

Angus Nicholls

Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth

Recent Publications from the *Nachlass*

Introduction

Hans Blumenberg has, at least up until recent times, not been thought of as an explicitly political philosopher. Outside of Germany, Blumenberg is perhaps best known as the author of a grand intellectual-historical trilogy comprising *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (1975) and *Work on Myth* (1979), all of which were translated into English during the 1980s by Robert M. Wallace and accompanied by introductions that situated Blumenberg within the landscape of post-war German thought. For those who read Blumenberg in German, or who are familiar with his shorter works, this picture is made more complex by a series

This paper has emerged from research undertaken jointly with Felix Heidenreich, some of which can be found in the Afterword (*Nachwort*) to our edition of Blumenberg's text *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos*, ed. Angus Nicholls and Felix Heidenreich (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), pp. 83–146. The first version of this paper was delivered at a conference – *Hans Blumenberg in Jerusalem*, 5 May 2015 – organised by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. I thank the other contributors to the Jerusalem conference for their helpful suggestions and comments, and I also wish to thank Felix Heidenreich, Pini Ifergan, and Rüdiger Zill for their comments on an earlier draft. Some of the arguments presented here also appear in the following publications: Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Angus Nicholls, "How to Do Nothing with Words: Hans Blumenberg's Reception of Plato's *Protagoras*," in *Prometheus gibt nicht auf: Antike Welt und modernes Leben in Hans Blumenbergs Philosophie*, ed. Melanie Möller (Munich: Fink, 2015), in press; Angus Nicholls, "The Goethe Complex: Hans Blumenberg on *Das Dämonische*," in *Das Dämonische. Schicksale einer Kategorie der Zweideutigkeit nach Goethe*, ed. Lars Friedrich, Eva Geulen, and Kirk Wetters (Munich: Fink, 2014), pp. 97–119. In those cases where existing translations of writings by Blumenberg are not available, the translations are my own.

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of less well-known texts published during Blumenberg's lifetime, some of which have not yet been translated into English, and which demonstrate that beneath their predominantly non-political surface, Blumenberg's works are full of latent yet highly intense political argumentation that has everything to do with recent German history. In fact, one might even claim that the latency and indirectness of the arguments expounded in these essays – three of which will be discussed below¹ – contributes to their very intensity. But within the last two years, Blumenberg's status as a merely latent political philosopher has been transformed by works emerging from the *Nachlass*. The essays "Präfiguration" ("Prefiguration," thought to be an unpublished part of the *Work on Myth* manuscript and published in 2014) and "Moses der Ägypter" ("Moses the Egyptian," published in 2015), both demonstrate that Blumenberg was very explicitly concerned with the nexus between myth and politics in a way that is redolent of Ernst Cassirer's attempt, outlined in *The Myth of the State* (1946), to understand the phenomenon of National Socialism in relation to the theory of myth.² "Moses der Ägypter" is also – at least to the best of my knowledge – the only published text in which Blumenberg openly reckons with issues relating to Zionism through his scathing critique of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

In my recent book *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth*³ I argue that Blumenberg's thought cannot be separated from his biography. On the face of it, one might think that philosophical

¹ The essays in question are "**Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie**" ("The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State"), *Schweizer Monatshefte* 48 (1968/9): 121–46; "**Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos**" ("The Concept of Reality and the Effective Potential of Myth"), in *Terror und Spiel. Probleme der Mythenrezeption* (Poetik und Hermeneutik 4), ed. Manfred Fuhrmann (Munich: Fink, 1971), pp. 11–66; and "**Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik**," in *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), pp. 104–36, translated by Robert M. Wallace as: "An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 429–58.

² Hans Blumenberg, *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos (Prefiguration: Work on Political Myth)*, ed. Angus Nicholls and Felix Heidenreich (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014); Hans Blumenberg, "Moses der Ägypter," in *Rigorismus der Wahrheit*, ed. Ahrlich Meyer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 9–21.

³ London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

arguments should stand or fall on the basis of their internal logic, regardless of their historical or indeed biographical contexts. Within the continental tradition of philosophy to which Blumenberg belonged, this position might be seen to accord with the early Edmund Husserl's vision of his discipline as a "rigorous science" (*strenge Wissenschaft*),⁴ and it also coincides with how philosophy had been conceived within the Anglo-American or 'analytic' tradition of the twentieth century. But as a thinker who is deeply influenced by the later Husserl – the Husserl of the so-called *Krisis-Schrift* or *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936) – Blumenberg probably thought otherwise.

Writing in the mid 1930s, under the rule of National Socialism, Husserl had concluded that his ambitious earlier project of making philosophy into a "rigorous science" was condemned to failure. Husserl's reassessment of his philosophical project was not merely a result of the historical circumstances in which he found himself after 1933, though those circumstances certainly contributed to the general atmosphere of crisis addressed in the book. In fact, the main problem was internal to Husserl's own thought: the first version of the phenomenological reduction, through which all prejudices and presuppositions concerning phenomena would be bracketed out so that pure consciousness as such could become an object of scientific investigation, was deemed by the late Husserl of the *Krisis-Schrift* to be a theoretical impossibility. Because human consciousness is always already bound up within a particular historical context, the real task of philosophy would not be that of bracketing out prejudices and presuppositions, but simply becoming aware of them in the first place. In order to describe this new form of the phenomenological reduction outlined in §36 of the *Krisis-Schrift*,⁵ Husserl needed a new philosophical concept: that of the *Lebenswelt* or life-world, the "science of the universal how of the givenness of the world."⁶

⁴ Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" (1910-11), trans. Quentin Lauer, in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 71–147.

⁵ See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 137–41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 146–47. For context see Dermot Moran, *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 178–217.

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The background to this claim was the notion that positivism and scientific modernity had produced a European culture that was highly successful in technocratic terms, but which had lost any sense of what normative goals technology should serve. Indeed, it was precisely the rigour of the natural sciences that had produced this crisis, which meant that only a historical-critical excavation and evaluation of the pre-scientific life-world – of the “prelogical validities” and “original self-evidences” behind technocratic modernity – could provide any chance of a normative reorientation in the European sciences.⁷ Historical self-reflection, embodied in the new science of the life-world, would therefore become one of the primary tasks allotted to philosophy – a task that the natural sciences were, in Husserl’s opinion, not well equipped to perform.⁸ In his *Habilitation* dissertation on Husserl of 1950, which remains unpublished, Blumenberg had already explored the results of Husserl’s reorientation in great depth,⁹ and his choice of dissertation topic – the crisis of Husserl’s phenomenology – may well have had a biographical as well as a strictly theoretical motivation. Blumenberg would have known the personal background to Husserl’s philosophical reorientation during the 1930s, since the supervisor of Blumenberg’s doctoral dissertation – Ludwig Landgrebe – had been Husserl’s academic assistant and had attended the public lectures based on the *Krisis-Schrift* that Husserl was forced to deliver outside of Germany, in Prague.¹⁰

Hans Blumenberg’s life had been shaped by the European crisis that Husserl had already seen unfolding before him in 1936, by which time Husserl himself had already been banned from teaching and publishing in Germany for three years.¹¹ Blumenberg was born in 1920 to a Catholic German father and a German Jewish mother who had converted to Protestantism. Having been categorised as a so-called *Halbjude* by the National Socialist regime, Blumenberg was barred from formal university education up until the end of the war, and was also imprisoned in a brutal work camp (*Arbeitslager*)

⁷ *The Crisis of European Sciences*, pp. 124, 127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 51–52, 12.

⁹ See Blumenberg, *Die ontologische Distanz. Eine Untersuchung über die Krisis der Phänomenologie Husserls (The Ontological Distance. An Investigation into the Crisis of Husserl’s Phenomenology, unpublished Habilitation diss., Kiel University, 1950).*

¹⁰ See Moran, *Husserl’s Crisis of the European Sciences*, pp. 31–32.

