it is in Blumenberg’s comments on the concept of utopia that the critical force of his philosophical anthropology becomes clearest and its political dimension comes into view.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 270.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

4.3. Dogma and Utopia

Utopia appears as one of a series of interrelated concepts to which Blumenberg devotes the most incisively critical passages of *Work on Myth*. These concepts – utopia, dogma, negation, and the imagination – are essential for developing a proper understanding of the philosophical and political positions he directs his anthropology against.

Blumenberg first discusses the concept of utopia in the context of a critique of the power of the imagination, in which he opposes his account of the development of myth to one in which it is seen as a product of the creative imagination. I will return to Blumenberg's Darwinistic approach to the development of cultural institutions in the next section; for now, we need only note that for Blumenberg the significance that myth holds for human life is intrinsically related to its development through the slow modification and transformation of narratives across generations. Hence, from this perspective, it is entirely illusory when 'thinkers and poets' believe that they can recreate the 'compelling quality' of authentic myths in products of the individual imagination.⁸⁸ Blumenberg then moves onto a more general negative reflection on the capacities of the imagination. The power of the imagination is an 'illusion engendered by reason', which is responsible for the idea, entirely disconnected from reality, of the 'free variation' within the totality of all logical possibilities.

In reality, Blumenberg asserts, such free variation is powerless:

With the coup de main of negation – which is a thoroughly contingent element in logic, since a kind of thinking that would lack negation is at least conceivable –

⁸⁸ Ibid., 161.

all that reason has left open to itself, in each case where something is given, is to think of it as nonexistent, as totally different.⁸⁹

Blumenberg refers to the ‘literary genre of “utopia,” with its (reluctantly admitted) poverty’ as evidence that the ‘imagination’s capacity to pursue and break through the opening created by negation’ really amounts to very little.⁹⁰ Utopia is nothing more than a ‘sum of negations’,⁹¹ unable to offer any reasonable alternative to the currently existing world. Blumenberg ironically notes that, in his prohibition on positive utopian images, Adorno ‘was sufficiently intelligent’ to put a positive spin on what is really the failure of utopian thought: ‘Imagination’s poverty of accomplishment only establishes that in its historical position, under the power of delusions, all that it can accomplish is the consolidation of the existing state of things...If only the obstacle of the existing state of things is removed, then the projection of a new totality...will proceed creatively after all’. Blumenberg’s judgment on Adorno’s position is quietly damning: ‘This has the fine irrefutability of philosophical propositions that is so easily mistaken for their truth’.⁹²

For Adorno, the negative image of utopia is a promissory note of emancipation from the distorted conditions of the present. For Blumenberg, it is an impotent dead-end that exists only in the logical possibility of negating all current conditions by imagining them as nonexistent. The purely negative nature of utopia comes even more sharply into focus in Blumenberg’s second reflection on the concept, in which utopia is interpreted as belonging to the category of dogma. Blumenberg calls dogma one of four fundamental ‘ways of looking at things’, along with myth, theoretical rationality, and mysticism.⁹³ This typology is not neutral: in *Work on Myth*, the contrast between myth and dogma in terms of both genesis and

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁹¹ Ibid., 221.

⁹² Ibid., 162.

⁹³ Ibid., 67.

reception is an important tool in sharpening the contours of the anthropological interpretation of myth and gesturing toward its broader normative ramifications. Where myth constructs a meaningful human life-world, Blumenberg identifies dogma with submission.

In Blumenberg's account, dogma first arises with the transition from mythic polytheism to the single, jealous God of monotheism. Where myth posited a plurality of deities having only an indirect interest in man and toward whom man simply adopted whatever attitude was most expedient, whether of veneration or cunning deceit, the God of monotheism offers salvation through His covenant with the chosen people, but only to those who observe his 'conditions': 'That he is the only one becomes the first article of his "dogma"'.⁹⁴ Absolutely set apart from the Creation, the God of monotheism becomes the source of revealed truths inaccessible to natural reason and to which the believer must submit without question (articles of faith). The tenets of monotheistic dogma introduce a new modality of the possession of truth, a 'rigorous claim to truth' and new 'seriousness' with regard to its absolute 'realism' that, in Blumenberg's account, is unknown in myth.⁹⁵ Absolutely beyond questioning, dogma 'marks out the minimum of what cannot be relinquished'.⁹⁶

Blumenberg gives a number of instructive examples of dogmatic thought, all of which stress its fundamentally negative character. For Blumenberg, the sentence 'in the beginning God created heaven and earth' is something of which we cannot 'understand a single word' because it does not in fact offer an explanation of the existence of the world, but functions as an 'elimination and blockage' of the search for such an explanation.⁹⁷ Augustine grasped the properly dogmatic character of the Creation when he posed the question of why God created

⁹⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*, 97, 178.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

heaven and earth not ‘in order to give an answer’ but rather as the refusal and discrediting of every inquiry into a possible answer in the form of the reply, ‘because he wanted to’.⁹⁸ In this way, dogma ‘simulates the provision of answers to questions, such as would inevitably arise in theoretical contexts, by means of a refusal of importunity’.⁹⁹ Blumenberg finds a ‘prototype’ of this refusal is in Exodus 3:14, where God names himself by refusing to be named: ‘I am that I am’.¹⁰⁰ The transcendent, self-creating God of dogma – Blumenberg cites Tertullian’s formula, ‘God is born of God’¹⁰¹ – who cannot be known through the world, and of whom no explanation can be given and no story told, cannot even truly be named. This is the significance of the tautological formulas from the Nicene Creed that Blumenberg places at the beginning of his chapter on ‘Myths and Dogmas’, and which simulate the appearance of definition, yet refuse comprehension: ‘God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God’.¹⁰²

Myth and dogma both quell the need for explanation by producing non-explanatory utterances. But myth does this through the production of stories, which transforms the primordial reality that stands against and terrifies humanity into a multiplicity of conflicting forces whose histories can be narrated. Dogma refuses both explanations and stories, affirming the existence of one ultimate yet inaccessible reality to which one must submit. Myths may make difficult demands on the visual imagination but it forgoes ‘the demands of what is essentially invisible’.¹⁰³ What is ‘essentially invisible’ is the realm of dogma, and the dogmatic claim is that the subject must submit to, rather than simply dismissing, this domain of invisibility. Here the relationship between dogma and utopia comes into focus:

⁹⁸ Ibid., 258.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 219.

The invisible presses towards processing in the form of dogma. Utopia also belongs in this category...In its intensified instances utopia is the result of a sum of negations, when it is focused solely on avoiding contamination by what currently exists and when it culminates in a prohibition against saying anything positively imagined and graphically descriptive about the new land as it will be after the bursting open of all delusion systems [Verblendungszusammenhänge]¹⁰⁴...It has to be reprehensible to depict the future if one is supposed to be able to be confident that it is produced by *necessity* as the dissolution of all oppression. The utopian prohibition of images demands submission, by refusing to provide stories. He who doesn't tolerate this is one of those who already, on other occasions, remained in wretched unbelief because they did not see. It is remarkable what a variety of formations of this elementary type have been created in a short period: [Karl] Barth's dialectical foreign God, [Rudolf] Bultmann's kerygma, Heidegger's being, Adorno's restoration by "negative dialectics" of the pure and empty horizon of possibility'.¹⁰⁵

In addition to continuing the critique of utopia as powerless and empty, begun through its association with the imagination, by connecting utopia to dogma this passage moves Blumenberg's critique in a quasi-ethical direction. The radical alterity of the utopian image

¹⁰⁴ As Wallace notes (*WM*, 261, note d), this phrase derives from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they refer to 'a social context of delusion [*ein gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang*]' responsible for giving existing social conditions an illusory appearance of immutability. See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 59.

¹⁰⁵ *WM*, 221-222 / *AM*, 245-246. Italics in original.

protects its adherents from doubt regarding its meaningful existence. As a ‘sum of negations’, the validity of the utopian hope is in fact identical with the inability to positively imagine the utopian future under the conditions of the present: ‘every image spoils the ideal’.¹⁰⁶ As a purely negative idea, like the central tenets of the monotheistic religions, utopia is thus outside the purview of the argumentation and proofs of natural reason. One either accepts it, ‘submits’ to it, or does not, introducing a fundamental distinction between ‘believers’ and those who live in ‘wretched unbelief’. Utopia enacts the distinction, fundamental to dogmatic thought, between adherents and heretics. In Blumenberg’s interpretation, myth is entirely outside this binary logic orthodoxy and exclusion, as it has no ‘core stock’ of truths to which it rigorously holds and which would provide the foundation for judging those who fail to adhere to these truths.¹⁰⁷

The contrast between myth and dogma also suggests another dimension to Blumenberg’s critique, one more intimately related to the idiosyncrasies of his anthropological account of myth. If Blumenberg’s account of myth is, as I have argued, essentially a way of describing the repertoire of cultural techniques that construct a human life-world and thereby allow the human being to cope with the fundamental antagonism that exists between itself and the world, then ‘dogma’ appears to fail in this all-important task. The existential orientation provided by adherence to inflexible dogmas comes at too high a price. Blumenberg calls this ‘the brutality of transcendence’:¹⁰⁸ in fixing thought on an absolute otherness unknowable by worldly reason, dogmatic thought ‘presents itself as the demand for submission to something for which no rational foundation can be given, and thus becomes the centre of new anxieties’.¹⁰⁹ This is precisely what happens in the breakdown of

¹⁰⁶ *WM*, 222.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 237-238.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

late scholasticism described by Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.¹¹⁰ Intensified to the point of extravagance, late mediaeval theology's insistence on the dogma of God's absolute power comes to appear as an absurdity that conflicts with the human need for security in its life-world. Something similar could be seen to result from the 'intensified instances' of utopian thought that Blumenberg attacks. Entirely negating the positive potentials of the present to avoid falling into the trap of creating apologetics for a distorted world, adherents of utopian ideology fix their sights on a utopian future that has been stripped of all content and has no meaningful connection to the concerns of the human life-world. In this sense, the central postulates of Blumenberg's anthropology, of the perpetual need for the human being to perform its 'work' on reality to transform it into a habitable life-world, again becomes the foundation for critique.

It is worth pausing to consider the four thinkers Blumenberg groups together under the banner of dogmatic utopianism. The link between the recovery of primitive Christianity in Barth and Bultmann, Adorno's radicalised Western Marxist critique, and Heidegger's semi-mystical ontology is not immediately obvious.¹¹¹ From the perspective opened up by

¹¹⁰ See chapter 6.3 below.

¹¹¹ Although the link Blumenberg proposes between these four thinkers is idiosyncratic, he is not alone in identifying a set of shared concerns and attitudes in Adorno and Heidegger. From the perspective opened up here, these similarities can be seen as centred on the critique of instrumental reason and the attempt to delineate the outlines of a utopian opening to the non-human. As David Roberts and Peter Murphy write, these 'totalising...critiques of Western civilisation...complemented by the appeal to nature and art as the redemptive other of domination' make Adorno and Heidegger the privileged 20th century inheritors of the romantic tradition. Roberts and Murphy, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), x-xi. The pairing of Adorno and Heidegger has been made with a number of distinct accents, not all of them as condemnatory as Blumenberg's. For accounts that point to Adorno's similarity to Heidegger chiefly to critique the romantic aspects of Adorno's thought, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol.1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1984), 385 and Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 42-43. For commentaries that approach the relationship from a position relatively sympathetic to both thinkers, see Alexander Garcia Düttmann, *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. Nicholas Walker (London and New York: Continuum, 2002) and Ute Guzzoni, "'Were speculation about the state of reconciliation permissible...': Reflections on the Relation Between Human Beings and Things in Adorno and Heidegger", in *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions*, ed. Iain

Blumenberg's text, what binds them together is a shared orientation towards alterity; an emphasis on a dimension of experience entirely outside the instrumentality that characterises the everyday relationship between human beings and the reality in which they live. Because they are figures working in a strictly theological register, the critique of Barth and Bultmann is of relatively little importance for understanding the ramifications of Blumenberg's anthropological project. However, as we will see, Blumenberg's association of Adorno and Heidegger with the irrationalism of Barth and Bultmann clarifies the terms of his opposition to their work in an important way. Blumenberg denies the rationality of Adorno and Heidegger's positions in a double sense. First, as 'dogmatic' the appeal to alterity appears as a move that excepts itself from the realm of arguments and proof, and can thus only be 'submitted' to. Second, if in the terms of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, reason 'just means being able to deal with something', then Adorno and Heidegger's positions are irrational in the sense that they fail to 'deal with' the unsurpassable task of constructing the human life-world, instead providing nothing more than romantic idylls of the escape from this necessity.

This connection between the four positions appears most clearly if one begins, as Blumenberg does, from the intensified transcendence of Barth's 'dialectical foreign God'. Barth's early theology stresses the 'utter contrast' and 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and world.¹¹² That God has revealed himself in Christ and yet remains wholly transcendent is something that cannot be grasped with any of the faculties of human reason,

Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 124-137. A measured account that approaches the similarity between the two as consisting not so much in their positions as in shared problematics and also takes seriously their differences can be found in Fred Dallmayr, 'Adorno and Heidegger', in *Life-World, Modernity and Critique: Paths between Heidegger and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 44-71.

¹¹² Barth, 'Fifteen Answers', in Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: an Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 32. Barth adopts the notion of the 'infinite qualitative distinction' from Kierkegaard. See Barth, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10.

but only through an act of God: as Barth paradoxically phrases it, in revelation God is both the ‘speaking voice’ and the ‘listening ear’.¹¹³ Barth’s theology is distinguished by this ‘realist’ understanding of revelation, which separates ‘faith as *God’s working* on us...from all known and unknown human organs and functions’.¹¹⁴ In his correspondence with Barth, Adolf von Harnack, the preeminent figure of Liberal Protestant theology, objected that Barth’s doctrine of revelation was something ‘incomprehensible’ of which one could say nothing.¹¹⁵ In his response, Barth simply affirmed Harnack’s objection: the fact of revelation is indeed ‘totally incomprehensible, inaudible and unbelievable’.¹¹⁶ In his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, Barth effuses that faith has no ‘historical and psychic reality’ but is rather ‘inexpressible divine reality’.¹¹⁷ For Barth, when the reality of revelation ‘becomes cognisable here or there, then the miracle has occurred which we cannot deny’ and with which we ‘cannot *reckon* as with any other possibility’ but can only ‘worship’ when it is ‘present as the miracle of God’.¹¹⁸

God is ‘wholly other’ to the world and man, and this radical distance of the world from God affects all phenomena equally. It is thus no longer possible, as Liberal Protestantism had, to develop a theological defence of high culture: ‘the gospel has as much and as little to do with “barbarism” as with culture’.¹¹⁹ Religion, including the Christian churches and systems of theology, is an entirely human institution. The identity of faith with the historical and psychological facts of the religious experience must be rejected,¹²⁰ for religious experience is only ‘the shameless and abortive anticipation of that which can

¹¹³ Barth, ‘An Answer’, in *Revelation and Theology*, 43.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47. Italics in original. On Barth’s ‘realism’ see Ingolf U. Dalferth, ‘Karl Barth’s Eschatological Realism’, in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14-45.

¹¹⁵ Harnack, ‘Open Letter,’ in *Revelation and Theology*, 36.

¹¹⁶ Barth, ‘An Answer’, 44.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 58.

¹¹⁸ Barth, ‘An Answer’, 49. Italics in original.

¹¹⁹ Barth, ‘Fifteen Answers’, 33.

¹²⁰ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 126.

proceed from the unknown God alone'.¹²¹ There is no truly Christian pedagogy, because the event of faith has no relation to the development of human faculties, but consists only in that 'either-or' where it becomes possible to choose 'God's truth' over 'our truth'.¹²²

Barth's early thought centres around a transcendent alterity conceived in negative terms, generating a discourse of invisibility and ineffability that moves close to Gnostic dualism. Identifying equivalent notions in Bultmann, Heidegger, and Adorno allows us to see what is at issue in Blumenberg's critique of utopia. Bultmann retains a respect for rationality and historical research that in some respects links him more closely with Liberal Protestantism than with Barth's neo-orthodoxy, which he criticised as a 'modern dogma of inspiration'.¹²³ But unlike Harnack's 'simple gospel', which Bultmann sees as reducing Christianity to an 'idealist ethic',¹²⁴ Bultmann's project of 'demythologising' Christianity is not intended to accommodate the core proclamations of the New Testament to human rationality – in fact, what he calls the 'objectifying representations' of myth are to be excised precisely because they attempt to represent God's revelation to man in Christ as something accessible to human experience and, in so doing, falsify it.¹²⁵ The core proclamation of the Christian faith (*kerygma*) that survives the process of demythologisation is an affirmation, very close to Barth, of the paradoxical and incomprehensible nature of God's revelation in Christ. In this 'absolute gift', the 'invisible, unfamiliar and nondisposable encounters us as love', demanding a 'radical submission to God, which expects everything from God and nothing from ourselves'.¹²⁶ For those who have received the revelation of this absolutely

¹²¹ Ibid., 50.

¹²² Barth, 'Fifteen Answers', 34; 'An Answer', 49. Italics in original.

¹²³ Rudolf Bultmann, 'Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* in Its Second Edition', in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), vol. 1, 119.

¹²⁴ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (London: SCM Press, 1985), 12.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 17-20.

transcendent God, ‘everything in this world has receded ... into the indifference of things that have no significance in themselves’.¹²⁷

Continuing along the lines suggested by Blumenberg’s critique, we can identify a similarity between Barth and Bultmann’s other-worldly transcendence and Adorno’s radically intensified idea of critique.¹²⁸ Adorno’s radical negativity, the project of negative dialectics he at one point identifies with the ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists’¹²⁹ is directed toward the utopian horizon of authentic freedom and the realised reconciliation of human beings with one another and with nature. Adorno sets up what he calls a ‘taboo that prohibits knowledge of any positive utopia’,¹³⁰ arguing that the attempt to picture the utopia of reconciliation on the basis of the distortion and iniquity of the present inevitably becomes an apology for the present. Whether in the total refusal embodied in the difficult work of art or in the ‘attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption’ poetically evoked in the final aphorism of *Minima Moralia*,¹³¹ Adorno’s utopia remains something that, as Albrecht Wellmer has argued, ‘can only be thought negatively’.¹³² Like the God of Barth and Bultmann, Adorno’s future horizon of

¹²⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁸ Despite, that is, Adorno's own critique of Dialectical Theology. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Reason and Revelation’, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 135. For accounts of Adorno’s thought that stress its proximity to theological themes see Gerrit Steunebrink, ‘Is Adorno’s Philosophy a Negative Theology?’, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 293-319; and Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

¹²⁹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 13.

¹³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 322. See also the similar formulation in Adorno, ‘On Benjamin’s *Deutsche Menschen*, a Book of Letters’, in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 331: ‘the expression of utopia is the taboo on its expression’.

¹³¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247.

¹³² Albrecht Wellmer, ‘Adorno, Modernity and the Sublime’, in *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 159.

redemption is an ‘imperceptible, inconceivable’ reality,¹³³ which nevertheless occupies the central motivating position in his thought as a whole. Thus Blumenberg's characterisation of Adorno's position, despite its initially vague appearance, accurately articulates one of the central dynamics of his mature work. The process of radical and ruthless criticism (negative dialectics) provides the only access to a ‘horizon of possibility’ that, because it is only glimpsed negatively, remains ‘pure and empty’.¹³⁴

Barth, Bultmann, and Adorno all, in various ways, gesture towards an ‘inexistent’ yet incredibly powerful dimension of experience: a God outside the world who calls into question all worldly values, a utopian hope that provides the perspective from which to evaluate the present in ruthlessly critical terms. ‘Heidegger's being’, as Blumenberg succinctly phrases it, initially appears unrelated to this dynamic. Being is precisely what *is*, and Heidegger's project, in both his early and late writings, is to attempt to grasp what really is and how it is disclosed to man. However, another of Blumenberg's characterisations of Heidegger's thought, also found in his discussion of dogma, provides the clue for understanding the link that this passage establishes between Heidegger's ontology and the idea of utopia. Here, Blumenberg compares the central category of Heidegger's thought to that of Bultmann: like the *kerygma*, arrived at through the elimination of all of Christianity's mythical content, Heidegger's being is ‘found by the continual process of eliminating the characteristic features of entities’.¹³⁵ Taking this passage alongside the one that primarily concerns us here suggests that the path to understanding Heidegger's fundamental ontology as ‘utopian’ or ‘dogmatic’ lies in the distinction between being and entities. While Heidegger famously rejects the onto-theological identification of being with a god-like supreme being, his whole approach to fundamental ontology presupposes the meaningfulness of a discourse

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ *WM*, 222.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 224.

on being as such (rather than on the being of specific entities). Within the semi-mystical pronouncements of his later work, we find the declared intention ‘to think being without regard to its being grounded in terms of beings’.¹³⁶ From Blumenberg’s perspective, the central idea of this project appears less as a radicalised phenomenology¹³⁷ than as a purely abstract and entirely negative figment of the imagination.¹³⁸ But, just as is in Barth, Bultmann, and Adorno, this abstraction is far from powerless, as it becomes the agent of a historical narrative with eschatological dimensions; falling away from the truth of being defines the present epoch, and the recovery of man’s authentic relationship of ‘releasement’ toward it heralds the epochal transfiguration which brings history to a close.

Thus Heidegger, like Adorno, Barth, and Bultmann, posits the existence of a dimension of experience outside the present order of things. For all four, reference to this dimension of otherness grounds a sharply critical attitude to existing conditions. For Barth and Bultmann, the stress on the unsurpassable duality of God and world cancels the hubristic deification of high culture and ethical life found in Liberal Protestantism; for Adorno, the utopian promise of emancipation relativises a world of distorted social relations; and for both

¹³⁶ Heidegger, ‘Time and Being’, in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 2.

¹³⁷ This is a central idea in Schürmann’s account of Heidegger’s work. See Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, esp. 140-151.

¹³⁸ Blumenberg makes a similar point in another text, where he argues that Heidegger’s ontology consists essentially in a metaphorical ‘substitution’. In its critique of the metaphysical/objectivist tradition of conceiving of being without reference to *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world, the Heideggerian understanding of being essentially ‘consists in our thoroughly learning what kind of thing the understanding of being is *not*’ (*PNC*, 98-99). See also the short 1987 text, originally published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which Blumenberg relates Heidegger’s ‘answer never given to the question of the meaning of being’ to the Hitchcockian device of the MacGuffin, the object or goal around which a film narrative turns, but which is in itself unimportant and potentially never revealed. For Blumenberg, Heidegger’s unanswerable central question is a device of this sort that creates an expectation of meaning that can never be satisfied. Blumenberg, ‘Being – A MacGuffin: How to Preserve the Desire to Think’, trans. David Adams, *Salmagundi* 90/91 (Spring-Summer 1991): 191-193. Robert Pippin gives an insightful account of how this strange cinematic analogy reveals Blumenberg’s reading of the ‘emptiness and misleading quality’ of the central question of Heidegger’s ontology. See Pippin, ‘Necessary Conditions for the Possibility of What Isn’t: Heidegger on Failed Meaning’, in *Transcendental Heidegger*, ed. Steven Crowell and Jeff Malpas (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007), 199-200.

Adorno and Heidegger, in different ways, reference to an entirely other mode of human-world relations grounds a radical critique of the instrumental relation to nature that characterises modernity. By characterising all four positions as ‘intensified instances’ of the logic of utopia, Blumenberg dismisses their central concepts of alterity as meaningless figments of the imagination, empty of any content outside of their opposition to what exists.

4.4. Blumenberg’s Defence of Existing Institutions

Blumenberg’s dismissal of utopia is part of a broader objection to the entire concept of critique, which in 1977 he claimed had become, in ‘recent years’, a ‘ubiquitous catchphrase’.¹³⁹ As Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink has noted, Blumenberg’s opposition to the concept of critique embraces the 18th century Enlightenment, the protest movements of the 1960s, and the leftist intelligentsia in general, and is often framed as an objection to a dominant trend of his entire epoch, rather than to anything more specific.¹⁴⁰ Although Blumenberg sometimes phrases his objections to the practice of critique as mere dismissal – claiming that it is ‘parasitic’ and its importance overestimated¹⁴¹ – his central objections are firmly grounded in his philosophical anthropology.

As noted earlier, Blumenberg’s arguments here are essentially identical to Marquard’s, and in this sense Taubes was justified in grouping them together. Blumenberg

¹³⁹ Letter from Blumenberg to Taubes, 24 May 1977, in *BTB*, 172. See also the reference, from 1971, to ‘critical reason’ as a phrase ‘that is going around currently’ (*AAR*, 452).

¹⁴⁰ Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, ‘Affinitäten, Dissonanzen: Die Korrespondenz zwischen Hans Blumenberg und Jacob Taubes’, in *BTB*, 310-311. Angus Nicholls also notes Blumenberg’s distaste for the idea of critique. See Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 196.

¹⁴¹ *BTB*, 172. See also the scathing comments (in *WM*, 184) about the current ‘professionalism in the realm of theory that also promotes those who are only able to invent questions, and still more those who only act as critics of the answers and who even equip them with the quasi-ethical pretension according to which being criticised is part of the immanent intention of all supposed answers. To expose oneself to criticism with a bearing expressive of the enjoyment of suffering thus becomes a professional faculty, just as being a good loser once was one of the duties of the so-called good sportsman’.

sees in Cartesian rationalism, the 18th century Enlightenment, and contemporary Critical Theory a tendency toward an overestimation of the importance of critique and an over-expansion of its practice.¹⁴² The rational criticism of existing beliefs and customs, today an ‘everyday sport’ in which ‘every institution ... is pressed ... to demonstrate its legitimacy’, aims towards a total reconstruction on rational grounds.¹⁴³ Blumenberg explains this through the metaphor of Cartesian city planning: ‘Descartes thought that the best way to build cities rationally was to begin by razing the old cities’.¹⁴⁴ Like Marquard, Blumenberg raises an objection based on human finitude against the desire to establish a ‘final rational foundation’ for all beliefs and practices. The critical reconstruction of all aspects of life would not only entirely dominate the individual human life (leaving no time for the gain in the ‘intelligent movement of existence’ that critique intends to effect); in fact, it is an impossible task to complete in the span of an individual life. There is ‘antinomy of life and thought’, an ‘indissoluble contradiction’ between the process of total critique and ‘the meagre finitude’ of human life.¹⁴⁵

According to Blumenberg, this dilemma can be escaped in two ways. The first is to ‘delegate’ the task of rational critique to a ‘small avant-garde’ who busy themselves with establishing rational foundations while everyone else goes about their normal business. But if the enlightenment project essentially consists in each individual thinking for themselves, then

¹⁴² Specifically with regard to the 18th century Enlightenment, Blumenberg repeatedly makes the point that that enlightened critique of traditional institutions disregards the needs answered by such institutions and ignores the potentially harmful consequences of dismantling them. See *LMA*, 64 and *GCW*, 337, 674.

¹⁴³ *WM*, 163. See the similar comments in *AAR*, 446, which are also notable for being almost indistinguishable from some of Marquard’s expressions of the same point: ‘Today we observe an extremely rapid dismantling of “obsolete” forms by critical proceedings in which everything that exists carries the burden of proving that its existence is justified’. If, as Jamme suggests, we should see this argument as directed particularly against a perceived excess of justification required by Habermas’ discourse ethics, then this brings Blumenberg and Marquard even closer together. See Christoph Jamme, “*Gott an hat ein Gewand*”, 101, n. 87. On Marquard’s critique of Habermas in these terms, see chapter 4.1 above.

¹⁴⁴ *WM*, 163.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

this delegation comes at the ‘fatal price’ of surrendering the Enlightenment’s ideal of autonomy.¹⁴⁶ The second alternative is identical to that which Marquard proposes: to reduce the field of rational critique by giving the benefit of the doubt to existing institutions. Blumenberg calls this attitude that of recognising ‘the rationality of things for which no rational foundation is given’.¹⁴⁷ Without giving any examples, he claims that the failure to recognise this implicit rationality leads to ‘moments in which the outcomes of centuries and millenniums are thoughtlessly sacrificed’.¹⁴⁸

Like Marquard, Blumenberg uses the concept of the ‘burden of proof’ to explain the conservative orientation necessitated by human finitude: ‘Where an institution exists, the question of its rational foundation is not, of itself, urgent, and the burden of proof always lies on the person who objects to the arrangement the institution carries with it’.¹⁴⁹ Blumenberg develops an evolutionary paradigm to explain why this situation does not dash all hopes of a rational human life. Like much of his anthropological account of culture, this evolutionary structure is first demonstrated in myth and then generalised to all institutions.

For Blumenberg, even the earliest surviving evidence of mythical tradition must be seen as the result of a long pre-history of refinement. This occurs through the feedback loop between narrator and audience that exists in the oral communication of myths, through which the success or failure of any given version or feature of a myth is continuously and directly made known to the narrator through the audience’s reactions.¹⁵⁰ This is what Blumenberg calls ‘Darwinism in the realm of words’:¹⁵¹ only what is effective survives. This pan-generational, communal refinement by trial and error gives myth its otherwise

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 164. As Robert Wallace has noted, Blumenberg clearly alludes here to the opening formulations of Kant’s 1784 essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ See Wallace, ‘Blumenberg’s Third Way: Between Habermas and Gadamer’, in *Dialectic and Narrative*, 190.

¹⁴⁷ *WM*, 163.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 152.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 159.

‘incomprehensible’ durability.¹⁵² Myth is a ‘psychological product of nature’,¹⁵³ which confronts us as something that ‘could not have been invented’ and thereby achieves a significance impossible for mere products of the imagination.¹⁵⁴ Blumenberg uses this idea to distinguish authentic myths, which have been refined through this feedback system, from what he calls ‘art myths’, which are imaginative productions that appropriate the form of myth without achieving its effectiveness.¹⁵⁵

Extending this logic to human culture in general, Blumenberg asks us to look upon history as ‘a process of optimisation’ through which institutions of every kind have been tested over the course of millennia of trial and error.¹⁵⁶ At the very least, the survival of an institution is proof that it did not ‘lead into fatal dead ends’ or ‘operate as a liability detracting from success in life’.¹⁵⁷ The fact that the specific function of every institution cannot be demonstrated is not an argument against the evolutionary perspective because ‘the mechanism of selection is precisely of such a kind that, in its results, it does not provide the explanation for their usefulness in life’.¹⁵⁸ In their successful functioning, institutions appear as taken-for-granted constants beyond doubt and, from Blumenberg’s Gehlenian perspective, this removal from the agonising multiplicity of possible decisions is key to their effective functioning. Thus ‘arguments of the kind that assert that something can no longer be accepted because it has already been accepted for a very long time without examination do not have the rational plausibility that is granted to them at times’.¹⁵⁹ The unquestioning acceptance of

¹⁵² Ibid., 159.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 159, 266.

¹⁵⁵ Blumenberg points to the narratives found in Gnosticism as an example. The ‘weakness of the Gnostic art myth’ is a result of it belonging ‘to an arcane literature that remains withdrawn from the discipline exercised by an audience’. Its incoherence and ‘fanciful proliferation’ are only possible because it was ‘not subject to any process of selection’, but was rather developed in the context of a cultic group (ibid., 209).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 165.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 166.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 166.

an institution can actually be the sign of its ‘usefulness in life’, that is, its rationality. Blumenberg refers to this anthropological criterion of rationality when he expresses his opposition to the demand for total critical justification with the claim that ‘it can be rational not to be rational to the utmost extent’.¹⁶⁰

With these arguments, Blumenberg limits the scope and importance of critical rationality. The demand for the subjection of all existing institutions to rational critique is dangerous, because it can lead to the destruction of useful institutions, and ultimately impossible, due to the finitude of human life.¹⁶¹ Rational critique, associated with utopian negation and the imagination, is not the agency responsible for existing institutions. These have been formed through a ‘process of selection’ that grants them a diversity and significance impossible for products of critical reason.¹⁶² With this increased burden of proof, critical rationality, it seems, must limit itself to the cancellation of institutions, or aspects of them, that appear unsatisfactory. Blumenberg’s philosophical engagement with the idea of critique ultimately accords with his off-hand characterisation of it as a ‘parasitic’ practice.

The extent to which Blumenberg’s evolutionary theory of institutions constitutes a conservative and potentially irrational defence of tradition has been the subject of debate among commentators. To some, Blumenberg appears to offer a defence of tradition as such. David Ingram argues that ‘if we accept Blumenberg’s claim that “reason just means being able to deal with something”, then even dogmatic forms of tradition are rational’ and points to the apparent contradiction between this position and the defence of modernity in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.¹⁶³ Writing in the same volume in which Ingram’s essay was

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶¹ Already in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg writes that ‘cultural criticism’ should be ‘called to account for irresponsibility in relation to the burdens of proof associated with what it presupposes’ (*LMA*, 117).

¹⁶² *WM*, 161.

¹⁶³ See David Ingram, ‘Reflections on the Anthropocentric Limits of Scientific Realism: Blumenberg on Myth, Reason, and the Legitimacy of the Modern Age’, in *Dialectic and Narrative*, 179-183. H.L.

published, Robert M. Wallace defends Blumenberg against the claim of ‘obscurantist traditionalism’.¹⁶⁴ Just as Marquard does in his defence of his own position, Wallace points to the fact that while Blumenberg’s evolutionary defence of tradition does reduce the ‘burden’ of what needs to be rationally tested, it does not leave tradition immune from rational criticism as such. Blumenberg clearly believes, as Wallace points out, that ‘the “burden of proof” of the “person who objects” can in fact be carried successfully in the right circumstances’.¹⁶⁵ The evolutionary framework further differentiates Blumenberg’s position from Gehlen’s ‘pure traditionalism’, by giving us a ‘rational basis’ for accepting institutions that can be criticised and revised in a ‘piecemeal manner’.¹⁶⁶

With regard to the normative orientation that emerges from Blumenberg’s anthropology, Wallace leaves unaddressed an important problem mentioned by Ingram. The ‘rationality’ of accepting institutions and traditions is found, Blumenberg argues, in an evolutionary perspective in which they are seen as the outcome of a long process of refinement and thus as the embodiment of ‘objective progress’.¹⁶⁷ But what, Ingram asks, is the standard by which this progress is judged?¹⁶⁸ What norms do the process of the refinement of institutions approach or fall short of, in the cases where the burden of proof required of one who proposes changes to institutions can be met?

In his critique of Blumenberg on this point, Ingram implies that such a standard or norm is absent from Blumenberg’s account of his ‘Darwinism of words’. On the contrary, I believe that the passage in which Blumenberg develops this argument provides a key point of

Ollig voices similar concerns in a review that emphasises Blumenberg’s connection to Gehlen. See Ollig, ‘Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*’, *Theologie und Philosophie* 10, no. 1 (1981): 148-152.

¹⁶⁴ Wallace uses this phrase not in the text under discussion here but in his translator’s introduction to *WM*, xxvii. The argument presented in both texts is essentially the same.

¹⁶⁵ Wallace, ‘Blumenberg’s Third Way’, 191.

¹⁶⁶ Wallace, ‘Blumenberg’s Third Way’, 193-195. This distinction from Gehlen is made in Wallace, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, xxix.

¹⁶⁷ *WM*, 165.

