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Shifting Grounds

Hans Blumenberg's Immanent and Transcendent Modes of Thought

1. Periodizing Blumenberg, Pluralizing Blumenberg

In his 1975 book about the *Genesis of the Copernican World*, Hans Blumenberg describes a type of historical thinking he is determined to avoid. He calls it “temporal ‘nostrocentrism.’” Such nostrocenrism, he writes, “establishes the status of each present moment as a goal.”¹ What is closest to the time of the interpreter inevitably limits the possibilities of what precedes it, and the present becomes nothing but a necessary convergence point of history. The result is a retrospective projection that eliminates complexity, negates the autonomy of each waypoint in this story, and ignores the possibility that at any moment things could have turned out differently.²

The interpretation of Blumenberg's own work seems beset by this same nostrocenrism. Hans Blumenberg's philosophical production spans almost five decades, but it is predominantly his final period that is made to determine the import of all that came before. In the last few decades, it is overwhelmingly his *Work on Myth* – and that means, his philosophical anthropology – that has been exalted to the telos of his life's work. Indeed, Oliver Müller recently called his anthropology just that, a *Lebensprojekt* (life project),³ and has suggested that an anthropological core is already present in his earliest

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¹ Hans Blumenberg: *The Genesis of the Copernican World* [1975], trans. by Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987, 170.

² For more about the role of nostrocenrism in Blumenberg's theory of history, see Hannes Bajohr: “Hans Blumenberg's History of Possibilities,” in: *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, July 8, 2019, <https://jhiblog.org/2019/07/08/hans-blumenbergs-history-of-possibilities>.

³ Oliver Müller: “Phänomenologische Anthropologie: Hans Blumenbergs Lebensprojekt,” in: *Interdisziplinäre Anthropologie* 4 (2016), 325–347. Similar notions can be found in Jürgen Goldstein: *Hans Blumenberg: Ein philosophisches Portrait*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2020; Xander Kirke: *Hans Blumenberg: Myth and Significance in Modern Politics*, Cham: Springer Nature, 2019; Angus Nicholls: *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth*, New York: Routledge, 2015 – for which see Hannes Bajohr: “Review of ‘Myth and the Human Sciences’ by Angus Nicholls,” in: *Germanic Review* 90, no. 4 (2015), 358–361 – as well as Elizabeth Brient: *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002; probably the first English language text to high-

writings.⁴ Blumenberg's posthumously published *Beschreibung des Menschen* seemed to confirm this interpretation.⁵ Yet such a position carries the precarious implication that everything leading up to his phenomenological anthropology is merely a preparation for, and should be read as standing in the service of, this last phase of his work. What does not fit this trajectory becomes irrelevant or even a mistake.⁶ Not only are there good philological reasons to assume that this interpretation lacks nuance, it also seems to be methodologically questionable: First, nostrocism inevitably runs the risk of teleological construction. And second, a necessary presupposition to this entelechial thinking in Blumenberg scholarship – that the end is already present in the beginning – is the assumption of a single, unified work. If everything leads up to anthropology, then no breaks, shifts, reversals or lateral movements are allowed. Felix Heidenreich, who also has argued for anthropology as the dominant category, makes this point expressly when he insists that in Blumenberg's oeuvre, "great revisions, like those of Heidegger or Wittgenstein, are nowhere to be found."⁷ Only through this premise of unity is it possible to spot in the early writings the seeds for positions that appear to come to fruition later.

The authors just mentioned would balk, with some justification, at the suggestion of a teleological tendency or a monolithic reading, and could give good reasons for their focus on anthropology. My concern here is Blumenberg's own warning against any overly linear reading of contingent points in time, lest "history be pushed aside by one story" ["die Verdrängung der Geschichte durch eine Geschichte"].⁸ This goes for Blumenberg's own history as well, of which there may be more than one, and whose individual phases may be ripe with possible junctions that, even if in the end not taken, remain open for later exploration.

I therefore propose, first, to *periodize* Blumenberg: Turns and revisions are the mark of his thought, and as such, each phase requires (and rewards) our full individual attention. And while it is also fruitful to seek a coherence in the whole of his production – which nevertheless should only be articulated once such fine-grained periodization has taken place – it may be useful, second, to *pluralize* Blumenberg: Investigating the potential of each individual phase could very well reveal hitherto unacknowledged aspects of Blumenberg fit to unsettle monolithic readings.

light Blumenberg's anthropology over any other facet of his work was David Adams: "Metaphors for Mankind. The Development of Hans Blumenberg's Anthropological Metaphorology," in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 1 (1991), 152–166.

⁴ Oliver Müller: *Sorge um die Vernunft: Hans Blumenbergs phänomenologische Anthropologie*, Paderborn: Mentis, 2005.

⁵ Hans Blumenberg *Beschreibung des Menschen*, ed. by Manfred Sommer, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006.

⁶ In his *Genesis of the Copernican World* Blumenberg calls this the lamentable tendency of the history of science to produce narratives of "in part interesting, in part at least charming (even if by now scarcely comprehensible) errors." This may be a bias in the history of philosophy as well, as Blumenberg's reception shows. Blumenberg, *Genesis*, 230.

⁷ Felix Heidenreich: *Mensch und Moderne bei Hans Blumenberg*, München: Fink, 2005, 21. Translations of German language sources are my own; for unpublished sources, I will add the German original in the footnotes.

⁸ Hans Blumenberg: "Ernst Cassirers gedenkend," in: *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981, 171.

What, then, would a non-unified approach to Blumenberg's oeuvre look like? There are many ways to order and present it: One could focus on the methodological allegiances that are dominant in each phase, proceeding from an early Christian-existentialist phase up to the mid-fifties, to the historical phenomenology of the late fifties and sixties, to the turn towards a phenomenological anthropology in the late sixties and seventies. Or one could focus on themes and topics, such as technology, language, or mythical thought, which traverse these phases. Or, especially interesting for literary scholars, one could investigate the changes in Blumenberg's style and writing strategies, comparing the dense early essays, the meandering voice of the great tomes, and the brief, aphoristic glosses of the eighties and nineties.

Here, I propose a more structural reading. It aims at an analysis of figures of justification. Blumenberg's work, I argue, can be periodized by paying attention to the shifts in the *criterion for an acceptable ground of philosophical inquiry*. I shall suggest that at its most fundamental, it is the move from an internal to an external, that is to say, from an *immanent* to a *transcendent* ground that marks the deepest restructuring of his work. I use "immanent" and "transcendent" as purely *relational* descriptors here; they say nothing about a metaphysical or theological stance. Rather, they are meant to indicate whether the *criterion of judgment* can be located within a system or is external to it. Self-contradiction within a system, for instance, would be an immanent, the breaking of some rule that is not part of the system a transcendent criterion.⁹

In what follows, I shall illustrate and develop these shifts by analyzing three subjects of abiding significance for Blumenberg: History, language, and aesthetics. In all three, we can see the same shifting ground, from immanence to transcendence, from internal to external criteria.

To make this argument, it will be necessary to overstate some of these tendencies. Yet I believe this is justified as a heuristic that creates the possibility of a non-monolithic, non-teleological reading, which in turn may open up other avenues of interpreting this work. To start, I shall show that Blumenberg made good use of the right to change his mind; his anthropology is a case in point.

II. Against Anthropology

A reading of the *Nachlass* as well as of published texts of the immediate post-war era challenges the notion of Blumenberg as a philosophical anthropologist *ab ovo*. Blumenberg criticized anthropology, which he believed placed an unwarranted emphasis on the biological, in three respects: that it is politically dangerous, reduces freedom, and negates history.

One of the dominant strands in German post-war philosophy, philosophical anthropology, was especially influential in the form of Arnold Gehlen's rich and intriguing *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*.¹⁰ Like other philosophers, Gehlen had tried to tailor

⁹ Thus, this usage follows Kant's, who introduces the distinction between "immanent" and "transcendent" (as opposed to "transcendental") in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 385 (B 352).

