

SIGNIFICANCE AND THE INDEFINITE IN HANS BLUMENBERG'S *WORK ON*

*MYTH*

by

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(Under the Direction of Elizabeth Brient)

ABSTRACT

Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* presents several difficulties to attempts at interpretation. First, it is a work that includes both the development of a theory of myth and the reception of myth, and the analysis and interpretation of historical texts from which these theories were developed and which illustrate them, but often without announcing its intentions or signaling when it is switching from the one to the other. Second, Blumenberg tends to avoid providing stable definitions for many of his key terms. His theory of myth posits that myth was developed to deal with something indefinite in the experience of the world, and I argue in this dissertation that this indefinite character is related to this tendency: his terms require a degree of elasticity in order to illuminate and reveal the phenomena he takes as his objects. Finally, *Work on Myth*, like his other large works, are dense and multi-valent works, works in which one might find many centers, interpretations of which can be taken in many directions. The interpretation I propose attempts to chart one course through this work by locating a center of his theory of myth and its reception in the concept of 'significance,' which cannot be defined. I show how Blumenberg grounds this theory of myth in an

anthropology, a theory less of human nature than of the conditions that allow human life to be possible. Further, I provide an account of two aspects, drawn from various parts of this work, of the coordination between the development of myth and the development the human species, to illustrate Blumenberg's account of myth's function. In the second part of the dissertation, I provide three readings in which Blumenberg develops the concept of significance, showing the way it responds to aspects of the experience of the world that are and remain indefinite, providing a structure that is necessary for the human way of life.

INDEX WORDS: Blumenberg, Hans, Work on Myth, Myth, Reception Theory, Philosophical Anthropology, Significance, Heidegger, Martin, Freud, Sigmund, Goethe, Johan Wolfgang von, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics

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## DEDICATION

For Forrest and Violet, whose love and support made this work possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study takes as its point of entry into Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* the question, which appears to have a kind of motivating function for Blumenberg's work, of the survival of myth in the present. If a theory is to be adequate, if it is to do justice to what myth is, it must be able to account for myth as we understand it in the ancient, and even the archaic, context, but it must also be able to account for myth as it appears, or reappears, through our history and up to the present time. The need for this becomes even more acute in light of the periodic attempts, at certain junctures in history, to "overcome" myth, to end any reliance upon myth, such as we find in the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> If myth is able to survive even such attempts, then the cause of this durability is surely something about myth that we must understand if we are to understand myth. Although he deals briefly with some rival theories of myth, he distinguishes his theory more fundamentally by opposing it to two general elements of other theories: first, the notion that myth is meant to explain things, especially natural phenomena, and second, that, in the attempt to understand myth, one ought to distinguish between myth as an archaic formation and its reception. This first element raises the issue of myth's function, which is of crucial importance for Blumenberg's theory of myth. Blumenberg in fact takes as a presupposition the idea that the best, if not the only, way to understand what myth is, is to understand what myth *does*. This is the case especially because myth is archaic, because

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<sup>1</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 17-18.

it developed in an oral culture to which we have no direct access, no evidence that can certify any theory about the experiences that underlie the content of myth. The oldest evidence we have of myth is very late, at least according to Blumenberg's theory, although I do not think this is a controversial element in it. It is in fact already a reception of myth in a context quite different from that of its formation. We see from this that the two elements by which Blumenberg distinguishes his theory from others are closely related: an understanding of the function of myth will allow us to see how the reception of myth is related to archaic myth.

This is in fact what Blumenberg's theory of myth provides. Blumenberg understands the function of myth in terms of, or in connection to, his philosophical anthropology. He posits a scenario in the development of the human species in which the protohuman creature finds itself maladapted to its environment, without the protection of instinct, and as a result it experiences the world as an absolute threat. Such an experience, which would overwhelm this creature, would make survival impossible. The creature cannot deal with the threat directly, that is, it cannot change the world; if it is to survive, however, it must at least avoid being overwhelmed, that is, it must deal with the anxiety it feels, it must come to see the world in a different way. Myth is a tool, then, for dealing with the world, a tool with which humans, and their ancestors, transformed the way they saw the world. The way myth does this is, broadly speaking, two-fold: first, in Blumenberg's "initial situation," myths were told in the safety of caves, and so they provided relief from the dangers of reality, and, second, the stories themselves gave a shape and a name to the indefinite hostility of the world, and they told of the moderation

of and distancing from these hostile powers.<sup>2</sup> Blumenberg in fact describes the function of myth generally with this last concept, distance: myth produces distance from the threat of reality. It tells stories of the banishment of monsters to the margins of the world, it places the most dangerous gods in the distant past, it removes humans from the focus of the gods attention. In addition, one of the aspects of myth that constitutes its attraction to later ages is the feeling of antiquity that it brings with it, that is, in the way in which it has this temporal distance built into it.

The function of myth, then, is to reduce the feeling of anxiety produced by a world that feels as if it is hostile, a feeling that is the result of the maladaptation of an immediate precursor of the human species. Myth accomplishes this reduction by producing distance. How does myth produce distance, and what is it about myth that makes it so well-suited to this function? I attempt an answer to the first question in the three readings that make up Part II of this dissertation. These three chapters constitute a description of the concept of ‘significance,’ the concept that is at the heart of Blumenberg’s functional theory of myth. Myth deals with ‘significance,’ it makes it visible and accessible, it ‘works’ on it, but it does not generate it. This entire dissertation is an attempt to answer the second question. Here, however, we must begin with a sketch of what ‘significance’ is, so that we may more easily understand why Blumenberg associates it so closely with myth. Any serious attempt to grasp Blumenberg’s use of this concept must begin by acknowledging two facts. First, one must recognize that ‘significance’ can be explained, but cannot be defined.<sup>3</sup> Second, one must recognize that one cannot make ‘significance’ up, nor attach ‘significance’ to something at will.

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<sup>2</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 65.

‘Significance’ must, on the contrary, maintain some basis in reality, must have some sort of ‘objective’ determination. This manifests itself in Blumenberg’s insistence that myth must not be thought of as fiction, that its function depends upon some connection to reality. I deal with these claims at some length in the following chapters, and include them here only for the sake of introducing ‘significance.’ They do not, however, get us very close to this concept itself.

The quickest way to see what this concept involves is to consider an example. Blumenberg points to a number of the salient features of myth in the following passage, in which one may perhaps also glimpse ‘significance:’

Flaubert noted in his Egyptian diary on June 12, 1850, that during the day his group had climbed a mountain on the summit of which there was a great number of large round stones that almost resembled cannonballs. He was told that these had originally been melons, which God had turned into stones. The story is over, the narrator is evidently satisfied; but not the traveler, who has to ask for the reason why. Because it pleased God, is the answer, and the story simply goes no further. It is satisfied to pursue the uniformity of the stones, which is contrary to the nature of accident, one step back, to a point where it has to appear entirely ‘natural.’ Melons just grow that way, and there is no need—in their case—for an explanation of why they look so similar and so uniform in size. Thus the introduction of the melons helps one to accept a characteristic of the surprising stones that stones do not in general and by their nature tend to have. It is a case of falling back on the life-world, on something that is familiar in it, and there is no thought that God would surely have to have

some purpose in dealing with the melons. This fragment of a myth takes only the single step from the life-world to the unusual, and then the story is over. He who asks “Why?” is himself at fault if he is annoyed by the answer. He has violated the rules of the game of the mythical world. Nothing has been asked of him; on the contrary, he has been offered something, something that in the face of the surprising facts can only be a ‘free gift.’ Dogma refuses such offers, because it commands one to believe its God to be capable of anything.<sup>4</sup>

This story presupposes that the similarity and uniformity of the stones is a cause of discomfort. The discomfort here is already greatly reduced from the experience of the “absolutism of reality,” the overwhelming anxiety in the face of a world that is hostile to the existence of the human individual, and the species. It is, however, a related discomfort. At this degree of intensity, it is something like what Freud called “the Uncanny,” *Unheimlich*, un-homelike. Although he does not say this explicitly here, the very fact that the story explains the uniformity is sufficient evidence that there is an initial discomfort. This discomfort is a result of the fact that rocks don’t tend to be either that uniform or that similar as a result of natural processes, they tend rather to appear irregular and different from one another. The regularity suggests not only something improbable, but also something deliberate.<sup>5</sup> If something is made or arranged deliberately, it is put that way by some power and for some reason. Something that is capable of affecting the shape of rocks must be a great power, one that is capable of doing great harm if it so desired. The fact that it has arranged these rocks in a particular

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<sup>4</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 257-258.

<sup>5</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 69. I discuss the relation of significance to probability in Part II, chapter 1.

way indicates that it has done so for someone to notice, for the sake of the kind of creature that is capable of noticing. This account is making explicit something that remains at the level of suggestion in Blumenberg, but it represents the way I understand the feeling of uncanniness at issue in this story. As uncanniness, it would never, I think, rise to this level of articulation.

The myth in the story is very brief. These stones were originally melons, which it had pleased the god to turn to stones. The aspect that caused the discomfort has been explained, or, perhaps, simply explained away. Blumenberg will insist that “explanation” is not the function of myth, and this is an important part of his explanation of why myth has survived despite the dominance of the theoretical attitude in the modern age, and the successes of modern science.<sup>6</sup> What we see in this passage does not contradict this claim: to the extent that a natural phenomenon is explained here, it is explained for the sake of reducing the feeling of uncanniness. We see this distinction here in the traveler’s desire to know more, to know why the god had turned the melons into stones. Theoretical rationality sees the asking and answering of such questions, and the investigation not only of the primary phenomenon, but of the answers to its questions also, to be its fundamental task. Myth, on the other hand, has nothing to offer to such questions or investigations.

What myth does, in this case, is to counter something uncanny with something familiar. It does not deny or do away with what is uncanny, it rather substitutes for it, or covers it with, something familiar. This story illustrates very clearly the way in which this substitution is only partial: the uncanniness of the regularity of the stones is placed in the context of the familiar, by claiming that they were once melons that have been

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<sup>6</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 67.

transformed, but the hearer of the myth is left with the uncanniness of the inscrutable will of the god who transformed them. We might say, then, that the story ‘works on’ an initial feeling of uncanniness: this emotional charge is neither manufactured, nor destroyed. It is reduced, delimited, and, to a degree, contained. It is in this that we see ‘significance.’ The feeling that something in the world is relevant to, takes notice of, as it were, what is human and individual, is ‘significance.’<sup>7</sup> We can see from this formulation, as a relevance of the world to the human, why it is important that ‘significance’ not be something made up. Fiction cannot produce this relevance. We see also that ‘significance’ is not, of its own, positive or negative. For both the feeling of uncanniness and the comfort provided by the story of the transformation of the melons are ‘significance.’ Finally, we see in this story that ‘significance’ often does not reside in a particular detail of a story, but rather in the way the story holds together, in the story as a whole, or in its basic pattern.<sup>8</sup> The discussion and support of these features makes up the bulk of the following study.

### Review of Literature

The literature most relevant to my dissertation can be divided into three basic subsets. The first subset of the literature is made up of studies that attempt to come to grips with Blumenberg’s project as a whole by showing the importance of certain aspects of it to his interest in Philosophical Anthropology. Most of these studies are grounded in a reading of Blumenberg’s *Beschreibung des Menschen*, which is his most direct engagement with Philosophical Anthropology, published from his *Nachlass* after his death, and so years after the publication of *Work on Myth*. Many of the texts in this volume were being composed around the same time as he was working on *Work on Myth*,

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<sup>7</sup> I mean this not as a definition, but rather as an example.

<sup>8</sup> Citation, reference.

however, and the latter, too, has at its heart Blumenberg's thought about "anthropogenesis." These studies tend to nod, at least, at *Work on Myth*, and thus are relevant, at least to a degree, to my thinking about it. These studies tend to emphasize, as I said above, a connection between Blumenberg's anthropology and some other aspect of his work, such as: metaphorology,<sup>9</sup> phenomenology,<sup>10</sup> or historicism.<sup>11</sup> This subset has been helpful for three reasons. First, these accounts provide general background information about philosophical anthropology, which is helpful because of the importance of philosophical anthropology in *Work on Myth*; second, they compensate, to some degree, for the brevity of Blumenberg's presentation there of certain elements of his own thought about philosophical anthropology. Perhaps more important is the third reason, because Blumenberg's overall project is strange and unfamiliar to new readers, the efforts to suggest a general shape for it provide a way, even if only a provisional one, to orient oneself in the text.

In his article "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg," Wetz shows that Blumenberg's interest in Anthropology develops not only out of his interest in Phenomenology, but also more specifically out of his critique of Husserl's commitment to the "absolute subject."<sup>12</sup> Blumenberg finds in Husserl's work itself an inability to separate the work of description from the concrete, finite, human individual, and

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<sup>9</sup> Ifergan, Pini. "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology." *Continental Philosophy Review*, 48 (Dordrecht, Boston: Kluwer Academic 2015), 359-377; Adams, David. "Metaphors for Mankind: The Development of Hans Blumenberg's Anthropological Metaphorology." *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 52, No. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1991), Pp. 152-166.

<sup>10</sup> Wetz, Franz Josef. "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg." *Iris* 1, no. 2. (Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press, 2009), 389-414.

<sup>11</sup> Hudson, Wayne. "After Blumenberg: historicism and philosophical anthropology." *History of the Human Sciences*. Vol. 6, No. 4. Pp. 109-16. London, Newbury Park and New Delhi: Sage Publishing. 1993

<sup>12</sup> Wetz, Franz Josef. "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg." 391.

concludes from this inability that the finite individual is the unavoidable starting point for all inquiry. His essay touches on many of the central topics of Blumenberg's anthropology that are important, too, in my study: the concepts of distance and visibility, the delay between stimulus and response, the interposition of myth and other aspects of culture between the individual and the world, and the need for consolation.<sup>13</sup> Much of his work, however, is engaged in relating Blumenberg's thought to his contemporaries and forebears: he provides a nice overview of major themes in his anthropology, without developing these at any length.

Ifergan discusses Blumenberg's anthropology in its relation to "metaphorology," as it is formulated in his early, and programmatic, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, as well as its revision signaled in "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality."<sup>14</sup> Even though he is considering Blumenberg's work more generally, Ifergan's strategy engages more directly with the concepts in Blumenberg's thought, and so his work is particularly helpful for my own. In this essay he points to the role of narrative in constructing the initial situation. Although here it is in reference to the late work *Höhlenausgänge*, his reading gets at what is crucial to my reading of *Work on Myth*.<sup>15</sup> His discussion of the function of absolute metaphor is also very suggestive. He identifies some points of comparison between the function of such metaphors and that of myth: first, in the history of absolute metaphor as a process of augmentation, rather than something teleologically directed; and, second, in the description of absolute metaphor's function. Here, quoting

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<sup>13</sup> Wetz, Franz Josef. "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg." 399; 400-401; 406; 407; 410-411, respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Translated by Robert Savage. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010). Blumenberg, Hans. "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality." In *Shipwreck With Spectator*. Translated by Steven Rendall. (Cambridge, MA. and London: The MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Ifergan, Pini. "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology." 363-364.

Blumenberg: “By providing a point of orientation, the content of absolute metaphors determines a particular attitude or conduct; they give structure to a world, representing the non-experienceable, non-apprehensible totality of the real.”<sup>16</sup>The advantage of these studies is their generality: they provide some insight into the shape of Blumenberg’s project as a whole, and aid in the attempt to put an individual work in context.

Another subset of the literature is made up of studies, usually essays, that deal with the history or importance of specific concepts at play in Blumenberg’s work, such as “distance,”<sup>17</sup> “significance,”<sup>18</sup> “consolation,”<sup>19</sup> “contingency,”<sup>20</sup> or “visibility.”<sup>21</sup> These works, in contrast to those in the first subset, cast light on particular topics in *Work on Myth*. Rüdiger Campe compares the concept of “contingency” as it appears in Blumenberg’s work to its appearance in the work of Niklas Luhmann.

In Blumenberg, contingency makes its appearance as the lack of determination—the “can be or not be”—of the beginning or the origin: the world may be structured this way or another; there can be this world or a different one; the world might not even emerge.<sup>22</sup>

Although his focus is on Blumenberg’s early work, his discussion of “contingency” illuminates the role this concept plays in *Work on Myth*. First, as Blumenberg puts it in his essay “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,”

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<sup>16</sup> Ifergan, Pini. “Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology.” 374-375.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, Alison. “Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 2017), 378-392.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstien, Jürgen. “Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg.” *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (Feb. 2011), 5-19.

<sup>19</sup> Pavesich, Vida.

<sup>20</sup> Campe, Rüdiger. “Contingencies in Blumenberg and Luhmann.” *Telos* 158 (Spring 2012), 81-99.

<sup>21</sup> Müller, Oliver. “Hans Blumenberg on Visibility.” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 65, (January 2016), 35-53.

<sup>22</sup> Campe, Rüdiger. “Contingencies in Blumenberg and Luhmann.” 89.

the central anthropological assumption, which guides *Work on Myth* as well, is that “It cannot be taken for granted that man is able to exist.”<sup>23</sup> That is to say, the existence of humankind is fundamentally contingent. Second, and this remains implicit, is that myth developed in order to meet a need, the need for significance, a need which arose as a result of the overwhelming character of life in a world to which the pre-human individual was not adapted biologically. This creature needed *something* to survive, and myth is what it developed. But the fact that myth is what it developed is entirely contingent: it could have been something else.

Jürgen Goldstein’s lovely essay compares the confrontation between Goethe and Napoleon in part IV of *Work on Myth* to the literary confrontation between Thomas Mann and Hitler, on the one hand, and Blumenberg and Thomas Mann on the other.<sup>24</sup> He shows the way that such confrontations can “work on significance,” i.e. the way they can augment the meaningfulness of such confrontations in the attempt to cope with a world that feels overwhelming. This essay begins with the introduction of what he calls “orphanic phenomena,” an idea he takes from the work of Wolfram Holgrebe. An orphanic phenomenon is something about which we have some knowledge, but that somehow “retreats” from any attempt to fix it conceptually.<sup>25</sup> This concept has informed my reading of Blumenberg perhaps as much as any other.

Samuel Moyn’s article is concerned primarily with Blumenberg’s attempts to distance his theory of myth from those that seek the origins of myth in order to

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<sup>23</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,” In *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Edited by Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy. (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 1996), 438.

<sup>24</sup> Goldstien, Jürgen. “Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg.”

<sup>25</sup> Goldstien, Jürgen. “Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg.” 6.

understand what myth is.<sup>26</sup> Moyn argues that, contrary to his insistence, Blumenberg does indeed have “a mania for origins,” that he “puts an account of origins at the center of philosophic concern, and that this is based in a reading of Vico.”<sup>27</sup> Moyn does not make the distinction, which I find in Blumenberg’s work, between those theories that base their understanding of myth on an account of the origin of the contents of myth that it purports to be true and Blumenberg’s own, which posits a hypothetical “initial situation” or “*status naturalis*” in the attempt to illuminate a role for myth in human life. Moyn does, however, acknowledge at the end of his essay that Blumenberg’s use of origins is both functional and metaphorical, and so his essay approaches the same conclusion as this dissertation.

Oliver Müller argues that Blumenberg places the fact of visibility at the very center of his anthropology.<sup>28</sup> Müller argues that Blumenberg might put too much emphasis on this single feature, but that he is right to recognize its importance. His discussion of “visibility” is rigorous and illuminating, and his suggestion that visibility is meaningful for Blumenberg in part as a response to his experience of National Socialism, with the forced visibility of Jewish people, and the connection between remaining invisible and survival, a suggestion with which he frames his essay, is both interesting and persuasive.

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<sup>26</sup> Moyn, Samuel. “Metaphorically Speaking: Hans Blumenberg, Giambattista Vico, and the Problem of Origins.” *Qui Parle*, Vol. 12, No. 1 The End of Nature (Spring/Summer 2000) pp. 55-76

<sup>27</sup> Moyn, Samuel. “Metaphorically Speaking: Hans Blumenberg, Giambattista Vico, and the Problem of Origins.” 56.

<sup>28</sup> Müller, Oliver. “Hans Blumenberg on Visibility.” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 65, January 2016. Pp. 35-53.

I want to address the argument in Alison Ross's article at greater length, primarily because it provides the opportunity to address two different types of objection, and it also allows me to make two points I had hoped to address in this Introduction. Ross's article attempts to critique the idea that distance is the most appropriate concept for understanding the role of myth, and other institutions, in the process of anthropogenesis. The idea of distance presupposes a situation of need, specifically a lack of adaptation and consequent "instinct deficiency" that produces a situation in which the best way to deal with threats is to be distant from them.<sup>29</sup> To make her case, Ross contrasts to Blumenberg's reliance on "instinct deficiency" and distance as a "coping strategy" the work of paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan, who has developed an account of an externalized, "symbolic" body that is submitted to evolution in the place of the physical "zoological" and genetic body. This much sounds similar to Blumenberg's own account, which I discuss in Part I, Chapter 1, with the primary differences that, according to Leroi-Gourhan, the substitution of the symbolic for the physical is the result of the bipedal posture, which frees the hands during locomotion, and this makes possible the use of tools and implements. Closely associated with such "tools for the hand" is language, which sets up the close association of hand and face in this development. Leroi-Gourhan thus emphasizes the big toe, in its necessity for an upright posture and bipedal locomotion, rather than the brain, as the organ of primary importance for the human species.<sup>30</sup> His account is based on paleontological evidence, and takes into account the effects of such technologies as tools and "expressive social techniques" on

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 3 (May 2017) 378-392. 380.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." 381.

ethnographical differentiation, a concern which is altogether lacking, Ross claims, in Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*.<sup>31</sup> Ross claims that Leroi-Gourhan's approach is superior to Blumenberg's for these reasons, and that attention to the richness or luxury provided by the morphological changes, which allows for the development of further richness in the form of material and linguistic technologies, accounts better for the available evidence than does the attention to "instinct deficiency" and the needs that define the pre-human creature in Blumenberg's account.

I want to point out first that Blumenberg's narrative, which is, by his own admission, a kind of speculative reconstruction, is an attempt to provide a model that would explain why such changes might have occurred. His model does not disdain evidence, but is oriented toward the illumination of something for which he claims no evidence is available.<sup>32</sup> The evidence Ross presents that supports Leroi-Gourhan's theory does not, as far as I can see, contradict Blumenberg's. For Blumenberg, too, admires the riches of human culture, and what they make possible. He locates these riches, however, among the accomplishments of the tools that were discovered in a situation of necessity: the luxury is a result of the deficiency and the strategies humans developed for dealing with it. It seems as if Leroi-Gourhan's theory identifies the factors that make possible the further development of humans, while Blumenberg's theory is seeking to understand why such a change might have taken place. That is to say, Blumenberg is not concerned only with what made the human species, but with why and how such changes or transformations happen in the first place.

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<sup>31</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." 382.

<sup>32</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 45.

The main force of Ross's disagreement with Blumenberg comes in the form of an effort to show that "instinct deficiency" would not necessarily characterize the creature that appears on this side of the transformation Blumenberg describes when setting up "the absolutism of reality:" "Species immaturity and the vulnerability associated with exposure are not absolute markers of specifically human frailty nor do they amount to much as arguments for how to install the coping strategy of distance."<sup>33</sup> She asks rhetorically what distinguishes human young from that of other species, "such as baby chimps, or other land-dwelling creatures unable to escape from predators to the treetops," and points out that the awareness that it is prey wouldn't distinguish the human species from other species, either: "Vulnerability is the status of prey and awareness of such dangers may just as readily be a feature of life before the leap, as it conditions it afterward."<sup>34</sup> A word, to begin with, about her strategy. She notes, correctly, that Blumenberg's theory sees myth as a strategy for dealing with a reality that feels to those living in it as if it has total control over their destiny. Further, she notes that Blumenberg explains this feeling by appealing to the claim that humans are not biologically adapted to a given environment. This entails an absence of instinct, that is to say, human behavior is not dictated by stimuli: a hiatus has opened up between stimulus and response, a hiatus that would be deadly were some other means for dealing with the stimulus not discovered. It is this hiatus that accounts for the possibility of freedom Ross mentions.<sup>35</sup> I want to draw attention to this hiatus, for it has a central place in my reading of Blumenberg, because it is in this space that all of the cognitive developments that lead to

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<sup>33</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." 385

<sup>34</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." 385.

<sup>35</sup> Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." 389.

the human way of life open up. Her strategy, however, is to argue that one must not accept the claim that “instinct deficiency” distinguishes the human species from other animals, and points to the specifics mentioned above. But it is not the specific vulnerability of being prey, nor an awareness of it, that makes humans unique in Blumenberg’s theory. To the extent that that which makes humans unique is something that precedes the development of the “symbolic” tools that Ross describes, it would be the “choosing against selection” and specialization, the “exploiting a favorable opportunity for survival” by “escaping the pressures of selection” that Blumenberg describes.<sup>36</sup>I think that Ross is correct that Blumenberg’s theory is not based on the sort of evidence that she adduces, and that it is perhaps vulnerable here.<sup>37</sup>His theory, however, is constructed in such a way that it might explain the evidence, and so is situated prior to the evidence, and must stand or fall on the coherence of that explanation. Since it may be seen to be compatible with the competitor used here to point out its shortcoming, if they are situated sequentially, then its coherence withstands this test.

Robert Segal’s essay “Hans Blumenberg as Theorist of Myth” is concerned primarily with Blumenberg’s attitude toward origins: Segal accepts Blumenberg’s claim that myth fails to give the origin of things, but not the claim that the theory of myth, on this basis, should not concern itself with the origin of myths, nor the claim that myth is

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<sup>36</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 4.

<sup>37</sup> One of my guiding strategies is to avoid faulting a work, any work, for failing to do what I *expect* it to, and to ask, rather, what it *is* doing. If Blumenberg is not trying to explain all of the paleontological evidence that Leroi-Gourhan explains, perhaps that is because he is trying to do something different. It then becomes the task of the reader to try to discern what he *is* trying to do. My effort in this dissertation will accordingly not spend time on the possible vulnerability I acknowledge here, but rather will be an attempt to discern what Blumenberg accomplishes in what he has done, to read the book that this is, and not to criticize it for not being what it is not.

not *concerned* with origins.<sup>38</sup> It becomes clear that Segal's reading of Blumenberg is not very close. He mentions, for instance, Blumenberg's criticism of Freud for rooting myth in pleasure—in the “absolutism of images and wishes”—when in fact this is an integral part of Blumenberg's theory of myth, corresponding to life in the caves, safely hidden from the absolutism of reality.<sup>39</sup> Nothing in Blumenberg's use of this phrase is a criticism.<sup>40</sup> Further, his choice of Tylor as the exemplar of the Enlightenment and Campbell as the exemplar of Romanticism generate some assumptions about what Blumenberg means by these terms, and these tendencies, that are not borne out in a reading of *Work on Myth*.<sup>41</sup> One suspects they were chosen just for this reason. Segal raises some issues that need to be addressed, particularly about origins, but his irritation that Blumenberg denies that “myth is primitive science” stems from a failure to understand what Blumenberg means by this denial, and the way he is using this denial to emphasize what he thinks myth is doing.

I suggest that Segal's question here can be answered. Theory, modern science, and perhaps philosophy, take it as their task to answer questions. No answer is final, but all answers are rather understood, by the questioner and the one providing answers, to be a basis for further questions. This is the internal logic of the theoretical attitude. What Blumenberg argues is that this is not the logic of myth. Even if a myth is providing a story to explain some phenomenon, the explanation is given because the explanation will reduce anxiety, will put the mind of the questioner at ease, and it is in the reduction of

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<sup>38</sup> Segal, Robert. “Hans Blumenberg as Theorist of Myth.” *Theorizing About Myth*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 143-152. 145.

<sup>39</sup> Segal, Robert. “Hans Blumenberg as Theorist of Myth.” 149.

<sup>40</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Tylor appears one time in the index, and is not criticized in the text where he is mentioned. Campbell does not appear at all.

anxiety that we see the internal logic of myth, as Blumenberg's histories of myth reception show.

The final entry in this subset is Kirk Wetters' "Working over Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute."<sup>42</sup> This essay begins with an attempt to characterize or position Blumenberg's work in general, but when he turns to his real topic, "the absolute," he begins with *Work on Myth*. His is a very interesting reading: he is sensitive to Blumenberg's almost always tacit suggestion of a connection between "the absolutism of reality" and twentieth Century political absolutism, and to Blumenberg's orientation of resistance to absolutism, a central aspect of his theory of myth.<sup>43</sup> His suggestion that "metaphorology" may always have been "meant [...] as a theory of myth" is also very interesting.<sup>44</sup> Like Ifergan, Wetters is also sensitive to the function of storytelling, in this case to its ability to work against absolutism.<sup>45</sup>

The last subset of the literature are those that address *Work on Myth* primarily, and as a whole. Barash argues that one may see a relation, in Ernst Cassirer's philosophy and in Blumenberg's, between their theory of myth and their understanding of the way myth manifests in history, which he links explicitly to politics. Although this thesis is perhaps not controversial, the direction in which Barash takes it is interesting. He begins by showing divergent readings of the "myth of Er" from Book X of Plato's *Republic* provided by Cassirer and Blumenberg, readings in which he finds their respective notions of the way myth manifests itself in history. Cassirer reads this myth as a transition in the

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<sup>42</sup> Wetters, Kirk. "Working over Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute." *Telos* 158 (Spring 2012). 100-118.

<sup>43</sup> Wetters, Kirk. "Working over Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute." 105.

<sup>44</sup> Wetters, Kirk. "Working over Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute." 113.

<sup>45</sup> Wetters, Kirk. "Working over Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute. 117-118.

mythical way of thinking, leading “toward the overcoming of its fundamental tendency,” in that the souls are given the ability to choose their own daemon, the ability to shape their own life, rather than having be it determined by fate.<sup>46</sup> Blumenberg, on the other hand, finds in this myth an early version of the type of thinking that will later come to be known as theodicy: the condition of the world rests on human shoulders in order to free the gods, who here are thought of as being good, of responsibility for a life that lacks obvious justice and reason.<sup>47</sup> Barash links these readings to the political orientations of the two philosophers, progressive in the case of Cassirer, and cautious, if not conservative, in the case of Blumenberg. Barash’s reading of the importance of theodicy in *Work on Myth* is compelling. The recognition of the reoccupation of its basic shape and logic by the philosophy of history, and that both are forms of “modern myth,” points to the importance of this theme in *Work on Myth*, despite the occasional way it surfaces there.<sup>48</sup> His connection of this to Blumenberg’s political orientation is fascinating. I disagree with his claim, however, that Blumenberg exempts Cassirer from his critique of philosophies of history: “Evidently, Cassirer’s philosophy of myth, in spite of its entrapment within the confines of philosophy of history, did not lapse into the closed horizon of the mythologies inspiring such modern projects.”<sup>49</sup> The “closed horizons” he mentions here were objectionable, and mythical, because “they ‘dispelled any desire to ask further questions,’” a central characteristic of Blumenberg’s theory of myth, and they

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<sup>46</sup> Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. “Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg’s Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Myth.” 331.

<sup>47</sup> Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. “Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg’s Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Myth.” 334.

<sup>48</sup> Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. “Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg’s Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Myth.” 338.

<sup>49</sup> Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. “Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg’s Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Myth.” 340.

“acted as if ‘there were no more questions to ask.’” Barash claims that Blumenberg does not aim this critique at Cassirer’s philosophy of history. Although it is not explicit, he does aim it at Cassirer’s, and Kant’s, general philosophical orientation, specifically at his commitment to symbolic forms.

The culture-circle theory was based on the assumption of a tradition extending, with a high degree of constancy, through man’s entire history, and traced the cultural correspondences back to an initial condition of mankind in an original circumscribed region. Mankind’s capacity for transporting constants through time and space, in this theory, looks amazing. If one doesn’t concede it, one can’t avoid more or less explicit assumptions to the effect that man is fundamentally equipped, independently of cultural tradition, with categorical or symbolic modes of ‘digestion.’ One is then threatened by the fate of all Platonisms: the derivation of accomplishments from innate or remembered forms can ‘explain’ everything only by the fact that it has been there all along. If one had to acquiesce in that, one would at any rate have acquiesced in the weakest form of theory.<sup>50</sup>

I would argue that it is a guiding presupposition of Blumenberg’s to pursue inquiry as far as he is able, and to avoid presuppositions or conclusions that shut inquiry down.

According to this, Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms shares with myth the effect of shutting questions down, rather than encouraging them.

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<sup>50</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 53.

Pini Ifergan's essay "Reading Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*" is set up as a question about Blumenberg: 'is he a philosophical skeptic?'<sup>51</sup> It begins by suggesting that, if a reader were to assume that he is, that reader would have an easier time working through Blumenberg's writings, freed as she would be from the obligation to find a theory or position that is Blumenberg's own. Ifergan later introduces a distinction between one who is a skeptic about the "possibility of knowledge," and one who is a skeptic about "the claim of knowledge to uncover ultimate and absolute truths about reality."<sup>52</sup> Ifergan argues that, whatever Blumenberg's position, his tendency to rely upon anecdote and narrative, his "erratic style" that is full of digression, actually blurs the boundary between these two versions of skepticism. This first part is definitely interested in Blumenberg's philosophical approach as a whole.

Ifergan's thinking about *Work on Myth* has a particular and pointed force. For instance, he contrasts parts 1 and 2 of *Work on Myth*, in which Blumenberg lays out what we might call the theoretical tools of his theory of myth, to part 3, in which he presents a history of the Prometheus myth. Ifergan argues that Blumenberg fails or refuses, altogether, to provide sufficient conceptual linkage between these two divisions. The definition he provides of myth in parts 1 and 2 is not enough to make intelligible the history as a case study, and reversing the direction, i.e. understanding the history to be the raw material from which the theory was derived, shifts the emphasis of the book to the question of whether one can imagine the absence of such myths in modern literature and theory, a question that interests Blumenberg, but fails to do justice to the richness of parts

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<sup>51</sup> Ifergan, Pini. "Reading Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*." *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 65, January 2016. Pp. 55-72

<sup>52</sup> Ifergan, Pini. "Reading Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*." 60.

1 and 2. He puts similar pressure on the connection between work on myth and work of myth, arguing that it is impossible to reconstruct the transition from one to the other. His answer to the objections he raises is, interestingly enough, the concept of significance, which he argues provides a “conceptual bridge” between the two halves of the book, as he identifies them, and between the work of myth and work on myth.<sup>53</sup> The story I tell is more complicated than this, but the way Ifergan, in describing this bridging function, identifies two meanings of ‘significance,’ seems compatible with my account. His account of the challenges one faces in the attempt to read *Work on Myth* as a unified whole poses perhaps the most direct challenge to my own way of reading Blumenberg. Although my reading focusses on parts 1 and 2 of *Work on Myth*, I hope the result will provide the groundwork for such a unified reading of the work as a whole.

Angus Nicholls’ *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth* is the first book devoted exclusively to *Work on Myth* to be published in English.<sup>54</sup> It is an enormously helpful resource for placing Hans Blumenberg’s work in its historical and intellectual context: it includes biographical material, discussions of the traditions of myth theories on which his work relies (Chapter 2); those of German philosophy, such as Philosophical Anthropology, Phenomenology, Existentialism, and the Philosophy of Life (Chapter 3); the pivotal importance of the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos in 1929 for the philosophy that follows it, including Blumenberg’s turn to anthropology (Chapter 4); there is also a discussion of the way his reading of the reception history of the Prometheus myth structures Blumenberg’s thinking about myth

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<sup>53</sup> Ifergan, Pini. “Reading Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*.” 71.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2016). Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2016)

and anthropology, and especially his reading of Goethe in the second half of *Work on Myth* (Chapters 5 and 6); and finally two chapters on the political implications of *Work on Myth*. I have relied heavily, in some ways, on this primarily philological work, especially in that it has freed me to attend to other matters, having to do with the shape and character of Blumenberg's thought. Some of the ways in which my reading differs from Nicholls' are signaled in footnotes in the main text of this dissertation.

Another longer work that deals with *Work on Myth* is "Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key," by Vida Pavesich.<sup>55</sup> Her work is much closer to mine than is Nicholls', and has been very suggestive to me in the ways that it differs from my own. Primary among these is the fact that she locates the key to the objectivity that is necessary for myth's function in intersubjectivity, which is inherent to the relationship between the teller of a story and an audience, and between one teller of a story and another.<sup>56</sup> I, on the contrary, focus on the indefinite object of anxiety, that on which myth works, to explain this objectivity that is both necessary and different in kind from that available to natural science. I think that Pavesich's emphasis on intersubjectivity is not only right, but that it also points to a shortcoming of my own work. The intersubjective domain does constitute a kind of objectivity that is necessary for myth, but it does not suffice, I think, to guarantee the connection to the non-human world that Blumenberg points to, in order to distinguish myth from fiction.<sup>57</sup> Both aspects are important to Blumenberg, and ought to be included in an understanding of the function of myth. This is to say, however, that

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<sup>55</sup> Pavesich, Vida. "Chapter Three: The Modes of Orientation: Myth, History, and Rationality as Adaptations." "Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key."

<sup>56</sup> Pavesich, Vida. "Chapter Three: The Modes of Orientation: Myth, History, and Rationality as Adaptations." "Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key." 177.

<sup>57</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 67-68.

though there are many points of contact, our accounts differ at a fundamental level, and so they should allow for an interesting dialogue.

With the exception of the last subsection, my work differs from the existing literature primarily in that it is covering different ground, i.e., I am presenting a reading of different parts of Blumenberg's writing than it is. There is greater overlap in the third section, but here my work is distinguished in other ways. My work is different in kind than that of Nicholls, in that his is philological and mine attempts to be philosophical. It is distinguished from the rest of the literature in this subsection by the importance I attribute to two features of Blumenberg's theory of myth: the indefinite, and the role it plays in his conception of significance, on the one hand, and the importance of the narrative patterns, "the means of operation with which significance works," on the other.<sup>58</sup> I trace different aspects of the role of the indefinite in each chapter. In Part II of this dissertation, I argue for the foundational importance of the narrative patterns in Blumenberg's account of the power of myth's attraction and function, as well as in myth's longevity.

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<sup>58</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 70.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ABSOLUTISM OF REALITY AND THE INDEFINITE

#### I

Blumenberg takes as his point of departure for *Work on Myth* a quotation from a letter Franz Kafka wrote to Max Brod:

They could not put the determining divine principle at sufficient distance from themselves; the whole pantheon was only a means by which the determining forces could be kept at a distance from man's earthly being, so that human lungs could have air.<sup>59</sup>

Blumenberg's primary interest in this work is not the "determining divine principle" itself, but rather the way myth functions. Myth's function, however, involves the transformation of our understanding of this "principle." What is decisive for Blumenberg's theory of myth, then, is not the reality, or lack of reality, of the gods, but rather the fact that there appears to be, in the prehistory of the human way of life, the feeling that there is some principle that has the power to determine this creature's destiny, the feeling that this creature absolutely lacks the ability to secure for itself the conditions of its survival. Blumenberg includes Kafka's quote as the epigram to chapter 1 of Part I of *Work on Myth*, and follows this with the question of "the mastering of reality:"

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

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<sup>59</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. Translated by Robert Wallace. (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985.), 3.

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 realization away from those who think they have already awakened from it.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas on the one hand, a culture, such as our own, that has distanced itself to so great a degree from so much that threatens its survival, can only with difficulty understand the intensity of the desire, and the need, to feel that it is possible to attain some control over the conditions of one's existence; there are many, and certainly have been many,<sup>61</sup> who experience the urgency of these threats, and who would accordingly experience the "dream" of the mastery of reality differently and more powerfully.<sup>62</sup> What is at issue in this talk of mastering reality, and for whom is it an issue? This chapter opens with a distinction between those who are bored with, and are even able to forget the "dream" of "the mastering of reality," and those who would "snatch its realization away" from this more fortunate group.<sup>63</sup> The suggestion that it is a dream may put the possibility of its realization in doubt, as I think it is meant to, and, further, the suggestion that its realization may be snatched away has the same purpose. The combined force of these two

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<sup>60</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Bassler, O. Bradley. *Diagnosing Contemporary Philosophy with the Matrix Movies*. London, Palgrave Macmillan. 2017, 144. Bassler's suggestion that in this passage there is a figure of the confrontation between the first and the third world, in which, at the very least, the dream of mastery would appear differently to those on the different sides of the divide reflects, and is perhaps an example of, the way significance appears differently, or, rather, that the same story might have different significance for different auditors, depending on the "assertion needs" she brings to the hearing. See below (or above?) (reference) for assertion needs.

<sup>62</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3

<sup>63</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3

suggestions leads us to the conclusion that what is at issue in the idea of mastering reality is at issue for everyone, whether or not everyone is often confronted with the necessity of this dream. To gain a clearer picture of what is at issue in this phrase, however, we will need first to work through considerations of what Blumenberg meant by “mastering” and what is involved in mastering, as well as what is meant by “reality.” This dissertation will constitute one path through these considerations.

Blumenberg does not begin his work by defining reality,<sup>64</sup> however, but rather by contrasting the dream of the “mastering of reality” to his hypothetical “*status naturalis*,” what he calls “the absolutism of reality.”<sup>65</sup> As a point of departure, one might understand the “absolutism of reality” to refer to the total domination of the individual by reality, and the “dream of the mastering of reality” to refer to its opposite, the idea that the individual can exercise total control over her reality. If we accept these two parameters, which may be thought of as ideal conditions which represent the limits that define the domain within which human life takes place, then we can think of the work of myth as an effort to move away from the ‘absolutism of reality’ and toward its mastery. This suggestion will attain greater clarity as we proceed. For the present, it will suffice to notice that the “absolutism of reality” and the “mastery of reality” represent idealities, conditions that do not have

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<sup>64</sup> What can be defined and what cannot? Why are we unable to define those things that cannot be defined? These are questions that we certainly would like to answer, but that Blumenberg perhaps did not equip us to answer, at least not in such a way that we were able to be certain such answers would correspond to his own answers. Certainly he makes the claim that the concept of ‘significance’ cannot be defined, although it can, he tells us, be explained. It is also the case that he does not spend a lot of energy clearly defining his terms. Often enough, what appears to be a definition of a term is not meant to be exhaustive or sufficient (e.g. “‘Reason’ just means being able to deal with something—in the limiting case, with the world,” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63). It will not benefit us, however, to assume that terms are never used in a precise, and even almost in a technical sense. We must be wary also of spending too much time on the terms themselves. We will consider at some length what Blumenberg intends by such terms as “reality,” “world,” “reason,” and “significance,” but we must bear in mind that there is in Blumenberg’s writing on the one hand a certain fluidity, and on the other hand a tendency to think in the terms of whichever author’s work he has just cited, or even whose work has at some time led to the reflection at issue.

<sup>65</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3

historical actuality. Rousseau accorded to his “*status naturalis*” just such an ideality, and its purpose was to illuminate the reality of human nature, the “nature of things,” as he understood it.<sup>66</sup> However great the difference between his explanation of why this state could not have been actualized in history and any explanation that Blumenberg might accept, it is my understanding of Blumenberg’s work that his concept of the “absolutism of reality” is put forward to illuminate the function of myth by showing its relation to what one might still call, although with hesitation, human nature.<sup>67</sup> As we shall see in greater detail, the “absolutism of reality” is a flexible ideality, especially because the term “reality” functions almost as a variable, in that a given world orientation or way of life will have an implicit or explicit concept of reality but, given Blumenberg’s understanding

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<sup>66</sup> Rousseau, Jean Jacques. “Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind.” In *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*. Ed Dunn, Susan. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 88.

“Nay, Few of our own writers seem to have so much as doubted, that a state of nature did once actually exist; though it plainly appears by sacred history, that even the first man, immediately furnished as he was by God himself with both instructions and precepts, never lived in that state, and that, if we give to the Books of Moses that credit which every Christian philosopher ought to give to them, we must deny that, even before the Deluge, such a state ever existed among men, unless they fell into it by some extraordinary event: a paradox very difficult to maintain, and altogether impossible to prove.

Let us begin, therefore, by laying aside facts, for they do not affect the question. The researches, in which we may engage on this occasion, are not to be taken for historical truths, but merely a hypothetical and conditional reasonings, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin, like those systems, which our naturalists daily make of the formation of the world. Religion commands us to believe that men, having been drawn by God himself out of a state of nature, are unequal, because it is His pleasure they should be so; but religion does not forbid us to draw conjectures solely from the nature of man, considered in itself, and from that of the beings which surround him, concerning the fate of mankind, had they been left to themselves.”

More interesting than the argument for why he believes that this was not a historical state, which is simply that he knows from scripture that the first humans were equipped “by God himself with both instructions and precepts,” is his reason for including this state, and, to some degree, basing his account upon it. Here he claims that the account of the state of nature is hypothetical, and that it is “fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin.” Blumenberg himself refers to this fact, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences*, Ch. 4, especially 110-111, shows Blumenberg’s avoidance of “substantialist presuppositions” in his approach to philosophical anthropology in favor of a functional and historicist approach to what it means to be human. What remains, however, is the question of the degree to which the presence of “assertion needs,” albeit different needs at different times, amounts to a historical constant, a kind of negative account of human nature. (Quotation from Blumenberg, Hans. *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 523, quoted in Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 111.

that humans do not have any direct access to reality itself, there is no single fixed concept of reality. Myth then is a tool for moving away from absolutism, the fear of being dominated by the world or something in it, the fear of having no means of self-preservation, whatever this might mean at a given time or place or for an individual. Blumenberg's theory of myth, then, is concerned with the motion away from, that is, with movement and change into and through history. His theory of myth, as we shall see, is very much also a theory of what it means to be human, of the conditions that make human life possible. To this end, Blumenberg's theory of myth is oriented to the historicity of this way of life: first in that the human way of life came to be in response to changing conditions, second in that the human way of life involves continuing changes to which that way of life must respond, and third in that the attempt to understand this way of life is made from some position within this sequence of changes, and thus cannot presuppose a privileged vantage from which to view it. The theory of myth, then, is not only able to shed light on what myth is, but also, by attempting to understand myth in terms of what it does, in terms of what we might call its anthropological function, it sheds light also on what it means to be human, and on the way that the human way of life also changes in response to changing conditions.<sup>68</sup>

Blumenberg provides an image for the concept of the "absolutism of reality" by constructing an "initial situation," a situation which is not, as I have argued above, intended to be understood as a historical reality. If it is to be able to show us "how to

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<sup>68</sup> I take it that this is what he means when he suggests that a theory of myth might aim at the understanding of "what has happened:" "[n]o theory of myth, if it is meant to show how to understand what has happened, can lose sight of this perfect convergence of Christianity with myth (despite the suspension of its means)." Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 24. Presumably, then, the theoretical construct he calls "the absolutism of reality" need not be a historical reality if it shows us "how to understand what has happened." (emphasis added).

understand what has happened,” however, it cannot be purely fictional either, but must occupy some middle ground, that is to say it must be at least a historical possibility. My approach to the “initial situation” will differ from that of Nicholls, who positions it with respect to current theories of paleoanthropology and paleontology,<sup>69</sup> and that of Pavesich, who treats it as a thought experiment or “thought model.”<sup>70</sup> Although this last designation might fit my conclusion well enough, I hope to show how it operates within this work, its function, so that we might better understand why such a model is called for. Blumenberg claims, first of all, that it is called for, that one encounters “the necessity of picturing an initial situation” in the attempt to discover the conditions that made human life possible.<sup>71</sup> The scenario he constructs shows the way in which one particular type of threat faced by this creature required it to develop new capacities as the result of which the human way of life came into being. As we shall see in more detail below, “work on myth” is a way of dealing with a need, and it is constitutive for this human way of life. This threat to survival is the result of a rapid change in the conditions of the life of this creature.

Whatever may have been the appearance of the prehuman creature that was induced, by an enforced or accidental change in the environment it inhabited, to avail itself of the sensory advantage of raising itself upright into a bipedal posture and to stabilize that advantage in spite of all its internal disadvantages in the functioning of organs—that creature had, in any case, left the protection of a more hidden form of life, and an adapted one, in order to expose itself to the risks of the

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<sup>69</sup> Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth*. New York and London: Routledge (Taylor and Francis). 2015. (cf. 112-116).

<sup>70</sup> Pavesich, Vida. “Chapter Three: The Modes of Orientation: Myth, History, and Rationality as Adaptations.” “Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key,” 174.