¹¹ So-called ‘non-Aryans’ were banned from being employed in civil service positions, including universities, from 1933. See Moran, *Husserl’s Crisis*, p. 31.

at Zerbst in Saxony-Anhalt in February 1945.¹² The simultaneously historical and biographical question confronting Hans Blumenberg in 1945 was thus the following: How does a former victim of National Socialism become a professional philosopher in Germany, within a philosophical landscape still deeply marked by the legacy of Nazi regime? This would not be a simple task, since in the immediate post-war philosophical scene in Germany, Blumenberg found himself surrounded by colleagues with deeply compromised political histories, but who still held significant positions of academic power.

Here just two of many important examples can be mentioned. Walter Bröcker, the Professor of Philosophy at Kiel where Blumenberg wrote his doctoral dissertation and his *Habilitation*, had been a member of both the paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA) of the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) between 1933 and 1935, and was a full member of the NSDAP from 1940 until 1945.¹³ Erich Rothacker, who edited the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* (*Archive for the History of Concepts*) in which Blumenberg published an important early book-length article,¹⁴ and whose eminently non-political obituary was both written and then read out at a public scientific meeting by none other than Blumenberg himself,¹⁵ was a member of the NSDAP from 1933 until the end of the war, and had briefly led the *Volksbildung* (people's education) section of Joseph Goebbels's *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (Ministry for People's Education and Propaganda).¹⁶ Alongside such compromised biographies there also

¹² For a further description of Blumenberg's experiences under National Socialism, see Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, pp. 11–13.

¹³ See Christian Tilitzki, *Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie in der Weimarer Republik und im dritten Reich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 815–16.

¹⁴ Hans Blumenberg, "Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960): 7–142. Translated by Robert Savage as *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Hans Blumenberg, "Nachruf auf Erich Rothacker. Gehalten am 29. April 1966 in der öffentlichen Sitzung der Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur" ("Obituary for Erich Rothacker, held on 29 April 1966 in the public meeting of the Mainz Academy for the Sciences and Literature"), *Jahrbuch der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz* (1966): 70–76.

¹⁶ See "Erich Rothacker," in Ernst Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2013), p. 510. For a detailed account of Rothacker's dealings with Goebbels and his other attempts to exert a cultural

existed the broader influence of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, with which Blumenberg had a deeply fraught relationship that is too complex to be explored at any length here,¹⁷ and which found its less 'primordial' and therefore more acceptable post-war manifestation in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer had himself signed the academic "Loyalty Oath" to Hitler as well as voluntarily attending a Nazi "political rehabilitation facility" in 1935,¹⁸ and following the publication of his opus *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)* in 1960, he came to dominate the post-war philosophical scene in Germany. It was probably for this reason that Blumenberg referred to him with pointed irony as "the Pope of German philosophy" in his private correspondence with Jacob Taubes.¹⁹

Under such historical and biographical circumstances it was virtually impossible for Blumenberg discretely to separate life from theory. In fact, in *Theorie der Lebenswelt (Theory of the Life-World)*, a text that was probably written in the second half of the 1970s and which emerged from the *Nachlass* in 2010, Blumenberg regards "the introduction of the concept of the life-world into philosophy" as being "Husserl's most successful invention."²⁰ In this text, Blumenberg claims that the life-world is at once "pre-logical" and "pre-predicative," being both "the world in which philosophy is *not* yet possible, and also the utopian final world [...] in which philosophy is *no longer* necessary" (pp. 120, 33). Of interest here is the sense in which Blumenberg deliberately endows Husserl's concept with political contours. The life-world, he argues, can be related to state of nature political theories

influence within the NSDAP, see Ralph Stöwer, *Erich Rothacker: Sein Leben und seine Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2012), pp. 13–17; 113–210.

¹⁷ On this subject, see Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, pp. 99–100; Felix Heidenreich, *Mensch und Moderne bei Hans Blumenberg* (Munich: Fink, 2005), pp. 25–30; Oliver Müller, *Sorge um die Vernunft. Hans Blumenbergs phänomenologische Anthropologie* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2005), pp. 47–59.

¹⁸ Tilitzki, *Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie*, pp. 340, 698; Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 158, 181–82; Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich*, p. 172.

¹⁹ Hans Blumenberg to Jacob Taubes, 22 March 1965, in Hans Blumenberg and Jacob Taubes, *Briefwechsel 1961–1981*, ed. Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Martin Tremml (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), pp. 47–48.

²⁰ *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, ed. Manfred Sommer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), p. 37.

such as that found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes. The life-world would in these terms be seen as a series of pre-philosophical “prejudices” or “institutions” which put the chaos of the *status naturalis* at an adequate distance so as to make a comfortable and ordered life possible (pp. 39, 123–24). When seen in this anthropological context, the function of theory or thought is primarily anticipatory and defensive: it is only required at all when this pre-logical life-world is disrupted by a state of exception or state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*). In Blumenberg’s words: “Thinking is the state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*], pure thought is the exception within the state of exception [*Ausnahme vom Ausnahmezustand*]” (p. 61). Here the boundary between pre-rational prejudices and institutions on the one hand, and pure thinking, philosophy, or theory on the other – the boundary, in other words, between *mythos* and *logos* – is never clearly demarcated. Both exist on the same continuum, providing the subject, who is periodically exposed to threats and crises, with a measure of orientation and a pragmatic means of dealing with reality. And although Blumenberg never explicitly relates this politically inflected theory of the life-world to his own biographical circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that it emerged from an author who was exposed to the terrors of National Socialism and was burdened with remembering them for the rest of his life.

In a recent essay that also takes into account the new and more explicitly political publications from the *Nachlass* to be discussed here, Felix Heidenreich argues that the most pronounced limitation of Blumenberg’s political thought can be found in its tendency towards a narrow subject-centredness and its lack of a conception of community.²¹ Heidenreich shows the extent to which Blumenberg regards the history of Western thought as a series of pragmatic responses to absolutism in its various guises. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, for example, the self-assertive methods of modern science are seen as a pragmatic response to theological absolutism – to the unpredictability and arbitrariness of God’s unlimited powers.²² Over a decade later, in *Work on Myth*, our pre-human ancestors’ response to the “absolutism of reality” – to the threats faced by a species forced to

²¹ Felix Heidenreich, “Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophy,” *Revista de Filosofia Aurora* 27, no. 41 (2015): 521–37.

²² Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 48.

adapt itself to living upon open and exposed ground – was to anticipate these potential threats by endowing them with names, personalities, and human characteristics. The act of naming these threats and telling stories about them served to make them familiar and integrate them into the life-world by replacing an object-less anxiety with object-oriented fear.²³ The individualistic nature of such essentially phenomenological and therefore subject-centred theories, according to Heidenreich, made them amenable to the cautious and sceptical liberalism of the young West Germany. No longer would private citizens be subjected to one set of strong institutions or “command systems” (*Führungssysteme*), along the lines of the infamous philosophy of institutions developed by Arnold Gehlen during the years of National Socialism.²⁴ Nor would they be forced to believe in a single grand theory of politics like that found just across the border in the GDR. Rather, the German *Grundgesetz* or Basic Law would ensure that multiple such institutions, based on multiple and often competing theories of reality, would always be under consideration by the public at any given time. The title of a well-known collection of essays by Blumenberg even seemed to announce his commitment to this form of sceptical pluralism: *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben* (*Realities in Which We Live*, 1986).

