Blumenberg, Heidegger, and the Origin of Mythology

A Critique of ‘Invisible Hand’ Models in Historical Explanation

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Glossary of Key Terms

**Myth:** In modern myth studies and anthropology, "myth" usually refers to *sacred myth*, including cosmogonic and other origin myths, as well as "sacred" stories with cultic status concerning the gods, which (in most primary cultures) were known and recited by persons with special communal status and used in connection with sacred rituals with a central place in social regulation, and so on. "Myth" used in this technical sense is distinguished from heroic legend, national legends, "profane" stories and tales (such as "fairy tales"), and fables, as well as from all "high literature" with named authors, including epic poetry, drama, and mythographic collections. Blumenberg, however, uses the term "myth" much more loosely, without regard to these distinctions, to refer to any "mythic" or legendary story-component, including new and altered ones that appear in much later mythographic, poetic, and dramatic sources. I will generally follow his usage in this paper. When I mean "myth" in the technical sense, I will use "sacred myth."

**Mythology:** In most ethnographic and anthropological literature, this term is used synonymously with "sacred myth." But in the Wallace translation of Blumenberg, it is used to designate *theories* of myth, such as those that try to account for the contents of various myths through psychological interpretation, linguistic interpretation, sociological interpretation, and so on. In other words, "mythology" (in this translation) means roughly "mythography" in the modern sense defined below. Since this is a confusing usage, however, I will use terms such as "mythographic studies" to indicate *theory of myth* in the broadest sense. Thus, where the term "mythology" appears, except in quotations from Blumenberg, it refers to "myth" in the usual primary sense.

**Mythography:** In its classical usage, this term designates the work of ancient "mythographers" or compilers of stories, such as Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid, who collected and wrote down orally transmitted myths and sacred stories as well as heroic legends, organized them into myth cycles, and often rationalized them with changes and interpolations. But more recently (as in William Doty’s seminal study, *Mythography*), the term has been used to refer to "the study of myths and rituals" in the broadest sense, including the more systematic theories of mythology we are familiar with, such as those of Frazer, Freud, Malinowski, Durkheim, Jung, Propp and Levi-Strauss. This newer usage arose because modern "ethnographers" like the Brothers Grimm, Frazer, and Lang also theorized about the traditional materials they collected. Thus ethnography now includes the writing down, collection and the study of oral legends and tales, and (in connection with primary cultures), oral myths and sacred rituals as well. However, "Mythography" in Doty’s broad sense refers to methodological reflection on the systematic hermeneutical approaches to myth advocated by ethnographers and others (such as psychologists, linguists, sociologists, and now, philosophers).

**Mythogony:** This is not a term found in mythographic theory, but is coined by Blumenberg to indicate the narrative quality of theories that propose to account for "the origin of myth." Thus is intended in a somewhat ironic or disparaging sense to indicate the difference between Blumenberg’s theory of myth’s function and a different kind of "theory" which seems to tell a kind of ‘origin myth’ for the contents of various origin myths. The terms thus reflects Blumenberg’s opinion that rival theories of sacred myth, and theories of the *in illu tempore* in particular, are themselves like mythic narratives, and thus do not really get behind the mythic to its supposed non-mythical sources.
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Introduction

In 1966, Hans Blumenberg began a minor revolution in the philosophy of history with the publication of his *Die Legitimatität der Neuzeit (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age)*. The ostensible aim of this massive work was to consolidate arguments in earlier articles in which Blumenberg had challenged Karl Löwith’s famous critique of modern conceptions of progress as "secularizations" of religious eschatology. But the argument Blumenberg presented has implications of a more far-reaching kind: his real purpose was to criticize the very idea of "secularization" as a paradigm of explanation in the history of ideas.

In response to Löwith, Blumenberg offers a substantially different account of the origin of the notion of "progress" and the different forms it assumed during the early modern period. But again, the real aim of Blumenberg’s analysis is not just to offer an alternative way to understand the emergence of modern ideas of human progress, enlightenment and improvement, but to put forward an entire paradigm of explanation for historical changes in ideas and culture -- an explanatory paradigm that will provide a general alternative to ‘secularization’ as a dominant model in cultural history. This larger project extended into Blumenberg’s next book, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, and is completed in his monumental 1979 book, *Arbeit am Mythos*, translated in 1990 as *Work on Myth*.

*Work on Myth* is even more original and far-reaching than Blumenberg’s previous works, both in its subject matter and hermeneutic approach. In this text, Blumenberg not only extends the historical model developed in the earlier books, but grounds it an interpretation of mythology. He thereby rings philosophical hermeneutics directly to bear on themes in mythographic theory, while

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1 *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, tr. Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1985): all references to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation LMA.

2 This is an especially fruitful combination, since it allows Blumenberg to connect ideas from philosophical debates about history and culture with twentieth century developments in psychology, anthropology, and sociology and the theories of mythology that have been developed along with these other social-scientific disciplines.
developing his own highly original interpretation of mythology and the continuing role of ‘the mythic’ in the development of human religion, culture, art, literature, and political institutions.

_Work on Myth_ shows us that fundamental questions about the structure, intelligibility, and explanation of ‘history’ in its widest Heideggerian sense -- as the growth of the human _lifeworld_ of meaning, institutions, rituals, practices, artistic monuments, traditions of idea and symbol, and the theories through which we understand all these -- ultimately converge with fundamental questions about the nature and significance of mythology in the dawn of human history. As I will suggest, Blumenberg’s development of this connection owes much to the German Idealist tradition, as well as to Heidegger and Mircea Eliade. In his discussion of Schelling, Ernst Benz notes that "Academic philosophy, it is true, still takes little account of the problems raised by mythology and the philosophy of mythology." Schelling’s insight was to see the possible _genetic_ relation between changes in myth form and inner alteration of ‘human spirit:’ thus his work still contributes something lacking in Freud’s exclusively sexual reading of mythic figures, "namely, the historical factor, an awareness of the relation between the development of mythology and the history of mankind."

In what follows, we will see how complex Blumenberg’s own relation to Schelling is in this respect. On the one hand, Schelling prefigures Blumenberg in holding that the "mythogenesis" in which mythic significance originates is a _displacement_: "Man was removed from his original standpoint and only then did mythology come into being." But on the other, as we will see, Blumenberg opposes Schelling’s thought that the content of mythology derives ultimately from a

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3See the "Appendix" to this paper for a direct argument for transcendental basis of this connection between theories of history and theories of myth in the apriori requirements of philosophy of history in general.


5Benz, ibid, p.209.

6Benz, ibid, p.211. In Blumenberg’s theory of myth as displacement from the "absolutism of reality," the terror of this experience has replaced the Fall in Schelling’s model.
kind of revelation, and insists that Schelling’s own conception of man’s ‘original standpoint’ is itself too *mythological*, and thus incapable of assuming the external standpoint from which the function(s) of mythology becomes accessible.

My main goal in this essay is to offer a kind of ‘Schellingian’ reply to Blumenberg: When Blumenberg describes the ‘original position’ out of which myth supposedly grows, his characterization simply makes this origin *profane* in the archetypal sense (the inversion of Schelling’s origin), and thus it remains dependent on precisely the kind of mythic significance that Blumenberg is trying to ‘get behind.’ It turns out, as Eliade predicted, to be impossible to *get outside* myth, or to assume such a perspective entirely external to mythic significance, from which an purely demythologized theory of myth can be proposed or evaluated.

Blumenberg’s interpretation succumbs to this familiar problem because he underestimates the subtlety of both mythological narrative and contemporary theories of myth. Blumenberg sees that any convincing philosophy of history must prove itself in an adequate account of the origin of mythology (or philosophical mythography), but as we will see, Blumenberg’s own theory of historical development in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and *Work on Myth* owes a large debt to the sociofunctionalist tradition in anthropology and ethnography. Ironically, Schelling was one of the progenitors of this movement. He wrote in his *Philosophy of Mythology* that myths and symbols were not simply invented, and have meaning as part of a process of consciousness lying beyond the intentions of their human creators: "Peoples and individuals are only instruments of this process, which they do not perceive as a whole, which they serve without understanding it." ⁷ From the beginning of the 20th century, there arose several systematic explanations of mythology as instrumental for various sets of latent purposes, both social and psychological. Other important studies in that period, which favored explanation in terms of expressive purposes, included

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Feuerbach’s theory of religion as a projection of human hopes and ideals, Rudolph Otto’s phenomenology of "the holy," and Ernst Cassier’s account of man’s "symbolic forms."