<sup>71</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3.

widened horizon of its perception, which were also those of its perceivability. It was, as yet, no forward thrust of curiosity, no gain in pleasure from the broadened horizon, no exaltation at acquiring verticality, but merely the exploitation of a favorable opportunity for survival by avoiding the pressure of selection, which would have driven toward irreversible specialization. It was a situational leap, which made the unoccupied distant horizon into the ongoing expectation of hitherto unknown things. What came about through the combination of leaving the shrinking rain forest for the savanna and settling in caves was a combination of the meeting of new requirements for performance in obtaining food outside the living places and the old advantage of undisturbed reproduction and rearing of the next generation, with its prolonged need for learning, now in the protection of housing that is easy to close off from the outside.<sup>72</sup>

Blumenberg's theory of myth has its source in this change of environment that makes possible a change in posture. There are two main aspects of this change: there is the transformation of this creature's body, and the exchanging of the forest for the savanna and the cave. The change of body, from a quadrupedal to an upright bipedal posture, leads to a "sensory advantage," in that the distance to which it is able to see is greatly increased. This advantage, however, has several concomitant disadvantages. First, the increase in vision is accompanied by an increase in visibility, so that it appears to predators from a much greater distance, just as they appear to it. Because both eyes point in the same direction and, as a result, its field of vision is limited to what is in front of it, and much more than this limited field is behind it, this is a significant disadvantage. In

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<sup>72</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

addition, the two-footed creature lacks the speed of its four-footed ancestor. Its new posture is not as conducive to organ-function. It's new habitat also lacks the cover of the trees, and their safe haven, into which it once was able to flee. However one conceives of the causes of this change, this creature has left the environment to which it was adapted, and has taken on a new form, one that is less suited to flight in any environment. In Blumenberg's account, the motivation for this change is "a sensory advantage," and this advantage is stabilized, despite its disadvantages, because the avoidance of biological specialization constitutes "a favorable opportunity for survival by avoiding the pressures of natural selection."<sup>73</sup>

In order to understand what Blumenberg might mean when he claims that "avoiding the pressures of selection" would present a "favorable opportunity for survival," it will be helpful first to identify the elements of natural selection that are relevant to his thinking.<sup>74</sup> First, a species evolves over time to become suited to life in a particular environment. This adaptation is driven by the need to find food and shelter, to escape predation, and to reproduce, and these things are difficult to accomplish. We can think of the difficulty of accomplishing these tasks as exerting a kind of pressure on an organism. The particular form these pressures take is determined by the character of the habitat, by the other organisms living there, the climate, and the particularities of the species in question, its physical abilities and limitations. A species changes over time in response to these pressures, formed by them, as it were, so as to be able to meet these needs in specific ways, and in a specific place, or type of place. Successful evolution, then, is the adaptation to a particular environment. As a species adapts to an environment,

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<sup>73</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

it becomes more suited to survival in that environment, and less suited to survival in any other. This is the “specialization” to which Blumenberg refers.<sup>75</sup> This adaptation includes the development of specialized organs and functions that are suited to the environment, but what is more important for our purposes is the development over time of instincts, of specific behaviors to deal with specific types of situations that arise for an organism within an environment. These behaviors tend to succeed, they tend to allow for survival, and part of this success lies in the fact that the behaviors are automatic, or nearly so. An important aspect of the language of adaptation and instinct is that instinctive behaviors do not rely upon deliberation, willing, choosing, judging, or knowing, all of which presuppose that some mental act is interposed between stimulus and response and, to allow for this act, some span of time is also interposed. “Instinct” suggests the absence of all this, and relies upon it. Instinctive behavior is successful because it is immediate, because it gives to the creature that must flee a predator or pursue its prey an advantage that would be lost with any hesitation.

When the creature abandons the forest for the savanna, it loses not only a habitat to which it was adapted, but the adaptations themselves, or at least their usefulness. The instincts that guided it safely through its life in the forest can no longer serve this purpose reliably. Because such automatic behaviors aren’t reliable, this creature must find some other way of dealing with the dangers it faces. With this need, however, a moment opens between stimulus and response. In fact, the response itself is not yet determined. The creature now faces a moment of confusion, of not knowing what to do. To describe the same situation another way: the newly expanded horizon that results from an upright

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<sup>75</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

posture and a new life on the treeless plain represents the “sum of the directions” from which an attack is possible.<sup>76</sup> Because of the lack of shelter or safe haven on the savanna, and because the creature is simply not fast enough to escape consistently, it cannot wait until its predator has emerged over the horizon if it is to find safety. It cannot wait for the stimulus to become present. Instead, the creature must deal with the threat before it has entered its field of vision. There is nothing in the adaptation of this creature, however, no instinct, that has prepared it for this need. This change in habitat and stature has produced a need for a sudden change in the way that it deals with danger:

What is here called the absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with this situational leap, which is inconceivable without super-accomplishment in consequence of a sudden lack of adaptation. Part of this is the capacity for foresight, anticipation of what has not yet taken place, preparation for what is absent, beyond the horizon. It all converges on what is accomplished by concepts. Before that, though, the pure state of indefinite anticipation is ‘anxiety.’ To formulate it paradoxically, it is intentionality of consciousness without an object.<sup>77</sup>

Blumenberg distinguishes this ‘anxiety’ from fear, which the creature would certainly have experienced prior to the “situational leap:” fear in the face of a predator, which would be the stimulus to trigger the flight response, would have been common. What is important here is the difference between the concrete object of fear and the indeterminate object of anxiety.<sup>78</sup> Anxiety presents to us a second way to conceive the fundamental

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<sup>76</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholls draws the connection between “anxiety” and “thrownness” on the one hand, and myth on the other, in Heidegger’s work, and begins to draw the outlines of Blumenberg’s relationship to Heidegger’s

rupture that leads to the “absolutism of reality,” the first being the opening up of the interval between stimulus and response. If consciousness is, in its stable state, intentional, that is, consciousness of some object, anxiety breaks this stable state apart. It retains the extending of consciousness toward something, and perhaps even intensifies this, but it represents a failure to complete this structure with an object. The ways this creature develops for dealing with this object are all versions of an intensified intension that is stretched out, as it were, extended toward the horizon: expectation, foresight, anticipation, preparation, but it is in each case an extending toward an object that is not so much non-existent as not yet determined. The danger is not illusory, it is, rather, still potential.

Because of this situation, the horizon comes to represent “the sum of directions” from which an attack is possible.<sup>79</sup> But the horizon is, at the same time, the whole of the possible visual field, from a given perspective. The visual field, here, is very important: for it is, in Blumenberg’s account, the motivation for the change in stature, or for the stabilization of this change. Everything this creature can see becomes suffused with the feeling of hostility, of impending attack, and so the world itself takes on this feeling. It is here that we get a feeling of what the “absolutism of reality” designates. The world in which this creature finds itself is characterized by an unfriendliness, an inhospitality, a strange hostility. The state of anxiety resembles or is accompanied by a kind of elementary confusion, since it lacks adapted mechanisms of behavior, and so this hostility

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thought (Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences*. 96-97, 99-103); Pavesich provides a nice way to see how this anxiety can arise in any historical context, as the result of rapid change of conditions (“institutions” or “ingrained habits, attitudes, and patterns of behavior,” and the disorientation that arises from this, e.g. Pavesich, Vida. “Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key.” Dissertation, University of California at San Diego, 2003, 169 – 170, quotation from 170).

<sup>79</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

felt in the absence of an concrete threat, and in the absence of instinctive ways of dealing with things, leaves this creature at risk of “panic and paralysis,” which are the “two extremes of anxiety behavior.”<sup>80</sup> Such responses would surely lead to the extinction of the species, and so it must develop ways of dealing with the anxiety; and it is anxiety the creature must deal with, because the object of fear is not present, is not even defined.

Despite the dangerous behaviors to which anxiety might lead, the moment of confusion in anxiety gives to it its “biological function in separation and transition situations where magnitudes of danger are not predefined.”<sup>81</sup> This is to say that it makes a certain kind of sense, and can in fact support the effort to survive, to be momentarily ‘paralyzed,’ or nearly so, by anxiety when faced with a new situation, when the risks are altogether unknown. It is in fact a way of dealing with those risks, especially if the state of anxiety does not last long. Its benefit diminishes rapidly, however, and this is because, first of all, anxiety is not “realistic.”<sup>82</sup> This is perhaps obvious. What distinguishes anxiety from fear is the fact that, in anxiety, the object that causes it is indeterminate. There are real causes of fear, and it is necessary to prepare for them, but in anxiety this necessity leads the creature to anticipate these objects, and, in a way, to allow the fear

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<sup>80</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7: “One’s ‘horizon’ is not only the sum of the directions from which one has to be prepared for the appearance of undefined things; it is also the sum of the directions to which anticipation of the possibilities and reaching out toward them are oriented. Prevention is matched by presumption [*Präsumption*]. What it fills the horizon with, imaginatively and wishfully, can lack realism as long as this does not extend to the central matter of survival. Even in the late phenomenon of theory there are collections of propositions that persist only by virtue of their irrefutability and that form a halo around a core stock of the necessary realism of propositions, the refutation of which would be lethal. Seen from the point of view of this realism, what appears at best as a residue of what is as yet unrefuted, or as something that, being irrefutable, is of no interest, is now understood only with difficulty. It will be as a means of maintaining a position in the face of an overpowering reality, through millenniums, that stories, which could not be contradicted by reality, were successful.”

that would belong to them to be distributed throughout its environment, to become a feature of the world as a whole. Although the imagination contributes to the way in which this anxiety is experienced, even before it is interpreted as the hostility of some superior power, there is a lack of realism in anxiety. For the 'objectlessness' of anxiety leads to the feeling that it is the world as a whole that is hostile, leads to the feeling that the hostility is actual, rather than potential. This anxiety is the basis of the condition Blumenberg calls the "absolutism of reality:" there is a correspondence between the paralyzing or panic-inducing character of an overwhelming fear of an indefinite object, and the feeling that one lacks, altogether, the power to secure one's own survival, or to influence one's living conditions.

One of the effects of anxiety with which Blumenberg is particularly concerned is related to the sensory advantage that motivates the change in habitat. The unfamiliarity of the new terrain on the one hand, and the overwhelming effect of anxiety on the senses, produces a kind of levelling, an experience of the topographical and geographical differentiations that would allow the creature to get its bearings and to choose one path or course as opposed to another. Everything is experienced with maximal intensity, the senses are overwhelmed. This sensory overload is one version of the confusion, and one version of the paralysis, associated with anxiety. The moment of confusion, and the momentary paralysis, threaten to prevent life from continuing, but they also provide the necessity and the opportunity for the cognitive and cultural developments that lead to the human way of life. In order for these developments to be possible, however, it is necessary first to get past the anxiety, or at least to reduce its intensity.

We have, up to this point, focused on the way that life on the savanna contributed to the transformations that led to the emergence of the human species, according to the hypothetical scenario with which Blumenberg begins his *Work on Myth*. The story Blumenberg tells, however, is that of a life divided between the savanna and caves: the open and exposed life of the hunter on the savanna is characterized by the “absolutism of reality.”<sup>83</sup> At the same time, sleeping, cooking and eating, and the raising of the next generation, took place in caves that could be shut off from the outside world. It is here in the caves that this creature would have been able to compensate for the anxiety of the other aspects of its life by indulging its wishes and dreams. Here there was safety and time to do the work that was necessary to make life on the savanna possible. The term “work” here refers to what is included in Blumenberg’s term “superaccomplishment,” the cognitive developments that allowed for this creature’s survival, and for the development of the human way of life.

Among the relics that dominate our conception of the early ages of man and that mark his image as that of the “tool maker,” we can detect nothing of what also had to be accomplished in order to make an unknown world known, to make an unarticulated field of data surveyable. This includes what, being beyond the horizon, is inaccessible to experience. To fill the last horizon, as the mythical ‘edge of the world,’ is only to anticipate the inception and degenerations of what is unfamiliar. *Homo Pictor* [man the painter] is not only the producer of cave paintings for magical practices relating to hunting, he is also the creature who covers up the lack of reliability of his world by projecting images.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7-8.

Anxiety, as an “over-reaction” to the danger of this new way of life to which the prehuman creature was not adapted, has the effect of overwhelming this creature’s ability to experience the world, of causing everything to be experienced at maximum intensity. Such maximum intensity cannot be sustained, and takes its toll on the nervous system of the creature. But just as important is the fact that it is impossible to navigate an environment when one’s senses have been so overwhelmed, and the data from the senses remain undifferentiated. We will consider more specifically the work that provides such differentiations below. For the present let us notice the way that the part of life lived in the caves reflects the needs produced by the part lived on the savanna. An upright posture on the savanna affords a sensory advantage, but this advantage leads to, or at least leaves the creature open to, the overwhelming of its senses, and a concentration of the attention and anticipation of danger not on the horizon, but on what is not yet visible, over the horizon. There is, then, a simultaneous overwhelming of the visual sense and a focusing of visual attentiveness on what is not visible. There is in this effect, or what it leads to, a lack of realism. The caves afford the opportunity to “project” images onto the understanding of the world. These images serve to cover up the ways in which the world lacks “reliability,” as well as the unrealistic anxieties about this, in order to remove them from immediate attention. These images do not immediately need to be realistic, since they populate the time when this creature is protected by the caves. The degree of realism required is a result of the fact that they must serve the purpose of covering over the “lack of reliability” and anxiety, and therefore cannot come into conflict with that reality to such a degree that the prehuman creature is aware of it.

The absolutism of reality is opposed by the absolutism of images and wishes. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud spoke of the “omnipotence of thoughts” as the signature of archaic animism. We must remember that after the abandonment of the forest, the division of life between caves and open hunting ground set in. The closed space allows what the open space prohibits: the power of the wish, of magic, of illusion, and the preparation of effects by thought. But not only by thought. The illusionary power of magic is less one of thought than one of ‘procedure.’ He who keeps to a rule whose importance and origin no one (any longer) knows can produce a precisely determined result that is not bound to the time and place of the procedure. In accordance with Freud’s personal interpretation of Haeckel’s fundamental biogenetic law, the phylogenetic ‘animism’ that was referred to corresponds to ontogenetic ‘narcissism’ in the main feature of its “overvaluation of one’s own psychical acts.” This is the presupposition of a concept of reality that makes consciousness of it arise from an ensuing “unmistakable protest of reality against narcissism.” It may be that one can take a further step toward the construction of the facts of the case by imagining the absolutism of wishes and images as that of products of the caves, in isolation, at first, from the absolutism of reality. The connection of the one to the other, whether one calls it magic or cult, would only be a secondary confrontation on the basis of an already structured, already differentiated, independent world. In the hunting magic of his cave pictures the hunter reaches, from his housing, out and across to the world.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 8.

We must be careful not to conflate, or to think that Blumenberg is conflating, wish, magic, illusion, various religious rites and rituals, and myth. These all share a common source, according to Blumenberg's account, in the needs generated during this life that was divided between the open savanna and the cave. This commonality involves an attempt to change the condition of life in the open from the safety of life in the cave. This is a part of a pattern that Blumenberg identifies according to which "the perception of [human] interest in relation to reality was played through in illusion and defended in the form of an (unrecognized) fiction before it could even begin to become realistic."<sup>86</sup> Even more than this, however, these activities serve to reduce the intensity of anxiety, and they do this in two ways. First, they serve to cover over or disguise the "lack of reliability" of the world, that is to say, the images, stories, and practices occupy the attention of this creature so that it is not attending to that which makes its life impossible, or, rather, which appears to it to do so. And second, these things produce in the creature the feeling that it is able to improve the conditions of its life, they produce the feeling that reality does not have absolute power over it. The practices themselves may not truly be effective, but because they produce this feeling, they encourage the creature to act as if it can effect such changes.<sup>87</sup> Because the anxiety is an overreaction in the first place, this creature can get away with these actions that produce only illusory changes. Such activities or engagements with the world, further, for the sake of making it more habitable, establish the conditions, at least eventually, for more realistic attempts to improve the conditions of the world. In this way, the images, stories, and practices,

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<sup>86</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Blumenberg refers to "an increasingly rich pattern of 'as if' behavior," Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12.

produce “distance” between the prehuman creature and the “absolutism of reality.” This is to say that such practices are effective in that they work, not on the world, but on the conception of what this creature’s abilities are in relation to the world. Blumenberg is interested also, here, in the fact that the “protest of reality against narcissism” produces consciousness of the concept of reality.<sup>88</sup> This is to say that the creature whose practices are unrealistic is only forced to recognize this lack of realism when confronted with a clash between those practices and reality. But this produces not only a recognition that a given practice is unrealistic,<sup>89</sup> but also a recognition of the concept of reality as such, that there is some interval between the way one understands reality and what it is calling reality. This recognition is a precondition of any effort to reform one’s concept of reality so that it can be more in line with reality.

In the preceding we have seen an example of the work of myth, of one way that myth can function to produce distance from the “absolutism of reality,” and we have seen it in a hypothetical early situation in which myth has not yet been differentiated from magical practices related to cave art, a situation in which image, story, and rite can be seen to serve one purpose. Chapter 2 of this dissertation presents the gradual process of the transformation of the feeling of the hostility of the world into the pantheon of divinities in and by myth, but it will be useful, before moving on, to consider more directly the way that myth specifically relates to the indefinite character of the superior power as conceived in Blumenberg’s concept of “the absolutism of reality:”

The way in which it pursued the reduction of the absolutism of reality was to distribute a block of opaque powerfulness, which stood over man and opposite

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<sup>88</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> This, on its own, may be quite difficult, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12.

him, among many powers that are played off against one another, or even cancel one another out. Not only to be able to shield oneself from one power with the aid of another, but simply to see one as always occupied and entangled with the other, was an encouragement to man deriving from their mere multiplicity. Seen in terms of the history of religion, it is the confining of a diffusely distributed quality of uncanniness and unmanageability into enclaves limited by strict sanctions.<sup>90</sup>

In this passage we see two distinct moments of the work of myth. First, we see the accomplishment of the work of “naming,” which is considered in greater detail in the next chapter. This work has to do with the dividing of a diffuse powerfulness into a multiplicity, among the members of which the power can be distributed. With the help of names, then, myth divides and distributes what was an aspect of the experience of the world itself among powers, which come to be viewed as divinities, and thereby frees the rest of the world, all the places that are not devoted to these divinities, for human action. The second moment we see in this passage involves playing these divinities against one another, entangling them in their own and one another’s affairs, so that their attention is occupied with divine, and not human, matters. This is the work of the stories that build up around those names, which latter Blumenberg calls the “matter [...] that belongs exclusively” to myth.<sup>91</sup>

As we saw above, a sudden change of biotope removed the ancestor of the human species from the environment to which it had adapted, within which its instincts were able to guide it more or less successfully, successfully enough at least to guarantee the species’ survival. After the change in environment, the instinctive signals were no longer

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<sup>90</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 13-14.

<sup>91</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 39.

appropriate to its situation. There was, then, prior to the change, a firmly established connection between certain kinds of stimuli and given responses: certain inputs simply ‘mean’ that certain actions are necessary, that is, things in this creature’s environment have a specific and definite meaning. In the new terrain, however, because the instinctive signals don’t trigger successful responses, this creature has to realize that it cannot rely upon these signals, and it must, rather, after some process of deliberation, find new ways to deal with the dangers. This obviously cannot happen in the presence of the threat. So much we have discussed above. The interval that opens up, however, between stimulus and response, the interval that makes a non-instinctive way of life both possible and necessary, also deprives this creature of the definite meanings that had previously been available to it. It still feels the need for them, but the signals no longer signal some particular, definite and reliable action. We may think of this as the epistemological aspect of the lack of adaptation. Blumenberg describes the way in which this basic situation has remained with humanity in the following passage:

It is a rigid realism of immediacy that is espoused by those who want to decide everything themselves, or to participate in every decision, so as to refuse the favor of institutions that would enable them not to be involved in everything themselves. The ‘art of living’—that primary skill, which has become obsolete even as a phrase, of dealing with and husbanding oneself—had to be acquired as a faculty for dealing with the fact that man does not have an environment that is arranged in categories and that can be perceived exclusively in its ‘relevances’ for him. To have a world is always the result of an art, even if it cannot be in any

sense a ‘universal artwork.’ Some of this will certainly have to be described under the heading of “work on myth.”<sup>92</sup>

This points out, first of all, that myth works not only on the world, or our conception of it, but that work on the life-world also involves work on the self. This has been implicit all along. Reduction of anxiety, a reduction that is necessary for the kind of action that makes life in the world possible, is certainly work on oneself. This passage is of particular interest also because viewing adaptation in an epistemological context helps to draw out the connection between this work and the philosophical position, more commonly recognized in this author’s milieu, that goes by the name skepticism. However Blumenberg’s work aligns with such a category,<sup>93</sup> what is important here is that we encounter expectations, within the history of philosophy and of human life more generally, that we will be able to find answers to fundamental questions, answers that we will be able to hold with great, or at least sufficient, confidence, and that we will be able to access some reality that will certify these answers. In fact, a great variety of such answers, all incompatible with one another, is available, but this proliferation itself casts every particular answer into doubt, since it would require an equal proliferation of fundamental realities to certify them. As we shall see, Blumenberg does not pretend access to fundamental reality, and his theory of myth emerges as compensation for this lack of access, as much as for anything. Myth thus provides ‘significance,’ in compensation for the definite meanings for which we still sometimes long.

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<sup>92</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Nicholls discusses Blumenberg’s general philosophical praxis in terms of skepticism: Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 30. Cf. Ifergan, Pini. “Reading Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*.”

Once he has emerged from the regularity of a condition in which his behavior was determined by his environment, the hominid creature has to deal with the failure of the indicators and determinants of his behavior, with the indeterminacy of what the constituent parts of his reality ‘mean’ for him. He begins to set up ‘significances’ [*Bedeutsamkeiten*] over against the disappearance of strict meanings [*Bedeutungen*].<sup>94</sup>

## II

Blumenberg’s theory of myth is motivated, in part, by the fact that myth has survived not only the long millenia of oral transmission, but more especially the series of ‘enlightenments’ that have worked toward its eradication.<sup>95</sup> In fact, Blumenberg’s account of myth’s formation over this long period of oral transmission provides an answer to the question of how its later survival was possible: myths underwent a strenuous process of testing before an audience, of optimization, such that those elements that worked, that were called for again by the audience, were retained, and those that did not were discarded. Blumenberg describes the condition the myths eventually acquired, or, more precisely, the quality this condition gives to myth, as “pregnance.”<sup>96</sup> This term is related to Goethe’s notion of “imprinted form” [*geprägte Form*].<sup>97</sup> This account has as its basis a metaphor of stamping, according to which the form of a thing is imprinted in some matter. The repeated tellings of a myth, and the refinement of the story to suit the needs and desires of the audience, causes the form of the story, what I will call its

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<sup>94</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 168-169.

<sup>95</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45-46. Not only the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but we can include the efforts of Plato, the Epicureans, the early Christian attitude to myth as well.

<sup>96</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

<sup>97</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68-9.

‘narrative pattern,’ to become ever more sharply defined, and ever more deeply imprinted in the matter.<sup>98</sup> My reading of Blumenberg’s theory of myth, and of the function and importance of significance in this theory, places a lot of emphasis on this metaphor. The historical pressures to which myth is a response exert pressure on a myth and on the one retelling it, and this pressure distorts the narrative pattern.<sup>99</sup> What makes myth so durable is that the pattern is imprinted so sharply in the material that it remains recognizable despite these distortions. Further, the fact that myth can be distorted and retain some identity accounts also for its appeal.<sup>100</sup> At the heart of my reading, then, is the image of a shape or pattern imprinted in some plastic material, such as clay or warm wax: the material can be stretched and pulled and misshapen when some force is applied to it, and both material and pattern are distorted by this force. The pattern itself, however, can still be recognized no matter how distorted it becomes.<sup>101</sup> Blumenberg claims that “pregnance” provides “resistance to factors that efface, resistance especially to time.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 39. “Just as little as the historian, later, can set episode alongside episode and anecdote alongside anecdote, since after all he is less bound to significance in the individual item than he is to overall coherence, so little can myth set emblem alongside emblem without joining them together by means of the matter [*Materie*]—names—that belongs quite exclusively to it.”). In another passage, it seems as if the story engraves itself in the consciousness, specifically the “imagination,” of the audience, i.e., as if the consciousness were the matter. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 76. “The mythical figure imprints on the imagination something that, as an omnipresent elementary fact of the life-world, becomes accessible to conceptual formulation only at a late stage: the enhancement of the value of the goal of an action by the mere increase in the difficulty of carrying it out.”

<sup>99</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 79. “Even if the myth, in order to illustrate this, had to be completely distorted, it nevertheless remained, precisely on account of this pressure, the unsurpassable means by which to express the epoch’s incipient doubt about the finality of its horizon and its narrowness.”

<sup>100</sup> Or begins to explain it. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 150-151.”

<sup>101</sup> This emphasis is at the heart of my disagreement with Nicholls’ suggestion that specific details of a particular version of a myth, specifically Hesiod’s retellings of the Prometheus myth, might cause trouble for Blumenberg’s theory of myth. The details are arrayed around the pattern in response to the distorting pressures: they need not be specific details, they need not confirm that myth is oriented to the securing of the means of survival, to support Blumenberg’s theory, since part of this securing, at least at a certain stage, is hiding this function of myth from us, allowing us to forget it. Nicholls, Angus. *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 134, 135.

<sup>102</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69. Notice here that the metaphor requires us to imagine something hard and unmoving, rather than something plastic, for this aspect of his theory.

Blumenberg dedicates much of his chapter on ‘significance’ to a presentation of the way such narrative patterns manifest “pregnance,” and how they “work on significance,” which we will consider in Part II of this dissertation.<sup>103</sup> Our interest here is in Blumenberg’s account of the way myth came to have pregnancy:

If one asks oneself the question what is the source of the iconic constancy of unit myths, then there is *one* answer, an answer that sounds trivial and all too simple to satisfy our expectations: the fundamental patterns of myths are simply so sharply defined [*prägnant*], so valid, so binding, so gripping in every sense, that they convince us again and again and still present themselves as the most useful material for any search for how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence.<sup>104</sup>

A major distinguishing quality of myth in Blumenberg’s account is the fact that, on the one hand, it is easily recognizable, i.e., has “iconic constancy,” and, on the other, it allows, and perhaps even provokes, what he calls “marginal variation,” a myth encourages one to try new variations.<sup>105</sup> Both of these aspects contribute to myth’s longevity, both the durability of the core and the generation of new interest in the form of new variations. At the center of Blumenberg’s account is another quality of myth, the “useful[ness]” of the material “for any search for how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence.” This is perhaps the most succinct statement of the work accomplished by myth and by “work on myth:” whatever an individual or a society’s attitude is toward divinity, there are questions about the hospitableness of the world,

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<sup>103</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 150-151.

<sup>105</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 34.

about its fitness for human habitation, which cannot be answered through empirical access to evidence. Blumenberg argues that myth deals with such questions. Because it is necessary to deal with these questions, at least in moments of crisis, there is always the possibility, if not at every moment the actuality, of a need for the work that myth performs. Myth, then, survives the efforts of the Enlightenment to eradicate it because it meets a need that goes unmet when we try to rely solely upon the scientific rationality the Enlightenment promoted. The serviceability of myth for the meeting of this need is at the basis of Blumenberg's argument that myth itself is a kind of rationality. The question remains, however, how well this need can be met with forms of culture that are not themselves mythical in derivation, and whether Blumenberg's account of work on myth equips us to understand and to speak about the servicing of these needs, i.e., the mythical functioning of non-mythical materials, or the degree to which myth and its function can be separated. I address this question in the conclusion.

Although the preceding takes for granted that myth is in fact useful for the purpose of dealing with questions of the fitness of the world for human habitation, this dissertation will include a kind of long-form argument that this is the case, that myth is indeed "useful" for this purpose, and this case will have two basic parts. The first, which follows immediately below, is Blumenberg's account of the way that myth came to have the property he calls "pregnance," to which he attributes myth's longevity and its appeal; the second will be an account, in chapters 5, 6, and 7, of the narrative patterns that constitute and manifest pregnancy, and several examples of their appearances in myths, including the way the patterns themselves are distorted by historical pressures and thereby meet changing historical needs. The result of this will illuminate how myth came

to be useful for dealing with such questions, and will present some examples of these dealings. A central part of Blumenberg's account of the way myth takes on the quality of pregnancy is the sheer length of time involved in the process of myth's formation:

One can and must proceed from the assumption that the age preceding the writing down of the early epics, the age in which their contents and forms originated, was several times longer than the passage of continuous written tradition that has been annexed to it. Much more important is the fact that that nonliterate prehistory must have enforced a more fine-textured and intensive testing of the reliable effectiveness of all the ingredients than their whole subsequent history in the form of 'literature'—especially in the form of material canonized for reading in school—could accomplish. The age of oral communications was a phase of continual and direct feedback regarding the success of literary means. It was most nearly comparable to the situation in which rhetoric originated, in which, however, the concrete function [of the delivery] determines the interests and the choice of listeners. Nothing is more unsparing for a text than oral delivery, especially before a public that wants to have a festival and knows how to implement that claim.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to the great length of time, Blumenberg's account emphasizes the importance of the regular performance of the material in front of an audience. He contrasts the requirement faced by the rhapsode, the performance of the mythical material, to the image of the romantic or modern author, struggling alone in his room, or his garret, who, feels no need to entertain his audience.<sup>107</sup> The reciter of the mythical material, by

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<sup>106</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 152.

<sup>107</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 154.

contrast, faces an audience whose desire ranges from the need to forget the immediate terrors of the day, at the earliest stage of this speculative account, to the participant in well-established religious festivals at later stages. In either case, the story that does not cause the audience to want to hear it again, and the rhapsode that does not entertain, are simply forgotten over time. Only those stories that are asked for, again and again, survive. But this is a story not only of survival, it is also a story of the “fine-textured and intensive testing of the reliable effectiveness” of these stories and their elements. This testing allows the elements of the stories that are not effective to be altered, it allows the stories themselves to take on the “pregnance,” the “imprinted form” that gives to myth its unique quality.<sup>108</sup> It is important, too, to this account that the effect and effectiveness of these stories is *reliable*, that the stories themselves demonstrate, in some way, the stability, whose absence in the archaic experience of the world gives rise to the need for myth in the first place.

Before presenting the central component of his theory of the development of myth, Blumenberg distinguishes his theory from certain misconceptions to which it may give rise. One has to do with the dominant quality of myth, which Blumenberg associates with the ability to withstand the wearing-away of time, rather than with origins. The second has to do with the force responsible for giving this quality to myth: imagination,<sup>109</sup> he argues, would not be capable of it. The first concern appears most clearly in opposition to a claim made by Ernst Cassirer:

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<sup>108</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68-69.

<sup>109</sup> Blumenberg’s interest in the “imagination” is related to his efforts to distinguish myth from fiction. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75. He appears to deny to the “imagination” sufficient power to invent the contents of myth, and he attributes to myth a variety of unexpected forms and contents that resembles nature. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 161-162.

Consequently it is questionable whether Ernst Cassirer is right when he says that the true character of the mythical “is first revealed when it appears as the being of origins”: “All the sanctity of mythical being goes back ultimately to the sanctity of origin. It does not adhere immediately to the content of the given but to its coming into being...” The question is whether this ‘original’ quality is not identical with the contents and forms having passed the test of selection, that is, with their durability over against time’s processes of attrition. Thus it is not as a result of the fact that a certain content is “thrust back into temporal distance” and “situated in the depths of the past” that it gets its mythical quality, but rather as a result of its stability through time.<sup>110</sup>

Humans need myth because they live in a world that is too often unreliable. Myth meets this need in several ways. It does this first by covering over this lack. A myth is a story, these stories are entertaining, and so they occupy the attention of the listeners, which prevents them from being overwhelmed by their anxieties about their world. The content of myth contributes to this work as well. We see in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, for example, a story of the “quick passage through” the “primeval times,” which were ruled by more vicious, less reliable gods, to the present times, under the increasingly lawful rule of the increasingly mature Zeus. One finds here a narrative of the process by which the world becomes safer, more reliably inhabitable for human beings. This shows a tendency in myth to place the greatest dangers at the margins of the world, in times long past, in Tartarus, for example. Blumenberg begins to argue here that myth acquires a reliable and durable form, and its contents take on a state, through the long millenia of testing before

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<sup>110</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 160.

an audience, and that this quality itself, of having passed through so much time, is communicated through them and contributes to the feeling of reliability they give.

Far from preserving some original quality, in Blumenberg's account myth takes on the quality that makes it distinctive only over the course of an extremely long process of formation. This quality is able to produce the feeling in its audience of something archaic. This is only one among many of the ways Blumenberg offers an alternative to, and often a critique of, the idea that one must know the origin of myth in order to understand myth, and of the idea that knowledge of such origins is available.

Blumenberg's interest in the relation myth has to the individual imagination can be seen in this connection. Myth cannot appear to its audience to be a fiction<sup>111</sup> if it is to perform its function: for if myth is able to work on the life-world, to produce distance between the causes of anxiety and the audience, it must have some relation to that world, a relation which fiction does not necessarily have.<sup>112</sup> Blumenberg argues in the following passage also that myth cannot simply be understood to be the product of the imagination. Myth strikes its audience as something that the imagination would not have been capable of producing.

What we find empirically present—and not only in organic nature—distinguishes itself, in contrast to the accomplishments of imagination, by the wealth of

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<sup>111</sup> Here the topic of realism in relation to myth appears again, and here we see perhaps more clearly why Blumenberg is so interested in “stories that cannot be contradicted by reality”. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7. The stories are not regarded as made up, but they rely on the absence of realism to provide a distraction from the terrors of reality. This is possible only if the stories are able to avoid coming into conflict with reality, while presenting a view of the world that differs in some ways from the one they inhabit. This points as well to the fact that the object of anxiety is indefinite: its indefiniteness allows it to be represented in different ways without necessarily coming into conflict with reality. This points also to the notion Blumenberg mentions, almost in passing, that basic aspects of human history are difficult to “overcome,” however often we try. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 18. We see, then, in a kind of microcosmic presentation, an account of the persistence of myth.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68; 75.

unexpected material in its forms and modes of behavior. No imagination could have invented what ethnology and cultural anthropology have collected in the way of regulations of existence, world interpretations, forms of life, classifications, ornaments, and insignia. All of this is the product of a process of selection that has been at work for a long time, and in that respect, in this analogy to the mechanism of evolution, approaches the stupendous variety and convincingness of the forms of nature itself. No aesthetic theory would credit the imagination with having invented what has been developed in human history in the way of institutions. The Neptunism of selection always has a head start, in relation to the Vulcanism that Idealist aesthetics expects of the imagination, as a result of its having shaped the latter's possibilities. So the aesthetics of the 'imitation of nature,' was not all mistaken when it included the canon of the mythical materials in its normative realm: The evidentness of myth would have arisen 'in the manner of nature' and would be equal to nature in the validity of its patterns.<sup>113</sup>

We see already in this passage reference to the idea that we can understand the formation of culture on an analogy with the formation of the various parts of "organic nature," that is, by the process of natural selection. Here Blumenberg looks to this theory to explain the variety of what we find in human culture, particularly in the institutions various cultures rely upon for the organization of their lives. Blumenberg explicitly distances himself, or his position, from the claims of "Idealist aesthetics," and, implicitly, from the

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<sup>113</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 162.

claims about the power of the imagination found in Romanticism.<sup>114</sup> The imagination plays an important role in Blumenberg's theory of myth, but that role is not the generation of the material that makes up the content of myth. The imagination, according to Blumenberg, would not be capable of this. He cites as his evidence, in this passage and in others, the literary genre of utopia, which provides for the imagination all the room it could desire for the production of material.<sup>115</sup> What Blumenberg finds is, to the contrary, that the content of utopia is made up primarily of the "negation" of what exists, rather than of positive conditions differing from those we can find in history that could be attributed to the imagination. The role of the imagination will be seen in 'work on myth,' in the way that the individual imagination distorts the patterns of inherited myth in response to its sensing of historical "problem pressures:" not in generating material, but in transforming that material so that it can meet contemporary and immediate needs.<sup>116</sup>

This is not to deny that the individual imagination played its role in the archaic period, the period of myth's development. What Blumenberg wants to deny is that the imagination is responsible for giving to myth its power, the quality that he calls 'pregnance.' This is not to be attributed to the imagination because it is not a quality that was present in myth from the beginning, but that it took on over the long process of refining and optimization that was necessary to make these stories into a form that could repeatedly perform their function. This was a process that took not generations, not

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<sup>114</sup> How distinct are "the claims of idealist aesthetics" and "the claims about the power of the imagination found in Romanticism"?

<sup>115</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 162; cf. 221-222.

<sup>116</sup> The phrase "problem pressures" appears in Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, E.g. 65. Here it refers to the pressure exerted upon a new epoch by the answers a previous epoch had been able to provide to fundamental questions that could no longer be answered, but that could not simply be ignored, either. I use the phrase here to refer, in perhaps a more general way to refer to the pressure a given way of life or set of assumptions about the world will occasionally face, the ways such things will at times find itself to be in conflict with reality.

centuries, but millenia. The imagination was at work at every step, but what gives to an individual myth its power is not the changes worked at any particular moment, but the whole process.

Blumenberg is interested not only in the variety of the mythical materials, but in what he calls their “convincingness” and the “validity of their patterns.”<sup>117</sup> These qualities are the result of the process of myth’s formation, and could not be the product of imagination. One consequence of the explanation of the formation of myth by means of natural selection, is that it can then be thought of by analogy to the natural world, which Blumenberg does explicitly in this passage. What makes this analogy especially interesting is that Blumenberg likens the effectiveness of myth to that of things formed by nature, i.e. he claims that myth is convincing and that its patterns are “valid”<sup>118</sup> in a way that is unlike the products of the human imagination and more like the products of nature. The “convincingness” approaches the idea alluded to above in the notion that myth is not regarded as fiction, and it is related also to the idea Blumenberg refers to in the passage quoted above when he says that myths “convince us again and again and still present themselves as the most useful material for any search for how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence.”<sup>119</sup> Let us turn to Blumenberg’s account of the way that myth develops, and the role that natural selection plays in this development.

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<sup>117</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 162.

<sup>118</sup> *Gültigkeit*, Blumenberg, Hans. *Arbeit am Mythos*, 180. I do not think that we normally speak of the products of nature as being “valid,” but I do not want to get hung up on the term. The idea is, I think, clear enough, however strange it might be. Myth strikes us, or at least it can, as having something real to offer. This is, I think, at the heart of this notion of validity. Even if my explanation is not convincing, it is nevertheless clear that Blumenberg attributes a certain power to myths that have undergone this process. His claim that it is convincing requires less explanation, and we may simply point to any or all of the modern appropriations of myth, such as those that will occupy our attention in the second part of this dissertation, as evidence.

<sup>119</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 151.

The application of the theory of evolution to man gave rise to doubts from the beginning, not only on account of its establishment of affinities with the animal realm but also especially on account of the possibility of translating an explanatory theorem into a useful legitimating principle for individual and social behavior, a principle such as is designated with the catchword *social Darwinism*.

The misconception that developed, however, consists precisely in the narrow interpretation of the concept of selection that restricts it to its performance in biological explanation. One notices this immediately when one makes use of such an apparently manageable expression as *the development of man*. Its ambiguity is made evident by the completely undisputed thesis that the factors that condition the development that produced man were made superfluous and nonfunctional precisely by their evolutionary success. The organic system resulting from the mechanism of evolution becomes 'man' by evading the pressure of that mechanism by setting against it something like a phantom body.

This is the sphere of his culture, his institutions—and also his myths.<sup>120</sup>

The process of evolution here is the evolution of the human species, and not simply of myth. A functional account of myth attributes to myth a function in human life and, in this case at least, a vital function. As such, myth provides something humans need, something they cannot get along without, and so it arises in the course of humans coming to be what they are. As we saw above, at the beginning of this chapter, the way that evolution, and especially the idea of natural selection, applies to human development is different than the way it traditionally applies to biological organisms, because humans

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<sup>120</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 164-165.

come to be the way they are by “avoiding the pressures of selection,” and the danger of “irreversible specialization.”<sup>121</sup> They sacrificed adaptation to an environment and the corresponding instincts for a way of life that dealt with danger in a different way: less immediate, and increasingly systematic, a way of life that required forethought and planning and the whole realm of mental accomplishment that characterizes human life. Blumenberg presents an account here of the reasons why it might be the case that there is little accessible empirical evidence for such a theory, and for the theory of evolution in general. A species changes in response to pressures, to the conditions in which it lived that made life untenable. Once a change has been accomplished successfully, the conditions that applied pressure to the organism no longer applied that pressure. Not only is the previous form abandoned, the relevance of the condition that gives rise to the new form is left behind.<sup>122</sup>

Blumenberg’s theory of the application of the idea of selection to human development argues that humans were able to survive despite their lack of adaptation and, in fact, they were able to avoid the pressure of adaptation, by submitting their culture to the forces of selection rather than their bodies.

If we can speak of a development of human culture taking place over milleniums, in doing so we imply that 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 artifacts and instruments, instead of himself, to the process of adaptation. The world we live in is a less Darwinistic world the more theory and technology *are* (objectively transposed) Darwinistic worlds. It is to these, rather

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<sup>121</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Ross, Alison. “Between Luxury and Need: the Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology.”

than to their producer, that the “survival of the fittest” applies. 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—that is pushed out far ahead of the frontiers of the body, a front line at which the action of selection on men’s *physis* and *psyche* [nature and soul] is intercepted. Only a manner of thinking that has intentionally made itself incapable of genetic and historiographical consideration of the past can deny that by this criterion there has been, and there is, objective progress. Even a decisionistic interpretation of institutions (in the widest sense) reflects only the late and almost momentary finding of a contingency that any effort on the part of rationality could supposedly easily and quickly lift it above. Unhistoricalness is an opportunistic way of easing our march, with disastrous consequences.<sup>123</sup>

There are two primary aspects of Blumenberg’s theory that appear in this passage. First, there is the account of human development: humans were afforded the protection they need from the pressures of selection by the interposition of their culture between themselves and those pressures.<sup>124</sup> Second, there is the process of the formation of those elements of culture as a result of their interaction with these forces. This analogy, however, is based on the pressures that an environment, or the attempt to survive an

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<sup>123</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 165.

<sup>124</sup> It is important to remember that this is not an account of the origin of culture, or of myth. As we saw in the “initial situation,” the escape from the pressures of selection was a condition that made the cognitive “super-accomplishment,” necessary, and this has to precede much of what we are referring to, in an objective way, as culture. The initial escape from these pressures was accomplished by the new habitat and stature, choices made “against selection” as it were, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4. Again, however, this account is not meant to be taken for a description of historical reality, but functions rather more like a hypothesis, an assumption that will make sense of the later developments, the conditions now in place for which we have documentary evidence. It is for the purpose of understanding myth as we find it, and the changes it has undergone up to the present, as well as for the purpose of trying to understand what it means to be human, that Blumenberg constructs this “initial situation,” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3.

environment, exert upon an organism living in that environment. These pressures are natural, they have to do with any organism's need for food and water, the need to withstand climatic conditions of whatever sort, and to escape predation. Blumenberg's theory of myth argues that myth takes on its form as a result of pressures that also must be attributed to nature, and this is one aspect of the argument, discussed above, that one ought not to attribute the power of myth to the individual imagination. In that part of the account, we see the development of myth, over the course of many thousands of years, in the repetition of stories of the gods, before an audience, and often with some kind of ritual purpose. The stories are refined, they are optimized, so that they take on a form that best suits the audience, that is capable, again and again, of entertaining them. But how does the need to entertain an audience, or even to distract that audience from its anxieties and its fundamental questions, align with the idea that myth acquires its form by interposing it between the forces of nature and the individual? The second half of this dissertation will comprise a long answer to this question, but a short answer is required here. We must begin by recognizing that the anxiety myth addresses is the result of an indefiniteness in the make-up of the human world, an indefiniteness that is felt, from time to time, and is experienced as a threat to a way of life. This indefiniteness is felt especially, for this reason, at times of rapid change of the living conditions, which we may think of, perhaps too tidily, as an understanding or a picture of the way the world works. What I am calling living conditions here tend to change when they cease to perform their function, that is, when they are perceived to come into conflict with reality.<sup>125</sup> This is not to suggest that anyone has a grasp of reality itself, but rather that

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<sup>125</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7. "One's 'horizon' is not only the sum of the directions from which one has to be prepared for the appearance of undefined things; it is also the sum of the directions to which

“the protest of reality” can be felt when the dominant understanding of the world differs to such an extent that this understanding promotes ideas that are contradicted by experience, and in such a way that there isn’t any available explanation of this contradiction within that way of understanding the world.<sup>126</sup> That is to say that the way that the rhapsodes kept the stories interesting is by responding, in their refinement of the stories, to the pressures of selection themselves. Now, assuming that the forces that exert themselves on humans, or that would exert themselves, were we not to interpose our culture between us and them, these problem pressures, are also historical. This is to say that they arise at different times and places in different ways. If each retelling of a myth were to take into account some such specific pressure, or type of pressure, then it would not acquire the sort of form that would make it so suitable to the continued use at different times and in different places. Blumenberg’s account of myth, however, is that myth does have such a form. My contention is that myth acquired such a form, or such a quality, which Blumenberg calls “pregnance,” not only by responding to specific pressures, but also, and more importantly, by responding to the indefiniteness of the pressures as a whole. Myth’s way of responding to this pressure involves a substitution of a story for an anxiety or a question, for something that is indeterminate, giving it, by means of this story, a kind of definition that nevertheless does not dissolve the initial

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anticipation of the possibilities and reaching out toward them are oriented. Prevention is matched by presumption [*Präsumption*]. What it fills the horizon with, imaginatively and wishfully, can lack realism as long as this does not extend to the central matter of survival. Even in the late phenomenon of theory there are collections of propositions that persist only by virtue of their irrefutability and that form a halo around a core stock of the necessary realism of propositions, the refutation of which would be lethal. Seen from the point of view of this realism, what appears at best as a residue of what is as yet unrefuted, or as something that, being irrefutable, is of no interest, is now understood only with difficulty. It will be as a means of maintaining a position in the face of an overpowering reality, through millenniums, that stories, which could not be contradicted by reality, were successful.”

<sup>126</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 8.

indefiniteness. It substitutes a name for what is unfamiliar, but the feeling of unfamiliarity remains, and still surrounds the name.<sup>127</sup> As we will see below, naming is one of the primary functions of myth, or one of the primary ways that myth functions to reduce the absolutism of reality. Blumenberg suggests that myth can be understood as “‘form as such,’ by which to define the undefined,” and that “‘form’” “‘is a means of self-preservation and stability in the world.’”<sup>128</sup> Blumenberg tells us that his use of this term is not epistemological: he is in fact arguing against Cassirer’s symbolic forms.<sup>129</sup> His use of the term operates on two levels. First, he is suggesting that humans, and their ancestors, could not live in a world that was altogether undetermined, a world that they could not survey, in which they could not orient themselves, and in which, as a result, they could not move around. It is form that does away with, that helps them to move away from, the effects of the terror felt in the face of “the absolutism of reality,” form such as is given to things in that world by giving them names, and, with these, a kind of elementary familiarity.<sup>130</sup> But Blumenberg’s account of “pregnance” and “significance” will focus on the way that the form the myths themselves take on, the narrative structure, responds to this need for form. For example, the closed-circle pattern, seen in the “cyclical schema” of the *Iliad* and in *Oedipus* is, on the one hand, “a basic pattern of trust in the world,”<sup>131</sup> and, at the same time, it is this pattern that receives the “pressures of selection” and is distorted by them, in the reception of myth Blumenberg calls “work on myth.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 22; cf. 25, 34-35.

<sup>128</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 168.

<sup>129</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 168.

<sup>130</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 168.

<sup>131</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 85.

<sup>132</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE DOMESTICATION OF THE GODS

Epigram: “To project myth onto the schema of progress would be an ill-considered way of providing it with contemporaneity. It has its own procedure by which to exhibit a directed process, by telling of the gaining of space, and the change of forms in the direction of human ones between the night and chaos of the beginning and a present state that is left undefined. In one sentence: the world ceases to contain as many monsters. In a sense that initially is not ethical at all, but more nearly physiognomic, the world becomes ‘friendlier.’ It approaches what the man who listens to myth needs: to be at home in the world.”<sup>133</sup>

In the course of presenting his theory of myth, Hans Blumenberg reveals several criteria by means of which his theory can be distinguished from potential competitors, e.g., understanding myth in terms of its function, understanding myth in terms of what it no longer is (its *terminus a quo*) rather than what it is not yet (*its terminus ad quem*), and the tendency to seek myth’s origin in the attempt to understand it. We will discuss each of these criteria in its turn, but I want to begin with a brief consideration of the last. There are several problems with the attempt to locate the meaning of myth in its origin, and we will have occasion to consider some of these problems below. For our purposes here, I

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<sup>133</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 113.

want only to touch on two of these problems. The first is that the origins of myth are lost to time:

It is the ‘intentionality’ of the history of the working up of myth that alone allows us, by thinking of it as proceeding constantly over time, also to make conjectures about what in each case are the previous phases of this history. But theories about the origin of myths are idle. Here the rule is: *Ignorabimus*. Is that bad? No, since we don’t know anything about the ‘origins’ in other cases either. Even so, such theories have implications that reach further than the claim to explain the phenomenon allows us to see.<sup>134</sup>

If we must understand the origin of myth in order to understand myth, and we have no access to that origin, then our understanding of myth will either be simply illusory, or must rest upon speculation about these origins. Such speculations have in fact produced some fascinating theoretical constructions, such as can be found in the astronomical and psychological approaches to myth. Despite the interest that these theories may generate in their own right, whether either of these reveals to us the actual historical origin of myth is a question to which we can come no closer to answering than we already have. The problem is not, then, the fact that speculation is involved, but rather that the theories themselves presuppose that we must know the origin in order to know the meaning of myth, but we cannot pass from speculation to knowledge because there is no possible means to certify one theory over another.