¹⁰ Arnold Gehlen: *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. by Clare McMillan and Karl A.

his philosophy, if only superficially, to national socialism. This resulted in the infamous last chapter of *Der Mensch* (considerably revised and sanitized in the fourth edition from 1950), which – borrowing from Alfred Rosenberg – spoke of the need for “Zucht” (discipline) and “oberste Führungssysteme” (highest directing systems) as the only way to impede the dangers of degeneration through freedom.¹¹ Blumenberg, whose heavily annotated personal copy is extant in his *Nachlass*, read Gehlen carefully in 1949,¹² noting each of his references to Nazi ideology with an exclamation mark in the margins. Gehlen would stay anathema until the late 1960s, when Blumenberg turned to a careful reconsideration of the anthropological tradition; but even then, he called Gehlen’s *Man*, although “fundamental,” still “questionable in its intention.”¹³

Yet Blumenberg’s early apprehension toward anthropology went beyond Gehlen’s own association with Nazism and included a systematic point. In 1953, in the lecture “Moral Problems of the Present” (“Moralprobleme der Gegenwart”), Blumenberg took aim at anthropology’s claim to explain everything “from upright gait to morality,” as he quotes Gehlen’s *Man*,¹⁴ through what he saw as a reduction to biological explanation. In so doing, Blumenberg argued, survival becomes the lone operative moral category, blotting out concepts like responsibility or guilt. Referencing Hannah Arendt, whose writing on these concepts he valued highly,¹⁵ he saw the same reduction to biology-as-survival not only at work in totalitarian regimes – which made a free, moral decision impossible by replacing it with a politics that confronted each citizen with the choice of life or death – but, by implication, also in philosophical anthropology.¹⁶ Blumenberg reiterated this apprehension against biologism when he reviewed the Kinsey Reports in 1955: The answer to the question “What are the consequences if one treats humans like objects of nature?” had already been given in history, which

Pillemer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

¹¹ For the changes from the first edition [1940] see Arnold Gehlen: *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, ed. by Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, vol. II, Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1993, esp. 686–695, 709–743; see also 710 for a note on the proximity to Rosenberg.

¹² Hans Blumenberg, “Leseliste 1942–1959,” Hans-Blumenberg-Nachlass at Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA).

¹³ Hans Blumenberg: “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” [1971], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, ed. by Hannes Bajohr, Florian Fuchs, and Joe Paul Kroll, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020, 188.

¹⁴ “‘Vom aufrechten Gang bis zur Moral’ – wie Arnold Gehlen es formuliert hat (S. 10) – rücken die Charaktere des Menschlichen zusammen unter den einen Gesichtspunkt der ‘Existenzbedingungen’.” Hans Blumenberg: “Moralprobleme der Gegenwart,” 10 (DLA Marbach). He quotes Gehlen, *Mensch*, 2:13; English as Gehlen, *Man*, 11.

¹⁵ See Hannes Bajohr: “Der Preis der Wahrheit: Hans Blumenberg über Hannah Arendts *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” *Merkur* 69, no. 792 (2015), 52–59.

¹⁶ “Wer Macht über Menschen gewinnen will, macht sich diesen Sachverhalt zunutze. So besteht, wie Hannah Arendt u.a. gezeigt haben, das Verfahren der totalen Diktatur ganz einfach darin, in einer immer wachsenden Zahl von Situationen der alltäglichen Lebensführung des Bürgers die Entscheidungen, die er zu treffen hat, mit der extremen Alternative von Sein oder Nichtsein in Verbindung zu bringen und dadurch den Versuch, an die Situation und ihre Bewältigung mit Freiheit und unter Anwendung moralischer Maßstäbe heranzugehen, von vornherein illusorisch zu machen.” Blumenberg, “Moralprobleme,” 10–11.

brought to light ... the consequences of the biologized image of man. Today, we are faced with the question of whether Hitler's bloody selection experiment has exhausted this consequence or whether the view of man as a 'natural being' still contains new and different conclusions that could determine human destiny and human forms of existence.¹⁷

At the time, Blumenberg was inclined to answer in the negative, and Kinsey was his case in point.

Beside the dehumanization Blumenberg saw in biological reductionism, he identified a second danger: "the unnoticed shift from the statistical results into the sphere of normativity." By this he meant positing a statistical average as a moral norm: "Because it is the behavior of the majority does not mean that it is the expression of the *natural*, nor that the natural is already the mandatory."¹⁸ Blumenberg had noted a year earlier that this naturalistic fallacy also applies to anthropology. In the lecture "The View of the Human and the Current Order of Life" ("Menschenbild und gegenwärtige Lebensordnung"), he stated that this "biologism" posits human beings as a "finished product of nature," and that their need to negotiate the "defect of freedom" was solved by extrapolating normative rules from biological givens.¹⁹ The argument that philosophical anthropology confuses Is and Ought and derives norms from facts was surprisingly close to Jürgen Habermas's assessment, who only a few years later wrote in an influential encyclopedia article that the current's main weakness was the tendency "to claim as 'nature' and to suggest as norm what has come about historically."²⁰

Indeed, history is the early Blumenberg's strongest argument against anthropology, which we find again in his marginalia to Gehlen's *Man*. It is closely connected to the project of his university habilitation, *The Ontological Distance (Die ontologische Distanz)*, 1950), in which Blumenberg argued (with Heidegger, but also against him) for the radical historicization of all philosophical ontologies.²¹ This maxim also pertained to any philosophy that attempted to be 'scientific.' As Blumenberg argues in a preparatory text to the habilitation, in which he also complains about the "fashion for philosophical anthropology" ("modische philosophische Anthropologie"),²² "the claim to scientificity" depends upon a "preliminary decision" ("Vorentscheidung"), a distanced ontological stance, that is not reflected in that philosophical position itself. "Such preliminary deci-

¹⁷ Hans Blumenberg, "Ein zu kompliziertes Säugetier: Anmerkungen zum Kinsey-Report," in: "Hans Blumenberg alias Axel Colly: Frühe Feuilletons (1952–1955)," ed. by Alexander Schmitz and Bernd Stiegler, in: *Neue Rundschau* 129, no. 4, special issue (2018): 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁹ "was er ist, ist d[ie] letzte Summe dessen, was er aus sich gemacht hat ... Biologismus"; "Das Richtige am E[xistenz]begriff ist, daß er den Menschen als e[in] sich selbst aufgegebenes Wesen, nicht als e[in] fertiges Naturprodukt sieht, das sozusagen nur den Defekt der Freiheit (wie die Unregelmäßigkeit einer Planetenbahn) hätte." Hans Blumenberg: "Menschenbild und gegenwärtige Lebensordnung," DLA Marbach.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas: "Philosophische Anthropologie (Ein Lexikonartikel)," in: *Kultur und Kritik: Verstreute Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973, 110.

²¹ Hans Blumenberg: *Die ontologische Distanz: Eine Untersuchung über die Krisis der Phänomenologie Husserls* (Habilitation, Kiel University, 1950).