Unfortunately, it is only this early segment of the literature on mythology which has had time to influence philosophy, to become known to mainstream continental philosophers, and Blumenberg is typical here. In conceiving his own account of the function of mythology, Blumenberg follows the pattern (if not the content) of sociofunctionalist theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the expressive theories become his foils. Though he tests his theory against outdated adversaries, such as Cassier, Freud, Müller, and Otto, Blumenberg does not engage the enormous developments in mythography and folklore from structural comparativists such as Carl Jung, Paul Radin, Vladimir Propp, and Claude Levi-Stauss to contemporary historians and critics such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Fontenrose, G.S. Kirk, Wendy O’Flaherty, Alan Dundes, and Joseph Campbell, to name only a handful. Like Schelling, who in his time could not do better,\(^8\) Blumenberg focuses almost entirely on Greek mythology from Hesiod onwards, which is much too narrow a view to allow for any serious discussion of the far more expansive, advanced, and detailed analyses offered by different theories in modern comparative mythography. Blumenberg’s perspective on myth is thus too ‘classical’ to address ethnographic and mythographic theories of the contemporary period, which can be dated from the birth of the Bollingen Foundation and its (initially Jungian) research and publications projects in 1942.

Blumenberg’s project throughout his trilogy must be seen, then, in two parallel contexts: first, as a contribution to long-running debates in philosophy about the rational explanation of history, including issues such as the role of the human sciences, human individuality and finitude, historical interpretation, artistic expression, and the relation between meaning and tradition; and second, as a philosophical reflection on related debates in anthropology and mythographic theory. It must also be

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\(^8\)See Benz, p.219: "In the past hundred years, research in the history of religions has made great advances. At Schelling’s time inquiry, generally speaking, had been limited to the myths of Greek and Roman antiquity."
judged in these twin contexts, and in the second we will discover the weaknesses which should make us doubt its prospects in the first.

Together, then, mythographic theory before the 1950s and Blumenberg’s project in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and provide the context for an analysis of *Work on Myth*. My aim in the first part of this paper is to explain Blumenberg’s fairly complex interpretive model. I will begin by briefly reviewing (a) the model as it first emerged in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; (b) structural questions it raises about the possibility of universal ‘functions’ in history; and (c) its debts to "sociofunctionalism." On the basis of these analyses, we will be in a better position to understand (1) why Blumenberg extends his model to the question of mythology in the first place; (2) how the particular interpretation of mythology he offers fits with his overall "invisible hand" model of historical explanation; and (3) how Blumenberg’s account of the further evolutionary development of human culture is supposed to complete his model.

In the second part of the paper, I will explore a central aspect of Blumenberg’s theory, namely his interpretation of mythological "significance." While this interpretation is inspired by sociofunctionalist theories of anthropology, with their emphasis on latent meanings, it also has more explicit ties both to Wilhelm Dilthey’s poetics and to Martin Heidegger’s analysis of man’s existential relation to the "world" of meaning (in opposition to meaningless facticity). By arguing that mythology arose as a quasi-adaptive ‘response’ to the meaninglessness that man originally encountered in his environment, Blumenberg is able to build several of Dilthey’s and Heidegger’s ideas into his own functional interpretation of the "significance" of myth. However, on the basis of this analysis, we can also see that Blumenberg’s functionalist theory of myth commits him to relativize human "transcendence," creative imagination, and initiative in relation to the involuntary function that first makes a ‘world’ of significance for man. It follows inevitably from the type of explanatory paradigm Blumenberg has developed that the "transcendent" side of human nature is
fundamentally less "primordial" than the hostile reality which supposedly opposed human existence in its infancy.

In the third part of the paper, I will offer a series of criticisms of Blumenberg’s theory by focusing on this fundamental asymmetry between the transcendent or imaginative side of myth and its alleged ‘latent function,’ which according to Blumenberg is rooted in the alien terror of "reality."

I will also argue show that Blumenberg’s attempt to make this account sound Heideggerian is unsuccessful. Because Heidegger is unwilling to sanction any purely naturalistic derivation of human capacities for "understanding" and "projection," his analysis of Dasein retains a symmetry between the transcendent and factual sides of human existence that is incompatible with Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology, and provides a basis for challenging Blumenberg’s whole project.

On this basis, I will present three distinct but related criticisms of Blumenberg’s theory. First, I argue that the conditions involved in Blumenberg’s original "absolutism of reality" already imply some capacity for transcendent meaning as a precondition. Second, I argue that the "absolutism of reality" cannot stand outside and behind all mythic significance as its source, as Blumenberg intends, because this original experience is characterized entirely in terms of metaphors for the archetypally profane. In light of my own analysis of this archetype in an earlier paper, it becomes obvious that Blumenberg postulated original ‘state of nature’ is mythic through and through. Third, I critique Blumenberg’s attempt to distinguish his explanation of myth from what he terms "mythogonic" theories of myth. On close inspection, it appears that Blumenberg cannot make this distinction rigorous, which reinforces the suspicion that the priority he gives to the function of myth, as opposed to the significance of its contents, is untenable.

I will conclude by arguing that these three problems undermine Blumenberg’s interpretation of mythology in fundamental ways, as well as putting in jeopardy his attempt to rescue the modern idea of progress from Löwith’s secularization critique. Moreover, in the light of Blumenberg’s failure, it
appears unlikely that any *state-of-nature* theory would ever be able to entirely reduce mythology to a functional result of processes with purely naturalistic origins.

Part One: Blumenberg’s ‘Invisible Hand’ Account

I. Substance vs Function

In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg initially develops his own model for explaining epochal change in the history of ideas by inverting the "secularization" paradigm championed by Karl Löwith. However, Blumenberg’s ‘corrective’ is motivated not just by his immediate concern to refute Löwith, but by his sense that "propositions of the form ‘B is the secularized A’" have become so popular that the explanatory paradigm itself is taken for granted (*LMA*, p.4) He cites many examples in his first few chapters, such as: "The modern work ethic is secularized monastic asceticism; the world revolution is the secularized expectation of the end of the world" (ibid). Blumenberg is particularly worried by the "theological pathos" which Löwith’s thesis unintentionally brought about -- a pathos which in its most extreme form uses the secularization critique to justify "a spiritual anathema upon what has transpired in history since the Middle Ages" (*LMA*, p.3).

This has created the impression that at least one aim of Blumenberg’s counterargument is to justify modern secular institutions against religious critiques revitalized by the secularization thesis. But at least at the outset, Blumenberg claims to separate forms of historical *explanation* from any *evaluative* judgments they might precipitate. He makes this distinction to secularization theories as well:

Bear in mind also that the use of the expression [i.e. secularization] no longer implies any clear judgment of value. Even one who deplores secularization as

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the decay of a former capacity for transcendence does so with hardly less 
resignation than someone who takes it as the triumph of the enlightenment 
(*LMA*, p.4).

We may, for example, agree that concepts in the modern doctrine of the state are to be explained as 
"'secularized theological concepts'" (*LMA*, p.14), while still entirely approving their secular form.  
Blumenberg tends to equivocate on this point, however, since in several other places he suggests that 
‘secularization’ accounts usually are meant to imply the "illegitimacy of the result of secularization" 
(*LMA*, p.18).

Blumenberg is not objecting, then, only to Löwith’s thesis and its theological extensions, 
although "the idea of progress as a transformation of a providentially guided ‘story of salvation’" 
(*LMA*, p.5). remains his exemplar of a explanation-by-secularization. He is opposed to any historical 
arguments for a process of "secularization" that go "beyond the quantitative/descriptive" sense that 
includes, for example, discussion of how advances in state institutions and secular practices have 
replaced church institutions and religious practices. The objectionable secularization-arguments, on 
the other hand, are those which claim to explain the genesis of ideas, those "whose aim is the 
understanding of historical processes" (*LMA*, p.16). Blumenberg is careful to maintain this 
"difference between descriptive and explanatory uses" of ‘secularization’ in historical accounts 
because his critique is aimed at the former (*LMA*, p.9).  
and possibly also because his own theory 
refers to the possibility of acquiring ideas directly through simple empirical acquaintance.  