We will deal below with Blumenberg’s positive contribution, i.e., with what he means by “the ‘intentionality’ of the history of the working up of myth,” but for now I

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<sup>134</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45.

want to consider what he may mean when he refers to the “implications that reach further than the claim to explain the phenomena allows us to see.”<sup>135</sup> Blumenberg follows this claim with the question of whether “myth work[s] up the terrors of an unknown world, with which it was confronted, into stories,” or whether myth itself produces those terrors, “for which it then also had palliatives to offer.”<sup>136</sup> If the latter is the case, as all enlightenments assume, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand why those enlightenments have had so little success in the attempt to do away with myth. This lack of success is much easier to explain if one assumes the former, but then one has, by doing so, assumed a need and a function for myth, and attributed to myth the rationality Blumenberg finds in it.<sup>137</sup>

Any theory of myth that locates the meaning of myth in its origin has another implication that is perhaps just as close to Blumenberg’s thoughts about myth as this last, and that is the assumption that the full meaning of the myth was present from the beginning. Blumenberg’s theory of myth shows, by contrast, a way that myths might have accrued meaning over the course of a long process of development in the context of oral delivery and the immediate feedback by an audience, as we saw in the previous chapter. The former assumption, that the full meaning of a thing is available from the beginning, and that this meaning is gradually lost or covered over with and by time, is related to an assumption about the philosophy of history, about the need, the desirability, and the possibility of retrieving what has been lost.<sup>138</sup> So theories of myth that fall into

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<sup>135</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45.

<sup>136</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. “Conclusions”

<sup>138</sup> Blumenberg’s response to this attitude is worthy of note. While he does not subscribe to the Romantic view of the world, he is sympathetic at least to what it desires: the idea that things can be repeated, the comfort available in things being repeatable, in that which once was not being irretrievably lost, is among the elementary accomplishments of myth, as well as being at the heart of romanticism. At the same time,

this category, that seek the meaning of myth in myth's origin, reveal, in the meeting of these concerns with philosophy of history and anthropology, what is available to a student of philosophy in the study of myth. Blumenberg does not belabor the fact that the evidence of origins is unavailable, but instead considers this approach in terms of its motivation:

To speak of beginnings is always to be suspected of a mania for returning to origins. Nothing wants to go back to the beginning that is the point toward which the lines of what we are speaking of here converge. On the contrary, everything apportioned itself according to its distance from that beginning. Consequently it is more prudent to speak of the "pluperfect" [*Vorvergangenheit*, the past's past] rather than of "origins." The pluperfect is not that of an omnipotence of wishes, which would have submitted to compromise with reality, as 'realism,' only after colliding with the hostility of what does not bow to wishes. There we can only imagine the single absolute experience that exists: that of the superior power of the Other.<sup>139</sup>

Blumenberg's account is based on the idea that what he calls the absolutism of reality, which represents a kind of limit concept, was, and was felt to be, an untenable situation, one which would have made human life impossible. The measures humans took to distance themselves from this situation, on the other hand, produced features that were and are constitutive of this human life. It is clear from this passage, and several others, not only that Blumenberg is suspicious of attempts to explain myth, or any other long-

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and this is not unrelated, he recognizes in the Philosophy of History underwriting Romanticism patterns such as those with and on which myth works, that is to say, there is something mythical about the philosophy of history. Again, this is not such a problem in itself, unless we fail to recognize it.

<sup>139</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 21.

standing human cultural phenomenon, in terms of its origin, but that he is also wary of the desire, underlying such attempts, to return to these origins. This desire is a significant, and perhaps defining, feature of Romanticism. We will see below how it figures in Blumenberg's critique of Heidegger, but let us notice here that his attitude toward this desire is not always simply critical. After citing a passage from the novella *Auf den Marmorklippen* by Ernst Jünger, with which he illustrates the condition of humans in face of "the absolutism of reality," Blumenberg notes:

This could have described, by approximation, what I have put prior to the mythical empowerment, as its *status naturalis* [state of nature]: In it man's potential power is unknown, unexplored, untested. At the same time the art myth of the *Marmorklippen* shows that everything that man gained in the way of dominion over reality, through knowledge, could not remove the danger of sinking back—indeed, the longing to sink back—to the level of his impotence, into archaic resignation, as it were. But for this sinking back not only to become possible but to become the epitome of new desires, something had to be forgotten. This forgetting is the achievement of distance through 'work on myth' itself. It is a necessary condition of everything that became possible on this side of the terror, the absolutism of reality. At the same time it is also a necessary condition of the fact that the desire to return home to the archaic irresponsibility of simple surrender to powers that cannot be gainsaid does not need to be resisted and is able to penetrate to the surface of consciousness.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

One way to think of the work *of* myth is to see it as the use of the imagination to diminish the paralyzing effects of the recognition that we, as humans, do not have the power to determine the duration and condition of our lives. While such a recognition, and its effects, are possible at any time, the absolutism of reality describes a situation when this domination by reality, or the feeling of it, was an absolute condition, was the defining condition of human life, and this made human life seem impossible. If the paralysis that comes with this anxiety had set in, human life would have been impossible. What is necessary in order to begin to move forward, to begin to determine what sorts of things humans can control, is, first of all, to find a way to forget this anxiety itself. The most immediate form of the distance myth can produce, then, is forgetting. Because the object of this anxiety is indefinite, and because myth substitutes for this indefinite powerfulness a powerful being, the increasing success of myth causes the character of what is feared increasingly to be forgotten. This makes possible the situation in which there can be a desire to return.

Blumenberg is claiming something stronger here, although this dynamic is certainly presupposed. What is desired here is “archaic resignation,” the “simple surrender to powers that cannot be gainsaid.”<sup>141</sup> Let it suffice to say, for now, that we can begin to understand the persistence of myth, despite the efforts of its opponents, as a result of the persistence of this desire to escape the “expenditure” of energy that is required to live as a mature individual, the desire for an authority to which we can surrender.<sup>142</sup> This may not be a universal or a constant desire, but it is a desire that we can

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<sup>141</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>142</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 92. Freud helps us to see the way that myth works at the level of the individual as well as that of the species. While Blumenberg’s attention tends, when speaking of the “absolutism of reality,” towards the coming into being of the species, there is a parallel, which receives a

perhaps imagine. What is most interesting in this passage, and what appears to be in stark contrast to the previous passage, is the claim that this desire does not need to be resisted. If “no one wants to go back to the origin” that is the “absolutism of reality,” how can it be that the desire to return does not need to be resisted? The answer to this question is, I’m afraid, all too simple, at least at first glance. The work of myth itself is a kind of substitution, and so the returns that are permitted, that are available to us, too, are substitutive. In fact, Blumenberg illustrates the permissibility of this desire in the sentence following the one above: “I see it as itself a mythical way of expressing this state of affairs when Ferenczi, in his *Theory of Genitality* of 1924, associates with the birth trauma the desire to return to the womb, which has to content itself with symbolic fulfillment in the sexual act.”<sup>143</sup> This provides a model of the sort of substitutive return that is available. Blumenberg here calls this “a mythical way of expressing” what is available in the way of compensation for the fear and difficulty that is a part of human life. It is mythical precisely because it involves such a substitution and because it produces this consolation,<sup>144</sup> it views the world as the sort of place where such a consolation is available. We will see below, in Chapter 6, dealing with Freud, the importance of the idea of ‘return’ for producing this effect.

Blumenberg’s account, then, is not a work that seeks the origins of myth, and even though his work provides a theoretical framework by means of which one may distinguish his work from those that do, it nevertheless pushes back into the archaic

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great deal of his attention later on, and which I deal with in chapter 2 of part II, in the development of the individual.

<sup>143</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>144</sup> For the anthropological function and significance of consolation, see Pavesich, Vida. “Hans Blumenberg: Philosophical Anthropology and the Ethics of Consolation.” In *Naturalism and Philosophical Anthropology*, Edited by Phillip Honenberger, 66-93. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

period in order to picture the conditions within which myth developed. He seeks, as he sees it, “the limit toward which the extrapolation of tangible, historical features into the archaic tends,” and he uses this limit, which he calls “the absolutism of reality,” as a point of reference by which to orient his theory of the development of myth. Blumenberg constructs an archaic situation in which myth might have developed, and so his theory to this degree resembles one that would explain myth by reference to its origins.

Blumenberg’s scenario, however, does not offer a source of the content of myth so much as it establishes the anthropological conditions that would produce the kind of need that myth services, i.e., it allows us to see myth’s anthropological function. Such a project, since it involves not only the “extrapolation of [...] historical features into the archaic” but also involves a prehistory of this limit concept itself,” will, if not inevitably, then at least certainly, involve some speculation about earliest times, times for which we have no direct evidence. The speculation involved in this particular instance involves narrative, the construction of stories that themselves function as models of historical processes. Since it is a speculation about the way myth works and the relation between this function and myth’s persistence, the use of narrative here might have the appearance of a certain kind of question begging, insofar as we understand myth to be a type or a mode of storytelling, or at least to involve or include storytelling, and we see that Blumenberg attempts to explain myth by telling a story about the conditions that might have led to its development. One might be suspicious, even apart from this, of such a use of narrative in a modern work of theory. I think that the charge of question begging is really only an appearance, but we might leave a final decision on this matter until later. This dissertation might be considered to include, if not a full-scale defense, at least an account of how and

why narrative might still function in a theoretical and philosophical work, if we understand what conditions call for it. Our work on Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*, at any rate, will begin with a presentation of some of the narratives that make up parts of his work. These narratives are rarely laid out at much length without interruption or digression, and so their presentation will require some reconstructive work, some expansion, and at times some guesswork about what Blumenberg means but does not explain.

In this chapter, I present and consider the narrative of the process that I call "the domestication of the gods," the process by which the diffuse uncanniness of the world passes through a series of forms, culminating, for the purposes of myth, in the gods of the Greek Pantheon, but continues into later forms. It may be helpful to sketch this process here at the beginning, before presenting it at greater length. First, let me suggest that, because this process is substitutive, the indefinite is not actually removed, but rather covered over or obscured. The process, then, is of the transformation of the gods into increasingly safe or friendly forms, or at least increasingly reliable ones, and this involves becoming increasingly definite. Further, stability is a result of form, and the gods become more stable, less able to act on their whims, and so they become more reliable, as their appearance, behavior and, eventually, their character, becomes more sharply defined. But this increase in stability never transforms all of what makes it necessary, the indefinite power, into these forms. The indefinite uncanniness is concentrated in tabooed objects or pushed to the margins of the world, it is still found in the divinities whose favor we seek and whose disfavor we seek to avoid, or provoke. These actions, the seeking, avoiding, and provoking, are only necessary because some of the discomfort remains, and must be

dealt with by action. Both aspects of this, the stepwise transformation of this power into a series of forms that are increasingly reliable, and the persistence of the indefinite and alien power or powerfulness that is a part of the world we experience, will play a role in what follows. In this chapter we will see one instance of the process of increasing reliability, which I here call domestication, and we will see how, despite these changes, something of the indefinite and alien remains. Blumenberg's own thinking about this process is not, simply speaking, historical, it does not simply rely upon tracing a development from the earliest written evidence of the gods to later ones, because our earliest written sources represent quite a late stage in this development.<sup>145</sup> We find instead a consideration of theories about the origins of myth from different disciplines, as well as theories about archaic and pre-human species from anthropology, philosophical anthropology, psychology, and neurology, in addition to the myths themselves, and this theory avails itself of phenomenological methods, such as free variation, as much as historical methods. So this model of a process by which the conversion or transformation of an affect into distance<sup>146</sup> is a narrative that may be thought of as a speculative pre-history, what a history of this process might look like; and it lays out stages of such a process, but its strength lies in its plausibility as a whole,<sup>147</sup> rather than in the documentary undergirding, which is not available, that would be necessary for a straightforward history.

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<sup>145</sup> I deal with this part of Blumenberg's account in Part I, Chapter 1

<sup>146</sup> E.g. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 16. "The historical power of myth is not founded in the origins of its contents, in the zone from which it draws its materials and its stories, but rather in the fact that, in its procedure and its 'form,' it is *no longer* something else. [...] But it will be incomparably more important to describe myth itself as already the manifestation of an overcoming, of the gaining of a distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness." Cf. Ross, Alison. "Between Luxury and Need: The Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." In *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 25:3, 378-392. Routledge. 2017.

<sup>147</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 39.

Myth's function is to transform the "emotional tension" that resulted from the change of habitat, discussed above, into distance, that is "the reduction of the absolutism of reality" and the reduction of anxiety.<sup>148</sup> Blumenberg distinguishes this anxiety from fear not only by means of its greater intensity, but by means of the object, which, in the case of anxiety, is indefinite. Myth deals with this anxiety by substituting something definite for this indefinite object.<sup>149</sup> I want to consider, here, the major steps of the process that Blumenberg envisions, along one of the lines he develops. In order for the result of this attempt to be perspicuous, I will need to stitch together the pieces of this picture that appear scattered throughout the first three chapters of *Work on Myth*, and this will lend to the picture itself a more solid appearance than perhaps it was meant to have, but I think that the effort will allow for a clarity that will benefit the attempt to understand Blumenberg's notion of 'work on myth.' In the third chapter of *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg indicates how he understands the transition from a feeling of helplessness to an idea about the character of the world:

Too little thought is given to the meaning of such localization for what is at first the diffuse quality of the numinous. "The holy" is the primary interpretation of the undefined 'power' [*Machtigkeit*] that is assumed and felt to exist on the strength of the simple fact that man is not the master of his fate, of the duration and circumstances of his life. When the primary interpretation of undefined 'power' is understood in this way, rites and myths are always secondary interpretations.

Even if the subsequent interpretation of myths is termed "secondary" in its turn, as a "secondary rationalization"—as a rationalization it tends, not unambiguously

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<sup>148</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5-6.

<sup>149</sup> As discussed above

and necessarily, but still in the direction of what had already been accomplished by the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power.’ ‘Reason’ just means being able to deal with something—in the limiting case, with the world. If the numinous is supposed to have been the primary interpretation, it is still already interpretation and not the thing itself that is interpreted. But we possess no other reality than the one we have interpreted. It is real only as the elementary mode of its interpretation, in contrast to what is excluded from it as unreal.<sup>150</sup>

In this passage, Blumenberg is discussing the serviceability of the vocabulary developed in Rudolph Otto’s 1918 book, *The Idea of the Holy*, in the attempt to think through the early human response to “the savage terror” that is felt in the face of the absolutism of reality. In this work, Otto argues that in the experience of religious observance one can find a unique attitude, which he calls “*mysterium tremendum*,” a “numinous feeling,” and corresponding to this attitude as its objective condition the experience of “the numen.”<sup>151</sup> Blumenberg relies heavily on Otto’s thought and vocabulary, seeing in it a real grappling with the anxiety that Blumenberg himself attributes to the experience of “the absolutism of reality.” This difference is the basis of the divergence from Otto’s work: despite the usefulness of the vocabulary, it is a mistake, Blumenberg argues, to see in “the holy” an experience of the primary phenomenon. Blumenberg does not substitute for this phenomenon some other, but argues, to the contrary, that what is primary is the feeling or the experience of helplessness, the fear that one lacks control over one’s own life.<sup>152</sup> He

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<sup>150</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>151</sup> Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1923. 12 ff.; 10-11.

<sup>152</sup> The feeling of utter helplessness, the anxiety itself, is an over-reaction to the state of affairs: it was never the case that survival was impossible. What was critical was the fear that it was impossible. This fear would be crippling, and being paralyzed by fear in such situations would have led to extinction. Myth, which

does not presume to have access to some phenomenon “out there” that has produced this feeling, and rather claims that there was never any access to such a phenomenon. What produces the anxiety was always the danger that had not been encountered, that had not yet materialized, that was essentially indefinite.

This passage helps us to piece together the story because it shows how the terror felt in the experience of the “absolutism of reality” is transformed into something else. The experience of helplessness, of being overpowered or being vulnerable to being overpowered, engenders the assumption that there is a superior power. Because of the indefinite nature of the danger that leads to this assumption, this power that is assumed to exist is at first diffuse: it is everywhere beyond the horizon. Blumenberg does not go into much detail about the mechanics, if you will, of this transformation, and I think it would be foolish to try to do so here. But what he does say is important for our inquiry. First, he understands the step from subjective feeling to an objective power to be an interpretation, which I take to refer to an effort to make sense of the situation in which the archaic human or pre-human finds herself. This theory is not founded upon some insight into archaic reality, so much as on the recognition that this reality, or that reality as such, was always beyond human grasp. We see here another way in which human life is based on a kind of indefiniteness, i.e. that indefiniteness resides in our relation to reality.

This passage is important also because it provides a point of departure for our thinking about the concept of reality. As we see, Blumenberg claims that humans have no direct access to reality, but that what counts as reality is itself the result of an interpretation of our experience. As we shall see later, myth presupposes a relation to

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works on this anxiety, is related directly to survival because it makes action possible. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 6.

reality, and can be thought of as working on reality.<sup>153</sup> This sounds strange if we are inclined to think of myths as fictions, but Blumenberg is explicit in his insistence that this is not the best way to understand them.<sup>154</sup> It is important that the stories myth tells are irrefutable, that is to say that they relate to reality in such a way that reality does not come into direct conflict with them, but this is more a matter of them dealing with things that are not testable, rather than of their being able to withstand such testing.<sup>155</sup> In order for the function of myth to be the reduction of the absolutism of reality, which requires myth to work on reality, myths cannot describe or create a world different from the one that we live in. Our concept of reality itself, however, is something that must be constructed and maintained, or perhaps it is better to say that, because we have no access to any primary reality underlying our experience, but our experience repeatedly gives rise to the idea that there is such a reality, one's reality, or concept of reality, will always be in a state of piecemeal construction and revision.<sup>156</sup>

Blumenberg provides in this passage also an explicit formulation of the thesis on which his claim that “the boundary between mythos and logos is illusory” is based: that “reason just means being able to deal with something—in the limiting case, with the world.”<sup>157</sup> This sounds perhaps too simple. He has constructed a scenario, however, in which the world, or the uncanny hostility of the world, is something that must be dealt with and which also cannot be dealt with directly, which is something of which one can

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<sup>153</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>154</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68; 75; 127-128.

<sup>155</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7. For the suggestion that one's concept of reality may only be revised one piece at a time, see. Blumenberg, Hans. “The Life-World and the Concept of Reality.” In *Life-World and Consciousness: Essays for Aron Gurwitsch*. Edited by Lester E. Embree, 425-444 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 428.

<sup>157</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

have no direct sensory experience. Blumenberg argues that myth is rational because it makes the world into a more habitable place for human life, by telling stories of it coming to be more habitable, and that it provides the conditions for the later development of the theoretical attitude, and the further development of mental and mechanical technologies that continued the work of making the world habitable. But myth's claim to rationality is more obscure because of the indefinite character of its object, of the object on which it works. Blumenberg characterizes this object at various times as the world, the life-world, or reality. What each of these formulations refers to, although they are not identical, is something that does not yield itself up to the reflective gaze.<sup>158</sup> A part of the difficulty and obscurity of Blumenberg's work is the attempt to "evoke" these phenomena that cannot be represented directly. But, for our purposes here, let it suffice to say that the work of myth is to make the world more habitable, more tolerant of human life, and that myth is rational because it is a tool with which we deal with something that must be dealt with.

The domestication of the gods in myth, then, is an aspect of work on myth, and in this passage we find a starting point, or perhaps a prehistory, of this process. Human beings are not in full control of the "duration and circumstances" of their lives.<sup>159</sup> At certain moments in the life of the human species, this control has been further from our grasp, or the conditions of this life have changed rapidly,<sup>160</sup> and this produces a fear that we altogether lack control, that reality has absolute dominion over human life.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Goldstein, Jürgen. "Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg." *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 5-19.

<sup>159</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>160</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 35.

<sup>161</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

However much this fear may be an overreaction to the circumstances, it becomes something that must be dealt with in order for human life to continue.<sup>162</sup> The first attempt to deal with the fear is to form an idea or a picture of the world that would produce this fear, and such a world contains a superior power that is capable of exercising this control over human life. In Blumenberg's account, this power is at first diffuse, as we have seen above, but it is localized, is unified into something that can be dealt with, by myths and rituals, which are themselves interpretations of the feeling of lacking control.

The *Other* is not yet by preference the other *One*. Only when the former is interpreted with the aid of the latter, when the neuter is made accessible by means of the metaphor of the alter ego, does a world exegesis begin that involves man, who comes to know, in the story of the Other One, who comes to be known. All at once man sees a piece of nature as having the character of the hunting or grazing ground of this Other One and conceives this as a possible confrontation, which is avoided or sought through one's behavior toward the dominion of the Other One and which obliges one to engage in compensatory actions, restitutions, efforts to compel good conduct, efforts to obtain favor, and exchange of gestures. He who touches or crosses the horizon of the Other One encounters him with the aid of his name, to which he has delegated his presence.<sup>163</sup>

This passage shows us also a version of the passage from the indefinite to the definite, this time emphasizing the fact that what needs to be converted by myth is what is and remains alien, what is "other."<sup>164</sup> Blumenberg is not referring here to an abstraction,<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 6.

<sup>163</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 22.

<sup>164</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 22.

<sup>165</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 41-42.

but rather to a generalized indefiniteness that characterizes the world, or that arises in our confrontation of it. What is of special interest in this passage is the idea that this alien indefiniteness is interpreted using the “metaphor of the alter ego:” precisely that in our experience of the world which most resists the friendly approach, which is opaque, powerful, foreign, hostile: in its place we substitute the human “I,” that which can be known. But the alter ego is the unknown I, it carries with it its own otherness, and with it the question of the degree to which it can be known, the degree to which its appearances reveal its true nature. Blumenberg does not dwell on or develop these implications, for what is important to him in this passage is that this work of metaphorical interpretation is necessary if this alien power is to become something to which humans can address themselves. This is of crucial importance for understanding Blumenberg’s account of myth. If the hostile powerfulness of the world can be seen as a powerful someone, then humans can take measures to placate this someone, to seek its favor or avoid its disfavor, to seek to compel it to act in one’s interest or against the interests of one’s enemies.<sup>166</sup> This has a twofold effect. First, it produces the idea that the god’s actions may become less threatening to survival, even if it is not made to welcome the existence of humans; and second, and perhaps more importantly, it produces the idea that humans are capable of effective action, of changing the character of the world, at least to some degree, by means of their own actions.<sup>167</sup> Because the “absolutism of reality” is the idea or feeling that this possibility is altogether lacking, that it is rather reality that exercises dominion over human existence, the presupposition in ritual, and in the myths that have been built up around them, that human action can compel or persuade the gods to act in their

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<sup>166</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5-6.

<sup>167</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12.

interest is already a huge step toward making the world a more habitable place for human life.

Blumenberg does not try to determine exactly how rituals and myths are related to one another, but he sees in both of them this process by which the original uncanny terror found in the experience of the world is transformed into an “institution,” by means of the power of naming and the regulation of modes of behavior, primarily through the production of repeatable material.

We will not, in this brief space, be able to address everything that the work of names and naming accomplishes in *Work in Myth*. Blumenberg devotes an entire chapter to the topic, and the work of names is evident up to the near present, as Blumenberg shows in his account of the naming of newly discovered stars and planets, and other astronomical objects.<sup>168</sup> It is, however, an important moment in the process of the transformation of the unfamiliar, alien, uncanniness of the world into a form with which humans are able to deal. His account of the power of the name is based on the distinction between what is unknown and what is unfamiliar.<sup>169</sup> Naming has its power with respect to that which is unfamiliar, and can transform this into something that can be addressed. This may not be a change that leads to knowledge, and so we see here one way in which myth, which Blumenberg tells us has names as its “material,” has a different function than theoretical endeavors aimed at knowing.

Stories are told in order to ‘kill’ [*vertreiben*] something. In the most harmless, but not least important case: to kill time. In another and more serious case: to kill fear.

The latter contains both ignorance and, more fundamentally, unfamiliarity. In

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<sup>168</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 43ff.

<sup>169</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 34-35.

connection with ignorance what is important is not that supposedly better knowledge—such as later generations, in retrospect, have considered themselves to possess—was not yet available. Even very good knowledge about what is invisible—like radiation or atoms or viruses or genes—does not put an end to fear. What is archaic is the fear not so much of what one does not yet know as merely of what one is not yet acquainted with. As something one is not yet acquainted with, it is nameless; as something nameless it cannot be conjured up or appealed to or magically attacked. Terror [Entsetzen], for which there are few equivalents in other languages, becomes “nameless” as the highest level of fright. So the earliest and not the least reliable form of familiarity with the world is to find names for what is undefined. Only then and on the strength of that can a story be told about it.<sup>170</sup>

We find in this passage, first, a good introduction to the way the work of names and naming relates to the work of myth in general. When that which is unfamiliar is given a name, it becomes something one can address, something whose favor one can work to earn, etc. This produces the idea or the feeling that one’s actions are effective, that one can change, perhaps for the better, the conditions of the world in which one lives. So Blumenberg sees this function of naming behind religious rites and rituals and behind magical practices, in that these later means for improving the conditions of life also do so by means of language. However ineffective these means may sometimes have been, and Blumenberg’s account does not presuppose that magical practices produced the effect that they claimed to produce, they did produce the feeling that humans could improve

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<sup>170</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 34-35.

their world by means of their actions, and this is already a reduction of the absolutism of reality.

What is perhaps more instructive for our purposes, however, is that the effectiveness of naming makes something unfamiliar into something familiar, but not into something that is known.<sup>171</sup> There are two aspects to this. First, it allows humans to begin the necessary reduction of anxiety without having to come to know the object that is the cause of this anxiety. It is good that it does not need to be known first, of course, because this object remains invisible and, to an extent, indefinite, even though it can be localized<sup>172</sup> and addressed.<sup>173</sup> The rites and rituals may incline the god to your wishes, or reduce its enmity, but its behavior is not determined, its whim is not excluded.<sup>174</sup> In this way the accomplishment of naming does not eradicate the indefiniteness of the cause of anxiety, it merely reduces it. This reduction, however, is no small thing. Let us note also that Blumenberg's claim goes much further than this. It is not only the case that knowledge of this object is unavailable, but also that knowledge does not do away with fear in the same way that familiarity does.<sup>175</sup> He cites examples, including genes, of things about which we have deep knowledge but about which we still feel significant

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<sup>171</sup> For the continuing relevance of this function, cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 56. "In this connection it is important to observe that Freud's earliest description of the psychic apparatus, in the "Entwurf einer Psychologie" (so named only by its editors) of 1895, does not yet seem to take notice of the function of assigning names. The possibility cannot be excluded that it was the cave guide in the Istrian Carso, three years later, possessed as he was by the lifework of finding names, who first made it manifest to Freud that any reconnoitering of the unknown is confronted with the urgency of seeing that unknown also as something unnamed and in need of naming."

<sup>172</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 62-63; cf. 96.

<sup>173</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12; 15-16.

<sup>174</sup> On the other hand, cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 127-8. "Although myth refuses, and must refuse, to provide explanations, it does 'produce' another life-stabilizing quality: the inadmissibility of the arbitrary, the elimination of caprice." We find in myth the story of the process of the limitation of absolute power, e.g., the progressive limitation of Zeus's ability to execute his will to rid the world of humans. But this is limitation and reduction, not elimination of this ability.

<sup>175</sup> Let us remember that "familiarity" is an example of the kind of "relation to reality" available to 'significance.' Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

fear. This is not, I think, just a matter, either, of a distinction between geneticists, on the one hand, who know about genes and do not fear, and the public who do not know and who do fear. Our genes are a part of us, but they determine who we are in ways that have nothing to do with our willing, or choosing, or acting, or thinking, or any of the activities we associate with who and what we are. They are impervious to our supplications, and are things that cannot become familiar to us. The practices of ‘gene therapy’ may in fact be attempts to reduce this fear, to make our genes into something that we can in some way effect. I do not mean to suggest anything about this practice except that it, too, can speak to the need that Blumenberg sees as the motivation for myth.

The work of naming as it is presented in this paragraph is framed by the issue of telling stories, which is natural enough in a theory of myth. But the power of the name is not limited to, nor is it identical with, telling stories.

The function of names is not exhausted in their allowing stories to get under way. Otherwise the abundance of names that are laid up around and between the figures that are equipped with stories would be incomprehensible. Hesiod’s *Theogony* offers the evidence for this superabundance, and it would no doubt be aesthetic projection if one chose to see in this only the ‘poetic’ aspect of the way the verses sound. Myth is always anxious about what one might call integration; it abhors a vacuum (as was still to be said for a long time, in a half-mythical proposition, of nature). Its stories are seldom localized in space, and never in time; only the structure of genealogy embeds them in a network of definiteness. Just as little as the historian, later, can set episode alongside episode and anecdote alongside anecdote, since after all he is less bound to significance in the

individual item than he is to overall coherence, so little can myth set emblem alongside emblem without joining them together by means of the matter—names—that belongs quite exclusively to it.<sup>176</sup>

What is most relevant to our immediate interest is the question of what is definite and what remains indefinite. Blumenberg speaks of the definiteness that myth can generate in terms of “localization” elsewhere as well, and we will deal with this again in its relation to “significance.”<sup>177</sup> Some work in coordination will be required to approach what he means by this term. It is clear in both passages, however, that the events narrated in particular myths are not related to the events narrated in other myths in such a way that they can be located in a definite point in time. They can sometimes be ordered: certain things in myth may be placed, in a fairly definite way, before others, but even this is not always the case.<sup>178</sup> What is decisive for myth is that the events are long past, that the point at which the listener finds herself is removed in time from the terror.<sup>179</sup> Localization in space is more complicated, in that myths are not often set in specific locations, and thus can be made to suit the situations of people living in different places. At the same time, myth “is oriented toward” local peculiarities.<sup>180</sup> In the place of a definite historical

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<sup>176</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 39.

<sup>177</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>178</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 132. “In myth, none of the stories leaves traces in the stories that come next, however well they are subsequently interwoven with one another. The gods produce stories, but they have no history. What is eternal is a matter of indifference to them, just as it can be a matter of indifference to those to whom their stories are told.”

<sup>179</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 62, 117.

<sup>180</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96-7. “Christianity strove for unlimited transportability by means of an increased degree of abstraction in its system of dogma, as an increased distance from myth. There is indeed the limit concept of a world religion that neither depends on autochthonous familiarities nor refers back to them, but there is no concept of a world myth, not even under the extreme assumptions of comparability in the culture-circle theory and in structuralism. These comparisons are never more than theoretical analyses, which cannot successfully lay hold of the specificity of names and stories. Myth by its nature is not capable of an abstract system of dogma that would leave local and temporal peculiarities behind it. On the contrary, it is oriented specifically toward these.” The indefiniteness of the myth allows individual myths to be adapted to different localities, so that there can be, e.g., an Athenian version of the

sequence, and in particular contrast to the datability that has become the desideratum of historical research, myth generates a form of definiteness by means of genealogy: a definiteness made up of names alone.

The power of names, then, is that names transform the indefinite, diffuse, hostile powerfulness of the world into something that can be addressed, they permit the notion that human action can affect the conditions of life in the world, and they produce a kind of definiteness, albeit a kind that allows some of the prior indefiniteness to remain.

Naming, then, is a moment in the process of the stabilization of living conditions that works by producing a more stable and reliable representation of divinity. To become stable themselves, however, the names of such divinities must gain acceptance, and we can see from this one aspect of the importance for myth of repetition and repeatability.

The work of repetition is, at its most basic, closely related to the work of naming: whatever a name is, and whatever its source, no name will be effective at making the unfamiliar familiar unless it gains acceptance.<sup>181</sup> A name stabilizes the uncanny power of the world only if it remains in use, i.e. if it is repeated. The same is true of stories:

“Nothing could have made so impressive what was no longer supposed to be possible as the continued telling of this story across the generations.”<sup>182</sup> At this second level, the importance of repetition allows us to see something that is crucial to Blumenberg’s understanding of myth’s function. The stories we know as myths have their origin in an oral culture, so the myths are formed before an audience that can make their feelings

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Orestes myth as well as a Spartan, that Zeus was hidden from his father on the island of Crete in a cave on Mt. Ida, Mt. Aegaeum, or Mt. Dicte, Hornblower, Simon, and Spawforth, Antony. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 1638. As opposed to the abstraction of Christianity that allows for its dogmatic definitions, myth retains a spatial and temporal indefiniteness that is “oriented [...] toward” “local and temporal peculiarities.”

<sup>181</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 168; cf. 54, 61.

<sup>182</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 19.

about the story known more or less immediately. This means that successful stories are asked for again, and unsuccessful stories are either forgotten or changed.<sup>183</sup> The myths that are handed down are those that could be told again and again, and they gain this repeatability by means of the process of reworking to meet the needs of the audience, over long periods of time.<sup>184</sup> This process produces stories that increasingly provide the kind of stability that we saw above in the case of names: the very fact that the same story is being heard provides a kind of comfort, but they are stories as well of a world that is more stable, with more reliable gods than were available before. At the same time, this process is what has produced the durability of myths, which goes toward explaining why they have remained interesting to a world that has exchanged many of the presuppositions that supported the world in which they developed for radically different ones.

The idea of repetition and repeatability is related to the work of myth at a yet more fundamental level, one that is fundamental to the renewed interest in myth that arose at the end of the eighteenth century.

[...] Romanticism contained an important consolation, in the area of philosophy of history, for the age to which it had to recommend itself: the consolation of the guarantee that mankind did not have to be deprived entirely, in its substance and its potential, of what it had once been. This is also something belonging to the nature of myth—the suggestion of repeatability, of a ‘re-cognition’ of elementary

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<sup>183</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 159.

<sup>184</sup> We will deal with this process at length in Chapter 3 of Part I.

stories, which approaches the function of ritual, by which the inviolable regularity of actions that are pleasing to the gods is secured and imprinted on the mind.<sup>185</sup>

Blumenberg is suggesting a connection, the full extent of which we will not be able to tease out in a preliminary discussion, between the way a good story can be repeated, and can provide comfort not only because there is comfort in the content but also because the story is itself familiar, on the one hand, and the idea that we humans can regain access to things from our past and that these past things can fill some lack. He has in mind here particularly the feeling, which was a part of the motivation for Romanticism, that in its attempt to rid the world of prejudice and superstition the Enlightenment also removed, or almost removed, something that we need.<sup>186</sup> We will deal with what this is at more length below, but we can perhaps characterize it in a negative fashion that will suffice for the present purpose. The Enlightenment sought to grasp everything by means of theoretical reason, and to deny the reality of anything that could not be grasped in this way. If Blumenberg is correct, however, myth is a way, and a rational way, of dealing with something that cannot be grasped by theoretical reason, something in fact that cannot, properly speaking, be grasped at all. Myth has other means than grasping at its disposal for dealing with its object. What became a problem is that the Enlightenment concept of reality seemed to fall short of the experience of the world, which includes encounters with the uncanny, on the one hand, but also a need for means by which we can position ourselves with respect to and orient ourselves within a world that is, at times, uncanny, or hostile, or indifferent. Blumenberg calls this significance,<sup>187</sup> this thing that myth gives us

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<sup>185</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 61.

<sup>186</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 45-47.

<sup>187</sup> Part two of this dissertation is devoted to significance.

access to, and that allows us to orient ourselves, but which theoretical rationality fails to grasp.

There is a direct connection, then, between this desire that what once was, or that humans once were, can be again, that we can in some sense repeat things from our own history, and what we have been calling the indefinite.<sup>188</sup> For it is precisely this indefinite that the Enlightenment wanted to banish, since to grasp something with the aid of concepts is to grasp something definite, to define the object grasped. The Enlightenment, further, denied reality to anything that could not be grasped in this way. Although this last sense of “repeatability” goes beyond the process of “the domestication of the gods,” repeatability in the first and second senses are crucial moments in that process. Only the name that is repeatable provides the stability of a god who can be called upon reliably, and the repetition of the stories of the gods allows those stories to take on their most reliable form.<sup>189</sup> The contention of the third sense of repeatability is that this defining characteristic of repetition and repeatability has a correlate in the hearer of myth, that it is related to the human desire that it not be impossible to access what once was, that some things from our past, at least, might not be lost forever.

After names for the gods have become stable enough to last, the gods of myth begin to take on forms. The tendency is for this process to lead, according to

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<sup>188</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 61.

<sup>189</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 54: “The fact that myth has to do with origins is far from consecrating it for the late observer; the fact that it ever got free of them, that it is able to characterize and make comprehensible the distance between itself and them, is the quintessence of what a ‘mythology’ [a study or doctrine of myth] can still offer. This includes what is achieved by a stabilization of names that is remote from controversy.”

Blumenberg, through animal forms before arriving at human forms. I quote here at length:

The fact that almost everywhere in the world the cults of gods with human forms have animal cults in the background would seem to be most readily explicable by the fact that the act of giving names, in a life-world that is characterized by nature, first applies to those impressions that represent Gestalts that are strictly reproduced according to a form or species, and therefore make the most modest demands in terms of the construction of concepts. Nature demonstrates for man the concrete reproduction that he achieves only with such difficulty in his own products and that is imitated, as it were, in the reverse direction, in the accomplishment of concepts. It is more difficult to conceive of and give a name to the identity of a numinous power that manifests itself in thunder and lightning than it is to grasp and attach a name to the combination of strangeness and familiarity in the genetically reproduced physiognomies of animals. The trueness to type of the animal figure creates, as it were, something that one can address. Mythical gods *are* typical gods. What one can refer to [as a fixed quantity] is not their moral identity, an identity connected to past actions and pointing toward future ones, but rather the sameness in kind of the characteristics and effects that are bound up with a particular area of competence. One can only count on it, refer to it, in connection with the particular episode in question. Nothing like a lifelong—to say nothing of a national—relationship can be established.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 131.

Blumenberg's understanding of theriomorphic gods is based on the idea that animals have something like a species existence, as opposed to the individual existence of humans. They are, in their appearance and in their behavior, typical. A god in the shape of a bull, for instance, could then be associated with behaviors that are typical of a bull. On the basis of this aspect of animal gods Blumenberg presents a kind of argument: the giving of names to gods on the basis of such typical qualities "would make the most modest demands" on the imagination.<sup>191</sup> Because the need to give such names presents itself as a kind of emergency situation, and because the fulfilling of this need is a kind of precondition for the leisure time that allows for greater exercise of the imagination, the solution that demands least of the imagination may be expected to be employed most frequently.

There is something more at issue here than this argument in Blumenberg's discussion of the typicality of animals, and thus of the gods who take animal form. He compares the relationship that exists between an individual member of an animal species and the species itself to that which exists between an original artifact and its reproductions. His analogy suggests that nature was able to accomplish this exact reproduction early, and humans were only to do so late in their development, but were able to "imitate" it "in the reverse direction" with concepts.<sup>192</sup> The last point, I take it, is contrasting the movement from original to copy to the movement from a group of

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<sup>191</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 131; There is a slight difference in phrasing in Blumenberg, Hans. *Arbeit am Mythos*, 147: <<Die Natur macht dem Menschen die reproduktive Konkretion vor, die er in seinen eigenen Gebilden nur so schwer erreicht und die in der Leistung des Begriffs gleichsam in umgekehrter Richtung mitgemacht wird.>> Here we find the phrase [*die reproduktive Konkretion*], something like "concreteness with respect to reproducibility," rather than "concrete reproduction" in Wallace's translation. Nevertheless, the point seems to be that nature is able to make exact copies, and "demonstrates" this power, and this idea, to humans.

<sup>192</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 131.

particulars to the concept that unites them in terms of what they have in common, what is typical to them. Blumenberg suggests that the typicalness of animals, on the other hand, stops short of individuation, that is, every particular instance of the species is meaningfully differentiated only at the level of species. Let us notice first that Blumenberg describes this situation as if humans desire to and seek to achieve this “concrete reproduction,” and surely they must desire it, for what else would motivate the achievements of concepts, on the one hand, and the eventual exact reproduction of an original artifact, for example, on the other. There is a connection that is being suggested here, then, between the way that gods attained forms in myth, concepts, and technology, a suggestion that each of these three products of human culture deal with different aspects of the human world, and deal with these different things in different ways, but nevertheless each is used to transform some part of the world into something we can live with more easily.

There is another aspect to this. Individuals that are collected under a concept are comprehended according to that concept, and this is what it means, from a certain perspective, to know anything, to grasp its *genus* and *differentia specifica*. According to this account, what distinguishes an individual cannot be grasped according to a concept, precisely because it is individual and unique, and thus cannot be known. The gods who have reached animal form, however, have behind them a diffuse uncanniness, a free-floating hostility. That which not only is capable of taking a typical form, but which also acts in a typical fashion, acts predictably. That which is predictable is also, at least to a certain extent, reliable. But if we can rid our minds of the familiar behaviors of our pets, in whose behaviors we see, or on to whom we project, individual “personalities,” there is

something alien, and alienating, about the typicality of wild animals. This typicality must be understood by contrast to what is human. And let us remember, the production of typicality by nature runs in the opposite direction to that which humans can produce. It moves toward individuation, but stops short. All this is moving toward the idea that sees preserved in the typicality of animal gods that which is indefinite and uncanny. It has been made into something with which humans can become more familiar, but which remains inhuman.

This point becomes clearest perhaps in the late return of theriomorphic gods in the animals that populate Aesop's fables. Blumenberg's account of these is worth considering in some detail:

As long as gods do not have human form, they have behavior, but no motives. To that extent, Aesop's Ionic animal fables are a late transfer of the anthropomorphic world of the gods back onto their preliminary theriomorphic stages. It is a way of dealing with what is typical that has become relaxed. As in the epic the gods are made to fit the human norm, in the fable men are reflected on the level of the animals. The Phrygian, Aesop, prefers animals as bearers of stories that point to the aspect of man that already, in the Ionic culture, begins to seem like a strange and inhuman quality: his typicalness.<sup>193</sup>

Blumenberg's reading of the animal characters of Aesop's fables as gods is perhaps controversial, but it will illuminate the process of 'domestication,' whether we accept it or not. First, this reading reveals something that signals a late stage in the process, the reduction in seriousness as a result of the increased distance accomplished by work on

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<sup>193</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 132.

myth. Blumenberg's contention is that the reversion to the animal forms is an attempt to deal with this "typicalness," which has become apparent within humans as well as in the experience of the world more generally. Here we see the connection between what is typical and what is alien or foreign: if the typical appears in oneself, in one's experience of oneself, that typicalness is precisely that in oneself which is not oneself, which has, as Blumenberg put it below, "escaped individuation."<sup>194</sup> What is typical is, to this extent, then, what has not yet been determined, and so what manifests itself as uncanny in myth is still indeterminate, or still retains an indeterminacy, even when it appears to be an aspect of the human experience no longer of the world, but of oneself.

If one were to view the world hierarchically, such that humans were situated at an intermediate position between the gods who are above them and the animals below, we can see in Blumenberg's account the suggestion that when we deal with the uncanny using myth, we locate that uncanniness one level below where we find it in experience. If what is disturbing has to do with the apparent hostility of that which is superior in its power, we deal with that superiority in myth by attributing it to human-like figures; but when that uncanniness appears within the human individual, we locate that uncanniness in stories of human-like animals. But perhaps this has more to do with the character of what disturbs us than it does with the hierarchy. Or does it reflect, rather, different stages in the domestication of the gods? The animal gods, now in this late "bourgeois"<sup>195</sup> form are appropriate images for dealing with this uncanniness because it is the uncanniness of the "typicality" that is a part of the human individual. This typicality was always a part of the gods, but, there, it represented an accomplishment in the process by which the gods

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<sup>194</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 132.

<sup>195</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 132.

took on a more stable, more reliable form. That same typicality in the individual could have almost the opposite effect, emphasizing the dominion of nature, of reality, over individual will or desire or effort.

At any rate, this allows us to see how the indefinite is preserved yet again in this later stage of the process of domestication.

This relationship of ‘being made in the image of...’ is recognizably different from the beautiful anthropomorphousness [sic.], with its invitation to artistic embodiment, of the Olympian gods. In them there is always a remainder of the originally foreign element, which had laboriously arrived at and put aside animal form, taking on human form as a mere gesture of friendliness, the better to let humanlike stories be told of them, but never entering into serious rivalry with man, any more than man does with them. For that, to be a god, in the language of the Greeks, meant too little.<sup>196</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of Blumenberg’s account of myth is that, if it is to be able to perform its function of reducing the absolutism of reality, of producing distance between the auditor of myth and that which causes terror, then humans cannot be the focus of myth.<sup>197</sup> That is to say, in order for humans to be the beneficiaries of myth, myth cannot be anthropocentric, even as the gods tend towards “anthropomorphousness.”<sup>198</sup> Accordingly, we find a reduction in the ability of any god, but especially of Zeus, to exercise his will to eliminate humans, in the mere fact that there is a multiplicity of gods. First, in that the gods are caught up in one another’s affairs, and thus less inclined to pay

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<sup>196</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 28-29.

<sup>197</sup> E.g. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 30: “Myth defocuses the gods’ interest in man.”

<sup>198</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 28-29.

attention to what humans are doing, but also because, since they are not omnipotent, the power and will of each god acts as a limitation of the ability of every other to exercise this power and will. So humans benefit, in that, practically speaking, they are more free, as a result of the mere fact of the pantheon, the particular entanglements of which are articulated in myth.<sup>199</sup>

It would feel as if we were cutting things short if we stopped before considering the evidence of this process that can be found in myth itself. We will consider, very briefly, two instances, the first being the effect of the dynastic changes in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and, second, the work of Prometheus on Zeus, one version of which is also found in the same text. There is no hope in so short a treatment of even beginning to address the ways in which Prometheus is important to *Work on Myth*, the final roughly 300 pages of which is devoted to this figure, much of this to the way that Goethe takes it up in the formation of his own self-understanding. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod narrates the story of the generation of the gods out of chaos, and the dynastic succession ending with Zeus. We see in this succession a transition from the earliest means of trickery and brutal force to something more limited and lawful, in the case of Zeus. Zeus does not eschew force, but he limits his own power first by enlisting the help of others to ensure his victory, others to whom he then owes a kind of debt. He then also agrees to a self-limitation of his own power, and his desire to punish humans, in exchange for information about his own fate from Prometheus, whose primary accomplishment was to withstand the punishments of Zeus for long enough to allow doubt to arise in Zeus's mind about his own fate.<sup>200</sup> In these stories we see the limitation of this power increase as

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<sup>199</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 13-14.

<sup>200</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 30 *inter alia*.

the distance, in mythical time, from chaos, increases. The transition from a limitation of power that is externally enforced to one that is imposed internally, even if begrudgingly, is also interesting. The content of these myths then reflects the process of “domestication” that Blumenberg suggests in the development of human thinking about the gods that constitutes a part of the work of myth, and that makes up the prehistory of our surviving myths. Within these myths the story is told of this process, a story that leads to the most powerful of these gods choosing to limit his own power, and thus taking on a form that is not only easier for humans to live with and live under, but also a form that is more familiar to humans, who must choose to accept those limits to their own power and will, at least those they are unable to deny.

## CHAPTER 4

### WORK ON MYTH AND THE RELATION OF MYTH TO HISTORY

The previous two chapters have been devoted to showing the function of myth, what Blumenberg calls the “work of myth,” to consist in the attempt to transform, on the basis of a substitution, the feeling that is produced by the experience of living in the world. Let us observe two things about this work. First, the work of myth is work done upon the primary level of experience, what Blumenberg refers to as “reality” or the “life-world.”<sup>201</sup> We must remember, however, that “reality,” according to Blumenberg, refers to the elementary interpretation of experience, and does not assume access to any fundamental reality or thing-in-itself.<sup>202</sup> Let us also note that myth is understood to be “the manifestation of an overcoming, of the gaining of a distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness.”<sup>203</sup> This production of distance or overcoming of terror is important because it “produces the conditions of familiarity,” a production that contributes to the “humanization of the world.”<sup>204</sup> “Work on myth,” most broadly conceived, refers to the reception of myth. This category includes everything from our earliest surviving evidence of myth, in the epics attributed to Homer,<sup>205</sup> to such modern phenomena as the naming of newly discovered planets after the names of Greek and Roman gods<sup>206</sup> and the

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<sup>201</sup> For “reality”: Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 50-51; “reality of the life-world” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 54-55; “the primary matter of the life-world” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 158.