¹⁶⁸ Ingram, ‘Reflections on the Anthropocentric Limits of Scientific Realism’, 181-182.

access to the normative foundations of his philosophical anthropology as a whole. Blumenberg's gives only one, vague formulation of the standard by which the objective progress embodied in institutions is to be judged: 'success' or 'usefulness' in life.¹⁶⁹ He gives some idea of the nature of this 'success' in the course of distinguishing his 'Darwinism of words' from social Darwinism, which, he argues, makes the mistake of understanding the 'development of man' in the purely biological terms appropriate for other living beings. The uniqueness of human evolution lies in the fact that only human beings have managed to evade the evolutionary mechanism of selection by developing 'culture' and 'institutions': 'the conditions of selection no longer reach and have an effect on man as a physical system to the extent that he has learned to subject his artefacts and instruments, instead of himself, to the process of adaptation'.¹⁷⁰ Culture takes the place of physical evolution in adapting human beings to their environment. This adaptation, of course, is not harmonious: 'Human culture is a front line of confrontation with nature – as well as of the obscuring of nature's superior power, by the scenery of myth.'¹⁷¹

This passage, which places myth alongside 'theory and technology' under the shared rubric of 'human culture' neatly exemplifies how Blumenberg's analysis of human culture, as motivated by the need to overcome the absolutism of reality, removes the distinction between technologies and techniques that facilitate physical survival and cultural institutions, such as myth, that grant the world 'significance'. In Blumenberg's anthropology, both appear as necessary for self-preservation in the face of a hostile reality. Much of the peculiar gravitas of Blumenberg's account of cultural institutions comes from the intimate association it assumes between the 'assurance and affirmation [*Zusicherung und Bekräftigung*]' they offer and the

¹⁶⁹ *WM*, 164, 166.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

achievement of bare physical survival.¹⁷² It is clear that an institution's usefulness for self-preservation in this expanded sense is the standard by which Blumenberg measures its 'success in life'.¹⁷³ An institution's contribution to human survival is thus the norm by which its evolutionary refinement is measured – and which it falls short of in the case of legitimate calls to transform it.

4.5. Concluding Remarks

To summarise: on the basis of his anthropology, Blumenberg attacks a range of positions that evoke the possibility of something outside the horizon of experience defined by the human being's fraught relationship to nature. In romanticism and German Idealism, Blumenberg finds fantasies of a relationship to nature that would leave behind the necessity of its continuing cultural construction and control, whether through a return to archaic receptivity or through a final and completed mastery. By associating utopia with dogma and the imagination, Blumenberg positions its invocation of future possibility as purely negative. He considers the critique of existing conditions that depends on this utopian horizon to be dangerous, as it promotes a critical attitude unconcerned with the self-preserving

¹⁷² *WM*, 160 / *AM*, 177. Translation modified.

¹⁷³ An example of Blumenberg's evaluation of institutions on the basis of their success in facilitating self-preservation can be found in his defence of parliamentary democracy, sketched in *AAR* and the essay 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie', *Schweizer Monatshefte: Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur* 48 (1968): 121-146. These texts present a defence of parliamentary democracy as a political system based on 'mere words' ('Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie', 128-129). For Blumenberg, the rhetorical focus of parliamentary institutions 'seeks to promote the delaying of actions', which are presented as essentially uncertain on skeptical grounds. Humans can never have adequate knowledge of the reasons for, or consequences of, action (*AAR*, 447). The rhetorical delay of potentially dangerous action through their replacement with verbal 'quasi-actions' ('Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie', 138) is presented as humane, while an action-centred political paradigm is associated with 'force' and 'terror' (*AAR*, 437). Punning on the title of J.L. Austin's *How to do Things with Words*, Blumenberg proposes another book title, closer to his ideal of political life: *How to do Nothing with Words* ('Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie', 138). As Felix Heidenreich has argued, these passages should be read against the backdrop of 1960s radicalism and the threat of Cold War escalation. See Heidenreich, 'Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophy', *Revista de Filosofía Aurora* 27, no. 41 (2015): 533.

achievements of human culture that are embedded in existing institutions. Here the political implications of Blumenberg's anthropology come into view, as Taubes argued, in the form of a defence of tradition and existing conditions; and, as I have argued, human self-preservation is the overarching concern of this conservative orientation.

The positions that Blumenberg targets support the hope for radical change, in social institutions or in the relationship between human beings and nature. We can isolate three ways in which Blumenberg invokes anthropological arguments to dismiss these hopes.

First, appeal to anthropological constants demonstrates the *impossibility* of such hopes, presenting them as fantasy images. The perpetual antagonism between human beings and their environment precludes both the romantic desire for a passive surrender to nature and Idealism's fantasy of total mastery over it. Similarly, human finitude is used as an argument against the possibility of a total rational reconstruction of all institutions, the end toward which Blumenberg believes contemporary socio-political critique to aim.

Second, basic anthropological needs are posited in such a way that the radical positions Blumenberg critiques are presented as either simply *failing* to satisfy these needs or as actively *endangering* the possibility of their satisfaction. In Blumenberg's account, the need to overcome the absolutism of reality is an anthropological absolute. The romantic renunciation of the mastery of reality is dangerous because it attempts to escape the project of mastery that is necessitated by the antagonism of reality to human beings; such renunciation threatens the possibility of human survival. Blumenberg interprets the ideas of alterity that propel Adorno, Heidegger, Barth, and Bultmann as dogmatic and utopian; they are presented as purely negative ideals that, because they cannot be instantiated in the world, fail to provide 'significance' to human life, which is an intrinsic part of the overcoming of the absolutism of

reality. The institutions that do provide human beings with their means of survival in the face of the absolutism of reality are also threatened by the overextension of rational critique.

Third, Blumenberg uses a reduced criterion for the success of currently existing institutions to argue that radical change is *unnecessary*. This reduced norm of success is strongly rooted in his basic anthropological schema: the necessity of self-preservation in the face of a hostile reality is appealed to again here. The evolutionary account of the development of institutions presumes that by simply existing they have more likely than not demonstrated their success in facilitating human survival. Thus existing conditions are thus in no need of radical transformation.

In all of these arguments, Blumenberg presents himself as a 'realist', grounding his position in the reality of human existence. His philosophical anthropology reduces the scope of the possibilities of human life and of its authentic needs; both are determined by the perpetual antagonism between the human being and reality. From this position of anthropological 'realism', Blumenberg attacks what he considers to be fantasies of an impossible harmony between humans and nature or of an entirely rational society. This same posture of realism allows him to dismiss the ideas of alterity he believes to be so important in Adorno and Heidegger as meaningless figments of the imagination, unconnected to the possibilities and authentic needs of human life. The central focus on the hypothetical scenario of the experience of the absolutism of reality announced on the first page of *Work on Myth* makes this distinction between anthropological realism and utopian fantasy possible, just as it grounds a functional interpretation of culture and provides the normative basis for a defence of existing conditions; it also, as I will suggest in the concluding chapter, provides the basis of a one-sided and somewhat reductive image of human life.

Of all the figures attacked by Blumenberg, it is within Adorno's work that the position Blumenberg dismisses can most clearly be located, substantiating the connection that he suggests between utopianism, radical social critique, and a romantic image of a non-antagonistic relationship to nature. In the final two chapters, I will argue that Blumenberg's work can be read as offering a complete reversal of the critique of modernity that Adorno articulates through the category of instrumental reason. In order to lay the ground for this interpretation of Blumenberg in relation to the central themes of Critical Theory, I will demonstrate in the next chapter how Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* offers a counter-paradigm to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by denying the possibility of reconciliation with nature that drives their critique of instrumental reason.

Chapter 5: 'Other Possibilities'

Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm inseparably binds human life to the 'mastering of reality' by means of cultural forms such as myth.¹ This chapter argues that Blumenberg's anthropological theory of myth can be understood as an answer to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, an answer that refuses the possibility of reconciliation between humanity and nature. The various strands of the critical dimension of Blumenberg's project that I have been exploring in the last two chapters here come together in the form of a refusal of any possibility of a human relation to nature that would break with active instrumental mastery. Where Horkheimer and Adorno direct their gaze toward an archaic past and a utopian future in order to descry possibilities for a non-instrumental relation to nature, Blumenberg defends the inescapability and necessity of the mastery of nature achieved by existing cultural forms. As I will show in the next chapter, reading Blumenberg's work as an answer to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason thus provides a perspective from which to understand what is at stake in his defence of modernity in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno develop a radical critique of Western reason that hinges on its inner connection with self-preservation. Arising out of a 'primal dread' of nature,² reason allows the human being to survive by means of a three-fold domination: over external nature, over the internal nature of

¹ *WM*, 3.

² *DE*, 38. In the following discussion, I do not propose any substantial distinction between the arguments of *DE* and Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*; for my purposes here they can be treated as complementary. However, the convergence of these two works, both published in 1947, should not overshadow the differences between Horkheimer and Adorno's other individual works. For an account that stresses the existence of 'fundamental differences' between the two, see Stefan Breuer, 'The Long Friendship: Theoretical Differences between Horkheimer and Adorno', trans. John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonß, and John McCole (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 257-279.

drives and impulses, and over other human beings.³ In this deeply pessimistic account, civilisation and the human survival it enables appear inseparably tied to a ‘violated and oppressed nature’.⁴ This connection between enlightenment reason and self-preservation brings reason into an intimate relationship with myth in a double sense. Insofar as it functions as a form of the domination over nature, myth is an archaic form of instrumental rationality; but insofar as modern rationality is propelled by the necessity of self-preservation, it retains a dark, unacknowledged link to the primordial fear of nature that gave birth to myth. As the authors summarise the thesis of their book: ‘Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology’.⁵

As a number of commentators have noted, Blumenberg’s understanding of myth approaches that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in several ways.⁶ Both texts use speculative accounts of anthropogenesis and human pre-history to develop the theme of a primordial human fear of nature.⁷ In both, this anthropological understanding is determinative for the functional interpretation of a series of cultural forms including myth, magic, monotheistic religion, and scientific rationality. Likewise, in both a functional interpretation of myth allows it to be read as a form of instrumental mastery over nature in the service of human self-preservation. However, beyond these parallels, the two works are opposed in their prescriptive and normative orientations. My approach here accords with Christoph Jamme’s comments on this issue; it is precisely the deep similarities between the two accounts that

³ See Jamme, “*Gott an hat ein Gewand*”, 94, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵ *DE*, xviii.

⁶ See Jamme, “*Gott an hat ein Gewand*”, 93-105; Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 196-199. This passage of Nicholls’ text also contains references to some contemporary reviews of *Work on Myth* that noted the connection between the arguments of the two books.

⁷ The importance of ‘speculative history’ in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been noted in Peter Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 159.

suggest that Blumenberg's book should be read 'as a reversal, as a polemical answer to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'.⁸

Horkheimer and Adorno's formulation of the inner connection between myth and enlightenment is intended to critically illuminate the enslavement of the dominant form of functional-instrumental reason to the archaic exigencies of self-preservation. In so doing, they attempt to clear a space in which a different, non-dominating relationship between humanity and nature can appear; a relation they characterise through the notion of 'mimesis'. As Jamme points out, this critique of instrumental reason, which Horkheimer and Adorno propound so vehemently, is entirely absent from Blumenberg's work.¹⁰ Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology should be read as proposing an account of the instrumental relation to nature in which it is figured as unsurpassable and necessary.

This chapter formulates the opposition between *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as consisting in the two texts' diverging positions on the possibility of reconciliation between humanity and nature. For Blumenberg, as we saw in the previous chapter, any idea of a radically different relationship between the human being and nature can only be a fantasy image. If 'there is no end to myth',¹² no possible exhaustion of the need for the cultural techniques that make human self-preservation possible through the mastery over nature, this is because the 'oppressiveness of contingency, which lies behind the myth, does not cease'.¹³ Horkheimer and Adorno's work, on the other hand, is grounded in the assumption that 'humanity has other possibilities'.¹⁴ These possibilities consist essentially in

⁸ Jamme, "Gott an hat ein Gewand", 100. Nicholls' specification (*Myth and the Human Sciences*, 198) that it should be read as a 'polemic of nuances' adds little to Jamme's interpretation and shows that he underestimates the seriousness of the difference between the normative horizons of the two works.

¹⁰ Jamme, "Gott an hat ein Gewand", 100.

¹² *WM*, 633.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁴ *DE*, 198.

a reconciliation with nature that fundamentally diverges from the relation of domination, subjugation, and instrumentalisation that they argue has been increasingly all encompassing since before the dawn of recorded history.¹⁵

I approach this antithesis through two main foci, which respectively serve to highlight the descriptive parallels and normative-prescriptive divergences between the two texts. The first concerns the interpretation of myth as functionally continuous with scientific rationality. In both Blumenberg and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this functional interpretation occurs through a rejection of understandings of myth either as a form of poetic production or as expressing an overwhelming experience of the numinous. In Blumenberg and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, myth is primarily rational – performing the function, equivalent to science, of distancing the human being from an archaic terror of nature and allowing it to master natural forces to facilitate self-preservation. For both, this equivalence does not result in an erasure of the distinction between myth and enlightened rationality; in fact, both see their own positions as defending the project of enlightened modernity.

The second focus concerns the diverging interpretations of magic and language presented by the two texts. Both present magic as an archaic form of the instrumental control over nature.¹⁶ This instrumental dimension essentially exhausts Blumenberg's interpretation of magic; however, in Horkheimer and Adorno, magic is dialectically split between its instrumental function and a moment of mimetic opening to nature. Through a comparison of the critiques of Freud's account of magic found in *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I show how Horkheimer and Adorno locate in mimetic magic a qualitatively

¹⁵ As Ferry and Renault note, this condemnation of modernity 'from a viewpoint exterior to it' brings Horkheimer and Adorno once again very close to Heidegger. See Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *Heidegger and Modernity*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 84. It also brings them into conflict with the rhetoric of the immanent critique of modernity – in which it would be measured against its own unrealised ideals – present in much work of the Frankfurt School.

¹⁶ This point of similarity is noted in Jamme, "*Gott an hat ein Gewand*", 98.

different relationship between nature and the subject, the archaic existence of which Blumenberg denies.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the same duality that exists in magic exists within language itself, which is both a tool of domination and the vessel of a ‘genuine mimetic function’,¹⁷ whereas for Blumenberg, language is ultimately only a tool for overcoming the absolutism of reality. Horkheimer and Adorno locate the promise of reconciliation with nature in the mimetic excess within magic and language. These ancient cultural forms point to a dimension of experience outside instrumental domination, a mimetic opening to nature that can be embraced as the promise of a future ‘fulfilment of past hopes’.¹⁸ By denying any non-instrumental dimension to magic and language, Blumenberg rejects Horkheimer and Adorno’s romantic image of a lost non-instrumental relation to nature in the distant past and the hope to reattain it in the future, thereby strengthening his presentation of an unsurpassable antagonism between the human being and nature.

5.1. Two Naturalistic Anthropologies

Horkheimer and Adorno give an account of the human being that is, broadly speaking, naturalistic. They take as their starting point the human being as a natural being engaged in a relationship to the rest of nature, not the consciousness revealed through introspection or the subjectivity of transcendental or absolute idealism.¹⁹ The attempt to complicate rigid distinctions between nature and distinctly human categories (reason, spirit, history, freedom)

¹⁷ *ER*, 179.

¹⁸ *DE*, xvii.

¹⁹ On this see Max Pensky, ‘Natural History: the Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno’, in *Contemporary Perspectives in Critical and Social Philosophy*, ed. John Rundell, Danielle Petherbridge, Jan Bryant, John Hewitt, and Jeremy Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 238. Axel Honneth points to the similarities between the anthropological arguments of Gehlen’s work and those of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, 40-41.

is a constant concern in Adorno's work from his early essay on 'The Idea of Natural History', which attempts to 'dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history' by 'pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference',²⁰ to his late *Negative Dialectics*, which explores at length the implications of the thesis that 'reason is different from nature and yet a moment of the latter'.²¹ As Adorno writes in his late essay on 'Progress': 'Spirit is not what it enthrones itself as, the Other, the transcendent in its purity, but is also a piece of natural history'.²²

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* human reason appears neither as a radical break with nature, nor even as a 'freak event in natural history' but rather as 'the last word in adaptation'.²³ Reason, precisely that attribute of the human being that has traditionally been seen to separate it from the instinctive behaviour of other animal life and open it to the possibility of freedom, is revealed as an 'instrument of adaptation' with the goal of preserving the natural, physical life of the human animal. The special achievement of reason consists only in 'making humans into beasts with an ever-wider reach'.²⁴ When Horkheimer and Adorno call human thought 'nature's own dread of itself',²⁵ they express the basic position of their 'naturalism' with paradoxical force. In opposing itself to the rest of nature, the human being remains under the spell of nature because its rational exploitation of nature is compelled by the natural instinct for self-preservation.²⁶

²⁰ Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (June 1984): 111.

²¹ Adorno, *Negativ Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 285, cited in Habermas, "'I Myself am Part of Nature": Adorno on the Intrication of Reason in Nature', in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 182. For a different translation of this passage, see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 289.

²² Adorno, 'Progress', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 156. Similar formulations also appear in Horkheimer's work: he writes that spirit is 'simultaneously identical with and different from nature' (*ER*, 170).

²³ *DE*, 184.

²⁴ *DE*, 185.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶ The extent of Horkheimer and Adorno's commitment to a naturalistic anthropology is clarified through their critique of Social Darwinism. Although they see reason as an instrument of adaptation,

Work on Myth and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* both use their naturalistic anthropologies to develop accounts that frame myth as primarily *functional*. It is this interpretation of myth primarily in terms of its function that makes possible the continuity between myth and scientific rationality proposed in both texts. In the following two sections I first discuss Blumenberg's interpretation of the rational function of myth, emphasising how this is formulated in opposition to aesthetic and numinous readings of myth. I then turn to how Horkheimer and Adorno develop an account of mythic instrumental rationality in strikingly similar terms.

5.2. The Rational Function of Myth in Blumenberg

Blumenberg explicitly grounds his functional interpretation of myth in his anthropological thought: 'only an assessment of the risk involved in the human mode of existence makes it possible to discuss and to evaluate functionally the behaviour that was serviceable in mastering it'.²⁷ The 'risk involved in the human mode of existence' refers to the whole

they reject the interpretation of human behaviour as straightforwardly determined by biological imperatives, arguing that this position occludes the unique antagonism that exists between human beings and the rest of nature and thereby legitimates the instrumental domination of nature by making it invisible. As Horkheimer writes, this biological-evolutionary anthropology is a 'rejection of any elements of the mind that transcend the function of adaptation and consequently are not instruments of self-preservation' (*ER*, 126). See also Adorno's comments on the affirmative function of Social Darwinism in *Negative Dialectics*, 229. Blumenberg also distances his evolutionary account of culture (his 'Darwinism of words') from a Social Darwinist account by emphasising the uniqueness of the human being's substitution of cultural evolution in the place of physical evolution (*WM*, 164-165). Nicholls has stressed this aspect of Blumenberg's account of culture. See Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 169-175. Rebekka Klein provides a nuanced account of this issue. She points out that, although Blumenberg's narrative of anthropogenesis should be opposed to a Darwinian account of hominisation because it sees human culture as a completely unprecedented means of survival, his position cannot be neatly distinguished from an evolutionary account because it ultimately equates rationality with biological self-preservation. See Rebekka Klein, 'Das Ende der Humanevolution? Blumenbergs Argumente gegen einen Erklärungsprimat von Darwins Evolutionstheorie', in *Auf Distanz zur Natur: Philosophische und Theologische Perspektiven in Hans Blumenbergs Anthropologie*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 175-178. Despite the qualifications built into his account, Blumenberg ultimately comes down much more strongly on the side of a reductive naturalism than Horkheimer and Adorno do.

²⁷ *WM*, 111.

complex of consequences Blumenberg sees as stemming from the hominoid creature's loss of instinct in the process of anthropogenesis, which I have discussed in detail in chapter 2. In Blumenberg's hypothetical picture of the experience of human creature deserted by instinct and confronted by the 'absolutism of reality', the world appears as unfriendly and alien because it appears to bear no especial relation to human needs; the survival of the human being, indeed its very existence, appears as entirely contingent. In Blumenberg's reconstruction of humanity's originary situation, the human being, terrified in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful and alien reality, 'believed he simply lacked control' over 'the conditions of his existence'.²⁸

The 'behaviour that was serviceable in mastering' this situation, which succeeded in giving the human being the sense of having some control over its existence and in transcending the 'feeling of utter dependency' that marks the epoch of the absolutism of reality,²⁹ are those techniques already discussed in chapter 2: the establishment of temporal distance from this original situation; the reduction of reality qua absolutely superior power through its division into multiple, conflicting powers; the determination of reality and its elements through naming; the positing of 'significance'. These techniques make up the 'work of myth' and define the function that it serves in relation to the original experience of the 'absolutism of reality'. The work of myth is that of 'the nameless being given names, the formless receiving form, the bestial being made human',³⁰ and all of these individual labours of humanisation share one ultimate goal: 'the function of myth is centred on man's security in the world'.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁹ Ibid., 142.

³⁰ Ibid., 630.

³¹ Ibid., 135.

It is this rational function that makes the ‘boundary line between myth and *logos*...imaginary’.³² Scientific or ‘theoretical’ rationality takes over myth’s function of ‘depleting the power of unfamiliar and uncanny phenomena’, building on the achievements of myth and acting according to ‘standards of achievement’ that it defines.³³ Myth and theoretical rationality are both modes of ‘mastering’ the instability of experience that stems from the human being’s failed environmental adaptation.³⁴ When viewed from the perspective of Blumenberg’s naturalistic anthropology of the human being’s struggle to adapt itself to an unfriendly reality, myth and theoretical rationality are equally exercises of reason.

The stakes of the ‘work of myth’ are extremely high. They concern the very survival of the human being, the fact that ‘it cannot be taken for granted that man is able to exist’,³⁶ and the possibility of constructing a humanised life-world that must be understood in the ‘functional context of self-preservation’.³⁷

Blumenberg sharpens this functional interpretation of myth by opposing it two other ‘antithetical categories of the interpretation of myth’ and its ‘original reality’: terror and poetry (or aesthetic ‘play’).³⁸ Blumenberg differentiates his own position from an interpretation of myth as poetic production by pointing to three serious flaws he believes it to contain. Firstly, the idea, which Blumenberg associates with the German Romantics, that myth is ‘mankind’s initial childlike poetry’, a product of an archaic period of human creativity that was unfettered by later distinctions between ‘truth and lie, reality and dream’ is anachronistic.³⁹ It takes a historical contingency in the survival of mythical traditions for an insight into the nature of myth as such, assuming that because ‘poets are the earliest stage of

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁶ *AAR*, 438.

³⁷ Blumenberg, ‘The Life-World and the Concept of Reality’, 438.

³⁸ Blumenberg, ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos’, in *ÄMS*, 333. See also the similar passage in *WM*, 66.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

the transmission of work on myth that is accessible to us' myth itself must be a product of poetic invention.⁴⁰ It is only through an 'illusion of temporal perspective', caused by the loss of previous written sources and the transition from oral to written culture, that Homer, for instance, appears to stand at the beginning of a mythical tradition; for Blumenberg, the Homeric text is actually the result of a long tradition of reception and refinement of mythical material.⁴¹

Secondly, the poetic understanding of myth is incapable of accounting for the 'incomprehensible' durability of basic mythical figures (what Blumenberg calls 'unit myths').⁴² One of the primary characteristics of these 'unit myths', represented in the European tradition Blumenberg discusses by figures such as Prometheus and Faust, is that we experience them as if they 'could not have been invented'.⁴³ For Blumenberg, the seemingly endless capacity for these unit myths to be articulated, interpreted, and deployed anew in new historical circumstances is incompatible with their being products of poetic imagination, regardless of whether this imagination is located in an individual or in 'collective invention' (a concept that Blumenberg dismisses as illusory). As we saw in chapter 4.4, in place of the poetic imagination, Blumenberg places his 'Darwinism in the realm of words',⁴⁴ the deep back-history of trial and error in the construction and elaboration of mythical figures and narratives that explains their longevity; nothing created by the whim of the artist could, Blumenberg suggests, have such durability.

Thirdly, by anachronistically projecting an aesthetic relationship to myth back into the origin of myth, the poetic understanding obscures myth's 'background of terror'.⁴⁶ In so

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 151-159.

⁴² Ibid., 159.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

doing, the poetic understanding of myth loses the ability to ‘make comprehensible the effectiveness and the effective power of mythical elements’,⁴⁷ which consists in the ‘removal away from’ this primeval state of terror.⁴⁸

Alongside this rejection of an aesthetic approach to myth, Blumenberg differentiates his position from one that seeks the ‘origin and the originative character of myth’⁴⁹ in terror. This differentiation is complex, as the concept of archaic terror clearly plays an essential role in Blumenberg’s own approach to the question of the origin of myth. The distinction can be grasped with reference to an objection Taubes makes to the basic assumptions of Blumenberg’s theory of myth. In place of Blumenberg’s theory of mythical narrative as ‘depotentialisation [*Depotenzierung*]...which reports of an event that it was “long ago” and has therefore lost its terror’, Taubes proposes an opposed interpretation of myth’s basic relationship to terror in which the ‘narration of [mythical] stories may be an attempt to participate in the mightiness and terror of an original event’.⁵⁰ Although Blumenberg does not directly answer Taubes, he does reject a similar interpretation of myth as the expression of an experience of terrifying awe stemming from an awareness of a numinous power; and as Taubes noted, he opposes to this an interpretation in which even the most terrifying aspects of myth perform the rational function of distancing the human being from a more primary terror.

In this argument, Blumenberg is primarily concerned with Rudolf Otto’s formulation of ‘the holy’ (*das Heilige*, which could also be translated as ‘the sacred’).⁵¹ Otto postulates

⁴⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 168. For Blumenberg the aesthetic is essentially a late cultural form that depends on ‘the background of terror’ in human life having already been partly overcome (ibid., 38-39). This aspect of Blumenberg’s position is noted (and criticised) in Jamme, “*Gott an hat ein Gewand*”, 103. In this regard, see Blumenberg’s commentary on the aesthetic representation of Medusa, which he believes illustrates the ‘meagre results’ achieved by art ‘in relation to the original terrors’ (*WM*, 15).

⁴⁹ *WM*, 59.

⁵⁰ Taubes in ‘Erste Diskussion: Mythos und Dogma’, in *Terror und Spiel: Probleme der Mythenrezeption*, 538.

⁵¹ See Blumenberg’s comments on Otto in *WM*, 14, 28, 62-63.

the existence of a ‘basic impulse’ or ‘fact of our nature’⁵³ existing universally within humanity and which complements and exceeds the rational aspect of religion. For our purposes here, we may restrict ourselves to enumerating three features of this universal experience: (1) it takes the form of an ‘awe’ that is closely analogous to worldly terror (although for Otto the two feelings are distinct);⁵⁴ (2) it involves awareness of our inferiority to and dependence on a superior, numinous power;⁵⁵ (3) this numinous power is experienced or ‘felt’ as ‘wholly other’ to everything else within ourselves and our sphere of existence.⁵⁶

The complexity of Blumenberg’s rejection of this approach becomes immediately obvious when we note the apparent concordance between these elements of Otto’s characterisation of the holy and Blumenberg’s image of the ‘absolutism of reality’, which he presents as: (1) terrifying; (2) causing the human being to feel powerless or helpless in relation to it; (3) alien to human life and concern. Given this apparent agreement between the two authors, how does Blumenberg distinguish his own position from the interpretation of myth as expressing the terror of the holy?

The answer lies in the conflict between the diachronic aspect of Blumenberg’s account and Otto’s characterisation of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum* as a primary fact of human nature. Blumenberg does not deny the connection between what Otto describes and his own account of the archaic absolutism of reality. Instead, he sees Otto’s phenomenology of the holy as ultimately reducible to his own account of the absolutism of reality. For Blumenberg, the phenomena Otto points to ‘are best seen as remnants of the aura of superior power and intractability that originally surrounded the appearances of the

⁵³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: an Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-30.

world⁵⁷. Moreover, the alienating quality of reality does not survive unchanged in these remnants of its superior power, but rather undergoes a basic transformation in which it becomes a sign for itself. Taboo, an instance where the danger and unfriendliness of the world appear to have maintained their power, is in fact a symbol of the overcoming of this primordial state. The taboo isolates, localises, and encloses the threatening appearance of reality in specific objects and actions, thus symbolising the marginalisation of the absolutism of reality within the profane life-world: ‘In the fear or awe that is accorded to such enclaves, the price of the domestication of the whole is paid’.⁵⁸ Even the notion of a superior, threatening, numinous power belonging to divinity, which seems to map so neatly onto Blumenberg’s account of the originary experience of reality, is already an interpretation in which the ‘undefined “power” that is assumed and felt to exist on the strength of the simple fact that man is not the master of his fate’ is distinguished from the world itself by undergoing ‘localisation’ in the person of the divinity.⁵⁹ The very ability to name and address the god, even if this god is explicitly understood to possess absolute power, converts ‘numinous indefiniteness’ into ‘nominal definiteness’.⁶⁰

For Blumenberg, the numinous or holy is indeed a ‘primary interpretation’ of the absolutism of reality, but ‘it is still already interpretation and not the thing itself that is interpreted’.⁶¹ In this act of interpretation, the ‘sign of what was originally and involuntarily terrifying is transferred to what is appointed to participate in this quality’, and in so doing this terror is “reduced” and levelled off”.⁶² Blumenberg thus interprets this containment and reduction of the originary terror through localising a symbol for it in the terrifying figures of myth and religion (and the taboos and sanctions of cult) as a technique through which the

⁵⁷ *WM*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 63.

human moves away from this terror, not as a form through which the original terror continues to express itself. Thus, even the numinous is, for Blumenberg, essentially functional, a rational technique of myth that enables the ‘removal away from’ an original terror.⁶³

5.3. The Rational Function of Myth in Horkheimer and Adorno

Horkheimer and Adorno also distinguish their account of myth from positions that can be characterised in terms of poetry and terror. Like Blumenberg, the distinction they draw between these account of myth and their own brings out the importance of the rational function of myth, which in their account is revealed by interpreting myth as the pre-history of instrumental reason’s domination of nature.

Horkheimer and Adorno reject the view that myth is a poetic form of discourse in which ‘the words are indifferent to the content’ and that must be located chronologically after the epoch of authentic religion. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this interpretation is only made possible by ‘hypostatizing’ a ‘late concept of myth, which presupposes reason as its explicit counterpart’,⁶⁴ thereby obscuring the rational function of myth. This aesthetic interpretation of myth blocks ‘perception of the dialectic of myth, religion, and enlightenment’.⁶⁵ Only through attention to the dialectic between myth and enlightenment can the rational, functional dimension of myth be understood (along with its correlate, the mythical compulsion that inheres within enlightenment and rationality).

Like Blumenberg, Horkheimer and Adorno also present the exclusive identification of myth with numinous terror as obscuring the dialectical (rather than oppositional) relationship between myth and enlightenment. This comes out most clearly in Horkheimer and Adorno’s

⁶³ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁴ *DE*, 261, n. 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

intervention into the discourse around sacrifice. To understand how this might be seen as similar to Blumenberg's critique of the understanding of myth through the terror of the numinous, we must note how the meaning of the term 'myth' undergoes a substantial expansion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. No longer referring primarily to mythical narratives and the figures that populate them, 'myth' becomes shorthand for a whole mythical world-view. Horkheimer and Adorno frequently characterise this world-view in terms of repetition: under the control of fate, the world is 'eternally the same',⁷⁶ trapped in 'nature's blind cycle', of which all mythical gods and their associated rites are symbols.⁷⁷

Sacrifice is a paradigmatic instance of such a rite; the interpretation of sacrifice is thus consequential for the interpretation of the mythical world-view as a whole. Horkheimer and Adorno pose their account of the 'rational' aspect of sacrifice against a 'magical' interpretation they identify with the work of Ludwig Klages.⁷⁸ Klages sees sacrifice as a 'symbolic communication with the deity',⁷⁹ the site of an interpenetration of the sacred and profane that must be ceaselessly rehearsed to restore and renew the cosmic order by 'abandoning one's soul to the supporting and nurturing life of the world'.⁸⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno stress a contrary aspect of sacrifice, noting its use as a technique for influencing the gods and nature.⁸¹

Their approach is similar to that of Roger Caillois, who understands sacrifice as a form of exchange in which 'the sacred powers...become the debtors of the donor, are bound

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 40, 260, n. 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 260, n. 6.

⁸¹ Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of sacrifice through its rational dimension marks one of the points where they clearly draw on Nietzsche. For Nietzsche's interpretation of sacrifice see *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, sec. 19, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 524-526. On Nietzsche's influence on the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* more generally, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 121-123.

by what they have received, and to be left in peace, have to grant what he is asking of them – material advantage, strength, or remission of punishment’.⁸² Horkheimer and Adorno refer to this as the ‘moment of fraud’ in sacrifice: the sacrifice, which appears to honour the gods, actually intends to control them. As much as it is a communion between the profane and the numinous embodied in nature and the gods, then, sacrifice is ‘cunning’, a ‘human contrivance intended to control the gods’ (and, through them, nature).⁸³ Klages and other ‘irrationalists’ were not blind to this element of sacrifice; they tried to distinguish the communion with the numinous from cunning exchange of the sacrificial victim for power, either by trying to find criteria to ‘distinguish between genuine and false communication with nature’⁸⁴ or by declaring ‘deception, cunning and rationality’ to be later deformations of the ‘archaism of sacrifice’.⁸⁵ But all such attempts are in vain: the fraudulent moment in sacrifice inheres in the mythical world-view; ‘cunning originates in cult’.⁸⁶ A mythical communion with nature cannot be ‘set against the illusion of the magical mastery of nature, because that very illusion constitutes the essence of myth’.⁸⁷

Sacrifice is thus divided between two aspects – communion with the divine through ‘magic self-abandonment’ and ‘self-preservation achieved through the technology of this magic’ – that exist in a state of ‘objective contradiction’.⁸⁸ As the Hegelian-Marxist terminology implies, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s historical scheme this objective contradiction cannot be perpetually maintained and tends towards its own resolution through the ‘further development of the rational element in sacrifice’, which severs cunning from

⁸² Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), 28. Horkheimer and Adorno refer to Caillois’ work in one of their formulations of the mimetic impulse. See *DE*, 189.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 260 n. 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 260, n. 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

communion with the numinous.⁸⁹ At the same time as sacrifice is ‘proved transient by its irrationality’, it ‘survives through its rationality’; this rationality has ‘transformed itself, not disappeared’.⁹⁰

As their reference to the ‘illusion of the magical mastery of nature’ as ‘the essence of myth’ suggests, for Horkheimer and Adorno this logic can be applied to myth and the mythical world-view as a whole. Myth is communion with ‘the hopelessly closed cycle of nature’,⁹¹ human’s worship of the nature ‘to which previously, like all other creatures, they had been merely subjected’.⁹² But, at the same time, myth is a collection of techniques for controlling nature, therefore aiding human self-preservation: sacrifice and other rituals that directly influence the gods; magical mimesis, which controls nature through adaptation to it;⁹³ the ‘formalism’ of the name, which already in mythical consciousness allows for ‘perennial designation’ by suppressing qualitative distinctions.⁹⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno characterise the rational aspect of myth in proto-scientific terms: ‘Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins – but therefore also to narrate, record, explain’.⁹⁵ The functional aspects of myth already contain the enlightenment tendencies that will ultimately negate the mythical world.

5.4. The Ambivalence of Myth

It has been widely remarked upon that that the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* diminish the distinction between myth and reason, with one commentator having gone so far

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁹¹ Ibid., 55.

⁹² Ibid., 12.

⁹³ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 47. Like sacrifice, which is split between a functional and devotional moment, magical mimesis and the mythical name demonstrate a fundamental ambiguity, which I shall discuss below.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 5.

as to state that for Horkheimer and Adorno the distinction between mythical and rational thought ‘does not make any difference’.⁹⁶ Such an interpretation is overly simplistic, obscuring the fact that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* actually outlines a number of related yet distinguishable dialectics of enlightenment.⁹⁷ The continuity between myth and enlightenment posed by the text is, at the very least, double, allowing Horkheimer and Adorno to critically identify instrumental-rational enlightenment with myth, while also upholding a position of enlightened rationality from which myth can be critiqued. As I will show later in this section, Blumenberg’s work exhibits a similarly ambivalent concept of myth.

