Myth and Metaphor

Key Issues in Hans Blumenberg's Cultural Anthropology

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Introduction

The German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) addresses questions in his writings (most notably in his seminal piece, *Work on Myth*)[2] that have bothered scholars since the Enlightenment: why have myths – with the triumphant advance of secular, scientific rationality – not simply evaporated into thin air? Why do they continue to live on and – as he argues – even provide answers for our age?

This essay will focus on two interrelated aspects of Blumenberg's philosophy: myth and metaphor. Blumenberg perceives the functions of myth and metaphor in the development of culture as rational and logical solutions to the life-threatening problems posed by man's biological deficits. (Here Blumenberg agrees with Arnold Gehlen's anthropological *theory of deficiency* and his definition of humans as *Mängelwesen* – beings lacking the necessary instincts to fit into the natural environment).[3] One of the central questions of anthropology is how man – despite this apparent lack of instincts – manages to exist. Blumenberg's answer: because he deals with reality belatedly, selectively, indirectly, and, most of all, metaphorically. Used correctly, myth and metaphor not only manage to dodge any immediate and frightening confrontation with reality, but even offer *Lebenskunst* (the art of living), that primary skill of dealing with and enjoying oneself. After taking a closer look at Blumenberg's definition of myth and (absolute) metaphor, the essay will show how both – even in our time – can be employed to compensate man's biological deficiencies.

Myth

"About myth we can say two things: first, that it is not there, and second, that it won't go away."[4] Northrop Frye's ironic commentary, as exaggerated as it might seem at first, nevertheless delineates the diverse heuristic traditions and heterogeneous aspects of myth. Two positions especially have survived into the present: first, myth as primitive history of prelogical societies; and second, myth as a repressed form of logical consciousness.

In *Work on Myth*, a term that intentionally avoids the distinction between imaginative and analytical work, Blumenberg examines the common root of both myth and science. By viewing myth as a rational measure of interpreting the world, he invalidates the often postulated dichotomy of the anthropomorphic blindness of *mythos* as opposed to the critical rationality of *logos* (as signifying mankind's ultimate rational victory over the forces of darkness). "The boundary line between myth and logos is imaginary," Blumenberg writes, since "Myth itself is a piece of high-carat 'work of logos'."[5] Myth was not replaced by science; rather science – by attempting to fulfil man's expectations of a better, safer, more knowledgeable life – continues the tradition established by myth. By focusing exclusively on the functions of myth, Blumenberg corrects the ethnocentric implication of a previously prelogical mentality in the development of human consciousness: "Not everything was deception," he points out, "that had not been allowed past the checkpoint of reason."[6]

Although Blumenberg's myth theory relies heavily on volume two of Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, it diverges significantly in at least three aspects: first, Cassirer interprets myth as a unique and logical symbolic form within a functioning system (but in the end nevertheless views it as an outdated model of interpreting reality); second, he sees the responses to an overwhelming anxiety as

spontaneous expressions of man's nature. Blumenberg, on the other hand, perceives these expressions (and ultimately the development of culture) as rational and logical solutions to the life-threatening problems posed by our biological nonadaption, our constitutional deficit of instinct. Thus, "man's uniqueness is not the result of what he is (in his essence or nature) but in what he *does* in order to deal with the *problem* of what he is."[7]

Blumenberg's focus on the contemporary relevance of myth constitutes yet another point of divergence from Cassirer. Whereas Cassirer assumes the archaic origin of myth to constitute one of its core characteristics, Blumenberg does not connect mythic relevance to its archaic foundation; neither content nor the (ultimately unanswerable) question of myth's origin is relevant in his philosophy. The only basis for any mythic verification, according to Blumenberg, lies in its reception. Thus, an ur-myth does not point toward an original myth, but instead reveals a mythic content that has endured throughout the processes of chronological wear and tear. Cassirer assumes the compelling power of the mythical motif to be fully present from the beginning (a belief that implies that myth itself has no history); yet, Blumenberg reminds us that the mythology we know "from Homer, Hesiod, the Ramayana, from our informants in 'primitive' cultures, and so on, must be imagined as the product of thousands of years of … storytelling, in the course of which vastly greater quantities of stories … and variations on earlier stories and figures were tested on audiences upon whose active approval the storyteller's success, perhaps even his livelihood depended."[8]

Rather than denoting a reverent process of handing down, the surviving myths are the product of an unsparing process of natural selection. As a result of such testing, most of the stories were discarded as not having the impact the surviving material has. Mythic structures derive their longevity from their dual (and seemingly contradictory) ability to both constantly incorporate new elements and data while retaining a stable and change-resistant core at the same time. By emphasising myth's temporal continuity instead of its supposed archaic origin, myth is no longer a static, unchangeable entity. Even more, the loss of "accurate datability requires compensation in the form of pregnance." [9] Blumenberg discovers those moments of pregnance in the initial confrontation of unprotected mankind with an absolute and overwhelming reality.