<sup>202</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63. I discuss this passage in chapter 1.

<sup>203</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 16. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 52. See Below, page 31.

<sup>204</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 388.

<sup>205</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 158.

<sup>206</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 43-45.

importance of Oedipus and Narcissus to the thought of Sigmund Freud.<sup>207</sup> It will be more helpful to attempt to characterize “work on myth” than to list its variations, although we will point to some of these variations as often as we may, in order to present as full a picture as possible.

Blumenberg’s theory of myth is not based on some conception of the origin of the contents of myth, and, despite an assumption that might arise in response to his hypothetical “initial situation,” neither is it based on the origin of its use; it is, rather, based upon myth’s anthropological function. To put it more plainly, myth, in his theory, is something like a tool or a means for “converting”<sup>208</sup> “terror,”<sup>209</sup> “panic,”<sup>210</sup> or “anxiety”<sup>211</sup> into “distance.”<sup>212</sup> Some distance from this primal “absolutism of reality” is necessary, however, in order for the work of myth to get under way: “myth itself,” as we saw above, is not only the means for this converting or “overcoming,” but is itself also the result of such an “overcoming.”<sup>213</sup> This is not a story of origins because, no matter where we begin telling the story, we find the work of myth already at work.<sup>214</sup> This aspect of Blumenberg’s theory is related to his conception of the historical nature of myth. The historical characteristic of myth consists not only in the fact that the individual stories come to be what they are over time, and that they change, in their retellings, according to the historical needs of the audience; it consists also in the fact that myth is one of the ways humans have of making the world in which they live, of making it

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<sup>207</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 92.

<sup>208</sup> Suggested by Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 20-21, 25.

<sup>209</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>210</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 6.

<sup>211</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4, 6

<sup>212</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9, 16, 21

<sup>213</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 16.

<sup>214</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

habitable, and this is a part of what makes the human way of life possible, i.e., what makes us human.<sup>215</sup> To say that myth is historical, in Blumenberg's theory, is to recognize its function in human history. The goal of this chapter is to tease out this special sense of the relation of myth to history in *Work on Myth*, a relation that provides a new perspective not only on the way in which and the reason why myth accompanies us through history, but also on the way in which myth conditions the way we understand history, and the relation this all has to the indefinite.

This distinction between the 'work of myth' and 'work on myth' is related to a conception of history that undergirds not only a traditional type of theory of myth, but that can be traced back to the Enlightenment's self-conception. In this conception, reason, by which it understands modern theoretical rationality, comes into its own only with the eradication from human consciousness of "prejudices" of all kinds, myth figuring prominently among these.<sup>216</sup> Although the need to banish myth was altered, and, as in the case of Romanticism, even reversed, by later developments in European Intellectual history, there remains in the conception of myth the idea that myth represents an attempt to understand and explain the world that is inferior to, even if it prepares the way for, theoretical rationality.<sup>217</sup> Rather than addressing a number of individual, contemporary or near contemporary, theories of myth,<sup>218</sup> Blumenberg critiques the underlying assumption about history, namely that human history has advanced "from *mythos* to *logos*."<sup>219</sup> Blumenberg critiques such theories on three main fronts. First, he critiques the

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<sup>215</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7.

<sup>216</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 46.

<sup>217</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12, 127-128, 166.

<sup>218</sup> With the exception of that of Ernst Cassirer, cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 160-161, 167-168.

<sup>219</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27-28.

assumption that the function of myth is to explain, i.e., that myth and theoretical rationality share the same function. On the basis of this first argument, and a different understanding of myth's function, Blumenberg argues in the second place that myth itself should be understood as a kind of rationality, which requires that the concept rationality itself be capable of a broader definition, so that in addition to *theoretical* rationality there could be a kind of rationality whose function is not explanation. Finally, the presupposition that human history proceeds from *mythos* to *logos* separates myth from its documented history in such a way that it prevents the understanding of the way myth has survived and remained vital in the later stages of human history. An additional measure of the explanatory power of 'work on myth' appears when it is seen in response to these three problems.

According to Blumenberg's theory, myth has a unique function, and, unlike theoretical rationality, it does not serve the purpose of explaining things or answering questions about the world. Blumenberg presents this difference of function also as a difference of the objects which these two attitudes treat:

The classical 'disinformation' that is contained in the formula "from mythos to logos" and that still lies innocently dormant in Plato's indecision between myth and logos is complete where the philosopher recognizes in myth only the identity of the objects for which he believes he has found the definitive mode of treatment. The mischief of that obvious historical formula lies in the fact that it does not permit one to recognize in myth itself one of the modes of accomplishment of logos.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27.

The presupposition here seems to be that, corresponding to a given function, there is a particular set of appropriate objects with which it works. The idea that *mythos* was replaced by *logos*, that it was an attempt to do the work *logos* accomplished, that of explaining, understanding, answering questions, would attribute to *mythos* the same objects that belong to *logos*. The progress “from *mythos* to *logos*” would then be an exchanging of one mode of dealing with these objects for another, better suited mode.

Pushing things to a distance is also the way to bring about the suspension or deflection of questionability. Myths do not answer questions; they make things unquestionable. Anything that could give rise to demands for explanation is shifted into the position of something that legitimates the rejection of such claims.

One can object that in the end all explanations are of this type, however much trouble they take over constants, atoms, and other ultimate magnitudes. But theoretical explanation must be prepared for the fact that it is compelled to take the next step, to allow atoms to be followed by protons, neutrons, and electrons as well as their variants and not to be able to ward off the suspicion, in connection with these, that every relationship that can be measured in whole numbers points to yet another level of elementary building blocks. Myths of creation avoid this regress: the world is very much in need of explanation, but what explains its origin comes from a great distance and tolerates no questions about *its* origin.<sup>221</sup>

The inherent logic of theoretical rationality is that each of its claims, each of its answers, is itself questionable. This is one aspect of its claim to preeminent rationality, that one

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<sup>221</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 126-127.

never has to rely on the fact that a given answer has already been accepted, and is always free, always encouraged, at least in principle, to subject any previous question, or answer, to further questioning. Theoretical rationality in this way understands itself to have the function of answering questions. Insofar as theoretical rationality is able to provide answers to questions that are relatively stable, it too is able to provide a powerful kind of security in the world. But its answers are always only relatively secure, since, in principle, they are always in need of further and better coordination with what is known about the world, and since what is known is always changing.<sup>222</sup> In addition, the questioning here has, again in principle and according to its inherent logic, a kind of regressive quality: any answer to a question, such as “what are the basic building blocks of the material world?” becomes in turn a question. “If the world is made of atoms, what are atoms made of?” This process continues indefinitely, in principle. Myth, by contrast, must avoid such a regress. Since its function is to provide stability, it cannot afford for its answers to be questionable. It sacrifices what might be viewed as the ‘seriousness’ of theoretical rationality in order to be able to cover over the abyss suggested by an infinite regress of explanations. This abyss is precisely what you aren’t supposed to see. Myth’s mode of operation is quite different: “Myth lets inquiry run up against the rampart of its

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<sup>222</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 230: “If one examines the historical experience of the modern age, one finds the incomparable lesson, which is seldom taken to heart, that could have been drawn from the possession of the sciences and from their historical form: to see the nonpossession of truth as what—in contrast to the promise that the truth would make people free—still comes closest to such a liberation. It may be that the history of science is still too short to make this upshot of intimacy with it manifest to the consciousness of the epoch. But there is reason to fear that the satiety with that same science relates to and is based on precisely its procedure of continual retraction, on obsolescence and transition as the modality of its possession of truth. In that case, even before the greatest gain could be drawn from the age of science—the gain that consists in its very form of knowledge—the realization of this profit would have been frustrated by the reluctance to pay the cost that it involves.”

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.”<sup>223</sup>

The most obvious difficulty with the “*mythos to logos*” conception is that it fails to account for why myth has remained in a world in which theoretical rationality has flourished. But this is only one aspect of Blumenberg’s critique of this view of human history, and the role myth plays in it. Blumenberg draws on an example to suggest some of its other dimensions:

That the course of things proceeded “from *mythos* to *logos*” is a dangerous misconception because we think that we assure ourselves by it that somewhere in the distant past the irreversible ‘spring forward’ [*Fortsprung*] took place that determined that something had been put far behind us and that from then on only ‘steps forward’ [*Fortschritte*] had to be executed. But was the spring really between the ‘myth’ that had said that the earth rests on the ocean or rises out of it and the ‘logos’ that had translated this into the so much paler universal formula that everything comes out of water and accordingly is composed of it? The comparability of these formulas supports the fiction that in both cases it was a question of the same interest, only of fundamentally different means by which to pursue it.<sup>224</sup>

Blumenberg’s critique of theories that explain myth and human history as a kind of “progress” “from *mythos* to *logos*” does not begin, however, by pointing out their explanatory weaknesses or failures, but rather by correlating such theories with a fundamental human need. In this case the theories provide a kind of assurance that

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<sup>223</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 257.

<sup>224</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27.

humans have put something definitively behind them: although continued progress is possible, humanity has passed the point where it could sink back to the mythical way of looking at the world, it has moved definitively to *logos*.<sup>225</sup> We see here that the theory of myth is responding to the same sort of need for security in the world that gave rise to myth in the first place. We will discuss this at greater length below, but for the present let us notice this evidence for the claim that the function of “work on myth,” of which the theory of myth is a type, tends in the same “direction” as the function of myth itself, that is, it tends toward the meeting of the same needs.<sup>226</sup>

Let us consider for a moment the rhetorical question with which Blumenberg introduces the comparison between a myth and a rational theory, which might appear to be competing attempts to answer the same question. It is interesting that the rhetorical question does not address the issue of function, although he moves immediately to that issue; it addresses, rather, whether the greatest “spring forward” of progress really appears to have taken place between myth and theory.<sup>227</sup> The implied answer to the rhetorical question, from Blumenberg’s perspective, is clearly “no,” but he leaves to his reader the job of answering where in fact the “spring forward” is to be located. I propose that an answer, albeit one that is not altogether straightforward, is suggested in the following passage:

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

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<sup>225</sup> Blumenberg, obviously, does not subscribe to this view, but he does recognize the desire for such comfort. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9, 17-18.

<sup>226</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>227</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27.

has turned to the supremacy of the subject. There is no criterion for this turning, for this ‘point of no return.’<sup>228</sup>

There is a kind of spring forward that has happened, and it is as inaccessible as the origin of the contents of the myths themselves. For myth is both the means, or one of the means, by which we accomplished this spring, and a result of it. This passage allows us to see, however, that one problem that results from the notion that we have moved “from *mythos* to *logos*” is that it presupposes a kind of progress that the persistence of myth through history seems to contradict. The persistence of myth through history indicates that the needs that gave rise to myth remain somehow with us. If myth is a way of dealing with aspects of the world that make, or threaten to make, human life impossible, then the survival of myth suggests that such aspects continue to present themselves, in different forms, through human history.

Blumenberg’s theory of myth, and his concept “work on myth,” works toward a different conception of history, and a different conception of the relationship between myth and history. We have said above that “work on myth” refers to the reception of myth in its various forms. But this concept, and even its name, tells us something more about the way Blumenberg understands it. For just as myth works on the ‘reality’ or the ‘life-world,’ just as it substitutes for an indefinite object of anxiety something definite with and on which humans can work, in an effort to improve the conditions of their life, in the same way, and in the same effort, one can work on a myth itself, to make that myth do this work with respect to the needs that arise within, and as a result of, particular historical conditions. The reception of myth is not passive, it is already a type of work.

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<sup>228</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

Work on myth, then, is also work on “reality,” which is to say that work on myth performs the same function as myth itself. While working through the vocabulary of “the Holy” that he receives from the work of Rudolph Otto, Blumenberg distinguishes his thinking from Otto’s, in going beyond it, by recognizing in “the Holy” not the primal reality itself, but rather an interpretation of “the undefined ‘power’ [*Machtigkeit*] that is assumed and felt to exist on the strength of the simple fact that man is not the master of his fate, of the duration and circumstances of his life.”<sup>229</sup>

When the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power’ is understood in this way, rites and myths are always secondary interpretations. Even if the subsequent interpretation of myths is termed “secondary” in its turn, as a “secondary rationalization”—as a rationalization it tends, not unambiguously and necessarily, but still in the direction of what had already been accomplished by the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power.’<sup>230</sup>

This provides us with a basic way to understand this work, i.e. as interpretation. The process that we have seen at work in the first two chapters has to do with aspects of the primary interpretation of what we might call facts about the situation in which humans find themselves in the world. ‘Work on myth’ involves the continued project by means of which this interpretation must be adjusted, time and again, to meet the needs that arise as a result of the changing conditions of human life. We see here that this, too, is a part of Blumenberg’s critique of that most obvious implication of the “from *mythos* to *logos*” conception of history, which it shares with most of the history of Western philosophy, namely, that by it myth is excluded from rationality. Blumenberg’s argument is simple:

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<sup>229</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>230</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

myth serves a vital human need, it deals with something that humans must deal with if they are to survive, and it is the tool best suited to this problem. The fact that myth deals with a different problem than the one theoretical rationality deals with does not exclude myth from rationality, but rather reveals it as “one of the modes of accomplishment of logos.”<sup>231</sup>

In a preliminary taxonomy, we might say that the work of myth substitutes for the indefinite frightfulness of reality names, figures, and stories, quantities humans can deal with, and that they continue to deal with because the indefiniteness remains a part of the experience of the world. ‘Work on myth’ refers to the reception of these myths, in the form of retellings of the myth, often with alterations to suit the current moment or the audience’s taste, but also collections of myths or mythologies, theories of myth, and other theoretical constructs that employ myth in an integral way, such as the case of Freud, and, perhaps most importantly, the various ways inherited myths appear in the history of literature. This presentation of the relationship between the work of myth and ‘work on myth,’ however, runs the risk of appearing as if the two are distinct in fact, when in reality, or, rather, in Blumenberg’s theory, they are distinct only conceptually. What we have shown above is that work on myth can be seen to function in the same way that myth functions, that it can service the same needs. If myth is to be understood in terms of function, then, one might argue, something that functions the same way as myth should be understood to be myth. I think that this would be an exaggeration of Blumenberg’s position, but it may serve to begin to show how these two concepts relate to one another. The degree of interrelationship between myth and work on myth appears even more

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<sup>231</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27.

clearly when we consider this question in light of his theory of the development of myth. There we see that myth acquires its form over the thousands of years of oral performance before an audience, during which time the stories undergo the alterations necessary for optimization, and for meeting the needs of the audience.

Blumenberg's argument is that the myths that have survived acquired the qualities that allowed them to survive during and as a result of this process, such that we must come to see 'work on myth' as the mode of the formation of myth:

Even though I distinguish, in discussing connections that are evident in literature, between myth and its reception, I do not want to leave room for the assumption that 'myth' is the primary, archaic formation, in relation to which everything subsequent can be called reception. Even the earliest items of myth that are accessible to us are already products of work on myth. In part, this preliterate phase of work has passed into the compound of myths, so that the process of reception has itself become a presentation of its manner of functioning.<sup>232</sup>

My suggestion is that it is not only "the earliest items of myth that are accessible to us" that are "products of work on myth" in Blumenberg's theory, but that he has, in his "Darwinistic" theory of the development of myth, attributed the forming of myth to the work of reception.<sup>233</sup> This is parallel, I think, to what he means when he says that "the process of reception has" "become a presentation of its manner of functioning."<sup>234</sup> This manner of functioning is variously described, but it has to do with producing distance between an individual, conceived initially as the audience of myth, and whatever it is that

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<sup>232</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 118.

<sup>233</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 118.

<sup>234</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 118.

makes life impossible.<sup>235</sup> In this conception of the function of myth, myth must be capable of being formed, or deformed, in such a way that it can respond to needs that, even for one audience at a given time, might not always be conceived in the same way. In the second division of this dissertation, we will look more closely at the aspect of myth, the narrative patterns, which allows them to be deformed in particular ways and so to respond to changing needs. For the present, it is enough to see that the activity whereby a telling of myth responds to changing needs is an act of reception, that this act of reception is the process by which myth attains its lasting form and acquires the quality of pregnancy, so that myth, in its form and its formation, relies on the reception of myth every bit as much as the reception of myth must have a myth to receive.

This interdependence points toward the third part of Blumenberg's critique of theories of myth that follow the pattern "from *mythos* to *logos*." Such theories associate myth very closely with the archaic period, because, according to them, myth was the way archaic humanity explained natural phenomena prior to the invention or discovery of reason. Even to the degree that such theories are able to attribute some power to myth in its archaic context, they are still unable to explain the way that myth continues to exert influence, to draw audiences within its orbit, during the later ages, including those when the myths were first written down.

Independently of conjectures about remote times, then, a philosophical theory of myth must prove itself with respect to the question of whether it can make comprehensible the effectiveness and the effective power of mythical elements, both archaic ones and possible newly formed ones. The weakness of the

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<sup>235</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, e.g. 62.

traditional mythologies [theories of myth], insofar as they are statements about mythologies as systems of myths, seems to me to be that they sever the connection between, on the one hand, the documentable history of the individual myths and, on the other hand, their original state, prior to all history—and they do this because, on grounds derived from a philosophy of history, these theories have assigned myth so definitively to an ‘epoch’ that everything after that can only be a specialty of the histories of literature and art. The identification of myth with ‘its’ primeval epoch places the accent of theory on the question—which is inaccessible to us, and consequently delivered over to speculation—of its origin.<sup>236</sup>

Blumenberg’s theory, based on his concept ‘work on myth,’ has several advantages over those theories he critiques. First, it is not based on speculation about the origin of the contents of myth, knowledge of which is simply unavailable, lost to time. Second, the intertwining of myth and reception in this theory allows us to see the later reception of myth, and even the attempt to construct theories about the nature and function of myth, to serve the same function myth serves. Because this function is connected to a vital human need, a need that is a part of the human condition, the need, and the function, remain with humanity through its history.<sup>237</sup> Viewed in this light, the persistence of myth is no longer a mystery. Further, Blumenberg’s theory provides a way to understand the power of

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<sup>236</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 66.

<sup>237</sup> This statement is meant descriptively, not normatively. Blumenberg’s theory suggests that the need myth serves is a constitutive part of the human way of life, but I am not sure that it goes so far as to demonstrate, or to claim, that it is a part of a human nature, or that myth is the unsurpassably best tool for dealing with this need.

myth, the power to withstand not only time but historical pressures, locating this power in the narrative patterns and in the quality of ‘pregnance’ they possess:

The way in which work on myth presents itself in the ancient epics is in its form—and not only in the content of what is narrated—itsself the successful result of this work. It becomes evident for the first time what aesthetic modes of operation could accomplish against the uncanniness of the world; to put it provocatively, too, lightning had not struck the singer who had no longer taken Olympus all that seriously.<sup>238</sup>

These patterns, which we will consider at length in the second part of the dissertation, are readily recognizable. They can account for the fascination myth has exercised over its audiences. They produce “the attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them.”<sup>239</sup> We will see also that these narrative patterns relate to the content of the stories in a way that the distinction between form and content does not quite capture. Certainly, attention to these patterns does not explain the source of the particular names in the myths, but the patterns are built out of the action of the myths and, in a myth such as Oedipus, for example, the action is as close to content as it is to form. Again, we will consider this at length in the second part.

Blumenberg’s theory of myth undermines three major distinctions on which the theories of myth he associates with the understanding of history that moves “from *mythos* to *logos*” turns, namely the distinction between myth and its later survival in literature, the distinction between the archaic ‘mythical’ epoch of oral literature, and the later epoch of writing and, thus, literature, and the distinction between the form and the content of

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<sup>238</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 133.

<sup>239</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 34.

myth. We have shown, above, the way that the notion of ‘work on myth’ shows the process of reception of myth to be the way that myth came to be, and allows us to see that, even in its late survivals, the reception of myth serves the same vital human need, the need to see the world as stable and secure enough for human life, as does myth. This way of thinking about myth does not show that the use of historical periods is unhelpful, but it suggests that the division between the preliterate phase of human history and the literate does not provide any great assistance in the understanding of myth, or, more precisely, it does not represent a decisive break in the way that myth functions.

Blumenberg locates this, to the contrary, prior to what he calls “the mythical empowerment.”<sup>240</sup> To put it perhaps too simply, this is to raise the question of the value of historical periods, not only for the effort to understand history, but also for the effort to service the need that motivates us to pursue knowledge of history in the first place.<sup>241</sup> We will return to this issue below.

What opens before us here is the question of the relationship that obtains between myth and history, and this relationship is, in *Work on Myth*, multiple, various, and complicated, and rarely spelled out explicitly. To be as explicit and clear as possible, though, there are in this theory connections made between myth, and the understanding of myth especially, and the study and understanding of history, between myth and the philosophy of history, and also between myth and what has happened, and what will happen, in history. In the second division of this dissertation we will consider several instances of the way that myth survives in history, instances of its reception, wherein the deformation of the fundamental pattern of a given myth by historical pressures will be

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<sup>240</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>241</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

visible. Here we will consider these three more formal aspects of the relation of myth to history. These will provide evidence of the way that myth works on what is indefinite in the human experience of the world, and will show ways in which this indefiniteness remains a structural component of that experience. This in turn will display some ways that the need for myth manifests itself in contemporary experience.

Because of the basic structure of Blumenberg's functional account of myth, which associates myth with a vital human need, we might begin our consideration of the relationship of myth to history by pointing to the way need manifests itself in this relation. As we have seen above, the need that calls for myth, that myth develops, or is developed, in order to deal with, is the result of a certain indefiniteness in the experience of the world, an indefiniteness that is also associated with that which threatens the human ability to survive. One of the ways this indefiniteness manifests itself, accordingly, is as an indifference on the part of the world to human survival: no part of the world takes notice of human life and its particular needs.<sup>242</sup> The feeling that the world takes no notice of, or is totally indifferent to, human life, has a tendency to 'level out' the experience of the world in such a way that nothing stands out from anything else, no aspect of life or one's environment means any more or less than any other.<sup>243</sup> We have seen above the

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<sup>242</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96-109.

<sup>243</sup> My understanding of this aspect of the "indifference" of space and time is based on a few different passages. First, Blumenberg's description of the "anxiety" experienced in the transition from forest to savanna, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5: "The transition from reacting, in the present, to pointlike stimuli, to the ongoing state of maximum excitement and suspense [*Höchstspannung*] of the organic system in a state of alarm [...];" a few pages later, Blumenberg employs a visual metaphor to illustrate the work of myth, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7-8: "Among the relics that dominate our conception of the early ages of man and that mark his image as that of the "tool maker," we can detect nothing of what also had to be accomplished in order to make an unknown world known, to make an unarticulated field of data surveyable." As a result, then, of this "maximum" suspension of the nervous system, among other things, the ability even to see one's surroundings meaningfully is destroyed. This may be too strong a formulation, but this aspect of the "indifference" of the world is, at any rate, exaggerated by anxiety. Blumenberg himself does not attribute it solely to anxiety, but speaks simply of the "indifference of space and time," Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96. Blumenberg does not, however, accept that humans have direct

sense in which, for humans, who lack adaptation to any particular environment, there are no definite meanings, and that what remains are significances. Blumenberg argues further that the need for significance is a result of “the indifference of space and time.”<sup>244</sup> This would imply, then, that this indifference is or represents one of the threats to human survival, if it can be thought of as the cause of the need for myth. But in what sense is indifference in time a threat to survival? In order to see the way that Blumenberg answers this question, it is necessary to employ the concept of ‘orientation.’<sup>245</sup> Although he does not use this term frequently, there are only four entries for it in the index of the English translation, it is certainly in the background of his thinking about the need for myth, and is related to the very important image of the horizon. Just as an individual must be able to distinguish the directions from one another if she is to get where she is trying to go, anyone who wants to navigate life successfully, who wants simply to get through the world, must meet some equally basic need. The cardinal directions themselves work against the indifference of space; what we need from history<sup>246</sup> may be thought of as a kind of equivalent.

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access to reality, so such a statement must be understood to refer to an experience of the world, rather than to the world itself, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63. My interpretation of Blumenberg attempts to locate one cause of such an experience in Blumenberg’s account of the formation of the human way of life.  
<sup>244</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96. Blumenberg deals both with space and time, but for the present purposes our attention will focus on certain aspects of his discussion of time. Myth addresses the indifference of and in space by orienting itself to “local [...] peculiarities,” by associating certain features of the landscape with activities of the gods and with their worship, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97.  
<sup>245</sup> Blumenberg’s focus on the way myth reduces the absolutism of reality points to a more fundamental need than the need for orientation. It is more like the need to be able to take the first step: one cannot move who has no room to draw breath. Orientation does not become a problem until this more fundamental need is secured.

<sup>246</sup> The relation between time and history will be addressed below at greater length, but it would not be right to shift from “the indifference of time” to “what we need from history” without addressing the change in subject. What history means here includes the following features: it is the domain of time about which we have documentary evidence; it is, from our perspective, already to some degree structured; and it is the subject of the discipline of history. Again, we will have arrived at a more nuanced understanding of the way the term ‘history’ is functioning here by the end of the present chapter.

There is an antinomy between what we need from history and what we find in history, an antinomy that we cannot master, because it is only a part of the constitutive antinomy of wishes and realities. In the wish structure of time, beginnings and ends play the most important role. What we need from history tends toward indicators having the clarity of mythical models, indicators that enable the individual subject, with his finite time, to determine how he can set himself in a relationship to the large-scale structures that reach far beyond himself. As a result of its motivation in the life-world, historiography also works against the indifference of time. That is why it cannot abandon the concept of epochs, however often its right to that concept is disputed. But the more it puts to work its technique of compacting, allocating roles, dating, dividing up and describing conditions, the less it avoids the suspicion of producing nominal artifacts in the service of the methodical processing of the material. The mythical mode of thought works toward evidentness in the articulation of time; it is able to do this because no one ever asks for its chronology. Besides beginnings and ends it has the free use of simultaneity and prefiguration, imitative execution and the recurrence of the same.<sup>247</sup>

We saw the instantiation of what Blumenberg here calls the “constitutive antinomy of wishes and realities” in the division of life between caves and savanna in the “initial situation” with which Blumenberg introduces the concept of “the absolutism of reality.”<sup>248</sup> He structures the human experience of history with reference to this antinomy, namely, with the claim that there is a fundamental opposition between what we need

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<sup>247</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

<sup>248</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 3-4.

from history and what we get from history. We can already see from the fact of this division that, even to the degree that we understand history to be already structured time,<sup>249</sup> we experience the indefinite in the historical and temporal aspects of human life. It is because there is something not only indifferent, but also undetermined, that one would seek in history “indicators” that have “the clarity of mythical models.”<sup>250</sup> In his description of what we need from history, Blumenberg provides one of the clearest statements of what myth provides, especially in a modern context, although I think these terms apply also to earlier times. What “the clarity of the mythical models” provides is the ability “to determine how he can set himself in a relationship to the large-scale structures that reach far beyond himself.”<sup>251</sup> Myth is called for precisely because the experience of human life is the experience of a life that encounters, or runs up against, or at least a life in which one has the feeling that there are such “large-scale structures,” structures that could be, and ought to be, relevant to an individual life.<sup>252</sup> One might recall, by way of example, Stephen Dedalus’s claim that “History” “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.<sup>253</sup> I suggest this not to draw attention to his attitude toward history, but rather to the way in which history itself can be seen as a large-scale structure of the sort Blumenberg has in mind, and that it appears oppressive precisely because Stephen has not found a way to “set himself in a relation to it” so that he can live his own life. History is for Stephen a reality that is absolute. This indicates to us something about myth’s function. There are aspects of our experience of

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<sup>249</sup> See below, pp. 24-27 of this chapter.

<sup>250</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

<sup>251</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

<sup>252</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

<sup>253</sup> Joyce, James. *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 34

the world that cannot be experienced on their own, at least not as a whole.<sup>254</sup> History and time, and the world itself, are such aspects of human life. These large-scale structures of the experience of human life contribute to that experience of the indefiniteness that arises in our confrontation with reality, and they do so because they cannot be experienced.<sup>255</sup>

There is a certain parallel to be seen between the distinction between “what we need from history and what we find in history” and the distinction between the mythical attitude and the theoretical attitude, and this is because the study of history is a theoretical endeavor, but one that has “its motivation in the life-world,” which suggests, as I understand it, that the study of history serves, or was once meant to serve, vital human needs. This is not necessarily to distinguish the study of history from other theoretical pursuits, for the modern sciences, too, have motivations in the life-world.<sup>256</sup> Blumenberg tells us that “beginnings and ends play the most important role” in what he calls the “wish structure of history,” which epochs provide for the study of history by dividing time, e.g. between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age.<sup>257</sup> What he means by this appears most clearly if we take as an example an individual human life. For any individual questions may arise about how one fits into history: ‘Am I living in the modern age or the post-modern?’ ‘What does it mean for me to be living in the “age of reason”?’ ‘What obligations, if any, are imposed upon me as a consequence of the fact

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<sup>254</sup> Considered at this level, we see an intersection between the function of myth and that of “absolute metaphor,” cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Translated by Robert Savage. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010; Blumenberg, Hans. “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality.” In *Shipwreck With Spectator*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Cambridge, MA. and London: The MIT Press, 1997.

<sup>255</sup> Goldstein, Jürgen. “Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg.” *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 5-19. Goldstein discusses in this article what he calls “orphic phenomena,” aspects of experience that “retreat” before the reflective gaze.

<sup>256</sup> Cf. “The Trial of Theoretical Curiosity” in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

<sup>257</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

that I was born at this time and place, i.e., that my personal history begins just when it does?’ The beginning and end of any life, furthermore, are precisely those parts of life that cannot be credited to that individual (except, I suppose, in cases of suicide), and that therefore represent a meeting place of nature and the individual. So the birth of a famous person, or the beginning of a major event, might appear to be places where the world takes notice, for a moment, of the individual or the singular. Here we are already on the way to the idea of ‘significance.’ There is a contrary tendency in the study of history, one that attributes the motive force for every event to some precursor,<sup>258</sup> and that attempts to view everything, every individual, with the indifference of the scientific observer.<sup>259</sup> The inherent logic of the type of work that goes into the study of history tends to diminish the significance of any particular person or event, while this study is motivated, at least in part, by the real need for significance. This provides an interesting example of one of the difficulties one encounters reading Blumenberg. He is not here recommending that one always ought to sacrifice historical or chronological accuracy for the sake of ‘significance,’ which cannot be manufactured, nor can events simply be “charged” with it.<sup>260</sup> On the other hand, he is all the while displaying something more than understanding for those times when precision was sacrificed. One can say with confidence that he recognizes the need for ‘significance,’ but it is his own drive “to understand what really happened” that causes him to recognize those times when the need for significance in history won the day over the need for historical or chronological precision.<sup>261</sup> There is, I

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<sup>258</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 102.

<sup>259</sup> Insofar as History, too, is a theoretical discipline, it would strive for the theoretical ideal, cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>260</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>261</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 24.

think, an analogous ambivalence in the desire to find anything definite in the political domain. We will touch on this, though only briefly, below.

Blumenberg lists at the end of this passage three of what I have called “narrative structures,” and which I will discuss at more length in the second part of this dissertation. He mentions these three here because they are used, or have been used, to display ‘significance’ in history. They are means of producing, or at least displaying “evidentness in the articulation of time,” that is, in providing for us some kind of structuring or differentiating model, some way to make “the homogeneous flow of time” into something to which we can set ourselves in some relation. This notion makes a kind of intuitive sense, at least to this reader, but Blumenberg provides a concrete example of this process, and one that reveals something relevant and interesting about his general statements about historical processes. This example comes in the form, interestingly enough, of the way that Christianity, in the process of consolidating itself as a dogmatic religion, responds to the “indifference of space and time.”<sup>262</sup> It will be helpful to introduce here the “dogmatic attitude,” which meets the need for security and stability by introducing definitions that are, or are intended to be, universally true.<sup>263</sup> Blumenberg sees in this process by which Christianity stabilized itself specific elements that work against ‘indifference:’ the way that the universal definitions make Christianity “transportable,” capable of being taken anywhere in the world, which responds, in a way, to the indifference of space, and the story of the “*descensus ad inferos*,” which responds

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<sup>262</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

<sup>263</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97: “Against the dogmatic mode of thought, with its claim to homogeneous validity in universal space and universal time—in other words, with precisely what Platonism had invented, by virtue of its introduction of the ‘Ideas’ as timeless and placeless validities, and as the imitation of which, as far as the claim to rigorous truth is concerned, one can regard the dogmatic mode of thought—against this mode of thought, the characteristic differentiation of the mythical ‘significances’ stands out as a structuring that is opposed to the intolerable indifference of space and time.”

in an analogous way to the indifference of time. As we will see below, myth works against indifference. The dogmatic attitude, at least as it is represented by Christianity in its process of consolidation, on the other hand, “conforms to it.”<sup>264</sup> So just as space, considered ‘in itself,’ if you will, lacks any means by which to distinguish one point from another; or, more appropriately, just as in the experience of space and time, the totality of these structures overwhelms the individual’s ability to “set themselves in relation to them,” Christianity defines itself in such a way that understanding of it does not depend upon such differentiations. We see here a movement toward, or a version of, the indifference that also manifests itself in the objectivity strived for in theoretical observation. The story of Jesus descending to the dead after his crucifixion, offering salvation to those who died before he lived, works against the “contingency” of the date of his birth, and, by doing so, also conforms to the “indifference of time.”<sup>265</sup> While this process allowed Christianity to take on a form that led to its achievement of “the rank of a world religion,” by conforming to indifference, its success relies upon elements of doctrine that are not simply dogmatic.<sup>266</sup> The story of the “*descensus ad inferos*,”<sup>267</sup> like that of the Ascension, displays a distinct mythical character, especially in the way they affirm the ‘significance’ of the directions of above and below.<sup>268</sup> Blumenberg’s interest in

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<sup>264</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

<sup>265</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

<sup>266</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97.

<sup>267</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. “Does it Matter When? On Time Indifference,” Translated by David Adams. *Philosophy and Literature* 22, No. 1. (Baltimore: John’s Hopkins University Press, 1998), 212-218. Online: <http://muse.jhu.edu/10.1353/phl.1998.0001>

<sup>268</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97. “So demythologizing must render the spatial and temporal distinctions invalid, must deny the priority given to the directions of above and below: It must deny the mythical element of an ascension of the messianic figure into heaven just as much as the assignment of the Last Judgment to the valley of Jehoshaphat.” Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 42: “To equip the world with names means to divide up and classify the undivided, to make the intangible tangible [greifbar], though not yet comprehensible [begreifbar]. The setting up of means of orientation also counteracts elementary forms of confusion—of perplexity, at the least, and, in the limiting case, of panic. A

this appearance of myth in a context in which it would not be expected to be welcome extends beyond the irony:

The mythical element serves to mark the gaining of a new and unmythical time structure. The timelessness of dogma and the omnipresence of the reality of God in the cult are aimed at leveling off the mythical profile. The fact that what seems to work toward rationality nevertheless counts as a renunciation, like the surrender of the character of the world as a finite ‘housing,’ at the beginning of the modern age, is something that can be felt as a self-denial only after a long delay.<sup>269</sup>

Two phenomena are relevant here. The “new and unmythical time structure” he refers to, I take it, is the structure provided by the unique temporal reference point of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and the division of time into the years counting down to that point and those counting up from there into the future. That is to say, the understanding of history is structured by and with respect to this most ‘significant’ event in Christianity.

Blumenberg’s suggestion is that this structuring, which contributes to knowledge, depends upon the differentiation that requires mythical ‘significance,’ a relative of the indefinite that this dissertation takes as its object. Let us notice also the connection Blumenberg draws, here, between this “temporal structure” and the transformation of the hope of the second coming, in the earliest days of the Church, into the fear of this coming, the hope for a “perhaps definitive postponement of eschatology.”<sup>270</sup> The need for

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precondition of this is the delimitation of directions and figures out of the continuum of the pregiven. The catalog of the winds, favorable and unfavorable—as distinguished, in a way that is not only quantitative, from that of disastrous storms—is a distinguishing mark of a life-world in which weather can become destiny.”

<sup>269</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 98.

<sup>270</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 98.

a temporal structure becomes acute only as a result of the combination of a developing realization that the end may not be coming so immediately, and the ‘levelling off’ all temporal moments underwent as a result of the prospect of an absolute fulfilment of time.

It is evident, at any rate, that, even in the process of dogmatization, when Christianity is seeking stability from universal definitions, needs arise that cannot be met by these means, needs that call rather for myth. Blumenberg argues, in fact, that the need that calls for myth increases as a result of the successes of the dogmatic and theoretical attitudes:

Only if we take into consideration the history of myth, to the extent that it is not primeval, will we be able to approach the question that we naturally ask: What after all does the disposition toward mythical ways of looking at things consist in and why is it not only able to compete with theoretical, dogmatic, and mystical ways, but actually increased in its attractiveness by the needs that they awaken? No one will want to maintain that myth has better arguments than science; no one will want to maintain that myth has martyrs, as dogma and ideology do, or that it has the intensity of experience of which mysticism speaks. Nevertheless it has something to offer that—even with reduced claims to reliability, certainty, faith, realism, and intersubjectivity—still constitutes satisfaction of intelligent expectations. The quality on which this depends can be designated by the term *significance* [*Bedeutsamkeit*], taken from Dilthey.<sup>271</sup>

Significance, then, provides for us means by which to differentiate what is indifferent, differentiation that is necessary for us to give structure to what is indefinite. These

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<sup>271</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

significances also allow the individual to find a position with respect to the structures they make possible. So we see here, too, that the transformations worked by myth do not do away with the need for myth, because these transformations of what is indefinite work on the indefinite rather than doing away with it. Human experience depends upon the transformation of the indefinite, the structuring of the indefinite, but the indefinite remains, even through this transformational structuring, a part of the experience of the human condition. The sense in which the dogmatic and theoretical attitudes contribute to indifference, and thus heighten the feeling of helplessness in the face of the indefinite, should not suggest that Blumenberg is opposed to these attitudes, or that he is advocating a return to myth or to the past. He suggests, rather, that myth has something to contribute that theory and dogma cannot, and, further, that the more successfully theory is mobilized to explain aspects of the world, the more pointedly we feel the need for significance. Although significance can attach to specific places and even people, the need for which significance is sought relates to the character of the world as a whole, the degree to which it can be experienced as friendly or hospitable, and it relates to the need an individual has to position himself in relation to time, or history as a whole, or any institution or structure that conditions human life.<sup>272</sup> When a particular thing, person, or event presents itself as significant, a point of connection of these great structures to the individual, a taking notice by the world of the human, suggests itself. Blumenberg at times uses the language of “levelling off.”<sup>273</sup> a similar phenomenon seems to be at work when, in the face of the

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<sup>272</sup> Myth is “seldom localized in space, and never in time,” but it is “oriented toward” local peculiarities, and ‘significance’ definitely attaches to particular things, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 39, 97. What makes significance tricky in this regard is that it is a quality that attaches to the particular thing, but to that thing as a whole, and it is thus not localizable within the thing that it attaches to. This will become more evident when we look more closely at the role the narrative patterns play in the work on significance in chapters 5-7.

<sup>273</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63; 69.

absolutism of reality, the senses of the individual are so overwhelmed that she is unable to take in the distinct elements of the surrounding world in order to orient herself;<sup>274</sup> in the same way, the objectivity for which the theoretical attitude strives reduces the value of all of its objects of study to zero, so that no one of them can stand out with respect to any other.<sup>275</sup> The concept of ‘significance’ points to a kind of value that attaches to things, people, and events, that gives to them the kind of “evidentness in time” that allows individuals to have some reference point for the purpose of orientation.

The final aspect of the relationship of myth to history we shall discuss here is that between myth and the philosophy of history. I use the phrase “philosophy of history” here in a neutral or general sense, to refer to the speculative theories that understand history teleologically, that thus understand it as if from its end, and that are critiqued on these grounds in *Work on Myth*. As we saw above, the philosophy of history of this teleological sort, which is often enough the referent when people use the phrase “Philosophy of History,” is implicated in Blumenberg’s critique of theories of myth that conform to the pattern “from mythos to logos.”<sup>276</sup> What we see when Blumenberg considers the philosophy of history that underlies such theories directly is not simply, again, that they fail to do justice to the power of myth, but rather that the understanding of history itself resembles myth.

Common to all affinities to myth is the fact that they do not make one believe or even allow one to believe that anything could have been definitively ‘come through’ in the history of mankind, however often people believed they had put

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<sup>274</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4, 5.

<sup>275</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>276</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 27, 49-51.

it behind them. That is not a matter of course, since myth itself speaks of monsters that have been subdued, of power that has been refined. Historical experience seems to speak against any finality of restraints that have been or can be arrived at. We have learned to regard ‘overcomings’ of this and that with mistrust, especially since the conjecture, or the suspicion, of latencies has arisen. We are acquainted with regressions to early states, with primitivisms, barbarisms, brutalisms, atavisms. Should declines and extinctions be excluded here? They contain the consolation of what they could make possible again. Withering away can offer less consolation than being struck dead by the stars in their fall.<sup>277</sup>

This statement appears as a comment on Blumenberg’s claim that Heidegger’s “story of Being” is in fact “another piece of Romanticism” due to “the circumstance, which is presupposed in it, that the true future can be nothing but the true past.”<sup>278</sup> Blumenberg does not reduce Romanticism to this idea of the return of what is past, of some original state, but this appears to be the aspect of Romanticism that is of central importance for him. This promise of the return of something original, for its part, contributes to the work of myth, in that it provides a kind of “consolation:”

[...] Romanticism contained an important consolation, in the area of philosophy of history, for the age to which it had to recommend itself: the consolation of the guarantee that mankind did not have to be deprived entirely, in its substance and its potential, of what it had once been. This is also something belonging to the nature of myth—the suggestion of repeatability, of a ‘re-cognition’ of

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<sup>277</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 52.

<sup>278</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 52.

elementary stories, which approaches the function of ritual, by which the inviolable regularity of actions that are pleasing to the gods is secured and imprinted on the mind.<sup>279</sup>

The successes of Enlightenment rationality had produced the unintended consequence that the world began to feel as if something to which people had become accustomed, a part of the human experience, was missing. Romanticism furnishes this age with an idea of history, and of what it means to be human, that finds its fulfillment (that is, the fulfillment both of history and the human individual) in the return of something original that has meanwhile been lost, an image of return, of the closing of a circle. Romanticism thus provides a kind of philosophy of history, and one that is teleological, in the sense that it presents a view of history as having a definite shape, the circle (although not yet the “eternal return of the same”), and of attaining its fulfillment in returning to its origin.<sup>280</sup> This very feature of Romanticism also constitutes its affinity to myth, which works against the belief that “anything could have been definitively ‘come through’ in the history of mankind,” or in “overcomings.”<sup>281</sup> My case, put simply: the idea that things are not easily left behind in human history is associated with myth, both with regard to the pattern it finds in the unfolding of history and in the way this idea compensates for the fear that something has been lost, and, in so doing, history, like myth, meets a human need. The philosophy of history undergirding the theories of myth that claim humans have moved “from mythos to logos” claim that myth is precisely left behind with the advance of and to theoretical reason. This is clearly opposed to the image of history as a

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<sup>279</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 61.

<sup>280</sup> Cf. Part II, chapter 2.

<sup>281</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 61.

circle, but to what do we attribute this pattern? Is it any less mythical because it is a linear? Does it not also meet human needs or provide consolation? More focally, are we able to draw any inferences from the fact that there is a tendency to see in history just the sort of patterns that give to myth its significance, and that the attempt to understand history gravitates to such patterns?

Let us begin to answer these questions by pointing out that, if we follow Blumenberg's argument, myth is not less rational, and is in fact an elementary accomplishment of rationality, whose success makes possible "the setting free of the world observer," the model for theoretical rationality.<sup>282</sup> More to the point, however, in order to understand the relationship between myth and the philosophy of history, we must first ask ourselves what the evidentiary basis might be for any philosophy of history, and what access to it is possible. In order to claim that history has a shape or a direction, one must be able to see that shape or the goal toward which it is proceeding. Unless history has ended, however, it would be impossible to have seen its end (and even if it had, one would face the same difficulties faced by the attempt to understand any historical event). If it is yet to come, one would face the difficulties faced in attempts to predict the future. I say this not to express my own, or Blumenberg's, reservations about speculative philosophy, but rather to suggest that history is precisely one of those structures with regard to which humans must position themselves with the aid of myth. It is simply not something that can be surveyed all at once. This does not mean that nothing meaningful can be said about the direction history is taking, or has taken.

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<sup>282</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 26. Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 117-118.

Zeus does not let loose the evils themselves over mankind, but only Pandora's dowry of curiosity, which assists Zeus's cunning. Thus her fate cannot be directly blamed on Zeus—here is one source of the stream of European theodicies, of the exoneration of the gods and of God by man. Such exoneration becomes seriously necessary only when the origin and condition of the world have to be entirely ascribed to God and would put his wisdom and goodness in question. That is then one of the ways in which man seeks to make himself indispensable to God—even if it is only as the sinner who drew the evils onto the world, and not yet as the subject of history whose detours have to help the God-in-the-process-of-becoming to final consciousness.

From this perspective it becomes evident that theodicy and—in its 'reoccupation'—the speculative philosophy of history finally fulfill myth's most secret longing not only to moderate the difference in power between gods and men and deprive it of its bitterest seriousness but also to reverse it. As God's defender, as the subject of history, man enters the role in which he is indispensable. It is not only for the world that, as its observer and actor, indeed as the producer of its 'reality,' he cannot be imagined as absent, but also indirectly, by way of this role in the world, for God as well, whose 'fortune' is now suspected of lying in man's hands.<sup>283</sup>

The connection Blumenberg is making here requires careful parsing. He begins this passage with the outcome of the Prometheus myth in Hesiod, with the gift of Pandora to Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus. This story displays an interesting tension in Hesiod's

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<sup>283</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

telling, because Hesiod is caught in between conflicting forces: a real admiration for Zeus, whose behavior, if not his will, has been made more moderate, who is the bringer of the order that produces cosmos, on the one hand; and the content of the inherited myth, which all too clearly displays Zeus' desire to bring about the end of humanity, on the other.<sup>284</sup> Even though Zeus is responsible neither for the existence of the world, nor of humanity, he, as the ruling god, is responsible to some degree for the condition in which humanity finds itself, and Hesiod, who also is instructed by the muses to sing his praises first and last, finds himself in a position wherein he must, or feels that he must, make the inherited stories accentuate Zeus as the bringer of order, as the one who allowed humans to survive, who moderated his most blood-thirsty desires.

Blumenberg suggests that because Zeus is not wholly responsible for the world, the corresponding pressure to free him from blame is less than it will be, for instance, in the case of Christianity.<sup>285</sup> But we see here nevertheless an attempt to shift responsibility for the evils of the world onto humans: Zeus sent all of the evils and all of the goods by way of Pandora, but left it to human "curiosity."<sup>286</sup> As opposed to the right way of living, which, according to Blumenberg's reading of Hesiod is achieved "When a person strictly obeys [Zeus's] rules of the correct work at the correct time" and which secures "a naked, miserable, and indigent existence," Epimetheus, in the story, accepts the gift of Pandora, abandoning himself, and, consequently, humanity, to the greater risk of "favor and benefaction."<sup>287</sup> What interests us in Blumenberg's interest in this story is twofold. First,

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<sup>284</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 31; 119-120, 305-309, esp. 308.

<sup>285</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

<sup>286</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

<sup>287</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 31-32.

to notice the direction in which ‘work on myth’ proceeds, toward the moderation of the will of Zeus, and the binding of his power, by means of the way Prometheus’ actions require him to limit himself. The tendency of myth is to remove humans from the center of attention, but in such a way that they benefit both from the action and from not being the center of attention.<sup>288</sup> Second, to notice the way in which Hesiod’s telling of the story has Epimetheus’ acceptance of the gift of Pandora working against this tendency: not only does he accept the evils of human life, in the gift of Pandora, but he does it in such a way that it makes humans responsible for the spreading of these evils among themselves, because they receive the gifts when they choose them.<sup>289</sup> Blumenberg sees in this dynamic a predecessor to the “stream of European theodicies,” constructed on the model of Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin, according to which the responsibility for evil in the world is placed on human shoulders, in the decision to choose their own desire in violation of the prohibition placed on them in Paradise, rather than on God, the creator of world and man. What is of particular interest to Blumenberg here is the idea that, by means of theodicy, god is made to depend upon humans for his own innocence, that god is somehow in need of justification, which can be accomplished only by means of the human action of producing a theodicy.