²² Hans Blumenberg: "Das Distanzproblem des Philosophierens," DLA Marbach, 1949, 57. Later, when praising Hans Lipps's *Menschliche Natur*, Blumenberg stresses that the title is misleading as it does *not* contain a philosophical anthropology. *Ibid.*, 93.

sions comprise the historical essence of human thought. They come within the ambit of a historical understanding of being and constitute the horizon that characterizes the respective ‘world picture.’”²³

In his marginal notes in *Man*, Blumenberg thus charged Gehlen with having ignored the historical contingency of what appears to be an objective, biological approach to the human being.²⁴ So fundamental an idea as the distance between human and world that Gehlen presupposed in explaining how the category of “object” emerges in *Homo sapiens* is, for Blumenberg, an ontological “preliminary decision.”²⁵ When Gehlen speaks of “experimentation” as a way in which humans familiarize themselves with the world, Blumenberg notes that “the experiment appears as the acme of human ontological ability. Humanness is almost always seen as the capability to perceive and schematize objects [*Gegenstandsfähigkeit*].”²⁶ Likewise, Gehlen’s insistence on “creativity”²⁷ as a human trait is insufficiently historicized; in both cases Gehlen “absolutizes the self-understanding of the modern age,”²⁸ totalizing a historically contingent ontological perspective by projecting it onto the history of the species as such: the experiment of post-Baconian science and man as the post-Cusan “creative being.” Such a move reduces history to a mechanical unfolding of the possibilities already inherent in the species. When discussing the basic “unspecified obligation” at the root of “primal imagination,” a drive motivating activity, Gehlen quotes Nietzsche’s equation of human instinct with the human: “*in praxi* we always follow its [the will’s, H.B.] bidding, for the simple reason that we *are* this bidding,”²⁹ Blumenberg notes in the margin: “History is a break with that ‘always.’”³⁰

As Odo Marquard was to point out later, anthropology and history don’t mix.³¹ One highlights persistent structures, the other constant change. And if anthropology seeks to

²³ “Der Anspruch auf Wissenschaftlichkeit enthält also eine ‘Vorentscheidung.’ Solche Vorentscheidungen machen das geschichtliche Wesen des menschlichen Denkens aus. Sie fallen innerhalb eines geschichtlichen Seinsverständnisses und konstituieren den Horizont, der das je zugehörige ‘Weltbild’ charakterisiert.” *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ A similar critique can be found in Blumenberg’s argument against anthropology as foundation for a philosophy of technology, Hans Blumenberg: “The Relationship between Nature and Technology as a Philosophical Problem” [1951], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 302–303.

²⁵ In his habilitation, he calls these distanced positions *Gegenständigkeit*, while Heideggerian being-in-the-world would be an example for the opposite extreme, *Inständigkeit*, Blumenberg, *Ontologische Distanz*, 8–10.

²⁶ “Der geistesgeschichtliche Horizont dieses Buches zeigt sich darin, dass das Experiment als die Höhe des menschlichen Seinkönnens erscheint. Menschsein ist fast durchgängig als Gegenstandsfähigkeit gesehen.” Marginal note in Hans Blumenberg’s working copy of Gehlen, *Mensch*, edition of 1940, 228.

²⁷ Gehlen, *Mensch*, 2:693.

²⁸ “Verabsolutierung des neuzeitlichen Selbstverständnisses,” marginal note in Hans Blumenberg’s working copy of Gehlen, *Mensch*, edition of 1940, 426.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, trans. by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti, London: Penguin, 2017, 380.

³⁰ “Geschichte ist die Brechung dieses ‘immer’ und damit das Bewusstsein des alten Grundgebotes am immer.” Marginal note in Hans Blumenberg’s working copy of Gehlen, *Mensch*, edition of 1940, 368.

³¹ This is the point Odo Marquard makes in *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Frank-

derive norms from the structure of the human, historical thought has a tendency to question the reference to truths outside its relative location in history.³² The latter relies on an *immanent*, the former on a *transcendent* criterion. And it is precisely this opposition that informs the shift in ground that can be traced within Blumenberg's work. Starting with a closer look at his theory of history, I shall now examine examples in which this shift is most visible. As such a reading highlights discontinuity, it allows a comparison between periods that may give rise to the thought that later phases of Blumenberg's oeuvre missed possibilities that were still open in earlier ones.

III. From Historical Coherence to Historical Correspondence

In 1969, literary scholar Hans Robert Jauß inquired in a letter to Blumenberg about the methodology behind his book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966),³³ Blumenberg's defense of modernity against the claim of secularization. In his reply, Blumenberg evaded a direct answer; it would be easier to face this question, he wrote,

if I didn't have this manuscript in my desk that was meant to be called *Structures of History* and still is called that, but can't be any longer, because in the meantime the concept of *structure* has been *spoiled* and *dulled* to me as it has been rapidly charged with ambiguities – and I do not intend to compete with other users of this term.³⁴

This response indicates a break in Blumenberg's oeuvre: the disavowal of a *structural* emphasis on history in favor of a more anthropological one. In the letter, Blumenberg grumbles that intellectual “fashion pressures”³⁵ keep him from embracing the term ‘structure.’ Nonetheless, and despite the fact that such a manuscript was never found and

furt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973.

³² Blumenberg noted this point himself in a dictionary entry on naturalism and supranaturalism he wrote in 1960: “the more ‘powerful’ experience of history has eclipsed nature as presupposition of the most comprehensive ontological structure.” Hans Blumenberg: “Naturalismus und Supranaturalismus,” in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1960, col. 1333.

³³ Hans Blumenberg: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* [1966], trans. by Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983.

³⁴ “Aus dürtügigem Anlaß jedenfalls haben Sie einen ganzen Köcher mit Problempfeilen gefüllt, denen mich darzubieten leichter wäre, wenn ich nicht dieses Manuskript im Schreibtisch hätte, das einmal ‚Strukturen der Geschichte‘ heißen sollte und noch heißt, aber nicht ferner heißen kann, weil mir inzwischen der Begriff der Struktur durch die schnelle Aufladung mit Vieldeutigkeiten verleidet und entschärft worden ist und ich auch nicht mit anderen Benutzern dieses Terms zu konkurrieren mich unterstehe.” Letter to Hans Robert Jauß, October 9, 1969, DLA Marbach.

³⁵ “Was nun die Vieldeutigkeiten von ‘Struktur’ angeht, so habe ich die Erfahrung gemacht, daß das ständige Bedürfnis, sich daraufhin zu kontrollieren, die modischen Pressionen nicht mitzumachen, nicht einmal mehr für den Zeitraum zwischen Konzeption und Niederschrift eines größeren Textes vorhält – dem ‘Sein’ wie der ‘Existenz,’ dem ‘Abendland’ wie der ‘Kunst’ widerstanden zu haben, erweist sich als ein Kinderspiel im Vergleich zu der Robustheit, die uns nun ‘Praxis’ und ‘Gesellschaft’ abverlangen. Diese Globalsubjekte von Pseudobehauptungen nenne ich, unter Mißbrauch eines edlen Philosophenwortes, das ‘jeweils Umgreifende.’” Ibid.

possibly never existed,³⁶ the title eloquently condenses his earlier theory of history and historiography. His historical structuralism eschews any recourse to an outside criterion, an eternal ground – be it being or human nature or anything else – and only deals with the integrity of the structure itself.

That this is indeed a purely immanent theory becomes clearest when one looks at Blumenberg's well-known thesis of the "reoccupation of answer positions"³⁷ formulated in *Legitimacy*, meant to explain the process of historical reception without assuming a substantial continuity in history. Blumenberg makes his case most succinctly in his engagement with Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History*, which had claimed the modern concept of progress to be a substantive secularization of Christian eschatology. Against this, Blumenberg shows not only that the immanent structure of scientific progress is at odds with the transcendent structure of eschatology,³⁸ but also, and more importantly, that the emergence of the idea of progress as a trans-subjective process of generating scientific knowledge and its use as an explanation for the course of history are parallel but substantially unconnected phenomena.³⁹ The question "what is the course of history?" remains pressing even after its answer has become implausible, and progress was used to fill this now-vacant answer position.

What has often been called Blumenberg's "functionalism" is usually connected with Ernst Cassirer (although rarely explained in any detail), but one may also illustrate it by evoking Gottlob Frege's notion of saturated and unsaturated functions.⁴⁰ Understood this way, the process of reoccupation would look like this:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) Middle Ages: | course of history(eschatology) | [saturated question] |
| (2) crisis of nominalism: | course of history() | [unsaturated question] |
| (3) modern age: | course of history(progress) | [reoccupation] |

It is possible to think of the question/answer compound as a function with one variable that can either be saturated, that is, answered (1 and 3), or unsaturated, that is, open and pressing (2). In order to fill the "answer position" of the question (to saturate the function with an argument), new concepts can "step in" as answers from unconnected fields. The genuinely modern idea of scientific progress (3) reoccupies the "unsaturated" position of the question for the course of history following the breakdown of late medieval nominalism (2) without having any direct connection to Christian eschatology as explanation for the 'totality of history' (1). Progress, then, does not take its (albeit profaned) substance

³⁶ It has been suggested that this manuscript was an early version of *Genesis of the Copernican World*, Rüdiger Zill: *Der absolute Leser. Hans Blumenberg. Eine intellektuelle Biografie*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020, 670.