The essays “Präfiguration” and “Moses der Ägypter” now reveal the more explicit consequences of Blumenberg’s political thinking when it is applied to two pressing questions that not only arose during Blumenberg’s lifetime, but which also touched him personally as a German of Jewish ancestry. First: how might one understand the phenomenon of National Socialism in relation to the theory of myth? And second: can and should political myth be overcome, or are there exceptional circumstances – such as, for example, the need to create a Jewish homeland in the wake of the Shoah – under which the deployment of political myth is unavoidable and for that reason defensible? In order to

²³ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 3–32.

²⁴ Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und Stellung in der Welt* (1940; Berlin: Junker and Dünnhaupt, 1941), p. 448. Translated by Clare McMillan and Carl Pillemer as *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988). The relevant section of this book, entitled “Oberste Führungssysteme” (the highest command systems), was removed from post-war editions, and therefore does not appear in the English translation, which is based on the third edition (published in 1950).

explore these questions, it will first of all be necessary to examine three essays that Blumenberg wrote around the politically significant year of 1968.

1. *The Political Writings Around 1968: Myth, Politics, Rhetoric*

Perhaps the primary question that animates Blumenberg's political writings is one that Kant had already posed in 1800: *Was ist der Mensch?* (What is the human being?)²⁵ Kant's answer was to say that the human being is divided between his natural inclinations on the one hand and his ability to surmount these inclinations through the use of reason and ethics on the other. But twentieth-century German philosophy was not satisfied with Kant's answer. Thinkers such as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen thought that by over emphasising the role played by reason in human orientation, Kant had neglected to consider the human being as a biological being. The movement that came to be seen as philosophical anthropology accordingly sought to re-examine the human being from a biological perspective, and to see what conclusions could be drawn from such an analysis.²⁶

To simplify the answers given by Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen: all three agreed that the human being is characterised by a lack of specialised biological adaptations that could be suited to a particular biological niche or environment. The human being is accordingly seen as weakly adapted, sick, unspecialised, and eccentric in its orientation. Culture – in the form of tools, housing, clothing, and especially language and rhetoric – therefore serves to compensate for the human being's lack of adaptations and to make it biologically viable. This is an old idea, which can already be found in the story about Prometheus told in Plato's *Protagoras* (320c–322d), in which the titan steals the mechanical arts and fire from the Gods and gives them to humans in order to help them survive. Yet even after humans have been given these gifts, Zeus still has to grant them political virtue (*areté*) and rhetoric, so that they do not destroy one another.

Blumenberg's early writings on myth and political theory are part of this philosophical tradition. Beginning with the sophism of Protagoras,

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Logik*, in *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, 7th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011), 3: 447–48.

²⁶ For an overview, see Joachim Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie: Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg: Alber, 2008).

this tradition emphasises that the human being needs rhetoric and the related capacity for political virtue in order to survive in a difficult world. Blumenberg first elaborated these ideas in relation to the theory of myth at the fourth Poetics and Hermeneutics meeting of 1968 in an essay entitled “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos” (“The Concept of Reality and the Effective Potential of Myth”). This theory of myth is heavily reminiscent of Vico’s *New Science* (1725–44, see in particular §§374–75, 377–79), and essentially tells us that the human being began to tell stories in order to cope with its sense of disorientation and anxiety in the face of threatening natural forces. Naming these forces, according to Blumenberg, rendered them approachable and amenable to supplication. Already in this essay we are given the latent political theory of myth that would become apparent in *Work on Myth* around a decade later. Myth, according to Blumenberg in this essay, brings about a *Gewaltenteilung* or ‘division of powers.’ By separating out the natural universe into a series of limited powers opposed to and at war with one another, the human being comes to find a sense of orientation in the world. Importantly, no single god is seen to be omnipotent, because polytheistic myth is opposed to monotheistic dogma:

The negation of the attribute ‘omnipotence’ is [...] of outstanding importance for myth and its reception. Its positive side coincides with what I refer to as circuitousness [*Umständlichkeit*], the categorical determination of mythological forms. Omnipotence fundamentally forbids the telling of a story about its possessor. Imagined topographically, stories are always detours [*Umwege*], whereas absolute power configures itself in a diagram as the shortest connection between two points. Every polytheism can be understood in terms of the immanent intention of rendering finite the powers that it represents.²⁷

In being primarily oral and not written, in recognising many gods, and in allowing numerous variations upon a core narrative, myth is characterised by tolerance. This is in some ways a mere restatement of David Hume’s dictum, outlined in *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), that “polytheism, claiming no single truth about a unique god, is more tolerant than monotheism.”²⁸ But Blumenberg’s unique addition is to show the distancing effect created by narrative. The telling of stories creates a psychological distance from the

²⁷ Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos” (note 1 above), p. 43.

²⁸ Ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 195.

god or force that is represented, and depicting the gods as being at war with one another – often in more or less ‘domestic’ dramas to do with sexual jealousy and similar themes – also reduces their power and humanises them. In Blumenberg’s words: “Mythology speaks of its objects as of something that one has left behind [...]. It is not the content of myth, but rather the distance that it grants to the listener and observer that is the decisive moment” (p. 17). Also of crucial importance for this theory of myth, and one of its most contested aspects, is the opposition that it posits between myth and dogma. Blumenberg argues for this opposition for different reasons than does Hume: it is decidedly not the case, according to Blumenberg, that myth has “*not yet* achieved the standard and the degree of absoluteness of a theology, but rather that it originally refrained from moving in the direction of this standard” (p. 42). Whereas Hume, and more generally the Enlightenment, saw mythic polytheism as the primitive forerunner to monotheistic dogma, Blumenberg sees myth and dogma as on-going parallel tendencies in Western thought.

Now the participants at the 1968 Poetics and Hermeneutics conference knew that these statements were probably not only about antiquity, but also implicitly about present-day Germany and recent German history. One of the respondents, Jurij Striedter, even accused Blumenberg of aestheticizing and rehabilitating myth, and of neglecting to consider the decidedly political uses to which myth had been put by National Socialism.²⁹ Jacob Taubes, also present at that meeting, vehemently contested Blumenberg’s opposition between myth and dogma.³⁰ The breakthrough to the dogmatic monotheism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Taubes went on to argue in a later essay first published in 1983, represented the overcoming of the moral relativism associated with choosing between multiple more or less equivalent gods. To Taubes – now writing soon after the publication of *Work on Myth* in 1979 – Blumenberg’s apparent rehabilitation of myth therefore seemed to be a potentially dangerous regression.³¹ In this opinion he was not alone, since following the publication of *Work on Myth*, which expanded upon the theory

²⁹ See Striedter’s critical comments in “Erste Diskussion – Mythos und Dogma,” in *Terror und Spiel* (note 1 above), pp. 527–47; in particular p. 540.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 538–45.

³¹ See Jacob Taubes, “On the Current State of Polytheism,” in his *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Amir Engel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 302–14.

of myth presented at the Poetics and Hermeneutics meeting in 1968, a whole range of reviewers followed Jurij Striedter by accusing Blumenberg not only of neglecting to examine the role played by myth in National Socialism, but also of tacitly rehabilitating myth.³²

In the same year as that politically charged Poetics and Hermeneutics meeting, Blumenberg also published what is probably the most openly political essay to have appeared during his lifetime: “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie” (“The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State”). Elsewhere I have argued that this essay should be seen within the context of Blumenberg’s reception of Plato’s *Protagoras* in *Work on Myth*, as in general the essay displays Blumenberg’s preference for sophism and his complete antagonism towards the entire Platonic tradition.³³ The essay turns on the idea that theories of the state are normally informed by theories about reality. Thus, because Plato thought that ultimate truth and reality lay in a realm of Ideas or forms that were only accessible to Philosopher-Kings, his theory of the state tended to be an illiberal one in which political policy would merely amount to the realisation of pure philosophical ideas. This is why, in Blumenberg’s view, Platonism sought to remove the playful and liberal tradition of rhetoric from politics.