Blumenberg isolates in this way a specific function in the “system of man’s interpretation of the world and of himself.”<sup>290</sup> Here the human being is necessary, it is the means by which the superior power brings about that which will happen. So, theodicy manifests the same systemic function that Hesiod accomplishes by placing on humans

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<sup>288</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 28-29, 30; 135-136.

<sup>289</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

<sup>290</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1983), 64.

responsibility for the evils of the world. Blumenberg's interest here is not, as it was when he discussed this issue in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the guilt that humans thus take upon themselves, and the effect this has on the life-world, but rather in the pattern according to which humans not only "moderate the difference in power between gods and men and deprive it of its bitterest seriousness but also reverse it."<sup>291</sup> The work of myth could be seen to do the former part of this, the moderation, but however much it may have dreamed of reversing it, this was beyond its scope.<sup>292</sup> It is in this sense that this function represents "myth's most secret longing," for it goes beyond myth, but in the same direction. In order to operate, myth cannot be "anthropocentric," because myth needs to keep humans out of the gods' attention, to provide them with distance from the superior powers that might threaten them.<sup>293</sup> It does, however, work for human interests, and promotes the idea that human actions can be effective, can effect changes in and on the world that benefit human life.<sup>294</sup>

Blumenberg finds in "the speculative Philosophy of History" not a specific shape that has been attributed to a structure that extends beyond the human capacity to grasp it, although it may also possess this; what he finds, rather, is a kind of narrative pattern, according to which humans are made "indispensable," since it is the human "subject of history" who is "the producer of reality."<sup>295</sup> This narrative pattern is connected to a vital human function, one that can be seen in the genre of theodicy, and in myth. This function is connected to the "vital human need" "to moderate the difference in power between

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<sup>291</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

<sup>292</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 31.

<sup>293</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 28-29, 30; 135-136.

<sup>294</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 12.

<sup>295</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32. On the reoccupation of the shape of theodicy specifically by the philosophy of history, cf. Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. "Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg's Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Myth."

gods and men.”<sup>296</sup> Although it goes beyond, in some ways, what was available to myth, the function it performs tends in the same direction as the function of myth. The drawing of this relationship between the philosophy of history and myth should not be taken as an attempt to convict it of irrationality, for Blumenberg argues that myth itself is an accomplishment of rationality, in that it provides for human needs that, if they weren’t met, would make the human way of life impossible. It may be useful to consider this issue alongside the question of the way mythical elements were used to define an “unmythical time structure,” discussed above.<sup>297</sup> The mythical elements of the Philosophy of history provide a way to think of human action in the world as effective, even in light of the overwhelming disproportion that obtains between the human individual and history, or between the individual and the world. This cannot be taken as a defense of the philosophy of history as philosophy, or as knowledge, but it can indicate the kind of rationality it possesses. But this suggests something greater, as well. It suggests that it is necessary for human survival, and for human development, that we be able to feel and think that our actions are effective, that the human individual has the capacity to make her world better by acting within and upon it. Such a thought may come into conflict with other ideas that we have about our world and human history, for example our awareness of the indefinite complexity of the systems at work within these. It makes more sense, however, to allow the idea that individual action is effective, because without it, certainly no action will be effective, because no action will be taken.

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<sup>296</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 32.

<sup>297</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 98. Discussion p. 27.

Accepting such an idea may allow us to see what Blumenberg means when he suggests that one might enjoy “a moderate realism.”<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 76.

## CHAPTER 5

### IN LIEU OF A DEFINITION I: GOETHE

A central theme in Blumenberg's theory of myth is that myth is a means by which humans produce distance between themselves and "the absolutism of reality," that which, in their life-world, threatens to overwhelm and to annihilate them. This distance makes possible the sorts of activities that make up the human way of life, and so this distance is constitutive of that life, in some way and to some degree. This concept of distance, however literally it may sometimes be used, suggests a metaphorical potential that remains, in *Work on Myth*, at the level of suggestion. We may benefit from making this potential more visible or explicit. The initial literal sense of "distance" is evident: the ancestor of humanity is safe when in its cave, and in danger when on the savanna. One might take a step further, and remember that the "situational leap" that led to the development of the human way of life was occasioned not only by emergence onto the savanna, but by taking on an upright posture, greatly increasing the diameter of its horizon, and thus extending its vision to, and making it visible from, a much greater distance.<sup>299</sup> As we saw repeatedly in part I, Blumenberg attaches great importance in his theory to the indefinite threat that looms just over the horizon, and so the idea of that which cannot be seen but which might see you is central here. So the "schema of distance" defines not only the separation of the caves from the savanna, but the relation of the individual to danger on the savanna.<sup>300</sup> The distance that the caves provide, and the

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<sup>299</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>300</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 117.

shelter, makes possible the imaginative transformation of the fear that characterizes experience outside of the cave, in the form of magic, cult, and myth.<sup>301</sup> Myths tell the stories, and this is central to Blumenberg's conception of myth, of monsters being banished from the world or pushed to its margins,<sup>302</sup> of the newer gods displacing older gods who were fiercer, less trustworthy, less tolerant of human life,<sup>303</sup> and of the current gods becoming more tolerant, of the (self-) moderation of their will and their behavior.<sup>304</sup> Let us notice that we can see distance both in space, in the monsters having been pushed to the margins of the world, and in time, in the previous generation of the gods, or the current god prior to the moderation of his dislike. The sense of 'distance,' however, has shifted here, although it is possible to put too fine a point on the distinction. The distance, to begin with, extends between the pre-human creature and the danger it faces, or the danger it fears, or imagines.<sup>305</sup> In the latter case, the distance is within the story itself. One wants to avoid, however, locating the distance entirely in the world in the first case, since the fear is not entirely 'realistic,' and to avoid locating it entirely in the imagination in the second, since the stories are not understood to be fictional.<sup>306</sup> We can see here one aspect of the relationship between myth and realism, discussed in Chapter 1: Blumenberg argues that myths are stories that can lack realism, so long as they are not contradicted by

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<sup>301</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 8.

<sup>302</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 26; 35; 113; 128. Cf. Kent, James. "Pushing the Monstrous to the Edge of the World; Shaking the Nightmare off the Chest: Hans Blumenberg and Walter Benjamin's Philosophies of Myth." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no.3 (2017): 363-377. Accessed online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1320016>.

<sup>303</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 40-41; 120; 125; 161.

<sup>304</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 38; 120; 301.

<sup>305</sup> Let us not fail to notice that the "initial situation" is a story Blumenberg constructs, out of inherited material, that he does not wish us to understand as a description of something that happened in history, but rather to explain what has come after, insofar as it does not come into conflict with reality.

<sup>306</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

reality, but they also have the status of reality, and it is for this reason that they cannot contradict reality, or one's sense of it.<sup>307</sup>

The "initial situation" provides us with something like a visual basis for the "schema of distance," but precisely because it is a story that we are not to regard as depicting historical reality, this literal sense of 'distance' cannot stand in isolation from the later, more figurative sense. This is to say that it does not, it cannot, provide a fully literal meaning, and a primary level of operation for the sense of 'distance.' To put too fine a point on the question that arises here: where, exactly, is the distance myth produces located? It is not wrong to say that this distance is located in space and in time, but neither is it sufficient. Because myth's relation to reality is complex and indirect, to say that the distance it works on or produces is in space and time serves only to defer the question, and not to answer it, since we would then be forced to ask whether it is the space and time in which we live, or the space and time of the story. As we saw in the preceding paragraph, these two spaces and times cannot be distinguished absolutely. It is not exactly correct to say, either, that they are or are not identical: it strikes me, rather, as being wrong-headed, or, again, as putting too fine a point upon the problem. But the bad formulation of the solution does serve to point out the difficulty in isolating a primary domain of reference for our concept of distance. It is perhaps not wrong to speak of this as some kind of a psychological (in a general sense) distance, that can appear, for instance, as forgetting or half-forgetting, but this, too, fails to do justice to distance in

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<sup>307</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 7; 8; 12; 68. There is a third sense in which distance is meant, in the way that myth itself is interposed between the individual and the absolutism of reality: here myth itself is the distance. Cf. Discussion in Part I, Ch. 1, text corresponding to note 64, especially the way that culture is placed between the individual and the forces of selection. Cf. Wetz, Franz Josef. "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg." *Iris*, 1, no. 2, 2009. 407.

myth. Let us include as a candidate for this domain the life-world, the world of lived human experience, and suggest that the distance myth produces may be located there. While this may be a kind of answer, and one that will be meaningful after we have “seen” this distance in what follows, it does little to illuminate the concept on its own. It may, however, point us in the right direction for our inquiry.

Let us return to the notion that the function of myth is to reduce anxiety by putting distance between the self and “the absolutism of reality.” Because human life cannot sustain the level of intensity that anxiety brings, this reduction proves to be necessary from time to time.<sup>308</sup> When we have spoken of myth up to this point, we have often spoken of the stories we have inherited, stories that developed in the archaic period, the many millenia-long period of oral delivery before an audience, as described in chapter 1. Blumenberg speaks also of the “affinity to myth” or “mythical ways of looking at things,” what we might describe as a mythical “attitude.”<sup>309</sup> The main features of this way of looking at things appear most clearly when presented in contrast to the theoretical attitude and the dogmatic attitude. The theoretical attitude indicates the stance the theoretical observer takes to her object, which is presented in the following passage precisely to illustrate what is distinctive about ‘significance,’ in particular Erich Rothacker’s “principle of significance:”

Its purport is that in man’s historical world of culture things have ‘valences’ for attention and for vital distance different from those they have in the objective world of things that is studied by the exact sciences, in which the distribution of subjective value to phenomena that are studied tends, in the norm, toward zero.

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<sup>308</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5-6.

<sup>309</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 51-52; 67; 26.

Although such indifference on the part of the analytical observer may never have been realized, historically or biographically, nevertheless it is part of the theoretical attitude. 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.<sup>310</sup>

What is at issue here, then, is not the performance of any historical individual, but rather what is demanded, in the ideal, by the concept of theoretical knowledge. It entails a way of comporting oneself toward that which would be the object of knowledge. Our understanding of “object,” the way it is opposed to the position of subject, is a function, at least in part, of this attitude to things toward which we, in our attempts to know, strive and of which, perhaps, we always fall short. In a corresponding way, the dogmatic attitude, which seeks to establish its domain in an abstract and universal way, by means of definitions, comports itself toward its object in a particular way, and so contributes something unique to human experience, just as does the theoretical attitude.<sup>311</sup> The passage cited introduces the theoretical attitude in order to illuminate, by means of contrast, the concept of “significance,” which designates the unique thing that myth provides. One who stands in the mythical attitude is, let us say, open to ‘significances,’ to “the ‘valences’ for attention and for vital distance” that things “in man’s historical world of culture” sometimes have.<sup>312</sup>

The function of myth, then, is to produce distance where it is needed, and the unique thing that myth provides is significance. This raises the question of the relation

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<sup>310</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>311</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67; 237-8.

<sup>312</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

between these two concepts: are distance and significance identical? If they are not, how are they related? We may begin with the suggestion that significance and distance perform a similar function in Blumenberg's theory of myth, in that they are two different ways of conceptualizing the function of myth. But this is simply to raise the same question in another way. For if the function of myth corresponds to a need in the human life-world, the claim that these two concepts correspond to different ways of thinking about that need, then we will have to ask how the need for significance is related to the need for distance. The following will in fact pursue such a line of inquiry, albeit indirectly. It will, furthermore, provide a glimpse of the range of work 'significance' performs in Blumenberg's theory of myth, and in so doing it will bring 'significance' closer to 'distance.' Let us begin with two features of 'significance,' which are in any case necessary to understand Blumenberg's treatment of this concept: "pregnance," and the narrative patterns with and on which 'significance' works. First is the concept of "pregnance," the name of which, at any rate, he takes from Goethe's phrase, "imprinted form."<sup>313</sup> The German term here translated as "imprinted," *Geprägte*, is the basis for this usage of "pregnance," which refers to the quality of something that has been printed or stamped. "Pregnance" is the quality that sets things that are significant apart from things that are not. Blumenberg follows Goethe in attributing this quality of 'pregnance' to formal aspects (Goethe's phrase is "imprinted form") of that which is significant or has significance, as we shall see below. In the mythical attitude, one is open to 'significance,' and one also responds to significant things in a way that is different "from the obligatory uniformity with which sciences administer and categorize their objects;" one here finds

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<sup>313</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

instead attitudes such as “reverence, astonishment, enthusiasm, rejection in different degrees of intensity.”<sup>314</sup> We shall then attend both to formal features of things with significance, and to the kinds of responses significant things elicit. These attitudes and responses correspond to a quality recognized in the objects that sets them apart. The set of significant objects

[...] includes everything that possesses ‘pregnance,’ as opposed to indifference, but also as opposed to the overwhelming evidence of, say the mystical event. As with the aesthetic object, part of the definition of significance is the way it emerges from the diffuse surrounding field of probabilities. History, like life, works against the tendency of a situation to be increasingly determined by probability, against the “death instinct” as the point toward which the leveling-off process converges. The outcomes and artifacts of history impress us as notions that one wouldn’t have believed any brain capable of. Pregnancy is resistance to factors that efface, that promote diffusion; resistance especially to time, which nevertheless is suspected of being able to produce pregnancy through the process of aging. This suggests a contradiction, or at least a difficulty.<sup>315</sup>

Blumenberg begins the process of isolating this quality with a kind of triangulation, and begins with the way value appears in the theoretical, mythical, and mystical attitudes: something that possesses ‘pregnance’ stands out much more than the object of theoretical investigation, but less so than does the “overwhelming evidence of a mystical event,” in which it is not appropriate to speak of an object.<sup>316</sup> As we saw above, the object of

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<sup>314</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>315</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

<sup>316</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

theoretical observation is separated off, as much as possible, from any “subjective value,” and so is approached to that degree with the stipulated ‘objectivity.’ In the “mystical event,” by contrast, there is, I take it, the experience of the identity of subject and object, and all importance is concentrated in this experience of unity, such that it simply cannot be denied or resisted.<sup>317</sup> Significance falls somewhere between these two poles. The significant thing stands out, but not in a way that is so well defined or so undeniable, especially with respect to what the significant thing signifies.

This comparison also points to an important feature of Blumenberg’s theory of myth, the relation of myth to reality, which we have touched on already. What is interesting here is that in, for example, the theoretical attitude, that which is real is obviously that which can be measured and observed, or counted, or investigated. In the mystical attitude, by contrast, the mystical event itself, however this is conceived, is experienced as an overwhelmingly real experience, by comparison to which the reality of everything else is radically diminished.<sup>318</sup> As we have seen above, myths are stories about reality, but they are stories which are not altogether realistic. What is crucial is that they are stories that cannot be contradicted by reality, not that they adhere to a strict realism. And what their relationship to reality consists in is, at any rate, not “empirical demonstrability.”<sup>319</sup> We see in this passage two ways to begin to draw the notion of ‘significance’ closer to that of distance. First, ‘pregnance’ is the quality possessed by ‘significant’ things, and second, ‘pregnance’ is opposed to indifference. To begin with the second, indifference, as we saw in chapter three, arises in the experience of time and

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<sup>317</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

<sup>318</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67; 69; 70; 185

<sup>319</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

space that is as yet undifferentiated, still indefinite. Blumenberg makes this opposition more explicit: the quality of ‘pregnance’ resists time, especially the effacing effect of time. Time tends to wear away the differentiating features of things. The metaphor here is clear enough: those things that possess a form that resembles something that has been engraved or imprinted with depth and sharpness stand out, and withstand that which wears it away. Temporal distance is, in a figurative sense, built into the concept of ‘pregnance,’ in that it is the passage of time, the distance through which the story has travelled, that has given it the quality of ‘pregnance;’ ‘pregnance’ also gives to the story the ability to endure through time.<sup>320</sup>

As to the other way in which ‘pregnance’ allows us to see the relationship between ‘significance’ and distance, the need for distance is conceived, in the semi-mythical “initial situation,” as a need for distance from the overwhelming powerfulness of a hostile world. The feeling that the world possesses this character produces a kind of “anxiety,” in the grip of which the nervous system of the individual is overloaded, so that the individual is unable to perceive things in a differentiated way.<sup>321</sup> Everything is “levelled-off.”<sup>322</sup> In such a situation, nothing is able to stand out, nothing is able to serve as a point of reference according to which one would be able to navigate the world, or even to figure out where one was in the world. One of the primary meanings of the term “distance,” then, is distance from the oppressiveness that overwhelms the senses and

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<sup>320</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 264: “What remains outside his comprehension is the fact that distance from the myths is not first established when one believes that one can assure oneself of their ‘falsehood.’ Distance presents itself in the myths themselves as the acceptance of their ‘significance.’ Through it, they make themselves available to the aesthetic reception, in such a way that they finally appear as a particular category of that reception.”

<sup>321</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 4.

<sup>322</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

makes the world appear flat, or levelled-off, in this way. When one responds to significance via the ‘pregnance’ of things, one creates distance between oneself and the terrifying indifference in the world.

Blumenberg connects this idea, here in this passage, to the notion of “probability.”<sup>323</sup> We will consider the relationship between significance and probability at greater length below, but let us notice here the particular set of concepts that relate in the same way to probability. Blumenberg claims that both “history” and “life” work “against the tendency of a situation to be increasingly determined by probability.”<sup>324</sup> We will see in greater detail the ways in which life may be thought of as improbable, but this is perhaps already clear from the notion of the human as that which survives because of a lack of adaptation, because of the mental development that is made necessary by this lack of adaptation, and the advantages of which are available as a result of this lack of adaptation. At any rate, the logic, that that which stands out as ‘significant’ cannot be that which is most probable, is fairly evident. This is the connection between the kind of levelling-off of the sensory apparatus and that achieved by means of probability: in both cases, what is lost is that which differentiates one thing from another in experience.

Before turning to Blumenberg’s first major case of ‘significance,’ we must first identify how it is that ‘pregnance’ can be seen in myths. We have spoken of the basic metaphor that is behind this term, and we have seen that it is an aspect of the ‘form’ of that which possesses it, but we have spoken of these things in the abstract. On this subject Blumenberg is explicit:

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<sup>323</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

<sup>324</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

One may ask what are the means of operation with which significance ‘works,’ and with which work on significance is done. If I list some of them, no claim to comprehensiveness is implied. But some can be named in place of all (and in place of those that are less common and less effective): simultaneity, latent identity, the closed-circle pattern, the recurrence of the same, the reciprocity between resistance and heightened existence, and the isolation of a thing or action, in the degree of reality ascribed to it, to the point of excluding every competing reality.<sup>325</sup>

I have referred to these elsewhere as “narrative patterns,” although perhaps ‘narrative means of structuring or arranging events’ would be more accurate. It is possible, especially looking at “the reciprocity between resistance and heightened existence,” that not all of the entries on this list fit neatly into a single category. I will, however, continue to refer to them, and sometimes, for the sake of simplicity, with one of the designations above. In any case, Blumenberg provides examples of each of these in the following section of the chapter titled ‘significance’. Goethe’s story, to which I now turn, is introduced as an example of latent identity primarily, and also, “in a subtle way” the closed circle.<sup>326</sup>

To return to our provisional formula, myth provides distance from that which makes life impossible: ‘significance’ is a means with which myth produces, or at least manifests, this distance, and it is a result of this distance. In the following example, we will see that significance can refer also to that from which distance is needed. In order to “see” significance, however, it is necessary to see both the experience of terror, and the

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<sup>325</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

<sup>326</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

movement away from that experience that results from the “aesthetic mode of operation” of telling stories.<sup>327</sup> For this reason, Blumenberg claims that he cannot use an archaic example by means of which to display the work of significance, since we have no access to the way that these stories arose in response to, or in some relation to, situations of terror.<sup>328</sup> Blumenberg accordingly chooses an example for this purpose that is not drawn from the stock of inherited myths, and chooses instead an incident from the life of Goethe.<sup>329</sup> This story will provide, among other things, a clear view of the way that mythical elements can operate outside of the confines of the inherited stories. More to our purpose, it will show the way that stories are told for the purpose of working on significance, and the relation of ‘significance’ to the indefinite; in addition, it will allow us to see the role distance plays in this work.

The episode, or series of episodes, in the life of Goethe has its origin in the infamous “necklace affair,” which “terrified” Goethe from the beginning.<sup>330</sup> Although Blumenberg takes knowledge of this story for granted, it may benefit us to present some of its details, as they are relevant to Goethe’s reaction. Two German jewelers, named Boehmer and Bassange, were living in Paris.<sup>331</sup> These jewelers had amassed a large

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<sup>327</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 130, (altered for grammar).

<sup>328</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

<sup>329</sup> There is some irony in the fact that Blumenberg chooses an example that is not mythical to display that which myth contributes to the human experience. In what sense, then, is this story not mythical, if it does indeed show us “significance”? Why, in particular, Goethe? Blumenberg answers this particular question, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 399: “It is no exemplary life, the life of this theater director and collector of anything and everything, not the life of a possible guide and escort in the discovery or invention of the meaning of existence. But on the other hand, is there another life that we have ever seen spread out before us in such multifarious relation to reality and illusion? Another life whose continuous formation in self-gain and self-loss, self-creation and self-disillusionment, has become comparably intelligible for us? Nor was that in the form, crude, or intended as crude, of a reckless exposure even approaching that of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, but rather as a result of the ‘work’ on reality—in all shades, from bright to dark, that it can turn toward life—that was accomplished in it.”

<sup>330</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73.

<sup>331</sup> Szerb, Antal. *The Queen’s Necklace*. Translated by Len Rix. (London: Pushkin Press, 2009), 17.

collection of formidable diamonds and, contrary to common practice, not only saved them, but used them for a great work that had not been commissioned. The necklace they made using these diamonds was, according to reports, “impossibly, [...] barbarically huge,” rather than “beautiful,” and was made in pursuit of “the dream of greatness,” something that, again, was an uncommon ambition for a jeweler at the time.<sup>332</sup> Their hope was that Louis XV would buy it for his companion, the Comtesse du Barry. Before this was possible, the King died of smallpox, and so they needed to find a new purchaser. The necklace was so outrageously expensive that there was only a very short list of potential buyers, and their hopes soon fell upon Marie-Antoinette, whose desire for jewelry was infamous. Even she, however, wanted nothing to do with something so expensive. Let us attempt to advance quickly through this story, since our interest lies in Goethe’s reaction to it rather than to the story itself. Jeanne de la Motte, an unscrupulous and ambitious descendant of the Valois, who had been a beggar until she was found at the age of eight and raised by a Marquise de Boulainvilliers, finds her way to a certain Duc Louis de Rohan, a former ambassador to Vienna, whose great ambition is to win the favor, and the love, of Marie-Antoinette, a hopeless cause, but one to which he was nonetheless devoted. Both of these persons, in the time leading up to our story, have found themselves in the presence of Cagliostro.<sup>333</sup> The Comtesse de la Motte persuades

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<sup>332</sup> Szerb, Antal. *The Queen’s Necklace*. 18.

<sup>333</sup> It will be helpful to say a few words here about Cagliostro’s role in the story. Cagliostro (1743-1795, dates probable) claimed to be a seer, a worker of miracles, an alchemist. He travelled around Europe, enjoyed great fame, and amassed followers, although many, in his own time and since, saw him to be a fraud. He depended on his followers for financial support, at times extracted, even according to later supporters, by means of fraud, Szerb, Antal. *The Queen’s Necklace*, 108. In his book on the necklace affair, Szerb begins his chapter on Cagliostro in the following way: “First of all, we must apologise (sic.) for Cagliostro’s presence in the case, like that of Pontius Pilate in the Creed. His innocence was established beyond doubt in the course of the trial. Nonetheless close attention must be paid to this mysterious personage. His contemporaries always believed that he was implicated in the necklace affair, and that is how he is remembered. Mention Cagliostro and people immediately think of the necklace; mention the

the Duc de Rohan to arrange the purchase on behalf of the Queen, to be paid by the King, by hiring a prostitute who, when suitably disguised and, in a meeting at night in a garden, she was able to pass off as Marie-Antoinette. This he does, and when payment is later refused, the jeweler brings charges against the King.<sup>334</sup>

Blumenberg's interest in this story takes its point of departure from the fact that Goethe is extremely troubled by it. There are two distinct aspects of this discomfort. First, he is troubled by what we might call the political consequences of the affair. Although neither Louis XVI nor Marie-Antoinette were directly involved in the fraud, they were implicated, and this affected the course of the trial. What was troubling to Goethe was the undermining of the monarchy that is evident already in the fact that such a fraud could get so near to them, and which could sway public opinion, or at least manifest the degree to which it had already moved, against the monarchy. The second aspect of this discomfort has to do with the susceptibility to deception, the willingness, and even the desire, to believe claims such as those made by Cagliostro. When he entered Paris in 1781, for instance, Cagliostro, who claimed to be an alchemist and a worker of other miracles, even, in the height of irony, conjured up "the spirits of Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert."<sup>335</sup> Goethe is troubled, perhaps more than anything, by the fact that people who thought themselves to number among the enlightened were taken in so easily

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necklace, and they think of Cagliostro. The truth of such legends often runs deeper than the facts of history. He is one of the main characters in the story not so much in terms of those facts but by reason of its nature." Szerb, Antal. *The Queen's Necklace*, 72. Goethe certainly associated him with the necklace affair, and, as we shall see below, seeks to find out about his origin in an attempt to deal with his reaction to the necklace affair. Just as important, and at the center of this story, is Goethe's uneasiness at the credulity, as he saw it, of so many who believed themselves to be "enlightened," but who were so eager to believe in Cagliostro's supposed miracles. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73-4. See below for discussion.

<sup>334</sup> Szerb, Antal. *The Queen's Necklace*.

<sup>335</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 74.

by these claims that seemed to him so obviously and absurdly fraudulent.<sup>336</sup> This latter tendency, this eagerness to believe, is what points to the importance of the person of Cagliostro in Goethe's response to the situation. Cagliostro represents, for Goethe, this tendency in people, the tendency to desire to believe in something that promises the miraculous, however gaudy or clumsy a representative he may be, and however much he may have been cleared of direct involvement in this particular fraud by the trial.<sup>337</sup> This eagerness to believe, furthermore, points to the need for 'significance,' which is increased, rather than diminished, by the success of the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

There are two elements to Blumenberg's presentation of this story. The first of these is the story that Goethe himself tells about the way that he reacted to the necklace affair, and the things he did to deal with it. The second is the way that Goethe returns to this event in his writings, periodically, and works through it. Goethe's immediate reaction was intense, and he tells us that upon hearing the news "the abyss of the coming revolution had opened up for the first time and had driven him into a crazy kind of behavior that was incomprehensible to those around him."<sup>338</sup> As a first attempt to deal with this, Goethe wrote a comic opera treating the event, *Der Gross-Cophta*, mocking Cagliostro and those taken in by his deceptions. It failed to be light-hearted, and no one found it "sympathetic."<sup>339</sup> Goethe then takes up the troubling events by telling a story at "the duke's mother's regular Friday gathering" in 1792, three months after the first

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<sup>336</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 74.

<sup>337</sup> Szerb, Antal. *The Queen's Necklace*. 72.

<sup>338</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

<sup>339</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73.

performance of his comic opera.<sup>340</sup> While staying in Palermo in 1787, Goethe heard that an advocate associated with the French court during Cagliostro's trial in Paris had undertaken an investigation into his, Cagliostro's, background, and had discovered that his mother and sister were still living in Palermo, "in the most miserable circumstances."<sup>341</sup> Goethe was able to contact this advocate, and have himself introduced to the family of Cagliostro, who was born Giuseppe Balsamo. Goethe used the pretense that he was "an Englishman who could give them an accurate account of Cagliostro's release from the Bastille and of his successful escape to England," an escape which was pure fabrication.<sup>342</sup> The sister tells Goethe that the last time her brother had visited them, he had borrowed from her a sum of money "in order to redeem his pawned things," and had never repaid it. Goethe does not have enough money with him while he is travelling to pay her back at that time, which he would have liked to have done "on the pretext that he will get the money back from her brother in England," but he does, on his return to Weimar, send the sum to her.<sup>343</sup> The money is brought, "at Christmastime," to the sister by an English storekeeper, and she and her mother thought that it had been returned by Cagliostro. Goethe hears of this in a letter of thanks sent from the family to the son, which he did not deliver, but which he read aloud at the gathering. Not long after the money is repaid, Cagliostro, who never escaped from the Bastille, is put on trial in Rome. Goethe tells his audience that he cannot continue assisting the Balsamo family without letting them know the truth:

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<sup>340</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 71.

<sup>341</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 71.

<sup>342</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 71.

<sup>343</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 71.

Now, since they have been informed of the imprisonment and sentencing of their relative, all I can do is to contribute something to their enlightenment<sup>344</sup> and to their consolation. I still have in my hands a sum for them, which I intend to send them, advising them at the same time of our true relationship.<sup>345</sup>

This story is passed on to us by a member of the gathering, and friend of Goethe, Böttiger, who includes in the telling the conjecture, made by another member of the gathering that evening, that this additional sum was the fee that he had received from the publisher for his play about Cagliostro, *Der Gross-Cophta*. Böttiger agrees that this is likely:

[...] and thus it would indeed be very singular that a sum of money that was earned by means of a play that scourges Cagliostro's frauds and brazen impudence was conveyed to the same Cagliostro's old mother and helpless sister in Palermo for their comfort, and that both things were done by the same German.<sup>346</sup>

The 'significance' of this story appears to those who first hear it, at the duke's mother's gathering, with the assistance of this assumption of the latent identity of the money repaid to Cagliostro's sister and the publisher's fee. We also see, in the operating of the latent identity, the closed circle pattern, because money that began in Palermo returns, after "a series of metamorphoses," as it were, in the end, to Palermo.<sup>347</sup> We will consider the closed-circle pattern at greater length in the next chapter, but let us pause for

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<sup>344</sup> There is something troubling about this claim to contribute to the "enlightenment" of Cagliostro's family. Cf. note 352.

<sup>345</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 72.

<sup>346</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 72.

<sup>347</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 72.

a moment to notice some things about this story. First, the narrative pattern of the latent identity of the money elevates the narration of something that appears mundane, it provides for the audience a suggestion that something meaningful has happened, by means of an “intensification” of the events themselves.<sup>348</sup> But this latent identity of the money repaid to Cagliostro’s family and the publishers fee has nothing to do with what makes this story significant to Goethe, its “subjective importance,” which “depends upon the presentiments of 1785.”<sup>349</sup>

The search into Cagliostro’s family background has a different meaning for the listeners from the one it has for him who gives the account of it. For them it was sufficient to conjecture the latent identity between the assistance and the publisher’s fee. For Goethe something else was also involved: the sobering of his relationship with Lavater, who was one of those who had been deceived by the supposed miracle worker Cagliostro, because they were all too ready to give credence. About the time of the writing of the Sicilian section of the *Italian Journey*, Goethe looks back, already with finality and with all the distance one feels toward a debacle, on the failure of the century of Enlightenment, which had first showed itself symptomatically in the success of figures like Cagliostro.<sup>350</sup>

Something curious begins to happen here. This story is an example, we are told, of two narrative devices with which significance works: latent identity and the closed circle. We see both of these in play in the way significance appears to the audience of the story, who

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<sup>348</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

<sup>349</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 72.

<sup>350</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73.

themselves supply the supplementary assumption about the latent identity. For Goethe himself, who alone knows whether the sum that he intends to give to Cagliostro's family in addition to the amount that was owed to them really is the same amount that he was given as a publisher's fee, finds the significance of this episode elsewhere. But Blumenberg describes this significance here in both local and global terms. First, on the local level, in terms of the cooling of his friendship with someone who was deceived by Cagliostro; and this serves the function of a symptom of the global level, for "the failure of the century of Enlightenment."<sup>351</sup> At least it comes to appear as a symptom over time, as Goethe returns repeatedly to this event, and his response to it:

What Goethe accomplished between the near insanity of his glimpse into the abyss in the necklace affair in 1785, its first working up in Sicily in 1787, the moral improvement of his curiosity<sup>352</sup> (after his return to Weimar) by the solace he provided to the Balsamo family, and the theatrical transformation of the material, and, finally, the late reversion to the events in the second part of the *Italian Journey* in 1817 and *Campaign in France* of 1824, was the depletion of power of something that had unnerved him dangerously.<sup>353</sup>

Let us begin with the obvious contrast: for the audience, the narrative devices augment the significance of a story that otherwise lacks real interest; whereas Goethe, who is

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<sup>351</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73.

<sup>352</sup> This too is a curious phrase. Blumenberg seems to be suggesting that Goethe perceives some impropriety in his curiosity about Cagliostro, and perhaps this is because curiosity seems so out of proportion when measured against "the failure of the century of Enlightenment," or even with the suffering of Cagliostro's family. Perhaps what causes this line to offend, however, like the claim to be "contributing to their enlightenment," is that it feels as if it is Goethe who benefits most from these actions: he undertakes the moral improvement of his curiosity to assuage his feeling of guilt, just as he "enlightens" Cagliostro's family, only after it is too late to keep them in the dark, not out of some sense that they will benefit from it, but because he could not maintain the deception. I don't know. I think I am too quick to condemn Goethe's actions.

<sup>353</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

overwhelmed by his perception of the significance of the ‘affair’ from the beginning, and who returns to this episode, “works it up,” in his writing, again and again, with the result that he is able to ‘deplete its power.’<sup>354</sup> There are two things to note here. The first is that myth, and the tools of myth, work on significance both by enhancing it and by depleting it. And, second, that seeing both of these operations allows us to understand better the way the narrative devices work on significance, and the relation between the two. The narrative devices themselves are, for Goethe, ways of dealing with the significance of this event, and are not to be understood as tools for generating significance, which they may appear to be when considering this story from the perspective of the audience. They do augment the significance of the assistance Goethe gives to Cagliostro’s family, or perhaps they rather transfer some of the excess significance Goethe perceives in the event itself to one of its minor consequences.<sup>355</sup> Blumenberg claims, in connection to Heidegger’s thinking about significance, although not, I think, as a description merely of Heidegger’s thinking, that

[e]quipping something with significance is not something that we can choose to do. Even granting that man makes history, still there is at least one of its side effects that man does not make; this is the ‘charging’ of constituent parts of the human world with significance.<sup>356</sup>

This is an important feature of Blumenberg’s theory of myth. Blumenberg claims that it is possible to “transfer” or to “simulate” the quality of “the numinous,”<sup>357</sup> to attach it

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<sup>354</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

<sup>355</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63-64.

<sup>356</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>357</sup> The numinous is certainly different than significance, and may in fact be an example or an interpretation of it. For Blumenberg, it is certainly an interpretation of the original uncanniness that adhered to the world, and a useful “nomenclature” for approaching his topic, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 20-21. In the structure of his third chapter, in which he introduces the concept of ‘significance,’ he employs this

somehow to people, such as priests, or to things in which it was not already present, but with which it is closely associated.<sup>358</sup> Even here, however, this quality is not simply generated, since “the numinous” is an interpretation of the uncanniness that results from the presence of the indefinite in human experience.<sup>359</sup> “Significance,’ too, cannot be generated by myth, but only “worked on,” whether by intensification, reduction, or transfer.<sup>360</sup>

#### Excursus: The Relationship Between Significance and “the Numinous”

Before we proceed, we must deal with a complication that arises, if not uniquely for those who attempt to forge a clear path through Blumenberg’s work, at least characteristically for them. It relates to the claim that one cannot simply choose to “charge” parts of the life-world with significance, one cannot “make it up,” but that there must always be an “objective foundation” for cases of significance.<sup>361</sup> It is fairly clear that Blumenberg is committed to this claim, since it occurs in several different contexts, in the chapter on significance, as well as beyond it, most notably perhaps in the insistence that myth is not fiction, and could not function if it were.<sup>362</sup> The case with which we are supporting those claims here, however, has two primary sources in the ‘significance’ chapter, and both of these complicate our ability to make the case. To begin with, Blumenberg takes the notion that humans are able to “reduce” the intensity of, to

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vocabulary as he approaches this introduction, but abandons it once he has the term ‘significance’ in play. This might suggest that ‘significance’ operates at a slightly deeper level, or perhaps it allows him to speak of myth in a way that distinguishes it from the domain of religion. In either case, the ‘numinous’ and ‘significance’ have structurally analogous positions in this chapter, which I take as a warrant for their comparison.

<sup>358</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63-64.

<sup>359</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>360</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63-64; 68.

<sup>361</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>362</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75; 108; 162

“simulate,” and to “transfer,” the quality of “the numinous” from Rudolf Otto.<sup>363</sup> Blumenberg claims that with the numinous, a “quality [...] that appears in men and in things,” and that has the “effect,” of producing a certain kind of fear, “the *mysterium tremendum*,” Otto was able to “decode the affect side” of myth, which we have described above as the anxiety in the face of the absolutism of reality, “and to equip it with a nomenclature of lasting effectiveness.”<sup>364</sup> Blumenberg, then, describes the “reduction,” “transfer,” and “simulation” functions with respect to this quality of the numinous. Myth is one of the ‘tools’ with which this function can be performed, as, for instance, in the way that myth breaks up, by means of the pantheon, the hostility and power of the world into separate domains that can be dealt with individually. In this we see both “reduction” of the intensity of what is terrifying, but also “distribution” of this among different figures or individuals.<sup>365</sup>

Blumenberg is indebted, in his theory of myth, to Otto’s thinking about “the Holy,” and to the language of “the numinous,” but he abandons it as soon as he introduces the concept of significance, although he attributes to our work on significance the functions Otto allows for work on “the numinous.” I argue that there are two reasons that cause Blumenberg to adopt the language of significance as opposed to that of “the Holy.” The first, about which he is more explicit, has to do with a shortcoming of the language of “the Holy” itself, which we find in a passage we have considered already:<sup>366</sup>

Too little thought is given to the meaning of such localization for what is at first the diffuse quality of the numinous. “The holy” is the primary interpretation of

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<sup>363</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>364</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 62; 21.

<sup>365</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>366</sup> Chapter 3.

the undefined ‘power’ [*Machtigkeit*] that is assumed and felt to exist on the strength of the simple fact that man is not the master of his fate, of the duration and circumstances of his life. When the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power’ is understood in this way, rites and myths are always secondary interpretations. Even if the subsequent interpretation of myths is termed “secondary” in its turn, as a “secondary rationalization”—as a rationalization it tends, not unambiguously and necessarily, but still in the direction of what had already been accomplished by the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power.’ ‘Reason’ just means being able to deal with something—in the limiting case, with the world. If the numinous is supposed to have been the primary interpretation, it is still already interpretation and not the thing itself that is interpreted. But we possess no other reality than the one we have interpreted. It is real only as the elementary mode of its interpretation, in contrast to what is excluded from it as unreal.<sup>367</sup>

What Otto considers to be a fundamental, primal experience, Blumenberg argues, appears rather to be an interpretation of something more basic. Blumenberg is careful here, because any interpretation could receive the same criticism as does Otto’s. What Blumenberg describes as more basic is not any feature of the world as such, but rather an experience, the experience of finding oneself to be unable to control “the duration and circumstances” of one’s own life, and this is the circumstance that is interpreted by the various interpretations.<sup>368</sup> We have described the process Blumenberg points to here at greater length above, but let us note here the consequence this has for the language of

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<sup>367</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

<sup>368</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

“the Holy,” for Blumenberg does not criticize this interpretation of the basic situation. Any consequence that follows would follow, then, from the mere fact that it is an interpretation. As this passage makes clear, however, any concept or nomenclature one employs to deal with the “undefined power,” a power with which we must deal if we are to live a human life, will involve such an interpretation, if, that is, the way we are dealing with the “undefined power” involves some sort of assumption about reality. “The Holy” makes just such an assumption, but the concept of significance avoids this. Something appears to be significant if it stands out, somehow, from its “diffuse surrounding field of probabilities.”<sup>369</sup> It may, by doing so, appear to be ‘more real,’ but, as we have seen, the significant has a somewhat vague relationship to reality. Blumenberg does insist that it has a “basis in reality,” and this basis gives to it the “status of reality,” but this is just to say that it really is a part of the life-world, and one, in order to experience significance, need go no further in determining just what that reality is.<sup>370</sup> This is not to say that one who is open to significance is operating prior to an interpretation of the world or reality. It is to say, rather, that we can think and talk about significance without reference to a particular interpretation of reality. Rudolf Otto’s thinking about “the Holy,” to the contrary, approaches a phenomenon in the history of religious psychology, an experience to which he refers, and which he suggests is necessary to have experienced if one is to understand his book.<sup>371</sup> This experience is related to things in the history of myth, again, as discussed in chapter 3 of this work. Despite this overlap, however, and this is I think the second reason why Blumenberg adopts the language of significance rather than

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<sup>369</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69.

<sup>370</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>371</sup> Otto, Rudolph. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1923, 1958), 8.

retaining that of “the Holy,” the history and function of myth is simply not the same as the history and function of religion.

This fact raises the question, then, of the degree to which the functions of work on “the numinous,” viz. reduction, simulation, and transfer, correspond to the functions of work on significance. More precisely, we might ask: if the quality of “the numinous” is something that can be simulated, why is it not the case that significance can be made up, or that aspects of the life-world can be charged with significance at will? More basic still: is simulation of the numinous the same thing as ‘making-up,’ and is transferring this quality the same as charging something with it at will? I can begin by proposing an answer to the last question, namely that simulation and transfer are related functions. This is to say that when the quality of the numinous is transferred to, for instance, a priest, it is not the case that it is simply made up. The function of the priest, to perform religious rites and ceremonies, rather, associates him with that in the world which is uncanny, and some of this quality is attracted to, or, as it were, transferred onto the person of the priest. Something similar happens in the case of the taboo.<sup>372</sup> If this is a plausible answer, then simulation would not be the same as simply ‘making this quality up,’ but it is rather the attaching of the quality to something that is associated with the quality’s ‘natural’ or ‘original’ bearer, if you will permit such terms. In the story of Goethe’s response to the ‘necklace affair,’ then, we see analogous functions, reduction in Goethe’s own case, and, in the case of the gathering to whom he tells this story, a kind of augmentation that, I argue, is a version of simulation. This would allow us to conclude that the function of “the numinous” in Otto’s system is taken over by “significance” in Blumenberg’s, so that

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<sup>372</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63-64.

we could take the evidence given about the “simulation” function of work on “the numinous” to be relevant to “significance.”<sup>373</sup>

There is a second complication. The claim that one is not able to “charge” parts of one’s world with significance at will appears in a passage, or at least very near to a passage, in which Blumenberg introduces, very briefly, an aspect of Heidegger’s presentation of the concept of significance. Since we will devote chapter 6 to Blumenberg’s thinking with and against Heidegger, I will not deal with this complication here at any great length. It is a difficulty one often faces in reading Blumenberg, however, that it is not clear to what degree he is speaking in the voice of the author he is discussing, and to what degree he is speaking in his own voice. Because, however, his claims that myth cannot be fiction do not present such a complication, and because they appear to support this claim, we can conclude, with some confidence, that, if Blumenberg is attributing this claim to Heidegger, he is not disagreeing with him.<sup>374</sup>

We have approached this idea from two different directions already in our thinking about myth in this dissertation. First, this feature of significance can be described in terms of the relation between myth and reality, and, second, in terms of the relationship between myth and fiction. If it is to perform its function, myth cannot be fiction: it does not need to be realistic, but it must not come into conflict with reality. This is reflected on the level of ‘significance,’ which we have seen to be both that which myth contributes, and that on which myth works. The relationship that obtains between myth and reality, as we have seen, is subtle; so, too, is that between significance and

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<sup>373</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63-4.

<sup>374</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75; 108; 162.

reality. Blumenberg describes this relationship here in terms of a balance between subjective and objective determination:

In significance, the subjective component can indeed be greater than the objective one, but the latter can never return to zero. As a valence that was ‘thought up,’ significance would have to break down. That is decisively important even for the phenomenon of the simulated new myth; where it appears, it makes use of the established repertory of procedures by which to secure an objective foundation, and dresses its creation up in a more or less ritualized scientific manner [...] So significance must have its own relationship to reality, a basis that has the status of reality. *Status of reality* does not mean empirical demonstrability; the place of the latter can be filled by taken-for-grantedness, familiarity, having been part of the world from the beginning. Even when the story of Prometheus is supplemented by the invention of his return from the Caucasus and his finding shelter in Athens in his old age, this is based on the unquestionability of the figure, which is precisely not felt to be something invented.<sup>375</sup>

I want to observe, briefly, the importance for this theory of the phrase “status of reality,” and that, for significance, this does not involve, or at least not primarily, “empirical demonstrability” or any kind of verifiable standing.<sup>376</sup> What this refers to primarily is something that is taken as reality, that is accepted non-reflectively, that is a part of the life-world. Myth, let us remember, has something to do with the margins of the world, and the status of reality presupposed by and for instances of significance, accordingly, is

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<sup>375</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>376</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

one that is suited to such margins; not the sort, that is, at which one can easily look directly. This is to say that we can see one way that significance meets the needs raised by the indefinite in the way that significance relates to reality.

Blumenberg's claim here is not, or not simply, that myth must have a "relationship to reality," but that significance itself must have one, that it cannot simply be something that is "thought up."<sup>377</sup> This distinction is obscured somewhat by the fact that he illustrates it with a reference to Prometheus. Is the significance of the story he mentions even the sort of thing that one can point to? It may help if we consider this distinction as it relates to the episode from Goethe's life, since we have already begun to articulate what is significant in that story. For the audience, the significance of the story is related to the latent identity of the sum paid to Cagliostro's family, on the one hand, and the fee Goethe's publisher paid him for the comic opera that deals with the necklace affair, and Cagliostro's supposed role in it, on the other. The point is simple. This identity would not seem particularly significant if it weren't actually the case. Significance is important because it, to overstate the case slightly, provides the feeling that the world takes notice of the individual, or at least that it is capable of producing unlikely convergences that indicate something to the individual, some possibility of meaning. Significance requires more than the recognition of the possibility of such convergences, but this possibility itself is not negligible.

The appearance of meaningful things in reality as a product of physical processes is improbable. That is why improbable distinctly marked [*ausgeprägt*] forms become indications of meaningfulness. In the most familiar case: natural beauty,

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<sup>377</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

which can be mistaken not for the beauty of art but for artificiality. Perhaps symmetry is the elementary example of a figure that resists interpretation as accident, that suggests meaning but that is not yet aesthetic. We no longer perceive this immediately, because we inhabit a world of technical mass distribution that conceals the concentrated improbability of the appearance of symmetries. But we still notice such symptoms when they consist in the unexpected coincidence of events, in the self-closing of a circle of vital events, or in the latent identity of things, persons, even of fictive subjects, across wide stretches of space or time.<sup>378</sup>

Blumenberg introduces two concepts that are very helpful for the attempt to see what is at issue in significance. The first is the idea that a pattern, even something so simple as “symmetry” might be, “resists interpretation as accident.”<sup>379</sup> That which is the way it is by accident need have no relevance to an individual’s life, whereas that which cannot be an accident must be the way that it is for some reason. The mere suggestion that something is the way that it is for some reason, even, and especially, if that reason is itself inscrutable, suggests that it means something, that the thing, and the reason, may mean something for human life. The second follows from this. Such patterns are uncommon, whereas that which appears to be the way it is by accident is common, and therefore is, or seems to be, more likely. For this reason, that which appears to be accidental is held to be that which is probable, and the significant comes to be associated with the improbable, and, to such a degree that improbability can be a mark of

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<sup>378</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 74.

<sup>379</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 74.

significance.<sup>380</sup> This explains, too, why the tools for working on significance, and with which significance works, are varieties of patterns.<sup>381</sup> Such patterns lend to the narratives this suggestion of meaningfulness, of improbability. Significance thus requires the “status of reality” in combination with the suggestion of meaning that is associated with improbability.

There is the appearance, in the preceding discussion, as in the passage of *Work on Myth* it discusses, that the telling of the story of Goethe’s response to the story of the necklace has been interrupted to discuss some general features of the concept of significance, and this is, to a degree, the case. This discussion has lead us, however, to an aspect of this concept that is central to Goethe’s reaction. We have discussed above the distinction between ‘significance’ and meaning in the context of adaptation, where we saw that, for instance, in the case of an animal that is adapted to its environment, any stimulus corresponds definitely to a particular response, and this is the “meaning” of the stimulus. For humans, who lack such adaptation, such meanings are not available, and they have to make do, instead, with significance, which is thus always related to the question “what am I to do now?”<sup>382</sup> Because this question can, under the right (or wrong) circumstances, be of vital, and in fact mortal, importance, there is a need to find, or to be open to, these indefinite suggestions of meaningfulness, which we here are calling

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<sup>380</sup> Cf. “As with the aesthetic object, part of the definition of significance is the way it emerges from the diffuse surrounding field of probabilities. History, like life, works against the tendency of a situation to be increasingly determined by probability, against the “death instinct” as the point toward which the leveling-off process converges. The outcomes and artifacts of history impress us as notions that one wouldn’t have believed any brain capable of,” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69. It is interesting that “history,” “life,” and “significance” all resist “determination by probability,” and yet “the appearance of meaningful things” by “physical processes is improbable,” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 69; 74. Is life not just such a natural process? We will see in the chapter on Freud the improbability of human life, and this, perhaps, is what Blumenberg is referring to here. In what domain does probability operate?