³⁷ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 65.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰ Frege introduces this idea that concepts may be conceived of as saturated functions with an argument with the following example: "Caesar conquered Gaul," where "conquered Gaul" would be the unsaturated function that can be saturated with the argument "Caesar." Gottlob Frege: "Function and Concept," in: *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, translated by Max Black et al., ed. by Brian McGuinness, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984, 146–147.

from eschatology – “progress” is not a relabeled “eschatology” – but only its position as an answer for the inherited question of history.

This functional, or compositional, model, which I have discussed on the molecular level of single question/answer compounds is embedded in an overarching structure on the molar level as a closed system of such question/answer compounds. They are the component parts in the structure of a historically specific knowledge. One could try to illustrate this by likening it to a semantic holism, epochally conceived. As Blumenberg explains in *Legitimacy*:

Systems of ideas – whether explicitly formulated as such in relations of substantiation between propositions and correlations between regional groups of propositions or only potentially formulable as abstracts of the explanatory accomplishments of a historical mental formation or an individual mind – systems of ideas stand to one another in certain relations of equivalence of their elements. This is the more true, the nearer they are to one another in history, so that the later one must transform the assertions of the earlier into questions that it now claims to answer itself.⁴¹

Blumenberg describes systems of ideas – which, as in his comparison between Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, are in fact stand-ins for the whole of an epoch’s knowledge – as webs of beliefs whose elements are, first, expressly stated propositions, and, second, propositions that stand in a relationship of inference to the former. What Blumenberg calls “propositions” here, and which he differentiates further into assertions and questions, are precisely the question/answer compounds detailed above.⁴² In this way, he can dismiss any direct connection (substantial continuity) between the systems of ideas but explain the process of reception through “equivalences” (functional continuity) on the level of arguments (answers) that saturate functions (questions).

This is a purely immanent model – there is no systematic place for anything outside the structure, as there is nothing beyond or reaching across in themselves autonomous epochs, only functional equivalency. On the one hand, this model merely offers a description of the make-up of these webs of beliefs; it is by no means a realism, and only allows for retrospective explanatory coherence, which is nevertheless of some heuristic force. On the other hand, the whole conceptual effort is aimed at the question of epochal transformation, at accounting for the collapse of such a web of beliefs and its replacement by another. Thus, Blumenberg also says something about the criteria for the integrity of the system, and tentatively goes beyond merely describing it. Immanence provides its own normativity as it has to retain coherence: The propositions within this system must not be mutually contradictory. Yet since they do not only contain already “formulated” but also “formulable” propositions, their coherence or non-coherence is not immediately

⁴¹ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 565.

⁴² This puts Blumenberg’s semantic holism in surprising proximity to Robert Brandom’s inferentialism – with the obvious difference that Brandom still believes in the possibility of conceptualization, while Blumenberg allows for an irreducibly nonconceptual expressibility in his idea of absolute metaphors. See Robert B. Brandom: *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). That becomes even clearer in Brandom’s recent interpretation of Hegel, see Robert B. Brandom: *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology’* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

apparent but emerges over time. In a process of ‘playing out,’ the possible inferences of such systems are temporalized and “unfold a need for coherence and an internal ‘logic’,”⁴³ as Jean-Claude Monod puts it. Once contradictions appear, they can push the system toward a point at which its answers lose their plausibility, so that in extreme cases the whole structure may have to be rearranged, or in part reintegrated into a totally new structure, giving rise to a new epoch. Taken together, this could be termed Blumenberg’s *coherence theory of history*.

In *Legitimacy*, he argues with such a coherence view in mind, claiming that modernity resulted when the internal contradictions of Christian theology came to a head: The first overcoming of Gnosticism through Augustine’s theodicy was so inconsistent with regard to the place of humans in it that all attempts to mend it were destined to fail, thus necessitating the second overcoming through a different system, i.e., modernity’s stance of self-assertion and human creativity. Here, history becomes a process of mounting exacerbations, spelling out the possible logical inferences of the fundamental philosophical and theological propositions contained in an epoch’s web of beliefs until their internal, structural collapse.

Yet Blumenberg’s later view appears to take a different position. Here, epochal validity is predicated on a transcendent criterion. The stated beliefs of an epoch must conform to, and can be explained functionally with reference to, a ground that remains outside its system. Analogous to the coherence view, this could be called the *correspondence theory of history*. Here, Blumenberg introduces a transhistorical, perennial criterion for all human achievements in history. In its most pithy formulation, it aims at reducing fear and keeping the “absolutism of reality” at bay.⁴⁴ This interpretation appears in the early nineteen-seventies, and it takes recourse to philosophical anthropology. It is informed by a variety of sources that, in the last few decades, have been exhaustively analyzed – Gehlen’s notion of humans as challenged by their being “creatures of deficiency” (*Mängelwesen*), Paul Alsborg’s concept of “body cancellation” (*Körperausschal-*

⁴³ Jean-Claude Monod: *Hans Blumenberg* (Paris: Belin, 2007), 117. Likewise, Rüdiger Campe recently pointed out “implication” as a general “technique” (*Verfahren*) in Blumenberg’s philosophizing: Rüdiger Campe, “Implikation. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion von Blumenbergs Verfahren,” paper given at the conference “New Approaches to Hans Blumenberg,” Berlin, October 10, 2019. Wolfgang Hübener writes more pejoratively about this technique: “Contraindications based in authentic material are unavailable to him. Instead, he argues from the pure idea.” Wolfgang Hübener: “Carl Schmitt und Hans Blumenberg oder über Kette und Schuß in der historischen Textur der Moderne,” in: *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie. Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. by Jacob Taubes, vol. 1, Munich/Paderborn/Vienna/Zurich: Fink/Schöningh, 1983, 57–76, here 68. This is not wrong. Indeed, it is the core of Blumenberg’s historiographical method. But what Hübener sees as a deficiency might as well be understood as the advantage of Blumenberg’s “phenomenological” approach to history – that it describes the conditions for the emergence of historical knowledge by delineating the specifically possible of an epoch. See Karin Krauthausen: “Hans Blumenbergs möglicher Valéry,” in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie* 6, no. 1 (2012), 39–63; Petra Boden: “Geschichtsphilosophie vs. Philosophische Anthropologie,” in: *Anthropologie und Ästhetik. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, ed. by Britta Herrmann, Paderborn: Fink, 2018, 97–130.

⁴⁴ Hans Blumenberg: *Work on Myth*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 1985, chap. 1. See also Hans Blumenberg: *Höhlenausgänge*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989, 811.

ting), and Erich Rothacker's "theorem of significance" (*Satz der Bedeutsamkeit*), to name just a few.⁴⁵ Taken together, they amount to an anthropology in which cultural achievements and culture as such function to avoid a reality that, in humans' lack of biological embeddedness, would otherwise overpower them. "The real," as one may indeed call it with Lacan, is the always-absent; to keep it at a distance forms the precondition of the anomaly that is the human. And it is this "achievement" (*Leistung*) of existence that may have historically variable solutions that nevertheless all are answers corresponding to the same, unchanging question: "How is the human possible?"⁴⁶ The internal dynamic of the web of beliefs an epoch allows for is now externally conditioned and has lost its sole normative force, which is transferred to the various strategies used to keep the absolutism of reality at bay. The arguments in the process of reoccupation are no longer a matter of responses to internal contradictions that result from its propositions' inferences, but now rest on an external standard of the "functional continuity with what makes that existence possible"⁴⁷ in the first place. But if Blumenberg's anthropology is indeed concerned with such conditions, one must assume that they remain steady throughout history, either as achievements that are to be defended or as goals that have yet to be achieved. The logic of the structural integrity of a web of beliefs is superseded by a logic that refers to the conditions of existence – and those beliefs are subordinated to the achievement of this existence. Interpreters who see only the later Blumenberg as committed to an anthropological approach bear the burden of accounting for the change in his theory of historical epochs, and that means the transition from a coherence to a correspondence model.