The most extraordinary aspect of this essay is its implicit polemic against Ernst Cassirer’s *Myth of the State*. In that book, written in American exile during the final stages of the war and published in 1946, Cassirer had seen National Socialism as cynically having deployed myth in order to increase its political power. According to this view, this resurgence of myth did not amount to a suspension of the Enlightenment; it was much more the cynical and technical exploitation of myth by a modern nation, the institutions of which had been weakened by the crisis of the Weimar Republic. The main precursor to this cynical use of myth is, in Cassirer’s view, Machiavelli. It was Machiavelli who, in Cassirer’s account, undertook to divorce politics from ethics in what came to be a new technical ‘art’ of politics:

What Machiavelli wished to introduce was not only a new science but a new *art* of politics. He was the first modern author who spoke about the ‘art of the state.’ [...] Plato and his followers had tried to give a theory of the *Legal State*; Machiavelli was

³² A summary of the immediate reception of *Work on Myth* can be found in Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, pp. 196–204.

³³ See Nicholls, “How to Do Nothing with Words” (see p. 3 above).

the first to introduce a theory that suppressed or minimised this specific feature. His art of politics was destined and equally fit for the illegal and for the legal state.³⁴

From Machiavelli's age onwards, argues Cassirer, politics became about 'winning the game' rather than determining what moral ends the game should achieve, and National Socialism is for Cassirer the paradigm example of political technics having divorced itself from ethics. In its description of a technocratic Germany that had completely lost its ethical bearings, Cassirer's analysis significantly resembles the earlier diagnosis found in Husserl's *Krisis-Schrift*.

What was Blumenberg's take on this? Writing against Cassirer, and only six years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Blumenberg claims that it is precisely Machiavelli who introduces a modern conception of politics that could prove to be useful within the context of the Cold War. A political technique which divorces itself from ethics, and which sees its legitimacy as being purely artificial rather than written in the stars or in the ground of Being, is a politics of words rather than deeds. And in the nuclear age, implies Blumenberg, words are definitely preferable to deeds:

Machiavelli's separation of ethics and politics [...] has come to be seen as dubious [...]. But this model of political technics is not only applicable to the praxis of poison and dagger, rather it also allows one to recognise the development of that kind of rationality which is satisfied with certain actions being refrained from, prevented or simulated. ("Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie," p. 138)

Modern politics, in Blumenberg's eminently melancholy and disenchanting view, should be about the preference for words over deeds, for rhetoric instead of action based on moral conviction. Here 'rhetoric' means first and foremost civilised behaviour and the willingness to negotiate. It involves renouncing the utopian aims of grand political theories on both the left and the right in order to secure the most minimal and essential of aims: bare survival. Adapting the title from a book by the speech act theorist J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Blumenberg gave this political programme the following ironic slogan: "How to do nothing with words" (ibid.).

Blumenberg later reiterates this position in 1971, in his essay on anthropology and rhetoric, "Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik" ("An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary

³⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), pp. 154–55.

Significance of Rhetoric”). Here Blumenberg sketches the aporia that arises when attempting to answer Kant’s question: “What is the human being?” One answer is that the human being is ‘rich’ on account of its rhetorical gifts and cultural capacities. The other answer, favoured by the ‘Promethean’ anthropology appearing in Plato’s *Protagoras* and then repeated in different ways by the exponents of philosophical anthropology in the twentieth century (such as Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen), is to say that the human being is ‘poor’ in the sense that it lacks a particular biological niche, specific bodily adaptations to ward off predators, or a strong instinctual organisation that would orient its behaviour. Blumenberg is aware that any answer to this question will carry with it political consequences. The answer given by philosophical anthropology, and especially by Gehlen, had been seen by the proponents of German critical theory to justify the strong ‘orienting’ institutions of the absolutist state,³⁵ and Blumenberg himself regards Gehlen as having propagated an “absolutism of institutions.”³⁶ It is for this reason that Blumenberg refuses to answer this anthropological question ontologically, by positing what the origin and essence of the human being might be:

What remains as the subject matter of anthropology is a ‘human nature’ that has never been ‘nature’ and never will be. That fact that it makes its appearance in metaphorical disguise – as animal and as machine, as sedimentary layers and as stream of consciousness, in contrast to and in competition with a god – does not warrant our expecting that at the end of all creeds and all moralizing it will lie before us revealed. Man comprehends himself only by way of what he is not. It is not only his situation that is potentially metaphorical; his constitution itself already is. (Ibid., p. 456)

To express this situation in the paradoxical terms that Blumenberg himself favours: “What is the human being?” is the question that we have always already answered but can never definitively answer. To answer the human question once and for all would, as Theodor W. Adorno points out in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), be to “sabotage its possibility.”³⁷ Human ‘nature’ is not ‘nature’ because the human being is characterised by its capacity for culture,

³⁵ See Jürgen Habermas’s trenchant critique of Gehlen in his influential article on “Anthropologie” written for *Das Fischer Lexikon Philosophie*, ed. Alwin Diemer and Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1958), pp. 18–35.

³⁶ Hans Blumenberg, “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” (note 1 above), p. 439.

³⁷ Trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 124.

and culture is protean and subject to historical change. As Blumenberg suggests in his major *Nachlass* work on anthropology – *Beschreibung des Menschen* (*Description of Man*, 2006) – the human being can be described, but never defined. Any ‘answer’ to the human question can therefore only ever be provisional, metaphorical, and in that sense rhetorical. When it comes to politics, Blumenberg therefore appears to favour the side of sophism to Platonism: “Man as a poor creature needs rhetoric as the art of appearance, which helps him to deal with his lack of truth” (pp. 431–32). In this case, the ‘lack of truth’ to which Blumenberg refers is found in our inability to define the human essence. Writing against all forms of political Platonism and in favour of political sophism, Blumenberg proposes that since humans can have no access to the absolute truth on any given matter, including themselves, then they are forced to make do with rhetoric as the fundamental medium of the political.

How is this later translated into the (mostly) latent political programme that Blumenberg develops in *Work on Myth*? In *Work on Myth*, myth is classed within the broader category of rhetoric.³⁸ Of importance to Blumenberg, writing on myth in the wake of National Socialism, is that any society must have a plurality of such myths. Blumenberg does not believe that myth is a ‘primitive’ phase in human development that can be left behind. It is much more a primordial mode of human orientation – of dividing threatening forces and distancing oneself from them – that is always latently present and can always return. Myth will always be part of politics, and the key to coping with myth is to ensure that at any given time, multiple myths should be in play and no one myth should ever be allowed to prevail over all of the others. Felix Heidenreich has recently described this anthropologically informed politics as a “liberalism of distance.”³⁹

Blumenberg’s ideas about political myth can be seen in his debate with Carl Schmitt on the correct interpretation of Goethe’s saying in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*): *nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse* (no

³⁸ Blumenberg points out that in ancient Greece, myths were originally oral narratives performed by rhapsodes in front of audiences. In this context, those stories that survived and were written down were the ones that audiences found to be the most convincing, captivating, and significant (pp. 149–72).

