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Blumenberg, Worldmaking, and Belatedness

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Blumenberg, Worldmaking, and Belatedness

José Luis Fernández *

The Blumenberg-Löwith 'debate' over the 'secularization hypothesis' is an evocative clash that has remained a topic of ongoing discussions both inside and outside of the mid-twentieth century German tradition, which has yet to register fully the implications of Blumenberg's work on the topic of modernity. On one side is Hans Blumenberg, who perceives modernity as justified on its own terms. On the other side is Karl Löwith, who does not recognize a substantive break between modernity and its epochal genetic precursors. My reading recognizes the heart of this debate to be over an impulse either to espouse or oppose the sovereignty of philosophical modernity in its relation to worldmaking. In this paper, I argue that Blumenberg's thesis of 'self-assertion' describes a re-establishing of the project of worldmaking in a sophisticated and nuanced language that is missed by Karl Löwith's diagnosis of modern philosophy of history.

1. Introduction

The Blumenberg-Löwith debate over the 'secularization hypothesis' is an evocative clash that continues to draw the attention of scholars interested in the history of ideas.[1] On one side is Hans Blumenberg, who perceives progress in the modern age (*Neuzeit*) as justified on its own terms. On the other side is Karl Löwith, who does not recognize a substantive break between modernity and its

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[1] Blumenberg's 1962 paper, "'Säkularisation': Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität", initiated the secularization debate in German philosophy. Although I use the term 'debate', Blumenberg and Löwith never actually debated face to face. Nevertheless, I follow Robert M. Wallace's use of the term as expressed in his essay "Progress, Secularization, and Modernity: The Blumenberg-Löwith Debate", *New German Critique*, no. 22, 1981.

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epochal genetic precursors, instead identifying a residual substructure to modern philosophies of history which produce no more than serial chronicles of distinctions without a difference. Although the so-called 'debate' has now endured over sixty years of study and commentary, it shows no signs of letting up. The reason for this is found in the degree of versatility Blumenberg displays in his treatment of modernity. His nimble traverse over intellectual history showcases a profuse erudition that can seem like an ever-changing Proteus wily shifting shapes to avoid being captured in any one form, but unlike the mythic sea-god Blumenberg's antipode is more than happy to divulge what he knows, often appearing to strain the limits of plenitude. Gianni Carchia, who himself collected the fruits from many disciplinary branches in his wide-ranging studies, states that Blumenberg's work can be read as a sort of "last chapter in that history of the *Umbesetzungen*, of which he is the master".[1] *Umbesetzung* or 'reoccupation' is a key part of Blumenberg's argument against the secularization theory's charge of modernity disavowing epochal paternity, and names that which independently develops new solutions to pregiven, 'carry over' questions.

As it frequently happens, there is a kind of positive assortment between scholars and their readers, and in Blumenberg's case the phenomenon of like-attracting-like manifests in those who value his blurring the lines between disciplines by drawing from studies that include philosophy, theology, science, history, literature, psychology, and sociology.[2] Bradley Bassler considers the combined components of this interdisciplinary *mélange*, as well as the assortative relation between scholars drawn to it, as something that invites us into "a conspicuous laboratory for investigating issues surrounding 'the promotion of modernity'" to reassess Blumenberg's ideas.[3] This helps to explain why the issue over the nature of modernity, which Blumenberg argues not to unfold

[1] Gianni Carchia, "Platonismo dell'immanenza. Fenomenologia e storia", in Andrea Borsari (ed.), *Hans Blumenberg: Mito, metafora, modernità* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), 215.

[2] Robert B. Pippin writes that Blumenberg's insatiable "curiosity" and cross-disciplinary scholarship has stamped him as, "'unclassifiable'. That means that he is often viewed as falling 'between' disciplines rather than a master of many (a mistake), and perhaps this has made him seem to some less central to their enterprise, perhaps even marginal". See Pippin, "[Book Review] History, Metaphors, Fables. A Hans Blumenberg Reader", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2021): 670.

[3] See O. Bradley Bassler, *The Pace of Modernity: Reading with Blumenberg* (Melbourne: re.press, 2012), 59.

in the sclerotic framework Löwith suggests, has remained a topic of ongoing discussions both inside and outside of the mid-twentieth century German tradition, which has yet to register fully the implications of Blumenberg's work.[1] This paper serves as but one attestant among others of this rolling interest,[2] and it perceives the heart of this debate as an impulse either to espouse or oppose the sovereignty of philosophical modernity in its relation to worldmaking.[3]

On my reading, worldmaking is the topical focus of Blumenberg's stance, whether on the liberating grounds of modern discourse or the emancipating power of myth. For Blumenberg, discourse and myth are *sui generis* emergent and serve as novel foundations upon which *new worlds* are created by *new needs*. As Robert M. Wallace frames this *poietic* independence,

> Blumenberg proposes that instead of always interpreting myth in terms of what it (supposedly) came before its *terminus ad quem*, science, the arrival of which appears to make it obsolete we should try interpreting it in terms of its *terminus a quo*, its point of departure. That point of departure is the problem that myth seeks to solve, which is the source of its real (and lasting) importance, regardless of what (if anything) comes 'after' it.[4]

[1] Blumenberg's work continues to receive broad interest, perhaps more than in his own time, and provides tools for contemporary interpretations of intellectual history. E.g., see *inter alia* the documentary film *Hans Blumenberg - Der unsichtbare Philosoph* (2018), the *Festschrift* on Blumenberg in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, 1 (2019), the recent intellectual biographies from Rüdiger Zill, *Der absolute Leser. Hans Blumenberg: Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020) and Jürgen Goldstein, *Hans Blumenberg: Ein philosophisches Portrait* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2020), the critical collection of essays in Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel Whistler, ed., *Interrogating Modernity: Debates with Hans Blumenberg* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), as well as the compendium from Hannes Bajohr, Florian Fuchs, and Joe Paul Kroll, ed., *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2020), and the steady flow of newly translated works into English like Hans Blumenberg, *St. Matthew Passion*, transl. Helmut Müller-Sievers and Paul Fleming (Cornell: Cornell UP, 2021).

[2] Sjoerd Griffioen, "Secularization between Faith and Reason: Reinvestigating the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate", *New German Critique* 46, no. 1 (2019): 71-101, recasts some of the more accepted conclusions of the debate that have favored Blumenberg to give a strongly charitable view of Löwith. See also his forthcoming *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[3] 'Worldmaking' in the sense of age-making or epoch-making, i.e., a defining characteristic of an historical stage.

[4] Robert M. Wallace, "Translator's Introduction", in Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, transl. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), ix.

Rather than being measured by results, the freedom that Blumenberg identifies in the work of modern discourse and myth underscores the indelible 'from which' *new* discourses and *new* myths press their stamp upon an age. This orientation, which puts pride of place on an age's point of embarkation, liberates historical activity from any attempt to encapsulate its identity on any point of disembarkation. In other words, the 'from which' is not handed down *ex ante* from a previous age, rather it arises *de se*, on its own, to delimit a world. Thus, for Blumenberg new ages are ushered in by new questions and new puzzles which stir human activity that might or might not prove successful, and in this sense the project of worldmaking is constantly renewed by its constitutive *incompleteness*.

Consequently, my interpretation of Blumenberg is strongly influenced by his reception of Immanuel Kant's view of the 'unfinished world', wherein the created (world) and the creators (humanity) are portrayed as free, untethered to a *haunting* heteronomy, and thus open-ended:

> Kant's critique concentrated all directed, purposeful processes in man's rational action, and this meant that the world could participate in this sort of directedness only by becoming a substrate subject to man's purposes. In its metaphorical usage, the expression 'unfinished world' no longer legitimates human action by reference to a prescribed definition and obligatory role in nature. Rather, the transcendental turning requires that the world must be 'unfinished', and thus material at man's disposal, because this is a condition of the possibility of human action.[1]

Viewing the world as 'a substrate subject to man's purposes' means that the world is much more than 'given', it can be made hospitable to human needs, which is similarly observed in Reinhart Koselleck's own view of the self-legitimating Kantian picture of the creation,

> With the imperative of his practical reason, Kant sought to realize the optative mood of a progressive future that broke with the condition of all previous history (…). The meaning of creation is (…) taken up and transposed into the work of man as soon as practical reason assumes power.[2]

[1] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 214.

[2] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New

Thus, for Kant, as for Blumenberg, to borrow a phrase from Victor Hugo's description of the protracted construction of Notre Dame Cathedral, worldmaking is an act of transformation that is "always pending and never completed, *pendent opera interrupta*" (the work hangs interrupted).[1] As Kant wrote in his pre-critical 1755 *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, and which is quoted by Blumenberg in his *The Genesis of the Copernican World* to suggest not only the contingency of natural creation but also that of the subject, "Creation is never completed [*Die Schöpfung ist niemals vollendet*]. Though it has once started, but will never cease. It is always busy in bringing forth more scenes of nature, new things and new worlds".[2] Kant, as also Blumenberg, sees progress as an emergent phenomenon taking place via humanity's increasing understanding of both the natural and social world according to its own rational standards. Jean-Claude Monod helpfully puts this repositioning of progress in worldly knowledge as being in direct proportion to progress in human ingenuity,

> Progress (…) such as the grand modern philosophies of history conceive it, sees time as a factor of growth in knowledge and/or human powers, an improvement immanent in relationships with nature, social relations [etc.] One of the conditions of possibility of such an interpretation was the valorization of the role of time in the discovery of new 'truths', notably at the astronomical level: the discovery of new planets thanks to the astronomical telescope, and the 'Progress' in the representation of the cosmos thanks to the Copernican revolution.[3]

York: Columbia UP, 2004), 198. On Kant's poetic model of the "makeability of history" (*Machbarkeit der Geschichte*), which is tied to active self-fulfillment, see also 197-98, 201.