Horkheimer and Adorno identify a hidden continuity of compulsion between myth and enlightenment, expressed in a number of forms throughout their book. The mythical world, as we have seen, is marked by a fatalistic natural cycle that is ‘eternally the same’ and inescapable.⁹⁸ In many of their arguments, Horkheimer and Adorno are at pains to show how the efforts of rationalisation to remove human beings from this compulsion actually ensure its survival in unconscious forms. The principle of legal justice, for instance, is neither a utilitarian construct, nor does it originate in freedom, as Kant claims. Rather, it is the secularised survival of the cosmic-natural ‘principle of equivalence’: ‘for both mythical and enlightened justice, guilt and atonement...are seen as the two sides of an equation...equivalence regulates punishment and reward within civilisation’.⁹⁹ In another characteristically extreme conjecture, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the compulsion of mythical nature survives in the very heart of rational thought, in its appeal to the validity of

⁹⁶ Avner Cohen, ‘Myth and Myth Criticism following the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’, *The European Legacy* 15, no. 5 (2010): 586. A more sophisticated version of this argument can be found in Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 106-130.

⁹⁷ For an attempt to distinguish between three dialectics of enlightenment (epistemological, ethical, and political), see Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 56-61.

⁹⁸ *DE*, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

logical principles: ‘Precisely by virtue of its irresistible logic, thought, in whose compulsive mechanism nature is reflected and perpetuated, also reflects itself as a nature oblivious of itself, as a mechanism of compulsion’.¹⁰⁰

These analyses help to strengthen the continuity between myth and enlightenment by demonstrating the survival of mythical principles in the heart of rational thought. They are complemented by those passages I have discussed above, which figure this continuity in terms of the functional similarity between mythical and rational thought’s ‘mastery of nature’, and in which the authors seek, very much like Blumenberg would later do, to distinguish such an account from ideas of myth as characterised exclusively by aesthetic or numinous experience.

This double continuity is, of course, expressed with great force in the book’s key formulation of its main argument: ‘Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology’.¹⁰¹ I have already noted how Horkheimer and Adorno broaden the concept of myth beyond mythical narratives to encompass an entire world-view determined by myth. To properly understand this famous passage, we must further note that the concept of myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is ambivalent or polysemic. If myth were only something identical to enlightenment (‘already enlightenment’), then it would be incoherent to accuse enlightenment of ‘reverting’ or regressing to myth as Horkheimer and Adorno so often do. In fact, the multiple uses of ‘myth’ in the book are evident even within this sentence itself, which in fact relies on two interrelated but distinct concepts of myth in order to be comprehensible. ‘Myth is already enlightenment’: this refers to ‘myth’ as functional rationality in the service of self-preservation. The ‘mythology’ to which enlightenment reverts, on the other hand, is the hypostatisation and adulation of ‘nature’s blind cycle’ as

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., xviii.

fateful necessity (transformed in modernity into the ‘mythical scientific respect of peoples for the given reality’).¹⁰²

Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim for the functional similarity between myth and enlightenment thus coexists with passages in which, in classically ‘enlightenment’ fashion, myth is synonymous with illusion and ideological deception. And these are not merely the result of lexical or conceptual imprecision; the critical force of the ‘second half’ of the dialectic of enlightenment (the claim that enlightenment reverts to myth) depends on the notion that myth’s fateful necessity and its contemporary variants in the ‘mythical scientific respect’ for the given are pernicious results of ideological deception.

A similarly polysemic use of the concept of myth can be found in Blumenberg’s work. In a discussion of Freud’s late work, Blumenberg argues that the death instinct offers an example of the fact that ‘every theory has the tendency to present itself as capable of broader application’ and, in extreme cases, to totalise itself.¹⁰³ This tendency, ‘the temptation to equal myth in the production of totality’, is at work in the death instinct, which draws all the phenomena of life together into the narrative of the ‘final return home to the original state’ (of inorganic matter, death).¹⁰⁴ In Blumenberg’s interpretation, the theory of the death instinct is a ‘story’ that is ‘homogeneously natural history and cultural history, cosmology and anthropology’;¹⁰⁵ it is a ‘total myth’¹⁰⁶ that accounts for everything and through giving all phenomena a place in this story strips reality of contingency and grants it significance. Blumenberg is unequivocal in his judgment of Freud’s enterprise: it is ‘regression to myth’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ibid., 33.

¹⁰³ *WM*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 94.

Once could interpret Blumenberg's talk of 'regression' in this passage as purely descriptive, rather than as containing any critical judgment on Freud's late enterprise. On this reading, Freud's 'regression' would simply demonstrate, once again, that myth is insuperable, that despite all enlightenment intentions, myth is destined to survive because of its irreplaceable functional achievement in distancing the human being from its original situation and generating significance. As I have shown, Blumenberg certainly holds myth to be insuperable in this sense, because the conditions (the absolutism of reality) that myth functions to overcome are themselves permanent. Freud's regression would simply be an example of the 'precarious readiness to regress into myth that characterises every stage of its overcoming',¹⁰⁸ and reference to this readiness to 'regress' would not imply criticism of any sort, but merely signify the inexorable nature of the demand placed on human life by the absolutism of reality.

I do not believe that this is all that Blumenberg intends by the phrase 'regression to myth'. Blumenberg's judgment of Freud brings up again the tension that exists in his account between myth's satisfaction of the urge for significance and the immanent logic of modern scientific rationality, which is bound up with the refusal of this satisfaction. Blumenberg's judgment of Freud accords with his general reflections on the 'affinity to myth' that 'always consists in finding and naming the subject of which the last of the correct stories can be told'.¹⁰⁹ The return to the inorganic is the subject of Freud's 'story' about the death drive, which in its totalising tendency attempts to function as a 'fundamental myth', that is, as a myth that 'carries with it the suggestion that owing to it and in it nothing is left unsaid'.¹¹⁰ It is precisely this aspiration towards totality that comes into conflict with the logic of scientific rationality, which, Blumenberg writes, 'depends on the abandonment of the claims to totality'

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

and the renunciation of the ‘kind of truth that people once thought they could expect from totality’; Blumenberg calls this renunciation a ‘norm of theoretical knowledge’.¹¹¹ Modern science, including philosophy, ‘cannot have a world concept’ (a concept of totality) and it is ‘frivolous to suppose’ that it might be able to ‘throw off’ its immanent norms in order to develop one.¹¹² The logic of scientific rationality precludes such world concepts; ‘However, we are operating here in the area of things that cannot be renounced, things that make themselves noticeable in the surrogates that they force into existence’.¹¹³ Stories such as Freud’s, which attempt to fulfil the mythical function of making the totality comprehensible *and* simultaneously to obey the norms of scientific rationality (being formulated as concepts rather than images), appear as illegitimate (‘frivolous’) from the perspective of scientific modernity. This illegitimacy of modern myth extends beyond instances of ‘total myth’ to also include more modest attempts to renew the mythical principle of significance within the modern regime of knowledge; thus, in addition to Blumenberg’s conflicted take on the issue of ‘significance’ in historiography,¹¹⁴ (discussed in chapter 2), he also refers to the ‘pure anachronism’ of finding significant correlations between human-historical and natural events (eclipses, for instance) in modernity, where it can only appear as ‘contrary to all science’ for the natural world ‘to take notice of man’.¹¹⁵ In certain respects, he argues, the legitimacy of the modern age conflicts with the work of myth.

A tension between myth and scientific modernity thus exists in Blumenberg’s account that is comparable to the dialectic of myth and enlightenment in Horkheimer and Adorno. While Blumenberg and the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* stress the rationality of myth, they also identify themselves with the project of modernity. However, they understand

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 176.

¹¹⁴ See chapter 2.4 above.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 106.

this project in radically different ways. Blumenberg defends the existing achievements of the modern age, understood as the achievement of human ‘self-assertion’ (which, I will argue in the final chapter, is closely related to the concept of self-preservation). In Horkheimer and Adorno, the radical core of the modern project is found in a ‘positive concept of enlightenment’ that takes up the cause of the hopes (freedom, ‘real humanity’, reconciliation with nature) that have so far remained unfulfilled by enlightenment.¹¹⁶ In combination with the stress placed by Blumenberg and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the rationality of myth (and the attendant upsetting of the ‘from *mythos* to *logos*’ paradigm), these identifications with modernity results in ambivalence towards myth, which is figured as both rational and regressive.

5.5. Instrumental and Mimetic Magic

So far, I have focused on the substantial similarities between the *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. On the basis of naturalistic anthropologies, both reject aesthetic and numinous interpretations of myth and present myth as a rational cultural form in the service of human self-preservation. Yet the critical project that Horkheimer and Adorno advance through this account of myth is entirely antithetical to Blumenberg’s work. Horkheimer and Adorno develop a critique of the instrumental mastery of nature in order to illuminate the possibility of a non-instrumental relation to nature; whereas Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology denies that any such altered relation is possible. In the next chapter, I will turn to how this difference plays itself out in Blumenberg’s defence of modern instrumental reason. For the remainder of this chapter, I wish to show how these opposed perspectives can be seen at work in the interpretation of archaic cultural forms in *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic*

¹¹⁶ *DE*, xiv-xvii.

of *Enlightenment*. In this section I focus on the two text's respective interpretations of magic, because mimetic magic provides Horkheimer and Adorno with one of the most important examples of the non-instrumental relation to nature that they wish to rescue in their 'fulfilment of past hopes'.¹¹⁷

In *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg names four basic 'ways of looking at things': mythical, theoretical, dogmatic, and mystical.¹¹⁸ The absence of magic is explained by the fact that Blumenberg considers magic to be, strictly speaking, only an element of myth. Specifically, 'magic is essentially a kind of "cunning"', which Blumenberg explicitly identifies as a 'mythical category'.¹²⁰ Cunning is one of the possibilities that myth presents for 'getting along with' and influencing the superior power it works to minimise; it is the 'malicious' counterpart to 'attitudes of reverence and seeking favor'.¹²¹ In designating magic as 'cunning', Blumenberg annexes it to the mythical work of reducing the absolutism of reality, understanding it as form through which humanity attempts to control this reality.

In Blumenberg's account, the particularity of magic within the broader mythical constellation of attempts to influence external reality consists in its exaggerated and fantastical quality. Magic is a 'depreciation of what is actual as a legitimation of disregarding it in favour of one's own will'.¹²² Blumenberg agrees with Freud that in magic 'men ascribe omnipotence to themselves';¹²³ in magic, Blumenberg writes, 'the absolutism of reality is opposed by the absolutism of images and wishes'.¹²⁴ But Blumenberg breaks with the schema of anthropological development contained in Freud's parallel between the phylogenetic stage

¹¹⁷ Ibid., xvii

¹¹⁸ *WM*, 67.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹²¹ *WM* 16.

¹²² Ibid., 123.

¹²³ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 13, *Totem and Taboo and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 88.

¹²⁴ *WM*, 8.

of magical animism and the ontogenetic stage of narcissism in the individual human infant. Freud rejects Alfred Adler's hypothesis of a 'primary sense of inferiority' in the child, opposing to it his own theory of the 'original narcissism' in which the infant fulfils its own desires through autoeroticism.¹²⁵ Just as narcissism stands at the origin of the individual life, magical animism stands at the origin of the 'evolution of human views of the universe'.¹²⁶ Only gradually, first through the religious ascription of omnipotence to the gods and then eventually through the scientific disenchantment of the world, is the archaic identity between thought and reality shaken in the realisation 'that the world is unknown and that means must therefore be sought for getting to know it'.¹²⁷

Although Blumenberg agrees with the characterisation of magic as 'an omnipotence of wishes' and also refers to the confrontation of the magical world with external reality, he believes Freud to be mistaken in his diachronic reconstruction. For Blumenberg, it is the absolutism of reality, not of wishes, that stands in the most archaic position, and 'there we can only imagine the single absolute experience that exists: that of the superior power of the Other'.¹²⁸ Magic is not, as Freud writes, something that 'came to primitive man naturally and as a matter of course'.¹²⁹ Rather, it was developed in the course of the confrontation with the absolutism of reality and in the attempt to alleviate this experience by exerting control over reality. When reality came, inevitably, to conflict with magic's omnipotence of wishes, it was not the human being's first encounter with the externality of reality, but rather the intrusion of an 'already structured, already differentiated, independent world', that is, of a reality already subjected to the work of myth.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 90, n. 2. On infantile autoeroticism, see *ibid.*, 88.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 91. On the magical identification of thought and reality see *ibid.*, 85.

¹²⁸ *WM*, 21.

¹²⁹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 91.

¹³⁰ *WM*, 8.

Blumenberg understands the magical name to be the key element of this magical control over nature. The ‘faith that underlies all magic’ holds that ‘the suitable naming of things will suspend the enmity between them and man, turning it into a relationship of pure serviceability’.¹³³ The goal of magical action is characterised by the control and use of non-human things by human beings, by the establishment of a ‘tamed and obedient reality’, as Blumenberg writes elsewhere.¹³⁴

Most of Blumenberg’s discussion of the principle of the magical name occurs in relation to Francis Bacon. Bacon understands the recovery of earthly paradise as conditional on the ‘rediscovery of the original names of all things’.¹³⁵ For Bacon, to ‘call’ things by their correct names is to ‘command’ them, enabling ‘a state of stable domination over this reality’, the ‘perfection of domination over nature’.¹³⁶ This ‘domination by means of the word’ breaks with the classical value attached to theoretical knowledge for its own sake.¹³⁷ Bacon ‘separated theory from existential fulfilment by reducing the necessary knowledge to the amount fixed by the requirements of domination over natural reality’.¹³⁸ Blumenberg thus directly identifies the belief in the magical power of the name with Bacon’s instrumentalisation of knowledge, in which knowledge of things is only of value insofar as it helps to control them.¹³⁹

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁴ *LMA*, 239.

¹³⁵ *WM*, 38.

¹³⁶ *LMA*, 106, 240.

¹³⁷ *GCW*, 202.

¹³⁸ *LMA*, 239. See also *ibid.*, 106: ‘Bacon has entirely separated his idea of paradise as man’s exercise of power through the word from the tradition of the ideal of theory as the highest fulfillment, and from the tradition of the next-worldly *visio beatifica* that was derived from that ideal’.

¹³⁹ Blumenberg does not see the relationship between Bacon’s thought and magic as merely an analogy. Rather, he presents Bacon as ‘relying on magic traditions’ (*WM*, 38). See also the similar comments in *LMA*, 106. Blumenberg is not alone in postulating a direct link between Bacon and magic; see the comments in Alexandre Koyré, *Galileo Studies*, trans. John Mepham (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), 39, n. 6.

Blumenberg's characterisation of Bacon is central to his understanding of magic as a whole: the ideal of magic is the control of nature through the magical name. Further, keeping in mind the fact that Blumenberg classifies magical cunning as a 'mythical category' we can understand this magical domination of nature as merely an extreme limit case of myth's work in relation to the absolutism of reality: to control nature and place it in the service of human life would be the achievement of a radical distance from the absolutism of reality, in which the human believed it lacked control over the conditions of its own existence and found that reality offered no guarantee of fulfilling its needs. The magical name also represents an extreme limit case of the work of myth carried out through naming. If true terror 'becomes "nameless" as the highest level of fright',¹⁴⁰ then naming reduces the uncanny and alienating quality of reality by producing 'acquaintance' with it.¹⁴¹ Naming produces stability in the referent, transforming even the most terrifying elements of reality into forces that can be 'conjured up or appealed to or magically attacked' and it humanises reality by assigning each named element to the 'inventory of a human life-world'.¹⁴² The magical domination by the name is merely the intensification of this fundamental logic of naming into the realm of fantasy, where the name not only reduces the alien quality of reality, but also directly controls reality in the service of human need.

The scholarship about magic that grew up around the work of the anthropological school in the late 19th century often attempted to distinguish and classify the basic types of magical rite. In 1896, the folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland distinguished three types of magic and their corresponding principles. Firstly, verbal magic based in incantations that assume that the goal of the rite 'can be attained by the use of certain verbal formularies'. Secondly, 'Mimetic Magic', the basic principle of which is expressed by the maxim 'like produces like'

¹⁴⁰ *WM*, 35.

¹⁴¹ *WM*, 34-58.

¹⁴² *PNC*, 84.

and in which the goal of the rite is attained by imitating it (as in rites that use water to bring rain). Third, ‘Sympathetic Magic’, in which action ‘upon substances identified with, though in effect detached from, the person (or thing) we intend to reach...are believed directly to affect the person (or thing) aimed at by means of sympathy between him (or it) and the substances actually acted upon’.¹⁴³

Blumenberg focuses his account of magic on the magic of the word. Horkheimer and Adorno similarly isolate one strand within the complex of magical representations, focusing their interpretation of magic almost exclusively on the concept of mimesis. The different foci chosen by Blumenberg and the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are important because, while Blumenberg’s account of verbal magic is directly continuous with his functional interpretation of culture as a means of attaining mastery over nature, Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of mimetic magic provides one of the key moments in their text when they look beyond the critique of instrumental reason to find models of reconciliation with nature.

In Horkheimer and Adorno’s account, magic is split between a reconciling promise and an instrumental function. Like Blumenberg, they recognise that magic is invested in the goal of exerting influence over nature; ‘magic like science is concerned with ends’.¹⁴⁴ Magic is the ‘domination’ or ‘mastery of nature’ not primarily through the word but through the ‘organised manipulation of mimesis’.¹⁴⁵ The magician imitates the wind, rain, or demon in order to influence, or even control, its behaviour.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Cited in Robert Fraser, *The Making of The Golden Bough: The Origins and Growth of an Argument* (Macmillan: London, 1990), 121. Marcel Mauss explain magic action of this sort as the ‘identification of a part with the whole’, illustrated by rites that act upon people by way of actions performed on their teeth, hair, possessions, and so on. See Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 79-80.

¹⁴⁴ DE 7.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid 7, 148, 260, n. 6.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

We have already seen something of this ‘instrumental’ approach to magic in Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of sacrifice, in which the ‘moment of fraud’ in sacrifice is understood as a means of exerting magical mastery over nature (placing the gods in humanity’s debt with the very rite that honours them). Sacrifice, however, is not exclusively identified with this magical cunning, but can also be legitimately discussed in terms of communion with the divine. Looking closely at this passage we can observe how tightly the concept of magic is bound up with the ‘objective contradiction’ inherent in sacrifice (and, as I suggested earlier, the mythical world in general). Here, the moment of cunning in sacrifice, which Klages attempts to distance from the authentic core of sacrifice, is defined in terms of the ‘magical mastery of nature’. But Klages’ opposing interpretation of sacrifice as the abandonment of the soul to the ‘supporting and nurturing life of the world’ is itself considered to be magical; it is, in fact, an understanding of sacrifice ‘entirely in terms of magic’, as ‘magic self-abandonment of the individual to the collective’.¹⁴⁷ Magic thus appears here in an ambivalent light, as both mastery of nature and abandonment to it. This ambivalence can be seen throughout Horkheimer and Adorno’s treatment of magic – including in their account of mimesis, the concept they see as foundational to all magic.

Magical mimesis is a technique for controlling nature and thus a form of ‘enlightenment’.¹⁴⁸ But its method conflicts with that of scientific enlightenment because it is dependent on the specific qualities of what it imitates. For Horkheimer and Adorno, scientific enlightenment is defined by instrumentalised knowledge: the enlightenment subject ‘knows things to the extent he can manipulate them’.¹⁴⁹ To approach phenomena in this instrumental manner is to deny their qualitative distinctions. When the external world becomes merely the means to the realisation of the enlightenment subject’s needs, ‘the essence of things is

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 260, n. 6.

¹⁴⁸ Stirk, *Max Horkheimer*, 153.

¹⁴⁹ *DE*, 6.

revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination'.¹⁵⁰ This homogenisation occurs on two levels: the subject 'subdues the abundance of qualities' in each object, classifying it as a mere specimen of a genus, interchangeable with all other specimens of the same genus insofar as they perform the same function for the subject; and the whole of nature becomes the 'chaotic stuff of mere classification' in an abstract concept of the unity of nature defined principally by its opposition to the subject.¹⁵¹ Magical mimesis, on the other hand, implies no such concept of the unity of nature, directing its rites at specific phenomena, at 'the wind, the rain, the snake outside or the demon inside the sick person, not at materials or specimens'.¹⁵²

For Horkheimer and Adorno, 'the world of magic still retained differences whose traces have vanished even in linguistic forms'.¹⁵⁸ They add a note to this statement referring to an anthropological textbook by Robert Lowie,¹⁵⁹ in which we find nothing about magic but rather some examples of the rich resources possessed by 'primitive languages' for denoting concrete situations: 'they not only have special words for the plants and animals that figure in their daily life, but also for ... modes of action we fail to distinguish' between, such as various forms of 'breaking' (by pressure, by 'rending asunder' and so on).¹⁶⁰ As the site of such fine linguistic distinctions, the world of magic thus becomes the locus of a form of thought that matches the qualitative richness of objective reality instead of repressing such richness for the sake of conceptual and practical efficiency. Thus, at the same time as it figures in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a proto-enlightenment form of the rational domination of nature, magical mimesis also, as Miriam Hansen has noted, 'assumes a critical

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 256, n. 13.

¹⁶⁰ Robert H. Lowie, *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1940), 345.

and corrective function vis-à-vis instrumental rationality’,¹⁶¹ acting as an example of ‘justice done to the perceived object’.¹⁶² The account of magical mimesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be seen as a speculative-historical precursor to Adorno’s later direction of his project of negative dialectics at the ‘divergence of concept and thing’,¹⁶³ the ‘*indivuum ineffabile*’ that cannot be captured in the concept, which he calls the ‘nonidentical in the phenomenon’.¹⁶⁴

The qualitative distinctions and specific representations of magic oppose it to the abstract unity of nature; and the passivity and receptivity of mimesis oppose it to the ‘correlative’ of the unity of nature, the unity and ‘identity of mind’ in the rational subject.¹⁶⁵ Where scientific reason imposes an ‘increasing distance from the object’ to pursue its goal of domination over nature,¹⁶⁶ the magical world presupposes a model of the relation between the subject and nature in which they cannot be sharply distinguished. The survival of the mimetic impulse in later periods of enlightenment¹⁶⁷ threatens the dissolution of the unified subject: ‘magic disintegrates the self which falls back into its power’.¹⁶⁸ This mimetic impulse lies behind the ‘tendency to lose oneself in one’s surroundings instead of actively engaging with them, the inclination to let oneself go, to lapse back into nature’.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶¹ Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer’, in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 90.

¹⁶² *DE*, 167.

¹⁶³ See Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 145.

¹⁶⁵ *DE*, 6. On Adorno’s use of the concept of mimesis as a ‘corrective’ to the philosophy of the subject, see Nicholas Walker, ‘Adorno and Heidegger on the Question of Art: Countering Hegel?’, in *Adorno and Heidegger*, 95-96.

¹⁶⁶ *DE*, 7.

¹⁶⁷ As Horkheimer argues: ‘If the final renunciation of the mimetic impulse does not promise to lead to the fulfilment of man’s potentialities, this impulse will always lie in wait, ready to break out as a destructive force...the mimetic impulse is never really overcome’ (*ER*, 116). More generally, the mimetic impulse survives within genuine thought itself, what Horkheimer and Adorno call ‘the active passivity of cognition’ (*DE*, 167).

¹⁶⁸ *DE*, 54.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

We can see Walter Benjamin's influence in this idea of mimetic magic as the site of a disintegration of the unified subject. Benjamin's notes on a 'mimetic faculty' inherent in all of humanity's 'higher functions' breaks with the Kantian account of the formation of blind intuitions by categorical thought by positing a lived experience of mimetic similarity that is not 'imported into things by virtue of chance comparisons on our part' but is actually the result of 'an active, mimetic force working expressly inside things'.¹⁷⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno pose the distinction between scientific rationality (presented in a Kantian key) and mimetic magic in similar terms: 'The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object'.¹⁷¹ The very identity of consciousness as the locus of meaning is inapplicable to the mimetic experience of magic (and threatened by its continued subterranean existence), because this experience is itself only an expression of mimetic relationships really existing within things themselves. Mimetic experience is thus understood as passive and receptive, an exemplary instance of 'the suppression of the separation of subject and object' to which Blumenberg objects in his critique of Heidegger.¹⁷² Benjamin's aim, stated early on in his work, of reaching a 'total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object' suggests that he sees this Nietzschean dissolution of the identity of

¹⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', trans. Edmund Jephcott in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720; Benjamin, 'On Astrology', trans. Rodney Livingstone in *ibid.*, 684. With regards to the influence of Benjamin on Horkheimer and Adorno on this point, it should be noted that Benjamin's doctoral thesis on the early German Romantics identifies as 'magical' a model of 'romantic observation' in which the distinction between observer and observed becomes blurred. See Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 147-8. On the connection between Benjamin's mimetic conception of language and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Stefano Cochetti, *Mythos und "Dialektik der Aufklärung"* (Königstein: Verlag Anton Hain, 1985), 51-55. The connection is also noted in Martin Jay, *Reason after Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 104.

¹⁷¹ *DE*, 7. See also *ibid.*, 5: 'The single distinction between man's own existence and reality swallows up all others'.

¹⁷² See chapter 3.1 above.

the subject into a flux of mimetic relationships as basically desirable.¹⁷³ The disintegration of the self in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a more ambivalent issue. The moment of dissolution into primordial unity with nature that mimetic magic contains can only be ‘delusive’, a ‘semblance of reconciliation’.¹⁷⁶ Yet this ‘semblance of reconciliation’ in magic still acts, at the very least, as a corrective to the purely instrumental relationship between spirit and nature in which the two are essentially opposed (the image of humanity as the ‘universal antirace’),¹⁷⁷ and as a speculative-historical prefiguration of the ‘remembrance of nature within the subject’.¹⁷⁸ Their stress on the moment of passivity and receptivity in magical mimesis brings Horkheimer and Adorno close to Heidegger’s weakening of the constructive activity of the subject.

These considerations on the relationship between the subject and nature in magic lead Horkheimer and Adorno to take issue with Freud’s account of magic in *Totem and Taboo*, focusing on the same aspect that Blumenberg discusses, the hypothesis of the ‘omnipotence of thought’. Blumenberg believes Freud to have made a historical error in his reconstruction of the progress of consciousness by placing the absolutism of thought in the most archaic position; similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno believe Freud’s to be guilty of anachronism. Where Freud had seen the development of the scientific world-view as weakening an original ‘over-valuation of psychical acts’ and ‘unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world’, Horkheimer and Adorno see these as characteristics not of magic but of the ‘more realistic form of world domination achieved by ... science’. The omnipotence of thought is

¹⁷³ Benjamin, ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’, trans. Mark Ritter, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 104.

¹⁷⁶ *DE*, 55. See also *ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁷⁸ *DE* 32. Habermas recognises the link between the discussion of magic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the work’s utopian image of a human reconciliation with nature when he refers to the figure of ‘remembrance of nature in the subject’ as ‘magically invoked’ (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 119-120).

incompatible with the magical worldview: ‘there can be no “over-valuation of psychical acts” in relation to reality where thought and reality are not radically distinguished’.¹⁷⁹

On the surface this appears to be a very weak criticism of Freud, as the ‘misunderstanding’ whereby magical consciousness mistakes its own psychological processes and associations for ‘laws of nature’ is in fact foundational for Freud’s reconstruction of the logic of those ‘savages who believe they can alter the external world by mere thinking’.¹⁸⁰ Because Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of Freud on this point seems so flawed when read this way, it must be interpreted otherwise, and this alternative interpretation yields an important insight for understanding the (pre)historical picture presented by *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and how it relates to Blumenberg’s work.

The difference between Freud and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on this point can be expressed as follows. Freud believes the omnipotence of thought, religion, and scientific rationality to represent three stages in the gradual realisation of the true relationship between thought and reality. The intertwinement of thought and reality in magical consciousness is thus merely confusion, a misapprehension corrected in the progress towards scientific realism. For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, magical thought is premised on a relation between thought and reality that is truly *different* from that of later epochs; rather, that is, than being merely a different interpretation (specifically, a misinterpretation) of this relationship. In the magical epoch, human thought really is in a more porous relationship with external reality – rather than only interpreting a relationship that is essentially fixed in more porous terms. Thus there can be no omnipotence of thought over external reality in magic because magical thought exists in mode of indistinction from reality. Magic is a qualitatively

¹⁷⁹ *DE*, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 83-87.

different mode of relationship between subject and object in which the two interpenetrate one another.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the difference between Blumenberg's critique of Freud on this point and that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We can see these two critiques of Freud as opposed in an important sense. Blumenberg does not really object to anything in Freud's reading of the logic of magic. Rather, he objects to the historical speculation in which Freud places the magical omnipotence over reality in the most archaic position possible, as the original human relationship to reality. For Blumenberg, of course, in the original scenario we find only 'the superior power of the Other'.¹⁸² Combined with his frequent stress on the illusory nature of attempts to finally transcend the experience defined by the absolutism of reality, this criticism of Freud's historical speculations amounts to an affirmation of a basic diachronic homogeneity in the relationship between the human being and reality. That is, while Blumenberg recognises a plurality of different forms of the human relation to reality, all of them (including the magical) are ultimately built on the same anthropological foundation: the confrontation of the human being with an alien reality that must be 'worked' on to generate a meaningful and liveable world.

Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, on the other hand, finds and objects to a postulated homogeneity of all human experience of this sort in Freud. For them, Freud's reading of magic is anachronistic because it fails to recognise that magical experience is grounded in a relationship between thought and reality qualitatively different from that of scientific rationality, one in which 'thought and reality are not radically distinguished'.¹⁸³ Although they too see the domination of nature as an aspect of magic, it is for them at the same time the site of a different relationship between thought and nature. Thus while

¹⁸² *WM*, 21.

¹⁸³ *DE*, 7.

Blumenberg uses his critique of Freud to reaffirm the unsurpassable horizon of the absolutism of reality in human life, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the same text affirms their belief that 'humanity has other possibilities'.¹⁸⁴

5.6. Instrumental and Mimetic Language

The same distinction between the two texts appears again in their respective interpretations of language. For Blumenberg – as we saw above in his interpretation of verbal magic – language is primarily a technique for overcoming the terror of reality, while for Horkheimer and Adorno language, like magic, is divided between instrumental and reconciling aspects. For Horkheimer and Adorno, again in line with Benjamin's speculations on the mimetic faculty,¹⁸⁵ language as such derives from mimetic behaviour. They adduce the example of hieroglyphics to argue that 'sign and image coincided' in ancient language.¹⁸⁶ Rather than being understood solely as a differential system of signs, for Horkheimer and Adorno, language both (arbitrarily) designates and (non-arbitrarily) imitates its objects. The mimetic element of language both extends back into its origins and continues to inhere within it today; thus Horkheimer writes of language's 'genuine mimetic function'¹⁸⁷ and Adorno's final work contains the terse statement that 'expression is a priori imitation'.¹⁸⁸ Considering this mimetic origin of language, it is unsurprising that the same split or ambiguity that marks their account of mimesis can also be found in their remarks on the name.¹⁸⁹

The ambiguity of language in Horkheimer and Adorno's account consists in the fact that it is both an instrument for the domination of nature and a medium of possible

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 198.

¹⁸⁵ See Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', 722.

¹⁸⁶ *DE*, 12.

¹⁸⁷ *ER*, 179.

¹⁸⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 153.

¹⁸⁹ See their remarks on how 'ambiguity of laughter is closely related to that of the name' in *DE*, 60

reconciliation with nature. The first half of this dialectic agrees with Blumenberg's account of the name as an instrument for the overcoming of the absolutism of reality, an instrument of which the magic domination of nature is merely an exaggerated instance. Horkheimer and Adorno also believe language to be a tool of this sort. Naming is an essential tool in the gradual severing of the mimetic tie with nature because it institutes distance between human beings and the qualities of specific phenomena. This distance, similarly to Blumenberg's reading of the role of the name in the work of myth, helps to alleviate a 'primal dread'.¹⁹⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno stress the role of the name in the Homeric enlightenment. The adventures of Odysseus represent the overcoming of a 'primeval world' in which places have specific qualities related to animistic powers, powers infinitely greater than the human subject. When Odysseus successfully traverses the succession of such 'sites of local divinities' that marks his adventure, these powers are weakened and the 'primeval world is secularised as the space he measures out'. In bestowing names on each of these places, 'the names give rise to a rational overview of space'.¹⁹¹

Only the suppression of the qualitative specificity of phenomena makes it possible for language to become a tool in the rational domination of nature; the 'perennial ability to designate' of words 'is bought at the cost of distancing themselves from any particular content which fulfils them, so that they refer from a distance to all possible contents'.¹⁹² This is 'language as mere instrument',¹⁹³ the foundational disregard of which for 'particular content' ends with propaganda, where the truthfulness of language is sacrificed to its effect,

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 38. It should also be noted more generally that the notion of distancing from the absolutism of reality plays an important role in Blumenberg's presentation of the work of myth in creating significance. See for example, *WM*, 110: 'significance is the form in which the background of nothing, as that which produces anxiety, has been put at a distance'. The importance of the idea of distance in Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology is recognised by Vida Pavesich. See Pavesich, 'Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology', 434, 441.

¹⁹¹ *DE*, 38-39.

¹⁹² Ibid., 47.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 181.

or pragmatism, where the aspiration to truthful representation is derided as ‘stationary contemplation’ and the goal of language is no longer conceived of as correct designation but rather as the facilitation of ‘consistency, stability and flowing intercourse’.¹⁹⁴ It is this trajectory towards instrumentalised language that explains Horkheimer and Adorno’s representation of ‘enlightenment as a nominalist tendency’.¹⁹⁵

However, the function of language within the instrumental domination of nature does not exhaust its essence. Signifying language is the suppression *and* inheritance of the mimetic impulse; it is only by inheriting the mimetic impulse that signifying language is able to suppress it, by taking its place. Language is thus also the locus of the survival of the mimetic impulse, the promise of, in Miriam Hansen’s words, ‘a relation of adaptation, affinity, and reciprocity, a nonobjectifying interchange with the Other’.¹⁹⁶ Language can ‘fulfil its genuine mimetic function’ if it creates a ‘linguistic structure in which things are called by their right names’;¹⁹⁷ in this effort, the mimetic energies inherent in language ‘work for reconciliation’ between humanity and nature.¹⁹⁸ Language can be the medium through which ‘nature is given the opportunity to mirror itself in the realm of spirit’, thereby gaining ‘a certain tranquillity by contemplating its own image’.¹⁹⁹ Finding the ‘right names’ for things is not a process of mystical intuition centred on the individual word, but rather consists in the ‘continuous theoretical effort in developing a philosophical truth’ through the ‘adequation of name and thing’.²⁰⁰

Although Horkheimer sees philosophy as ‘at one with art in reflecting passion through language and thus transferring it to the sphere of experience and memory’,²⁰² the

¹⁹⁴ This is a phrase from William James that Horkheimer refers to in his critique of pragmatism as functionalised rationality. See *ER*, 45.

¹⁹⁵ *DE*, 17.

¹⁹⁶ Miriam Hansen, ‘Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing’, 90.

¹⁹⁷ *ER*, 179

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

reconciliation of humanity and nature though philosophical truth does not abandon knowledge in favour of imitation. Rather, it proposes the sublation of this opposition, just as Adorno's later work ultimately looks beyond the 'blind' semblance of reconciliation found in works of art toward reconciliation through the medium of the concept, a philosophical thought able to 'use the concept in order to reach beyond the concept'.²⁰³ In this utopian image, language becomes the medium of the 'liberation of thought from power'.²⁰⁴ Like magic, with which it shares its roots in the mimetic faculty, language is fundamentally ambiguous, at once an instrument of the domination of nature that defines the trajectory of human experience from pre-history to the present and the site of 'other possibilities' for the relationship between humanity and nature.

5.7. Contrasting Horizons

A core of agreement exists between *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Both see magic and language as instruments that, in the broadest sense, allow for the human control over nature. This agreement is part of a more general correspondence between the anthropological frameworks of the two books, in which, as I have shown, an understanding of human thought and behaviour as instruments of the adaptation necessary for human self-preservation grounds a reading of myth and scientific rationality as functionally similar. However, these agreements serve to highlight the opposed anthropological horizons of the two texts and their sharply differing positions on the future possibilities of human life. Horkheimer and Adorno introduce a supplementary element into their interpretations of magic and language that is absent from Blumenberg's account. Through their shared origin in

²⁰² Ibid., 179.