<sup>381</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70.

<sup>382</sup> Ch. 2, text corresponding to footnote 36. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 1678-169.

significance, in the world. We have seen, too, the way that the theoretical attitude, which views its objects in such a way as to obviate the possibility of seeing significance, or at least to reduce it as much as possible, increases the need for such significance by virtue of its success.

There is never anywhere a lack of readiness to acquiesce in the suggestion that what is apparently meaningless contains meaningfulness. It does not have to take as much shape as the question, What does that mean? It already means, without any ‘what.’ When the faithless son and brother, precisely by means of his infamous deeds and (what is still more) through the agency of a poet, pays his debt, which he has certainly long since forgotten, by providing, through his entirely unintended intervention in history, the material for a theater piece—then that is a concentration of circumstances that could not have been anticipated but that nevertheless proves to be possible. Fictional materials cannot achieve this suggestion of meaning; but the significance of myth is not recognizable as something fictional, because it has no nameable author, because it comes from afar and does not lay claim to a particular chronological position.<sup>383</sup>

This is the description of our susceptibility, like that of the original audience of Goethe’s story, to the suggestion that there is something significant in the latent identity of the money repaid to Cagliostro’s family and the money Goethe received for the play, and this illustrates very nicely the way significance appears in this example. But this “readiness to acquiesce” is precisely what troubled Goethe in those who were taken in by Cagliostro,

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<sup>383</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

including his friend Lavater. The driving force behind “the failure of the century of Enlightenment” was not very different from the need that drives the human openness to significance.<sup>384</sup> In his presentation of this example, Blumenberg does not spell out this connection between the need for significance and the so-called credulity of those who were taken in by Cagliostro, but it pushes us towards it. There is in this connection a kind of cautionary force, like that which surrounds the issue of “remythicization,” which we touched on in chapter three. The need for significance is a vital human need, but it requires something to give it measure. It is curious that the source of this measure is, or so Blumenberg hints, the historical formations of the inherited myths themselves.

This provides us some insight into the way that Blumenberg conceives of the relationship between myths and their contents. We have seen that the mythical attitude or “tendency to myth” can operate, with its specific openness to significance, independently of the material from inherited myths. As we have seen, Blumenberg is interested sometimes in the inherited myths themselves, but often, too, he is interested in the “affinity to myth,” with a certain orientation to the world, one that involves an openness to significances, and a tendency to “take refuge behind images,” a certain “way of looking at things.”<sup>385</sup> We will see, for instance, that Freud’s “affinity to myth” is seen in the use to which he puts the figures of Oedipus and Narcissus, but just as much in the position of the “death instinct” in his thought, in the way the pattern of a closed circle structures it.<sup>386</sup> To this extent it we can see a way in which, in the attempt to think about what myth does, we can abstract from the content of myth. We can see this especially in

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<sup>384</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 73.

<sup>385</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 51-52; 401; 67.

<sup>386</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86 ff. Part II, Chapter 2.

our first example of significance, in the story of Goethe's attempt to deal with his own response to the figure of Cagliostro and with the necklace affair. Here we can see an example of Goethe's "affinity to myth" that "tends toward the quality of myth" even though there is no reference to any mythical content (with the exception of his suggestion that this story affected him "like the gorgon's head").<sup>387</sup> We might conclude here that, in the attempt to think about myth, to isolate its function, it is sometimes useful to abstract away from the content of myth. The content of myth, however, has a special relation to the actual functioning of myth, and Blumenberg's account of the development of myth is based, in part, on the unique effectiveness of myth in performing its function. We saw this, in an interesting way, in our discussion of the relationship of myth to history, in chapter 4:

In historylessness lies the opportunity of every remythification: It is easiest to project mythical turning points into empty space. That is why the removal of history from school curricula is not so much a mistake in planning or a failure of understanding as, rather, an alarming symptom: Either mythification is already at work or it will immediately be induced by the loss of the historical consciousness of time. It may be that we can learn nothing from history but the fact that we have a history; but this already is enough to prevent us from putting ourselves under the regime of wishes—including the wish that the suspicion that there is a 'repetition of the same' could make it possible for us not to will it, so that instead, in what has become the empty space of time, other pregnant

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<sup>387</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 70; 73.

significances [*Prägnanzen*] (not ones that history would ever confirm) can be displayed, and offered for imitation and for the formation of expectations.<sup>388</sup>

This passage raises an issue that is very much at the heart of the story Blumenberg employs as his first illustration of the concept of ‘significance,’ since, for this illustration, he draws upon a story from recent history, rather than from one of our inherited myths. More interesting still, unlike almost all of the illustrations that follow it in the chapter on ‘significance,’<sup>389</sup> Goethe does not draw from the stock of inherited myth in his attempt to deal with the significance of the necklace affair. The story that has occupied our attention in this chapter, however, allows us to leave to one side the question of fiction; we have dealt with issues of deception, fraud, and guesswork, but the basic details that make up the story are things that actually happened. I want to place some emphasis on this point because, although we are dealing with the theory of myth in this work, much of it involves the search for significance in history. Blumenberg’s theory is interested in finding significance in myth, in a sense, but the way that this is done, according to Blumenberg, is by means of the reception of myth, wherein one works upon a myth, such that historically specific pressure is exerted upon its basic pattern, distorting it in such a way that it becomes suitable to the historical context of its reception. Such work on myth, then, is a means of adjusting to, not to say adapting to, a historical context from which one has become somehow alienated. This is to say that work on myth is always a kind of

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<sup>388</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 99.

<sup>389</sup> Heidegger is the other exception.

work on the world and work on the self.<sup>390</sup> Work on myth operates within a horizon that is historically determined.<sup>391</sup>

Blumenberg implies that there is a degree to which such historical determination depends upon our awareness of it. This is not to say that we, as humans, can free ourselves from this determination simply by remaining or becoming aware of it. I take him rather to be suggesting that history can show us something about our possibilities and limits, primary among these the way that our history provides limits for us. This is what he means, I suggest, when he says that “we can learn nothing from history but that we have a history.”<sup>392</sup> We do not find lessons that we can simply repeat, because each historical situation is unique. But this very fact is something that we can learn from history. More to the point, the limits imposed upon us by having a history must be understood in the context of the work attributed to myth, which is called for by and directed against what Blumenberg calls “indifference.”<sup>393</sup> The limits imposed by history can serve to provide a kind of structuring differentiation. They can provide for us something on which we can rely, something we can take for granted, something whose foundations do not stand in immediate need of rational grounding.<sup>394</sup> Such things that can be taken for granted are a necessary condition, again, of the human way of life, which has

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<sup>390</sup> Cf. e.g. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 103: “Simultaneity with a victory in a battle or at Olympia does not awaken acute historical doubt, but simultaneity with the beacon fire at Ephesus already attracts critical attention. This differentiation is a criterion for ‘significance,’ which is not something with which we readily credit history.”

<sup>391</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 166: “The fact that the choice of world interpretations, the decision between forms of life, has already been accomplished is what constitutes the circumstance of having a history.”

<sup>392</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 99.

<sup>393</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

<sup>394</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 162-163. Robert Wallace describes Arnold Gehlen’s special usage of the term “institution,” which Blumenberg borrows, in “Translator’s Note d” of part II, chapter 1 of *Work on Myth*: “For Gehlen, institutions are the shared patterns of perception and behavior that man erects to take the place of instincts (with which, in comparison to other animals, he is very poorly equipped) in guiding his actions.” In Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 173.

been set free to pursue other interests precisely by taking certain things for granted. This is to say that I take Blumenberg's comments in this passage about "having a history" to be related to his thoughts about the function of "institutions" in human existence.

"Institutions," he claims, serve to distribute "burdens of proof," allowing us to avoid the efforts, which would surely prove to be impossible, of providing rational foundations for every aspect of life.<sup>395</sup> The most relevant articulation of this idea appears in the context of Blumenberg's Darwinistic theory of the development of myth. For the sake of economy, I quote this passage at perhaps excessive length:

Every economy of ideas for which no rational foundation is given becomes suspect when it presents itself as the demand for submission to something for which no rational foundation *can* be given, and this becomes the center of new anxieties. It can be rational not to be rational to the utmost extent. But as a means by which to express this circumstance, myth would be much too risky, because its pragmatic implications cannot be unambiguous. One would not be justified in 'setting it up,' if that were possible. On the other hand, rationality is all too ready to engage in destruction when it fails to recognize the rationality of things for which no rational foundation is given, and believes it can afford to get carried away by the process of establishing rational foundations. Descartes thought that the best way to build cities rationally was to begin by razing the old cities. Not even World War II yielded proof of this prospect for rationality. There are moments in which the outcomes of centuries and milleniums are thoughtlessly sacrificed. What had been held fast and passed on by a loyalty

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<sup>395</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 166.

shielded from all reflection becomes a source of offense and is gotten rid of. One does not need to be conservative, however, to see that the demand for ‘critical’ destruction, and then for a final rational foundation, leads to burdens of proof that, if they were really accepted and undertaken as seriously as they are asserted and demanded, would no longer leave room for what is supposed to be gained, by this process, for the intelligent movement of existence. Thus the selection of constants over long periods of time is, in fact, a condition of the possibility of running the risks of “trial and error” in parts of one’s behavior.<sup>396</sup>

This passage provides evidence, or so I argue, of the value for the human type of existence of having a history, and, Blumenberg suggests, the possession, and teaching, of a “historical consciousness” gives access to this history, and to its benefit.<sup>397</sup> In the absence of this “historical consciousness,” a kind of void opens up, an absence of the limitations, and their structuring potential. Because the human way of life needs this structure, something will emerge to fill the void. Blumenberg’s warning here is interesting.<sup>398</sup> The loss of this historical consciousness is “a symptom” of an already operating “mythicization,” or a signal that it is about to commence.<sup>399</sup> The danger of such “mythicization” appears in the relationship between myth and wishes. As we saw in chapter 2, Blumenberg’s account of the development of myth depends upon a life that is split between the savanna, the domain of the “absolutism of reality,” and the cave, the domain of the “absolutism of wishes,” where it was possible to “work up” the anxiety experienced on the savanna in safety. The process of “remythicization” Blumenberg

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<sup>396</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 162-163.

<sup>397</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 99.

<sup>398</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 99.

<sup>399</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 99.

describes here involves the filling up of the empty space left by the loss of “the historical consciousness of time” by a particular set of wishes. That is to say, Blumenberg is concerned not only with the fact that in this process wishes, and some particular person’s wishes, govern, but that we, in general, allow it to happen. This is an example of the sort of passage in which Blumenberg approaches the use of myth by the Nazi’s during the Third Reich, with its characteristic laboriously indirect sentence construction. What interests me about the warning, primarily, is that what he calls “historical consciousness of time,” which refers, or so I propose, to the consciousness of the historical condition of human life, a condition that involves certain historically specific limitations, limitations which structure, or might structure that life and so make it possible; this historical consciousness, is placed alongside our inherited myths, with the histories of their reception, as a preventative measure to the void that invites, perhaps even gives rise to, this mythicization.

This points to yet another aspect of the relationship between significance and distance. The distance in time, the long development of the “imprinted form” of these myths, is somehow preserved in them.<sup>400</sup> This “pregnance,” in conjunction with the histories of their reception, which adds somehow to the “pregnance,” contributes to their serviceability, accounts for the fact that they “convince us again and again and still present themselves as the most useful material for any search for how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence.”<sup>401</sup> To put the point too neatly, the structuring of existence that “the historical consciousness of time” provides is related to the significance

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<sup>400</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68-9.

<sup>401</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 150-151.

of myth. For structuring is specifically related to significance.<sup>402</sup> It is not only that myth provides distance from the oppressiveness of a hostile world by providing significance, but it is also the case that distance is the form taken by the structuring significances. We see this, finally, in Goethe's habit of returning to the story of the 'necklace affair,' and his response to it. For he distances himself from the overwhelming significance he perceives initially, but his return to this episode shows us that he finds significance, also, in the distance itself.

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<sup>402</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97: "Against the dogmatic mode of thought, with its claim to homogeneous validity in universal space and universal time—in other words, with precisely what Platonism had invented, by virtue of its introduction of the 'Ideas' as timeless and placeless validities, and as the imitation of which, as far as the claim to rigorous truth is concerned, one can regard the dogmatic mode of thought—against this mode of thought, the characteristic differentiation of the mythical 'significances' stands out as a structuring that is opposed to the intolerable indifference of space and time. So demythologizing must render the spatial and temporal distinctions invalid, must deny the priority given to the directions of above and below: It must deny the mythical element of an ascension of the messianic figure into heaven just as much as the assignment of the Last Judgment to the valley of Jehoshaphat."

## CHAPTER 6

### IN LIEU OF A DEFINITION II: THE CASE OF FREUD

The central section of Part I, chapter 3, “‘significance,’” which begins with the Goethe illustration discussed in our previous chapter, comprises a compact history of the “closed circle pattern” as a tool with which myth and its reception address the issue of “trust in the world.”<sup>403</sup> Following the Goethe illustration, we find a very brief history of the way the structure of the *Odyssey*, completed by the homecoming of Odysseus, as a closing of the circle, is adapted at certain moments in history, adaptations that show us something about the historical pressures characteristic of those moments. These episodes in the history of deformations of the basic pattern of the *Odyssey* illustrate the way that significance is renewed in new historical contexts, and they show, at the same time, the way ‘pregnance’ is gained for the story, and for the figure of Odysseus, by and through these deformations. Most importantly for our purpose, this history shows the intimate connection that obtains between the closed circle pattern and the question not only of the degree to which the world is habitable, but of the degree to which it is homelike, that it meets the need, or at least the desire, humans have to feel at home. The present chapter’s aim is to present the importance of the closed-circle pattern in Freud’s thinking for Blumenberg’s concept of ‘significance,’ and because this discussion follows immediately on the heels of the history of deformations of the *Odyssey*’s closing of the circle and presupposes what is learned there, we will touch briefly on these transformation here.

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<sup>403</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 85; cf. 76.

This brief history begins with the presupposition of Odysseus' return home to a faithful Penelope, and a fulfilling reunion with her that includes a recounting to her of his wanderings, the story of the *Odyssey* itself, as we find it in the version attributed to Homer. Although it is not the case that Blumenberg thinks of this, or any, version of a myth as being the standard, he can, because of the standing of Homer's epics in Greek and European culture, treat it as canonical, as a version familiar to most authors. This brief history does not actually presuppose this knowledge in every case, however. The first version he mentions, in fact, which he attributes generally to "Stoicism," requires no such assumption: in their allegorical interpretations of Odysseus, they disdained his homecoming, and valued only the resistance to "external fortunes and internal weaknesses."<sup>404</sup> More interesting than this is the version found in Plotinus' writing, who was able to retain the homecoming, but, in order to do so, had to combine fleeing with the idea of returning. For Plotinus,

Odysseus's return to his earthly homeland of Ithaca no longer seems adequate to his endless afflictions; the basic movement of existence has become one of flight from the earthly assignment of sense, so that it now seems more nonsense than sense to return to the place from which one set out. But this remains the image for flight to a place that is held to be in a higher sense one's place of origin.<sup>405</sup>

What is most striking about this is not the "violence"<sup>406</sup> of this distortion, in which "return" must also be flight, so that flight from this world, or the world of sense, can be

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<sup>404</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 77.

<sup>405</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 77.

<sup>406</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 77, uses this term to describe the quotations from Homer with which Plotinus constructs his telling, attributing a line spoken by Agamemnon at Troy to Odysseus, who he

understood also to be a return to the one, which is the source of everything and each thing, but rather the fact that, even though this violence was necessary to make the story fit Plotinus' world view, the story of the *Odyssey* still appealed to him for this purpose.

We begin to notice something interesting with Dante's appropriation of the Odysseus myth:

The Middle Ages had to go even a step further in the deformation of the plan of the *Odyssey*. Here least of all could it be believed that return to man's earthly home might represent his wholeness [or "salvation": *Heil*]; redeemed man is destined for a higher happiness than merely returning to the point of departure of his fall. But the explosion of the figure is assisted by a further element as well, the absence of the decisive presupposition of a Platonic interpretation: In order to describe the story of the soul as a cyclical detour, a symmetrical drama, one had to ascribe preexistence to the soul. This was the way in which Platonism had still been able to close the circle. Seen in the medieval manner, Odysseus can no longer represent the new salvation, but only the old wickedness. In Dante he becomes the figure of senselessness, fallen into the power of curiosity about the world.<sup>407</sup>

We begin with the observation that there is a kind of development in the understanding of the world that we found in Plotinus. Happiness or salvation, like in Plotinus, is not to be found in our life in this world, but is rather to be found in some kind of escape from it.

Whereas in Plotinus, the immortality of the soul allowed its flight from this world to

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describes as the figure with "higher mythical pregnancy," but also so that Odysseus return could be connected to the idea that line expresses, "Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland!"

<sup>407</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 78-79.

complete a circular process, the Christian Middle Ages understood the soul to be created, with the result, at least for Dante, that the achievement of happiness, in the form of the soul's ascent to heaven after death, could not be understood as a closing of the circle. There is the appearance, in Blumenberg's telling, that the pressure exerted upon the circular pattern in Dante's telling is a kind of development of that in Plotinus's. This does not appear to be a claim about influence, but more nearly one about a process or development according to which human ideas about meaning or happiness or fulfillment increasingly find that meaning, etc., to be something unavailable, that it is hard to imagine its attainment in this world.<sup>408</sup> For Dante, and for Christian thought as it is to be found in the tradition following St. Augustine, there is a radical break between what is available on earth, at least by human means, and this happiness. Blumenberg alludes to this fact in his reference to "curiosity," the inordinate, at any intensity, desire to perceive or know things about the world.<sup>409</sup>

Despite this fact, Odysseus remains a figure who is able to represent the human capacity to feel or to be at home in the world. In this telling, Odysseus' wanderings are the result of curiosity, which leads him to transcend the boundaries of the known world, sailing past the Pillars of Hercules, and to his eventual demise by shipwreck. Blumenberg puts the point this way:

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<sup>408</sup> This process posits Homer's *Odyssey* as its point of departure, which does not portray human life as easy, or fun, or happy. The fulfillment it portrays, however, is in this world. Blumenberg suggests a connection between such fulfillment, or happiness, and meaning. We should always remember, however, that "[m]yth allows man to live, by depleting superior power; for man's happiness, it has no images." Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 31. Should we distinguish between the "images" myth has to provide and its structure? I think it is rather the case that Plotinus and Dante understood the promise of happiness in another world, and employ the image of fulfillment, of trust and stability, to represent the attainment of that happiness. What they get from myth is, perhaps, this image of fulfillment rather than the promise of happiness.

<sup>409</sup> Blumenberg devotes part III of his great *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* to a history of "curiosity."

Even if the myth, in order to illustrate this, had to be completely distorted, it nevertheless remained, precisely on account of this pressure, the unsurpassable means by which to express the epoch's incipient doubt about the finality of its horizon and its narrowness.<sup>410</sup>

As we have seen above, the claim here points again to the fact that the forces at work in the formation of myth produce in myth its suitability for later reception. That is, the historical pressures to which myth responds in its receptions are just the sort of pressures to which it had to respond in the long era of its formation in oral performance. These steps in this history, however, allow us to specify these "historical pressures," rather than speaking of them generally. What is at issue here are the ideas and hopes that are available, at any time, about what it is possible for a human life to be or to include. Blumenberg sees in Dante's treatment of Odysseus not only the condemnation of his curiosity and the transgression of permissible interest in the world, but also a dissatisfaction, still "incipient," with the "narrowness" of the horizon of what is permissible.<sup>411</sup> It is interesting that Odysseus is the "unsurpassable" figure by means of which an interest in this question, "of how matters stand, in a general sense, with human existence," no matter how these matters are understood to stand.<sup>412</sup> To put this another way, the very pressures that distort the pattern, turning the circle to a line, in this case, and not only the pressures but the distortion itself, is what makes a myth such as this one the superior means for dealing with these pressures.

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<sup>410</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 79.

<sup>411</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 79.

<sup>412</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 79; 151.

The strangeness of this situation appears even more clearly in Blumenberg's virtuosic reading of James Joyce's reception of the Odysseus myth, his novel *Ulysses*. Blumenberg dwells longer on this reading than will serve our purpose here, so I will focus on the relation of narrative pattern to the question of the home-likeness of the world.

At the end, the Odyssey of triviality that Leopold Bloom traverses in that single day even refutes the closed circle pattern of meaning. His return home is the least important and consequential station of all and concludes with the internal monologue of Molly Bloom, expressing her unaffectedness by this return home. Odysseus/Bloom, Joyce writes to Frank Budgen on December 10, 1920, "romances about Ithaca... and when he gets back it gives him the pip." That which occupies the position of home refutes what is still called coming home.<sup>413</sup>

In contrast to Dante's version, Joyce's Odysseus, Leopold Bloom, completes a circle, returning to the home from which he set out on a not particularly significant day in 1904. What is "exploded" here is not the pattern itself, but the possibility that such a thing could still mean something, the connection of the pattern to significance. We find this explosion in the "everyday" setting of the novel, as well as in the indifference with which Bloom's Penelope, his wife Molly, greets him on his return.<sup>414</sup> She has not, this day, been unfaithful, but she contemplates infidelity with Stephen Dedalus, this novel's Telemachus. This negation of the possibility of meaning points to a connection that has been hovering just beyond our attention for some time, the connection between, on the one hand, the question of the degree to which the world is reliable, and therefore home-

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<sup>413</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 81.

<sup>414</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 81.

like, and, on the other, the availability of meaning(s). For Leopold Bloom is the Odysseus whose journey is least meaningful, and who comes home only in the most meaningless sense, who finds a place that is not homelike, where he is not welcome. This connection is in fact integral to the narrative pattern, in which the connection by which the circle is closed is the establishment of meaning, and it is this meaning that gives the impression of significance, which is, or accompanies, or gives rise to, the feeling that makes a place feel like a home, the feeling that something matters, and that one is somehow involved or affected by this mattering.

Blumenberg's reading of Freud in Chapter three of the first part of *Work on Myth* is concerned with the closed circle pattern, but not primarily with the Odysseus myth. The connection drawn in the reception history of that myth, adumbrated above, between the narrative pattern and the related issues of the home-likeness of the world and the availability of meaning, are presuppositions of this reading. The closed circle pattern appears in Freud's writing in connection, first and foremost, with his reception of the figure of Oedipus. Despite the very different emotional charge connected with this closing of the circle in comparison with that found in Homer's *Odyssey*, Blumenberg claims that the significance of this pattern, the questions connected to it, are the same:

The cyclical schema<sup>415</sup> had been a basic pattern of trust in the world, and it is still the same thing when it emerges again as an archaism. The reliability of every

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<sup>415</sup> Let us observe that the "closing of the circle," as a narrative pattern, is not simply the same thing as a "cyclical schema," especially in that the cyclical schema denotes a repetition, whereas the closing of the circle implies, at least in our two examples, something singular (except perhaps in the case of Leopold Bloom, since we are to understand his as a day that could be "any other day:" and it is just this that is an element of the evacuation of meaning from this telling). I connect the two here, however, with two factors to support the decision. First, they are connected by the idea of being "a pattern of trust in the world" and the circularity they share; and, second, they are connected, as we shall see below, by the story of Freud's experience of uncanniness in the way he accidentally returned, three times, to the red light district in the "small provincial town in Italy." Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 87. This chapter on Freud as a whole

path through life—fulfillable, after delay, however much it may be impeded by the gods' division of powers—is imprinted in advance in the pattern of the closed circle. Even in the horror of returning to an unknown origin, as in the Oedipus myth, there is the impossibility of missing it, which points, even as a degenerate form, to the fundamental pattern of a deeper precision. Of course it is delusion (*atē*) that makes one adhere to this precision; as the doom decreed by the gods, it is the agency by which meaning is established through hidden processes—a delusion that seems a mockery of all meaning only to those who are also subjected to such dooms.<sup>416</sup>

Significance is the idea that meaningfulness is possible, that the world, or things in the world, can be meaningfully relevant to human lives. Blumenberg argues, further, that humans need significance, because they live in a world in which determinate meaning is not available.<sup>417</sup> The closing of the circle suggests such meaning, and, by this alone, provides a kind of comfort. It is all too easy, on this basis, to see in the closing of the circle, and in significance, something positive, the suggestion not only that something is meaningful, but also that it means something good. This is not Blumenberg's view. What he argues here is altogether stranger: the closed-circle pattern provides comfort, it suggests that the world is reliable: even when it brings about the sort of horror found in the Oedipus myth, it suggests that one can rely upon meeting the doom that is one's own. It has this effect, at least, for the audience of the story, although perhaps not for those

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will serve as an argument for the connection, at least in this case, between the closed circle and the repeating cycle. It is not enough, I think, to say that the closed circle is simply a single instance of a cyclical pattern, because the repetitiveness is a source of the comfort the pattern provides, as much as is the circularity. But the point of closing, in both instances, points to the reason that they are connected to meaning, or represents this connection.

<sup>416</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 85-86.

<sup>417</sup> Chapter 2, text corresponding to note 94; Chapter 5, text corresponding to note 382.

who experience “such dooms.”<sup>418</sup> It is interesting to note, as well, that for Blumenberg, and this is something that we shall see at greater length below, the horror of the Oedipus myth is not simply, not even primarily, associated with the crimes he commits, but with the closing of the circle itself. The horror is that of “returning to an unknown origin:” we cannot separate, in our attempt to parse the nature of this horror, the fact that the origin to which he “returns” is his mother from the fact that the origin is unknown. The fact that it is unknown is what makes the return possible, and also what makes it inevitable. The unknown in this myth takes on a kind of coercive force, in that Oedipus’ ignorance is the means by which the gods bring about his doom.

Freud’s reception of the Oedipus material is less the focus of Blumenberg’s reading of Freud than it is a kind of helpful model for the attempt to understand the significance of the mythical pattern of the circle in Freud’s thought. So Blumenberg’s interest in Freud in this chapter is not limited to his reception of Freud. The significance of this pattern for Freud, as Blumenberg reads him, is based on Blumenberg’s reading of the Oedipus myth: in fact, it is in Blumenberg’s disagreement with Freud’s reading of this myth that the significance of Freud’s reading of this myth really becomes clear. I will make this case slowly over the course of the present chapter, as Blumenberg’s presentation itself has several phases. There is a version of what we might call the Oedipal circle, that is, the fated closing of the circle, that relates to and appears in Freud’s thinking about “the Uncanny:”

Sigmund Freud’s affinity to myth relates to the mythical cycle in a multiple concentric fashion. Perhaps it already did this in the Italian experience that he

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<sup>418</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

reports as part of the basis for his concept of the “uncanny.” The weight that he gives to the harmless event by its late insertion into his own work presupposes that the point to which this circle, this repetition of the same, returned had a specific ‘significance’ for him. It was an Odyssey experience of the type described by Joyce. On a single day in a small provincial town in Italy Freud came into the “red light district” three times, unintentionally, and the greater his dismay and his haste to get free of this quarter, the more certainly the circle closed. Who else but Freud would have experienced that in this way and would have been able to enact for himself so impressively the fixation on sexual matters, with this trick of the id? The third time, a “feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny.” He explicitly performs the theoretician’s most difficult renunciation, the renunciation of all further curiosity, in order to get free of the feeling of a helplessness that is otherwise peculiar to the state of dreaming. Freud recognized the ambivalence of ‘significance’ in the coercive and fateful way in which the closing of the circle is accomplished: the uncanny as the inescapable, the meaningful as the unmistakable. This must be borne in mind in connection with the renewed interest in Oedipus.<sup>419</sup>

Blumenberg does not dwell, in this work, on what exactly he intends with the phrase “affinity to myth” [*Affinität zum Mythos*<sup>420</sup>], but I think that it is not insignificant. It points, first of all, to the notion that he is not simply pursuing the reception of a particular story or narrative pattern, but, rather, is trying to find what in this pattern constitutes the attraction to it for the thinker. Not only, then, does he want to know what work myth is

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<sup>419</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86-87.

<sup>420</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Arbeit zum Mythos*, 98.

doing for Freud, but also why Freud turns to myth to do this work: what is it about myth, and about the work that he needs to accomplish, that makes these two a suitable match. As we saw above, in the chapter on Goethe, this question may be asked much more profitably of the modern reception of myth because the material in which we may find an answer is at least more likely to be available. Let us notice also that Blumenberg speaks of the affinity to myth, in general, rather than an affinity to a particular myth. This generality stands out, perhaps, because it characterizes this sentence as a whole, and lends to it a peculiar opacity: “Sigmund Freud’s affinity to myth relates to the mythical cycle in a multiple concentric fashion.”<sup>421</sup> The mythical cycle, in the context of this chapter, ought to refer not to its appearance in the Oedipus myth, but to the pattern itself that we see in the Odysseus myth, in the New Testament story of the Prodigal Son,<sup>422</sup> and perhaps in the myth of Sisyphus,<sup>423</sup> in addition to that of Oedipus. This suggests that the pattern can be thought of independently from the way it appears in the different stories. The separation of the pattern from the story may seem unnecessary, since the significance of the pattern changes, to some degree, in each reception of any individual story. The question that arises, then, is what is accomplished by this separation. The answer to this question must begin, I suggest, with the phrase “affinity to myth,” and with the idea that the significance of Freud’s reception of myth must be sought first in the needs that induce him to turn to myth, and with the way that he transforms the myths in his reception of them. To put this more simply, the particular version of the mythical pattern of the closed circle that Freud

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<sup>421</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86. [“Sigmund Freuds Affinität zum Mythos ist in mehrfacher Konzentrität auf den mythischen Zyklus bezogen.“]. Blumenberg, Hans. *Arbeit am Mythos*, 98.

<sup>422</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 77-78.

<sup>423</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 76.

finds so compelling appears in connection to Oedipus, but also independently, as we see in this illustration of “the uncanny.”

All this does not yet reveal fully the strange and estranging generality of Blumenberg’s statement. It begins with the generality of “Freud’s affinity to myth,” and its relation to “the mythical cycle” in general.<sup>424</sup> It is the description of this relation as a “multiple concentricity,” or that his affinity relates to the pattern in “a multiple concentric fashion” that resists an easy grasp most vigorously. This resistance is not the result of a lack of candidates for the referent of this phrase, which appear first in the episode that illustrates “the Uncanny,” and which we find repeatedly in Blumenberg’s reading. What resists interpretation is rather the generality itself. Any one of these specific cycles, because it is specific, would not do justice to the generality of the initial claim. The generality might be pointing to the fact that it is a figure that appears in different ways in Freud’s thought. What supports this possibility is the claim that the relation to the cycle is not only “multiple”, but also “concentric.”<sup>425</sup> Again, if we tried to connect this claim to the particular repetition of a closed circle, to a particular cyclical pattern, then what would indicate that the repetitions were concentric as opposed to, say congruent, circles? As for this story itself, Freud finds himself, quite by accident, in “the red light district” of a small town, hastens to leave immediately and, in his attempt to flee, and despite his intention, finds himself returning to the same part of town a second and a third time.<sup>426</sup> Let us observe the salient features of this story: we find the closing of a circle, and the connection of this with the sense of significance; we find the repetition of this closing;

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<sup>424</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

<sup>425</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

<sup>426</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86-87.

and, we find the accomplishment of the closing of this circle despite attempt to avoid it. Blumenberg connects this episode explicitly with Oedipus, and emphasizes here the “ambivalence of ‘significance:’” this is equivalent to his claim in the passage quoted above, that the closed circle pattern is a pattern of the establishment of meaning, and only seems to be a mockery of all meaning to those who also have to undergo “such dooms.”<sup>427</sup> It is from the perspective of one hearing such a story, that this could be experienced as ambivalence. This ambivalence, at any rate, will figure prominently in Freuds “affinity to myth.”<sup>428</sup>

In order to see how, or what, it means that, Freud’s “affinity to myth relates to the mythical cycle in a multiple concentric fashion,” we will proceed from the assumption, then, that Blumenberg’s reading of Freud will present to us one circle at a time, as it were, and that we will not, for instance, see the “concentricity” in a single story, such as the uncanny episode described above. This will prove, in the end, to be a false assumption, for the grand theory with which Blumenberg ends this reading will encompass the circles found in and represented by the readings of aspects of Freud’s thought that come before it. Blumenberg constructs this piecemeal, however, so it will be useful to follow him in this. The presentation of the fundamental pattern of the Oedipus myth, and of what is fundamental to Freud’s reception of it, is the next major step in this construction. Blumenberg begins to isolate the features of this pattern:

The Oedipus complex that Freud discovered or invented is not given that name only because it reflects, on the moderate level of desires, the murder of one’s father and incest with one’s mother. It is also, and above all, given that name

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<sup>427</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

<sup>428</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

because it assumes, as an instinctive impulse of infancy, an unexpressed inclination to return home to the mother, in opposition to the centrifugally directed claims of reality, represented by the father. “Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex.” In other words, he has to learn not to return home. Or according to Freud’s later insight, not to return home right away.<sup>429</sup>

Blumenberg expresses here his desire to shift the emphasis in thinking about the Oedipus complex away from “the level of desires,” and to place it somewhere else, a tendency that he will develop in what follows. He replaces the desires in this passage with “an unexpressed inclination to return home to the mother.”<sup>430</sup> The tendency to return is opposed to “the centrifugally directed claims of reality,” and this allows us to see the field of operation here more clearly. The image is that of a circular force that propels the individual increasingly outward from the center, further with each revolution. In this center is the mother, especially her womb, the origin, as it were, of the individual. “Reality,” which is associated with the father, pulls or drives the individual away from the mother. The demands of reality, however, exceed that which the individual believes himself (significantly, I think, *himself*) to be capable of, and so this centrifugal force produces, or is at least met with, an inclination to return. Blumenberg suggests here, and will develop below, that this inclination is not to be understood in terms of desire, at least not primarily. There is clearly, however, an association of the “unexpressed inclination” of this theory and the incest of the myth. It is significant, too, that the mother’s womb is not only origin, but it is also, and more importantly, home: it represents the security that

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<sup>429</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 87.

<sup>430</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 87.

is lacking in the world. Freud's emphasis on the element of desire in the Oedipus complex highlights the symbolic nature of the fulfillment, which is the only fulfillment possible, given the impossible nature of the desire itself.

The refinement of emphasis in this passage takes place within the confines of Freud's own reading of the Oedipus myth. Despite his claim to the contrary, however, Blumenberg's description of the difference between Freud's theory and the "pattern of the myth" leaves little doubt that Blumenberg's supplement, the potential that Freud himself does not see in his own myth, is a necessary condition for one who would see the significance of Freud's reception of Oedipus. Blumenberg introduces this disagreement in the following way: "It is not a correction of Freud's anamnesis of the Oedipus myth, but an observation on his technique of 'reception' if one does not leave unnoticed the way in which he fails to reproduce the pattern of the myth."<sup>431</sup> Blumenberg's tone here is ironic, but his irony is not simple. According to Blumenberg's theory of myth, a given myth does not have a definitive version, a standard used to measure the others, at least not in terms of correctness. From that perspective, Freud's failure "to reproduce the pattern of the myth" is not something that calls for correction, and it does not call into question the legitimacy of his reception of the myth. Let us accept, then, that Blumenberg does not intend to correct "Freud's anamnesis"<sup>432</sup> of the Oedipus myth;" this still leaves open the question of what he accomplishes with this "observation on his technique of

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<sup>431</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

<sup>432</sup> One perhaps does not need to know that Blumenberg distrusts theories that rely upon the sort of inherent forms that are recalled by any "anamnesis" to feel the irony in this choice of words. This recognition is not intended, however, to direct our attention away from the importance of latencies, especially stories that remain latent in humanity, in what follows.

reception.”<sup>433</sup> In order to answer this question, let us first look, in detail, at this observation:

He carried his idea of the mechanism of the genesis of dreams from censored desires over to myth for the first time in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. If Greek tragedy is still able to stir the modern spectator just as deeply as it did the contemporaries of the ancient poet, although elements and conditions underlying the material have, after all, disappeared in the meantime—such as the function of gods and above all the oracle—then such a continuous readiness for reception must be connected with the constancy of the substratum of desires. The poet himself would already have found the material ready to hand as the result of a process of selection that would always be traceable to the tabooed desire for incest. But laying stress on this element, one hits upon neither the core of the myth nor that of the tragedy. What supports this configuration is not the type of guilt that Oedipus unknowingly lays upon himself through patricide and incest, but rather the way in which he discovers it. Of course it was meant to be the worst conceivable crime, but at bottom its casuistry didn’t matter very much. The gods delude man into doing atrocious things in ignorance and leave it to the infallibility of his fate for him to discover this and expiate it according to the rules of his reason—which is more a public than a private reason, so that it is determined entirely by the deed and not by the intention. What is disastrously uncovered are the past deeds of a king, not the hidden underworld of desires that belong to the psychic ‘apparatus.’<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

<sup>434</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

Freud's reading of the Oedipus myth is related to his theory of the origin of myth itself, that is to say, the Oedipus story serves as an example of the origin of myth, whereby the desires that all humans experience, but which they cannot accept, and so censor, are transferred into the myth, where they can safely be dealt with, in all their horror, but without the high stakes one could not avoid if one confronted them directly. This theory is presented, here, as an attempt to answer the question of why myths have been able to survive when the cultural conditions in which they arose, and on which they are based, have long since passed away.<sup>435</sup> Freud's answer is that, because the myths are related to these censored desires, which are a part of our human condition, they remain relevant despite the changing cultural conditions.

Blumenberg's objection, or, shall we say "observation," does not explicitly address the disagreement about the origin of myth, or the possibility of finding the origin of the contents of myth, but rather focusses on the fact that, in the Oedipus myth, the desires are not what is at issue. Or, rather, that Oedipus's desire is to rid his city of the plague, as he is commanded to do by the oracle and obligated to do by his role as the king.<sup>436</sup> The reason that motivates the events in the story, and the motive force of the tragedy, is a "public reason," in Blumenberg's phrase. What is central to the myth, then, is the way that the circle is closed without Oedipus's knowledge, and despite his intention. What sets the tragedy in motion, what put him on the road to Thebes, where he crossed paths, again in ignorance, with his father, was his newly acquired knowledge of a prophecy foretelling that he would do exactly what he ended up doing, and his desperate

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<sup>435</sup> This question lingers in the Background of Blumenberg's theory of myth, though his answer to it is quite different. This is perhaps not unrelated to the irony in his treatment of Freud.

<sup>436</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88-89.

attempts to avoid doing it. This is what made his crimes possible. Blumenberg argues, further, that the action of the myth is possible only because Oedipus desires to fulfill his obligations, to rid Thebes of plague, not to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Blumenberg contrasts a public reason, which is “determined entirely by the deed and not by the intention,”<sup>437</sup> and which here is associated with “reasons of state,” to the private reason of the individual desires, and also the role of the gods, the oracle, and fate in bringing about the events that happen. What makes the Oedipus myth what it is, what gives it its power, is this fated closing of the circle, this impossibility of missing one’s goal, when all one wants to do is to avoid it, or even when one’s goal has nothing whatsoever to do with this fate.

The crux of Blumenberg’s disagreement with Freud’s reading of Oedipus comes in the claim that what “supports this configuration,” that of the myth itself, “is not the type of guilt that Oedipus unknowingly lays upon himself [...], but rather the way in which he discovers it,”<sup>438</sup> and that the “atrocities that are attached to Oedipus, more than being concealed in him, are exceptional<sup>439</sup> in the way in which they are adapted to the

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<sup>437</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88: “Kleist picked up this ‘public’ character of the subject; but it is not an accident that it was now possible only in the form of a comedy, because the post-Christian concept of freedom no longer permitted one to be guilty of unconscious action, unless it was in the form of the public scandal of an official administrator of justice. The fact that religious guilt is of a different type is something that we are confronted with by the doctrine of Original Sin, which is anachronistic with respect to this concept of freedom; its type of guilt is closer to a concept of ‘impurity’ that someone can incur, with all its consequences, without being guilty of it by his actions.” Is Freud’s “concept of freedom,” at least as it is implied in his transference of the motive force of the Oedipus myth to the desires, more like religious guilt or impurity, or is it more like the “post-Christian” type? The emphasis, in dealing with the desires, is more like the post-Christian version, in that one’s intention is what matters, except that it also presupposes that everyone desires precisely those forbidden things, so that these desires are very much like Original Sin, like religious impurity, in that they depend in no way on the individual will, but rather are an inherent part of the human condition.

<sup>438</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

<sup>439</sup> Does the claim that they are exceptional suggest that Blumenberg’s reading says much more about Oedipus than it does about myth in general, i.e., is it “exceptional” with respect to other myths? Would it be a problem for his theory of this were the case?

formal schema of the tragedy.”<sup>440</sup> ‘Returning home,’ the closing of the circle, in the myth and the tragedy, is accomplished by the discovery of the crimes and not by committing them. If we take Blumenberg at his word that he does not intend to correct Freud’s reception of this myth, then we must ask what it is that Freud does to the story when he transfers the motive force in it to the desires. In our previous cases of reception, we found that historical pressures had a tendency to distort the fundamental patterns of myths in particular ways, suiting them to the needs of those historical moments when they were received. Is Freud’s reception of Oedipus another example of this? The fundamental pattern of the myth, the closing of the circle, is the same, but, whereas in the ancient myth, and in the tragedy, the motive force of this closing is fate, so that it takes on the pattern I call ‘the fated closing of the circle,’ in Freud’s telling this role is played by the desires. Further, for Freud the circle is closed by means of the return to the mother, and not by the discovery of oneself as the criminal. Let us observe, however, that these two closings of the circle, the first in the return to the mother and the second in the fated discovery of himself as the criminal, might already provide two concentric circles, that is, they might provide some insight into Blumenberg’s reading of Freud’s “affinity to myth.”<sup>441</sup>

This disagreement might also imply that the desires, in Freud, perform the function formerly played by fate in earlier versions of the Oedipus myth. This will prove to be too simple a formula, but it will point the way forward in our attempt to understand why Blumenberg makes this “observation” about Freud’s “technique of reception,” why it appears to undermine Freud’s reading of Oedipus while claiming that it should not, and

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<sup>440</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

<sup>441</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

how it can stand alongside Freud's reception of the myth, rather than replacing it. What makes this difficult to accomplish, and also why it is important, is that the 'significance' of myth is related to the pattern, its "imprinted form," and it is this that Blumenberg claims that Freud has "failed to reproduce" in his reception of Oedipus.<sup>442</sup> But we can see by the place it occupies in this chapter, and by what Blumenberg says about it, that it does not lack significance.

Freud's reception of the Oedipus material, however, is not intended to be a new version of the myth, at least not primarily. The myth rather provided for him some insight into the human condition<sup>443</sup> (and conversely, his insight into the human condition provided him with a new view of the myth, I think). This is to say that Freud is tuned into the 'significance' of the myth with a particular intensity:

The royal incest on the throne of Thebes, as a mother-son monad, restores for a moment the real, intact, primeval world, the enticing image of which stands behind Freud's idea of the traumas and denials of both ontogenesis and phylogenesis.<sup>444</sup> In the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in 1932, he still said that only the relationship to her son brought the mother unrestricted satisfaction and it was "altogether the most perfect, the most free from

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<sup>442</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68; 88.

<sup>443</sup> I say "human" condition, but the degree to which he is talking about a male phenomenon, the importance of the difference of sex, is perhaps most evident here.

<sup>444</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5: "Freud described the complete helplessness of the ego in the face of overwhelming danger as the core of the traumatic situation, and saw in the child's early demand for love the compensation for such helplessness. Ferenczi found the correlate of the phylogenetic transition from the sea to the land in the ontogenetic birth trauma, and no speculation is required in order to recognize the repetition of this fundamental situation in the emergence from the primeval forest's concealment into the savanna as well."

ambivalence of all human relationships.” In the myth it was the oracle, it was affairs of state, that had put an end to this paradise.<sup>445</sup>

We can see in this passage one assumption that definitely distinguishes it from Blumenberg’s view, namely that the primeval time is something to which one would want to return. Blumenberg, of course, argues the opposite,<sup>446</sup> as we have seen above,<sup>447</sup> and attributes to the work of myth the forgetting of what this primeval life was like.<sup>448</sup> Only this forgetting permits what was forgotten, the primeval state itself, to become an object of desire, as it is for Freud. Freud’s interest in the desires, and in their connection to the Oedipus material, interprets this desire as the result of a need, and this need is produced by an archaic trauma. The fundamental condition of human life, according to Freud, must be understood against the background of the traumatic entry into it: this trauma is experienced in the emergence of air-breathing life from the oceans, and, at the individual level, in the process of being born.<sup>449</sup> The desire for the mother is thus informed by the desire to return to the secure state, or at least the comfortable or comforting state, before the trauma. The interpretation of this desire as sexual, then, is already a “sublimation,”<sup>450</sup> or at least a symbolic form, of the “actual” desire.

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<sup>445</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

<sup>446</sup> E.g. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 21: “Nothing wants to go back to the beginning that is the point toward which the lines of what we are speaking of here converge. On the contrary, everything apportions itself according to its distance from that beginning.”

<sup>447</sup> Chapter 2.

<sup>448</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>449</sup> Let it not escape our notice that this connection appears to be attributed to Freud in the passage quoted in the main text, and to Ferenczi in the passage quoted in footnote 444. What is important for Blumenberg is the connection, which provides another version of concentricity. Let us also notice the linking of these emergence traumas with the cave myth and with the emergence from the forest to the savanna, which Blumenberg makes explicitly, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 5.

<sup>450</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 93.

The next level of development of this fundamental pattern is to be found in the work of one of Freud's students:

Perhaps the most perfect consistency of the closed-circle pattern of the instinct to return, in psychoanalysis—the complete figure of the flight from contingency—was something that could be accomplished only symbolically. In his *Theory of Genitality* of 1924 Ferenczi explained the sexual act as the symbolically successful return of the man, represented by the penis, into the female genitalia—thus letting the relation between individuals, in the Oedipus complex, dissolve in the symbolism of the gender relation. The logic of this conception also implies that only the death instinct is the final intensification of the desire to return, and in it the physical nonidentity of what one might call the “point returned to” succeeds in expressing absolute noncontingency in pure form. The old metaphor of the womb of mother nature acquires an unexpected reading in the system of these instincts of flight and return.<sup>451</sup>

Several important things are accomplished in this passage. There is a shift in Blumenberg's language from “desire” to “instinct.”<sup>452</sup> This shift is compatible with Freud's association of the sexual desire for the mother with the emergence trauma, and is noteworthy because it avoids the kind of moral entanglements that go along with the word “desire,” especially in that it views the tendency at the species level, rather than the individual level. This distinction between the species and the individual levels will be important in what follows, and, again, it represents two “concentric” domains of the operation of the mythical material. Next, there is the connection of the instinct to return

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<sup>451</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

<sup>452</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

with flight from contingency. This connection suggests that what is traumatic here must be understood not with reference to any particular event, but rather with the loss of security. This loss of security expresses itself in any and every life, so Blumenberg suggests, in the fact that we humans find ourselves without any definite knowledge regarding how best to live our lives, in the unavailability of definite meanings. It is the contingency itself in which the trauma of life is experienced.<sup>453</sup> Finally, we see in this passage an extension of the desire to return to the mother in the metaphor of “the womb of mother nature,” so that there is an association of the incest taboo and the death drive, as different versions of the same closing of the circle.<sup>454</sup> In both cases we find a wish for non-existence, but in different directions, as it were. This provides yet another image of the “multiple concentric” relation of Freud’s “affinity to myth” and the “mythical pattern” of the closed circle.<sup>455</sup>

Blumenberg now turns his attention to the development of Freud’s theory of the instincts, in which the connection between the instinct to return and the death drive becomes more concrete. The logic of this is simple. In Freud’s view, the emergence of the individual and the species is the result of a traumatic process, and leaves both individual and species exposed. Although the language here differs significantly from that employed by Blumenberg in his theory of myth, the language of the “absolutism of reality” and the “Darwinism in the realm of words,” Freud is concerned with a similar phenomenon, the great difficulty with which life is maintained. In Freud’s theory, however, this difficulty is found in all life, in life as such, as well as in the individual.

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<sup>453</sup> Cf. above, text corresponding to note 15, this chapter.

<sup>454</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

<sup>455</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 86.