[1] Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, transl. John Sturrock (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 129; cfr. Virgil, *Aen.*, IV 88.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, transl. Stanley L. Jaki (Edinburgh: Scottish Academy Press, 1981), 244 (WiA 1:314). Parenthetical numbers preceded by 'WiA' refer to the Akademie paginations of Kant's works.

[3] Jean-Claude Monod, *Hans Blumenberg* (Paris: Belin, 2007), 131: "Le *progrès,* de son côté, tel que le conçoivent les grandes philosophies de l'Histoire modernes, voit dans le temps un facteur d'accroissement des savoirs et/ou des pouvoirs de l'homme, une amelioration immanente des rapports avec la Nature, des rapports sociaux… L'une des conditions de possibilité d'une telle représentation a été la valorisation du rôle du temps dans la découverte de 'vérités' nouvelles, notamment au plan astronomique: la découverte de planètes nouvelles grâce à la lunette astronomique, et le 'progrès' dans la représentation du cosmos grâce à la révolution copernicienne".

Thus, if the world is to show consistent progress, it will correspond to the same fecund movement in human invention and self-understanding. Ernst Cassirer captures the crux of this distinction in a 'motto' he ascribes to René Descartes' imaginative exercise to fashion a world based on nothing but principles of thought in his posthumously published *Le Monde* (*The World*):[1]

"Give me matter and I will build you a world". Thought no longer wants to accept the world simply as empirically given; it sets itself the task of analyzing the structure of the universe, in fact, *of producing this structure with its own resources. Beginning with its own clear and distinct ideas, it finds in them the model for all reality.*[2]

Although Cassirer is right about this 'motto' capturing the spirit of Descartes' own worldbuilding enterprise, it is not explicitly stated in the Poitevin's text.[3] However, this 'motto' does inspire three explicit mentions in Kant's *Universal Natural History*, "*Give me matter and I will build a world out of it* [*Gebet mir Materie, ich will eine Welt daraus bauen!*], that is, give me matter and I will show you how a world is to come into being out of it;" the upshot concluding that it will be far easier to explain the universe by rational discoveries of mechanical principles (these are descriptive, i.e., the 'how') than it will be to explain the rise of life from those very same laws (these would be explanatory, i.e., the 'why'):

Are we in a position to say: *Give me matter and I will show you how a caterpillar can be created*?... I dare to say that we will understand the formation of all the heavenly bodies, the cause of their motion, in short, the origin of the whole present constitution of the universe sooner than the creation of a single plant or caterpillar becomes clearly and completely known on mechanical grounds.[4]

Although this seems like a defeating proposition, it actually serves to affirm the notion that while the mechanical world might ultimately be completely de-

[1] René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, transl. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 21: "For a while, then, allow your thought to wander beyond this world to view another, wholly new, world, which I call forth in imaginary spaces before it".

[2] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, transl. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettygrove (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009 [1951]), 51. My italics.

[3] Poitevin was a sobriquet used by Descartes in his youth to signal a belonging to and fondness of his family's rural properties in Poitou.

[4] Kant, *Universal History*, 1:229-30.

scribed, the indefinite emergence and unfinished quality of the lifeworld of biology and freedom will require an indefinite time to arrive at an explanation.

The reason for this is that one must keep in mind Kant's mature belief that mechanistic actions are heteronomously derived from nomological principles, but that the freely willed, autonomous actions of the human lifeworld transcend mere mechanism by reason's use of what it is given by nature. Thus, a distinction is drawn between two kinds of emergence: one applies to cosmogony; the other, for lack of a better term, applies to *ratiogony*, the latter of which possesses the power to further shape the former toward newer, higher, freer ends. Reflecting on this elevated power, Blumenberg goes on to state:

> Kant, with his great cosmogonic speculation of 1755, which combined the Cartesian approach with Newton's physics, was the first to find his way to the idea of the 'unfinished *[unvollendete]* world' and to project in it the cosmic archetype of endless progress (…).Progress now becomes a category with a noncosmic status, a structure of human history, not of natural development. The 'unfinished world' becomes the metaphor of a teleology that discovers reason as its own immanent rule that up until then had been projected onto nature.[1]

This is an important move because it valorizes a creative capacity that would otherwise neither be needed nor developed. If the world were complete or *finished* by nature herself, the mechanical organization of existence would be perfect and sufficient, and thus not allowing for the formation of free human creativity. However, the perpetually "unfinished" state of the world is a necessary precondition for worldly progress. Thus, as Blumenberg puts it in *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, "The 'incomplete world' legitimizes man's demiurgic inclination".[2] New things and new worlds not only emerge in nature, but also from human historical activity, which comports with a pair of Kant's 1784 essays. In *What is Enlightenment?* Kant treats the notion of enlightenment as a *perpetually unfinished*, ongoing endeavor. He makes the important observation that the views of one historically situated standpoint cannot bind those of its successors, and that this openness is the very nature of enlightenment and the heart of progress:

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 212, 214.

[2] Hans Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, transl. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 65.

One generation cannot form an alliance and conspire to put a subsequent generation in such a position in which it would be impossible for the latter to expand its knowledge (particularly where such knowledge is so vital), to rid this knowledge of errors, and, more generally, to proceed along the path of enlightenment. That would be a violation of human nature, the original vocation of which consists precisely in this progress.[1]

By famously stating that we do not live in "an *enlightened age*", but rather "in an age of *enlightenment*" (WiA 8:40), Kant argues that the present age, and subsequent ages, are working toward, but can only approximate, progress toward historical completion. Similarly, in *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, Kant argues that history is a process whereby intergenerational membership in humanity requires "arduous endeavors" toward the ongoing moral development of the human species. However, because the burden of this toilsome labor is always incomplete, history also becomes a product against which autonomous agents work to improve themselves and their world, even when realizing that it is an endless task.[2]

Blumenberg's response to Löwith is that modernity is no imitative offspring but rather stands independent from inherited models reinforces Kant's Enlightenment Age belief that legitimacy derives from a selfsame source: *self*-knowledge, *self*-critique, and *self*-legitimacy, lest one become an epigonic "plaster cast" (*Gipsabdruck*) of a predecessor.[3] For example, as he characterizes Giambattista Vico's ontogenetic interpretive model of metaphor in *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*,

We understand only what we have made, and we understand other things, what we have not made, precisely only by taking a detour through the self-made. The metaphor is, thanks to its 'artificiality', this detour through the self-made. To this extent it is still, with all necessary caution in the face of the 'precursors' of idealism, a 'transcendental' element. For it creates experience, without deriving from experience.[4]

[1] Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* in *Toward Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), 20-21 (WiA 8:39).

[2] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective", in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History,* ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), 6 (WiA 8:20).

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. & transl. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), A836/B864.

[4] Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 175. The passage

Self-legitimacy thus becomes a *sine qua non* condition for world-legitimacy, and the indeterminate substrate of the unfinished world allows for the continuous enterprise of its re-creating. Lucien Goldmann illustrates this point in his juxtaposition of Martin Heidegger and Kant:

the greatest difference between the world of Heidegger and that of Kant is that for Heidegger the world is *given*, whilst for Kant it is *to be created*. In the language of Heidegger, we might say that for him a fundamental category of existence is *being in the world*; for Kant, on the contrary, *it is the task of creating a world*.[1]

Although material availability might be confined, world creation always starts from scratch, each world taking on the shape of something other than its previous form. For Blumenberg, the denial of this auto-generative capacity, as well as the loss of affirming its self-defining independence, would seem to lock up the world and its worldmakers in a recurring Kafkaesque nightmare in which sons can never quite escape the shadows of their dominating, 'absolute' fathers:

He is an 'absolute' father, inaccessible in his distance, inescapable in his presence. Under his power, one can feel all otherwise reliable realities, as it were, 'melt into air'; what remains is the awareness of an unfathomable nothingness.[2]

Although the task of epochal genetic accounting seems a rather peculiar practice, marking the boundaries between beginnings and endings nonetheless became, as Cassirer puts it, a novel desire of philosophical modernity:

In the history of European civilization there never was a break of continuity. To seek for a point in this history in which the Middle Ages 'end' and the modern world 'begins'

above is translated in English from Blumenberg, *La leggibilità del mondo: Il libro come metafora della natura*, transl., Bruno Argenton (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 169-70: "[N]oi comprendiamo solo ciò che abbiamo fatto e il resto che non abbiamo fatto lo comprendiamo appunto passando attraverso ciò che abbiamo fatto. Inforza del suo carattere 'artificioso' la metafora, dovunque presa, è questa deviazione attraverso ciò che noi stessi abbiamo fatto. In questo essa è anche, con tutta la necessaria cautela di fronte ai 'precorrimenti' dell'idealismo, un elemento 'trascendentale'. Perché essa crea esperienza senza derivare dall'esperienza".

[1] Lucien Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant*, transl. Robert Black (London: New Left Books, 1971), 57.

[2] Hans Blumenberg, "The Absolute Father", in *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 471.

is a sheer absurdity. But that does not do away with the necessity of looking for an *intellectual* line of demarcation between the two ages.[1]

The Blumenberg-Löwith debate is an expression of this modern desideratum, as the intellectual lines of demarcation that would subtend the opposing sides of one age from another are either (i) erased via a strange act of hereditary violence, in which the passing of certain epochal traits wipe out any claim to uniqueness for present and future epochs (*à la* Löwith), or (ii) reinforced by asserting that a seemingly genealogical resemblance poses no barrier to the modern age's authenticity (*à la* Blumenberg). The latter view claims distinctiveness over the former by dealing with one's 'carry over', inheritance in innovative, reoccupational, ways. Here one is reminded of the Goethean commission to make one's own what one has inherited: "*Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vätern hast, Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen*" (That which you have inherited from your forebears, acquire for yourself, to make it your own).[2]

This essay takes seriously Goethe's imperative by recognizing its *autopoietic* power in Blumenberg's defense of modernity's legitimacy, and it argues that Blumenberg's thesis of 'self-assertion' describes a re-establishing of the project of world improvement in a sophisticated and nuanced language that is missed in Löwith's thesis and by other critics of modernity. Toward this purpose, the rest of my paper is divided into five sections. In §2, I give preliminary background to Löwith's secularization hypothesis. In §3, I articulate Blumenberg's challenge to Löwith, as well as framing his optimistic work *on* myth against Adorno's and Horkheimer's pessimistic work *of* myth. In §4, I demonstrate how Blumenberg's incorporation of medieval philosophy, namely, from William of Ockham, explains how feelings of *Ordnungsschwund* (the disappearance of order) *and Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) inform his theory of self-assertion as legitimating the modern age. And in §5, I conclude by arguing that Löwith's thesis is undermined by Blumenberg's identification of modernity through the emergence of unique problems, crises, and research agendas rather than by any measure of their fulfilments.