²⁰³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 94-95.

²⁰⁴ *DE*, 165

the mimetic faculty, both magic and language exemplify a reconciling relationship between humanity and nature that suggests an alternative to the instrumental domination of nature.

In their reading of mimetic magic, this alternate relationship is strongly associated with the past: magic, as we have seen, is for Horkheimer and Adorno the historical locus of qualitatively differentiated experience that has vanished in the progress of enlightenment. Magic, although it is itself dialectically split between its dominating and purely imitative moments, suggests to Horkheimer and Adorno the existence of an even more archaic form of ‘mimetic behaviour proper’, consisting in the ‘organic adaptation to otherness’, progressively erased by magic’s ‘organised manipulation of mimesis’ and then by ‘rational praxis’.²⁰⁵ The image of a language that would fulfil its ‘genuine mimetic function’, on the other hand, is presented chiefly as a future possibility, an agent of utopian reconciliation between spirit and nature.

The question of the extent to which Horkheimer and Adorno’s image of future redemption can be seen in romantic terms, as the reattainment of a ‘lost immediacy’ or ‘original oneness’ in relations between humanity and nature,²⁰⁶ divides commentators. On the one hand, David Roberts sees Horkheimer and Adorno’s work, along with Heidegger’s, as the culmination of a romantic critique of enlightenment in which ‘the fall from nature into history points to the redeeming reunion of nature and history’.²⁰⁷ Peter Stirk, on the other hand, has entirely disassociated Horkheimer’s image of reconciliation from his idea of nature, arguing that the latter is entirely bereft of ‘redeeming features’.²⁰⁸ Both of these views are somewhat reductive. Roberts fails to register Horkheimer and Adorno’s Hegelian insistence that reconciliation with nature can only be truly realised as the result of a process of historical

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 148.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 196.

²⁰⁷ David Roberts, ‘Art and Myth: Adorno and Heidegger’, *Thesis Eleven* 58, no. 1 (1999): 21-22.

²⁰⁸ Stirk, *Max Horkheimer*, 242, n. 103.

mediation,²⁰⁹ while Stirk underestimates the role played by the image of humanity's past mimetic relationship to nature as a corrective to the history of instrumental rationality. Although for Horkheimer and Adorno the desire to return to prehistoric unity with nature is false, it has a moment of truth, present in the fact that we 'cannot conceive of a happiness not nourished by the image of that primal age'.²¹⁰

The exact relationship between the archaic past and the reconciled future in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains aporetic. However, at the very least we should note that Horkheimer and Adorno's images of past and future work in concert: the fact that a relationship between humanity and nature that is different from instrumental reason *has* existed in the past provides support for the belief that it *can* exist in the future. The argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is built on the hope for a new relationship between humanity and nature, a hope supported by speculations about the archaic existence of precisely such an alternate relationship.²¹¹

It is precisely this hope that is lacking in Blumenberg's work. Blumenberg dismisses the existence of a qualitatively different relationship between humanity and nature in the archaic past. His representation of magic is entirely free of the supplementary element in Horkheimer and Adorno's commentary, focusing only on the role of magic as an instrument

²⁰⁹ *DE*, 49.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

²¹¹ Even if, as Habermas has argued, the book's totalising critique of rationality appears to empty its image of reconciliation of any substantive content. Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of rationality *per se* means that they are unable to theoretically develop their image of mimetic reconciliation, because to do so would be to articulate the counter-image to instrumental reason with the tools of instrumental reason itself. The idea of mimesis therefore remains, for Habermas, only a 'placeholder' for a properly developed account of the 'other possibilities' of the human relation to nature. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 382-383. See also the related formulations in Habermas, 'Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions', in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 141. A similar argument is presented with regard to Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* in Georg Lohmann, 'The Failure of Self-Realization: An Interpretation of Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*', trans. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, 387-412.

for the control of reality. As we saw in the previous chapter, the desire to return to a state of unity between the human and nature can only appear to Blumenberg as either mistaken (based on a romanticised image of the past that ‘accepts as matter of course’ the human life-world that is in fact wrested from the experience of the absolutism of reality)²¹² or pathological (in the desire ‘archaic irresponsibility’).²¹³ And there is nothing whatsoever in his work to suggest that a fundamentally altered relationship between humanity and nature can be expected in the future, not even in the form of a perfection of the mastery of reality: man ‘never entirely attains the certainty that he has reached the turning point in his history at which the relative predominance of reality over his consciousness and his fate has turned into the supremacy of the subject’.²¹⁴

Blumenberg shares a number of Horkheimer and Adorno’s key presuppositions: that the human being is a natural being, but a unique one that occupies an uncomfortable position within nature that makes the fear of nature an essential ingredient of the anthropological makeup; that rationality should be understood functionally, as self-preservation through the mastery of nature; that, in this regard, a functional continuity can be seen at work in myth and scientific rationality. In Horkheimer and Adorno this paradigm is developed with critical intent, and is supplemented by the image of a reconciliation of spirit and nature that would break with a human relationship to nature founded in fear and domination. By figuring the horizon of experience defined by the confrontation with the absolutism of reality as unsurpassable, Blumenberg cancels the critical aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno’s paradigm, rewriting the critique of instrumental reason as an account of permanent and inescapable structures of the relation between humanity and nature. Blumenberg agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the link between human culture and self-preservation,

²¹² *WM*, 3.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

but denies the possibility of somehow overcoming this in order to reach an orientation to reality that would be truly open and receptive, rather than instrumentalised for human needs.²¹⁵ As I will show in the following two chapters, Blumenberg performs the same reversal of the critique of instrumental reason in his account of modernity.

²¹⁵ Put in slightly different terms, we could say that Blumenberg denies the possibility of reason ever breaking free from the necessities of self-preservation, a possibility Adorno identifies with reason's ability to reflect on its role in self-preservation, which places it 'above nature'. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 289.

Chapter 6: Modernity as Human Self-Assertion

The previous chapter has demonstrated a number of similarities in the way Blumenberg and Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualise the relationship between mythical thought and scientific-theoretical rationality. In both, an understanding of human thought and behaviour as instruments of the adaptation necessary for human self-preservation grounds a reading of myth and scientific rationality as functionally similar. The differences between their respective interpretations of magic and naming, articulated in both *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in relation to speculative accounts of human anthropogenesis and pre-history, pointed to a fundamental disagreement about the possibility of a human relationship to nature that would break with the theoretical and practical domination of nature in the service of the self-preservation of the subject; a relationship that would leave behind humanity's position as the 'universal antirace' of nature.¹ Through the speculative reconstruction of the 'mimetic behaviour proper' that pre-dated the turn to the instrumentalisation of knowledge, which in their account is prefigured in archaic mimetic magic,² Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to recall forgotten possibilities of the human relationship to nature in order to affirm the possibility of a future 'mimetic reconciliation' with nature,³ even if their totalising critique of rationality as such means they can offer no more than a sketch of the utopian contours of this relationship.

The instrumental domination of internal and external nature in the service of human self-preservation that Horkheimer and Adorno see as a tragic distortion of the human relationship with nature, Blumenberg regards as unsurpassable and necessary. As I have shown through my analysis of Blumenberg's account of magic, the lack of any radically

¹ *DE*, 165.

² *Ibid.*, 148.

³ On *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a recollection of forgotten possibilities and the importance of the concept of recollection in the 'pessimistic' phase of first generation Critical Theory more generally, see Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 179, 188.

different relationship with nature in Blumenberg's speculative reconstruction of the pre-historic past is – in an exact counter-image of Horkheimer and Adorno – consistent with his denial of the future possibility of a non-antagonistic relationship between humanity and nature. That such reconciliation is able to emerge as a desire is itself the result of the relative success of the cognitive and practical mastery of reality, which allows the mimetic 'surrender' to nature to appear no longer as terrifying, but as attractive.⁴ The mastery of a hostile reality will never lose its necessity for the human being, nor will it ever even reach a radical 'turning point' after which this mastery could be seen as definitively achieved.⁵ In Blumenberg's anthropobiological account, the essential constitution of the human being means there can be no end to the cultural work of dealing with the raw material of an unfriendly reality and constituting from it a world in which human beings can live.

In this chapter and the following one, I build on the perspective opened up by the comparative reading of *Work on Myth* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to interpret Blumenberg's account of the modern age. Blumenberg's work on the modern age exceeds the claim that the instrumental domination of nature is a necessary response to the human's being deficient constitution. I will argue, in what follows, that Blumenberg in fact celebrates the modern epoch in which this mastery of nature was first self-consciously understood as the proper fulfilment of inherent anthropological possibilities.

In Horkheimer and Adorno, the hoped-for mimetic reconciliation with nature realises a possibility attested to by the past existence of 'mimetic behaviour proper' and present within rationality itself in the form of philosophy's 'frustrated ... intention of discovering the truth', of doing justice to the object of cognition.⁶ Mimetic reconciliation would represent a radical transformation of the human being, in which, by finally fulfilling this promise

⁴ *WM*, 9. See chapter 4.2 above.

⁵ *WM*, 9

⁶ *ER*, 176.

inherent within rationality itself, it would transcend the domination of nature (both internal and external).⁷ Despite Adorno's bitter critique of Heidegger, Blumenberg's work allows us to see a fundamental similarity between the utopian future horizon of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason and the orientation of Heidegger's later thought toward the coming epochal event in which man will appropriate his own essence as shepherd of being. In contrast to both of these anthropo-eschatological expectations and their attendant visions of the new cognitive relationship between the human and nature (Horkheimer and Adorno's mimetic reconciliation, Heidegger's releasement and meditative thinking), we can understand Blumenberg as positing this decisive transformation in humanity and its relation to nature as having already happened.

For Blumenberg, the modern age is defined by a transformation in the understanding of 'how [man] stands in relation to everything else that exists and how it stands in relation to him',⁸ a transformation in which the true nature of the human 'situation in the world' is recognised for the first time.⁹ In the transformation of the understanding of the relationship between humanity and the world that Blumenberg calls 'self-assertion' (a concept that, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, is closely related to self-preservation), this new relation to the world is adopted as the program of the modern epoch. To define modernity through the emergence of human self-assertion is, I wish to show, very close to understanding it, as Horkheimer and Adorno do, as characterised by the intensified domination of nature through instrumental reason. Thus, it is precisely the paradigm of modern rationality at which Critical Theory and Heidegger hurl the full force of their pessimistic critique that Blumenberg defends as human 'self-assertion'.

⁷ *DE*, 165.

⁸ *PM*, 101.

⁹ *LMA*, 138.

This chapter turns first to the key elements of the interpretation of modernity as the epoch of instrumental reason. To prepare the way for my demonstration of the similarities between this interpretation and Blumenberg's account, I discuss in detail the complexities of Blumenberg's idea of the 'legitimacy' of the modern age, distinguishing between historiographic and substantial senses in which he argues for this legitimacy. The legitimacy of the concept of the modern age for historical understanding emerges through Blumenberg's critique of interpretations of modernity through the category of secularisation. The substantial sense consists in Blumenberg's argument that the human self-assertion that defines modernity was generated as a novel and successful response to a crisis situation in the late mediaeval world. When examined in detail, Blumenberg's account of this self-assertion shares most of its key features with the instrumental attitude attacked by Heidegger and Critical Theory. The chapter closes with a consideration of Blumenberg's own reservations about certain aspects of modernity, arguing that these in fact strengthen his commitment to defending modern self-assertion. In the course of the next chapter, I return to these arguments, pointing to the consistency between Blumenberg's account of modern self-assertion and his anthropobiological paradigm.

6.1. Modernity as the Epoch of Instrumental Reason

The speculative pre-historical narrative and totalising critique of civilisation contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are essentially by-products of a critique of modernity. As the opening pages of the text make clear, its critique is directed primarily at the 'barbarism' of the authors' contemporary world,¹⁰ a barbarism that is traced back to the reduction of knowledge to a tool for the domination of nature and human beings. This finds its

¹⁰ *DE*, xiv.

paradigmatic expression in Bacon, for whom, as for the modern world as a whole, ‘knowledge and power are synonymous’.¹¹ Anchoring this instrumental attitude towards knowledge anthropologically (in the need to overcome the ‘real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people’)¹² weakens to some extent the epochal specificity of a modernity primarily understood through its embrace of this instrumental attitude; however it does not obscure Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical focus on modernity. For it is precisely the critical desire to illuminate the purported ‘irrationality’ at the core of a utilitarian-instrumental rationality understood as the defining feature of modern society (and its characteristic forms of subjectivity) that motivates the connection of this distorted model of rationality with the ‘blind’ impulse toward self-preservation. That the 18th century Enlightenment was merely the ‘consummation’ of enlightenment’s domination of nature, and thus failed to escape the irrational enslavement to self-preservation, vitiates it – binding it to internal repression and external oppression – and opens the space to demand a ‘positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination’.¹³

This relationship between genetic and critical elements is particularly clear in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason*. Here, Horkheimer excavates the dominance of ‘subjective’ reason – an extreme form of purposive rationality in which it is reduced to a tool for determining the most expedient means to achieve ends that are in themselves outside the purview of rational discourse and thus given over to the instinct for self-preservation¹⁴ – in the very origins of (Western) reason itself,¹⁵ finding a ‘pragmatic attitude that is typical of Western civilisation as a whole’ already evident in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ At the same time he views contemporary industrial society as unique in its domination by this mode of reason, to

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 10-11.

¹³ DE, xviii.

¹⁴ See *ER*, 3-57.

¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64, 104.

the extent that the disappearance of ‘objective’ reason – defined by the belief in an ‘objective truth’ that grounds both the epistemological goal of *adequatio* between thought and external reality and the practical goal of conduct in accord with objectively existing universal norms – can be viewed as an event internal to modernity itself. The gradual diminishment of the universal aspirations of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and their replacement by the functional self-preservation of mass-democratic and totalitarian technocracies is understood as the consummation of ‘relativist tendencies’ inherent within modernity from its beginning.¹⁷

Although Horkheimer and Adorno make frequent reference to political and sociological pathologies, their understanding and critique of modernity is primarily philosophical, based on an ‘inquiry into the concept of rationality that underlies our contemporary industrial culture’.¹⁸ The philosophical dimension of their account emerges strongly if one looks into the relationship of their thought to two of its main sources, Weber’s analysis of rationalisation and Lukács’s critique of reification.

Weber approaches the problem of the specificity of the civilisation of the modern West through the analysis of its ‘specific type of “rationalism”’.¹⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno draw inspiration in particular from the way Weber links the dissolution of objective metaphysical world-views in the (mutually contradictory) rationalisations of the individual life-spheres to the ‘disenchantment of the world’, the disconnection of the world of concrete phenomena from values, norms, and meaning. For Weber, this disenchantment is bound up with the rationalisation of action, the increasing prevalence of actions motivated by the rational calculation and weighing of means and ends rather than faithfulness to a conviction, traditional custom, or unreflective impulse. As Seyla Benhabib has argued, the important

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., v.

¹⁹ Max Weber, ‘Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*’, in *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin, 2002), 365.

thing to note here in relation to Horkheimer and Adorno's adoption of elements of Weber's analysis is that, for Weber, no single explanatory logic can be found to lie behind the rationalisation processes of the different life-spheres.²⁰ Rather than suggesting that the multiplicity of rationalisation processes are expressions of an overarching rationality, Weber uses the notion of rationalisation as a tool to examine the kinds of actions that occur within the life-spheres of societies in the modern West.

Lukács proposes a single explanatory logic behind modernity in his marriage of Weberian rationalisation to the Marxist concept of alienation. For Lukács, modernity is characterised by the fragmentation of a pre-capitalist social totality, a process that can be traced back to the dominance of the commodity-form. In the commodity, the social value invested in things takes on the appearance of an intrinsic value, masking the role played by social relations (and thus by social subjects) in the establishment of this value. This structure 'stamps its imprint on the whole consciousness of man' in modern capitalism, constituting the phenomenon Lukács calls 'reification'.²¹ In the relation of the individual to society, reification results in the appearance of social structures as unchanging 'second nature' to which the subject may only passively adapt. In intersubjective relations, reification determines the attitude of atomised individuals to other members of society, who only appear as means or hindrances to individual goals conceived in materialistic terms. The subject is thus blinded to its true identity as a member of a collective social agent that has the power to determine social life, which in capitalism confronts the subject in the false form of a 'phantom objectivity'.²²

²⁰ Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 186.

²¹ György Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 100.

²² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83.

As Habermas has suggested, Lukács makes a move that proves to be decisive for his influence on Horkheimer and Adorno when he applies the category of reification to the epistemology of modern science.²³ The pathological subject-world relation of reified consciousness is expressed as universal abstraction in the insuperable Kantian dualism (representative for Lukács, as it will also be for Horkheimer and Adorno and Blumenberg, of the epistemological underpinnings of modern science as a whole) between a transcendental subject and a material substrate, which rests ‘undisturbed in its irrationality (‘non-createdness’, ‘givenness’)’.²⁴ As Horkheimer and Adorno also will, Lukács thus links his critique of modern society to a historicising and relativising critique of the seemingly universal and timeless model of cognitive relation between subject and object produced within this society.

In this reduction of modernity to the explanatory core of the commodity-form, Lukács gives a simultaneously materialist and philosophical spin on Weber’s rationalisation processes. His account is materialist in that the socio-economic base determines the totality of seemingly autonomous rationalisation processes. However, it is philosophical in that these social phenomena are ultimately grounded in the Hegelian narrative of the collective human subject that has become alienated from its own potential and can transcend capitalist reification by recognition of itself as the ‘identical subject-object of the real history of mankind’.²⁵ Through the identification of the subject-object of real human history with the proletariat, the problem of reification then receives its solution in revolutionary Leninist politics.

²³ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 361-2, 372, 378.

²⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 120.

²⁵ See Lukács’ preface to the 1967 edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, xxiii.

Horkheimer and Adorno follow Lukács by grounding their semi-Weberian description of modernity in a single explanatory logic. But where Lukács sought the master key to the pathologies of modern society in the economic sphere, and explained the ‘whole consciousness of man’ as resulting from this material base, Horkheimer and Adorno tend to emphasise the primacy of the ‘structures of consciousness’ shaped by instrumental reason.²⁶

The extent to which Horkheimer and Adorno translate Weber and Lukács’ narratives into a philosophical narrative,²⁷ centred on the cognitive relation of the human subject to nature, stands out clearly if we look at the prescriptive moment within the critique of instrumental reason. In Horkheimer’s pre-war work, the resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity is still, in a manner close to Lukács, to be found in the overcoming of reification through the self-recognition of the productive power of the social subject: ‘in so far as the objective realities given in perception are conceived as products which in principle should be under human control and, in the future at least, will in fact come under it, these realities lose their character of pure factuality’.²⁸ This transformation occurs on the political stage in the ‘historical process of proletarian emancipation’.²⁹ Although *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains occasional rhetorical remnants of the faith in the concrete fulfilment of real human history through the revolutionary vanguard,³⁰ once the problem of capitalist reification is traced back to the instrumental attitude of Western civilisation as a whole, the prescriptive response to the problem is accordingly modulated into a philosophical key. If the

²⁶ See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 378. Axel Honneth makes a similar point, arguing that, in contrast to Lukács’ Marxist explanation of reified consciousness as resulting from commodity exchange, for Horkheimer and Adorno, ‘commodity exchange is merely the historically developed form of instrumental reason’. Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, 38.

²⁷ This transformation is noted in Habermas, ‘Conceptions of Modernity’, 141.

²⁸ Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 209.

²⁹ Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, 215.

³⁰ See, for example, the invocation of the ‘revolutionary avant-garde’ and its ‘idea of the community of free individuals’ in *DE*, 71.

problem of Western civilisation that reaches its culmination in modernity is primarily one of a distorted relationship between humanity and nature conceptualised in terms of the aims and means of knowledge, the cure to this ‘disease of reason’ consists in a transformation of this primarily cognitive relationship.³¹ Thus the idea of a reconciliation with nature is pictured not as a revolution in the concrete interaction with nature but appears in the image of ‘justice done to the perceived object’ through the ‘active passivity of cognition’ free from the blind enslavement to domination in the service of self-preservation.³² Thus, Horkheimer poses ‘genuine’ philosophical thought itself, if properly conceived as the attempted adequation of thought and thing, as an alternative to the subjective-functional rationality that underlies industrial society.³³ This philosophical response to the problems of modernity becomes more explicit in Adorno’s later negative dialectic, which traces instrumental reason back to the more fundamental structure of identity-thinking and concerns itself with this structure’s immanent critique, seeking out the utopian moment of the concept’s self-negation, in which concrete particularity exceeds the homogenising force of the concept.

My aim in pointing to the philosophical, rather than sociological or dialectical-materialist, orientation of the critique of modernity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not to emphasise Critical Theory’s turn away from a practical program of social criticism towards metaphysical pessimism and aestheticism, a turn that can be seen to begin with the text’s totalising critique of rationality. Rather I wish only to clarify that for Horkheimer and Adorno modernity is primarily characterised by a changed relationship between humans and nature and is understood as a change in the aims and means of knowledge; that is, as a transformation of rationality. In doing this, they do not intend to limit their analysis and critique to the intellectual sphere, but rather see the epistemological transformation they

³¹ *ER*, 176.

³² *DE*, 167.

³³ *ER*, 180.

describe as the foundation of economic, social, and political phenomena. For them, modernity is in its most foundational aspect defined by the consummation of the purely instrumental relationship between humanity and nature and thus by the dominance of instrumental reason. In placing this epistemological transformation on centre stage, Horkheimer and Adorno again approach Heidegger, who unambiguously identifies the ‘ground’ on which the practical and historical transformations of modernity stand with ‘modern philosophy’, which develops a ‘completely new relation of man to the world and his place in it’ in which ‘the world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought’.³⁴

This perspective on Horkheimer and Adorno’s position makes it possible to compare their account of modernity to that developed by Blumenberg. The peculiarly limited appearance of Blumenberg’s account of the modern age, which lacks many of the standard *topoi* of theories of modernity (the nation state, republicanism, rational law, capitalism, social differentiation, bureaucratisation), has impeded understanding of the paradoxical proximity of his account of the modern age to the critique of modern instrumental reason in Horkheimer, Adorno, and Heidegger. Like these radically pessimistic authors, Blumenberg intends to transcend historical detail to give an account of the transformation in the human relationship to the world that underlies the complex of phenomena we associate with the modern age, and he too sees this as a transformation of the aims and means of knowledge. My intention here is to establish that Blumenberg’s interpretation of this transformation of knowledge shares its most important features with the critique of modernity as the epoch of instrumental reason.

³⁴ Heidegger, ‘Memorial Address’, 50. More extreme formulations of the primacy of thought in Heidegger’s understanding of modernity can be found in his wartime writings. See for example his analysis to the ‘desolation of the earth stemming from metaphysics’ in a text in which he also claims that the two world wars were the ‘consequence’ of the abandonment of being. Heidegger, ‘Overcoming Metaphysics’, 68, 84.

The transformation of the aims and means of knowledge that appears in Horkheimer and Adorno as the modern dominance of instrumental reason and in Blumenberg as modern man's self-assertion implies a changed understanding of both poles of this relation of knowledge; modernity's foundational epistemological transformation, as it is formulated in the critique of instrumental reason and in Blumenberg, has both an anthropological and a metaphysical or ontological dimension. The human being must be understood as capable of knowing and intervening in nature, and nature must be conceived of as at least minimally susceptible to this knowledge of and intervention in it.

More specifically, I will focus on three interrelated elements of this epistemological transformation that are foundational for both the critique of instrumental reason and Blumenberg's narrative of modern self-assertion. These are: (1) Modernity transforms the theoretical attitude from one centred on contemplation to one directed towards action. (2) Thought renounces the goal of adequation to its object. (3) External reality or nature is reduced to a meaningless material substrate of human activity.

As a backdrop to Blumenberg's interpretation of these motifs, I will point here to how they figure into Horkheimer and Adorno's critique. (1) is essentially synonymous with the idea of instrumental reason itself. Instrumental reason does not seek the contemplative 'joy of understanding', but rather orients itself toward practical utility: 'What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings'.³⁵ 'Power and knowledge are synonymous'.³⁶ This represents the destruction of the genuinely theoretical interest in truth 'pursued for its own sake'.³⁷

This implies (2), because the idea of truth determinative for instrumental reason can no longer be defined in terms of 'justice done to the perceived object' or *adequatio* but only

³⁵ *DE*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *ER*, 45.

in terms of utility (ultimately in the service of self-preservation). Thought renounces its ‘mimetic’ relationship of ‘resemblance’ to its object and becomes ‘estranged’ from it because it no longer attempts to penetrate the phenomenon ‘in itself’ but only to understand how it can be used.³⁸ Thus the pragmatist redefinition of truth as expedience is not an aberration but simply the ‘attempt to make a philosophy out of’ the instrumental or functional understanding of knowledge existent in modernity as a whole.³⁹

This renunciation of the attempt to know the thing in itself comes at the cost of (3), which Horkheimer and Adorno understand as the refusal of any immanent meaning in concrete reality (formulated in Weberian terms as the ‘disenchantment of the world’ and the ‘extirpation of animism’)⁴⁰ and the insensitivity to the qualitative specificity of things. The plurality of things is reduced to matter, its abundance of qualities ‘subdued’ so that the subject may master it more completely,⁴¹ both in the cognitive-theoretical sense of fitting the concrete into a pre-determined conceptual schema (represented by the mathematisation of nature, which for Horkheimer and Adorno is a tautological operation through which ‘thought makes the world resemble itself’)⁴² and in the practical disregard for whatever in phenomena and events cannot be mimicked or made to repeat itself for utilitarian purposes (the core of their interpretation of mechanistic metaphysics and experimental science in general).

As has often been noted, these central aspects of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique are also present in Heidegger’s account of modernity through the categories of technology, subjectivism, and calculative thought.⁴³ Heidegger too envisages modernity as a fundamental

³⁸ *DE*, 6, 13.

³⁹ *ER*, 41-55.

⁴⁰ *DE*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4, 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³ See for example Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *Heidegger and Modernity*, 83, which argues that Heidegger and Critical Theory ‘make common cause in attacking the despotic influence of “instrumental reason”’. As Schürmann notes, Adorno and Heidegger agree not only on the disastrous effects of the instrumental relation to the world, but also in their diagnosis of its roots in a ‘conceptual

transformation in the understanding of thought and the relation to things. Modernity introduces a ‘completely new relation of man to the world and his place in it’.⁴⁴ The relation of man to the world becomes ‘in principle a technical one’, reflected epistemologically by the dominance of calculative thought, which seeks to know phenomena only with the ‘calculated intention of their serving specific purposes’, abandoning the receptive opening toward things and their ‘mystery’.⁴⁵ As a mere ‘standing-reserve’ of potential usefulness for the subject that postures as ‘lord of the earth’,⁴⁶ things lose their inherent meaning and distinctness, acquiring a ‘monotonous uniformity’.⁴⁷ Heidegger’s rhetoric is even more apocalyptic than Horkheimer and Adorno’s: the end result of modern calculative thinking is the ‘desert of the desolated earth, which is only supposed to be of use for the guarantee of the dominance of man whose effects are limited to judging whether something is important or unimportant for life’.⁴⁸

By showing how these central elements of the interpretation of the transformed relationship between humans and nature in modernity can also be found to play an important role in Blumenberg’s narrative of the modern age as human self-assertion, I wish to clarify how Blumenberg’s assessment of these phenomena differs from that of Heidegger and Critical Theory, and show how this allows us to understand that his interpretation of modernity both implies the anthropobiological presuppositions of his philosophical anthropology and reinforces the normative image of the human being as essentially constructive that was introduced in chapter 3.

thought’ practiced by Western humanity long before modernity but now grown hypertrophic. Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 369, n. 47. For an explicit placement of Heidegger’s work within the tradition of the critique of instrumental reason, see Darrow Schechter, *The Critique of Instrumental Reason from Weber to Habermas* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 114-149. For a more general discussion of Heidegger as a critic of modernity, see Robert Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 118-143.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, ‘Memorial Address’, 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 46, 50, 55.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, ‘Question Concerning Technology’, in *BW*, 332.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, ‘Overcoming Metaphysics’, 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

6.2. What is the ‘Legitimacy’ of the Modern Age? Blumenberg Against the Secularisation Thesis

To understand what Blumenberg means by placing his interpretation of modernity under the rubric of human self-assertion it is necessary to return to the context in which this concept is developed in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. This text grew out of a conference paper presented in 1962 that attempted to refute the interpretation of core structures and concepts of modernity as secularised forms of originally theological structures and concepts. However, transcending this apparently narrow and technical genesis, the resulting book presented nothing less than a new ‘analysis and defence’ of modernity as such.⁴⁹ Blumenberg’s ultimate claim, as Robert Pippin has noted, is that the modern age (the *Neuzeit*) was both actually new and ‘better than the old’ (that is, the pre-modern).⁵⁰ However, understanding the specific nature (and we might also say, the stakes) of this claim on behalf of the modern age is surprisingly complex, because the titular concept of ‘legitimacy’ through which it is articulated is somewhat slippery. Blumenberg’s use of the concept of legitimacy is twofold: with it, he defends both the category and the phenomenon of modernity. On the one hand, his claim about the ‘legitimacy of the modern age’ is a ‘formal’⁵¹ or historiographic claim about the validity of the category of modernity or the modern age for understanding (and writing) history. On the other, it is a substantive or historical claim that evaluates the phenomenon of the modern age itself.

Blumenberg’s claim for the formal/historiographic ‘legitimacy’ of the category of the modern age in historical understanding arises directly out of his attempt to discredit ‘the

⁴⁹ Wallace, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ in *LMA*, xiv.

⁵⁰ Robert Pippin, ‘Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem’, in *Idealism as Modernism*, 266. Italics in original. Brient phrases the matter in similar terms, noting that the thesis of the ‘legitimacy’ of the modern age involves both that ‘leading concepts and attitudes of modernity are...new and original’ and that these are necessary responses to the crisis provoked by late mediaeval theological absolutism. Brient, *Immanence of the Infinite*, 8.

⁵¹ Richard H. Kennington, ‘Blumenberg and the Legitimacy of the Modern Age’, in *The Ambiguous Legacy of Enlightenment*, ed. William A. Rusher (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 24.

historical applicability of the category of secularisation' in the interpretation of the modern age.⁵² As Blumenberg notes, 'talk of the "legitimacy" of the modern age makes sense only to the extent that that legitimacy is disputed'.⁵³ He views secularisation theses as disputing the legitimacy of the category of the modern age by implicitly holding that 'the worldly form of what was secularised is... a pseudomorph – in other words: an inauthentic manifestation – of its original reality [*die Uneigentlichkeit seiner ursprünglichen Realität*]'.⁵⁴

In order to understand this claim, it is important to note that Blumenberg distinguishes between two uses of the concept of secularisation. The first is a descriptive use that merely refers to the diminishing importance of religious institutions and belief in the private and public life of modernity.⁵⁵ This use of the term claims nothing more than that in modernity 'there are fewer sacred things and more profane ones'.⁵⁶ Blumenberg calls this a 'quantitative/descriptive' use of the term,⁵⁷ against which 'no greater objection can be brought ... than that very little is asserted by it'.⁵⁸ He differentiates this from an explanatory use of the term, which implies the 'claim to render intelligible by this terminology something that would otherwise not be intelligible', and which is the object of his critique.⁵⁹

Explanations of phenomena through the concept of secularisation take the form 'B is the secularised A'.⁶⁰ Immediately following this formalisation, Blumenberg gives three exemplary instances of this form of argument that clearly refer, in abbreviated form, to the argumentative strategies of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*,

⁵² *LMA*, 13.

⁵³ *LMA*, 61.

⁵⁴ *LMA*, 18 / Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung: Erweiterte und überarbeitete Neuausgabe von 'Die Legitimität der Neuzeit', erster und zweiter Teil* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 25.

⁵⁵ *LMA*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* and Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*: 'The modern work ethic is secularised monastic asceticism; The world revolution is the secularised expectation of the end of the world; The president of the Federal Republic is a secularised monarch'.⁶¹ In Blumenberg's reading, all such theses assume 'the identity of a substance that endures throughout the process' of historical change,⁶² which he calls 'historical substantialism'.⁶³ The hermeneutic aim of the concept of secularisation is to reveal the identity of the original substance throughout 'transformation, metamorphosis, conversion to new functions'⁶⁴ and in that way reveal 'a whole dimension of hidden meaning'.⁶⁵ Thus, to refer to the examples cited above, religiously motivated asceticism, eschatological expectation, and the absolute monarch are understood, on Blumenberg's reading of such theories, as core contents that undergo historical change by being translated into worldly terms but nevertheless retain their identity. The modern work ethic, for instance, would then be related to its precedent in monastic asceticism 'by an unequivocal nexus of dependence'.⁶⁶

As Elizabeth Brient has noted, for Blumenberg, the legitimacy of the historiographic category of modernity is denied by such postulated continuities between the pre-modern and the modern, even if the secularised form is viewed as superior,⁶⁷ as in Hegel's interpretation of his own philosophy as the rational idea of the unity of 'Essential Being' and the self that is contained in Christianity only as an imaginative representation.⁶⁸ 'Secularisation' here would mean the illumination of something previously obscure and the realisation in modern

⁶¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶² Ibid., 16.

⁶³ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷ Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 18.

⁶⁸ See G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 475-476.

philosophy of what had remained in theology only a possibility.⁶⁹ For Blumenberg, this positive evaluation of the secularisation process remains insufficient. Intrinsic to the modern age is its novelty, its epochal break with what preceded it: modernity is defined precisely through its status as the *Neuzeit*, the new age. Thus, for Blumenberg, any postulated continuity of substance between the pre-modern and modern is a ‘levelling off’ that denies the reality of modernity’s break with what came before it and in so doing attacks the legitimacy of the category of the modern age for historical understanding.⁷⁰

In addition to this ‘levelling’ postulate of substantial historical continuity, Blumenberg finds implied in secularisation theses of the type exemplified by Weber, Schmitt, and Löwith a specific interpretation of this continuity in which the secularisation of an originally theological content is seen as ‘an alienation from its original meaning and function’.⁷¹ Blumenberg identifies what he calls a ‘background metaphoric’ of the use of the concept of secularisation in historical explanation in the canon-law meaning of the term, which refers to the expropriation of church property by secular authorities. Blumenberg does not claim that a demonstrable genetic link exists between the canon-law and historical-explanatory uses of the concept of secularisation.⁷² Rather, in using his concept of ‘background metaphoric’ he refers to a background of metaphorical resonances that subsist in the concept and influence its use, although they are not part of its explicit terminological definition; he thus also uses the term ‘implicative metaphoric’ to describe the relationship, gesturing to a dimension of the concept’s resonance that is contained in what its background metaphor implies.⁷³

⁶⁹ See *LMA*, 27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 18-22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

The canon-law background metaphor implies three features of the explanatory use of the concept of secularisation, which Blumenberg enumerates in the form of a ‘catalogue of the characteristic features of expropriation proceedings’. The first is the ‘identifiability of the expropriated property’, that is, the postulation of a historical substance that undergoes the process of secularisation. The second is ‘the legitimacy of its initial ownership’, that is, that the secularised content had its ‘original meaning and function’ in the theological sphere. The third is ‘the unilateral nature of its removal’, that is, that the secularised content has been ‘usurped for the world’,⁷⁴ stolen from its original theological owners.⁷⁵ In this reference to canon-law, Blumenberg formalises what he considers to be the implications of the explanatory use of the concept of secularisation: the ideas of the modern age are not only new, they have been ‘stolen’ from what came before, and through this act of theft have become ‘inauthentic’ in relation to their original context of meaning. Formed from stolen and degraded theological contents, modernity can no longer lay claim to having constituted a new epoch, and the legitimacy of the category of modernity for understanding history is thrown radically into doubt.