Life, accordingly, is viewed as something exceptionally fragile, tenuous: only a great expenditure of energy will make survival possible. This expenditure of energy, however, runs contrary to the tendency towards dissolution that is evident in some natural processes, such as, for instance, entropy. The connection of the eros drive and the death drive to the closed circle pattern associated with Oedipus comes into definition against this backdrop:

The return to the point of departure and to the primeval state, which is temporarily denied to the individual—and is still more something that he must deny to himself—he must finally, nevertheless, accomplish in a still more radical form, when he abandons his exposed, improbable state and returns to the physically ‘normal’ state. He is only a particle in the stream of the great return that life as a whole—as the episodic state of exception to the entropy of energy—passes through.<sup>456</sup>

Sexual desire, as the symbolic return to the womb of the mother, is one version of a return to the point of departure, a closing of the circle as avoiding the effort, the struggle, of living in a state in which one is exposed to as yet unknown difficulties. The analogy of this desire, or, rather, instinct, in the death instinct mentioned above, is evident. The analogy is strengthened, however, by the fact that both incest and death are things that one must deny oneself; the analogy is made more interesting by the fact that, although death is something whose relief we must, so argues Freud, deny ourselves, it is nevertheless something that will be accomplished eventually, and inevitably. Something like an ethical concern, which is abandoned in the shift from talk of “desire” to talk of

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<sup>456</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89-90. I note only in passing this anthropological transposition of the language of Carl Schmitt.

“instincts,” returns here. This “energetical” model of existence presupposes a finite amount of energy, an excess of which is required, is “bound,” for life to be possible, and must eventually return to its “normal state.”<sup>457</sup> There is in this sense an obligation, to the universe, as it were, to return to this state. Blumenberg’s interest in this “energetical view” is its ability to coordinate what is happening in the “psychic realm” and in the organic.<sup>458</sup>

It has already become clear that Freud’s reception of myth is different from that of Plotinus, Dante, Goethe, or Joyce, although it would not be fair, either, to say that all of these are the same. In every case, including Freud, the reception of the mythical and narrative pattern of the closed circle gives a form to a vision or concern about human security in the world, about the possibility of finding the world to be a home. Even in Joyce’s novel, this mythical element is not tied to the fictional setting, but to a particular view of the human condition. But in each of the other cases, the presence of mythical figures or forms appears in a literary context that is not primarily mythical, be it that of the new philosophical vision of Plotinus, or the view of the medieval Christian world that we find in Dante, or the crises of world and of meaning faced by Goethe and Joyce, respectively. And in each of these cases, the tools of myth are used to deal with ‘significance’. All of this would apply, too, to Freud’s reception of myth. Here, however, an interesting inversion takes place:

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<sup>457</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>458</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90: “It sees the identity of the organic system, maintained at huge expense against all destructive probabilities, as a form of the flow-through of matter and energy. This risky outsider status of the organic realm as a whole is merely reflected in the existence of the individual outside the uterus, in the risky situation in which he is abandoned to his own self-preservation and self-determination—this most exposed state, to return from which can only be the most secret of all wishes, because it offends against the ‘ethics’ of effort.”

Every theory has the tendency to present itself as capable of broader application. Thus also Freud's completion of the system of the psychic instincts with the death instinct is on the verge of a cosmology of the highest level, the level of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence." It has the multiple significance that favors any expansion. With the approach to the totality that is characteristic of a world view [*Weltansicht*], and with the association of the psychic disposition to decay with the thermodynamic one, the early discovery—through Freud's self-analysis—of the impulse of the individual life to retreat takes on the cachet of a great myth. What he had made into the foundation of his conception of the psychic apparatus—the return of the level of instinctive energy to its initial state, through the discharge of excitation—becomes, as the return of life (both individual and universal) into death as the predominant 'what came before,' the circularity law of the universe itself. If one regards what Freud called the "primary process" as the quickest connection between the exciting stimulus and the free discharge of excitement, then the "secondary process," with its ways of binding energy, is a still more difficult and risky detour—like life itself, as a whole, in its relation to its inorganic substratum. The optimal level of a physical state is that in which it is least endangered. For life it would be the state of its definitive safety—and then all that is left to say is: life, when one has it behind one.<sup>459</sup>

Let us work quickly through the levels here, beginning with the "psychic apparatus:"

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<sup>459</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90-91.

The model for this apparatus was the open arc of the transmission of a stimulus in the organic system—the equalization of energy between the afferent and the efferent sides with the continual tendency to keep the inner and bound energy at the lowest possible level.<sup>460</sup>

The human psyche thus operates in the same way as the nervous system does, at least according to this theory, such that a charge is bound, concentrated in one place, from a finite store of energy. Because of this finitude, and because this binding itself takes energy, stability is achieved only when the bound energy is discharged, when the system as a whole returns to the state in which the energy is dispersed evenly throughout. Freud's theory explains the operation of instinctive energy according to this model, so human feeling and action is motivated by this binding of energy and the drive to discharge it as quickly as possible. As we saw above, Freud employs this model to explain the individual human life, as an "episodic state of exception to the entropy of energy," the temporarily bound energy that resists the return to the normal state, though only temporarily, and though it retains the instinct to return.<sup>461</sup> The second law of thermodynamics itself suggests that organic life as a whole is something like this temporary state. With this theory then, the mythical pattern of the fated closing of the circle, operating on the several levels at one time, comes to be "the circularity law of the universe itself."<sup>462</sup> What sets Freud's reception of myth apart is not that it happens within a theoretical context, but rather that Freud accomplishes in that context the "totality"<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>461</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>462</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>463</sup> On the totality of myth, and its abandonment by science, cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 175: "Prometheus and Orpheus—these names make clear, at the same time, that it has to be a mistake to measure and explain the significance of a fundamental myth by the fact that it was supposed to give

that is characteristic of myth, even if it is an ambition of theory, something toward which it seeks to “expand.”<sup>464</sup> With this, Freud’s theory becomes a myth, or at least “takes on the cachet of a great myth.”<sup>465</sup> Whether or not we understand this claim, and the comparison to Nietzsche’s “Eternal recurrence,” to be terms of praise or rebuke, let us not fail to observe that the discovery singled out here, of the “impulse to retreat,” which is the foundation of the Oedipus Complex, and the center of the “multiple concentric” relation to the mythical pattern, is expressed in the terms that Blumenberg claims to be the fundamental pattern of the myth, rather than those Freud recognizes explicitly. This is not to claim that these are not Freud’s terms, but rather that this is what Blumenberg claims that Freud “fails to reproduce” in his “anamnesis of the Oedipus myth.”<sup>466</sup>

Blumenberg’s “observation,” then, allows the totality (a quality of myth) of Freud’s theory to appear in its full relation to the mythical pattern, a relation that may be or have been obscured by Freud’s failure to recognize, or at least to reproduce, the essential pattern of the Oedipus myth in his thinking about the Oedipus complex.

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answers to questions. Nevertheless, a fundamental myth will have to be assessed in terms of the scope of its accomplishment: being radical, it becomes capable of being total. But that only means that it carries with it the suggestion that owing to it and in it nothing is left unsaid. What is not said is a different category from what is not asked. What totality means here is something that we know at all only since it was renounced, and had to be renounced, so that we could have scientific knowledge.

Science depends on the abandonment of the claim to totality. There is so much talk of a ‘world concept’ in philosophy precisely because philosophy cannot have a world concept—it can never have more than an idea of something that must continue to be withheld from it because it is not able to deny itself the norm of theoretical knowledge. It is frivolous to suppose that it might throw off this very norm in favor of a world concept of whatever kind, or that it may even have done so in one case or another. That is playing with possibilities that do not exist—a subtle kind of dealing with options that are not open. The renouncing of totality in favor of science is just as final as the renouncing of the kind of truth that people once thought they could expect from totality, or as the renouncing of specific “why” questions, or, finally, as the renouncing of the ‘intuitive’ character of knowledge [*Verzicht auf Anschaulichkeit*]. 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.”

<sup>464</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>465</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 90.

<sup>466</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

Blumenberg does not indicate whether he thought this relation was evident to Freud himself.

It is not a myth of the eternal return of the same but rather of the final return home to the original state. To promise this is the great temptation of comprehensive theories, the temptation to equal myth in the production of totality. The death instinct completes this story of history and permeates it with the tenor of the contingency of life, of its being an exceptional state, and of circumstantiality<sup>467</sup> as its fundamental form. The instinct reflects the physical decrepitude in which organic life returns to its inorganic basis. It thus compensates for its improbability, its only being able to maintain itself at the cost, to the surrounding physical world, of its consumption of energy. The fact that the second law of thermodynamics is reflected in the psyche as an instinct constitutes the psychic realm's affinity to the circular structure of myth. Thus we have a common source and basis for the death instinct and the Oedipus complex. Thus the latter is not primarily rivalry in a libidinous relationship, but the individual's tendency to revert to his origin, to the womb of his own mother—the evasion of the expenditure that the maturing of individuality

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<sup>467</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 142: "If one looks for a universal instrument to describe myth's modes of procedure, "circumstantiality" will do as at least an approximation. What this can point to or at least outline must again be considered against the background of the absolutism of reality. The feeling of utter dependency implies the wish that the superior power might hold still, remain occupied with itself or at least—if its goodwill cannot be established—operate with the delays involved in circumstantiality. Our age, in which rapid decisions and striking dealings on a large scale are admired, has lost touch with the experience that circumstantiality can be merciful. The illustration of this that simply cannot be exhausted is the sudden change in the fundamental mood of the early period of Christianity from an impatient anticipation of the impending and abbreviated summary proceedings of the apocalypse to fervent entreaties that it should be delayed. To know that one is not yet—and is continually less and less—equal to the demands of the end is to come to terms with the world again. This is not the kind of circumstantiality in relation to which absolute power would turn out to be finite, but it is the kind with which that power confirms the 'constitutional' limits it has vouchsafed to us."

requires. Thus the central mythical figures that Freud reintroduced into general circulation—Narcissus and Oedipus—are representatives of the ‘significance’ of myth itself. For narcissism, too, is a turning back: a turning away from the reality outside the ego, an avoidance of the expenditure involved in separation and the energy involved in existence. The death instinct, the implication of the great myth, reflects on the other tendencies to return that are characteristic of life, which appears as the redundancy of a detour from what is not yet to what is no longer. The epitome of all difficulties is not yet to be what is no longer.<sup>468</sup>

This is a theory, then, not of repeating cycles but of a final closing of the circle, a restoration of a prior state, a state that is desired because it is stable. The longing for this stability, even though it is that of death or non-existence, is a result of the contingency of human existence, of the insufficiency of reason, of the “inapplicability of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”<sup>469</sup> to many vital human concerns.<sup>470</sup> The finality of the closing of the circle is related to the totality of the theory, and thus of its connection to myth, or its mythical quality.

Blumenberg is able to accomplish yet more by means of his “observation” about Freud’s failure to reproduce the fundamental pattern of the Oedipus myth. This observation itself allowed him to place his own reading of this fundamental pattern alongside Freud’s reception of it, even if it was misrecognized. The association of the instinct to return with the Oedipus material, then, provides a perspective from which we

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<sup>468</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 91-92.

<sup>469</sup> Blumenberg makes this claim specifically about the “inapplicability of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason to space-time positions.” Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96. There is sometimes a very literal quality to Blumenberg’s thinking about the stability and security of the world.

<sup>470</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

can see the unity of the Oedipus complex, the eros and death drives, and the principle of entropy as it operates in nature. More than this, Blumenberg associates the instinct to return, the fundamental pattern of Freud's reception of Oedipus, with the figure of Narcissus as well. Both of these figures, in Freud's thinking, appear in connection with usually subconscious tendencies to avoid confronting reality. Let us remember at this point that myth itself develops, in Blumenberg's theory, as a technique for reducing the overwhelming "absolutism of reality," that it is in fact a tool for turning away from a reality that is overwhelming, for dealing with the anxiety that results from it, and so for confronting reality only indirectly. Blumenberg is able, then, to associate Freud's (now corrected!) reception of the fundamental pattern of the Oedipus myth with the function of myth, so that Oedipus and Narcissus, in Freud's thinking, are "representatives of the significance of myth itself."<sup>471</sup>

There is much in Blumenberg's reading of Freud in this chapter that is of interest, particularly in connection with Freud's continued insistence that one must resist the instinct to return, that one must follow the "secondary process," warding off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself," that nevertheless fall just outside of the scope of this chapter. I mention this here for a purpose, however, because Blumenberg draws on this feature of Freud's character, as much as his thinking, to assist him in making a point about the relationship between myth and rationality, a case that he constructs irregularly over the course of this work:

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<sup>471</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 92.

As is also the case in myth, the rationality of the shortest path becomes nonsensical—here, it becomes a temptation that conflicts with the sense of life, which is to delay the point where it becomes what is no longer. Rationality, however paradoxical it may sound, would then become mere instinctiveness. That is the opposite of a refusal that Freud calls intelligent efforts [*intelligentes Streben*]. He himself speaks of the paradox that the organism defends itself against all influences and threats that could after all help it to achieve by the shortest path the goal—which cannot be relativized—of being what is no longer.<sup>472</sup>

Blumenberg's case here is complex. If all life shares the instinct to return to its origin, as the only place where it can find security, then rationality, insofar as this indicates the most direct route to a desired goal or conclusion, would dictate that one return to this origin as quickly as possible. Not only would this necessitate suicide, not only would this result in non-existence, which, although he thought this fact to be paradoxical, Freud maintained was not what one should do; this rationality, however, would also converge precisely with instinct, in directing one immediately to return to the origin. Blumenberg's presentation of the absurdity, however 'rational' it may be, of the position that Freud resists, relies upon the contradiction that is implied by the "rationality of the shortest path" and its resultant reduction to "instinctiveness," the instinct to return to the point of departure, in its failure to be able to support the effort of living.<sup>473</sup>

It is curious that Blumenberg describes Freud's "affinity to myth," near the end of his presentation of it, as a "regression to myth," "with all the needs marked out that had

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<sup>472</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 93.

<sup>473</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 93.

been left unmet when rationality was nearly realized by a monism of energy.”<sup>474</sup> Before we deal with the choice of a dualism rather than a monism, we must ask why this should be a “regression?”<sup>475</sup> There is a personal parallel to the return to myth in Romanticism, following its abandonment by the Enlightenment: in the development of Freud’s thought, there is a period in which the death instinct comes to ascendancy, displacing eros and the other instincts, making of them detours on the way to death.<sup>476</sup> This “ordering of the instincts” reveals the beginning of a “process of formation” of a story, a cosmic story of life as a non-sensical resistance and refusal of the most secret desire, and the inevitable goal. The finality of this cycle, however, means that the story is quickly and finally exhausted. The abandonment of the monism of the death instinct, the choice of a dualism of instincts, however, allows for stories to continue.<sup>477</sup>

There is a connection to be made between this choice, in its relation to stories, and the sort of rationality inherent to myth, and to Freud’s thinking. Perhaps this choice of dualism is called a “regression” because it chooses myth over an overly narrow understanding of scientific rationality, that is to say, ironically. At any rate, according to Blumenberg, in both Freud and myth, the rationality of the shortest path makes no sense. One can see this, in a general kind of way, to be true of stories as such: the best story is not necessarily the shortest and most direct one. Blumenberg is telling a story of a development in Freud’s thinking, a development that moves from a theory that is tending toward a “monism of energy,” and toward determination by a single logic, to a dualism of

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<sup>474</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>475</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>476</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 93.

<sup>477</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, Part II, Chapter 2, on the distinction between Gnosticism and Christian dogmatics in their relation to myth.

instincts, wherein the logic of the eros instinct resists that of the death instinct. The story of the development of Freud's theory is itself not a story of the 'shortest distance.' In Blumenberg's telling, the far greater part goes to the laying out of the logic of the death instinct, because this logic reproduces the pattern of the Oedipus complex, as Blumenberg reads it. This pattern is that of the fated closing of the circle, what we might call the essential governing principle of the Oedipus myth. As this pattern becomes more and more total, the subordinate instincts of self-preservation and self-assertion can appear only as paradoxical: they shield the organisms return, they ensure that the organism follows only its own path to its destination, the return to inorganic existence. The turning point in this story is signaled, I think, when Blumenberg opposes "intelligent efforts" to the "rationality of the shortest path," which, under the domination of the death instinct would be reduced to "mere instinctiveness."<sup>478</sup> Freud does not deny the drive to preserve one's own life, but the death instinct, if its logic governs unopposed, leaves no room for the choice of life as a sensible choice. We can perhaps see something in the role contingency plays in the development of this story. The desire to "return" is the desire to escape contingency, which is experienced in the effort and risk of living one's own life.<sup>479</sup> The story of the world governed by the death instinct is one in which this sense of contingency, as the fragility and also the unlikeliness of life, an unlikeliness that requires great effort and energy to maintain, extends to every aspect of organic life.<sup>480</sup> Blumenberg suggests, I think, not that Freud is wrong in constructing a story so 'permeated' with contingency, in fact this is what he gets 'right:' this contingency is the

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<sup>478</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 93.

<sup>479</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 89.

<sup>480</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 91.

presence of the indefinite in human life. Freud's choice of the dualism of instincts preserves this indefiniteness, but conceives of life in such a way that he is able "to keep open the possibility of a story," to make a kind of sense of the preservation of life.<sup>481</sup> But must this return to myth be a regression?

The word "regression" would make sense, first of all, if it were the case that myth is something that one ought to have grown out of, as is suggested by the philosophy of history which views human kind having moved from *mythos* to *logos*, but this Blumenberg has argued against. Is it a regression because it appears in the context of a theoretical venture? Is it a regression because of the needs to which it responds? It is this that connects the story of Freud's development with Blumenberg's interest in 'significance,' in that it is a need for 'significance' that gives rise to myth. Blumenberg approaches this issue by considering Freud's account of the way the death instinct was introduced to his theory.<sup>482</sup> What is at issue here is whether the idea of the death instinct could be introduced as a speculation about "our phylogenetic prehistory" in the absence of data to support its application to the "individual childhood."<sup>483</sup> Freud claims that it began as an "obscure speculation," in support of which he only later was able to find the data from analyses. Blumenberg is skeptical that Freud was able to hold such a speculation "suspended in the heuristic element."<sup>484</sup> Although he expresses this skepticism, I think it does not matter much, to Blumenberg or to his readers, whether Freud was able to sustain such a suspension or not. What is at issue here is the question of the way individuals on the one hand, and the species on the other, relate to the theory

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<sup>481</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>482</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>483</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>484</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

in the provision of evidence. The acceptance of “collective latencies without evidence from individuals” suggests that Blumenberg is shifting the emphasis, again, from the desires to the way that a pattern is used to make sense, or make something, of human life. What is new here is the idea of “the storing up of a story.”<sup>485</sup>

One may doubt whether such speculation could ever be held suspended in the heuristic element. But Freud strictly insists on the principle, which he defends against Jung, of not abandoning the key of the prehistory constituted by the individual childhood in favor of phylogenetic prehistory, and not letting the former serve as a substitute for the latter, rather than the latter for the former. It is *Moses and Monotheism*, at the latest, that will show that there can be collective latencies without evidence from individuals and that the storing up of a story depends neither on the subjective unconscious nor on the objective culture alone. Seen from that perspective, the question arises whether the theory of the death instinct does not presuppose a conservative function extending across the widest latency that is even conceivable. Instincts can only be conservative at all because they contain a ‘story’ [or “history”: *Geschichte*] “stored up for further repetition,” and only by giving “a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new.” The death instinct is conservative because it has stored up the story of life and, in that story, the latency that stretches furthest of all, that of life’s derivation from its not-yet-existence in inanimate nature, in the maternal womb of matter.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>486</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

From *Moses and Monotheism*, we can derive two principles, first that there can be collective latencies without evidence from individuals, and second that there can be “a storing up of stories” that depends neither upon “the subjective unconscious” nor upon objective culture alone.<sup>487</sup> If we apply these two principles from the later work, where they appear, to the theory of the death instinct, we can reach the following conclusions: First, we might follow Blumenberg in doubting that Freud refused this speculation until he could support it with data from analyses. Second, these principles also allow us to understand the “conservative function” of the death instinct, that is, its tendency to return us to a former state rather than producing a new one, as “the storing up of a story.”<sup>488</sup> There seems to be here a very close connection between “latency” and the “storing up of a story.”<sup>489</sup> But what is latent here is just the evidence, or should we say the presence, of the death instinct itself. Is Blumenberg suggesting that the instinct itself is a story? He says rather that instincts “contain” a story,<sup>490</sup> and it is only by doing so that they can be conservative: they can only reproduce or return us to a previous state if they somehow “contain” this state and the means for achieving it. What is important for our purposes here is, to begin with, the association between this instinct that elevates Freud’s theory to the status of a great myth and its defining characteristic of “storing up a story.”<sup>491</sup> This story, that of “life’s derivation from its not-yet-existence” and its indirect, shielded return to it, is the very pattern, the fated closing of the circle, that relates Freud’s theory to significance, or that constitutes that relation.

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<sup>487</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>488</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>489</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

<sup>490</sup> The fact that the German term *die Geschichte* is the word both for “story” and “history” deserves serious consideration in this connection, and would bear much fruit, I think, in particular in linking the concerns here to those in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

<sup>491</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 94.

Blumenberg concludes this discussion of Freud's relation to the mythical pattern of the fated closing of the circle by considering the importance of his attitude to suicide for our understanding of the way myth relates to significance. This attitude is expressed in terms of the distinction between the "rational" response to the death instinct as opposed to the "intelligent" response: suicide is "rational" and direct, whereas the "intelligent" response is "indirect and roundabout," and which therefore preserves life by delaying death, by taking a circuitous path. Freud's reasoning in this matter appears to be based on the principle that one's death wish is "transferred" to oneself from another, at whom it is more properly, or originally, directed. Blumenberg considers the theory of this transference to be "a piece of myth, or at least a reproduction of its mode of thought," reproductions which, he claims, "simply abound" in Freud's work.<sup>492</sup> Blumenberg's interest here is not to deny that the development of the theory of the death instinct has its own "logic" governing its place in Freud's theory, but rather that these developments, and here, the attitude towards suicide and the ability to transfer the addressee of a death wish, also correspond to Freud's "need for consolation," in that they shield him from a painful matter in which he "was involved in many ways."<sup>493</sup>

Here we have before us the way in which the formal renewal of myth—as the servicing of the need for significance—works in one of its few successful cases: It ties acute experiences and important current events into the context of long familiarity and creates prefiguration, but also a decrease in the expectation of freedom, a decrease in what is conceded to candor and ultimate self-knowledge, since these come under the protection of the unrecognized preestablished

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<sup>492</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95.

<sup>493</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95.

patterns [*Vorgegebenheiten*]. Even where healing is no longer possible, in the case of suicide, tracing the catastrophe back to the ground plan of an eidetic normality of what is fated in any case becomes helpful to the survivor, as a means of exempting himself from traumatic impact. Where myth exists, history becomes a failure to fulfill its guaranteeing preindication. What is provided for on the overarching specieswide level of the instincts is no longer something that we must take in hand and take responsibility for. Once again the oldest imperative—to be obedient to nature—proved to be valid: as the device by which to free oneself from the obligation to make history.<sup>494</sup>

The discussion of Freud's attitude toward suicide provides an example of an "acute experience" that can be tied to a stage in the development of Freud's theory, and so it allows us to see what cannot be seen in the case of ancient myth: the need that gives rise to myth. Significance emerges in the connecting of "acute experiences and important current events," the difficult aspects of the stuff of everyday life, to or within what Blumenberg calls "the context of long familiarity:" Such stories help us to deal with what is difficult by allowing us to fit it into what might be expected to happen anyway.<sup>495</sup> In the language Blumenberg uses in another passage, these stories allow the individual to make sense of events over which he lacks control by placing them within a context of world-historical scale, and by means of this "to set himself in a relationship to the large-scale structures that reach far beyond him."<sup>496</sup> Myths give us access to 'significance,' and

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<sup>494</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95-96. Notice that myth, here, has the function of allowing one to avoid responsibility. Responsibility "reoccupies" the position in Blumenberg's theory that was occupied by the "absolutism of reality" in the archaic context. This reminds us again of the relation between the philosophy of history and theodicy.

<sup>495</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95.

<sup>496</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100.

‘significance’ allows us to connect the local to the global. The nature of such connections cannot be decided in advance, for then they would not be able to connect each new time to the individual. They must then be indefinite in nature. This indefinite character of what is significant reflects, in a way, the indefinite character of the world in the absence of such connections.<sup>497</sup>

“Prefiguration,” which is also the title of an excised chapter on political myth, is a tool with which myth accomplishes this familiarity. To understand what occurs now, what creates difficulty for an individual life, as happening according to an established pattern, is to diminish what we expect to be available to human freedom, but precisely this fact lets the individual off the hook. It at least alleviates the responsibility the individual has to “make history.”<sup>498</sup> This is what Blumenberg has in mind, I think, when he claims that Freud’s thought provides “the most complete guidelines to the formulation of excuses that have been offered since Origin.”<sup>499</sup>

One reason that this section is so complicated is the ambivalence of Blumenberg’s attitude toward Freud. There is an ironically critical tone in this last quotation, one that stops short, perhaps, of sneering, but one also that appears not infrequently in the discussion of Freud. But he seems to be suggesting a criticism of Freud, here, on grounds that are, structurally speaking, similar to the terms in which he defends myth as a kind of reason. Myth provides humans with a means of dealing with the feeling that reality is overwhelming, a means of attaining the shelter that can be found

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<sup>497</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97. For the structuring role of significance, its use in connecting the individual to meaningful distinctions by which orientation becomes possible, cf. Chapter 5, note 402, and corresponding text.

<sup>498</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95-96.

<sup>499</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 95.

in a little distance. Freud's theory, here, provides a narrative within which the "desire" to retreat to such a shelter is essential to all life, although this desire is one which life, in order to be life, must resist. Why then would Blumenberg imply that Freud goes too far in letting the individual feel as if she could not help but have this desire, in, again, letting her off the hook? Is this self-ironizing on Blumenberg's part?

This aspect of Freud's affinity to myth—and this looks forward also to Blumenberg's reading of and argument with Heidegger, which will make up our penultimate chapter—connects it also with some of the historical concerns in *Work on Myth*. This aspect is to be found in what Freud calls the "conservative nature of the instincts."<sup>500</sup>

The new total myth gives the evolution of the organic world the appearance that a higher plane of the world process has been arrived at. On the contrary, as Freud says, it would contradict the "conservative nature of the instincts" if a state that had never yet been attained were the goal of the development. Such a *telos* [goal] of life can only be "an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or another departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads."<sup>501</sup>

What I am interested in here is actually contained in the idea of "the instinct to *return*," the idea that the goal is something that exists somehow in our past. I mentioned Blumenberg's opposition to such an idea in footnote 446 in this chapter above, and I will treat the issue at greater length in the next chapter. This attitude, for its part, has a manifold and ambivalent connection to myth. According to Blumenberg's theory, myth

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<sup>500</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 91.

<sup>501</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 91.

wants to produce distance from the terror of the origin, the archaic, the primordial, but it produces this distance, in part, in the form of forgetting, and this forgetting makes possible the desire to return to this origin.<sup>502</sup> This forgetting, and this desire, found concrete historical existence in the Enlightenment's banishment of myth from the world it sought to create, and in Romanticism's desire and effort to return to the past that it hoped had not been forever lost.<sup>503</sup> The desire to return, and the belief that such a return is both desirable and possible, then, is associated in *Work on Myth* with Romanticism, from which Blumenberg carefully distances his own position, and which he associates particularly with Martin Heidegger's reception of myth.<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 9.

<sup>503</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 61.

<sup>504</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 51-52.

## CHAPTER 7

### IN LIEU OF A DEFINITION III: HEIDEGGER

Blumenberg's presentation and discussion of the concept of 'significance' in Part 1, chapter 3 of *Work on Myth* is framed, in a way, by his reliance upon and departure from the thinking of Martin Heidegger, in whose *Being and Time* the concept of significance also played a role. My aim in this chapter, like that in the previous chapter, is not to produce a critical reading of Blumenberg's reading of Heidegger, that is, I am not trying to position Blumenberg's reading with respect to Heidegger's, or to measure it by means of experts in Heidegger's philosophy, or even of my own reading of Heidegger. There is a need for this work, but it is not my work here. My work, rather, is to measure the distance between Blumenberg's understanding of Heidegger and Blumenberg's own position, as he presents it explicitly and, as I can discern it, where he does not. Just as in the previous chapter on Freud, then, it is quite beside the point in which I am interested if, for instance, Blumenberg misunderstands or misrepresents something in Heidegger's writing, because I am interested in the way Blumenberg is using his argument with Heidegger to clarify his own position. Even if he is wrong about Heidegger's position, then, the position Blumenberg articulates as Heidegger's will serve just as well to set off his own. To this end, we will take into consideration not only what Blumenberg says about Heidegger, but also where these passages appear in the chapter, and what function the introduction of and argument with Heidegger's thought might serve at these particular places.

Martin Heidegger first appears shortly after the introduction of the term ‘significance,’ in its particular, if not technical, usage. This introduction is made with reference to Wilhelm Dilthey, from whom Blumenberg claims to have taken the term, and to the “principle of significance” elaborated by Erich Rothacker.<sup>505</sup> In this opening<sup>506</sup> section, Blumenberg situates the concept of ‘significance’ with respect to issues of temporality and reality: ‘significance’ is related to “finitude,” specifically the limited time given to the individual human life, and is opposed, in a sense, to the “open temporal horizon” of the theoretical attitude. The work of the latter presupposes the communicability not only of results but of process, and thus not only allows but even demands the distinction between the theoretical subject and the individual human subject.<sup>507</sup> The theoretical subject “is only able to strive for indifference”—the indifference according to which “the distribution of subjective value to the phenomena that are studied tends, in the norm, toward zero”—because it “is not identical with the individual subject.”<sup>508</sup> On the side of ‘significance,’ which is to be found, according to Blumenberg’s reading of Rothacker, in “man’s historical world of culture,” the finitude of the human individual is connected to the recognition of subjective value that attaches to certain things in this world. ‘Significance’ is not, however, a purely subjective phenomenon. It must always have some “basis in reality,” it is not a value that is simply “thought up,” but must always have the “status of reality.”<sup>509</sup> We have considered the way Blumenberg positions ‘significance,’ as a subjective value with a necessary objective

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<sup>505</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67. Cf. Ch. 4 and Ch. 5 of the present work for these passages.

<sup>506</sup> It is roughly ten pages into the chapter, but it is where the term ‘significance’ is explicitly introduced.

<sup>507</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>508</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>509</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68. Cf. Part II, Ch. 1 of this dissertation, text corresponding to note 76.

basis, in other contexts.<sup>510</sup> For our purposes here, this positioning is relevant because it is in this context that Heidegger is invoked.

Before examining these two passages in *Work on Myth*, however, and for the sake of doing so, I will first work through section 18 of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger introduces “significance.”<sup>511</sup> I want to reiterate the claim that the purpose here is not to show what Blumenberg has gotten right or wrong in his treatment of Heidegger, but rather to introduce the terms and their interrelations, the elements of Heidegger’s thought on which Blumenberg will exert his pressure.

#### Significance in *Being and Time*

As is always the case in dealing with Heidegger’s work, paraphrases risk missing the power of what he is doing with vocabulary, whereas a too heavy reliance upon his specialized vocabulary risks missing the work of understanding what he is saying. I will do my best, in the brief space available, to thread this needle. Rather than trying to define these terms from the outset, however, it will be more effective to allow their meaning to emerge as we show the development of their relationship. Section 18, titled “*Involvement and Significance; The Worldhood of the World*,” begins with the relationship between the “world,” and those things that are “ready-to-hand,” whose type of being he also calls “equipment.”<sup>512</sup> That which is “ready-to-hand” is to be understood in distinction from a thing “present-at-hand,” this latter being something like an object with properties that is understood to be just what it is in isolation. A thing “ready-to-hand,” by contrast, is something that one “encounters,” and such an “encounter” is possible because “the world

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<sup>510</sup> Cf. Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>511</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*.

<sup>512</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

has already been discovered;” and with such an encounter, the world is “always ‘there.’”<sup>513</sup> The world here then is a kind of background or context within which the thing that is “ready-to-hand” can be “encountered,” and, conversely, the “ready-to-hand” provides the opportunity to see “world.”<sup>514</sup>

The thing that is “ready-to-hand” can be encountered because it has already been “freed by the world.”<sup>515</sup> This being set free depends upon what Heidegger calls the “state” of “reference” or “assignment,” states which belong to the “ready-to-hand,” which make them what they are.<sup>516</sup> “Serviceability” and “usability” are two examples of references: something has “serviceability” if it has a “towards-which,” that is to say, if it is the thing that it is because and insofar as it exists to serve some purpose.<sup>517</sup> This reference, “serviceability,” is thus constitutive of the thing that is “ready-to-hand” because the purpose it serves determines how and what it is. Such a thing’s “Usability,” likewise, designates its “for-which,” what it is used for.<sup>518</sup> Reference is thus a “constitutive” “state” of equipment, but such references are not “properties:” “the ‘indicating’ of a sign and the ‘hammering’ of the hammer are not properties of entities.”<sup>519</sup> This in fact provides a further distinction between objects “ready-to-hand” and objects “present-at-hand:” the latter are things that possess definite characteristics, and are defined by them, whereas the former are rather “appropriate for some purposes and inappropriate for others.”<sup>520</sup> What makes a hammer a hammer is its usefulness in

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<sup>513</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>514</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>515</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>516</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>517</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>518</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>519</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 114, 83.

<sup>520</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 115, 83.

hammering, in the service of making something fast, and not the properties of some object. Heidegger suggests that “presence-at-hand” is “a possible kind of Being for something ready-to-hand.”<sup>521</sup> The hammer can be removed from the context of its use, considered merely as an object with properties, but this is a diminished kind of being in the sense that the meaning of the hammer is fully realized only in the context and world of its use. This is what is meant by the claim that “serviceability,” which is a “reference,” is “a constitutive state of equipment,” and that “it is not an appropriateness of some entity; it is rather the condition (so far as Being is in question) which makes it possible for the character of such an entity to be defined by its appropriatenesses.”<sup>522</sup> The terms “reference” and “assignment” refer to the condition or state or way in which things “ready-to-hand” are when they *are* meaningfully in use, that is, and in a context of use or a world, and this is what makes them what they are.

To say that the Being of the ready-to-hand has the structure of assignment or reference means that it has in itself the character of *having been assigned or referred* [*Verweisenheit*]. An entity is discovered when it has been assigned or referred to something, and referred as that entity which it is. *With* any such entity there is an involvement which it has *in* something. The character of Being which belongs to the ready-to-hand is just such an *involvement*. If something has an involvement, this implies letting it be involved in something. The relationship of the “with...in...” shall be indicated by the term “assignment” or “reference.”<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 115, 83.

<sup>522</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 115, 83.

<sup>523</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 115, 83-84.

Thinking of a thing “ready-to-hand” in terms of its “reference” is to understand it structurally, and it is in this structure that Heidegger understands its being. So, Heidegger claims that to “discover” such an object is to recognize its “reference:” to recognize that something has a reference is to see that it has an “involvement” in something, and the concept of “involvement” is expressed in terms of the structure of a relationship. The form of this relationship, “*with* any such entity there is an involvement which it has *in* something,” is striking. The “with” and “in,” with which the relationship is described, do not indicate ownership: the involvement does not belong to the entity, but rather is somehow “with” it, and it is also an “involvement” “in” something, e.g., in some use or service. “Assignment” and “reference,” then, are types of “involvement,” so that we might think of “involvement” at a level that is lower and deeper, if we follow Heidegger’s metaphor of discovery.<sup>524</sup>

“Involvement” designates the “Being” of an “entity within-the-world” that has been “freed for its Being:” what such an entity is, as a piece of “equipment,” *is* its involvement.<sup>525</sup> Such a thing is ‘involved’ in its “usability” or “serviceability,” as we saw above. Heidegger claims that such “serviceability” has, for its own part, involvement *with* it:

*with* this thing, for instance, which is ready-to-hand, and which we accordingly call a “hammer”, there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in the protection against bad weather; and this protection ‘is’ for

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<sup>524</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 115, 83-84.

<sup>525</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 116, 84.

the sake of [um-willen] providing shelter for Dasein—that is to say for the sake of a possibility for Dasein’s Being.<sup>526</sup>

Dasein is a different type of being than either that which is “ready-to-hand” or that which is “present-at-hand.” It is, I think, not correct to say simply that Dasein is human being, but it refers, at any rate to the sort of Being that humans have and things do not, and refers, as Da-sein, ‘Being-there,’ to the fact that Dasein’s Being is “in” a world in a different sense than the way things or equipment are. The concept of “involvement” here allows us to recognize sequences, sequences precisely of involvement, which link the being of equipment to the Being of Dasein, that the being of equipment is ultimately “for the sake of” Dasein’s Being, and that this relationship is constitutive. The “structure of involvements,” viewed as a “totality,” always leads “back”<sup>527</sup> to Dasein, which Heidegger understands as the “sole authentic “for-the-sake-of-which.”<sup>528</sup>

One “frees” an entity “within-the-world,” or allows it to be “involved” when one “discovers” it in its “readiness-to-hand,” in its “structure of involvement.”<sup>529</sup> So, a thing can only be discovered insofar as one has already, and so “*a priori*,” allowed entities to be involved. Such already having allowed things to be involved is a “kind of Being belonging to Dasein.”<sup>530</sup> The “in-which” of an involvement, that to which it refers, has a kind of heuristic priority: the “in-which” provides access to the “for-which.”<sup>531</sup> This is to say that the structure of involvement gives us our only access to this type of being, and this type of being is revealed as that involvement and within a world. There is thus a

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<sup>526</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 116, 84.

<sup>527</sup> The direction of this motion is significant.

<sup>528</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 116-117, 84.

<sup>529</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 117, 85.

<sup>530</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 117, 85.

<sup>531</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 117-118, 85.

connection between the structure of involvement and world. We see here again the heuristic priority of that which comes after, or at least appears to come after. One is able to discover an involvement only to the extent that, and only because, the totality of involvement has already been discovered, and this totality is the “worldly character” of equipment.<sup>532</sup> This structure, again, extends outward, or backward, toward the “for-the-sake-of-which:” the totality of involvements can be discovered only because, and only if, that-for-the-sake-of-which entities are freed has been disclosed, i.e., a possibility of the Being of Dasein.<sup>533</sup>

Heidegger introduces a distinction here: the kind of Being that belongs to entities within-the-world is discovered, whereas the kind of Being belonging to Dasein is “disclosed.”<sup>534</sup> What this disclosure involves appears at first to be a kind of sleight-of-hand. An understanding of Being belongs to Dasein’s being. “Understanding” itself is understood to have a kind of Being, and it has this “in an act of understanding.”<sup>535</sup> Dasein is “Being-in-the-world,” this is the type of Being belonging to it, and, because an understanding of Being belongs to Dasein, so does an understanding of what it means to be within the world. That is to say, it, the Being of Dasein, and “world” with it, must already be “disclosed” to it if a “discovery” of the Being of entities is to be possible. So, the letting be freed of something for its involvement presupposes an “understanding” of the totality of the structure of involvements. This totality of the structure of involvements, from the entity to its “in-which,” to the “in-which” of that “in-which,” and ultimately to the “for-the-sake-of-which,” this totality is disclosed to Dasein before any particular

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<sup>532</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118, 85.

<sup>533</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118, 85.

<sup>534</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118, 86.

<sup>535</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118, 86.

setting free of an involvement is possible.<sup>536</sup> Not only must the totality of involvement be understood beforehand, but also “such things as letting something be involved, and such things as the “with-which” and “in-which” of involvements.”<sup>537</sup> This is really what it means to understand the totality of the structure of involvements, since this structure is made up of these relationships, which are discovered by us on the basis of the prior disclosure, the always already having been disclosed of the “for-the-sake-of-which” to whose Being this understanding belongs.

This is to say that Dasein “is” in a sense this understanding of its own Being, which is “Being-in-the-world,” and a part of this is an understanding of the world in which it is. The worldly character of the piece of equipment can be seen as, or in, a totality of relations. The same holds true for Dasein’s worldly character:

In understanding a context of relations such as we have mentioned, Dasein has assigned itself to an “in-order-to” [Um-zu], and it has done so in terms of a potentiality-for-Being that it itself is [...] This “in-order-to” prescribes a “toward-this” as a possible “in-which” for letting something be involved; and the structure of letting it be involved implies that this is an involvement that something *has*—an involvement which is *with* something. Dasein always assigns itself from a “for-the-sake-of-which” to the “with-which” of an involvement; that is to say, to the extent that it is, it always lets entities be encountered as ready to hand. *That wherein* [Worin] Dasein understands itself beforehand in the mode of assigning itself is *that for which* [das Woraufhin] it has let entities be encountered beforehand. *The “wherein” of an act of understanding which assigns*

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<sup>536</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118-119, 86.

<sup>537</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 118, 86.

*or refers itself, is that for which one lets entities be encountered in the kind of Being that belongs to involvements; and the “wherein” is the phenomenon of the world. And the structure of that to which [woraufhin] Dasein assigns itself is what makes up the worldhood of the world.*<sup>538</sup>

Understanding is presented as a kind of involvement, having the structure of involvement, one that has the character of “in-order-to.”<sup>539</sup> Heidegger describes a particular type of act of understanding here, the act of understanding the world: because the world must be disclosed already if the discovery of entities within it is to be possible, the world has the structure of the “within which” for letting something be involved, and the act of understanding itself has the structure of a “toward-this,” a directedness toward the world, which it seeks to understand (or has already understood, but a “toward-this” of disclosure). Because “involvement” is always “with” something, the thing that is involved “in” something else, to which it is referred, and this involvement is the act of understanding the world, the “with-which” of the involvement is a possibility of Dasein itself. Dasein is<sup>540</sup> a “for-the-sake-of-which,” but it takes on the structure of “with-which” in the act of understanding by means of “assigning” to itself this structure.<sup>541</sup> Heidegger’s brevity obscures his reasoning, but some connections are clear: Dasein is in a sense both a “for-the-sake-of-which” and a “with-which,” and this is connected to his activity of letting things be involved, which presupposes an already discovered world; Dasein is Being-in-the-world, and an understanding of the world is a part of this being, so “world”

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<sup>538</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86.

<sup>539</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86.

<sup>540</sup> Or the “for-the-sake-of-which” is a possible way of being for Dasein, at any rate.

<sup>541</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86.

is the “wherein” of involvements, and also the “for which” of the involvements.<sup>542</sup> The world then is understood as the “wherein” of involvements, since involvements are understood, since the beginning, to presuppose a totality of involvements, and its “worldhood” is this structural quality, the way the world is, which makes possible, and is made up of and by, the relations within it.<sup>543</sup> “The world,” as “that wherein Dasein already understands itself,” is “primordially familiar,” even if this familiarity is not raised to an explicit level.<sup>544</sup>

The “relations” discussed above, those of reference, assignment, and involvement, are, or have already been, “disclosed” in the “act of understanding.”<sup>545</sup> Heidegger claims that the “act of understanding” “holds” these relations “in this disclosedness,” that it “holds itself in them with familiarity,” and that “it holds them *before* itself, for it is in these that assignment operates.”<sup>546</sup> The act of understanding is an activity of Dasein, one that is related to its being, and is thus a way of Being-in-the-world. Because understanding is a kind of involvement, it is a kind of relation; the act of understanding is an involvement, and involvement is what is understood in the act. Understanding, however, is a certain kind of involvement, and is possible because the totality of such involvements must always already have been disclosed if letting something be involved is

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<sup>542</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86.

<sup>543</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86.

<sup>544</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 119, 86. Cf. Dreyfus who provides some clarity even with the slightly different translation than the one I use of key terms, Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 97: “In laying out world, Heidegger seems to shift without explanation from speaking of the workshop, to the referential whole (*Verweisungsganzheit*), to the equipmental whole (*Zeugganzes*), to the involvement whole (*Bewandtnisganzheit*), to the phenomenon of world, to worldliness. The *equipmental whole*, I take it, describes the interrelated equipment; the *referential whole* its interrelations; and the *involvement whole* adds human purposiveness. The workshop is a specific example of all these wholes; the *phenomenon of world* is the special way the world manifests itself; and *worldliness* is the way of being of the world and all its subworlds.”

<sup>545</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 120, 87.

<sup>546</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 120, 87.

to be possible. If we think of involvement as being like the use of a tool, then we can see that one must understand why one would use a tool, and what one would use it for, in order to be able to use it, and this is something like what letting something be involved might mean. The act of understanding is a way of relating to a totality of such relations in which the ultimate reason for the totality of these relations, which Heidegger calls the Being of Dasein, “assigns” itself from this position to the position of “with-which,” as a kind of tool “with-which” the act of understanding is accomplished: it does not thereby cease to be a “for-the-sake-of-which,” but it relates itself for a purpose to the totality of relations that it also is, since it is Being-in-the-world, and the totality of relations to which it relates itself is this world and its character as world.

The understanding lets itself make assignments both in these relationships and of them. The relational character which these relationships of assigning possess, we take as one of *signifying*. In its familiarity with these relationships, Dasein ‘signifies’ to itself: in a primordial manner it gives itself both its Being and its potentiality-for-Being as something which it is to understand with regard to its Being-in-the-world. The “for-the-sake-of-which” signifies an “in-order-to”; this in turn, a “towards-this”; the latter, an “in-which” of letting something be involved; and that in turn, the “with-which” of an involvement. These relationships are bound up with one another as a primordial totality; they are what they are as this signifying [Be-deuten] in which Dasein gives itself beforehand its Being-in-the-world as something to be understood. The relational totality of this signifying we call “*significance*”. This is what makes up the structure of the world—the structure of that wherein Dasein as such already is. *Dasein, in its familiarity*

*with significance, is the ontical condition for the possibility of discovering entities which are encountered in a world with involvement (readiness-to-hand) as their kind of Being, and which can thus make themselves known as they are in themselves [in-seinem-sich].*<sup>547</sup>

We have thus, in a sense, traced the same structure of the world in two slightly different ways. When considering the concept of involvement with equipment, and the ontical “setting-free” of that equipment, we have moved from the “with-which” of this involvement out to the “for-the-sake-of-which,” which is always a possible way of Being for Dasein. These same relations, however, when viewed with respect to the possibility of understanding, that is, when the relation is seen in terms of “signifying,” moves rather inward, from the “for-the-sake-of-which” to the “with-which.”<sup>548</sup> This structure, viewed in this latter way, is “significance,” which is to say that “significance” is the totality of these relations, and this totality is that which allows the relations to signify anything at all. Heidegger maintains all along that the disclosure of Being presupposes a kind of knowledge of Being. This knowledge must be primordial to or for Dasein, a kind of understanding of what equipment is for, not in isolation, but within a network of meanings, of the ‘whys’ and ‘what-fors’ of the things Dasein uses in its workings-out of the possible ways in which Dasein might be. Significance is the backdrop or context of signifying relations, as a whole, that allows any particular entity to signify to Dasein its

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<sup>547</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 120, 87.

<sup>548</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 120, 87.

meaning.<sup>549</sup> As Dreyfus puts it, “[s]ignificance is the background upon which entities can make sense and activities can have a point.”<sup>550</sup>

### Heidegger in *Work on Myth*

Dreyfus, in fact, provides the connection to Blumenberg’s first reference to Heidegger in his chapter on ‘significance.’ This connection appears in his most direct engagement with the concept of significance as it appears in *Being and Time*, in which he also provides a clear and compact summary of section 18:

we must remember that any given piece of equipment, e.g., a hammer, is what it is in a referential whole which connects it with other equipment, and any use of equipment, e.g., hammering, takes place in an involvement whole that connects

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<sup>549</sup> Cf. Dahlstrom, Daniel O. *The Heidegger Dictionary*. (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 127: “‘Meaningfulness’ (*Bedeutsamkeit*) is Heidegger’s term for this entire, stratified complex, making up the structure (worldhood) of the world. “Meaningfulness is that on the basis of which the world as such is disclosed” (a world that becomes utterly meaningless in angst). Meaningfulness is the ontological condition of the possibility that Dasein, in interpreting, can disclose meanings [...]”