This change occurs paradigmatically between two works, *Legitimacy* and *Work on Myth*.⁴⁸ But it can also be seen as a switch between research paradigms, from "historical phenomenology" to "phenomenological anthropology."⁴⁹ The immanent or coherence

⁴⁵ See for these influences e.g. Adams, "Metaphors for Mankind"; Vida Pavesich: "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology: After Heidegger and Cassirer," in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (2008), 421–448; Müller, *Sorge um die Vernunft*; Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne*.

⁴⁶ Blumenberg, *Beschreibung*, 535. Most anthropological interpretations of Blumenberg see him as mixing historicism and anthropology. See for example Wayne Hudson: "After Blumenberg: Historicism and Philosophical Anthropology," in: *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 4 (1993), 109–116 and his reformulated position in Wayne Hudson: "Theology and Historicism," in: *Thesis Eleven* 116, no. 1 (2013), 19–39.

⁴⁷ Blumenberg, "Anthropological Approach," 187.

⁴⁸ *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, as Rüdiger Zill relates, was in all likelihood finished already before the shift, even though it was published at a later date, Zill, *Der absolute Leser*, 485. Anthropological themes only really appear in the last chapter added before publication. *Ibid.*, 486.

⁴⁹ It seems that Blumenberg's appropriation of the life-world from Husserl's late writings is something like the hinge that connects the two approaches. It plays a role both for historical phenomenology, in which "concepts of reality" are historicized life-worlds, and for phenomenological anthropology, in which the life-world becomes analogous to the absolutism of reality. This functional transformation of the concept of the life-world, however, also follows the logic of a shift from an immanent to a transcendent ground – from an investigation of the historical conditions of rationality (historical phenomenology) to the "rationality of the conditions of rationality itself" (phenomenological anthropology), Hans Blumenberg: "Die Lebenswelt als Thema der Phänomenologie," in *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, ed. by Manfred Sommer, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010, 131.

model is not only in play in *Legitimacy*, which deals with systems of ideas and epochal knowledges, but in fact informs Blumenberg's larger project of a historical phenomenology, the historiography of how different epochs conceived of reality. This approach warrants its own study, but even a cursory view shows that the same coherence view is at work here. Each epoch, Blumenberg argued, is structured by a pre-reflexive understanding of what counts as real, its "concepts of reality."⁵⁰ The ancient Greek concept of reality, for instance, takes the real to be "instantaneously evident," as in Plato's conception of the good. The reality of the real does not allow for any doubt, as it will later in the Cartesian model, which relies on God as its guarantor.⁵¹ Concepts of reality are not identical to historical knowledge but act as meta-structures that order the webs of beliefs that constitute an epoch and prescribe their possible elements. The validity of both an epoch and its meta-structures is determined only by immanent coherence, so that not any external criterion but "the exhaustion of their implications and the excessive strain on their capacity to answer questions inspire a search for a new basis."⁵² Here, anthropological considerations are not yet a factor.⁵³ This changes with the second, the transcendent

⁵⁰ See Hannes Bajohr, Florian Fuchs, and Joe Paul Kroll: "Hans Blumenberg: An Introduction," in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 1–29; Hannes Bajohr: "Hans Blumenberg's Early Theory of Technology and History," in: *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 40, no. 1 (2019), 3–15.

⁵¹ See Hans Blumenberg: "Preliminary Remarks on the Concept of Reality" [1974], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 117–126; Hans Blumenberg: "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel" [1964], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 499–524.

⁵² Blumenberg, "Possibility of the Novel," 504.

⁵³ A possible objection is that the very criterion Blumenberg suggests for the collapse of Nominalism is in fact anthropological – that it has no place for humans in an inhumane cosmos would then be a violation of the need to keep the absolutism of reality at bay, as Odo Marquard saw it: Odo Marquard: "Entlastung vom Absoluten: In memoriam," in: *Die Kunst des Überlebens: Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg*, ed. by Franz Josef Wetz and Hermann Timm (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 17–27. But this is not at all self-evident. Blumenberg himself distinguishes the term "self-assertion" as a historically situated "existential program" that is not simply reducible to biological needs (and this means taking his critique of Gehlen to heart) from a logic of "self-preservation," Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 138. The latter can be read as not so much relating to eternal biological conditions but to the *rational integrity of a structure*. A world view without a place for the perspective from which to hold this view, one could argue, becomes internally contradictory. Evidence for this reading can be found in a 1969 essay, in which Blumenberg expressly discusses self-preservation as being at the core of "modern rationality," Blumenberg, "Self-Preservation and Inertia. On the Constitution of Modern Rationality," in: *Contemporary German Philosophy*, vol. III, ed. by Darrel E. Christensen et al. (University Park/London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 209–256. Blumenberg uses the notion of structural integrity when he discusses the logic of Hobbes's notion of the Leviathan: "Consistency, immanent harmony with itself, is the mark of the modern concept of reality. Self-preservation (instead of a transcendent *conservatio*) is the principle of this consistency and thus the principle of the idea of the state that corresponds to it." ["Konsistenz, immanente Einstimmigkeit, ist das Merkmal des neuzeitlichen Wirklichkeitsbegriffes, Selbsterhaltung (anstelle einer transzendenten *conservatio*) ist das Prinzip dieser Konsistenz, und damit auch das Prinzip der ihr korrespondierenden Staatsidee."] Hans Blumenberg, "WST," 16 (DLA Marbach). See for a discussion: Hannes Bajohr, "The Vanishing

or correspondence model, which informs Blumenberg's later phenomenological anthropology. Here, the historically variable concepts of reality are flanked by a transhistorical condition, the *terminus a quo* that is the absolutism of reality. It is both the primal scene of hominization that is always already behind us in evolutionary terms, and at the same time the ever-present threat that must be kept constantly at bay.⁵⁴ Names, metaphors, myths, and anecdotes help to achieve this distance.

The difference in what constitutes a legitimate philosophical ground vis-à-vis historical reality has ramifications for the interpretation of Blumenberg's work. To give just one example, it is evidence for the argument that the *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* from 1960 constitute a project that is wholly different from, and possibly incompatible with, that of the *Theory of Nonconceptuality*, which Blumenberg develops in the late seventies and eighties. In *Paradigms*, metaphors are, seen from the perspective of those who deploy them, orientations *within* systems of ideas and epochal world views, while for the metaphorologist they also allow the inference of the historical concepts of reality that were in place when a philosophical text was written. The Platonic predominance of the metaphor of light can thus become an index for a notion of reality as instantaneous evidence – just as the light of the sun is not in doubt, neither is the reality of the real, once confronted. In the “Theory of Nonconceptuality,” on the other hand, the function of metaphors goes beyond such orientation and is based on certain anthropological “significances,” of which are culturally made, but some are of perennial character, such as prosopopoeia, symmetry, or prefiguration – a basis that did not yet exist in *Paradigms*'s coherence model.⁵⁵

What I wish to stress here is that it is *possible* to read the notion of self-assertion through a nostercentric retroprojection in a strongly anthropological light, but that this is neither *necessary* nor *necessarily productive*. Rather, if we abstain from setting a goal toward which his thought converges, we can keep Blumenberg's work open and plural. That there is more to this than playing devil's advocate will be reinforced when we move from history to other spheres in which this shift also takes place: language and aesthetics.

IV. Ambiguity and Terror: Language and Aesthetics

While Blumenberg is known for his metaphorology and his theory of nonconceptuality, his theory of language itself has rarely been a focus of investigation. This is surprising, since from the very start language was a central concern for Blumenberg, and here, too, a shift from an immanent to a transcendent model occurs.