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10In one insightful discussion, Blumenberg even suggests that in Karl Barth’s "theology of crisis," secularization plays a 
paradoxical role: terrible as it is, secularization is approved since it clarifies the difference between the world and the 
transcendence of a divinity "foreign" to it, forcing the individual to choose (p.5-6).

11Thus he also says later, "There are entirely harmless formulations of the secularization theorem, of the type that can 
hardly be contradicted" such as "that the modern age is unthinkable without Christianity" (p.30).

12As we will see, this is part of the process in Blumenberg’s own counter-explanations for how the idea of progress 
originated; see p.30-31 for example.
What characterizes secularization as an "explanatory claim, as opposed to the merely quantitative statement and description of conditions" (LMA, p.13) for Blumenberg, is the belief that historical change can be explained as the modification of "substances" that provide a continuity in the (noematic) content of changing ideas. It is this assumption of continuous substances in history that makes it possible to claim that some modern ideas have a hidden meaning that undercuts them, a content which is misunderstood in them: "The genuine substance that was secularized is ‘wrapped up in’ what thus became worldly, and remains ‘wrapped up in it’" (LMA, p.17). For example, a modern conception of progress as the secularization of eschatology assumes that there is a religious idea-substance which remains self-identical when it is ‘secularized.’ Hence Blumenberg says,

I do in fact regard the secularization theorem as a special case of historical substantialism insofar as theoretical success is made to depend on the establishment of constants in history (LMA, p.16).

It is this notion of constant idea-substances, as Blumenberg sees, that makes it possible for secularization analyses to act as undercutting critiques: they imply that the result of a ‘secularization’ process is dependent on the original substance, which is its "condition of possibility" (LMA, p.17).  

Blumenberg’s opposition to this "substantialism" and to the type of explanation it makes possible is the genesis of his alternative conception of historical development. Within his first chapter, he cites Hannah Arendt’s thesis that modernity is defined by humanity’s "alienation" from the world as evidence that a more complex model is needed: Arendt at least shows that "the ‘worldliness’ of the modern age cannot be described as the recovery of a consciousness of reality that

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13I introduce the term "noematic," which Blumenberg does not use, to indicate the relevance of the phenomenological conception of intentionality here. Blumenberg seems to accept that "ideas" in history do have something like the two-part structure of an eidetic form or function with a content -- although he wants to divert attention from the latter to the former.

14In Heidegger’s terms, the ‘secularized result’ thus appears as a kind of "deficient mode" of its original substance -- and Blumenberg is quick to point out the notion of substance implied in Heidegger’s argument that humanity’s everyday understanding of Being is just such as deficient mode of the authentic self-understanding possible for it.
existed before the Christian epoch" (LMA, p.8). Thus the Renaissance was wrong in assuming that "the new concept of reality" forming in the modern age could be understood as "the original constitutive substance" of an older classical world-view "come back to light, undisguised" (LMA, p.8). This example illustrates the notion that identical idea-substances are not carried over from era to era in different forms, recovered, etc. This criticism, however, does not commit Blumenberg to a completely ‘historicist’ conception of history as a series of epochs each with their own institutions and ideas, without any overall unity. Rather, against the preconception of "constants" which "bring a theoretical process to an end," (LMA, p.29) Blumenberg argues that the sought-for continuity can only be found on the level of the (noetic) forms or functions in which substantially non-identical contents appear.

We can see how this alternative is supposed to work by briefly considering Blumenberg’s response to Löwith’s analysis of modern ideas of progress as a secularization of eschatology. Blumenberg argues (1) that eschatology involves a transcendent event entirely heterogenous to historical time, whereas progress envisions immanent development within history (LMA, p.30); and (2) that eschatology is reduces all independent ethical standards to arbitrary divine voluntarism, whereas the enlightenment concept of progress provides both an assurance of historical development and a moral basis for critiquing secular time (LMA, p.31-32). Little weight can be given to these responses to Löwith, however, because as I have shown elsewhere, they depend on a reductive and one-sided misinterpretation of eschatological beliefs and their role in the history of political ideas.  

Part of Blumenberg’s argument that progress cannot be a secularization of eschatology thus involves

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15See my essay, "The Essence of Eschatology: A Modal Interpretation," in Ultimate Reality and Meaning, Vol. 19.2, (September, 1996), 206-239, especially §§II, VI, and IX. As I point out (p.236), Blumenberg’s interpretation of eschatology is one-sided in a way that favors two of its essential features while downplaying two others that make Löwith’s secularization thesis harder to dismiss. My analysis implies that the late medieval sense of eschatology as an amoral and utterly criterionless divine power which Blumenberg sees as setting the context for the emergence of modern progress is at best a degeneration of the real meaning of eschatology, like contemporary millenialist perversions. But Blumenberg takes this particular deficient conception of eschatology as the paradigm.

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presupposing a caricature of eschatology that is tailored to contrast with the enlightenment ideal. The other part of the argument is more persuasive: Blumenberg shows demonstrates that several experiences beginning in the early modern age themselves presented examples of a ‘benign’ kind of progress without utopian pretentions. For instance, "One such experience is the unity of methodologically regulated theory as a coherent entity developing independently of individuals and generations" (LMA, p.31). There are other examples with even less built-in theoretical content: for instance, the experience of a very simple kind of progress in astronomy "with the increased accuracy it gained as a result of the length of temporal distances" (LMA, p.30).

This might give the impression that Blumenberg’s alternative is just a higher-order form of empiricism: a notion of progress free from religious content seems to be derived inductively from several types of experiences in which progress is easily observable. As Blumenberg suggests, benign progress becomes "the highest-level generalization" from these experiences (LMA, p.30-31), including not only those in science, but also the Renaissance experience of being able to create art perceived as having equal or greater "validity" with respect to classical models previously viewed as absolute.  

But in Part II of the Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Blumenberg argues that this modest modern idea of "possible progress" not only emerged from new experiences -- it emerged in response to a critical problem created "by the overriding emphasis in the late Middle Ages on the theme of divine omnipotence." When late medieval nominalism envisioned God’s will as involving a capacity for free decision superior to any determining "reasons," then "the finite world becomes totally

16For a summary of this point, see The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Translator’s Introduction, p.xviii.
17The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Translator’s Introduction, p.xviii
18In his The Great Chain of Being, Arthur Lovejoy describes in more detail how different aspects of this problem resulted from "the Augustinian insistence on the primacy of the divine will in the constitution of reality" (p.158). See, for example, his discussion of Samuel Clarke’s theology, p.163.
According to Blumenberg, this result created a need which the new idea of progress met by re-establishing the simple possibility of human "self-assertion against the uncertainty imposed on knowledge by the overwhelming heterogenous theological principle" (LMA, p.34). The concrete possibility of initiative-taking implied a real possibility of modest progress, without depending on divine providential will that was supposed to give an overarching meaning to history but could no longer fulfill this function.

Blumenberg alludes to this argument in his discussion of eschatology when he says "when the time had come for the emergence of the idea of progress, it was more nearly an aggregate of terror and dread" than of hope (LMA, p.31). This constitutes one of Blumenberg’s alleged disanalogies between eschatology and progress, but it also has another point: to suggest the nature of the problem to which the new idea of progress responded. As Blumenberg says, "Where hope is to arise, it had to be set up and safeguarded as a new and original aggregate of this-worldly possibilities" against a divine eschatological power which had become utterly arbitrary (LMA, p.31).

In this example, we see how continuity from one epoch to the next is explained on the functional level, rather than by the identity of historical substances or contents. In Blumenberg’s model of historical development, new conceptions arise to answer problems created in immediately antecedent periods. Innovations thus acquire a functional significance from solving the problems or questions in response to which they arose.

II. Blumenberg’s ‘Evolutionary’ Model

In his Work on Myth, Hans Blumenberg’s explanation of mythology parallels his attempt in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age to account for modern conceptions of enlightenment and progress.
without recourse to Löwith’s "secularizations" of religious concepts. Because the same basic pattern of explanation is employed in both works, there is a direct analogy to be drawn between the central arguments.