Blumenberg’s argument on these points responds most directly to Löwith’s argument in *Meaning in History*. Despite Blumenberg’s attempt to gloss over the differences between the different secularisation narratives he discusses by attributing to the explanatory use of the concept of secularisation as such the implication he finds in its canon-law background metaphors, it is clear that his general characterisation fails to accurately capture the thesis of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, a thesis that Blumenberg calls ‘a model one for the secularisation theorem’.⁷⁶ In neither intention nor effect does Weber’s revelation of the role

⁷⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 23-4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 10. Blumenberg only captures one aspect of what ‘political theology’ means for Schmitt: the thesis of a historical development of ‘all significant concepts of the modern state’ from secularised theological concepts, which were ‘transferred from theology to the theory of the state’. The other, and

of inner-worldly asceticism in the genesis of modern capitalism cast doubt on the distinction between modern and pre-modern, nor does it reduce the ‘spirit’ of capitalism to a derivative form of a properly theological worldview. Blumenberg appears to direct his attack, above all, at a sort of pop-intellectual phenomena of secularisation narratives, ending his list of exemplary secularisation theses with the weary complaint, ‘And so it goes on. Every literary supplement shows that it still goes on’.⁷⁷ In terms of the specific examples he discusses, however, only Löwith’s interpretation, in *Meaning in History*, of the modern ideology of progress as ‘entirely dependent ... on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation’ seems to immediately fit into the terms of Blumenberg’s characterisation with any accuracy.⁷⁸

Löwith argues that the modern philosophy of history – a ‘systematic interpretation of universal history’ in which ‘historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning’ characterised by the belief in historical ‘progress from primitive backwardness to civilised progressiveness’⁷⁹ – does not have its ‘genuine sources’ in the rational analysis of historical events.⁸⁰ From the obdurate contingency of historical events (the fact that everything that has occurred could have been otherwise) follows ‘the

arguably more important, element of Schmitt’s account of political theology is the claim that these political concepts are secularised theological concepts also in their ‘systemic structure’, which he describes as an ‘analogy’, between, for instance, the legal exception and the theological miracle. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 35-36. Schmitt’s intention is primarily political polemic, not historical reconstruction. He poses the structure of political-theological analogy he finds in counterrevolutionary Catholic thought (de Maistre and Cortés) against the political ‘naturalism’ of Bakunin’s anarchism, which does away with this analogy. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 53-66. On the importance of Schmitt’s critique of Bakunin for understanding his use of the concept of political theology, see Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 79-81. In the second edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg himself admits the truth of Schmitt’s complaint that he had been ‘lumped together’ with structurally distinct versions of the secularisation thesis. See *LMA*, 98. For Schmitt’s complaint, see Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 117.

⁷⁷ *LMA*, 61.

⁷⁸ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 217.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

impossibility of establishing a meaningful plan of history by means of *reason*'.⁸¹ Because the foundations for establishing 'meaning in history' cannot be found in reason, they must be sought in faith, in the Christian belief in a providential guidance of history toward salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*, in which history is 'determined' by the 'ways of salvation').⁸²

The insight 'that our modern historical consciousness is derived from Christianity' is unacceptable to modern thought, which views itself as determined not by faith but by reason; modern historical consciousness thus labours under a 'vast construct of illusions'.⁸³ As Julian Joseph Potter has written, Löwith sees his project as the 'deconstruction of the history of the modern mind with the object of exposing the overreaching of its grasp: the hidden transference of imagined pasts and futures from logics that no longer accord with the radical skepticism that lies at its heart'.⁸⁴ This 'overreaching' leads modern historical consciousness to seek out meaning in history, where only contingency can be found. In the place of this confusion (or 'inconsistent compound') of reason and faith,⁸⁵ which characterises a modern historical consciousness that, having 'worn too thin to give hopeful support', now nears its end,⁸⁶ Löwith counsels a return to either one of two attitudes toward history that he believes to be free of such delusions and to have the same salutary effect of producing a 'definite resignation ... in the face of the incalculability and unpredictability of historical issues'.⁸⁷ The first, 'the common sense of the natural man' central to Löwith's work,⁸⁸ is the ancient understanding of history not as directed toward a goal but as an ever-repeating cyclical process that conforms to the patterns of nature conceived, in the Stoic sense, as *cosmos*. The

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 198. Italics in original.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 225, n. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, v.

⁸⁴ Julian Joseph Potter, 'Meaning in Eternity: Karl Löwith's Critique of Hope and Hubris', *Thesis Eleven* 110, no. 1 (2012): 28.

⁸⁵ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, vi. See Potter, 'Meaning in eternity', 37-40, 42-44.

second, the ‘uncommon sense of the Christian believer’,⁸⁹ is the return to authentic Christian faith, in which the immediate eschatological expectation of redemption by a radically transcendent God makes worldly history entirely irrelevant to essential human interests. Löwith distinguishes this authentically Christian indifference to history from the later *heilsgeschichtlich* understanding of history as guided by God’s providential purpose, which is then ‘secularised and trivialised’ in modern historical consciousness.⁹⁰ As Blumenberg writes: ‘the secularisation of Christianity that produces modernity becomes for Löwith a comparatively unimportant differentiation as soon as he turns his attention to the unique epochal break that in one stroke decided in favour of both the Middle Ages and the modern age’.⁹¹ That is, the truly epochal distinction in historical consciousness is not that between the providential history of salvation and the modern history of progress, but between the earlier resignation in the face of history and the belief in the meaning of history.

Löwith’s thesis of the dependence of modern historical consciousness on Christian ideas of providential history thus provides an explanatory use of secularisation that contains those ‘implications’ Blumenberg believes to be enfolded within the concept, discussed above. Modern historical consciousness is decisively marked by the influence of ideas that have been adopted from an earlier theological context and that are so alien to their new modern use that they fundamentally conflict with the empirical, rational, and skeptical worldview of modernity, turning modern historical consciousness into an ‘inconsistent compound’. For Löwith, the concept of progress is indeed an ‘inauthentic manifestation’ of the late-Christian history of salvation. And in downplaying the importance of the distinction between the late-Christian and the modern in favour of a more fundamental distinction between an archaic indifference to history and a Christian-Modern existential investment in it, Löwith

⁸⁹ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, vi.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁹¹ *LMA*, 28.

fundamentally challenges (at least in terms of historical consciousness) the reality of the epochal break between pre-modern and modern, which as we have seen, is for Blumenberg the guarantee of the legitimacy of the concept of the modern age in historical understanding.

Blumenberg levels a number of arguments specifically against Löwith's thesis in an (only partly successful) attempt to discredit it.⁹² Beyond these specific criticisms, Blumenberg's answer to the challenge to the legitimacy of the concept of the modern age he sees articulated by the secularisation thesis (and also by the idea of modernity as a renaissance of antiquity)⁹³ is to develop his own account of modernity as 'characterised by an authentically modern content',⁹⁴ and thus to affirm, notwithstanding the apparent existence of substantial continuities across the epochal 'threshold', the reality of the epochal distinction between the pre-modern and modern. For Blumenberg, however, the self-understanding of modern rationalism, exemplified by Descartes' new beginning to theoretical investigation on

⁹² Blumenberg makes three main arguments. First, that mediaeval Christian eschatology cannot be understood to have provided the theological content to be secularised in the modern concept of progress, because the latter involves a hopeful expectation of a better future, whereas mediaeval eschatology had become 'an aggregate of terror and dread' (ibid., 31). Second, that there is a 'formal' difference between Christian eschatology and the secular concept of progress so great it refutes the thesis of a 'transposition of the one into the other': while eschatological expectation is directed at a final event that interrupts history, 'that transcends it and is heterogeneous to it', the idea of progress refers to an immanent historical process and an idea of the future 'immanent in history' (ibid., 30). Third, that the Christian theology of history is itself already a product of secularisation, of rapprochement with the world. As the immediate eschatological expectation of early Christianity fades away and the Church looks to expand its influence in the Hellenistic world, Christianity transforms itself from apocalyptic prophecy into the 'true and final knowledge of this world' a systematic metaphysics aimed at displacing the authority of Hellenistic philosophy (by appropriating its idea of cosmic providence). This background to the Christian idea of the providential guidance of history means that it 'does not belong originally to Christianity'. Thus 'what might appear to be a secularised reconstruction can always be the worldly original itself again': the secularisation of the Christian theology of history would in reality be the 'renaissance' of the Stoic ideas from which that theology of history was derived (ibid., 37-39, 67-69).

⁹³ Blumenberg calls the idea of the renaissance a 'weapon' with which 'the legitimacy of the modern age is attacked' (ibid., 125). Unlike the secularisation thesis, which arises through the hermeneutic challenge of reconstructing the past, the renaissance thesis is immanent within modernity as its own 'misunderstanding of itself' (ibid.). Modernity conceived as a renaissance would simply be the resumption of the 'continuity of history' that was interrupted by the Christian Middle Ages, the 'normalisation of a disturbed situation' (LMA 147). This interpretation 'displaces the authenticity of the modern age, making it a remainder, a pagan substratum' rather than the locus of new, distinctively modern ideas and structures (LMA 8).

⁹⁴ Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 20.

purely rational foundations that radically break with tradition through methodical doubt, must be rejected.⁹⁵ If the ‘most comprehensive definition of the possibilities of error in historical cognition’ is the ‘error of thinking that anything can happen at any time’,⁹⁶ then modernity’s ‘absolute beginning’ fails to satisfy the demands of historical rationality because it gives no account of why this rational re-foundation occurred at that particular time and not another, and of how it ever came to pass that it was necessary. The self-interpretation of modern rationalism, which was adopted by the 18th century Enlightenment,⁹⁷ is thus ‘no more rational than any *creatio ex nihilo*’, and the emergence of modern thought remains in need of an historical explanation.⁹⁸ Blumenberg agrees with Löwith and other theorists of secularisation that ‘the modern age is unthinkable without Christianity’.⁹⁹ The task he sets himself is to offer an alternate explanation of the integral role played by Christianity in the genesis of the modern age, and the apparent continuities between pre-modern and modern, in such a way that the concept of the modern age, which as we have seen is for Blumenberg bound up with its claim to novelty, retains its legitimacy.

He first attempts such an alternate narrative with regards to a central point of his dispute with Löwith, the modern concept of progress. Blumenberg argues that although the idea of progress may come to ‘touch the question of the meaning and the course of history as such and as a whole’,¹⁰⁰ it initially emerges ‘partially’ in the fields of science (‘theory’) and aesthetics.¹⁰¹ Before it becomes the basis of a historical metaphysics, progress is an

⁹⁵ *LMA*, 145.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 461.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Löwith, ‘Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg’, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Stichweh and Marc B. de Launay, vol. 2, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1983), 454.

¹⁰¹ *LMA*, 33. Löwith calls this thesis ‘improbable’. See Löwith, ‘Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg’, 454.

‘experience’ in these two fields. Astronomical observations provides Blumenberg’s primary example of the models of scientific progress that the early modern age ‘found...already present’.¹⁰² Building on the still extant astronomical catalogues of antiquity, astronomy was able to increase the accuracy of its predictions through hundreds of years of continuous observation. Particularly with regard to phenomena such as comets, which recur only after very long periods,¹⁰³ the increasing success of astronomical prediction provides a model of progress that informs the idea of scientific method more generally, in which the methodical regulation (subjection to rules determining that its findings are repeatable and thus intersubjectively valid) of scientific inquiry facilitates the measurable increase in knowledge. Because this knowledge is methodically regulated it can be compared with the state of knowledge on the same topic in the past and this grounds the assumption of its continuing development in the future, providing a local and ‘partial’ model of progress.¹⁰⁴ In aesthetics, despite the ‘contestability and the controversial status of possible or actual instances of progress’, Blumenberg finds another partial model of progress in the early-modern rebellion against the timeless validity of classical models (the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*).¹⁰⁵ In the arguments of the ‘moderns’ that the art (and technology) of their times could equal and surpass the achievements of antiquity, Blumenberg sees a model of progress, that, just as in the field of science, has not yet been generalised to an explanatory principle of history as a whole.

Blumenberg does not deny that such a generalised notion of progress becomes characteristic of modern historical consciousness; nor does he deny that in its generalisation into a ‘meaning’ of history as a whole progress is in some ways comparable to the Christian

¹⁰² *LMA*, 30.

¹⁰³ Blumenberg, ‘On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress’, trans. E.B. Ashton, *Social Research* 41, no. 1 (1974): 16-17.

¹⁰⁴ *LMA*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

theology of history developed through its adoption of the Stoic notion of providence. It is order to explain these continuities in a way that does not entail the substantial continuity he sees implied by secularisation theses, and thus does not weaken the category of the modern age, that Blumenberg develops his ‘reoccupation’ model of historical continuity. The key to this conception is the interpretation of ideas in terms of their ‘functions’ in ‘man’s interpretation of the world and of himself’.¹⁰⁶ In its transposition of its original eschatology into a theological metaphysics of history, Christianity provides an account of a ‘historical totality ... bounded by Creation and Judgment’ and guided by Providence.¹⁰⁷ This performs a specific ‘function’ for human consciousness by diminishing the apparent contingency of historical events and providing an interpretative frame through which human beings can view their own place within history, which appears as a comprehensible and meaningful totality. In *Heilsgeschichte*, Christian theology has an answer to the question of the meaning of history; it is able to give such an answer because its knowledge is not empirically grounded and limited to the possibilities of human knowledge but based on the appeal to transcendent sources.¹⁰⁸ As the Scholastic system begins to lose its ‘credibility and general acceptance’, this answer loses its potency and no longer performs its function for human orientation within the world. But the question remains, and it carries with it expectations of the functions that will be fulfilled by new, competing theoretical orientations to the world, expectations that cannot easily be set aside without appearing as the new epoch’s ‘admission that it is not a match for them’.¹⁰⁹

In Blumenberg’s interpretation, the generalisation of partial ideas of progress (‘aesthetic, theoretical, technical and moral’) into the historical metaphysics of progress¹¹⁰ is

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 64-5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 33-34.

an attempt to satisfy the ‘residual need’ for an explanation of the totality of history bequeathed to it by the now-defunct Scholastic system.¹¹¹ The generalised idea of progress is an example of the ‘*reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated’.¹¹² In this reoccupation, the idea of progress becomes ‘overextended’ beyond the limited domains in which its ‘authentic rationality’ was valid and demonstrable (its ‘empirical foundation’) and becomes precisely that at which Löwith directs his critical gaze: a metaphysical world-view, ‘a faith encompassing the future’.¹¹³ The secularisation thesis appears plausible because it refers to a real ‘identity in the historical process’; however, this identity or continuity is ‘not one of contents but of functions’, which can be performed by ‘totally heterogeneous contents’,¹¹⁴ as Blumenberg argues is the case with the reoccupation of the metaphysics of history by the generalised notion of progress. By distinguishing between the ‘independently generated idea of progress’¹¹⁵ and its generalisation into a metaphysics of the historical totality, Blumenberg attempts to both explain the appearance of secularisation and assert the existence of novel ideas belonging to the modern age alone, thus retaining the legitimacy of the category of the modern age for historical understanding.

In Löwith’s review of the first edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, he charged Blumenberg’s book with itself having failed to escape what it found unacceptable in the self-understanding of modern rationalism exemplified by Descartes: ‘the assertion that the rationality and autonomy of man in the modern age is an absolutely original and free-standing

¹¹¹ Ibid., 48. See also *ibid.*, 114.

¹¹² Ibid., 65. Italics in original.

¹¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 64. See also *ibid.*, 89, where Blumenberg refers to ‘the reoccupation that is the reality underlying the appearance of secularisation’.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

one'.¹¹⁶ Although Blumenberg's intention is to give an account of modernity that satisfies the demands of historical rationality by avoiding precisely this assertion (the unhistorical postulate of an auto-generation of the modern age *ex nihilo*), there is some truth to Löwith's critique if it is read within the limited field of the debate on the interpretation of the modern idea of progress (the specific topic of his exchange with Blumenberg). As Robert Wallace has noted, in his account of the genesis of the modern idea of progress and re-purposing as a metaphysics of history, Blumenberg has not yet established how his account of modernity will escape the *creation ex nihilo* problem. Because, although he accounts for the function that the idea of progress comes to perform in a way that makes it 'unthinkable without Christianity', he has not yet demonstrated why the new, modern content contained in the limited, 'authentic' idea of progress should not be seen as having sprung 'into being from nothing'.¹¹⁷

Blumenberg wants to account for the genesis of the novel 'contents' (ideas, concepts, structures) of the modern age in a way that nevertheless ties them to the historical situation in which they emerged (and thus satisfies the conditions of historical rationality). It is in order to do so that Blumenberg develops his interpretation of the core contents of the modern age as responses to specific problems brought about by the development of late mediaeval scholasticism in the direction of what he calls 'theological absolutism'. Blumenberg views late mediaeval theology as having created a situation of radical uncertainty for human knowledge of the world by focusing its attention exclusively on unfolding the theoretical consequences of God's infinite potentiality (*potentia absoluta*). The response to this situation

¹¹⁶ Löwith, 'Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg', 454. Schmitt presents a similar critique, charging Blumenberg with understanding modernity as a 'self-empowering novelty', the rational establishment of a blank slate 'for the possibility of the self-creation of an ever new worldliness'. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 121, 129.

¹¹⁷ Robert M. Wallace, 'Progress, Secularization, and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate', *New German Critique* 22 (Winter, 1981): 75-77.

is what Blumenberg calls human ‘self-assertion’, the occurrence of which constitutes the essential novelty of the modern age in his account.

I will return shortly to the identification of what is novel in modernity with ‘self-assertion’. For now, we may simply note that in this narrative Blumenberg has offered an account of the genesis of the modern age that defends the epochal break on which the legitimacy of the concept of the modern age for historical understanding depends not by asserting an absolute new beginning at the dawn of the modern age, but rather by interpreting the historical relationship between the pre-modern and modern in terms of a response or reaction (not as a hidden continuity, as the secularisation thesis does). For Blumenberg the mediaeval is less the precursor to the modern than it is a ‘provocation’ to which the modern age responds.¹¹⁸ Modernity is indeed only intelligible in relation to what came before it, but as its ‘necessary counter-position’ rather than its secularisation:¹¹⁹ ‘The modern age does not have recourse to what went before it, so much as it opposes and takes a stand against the challenge constituted by what went before it’.¹²⁰

This first, formal/historiographic defence of the legitimacy of the category of the modern age immediately suggests a further aspect of Blumenberg’s defence. In Blumenberg’s interpretation, the novelty of the modern age and the reality of its epochal break with what came before are essential to the self-comprehension of the modern age, which ‘itself laid claim to this discontinuity vis-à-vis the Middle Ages’¹²¹ and makes a ‘claim to have led man into a new and final phase of self-possession and self-realisation’.¹²² Thus in defending the reality of this epochal distinction, Blumenberg vindicates the self-understanding of the

¹¹⁸ *LMA*, 178.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 378. See also *ibid.*, 468: ‘Its self-understanding is one of the constitutive phenomena of this historical phase’.

modern age (and of those who identify themselves with the modern project) against the accusation of self-deception that he believes to be implied by secularisation theses. Secularisation theses imply that ‘worldly reason’s consciousness of its own authenticity’ is a ‘misleading veil’ over a situation in reality characterised by ‘historical dependence’.¹²³ For Blumenberg, although the modern age is prone to misunderstanding its connection to the historical context in which it emerged (in rationalism) and its relationship with antiquity (in the idea of renaissance), it is fundamentally correct in its own self-interpretation as a new epoch characterised by the dominance of worldly rationality.

We can thus view the series of arguments I have outlined so far as developing a notion of the legitimacy of the modern age with three elements that emerge, as Blumenberg points out at one moment in the text, from the question of the ‘truth or falsehood’ of the secularisation thesis.¹²⁴ First, the category of the modern age can be used legitimately in historical understanding. Second, this is true because the ‘contents’ of modernity are new and belong ‘properly’ to it rather than being expropriated and deformed theological contents. Third, this means that, insofar as the modern age believes itself to be a new age that has broken with the mediaeval past, it is correct in the basic contours of its understanding of itself and vindicated in relation to the accusation that it is deluded about its own relation to the past.

All of this demonstrates the importance and complexity of Blumenberg’s claim that the *Neuzeit* is indeed new, but it has not yet touched on the more important aspects of his argument, which Pippin formulates as the claim that the modern age is ‘better’ than what came before. Although I have shown that the formal/historiographic aspects of Blumenberg’s argument for the legitimacy of the modern age already involves a vindication of modernity’s self-understanding that engages with the phenomenon rather than only the historical category

¹²³ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 91.

of the modern age, trying to understand the sense(s) in which Blumenberg might be arguing that the modern age is ‘better’ gets to the heart of his ‘substantial’ defence of the modern age itself.

6.3. Blumenberg’s Interpretation of Modernity as Human Self-Assertion

The following somewhat hermetic passage summarises the primary argument of Blumenberg’s substantial defence of the legitimacy of the modern age: ‘The concept of the legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but rather from the necessity of those accomplishments’.¹²⁵ Modernity, identified here with the human being’s ‘postmedieval self-assertion’,¹²⁶ is a necessary ‘answer to a crisis’¹²⁷ brought about by late mediaeval ‘theological absolutism’¹²⁸ and is legitimated by its success in resolving this late mediaeval crisis situation. The self-assertion of ‘worldly reason’ is (in a limited sense) ‘better’ than the late mediaeval theological worldview because it provides a better answer to the late mediaeval crisis than does theological absolutism, which cannot resolve the problem because its own ‘intensified concern for salvation’ is the root cause of the crisis. Modern self-assertion steps in where the Christian epoch’s “own means” simply were insufficient to eliminate the disturbances, distortions, and loss of balance of its spiritual structure’.¹²⁹ In this sense, Blumenberg’s defence of the necessity of the modern age’s

¹²⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 146.

¹²⁸ Blumenberg uses this term throughout *LMA*.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 176. Thus it is quite inaccurate to claim, as Austin Harrington does, that in Blumenberg’s narrative secular modernity is the result of a ‘process of rationalisation immanent and internal to religious life itself’. Blumenberg of course stresses the background situation out of which modernity arises, but his narrative opposes self-assertive worldly reason as an ‘exogenous agency’ to the theological world-view that was incapable of rationally resolving the problems it had introduced through theological absolutism. See Austin Harrington, ‘Theological History and the Legitimacy of the Modern Social Sciences’, 11. Similarly, David Ingram’s claim that for Blumenberg modernity solves the crisis of late mediaeval theological absolutism ‘in a manner commensurate with the latter’s

response to the crisis brought about by late mediaeval theology contains a substantial and positive evaluation of what he calls the ‘rationality of the rationalism of the modern age’.¹³⁰ The modern age is entitled to ‘the consciousness of legitimacy’¹³¹ not only in being able to clear itself of the charge that its understanding of its relationship to the past is a self-deception, but also in relation to the suspicions that it is the outcome of a ‘wrong turn’ in history¹³² or that the elevation of secular rationality to the dominant force within human life is an illegitimate usurpation (what Schmitt dismissively called man’s ‘self-empowerment’)¹³³ of a position properly occupied by religion. The thesis of the historical necessity of modern self-assertion in the late mediaeval situation is intended to show that a situation of self- and world-interpretation dominated by theology had become unworkable, and in this sense to defend the validity of modern self-assertion’s superior ‘answer’ to this crisis-situation.

In order to understand the nature of this substantial evaluation of the modern age, it is necessary to look in more detail at Blumenberg’s interpretation of modernity in terms of human self-assertion. This necessitates a detailed account of Blumenberg’s interpretation of late mediaeval theology, because his argument proposes that modern self-assertion arises from and responds to a late mediaeval image of the world that renounces rational necessity, lawful regularity, and intelligibility for human cognition.

own criteria for success’ overemphasises the element of continuity at the expense of an accurate understanding of Blumenberg’s historical narrative. The continuity of ‘questions’ between the pre-modern and modern that Blumenberg emphasises does not alter the fact that modernity’s self-assertive ‘success’ consists in its introduction of a model of theory and an idea of worldly happiness that are incommensurable with the Aristotelean-Scholastic model of science (which, in Blumenberg’s reading, remains determinative for late mediaeval thought) and the existential orientation toward extrawordly salvation. See David Ingram, ‘Reflections on the Anthropocentric Limits of Scientific Realism’, in *Dialectic and Narrative*, 166.

¹³⁰ *LMA*, 99.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³² *LMA*, 116-118. See also the commentary on this point in Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 13-14.

¹³³ Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 120.

The emergence of self-assertion is a ‘change in man’s understanding of and relation to the world’¹³⁴ characterised by a ‘new concentration on man’s self-interest’.¹³⁵ In Blumenberg’s reading, the orientation of the modern worldview toward (worldly) human interests can be seen in the theoretical realm through the attempt to establish reliable knowledge of the world, and in the practical realm through the ‘mastery and alteration of reality’ in order to improve the conditions of human life (through medicine, engineering, industry, and so on).¹³⁶

This reorientation can be understood as a transformed relationship between knowledge (the attainment of theoretical truth about the world) and happiness (or ‘existential fulfillment’),¹³⁷ which Blumenberg contextualises by relating it to three previous stages of the relation between the two. In classical Greek thought, through the idea of *eudemonia*, knowledge and happiness are coterminous: true happiness is the attainment of knowledge through the *bios theoretikos* (contemplative life).¹³⁸ The Hellenistic schools introduce the ‘idea of an “economy” of theoretical activity’, emphasising the ‘threat posed to human *eudemonia* by the appetite for knowledge’.¹³⁹ In the notion of *ataraxia*, Epicurus, like Pyrrhonian Skepticism, breaks with the identity of *eudemonia* and knowledge to introduce a

¹³⁴ *LMA*, 139.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³⁷ Blumenberg equates ‘existential fulfillment’ with ‘happiness’ at a number of points in the text. See, with regard to Francis Bacon, *ibid.*, 239; and, in relation to Augustine and Hellenistic thought, *ibid.*, 270.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 232, 239. See also *ibid.*, 68 on ‘philosophical contemplation’ as the ‘philosopher’s bliss’.

¹³⁹ *LMA* 264-5, 279. In an earlier text, Blumenberg points to the ‘economics of epistemic comportment’ in the Hellenistic schools as the primary and underacknowledged difference between the philosophical thought of Greek classicism and Hellenism: ‘whereas truth is conceived in the former as the consummating *entelechy* of spirit, for the latter it is a corrective with curative properties, a medicine (*pharmakos*) to be administered in carefully measured doses’ (*PM*, 19). Thomas Bénatouïl and Mauro Bonazzi voice reservations about Blumenberg’s interpretation of the evolution of Greek thought after Aristotle, arguing that the conception of theory in the Hellenistic schools contains more substantial continuities with Platonic and Aristotelian views than Blumenberg admits. See Bénatouïl and Bonazzi, ‘*Theoria* and *Bios Theoretikos* from the Presocratics to the End of Antiquity: An Overview’, in *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life After Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Thomas Bénatouïl and Mauro Bonazzi (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1-2.

purely negative notion of happiness as ‘what is left over when one succeeds in eliminating disturbing factors’, chief among which are the uncertainty and confusion caused by the attempt to gain knowledge about the world.¹⁴⁰ This disconnection of knowledge from happiness creates the ‘conditions under which Christianity could appear to the Hellenistic spiritual world less as a “breach” than as a logical consequence’.¹⁴¹ In its ideal of a ‘beatific vision’ of God, Christianity retains a vestige of the classical notion of ‘fulfilment through theory’, because the attainment of blessedness is conceived as knowledge of God.¹⁴² However, the main drive of Christianity is in Augustine’s intensification of the Hellenistic disconnection of knowledge from happiness by making faith the ‘condition of happiness’,¹⁴³ and interpreting the drive for knowledge as an ‘impious pride’ in human abilities incompatible with faith received from the grace of God.¹⁴⁴

The self-assertion of the modern age reconnects happiness to knowledge, but in a newly mediated form that can in no way be seen as a renaissance of ancient attitudes.¹⁴⁵ In the modern age, knowledge does not return to its Aristotelian status as an end in itself identical with happiness but rather becomes an ‘instrument’ for the worldly attainment of happiness understood as a ‘stable domination over ... reality’ in the double sense of ‘theoretical and technical mastery’: a reliable theoretical grasp of reality and a practical control over physical phenomena.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ LMA 271. See also *ibid.*, 173, where the ideal of Skepticism is defined as ‘human happiness without possession of the truth’. On the ‘essential similarity’ between Skepticism and Epicureanism, see *ibid.*, 181.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 232. See also the comments on the integration of an idea of *theoria* into Christianity in the form of ‘vision’ in Blumenberg, ‘Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stages of Philosophical Concept Formation’, 47.

¹⁴³ LMA, 271.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 239-240, 383.

The Christian epoch and secular modernity are, in Blumenberg's narrative, both equally invested in the goal of human happiness or 'existential fulfillment'. They differ, however, in their understandings of this happiness and the means to its attainment: in the Augustinian brand of Christianity Blumenberg focuses on, happiness lies in the salvation that comes only through faith and requires the renunciation of the claim to knowledge of the world; whereas in the modern age, happiness exists in the control over the conditions of life achieved with the help of knowledge.

How then can Blumenberg define modernity through the intensified concentration on 'man's self-interest'?

The answer to this question comes in Blumenberg's reading of the particular situation of late mediaeval theology, defined by what he calls 'theological absolutism'. The salient feature of this moment in Christian thought, which he stresses is not characteristic of the history of Christianity as a whole,¹⁴⁷ is the simultaneous negation of the possibility of theoretical knowledge of the world *and* of the 'human relevance' of salvation (Christianity's model of happiness).¹⁴⁸

Blumenberg views the history of Christianity in the Middle Ages as marked by a tension between its fideistic (Augustinian) and rationalistic (Aristotelian) elements. Scholasticism attempts an integrated 'symbiosis' between its native Christian elements and Aristotelianism that only serves to intensify the contradiction between their respective metaphysics.¹⁴⁹ On the one hand, the Aristotelian and Stoic sources of scholasticism provide the foundations for a metaphysics of the cosmos that sees reality as exhibiting rational necessity, lawful regularity, and intelligibility for human reason. Christianity, on the other hand, introduces the 'contingency' of a reality that is no longer seen as embodying principles

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹⁴⁹ *GCW*, 144, 164.

of rational construction (accessible to human knowledge insofar as they are the ‘necessary characteristics of a world as such’)¹⁵⁰ but as the product of an absolutely powerful and free God.¹⁵¹ Scholasticism attempts to ‘salvage the dignity of the ancient cosmos’ for the Creation, including through its integration of an anthropocentric teleology, one aspect of which is to ensure the fit between human faculties for cognition and the cosmos.¹⁵² But already in Augustine, the precedent had been set for the appeal to the miracle as the negation of a lawful regularity in nature and as God’s deliberate frustration of the hubristic human desires for knowledge of the world.¹⁵³

This tension within Scholasticism becomes critical in the famous condemnation of a list of Aristotelian theses by the bishop of Paris in 1277. Here the scholastic insistence on the order of nature, its lawful regularity and necessity, is attacked as a restriction of divine omnipotence.¹⁵⁴ If it is taken to be inalterable, the teleological order of nature limits the range of God’s possible dealings with his Creation, and thus places limits on his sovereignty.¹⁵⁵ In Blumenberg’s reading, ‘this document marks the exact point in time when the interest in the rationality and human intelligibility of creation cedes priority to the speculative fascination exerted by the theological predicates of absolute power and freedom’.¹⁵⁶

Blumenberg singles out particularly the attack on Thomas’ acceptance of the Aristotelian proof of the uniqueness of the world, because this opens up the space for Ockham’s distinction between the creative power and the created world, between God’s *potentia absoluta* (absolute power) and *potentia ordinata* (ordained power), through which

¹⁵⁰ *LMA*, 152.

¹⁵¹ Blumenberg emphasises the Christian provenance of the idea of contingency in ‘Self-Preservation and Inertia: On the Constitution of Modern Rationality’, *Contemporary German Philosophy* 3 (1983): 226.

¹⁵² *LMA*, 130-132, 188.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁵⁴ *GCW*, 163.

¹⁵⁵ *LMA.*, 188.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

14th century nominalism will develop its most extreme theocentric speculations.¹⁵⁷ The existing world can no longer be seen as the ‘unique and exhaustive possibility of divine action’, because this would restrict God’s absolute power to his ordained power.¹⁵⁸ The existing world thus becomes not only contingent on God’s creative act, but entirely arbitrary, as it is in God’s power for everything to be otherwise than it is: ‘Much of what He could create, He does not choose to create’.¹⁵⁹ According to a line of argument found in Jean Buridan, the existing world must be seen as deficient in comparison to God’s absolute possibility, because if it were the best and insurpassable world this would entail the assertion that God could not have created anything better than what he has, placing limits on his *potentia absoluta*.¹⁶⁰ Nominalism thus introduces the speculative theme of the infinity of possible worlds to demonstrate the impossibility of the existing world exhausting what is possible for God,¹⁶¹ and in the process reduces reality to the status of a mere *factum*.¹⁶²

The nominalism of Ockham, Buridan, and Oresme focuses its speculative attention on the theoretical consequences of God’s absolute omnipotence, with destructive results for the possibility of human knowledge about the world. Buridan formulates this on a general level when he argues that, ‘Since you do not know God’s will, you cannot be certain of anything’.¹⁶³ Because the creator absolutely transcends the possibilities of human knowledge, we cannot truly know the cause of created things and, similarly, because the will of God is unknown, we cannot know the true goal of anything in nature.¹⁶⁴ More specifically, we can point to the radical consequences for the possibility of knowledge of the world in

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹⁵⁸ *GCW*, 163.

¹⁵⁹ *LMA*, 153. See also the 1957 essay “‘Imitation of Nature’: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being”, trans. Anna Wertz, *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (2000): 40 Here Blumenberg stresses the ‘emotional’ effect of this ‘peculiar arbitrariness’ of the late mediaeval world.

¹⁶⁰ *LMA*, 198-199.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 160-163.

¹⁶² Ibid., 138.

¹⁶³ *GCW*, 154-155.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 154.

nominalism's approach to causality and the problem of universals. Nominalism brings a 'principle of immediacy' to bear on both of these problems.¹⁶⁵

In causality, the scholastic image of a chain of causal mediations leading from the primary cause (God) onward is relativised.¹⁶⁶ 'The first cause operates immediately',¹⁶⁷ or at least can do so: any effect that God can produce by means of something in creation (a 'secondary' cause), he can also 'produce directly on his own account'.¹⁶⁸ This means that any appearance of necessary causal connections between events in the world may be illusory and cannot provide the basis of certain knowledge of laws of nature. From the principle of the immediate operation of the first cause it follows that any created thing can exist independently of any other created thing through the direct agency of God; even accidents can exist independently of substance.¹⁶⁹

The radical consequences of this doctrine for epistemology come immediately into view if we take into account Ockham's reliance on the Aristotelian 'causal' theory of knowledge, in which the object of knowledge partly causes the intuition of it.¹⁷⁰ The combination of this epistemological standpoint with the insistence on the immediacy of God's causality yields one of Ockham's most famous theses: 'Intuitive cognition of a non-existent object is possible by the divine power'.¹⁷¹ God can directly cause the perception of an object that is not present to the senses and even of an object that has not been actualised in

¹⁶⁵ *GCW*, 163.

¹⁶⁶ Blumenberg claim that Oresme, in his view the 'most radical thinker deriving from nominalism', rejects the concept of causality tout court. See *LMA*, 172, 190.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁶⁸ William of Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Philotheus Boehner (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), 25.

¹⁶⁹ Blumenberg, 'Self-Preservation and Inertia', 238.

¹⁷⁰ On the causal link between knowledge and its object in ancient thought, see Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange, trans. David Henry Wilson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 40-41.