[1] Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974 [1946]), 130.
[2] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part 1*, transl. Peter Salm (New York: Bantam, 1985), 54.

2. Löwith's Thesis

Löwith's *Meaning in History*[1] argues for what is known as the 'secularization hypothesis': namely, that the notion of progress in general discourses of modernity is but a secularization of Christian eschatology: "[T]he following outline aims to show that philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfillment and that it ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern".[2] Although the notion of secularization can take several basic forms, from just describing the progressive withdrawal of religion from the political sphere,[3] to perhaps motivating a quasi-Nietzschean espousal to existentially affirm *this life*, rather than some life transcendent, what Martin Hägglund calls "secular faith",[4] or to something along the lines of Charles Taylor's colossal polemic against "subtraction stories", in his belief that even these narrative of religious withdrawal have not eliminated creative "cross pressures" which can produce a "nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options",[5] Löwith treats the secularization thesis as an overarching, schematic conceptual critique. On his view, the pattern he believes he detects in modern philosophies of history discloses that "the very doctrine of progress had to assume the function of providence, that is, to foresee and to provide for the future",[6] and thus the eschatologizing of the philosophy of history did nothing more than subconsciously act to immanentize transcendence or, to put more plainly, of *worlding* the otherworldly.

[1] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
[2] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 2.
[3] See, e.g., Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la secularization de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Vrin, 2002).
[4] Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 2019), 5-6.
[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007), 299.
[6] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 60.

Overall, Löwith's work looks to a constellation of philosophers including, among others, Saint Augustine, Giambattista Vico, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx to identify what he takes to be the common ascription of a directed *purpose* in their historical narratives, "It is not by chance that we use the words 'meaning' and 'purpose' interchangeably, for it is mainly purpose which constitutes meaning for use".[1] With regard to his gallery of philosophers, the charge of secularization attaches to those that read the successive movement of historical events as unified toward an ultimate meaning, "secular history is not meaningful in itself but is a fragmentary reflection of its supra-historical substance, the story of salvation, which is determined by a sacred beginning, center, and end".[2] Löwith's main concern is over how some philosophers of history play the role of false prophets by attempting to offer predictive interpretations of what are by all accounts unpredictable future events. Hence, he criticizes these philosophers for projecting a picture of the future as driving the past forward.[3]

Consequently, he inveighs against philosophers who incorporate a totalizing narrative in their historiography; specifically, "the theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation".[4]

Lowith's secularization thesis is put into sharp relief by Robert Pippin, who in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* writes:

> [Löwith] is not claiming that the modern notion of progress is Christian eschatology, but just that no explanation of why the idea of progress became such a powerful one in western intellectual history can dispense with a reliance on a Christian assumption that human history as a whole must have some redeeming point to it.[5]

[1] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 5.

[2] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 181.

[3] Löwith's worries find a sympathetic ally in Arthur Danto's critique of "substantive philosophers of history", in his influential analytical philosophy of history. See Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, with a New Introduction by Lydia Goehr and a New Conclusion by Frank Ankersmit (New York: Columbia UP, 2007). For a critique of Danto's position, namely, his reading of these philosophers as 'prophetic' against my own reading of them as 'proleptic', see the chapter on "Kant's Proleptic Philosophy of History", in José Luis Fernández, *Kant's Proleptic Philosophy of History: The World Well-Hoped* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 2019).

[4] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1.

[5] Robert B. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem", in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 270.

Pippin is right to point out that Löwith is not positing a strict identity statement that equates modern philosophies of progress with Christian eschatology. However, Löwith's thesis *is* that the modern notion of progress "is like" Christian eschatology insofar as it anticipates an end or goal. Instead of positing strict identity between modern progress and Christian eschatology, Löwith's theory instead puts forward an *analogy* that infers salvation and redemption as the shared attributes which bind the respective analogues. Pippin argues that the "disanalogies between the eschatological and modern progressive views should cause no great concern to Löwith" (Pippin, 1997: 270) because, presumably, it does not undermine his notion of progress as a species of salvation. However, Blumenberg himself warns of uncritically accepting the correspondence of this analogy in his 1962 sally against Löwith:

> [I]t should be quite coolly noted that a historical interpretation seeking to avail itself of the expression *secularization* bears, from a methodical perspective, the *burden of proving* that the *features* of the seizure are in evidence in the thematic process. Failing that, what emerges may well be a statement that sounds profound and creates the illusion of having understood something, but its grasp for a historical structure misses the mark. An impressive and well-known book can thus simply assume the origin of the historical idea of progress from theological eschatology as *known*, but none of the above features has yet been cited in support of the claim that the idea of progress was a secularized form of eschatology.[1]

Thus, *pace* Pippin, and in agreement with Blumenberg, I should like to hone in on the logic of this analogy to expose how its false congruities should, indeed, cause great concern to adherents of the secularization thesis.

Löwith's explication of his secularization thesis itself relies, *ex facie*, on similarities he believes he identifies in his reading of Hegel's description of the realization of Spirit (*Geist*) in history. Indeed, Löwith portrays Hegel as little more than a historizicer of eschatology:

> [Hegel] is the last philosopher of history because he is the last philosopher whose immense historical sense was still restrained and disciplined by the Christian tradition (…)

[1] Blumenberg, "'Säkularisation': Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität", translated as "Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Illegitimacy", in *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, 56-57.

Hegel interprets the Christian religion in terms of speculative reason, and providence as "cunning of reason" (…) With this secularization of the Christian faith, or, as Hegel would say, with his realization of the Spirit, Hegel believed himself loyal to the genius of Christianity by realizing the Kingdom of God on earth.[1]

This classification is repeated in Löwith's classic textbook on 19th-century philosophy, wherein he understands the end-time of history as guiding Hegel's attempt to provide a totalized or united account of how Spirit strives to know itself, as itself, through its own immanent power to actualize its immanent purpose.[2] As Löwith puts it, "Hegel's philosophy of history is a pseudo-theological schematization of history arranged according to the idea of progress toward an eschatological fulfillment at the end of time".[3] However, is Löwith right? Is this a fair analogy, between the "end time" (*eschaton*) and "purpose" (*Zweck*)? On my reading, the so-called 'end of history' thesis in Hegel's philosophy is careful to avoid making the kind of auguries and prophetic pronouncements that earned Tiresias and other diviners their just *contrapasso* in Canto XX of Dante's hopeless *Inferno*,[4] nor does it have anything to do with any preconceived end-point in time, in which history is ended and transcended.

Recall that in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel argues that Spirit, which comes to know itself within the medium of history, is "indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward".[5] Moreover, evidence for this ongoing, independent development is given at the very end of the *Phenomenology*, for "Absolute Knowing" is not only an internal reflection of what can count as authoritative norms, it is also self-certifying and self-legitimating within its own terms without recourse to what these should be according to any preconceived

[1] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 57-58.

[2] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964).

[3] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 32.

[4] In Canto XX of *Inferno*, which takes place in the Fourth Bolgia of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Dante paints a memorable portrait of the just punishments of fortune tellers and diviners, who, having claimed in life the ability to see into the future, are in death condemned to walk forward with their heads on backwards and thus unable to see where they are going. See Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, tr. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989), pp. 203-207.

[5] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 6.

ideas,[1] arguing, as he did in both the *Science of Logic*[2] and the *Encyclopedia Logic*,[3] for a presuppositionless starting point to philosophy. Löwith, however, seems so intent on making his case that Hegel conflates theology and philosophy, e.g., as seen in his claim above that Hegel is a historicizer of eschatology and "pseudo-theological" schematizer, that he fails to distinguish not only the self-legitimating aspect of Hegel's thought, but also the difference between the aims of theology and the aims of philosophy.[4] The former may be viewed as apologetic and consoling; the latter, however, at least for Hegel, is descriptive and unconsoling.

The descriptive aspect of Hegel's philosophy is articulated in the *Phenomenology*, specifically wherein Hegel announced that he was aware of the dangers of defending presupposed beliefs, and endeavored to avoid "being the arbitrarily moving principle of the content" under philosophical investigation via his phenomenological method: i.e., to let the content "move spontaneously of its own nature (…) and then to contemplate this movement".[5] Rather than setting out a prescriptive philosophy, Hegel himself acknowledged that his philosophy is not a platform from which to derive a prescriptive *ought to be* from a merely descriptive *what is*. As Hegel affirms in the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right*:

> This book (…) is to be nothing other than the endeavour to apprehend and portray the state as something inherently rational (…) *The instruction which it may contain cannot consist in teaching the state what it ought to be*; it can only show how the state, the ethical universe, is to be understood (…) *One more word about giving instruction as to what the*

[1] For an instructive account of Hegel's Absolute, see Allegra de Laurentiis, "Absolute Knowing", in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 246-264.

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, transl. A.V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1969), 70.

[3] "All assumptions and postulates must (…) be left behind at the entrance to philosophy" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic, Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, transl. Wiliam Wallace [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975], 111).

[4] I work toward a clear explication of this difference in José Luis Fernández, "Evil as a Modal Mismatch: On Hegel's Distinction Between What Is and What Ought to Be", *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2021): 599-616.