The late medieval problem of world contingency created by extreme dependence on a divine power whose will transcends all limits is strikingly similar to the intolerable ‘initial state’ which Blumenberg hypothesizes in order to explain the functional genesis of mythology: In both cases, then, Blumenberg suggests that new ways of defining human potentials and conditions of existence arose in reaction to severe problems created in the directly antecedent historical context. In both cases, the new conception in effect ‘answers’ a question that has arisen from a crisis in immediately prior conditions. In such a model, moreover, the innovative content is thus distinct from the formal role it first plays, and in time, the two may even be separable. As Robert Wallace acknowledges, this historical dynamic of problems-solutions provides the basis for "the distinction between content (or ‘substance’ and function”) that is central to Blumenberg’s explanatory strategy in both books." 20

In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the result of this distinction between form/function and content/substance is a general conception of historical change which is neither a "teleological" philosophy of necessary progress toward an ultimate utopian end, nor a "historicist" conception. On this model, as Wallace says, the "problems or questions" established in an earlier age do not simply vanish when crises have brought about great shifts in thinking and made new problems central. 21 Rather, the problems central to previous ages can remain as "residual needs" for answers even after the ideas which originally served in the role of answering them have been eclipsed (*LMA*, p.65). Thus, in the medieval period, "theology created new positions in the framework of statements about

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20 *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Translator’s Introduction, (p.xvi-xvii).

21 *ibid*, p.xx
the world and man" which could only be satisfied by appeal to "transcendent sources." As a result, in the early modern period,

What mainly occurred...should be described not as the transposition of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the reoccupation of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated (LMA, p.65).

Using this model, Blumenberg explains the more extreme humanist notions of "inevitable progress" which dominated Enlightenment philosophy of history, not as secularizations of eschatological ideas, but rather as the result of late attempts to answer the question which eschatological ideas had formerly satisfied. As Wallace summarizes Blumenberg’s lengthy argument on this point:

..the legitimate modern idea of ‘possible progress’ was distorted and largely discredited as a result of its being forced to "reoccupy" a "position" that was established by medieval Christianity (the position of an account of history as a whole). 22

Perhaps like Heidegger’s Seinsfrage, this question of an embracing or complete meaning for history could no longer be answered by eschatology, and so the new idea of progress was drafted to fulfill this older function. Whatever we ultimately think of this ingenious alternative to Löwith’s analysis, it shows that for Blumenberg, ideas initially generated in answer to one set of problems (and thus adapted to the role this set defines) can be ‘transferred’ anachronistically to serve in other leftover roles or ‘positions’ -- such as the need for something which provides the meaning of "the totality of history" (LMA, p.48). 23 Functional positions thus operate at two distinct explanatory levels for Blumenberg: new problems arising from old contexts explain the derivation of new ideas,

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22ibid, p.xxi.

23Thus Blumenberg takes eschatology to be defined by this ‘hierophantic’ or cosmological function of giving a total meaning to temporal being. My analysis in "The Essence of Eschatology," op. cit., shows that this is only half-right, since the constitutive soteriological significance of eschatology does not involve making shared profane temporality intelligible or giving it a meaningful shape. Instead, as I demonstrate, the uniquely eschatological sense of ‘final possibility’ results from an overlap of the earlier cosmological function Blumenberg identifies and a soteriological function motivated by the inward discovery of ethical differences between good and evil.
and the problems of older contexts explain why the contents of these new ideas may be distorted by being forced to play roles for which they are inappropriate.

The idea of ‘reoccupation’ says nothing about the derivation of the newly installed element...what was laid hold of was the independently generated idea of progress, the authentic rationality of which was overextended in the process...The idea of progress is removed from its empirical foundation...and is forced to perform a function that was originally defined by a system that is alien to it (LMA, p.49, my italics).

It is the distinction between the two dynamic processes driven by functional positions, then, that allows Blumenberg to ‘invert’ the picture created by secularization accounts. These two functional processes provide a way of accounting for continuity in history over epochal change in general, and they suggest a ‘theory of error’ to explain why secularization analyses seemed so attractive to people. As Blumenberg argues,

The only reason why ‘secularization’ could ever have become so plausible as a mode of explanation of historical processes is that supposedly secularized ideas can in fact mostly be traced back to an identity in the historical process. Of course the identity, according to the thesis advocated here, is not one of contents but one of functions. In fact, it is possible for totally heterogenous contents to take on identical functions in specific positions in the system of man’s interpretation of the world and of himself (LMA, p.64).

When we take this ‘function-substance’ distinction together with the two dynamic processes Blumenberg explains through the genesis and persistence of functional positions, Blumenberg’s model for development in the history of ideas might be described as ‘evolutionary’ in a broad sense. Like evolutionary adaptions, new ideas arise as ‘solutions’ to the problems that form their immediate context -- problems that themselves arose out of internal crises in solutions to earlier problems, and so on. Along with this kind of development goes a "continuity of history across the epochal threshold" which "lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of

\[24\text{As David Ingram puts it, for Blumenberg, "some minimal continuity -- the functional reoccupation of identical positions by successive epochs -- is a transcendental condition for the possibility of experiencing historical change in general" ("Blumenberg and the Philosophical Grounds of Historiography," History and Theory, XXIX, No. 1, p.2.). The Kantian sound of this requirement is, I think, not accidental.}\]
problems" (LMA, p.48). We receive from tradition the questions which played crucial roles in ages directly preceding our own. As a result, just as species will retain vestigial traces of organs (the appendix, miniature gill-spots etc.), in history, certain problems will continue to define "positions" that need to be "reoccupied" by potential answers "even when an epochal change dissolves the context in which they originated." 25

This analogy with evolutionary theory is not perfect, because there is nothing in biological evolution that corresponds very well to answers fit for one problem being misused to answer other problems -- for even when biological adaptions arising from one set of circumstances are employed to meet new needs, there can be no such thing in natural selection as needs or pressures that ‘remain’ after their immediate environmental cause is removed. 26 But the analogy is suggestive, in any case, when trying to grasp how Blumenberg’s model avoids the teleological paradigm for historical development observed in Voltaire, Comte, Hegel, and Herder, while still offering an alternative to the ‘secularization’ paradigm. 27

III. Structural Implications: Original ‘Positions’

Blumenberg’s model and his account of how ideas can be forced into roles not suited for them has several important implications relevant for understanding his larger project in Work on Myth. First, we should note its similarity to Kant’s argument in the Critique of Pure Reason that by its own internal logic the faculty of pure reason necessarily extends itself to concepts for which it can have

\[\text{\textsuperscript{25}}\text{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Translator’s Introduction, p.xx}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\text{Such a “pressure” would not find a basis in any of the three basic causes of adaptions identified by Julian Huxley (i.e. inorganic environment, organic environment, and internal adjustment). See Marston Bates, The Nature of Natural History (Princeton University Press – Science Library), p.206.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{27}}\text{In his comments on these Enlightenment thinkers, in fact, Blumenberg suggests that Hegel’s attempted to join the Enlightenment and Christian conceptions of history “in such a way that the identity of reason realizing itself in history can still be seen to be confirmed by a subterranean constancy of the realized ideas” (LMA, p.49-50). The suggestion is that by rejecting substance-identities, we can avoid both the secularization and teleological paradigms, since the latter also depended ultimately on a substance-based continuity.}\]
no corresponding objects, 28 thereby creating "transcendental illusion" which "does not cease even after it has been detected and its invalidity clearly revealed by transcendental criticism." 29 Despite his promise to separate explanatory and evaluative judgments, in Blumenberg’s own descriptions he cannot avoid implying the illegitimacy of functional ‘positions’ which have persisted beyond the point of their original corresponding idea-substances: thus he speaks of "the excessive longevity of a system of questions that extends across a change of epochs" (LMA, p.65, my italics). He argues that "what drives reason to overextension" (as in cases such as "inevitable progress") is "its inability to shake off inherited questions" which it cannot possibly answer, since these questions originated in theology (LMA, p.48):

Modern reason, in the form of philosophy, accepted the challenge of the questions, both the great and the all too great, that were bequeathed to it (LMA, p.48).