³⁹ Felix Heidenreich, “Ein Liberalismus der Distanz. Zu den ideenpolitischen Aspekten der phänomenologischen Anthropologie Blumenbergs,” *Journal Phänomenologie* 35 (2011): 52–63.

one can stand against a god unless he is a god himself).⁴⁰ This debate had begun with Schmitt's analysis of the saying in *Political Theology II* (1970). It then continued in the correspondence between Blumenberg and Schmitt during the mid 1970s, and finally ended with Blumenberg's interpretation of the saying in *Work on Myth* in 1979. Goethe had developed this saying in relation to the theme of so-called daemonic (*dämonisch*) individuals, such as Napoleon, who seem to oppose the entire world on their march through history.⁴¹ Whereas Schmitt interpreted the saying in a monotheistic and Christian way, arguing that it refers to the dualism of the Father and Son within the totality of the divine,⁴² Blumenberg favoured a polytheistic interpretation, in my view for political reasons. Seen in polytheistic terms, the saying states that any would-be omnipotent God must be limited by other gods within a system of counterbalanced powers. As Blumenberg wrote to Schmitt in 1975, some four years prior to the publication of *Work on Myth*:

Goethe's apothegm seizes upon the generality of the meaning of polytheism as its separation of powers, its prevention of absolute power and of any religion as a feeling of unconditional dependence on this power. Gods, when there are many of them, always already stand one against the other. A god can only in turn be limited by a god.⁴³

This formulation is then repeated in *Work on Myth*, but now within a broader discussion of the saying's political meaning between 1939 and 1945. Schmitt himself had commented in *Political Theology II* that Goethe's saying had been "cited and interpreted by people intimate with Goethe's work in countless informal conversations during the last war, 1939–45" (p. 126). Blumenberg responded by arguing that presumably for readers opposed to Hitler and hoping for an end to the war,

⁴⁰ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurter Ausgabe), 2 parts, 40 vols., ed. Hendrik Birus et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2003), vol. 1.14, pp. 841–42.

⁴¹ On this subject, see Angus Nicholls, *Goethe's Concept of the Daemonic: After the Ancients* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).

⁴² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp. 127–29.

⁴³ Hans Blumenberg to Carl Schmitt, 7 August 1975, in Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Alexander Schmitz and Marcel Lepper (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 133.

the secret comfort from *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, with which those who knew Goethe consoled themselves, will have presented itself [...] in the fact that Goethe had before his eyes, in the fourth part [of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, AN], the failed Napoleon, the incarnate demon who had been able, if any man at all was able, to confront God with defiance, and whom only the summoning up of the universe was able to overcome. (*Work on Myth*, p. 532)

For those readers between 1939 and 1945, the saying therefore meant: any one who purports, like Napoleon or Hitler, to set themselves up as an omnipotent God will eventually be brought undone by the other gods who will inevitably be summoned to oppose him.

This debate allows us to see the mode in which Blumenberg engaged in highly charged political debates about recent German history, both in private correspondence and in his published works. The correspondence between Blumenberg and Schmitt – the former a victim of National Socialism, the latter one of its chief jurists and intellectual supporters – could not be more political, but it is conducted in the hyper-erudite and civilised code of the German intellectual elite. Rarely is the real matter at hand directly addressed, presumably because it is at once unspeakable and all too obvious. The only way to have a conversation about recent German history seems to have been to interpret sayings written in Latin by Goethe.

Until the recent publications from the *Nachlass*, therefore, Blumenberg's mostly latent ideas about political myth had to be extrapolated and decoded from his various publications, before being assembled into something resembling a political theory. The basic lineaments of the theory are these: myth and rhetoric are fundamental forms of human orientation which are never entirely left behind, and which are resorted to precisely because human beings do not have access to absolute truth in the way that Plato and other political rationalists had imagined. Given this situation, and the dangers that may arise when one political myth threatens to dominate all others, the best political solution is to ensure that there is always a constitutionally guaranteed plurality of myths and rhetorical agents within any society. Blumenberg's colleague in the Poetics and Hermeneutics group, Odo Marquard, went on to develop this liberal theory of myth and rhetoric in much more explicitly political terms than Blumenberg ever did during his lifetime.⁴⁴ Yet recent

⁴⁴ See Odo Marquard, "Lob des Polytheismus. Über Monomythie und Polymythie," in *Philosophie und Mythos. Ein Kolloquium*, ed. Hans Poser (Berlin: De Gruyter,

publications from the *Nachlass*, and especially the essay “Moses der Ägypter,” may indicate that Blumenberg could also envision exceptional circumstances in which political myth, and even a ‘national’ myth, may be unavoidable, if not normative. Such a position could be seen to place him in close theoretical proximity to his intellectual opponent: Carl Schmitt.

2. “Prefiguration” and “Moses the Egyptian”

Carl Schmitt had long recognised the importance of myth within politics. Schmitt had been an avid reader of the French private scholar, Georges Sorel, whose *Réflexions sur la violence* (*Reflections on Violence*, 1908) had offered a theory of political myth that was applied to the general strike of the French left. In Sorel’s view,

Men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. I proposed to give the name of ‘myths’ to these constructions.⁴⁵

For Sorel, myths are decidedly non-rational in that they come to expression through images rather than through concepts. Seen in this way, myths are not “descriptions of things,” but much more “expressions of a will to act,” and because myth is non-rational, it “cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical to the convictions of a group.” Sorel thought that socialist doctrine would, on its own, not be enough to inspire a mass movement; rather, it also needed a captivating image of mass action – the “myth of the general strike” – in order to become “firmly established in the minds of workers.” Sorel’s ideas about myth were informed by the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Whereas rational argument and concepts are associated with the external and logical sequence of mathematical time, myths can penetrate to the inner-self of duration, to the non-rational “essence of emotional life.” In this way they appeal to “*intuition alone*, before any considered analyses are made.”⁴⁶

1979), pp. 40–58; “Aufgeklärter Polytheismus – auch eine politische Theologie,” in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, vol. 1, *Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. Jacob Taubes (Munich: Fink, 1983), pp. 77–84.

⁴⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–30, 26, 113, emphasis in the original.

In his early anti-democratic manifesto, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (*The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 1923), Schmitt adopted Sorel's general insight, namely, that political action is best motivated not by rational ideas, but by emotionally captivating myths:

The criterion, as to whether a people or another social group has a historical mission and whether its historical moment has come, lies only in myth. Out of the depths of authentic life-instincts, not out of reasoning or a consideration of purposes, there emerges the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. In unmediated intuition, an inspired mass creates the mythical image that drives its energy forward.⁴⁷

But unlike Sorel, Schmitt's hopes for political myth were invested in the right and not the left wing of European politics. For Schmitt, Sorel's theory of myth is a "theory of direct, active decision," which could effectively bypass the deliberations of any parliament. Indeed, it was the "national myth" that had brought Mussolini to power in 1922, which particularly impressed Schmitt. "A common spiritual enemy," writes Schmitt, "can [...] produce the most remarkable agreement," and the way in which the Italian fascists had demonized the communists was able to create a powerful wave of political emotion. Schmitt therefore concludes that "the theory of myth is the most powerful symptom of the decline of the relative rationalism of parliamentary thought" (p. 76).

Of importance to Schmitt is the requirement that a single political myth – in other words, a monotheistic *political theology* – should emerge within the nation-state. The inherent risk of political myth is that it could fragment the national identity if it were to descend into a relativistic polytheism:

The last remnants of solidarity and a feeling of belonging together will be destroyed in the pluralism of an unforeseeable number of myths. For political theology that is polytheism, just as every myth is polytheistic. (Ibid.)

We can assume that Blumenberg was familiar with both Sorel's and Schmitt's ideas about political myth. A German translation of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* was published in 1968, in the Suhrkamp series on *Theorie* that Blumenberg co-edited with Dieter Henrich and Jacob Taubes, and Schmitt's ideas about political myth are implicit in Blumenberg's debate with him about Goethe's Latin saying in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. In that debate,

⁴⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 68.

Blumenberg was of course calling for the very situation that Schmitt wanted to avoid: a liberal ‘polytheistic’ state in which no single myth would ever be able to dominate.