[5] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 36; §58. For a helpful discussion of Hegel's method, see Kenley R. Dove, "Hegel's Phenomenological Method", *Review of Metaphysics* 23, 4 (1970). See also Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), 129.

world ought to be. Philosophy always comes on the scene too late to give it [i.e., to give instruction as to what the world ought to be].[1]

In the above overture to his political theory, Hegel writes that his philosophy, properly understood, does not, indeed cannot, prescribe what 'ought to be'. The reason for this is underwritten by Hegel's phenomenological method, in which free human reason is able to receive extant knowledge without being incarcerated in its thinking by traditional wisdom. Instead, with echoes of the Goethean commission to make one's own what one has inherited, Hegel views such wisdom merely as an 'heirloom' whose value lies not in an inheritance (*Erbstück*) of the past but rather in its new transformative potential:

> That which each generation has produced in science and in intellectual activity is an heirloom to which all the past generations have added their savings (…). To receive this inheritance is also to enter into its use (…). In this manner that which is received is changed, and the material worked upon is both enriched and preserved at the same tie. This is the function of our own age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In thus appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before.[2]

The unconsoling aspect to Hegel's philosophy is made explicit in his philosophy of history, which states that even though philosophy aims to reconcile reality with the rational, "consolation is merely something received in compensation for a misfortune which never ought to have happened in the first place, and it belongs to the world of finite things. Philosophy, therefore, is not really a means of consolation",[3] a sobering sentiment that nearly a hundred years after Hegel's death will find a kindred echo in Sigmund Freud's self-admonition: "Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I

[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, transl. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967), 11-12. My italics.
[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Vol. 1*, transl. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 3.
[3] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, transl. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), 67.

bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation".[1] Hegel's philosophy may present cold comfort to the monstrous suffering experienced by human beings in history, but it does not see its purpose as providing an argument that justifies history as the "slaughter-bench" (*Schlachtbank*) of victimization.

Hegel did posit an end or purpose to history, i.e., Spirit fully grasping its self-determining freedom and the establishment of a rationally ordered state, but one can point out, *contra* Löwith, that Hegel's theory is not prophetic, i.e., philosophical reflection takes it content from the present rather than the future:

> To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords to those in whom there has once arisen an inner voice bidding them to comprehend.[2]

Thus, in contradistinction to soteriological studies, Hegel did not prophesy a single, determinate future: "the future is not absolute, and remains exposed to contingency".[3] In his interpretation of Hegel, Löwith seems, uncharitably, to acknowledge Hegel's failure to envision history post-1831 because he does not consider far enough the ramifications that Hegel's disavowal of prophecy has on the logic of his characterization of Hegel as an historizicer of eschatology. And it was precisely with antipathy toward the prophetic that Hegel famously wrote: "[E]very individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thought. It is just absurd to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes".[4] Theologians foresee a future with a belief in certainty that is absent in Hegel's more measured philosophizing—a *hic saltus* challenge, indeed.[5]

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, transl. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 92.

[2] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 12.

[3] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A.W. Wood, transl. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 155: *Zusatz* to §127. While I prefer the Knox translation, the *Zusätze* (Additions) in this edition are more detailed.

[4] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 11.

[5] Hegel uses the phrase "*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*" (Here is Rhodes, here is your jump) as a challenge to prove one's boast or to perform an impossible feat; in this case, the absurdity of philosophizing about a world apart from the present. The challenge is an intertextual example of the box within a box motif: Hegel is remotely quoting Erasmus (*Adagia* III, iii, 28), who himself is quoting Aesop

But all of this is missed on Löwith, whose description of the eschatologization of history conforms to a theological apologetics that ultimately sees chance and coincident happenings in history following from inevitability:

In the reality of that agitated sea which we call 'history', it makes little difference whether man feels himself in the hands of God's inscrutable will or in the hands of chance and fate. *Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt*, could easily be translated into terms of a theology which believes that God works not only through those who obey his will but also through those who perforce serve him against their will.[1]

Ideas of preordination and fate are pivotal to Löwith's critique of the philosophy of history, which, as we have seen, relies on a *purposive* orientation to historical progress.[2] The following distillation of Löwith's view of this turn provides us a glimpse of such purposiveness:

History (…) is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts (…) If we reflect on the whole course of history, imagining its beginning and anticipating its end, we think of its meaning in terms of an ultimate purpose.[3]

Consequently, in his critique of purposively minded philosophical historiography, Löwith regards its discourses as forgetful of its eschatological character,

(*The Boastful Athlete*). See the Knox translation of the *Philosophy of Right*, 303, n. 31.

[1] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 199. The Latin in this passage is another example of a box within a box motif. Löwith is quoting Augustine, who in turn is quoting Seneca: "Fate leads the willing and drags the unwilling". See Augustine, *City of God*, transl. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1984), 189; and Seneca, "Letter CVII, 11", in *Letters from a Stoic*, transl. Robin Campbell (New York: Penguin, 1969), 200. For an account of the source of Seneca's phrase, see M. Marcovich, "On the Origin of Seneca's 'Ducunt Volentum Fata, Nolentum Trahunt'," *Classical Philology* 54, no. 2 (1959): 119-121. Marcovich argues that the source for "Seneca's verse" is found in either Chrysippus or Zeno, and literally alludes to an account of a dog chained to a moving wagon, to which the dog can choose to follow along or get dragged.

[2] 'Preordination' and 'fate' are examples of closed-ended teleologies, i.e., events and states of affairs that unfold necessarily and cannot fail to be otherwise; whereas 'destiny' is an example of an open-ended teleology that might, or might not, be achieved. The distinction between fate (*Schicksal*) and destiny (*Geschick*) is discussed in David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure After Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005): "Whereas fate denies us freedom, destiny is an ontological dispensation that grants it" (269).

[3] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1, 5.

and it is modernity's obliviousness to the secularization framework that challenges any claims to historical self-legitimacy. On his view, modernity is merely a masquerading version of what came before.

3. Blumenberg's Challenge

In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg offers a critical challenge to Löwith's "thesis that the modern historical consciousness is derived from the secularization of the Christian 'salvation story' [*Heilsgeschichte*] and, more particularly, of providence and eschatological finitude"[1] by arguing for a modern framework to approaching problems that was unavailable in prior historical periods.[2] Following the articulation of Löwith's hypothesis, my understanding of Blumenberg's opposition shapes up as a contest over *epochal paternity*. As we have seen, Löwith views philosophical modernity as disavowing its antecedent progenitor. As Martin Jay notes,

> Borrowing the old trick of early Christian polemicists, who accused the ancient Greeks of having secretly stolen their best ideas from the Bible, the secularization theorists located the unacknowledged paternity of the modern in originally religious ideas. Illegitimacy comes therefore not from lacking a proper parent, but from denying his generative power.[3]

In answer to Löwith's thesis, Blumenberg defends the legitimacy of the modern age with his thesis of the 'self-assertion of reason':

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 27.
[2] Prefiguring Löwith, Blumenberg identifies the secularization thesis first put forward in Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*. See Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 92.
[3] Martin Jay, "The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (Review)", *History and Theory* 24, no. 2 (1985): 184.

['S]elf-assertion' (…) means an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him.[1]

It is important to note that Blumenberg is not arguing that there is no connection between the past and the present, but that ages are created and defined by their unique pressures and demands, toward which human beings are forced to confront and attempt to solve, successfully or not. With respect to Löwith's argument that modern progress is but a variant of a hopeful salvation story, Blumenberg again counters:

Eschatology may have been, for a shorter or longer moment in history, an aggregate of hopes; but when the time has come for the emergence of the idea of progress, it was more nearly an aggregate of terror and dread. Where hope was to arise, it had to be set up and safeguarded as a new and original aggregate of this-worldly possibilities over against those possibilities of the next world. From a point of view that understands history as progress, the theological expectation of the final events impinging on it from outside—even if they were still hoped for—appears as a hindrance to the attitudes and activities that can secure for man the realization of his possibilities and the satisfaction of his needs.[2]

Blumenberg's invocation of eschatological hope reminds of Thucydides' account of the Athenian generals counseling the hapless Melians not to turn to sources of invisible, transcendent hope when immanent, visible signs of hope disappear.[3] Blumenberg thus inverts Löwith's thesis that secularization is but veiled eschatology by arguing that eschatology secularized itself out of need because of the end-time's *perpetual deferment*:

The eschatological future had (…) lost its connection with the blessings of salvation that had already been conveyed to redeemed mankind. Consequently, the basic eschatological attitude of the Christian epoch could no longer be one of hope for the final events

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 138.
[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 31.
[3] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, transl. Richard Crawley (New York: Modern Library, 1982), 352 (5:103)

but was rather one of fear of judgment and the destruction of the world. (…) Early Christianity found itself in what was (…) the difficult position of having to demonstrate the trustworthiness of its God to an unbelieving surrounding world not by the fulfillment of His promises but by the postponement of this fulfillment. (…) For the Middle Ages there was both a *cosmic* and an *individual* eschatology. This split made it inevitable that man's interest would be absorbed by the question of his own 'last things'.[1]

As we see, Blumenberg's challenge to Löwith's thesis turns on a radical repositioning of the medieval mind frame due to a diminishing loss of confidence in soteriological hope, and he quotes the ecclesiastical writer Tertullian to mark this uncertainty: "Since He has fixed the eternal judgment after the end of the world, He does not carry out the separation presupposed by that judgment before the end of the world".[2] Ludovico Battista offers commentary on this split created by salvific opacity:

For the modern consciousness there is no longer a space for the divine will (…) God is relegated to a sphere separated and unattainable from knowledge, which however confirms the modern *Spaltung* [cleft] between subject and object. The project of the modernity is based on this original loss, only starting from which if they can understand its deep limits.[3]

This is an important observation because felt insecurities over worldly deliverance through what Rudolf Otto identifies as "the numinous"[4] grace of salvation introduced new existential anxieties.

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 44-46.

[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 44.

