

A NOTE ON BLUMENBERG'S *BESCHREIBUNG DES MENSCHEN*

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Description of the Human (Beschreibung des Menschen) was not published during Hans Blumenberg's lifetime; a posthumous compilation from two separate manuscripts by editor and former Blumenberg student Manfred Sommer, it was issued by Suhrkamp Verlag in 2006. It is based on lectures on the German tradition of philosophical anthropology that Blumenberg gave at the University of Münster in 1976–77 and 1980–81. Since Blumenberg did not date his lectures, it is possible that later or earlier text variants were included in the manuscript. This ambiguity is partly an artifact of Blumenberg's own way of working: because he wrote his books simultaneously, as Sommer puts it, but published them sequentially, passages in Blumenberg's manuscripts may date from radically different points in time. And since Blumenberg stopped publishing altogether in 1989—and decided to write only for his estate (*Nachlass*) as early as in the mid-Eighties—posthumous publication has become the norm for his books. The earlier books from the *Nachlass* in particular were the result of editorial decisions that were not always clear.

What is clear, however, is that *Description of the Human* is to be understood as one of Blumenberg's chefs d'oeuvre. While his earlier works, such as *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960) and *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), are inspired

by intellectual history and the theory of language in the phenomenological tradition, in the 1970s Blumenberg took a decided anthropological turn. What had previously been explained with recourse to the specific construction of what can appear as real in an epoch—Blumenberg speaks of “concepts of reality”—after this turn he looked for transhistorical, anthropological explanations. *Description of the Human*'s basic project is the explicit fusion of Husserlian phenomenology and the German tradition of philosophical anthropology—the attempt to grasp what the human is by identifying its basic structures, the most influential representatives of which are Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen. The result is a highly nuanced, often digressive, but at the same time bold conception of the possibility of human self-reflection that is at the core of philosophy and of culture as a recipe for the species' survival.

The chapters selected here give only a glimpse of the book, which in its original German runs to some nine hundred pages. The first excerpt (“Anthropology: Its Legitimacy and Rationality”) sets up Blumenberg's defense of philosophical anthropology as a project that has consistently failed due to its essentialist premises. The danger of identifying perennial structures is not least that they extend to the political power to define what counts as not human (Blumenberg, who was persecuted by the Nazis as a “half Jew,” is sensitive to this point). Instead of answering the question “What is man?” he proposes a minimalist anthropology that seeks to answer a different but no less ambitious question: “How is man possible?”

The second excerpt (“Existential Risk and Preemption”) gives a brief insight into this functionalist anthropology. Taking issue with the traditional notion of the human as rational, Blumenberg attempts to characterize rationality as a last resort of evolution—an act of desperation, rather than the pinnacle of this development. The lack of specialization forced *Homo sapiens* to compensate for it by cultural means. The transition of early hominids from dwelling in forests into the habitat of the open savannah required new skills such as wide visual overview and what Blumenberg calls *actio per distans*—actions over spatial distance. With this came the ability to anticipate and preempt future events but also the development of language and concepts for handling the absent and the past. Thus, experience could be handed down and communicated; history began. Names, metaphors, and myths, then, are all means of keeping reality at bay for a creature that is, structurally, a being of detours. This strategy Blumenberg famously discussed in *Work on Myth* (1979), to which *Description of the Human* can be read both as a prolegomenon and as the underlying theory.