¹⁷¹ Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, 25-27.

the Creation but exists only in the realm of possibility.¹⁷² The reliability of sensory experience for knowledge of the world, which had, in the form of the teleological fit between the human cognitive faculty and the world, been a foundational element of Scholastic thought, is thus called radically into question. Although, in Blumenberg's reading, nominalism does not 'reckon seriously with intentional deception occurring in fact', it shakes the foundations of reliable knowledge of the world:¹⁷³ while the nominalist God may not actually be Descartes' *genius malignus*, he is 'the God who does not enable man to be certain that he is *not*'.¹⁷⁴ Thus the miracle, which demonstrates that anything is possible at any time, becomes the paradigm for nominalism's 'system of breaches of system'.¹⁷⁵

Blumenberg reads Ockham's argument against the real existence of universals as dependent on the same principle of immediacy and as equally destructive for the possibility of human knowledge of the world. For Blumenberg, Ockham's argument that only singular things actually exist and thus universal concepts have no reality outside the mind is intrinsically connected with his theological focus on God's *potentia absoluta*. Ockham argues against the real existence of universals logically, but also theologically. The real existence of universals would restrict God's creative power, because something in the individual thing (the universal in which the individual thing participates) would pre-exist its creation; individuals would not be truly created *ex nihilo*, would not truly be contingent to the core of their being,¹⁷⁶ but would rather be the imitation of a pre-existing archetype.¹⁷⁷ Ockham argues that this would also restrict God's dealing with his creatures after creation. If universals were real, they would form part of the essence of individuals. When God

¹⁷² Ibid., 27.

¹⁷³ *LMA*, 188.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 184.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 188-189. See the similar comments on the late mediaeval shift of emphasis from norm and system toward marginal issues (such as, in addition to miracles, God's annihilation of existents) in Blumenberg, 'Self-Preservation and Inertia', 238-9.

¹⁷⁶ See Philotheus Boehner, 'Introduction', in Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, xxii.

¹⁷⁷ Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, 35-6. See Blumenberg's comments on this in *LMA*, 153.

annihilates an individual, he annihilates ‘the whole of the essence of the individual’, which would in this case include the universal. Thus God would be unable to annihilate a single individual without annihilating every other individual that participates in the same universal, restricting God’s power and contradicting his ability to cause all things directly and independently of all other things.¹⁷⁸ Against the doctrine of the reality of universals and the suggestion of Platonic cosmogony it carries with it, Ockham thus poses his radical image of the Creation in which ‘every entity comes into existence from nothing, in such a way that even in respect to its conceptual definition it was not there previously’.¹⁷⁹

Ockham’s position on universals opens a gulf between human cognition, in which universals play a necessary role as classificatory concepts, and the reality of created things, in which no universals can be found. Created reality is marked by an abundance and plurality that cannot be reflected by the classificatory apparatus of human thought, which, in Blumenberg’s paradoxical formulation, becomes an ‘auxiliary construct that is just as indispensable as it is inappropriate’.¹⁸⁰ When Ockham asserts that ‘plurality must not be asserted without necessity’ (one formulation of his famous ‘razor’),¹⁸¹ this principle is not, in Blumenberg’s reading, intended to allow man to reconstruct an order given in reality, but is instead a ‘principle of economy’ through which man reduces reality to what can be cognised.¹⁸² There is no reason to assume that the principle of economy in explanation maps onto the real nature of things in themselves because, as infinitely powerful, God has no need for economy and does ‘many things lavishly that could have been done simply’.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, 36.

¹⁷⁹ *LMA* 153.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, 97.

¹⁸² *LMA*, 154.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

The same split between cognition and Creation can be seen to result from the nominalist thesis of God's direct causation. According to this thesis, the appearance of natural causality may at any given time be illusory; however, the assumption of natural causality remains essential to the possibility of cognition of the world. The immediate operation of the first cause results in the 'constant, inward, and most radical dependence of the world on God',¹⁸⁴ its 'continual creation', which has its corollary the perpetual threat of annihilation of any thing at any time.¹⁸⁵ One can no longer assume 'a world course that is minimally consistent in itself and constant in itself'.¹⁸⁶ But this ontological insight into the radical uncertainty of the true nature of things can have no relation to the human being's attempt to understand a created world that at least appears to exhibit some degree of regularity according with natural causality and in which the *potentia ordinata* seems generally to restrain itself from bringing into effect the more extravagant possibilities logically implied by its *potentia absoluta*. The epistemological result of this, as Louis Dupré has written in an interpretation of the role of nominalist theology in the genesis of modernity that shares much with Blumenberg, is 'mental life separated from cosmic being'.¹⁸⁷ Reality in itself and human cognition, the 'creative and cognitive principles', no longer appear to have any direct relation to each other: they 'operate as though without taking each other into account'.¹⁸⁸

Blumenberg sees this as a significant transformation of the human relation to the world that challenges the very claim to knowledge of the world. In his reading, nominalism's 'intention in this ... was to bring the pretension to theory to the point of inevitable resignation

¹⁸⁴ Blumenberg, 'Self-Preservation and Inertia', 218.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 237-239. On the uncertainty of the persistence of the world in nominalism, see also *LMA*, 161-162.

¹⁸⁶ *LMA*, 198.

¹⁸⁷ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁸⁸ *LMA*, 154.

and thus to submission to faith',¹⁸⁹ to intensify the need for extra-worldly salvation by demonstrating the futility of attempts to gain reliable knowledge about the world (and the futility of 'this-worldly possibilities' in general).¹⁹⁰ In this sense, nominalism would simply represent a particularly extreme example of the economy of knowledge and happiness present already in Hellenistic philosophy and Augustine, in which happiness (salvation) comes at the expense of knowledge. In Blumenberg's reading, however, nominalism's theological absolutism distinguishes itself from the Hellenistic schools and from earlier Christianity by also negating the bases of a meaningful existential orientation toward salvation.¹⁹¹ In Blumenberg's historical narrative this negation complements the refusal of the possibility of knowledge to create an unsustainable crisis in humanity's understanding of its place in the world, only resolved through the fundamental change in existential orientation represented by self-assertion.

Blumenberg focuses on two ways in which late mediaeval theology complicates the traditional Christian orientation toward salvation (the 'escape into transcendence').¹⁹² First, he points to the adoption by nominalist theology of the doctrine of predestination. If the salvation of each individual soul is conditional not on the actions and will of the individual but on an 'absolute' divine decision incomprehensible to and hidden from human knowledge,¹⁹³ then the existential rationale for the rejection of the claims of knowledge in favour of faith disappears.¹⁹⁴ Theology demands unconditional submission, but submission does not guarantee salvation and in fact appears irrelevant to it, if decisions about election

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 155-156.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 151. See also *ibid.*, 191, where Blumenberg writes that nominalism 'aimed at the submission and resignation of reason'.

¹⁹¹ On salvation as 'existential interest', see the remarks in *ibid.*, 233.

¹⁹² Ibid., 137.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ See also the well-formulated commentary on this point in Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 66-67.

and rejection have been predestined from eternity.¹⁹⁵ Individual salvation now depends on a faith that the individual ‘can no longer choose to have’, and thus loses its force in determining the way human beings relate to the world and knowledge.¹⁹⁶

Second, theological absolutism results in a fundamental change in the understanding of God’s historical Incarnation in Christ, the traditional understanding of which clashes with nominalism’s theocentric focus. The Biblical God has, of course, a special relationship to man, whom he made in his own image, and for the sake of whose salvation, according to the Nicene Creed, he came down from heaven and was crucified.¹⁹⁷ Late mediaeval theology rejects this ‘motivational connection’ between the Creation and Incarnation because it weakens the ‘exalted self-sufficiency’ that becomes a key characteristic of the divine through Scholasticism’s attempted synthesis of the Aristotelian unmoved mover (defined as thought thinking itself) and the Biblical God.¹⁹⁸ If the love of man and desire to redeem him from sin motivate the Incarnation, then it appears as if God ‘needs’ man to express his complete Trinitarian nature, an inadmissible conclusion for a theological system increasingly concerned with the ‘absolute self-reference of divinity’.¹⁹⁹

Rather than being motivated by the love of man and the ‘trivial’ events of human history, the Incarnation becomes predestined from eternity, and the choice of its human form an arbitrary decision of God’s ‘pure will’.²⁰⁰ In the same moment, the doctrine of God’s love for man undergoes a fundamental transformation, becoming ‘the detour taken by God’s self-love when he chooses ... those into whom he causes the love of himself to flow’ in order that

¹⁹⁵ *LMA*, 154, 171.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137, 154.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174-175.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

it may ultimately return to him as man's love of God (glory).²⁰¹ If human history has become irrelevant for God's actions, it is equally the case that this God who is no longer concerned with man's salvation has become irrelevant for the human being.

This, then, is the crisis situation in which the subject of Blumenberg's historical narrative finds itself at the end of the Middle Ages and to which modern self-assertion responds. The heightened focus of theological speculation on God's omnipotence has radical implications for the understanding of the world, which forfeits the rational necessity, lawful regularity, and intelligibility for human cognition it possessed in form of the Aristotelian-Scholastic cosmos. Through the principle of immediacy, the created world undergoes a disappearance of order (*Ordnungsschwund*)²⁰² and purpose (*Telosschwund*)²⁰³ with destructive effects for the previous understanding of the relation of human knowledge to the world. What knowledge there can be of the radically uncertain reality conceived by nominalism is no longer guaranteed by an inherent intelligibility within a cosmos that ensures a teleological suitability between knowledge and its object: rather it is a pragmatic human construct in the face of a reality essentially unintelligible in its extreme plurality and lack of any necessary order. At the same time, the meaningfulness of the orientation toward salvation (the escape into transcendence), which is supposed to be the existential compensation for the forfeiture of the claim to knowledge, loses its foundations through the idea of absolute predestination and a reconfiguring of the relation between God and man that privileges divine self-sufficiency.

Referring to Schiller's remark that history 'must give an accounting of everything man has ever "taken from and given to himself"', Blumenberg calls this dual negation of the

²⁰¹ Ibid., 176. On the 'plausibility for the Middle Ages' of the '*gloria dei* as the embodiment of the final purposes of the world and of man', see *ibid.*, 170-171.

²⁰² *LMA*, 137 / Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, 158.

²⁰³ *LMA*, 147 / Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, 169.

possibilities of knowledge and of salvation the ‘extreme of taking from ourselves’.²⁰⁴ In focusing its activities on the ‘logic of the “maximal God”’, theology alienates itself from its original function of providing ‘human assurance’ through the hope for salvation.²⁰⁵ Theological absolutism allows a pedantic concern for theological ‘rigour’²⁰⁶ to repress the ‘humanistic elements of the Christian tradition’ in favour of the autonomous development of the immanent logic of the divine.²⁰⁷

It is fitting that Blumenberg refers to Feuerbach in this context,²⁰⁸ for he understands the development of late mediaeval theology in the tradition of analyses of the autonomisation of cultural forms by Feuerbach, Marx and Simmel. In theological absolutism, theology alienates itself from its human function, finding in the speculative focus on divinity an end in itself that no longer serves human life but in fact robs it of security and meaning.²⁰⁹ The development of mediaeval theology ends with a ‘phase of objectivisation that has become autonomous, of hardening against what is human’.²¹⁰

Against this backdrop, modern self-assertion attempts the ‘counterexertion’ of constructing a new world-view that serves ‘man’s purposes in relation to the world’.²¹¹ In order to do so, modern self-assertion intensifies the situation brought about by theological absolutism with regards to the pursuits of both knowledge and happiness. In knowledge, the gulf between thought and being is accepted, but instead of acting as the grounds for resignation, its ‘offensiveness to rationality’ becomes the motor for constructive

²⁰⁴ *LMA*, 178.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 465.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰⁸ He refers specifically to Feuerbach’s articulation of a contradiction between mediaeval Christianity’s theology and its Christology: where the speculative thought of God presses towards anti-humanist theocentrism, Feuerbach, in the tradition of Hegel and Strauss, reads the doctrine of the Incarnation as the foundation of a ‘religious anthropology’ in which the human being discovers itself as the real content of religion (*ibid.*, 177).

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

epistemological enterprise.²¹² In theological absolutism, ‘this-worldliness’ is ‘conditioned precisely by the absence and inaccessibility of truth’; in Blumenberg’s reading, modernity’s main epistemological current is not the return to the intelligible cosmos but the construction of a model of knowledge in which ‘man does not require certainty in the sense of insight into the plan of creation and the reality lying open before God in order to assert himself in existence’.²¹³ With regards to happiness, the possibility of salvation had become unable to ground an existential orientation. Modernity does not reassert the meaningfulness of the escape into transcendence, but rather formulates an image of worldly happiness made possible by the control of nature.

6.4. Aspects of Self-Assertion

More specifically, I would like to point to three main themes that Blumenberg focuses on in his account of modernity as human self-assertion and which reveal the proximity of the descriptive aspect of his account of modernity to the analysis of modern Western societies through the category of instrumental reason. These are: (1) Modernity transforms the theoretical attitude from one centred on contemplation to one directed towards action. (2) Thought renounces the goal of adequation to its object. (3) External reality or nature is reduced to a meaningless material substrate of human activity.

In the centrality of these themes to Blumenberg’s account, we see how much is shared between the accounts of modernity in Blumenberg and Horkheimer and Adorno. The previous chapter showed how Blumenberg and the Frankfurt School authors began from comparable interpretations of myth and magic in terms of their instrumental function but reached radically different conclusions about the ‘other possibilities’ of the human relation to

²¹² Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 42.

²¹³ *LMA*, 199.

nature. Similarly, here we shall see that Blumenberg's account ultimately offers a defence of modernity as the epoch of fulfilled instrumental rationality, a defence directed against the critique of modernity through the category of instrumental reason in the Frankfurt School and Heidegger.

(1) *Modernity transforms the theoretical attitude from one centred on contemplation to one directed towards action.* This transformation affects both the aim and means of knowledge, connecting both with the existential project of self-assertion. This dual aspect is captured by the ambiguity of the phrase 'theoretical mastery of reality':²¹⁴ in modernity, theory (as science) becomes a necessary tool of the technical mastery of reality, but insofar as its constructed epistemological frameworks depart from the receptive model of ancient *theoria*, it is also itself a form of the 'mastery' of reality (through forcibly placing external reality into frameworks that ensure its comprehensibility).

The ancient model of *theoria* (etymologically derived from *theoros*, spectator), which continues to inform the mediaeval period through the Scholastic appropriation of Aristotle, conceives of knowledge as attained through receptive means and as constituting an end in itself. The knowing subject is 'the onlooker in repose, the leisurely enjoyer of the world' who in contemplating reality allows it to show the truth about itself.²¹⁵ In this conception of theory, human reason is 'a mere organ for reading off what is pregiven in nature'.²¹⁶ As Gadamer writes, ancient *theoria* is 'not something active but something passive (*pathos*)', which aims at 'being purely present to what is truly real'.²¹⁷

In Blumenberg's reading, this passive model of theory is only possible on the basis of a teleological ordering of the cosmos that guarantee agreement between 'man's theoretical

²¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 234.

²¹⁶ *GCW*, 36.

²¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinscheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 122.

rationality and the world's constructive principle'.²¹⁸ When taken alongside Aristotle's account of the human being, in which the attainment of knowledge through the exercise of reason is the natural *telos* of human life (and thus an end in itself exempt from justification by its practical utility), this means that the cosmos is ordered in a way that makes fulfilment of the essential potentialities of human life possible.²¹⁹ Blumenberg formalises the core commitment of the teleological basis of the ancient contemplative model of theory as the 'postulate of visibility', the deep-seated assumption that reality is structured such that everything relevant to human knowledge about the world is visible to the naked eye.²²⁰ The need for technological enhancements of the organs of sensory intuition, through the invention of devices such as the telescope, cannot be admitted in this paradigm; nor can abstract models of theoretical explanation that relinquish sensory intuition become dominant. When classical thought does confront the question of human invention, its approach to it is determined by its teleological naturalism: all *techne* is either the imitation of nature or the actualisation of what exists in nature as potential.²²¹ The realm of technological invention, that which appears least of all to confirm the teleological fit between what is given in the cosmos and the needs of the human being, becomes another example of how human beings are 'taken care of by providence'.²²²

As we have seen, it is precisely this assurance of anthropocentric teleology that disappears in the *Ordnungsschwund* of late medieval nominalism. The immediate action of

²¹⁸ *GCW*, 41.

²¹⁹ See *LMA*, 256: 'Man's life is thus in principle capable of fulfilment in its essential pretension to knowledge, and the objectivity to which he has access exceeds neither his powers nor his finitude'.

²²⁰ On the postulate of visibility, see *LMA*, 234 and *GCW*, 630-632. The forfeiture of the possibility of knowledge of nature through *Anschauung* (sense intuition, immediate apprehension, or 'contemplation' in the sense implied by ancient *theoria*) in modern science is discussed at length in *GCW* (see particularly 35-51).

²²¹ See Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 17-18. As Blumenberg writes in another passage, in the Aristotelian concept of technology, human technology is a form of 'acting on nature's behalf' (*PM*, 21). On the 'organic metaphors of the mechanical' that provides the background of this view, see *ibid.*, 67-68.

²²² *LMA*, 234.

the primary cause, breaking with the order of the cosmos, destabilises the teleologically ordained intelligibility of the world for human reason, introducing perpetual uncertainty through the possibility of deception in every appearance of natural causality and, indeed, in every sensory intuition. The problem of universals makes particularly clear how in this situation reason can no longer be thought of as a receptive mirror of what exists, becoming rather the productive source of categories through which reality is filtered in order to become accessible to cognition.²²³ In nominalism, motivated by its desire to realise the speculative possibilities contained within the immanent logic of the concept of an absolute deity, this negation of the ancient model of theoretical knowledge is embraced as the negation of the possibility of human knowledge as such. Drawing radically different conclusions from the same situation, modern self-assertion answers the crisis of the ancient model of *theoria* with a fundamentally transformed idea of theory and the knowledge that results from it, in which both the aim and means of knowledge become active.

The teleological underpinnings of the belief that the cosmos providentially provides for human life have disappeared, leaving the human being in the position of ‘providing’ for its own needs in the face of ‘a nature that is not adjusted for his benefit’.²²⁴ Theoretical knowledge comes to be understood as an ‘instrument’ that performs this necessary task by ‘producing real human power over nature’ and thus overcoming the ‘radical insecurity of man’s relation to reality’ generated by nominalism’s theological absolutism.²²⁵ In modernity, ‘orientation and preservation of man in the world are immediately defined as functions of theory’.²²⁶ It is this transformation within the understanding of the aim of knowledge that

²²³ See, in addition to the passage on Ockham cited already, Blumenberg’s discussion of the two alternative theories of knowledge entertained by Ockham’s follower Jean de Mirecourt, one of which continues the ‘receptiveness that is basic to the Aristotelian system’, the other of which interprets knowledge as ‘an activity (*actio*) of the knowing subject’ (ibid, 197).

²²⁴ Ibid., 199.

²²⁵ Ibid., 155. On theory as instrument see also ibid., 182, 200.

²²⁶ Ibid., 202.

Blumenberg refers to when he characterises modern knowledge through its possession of ‘a new sort of “seriousness”’ and connects this with the ‘elementary concern for self-assertion’.²²⁷ Hence the goal of theoretical activity in modernity can no longer be the end in itself of fulfilling the rational nature of the human being through living the ‘reposeful and bliss-conferring’ *bios theoretikos* (contemplative life).²²⁸ This diminishes the ‘autonomous dignity of theory’:²²⁹ theory is no longer itself happiness (*eudemonia*), but only a means to happiness understood to be dependent on the successful control of nature.²³⁰

To this instrumentalised conception of the aim of theoretical knowledge as ‘functionalised for power’,²³¹ there corresponds a newly active conception of the means by which such knowledge is attained. Blumenberg’s paradigm of these newly active means of attaining knowledge is the experiment. In contrast to the receptive relationship to nature’s ‘intuitive givenness’ that is determinative for both ancient *theoria* and ‘everyday experience’, experimental science is founded on hypothetical conjectures that, in predicting the outcome of the experiment, guide the attention of the scientist towards specific aspects of the phenomena studied.²³² Two aspects of the experiment are key to Blumenberg’s understanding of its importance for the epistemological foundations of the modern relation to nature. The first is that the hypothesis that guides experimental observation is generated by the subject, rather than received from nature. The second is that the experiment is an activity performed by the subject, and one that may entail the construction of artificial conditions not given in nature. Experimental observation is controlled and regulated by scientific method, with the

²²⁷ Ibid., 182.

²²⁸ Ibid., 385.

²²⁹ Ibid., 202.

²³⁰ Blumenberg makes this point a number of times: see *ibid.*, 155 where it is formulated as a characteristic of philosophy and science in modernity and *ibid.*, 239-240, where the new relationship between knowledge and happiness is attributed to Bacon. See also *ibid.*, 200: modern science ‘no longer has to provide man’s happiness immediately as truth’.

²³¹ Ibid., 388.

²³² *GCW*, 394.

intention that the outcome of an experiment should be repeatable and the hypothesis perpetually open to verification or falsification.²³³ This repeatability of the experiment means that specific experiences can be *produced* by the subject: ‘that all phenomena can be manufactured is ... the universal presupposition of experimental investigations of nature, and hypotheses are outlines of instructions for the manufacture of phenomena’.²³⁴ As a means for attaining knowledge, this production of experience must be seen in sharp contrast to the ancient ideal of receptive contemplation: in modern science, the reality naturally given to contemplative intuition ‘is more than a matter of indifference only insofar as the theory projects upon it the reality *to be produced*’.²³⁵

By artificially producing the conditions under which experimental observation occurs, the subject of modern science ‘earns’ whatever knowledge it attains; theory, once conceived as blissful contemplation, becomes labour.²³⁶ All of this can be seen as an expansion on Kant’s famous reflection on the revolutionary transformation of modern experimental science’s relationship to nature, which, drawing on the judicial metaphors already present in Bacon, he expressed through the image of reason being ‘instructed by nature not like a pupil

²³³ On the assumed repeatability of experience in methodologically regulated experimental science and the resulting eclipse of ‘unique and actual’ experience, see Blumenberg, ‘Light as a Metaphor for Truth’, 48-49. In pointing to this change as an aspect of the self-assertive modernity he wishes to defend, Blumenberg can here be seen to again take up a polemical position against Critical Theory. Benjamin and Adorno both interpret the privilege accorded to the repeatable experience of the experiment to the detriment of unique experience as the ‘destruction of experience’ under the conditions of capitalist modernity. On this theme in Benjamin and Adorno’s thought, see two texts by Martin Jay: ‘Lamenting the Crisis of Experience: Benjamin and Adorno’, in *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 312-360 and ‘Is Experience Still in Crisis? Reflections on a Frankfurt School Lament’, in *Essays from the Edge* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011) 22-35.

²³⁴ Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 46.

²³⁵ *LMA*, 200. Italics in original. In sharpening this distinction between everyday experience and experimental experience, Blumenberg follows in the footsteps of many commentators on the epistemological foundations of the scientific revolution. See, for example, Alexandre Koyré, ‘An Experiment in Measurement’, in *Metaphysics and Measurement: Essays in Scientific Revolution*, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1968), 89-91, where the teleological, goal-directed, and theoretically grounded experiment is contrasted to ‘common-sense observation and experience’ and related to the ‘“activism” of modern science’.

²³⁶ *PM*, 21-25.

... but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them'.²³⁷ Like Horkheimer and Adorno (and Lukács before them), Blumenberg views Kant's epistemology as the conscious expression of a revolutionary change in the human relationship to nature that had begun several centuries before and which characterises modernity as a whole. In Kant, the question of the condition of possibility of the 'synthetic structure of the given' (the possibility of experience) achieves clarity 'for the first time', and it is answered not with reference to any quality of thing in themselves but through the categories of the understanding.²³⁸ In another passage, Blumenberg points to Kant's investigation of the transcendently given 'concept of nature as such' as the abstract expression of the 'solution' that the modern epoch as a whole found to the problem of acquiring knowledge about the world after the dissolution of the teleologically ordered cosmos: rather than mirroring the given, theoretical constructs 'anticipated the factual world'.²³⁹ It is not inaccurate to say that Blumenberg understands the epistemology of the modern age as a whole through a Kantian lens: for Blumenberg, modernity is characterised by the active construction of reality on the part of the subject and the role of subjective activity in the acquisition of knowledge.

Specific examples of Blumenberg's constructivist interpretation of the epistemology of the modern age (his emphasis on the activity of the knowing subject) can be found in his readings of mechanism and mathematisation in modern science. In Blumenberg's reading, the mechanistic understanding of natural processes begins from the inaccessibility of their inner causal structures. In the place of the inaccessible interiority of things, the human being constructs and projects an explanatory structure derived from an area in which it can have

²³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B xiii. On Bacon's judicial metaphors of the acquisition of knowledge, see *PM*, 21. Blumenberg briefly discusses Kant's interrogation metaphor in the same text, as one of a number of 'testimonies' to the importance of the transformation of the conception of theory in the modern age (*ibid.*, 27).

²³⁸ *LMA*, 187.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

epistemological confidence: the technology of man-made machines.²⁴⁰ In Blumenberg's interpretation, mechanism as a thesis about the real, metaphysical-ontological nature of things is only possible on the basis of the suppression or forgetting of an act of metaphorical 'transference' from technology to nature on the part of the subject.²⁴¹ This active construction of reality by the subject facilitates an instrumentalisation of knowledge: 'the *interest* that guides us when we examine a machine is *not purely theoretical*'.²⁴² We study a machine 'in order to appropriate its effect'; the mechanistic understanding of all natural processes thus places them securely within the orbit of what can be appropriated by the human being, but without implying the teleologically based Aristotelian notion of technology as the imitation of nature: rather, the effects of natural processes are conceived as appropriable because they are themselves understood on the model of human technology.²⁴³

Similarly, Blumenberg's interpretation of the mathematisation intrinsic to modern science tends to downplay the importance of the Platonic mathematical ontology of nature emphasised by Koyré in his account of the 'spirit of mathematisation' in modern science.²⁴⁴ For Blumenberg, the mathematisation of natural science is a key tool in the modern age's

²⁴⁰ *PM*, 68. On the importance for the modern age of the connection between making something and knowing the truth about it 'from within', see *ibid.*, 23.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴² *Ibid.* Italics in original.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

²⁴⁴ Koyré, 'Gassendi and Science in his Time', in *Metaphysics and Measurement*, 118. On Platonism as the condition for the mathematisation of modern physics, see also, in the same volume, the final section of 'Galileo and Plato', 32-43. Blumenberg questions the authenticity of the connection between Galileo's mathematical language of nature and Platonism. While admitting that certain elements of Platonic doctrine, such as Salviati's appeals to anamnesis in the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (which Koyré explicitly uses as evidence of Galileo's Platonism: see 'Galileo and Plato', 42), are present in Galileo's work, he views these as partly 'rhetorical elements' directed against Aristotelianism. On this see *GCW*, 410. Blumenberg adopts Cassirer's reservations about identifying Galileo's mathematisation of natural science with Platonism, pointing to the transformation undergone by the Platonic doctrine of Ideas when physical reality is interpreted as 'being ideal' in the sense of being susceptible to mathematisation: 'It is true that he starts from the Platonic concept of science, but the objects of this science are ones that, according to its concept, it would have had to deny itself'. In using mathematisation to ground certain knowledge of nature, Galilean science in fact breaks with Plato, for whom the perceptible world, as a deviation from the Ideas, cannot be the object of 'sufficiently grounded knowledge' (*ibid.*, 417-418).

self-assertion against the radical uncertainty of knowledge in nominalism. Against the epistemological situation of Ockham's razor, in which human cognition renounces the claim to know the actual workings of the first cause and puts the principle of economy in the place of such knowledge of things in themselves, the metaphysics that holds that phenomena in nature can be comprehended through mathematical laws creates the possibility of certainty in human knowledge by levelling the distinction between creative divinity and the human intellect.²⁴⁵ If creation follows mathematical law, then its principles are completely accessible to the human intellect, rather than hidden from it as they are in theological absolutism. Truths about the physical world become mathematical truths, which are the 'common property' of all rational beings, human or divine.²⁴⁶ Mathematical truths are necessary (that is, universally valid) rather than contingent on the will of the creator; thus knowledge of the mathematical laws of nature is knowledge of necessity, and 'there just could not be a higher degree of certainty than being certain that a state of affairs is necessary'.²⁴⁷ Even if human beings cannot grasp all truths, Galileo argues, those that are grasped mathematically can be held with certainty.²⁴⁸ The mathematisation of natural science thus becomes 'the form in which the rational explanation of realised possibilities', of physical reality, becomes possible to human thought.²⁴⁹

The self-assertive function of mathematisation depends on a realist understanding of mathematics: mathematical laws can only provide the means to certain knowledge of nature if mathematical truths have an existence beyond human cognition. The understanding of

²⁴⁵ *LMA*, 390.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

²⁴⁷ *GCW*, 417.

²⁴⁸ *LMA*, 393.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 642, n. 25. See also *ibid.*, 149: 'Theological absolutism denied man any insight into the rationality of the Creation, which is exactly what Leibniz wanted to open up in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason and by means of the God who practices mathematics'. However, cf. Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 39, n. 11, where Blumenberg refers to the 'ultimate failure of Leibniz and Wolff to ensure the *ratio sufficiens* of the factual world'.

mathematics as ‘a constructivist makeshift of knowledge over against the pure heterogeneousness of the world’, which had found a natural place in Ockham’s thought, was thus incompatible with the integral role mathematisation played within modern self-assertion.²⁵⁰ But in another passage Blumenberg suggests precisely such a ‘constructivist’ reading of mathematics, and in so doing points to another aspect of its importance in the modern age. Here mathematisation is interpreted as the paradigmatic instance of the structure of epistemological projection discussed already in relation to mechanism. Human beings can know with certainty only that which they themselves have made: ‘the more “artificial” the object, the more “truth” it has for mankind’.²⁵¹ Blumenberg expresses this epistemological principle of the modern age in the form of an injunction: ‘Take nothing for granted, produce everything and relate it to other products!’²⁵²

The paradigm for this epistemological situation is ‘the modern relationship between the natural sciences and mathematics’, the true significance of which for the modern age becomes accessible to us only ‘once we have freed our gaze from traditional theories about the receptive origin of mathematics (however that origin may be conceived)’.²⁵³ In this passage, Blumenberg seems to suggest that the incomparable success of the mathematisation of natural science is really due to the ‘artificiality’ of mathematics, its status as human product. Mathematical natural science is a ‘constructive, always preemptive act of rational investigation’ that posits, rather than receives, a code through which nature becomes comprehensible.²⁵⁴ In the light of this passage, then, the quasi-Platonic mathematical ontology of modern science appears, just as mechanistic ontology did, as the result of a suppressed transference from mathematics to nature, which covers over the constructive

²⁵⁰ *LMA*, 390.

²⁵¹ *PM*, 23.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, n. 36.

activity of human cognition (and thus protects it from the suspicion of arbitrariness). In modernity, mathematisation, like mechanism, is a form of self-assertion: a cognitive frame through which the human being actively constructs its reality in the service of its own interests.

(2) *Thought renounces the goal of adequation to its object.* When followed through in its immanent logic, this new understanding of knowledge as a constructive activity of the subject that aims at control over physical phenomena complicates the traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic understanding of truth as *adequatio intellectus et rei*, the agreement between thought and thing. The correspondence theory of truth does not accurately describe the norm for theoretical success that regulates modern knowledge. As we have seen, in Blumenberg's reading, the aim of knowledge in modernity is instrumental: knowledge is no longer an end in itself, but rather a means to a technical end. In modernity, theoretical success is thus defined by the 'power to foresee events, to anticipate them, to alter or to produce them'.²⁵⁵ Truth as the aim of adequate cognitive representation of the thing in itself cedes its position of primary importance to success in instrumental mastery. Blumenberg calls this 'the disassociation of theoretical efficacy from the idea of truth', or, in even stronger terms, refers to a 'diminution of the claim to truth' as such in the modern age.²⁵⁶

For Blumenberg '*techne* and *aletheia* are foreign to each other':²⁵⁷ thus the modern 'involvement with technique integrates theory and the theoretical attitude into the functional complex of the immanent teleology of human self-assertion, and weakens its – until then – irreducible claim to truth'.²⁵⁸ For the instrumental attitude of modern theory, the truth of how things are in themselves is irrelevant and figures into knowledge only as a 'luxurious surplus

²⁵⁵ *LMA*, 209.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 202, 205.

²⁵⁷ Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 27.

²⁵⁸ *LMA*, 208.

benefit' that may be arrived at, almost by accident, in the course of attempting to control them.²⁵⁹ As Blumenberg formulates this attitude in relation to Bacon, for modern science, the importance of the object lies 'not in what it is but in what it makes possible'.²⁶⁰ Whether or not a given hypothesis agrees with the reality of the thing in itself is immaterial so long as it has an 'explanatory value covering the relevant range of experience'; and such explanatory value is defined by the fact that it makes possible the anticipation, alteration, and production of phenomena.²⁶¹ From the infinity of possible hypotheses, we cannot hope to ever be able to know which truly correspond to how things are in themselves; we can only know 'with which of these possibilities we can *functionally cope* [*wir* funktional zurechtkommen]'.²⁶² What Horkheimer and Adorno call 'justice done to the perceived object' has thus become an irrelevant standard by which to judge the success or failure of modern theoretical cognition, in which function has replaced truth.²⁶³

Blumenberg finds the paradigm for the modern functionalisation of knowledge at the expense of the claim to truth in astronomy. Paradoxically, in order to make this point he turns not to Copernicus and his followers, but to the 'constructivist tradition' of Ptolemaic astronomy.²⁶⁴ Ptolemaic astronomy assumes that the heavenly bodies are unknowable with any certainty due to their radical distance from the realm of earthly experience.²⁶⁵ Whatever knowledge is possible in astronomy cannot be judged by the 'criterion of adequacy to the object', which provides the norm or ideal of the Aristotelian tradition's idea of what constitutes science.²⁶⁶ In the Ptolemaic conception, astronomy was a 'mere "art"' that could

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 389.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 208. See also Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 43-44.

²⁶² Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 46 / Blumenberg, "'Nachahmung der Natur": Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen', in *ÄMS*, 44. Italics in original

²⁶³ *DE*, 167.

²⁶⁴ *LMA*, 205.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 200-201.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 201.

not hope to propose causal explanations of the motions of the heavenly bodies that would fulfil the Aristotelian norm of adequacy, but could only ‘render the unknown and inaccessible mechanism of the goings on in the heavens sufficiently calculable to meet the human needs for temporal and spatial orientation in the world’.²⁶⁷ Whether the ‘highly artificial’ hypotheses used by Ptolemaic astronomy actually correspond to the reality of celestial phenomena cannot be verified, due to the limited accessibility (before the invention of the telescope) of astronomical objects to empirical experience. Such verification is also unnecessary if these hypotheses succeed in performing their intended ‘orientation’ (by making possible the prediction of astronomical phenomena, facilitating the accuracy of the calendar, and so on).

That astronomy thus has the ‘basic character of invention ... rather than of self-measurement against the given’ withdraws it from the norms of Aristotelian science, placing it within domain of the *artes liberales*, in which mathematical and geometrical tools excluded by the Aristotelian idea of science were available to it.²⁶⁸ Copernicus’ radical claim to a real correspondence between his theory and astronomical reality, the primary focus of Blumenberg’s interpretation of the Copernican ‘reform’ in *The Genesis of the Copernican World*,²⁶⁹ is presented here as a surprisingly marginal occurrence. Based on a principle of anthropocentric teleology that could not, in Blumenberg’s reading, authentically be revived after its destruction by theological absolutism, Copernicus’ epistemological opposition to the constructivist tradition of Ptolemaic astronomy had ‘no direct effect on the theory of science’.²⁷⁰ Because Copernicus accepted the mathematisation of astronomy, which in Blumenberg’s reading is bound up with its withdrawal from the norms of Aristotelian science

²⁶⁷ *LMA*, 200.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 201-202.

²⁶⁹ See in particular the chapter ‘The Intolerability of Forgoing Truth in Favor of Technique’, in *GCW*, 209-229.