Reality of the State: On Hans Blumenberg's Political Theory,” in: *New German Critique*, forthcoming 2021.

⁵⁴ Barbara Merker demonstrated this double structure with admirable clarity: Barbara Merker: “Bedürfnis nach Bedeutsamkeit: Zwischen Lebenswelt und Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit,” in: *Die Kunst des Überlebens: Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg*, ed. by Franz Josef Wetz and Hermann Timm, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999, 68–98.

⁵⁵ See Hans Blumenberg: “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality” [1979], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 242; Hans Blumenberg: *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos*, ed. by Felix Heidenreich and Angus Nicholls (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 9–10.

Already in his very first philosophical publication, “The Linguistic Reality of Philosophy” from 1946, Blumenberg highlighted the role that the equivocality of language plays for any philosophical inquiry. In this article, he argued against Husserl’s goal of creating the foundations of an exact descriptive language by clarifying and “fixing” terms as fulfilled intuitions.⁵⁶ In the following years, Blumenberg pursued this train of thought, and developed a theory of language that was aimed against both Husserl, whose ideal is full conceptual objectivity, and Heidegger, whose idea of Dasein’s being-in-the-world aims at reaching a level prior to conceptual thought. Indeed, in his dissertation and habilitation, Blumenberg interprets Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as a critique of language that is directed against apophantic speech – that is, against judgment, concept, and generally the theoretical attitude that picks out objects for a subject and clearly separates the two. For Blumenberg, however, this is a paradox: Dasein as “in each case mine” (*je meines*)⁵⁷ cannot be made the object of philosophical, i.e. apophantic, language without itself being turned into a concept, thus canceling its defining quality. Taken seriously, Heidegger’s existential analytic bereaves “onto’logy’ of the possibility of logos.”⁵⁸ The result, for Blumenberg, is not philosophy but mysticism, the attempt to say the unsayable that he saw (unsuccessfully) exemplified in the post-*Kehre* Heidegger – and “mysticism in the guise of language is always a paradox.”⁵⁹ Heidegger fails because his project takes the shape of a *unio mystica* and is “excessively demanding of language.”⁶⁰

Husserl, on the other hand, went too far in the opposite direction with his attempt at “a definitive fixation of scientific language” by capturing the essences phenomenological *Wesensschau* would yield and fixing them as concepts that designate the same object in all possible worlds.⁶¹ Blumenberg developed his critique by looking at a set of linguistic markers that had already troubled Husserl in his *Logical Investigations*, called “essentially occasional expressions”⁶² and to which Blumenberg usually referred as “occasional meanings.” Contemporary philosophers discuss them under the name “demonstratives.” A demonstrative, as David Kaplan defines it, is an expression whose “referent is dependent on the context of use.” Examples would be terms like “I”, “here”, “now”, which all change their meaning depending on *who* speaks *where* at *what time*. This ambiguity of occasional meanings is what keeps them from being “fixated” conceptually, as Blumen-

⁵⁶ Hans Blumenberg: “The Linguistic Reality of Philosophy” [1946/1947], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 33–39. See also Hannes Bajohr: “Ein Anfang mit der Sprache: Hans Blumenbergs erste philosophische Veröffentlichung,” *ZfL Blog*, 2018, <https://www.zflprojekte.de/zfl-blog/2018/08/13/hannes-bajohr-ein-anfang-mit-der-sprache-hans-blumenbergs-erste-philosophische-veroeffentlichung/>.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time* [1927], trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 67 (German 41).

⁵⁸ Hans Blumenberg: *Beiträge zum Problem der Ursprünglichkeit der mittelalterlich-scholastischen Ontologie*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020, 147.

⁵⁹ “Mystik im Gewand der Sprache ist immer eine Paradoxie.” Blumenberg, “Das Distanzproblem des Philosophierens,” 102–103.

⁶⁰ Blumenberg, *Ontologische Distanz*, 216.

⁶¹ Edmund Husserl: “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” [1910–1911], in: *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. by Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 96.

⁶² Edmund Husserl: *Logical Investigations* [1900–1901], trans. by J. N. Findlay, ed. by Dermot Moran, vol. II, London/New York: Routledge, 2001, 197.

berg argued in a paper he wrote for a conference in 1952.⁶³ For Husserl's project of a 'scientific' language, occasional meanings are the unsurpassable obstacle. For Blumenberg, *all* concepts have an occasional core: In reference to the linguist Walter Porzig and, surprisingly, Bertrand Russell's notion of "egocentric particulars,"⁶⁴ Blumenberg develops a theory of concepts that posits they begin with the reference to the *occasio*, the situation in which they first occur, and are then increasingly abstracted.⁶⁵ Any concept can, by way of regression, be traced back to its original situation, and this meaning cannot be fully sublated into concept.⁶⁶

In the paper on occasional meanings, Blumenberg places Husserl and Heidegger at opposite poles of language, which is situated between complete univocity and complete ambiguity, that are both unreachable and act as boundary concepts: On the one end is pure "information" (*Mitteilung*), which is objective and transportable, on the other, pure "expression" (*Ausdruck*), which cannot be detached from subjectivity and occasionality⁶⁷ Each pole is excluded from the realm of language because it cancels out its conditions – pure and objective information would be absolutely non-occasional, which no language can be; pure and subjective expression would already be negated in the attempt at communication, which always presupposes some degree of objectification. As a result, "Language is never 'exact' enough to fixate the objective in a conceptually univocal way; yet neither is language ever 'free' enough to be completely at the disposal of the expressive subject's spontaneity."⁶⁸ In this model, language is a weak medium of meaning that

⁶³ Hans Blumenberg: "Okkasionelle Bedeutungen," DLA Marbach, 1952. Blumenberg had written the text for the first convention of the "Inner Circle" ("Engerer Kreis") of the "Allgemeine Gesellschaft für Philosophie in Deutschland" that was to convene in Marburg September 29 to October 3, 1952. As Blumenberg was initially not listed in the program and had apparently been forgotten, he withdrew his contribution.

⁶⁴ Walter Porzig: "Die Entstehung der abstrakten Namen im Indogermanischen," in: *Studium Generale* 4, no. 1 (1951), 145–153; Bertrand Russell: *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth: The William James Lectures for 1940 Delivered at Harvard University* [1950], London: Routledge, 1995, chap. 7.

⁶⁵ Blumenberg, "Okkasionelle Bedeutungen," 5.

⁶⁶ "Der Eigenname ist also gleichsam ein 'Begriff' bestimmter möglicher Erfahrungen eines identischen Gegebenen. Gehen aber auch diese Subjekte 'jenes' und 'dieses' noch auf logisch vorausliegende Prädikate zurück oder sind sie schon nicht reduzierbare Ursobjekte? Auch 'dieses' und 'jenes' sind noch begriffliche Subjekte, insofern sie die abstr[akte] Bedeutung 'etwas' implizieren, die von einem vorausliegenden Prädikat hergeleitet werden kann, das die Form hat: '... ist etwas.' Das Subjekt ist nun allerdings ein rein deiktischer Ausdruck, den wir sprachlich überhaupt nicht vollgültig zu fixieren vermögen, etwa: 'Da ist etwas,' wobei die Okkasionalität des 'da,' die Bezogenheit auf eine Situation des raum-zeitlichen Erscheinens und Zeigens gar nicht eliminiert werden kann. ... Es zeigt sich: in der Subjektsfunktion ist das Begriffliche immer nur eine funktional modifizierte Überlagerung einer ursprünglich okkasionellen Bedeutung. Der Begriff entsteht aus der Prädikatsfunktion; in der Subjektstelle ist er immer in der Funktion des Ergreifens und Setzens Derivat eines logisch ursprünglicheren Prädikats." *Ibid.*, 7–8. I offer a more extensive analysis of Blumenberg's discussion of occasional meanings in my dissertation: Hannes Bajohr: *History and Metaphor: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Language*, Doctoral Thesis, Columbia University, 2017, chap. 2.

⁶⁷ Blumenberg, "Okkasionelle Bedeutungen," 1–2.