Having grown up under National Socialism, Blumenberg had experienced the way in which a ‘national myth’ could be concocted and maintained. Yet for reasons that are probably more personal than theoretical, Blumenberg avoided directly expressing himself on this subject during his lifetime. This decision forms part of the negative reception history of *Work on Myth*, since reviewers took Blumenberg to task for having neglected this subject. One such reviewer was Götz Müller, who bemoaned the fact Blumenberg’s book “barely even mentioned” the “dangerous proliferation of modern myths” in recent German history.⁴⁸ In this respect, Blumenberg was compared unfavourably to Ernst Cassirer, who had at least attempted such an analysis in *The Myth of the State*. Götz Müller’s critique led to the following response from Blumenberg:

It is always difficult for me to say anything about reviews. It is always too late. But I do feel stung by yours, and for good reason. The book is missing a chapter that was already present in the manuscript, but which completely and utterly spoiled my taste for the book. I held it back. After I am gone, one may do with it what one wants. It was called: Stalingrad as mythical consequence. It cost me more work than most of the other things in the book.⁴⁹

That missing chapter has since been discovered in the *Nachlass* and has been published as the essay “Präfiguration.” Blumenberg probably began writing it during the 1970s, and then returned to it in the early 1980s, for possible inclusion in other book projects that never saw completion.

“Präfiguration” constitutes what is, to the best of my knowledge, Blumenberg’s only attempt to elaborate an explicitly political theory of myth. The idea of prefiguration emerges from Biblical typology, according to which certain events in the Old Testament are seen to prefigure those that appear in the New Testament.⁵⁰ In political contexts, prefiguration appears when

⁴⁸ Götz Müller, “Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 100 (1981): 314–18, republished in Blumenberg, *Präfiguration*, pp. 69–78; here p.78.

⁴⁹ Hans Blumenberg to Götz Müller, 20 July 1981, in *Präfiguration*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Erich Auerbach explains Biblical prefiguration as follows: “figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first”;

justifications are sought for political actions by invoking highly significant precedents for them. So, for example, Blumenberg claims, following the analysis of Chaim Herzog,⁵¹ that when the Egyptian and Syrian armies were debating about when to begin the surprise attack of the Yom Kippur War, they chose the tenth day of Ramadan, because Mohammed also chose the tenth day in the month of fasting to begin Battle of Badr in 623 (*Präfiguration*, pp. 10–11). In other words, when a decision cannot be made rationally, it is made mythically, by invoking an emotionally laden precedent:

The phenomenon of prefiguration presupposes that the mythical form of thought, as a disposition towards particular modes of functioning, is still or once again virulent. In prefiguration, mythicization approaches or even oversteps the border of magic as soon as the explicit act of repeating a ‘prefigure’ [*Präfigurat*] is associated with the expectation of producing the identical effect. To begin with, however, prefiguration is only something like a decision-making aid: under the presupposition of a constancy of conditions, what has already been done once does not require renewed deliberation, confusion or cluelessness, it is pre-decided by the paradigm. [...] the relation to prefiguration should guarantee to the action an assuredness of decision making, the commitment to the impossibility of breaking off, but also magical protection; and because the action is barred from running off course along the paths of personal capriciousness, the definitiveness of its outcome is warranted. A trail that has already been blazed is used, and nothing excludes that it can be trodden in the opposite direction. (*Präfiguration*, pp. 9, 16–17)

Because prefiguration provides the human being with a non-rational means of orientation in situations where rational arguments will not suffice, Blumenberg places it within the more general categories of myth and rhetoric. Seen in this way, there can be both positive and negative forms of prefiguration: positive prefiguration would invoke a precedent that is auspicious and should be repeated (as in the above example conjoining the Battle of Badr and the Yom Kippur War), whereas a negative prefiguration occurs when an action would seek to ‘correct’ or ‘turn around’ a prior historical event.

The main example used by Blumenberg in order to understand the deployment of myth under National Socialism involves a negative prefiguration

so, for example, “Adam appears as the *typos* of the future Christ” (in 1 Corinthians, 15:21). See Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” trans. Ralph Mannheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959), pp. 11–76; here pp. 53, 50.

⁵¹ Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975), p. 33.

that was used to justify Hitler's decision to invade Stalingrad. Hitler, according to Blumenberg,

initiated the turning point of the war with his order to attack Stalingrad. For this purpose he travelled especially to Poltava, where the prototype of the northern conflict with the east, Charles XII [i.e., Charles of Sweden, AN], had been defeated in 1709. This defeat was to be made up for. There no historical experiences applied, rather what was to be made as history, and where, had its prior impression [*Vorprägung*]. This prior impression had to allow itself to be reversed in order to proceed in the opposite direction, provided one had only taken the correct *point de départ* [...]. Hitler alone, it seems, trusted in the identifications that he sought. Among the many around him who engaged in mythicization, he was the only one who gave himself over to the archaic compulsion to repeat, so long as the omen did not stand against him. This did not serve the cause of realism. When his armies became bogged down outside of Moscow in the early winter of 1941, he appealed, in opposition to the manifest parallels that were being whispered all around, to the principle that history does not repeat itself. (Ibid., pp. 31–32)

The 'manifest parallels' of which Blumenberg speaks are of course those already discussed in relation to Goethe's Latin saying: it was Napoleon who, like Hitler, had been brought undone by the winter during his Russian campaign of 1812, and who therefore served as Hitler's negative 'prefigure' (*Präfigur*). This allows us to see how this 'lost chapter' of *Work of Myth* could have been fitted into the final manuscript, joining up with the discussion of Napoleon as a daemonic personality in relation to Goethe's Latin saying.

The essay on "Präfiguration" does not purport to be an explanation of the phenomenon of National Socialism, but is much more a case study that examines the workings of political myth. At best it offers an analysis of the non-rational premises upon which certain decisions may have been made. Its phenomenological basis – according to which an individual subject gains a sense of orientation and legitimation through either positive or negative invocations of historical precedents – tells us little if anything about National Socialism as a sociological phenomenon. Blumenberg does admittedly entertain the notion that nation-states can be akin to individually acting subjects, in that they also orient themselves according to their histories. A prefiguration could in this way be politically convincing only if it suggests to the nation as a whole that there is an inherent logic of both positive and negative repetition in history itself. Here the repetition of history does not suggest that history "will be repeated" (*wiederholt werde*) through the

contingent actions of certain historical agents; it rather means that history “will repeat itself” (*sich wiederholen werde*) – in other words, that there is some higher and universal pattern in history itself that is being invoked, and to which an individual or regime (in this case Hitler and National Socialism) wish to attach themselves. This form of “self-mythicization” also has a broader societal operation, in that it “functions on the condition that others also put it into effect for themselves. What develops in this way is a world which stands in opposition to realism” (pp. 32–33).

On the basis of reading “Präfiguration,” one might conclude that Blumenberg offers a total condemnation of political myth *per se*. But this is definitely not the case, since Hitler and his regime represent only an extreme case in which political myth turns out to be disastrous. Insofar as Blumenberg’s political writings entertain the notion that not every political decision-making process can be rational, and that many are in fact rhetorical, then he would appear to suggest that myth is a rhetorical mode of orientation, which it would be very difficult indeed to excise from politics completely. Just as Blumenberg opposes the Enlightenment’s strict opposition between *mythos* and *logos* – on the grounds that this opposition is itself a myth designed by Plato and others to ensure the victory of philosophy over poetry and sophistry – so too would he be likely to maintain that there are situations in which the use of political myth could be, if not rational and normative, then at least pragmatic and functionally effective. Crucially, however, Blumenberg does not identify an operational tipping point at which the orienting and enabling function of political myth might slide into a disorienting form of mytho-mania, as in the case of Hitler. And even more importantly, his theory of political myth remains strictly phenomenological in the sense of being merely descriptive, rather than politically active or normative.