²⁷⁰ *LMA*, 205-206.

and its establishment as a pragmatically hypothetical ‘art’, his claim to *adequatio* had little effect on the ‘overall process’ of the development of a constructivist model of scientific knowledge in modernity.²⁷¹

By stressing the unintelligibility of the divine will that lies behind all things as first cause, nominalism’s theological absolutism generalised the epistemological situation of astronomy to all knowledge. The inaccessibility of the inner causal structure of things is no longer specific to celestial phenomena but becomes the normal situation of human cognition in relation to the world.²⁷² The constructivist tradition of astronomy provides ‘the model for the new position of theory in view of the hidden nature of the *deus absconditus*’s [hidden God’s] creation’.²⁷³ For Blumenberg, this constructivist tradition is of central importance for the epistemological revolution of the modern age that he interprets as human self-assertion. Resigned to the inaccessibility of things in themselves, all science follows astronomy in renouncing the goal of *adequatio* in favour of explanatory efficacy; the mathematisation of the sciences, ‘crucial to their becoming scientific’ in the modern sense, appears here as an aspect of this ‘detachment from the traditional concept of science’ and attendant ‘diminution of the claim to truth’.²⁷⁴

Blumenberg views this diminution of the importance of the thing in itself as possessing a significance for the modern age that goes beyond the epistemology of science to effect a change within the modern age’s very ‘concept of reality’ (*Wirklichkeitsbegriff*). Blumenberg develops the category of the ‘concept of reality’ to articulate the fundamental orientation of the human being to reality, its ‘attitude to the world’.²⁷⁵ This orientation exists below the level of specific theories and concepts as something ‘taken for granted and never

²⁷¹ Ibid., 206.

²⁷² Ibid., 200.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 202.

²⁷⁵ Blumenberg ‘The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel’, 31-32.

specifically formulated' yet determinative for all of our dealings with the world.²⁷⁶ In pluralising these concepts of reality, he historicises them, characterising each major historical epoch in terms of its underlying concept of reality (or tension between conflicting concepts of reality). As Anselm Haverkamp has noted, in attempting to articulate historical variability within the human being's most fundamental orientation to the world, Blumenberg's concepts of reality are developed as an alternative to Heidegger's history of being.²⁷⁷

Returning to the conflict between Blumenberg and Heidegger's anthropologies sketched in chapter 3, we can see Blumenberg's alternative as emphasising the conceptualising activity of the human being, whereas Heidegger attempts to historicise being itself (and thus understand history as something destined by being for man, who receives it passively).²⁷⁸ While Blumenberg does characterise his discourse on the concepts of reality as 'ontological',²⁷⁹ his is a second-order ontology that addresses the frames through which reality or being has been constructed by humans, without attempting to think being itself outside of these constructions. The historical narrative of successive concepts of reality both illustrates and assumes the claim, foundational for Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, that 'an "immediate" and pure experience of the world' is impossible for humans.²⁸⁰

Just as the comparison with ancient *theoria* clarifies the specific nature of the aims and means of knowledge in modernity, Blumenberg's formulation of the modern concept of reality emerges most lucidly when compared to the classical concept of reality. Blumenberg defines this concept through the idea of 'instantaneous evidence': the classical attitude 'presumed that reality presented itself as such and of its own accord, and that at the moment

²⁷⁶ Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 30.

²⁷⁷ Anselm Haverkamp, 'Die Technik der Rhetorik: Blumenbergs Projekt', in *ÄMS*, 436, n. 2.

²⁷⁸ Blumenberg argues that Heidegger's 'history of being' conceives human history as the work of an external agency, to which human beings can only submit. See *LMA*, 191-192.

²⁷⁹ Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 39.

²⁸⁰ *PM*, 75.

of its presence it was there and totally incontrovertible'.²⁸¹ Here the Platonic allegory of the cave provides a model instance: the cave dweller who manages to glimpse the Ideas 'immediately and with total confidence realises' that they are the true reality and that the life of the cave (the empirical, sensual world) 'is not and could never be such a reality'.²⁸² The appearance of reality, which has an apodictic certainty embedded within it, makes possible the comparison between how things truly are and our ideas of them, which is essential for the concept of truth as *adequatio*.

The modern concept of reality excludes the possibility of this 'ontological comparative'.²⁸³ Blumenberg formulates the modern concept of reality by drawing on a passage from Leibniz's annotations to Descartes' *Principle of Philosophy*, in which Leibniz questions the coherence of the Cartesian problem of the *genius malignus*.²⁸⁴ What would it mean for us to be deceived about reality as a whole, and how could we ever become aware of such a deception? For Leibniz, Descartes cannot definitively resolve the problem he introduces with his evil genius. In attempting to do so he relies on 'the traditional concept of reality' as an 'insuperable presence' that would be recognised as such without hesitation if it could ever be glimpsed through the web of deceptions spun by the *genius malignus*.²⁸⁵ It is precisely this possibility that Leibniz rejects: if our entire consciousness of reality were mistaken, we could never know that this was the case, because we could never know that the true reality was, in fact, more real than the supposed delusion.²⁸⁶ This is because our consciousness of reality is not grounded in correspondence between our ideas and things in

²⁸¹ Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 31.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 41 n. 13.

²⁸⁴ This formulation occurs in two texts: *LMA*, 186-187 and Blumenberg, 'The Life-World and the Concept of Reality', 426-428.

²⁸⁵ *LMA*, 186.

²⁸⁶ Blumenberg, 'Life-World and the Concept of Reality', 427-428.

themselves but is in fact an ‘intersubjective context’.²⁸⁷ what is real is what is accepted intersubjectively as real and can thus be integrated into the texture of our intersubjectively constituted world.²⁸⁸ It is thus not only that a lack of correspondence between ideas and things in themselves can never be decisively proved or refuted, but also that such a failed correspondence ‘would have no relevance whatsoever for man’.²⁸⁹

Blumenberg uses the *Wirklichkeitsbegriff* paradigm to formulate the change in the status of the object of knowledge that occurs in the modern age. Ancient *theoria* is rooted in the classical concept of reality as instantaneous evidence: reality shows the truth about itself to the contemplative theoretical subject, communicating its own ‘pregiven coherent context’ for theoretical understanding.²⁹⁰ Modernity’s active model of theoretical cognition is directed against this ‘concept of reality as reality in the present’ and ‘rests entirely on the concept of reality as experimental consistency’.²⁹¹ The object can become a source of knowledge about the world only when it is integrated into a methodically regulated (and thus intersubjectively valid) experimental context. Before this integration, it is only ‘factual material that has not yet been organised’.²⁹² The findings of the experiment, in which things are ‘withdrawn from their natural condition’ to be studied under artificial conditions, constitute the reality that modern science directs itself toward; contemplative intuition of the object has become irrelevant and is no longer a source of knowledge.²⁹³ Knowledge no longer aims for *adequatio* to the thing in itself, but for coherent integration of the data produced in the experiment into the intersubjectively ratified totality of scientific knowledge, itself functionalised for instrumental ends. Thus Blumenberg can claim that a general feature of the

²⁸⁷ Blumenberg, ‘Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel’, 45.

²⁸⁸ Blumenberg, ‘Life-World and the Concept of Reality’, 428.

²⁸⁹ *LMA*, 187.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 385.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

methodically regulated science of the modern age is ‘the way in which it directs one’s attention primarily away from the object of interest itself’.²⁹⁴

(3) *External reality or nature is reduced to a meaningless material substrate of human activity.* As we have seen already, for Blumenberg the modern revolution in the human relationship to the world can only be comprehended against the backdrop of the epistemological crisis brought about by theological absolutism. Blumenberg essentially describes here a variant on the Weberian theme of the ‘disenchantment of the world’. In the crisis of theological absolutism, reality loses its *cosmos* quality: it no longer appears as the expression of a teleological, and thus rational and intelligible, order. In this *Ordnungsschwund*, events and objects in the world lose their meaning: they no longer express a teleological order or providential will, but are arbitrary and contingent. Obstacles faced by human beings in their dealings with nature no longer appear as ‘metaphysical marks’ of the cosmic order, and the misfortune that befalls man no longer appears as ‘punishing justice’.²⁹⁵ Rather, all of the ‘bad aspects of the world’ simply result from the fact that, as purely contingent, ‘reality proves to be inconsiderate of man’.²⁹⁶ In the absence of any teleological order, whether or not any aspect of reality facilitates or inhibits whatever purpose human beings attempt to achieve with is purely a matter of chance.

The lack of any greater cosmic meaning in the existing state of things introduces the possibility, unfathomable for teleological consciousness, of seeing nature as deficient and able to be rectified in this deficiency by human endeavour: ‘Man keeps in view the deficiency

²⁹⁴ Ibid. See also Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 47: ‘An era of the highest regard for science is at the same time an age of the decreasing significance of the object of scientific study’. Blumenberg also points to the extent of the resistance to this new relationship between theory and its object as evidence of its importance for the modern age. He reads Goethe’s insistence that ‘hypotheses and theories get in the way of the self-disclosure of the phenomena’ as an image in negative of modernity’s characteristic model of theory (*PM*, 28-30).

²⁹⁵ *LMA*, 138.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 209. See also the commentary in Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 66.

of nature as the motive of his activity as a whole'.²⁹⁷ If nature fails to yield of itself what humans require for their existence, then human technology produces it artificially. No longer a text from which humans read off the structure of the cosmos, the currently existing state of reality is merely an irritation or 'challenge' that spurs on human activity by its very deficiency.²⁹⁸ Rather than simply actualising an inherently given natural potential, as in the Aristotelian understanding of nature, technology reduces nature to its 'raw potential as matter and energy' in order to achieve human needs left unanswered by the natural state of things.²⁹⁹

This reality that no longer appears as a cosmos is thus 'nonbinding'.³⁰⁰ without any conception of an inherently given order within reality, 'man can make what he wants of the world'.³⁰¹ The disenchantment of the world is thus for Blumenberg a condition of the realisation of human freedom in modernity: the dissolution of a pre-established cosmic order makes reality the bearer of infinite possibilities among which the human being freely chooses. Outside the assurance of anthropocentric teleology, human beings develop a new sense of 'responsibility for the condition of the world' over which they exercise ever-increasing mastery.³⁰²

In this world-view, external reality is homogenised in a triple sense. Firstly, the accessibility or inaccessibility of phenomena in the world to human knowledge is no longer the expression of a teleological determination of what it is necessary for human beings to know. This entails a 'levelling off and homogenisation of the world of objects';³⁰³ everything is now a potential object of human knowledge, potential raw material for the theory with

²⁹⁷ *LMA*, 139.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁹⁹ Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 47.

³⁰⁰ *PM*, 59.

³⁰¹ *LMA*, 164.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 389.

which it makes itself ‘master of the world’.³⁰⁴ Second, to become amenable to the highly artificial theoretical constructions of modern science, reality must be stripped of its intuitively given distinctions and structures and become unorganised ‘factual material’, a ‘pure materiality’ given form and meaning only through the context of the experiment.³⁰⁵ Third, by working on the assumption that all phenomena can be artificially produced,³⁰⁶ self-assertion strips phenomena of their qualitative specificity: science directs itself toward what is reproducible in the phenomenon, not what is ‘unique and actual’.³⁰⁷

The metaphysics of self-assertion always retain a ‘dualistic element’ in which man as free subject is set off against the ‘pure materiality’ that provides both the challenge to which human technical mastery responds and the raw material with which this mastery is achieved.³⁰⁸ Nature is now ‘the opposing term to technical and artistic will’.³⁰⁹ There can be no reconciliation with a nature that has become a mere ‘substrate underlying what man constructs’,³¹⁰ ‘an object whose meaning was exhausted by its theoretical and practical mastery’.³¹¹ Rather than simply a created being among others, man has become the agent of a ‘demiurgic production’ that reduces everything else in existence to a ‘field of his existential prospects’.³¹²

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 183.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 209, 385.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 209.

³⁰⁷ Blumenberg, ‘Light as a Metaphor for Truth’, 49.

³⁰⁸ On the dualism inherent in modern self-assertion, see the discussion of Nietzsche’s failed attempt to overcome this dualism in *LMA*, 141-142.

³⁰⁹ Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 24.

³¹⁰ *LMA*, 164.

³¹¹ Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 24.

³¹² *LMA*, 182, 209.

6.5. Late Modernity: Science's Autonomy from Life

Blumenberg's defence of modernity is not without reservations. At a number of points throughout his work he expresses concern over the autonomy of scientific and technological research in the 'later phases of the modern age'.³¹³ As we have seen, Blumenberg views modernity's advances in scientific knowledge and the technological control over nature as constituting a new human relationship to the world that he interprets as 'self-assertion'. It is precisely the self-assertive function of science and technology that disappears from view as they develop into autonomous 'industries' in late modernity; a development that Blumenberg sees as 'alarming' and as cause for 'uneasiness'.³¹⁴

Through institutionalisation, the work of scientific elites is separated from the general public. Embedded within research and academic institutions, the scientific *Epistemokratie* no longer justifies or necessarily even explains its work to the rest of humanity, which therefore has little chance of gaining any real understanding of the results of increasingly specialised scientific research.³¹⁵ Science thus becomes distanced from the life-world of the non-scientist. But this distance between science and the life-world does not only affect the relationship of institutionalised science to the general public. Additionally, it is internal to the scientific sphere itself: even for the scientist, scientific knowledge has little relation to the life-world. Through specialisation and ever-growing complexity, science becomes autonomous from its original life-world motivations. In becoming an autonomous end in itself, scientific research is 'carried forward by an immanent logic',³¹⁶ constantly generating and proposing answers to new research questions, unconcerned by the function of this

³¹³ Ibid., 177.

³¹⁴ *GCW*, 133; *LMA*, 230.

³¹⁵ *LMA*, 230.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 438.

knowledge. Ultimately, in becoming distanced from the anthropological needs that originally motivated theoretical inquiry, science cannot escape the ‘suspicion of meaninglessness’.³¹⁷

Blumenberg sees the late modern autonomy of science and technology as ‘stupendous examples’ of the idea of ‘phases of objectivisation that loose themselves from their original motivation’, which he also uses to interpret the intensification of late mediaeval theology’s concern with divine omnipotence at the cost of its human function.³¹⁸ The development of science and technology in late modernity thus appears as a similarly pathological ‘hardening that is insulated from what is human’.³¹⁹ In keeping with the Weberian tenor of this commentary on the autonomy of scientific knowledge from lived experience in late modernity, however, Blumenberg presents this distancing from the life-world as a necessary condition of the progress of scientific knowledge.

Blumenberg repeatedly makes the point that modern science was forced to renounce metaphysical images of totality, to give up attempting to ‘grasp the truth of the world as a whole’.³²⁰ As we saw in chapter 3, Blumenberg has a roughly Kantian understanding of the limits of the understanding, viewing the totality of what exists as inaccessible to sensory intuition and comprehensible only in the form of metaphorical or nonconceptual images. In attempting to fulfil the ‘human interest in orientation in the world’,³²¹ science’s original motivating questions ask precisely about matters that transcends the bounds of sense: of the nature of the world as a whole and humanity’s place in it. Modern science’s refusal to answer such questions safeguards its rationality by ensuring that it does not stray into arbitrary speculation; science paradoxically ‘flourishes at the expense of the questions to answer which

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³²⁰ *GCW*, 312. For other instances of this argument, see Blumenberg’s comments about the pathological over-extension of historical understanding in the attempt to know the ‘totality of history’ in *LMA*, 49; and the comments in *WM*, 91-94 about the conflict between modern scientific rationality and attempts to ‘equal myth in the production of totality’, discussed in chapter 2.4 above.

³²¹ *LMA*, 231.

it was set in motion'.³²² To ask that science be forced back into answering the life-world questions that motivated it would be to renounce the progress of modern science. Bearing in mind the progress of medical science in particular, Blumenberg sees such a renunciation of modern science as untenable, suggesting that 'the limits of responsible behaviour may be much narrower here than many people imagine'.³²³

Yet Blumenberg does not simply resign himself to a fatalistic acceptance of the alienation of modern science from its original motivations. In the same passage in which he points to the autonomy of science in late modernity as an exemplary instance of alienated objectivisation, he writes of the 'unavoidable counterexertion' of bringing such alienated structures 'back into their human function', of 'subject[ing] them again to man's purposes in relation to the world'.³²⁴ Due to the dangers Blumenberg sees in interfering with the processes of autonomous modern science, it seems highly unlikely that this is intended as a suggestion for a practical reconstruction of the activity of modern science.

Rather, this 'counterexertion' takes the form of Blumenberg's anthropological hermeneutic, in which cultural phenomena are insistently investigated with regard to their function in establishing the human being's position within an essentially antagonistic reality (its life-world). This means that science is '(for once) interpreted as an answer to a question', seen in terms of the 'experiential space' of the anthropological needs fulfilled by the

³²² *GCW*, 79.

³²³ *LMA*, 230. Blumenberg adopts a similar position with regards to the abstraction from sensory intuition in modern science. Husserl's critique of Galileo in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, Blumenberg writes, does indeed 'contain a penetrating diagnosis of the genetic structure of modern science' in its account of how Galileo's mathematically formalised physics is detached from sensory intuition. But the 'therapeutic conclusions' Husserl drew from this critique 'involved an indigestible prescription': 'that we should find our way back to that suppressed and forgotten intuitiveness of nature as it is experienced in the life-world'. Husserl is wrong, Blumenberg thinks, to suggest that the advances of modern sciences can be retained without the forfeiture of intuition; the two phenomena are historically and logically bound together (*GCW*, 402-405).

³²⁴ *LMA*, 177.

theoretical attitude.³²⁵ Blumenberg's anthropological stress on the life-world as 'the constant motivating support ... of all theory'³²⁶ allows us to see that, as paradoxical as it may sound, the renunciation of science's ability to answer its motivating questions itself fulfils an anthropological need that originates in the life-world. By securing the knowledge of a more limited realm of phenomena by renouncing questions of totality, science can satisfy the 'need not to have to live in an unknown and untransparent world'.³²⁷ This functional interpretation of science necessitate a break with the standard position of the history of science, which, because it focuses on the results of scientific research, never allows the motivation of science as a whole to come into view. This change in perspective from theoretical results to life-world motivations is the key aspect of Blumenberg's metaphorology and theory of nonconceptuality. It also stands at the core of the interpretative paradigm of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*: by viewing modernity as 'self-assertion', Blumenberg makes the increase of knowledge about reality in modernity secondary to the anthropological function performed by the new human relationship to reality. Modernity is defended not in enlightenment terms – as the epoch that broke with dogmatic tradition and achieved an empirically grounded relation to reality³²⁸ – but as the epoch of a new human relation to reality that, through the possibility of instrumental control over external reality, fulfils the anthropological need for a stable and comprehensible world.

Blumenberg's somewhat ambivalent critique of the autonomy of science from the life-world in late modernity thus demonstrates yet again how, in his interpretation, the core of modernity consists in the new human relation to reality and its anthropological function. When modern science becomes a purely autonomous process of perpetually increasing

³²⁵ *GCW*, 47.

³²⁶ *PNC*, 81.

³²⁷ *GCW*, 324.

³²⁸ Blumenberg explicitly rejects the claim that modern physics is more grounded in concrete experience than Aristotelian physics was. Modern physics is made possible not by 'more experience' but by a 'different kind of experience', 'experimental' rather than 'everyday' (*GCW*, 394).

knowledge about the world, he views it as alienated, and sees a counter-exertion required in order to recover the anthropological motivation and function of this search for knowledge. Blumenberg's interpretation of modernity as 'self-assertion' is precisely such a counter-exertion, enacting the logic it describes within modernity.

Chapter 7: Outcomes and Limitations of Blumenberg's Anthropology.

This chapter proposes a connection between Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm and his defence of modernity. The first section concerns Blumenberg's formulation of the modern self-image of the human being as master of nature. Returning to the concept of 'legitimacy', I discuss the objection voiced by numerous critics that Blumenberg's defence of this new image of the human being is limited to its historical function in overcoming the late mediaeval crisis. In the second section, I turn to an aspect of his account that suggests a less modest defence of the modern human self-image. In showing how Blumenberg's distinction between 'self-assertion' and 'self-preservation' ultimately collapses, I argue that for Blumenberg the modern worldview brings essential anthropological structures to conscious awareness. Demonstrating how a similar logic exists in other aspects of his account of modernity, in the third section I show how this reading of Blumenberg's defence of modernity makes explicit the full significance of the confrontation between Blumenberg and Critical Theory that has been staged in the previous two chapters. This then sets the stage for the final section, in which I reflect on the limitations of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, suggesting some areas in which his emphasis on the functional dimension of human life is reductive.

7.1. The Human Self-Image in Modernity

Blumenberg interprets modernity primarily in anthropological terms, as a fundamental change in humanity's understanding of itself and its relationship to the world. The transformation in the relation between thought and its object discussed in the previous chapter constitutes a self-assertive revolution in 'man's understanding of and relation to the

world'.¹ Beginning in the crisis period of the late mediaeval world, 'man's interest in himself and his position in the world became the overriding consideration'.² By rethinking theory as an activity oriented toward the practical mastery of material reality, the modern age creates a model of knowledge unaffected by the uncertainty that haunted theological absolutism and lays the foundations for the uninhibited technical control over the material conditions of human life. This is the inseparably dual sense in which Blumenberg understands how the human subject asserts itself in modernity: it is both theoretical self-assertion, in the secure possession of knowledge through structures (explanatory and experimental) posited by the subject, and practical self-assertion, in the technical intervention into nature. These two dimensions are mutually reinforcing: the new model of the theoretical relationship between human and world makes possible a newly uninhibited technology at the same time that theory receives its orientation and the criteria of its success from the practice of technical intervention into nature.

In modernity, human beings are, in a phrase from Descartes cited by Blumenberg, the 'masters and possessors of nature',³ and they hold this position not through the cosmic guarantee of anthropocentric teleology but by means of their 'own works and achievements'.⁴ Self-assertion is a sort of 'burden' in that in this epochal transformation of man's relation to the world he becomes conscious for the first time that he is responsible for the conditions of his life.⁵ However, this burden also introduces the possibility that he can work to control these conditions through the instrumental mastery of nature. The crises of knowledge and salvation in theological absolutism are answered by the new self-image the human being

¹ *LMA*, 139.

² Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 38.

³ *LMA*, 182.

⁴ Blumenberg, 'The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel', 38.

⁵ *LMA*, 138-139.

forms on the basis of its theoretical mastery of reality, a self-image that finds perpetual ‘self-confirmation’ in the control over reality exercised by modern technology.⁶

To return to the concept of legitimacy discussed in the last chapter, the instrumental relation to the world is legitimated by the superiority of its response to the crisis brought about by theological absolutism. Where the epistemological and soteriological resignations of nominalism offered no way out of the crisis situation, the modern revolution in the relation to the world offered an ‘existential program’ that promised both knowledge and happiness through a newly instrumental model of theory.⁷ A functionalised model of knowledge takes the place of impossible *adequatio* to things in themselves,⁸ and the orientation towards worldly happiness (facilitated by technical control over nature) takes the place of uncertain hope for extraworldly salvation. If these innovations form the core of the self-assertion of the modern age, as they do in Blumenberg’s presentation of the historical material,⁹ and are shown to be superior to the theological paradoxes they replace, then the phenomenon of the modern age (rather than just the historiographic category) is legitimated as both new and ‘better’ than the pre-modern. As Blumenberg notes with regard to the reduction of the world to pure materiality, the superiority of the new world-view does not consist in the superiority of its theoretical propositions (i.e. their greater truthfulness).¹⁰ Rather, the new world-view is legitimated as better than the pre-modern on the basis that it successfully assures human reason ‘of its possibilities in the world’. That is, the modern world-view is legitimated as a

⁶ Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 32.

⁷ *LMA*, 138.

⁸ Brient makes the important point that, in Blumenberg’s reconstruction, nominalism renders *adequatio* impossible without surrendering it as the ‘cognitive ideal of truth’. Thus nominalist theologians were ‘compelled to resign themselves to the impossibility of conclusive demonstration in the science of nature’ (Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 68).

⁹ Pippin has noted how Blumenberg identifies a certain idea of scientific rationality with the modern age as such. See Pippin, ‘Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem’, 282.

¹⁰ *LMA*, 209-210.

‘postulate of self-assertion’,¹¹ as the ‘existential program’¹² of a bearable and thus sustainable new position of the human being in relation to the rest of reality, as the master and possessor of nature.

A number of commentators have pointed to the peculiarly limited nature of Blumenberg’s defence of the modern age through the category of self-assertion. Blumenberg appears to limit his substantive historical argument for the superiority of the modern to the pre-modern to the claim that modernity successfully escaped the epistemological-anthropological situation of the late mediaeval world. This situation was untenable and could not be sustained; overcoming it by means of a superior new ‘answer’ to the ‘question’ of the relation between the human being and the world was necessary and thus legitimate. On the one hand, Robert M. Wallace places the restrictedness of Blumenberg’s claim at the centre of his defence of it: in restricting his claim about modernity’s legitimacy to its resolution of a ‘preceding problem’, Blumenberg avoids the pitfalls of defending it by means of the ‘teleological goal’ assumed by enlightenment progressivism and related positions, such as Habermas’ conception of a universally valid learning process.¹³

On the other hand, Pippin and Brient have criticised the restricted nature of Blumenberg’s defence of the legitimacy of the modern age. For Pippin, Blumenberg’s historical demonstration of how a newly instrumentalised idea and practice of scientific rationality can be seen as a successful resolution of the problems of theological absolutism does not constitute a sufficient defence of the modern age. Blumenberg has demonstrated not

¹¹ Ibid., 210.

¹² Ibid., 138.

¹³ Robert M. Wallace, ‘Blumenberg’s Third Way: Between Habermas and Gadamer’, in *Dialectic and Narrative*, 188-189. Wallace points to three problematic aspects of defences of the modern through historical teleology: the presumptuousness of assuming that modernity (i.e. ‘our’ epoch) is closer to the goal of human history than previous epochs, the conflict between viewing history as having an inherent goal and the destruction of teleology intrinsic to modern science, and the ethical problem of denying to earlier generations, as not yet fully developed in their humanity, the ‘full respect that Kant taught us is due to fellow free moral agents’. As Wallace notes, all of these arguments can be found in Blumenberg’s work (ibid., 186-187).

The Legitimacy of the Modern Age but only ‘The Historical Appropriateness of Some Elements of the Modern Enterprise’, leaving untouched the ‘full implications of the modern project’.¹⁴ These would include such issues as whether or not the newly instrumentalised idea of theory and relation to nature is desirable in itself, outside of its functional role in overcoming the problems of the late mediaeval world. By restricting his discussion of the modern phenomena he defends to their role in the historical process and ignoring their possibly problematic implications for the life of modern societies, Blumenberg risks a ‘wilful myopia’ in his defence of modernity.¹⁵ And in this restriction, he may be accused of legitimating the modern phenomena he defends at the cost of trivialising them, by artificially separating their ‘self-assertive’ historical function from their broader implications.¹⁶

Brient follows Pippin, pointing to the modesty of the legitimacy with which Blumenberg’s argument is concerned and suggesting that a ‘robust and positive sense of modernity’s legitimacy can’t be gleaned merely from the virtue of historical necessity’.¹⁷ For Brient, Blumenberg has failed to think through the ‘new and troubling questions’ raised by the pragmatic-instrumental modern rationality he defends.¹⁸ Thus Blumenberg’s ‘defence of modernity is only partially successful’, because it addresses only the origin, and not the consequences, of those fundamental transformations in the relation between human and world that Blumenberg groups together under the rubric of self-assertion.¹⁹

These commentaries accurately represent Blumenberg’s argument as he explicitly presents it in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. In one of the clearest statements of the

¹⁴ Pippin, ‘Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem’, 284. See also Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 26-28.

¹⁵ Pippin, ‘Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem’, 285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁷ Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-86. See also *ibid.*, 80: ‘Blumenberg is too quick to see, in his account of the *origins* of modern worldly self-assertion, an argument for the ‘legitimacy’ of the modern age’. Italics in original.

substantive-historical legitimacy he argues for, he states that the ‘concept of the legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but rather from the necessity of those accomplishments’.²⁰ It is the anthropological necessity of the self-assertion made possible by the new model of rationality in the context of the untenable late medieval situation that ‘legitimizes’ it, not the specific findings of modern science or the implications of its new relationship to the world.²¹ Wallace is correct to oppose Blumenberg’s defence of modernity to defences based on the idea of progress. In the passage I have just cited, modernity is legitimated neither by the fact that it has progressed beyond the pre-modern (in the attainment of knowledge or liberty, for instance), nor by the potential it holds within itself as an ‘unfinished project’ for further progress,²² but simply by the fact that it accomplished an anthropologically necessary ‘postmedieval self-assertion’.²³

Similarly, Pippin and Brient are right to direct their critiques of Blumenberg’s position at the limited nature of his defence of the modern age. Blumenberg is not entirely blind to the existence of what Habermas calls the ‘aporias’ of cultural modernity,²⁴ specifically with regards to problematic aspects of modern scientific rationality. Most notably, he frequently returns, as I showed at the end of the last chapter, to the problem of

²⁰ *LMA*, 99.

²¹ Blumenberg makes a similar claim regarding the legitimacy of theoretical curiosity in modernity: the ‘rehabilitation’ of theoretical curiosity about the world as a legitimate instinct in modernity is ‘justified in the first instance only as the rejection of discrimination against it’ in the mediaeval economy of knowledge, which had posed unrestricted curiosity against salvation by viewing it as impious pride. Whether or not ‘man in fact achieved happiness’ in exercising ‘the rights that he had thus recovered’ is irrelevant to the question of the legitimacy of modern theoretical curiosity, which concerns only the necessity of overcoming the medieval situation in which theoretical curiosity was restricted (*ibid.*, 241).

²² See Habermas, ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, trans. Nicholas Walker, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 38-55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99. Rorty fails to grasp that Blumenberg’s defence of the modern against its critics does not, as one might expect, entail that ‘the future lies (of all directions) ahead’. He thus fails to grasp the specificity of Blumenberg’s argument, viewing it simply as a defence of Enlightenment ideals. Richard Rorty, ‘Against Belatedness’, review of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, by Hans Blumenberg, *London Review of Books* 5, no. 11 (1983): 3-5, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v05/n11/richard-rorty/against-belatedness>

²⁴ See Habermas, ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, 44, 53.

science's alienation from the life-world under conditions of professionalisation and specialisation. Some of his earliest articles appear to express some ambivalence about the contemporary hypertrophy of technology, lamenting a reduced freedom of perception in a world dominated by 'prefabricated' and 'technologically pre-cast situations and aspects' and vaguely counselling a new recognition of nature as something more than a material substrate of the 'violent assertion of the constructed'.²⁵ These somewhat romantic sentiments, with their implied positive evaluation of nature, do not continue beyond Blumenberg's earliest work, and find no place in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. More importantly however, as Pippin and Brient's critiques allow us to clearly see, the limited nature of Blumenberg's understanding of the legitimacy of the modern age means that such reservation about the implications and results of self-assertion can have no importance for Blumenberg's defence of modernity. Thus, while the achieved technical dominance of humanity over nature may have brought problems with it, these do not affect the fact that the historical epoch defined by the attempt to achieve such dominance is legitimate as a necessary response to the late mediaeval crisis.

If taken exclusively in these terms, then, Blumenberg's substantive defence of the legitimacy of the modern age is indeed extremely modest. If this narrowly historical understanding of the legitimacy of the modern age exhausted Blumenberg's substantive defence, then it would be difficult to find in his position any meaningful response to the critique of modernity's instrumental reason found in Critical Theory and Heidegger. In restricting himself to the anthropological-historical necessity of the newly instrumental model of theory and relation to the world, he would still remain unable to respond in any relevant way to the claim, put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno, that this rationality represents a fundamentally distorted relation to nature with disastrous results for human and non-human

²⁵ See 'Light as a Metaphor for Truth', 54 and 'Imitation of Nature', 47-48.

life. Further, despite the importance of a notion of human ‘need’ in his historical argument, Blumenberg’s defence of modernity would appear to have little relation to the philosophical anthropology he developed in later works. As Wallace notes in his enthusiastic gloss on Blumenberg’s argument, considerations of ‘human nature’ would be irrelevant to this defence of the modern age founded solely on its status as simply the ‘nearest thing to a solution that was available’ to the problems created by the untenable position of late mediaeval theology.²⁶

7.2. Self-Assertion and Self-Preservation

However, another aspect of Blumenberg’s argument, overlooked by these commentators, suggests that his substantive historical defence of modernity makes a claim that exceeds the modest claim to historical necessity and is able to enter into a more meaningful dialogue with the critique of instrumental reason; in so doing, it also illuminates an otherwise obscure continuity between his defence of modernity and his philosophical anthropology.

In an important passage, Blumenberg distinguishes his concept of ‘self-assertion’ from self-preservation. Self-assertion is not the ‘naked biological and economic preservation of the human organism by the means naturally available to it’. Where ‘self-preservation is a biological characteristic’, self-assertion is an ‘existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him’.²⁷ By sharply distinguishing between self-assertion and self-preservation, Blumenberg isolates his account of modernity’s instrumental rationality from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the critical framework of which depends on the identification of the domination *over* nature by instrumental rationality with a domination *by* nature in the form of

²⁶ Wallace, ‘Blumenberg’s Third Way’, 188.

²⁷ *LMA*, 138.

the blind impulse toward self-preservation. The historical project of self-assertion would then be exempt from Horkheimer and Adorno's disturbing dialectic, in which the freedom of humanity vis-à-vis the nature it dominates is bought at the cost of enslavement to self-preservation.

Commentators who have discussed this passage have tended to accept Blumenberg's distinction at face value. For Brient, the distinction of modern self-assertion from the drive toward self-preservation 'which has always been with us' helps to emphasise modern self-assertion's status as a 'new quality of consciousness and orientation to the world'.²⁸ Ingram identifies the distinction as an important feature of Blumenberg's position in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* that is later weakened in his *Work on Myth*, which 'seems to commit the same mistake secularisation theorists like Heidegger and Adorno make: blurring the distinction between premodernity and modernity, myth, and reason, by reducing rational self-assertion to some universal, anthropological disposition for self-preservation'.²⁹

Closer attention to the passage in question, however, shows that the distinction begins to blur even as it is being formulated. Blumenberg first opposes self-assertion as the existential program generated in the specific historical situation of the threshold to modernity from self-preservation as a nakedly 'biological characteristic' of the living being. But the unsuitability of such a rigid distinction for understanding the human being is made immediately apparent: 'insofar as man stepped onto the world's stage an imperfectly equipped and adapted organism, he had need from the start of auxiliary means, implements, and technical procedures for securing the satisfaction of his elementary needs'.³⁰ The philosophical anthropology of *Work on Myth* is prefigured in this dense passage, which

²⁸ Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 67-68.

²⁹ Ingram, 'Reflections on the Anthropocentric Limits of Scientific Realism', 180.

³⁰ *LMA*, 138.

already appeared in full in the 1966 edition of the *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.³¹ Blumenberg uses the phrase *anthropologischen Mangelstruktur* (anthropological structure of want or lack), which clearly implies Gehlen's anthropobiological paradigm, to refer to the human being's lack of natural adaptation to its environment. It is this failure, as *Work on Myth* argues, that necessitate the human being's 'art of living', its cultural mechanisms for coping with the absolutism of reality. Here these mechanisms are identified, somewhat more narrowly than in the later work, with technology. If the human being had 'need from the start' of technology, then its self-preservation was not merely biological but also 'cultural'. These non-natural means for securing the satisfaction of human needs are interventions into the natural course of things, which seek to control nature to facilitate human survival; thus they at the very least foreshadow the technological-instrumental relation to nature that Blumenberg calls 'self-assertion'.