⁶⁸"Nie ist die Sprache 'exakt' genug, um das Objektive begrifflich eindeutig zu fixieren; nie aber

can only approximate but never reach its boundary concepts.⁶⁹ Thereby, however, language also provides its own immanent criterion for expressibility. Everything that can be said must be situated between these two extreme poles, and it is only the internal dynamic of language as a system of possible meanings, nothing external to it, that determines its scope.

In his later thought, Blumenberg holds on to the idea of language as weak, as essentially limited with regard to complete objectivity and complete subjectivity alike. However, now he describes this by a transcendent criterion – the anthropological result of the human being as *Mängelwesen*, for whom language is only secondarily a way to describe, even less to ‘fixate,’ meanings, but is first and foremost a way to gain distance from the absolutism of reality. This is indeed a shift in ground, and not just an extrapolation of the earlier model. It also implies a decentering of language, as the theory of meaning (*Bedeutung*) gives way to a theory of significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*). “Significance,” for Blumenberg, describes the result of an anthropological need for orientation and the human being’s receptivity to meaning-potentials, which are reinforced by use: Certain structures of the life-world – such as symmetries, repetitions, or anthropomorphisms – appear as suggestions of significance.⁷⁰ They can be filled and thus, over time, build up a “second layer of intentionality,”⁷¹ the world of culture. Names are not, as in the text on occasional meanings, an initial attempt at abstraction from an irreducible occasional core, but only the first in a series of crutches for dealing with the world.⁷² But while names, metaphors and myths are important ways of gaining orientation, language is only one way among many to do so, and institutions as well as technology would count as such.⁷³ Thus, language, as Blumenberg put it on an unnumbered index card, “did not emerge in order to describe, but to cope [*bewältigen*]; hence its clumsiness at such a late, life-worldly task.”⁷⁴ Herein lies a shift from a theory of meaning that operates *solely* in the mode of language to a theory of significance in which language is *only one* instrument of relief

auch ist die Sprache ‘frei’ genug, um ganz der Spontaneität des expressiven Subjekts verfügbar zu werden.” Ibid., 2.

⁶⁹ “Boundary concept” is used here in the Kantian sense of a *conceptus terminator*. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 255/B 310–311.

⁷⁰ Particularly in Blumenberg: *Präfiguration* and Blumenberg: “Prospect for a Theory of Non-conceptuality.” In an only recently published manuscript, Blumenberg uses the term “expression” (*Ausdruck*) for the anthropologically primordial engagement with things: A rock can seem to “express” material hardness, “express” resistance. Expression thus understood may even be read as precultural and prior to the endowment with significances. Compared to expression and significance, language is in either case a negligible factor, Hans Blumenberg: *Realität und Realismus*, ed. by Nicola Zambon, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020, 115–119.

⁷¹ Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne*, 51.

⁷² “What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories.” Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 6.

⁷³ See Rüdiger Campe: “From the Theory of Technology to the Technique of Metaphor. Blumenberg’s Opening Move,” in: *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (2000), 105–126, here 109.

⁷⁴ “Die Sprache ist nicht entstanden, um zu beschreiben, sondern um zu bewältigen; das macht ihre Unbeholfenheit für eine so späte, ganz unelbensweltliche Aufgabe.” Hans Blumenberg, Karteikarte (no number): “Theorie der Begriffsgeschichte,” DLA Marbach.

among others; the logic of the autonomous semantic structure is replaced by a logic of the conditions of human survival, and that Blumenberg is able to describe concepts and the prehistorical trap as fulfilling the same function, speaks to this argument.⁷⁵ Again, it is a transcendent criterion – coping with reality – that serves as the ground for this theory of language. This is radically different in the early phase, where the equivocality at play between the two unreachable extremes of full objectivity and full subjectivity dictates the scope of expressibility – purely immanently from the structure of language, foregoing any external criterion, anthropological or otherwise.

The ambiguity of language that Blumenberg develops in his paper on occasional meanings is taken up again in the text “Speech Situation and Immanent Poetics” – announcing its methodical approach already in the title – which he presented at the second Poetics and Hermeneutics conference in 1964.⁷⁶ Here, language’s ambiguity is understood as an explicitly *aesthetic* criterion. But instead of treating language in its totality, Blumenberg distinguished the internal tendencies of specific types of languages: to the language of science he assigns a propensity towards definiteness, to the poetic language an inclination towards ambiguity.

For Blumenberg, poetic ambiguity involves two things. First, it describes the frustration of the normal, life-worldly expectation of meaning. Once its reference function is reduced, poetic speech makes a multitude of interpretations possible. For Blumenberg, this is accompanied by a gain in freedom: the modality of reality as the being-so of what has become returns to the modality of what is possible, of being able to be different.⁷⁷ (Of course, what is possible in each case is determined by the historical concept of reality structuring the possible web of beliefs of an epoch – which is why Blumenberg can also use implicit assumptions about art as indicators of concepts of reality in his text on the possibility of the novel.⁷⁸)

But ambiguity can also mean a shift from an openness of reference to absolute self-reference: If thwarting of expected meaning is driven far enough, then the “meaning-expectation” of aesthetic consciousness “is diverted from the referencing function of the word and reoriented toward the objecthood of the linguistic-pictorial presence itself. ... [L]anguage ceases to be a reference to anything else and begins to signify only itself.”⁷⁹ This tendency is especially intensified in modernist literature, which strives to distinguish itself from the increasingly specialized language of science: the more exact the one language type, the more ambiguous the other.

Ambiguity, as both an artwork’s self-reference and its openness to interpretation, is essential not only for language-based but also for visual art, as Blumenberg explains in his text on Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos*: As opposed to the theoretical attitude that calls for the determination of an object and the precise classification of its ontological status –

⁷⁵ Hans Blumenberg: “Theory of Nonconceptuality” [circa 1975], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 260–261.

⁷⁶ Hans Blumenberg: “Speech Situation and Immanent Poetics” [1966], in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 449–465.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁷⁸ Blumenberg, “Possibility of the Novel,” 499–501; the same point also in Blumenberg, “Preliminary Remarks,” 118.

⁷⁹ Blumenberg, “Speech Situation,” 459–460.

which depends on the historically specific concept of reality – the aesthetic attitude is open to the equivalence of different interpretations as well as to the recognition of the autonomous value of the aesthetic object. As in poetic language, aesthetic pleasure is characterized by freedom: “The aesthetic-receptive subject does not enjoy the object as such and no specific aspect of it; rather, the subject enjoys, through the object or by way of it, its own not-being-constrained by the factual world, its freedom toward the ‘given.’”⁸⁰ Again, “Art reflects ... possibility itself,” as Gerhard Gamm put it.⁸¹

In Blumenberg’s late aesthetics, by contrast, this enjoyment is explicitly anthropologically grounded. It is no longer the experience of the subject’s freedom in a Kantian sense, but the freedom from what is phylogenetically already overcome. *Work on Myth* is dedicated, among other things, to the “afterlife” of myths in their aesthetic potential, which remains once their primary function of structuring and dealing with reality has been achieved. In the paper on which the book is based, Blumenberg describes myth as situated “between terror and poetry”: the horror of the absolutism of reality is first tamed in myth and then released for reception and variation. What is enjoyed are “the rudiments of tamed terror”⁸² that are transposed into the aesthetic – from the sublime, the beautiful. In *Beschreibung des Menschen*, Blumenberg summarizes this in the concept of simulation: the voluntary exposure to previously overcome danger from a position of security.⁸³ In *Shipwreck with Spectator*, this situation is represented by the titular image of a catastrophe witnessed from the safety of the shore.⁸⁴

In its most extreme interpretation, the anthropological approach declares the *sole* function of the aesthetic to be the epistemic ordering of what would otherwise seem frightful and contingent. Felix Heidenreich, for instance, understands Blumenberg’s notion of beauty as part of a culturally produced second layer of intentionality that provides a world of significances. “Music is already ordered time, painting is already ordered color reception, myth is the ordered world.”⁸⁵ A momentous shift has occurred in Blumenberg’s aesthetics: He no longer views the contemplation of art as the enjoyment of “possibility itself,” but as the security of experiencing nature from a safe distance. Again, immanent and transcendent criteria are clearly split between the early and the late phase.