Against Löwith, the implication is clearly that the solution to the excesses of secular humanism is not to ‘unsecularize’ idea-substances from an earlier epoch, but to remove the pressure of the questions themselves, which are inappropriate anachronisms in the modern age. 30 At one point, Blumenberg goes so far as to suggest that when a question has continued beyond the time when "the credibility and general acceptance" of its original answers has dwindled due to internal inconsistencies, it may eventually "be possible to destroy the question itself critically" (LMA, p.66).

Blumenberg has moved away, then, from Kant’s notion that certain transcendental ideals are the result of inevitable overextensions from which reason can never free itself. In his model, moreover,

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28Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, tr. Norman Kemp Smith, p.327 (introduction to "The Dialectical Inferences of Pure Reason").

29Ibid, p.299 (Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic: "Transcendental Illusion").

30In one instance, Blumenberg even suggests his approval for the positivist extension of Kant’s critique into a program of showing the "meaninglessness" of metaphysical questions left over from medieval theology: he complains that the reason vestigial questions retain their force is that "Every attempt at resignation with respect to the unknowable then meets with the reproach of being ‘positivist,’ or whatever other catchword for that reproach may be convenient" (LMA, p.48).
it appears (on first examination) that not only vestigial questions but all "functional positions" are historically contingent. Thus he argues, for example, that the process in Christianity which eventually led to the crisis in the late medieval period itself began when ideas indigenous to Christianity were forced to reoccupy the role that had been played by "the great cosmological speculations of Greek antiquity" (LMA, p.65). The model Blumenberg is developing in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age seems to imply that even the problems or questions created by an era will be rooted in previous "reoccupations" or crises in yet earlier periods. As he result, he concludes:

We are going to have to free ourselves from the idea that there is a firm canon of the ‘great questions’ that throughout history and with an unchanging urgency have occupied human curiosity and motivated the pretension to world- and self-interpretation (LMA, p.65).

By saying this, Blumenberg sets himself against other theorists who have used great questions or ‘positional roles’ to explain historical developments in ideas, but in ways that oppose historicism rather than strengthen it. Theorists following Husserl, in particular, have used the model of ‘great questions’ or perennial problems to show that philosophical thought, at least in its purest form, can transcend the limitations of weltanschauung, both allowing us to understand the significance of ancient authors, and, more importantly, to see the very roots of reason. Thus Leo Strauss, the greatest exponent of this view, says of Aristotle:

...But whatever one might think of his answers, certainly the fundamental questions to which they are the answers are identical with the fundamental questions that are of immediate concern for us today. Realizing this, we realize at the same time that the epoch which regarded Aristotle’s fundamental questions as obsolete completely lacked clarity about what the fundamental issues are.

Far from legitimizing the historicist inference, history seems rather to prove that all human thought, and certainly all philosophic thought, is concerned with the same fundamental themes or the same fundamental problems, and therefore that there exists an unchanging framework which persists in all changes of human knowledge of both facts and principles...If the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical limitations or of grasping something trans-historical. \(^{31}\)

Initially, Blumenberg’s model of changing functional positions, or roles concepts are needed to fill, seems to be the historicist polar opposite of Strauss’ theory of history. But on closer inspection, Blumenberg’s objection to an absolutely fixed canon of fundamental questions of the kind Strauss posits does not necessarily commit him to assert the complete contingency of all functional positions. Blumenberg is too insightful to reintroduce simplistic historicism at the level of functions or ‘positions:’ he knows that they cannot all be contingent or context-relative. The reason why there must be universal questions or ultimate functional roles in the history of culture is apparent from two questions prompted by the structure of Blumenberg’s own theory.

First, unlike the metaphysical substances that once figured in cosmological arguments, human history seems to have a limited extension into the past. Even if we extend it (as we must) to include the very earliest forms of identifiably ‘human’ activity that paleoanthropology reveals to us, there comes a point within the biological time-frame of homo sapiens where the first traces of what we recognize as "culture" cease, or at least fade off. There can be no infinite regression, then, in the derivation of functional ‘problems’ from earlier crises in answers to yet earlier questions, and so on. At the beginning of the chain there must be a set of original problems and/or original idea-contents that are not derived from anything antecedent in "history" itself. These original ‘moments’ must have non-cultural causes, either in entirely natural contingencies or in transcendent intervention. Any problems or functional ‘positions’ present in this very first stage of culture seem to have a certain priority, if not perennial significance. Whether or not they continue forever as Strauss says, original problems or original idea contents which give rise to problems (whichever came first), would certainly condition all later developments even on Blumenberg’s complex model.

Second, whether or not there could be an infinite regression in "history," Blumenberg’s model has to face the following question: what kind of historical development could remove our access to apparently transcendental ideas (such as eschatology), but not also remove the need which maintains
the ‘positions’ as ‘positions’ after their time, as it were? On Blumenberg’s model, some such imbalance in historical effects is required to account for very possibility of ‘forced reoccupations’ of a religious position by inherently secular contents not suited to it. It is understandable how a crisis at the end of one era could provoke the rejection of ideas that had fulfilled crucial roles up to that point, but why would the same crisis not also remove the sense of urgency surrounding the roles themselves -- unless certain functional ‘roles’ (certain "timeless questions") are essential to human reason and/or culture as such, in much the way Strauss thought all perennial problems are.\textsuperscript{33}

The lack of an adequate answer to this question puts Blumenberg’s arguments against opponents such as Löwith and Strauss in danger. For example, to defend against the suspicion that secular modernity inevitably leads to distortive "secularizations" such as the belief in human-initiated utopian progress and ‘secular’ eschatologies (in Marxism, fascism, etc.),\textsuperscript{34} Blumenberg must hold that the question of "the meaning and pattern of world history as a whole" (as Wallace calls it) persists only contingently rather than necessarily. For if the question of the meaning of history -- the question once answered by eschatology -- really persists because it is linked to the very conditions in

\textsuperscript{32}For example, if we are not persuaded by Blumenberg’s explanation that God’s power became too overwhelming, we might substitute our own speculations: perhaps the horrors of 20th century wars combined with a vast increase in our awareness of suffering because of modern media have to a widespread sense that the old theological answers to the "problem of evil" are inadequate and that consequently religious faith involves self-deception.

\textsuperscript{33}Blumenberg sometimes writes as if he thinks that in this debate against Husserl and Strauss, he has an ally in Heidegger’s existential conception of history and deconstruction of metaphysics. This, however, implies a misunderstanding of Heidegger’s real position. For Heidegger, the \textit{seinsfrage}, the question of the Meaning of Being, is \textit{precisely} the ultimate fundamental question or ‘position’ whose attempted answers displace one another in time. While the significance of this question can be covered over, it can never be superseded: necessarily, some concept always functions as our tacitly accepted notion of ‘being.’ Equiprimordial with this function is the fundamental question of the meaning of Dasein. By pursuing an answer to the former question through the latter, Heidegger reveals his deep sympathy with Löwith’s belief that modern metaphysical ideas are secularized, degenerated, levelled off answers that are only possible when the highest meaning of the questions themselves have been profaned. Heidegger’s interest in reviving the transcendental significance of scholastic metaphysical questions, as well as his belief that we can think ourselves into the worldviews of men like Parmenides and Heraclitus, should show his agreement with Strauss on the transcendence of human reason. Far from denying this trans-historical capacity, for Heidegger the ‘deconstruction of metaphysics’ is possible only in \textit{virtue} of it.

\textsuperscript{34}Paul Tillich illustrates this view, for example, when he describes "idolatrous" faiths as those in which inherently finite and non-ultimate contents such as "nation" or technological progress are made objects of misplaced "ultimate concern" (see his \textit{Dynamics of Faith}, chapter 1: "What Faith Is").
which human culture originated, and so remains unavoidable and unremovable by criticism, then the secularization model is right. Because secular modernity is in principle unable to answer this fundamental question with contents appealing to transcendence, and yet the ‘position’ formed by this question is inexorable, it would be impossible in principle for the modern world ever to avoid forcing its supposedly ‘benign’ notion of progress to play the apocalyptic “inevitable” progress.