In “Moses der Ägypter,” one of the most explosive and perplexing texts to have emerged from the *Nachlass*, Blumenberg does appear to suggest that political myth may inevitably be resorted to under certain exceptional circumstances. Indeed, the central premise of this essay – which was probably written in the mid to late 1980s – is that myths can be functionally effective in endowing cultural groups and even nations with a sense of collective identity. Those who seek to expose these myths, usually in the name of ‘enlightenment’ or ‘truth,’ run the risk of alienating and even damaging those to whom these myths offer a form of existential and political orientation.

“Nothing is less certain,” writes Blumenberg, than the idea that “the truth wants to be loved, can be loved, may be loved.” Those who seek to expose or unveil myths of this kind are indulging in what Blumenberg refers to as the “absolutism of truth” – the unconditional desire to tell the ‘truth’ regardless of the damaging effects that this may have upon those who are forced to hear it.⁵² Two such people were Sigmund Freud and Hannah Arendt, and in both of their cases, the problem that Blumenberg identifies is not only *that* they decided to tell their respective ‘truths’, but also *when* they decided to tell them.

Freud’s ‘truth’ appears in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion (Moses and Monotheism)*; it concerns nothing less than the cultural identity of the Jews, and was told at one of the darkest points in their history, in 1939, a year after Freud himself had been forced to leave Vienna for London. Freud’s book begins as follows:

To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken light-heartedly – especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favour of supposed national interests.⁵³

These lines express the essence of what Blumenberg means by the “absolutism of truth”: no matter what the consequences, for the sake of ‘science’ the truth must be told. Freud’s claim that Moses was an Egyptian and not a Hebrew – a figure who led the Israelites out of Egypt, only to be murdered by them and subsequently worshipped as the slain Father of Judaism so that his followers could expiate their guilt – is well known and need not be examined in detail here.⁵⁴ The main point for Blumenberg is that in the name of ‘truth,’ Freud was prepared “to put the self-assuredness of his people at risk” so that he could offer them “an analysis” of their religion which would purportedly aid their self-understanding, not to mention being the final crowning achievement of Freud’s scientific career. At least for the narcissistic Freud, according to Blumenberg, “1939 was not the worst possible moment in which also to

⁵² Blumenberg, “Moses der Ägypter,” in *Rigorismus der Wahrheit* (note 2 above), p. 11.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: The Hogarth Press, 1939), p. 11.

⁵⁴ For a critical-historical account, see Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 144–67.

take away from a humiliated and beaten down people the man who in the beginning had justified their faith in history” (pp. 11, 9). Even if Moses was a mythical figure, argues Blumenberg, the Jewish people needed this myth in their darkest hour. Blumenberg’s discussion of Freud in this essay needs to be seen within the broader context of his extensive engagement with Freud’s writings, a subject that cannot be explored here.⁵⁵ But at least for the purposes of Blumenberg’s argument about political myth, the main role played by Freud in “Moses der Ägypter” is to set up a parallel for the real focus of the essay: Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The following sentence makes this parallel immediately clear: “Just as Freud had taken Moses away from his people, so too does Hannah Arendt take Adolf Eichmann away from the state of Israel” (p. 13). The parallel between Moses and Eichmann is a disorienting and shocking one, and deliberately so in this highly personal and polemical essay. It can be understood by way of comparison with Blumenberg’s discussion of the positive and negative forms of prefiguration. Whereas Moses is the positive national hero, there exists also “the negative national hero as state founder. He must, like Moses, be killed, although he created the conditions of possibility for this national existence” (p. 14). This is because

There are states that have been founded through their enemies. Otherwise no one would have managed to overcome the impossibility of their existence. They exist, although or because everything else that could have favoured their coming into being would have been too weak, too friendly, too ideal, and too literary, in order for them to prevail against a world of resistances. (Ibid., pp. 13–14)

Whether or not one accepts Blumenberg’s analysis of how the state of Israel came into being – or, for that matter, the role played by the Eichmann trial in the formation of Israel’s national identity – Blumenberg’s essay demands a reconsideration of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This reconsideration would need to assess Arendt’s argument in relation to Blumenberg’s theory of political myth.

Arendt was prepared to excuse the circumstances under which Eichmann was kidnapped in Argentina and brought to Israel, since the likelihood of

⁵⁵ See Rüdiger Zill, “Zwischen Affinität und Kritik. Hans Blumenberg liest Sigmund Freud,” in *Hans Blumenberg beobachtet. Wissenschaft, Technik und Philosophie*, ed. Cornelius Borck (Freiburg: Alber, 2013), pp. 126–48. See also the commentary of Ahlrich Meyer in *Rigorismus der Wahrheit*, pp. 105–15.

the Argentinian government granting an extradition for crimes that were more than fifteen years old was remote.⁵⁶ But her overall attitude towards the Eichmann trial was shaped by her claim that the state of Israel did not have a right to try Eichmann in Jerusalem before an Israeli court. “Insofar as the victims were Jews,” according to Arendt, “it was right and proper that a Jewish court should sit in judgement; but insofar as the crime was a crime against humanity, it needed an international tribunal to do justice to it” (p. 269). Further to this, from the beginning she described the whole procedure as “the show trial of David Ben-Gurion” (p. 4). The purpose of this show trial was not just to try Eichmann for his specific crimes, but also for “anti-Semitism throughout history” (p. 19), which was in Arendt’s view an impossible task. For the local Israeli population, as well as for the diaspora, the trial should also “convince them that only in Israel could a Jew be safe and live an honorable life” (p. 8). All of this meant that the entire evil of the Nazi regime had to be projected onto one individual who was, in Arendt’s opinion, much more a “clown” than he was the “monster” or the “clever, calculating liar” depicted by the prosecution (p. 54). The phrase “the banality of evil” was therefore designed to describe an unremarkable man – a man who was “not Iago and not Macbeth,” but simply an administrator who was unusually diligent in carrying out his orders. It was, in short, impossible to “extract any diabolic or demonic profundity from Eichmann” (pp. 287–88).

Blumenberg is not especially interested in the truth or otherwise of Arendt’s characterisation of Eichmann, which in the meantime has been undermined by new research that shows him to have been far more intelligent and calculating than Arendt had assumed, and far more deeply committed to National Socialism and anti-Semitism than she was prepared to accept.⁵⁷ For Blumenberg, the political meaning of the trial is more important than the actual personality of Eichmann. In his view, it is Arendt’s unconditional drive for the ‘truth’ and her insistence upon moral rigour that prevent her from seeing what can only be described as the mythical dimensions of the Eichmann trial, and the mythical status of Eichmann himself. Arendt, argues Blumenberg, “sees everything in juridical terms, because she will not allow

⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; London: Penguin, 2006), p. 264.

⁵⁷ See Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, trans. Ruth Martin (London: Bodley Head, 2014).

any state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*], and also, as a citizen of the USA, did not need to” (p. 16).

Does Blumenberg, by invoking the ‘state of exception,’ deliberately use the language of Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, the book that he had so trenchantly opposed for so many years,⁵⁸ and in which we are told that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception”?⁵⁹ It is hard to avoid drawing this conclusion. But here it may be possible to differentiate between Schmitt’s and Blumenberg’s usages of this term. For Schmitt the decision concerning the state of exception forms the very essence of the political, and is at bottom non-rational because it cannot be derived from any pre-existing norms. It is on this basis that Schmitt develops his entire theory of sovereignty: “the exception,” he argues, “is to be understood to refer to a general concept in the theory of the state, and not merely to a construct applied to any emergency decree or state of siege” (ibid.) For Blumenberg, as we have seen, the state of exception is primarily anticipatory and defensive, arising when the everydayness of the life-world has been disrupted by an intrusion from the outside. In such situations, political myth may provide a necessary and unavoidable orienting function.