For Blumenberg, these confrontations constitute the starting point of myth which he calls the *absolutism of reality*. The term describes a situation in which man is ruled by the sense of a "demonic captivity, magic helplessness, [and] utter dependency". For Blumenberg, the mental state of being at the mercy of some unpredictable, most often even unknowable, force comes closest to *Angst*, the German term normally translated as "anxiety", but more appropriately rendered as a feeling of intense fear lacking a specific threat. This threat is imagined as "the single absolute experience that exists: that of the superior power of the Other."[10]

What precisely is the role of myth in relation to the "absolutism of reality"? It is to overcome (or sometimes even to forestall) *Angst* by rationalizing it into plain *fear*: "This occurs primarily not through experience and knowledge, but rather through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnamable." What has become identifiable through stories, names, and metaphors is no longer threatening or unfamiliar. Or – as Blumenberg puts it, so much more poetically – "every story gives an Achilles' heel to sheer power".[11] Myth transforms indeterminable anxiety into determined fear and unfamiliarity into a feeling of belonging. According to Blumenberg, myth was thus able

> to leave behind the old terrors, as monsters that had been vanquished, because it did not need these fears as means to protect a truth or a law. The single institution that sustained it was not aimed at alarming and frightening its public, but rather, on the contrary, at bringing forward the terror, tamed, as a liberating insurance of more beautiful things.[12]

Blumenberg does not try to invoke a mythical *Götterdämmerung*, an anti-Enlightenment and anti-technical aura; his sole interest is to demonstrate the applicability of myth in man's never-ending battle against the *absolutism of reality*.

How myth can be applied to contemporary environmental problems is aptly demonstrated in a study concerning a nuclear waste depository near Carlsbad, New Mexico. In 1999, Gregory Benford, award-winning author, advisor to NASA, and Professor of Physics at UC Irvine, was nominated consulting scientist on a high-ranking US Government council responsible for creating a marker to secure the nuclear site. Called WIPP (Waste Isolation Pilot Project), the radioactive waste has been stored in

abandoned salt mines near Carlsbad since 1999. The place was chosen both for its relatively low level of population and for the fact that – due to the barrenness of the surrounding salt lakes and deserts – new cities are unlikely to be built in the vicinity.

Supplied by Congress with a $1.8 billion budget, a committee of physicists, anthropologists, archaeologists, artists and linguists was asked to develop a warning system that would keep people from accidentally or intentionally approaching the radioactive site – not for the next 10, 100, or even 1,000 years, but for the next 10,000 years. In Part I one of his book, *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia* ("Ten Thousand Years of Solitude"),[13] Benford describes the project, asking some of the basic questions of our time: How do we create taboos? How do we keep people from trespassing into possibly dangerous territory? How do we tell people who are used to being praised for venturing farther into unknown territories than others, "No more"? In addition, in order to project 10,000 years into the future, the commission had to assume that the political system in the US would remain relatively stable (a theory called "USA Forever"). The next issue was even more problematic: What was the chance of someone opening the site (the government, hikers, natural scientists, children, etc.) within the next 10,000 years? The risk of that happening was evaluated at around 10%, a rate the US government calls "tolerable".

In order to communicate with the future and to save future civilisations from the deadly hazards created by the present civilisation, the easiest solution initially appeared to be some kind of "No Trespassing" sign. However, any kind of written warnings, linguists maintained, would be understood no longer than 2,000 years. The symbol of radioactivity seemed another possible choice; yet, even people asked in recent polls often were unable to identify the symbol and wanted to know what the "propeller" was supposed to mean. Anthropologists suggested skulls; however, children viewing skulls automatically identified them as "pirates". Inscribing "Mr. Yuk", a round, frowning face onto the ground, seemed another viable alternative; yet, geologists were quick to point out that due to geological shifts on the earth's surface, Mr. Yuk´s frowning face might change to a friendly, welcoming face within only a few thousand years.

Architects on the counsel argued that a labyrinth of (spiky) columns might suggest danger to future generations. However, Jon Lomberg, who together with Carl Sagan worked on the *Voyager* mission, objected that the site might be mistaken as "art", a place to take your family for a picnic. Lomberg instead proposed to create low levels of radioactivity right above the underground storage. This suggestion pointed to a gigantic moral dilemma, that is, for the first time in recorded history the present civilisation is creating potentially deadly zones in which trespassing could lead to immediate death or mutilation for future generations.