It is for this reason that, as Wallace notes in his own analysis, Blumenberg presents ideas such as "inevitable progress" as "resulting from attempts to meet ‘needs’ that are not rational, are not humanly universal." 35 For if the functional position once held by eschatology is universal or perennial, then the only alternative to religious eschatology will be distortive reoccupation of the eschatological position. Thus Blumenberg’s entire argument in defense of the modern age unravels if the ‘eschatological position’ turns out to be essential to human culture, a fundamental component of historical consciousness itself. 36

But as we saw, the inevitability of some "humanly universal" functional positions is already implicit within Blumenberg’s theory. Wallace should not just assume, then, that by separating the modern notion of progress from the ‘functional position’ it has been forced to reoccupy, Blumenberg has adequately shown that the modern age can dispense with the eschatological position 37 as "not humanly universal." To demonstrate decisively that the ‘eschatological position’ is not among the original and universal ‘positions,’ but remains historically contingent, Blumenberg would have to show that the initial conditions which began series of historical changes explained by his model

35The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Translator’s Introduction, p.xxvi; my italics.

36For in that case, Blumenberg’s distinction between benign progress and inevitable progress would be analytic only, and without practical significance. In response to him, we could maintain that the modern concept of progress is a secularization of eschatology, because by cutting off access to the transcendent, the world view of the Enlightenment entails that some secular idea not fit to play the role must distortively reoccupy the eschatological position, since that position must be filled. Thus the hubris and danger involved in notions such as "inevitable progress" and human-initiated political eschatologies is integral to secular modernity and must be corrected.

37Wallace does take this for granted when he argues, on Blumenberg’s behalf, that "the notion of progress as a necessary and inevitable process is certainly not essential to human self-assertion," nor to "the modern age" itself (LMA, Translator’s Introduction, p.xx).
exclude eschatology. In place of this question of final or ultimate meaning, he must posit other ‘positions’ as original and universal, and explain how the needs apparently satisfied by cosmogonic and eschatological myths are derivative from these.

By its own logic, then, the model Blumenberg develops in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age implies the point of departure for the more comprehensive theory developed in Work on Myth. To begin the historical series, Blumenberg postulates the "limit-concept" of an original ‘problem’ that did not itself arise out of any cultural solution to an earlier problem (WM, p.xviii). Mythology will then be the original ‘solution’ to this first and most primordial ‘problem,’ which Blumenberg calls "the absolutism of reality."

IV. Cognitive Implications: Latent Functional Significance

In describing the explanatory model which Blumenberg develops in his The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, we have focused on how its basic concepts and dynamic processes together form an ‘evolutionary’ account -- an account which remains incomplete until Blumenberg eventually applies it to questions concerning the very origin of human culture. But to understand his answer to these questions, we also have to consider the cognitive side of his model, i.e. the way human consciousness of meanings are located and operate within different parts of it. Because in Blumenberg’s explanatory model, ideas and cultural institutions in every epoch are always motivated and accompanied by inherited functional ‘positions,’ they are always involved in layers of functional significance, not all of which may be immediately apparent.

In this respect, Blumenberg clearly comes out of a tradition of "functionalist" treatments of cultural institutions, including mythology, which was created by the pioneering work of anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and sociologists such as Emile Durkheim. As

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William Doty notes in his revealing discussion of "Sociofunctionalism," the key to their approach was to assume that the "real" meaning of myths and rituals is never transparent in their content, but can only be grasped in unacknowledged social and political purposes they serve, such as providing a social "charter" for society to justify its traditional hierarchies, producing communal solidarity and loyalty, supporting the society’s highest values by expressing them in a projected transcendent realm, etc. The same point is emphasized in a distinction noted by the philosopher of science Wesley Salmon in his discussion of functional explanation:

The influential sociologist R. K. Merton (1950, 1957) also advocates functional analysis in the study of human institutions. He distinguishes carefully between latent function and manifest function. The rain dance has the manifest function of bringing rainfall...it has the latent function, however, of promoting social cohesiveness in times of distress...In such cases, the latent function explains the survival of a practice that fails miserably to fulfill its manifest function.

We should recognize that Blumenberg’s own explanation of myth is much broader than the kinds of accounts advanced by the earlier generation of "sociofunctionalists," whose arguments emphasized how the "individual meanings of myths and rituals" differ from one local context to another. Blumenberg, on the other hand, tries to explain what Wallace calls the one "ultimate human function of myth" (WM, p.xviii) in terms of the primordial and universal ‘context’ that underlies all the functions of mythological narratives and rituals in more specific contexts. Nevertheless, from the beginning of Work on Myth, Blumenberg emphasizes the same critical distinction between the "content" of a myth (i.e. its "manifest function") and its "function" (in the latent sense). For example he argues:

The historical power of myth is not founded in the origins of its contents, in the zone from which it draws its materials and its stories,

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39William G. Doty, Mythography, pp.42-43.

40Wesley C. Salmon, Four Decades of Scientific Explanation, p.28

41Doty, Mythography, p.42
but rather in the fact that, in its procedure and its ‘form,’ it is *no longer* something else (*WM*, p.16).

The idea is that the contents of even the earliest myths could only have their ‘manifest meanings’ because man had already achieved some distance from the original context. It is only by virtue of an initial, invisible achievement that a "zone" of potentially *meaningful* materials can even exist - and it is this non-specific potential that is the hidden "significance" of myth’s latent function. Thus the very existence of myth is the result of something else: myth is "already the manifestation of an overcoming, of a gaining of distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness" (*WM*, p.16). In other words, the original state from which myth escapes -- and towards which mythic "significance" in general points -- cannot ever be fully represented, or made into manifest content, in any myth. That primordial context can only be inferred by a critical philosophy of history, extended to include what Blumenberg calls a "philosophical anthropology."

V. Myth as Reduction of the Absolutism of Reality

Blumenberg begins his interpretation of mythology by explaining this primordial context in terms of an anthropological set of conditions out of which all myth and other forms of human culture and institutions first began to develop. Blumenberg makes the highly significant point that his postulated primordial conditions, which he calls "the absolutism of reality," serve the same explanatory purpose in his theory as "an initial situation" or "old status naturalis" played in "philosophical theories of culture and state" (*WM*, p.3).

The absolutism of reality arose, roughly, when early humans were forced out of "the concealment of the primeval forest" to which they were biologically adapted, and into the caves and savannas where they faced the open horizon (*WM*, p.4). As proto-hunter-gatherer, Blumenberg hypothesizes, early man then faced a "sudden lack of adaption" in which only intelligence, the "capacity for foresight," and "anticipation" could allow him to survive. In facing
the complete horizon of possibilities, man first experienced "lebensangst" or "existential anxiety" (WM, p.6), the "pure state of indefinite anticipation" (WM, p.4). This "complete helplessness of the ego," which (in Freud’s account) every child experiences in the face of the hostile power of an alien reality, "had to be reduced" by being split up and "rationalized into fears" of specific, identifiable factors or threats (WM, p.5). Man first invented myth and divinities as a response to this absolute need for a reduction of anxiety:

..man came close to not having control of the conditions of his existence, and what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them. It may have been earlier of later that he interpreted this circumstance of the superior power of what is in (in each case) ‘other’ by assuming the existence of superior powers (WM, p.3-4).

By giving "names for the unnameable" (WM, p.5), by "setting up images against the abomination" (WM, p.10), myth served to distance the absolutism of reality and make its powers multiple and thus addressable. In this we see the functional significance of polytheism and a pantheon of gods:

The way in which [myth] pursued the reduction of the absolutism of reality was to distribute a block of opaque powerfulness, which stood over man and opposite him, among many powers that are played off against one another, or even cancel one another out (WM, p.13-14).