⁸⁰ Hans Blumenberg: “Socrates and the ‘objet ambigu’: Paul Valéry’s Discussion of the Ontology of the Aesthetic Object and Its Tradition,” in: *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 440.

⁸¹ Gerhard Gamm: “Das Schönste, was es gibt: Blumenberg und Valéry über ästhetische Effekte,” in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie* 6, no. 1 (2012), 105. This interpretation assumes that Blumenberg is indeed not just interpreting but agreeing with Valéry’s aesthetics. I thank Timothy Attanucci for pointing this out.

⁸² Hans Blumenberg: “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos” [1971], in Blumenberg: *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*, ed. by Anselm Haverkamp, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001, 327–405.

⁸³ Blumenberg, *Beschreibung*, 601.

⁸⁴ Hans Blumenberg: *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* [1979], trans. by Steven Rendall (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

⁸⁵ Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne*, 217.

V. Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show a series of breaks in Hans Blumenberg's work that can be summarized as a shift from immanent to transcendent argumentative structures.⁸⁶ Studying this shift reveals that the early, immanent interpretations have a value that is independent of their role in Blumenberg's later, transcendent approach. One may argue that the increasing focus on anthropology as an external criterion was regressive: While Blumenberg went to great pains to avoid a simple essentialism by insisting on a functional interpretation of anthropology – the guiding question was not “what is man?” but “how is man possible?”⁸⁷ – he sometimes overemphasized evolutionary biology, even to the point of suggesting a biological determinism.⁸⁸ By investigating the fault lines that run through his oeuvre, however, we can remain aware of each phase's intellectual possibilities without lapsing into nostricism. Once established, this multitude of Blumenbergs may even allow us to pit the philosopher against himself.

Blumenberg did not make these fault lines easy to trace, and I would like to end with one example of this. Above, I discussed the secret ‘grand theory’ he developed during the sixties, his “historical phenomenology.” He first mentioned it publicly in 1963: Discussing his essay on the novel, Blumenberg speaks briefly of the “possibility of a historical phenomenology as eidetic description” – and even here it only occurs in the protocol documenting the discussions customary at the Poetik und Hermeneutik conferences.⁸⁹ In

⁸⁶ All the examples of transcendent grounds discussed here are anthropological, but there are others to be found as well. In the very first phase of Blumenberg's oeuvre, for instance, one can find a transcendent model that gives a criterion different from the function of making the human possible. It is transcendent in a more traditional sense, that is, theological. In “Atommal,” written in 1945, after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Blumenberg pondered the alternative between a morality based on humanism and on theology: “Can the ‘human’ maintain or regain its full normative validity with regard to conduct and action in our present time? Depending on how we feel urged to answer this question, we will be able to decide either to strive for further contemplation and a sustainable ground within the space of moral-philosophical reflection defined here, or to cross that border and place everything on submission to a divine commandment, an absolute claim and a promised judgment.” The choice outlined in the last sentence strikingly illustrates the alternative of an immanent, Kantian, and transcendent, theological, morality. Hans Blumenberg: “Atommal: Ein Gegenstück zur Atomstrategie,” in: *Schriften zur Technik*, ed. by Alexander Schmitz and Bernd Stiegler (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 16.

⁸⁷ I have written about Blumenberg's “negative anthropology” in Hannes Bajohr: “The Unity of the World: Arendt and Blumenberg on the Anthropology of Metaphor,” in: *Germanic Review* 90, no. 1 (2015), 42–59. However, even a negative anthropology is still an anthropology, and it still assumes a supra-historical continuity – if not a continuity of substance, then one of function, form, or conditionality. See also *Negative Anthropologie: Ideengeschichte und Systematik einer unausgeschöpften Denkfigur*, ed. by Hannes Bajohr and Sebastian Edinger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021).

⁸⁸ See for an especially drastic example that connects terrorism to a genetic predisposition, Joe Paul Kroll: *A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith, and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity* (Dissertation, Princeton, 2010), 84; for Blumenberg's rather questionable discussion of gender roles and evolution found in the *Nachlass*, see Josefa Ros Velasco, “Hans Blumenberg y el feminismo,” in: *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 33, no. 1 (2016), 285–303.

⁸⁹ “Diskussion: Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans. Kunst und Natur in der idealisti-

1981, in the foreword to his *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben (Realities We Live In)*, he speaks of a “phenomenology of history.”⁹⁰ Does this title still name the same project? Much had happened between 1963 and 1981 – not only the turn toward anthropology but also the publication of his definitive work on the history of science, *Genesis of the Copernican World*. Can the immanentist, ultra-historicist theory of the structures that determine what in an epoch can be conceived of as real remain unaffected by the transcendent, anthropological theory of a creature in need of constantly keeping reality at bay? Does the overpowering reality central to the latter theory defy historicization, taking place in the former? Does “reality” still constitute the same category in each case? Or do they simply coexist, the historical concepts of reality bookended by the unattainable, awesome reality kept at bay?

That Blumenberg did not have a fixed notion of the concepts of reality and kept working on the framework of their application has become apparent with the recent publication of *Realität und Realismus*, a lecture he gave in the nineteen-eighties. In a marginal note to the manuscript that is included in the publication, Blumenberg documents his doubts about the historical reading he had espoused earlier: “Do they [the concepts of reality, H.B.] have to form a series at all? Is it not possible that the consciousness of reality splits into two species – consistency and contrast? Where else would one find the epoch belonging to the fourth concept of reality?”⁹¹

Especially surprising in this passage is the mention of the fourth concept of reality, reality as resistance. It is the final and contemporary concept of reality discussed in the essay on the “Possibility of the Novel.” This marginal note gives one more reason to assume that the concepts of reality indeed underwent a functional change, from diachronic to synchronous concept, and that it is the fourth concept of reality in which this change becomes most apparent. For readers of *Work on Myth*, it must remarkably similar to the anthropological *terminus a quo* of the anthropological absolutism of reality itself. What once was historical and bound to the epoch of late modernity now constitute the basic human world relation of primordial terror.⁹² This proximity at least raises the suspicion that the later Blumenberg was subject to the same fallacy that he, as a young man, ascribed to Gehlen: the projection of a historically contingent perspective onto the history of the species as such. The alternative interpretation – that he found modernity to be the final realization of what had always already been inherent in humans – is equally unsatisfactory; after all, it would violate the very prohibition of nrocentrism he formulated so forcefully.

schen Ästhetik,” in: *Nachahmung und Illusion: Kolloquium Giessen, Juni 1963. Vorlagen und Verhandlungen*, ed. by Hans Robert Jauß (München: Fink, 1964), 226. However, the term “concept of reality” already appears in the 1947 dissertation, Blumenberg: *Beiträge zum Problem der Ursprünglichkeit*, 15.

⁹⁰ Hans Blumenberg: “Einleitung,” in: *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 6.

⁹¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Realität und Realismus*, 79. Blumenberg had always conceded that the concepts of reality constituted a *typology*, and that different types could appear at different times – but only as retrospective anachronisms and only after their earlier types have been introduced once, Blumenberg, “Possibility of the Novel,” 504n5. In this note, however, they are possible at any time because they are general states and attitudes of consciousness.

⁹² See for a discussion of the concept of reality as “resistance” Blumenberg, “Possibility of the Novel,” 505–506.

It is possible that Blumenberg's "historical phenomenology" ended up in 1981 as a completely different project from that which he had started in 1963. If that is the case, its function and meaning changed quietly, unnoticed. Only its name had remained the same – the model case of a linguistic reoccupation, as described in *Legitimacy*. The possibility of identifying such reoccupations in Blumenberg's own work is not the least reason that we should historicize and pluralize it.