Although the issue is far from being resolved, thus far the counsel seems to have decided on two components for marking the site as dangerous: first, a field of columns, buried markers, and concrete "thorns". (The plan to have the site – as an added "attraction" – emanate low, only slightly hazardous, levels of radioactivity was eventually abandoned). One other plan, to date considered the most likely to actually succeed, consists of a "significant" story. According to Blumenberg, significance is achieved by the "Darwinism of Words", an unsparing process of "natural selection". Unlike "holy texts", which must never be altered even one iota, mythic stories, as pointed out before, feature both a change-resistant centre (safe from the wear and tear of time) and a change-oriented periphery, capable of incorporating different pertinent (historical, mythical, literary) events. Evaluating the aspect of lasting impact plus the opportunity of incorporating new data, the commission came up with a mythic story called the "enlightened Pharaoh's curse".

Yet, one problem remains: since the aspect of "natural selection" cannot be easily predicted and constancy of the core does not necessarily imply complete stability of the core, the commission needs to select an ur-motif. One possibility: a motif which tells of the amorality of a tribe which lived approximately 2000 AD in a beautiful place. However, due to an unprecedented level of selfishness this tribe thought it fit to create the potential for destroying that place and running the risk of annihilating future populations. It is more than likely that the "Darwinism of Words" will eventually make the "real" story emerge and tell of our inability, our lack of instinct, to fit into the natural environment. And hopefully it will serve as a warning for future generations to not pursue the course our civilisation has begun. Hopefully it will provide future generations with the insight that to "create monsters" is not just harmful, but unnatural.

Metaphor

In *Höhlenausgänge*,[14] Blumenberg again postulates the *absolutism of reality* and the attempts of archaic men to secure their survival in a sometimes hostile world as mankind's basic anthropological starting point. Blumenberg argues that the dramatically enlarged horizon of what man could perceive (and within which he could *be* perceived) must have been a situation of great ambiguity and anxiety. Having been displaced from the sheltering forest into the savanna's open, and thus unprotected, space, man attempts to regain his original security by making the cave his home. The withdrawal from reality into the security of the cave is no cheap escapism or plea for a naïve way of circumventing reality. It is a rational and functional means of avoiding the two other possible ways of dealing with reality: escape or attack. In the history of human development, Blumenberg reminds us in *Höhlenausgänge*, withdrawals are as characteristic (and successful) as is progress.[15]

The failure to achieve security and sanctuary results in a feeling Martin Heidegger appropriately calls *Unheimlichkeit* ("not-being-at-home"). Like no other human habitat, the cave exemplifies people's longing for certainty in uncertain times, for being-at-home in an unknown world, and for security in insecure situations. The cave provides refuge for the refugee, sanctuary for the hunted, and protection for the person running from bad weather.[16] Blumenberg describes both the caves of archaic man and the *caves* of myths and stories (which similarly protect from the *absolutism* of *reality* and offer sanctuary) in anthropological terms. However, Blumenberg is not the only scholar/philosopher to emphasise the anthropological basis of metaphor: in their seminal work on metaphor, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson describe metaphor as a device of orientation in an initially incomprehensible world.[17] But while for them metaphors – as a medium of experience – are significant solely as a structuring device, Blumenberg defines the function of metaphor as an active process of discovery and coping.

Absolute Metaphor

The cave is one of the most significant *absolute metaphors* in Blumenberg's oeuvre. Like other *absolute metaphors*, Blumenberg interprets the cave both as a creative potentiality and an irreducible cognitive structure which cannot be substituted by any other term. Blumenberg's concept of the *absolute metaphor*, David Adams writes, "represents an attempt to identify a poetic – more specifically, a non-positivist, non-empiricist, and non-rationalist – foundation or structuring agent for knowledge."[18] The result: The *absolute metaphor* activates an imaginative system which fulfils the need for significance and orientation, even if what appears to be true or rational has to be ignored. On a cognitive level, the *absolute metaphor* furthers an understanding of fundamental facts; as a creative implication it fulfils the emotional need of mankind to create perspectives from which to view the world.