Thus, although myth can only represent the absolutism of reality as changed in some way (broken up, named, etc), very strong indications of that original condition are evident in myth. For example, the limited sphere of what is "taboo" replicates in a more controlled way "the overall tinge of an undefined unfriendliness that originally adhered to the world" (WM, p.14). In

42Blumenberg assures his readers that "What justifies us in using this limit concept is the common core of all currently respected theories on the subject of anthropogenesis" (p.4). However, Blumenberg does not refer to the work of specific anthropologists at this point. But even if he had, I seriously doubt that any evolutionary anthropologist has the evidence to assert that early hunter-gatherers would necessarily have been struck by an overwhelming, non-specific terror of the world, or indefinite anxiety from new open surroundings. Whatever evidence Blumenberg is working from, he has added more than a little of his own speculation to it. Overall, I am very dubious that current paleoanthropologists (who change their tune quite often) are even agreed on Blumenberg’s basic model of hominoid emergence into a situation in which they were biologically non-adapted and suffering from a deficit in instinct. But this issue must be left for another paper, especially since I will concentrate on a criticism of Blumenberg’s interpretation of myth in its own terms.
this reading, Blumenberg clearly uses the Freudian notion of psychic energy reduction through *sublimation*: by transferring its fearsome qualities to something else, the absolutism of reality can be reduced.

Blumenberg argues that we can see the functional significance of myth in the ways "Greek myth tried to concentrate the world’s alienating quality into forms." (*WM*, p.14). For example, among the Gorgons, "who are descended from the sea, with its resistance to form...it is especially Medusa, with her look that kills by turning to stone, in whom unapproachability and intolerability have been most proverbially concentrated" (*WM*, p.15). Yet for all her forbidding power, Medusa’s mortality and her defeat at the hands of Perseus shows "fear in its purest form but still as something that could be overcome" (*WM*, p.65).

This overcoming of the monstrous can be seen not only in this myth, but in the entire progression of Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Greek myth in general. As Blumenberg often stresses, almost all the monsters of Greek myth derive from the terrible figures in the earlier generations of Hesiod’s genealogy of the gods, such as Ouranos and Gaia (Heaven and Earth) who gave birth to the titans, cyclops, and giants; 43 Night who "bare hateful doom and black Fate and Death" and other horrors such as Woe and Strife; 44 and also Pontus "the fruitless deep with his raging swell," from whom Nereus and the Gorgons came. 45 But again, in the very fact that these powers are named, an "apotropiac accomplishment" of "work on myth" has already been registered (*WM*, p.15). As we see in Hesiod, "Myth itself tells the story of the origin of the first names from night, from earth, from chaos" (*WM*, p.38). Every subsequent overcoming of these original powers, every step away from the monstrous, is a further achievement of reduction. When

43*Theogony*, lines 130-145; in the Loeb Classical Edition p.89.
44ibid, lines 210-224; Loeb Classic Edition p.95
45ibid, line 132; Loeb Classical Edition, p.89.

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"Aphrodite arises from the foam of the terrible castration of Uranus--that is like a metaphor for the accomplishment of myth itself" (WM, p.38).

The same accomplishment is evident more generally in the progression of the mythical genealogy as it moves away from original ‘totem’ or animal forms of the gods (which lie in the background of the Homeric epithets), and mixed monstrous forms, towards gods and heroes who have a more human depiction in epic poetry. Myth allows man to be "at home in the world" by narrating the "change of forms in the direction of human ones between the night and chaos of the beginning," in the process of which "the world ceases to contain as many monsters" (WM, p.113).

In Greek myth, in particular, the elimination of monsters by heroes follows the central "world decision that goes against the figures of terror," as represented in Zeus’ defeat of the titans and "terrible earth-born Typhon, son of Tartarus and Gaea" (WM, p.66).

These examples give a sense of how Blumenberg interprets some basic features of myth in accordance with his reduction of the absolutism of reality model. However, to fully grasp Blumenberg’s view of myth and its relevance in cultural history, as well as his criticism of other theories of myth, we must focus on his most fundamental point: namely, that myth could only function to reduce the absolutism of reality by hiding the fact that there ever was such an absolutism, and that myth arose as a response to it.

VI. The Hidden Work Of Myth

This assertion of myth’s fundamental non-transparency in Blumenberg’s functional analysis relates to his crucial distinction between "work on myth" as opposed to the "work of myth." Put roughly, the "work of myth" means its original function of reducing the absolutism of reality, a function which work on the developing content of myth increasingly hides and obscures. This explains the continuity Blumenberg sees from work on myth to early uses of theory. When
Thales begins to use "theory" to deplete the power of "unfamiliar and uncanny phenomena" by predicting them, the irony is that his enterprise is only possible because of "the millenniums-long work of myth itself" (WM, p.26).

Thus "work on myth" must always presuppose some accomplishment in the "work of myth," because the latter begins in the "intentionality" which first achieves "the coordination of parts into a whole, of qualities into an object, of things into a world" (WM, p.21--my italics). As we saw, in Blumenberg's view this "integration" is first made evident in the "joining" of names into the coherence of genealogical relations (WM, p.39). Thus he says: "The fact that the world could be mastered is expressed early on by the effort to avoid leaving any gap in the totality of names" (WM, p.40). But even this genealogical totality through which myth converts "numinos indefiniteness into nominal definiteness" and makes "what is uncanny familiar and addressable" (WM, p.25) in principle refers back to the turning point where the absolutism of reality was opposed through the sheer act of interpreting it:

[In the absolutism of reality] we can only imagine the single absolute experience that exists: that of the superior power of the Other. The Other is not yet by preference the other One. Only when the former is interpreted with the aid of the latter...does a world exegesis begins that involves man (WM, p.21-21).

This primordial act of interpretation which makes reality into a potentially meaningful unity is the essential "work of myth"--the establishment of myth’s primordial function--which must be supposed before any specific mythical content or narrative can first be worked up or ‘worked on.’ But traces of this original work of myth and the absolutism of reality with which it grapples reveal themselves in work on myth in various ways. For example, we see it in Hesiod’s effort to produce a catalogue that would "avoid leaving any gap in the totality of names:"

..this already ‘literary’ phenomenon still allows an initial state to show through, in which the namelessness of what was shapeless and the striving for words for what was unfamiliar were dominant....If one perceives in the background of the entire genealogy of the gods, the
Theogony, line 116; Loeb Classical Edition, p.87: “Verily at the first Chaos came to be..”

Aeschylus’s Oresteia, tr. Richard Lattimore: in “The Eumenides” we see that the Furies only care about natural relations of “kindred blood” as opposed to legally established relations such as marriage (lines 212-215, p.142).

This figure of Chaos, the first of Hesiod’s four original/uncreated ‘gods,’ is as near as myth can come to expressing the ineffable condition in the absolutism of reality. As Blumenberg comments much later,

Chaos, in the language of the Theogony, is not yet the disordered mixed state of matter...Chaos is the pure metaphor of the gaping or yawning open of an abyss, which requires no localization, no description of its edges or depth, but is only the opaque space in which forms make their appearance (WM, p.127).

As Wallace points out, Blumenberg is drawing here on the etymology of Χάος, which "derives from the verb chainein, to yawn, gape, or open wide" (WM, p.145). The analogies between "chaos" in this sense and Blumenberg’s idea of the ‘open horizon’ in man’s state of nature, and also with the later Heidegger’s notion of the "clearing of Being," are already apparent.

Blumenberg mentions several other instances in which an earlier state closer to the absolutism of nature seems to show through in a myth that works to cover it over or overcome it. For example, the trial of Orestes which relates Athena to Attica and begins the genealogy of the "Attic state myth" is "above all an event that makes the work of myth pregnantly evident as the bringing to an end of something that is no longer supposed to exist" (WM, p.126--emphasis added). Blumenberg is apparently referring to the triumph of Athena’s rule over the vengeful lust of the chorus of furies in the Eumenides, which symbolizes the replacement of justice based on blood-relation with justice by rule of law.

As Blumenberg notes, "the introduction of quasi-legal transactions into myth is characteristic of Zeus’ epoch" (WM, p.125) -- the epoch which Athena certainly represents, as opposed to the

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46 Theogony, line 116; Loeb Classical Edition, p.87: "Verily at the first Chaos came to be."

47 Aeschylus’s Oresteia, tr. Richard Lattimore: in “The Eumenides” we see that the Furies only care about natural relations of “kindred blood” as opposed to legally established relations such as marriage (lines 212-215, p.142).
Furies, who are children of Night and "like no seed ever begotten, not seen ever by the gods as goddesses, nor yet stamped in the likeness of any human form."  Athena’s victory over them is another Olympian triumph over the monstrous, but it also reveals what went before. We see the same process at work in myths like those of Idomeneus and Abraham, which mark the end of human sacrifice: "Such myths, like the prevention of Abraham’s obedience, are monuments to the final leaving behind of archaic rituals" (WM, p.119). In them, the explicit meaning which denies human sacrifice cannot entirely hide the latent functional meaning of ending a barbaric institution which really did exist beforehand, according to Blumenberg.