<sup>550</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World*, 97. Cf. also, Taminioux, Jacques. *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology*. SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 64. Taminioux touches on the concept of “significance,” though only briefly, in dealing with the concept of meaning, *Bedeutung*: “It is by virtue of *Worumwillen*, i.e., being-in-the-care-of-oneself, and in function of it alone, that there can be *Bedeutung* in the strict sense, as opposed to the references characteristic of signs and the ready-to-hand in general. More profound than the references in which everyday Dasein becomes absorbed and loses itself, there is the reference of Dasein to its can-be in the ownmost mode as opposed to its can-be in the inauthentic mode. Properly speaking, *Bedeutung* consists in the fact that Dasein “in a primordial manner...gives itself both its Being and its potentiality-for-Being as something which it is to understand with regard to its Being-in-the-world” (120 modified; 87). This self-giving of self-understanding is what originally constitutes *Bedeutung*. For Dasein *Bedeutung* consists in giving itself to “be-deuten,” that is, to “make clear” to itself its own Being, being for the sake of itself (*umwillen seiner*). On the basis of this originary self-giving clarity and in the wake of a sequence of steps that bring about a gradual distancing from primordial *umwillen* (“for-the-sake-of”), we can have a clarification of the characteristics of *Um-zu* (“in-order-to”), of *Da-zu* (“toward-which”), of *Wo-bei* (“next-to-which”), and of *Wo-mit* (“by-means-of-which”), in short of the contexture of functional relations familiar to the everyday comportment of Dasein, characterized by what Heidegger calls *Bedeutsamkeit*, significance. But this significance that propagates itself within the environment and animates the contexture or the totality of functional involvements, even though from the outset it is familiar to Dasein, is yet secondary to and derivative from the primordial “self-referential” *Bedeutung*. It is this primordial *umwillen seiner* which initially brings about clarity (*be-deutet*) and which, in the final analysis, alone “matters” (another meaning of the German word *bedeutet*.)” Does this, or the glosses provided by Dahlstrom and Dreyfus, amount to definitions? It would be interesting to compare the distinction between meaning and significance pointed out here, as it appears in *Being and Time*, with the same distinction, discussed above, as it appears in *Work on Myth*, though that comparison falls outside the scope of the present work.

it with many ways of being human. The involvement whole and Dasein's life are both organized by the same for-the-sake-of-whichs. It helps to distinguish something like an "objective" and a "subjective" side of this phenomenon only to see that in the end they cannot be distinguished. On the "objective" side we would have equipment defined by its in-order-to, which in turn gets its point in terms of for-the-sake-of-whichs. On the "subjective" side we would have Dasein's self-interpretation which is accomplished by "assigning itself" to for-the-sake-of-whichs. But obviously this separation will not work. On the one hand, Dasein needs the referential whole and the involvement whole to be itself. On the other hand, the "objective" or equipment side is organized in terms of for-the-sake-of-whichs that are ways of being Dasein. The referential whole only makes sense because it all "hangs," so to speak, from for-the-sake-of-whichs that are Dasein's ways of taking a stand on itself, and Dasein exists and makes sense only because it takes over the for-the-sake-of-whichs that are built into and organize the involvement whole.<sup>551</sup>

Dreyfus here speaks of an "objective" and a "subjective" side to the phenomenon of world, according to which Dasein would be the subject, and the world, or things in it, would be the object, only for the sake of undermining this distinction.<sup>552</sup> The "world" Heidegger describes, the relational totality of which is designated by "significance," only

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<sup>551</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World*, 97.

<sup>552</sup> Dreyfus puts the point in a weaker fashion earlier on the same page, Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World*, 98: "'Subject' and 'object,' Dasein and world, are ultimately so intimately intertwined that one cannot separate the world from Daseining. 'With equal primordially the understanding projects Dasein's being both upon its 'for-the-sake-of-which' and upon significance, as the worldliness of its current world' (185)[145]." But it is not just that these two distinct things, subject and object, are "inextricably intertwined; rather, the two are not, according to Heidegger, distinct, until they are separated out by a specific kind of activity of Dasein.

is as a relational totality, which is constituted by Dasein's Being-in-the-world, and Dasein only is Dasein in this way: "Dasein needs "for-the-sake-of-whichs" and the whole involvement structure in order to take a stand on itself, i.e., in order to *be* itself."<sup>553</sup> Significance in *Being and Time*, then, is an elementary structuring principle of the world as it is for Dasein when it is involved with equipment in its way of being.

In the paragraph immediately preceding the first appearance of Heidegger in Blumenberg's chapter on 'significance,' he, too, is interested in the relation of the subjective and objective in connection with significance. What he means by these terms, however, and their relation to what significance is, are markedly different. Let us in fact go back two paragraphs, to the introduction of Rothacker's "principle of significance," where we find the contrast between the human "historical world of culture," in which one can perceive or recognize the "'valences' for attention and vital distance," which is the point of departure for our approach to a grasp of 'significance.'<sup>554</sup> The attitude that recognizes these valences accordingly treats different objects in the world differently, i.e., it allows different values to be attached to different things, and it somehow is sensitive to, it picks up on this value. The value at issue here includes a relevance, of an indefinite sort, of the object with this value to the individual who recognizes it. We might say that the indefinite value and the indefinite relevance<sup>555</sup> are so closely related that they might almost appear to be one and the same. This value, therefore, has a clear subjective character. The attitude that recognizes this value is understood in contrast to the tendency

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<sup>553</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World*, 95.

<sup>554</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>555</sup> We see the indefinite character in such expressions as "it means, without any what." Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 75.

toward objectivity in the theoretical attitude, in which the ideal is to treat every object indifferently, as if no object had any greater value than any other.<sup>556</sup>

Significance, however, has as its function the reduction of anxiety, the production of distance. The relevance of that which is significant to the individual is important because it is this relevance that allows the individual to “work on” the “significance” of the significant thing, and by so doing to work toward finding her bearings with respect to the indeterminate and indifferent world in which she finds herself. If the value of which we speak here were wholly subjective, if it had only subjective determinations, it would not be able to provide this relevance, that is to say, the relevance it suggested would not be so easily taken to be relevance to the world in which one lives. Blumenberg claims, then, that significance must always have some sort of an objective determination, some “basis in reality,” a basis which maintains the “status of reality.”<sup>557</sup> So significance requires subjective determinations so that its relevance to the individual can be recognized, and it requires objective determinations so that it can be experienced as real, and not as something “made up.”<sup>558</sup>

In introducing Heidegger’s understanding of significance, Blumenberg brings up its relation to subject and object, that is to say, its priority, but does not draw attention to

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<sup>556</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>557</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>558</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68: “In significance, the subjective component can indeed be greater than the objective one, but the latter can never return to zero. As a valence that was ‘thought up,’ significance would have to break down. That is decisively important even for the phenomenon of the simulated new myth; where it appears, it makes use of the established repertory of procedures by which to secure an objective foundation, and dresses its creation up in a more or less ritualized scientific manner, as for instance [...] So significance must have its own relationship to reality, a basis that has the status of reality. *Status of reality* does not mean empirical demonstrability; the place of the latter can be filled by taken-for-grantedness, familiarity, having been part of the world from the beginning. Even when the story of Prometheus is supplemented by the invention of his return from the Caucasus and his finding shelter in Athens in his old age, this is based on the unquestionability of the figure, which is precisely not felt to be something invented.”

the difference between this and his understanding of the relation between the two, and the relevance of this to ‘significance.’ The way he introduces Heidegger here, and what he accomplishes by doing so, causes a little discomfort, at least in this reader. Although there is the connection I have just mentioned, the importance of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity for significance, the different ways the two thinkers understand this, on the one hand, and the abruptness of the nod to Heidegger, its passing apparently without comment, on the other, raises questions that are not easy to answer.<sup>559</sup>

Significance is one of the concepts that can be explained but cannot, in the strict sense, be defined. Heidegger associated it, together with ‘involvement,’ with the ‘worldhood’ of the world, and thus with the assemblage of being-in-the-world, from which objects, as ‘present at hand’ with their properties, must first be detached before one can bring to them a theoretical interest that is no longer subjectively ‘owned.’ Equipping something with significance is not something that we can choose to do. Even granting that man makes history, still there is at least one of its side effects that man does not make; this is the ‘charging’ of constituent parts of the human world with significance.<sup>560</sup>

This passage begins a paragraph, and so we must begin with the apparently simple question of the relation between the first sentence of the paragraph and the two that follow it: is the fact that significance can be “explained,” but not “defined” itself

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<sup>559</sup> Blumenberg’s compositional style appears to be associative in nature, and I do not mean to discount the simple facts that a) Blumenberg is discussing significance, which is an important term in *Being and Time*, b) the connection I have referred to in this passage is relevant to Heidegger’s treatment, and c) Heidegger is often not far from Blumenberg’s mind, and that these should be enough to explain Heidegger’s appearance here. It is. To explain why it might be here, however, is not to describe what it does here. It does *something*, and this something is strange. I think it becomes less strange in light of his more extended response to Heidegger at the end of the chapter, as we shall see below.

<sup>560</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

explained by the fact that significance is somehow prior to the separation of objects, as present-at-hand, from the world of their involvements? The answer to this question is not even apparently simple. First, the claim that significance cannot be defined precedes the introduction of Heidegger, although their proximity gives the appearance that Heidegger is meant to explain the claim. The claim itself appears to be in Blumenberg's own voice, and I think a reading of this chapter supports the idea that he does not try to define significance, but I do not take it for granted that Blumenberg accepts Heidegger's understanding of significance, and especially Heidegger's basic idea that it is possible to go back to some prior unity.<sup>561</sup> There are, then, contradictory impulses that strike the reader before we have even begun to address the content of these three sentences.

The content itself we can make sense of on the basis of the discussion of Heidegger above. It begins by locating significance with "the worldhood of the world."<sup>562</sup> When dealing with "involvements," the kinds of activity in which Dasein is engaged are what Heidegger calls "setting free," that is to say, the using of equipment. Using equipment, or things ready-to-hand, involves on the part of Dasein a very different attitude, or frame of mind, or state of consciousness, than is found in "theoretical interest."<sup>563</sup> Theoretical interest deals not with such entities that are "ready-to-hand," but rather with objects, properly speaking, isolated things understood in terms of their properties, separated off from any network of relations, or any uses. Heidegger claims that such objects are not primary, but rather that the world in which the subjective and objective have not yet been separated is the basis upon which this theoretical interest is

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<sup>561</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109 ff. and discussion below.

<sup>562</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>563</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

possible. Because significance just is such a network, is the structural condition of the world that allows things in the world to signify to Dasein, significance not only precedes, in a certain sense, the theoretical interest, and makes it possible, but the separation of the subjective and objective that is involved in this interest would cause the world and significance to disappear, as it were.

Why can significance not be defined? The first two possible answers that come to mind are based upon Aristotle and Kant, respectively. First, if the set of things to which significance refers lacked sufficient unity to be contained together by, e.g., a given genus and differentia, it would accordingly only be capable of something like a ‘*pros hen*’ definition, as Aristotle argues is the case for being in *Metaphysics* Γ.2. Alternately, significance might be the sort of phenomenon that, like certain spatial phenomena in Kant, such as the difference between identical right and left facing angles, can be pointed to or described, but not defined. My suggestion is that the latter is closer to what Blumenberg has in mind. To make the case briefly, Kant understands space to be a *totum*, rather than a *compositum*: “A *totum* is a unity in which the whole precedes the parts, which are in turn only possible as limitations of that whole.”<sup>564</sup> Identical right and left facing angles, which I’m using as an example of what Kant calls “incongruent counterparts,” “can only be accounted for with reference to space as a whole, a whole that precedes its parts.”<sup>565</sup> There are a few things to say about this in the attempt to link it to significance in Blumenberg. I want to lean on Kant’s thinking about “incongruent counterparts” to understand why Blumenberg claims that significance cannot be defined

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<sup>564</sup> Brient, Elizabeth. “Incongruity and Wholeness: Kant on Incongruent Counterparts and the *Totum* Character of Space,” 2. (Unpublished)

<sup>565</sup> Brient, Elizabeth. “Incongruity and Wholeness: Kant on Incongruent Counterparts and the *Totum* Character of Space,” 3. (Unpublished)

and why he follows this claim with a few sentences about Heidegger without making the relation between them explicit, but it is not clear how far we can push this connection.

This is a feature, first of all, of certain spatial phenomena, and these are to be understood with reference to space as a whole, which precedes its parts. Blumenberg claims:

The entire need for significance is based on the indifference [or “nondifferentiation”: *Indifferenz*] of space and of time—on the inapplicability of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason to space-time positions, an inapplicability that had driven Leibniz to the step, as desperate as it was daring, of denying reality to space and time and making them into mere modes of ordering employed by reason. Myth doesn’t even let indifferences arise. Significance makes possible a ‘density’ that excludes empty spaces and empty times, but it also makes possible an indefiniteness of dating and localization that is the equivalent of ubiquitousness.<sup>566</sup>

Heidegger’s thinking about “the worldhood of the world” is a part of a very different understanding of space,<sup>567</sup> perhaps, than what is found in Kant, but he is dealing here

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<sup>566</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

<sup>567</sup> Cf. Mulhall, Stephen. *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Heidegger and Being and Time*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 52-3. “This notion of world is, of course, not at all familiar to those acquainted with the Western philosophical tradition—as Heidegger emphasizes when he contrasts his phenomenological understanding of space with the Cartesian alternative. For Descartes, space is essentially mathematicised: spatial location is fixed by imposing an objective system of co-ordinates upon the world and assigning a sequence of numbers to each and every item in it, and Dasein’s progress through this fixed array of present-at-hand items is a matter of measuring off stretches of a space that is itself present-at-hand. On Heidegger’s view, however, Dasein most fundamentally understands spatial relations with objects as a matter of near and far, close and distant; and these in turn are understood in relation to its practical purposes. The spectacles on my nose are further away from me than the picture on the wall that I use them to examine, the friend I see across the road is nearer to me than the pavement under my feet; my friend would not have been any closer to me if she had appeared at my side, and moving right up to the picture would in fact distance it from me. Closeness and distance in this sense are a matter of handiness and unhandiness; the spatial disposition of the manifold of objects populating my environment is determined by their serviceability for my current activities. In Heidegger’s terminology, Cartesian space is an abstraction from our understanding of space as a region or set of regions, an interlinked totality of places and objects that belong to an equipmental totality and an envoning work world. Objects are in the first instance handy or

nevertheless with something that one might call spatial. Furthermore, Blumenberg's paraphrase of Heidegger is pointing precisely to the notion that the whole, here the world, precedes the division into parts that the separation of object from the world, and, thereby, the separation of the subject also, accomplishes. Although this would be sufficient support to conclude that this is what Blumenberg has in mind, it also leads us right back to the conflict pointed out above. For it is precisely Heidegger's claim that one can, and even that one should, go back to the prior unity, that Blumenberg will oppose. For Blumenberg, what is prior is "the absolutism of reality:" without trying to distinguish this "absolutism" from a totality or a unity, which we find both in Heidegger and in Freud, let it suffice to say that no one would want to go back, and that, despite our fears to the contrary, no one can go back.<sup>568</sup>

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unhandy, and it is their significance in that respect—rather than a pure co-ordinate system—that most fundamentally places them in relation to one another and to Dasein. Space and spatiality are thus neither in the subject nor in the world, but rather disclosed by Dasein in its disclosure of the world; Dasein exists spatially, it is spatial." Notice that space, as described here, is neither, strictly speaking, subjective nor objective.

<sup>568</sup> Blumenberg addresses this feature of Heidegger's thinking in Chapter 2 of pt. I, and so it does not address 'significance' directly, but his discussion there is, I think, relevant to our considerations here, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 51-52: "Affinity to myth always consists in finding and naming the subject of which the last of the correct stories can be told. Even what is traditionally most abstract can become a name, as soon as it is transformed into an acting or suffering subject. It can be as insubstantial in appearance as "Being." When it has become the name of a subject that is pregnant with stories, this can be gathered from people's considering the possibility of, or actually, no longer writing it like the old abstract noun. What makes "the story of Being" into another piece of Romanticism is the circumstance, which is presupposed in it, that the true future can be nothing but the true past. Not as the 'turning back' of man who has been promoted to the status of the subject of history, but as the 'return' of the Being that was hidden, throughout an epoch, by metaphysics. Its return—not foreseen, but only to be awaited—is no better than the new creation that must result from the impending chaos, at whatever price." Blumenberg appears to differ from Heidegger precisely with regard to the assumption that it was desirable, or even possible, to return to some previous way of doing things, to the answers from a different time, and for these to be available to us as what is true or real. Blumenberg's attitude to this possibility is evident when we recall that what he offers as a primordial "reality" is the "absolutism of reality". Unlike Being for Heidegger, the "absolutism of reality" is in Blumenberg a limit condition, a theoretical construct, rather than a historical reality. Rather than undermining the analogy, however, this difference can be seen to make the point: while the condition he describes is obviously not desirable, is in fact an image of the impossibility of the human way of life, it makes no claim to privileged access to reality. Blumenberg shows, in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, that the answers to fundamental questions about self and world are connected not only to an entire way of thinking about self, world, and their relation, but to previous systems of such thought as well. Although he constructs a theory of the way that questions can

Blumenberg does not return, either here, in the following sentences, or later in the chapter, to this notion that significance cannot be defined, but turns rather to the notion that “[e]quipping something with significance is not something that we can choose to do.”<sup>569</sup> We are left again with the question of the relation to Heidegger, but here it seems clearer that he is not attributing this idea in any straightforward manner to Heidegger, for whom significance is a quality of the world, rather than something that is possessed by a particular entity within it. There is, however, a clear, if associative, relation between this claim and the objective requirement for significance: if significance were wholly subjective, determined entirely by the subject, then it would be possible for the subject to choose to imbue something with significance, indeed this would be the only way for a thing to get it. But this line of thinking has more to do with the subjective and objective relation to significance as Blumenberg conceives it than it does with Heidegger. Is the claim that significance cannot be made up, or instilled in particular things, then, related to the idea that significance cannot be defined? While the relationship between these two will become clear only at the end, my suggestion is that they are indirectly related, in that they are both functions of the relationship between significance and the indefinite.

Blumenberg’s first interaction with Heidegger’s thinking about significance, in this chapter, raises more questions than it answers, but it also, by so doing, points us in a

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pass from one epoch to another, and although he articulates in *Work on Myth* how, within this dynamic, anachronisms and archaisms may appear, his understanding of historical change is not based on the availability of some final reality whose real truth may be accessed, given the proper conditions, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 101-102. It is just this that he finds in Heidegger’s “Being.” It would be interesting, in addition, to relate the directionality that is implied in the contrast between *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 19; 168, i.e., the attempt to understand a phenomenon, specifically myth, with respect to what it no longer is rather than what it is not yet, with the temporal directionality in this passage, in which he makes a passing reference to this contrast, on the one hand, and also with the significance attached to the directions above and below, etc. in chapter 3, Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97.

<sup>569</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 68.

direction. Blumenberg returns to Heidegger at the end of the chapter, but his treatment here is more extensive, taking up two full paragraphs. In the first, he presents the concept of significance in its context in Heidegger's thought, and in its broader context in the history of philosophy, and in the second paragraph he points to some of the problems with Heidegger's thinking about significance, which indicate also a deeper disagreement.

That remains the case when Heidegger takes over the term *significance* from the philosophy of life. What he designates with it is the result of the device of tracing a differentiated way in which the world is given back to an elementary and unified way. "Significance" [*Bedeusamkeit*] then becomes the quality of the world for the Dasein that is in it, as the functional specifications of which "significations" [*Bedeutungen*] first become possible. To have something signify something to itself, presupposes a 'significance' that supports the relational totality of signifying. It is "what makes up the structure of the world—the structure of that wherein Dasein already is." The terms *familiarity* (with the world) and *significance* (of the world for Dasein) correspond to one another and assist in the suppression of the separation of subject and object (a separation that has supposedly been left behind) by the unity of Being-in-the-world. It is the unannounced return of Bergson's pre-epistemological *données immédiates* [immediate 'givens'] of 1889, the fulfillment by a coup de main of the expectations aroused by the philosophy of life.<sup>570</sup>

The connection to the philosophy of life, specifically I presume to Dilthey as much as to Bergson who he mentions specifically, falls outside of the scope of this study. There are,

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<sup>570</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109, 110.

however, several aspects of this presentation that are relevant. First, Blumenberg draws attention to the direction of Heidegger's thinking, that is to say not only that he finds significance by looking or working back from the "differentiated" way of life that is characteristic of the theoretical attitude, the attitude from which we are accustomed to reflect upon things, but also that significance points back toward that unity, to the source or origin. Second, Blumenberg finds in Heidegger the connection between "significance" and "familiarity."<sup>571</sup> As we saw also above, significance is a condition of the world that makes significations possible, and these significations designate certain relations between things, relations that, taken as a whole, make up "the structure of the world" of things ready-to-hand.<sup>572</sup> The fact that things in this world, usable things, are what they are when they are in use, and that this use presupposes not only a knowledge of the thing used, at least of what it is for, and that this knowledge presupposes a further knowledge of why such a thing would be used, how such functions connect to possible ways of being for Dasein, is what Heidegger designates with the term "familiarity."<sup>573</sup> Dasein has "familiarity" with the world in that he knows what is necessary if he is to work within that world, and this work itself makes the world more familiar. This is possible because things in this world signify to Dasein such uses or functions, and these in turn signify possible ways of being. This signifying, on the one hand, is possible, according to Heidegger, on the basis of significance, the quality of the world that allows these particular things to indicate to Dasein, but the particular instances of "signifying" also point back, for the thinker on the path to Being, to significance itself.

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<sup>571</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109, 110.

<sup>572</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109, 110.

<sup>573</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109, 110.

The connection between “significance” and “familiarity” resembles the function that Blumenberg attributes to ‘significance,’ i.e. that it is involved in making the world more livable for humans. For Blumenberg, ‘significance’ provides “structuring differentiations,” places or things in the world that stand out from the background of “indifference,” places or things that have some relevance to the individual, or that indicate ways in which aspects of the world may be relevant.<sup>574</sup> This relevance, let us notice, is based upon differentiation among the things within the world, and, although it implies a kind of connectedness, it surely never amounts to an overcoming of the distinction between individual and world, or subject and object. There is a kind of echoing of Heidegger’s schema according to which the prior unity is later broken up into subject and object by means of Dasein’s way of being in Blumenberg’s breaking up of the “indifference of space and time” with the structuring differentiations of significance.<sup>575</sup> In Blumenberg, however, the indifference of the world without these differentiations is unbearable, it constitutes a real threat to survival. I suggest that it would also be a mistake, or at least a misunderstanding of Blumenberg, to think of this indifference as the real, or a real, quality or condition of the world. Blumenberg claims no access to any such reality, nor to the origin of its indifference. He has argued, to the contrary, that the most basic level to which we have access will always already be an interpretation of something more elementary, to which we do not have access.<sup>576</sup> He has also shown, in the same passage, how the experience of indifference and hostility might be produced within such an interpretation, and as a result, at least in part, of the attitude

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<sup>574</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 97.

<sup>575</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 96.

<sup>576</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 63.

one strikes in the act of interpreting. The appearance of agreement, then, between Heidegger's schema and Blumenberg's, remains only an appearance.

Blumenberg begins to signal this disagreement at the end of the paragraph, by suggesting that what Heidegger accomplishes is really the "suppression of the separation of subject and object," that this separation has only "supposedly been left behind."<sup>577</sup> The disagreement appears to concern a question of what is primary and what access one has to it. Blumenberg raises this suggestion to a more explicit level in the next paragraph.

This does not exhaust the foundational relationships that Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" offers as orientation for efforts to gain access to the 'work of myth.' The intertwining of significance and familiarity is a foreground appearance and disguises something that one is not supposed to become aware of in its subjective-objective ambivalence: the way they correspond to nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] and the production of anxiety [*Ängstigung*]. If significance is the quality of the world as it would not originally have been for men, then it is wrung from a situation that produced anxiety, the forcing of which into concealment is brought about and confirmed by that very significance. Significance is the form in which the background of nothing [*des nichts*], as that which produces anxiety, has been put at a distance, whereby, without this 'prehistory,' the function of what is significant remains uncomprehended, though present. For the need for significance is rooted in the fact that we are conscious of never being definitively exempted from the production of anxiety. Care, as the being of "Dasein," which is supposed to be disclosed especially in the basic state of mind of anxiety, is the

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<sup>577</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109.

source not only of the totality of the structure of Dasein but also of its wanting significance in the world, in its experience, in history. The ‘naked truth’ is not what life can live with; for, let us not forget, this life is the result of a long history of complete congruence between [man’s] environment and ‘signification’—congruence that is only shattered in its most recent phase. In this history life itself continually deprives itself of an immediate relation to its abysses, to what would make it impossible, and thus refuses to obey the summons of its terrifying “authenticity.”<sup>578</sup>

Although the disagreement is more explicit, it does not take the form of critique; on the contrary, Blumenberg adopts Heidegger’s language to present his own vision of the function and importance of significance. What we see here resembles, in fact, Blumenberg’s “correction,” despite his claim to the contrary, of Freud’s “anamnesis” of the Oedipus myth.<sup>579</sup> The elements put into play by this correction are present, even if they are not recognized as the elements they are by the author. The unity of subject and object in a world characterized by significance is a “foreground appearance” that disguises something else, something one is not supposed to notice, and that is the relationship between “significance,” “nothingness,” and “anxiety.”<sup>580</sup> The question of whether the unity or the division is prior begins to appear to be misleading, and what comes to appear more relevant is the nothingness that lies behind Dasein, and the “anxiety” produced by the proximity of this nothingness and its call. We thus see here the by now familiar pattern: In place of “the absolutism of reality,” we find Heidegger’s

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<sup>578</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

<sup>579</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 88.

<sup>580</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

“nothingness,” the fundamental nothing with respect to which Dasein holds itself out, or suspends itself over.<sup>581</sup> The proximity of this nothingness to Being, to Dasein’s Being, reveals itself to Dasein in “anxiety.”<sup>582</sup> Blumenberg organizes these elements so that they form an image of his vision of the “work of myth.”<sup>583</sup> This unlivable anxiety that is the response to nothingness is transformed into significance by somehow placing that nothingness “at a distance,” such that significance is both the means for putting that nothingness at a distance and the result of that distance. Nothingness, the possibility of non-existence, a possibility that is Dasein’s own, is the finitude that is the condition of the need for significance.<sup>584</sup> We find here, even if it requires a repositioning, or re-orientation, of Heidegger’s thinking about significance, the relationship between significance and the indefinite that has acted as a guide to this study. Significance “is wrung from a situation that produces anxiety,” the suspension of life, and the human form of life, above its “abysses,” its relation “to what would make it impossible.”<sup>585</sup> Significance is a way that humans deal with these abysses, a way that we deprive ourselves of an “immediate relationship” to our “abysses,” by increasing our distance from them, and it is a consolation for their continued presence.

There is something playful in this passage. It is less as if he is trying to measure the distance between his own position and Heidegger’s, or to critique Heidegger’s position, and more as if he is showing the independence of his position from the language in which it articulated. This itself may be an aspect of his critique of Heidegger, who

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<sup>581</sup> Dahlstrom, Daniel O. *The Heidegger Dictionary*, 144.

<sup>582</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

<sup>583</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

<sup>584</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 67.

<sup>585</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

made a case for the integral relationship between language and thought, and in fact constructed a vocabulary of sorts in the writing of *Being and Time*, even if he later abandoned it. Blumenberg, however, as we have seen throughout, often uses the thought and vocabulary of other thinkers to work toward his vision, often adopting or discarding terms and presuppositions without much, or any, warning. I want to suggest that this feature of Blumenberg's writing is related to significance. There is a kind of parallel between the way that significance responds to, covers over and transforms, a kind of indefiniteness that arises in our confrontation of the world, especially the kind of indefinite and hostile character that manifests itself as life's "abysses," and the way Blumenberg approaches the description of this relation by working towards it using a series of vocabularies, none of which are optimal, but each of which has something to contribute. This is precisely not to say that Blumenberg's thinking about this phenomenon is primarily informed by lexica; it is to say, to the contrary, that the connection he is pursuing is not, perhaps cannot be, adequately captured in language.<sup>586</sup> It is for this reason that he pursues it primarily by attending to the images and patterns with and on which myth works, and this is also the real reason why, I suggest, "significance" cannot be defined. "Significance" appears in and as the transformation of the anxiety felt in response to life's "abysses" into a kind of distance, and this distance, for its part, appears in the patterns and images of myth, and in the light-heartedness that appears in myth.<sup>587</sup> We can approach the same point from another direction, if we recall that significance is a kind of compensation for strict meaning, it is what is available to us

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<sup>586</sup> Cf. Goldstein, Jürgen. "Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg." *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 5-19.

<sup>587</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 18; 121 16.

given the fact that strict meanings are not available. Heidegger's approach to language is equivalent to the idea that such meanings are available, that is to say he operates on the assumption that there is a given lexicon that is adequate to the matter he seeks to present; Blumenberg's playful treatment of various lexica, on the other hand, makes do, as well as it is able, with every available lexicon, on the assumption that the phenomenon he seeks to present cannot be captured adequately by any of them, but that, given the proper approach, one may shed some light on it.

Blumenberg himself offers a description, albeit a metaphorical one, of what he is doing with Heidegger's philosophy in this section. Although it may raise more questions than it answers, and although, in so doing, it may prove to be as confusing as it is illuminating, it will at least be fun to consider this before moving on. The following paragraph, the last in the chapter titled 'significance,' follows immediately after the two on Heidegger discussed above:

This would be an example, taking advantage of movable descriptive scenery from the stock belonging to the philosophy that follows the philosophy of life, of the attempt to arrive at a phenomenology of significance as an 'apotropaic' [averting] quality with respect to the stupefaction that is delivered over to the 'absolutism of reality.' Even if great historiographical errors may have resulted from yielding to significances, nevertheless we are continually getting further away from the all-inclusive suspicion, promoted by a negative analysis of myth, that it was misunderstandings of significations—especially metaphors that were taken literally—that helped myth's great self-deception to get under way in the age in which, according to Auguste Comte's classification of stages, it was

dominant. Only an assessment of the risk involved in the human mode of existence makes it possible to discuss and to evaluate functionally the behavior that was serviceable in mastering it, and to take seriously the tentative inclination to be able to avail ourselves of such serviceability once again.<sup>588</sup>

There are several things to note in this passage. First, the metaphor according to which the vocabulary developed by Heidegger is understood as “movable descriptive scenery,” implies not only that this vocabulary can be separated from its particular philosophical context, the set of assumptions and practices specific to Heidegger and his philosophical orientation, but also that this vocabulary can be thought of as a kind of appearance and as a backdrop, but in either case as something like the setting of what is really important.<sup>589</sup>

This movable scenery can be taken down from one stage and set up on another, but it is never as important as the play that is being staged upon and around it. Second, it seems worth mentioning that Blumenberg avoids mentioning the name of the movement associated with this stage of Heidegger’s philosophy, Existentialism, in favor of an effortful circumlocution, “the philosophy that follows the philosophy of life.”<sup>590</sup>

Blumenberg has made clear, since the introduction of the term ‘significance,’ the source of his thinking about this term, in Dilthey, who is associated with the philosophy of life, just as he related Heidegger’s “suppression of the separation of subject and object” to Berson’s “*données immédiates*.”<sup>591</sup> The concept of significance is clearly related, conceptually and historically, to the philosophy of life. But he deals with this concept not in Dilthey’s writings, but in Heidegger’s. Does he mean to suggest that it is a kind of

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<sup>588</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110-111.

<sup>589</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110-111.

<sup>590</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110-111.

<sup>591</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109.

atavism<sup>592</sup> or survival<sup>593</sup> when it appears there? If it were, would that not mean that it would be the same thing in Blumenberg's own writing? This does not seem entirely plausible. What is more clear is that the association between the philosophy of life and Heidegger's thinking about significance, however, is intended to reflect poorly on Heidegger. It suggests not only that Heidegger has allowed something unexamined—or perhaps just not admitted—into his philosophy, allowed himself to believe that reality might be, to any degree, simply “given,” but also that he had allowed himself to desire direct contact with a primordial reality that he himself characterized as “abyss” and “nothingness.” Blumenberg's language, the “*suppression* of the separation,” “fulfillment by a *coup de main*,” suggests his concern is more with the former, with the possibility of Heidegger's deceiving rather than his self-deception.<sup>594</sup> It is possible, however, to put too fine a point on what was meant only to be a subtle barb directed at Heidegger and, by so doing, to miss the point, or at least to ruin the joke. I have risked doing this, but it is my contention that even the most subtle barb has a particular shape, and that it may be worthwhile to try to see what it is.

More interesting still is the description Blumenberg gives of his own effort, a description that applies, I think, to the work of this chapter more broadly: it is an “attempt to arrive at a phenomenology of ‘significance’ as an apotropaic quality with respect to the stupefaction that is delivered over to the ‘absolutism of reality.’”<sup>595</sup> This confirms, I think, the suggestion that his attempt has all along been to describe this quality, and that he finds the thought, and the vocabulary, of various thinkers to be helpful, up to a point,

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<sup>592</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 52.

<sup>593</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 59.

<sup>594</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 109-110.

<sup>595</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 110.

in that effort. At a certain point, however, the object eludes the grasp that would hold it tight and fix it. This is not a feature of the inherited thought alone, but of the object itself, and so the attempt to deal with Blumenberg's comments about Freud or Heidegger as instances of critique fail to do justice to what we see on the page. Blumenberg rather subjects their thought to the pressure necessary to transform them so that they are more suitable to the object he has in view, to the extent that he has it in view.<sup>596</sup> I want to point out, in conclusion, the way Blumenberg positions the function of 'significance' in the closing lines of this chapter. First, he recognizes that the tendency to "yield to significances" might come at a cost, that the desire to find significances in history might lead to historiographical errors.<sup>597</sup> While recognizing this as a loss, Blumenberg claims that the desire to find and "yield to" significances, what he elsewhere calls the "affinity to myth," is in the service of the human way of life.<sup>598</sup> This is the heart of his argument that myth is a form of rationality: myth provides something that this way of life must have, and that other things do not provide, at least not as well. This explains why interest in myth survives, and even increases, in an era that relies increasingly on the sciences and that views itself in the terms of the theoretical attitude. Such reliance increases the need for significance because the theoretical attitude tends to do away with just this sort of particular value. But this value is called for because of, and as a compensation for, the risks of the human way of life.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Cf. Goldstein, Jürgen. "Work on Significance: Human Self-Affirmations in Hans Blumenberg." *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 5-19. Especially the notion of the "orphic phenomena," which he uses there to describe what Blumenberg calls "nonconceptuality," especially in the tendency of such things to retreat at the approach of "reflective" inquiry, or the attempt to view them directly.

<sup>597</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 100; 101; 102.

<sup>598</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 111.

<sup>599</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*, 111.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSIONS

There is a characteristic quality of Blumenberg's work, and probably more than one, that makes it difficult, and perhaps also risky, to draw very definite conclusions about it, and this has to do with a certain caution in his own work. His work is in many ways bold, he himself speaks of "the courage of our conjectures," but this boldness is accompanied by a pronounced sensitivity to ambiguity and ambivalence, and a resistance to the sort of formulations that translates easily into slogans for practical action, or even the sort of conclusiveness that leads to or promotes the kind of confidence that is necessary for, e.g., political convictions. Jeffrey Barash identifies this caution in the contrast between Blumenberg's thinking about myth in history and Cassirer's.<sup>600</sup> I do not mean to suggest that because Blumenberg's work does not yield easily to certain types of conclusions that one cannot draw conclusions about his work, or about work done upon it; I point this out, on the contrary, because this quality of Blumenberg's work actually forms and informs the sort of conclusions I draw and the way I draw conclusions. My conclusions, accordingly, will begin with questions, and will point, at their best, to further avenues of inquiry.

There are two ideas that are fundamental to this dissertation that differentiate it from other writing about Blumenberg: first, that the object on which myth 'works' is an indefiniteness in the experience of the world, and, although myth works on it, primarily

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<sup>600</sup> Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. "Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg's Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Myth." 340.

by means of substitution and subsequent transformation, this indefiniteness remains a part of that experience; and second, that the “means of operation with which significance works,” the narrative patterns such as simultaneity, latent identity, the “reciprocity between resistance and heightened existence,” and, especially for this study, the closed-circle pattern, lie at the center not only of Blumenberg’s conception of ‘significance,’ but of his conception of “work on myth” as well, his theory of the reception of myth and its enduring power and appeal.<sup>601</sup>

The readings in Chapters 2-4 of this dissertation attempt to show that myth is a tool with which humans attempt to reduce the anxiety that is produced by living in a world over which we have, and, more importantly, feel that we have, insufficient control, by interposing some distance between the individual and the world. Myth, then, works on the world in one sense, but it does not attempt actually to change the world, but rather to tell stories about certain aspects of the world that will allow the hearer of the story to feel differently about the world. Part of Blumenberg’s account of the reason why myth has endured is that its function is actually different from that of theoretical rationality, which has at times attempted, in the name of ‘Enlightenment,’ to rid the world of myth. Blumenberg emphasizes, and consequently so do I, the effort on the part of myth to

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<sup>601</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 70. In her dissertation, Pavesich recognizes the place of these “means of operation,” but they do not receive there the emphasis or the close attention they do here, Pavesich, Vida. “Chapter Three: The Modes of Orientation: Myth, History, and Rationality as Adaptations.” “Hans Blumenberg: An Anthropological Key.” 177. One finds the recognition of the indefinite nature of that on which myth works in both Crowell, Steven Galt. “The Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature.” *Issues in Husserl’s Ideas II*. Edited by Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 81-105, and Ifergan, Pini. “Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology.” *Continental Review*. (2015) 48:359-377, but this is only mentioned in both places.

forestall questions, to make them unnecessary, in contrast to theoretical rationality's effort to answer them. Another aspect of this difference in function, however, has to do with what, in the world, myth works on. Myth has to do with "the margins" of the world, with the feeling produced by the individual's inability to control "the duration and circumstances" of her life.<sup>602</sup> This is the feeling of a diffuse hostility, that arises in our confrontation of the world and is felt to be a characteristic of the world itself. The history of myth presents us with a succession of transformations of this hostility, concentrating, in each case, this hostility into a hostile power or powers, then telling stories of the limitation of this power.<sup>603</sup> A central part of Blumenberg's account of the durability of myth, I argue, is that this indefiniteness, for which myth substitutes its stories about the gods, remains behind or underneath these substitutions and these transformations, in our experience of the world. The fact, and the presence, of this experience of the indefinite is one way to describe the continued presence of the need for myth in human life. In fact, precisely because it deals with this indefiniteness by means of substitution, we can expect that myth does not do away with it, but provides rather a means of coping with it.

Theoretical rationality, by contrast, would appear to offer the means of reducing this indefinite, by striving for conceptual definition, by making the world increasingly known and knowable. Blumenberg argues that, on the contrary, the success of theoretical rationality's efforts increases the need for myth, rather than decreasing it. This is a result of the way that theoretical rationality achieves knowledge, i.e., of the way that it conceives of its objects of knowledge. The effect is produced by the very object character of these objects, which are reduced to, are understood to consist entirely in, their sensible

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<sup>602</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 8, 128; 63.

<sup>603</sup> See my account in Part I, Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

qualities. To the extent that the world is understood to be a collection of such objects, and all such objects are, in their sensible being, which is their only being, equal, the world, even if it is entirely knowable, is entirely alien in that it means nothing, it signifies nothing to human beings. In such a world, humans would lack the means by which to move or to act, they would experience the world to have the same hostility Blumenberg describes in his hypothetical “initial situation.” In any event, Blumenberg argues that the success of the theoretical attitude serves to increase the need for myth, which is the need for significance, rather than to decrease it.<sup>604</sup>

The success of myth, then, does not remove the need for myth, although it may reduce the urgency of this need, for a time, and the success of theoretical rationality serves actually to increase this need. We would expect, then, to find this need to be a present, if not certainly a constant, fact of human life. A number of questions present themselves here: does this theory of myth help us to recognize the way the need for myth manifests itself in our own lives and culture, and also to recognize the ways we rely on myth? More, generally, how does such a theory of myth, based in a conception of an anthropological need for myth, affect our ability to rely on myth? Do we rely on things besides the classical myths to meet the need for significance and, to the extent that we do, do we do so at our own peril, as Blumenberg suggests?<sup>605</sup>

I want to begin with the penultimate question, the question whether a theory of myth affects our ability to rely on myth. This question was suggested to me by a claim that Blumenberg makes about the “truthfulness” of metaphor in the early work,

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<sup>604</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 67.

<sup>605</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 99.

*Paradigms for a Metaphorology*.<sup>606</sup> He claims that metaphors do not actually “say anything truthful at all:”

Absolute metaphors ‘answer’ the supposedly naïve, in principle unanswerable questions whose relevance lies quite simply in the fact that they cannot be brushed aside, since we do not *pose* them ourselves but find them already *posed* in the ground of our existence. We must bear in mind here that a metaphorology cannot result in any method for *using* metaphors, or for addressing the questions that announce themselves in them. On the contrary: as students of metaphorology, we have already deprived ourselves of the possibility of finding ‘answers’ in metaphors to those unanswerable questions.<sup>607</sup>

Let us notice, first of all, the similarity between the function attributed here, and in the passage in note 606, to absolute metaphor, and that attributed to myth in *Work on Myth*. They “give structure to a world,” they “answer” questions that we already find “posed in the ground of our existence.” The passage quoted in note 606 suggests that we may understand this last phrase to indicate the sort of questions about the whole of the world that our actions in the world and attitudes toward the world imply answers to. Metaphor

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<sup>606</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Translated by Robert Savage. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 13. Here is a little bit more about such “naïve questions,” for the sake of clarity: “By providing a point of orientation, the content of absolute metaphors determines a particular attitude or conduct [*Verhalten*]; they give structure to a world, representing the nonexperienceable, nonapprehensible totality of the real. To the historically trained eye, they therefore indicate the fundamental certainties, conjectures, and judgments in relation to which the attitudes and expectations, actions and inactions, longings and disappointments, interests and indifferences of an epoch are regulated. “What genuine guidance does it give?” This form of the “truth question,” formulated by pragmatism, is pertinent here in a sense that has nothing to do with biology. A question like “What is the world?”, with its demand as imprecise as it is hypertrophic, cannot serve as a point of departure for theoretical discourse; but it does bring to light an implicit need for knowledge that, in the ‘how’ of an attitude, knows itself to be reliant on the ‘what’ of an all-encompassing and sustaining whole, and that seeks to give a modicum of stability by taking its bearings from that whole. Time and again, this implicit questioning has ‘lived itself out’ in metaphors, and it has induced from metaphors different styles of relating to the world.” Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. 14-15.

<sup>607</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. 14.

then ‘answers’ such questions in a different way than theoretical rationality would: for example, the metaphor of the “mighty truth,” a metaphor used to make the claim that the truth itself will guarantee that it be discovered, that humans come to know the truth, despite the degree to which we are well- or ill-equipped to discover it and despite the degree to which this truth is hidden in or by nature, answers a question that is never posed explicitly, and, more importantly, provides comfort in the absence of any ability, or any repeatable procedure by which, to certify the claim. It “answers” then in the sense of doing away with the question.<sup>608</sup>

To think of metaphors in this way, then, is to come to see the way that humans rely on metaphors to prop up, or to “structure,” those aspects of human life that are inaccessible to theoretical rationality, but which our lives presuppose answers to. Because this theory of metaphor attends precisely to the way metaphors provide answers that are not saying “anything truthful,” i.e., are dealing with matters whose truth we have no access to, such a theory of metaphor makes it impossible for its practitioner any longer to find such ‘answers’ in metaphor. This seems to make sense. Because the function of “absolute metaphor” is very much like the function of myth, particularly in that both provide a kind of structure for aspects of our world that we don’t have sensory or theoretical access to,<sup>609</sup> but which we nevertheless rely upon, I suggest that we can extend this claim about metaphor to myth. Blumenberg’s theory of myth, further, is based on the claim that the function of myth, the servicing of the need for significance, is a necessary

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<sup>608</sup> This is one of the truth metaphors Blumenberg discusses in, Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*.

<sup>609</sup> This is precisely not, in Blumenberg’s mind, to abandon such matters to “unreason,” but rather the attempt to shine some light on a domain to which it cannot gain access. Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 400-401.

function, that ‘significance’ is something that humans need, but that we need myth to make “accessible” to us.<sup>610</sup> If, then, this theory of myth renders us unable to rely on myth, but myth fulfills a necessary function, how do we service the need for significance by some other means? Isn’t it ironic that the theory of myth that shows us myth’s “anthropological function” would preclude it also from performing this function?

This suggests another, more general question, the last of those listed above. If we, who are ‘enlightened’ by Blumenberg’s theory of myth, can no longer rely on myth to service our need for significance, are we forced to rely upon different stories, stories that have not passed through the process of optimization, for this need, which Blumenberg warns against, however cryptic that warning might be? And, to the extent that we are relying on such narratives, does it still make sense to speak of this reliance in terms of myth. This is to say, do we reduce myth to its function, or is the process of optimization, which I discuss in Chapter 2, and the inherited myths that are its products, an integral part of his theory of myth?

The answer to this question must begin, I think, by recalling first that “work on myth” tends to do the same work that myth does, and second that work on myth includes the reception of myth in contexts and enterprises that are not mythical. A theory of myth, then, would count as work on myth. Significance, let us recall, must be positioned between definite meanings and meaninglessness, and ties the concerns of the individual to “large-scale structures that reach far beyond him.”<sup>611</sup> I want to suggest that we might think of Blumenberg’s own work in connection to his concept of significance. This would

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<sup>610</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 6.

<sup>611</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 100. Cf. Heidenreich, Felix. “Bedeutsamkeit.” *Blumenberg Lesen: Ein Glossar*. Edited by Robert Buch and Daniel Weidener. ( Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014) 43-56.

resolve the problem that arises, for instance, from the fact that his “initial situation” has a speculative character, that it is not meant to be understood as a historical condition, or to be a verifiable theory of the prehistory of man. He tells us explicitly that it is neither. It is undoubtedly a narrative, and we see in it a pattern that is familiar from, among other things, the story of the banishment from Eden in the book of Genesis. What I have been calling Blumenberg’s theory of myth would then rather be an attempt to forestall certain questions that we may not, perhaps, be able to help asking, but that we cannot answer with the means of theoretical rationality, such as the natural and empirical sciences, for example. In place of evidence about the origin of the human species, and the origin of the contents of myths, Blumenberg substitutes a story about where we come from and why we developed myth. This story provides a context within which we can make some sort of sense of, or at least cope with, the fact that we cannot know as confidently as we want the answer to these questions that we cannot help asking.

At this point I want to emphasize again Blumenberg’s repeated attempts to distinguish myth from fiction. His narrative is not meant to be fact, but neither is it meant to be fiction. It is compatible, or is meant to be, with the scientific theories that were available to Blumenberg, and were “currently respected,” when he was composing this work.<sup>612</sup> It is a story, like the myths that he is thinking about, that cannot be “contradicted by reality,” but cannot be confirmed by it, either.<sup>613</sup> It thus occupies an intermediate position, or perhaps rather, a simply *different* position to that occupied by fiction or by verifiable fact. I do not mean to press this line of thought too far, to attempt to identify the position occupied by Blumenberg’s work somewhere between fact and fiction. In

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<sup>612</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 4.

<sup>613</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 7.

fact, I think such an attempt would be misguided. I would like to suggest, however, that the concept of ‘significance,’ as Blumenberg describes it, might help us to understand what he might be aiming for in certain passages of his work that are more reliant on narrative than one might expect in a work of philosophy. I also would like to suggest that it points toward an answer to the question of how one might service the need for significance when one is unable to rely upon inherited myths for this purpose.

This leaves us with the question, however, about the reliability of such narratives. Blumenberg raises this concern with his notion of “remythicization,” with the dangers to which one opens oneself when one relies upon, or opens up the space for, narratives that have not been optimized by the historical process that produced our inherited myths.<sup>614</sup> This warning is not based on the claim that myth is more reliable than theory, however, but that optimized and inherited myths are more reliable than new myths, because they have been formed by and against reality, by the confrontation of their narratives with different historical realities. Blumenberg’s narratives are not new myths, exactly, but they appear rather in a theoretical context, in a “philosophical theory of myth.”<sup>615</sup> This implies a distinction between a theoretical venture and the theoretical attitude, the ideal toward which the theoretical observer strives: perhaps there is room for different sorts of attitudes within the same venture? Blumenberg employs his narrative, with an interest in making significance available, but also in an attempt to understand what myth is, and “to show how to understand what has happened,” to show at least the way myth has served to shape our history.<sup>616</sup> This is to suggest that *Work on Myth*, and work on myth, is not

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<sup>614</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 99.

<sup>615</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 66.

<sup>616</sup> Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. 24.

myth, but designates, or includes within the designation, rather, the attempt to fulfill the function of myth with the means available to us. The mere fact that this is a theoretical venture is, surely, not on its own proof against the sorts of abuses that Blumenberg associates with “remythicization:” the possibility that a new myth will be constructed in order to, or at least used to, impose an individual’s wishes upon others, that it will be less bounded by its repeated encounters with reality. Here, however, the feature of Blumenberg’s work with which I began this last chapter is relevant, the way it resists reduction to easy conclusions, especially to practical platitudes. It is definitely not a theory of how one might use myths. The fact that one who is schooled in this theory of myth might be unable to rely upon myth to perform its necessary function has its upside: one who is unable to rely on myth may be less susceptible to those whose interest in myth is an interest in controlling others. Once again, myth and work on myth appear to work against the threat of absolutism.

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