This trial is *the* exception within Blumenberg’s theory of political myth, because for him, in these very specific historical circumstances, liberal polytheism underpinned by transparent institutions apparently did not apply. Had Eichmann’s crimes been “internationalised” as “crimes against humanity” – which might, at least according to one way of reading, have been the ‘liberal’ or ‘polytheistic’ solution – then in Blumenberg’s view they would have lost their specific political significance for Israel: that of legitimising a state whose very right to existence had from the beginning been seen as questionable and whose borders were, in the early 1960s, often under threat. Here the ‘liberalism’ or ‘polytheism’ of an international tribunal would have consisted in many nations or ‘gods’ coming together in order to pass judgement upon crimes against humanity. But for Blumenberg, the purpose of the trial was precisely *not* to come to universally valid judgements about an abstract ‘humanity’ which, as we have seen, can in any case not be defined; its pragmatic political function

⁵⁸ For background see Pini Ifergan, “Cutting to the Chase: Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on Political Theology and Secularization,” *New German Critique* 37, no. 3 (2010): 149–71.

⁵⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 5.

was much more to enable the people of Israel to apprehend, try and judge “its historical enemy and negative state founder” (p. 19). This was nothing less than a “mythical act,” which had to be concentrated onto one demonic figure, so that the legitimacy of Israel could be made clear and concrete (*anschaulich*) through a single example (p. 17).

As in the cases of Sorel’s and Schmitt’s theories of political myth, the function of myth here is not that of providing a logical *argument*, but rather of creating an *image* that is laden with significance. What Arendt had offered was a legal and sociological analysis of the Eichmann trial, whereas Blumenberg viewed the trial as an example of a precarious nation-state engaging in the creation of its own political myth. And in Blumenberg’s view “one cannot have both at the same time: the analysis and the myth” (p. 18). Whereas Arendt chose the analysis, Blumenberg recognised the unavailability and necessity of political myth under those particular historical circumstances. This theory of political myth is outlined not from a position of universality, but from a historically situated phenomenological position – the perspective of a subject or nation-state under threat. Herein we might also find a possible distinction between the positions of Blumenberg and Schmitt: for Blumenberg ‘legitimate’ political myth is preventative and defensive rather than aggressive. Yet this differentiation is admittedly a precarious one: historical experience teaches us that in international relations, the distinction between ‘defensive’ or ‘preventative’ actions on the one hand, and aggressive interventions on the other, is often merely subjective. And Blumenberg himself would surely recognise that the terms ‘defensive’ and ‘preventative’ can have hyper-rhetorical functions in political contexts.

“Rigorous science” (*strenge Wissenschaft*) was the goal that Husserl had announced for philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century, but from which he had already retreated by 1936. In Blumenberg’s view, Arendt fails to grasp the meaning of this pragmatic retreat, namely, that any philosophical judgement must depend on the historical context of the phenomenon being judged, and the historical position from which the judgement is being made. Or to put this in another way: ‘truth’ is itself a historically contingent category. This critique pertains to the deepest wound inflicted by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: its claims about the complicity of the European Jewish Councils in the so-called ‘final solution.’ In Arendt’s words, Eichmann “did not expect the Jews to share the general enthusiasm over their destruction. [...] he expected – and received, to a truly extraordinary degree – their cooperation”

(p. 117). This judgement is, to say the least, *streng*. The historical position in which those Jewish leaders found themselves was, in Blumenberg's view, entirely without precedent: "it was a reality of the unbelievable," with which no one could have been expected to reckon (p. 14). To judge these Jewish leaders from the safe position of being a US citizen, and some sixteen or more years after the event, is to fail to account for the effects exerted by historicity upon 'truth.' Blumenberg's critique of Arendt does not contain the personal dimension that can be found in the letters of Gershom Scholem, who thought that Arendt's judgement concerning the Jewish Councils displayed a lack of love for the Jewish people.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, "Moses der Ägypter" is without doubt one of the most personal and revealing texts to have emerged from the Blumenberg *Nachlass*.

Epilogue: On 'Judging' the Blumenberg Nachlass

When Husserl attempted to reorient philosophy as a 'rigorous science,' one of his aims was to overcome the apparent relativism of Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy of historical world-views. A philosophy that sees 'truth' as being dependent upon the observer's historical and cultural perspectives would, according to Husserl, be a philosophy that radically fails to attain the status of 'science' (*Wissenschaft*), because it would be unable to develop universal and timeless criteria according to which 'truth' could be distinguished from 'non-truth.'⁶¹ Husserl was primarily writing against Dilthey's late work, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (*The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, 1910), in which Dilthey develops the concept of *Lebensäußerungen* (life-expressions). For Dilthey, all texts in the human sciences are life-expressions: concretisations of what it was like to be a human being within a particular culture at a particular point in history. The task confronting the interpreter of such life-expressions is that of understanding and entering-into (*sich hineinversetzen*) the point of view of the person behind that life-expression. This procedure is never entirely rational, because it involves not only a historical reconstruction of the context in which

⁶⁰ Gershom Scholem to Hannah Arendt, 23 June 1963, in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 241.

⁶¹ Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" (note 4 above), pp. 122–36.

the text was formed; it also requires both imagination and empathy.⁶² Dilthey's insight was of course contradicted by much of twentieth-century theory that – in light of structuralism – discovered that texts could mean many other things than what their authors intended them to mean. This may also, of course, turn out to be the fate of “Moses der Ägypter.”

“Moses der Ägypter” is a life-expression in the deepest sense. It cannot be understood separately from the author's historical context, and it also demands knowledge of the author's biography. (It will also be a definitive text for whoever takes on the difficult task of writing that biography.) To someone like myself, who is at least somewhat familiar with the Blumenberg *Nachlass*, the text is unprecedented in its political vehemence. However naïve Blumenberg's apparent faith in ‘polytheistic liberalism’ might seem to us today – we who live in a culture in which ever fewer multi-national media corporations can dominate what appears on the rhetorical stage of politics – the theory of political myth found in “Moses der Ägypter” risks contravening even that very meagre liberalism. Like all philosophers before him, Blumenberg is unable to develop universally valid criteria for when the ‘state of exception’ should arise. That for him the ‘state of exception’ corresponded with the need to create and defend a Jewish homeland is hardly surprising, given his biography. When ‘judging’ this text, therefore, we need to pose questions that cannot be given definitive answers. Is this most personal of texts merely a case of private ‘working-through’ (*durcharbeiten*) in the Freudian sense of that term? Or was Blumenberg really prepared to have published, in his name, such a potentially illiberal theory of political myth? The *Nachlass* provides us with at least half-answers to those questions. On 10 February 1988, Blumenberg wrote the following to his friend and confidant Henning Ritter:

For many years I have had an essay, “Moses der Ägypter,” under lock and key, which brings together the monstrous behind-the-back connivings [*Hinterrücklichkeiten*] of Freud and Arendt. Essentially, it was only my consideration for Hans Jonas that prevented me from allowing anybody to even read it.⁶³

⁶² Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 226–29, 233–37.

⁶³ Hans Blumenberg to Henning Ritter, 10 February 1988, *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach*, quoted in Hannes Bajohr, “Der Preis der Wahrheit: Hans Blumenberg über Hannah Arendts *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” *Merkur* 69, no. 5 (2015): 52–59; here p. 59.

It was Blumenberg's respect for Jonas – the common friend of Blumenberg and Arendt – that stood in the way not only of Blumenberg publishing this essay, but also of him even showing it to anyone. Like much of what lies in his *Nachlass*, Blumenberg appears to have written "Moses der Ägypter" primarily for himself.

Queen Mary University of London