[3] Ludovico Battista, *Hans Blumenberg: e l'autodistruzione del cristianesimo* (Rome: Viella, 2021), 195: "Per la coscienza moderna non vi è più posto per il volere divino (…). Dio viene relegato in una sfera separata e irraggiungibile dal sapere, che però conferma la *Spaltung* moderna tra soggetto e oggettività: con Lutero e la Riforma. Il progetto della modernità si basa su questa perdita originaria, solo a partire dalla quale se ne possono comprendere i limiti profondi".

[4] For Otto, "the numinous" is a reflection in the mind felt as an "objective and outside the self" determinate state; specifically, as an ineffable "*mysterium tremendum*", which, with some resonance to Kant's theory of the sublime, "is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar". See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, transl. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958), 11-13. Cf. Freud's reply to Romain Rolland's expression of the 'oceanic feeling', which shares some features with the *mysterium tremendum*, being attributed to an unconscious regression to infantile anxiety and soothing. See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 11-20. Explications of the ineffability of Kant's theory of sublime feeling, and its applicability to religious existential thought,

Commenting on these anxieties, Robert M. Wallace notes, "Both salvation and the creation had thus been deprived of all accessible meaning and reliability" to the human individual.[1] This shift in perspective had a radical distancing effect between human beings and their ideas about God's redemptive promise, and resulted in bringing them to focusing more on their own immanent horizons, and, thus, the loss of worldly deliverance would establish the agenda of world improvement. No longer able to rely on the prevailing worldview, human beings turned their focus not towards the conceptually opaque and spiritually unreliable, but to the immediate and dependable, namely, themselves and their worldmaking powers. Frank B. Farrell provides an excellent analysis of this turn:

> Man is no longer at home in a meaningful universe in which he has a proper place, in which it is something about him and what he is that gives him a role in God's dealing with creatures. The radical contingency of the world is matched by a radical insecurity of the self (…) Instead of trying for a theoretical understanding of the metaphysical character of the universe (an understanding that has become impossible), we shall instead turn to what we can take reality to be through our own labor and construction, to the ways we make it our own through the working upon it we accomplish.[2]

Blumenberg argues that these existential frustrations led human beings to tailor their actions not toward taking part in a chance, merely possible, and uncertain dwelling in God's kingdom, but rather toward the creative project of self-assertion in the making of a world. Thus, self-assertion is proleptic and *poietic*. It both anticipates and creates through the self-legitimating character of its own standards.

can be seen in my essays, "The Necessity of Feeling in Unamuno and Kant: For the Tragic as for the Beautiful and Sublime", in *The Redemption of Feeling*: *The Religious Existentialists*, ed. Anthony Malagon and Abi Doukhan (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 103-115, and "Kantian Sublimity and Supersensible Comfort: A Case for the Mathematical Sublime", *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 43, no. 2 (2020): 24-34.

[1] Robert M. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization, and Modernity: The Blumenberg-Löwith Debate", *New German Critique*, 22 (1981): 76.

[2] Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism, and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 153. See also, Farrell, "The Thinning Out of the World", in *How Theology Shaped Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019).

3.1. A Critique of Belatedness

Robert Pippin infers from Blumenberg's legitimation project that "the likes of Horkheimer and Adorno were wrong to look for the 'dialectic' of Enlightenment within the concept of Enlightenment rationality; they could not have possibly understood that concept without the details of the dialogue out of which it developed" (Pippin 1997, 267-68). The concern here is with attributing the troubles of today as the remnant failures of the past. The past and present, their standards, their needs, and their problems are not uniform and commensurable. Pippin goes on to state that if Blumenberg's approach can be successfully defended, it "would help support some of what Richard Rorty has recently been saying about how we ought to read the story of the modern intellectual tradition" (Pippin 1997, 268 fn. 3). What Rorty finds so attractive in Blumenberg is that he is someone "whose upbeat history we can cite against those who revel in belatedness, and against those who fear that telling big sweeping *geistesgeschichtlich* stories will reinforce our bad old totalising urges".[1] *Geistesgeschichtlich* stories are wide-ranging historical narratives that aim to explain history according to a single organizing principle. But what is so bad with these kinds of *Geistesgeschichte* (history of ideas)?

In this context, "belatedness" is a term of art for not showing up at the time when help is needed. In other words, these kinds of stories are practically useless. Although it was Friedrich Nietzsche who introduced a critique against latecomers (*Spätlinge*) in modernity,[2] Rorty's mention of belatedness[3] is identified

[1] Richard Rorty, "'Against Belatedness'. Review of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* by Hans Blumenberg". *London Review of Books* (16 June 1983): 3-5. See, also, Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres", in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), esp. 58-60.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", in *Untimely Meditations*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 104. With Hegelians in mind, Nietzsche writes, "The belief that one is a latecomer of the ages is, in any case, paralysing and depressing: but it must appear dreadful and devastating when such a belief one day by a bold inversion raises this latecomer to godhood as the true meaning and goal of all previous events, when his miserable condition is equated with a completion of world-history".

[3] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 25: "Hegel's *Phenomenology* was the book which began philosophy's period of belatedness and anxiety, the one which set the task for Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida—the task of being something more than another ride on the same old dialectical seesaw".

most strongly in Hegel's philosophy of history, e.g., in the famous "owl of Minerva" (Hegel 1967, 11-12), that Epimethean bird which is all hindsight and thus "always comes on the scene too late" to give instruction to itself.[1] I have already tried to show how this critique can be defeated in section two of this paper, but we can also see how the charge of Hegelian belatedness was discarded by the so-called Young Hegelians, who were readers of Hegel's philosophy of history with an orientation toward the future, in displacing the symbol of the *tardy owl* that takes flight at dusk for an *early bird*, namely, the forward heralding cockcrow that instead announces "a new dawn".[2] Close readers of Blumenberg will have recognized this proleptic, Young Hegelian stance in his allusion to Ludwig Feuerbach's 'knowledge drive' (*Wissenstrieb*): "Even where the knowledge drive seems to be an interest in history, it relates to history as not a dimension of memory and preservation but rather an arsenal and onset of anticipations and projections".[3]

My own appraisal of the belatedness critique is less "reveling" in critical disdain, and allows for a more charitable clinical propedeutic that marks out a possible path toward corrective action, e.g., as found in Creon's interpretation of the Delphic report to an eagerly awaiting Œdipus, "Good news! For pain turns to pleasure when we have set the crooked straight".[4] Creon is, of course, first in line as an unaware messenger of doom, but his report that although Thebes might well be dying from a hitherto unknown crime, if it can be found out and redressed in time, belated though this knowledge arrives and action fulfilled, the city's future might be saved. In this more therapeutic sense, belatedness is also famously linked to Freud's theory of traumatic pathology and abreaction[5] as a kind of "deferred action" attributed to arriving late to an event—

[1] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 11-12.

[2] The Hegelian symbol of the 'cockcrow' is attributed to Karl Michelet, who attempted to diplomatically bridge the division between Old and Young Hegelians. See, Lawrence S. Stepelevich (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 4.

[3] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 440.

[4] This quote is from *Sophocles' King Œdipus*, W.B. Yeats' own translation for the modern stage. It is chosen here for stylistic preference. See *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, II: The Plays* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 370.

[5] Sigmund Freud, *On the Physical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena*, in James Strachey (ed. and transl.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 3 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962). Basically, a therapy for psychical trauma by reliving an experience through

i.e., a retrospective attribution.[1] As Freud puts it, the experience of belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) is over "how it is that an event which occurred so long ago (…) can persist in exercising its power over the subject[?]",[2] and again how

in the case of all the events which have become determinants of hysterical phenomena, we are dealing with psychical traumas which have not been completely abreacted, or completely dealt with. Thus we may assert that hysterical patients suffer from incompletely abreacted psychical traumas.[3]

For Freud, the belated reliving of a past event is a discovery of hidden lingering forces, thus producing a dilatory, better late than never, experiential awareness concomitant with an arrival of meaning.

In *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg does not specifically refer to the pathology of belatedness, but does he capture its Freudian connotation in that,

Discontent is given retrospective self-evidence. This is not what gives rise to or stabilizes a theorem like that of secularization, but it certainly does serve to explain its success. *The suggestion of a distant event that is responsible for what is wrong in the present—a suggestion with which the secularization theorem also presents us—is (not the only, but) an additional reason why the category of secularization is in need of a critique.*[4]

Not being able to break free from the past also means that the future cannot be free of the present. For Blumenberg, the secularization hypothesis has the effect of placing authority, responsibility, and accountability in a recursive loop in which the past world never collapses, and the future world never becomes, thus inescapably revolving around a carceral Möbius strip of history. In the next section, I discuss Blumenberg's theory of myth to argue that the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* exhibit these same attributes of hysterical belatedness.

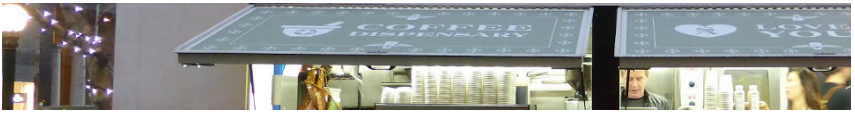
memory for cathartic ends: "Let us now consider the manner in which our therapy operates. It falls in with one of the dearest human wishes—the wish to be able to do something over again. Someone has experienced a psychical trauma without reacting to it sufficiently. We get him to experience it a second time" (39).

[1] See Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 1 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 356.

[2] Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, 35.

[3] Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, 38.

[4] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 118-19; my italics.