Two kinds of people inhabit the cave: the daring ones keen on going outside to meet the world's challenges, and the hesitant ones preferring to remain inside. Throughout *Höhlenausgänge*, Blumenberg speculates on the progress achieved in the interaction of the weak and their desire not to be the useless and the disdained ones, and the active ones with their unconcealed yearning not to be condemned to the arbitrariness of the uncontrollable forces outside.[19]

The dilemma of the cave is that survival can only be guaranteed by leaving it. This departure soon becomes the most important aspect of existence. Nevertheless, as cave paintings prove, at one point the dominance of strength – that is, the dominance of the ones able to leave the cave and fight/hunt for a living – is matched or, at least, diminished. In the cave, man's *second nature* – culture – slowly develops. Telling stories and describing reality without actually being there soon becomes the privilege of the weak; the pleasure of making something happen without actually experiencing it becomes the secret of the underdog.[20]

While mankind is limited to lives of constant "escape and attack" without the cave, the security of the cave supports the imaginative faculties. In their visions and fantasies, *the cave sitters* anticipate adventures too daring to try out in reality. Blumenberg reminds us that the first flights to the moon were undertaken in fairytales and myths, not in reality. However, the step towards a cultural being is not a triumph over men's natural faculties since a high price has to be paid for cultural advances: an unreflective but highly instinctual existence is traded for a reflective, but highly conscious state which forever estranges us from our instinctual origins.

The *cave sitters* never leave the cave, but acquire – through paintings and stories, chants and fetishes – the unknown world outside. Those excluded from the hunt become dreamers, storytellers, painters. Thus, from the state of a barely accepted *cave-sitter-existence*, a storytelling and picture-painting culture develops. The members of the cave community are mutually dependent since the continuous battle with an overwhelming reality is – without the security of the cave – as undesirable as a mere *cave-sitter-existence* is without the antagonism outside to provide food for thought and stories. Again, both the telling of a story and the painting of a picture are functional processes: they either equip the hunters with a narrative armour to help them overcome a reality perceived as too threatening to deal with, or they become the imaginative enrichment of a (physically) unthreatened existence. The fact that this process is called *magic* rather than *theory* does not, as Blumenberg points out, alter its primary task of creating distance from the *absolutism of reality*.[21]

Furthermore, for the *cave sitters* storytelling and other imaginative achievements are functional in that they eventually lead to the abandonment of the cave. The search for security from an overwhelming reality and the need for imaginative constructs are only the very first steps on the *reality ladder*. The paradox of the cave is that it invites you to stay and enables you to leave. For the development of mankind, the ambivalence of the anthropological cave can only for a short time be an appropriate means of distancing and overcoming reality. The critical aspect of anthropogenesis must be the eventual departure from the cave. The only danger for the *cave sitters* is staying inside: to remain in the cave, Blumenberg points out, is comparable to Adam not wanting to be godlike and instead preferring to remain in paradise.[22] Armed only with basic anthropological distancing methods – images, myths and stories – man eventually steps outside the cave. In Blumenberg's philosophy, it is this stepping out of the cave that marks the zenith of personhood (*Selbstfindung* and *Selbsterfindung*).[23]

Today's Caves

To reach the "zenith of personhood" is important; however, according to Blumenberg, returning to the cave has always been and will continue to be the most significant step for both the physical as well as emotional survival of mankind. Expanding on his discussion of the anthropological and fictional caves, he demands a return to places which promise some measure of security in order to be able to deal with the contingencies of contemporary life. Blumenberg calls the generic concept of all caves mankind can devise today – actual, fictional (which Blumenberg calls *Kulturhöhle der Fiktion*, the *cultural cave of fiction*) as well as emotional ones – *institution*. His concept of the institution is comparable to Michael Prendergast's *tacit* or *habitual knowledge*, René Bourdieu's *sens pratique*, Mary Douglas's *common sense* and Wolfgang Iser's *stummes Wissen* (implicit knowledge). The common denominator of these terms is that they are endowed with such measure of certainty that they can be taken for granted. They become habitual, ordinary and banal; eventually they turn into processes that produce an implicit and natural knowledge which is no longer questioned.

But what happens, Iser asks, "if we want the security *and* the return of whatever had to be sacrificed to gain security?"[24] That is, if the security of the cave is as necessary and desirable as is the approval which can only result from a successful confrontation with reality? Blumenberg's definition of habit and ordinariness as *institutional caves* again shows the ambivalence of the metaphorical *cave*: On the one hand, man cannot exist without institutions and organisations which reduce the contingency of reality; on the other hand, he is hesitant about paying the price for the restriction of individuality and his pragmatically oriented sense of security.