The logic of the passage thus undermines its initially dualistic rhetoric, but without the distinction between the two concepts collapsing entirely. Modernity's 'understanding of and relation to the world', the instrumental attitude Blumenberg calls self-assertion, becomes the conscious acceptance of the situation that has always necessitated the use of technological means to ensure human self-preservation.³² Immediately after characterising the human being as imperfectly equipped by nature for survival, Blumenberg notes this 'in relation to this aspect of human nature the means of self-preservation ... were constant for long periods'.³³ In the main, until modernity, 'man has not seen his situation in the world as one of

³¹ See Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 91-92.

³² Christian Polke has suggested in passing a similar link between Blumenberg's anthropology and his theory of modernity through the concept of self-preservation. See Polke, 'Symbol, Metapher, Kultur: Beschreibungen des Menschen bei Ernst Cassirer und Hans Blumenberg', in *Auf Distanz zur Natur*, 49-50.

³³ *LMA*, 138. The reference to the anthropocentric cosmos as a 'means of self-preservation' also suggests that Blumenberg is here already working with the philosophical anthropology of his later works: the construction of an image of external reality that suppresses the radical uncertainty that humanity faces in the hypothetical 'initial situation' of the absolutism of reality appears here as a matter of survival, of the preservation of life.

fundamental want [*fundamentalen Mangels*] and physical need’,³⁴ but has rather conceived of reality as an anthropocentrically structured cosmos that ensures that human beings are ‘well provided for by nature’. Technology is conceived not, as it will be in modernity, as a conscious subjection of nature to human will (the ‘will to extort from this reality a new “humanity”’) but as a way of ‘supplementing and assisting nature’.³⁵

Although it is never directly stated, the logic of Blumenberg’s argument here implies that this anthropocentric world-view conceals the real situation of the human being, which even in its biological life has not been adequately provided for by nature and is forced from the very beginning to make use of artifice in order to preserve itself. The ‘destruction of trust in an ordered structure of the world oriented to man’ in the crisis of theological absolutism brings the reality of the human situation to conscious awareness: the *Ordnungsschwund* ‘pulled self-preservation out of its biologically determined normality, where it went unnoticed, and turned it into the “theme” of human self-comprehension’.³⁶ When ‘man appears not to be “taken into consideration” by the structure of reality, he is left ‘consciously facing an alienated reality’.³⁷ This description of the modern relation to the world prefigures *Work on Myth*’s speculative narrative of anthropogenesis, in which the failure of the hominoid’s creature adaptation to its natural environment results in a confrontation with a reality that appears as radically ‘unfriendly’ and ‘alienating’.

Self-assertion thus remains distinct and novel in relation to the drive toward self-preservation. But its distinctiveness and novelty consist in the fact that as a worldview it brings to conscious awareness the situation of the human being in relation to reality as such.³⁸

³⁴ *LMA*, 138 / Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, 159.

³⁵ *LMA*, 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 138-9.

³⁸ Dieter Thomä hints at a similar interpretation of Blumenberg’s position by focusing on the idea of finitude: the modern age is a ‘dramatic resurgence of human finitude, of earthly existence’ and is

The destruction of anthropocentric teleology brings about a sort of disillusionment, in which the real relation between human beings and nature comes to consciousness for the first time and is adopted as the technological program of the modern epoch: to master an essentially alien and unfriendly reality, which in its natural functioning betrays no accommodation to the interests of human self-preservation. Blumenberg's argument simultaneously posits an intrinsic relationship of technology (and the corresponding technical-instrumental relation to the world) to the constitution of the human being and 'wants to characterise the modern age as an epoch marked by technology' in particular.³⁹ The continuity of technological innovation that runs from pre-history up to the most advanced modern scientific invention is a quantitative increase in complexity, which creates a bridge between 'a stone tool and moon rocket'.⁴⁰ However, this quantitative continuity is accompanied by a qualitative rupture, a 'new quality of consciousness' that consists in the disillusioned recognition of the anthropological relation to reality that itself necessitates technological invention.⁴¹

This idea of self-assertion as the conscious articulation of an essential anthropological structure in modernity is evident in Blumenberg's language in several other passages: thus, although he stresses the novelty of modernity's self-assertion, he refers to self-assertion as 'latent' in the mediaeval, not as absent from it;⁴² Hellenistic philosophy's residual trust in the

'human in the specific sense that it is willing to finally acknowledge and to take charge of the finite existence of human beings'. Thomä, 'German Philosophy after 1980: Themes out of School', in *After Poststructuralism: Transitions and Transformations*, ed. Rosi Braidotti (London: Routledge, 2014), 52.

³⁹ *LMA*, 233.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 139. It is possible to see Blumenberg's interpretation of modern technology as attempting the same isolation of his argument from the paradigm of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* pointed to earlier with regard to the distinction between self-assertion and self-preservation. Although Horkheimer and Adorno point to a radical intensification of instrumental mastery in modernity, their identification of this mastery with regression to natural impulse depends on qualitative identity across all of human history; thus the invocation of the Bible as proof of the antiquity of the instrumental attitude to nature.

⁴² *LMA*, 140. See also *ibid.*, 139, where teleological 'trust in the world' is made responsible for a 'disastrous lulling of [human] activity'; 'lulling' implying that this activity was not actually absent, but only subdued and misunderstood.

anthropocentric cosmos ensures that the problem of self-assertion remains ‘hidden’ from it,⁴³ just as Aristotelian science has ‘obscured’ the ‘element of self-assertion’ in knowledge and ‘withheld it from consciousness’;⁴⁴ the Aristotelian understanding of human activity as bound to the imitation of nature can be seen as having actually ‘eliminated the space for authentic human works’ or ‘more precisely’ as having ‘rendered it invisible’.⁴⁵ As Jacob Taubes noted in his critique of Blumenberg’s 1965 essay ‘Sprachsituation und immanente Poetik’, modernity here appears ‘as merely a stage at which the possibilities of an unvarying type are “consciously” seized [*nur als Stufe, in der die Möglichkeiten eines immer gleichbleibenden Typus ›bewußt‹ ergriffen werden*].’⁴⁶

A similar logic reappears in Blumenberg’s account of the justification of theoretical curiosity about the world in modernity. Just as it seems valid to oppose the omnipresence of technology across human history to the attempt to characterise modernity as the technological epoch, curiosity about the world appears as an ahistorical anthropological constant that appears to upset Blumenberg’s thesis of modernity as the age of the justification of theoretical curiosity.⁴⁷ For Blumenberg, such ‘naïve curiosity’ certainly exists within the anthropological makeup, but it must be distinguished from the reflexive, ‘self-conscious’ curiosity that arises in modernity.⁴⁸ With the dissolution of the anthropocentric teleology that grounded the economy of knowledge in which necessary knowledge could be clearly distinguished from the vice of curiosity, modern humanity adopts its natural propensity for unbounded curiosity about the world as part of its self-understanding. Just as in Blumenberg’s presentation of modern technology and of self-assertion more generally, ‘what

⁴³ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁵ Blumenberg, ‘Imitation of Nature’, 24.

⁴⁶ Taubes, response to Blumenberg, ‘Sprachsituation und immanente Poetik’, in *Immanente Ästhetik: Ästhetische Reflexion*, ed. Wolfgang Iser (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1966), 460, cited in *BTB*, 43.

⁴⁷ *LMA*, 233-234.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 234-236.

was natural and went without saying is explicitly “entered into” and accentuated’,⁴⁹ becoming an important element of the self-interpretation of the modern human being.

7.3. The Anthropological Defence of Instrumental Reason

This anthropological-historical logic, whose frequent reoccurrence in Blumenberg’s account of modernity I have demonstrated, points to an aspect of his defence of the modern age that far exceeds his explicit definitions of the ‘legitimacy of the modern age’. When I introduced Blumenberg’s defence of modernity in the previous chapter I distinguished two main sense of the ‘legitimacy’ for which he argues: first, the historiographic claim for the legitimacy of the category of modernity for understanding history; second, the substantive historical claim that modernity is both new and better than the pre-modern. In terms of Blumenberg’s own attempts to define the second, substantive sense of legitimacy, it was shown that his argument is essentially exhausted by the claim for the historical necessity of the transformation of the human relation to the world that he calls self-assertion. The anthropological-historical logic of modernity whose existence in Blumenberg’s argument I have demonstrated above, however, exceeds this modest claim for the historical necessity of modern self-assertion. Here Blumenberg’s defence of modern self-assertion no longer appears so exclusively ‘qualified and historicist’, so distant from ‘any abstract or atemporal account’ of the legitimacy of modernity.⁵⁰ Rather, in these passages the project of modern self-assertion is defended with reference to ‘human nature’, celebrated as the moment in which the basic human relationship to nature defined by man’s status as *Mängelwesen* was ‘entered into’ and made into a self-reflexive determinant of human self-consciousness. The lack of any preordained instinctual accord between human needs and external reality necessitates an instrumental approach to

⁴⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁵⁰ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 26-27.

nature, attested to by thousands of years of practical (technological) and conceptual control over nature; but only in modern self-assertion does this instrumental attitude become the determining element in the human understanding of itself and its relation to the world. *Only in modernity, we might say, does the human being finally understand the true nature of its situation.*

The expanded dimension of Blumenberg's defence of modernity is evident in passages that move beyond the relatively narrow historical scope of the threshold to modernity that occupies much of the book. Chief among these is his impassioned defence of the 'greatness of the much reviled nineteenth century'.⁵¹ This greatness consists in the 'process of technicisation (in the shape of industrialisation) as man's self-assertion in the face of nature's inhumanity'.⁵² Where the ideologies of Malthusianism and Social Darwinism counselled clearing away the hindrances to natural selection and allowing it to run its course, the historical reality of industrialisation 'violated the supposed law of nature' through industrial food production, making possible sustainable population growth: 'Technical progress made it evident that the scope available for life was not a natural constant and did not stand in a necessarily ultimate disproportion to the growth of population'.⁵³ Clearly, in this passage Blumenberg is not defending modern self-assertion only as a necessary response to the late mediaeval crisis situation. Rather he defends both the principle and the effects of an attitude to nature that breaks with 'resignation before 'laws of nature''',⁵⁴ in order to treat nature as raw material to be exploited in the interest of human self-preservation.

Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology provides the basis for his expanded substantive defence of modernity, and unlike the limited argument for the historical necessity

⁵¹ *LMA*, 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

of modern self-assertion, this anthropologically grounded defence is able to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the Frankfurt School and Heideggerian critiques of modernity's instrumental reason. Blumenberg's narrative of modernity is not entirely incommensurable with the critique of modern instrumentality (as might appear to be the case if one attends only to his explicit attempts to define the sense of 'legitimacy' with which his argument operates). Rather, as Rorty noted, it should be seen as an attempt to make all the things that Critical Theory and Heidegger 'made look bad look good again'.⁵⁵

As we have seen, Blumenberg's substantive defence of modernity is grounded in the concept of self-assertion, to which he primarily attends with regards to its function in escaping the crisis situation of the late mediaeval period. The transformation in the modern relationship to the world that Blumenberg's defends in terms of self-assertion has, as we have seen, three primary and interrelated elements: first, that the means and ends of theoretical knowledge of the world is conceived as practical-instrumental rather than contemplative; second, that this entails giving up on the goal of knowledge's *adequatio* to its object in favour of a newly functionalised norm of theoretical success; third, that the object of knowledge (reality) loses its status as a meaningfully ordered cosmos and becomes a malleable material amenable to human control, both practically and through the projection of theoretical constructions. This interpretation of modernity as a primarily epistemological transformation in the human relation to and understanding of the world is essentially identical to the analyses given by Horkheimer and Adorno in their radically pessimistic critique of enlightenment *qua* domination of nature and by Heidegger in his critique of modernity as the epoch of subjectivist technology. On the basis of opposed anthropological conceptions this interpretation of modernity as the epoch of instrumental reason receives radically differing normative evaluations from Blumenberg and these critics of modernity.

⁵⁵ Rorty, 'Against Belatedness'.

The primary site of this radical difference in anthropological images concerns the possibility of human reconciliation with nature. Heidegger and Adorno reach back to what they perceive as archaic evidence of a fundamentally different relationship between human and non-human being (pre-magical mimesis and the thought of the pre-Socratics). For both, these speculations on archaic relations to non-human being partly found the hope for a future that radically negates the instrumental attitude.⁵⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer conceive this as a state of mimetic reconciliation with the non-human, the ‘uncoercive gaze upon the object’⁵⁷ and ‘communication of the differentiated’,⁵⁸ whereas Heidegger imagines it in terms of an ‘other thinking’ in which calculative thinking cede to meditative thinking and ‘releasement’. Heidegger makes clearer than Adorno and Horkheimer the anthropological dimension of this utopian image: it is nothing less than ‘bringing man back to his essence’⁵⁹ as the being that has been ‘appropriated’ by being for ‘guardianship’ of its truth,⁶⁰ the realisation of his position as the ‘shepherd of being’, which has been occluded by centuries of metaphysical subjectivism. Although the anthropological-eschatological dimension is not as obvious in Adorno and Horkheimer, it is nonetheless present: the state of reconciliation would be the realisation of the possibilities that have always existed in the concept’s intrinsic relationship to the non-identical, the recognition of the latent intrication of the human subject in nature.

Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology denies the possibility of such a radically different approach to nature: the work of myth can never be transcended because non-human reality always remains threatening, alienating, and in need of ‘work’. There can be no

⁵⁶ David Roberts expresses the logic of such positions well: ‘Heidegger returns to antiquity to find a way beyond the crisis of modernity’. Roberts, ‘Technology and Modernity: Spengler, Jünger, Heidegger, Cassirer’, *Thesis Eleven* 111, no.1 (2012): 20. Although Roberts refers here only to Heidegger, his other writings make clear that the logic of this modern counter-imaginary is also, on his reading, determinative for Horkheimer and Adorno’s position: see Roberts and Peter Murphy, *Dialectic of Romanticism*, x-xi.

⁵⁷ Adorno, ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’, in *Critical Models*, 130.

⁵⁸ Adorno, ‘On Subject and Object’, in *Critical Models*, 247.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, 223.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

receptive opening to non-human reality, because in itself, outside of the constructions imposed on it by human beings, reality is nothing but the ‘absolutism of reality’, an undifferentiated terror. There can be no radically ‘other thinking’, no truly non-instrumental reason because human reason is in its very essence ‘the organ of self-preservation’, something that would be ‘unnecessary, if the body did not need it in order to exist’.⁶¹

The perfected instrumental rationality that Horkheimer and Adorno see as man’s radical alienation from nature, Blumenberg understands as the overcoming of another alienation: the alienation of human beings from their demiurgic ability to control nature, suppressed and forgotten by theology and the metaphysics of the cosmos. The understanding of modernity’s instrumental attitude to knowledge and its object as recognition of and ‘entering into’ the anthropological situation means that the position of a decisive epochal transformation in which the potentiality of human life is finally appropriated is not left unoccupied in Blumenberg’s work. But rather than locating this event in the future and thereby grounding a radical critique of the present (as the site of its absence), Blumenberg sees this event as already having taken place in modernity’s self-assertion. He thus uses his anthropological speculation to ground a reconstructive defence of the modern relation between human and non-human being. He accepts the instrumental attitude to nature as appropriate to the anthropological makeup, thereby defending the essence of the modernity he believes to be characterised by this attitude. This anthropological understanding of modernity also provides the foundation of his critical attitude towards what he sees as the excesses of enlightenment and scientific culture: enlightenment criticality and specialised science are criticised for having lost sight of their role in the construction of a liveable human world. His own critique is thus directed not at modernity itself but at elements within modern

⁶¹ *BM*, 166.

scientific and intellectual culture he believes to have become alienated from their properly modern function, of serving human life.

In her discussion of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* alongside Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Brient raises a problem with Blumenberg's account that can help us to grasp just how extreme his position is with regard to the possibility of a receptive openness to reality. From an Arendtian perspective, Brient notes, Blumenberg appears to defend an attitude to the world that, in viewing reality as raw material for the fulfilment of human needs (theoretical and practical), appears to 'rob everything else that exists – the whole of nature as well as the products of human activity – of its own intrinsic worth'.⁶² As mere means to human ends, everything loses its inherent meaning: as Blumenberg himself writes, in modernity nature became 'an object whose meaning was exhausted by its theoretical and practical mastery'.⁶³ A similar criticism could be levelled from the perspectives of Adorno or Heidegger, both of whom develop variations on the Romantic critique of science that has, at least since Goethe, opposed an experiential richness of the concrete to mathematised and abstract science.⁶⁴ Especially in Adorno, the theme of the qualitative richness inherent in the '*individuum ineffabile*', from which cognition alienates itself by means of its paranoiac pre-fabrication of experience in the form of identity thinking, is developed with an extraordinary sophistication. But it is precisely this appeal to the richness of concrete experience in opposition to the supposedly impoverished forms of conceptual thought that becomes impossible if we accept the terms of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology. There simply

⁶² Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 82.

⁶³ Blumenberg, 'Imitation of Nature', 24.

⁶⁴ Honneth notes the proximity (paradoxical when viewed from a political perspective) of Horkheimer and Adorno's position to the 'traditional form of cultural criticism' in which 'the objectification of nature through technology and science is itself taken to be a sign of a process of the decay of civilisation'. Honneth sees Horkheimer and Adorno as dependent, via the influence of Benjamin, on such positions as they were articulated in *Lebensphilosophie*, rather than as simply developing structurally similar arguments. See Honneth, *Critique of Power*, 42, 312, n. 25.

is no such richness of the concrete for Blumenberg: reality in itself is, we might say, merely the *reality principle*, the resistance encountered by the human being's struggle to preserve itself.⁶⁵ Whatever meaning appears to inhere in reality in itself (as, for instance, it appears to in the pre-modern teleological cosmos) is the result of the human effort to generate significance; in itself, reality is merely the terrifying 'absolutism of reality' that provokes the work of projecting meaning onto it. Blumenberg constructs for himself a position from which the most fundamental discomfort with instrumental rationality experienced by critics such as Adorno and Heidegger appears as delusional, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning-giving achievements of the human being in relation to reality.

This, then, is Blumenberg's position of stark opposition to the critique of modernity's instrumental reason in Critical Theory and Heidegger. The human being is essentially barred from the possibility of a new, non-antagonistic opening to and reconciliation with nature, which must be dismissed as a dangerous, utopian fantasy. The recognition of this unsurpassable limit of perpetual antagonism in the human relation to nature entirely transforms the evaluation of the modern instrumental mastery of nature. With any other relation now having disappeared, this can no longer appear as a pathological impoverishment of experience. Rather, for Blumenberg, this instrumental relation to reality must be seen as expressing the reality of the human situation as such, the necessary position the human being has always unconsciously adopted in the face of the absolutism of reality. Modern instrumental reason is merely the conscious adoption of this anthropologically necessary attitude.

⁶⁵ Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink notes that for Blumenberg 'resistance and reality belong together'. Kopp-Oberstebrink, 'Affinitäten, Dissonanzen', in *BTB*, 295.

7.4. Limitations of Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology

The reading of Blumenberg's position that I have developed can be briefly summarised as follows. Blumenberg extends the anthropobiological paradigm of Arnold Gehlen, developing an interpretation of human life and cultural forms that ties them to the need for self-preservation. On the basis of this anthropobiology, Blumenberg develops an image, directed especially against Heidegger, of the human being as active and constructive in relation to its reality. This anthropological image has normative ramifications, visible in Blumenberg's critique of philosophical positions that, through utopian images and appeals to radical alterity, entertain the possibility of an entirely different relationship between the human being and external reality than the one that currently exists. For Blumenberg, a degree of antagonism between the human being and reality (nature) is insuperable. This both necessitates the continuing work of the cultural construction of the human life-world and provides the foundations for a defence of the rationality of existing institutions, which are interpreted primarily through their role in enabling self-preservation.

From Blumenberg's perspective, the hope for reconciliation with nature expressed by Horkheimer and Adorno is premised on a romantic reconstruction of pre-history that falsely locates a moment in the distant past when a non-antagonistic relationship between humanity and nature could be glimpsed. By reading magic, the cultural form in which Horkheimer and Adorno had glimpsed such a relationship, exclusively as a form of mastery over nature necessitated by the perpetual antagonism between humanity and nature, Blumenberg dismisses the foundations of the hope for a reconciliation with nature. His interpretation of modernity, in which the establishment of a relationship of mastery over nature is praised as the moment in which humanity properly 'entered into' and accepted its true relation to nature, thus serves as a sharply opposed counter-image to the critique of instrumental reason in both the Frankfurt School and Heidegger. Throughout all of these developments of the normative

aspect of Blumenberg's thought, I have wished to show how the anthropobiological focus on self-preservation remains central to Blumenberg's position.

To conclude, I would like to point to two areas that reveal the limitations of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology. The first is Blumenberg's failure to give a satisfactory account of the aesthetic dimension of human experience. The second is his continuing investment in a philosophy of the subject and a corresponding lack of any sophisticated account of the human as social being. These points are closely related because they demonstrate how Blumenberg overemphasises the functional dimension of human life by constantly placing the human need for self-preservation in the face of an unfriendly reality at the centre of his analysis. In so doing, he offers a reductive account of human life that fails to recognise how it is structured and guided by needs and desires in addition to that of self-preservation.

Blumenberg's work lacks a sophisticated account of the aesthetic in both a straightforward and a more profound sense. He tends to interpret art in terms of the anthropobiological account of culture that he derives from Gehlen. Art becomes merely one more cultural technique (alongside myth, science, and so on) that allows the human being to live by establishing significance and order in its experience and by distancing it from the paralysing absolutism of reality. When, for example, Blumenberg reflects on the relationship of Romantic landscape painting to what it depicts, he emphasises how painting 'reclaims' an element of the natural world – his example is the rainbow – from the 'insignificance assigned to it by the Enlightenment'.⁶⁶ The artist keeps 'the phenomenon on the plane of narratability or pictorialising' after the immanent rationalities of the sciences have led them to abandon this task.⁶⁷ Similarly, his discussion of the modern novel concerns the way it reflects the

⁶⁶ *WM*, 265-266.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

modern concept of reality as ‘intersubjective context’ (discussed in chapter 6.4 above). By modelling a believable world that does not correspond exactly to the real world, the novel ‘claims as its subject matter the formal proof of reality and not the material content that presents itself with this proof’.⁶⁸

Both of these examples demonstrate the fascinating way Blumenberg integrates art into his anthropological paradigm and account of modernity. But both are also notable for their lack of any specifically aesthetic concepts, most notably beauty. In Blumenberg’s work, as these two examples have shown, art does not achieve anything that cannot be achieved by other cultural forms; myth also provides significance, philosophy and science also model reality concepts. In Blumenberg’s work, art has no specificity, because it does not fulfil specifically aesthetic needs or desires (such as the desire to experience beauty) but is simply one more cultural technique for constructing a meaningful human world in the face of the absolutism of reality. Any autonomy of aesthetic experience – which would be irreducible to the anthropobiological understanding of culture as ultimately in the service of human self-preservation – remains unthinkable within the terms of Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology.

This limitation suggests a more profound sense in which Blumenberg’s work should be seen as lacking an account of the aesthetic dimension of human experience. My point here carries on from Brient’s argument, discussed at the end of the previous section, that Blumenberg’s account of modernity as self-assertion ultimately robs all phenomena of their intrinsic worth. The impossibility of such an appeal to the richness of concrete experience within Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology points to a deeper sense in which his work lacks an account of the aesthetic dimension of experience, a sense that concerns an aspect of Blumenberg’s project far more important than the limited nature of his accounts of works of

⁶⁸ Blumenberg, ‘The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel’, 42.

art. This can be clarified by again comparing Blumenberg's work to the critique of instrumental reason in Adorno and Heidegger. As Habermas and Honneth have argued, this critique is grounded in an aesthetic experience, construed in the broadest possible sense: not only as the dimension of experience proper to the work of art, but also as an 'experiential horizon'⁶⁹ in which the relation to nature is characterised not by practical considerations but by attention to its 'sensory richness'.⁷⁰ For Honneth, this dimension of experience is determinative for the image of the subject's reconciliation with nature, in which it would realise its ability to 'noncoercively take over in its inner cognising capacity the sensible manifold of the impressions given by nature'.⁷¹

For Habermas and Honneth, the aesthetic foundation of the critique of instrumental reason results in its weakness and distortion as a critique of modernity, because it derives from an idea (the 'uncoerced relation to nature') that belongs properly to aesthetics, not to critical social theory.⁷² But the near-complete absence of this aesthetic dimension from Blumenberg's work results in distortions and limitations of equal gravity, both in his defence of modernity and in his philosophical anthropology more generally. In Blumenberg's work, the 'yielding attitude to things' characteristic of aesthetic experience⁷³ can only be viewed pathologically, through such concepts as utopia and romanticism.

As I showed at the close of the previous chapter, Blumenberg's work does reflect a modest concern with the aporias of modernity through his critique of the alienation of scientific rationality from the life-world. But his interpretation of modernity as self-assertion, when interpreted, as I have suggested, as an anthropological defence of instrumental reason, is unable to take seriously the discomfort caused by the increasing eclipse of the aesthetic

⁶⁹ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 129.

⁷⁰ Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁷³ See *ibid.*, 62.

experience of nature by a cognitive-instrumental experience, even on a subjective level. Blumenberg's defence of modernity suffers from exaggeration: wishing to defend modernity as instrumental reason against its critics, he attempts to simply erase the entire experiential basis on which the critique is based. As Martin Jay writes, even if Adorno and Heidegger's totalising critiques of modern rationality are themselves deeply flawed, they surely 'were on to something in deploring the rise of an aggressive self treating the world as nothing more than a means to human ends'.⁷⁴ Ultimately, Blumenberg has no other response to offer to such a position than to repeatedly reassert the primacy of the human's need for self-preservation in the face of a hostile reality and praise modernity's achievement of a new stage of self-consciousness and sophistication in this self-preservation.

This weakness in Blumenberg's defence of modernity is reflective of a more fundamental limitation of his philosophical anthropology as a whole. Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm is essentially an interpretation of human life in relation to the need for self-preservation. Dimensions of human experience, such as the 'aesthetic' in the broad sense I am using the term here, that should be understood as existing at least partly

⁷⁴ Martin Jay, 'Blumenberg and Modernism: A Reflection on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*', in *Fin-de-siècle Socialism and Other Essays*, 162. It is tempting to frame this missing dimension of Blumenberg's thought in terms of the ecological problems that increasingly occupy us in the era of climate change and environmental disaster, especially as a number of commentators on these issue have turned to the critique of instrumental reason in Heidegger and Adorno as resources for a new philosophy of nature. See for example: Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 121-154; W.S.K. Cameron, 'Martin Heidegger: Individual and Collective Responsibility', in *Engaging Nature: Environmentalism and the Political Theory Canon*, ed. Peter Cannavò and Joseph H. Lane (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), 239-252; and Frank Schalow, *The Incarnality of Being: the Earth, Animals, and the Body in Heidegger's Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). However, Blumenberg's anthropocentric focus on self-preservation does in fact suggest a sort of environmental ethic, gestured toward in his reflections on the growing disillusionment with the 18th century Enlightenment's hope for a rationally inhabited cosmos (*GCW*, 675-685). If it turns out that only the Earth can support human life, then this contributes to the 'will to preserve the Earth' (*GCW*, 3). A form of environmentalism would follow from Blumenberg's focus on self-preservation, as the preservation of the livable environment is necessary for the continuation of human life. This would be a minimal form of environmentalism, to be sure, as it would only require the protection of whatever is necessary for human survival; but it seems at least as useful to the philosophical discourse on these issues as the romantic reconciliation with nature counseled by Adorno and Heidegger.

outside this functional dimension, cannot have any meaningful, autonomous existence in Blumenberg's work. They are either reduced to a functional dimension, as I have argued Blumenberg does in his interpretations of art; or they are pathologised in relation to this functional dimension, as romantic renunciations and delusions that express a dangerous desire for 'archaic submission'. In neither case does Blumenberg take seriously the existence of non-functional dimensions of human experience, and this results in his picture of the human possessing a markedly reductive quality. By either functionalising or pathologising the aesthetic experience, Blumenberg fails to adequately integrate it into his account of the human being, and his philosophical anthropology is poorer as a result.

A similar reductionism is at work in Blumenberg's failure to adequately address the social dimension of human experience. As Jay and Heidenreich have both argued, Blumenberg remains within the paradigm of a philosophy of the subject.⁷⁵ The agent of his narratives, whether of the development of culture in *Work on Myth* or of the birth of the modern age in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, is a subject confronted by externality. This paradigm is clearest in *Work on Myth*, which places the individual human being's need for survival in the face of the absolutism of reality at the centre of its functional interpretation of culture. As Heidenreich writes: 'It is basically the single subject which works on myth, which seems to project "significance" into the world'.⁷⁶ The subjective paradigm is equally central to Blumenberg's narrative of the modern age. What is the self, Jay insightfully asks, 'whose assertion, according to Blumenberg, marks the modern turn?'⁷⁷ Blumenberg's narrative clearly involves an understanding of European humanity as a collective agency, asserting itself both against nature and against the 'second nature' of the alienated structures of

⁷⁵ See Jay, 'Blumenberg and Modernism', 161-163; Heidenreich, 'Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophy', 536-538; and Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne bei Hans Blumenberg*, 228-231.

⁷⁶ Heidenreich, 'Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophy', 537.

⁷⁷ Jay, 'Blumenberg and Modernism', 161.

theological absolutism. He tells a story about humanity as a whole, assuming a model of collective subjectivity inherited from German Idealism.⁷⁸

Only this model of a collective human subject justifies the absence of ‘materialist’ elements (economic, social, and political) from Blumenberg’s narrative of modernity,⁷⁹ because the highly abstract narrative of this meta-subject’s intellectual overcoming of its own self-alienation through the establishment of the instrumental world-view is placed above any merely empirical details of how social actors might have struggled amongst themselves for money, power, recognition, and so on. Similarly, *Work on Myth*’s primary focus on the human’s confrontation with a hostile external reality explains the absence of any ‘ideological’ element of his theory of myth, because the self-preservation effected by cultural techniques such as myth is emphasised to the exclusion of their social functions (maintaining the privilege of priestly elites, for instance).

Blumenberg’s subjective paradigm results in the profound absence of any social dimension from his philosophical anthropology. Heidenreich has gestured toward this feature of Blumenberg’s work, pointing to how Blumenberg’s political thought cannot address ideas such as the *res publica* and law, which transcend the individual subject.⁸⁰ But this analysis should not be restricted to Blumenberg’s political thought or tied too closely to the liberal individualism of his specifically political arguments. Rather, this limitation of Blumenberg’s political thought should be seen as symptomatic of the absence of a social dimension from his philosophical anthropology as a whole.

⁷⁸ Ibid. In fact, the basic outlines of Blumenberg’s narrative of modernity could also be seen as stemming ultimately from Hegelian Idealism by way of Feuerbach. Reduced to its most abstract form, Blumenberg’s narrative of modernity is a story about the collective human subject overcoming its alienated servitude to its own products (the doctrines of theological absolutism), thereby reorienting its world-view around itself. Despite the richness of historical and textual detail that Blumenberg draws on in developing this narrative, the parallels are clear between its basic narrative of the subject overcoming its self-alienation and versions of the Hegelian narrative, both in Hegel himself and in later variants such as Feuerbach and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Heidenreich, ‘Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophy’, 536-538.

This absent dimension can be understood in a number of ways. I have suggested one of these by pointing to the absence of any account of struggles between social actors in Blumenberg's account of modernity and to the way Blumenberg's theory of myth excludes any consideration of the social function of myth. What is missing here is the dimension of intersubjectivity,⁸¹ of the dynamic interactions between social actors constitutive of the life of human societies, obscured by Blumenberg's primary focus on the confrontation of an individual or collective subject with external forces. More importantly, Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology lacks any place for collectivity. Whatever we might make of Blumenberg's dismissal of radical social criticism (including in the student protest movements of the late 1960s), his defence of liberal democracy against it is undoubtedly premised on a refusal to accept that any legitimate needs or desires are expressed within such criticism. As I have shown, his defence of parliamentary democracy and other institutions exclusively appeals to the need for individual self-preservation; the idea of political desires that transcend this need – desires for collective social determination, for autonomy – can have no place within Blumenberg's thought. The individualistic focus of Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm ultimately leaves him unable to comprehend the existence of politics, if we understand this as an 'explicit collective activity...whose object is the

⁸¹ The notion of intersubjectivity does figure into Blumenberg's analysis of the modern concept of reality as 'intersubjective context' (discussed in chapter 6.4), but he fails to integrate this in any meaningful way into his anthropology. The thesis that what constitutes reality in modernity is what is agreed to be real remains on the level of epistemological proofs. It does not demonstrate any attempt on Blumenberg's part to think through the role played by interactions between social actors in the development of the modern age (or in human life as such). In *Beschreibung des Menschen*, Blumenberg devotes a long discussion to the place of intersubjectivity in Husserl's thought (*BM*, 48-145), but he sharply distinguishes it from 'sociality' (*Geselligkeit*) (*ibid.*, 55). Relations between human beings enter into Blumenberg's formulation of his philosophical anthropology in this text, but their importance is restricted to the primordial fear stemming from our awareness that, as bodies, we are visible to others (*ibid.*, 831). For a discussion of this theme in Blumenberg's work, see Hannes Langbein, 'Sichtbarkeit und Ebenbildlichkeit: Zur Theorie der Visibilität des Menschen bei Hans Blumenberg', in *Auf Distanz zur Natur*, 88-92. Other human beings enter into Blumenberg's anthropology here only as a threat to the subject, analogous to non-human predators and also to what Jamme call his one-sided portrayal of nature as 'the threatening' (*das Bedrohliche*). See Jamme, "Gott an hat ein Gewand", 103.

institution of society as such’;⁸² that is, as an activity that both stems from and aims at collective life, not only at the preservation of the individual.

This weakness within Blumenberg’s thought is not political, but anthropological. Here we can again see the reductive overemphasis on the functional dimension of human life demonstrated in Blumenberg’s denial of the dimension of aesthetic experience. This reduction is visible in a double sense. First, collective social desires or needs that transcend the function of individual self-preservation remain unthinkable within the terms of his philosophical anthropology and are accordingly dismissed. Second, the interpretation of cultural forms such as myth solely through the lens of their functionality for individual self-preservation obscures their character as collective inventions demonstrative of a radically creative capacity within human societies that transcends functional concerns. This is what Castoriadis calls the ‘radical imaginary’, the ‘immeasurably developed imagination’ that ‘having broken with any subservience to the “functional”’ can alone explain the unprecedented creativity of human societies, the dizzying varieties of their languages, myths, cultural practices, and intellectual systems.⁸³

My point here is not to oppose a position like that of Castoriadis to Blumenberg, but rather to point to how Blumenberg’s anthropological thought is reductive in the strictest sense. The interpretation of cultural forms through Blumenberg’s anthropobiological paradigm reduces their meaning to the function they perform in the self-preservation of the individual against the absolutism of reality. Blumenberg does indeed stress the active, constructive capacities of the human being against the Heideggerian model of receptivity, but

⁸² Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Power, Politics, Autonomy’, in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 160.

⁸³ Castoriadis, ‘Primal Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions’, in *Figures of the Thinkable*, 98.

his reductive functionalism ties the results of human activity to natural life, thereby obscuring the inexplicable excess of creative energy manifested by these cultural forms.

Blumenberg's anthropobiological paradigm acts as an important counter-balance to the utopianism and romanticism of Heidegger and the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, asking important questions about how seriously we can take the image of reconciliation with nature that propels the critique of instrumental reason. Though his focus on the exigencies of human survival, Blumenberg introduces a dose of 'realism' into the discourse of 20th century German philosophy that poses important challenges to those who wish to defend the fabric of political radicalism (whether left or right), romantic naturalism, and pessimistic critique characteristic of so much thinking that takes its bearings from Heidegger or first-generation Critical Theory. But ultimately he remains overly indebted to Gehlen, presenting a philosophical anthropology too closely centred on survival, resulting in a reductive overemphasis on the functional dimension of human life. It is perhaps only by breaking with Gehlen and the paradigm of 20th century German Philosophical Anthropology that the groundwork can be laid for a non-functionalist philosophical anthropology.

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