3.2. Self-Assertion and Myth

In his *Work on Myth*,[1] Blumenberg articulates the relationship between mythology and self-assertion. For Blumenberg, myth and self-assertion share a crucial characteristic of the modern age: while the risk of instrumentalizing reason is always extant, myth and self-assertion exhibit the desire to master reality by recognizing its own creative powers. By 'working *on* myth', as opposed to relying on the inherited 'work *of* myth', Blumenberg envisions human beings being summoned not only to the task of actively fashioning new myths, but also of 'developing' extant myths to suit *new needs*. Scholars will note that this insight was already extant in *Legitimacy*, where in a noticeable passage Blumenberg strongly anticipates what will emerge seven years later in Harold Bloom's masterful rendering of the 'anxiety of influence'[2] as the creative drive to strangle those whose powerful influence can serve to inhibit newness:

> Just as partially as in the field of theory, the idea of progress makes its appearance in the field of the literary and aesthetic argument with the tradition. Here it is not primarily the establishment of a continuous sequence of surpassings of what at each point has already been achieved but rather the comparison between the literature and art of antiquity, with its canonized exemplary status, and the output of one's contemporaries. Here the idea of progress arises from protest against the status of permanent prototypes as obligatory ideals. The *querelle des anciens et des modernes* (…) is the aesthetic analogue

[1] Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, transl. R.M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

[2] In 1973, the literary critic Harold Bloom coined the phrase in his book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1973). Briefly, Bloom posited the idea that poets, or, for our purposes, philosophers and thinkers, suffered a strained relationship with their masterful precursors. On Bloom's view, only the "Strong poets", i.e., those who are able to sublimate this anxiety into highly original works, can prevail over this anxiety and achieve creative renown. "Weak poets", by contrast, are merely capable of producing derivative products.

of the detachment of theory from the authority of [dominant precursors] (…) The disadvantage of the aesthetic model of progress, as is already made clear by the fact of the *querelle,* is the contestability and the controversial status of possible or actual instances of progress in this area; its advantage is the uncontested premise that here it is man, and man alone, who produces the realities in the aesthetic sphere, and hence would also be the agent of any progress that might take place in it.[1]

As an example of this quarrel between the ancient and the moderns, Blumenberg points to the work of Dante, who drew from the already dominant Homeric and Virgilian portraits of Odysseus (Ulisse) and

consistently 'further developed' [these myths] on the basis of the restlessness of [Odysseus's] curiosity about the world, the Odysseus who does not return home to Ithaca but rather undertakes the final adventure of crossing the boundary of the known world, sails through the Pillars of Hercules, and after five months of voyaging across the ocean sights a mysterious mountain and is shipwrecked.[2]

Blumenberg elucidates how, in the creative hands of Dante, Odysseus's shipwreck is not the result of divine retribution,[3] but rather his famous cunning and striving are in thrall to his unquenchable *curiositas*, a venial foible that prevents his final homecoming and lands him in the penultimate ring of *Inferno*.[4] Dante, Blumenberg avers,

leaves his Odysseus standing in twilight: the foolhardy venture (*folle volo*) does not lead to the sought-for discovery of an uninhabited world (*mondo senza gente*), but rather the rejoicing of the companions at the sight of the unknown land (*nuova terra*) dies amid turmoil and destruction.[5]

Similarly, Blumenberg understands Goethe's early poem *Prometheus*, which was adapted from an earlier eponymous fragmentary drama, as a thoroughly modern symbol of the human striving to break free from constrictive rules and

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 33.
[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 338. For a study of the nautical metaphoric of the shipwreck and its relation to reality, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, transl. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).
[3] Homer, *The Odyssey*, transl. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 283.
[4] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 1, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI.
[5] Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 339.

traditions, namely, the effort to celebrate humankind's power to create from unbounded freedom.[1] Goethe's ode is to the primogenitorial Titan, who offered human beings many goods and crafts, but none greater than the autonomy[2] to go forward unfettered from any previous standard, including himself,

> Here I sit, forming men
> In my image,
> A race to resemble me:
> To suffer, to weep,
> To enjoy, to be glad—
> And never to heed you,
> Like me![3]

For Goethe the Promethean viewpoint (*Absicht*) is firmly set in this world and turns away from any hint of preordained heavenly authority. Commenting on this perspective, Blumenberg considers,

> Think how difficult it would have become for Goethe to construct the most defiant lines of his ode if he had been referred to a Prometheus who had not made men after his own image but had only had to fabricate images after the image of someone else.[4]

Here Blumenberg calls attention to Goethe's own Promethean gift of myth-making, which itself was not dependent on dogmatism:[5]

> Goethe's (…) fundamental idea [was] that God would have had to arrange the world differently if he had been concerned for man. (…) Goethe's (…) self-discovery (…) leads to

[1] Note also Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, wherein Prometheus freed human beings from feeling tied to inescapable fate by removing their own power of forethought, which included the melancholy of foreseeing of one's doom, leaving in its place the gift of *blind hope*. See Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, transl. Philip Vellacott (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 28, line 250

[2] Walter Kaufmann draws a distinction between Kantian autonomy, based on unswerving obedience to rationally formulated universal laws, and Goethean autonomy that acts to, "enjoy and explore the passions without becoming their slave, to employ them creatively instead of either being dominated by them or trying to resist them". See Walter Kaufmann, *Goethe, Kant, and Hegel: Discovering the Mind, Vol. 1* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), 22.

[4] Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 393.

[5] Commenting on the creative affinity between Goethe and Prometheus, Rüdiger Safranski, *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art*, transl. David Dollenmayer (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), notes that the latter "does what authors also enjoy doing—forming men in his own image, though with clay rather than words" (116).

the disappointing realization that his metaphysical gesture promises no single meaning that could be inferred from a distant source or from a unique instance in which it was put forward.[1]

In other words, Goethe was attuned to the idea that while the world may not have purposes that are aimed *a priori* at our needs, we do have purposes *a posteriori*, individually and collectively. Therefore, the location of the means for the ends of human satisfaction is immanent, not transcendent, and Goethe's great inspiration from "Prometheus" is his placing pride of place on "self-reliant life".[2] The immanent, here and now, foci from poets like Dante and Goethe leads Blumenberg to argue that the advent of modernity finds human beings caring less about how things seem from the standpoint of old source standards, and instead channel their energies on how things can be known and achieved in new and unfamiliar circumstances in which the old standards prove inutile. Blumenberg's use of Goethe is, especially, a judicious choice to convey this modern condition, as shown through the frustration in the figure of Faust:

> Alas, I have studied philosophy, the law as well as medicine,
> And to my sorrow, theology, studied them all with ardent zeal,
> Yet here I am a wretched fool, no wiser than I was before,
> They call me Magister, even Doctor, and for some ten years now
> I've led my students by the nose, up and down, across, and in circles,
> All I see is that we cannot know! This burns my heart.[3]

Faust's vexation leaves him entangled in perplexing knots, but rather than keep toiling in such suffocating paradigms, he wishes to break free from the old regimes of knowledge. Although a cautionary, diabolical tale, Faust discarded the old standards because they could not suit his needs.

Consequently, Blumenberg explains how inherited myths, like inherited knowledge, are *refashioned* in a continual project of creation. Hence the *poietic* "work *on* myth", Blumenberg writes, "is real epigenesis",[4] and the innovation that mythmakers like Dante and Goethe exhibit is facilitated by the requirement to contravene prevailing wisdom: "A precondition for the Odysseus in the *Divina*

[1] Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 556.
[2] See Henry Hatfield, *Goethe: A Critical Introduction* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 34.
[4] Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 275.

Commedia (…) was that, for Dante, Homer was not inviolable".[1] For Blumenberg, mythmaking is a form of worldmaking and, like self-assertion, it does not treat inherited tradition as unbreakable because the making of a new world is not a re-making of an old world, but rather an attempt to re-make the world to suit newly arising needs:

> Only if we take into consideration the history of myth, to the extent that it is not primeval, will we be able to approach the question that we naturally ask: What after all does the disposition toward mythical ways of looking at things consist in and why is it not only able to compete with theoretical, dogmatical, and mystical ways, but actually increased in its attractiveness *by the needs they awaken?*[2]

The making of new myths is not a belated phenomenon. These narratives are spun as guiding threads to better grasp the age in which they are being fashioned. The mythic exploits of Achilles instructed the ancient Greeks in their own age in a way that is not accessible or applicable to future readers and admirers. Like the world in which they are born, myths are constructed by the emerging epochal needs that are being expressed through unique epochal narratives.

Consequently, Blumenberg's treatment of myth looks forward with self-affirmation at the start, while the same from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* looks backward with self-reproach.[3] Briefly, the authors of *Dialectic* argue that the paradigm shift shepherded in by Enlightenment was not without harmful effects, namely, the removal of mysterious and mythological aspects from the world, which become classified as distrustful: "For Enlightenment anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion".[4] This removal reveals that the mastery of nature and others is the desideratum of "instrumental reason", a term that is used by commentators rather than actually appearing in the book,[5] and leads to what the authors call, borrowing from Max Weber's own contri-

[1] Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 276.
[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 67; my italics.
[3] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).
[4] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.
[5] Adorno's coauthor Horkheimer has a greater claim for positing this popular term. See, e.g., Max Horkheimer, *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* (1947), published in English as *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

bution to secularization theories in his famous phrase,[1] "the disenchantment of the world".[2]

My first thoughts on this matter cast doubts on the phrase itself. The authors of *Dialectic* treat *instrumental* reason as *adjectival* to the noun, specifically, as a power that produces corrosive effects; however, any serious reader of Kant fully understands how this formulation fails to grasp how reason itself can be instrumentalized by a will aiming solely to "its *preservation*, its *welfare*, in a word its *happiness*", which would require no more than *instinct* from the human constitution.[3] Consequently, perhaps a better phrase would stress the past participle of the *transitive verb*, i.e., it would be *instrumentalized* reason. Hence, the focus of the phrase would fall on what was done to reason, rather than to a species of reason itself. However, putting these thoughts aside for another time, in *Dialectic* the movement from enchantment to disenchantment proceeds as follows. The world, once full of deities, becomes, to borrow a term from Heidegger, a standing reserve or stockpile (*Bestand*).[4] This disenchanted, thinned out space is no longer tolerant of its former *mythos*, and is characterized by a *logos* that

[1] See Max Weber, "Science as Vocation", in *The Vocation Lectures*, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 13, 30: "we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation.* That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends (…) Our age is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and above all, by the disenchantment of the world". See also Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), 124, for a genetic narrative of how the rationalization of the world and the elimination of magical thinking led to Capitalism operating free and untethered from any connection to its religious/magical precursors: "Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. To-day the spirit of religious asceticism (…) has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer". Blumenberg includes Weber's theory in the "forgetfulness of Being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*) camp, namely, with a group of thinkers, e.g., Freud, Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl, who posit accounts that "what is past and forgotten can have its own kind of harmful presence" (Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 116).