Conclusion

Do valid reasons exist in our contemporary reality for a return to an anthropological pattern of behaviour, an anthropological order? Do we still have a need for a return to *caves* which provide security amidst the insecurity of contingent reality? Blumenberg's answer would be "yes". While security was and is of existential significance for mankind's emotional and physical survival, in today's change-oriented world man is confronted with yet another – no less dangerous – threat: the threat of an excessive onslaught of information, technology, knowledge (in Arnold Gehlen's terminology: stimulus satiation (*Reizüberflutung*)). Combined with both the expansive developments of globalised economies and the individualistic tendencies of modern technological societies, stimulus satiation reinforces the insecurities of the individual. Large family units and other communal connections have been replaced by highly

complex technological as well as administrative infrastructures which are no longer controllable or verifiable by the individual.

Due to the global adjustment of life styles and the diverse means of mobility and communication, space – especially as a site of social competence – is more and more at risk of vanishing. The current philosophical debate about reality rapidly becoming discontinuous, in Germany headed by the philosopher and former colleague of Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, focuses on terms such as *culture of preservation* as well as *culture of compensation and protection*.[25] According to Marquard, a *culture of preservation* (*Bewahrungskultur*) is fast developing in our modern societies in a compensatory relationship with progress. It continues to hold on to those aspects of reality which do not support progress. Given the rapid development of discontinuities in contemporary society, the return to *caves* – actual, metaphorical, or institutional ones – might (as so often before in the history of mankind) turn formerly insurmountable obstacles into surmountable fear and thus help us to live our lives freely and constructively.

The return to basic anthropological patterns seems to fulfil the need for security while at the same time evoking a culture of preservation. Thus, a stability is being re-established which – due to the radical intertextuality and the many mutually challenging (and often colliding) discourses of postmodern, globalised societies – was on the verge of vanishing. The development from complexity to simplicity must not be misread as an unnecessary reduction of the convolutions and entanglements of modern life, or the confirmation of a new holism as a means of denying the multicultural, polyphonic voices which are integral parts of our lives. Rather, it demonstrates that in global crises and upheavals, mankind concentrates on basic and elementary needs: culture – in times of crises – returns to nature only to be revitalised by it eventually.

Notes

1. Maria Moss received her Ph.D. from Hamburg University and her post-doctoral degree in American Literature and Culture from the Free University of Berlin. Besides numerous publications on ethnic literature and myth theory, she also conducted interviews with contemporary writers such as Don DeLillo and Stewart O'Nan. She is the author of *We've Been Here Before: Women in Creation Myths and Contemporary Literature of the Native American Southwest* (1992), *Höhlenein- und Ausgänge: Wirklichkeitsbewältigung in der zeitgenössischen Literatur Nordamerikas* (a re-evaluation of contemporary North American literature, 2006), and co-author of *The American Sublime* (1998), *Mirror-Writing: Reconstructions of Native American Identity* (2000) as well as *Neo-Realism: Between Innovation and Continuation* (2004). She currently teaches American and Canadian Studies at Leuphana University Lüneburg and is co-editing the conference proceedings, *White-Indian Relations: Moving into the 21st Century*.
2. Two other books by Blumenberg have thus far been translated into English: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985) and Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence (1996). [To these now can be added *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (2010) – *ed.*]
3. Arnold Gehlen (1959), *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, Athenäum Verlag, Bonn.
4. Northrop Frye (1990), "The Koine of Myth: Myth as a Universally Intelligible Language" in R. Denham (ed), *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, p. 168.
5. Hans Blumenberg (1985), *Work on Myth*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 12.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
7. Robert M. Wallace (1985), "Introduction" in Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, pp. xv-xvi.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xx.
9. Blumenberg, *Work*, p. 102.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 21.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 16.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
13. Gregory Benford (2000), *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia*, Perennial, New York.
14. Hans Blumenberg (1989), *Höhlenausgänge*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M.
15. Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, p. 805.
16. Franz Josef Wetz (1993), *Hans Blumenberg: Eine Einführung*, Junius, Hamburg.
17. George Lakoff & Mark Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
18. "Thus," David Adams continues, "it is roughly analogous to Northrop Frye's 'mode', Michel Foucault´s 'episteme', Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm', Hayden White's 'poetic act of prefiguration', and Stephen Pepper's 'root metaphor'; they all offer a means of identifying and comparing 'world-views'." David Adams (1991), "The Divine Act of Forgetting: Aesthetic Distance in Benjamin, Blumenberg, and Pynchon," Diss. City University of New York, pp. 107-08.
19. Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, p. 31.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 798-99.
23. The translation of these terms would be *finding one's self* and *inventing one's self*; in German, both times the word *finding* (to find), implying a successful search, is used.
24. Wolfgang Iser (1989), *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore; p. 212.
25. Odo Marquard (1981), *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen: Philosophische Studien*, Reclam, Stuttgart.