[2] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1-2.

[3] See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 4:395.

[4] See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, transl. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 17-27.

views objects (natural, human, theoretical, aesthetic, etc.) as ready materials for instrumentalized reason to manipulate. "Enlightenment", the authors aver, "is mythical fear radicalized",[1] and "the epic shows clear links to myth".[2] The linking of epic to myth suggests that both seek power and knowledge: "what epic and myth have in common [is] power and exploitation".[3] Consequently, the aim of myth is, consonant with the authors' portrait of instrumentalized reason, domination and captivity, which, because the employment of rationality is done by human beings, two-dimensional subjects are dissolved into one-dimensional objects that are enslaved, as Kant would put it, by heteronomous inclinations[4] capable of forming no more than a society of devils.[5]

The difference here between Blumenberg, Adorno and Horkheimer is telling. The exiled authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* draw from the "work *of* myth" to perpetuate a no-way-out, pessimistic critique using the Enlightenment-myth analogy,[6] while Blumenberg sees hope in the ability to "work *on* myth". Here one need only be reminded of the more optimistic employment of the philosopher's duty, *à la* Plato, i.e., to expose deficiencies in certain myths, which Blumenberg himself puts to propitious use in *Höhlenausgänge* (*Cave Exits*).[7] As Plato so skillfully works to convey in *Republic*, the climb up (*anabasis*) from the

[1] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

[2] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

[3] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 37.

[4] See Section II of Kant, *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant argues that human beings are capable of forming two kinds of commands, hypothetical imperatives or instrumental commands, and categorical imperatives or moral commands (WiA 4:414). The ability to form categorical imperatives is definitive of autonomous subjects. The authors of *Dialectic* argue that *instrumentalized* reason has so thoroughly dominated modernity that the latter kind of commands is lost on the subject, thus leading to a loss of the subject herself.

[5] A 'nation of devils' is composed of radically self-interested beings capable of following nothing but selfish inclination. See Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace", in *Toward Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, Peace, and History* ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), 90 (WiA 8:366).

[6] Horkheimer's turn to pessimism is well documented. See Peter E. Gordon's lucid explication of this grim resignation in *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2020), 70-79. See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, transl. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 114, who argues that "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds out scarcely any prospect for an escape from the myth of purposive rationality that has turned into objective violence".

[7] Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989).

cave requires an education in philosophy, which then obliges a return down (*katabasis*) not so much only to free the unphilosophical prisoners, but rather for expert hands to, upon pain of injury or even death, for fashion new, higher myths to suit the needs of, or times in which, we are either incapable or unwilling to make the upward climb toward truth. Blumenberg focuses on assessing ascensional imperatives to leave the cave, but it is precisely in the opposite journey, i.e., in a philosopher perhaps seeking *Höhleneingänge* (*Cave Entrances*), that bolster his mythopoetic hope in fashioning a better world. This is seen in Plato's argument that eventually a true philosopher must not stay above it all and "refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave [but, should instead,] guard and care for others [and, thus,] must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing the world dark".[1] A good society will require philosophers to form arguments, yes, but, because most people will not climb out of the cave, it will also require the expert authorization of "useful fictions".[2] As Jorge Luis Borges deferentially observes of this remarkable, polymathic blend, "Plato could do both".[3]

Plato was well aware of the power of myths to create worlds. The philosopher's return to the cave thus carries a double duty: one, relating to those still locked in ignorance of philosophy the experience of attaining knowledge, specifically the philosopher's duty to free his former fellows from the shadows that blind them to truth, even, as happened to his beloved Socrates, if it resulted in personal harm; the other, a duty to the ideas themselves, i.e., even if the attempt to manifest the intelligible is to aimed at those who refuse to engage in dialogue, thus requiring the philosopher to fashion new myths for the recalcitrant mobs. Indeed, this enduring story of the cave in Book VII of *Republic*, as well as the concluding 'Myth of Er', in Book X, which stresses the value of philosophy in choosing one's life, are not themselves 'works *of* myth', but rather are 'works *on* myth' by dint of being invented by Plato.[4] Blumenberg's reading of Plato

[1] Plato, *Republic*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 519d-520b.
[2] Plato, *Republic*, 382c-d.
[3] See Seamus Heaney, Richard Kearney and Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and the World of Fiction: An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges", *The Crane Bag* 6, no. 2, Latin-American Issue (1982): 75. See also Borges in Richard Burgin (ed.), *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Souvenir Press, 1973), 160.
[4] Indeed, Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, transl. Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: University of Chicago

speaks to how the skillful use of myth has application not only from out of the cave, but also, as one imagines the freed Platonic prisoner is now tasked, on discerning how to lift up others while himself avoiding injurious attack for the sake of society. His concluding thought on Plato's speleological metaphoric finds its most salient point on whether the ancient allegory can still suit our present needs.

Moreover, as we have seen in Blumenberg's use of Dante, himself an exiled intellectual for fear of being burned alive, his "work *on* myth" sheds light on a mythical figure's missteps—missteps captured in an incontinence to know at all costs. In contrast to Adorno's and Horkheimer's negative account of myth, which is about revealing too late the concealed ways that narratives dominate, order, and control, Blumenberg believes that if we are successful in creating the right myths, they will reveal to liberating consciousness the perils and dangers of a new and unfamiliar age. Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment reason via myth renders myths useless, as any attempt to guide the way forward will always be *belated*. In contrast, for Blumenberg the only way forward is through the creation of new myths that can navigate the rough tides and currents of the present time.

Consequently, Blumenberg's accounts of the work *on* myth and the self-assertion of reason relate not only how narrative and theoretical inconstancies are needed in order to ensure that the wheels of progress keep spinning, but also that inherited stories and wisdom ought not be viewed as sacrosanct. If received opinions should prove useless to addressing and redressing new or inherited problems, then they need to stand trial for their efficacy. As new arrays of ideas and beliefs come to overhaul the ones of the *ancien régime*, the transformation of conceptual schema ushers in a period of epochal change. One such shift is found in the epochal threshold between the medieval and the modern world, during which human beings ascribed to the world the infinite creative power previously reserved for God. This re-allocation of power does violence to the old relationship between God, man, and world. Indeed, as Elizabeth Brient points out,

Press, 1998), remarks that "it is important to note that in Plato, the term *muthologia*, which is connected at least once with the term *poiēsis* (…) designates not only 'myth-telling' but also 'myth-making'" (35).

The cosmos of the Middle Ages is a finite, well-ordered whole, a closed hierarchy, whose order and value (…) is granted by an infinite and benevolent God. In the transition to the modern age, the world comes to 'acquire' the divine attribute of infinite being, but only at the price of destruction of this ancient order.[1]

The destruction of the ancient order has the effect of bringing on the existential mode of *Unheimlichkeit* or what Heidegger[2] and Freud[3] called, respectively, 'unhomey' and 'uncanny': i.e., feelings of radical unfamiliarity or of being *not-at-home* in the world. That not feeling at-home in the world can serve to motivate building a world in which one can feel at home is also expressed in Hegel's philosophy, where in so many passages one reads that Spirit feels like "a wanderer in the desert craving for a mere mouthful of water" (Hegel 1977, 5), but that in this lack it "has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined" (Hegel 1977, 6). Spirit's feeling of alienation (*Entfremdung*) or of feeling estranged or split off from the world is, for Hegel, a necessary experience in its work toward reconciliation. Thus, the process of successive metamorphoses to complete itself will always require a sense of Spirit never truly feeling at-home in the world:

The standpoint of consciousness which knows objects in their antithesis to itself, and itself in antithesis to them, is for Science the antithesis of its own standpoint. The situation in which consciousness knows itself to be at home is for Science one marked by the absence of Spirit (Hegel 1977, 15).

The points being connected here between Heidegger, Freud, and Hegel is

[1] Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold of Modernity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 98.

[2] Heidegger uses the term to express *Nicht-zuhause-sein* or not-being-at-home. Used in this way, *Unheimlichkeit* is a state of mind denoting feelings of anxiety over alienation and unfamiliarity. For our purposes, man's unfamiliarity with his new metaphysical picture of the world. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 233.

[3] Recalling Friedrich Schelling's definition of *Unheimlichkeit*, Freud reminds us that the uncanny is a kind of making conscious of the unconscious, i.e., the name for everything that "ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light". For our purposes, the coming to light of the intensification of God's inscrutable transcendence. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, transl. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 224.

that the sense of unease, of unfamiliarity, motivates action toward its removal. Consequently, with feelings of certainty being disrupted and pictures of reality presenting themselves as indifferent and arbitrary to the human individual, Blumenberg tracks down this 'disappearance of order' (*Ordnungsschwund*) to, in general, late medieval nominalism, and, in particular, to the thoughts of William of Ockham. In what follows, I will focus on the relation between God, man, and world on the stage set by Ockham's thought to frame how the *Ordnungsschwund,* which caused "doubt regarding the existence of a structure of reality that can be related to man",[1] brought about the feeling of *Unheimlichkeit* that motivated the modern project of worldmaking.

4. The Ockhamite Origins of Modernity

Blumenberg's argument against Löwith depends on demonstrating how late medieval nominalists were joined in defending the idea of God's absolute power from any "immanent laws" of physical necessity.[2] God cannot be tied to the causal laws governing nature. Consequently, the created world comes to be understood not principally as an expression of God's omnibenevolence or of His omniscience, but rather of His omnipotence:

> The negative definitions of 1277 led to two centuries of debates in which the concept of God is defined by the attribute of omnipotence—and indirectly by the upsurge in criticism of omnipotence as the sole attribute, which anticipates the beginning of modernity.[3]

Here, Blumenberg is referring to the 1277 Condemnations which liberated natural science from theology and foreshadowed the rise of nominalism, and took place,

> When Etienne Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, condemned a list of propositions that as a whole reflected the conclusions of the thirteenth century's completed reception of

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 187.
[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 160-161.
[3] Hans Blumenberg, "The Excesses of the Philosophers' God", in *St. Matthew Passion*, transl. Helmut Müller-Sievers and Paul Fleming (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2021), 225.

Aristotle. Three years after the death of the classic author of High Scholasticism, Thomas Aquinas, his acceptance of the Aristotelian proof of the uniqueness of the world was condemned as a philosophical restriction of divine omnipotence.[1]

This idea of theological absolutism is perhaps the central factor supporting Blumenberg's concern over worldbuilding. Concluding with the "epistemological resignation", introduced by the medieval canonization of Ptolemy's geocentric model in *Almagest*, an uncomfortable acceptance that motivates "attention to the world",[2] the loss of confidence on previous models of physical reality moved concomitantly with a similar despondency and diffidence in God's redemptive plan. This undesirable but inevitable conclusion led human beings to view reality as a merely factual state of affairs. Blumenberg builds on this idea to produce a similar, though arguably more terrifying, picture of the arbitrary character of the world in Ockham's attempt to himself build on the thoughts of his predecessors, most notably John Duns Scotus, in elevating God's omnipotence to radical predominance, which implied the radically contingent nature of existence.[3] Blumenberg's explication of the Ockhamite influence on modernity is complex and subtle, but not very elaborate. As a supplement to Blumenberg's argument, I will note some of the central ideas held by Ockham on God's omnipotence.

Recall that God's absolute power has no necessary tie with nomological necessity. He can produce *Y* with or without need of *X*, and the lawful, causal structure of the created world does not interfere with His omnipotent agency. For God can choose at any time to override or bypass the natural order. He is, at any time, capable of interrupting the natural causal sequence of events and directly produce any given effect.[4] God is indeed the first and final cause of everything, but unnecessary metaphysical complications do not help us to

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 160.

[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 505.

[3] Scotus makes a distinction between the 'fact' of the world and its preordained 'possibilities' by asking the famous question: "Can God make things otherwise than he has ordered them to be made?" See John Duns Scotus, "Ordinatio I 44", in *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, transl. Allan B. Wolter (Washington, D.C.: O.F.M., 1986), 246.

[4] William of Ockham, "Editor's Introduction", in *Philosophical Writings*, transl. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), xx: "God can create or produce or conserve an accident without its substance, matter without form, and *vice versa*".

understand the natural world. Hence, on Ockham's view, theology (founded on God, necessity, etc.) and the natural sciences (founded on natural laws, contingency, etc.) must be separated. In other words, Ockham comes to the modern view that science cannot be theocentric.

4.1. Potentia Absoluta and Potentia Ordinata: Progress, not Providence

The world picture that emerges from Ockham's nominalism is one that is radically *contingent* on a Divine will. God's will is not bound by any nomological necessities that would somehow have influence on His actions. Subsequently, the natural, physical order of the world is not an absolute order, but merely an *ordained* order.

Hence, we ought to note that God's *potentia ordinata*, i.e., the way things arbitrarily *are*, is only one expression of His *potentia absoluta*, i.e., the way things *could be* at any given time.[1] Consequently, the world comes to be seen as not tied to God's creative power through any *necessary* relationship. Indeed, in terms of ontology, as much as this world *is*, it could just as easily *not be*. As Margaret Osler puts it, "The contingency of creation is the true meaning of Ockham's account of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. Everything other than God exists contingently. Since the world is not logically necessary, God equally could have chosen not to create it".[2]

As a result, an unlimited number of possible worlds[3] correspond to God's *potentia absoluta*, with God's *potentia ordinata* representing only the divine choice of one actual world out of an infinite number of choices. Moreover, it is futile trying to rationally account for God's creative choices.[4] For God's *potentia absoluta* not only releases Him from his own ordinances in the nomological order

[1] See Blumenberg, 1983: 153. Respectively, "[ordered or ordained power]" and "[complete, absolute power]".

[2] Margaret J. Osler, *Divine Will and Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 30.

[3] Blumenberg, 1983: 160-61: "To the *potentia absoluta* (…) corresponded an infinity of possible worlds, but no infinity of actual worlds was allowed to correspond to it".

[4] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 154: "Ockham's distinction between the *potentia absoluta* and the *potentia ordinata* does not alleviate the situation for rationality because although it does imply that

of things, but it also frees Him from the order of grace and human intelligibility. In the natural order, God's absolute power means that His actions need not be subordinated to His own laws, e.g., during the performing of miracles (which, by definition, is a contravention of natural laws). Although God created this world, He could easily choose to destroy it and create a radically different one, with a set of different natural laws that we could not imagine.

Moreover, while we have no choice but to abide by the rules for human salvation that God ordains, He is not obligated to keep to the promise of these rules. Conceivably, God can choose not to save people that follow His rules and save people who do not follow His rules. The fact that we do follow these rules gives us no purchase on salvation because of the opacity of the God-Mind. For example, commenting on the difficulty of interpreting the sparse details of God choosing to accept Abel's offering over that of Cain's in *Genesis 4*, Blumenberg writes, "The lovers of the unfathomable depths of the will of the divinity (who thus deserved to be called *deus absconditus*) have seen the expression of the will of this "concealed God", in the notion that He selects and rejects as He sees fit".[1] As I touched upon earlier, an awareness of God's inscrutable will and lack of knowledge over His creative choices led to the "disappearance of order" (*Ordnungsschwund*) which in late medieval human beings produced feels of the "uncanniness" (*Unheimlichkeit*) of being *not-at-home* in the world, their world being only a state of affairs, what Blumenberg calls merely "the 'facticity' of reality".[2]

Blumenberg's thesis against the secularization hypothesis argues that it was precisely this relationship between *Ordnungsschwund* and *Unheimlichkeit* that opened up new conceptual and existential possibilities: possibilities not having to do with God and the promise of His kingdom, but rather having to do with

once chosen, the *ordo* [order] will be observed, it does not provide any access to the contents of the chosen order". See also Richard A. Lee, "Pierre d'Ailly", in *A Companion to the Middle Ages*, eds. Jorge J.E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003): "As creator and lawgiver, God maintains the order that has been created. Just as we are bound to the laws God has established, even though we cannot further ground these laws in reason, so too we are bound to a natural order that has been established, even though that order is contingent and not further explicable by reason" (536-37).

[1] Hans Blumenberg, "Terra Inviolata", in *Care Crosses the River*, transl. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010), 82.

[2] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 138.

the active human project of the self-assertion of reason. The increasing intensification of God's transcendence and the self-assertion of reason changed the horizon of human possibilities not only in theory, but also in practice. Through their own needs, fears, efforts, and expectations, human beings literally changed the world into something new. Marcel Gauchet describes this groundbreaking transformation as follows:

> As God withdrew, the world changed from something *presented* as unalterable to something to be *constituted*. God having become Other to the world, the world now became Other to humans, in two ways: by its objectivity at the level of representation, and by its ability to be transformed at the level of action.[1]

Thus, the understanding of progress that was heralded in by human action became the characteristic of the modern age not as Löwith would have it, i.e., under the veil of secularization, but rather by the fact that it became all but impossible to choose the alternative of the salvation story. In other words, as soon as salvation became tied to the arbitrary will of God, its function broke down inside the old paradigm between God, man, and world. For these reasons, Blumenberg argues, human beings turned their gaze not towards heaven and the redemptive promise, but rather peripherally to the new mechanistic science which aimed to solve problems old and new, with greater emphasis on the *new*. Dynamic notions of progress, situated to solve the problems of this-life and this-world, the here and now, usurped the role once held by Providence, which held to static beliefs and useless applications.

5. Conclusion

Lowith's secularization thesis asserts that notions of progress in modernity *is like* Christian eschatology because, as Pippin puts it, "human history as a whole must have some redeeming point to it". However, what Blumenberg reveals in his skillfully developed response is that neither the modern age nor self-assertion can consider any such point as sacrosanct. What Löwith seems

[1] Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, transl. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 95.

to miss in his critique the philosophy of history is that the "redeeming point" of historical progress is not the end or goal, but is instead the new, hitherto unanticipated problems themselves that launch an age, whether or not they are solved. The legitimacy of an age is thus defined at the start, by its quests and pursuits.

Blumenberg shows that the desires of modernity are always shifting as problems, old and new, are put before a *poietic* human capacity to effect change in research programs of its own making, out of its own needs. The logic of Lowith's analogy, i.e., that modern notions of progress *is like* Christian eschatology, requires that the goals or accomplishments of reason guide both analogues and find legitimacy in the success of its goals, i.e., progress and eschatology are defined by their endpoints, which is certainly a condition of belatedness as a critique. Instead, however, Blumenberg exposes the false congruities of Lowith's analogy by arguing that we need not wait for belated confirmation of legitimacy, but rather that ages and epochs are defined by their starting points, i.e., the newly emerging needs and problems that require work toward their satisfactions, whether or not these efforts succeed: "The concept of legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but rather from the necessity of those accomplishments".[1] To recall a previous note in this essay of how Blumenberg interprets Dante's Ulisse as a refashioning of Homer's Odysseus, allow me to conclude by modifying Alfred Lord Tennyson's exhortation through old, doomed Ulysses, "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down"; however, we find the legitimacy of our actions not at the end of our journey but at the moment when we begin "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".[2]

[1] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 99.
[2] Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses", in *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 50.

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