Given Blumenberg’s interpretation of myth in terms of its latent "work" on the absolutism of reality, the elimination of monsters and the transition towards more human forms "must have to do with myth’s function of producing distance from the quality of uncanniness" (WM, p.117). Using Blumenberg’s terms strictly, however, we have to remember that as episodes in the content of myth, these developments constitute work on myth. As Blumenberg says, "even the earliest items of myth that are accessible to us are already products of work on myth" (WM, p.118), which also means that they have been conditioned by their reception over time. In other words, the very form of myth, whatever the content, already constitutes a world at least at one remove from the absolutism of reality itself:

Myth represents a world of stories that localizes the hearer’s standpoint in time in such a way that the fund of the monstrous and the unbearable recedes in relation to him (WM, p.117).

Properly speaking, then, the work of myth means just this first step away from the absolutism, the step by means of which the basic orientation or standpoint of all myth is attained. This orientation or mythic form, which is the ‘work of myth’ itself in some sense ‘prior’ to all

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49 This touches on the connection, in Blumenberg’s theory, between "work on myth" and the "Darwinism of words" evolutionary theory of institutional/cultural development, which must be reserved for later discussion.
actual mythic content whatsoever. Relative to this basic orientation in which we have a mythic world, the first "contents" of myths, as well as revisions of this content in subsequent mythic narratives and borrowings in later philosophy and literature, count as "work on myth." Work on myth has several successive stages (oral form, written form, ‘theoria’ etc.) but the "work of myth" is always the virtual first stage that establishes the functional significance of all the rest.

Robert Wallace confirms this analysis when he comments that the "work of myth" refers to "the essential and original function and accomplishment of myth as such" (WM, p.112), which is the production of a ‘world’ of significance. Thus when the originally unintelligible "is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by the telling of stories" (WM, p.6), the bare significance itself is what arises from the work of myth, or the function of myth at its most primordial level. Yet, like the "diffuse quality of the numinos" in Rudolph Otto’s theory (WM, p.63), this latent significance of myth can only be ‘manifested’--that is, acquire content -- in the "localized" framework of actual myths. As Blumenberg puts it, "Only work on myth -- even if it is the work of finally reducing it -- makes the work of myth manifest" (WM, p.118). This reminds us once again that the pure functional form of myth established by the ‘work of myth’ remains virtual -- it is an ideal limit concept.

To this extent, we see that Blumenberg does agree with the contextualism that was mentioned as typical of the sociofunctionalists. Although he posits a ‘virtual’ level of significance arising out of a universal context, its ideal function only gets realized in the "work on myth" that occurs in sub-functions conditioned by the evolution of local cultural/social institutions. Thus Blumenberg has not in any way contradicted the earlier sociofunctionalists. Rather, he has extended their theory and refined it in his notion of the "Darwinism of words."

VII. The ‘Darwinism of Words’
Given this basic division between the ‘work of myth’ as the establishment and continuance of a universal function, and the stages of "work on myth," Blumenberg goes on to consider in much greater detail how different kinds of transformations occur within work on myth as a whole -- transformations in which idea-contents, rituals, and institutions are altered in accordance with the underlying function of further reducing the absolutism of reality. A brief review of his basic strategy in this portion of Work on Myth will show how Blumenberg links his interpretation of mythology with the model of historical development already given in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age.

Blumenberg begins by considering the well-known fact that mythology has a "constancy..of core contents" (WM, p.) which have been retained over time. This phenomenon appears problematic for Blumenberg’s argument in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age against explaining epochal changes in ideas by the ‘identity of idea-substances’ (which secularization theory assumed). But with mythology, it is clear that Blumenberg cannot argue that absolutely no identical "contents" continue through history: rather, he has to account for the continuance of "substances" such as mythic icons, theoretical ideas, and cultural institutions where these do persist over time, in a way compatible with his ‘evolutionary’ substance-function model. What he must oppose is not the continuity of any contents whatsoever, but any attempt to explain such continuance by postulating a transcendental origin for these contents rather than a latent functional genesis. He writes:

Tylor spoke, in ethnology, of "survivals." But what causes survival? A model explanation of such phenomena is the explanation in terms of innate ideas. It does not return for the first time in depth psychology’s notion of "archetypes,"

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50Some minimal possibility of ‘identities in substance’ over time was already apparent, in fact, in the very idea of an idea originating to answer one functional ‘question’ and then being transferred into a another role in which it ‘reoccupies’ some quite different functional ‘position.’ For example, Blumenberg’s own theory implied an ‘identity of substance’ between the original early modern notion simple ‘possible progress’ and the later Enlightenment theoretical concept of "inevitable progress."
but already in Freud in the assertion of universal infantile experiences (WM, p.151).

Blumenberg’s response is to postulate a radically different mechanism to explain the persistence of certain contents, both in mythology and in all later cultural history. The mechanism Blumenberg has in mind is ‘filtering’ by reception: "materials" or whole "works" are "tendered by an author or a transmitter [bard] who seeks applause and reward at all costs, to an audience that is free to make any judgment and react any way" (WM, p.154). Although he recognizes that epic literature itself is a later stage which "already presupposes the long work of myth on the primary matter of the life-world" (WM, p.158), he does suggest that this reception-mechanism is clearly evinced in the case of "the rhapsodist of the early Greek epic...who offers pleasure and amusement, one who adapts himself with precision and flexibility to his audience and its desires" (WM, p.155).

The point of these examples is, however, is not so much the literal demand for pleasure and entertainment (which may be a later development) but to suggest how changes in contents can be driven entirely by demand-functions. The real "demand" driving the process, of course, is the hidden, never completely conscious demand for the reduction of the absolutism of reality: the rhapsodist’s cosmogonies help in "conjuring up the stability of the world," and "the singer does not offer only amusement and diversions; he also offers some of the assurance and sanction that will one day be called cosmos" (WM, p.159-160). In postulating this mechanism, however, Blumenberg makes it even clearer that his philosophy of history is evolutionary in its most fundamental premises. The function governing "work on myth" as a whole is the "reduction" demand established in the first step into "culture," but the mechanism this function sets up is...

..to say it outright, a piece of Darwinism in the realm of words. It is a process of the kind that produces institutions and rituals having a durability that is incomprehensible in retrospect (WM, p.159).
On the basis of this radical theory, Blumenberg can then argue that the "iconic constancy" we observe in mythology from its earliest recorded forms onwards, which has motivated the archetypal interpretation of myth, is just a derivative result of centuries of ‘invisible’ optimization in oral traditions between the introduction of mythic contents and their earliest commitment to writing:

...nonliterate prehistory must have enforced a more fine-textured and intensive testing of the reliable effectiveness of all ingredients [i.e. ‘contents’] than their whole subsequent history in the form of ‘literature’...could accomplish (WM, p.152).

Blumenberg is suggesting, in effect, that because the oral "superepoch" of human history is so much longer and even more selective than the written (WM, p.153), the iconic contents of earliest recorded mythology would be just those that had already turned out (by chance, if nothing else) to be able to perform the required function of reducing absolutism in many different circumstances of human life. In that case, their apparently "improbable survival all the way to the present" (WM, p.151) and their durable "independence of circumstances of place and epoch" (WM, p.149) are not surprising, and need not be explained by a doctrine of innate ideas or archetypes of the Jungian sort.

There are many objections that ought to be raised to Blumenberg’s "Darwinian" explanation of the development of "iconic constants" in mythology, but their full discussion must be postponed at this point. Wallace is right in pointing out the novelty of Blumenberg’s theory, but wrong when he asserts that "Scholars who study myth in oral cultures have not speculated much on any diachronic process by which its patterns may have developed" and adds that mythographic theories have presented mainly "static" pictures of mythology (WM, p.xxi). For most of the greatest scholars of mythology, this has not been the case.52

51Such as the Sumerian version of Gilgamesh or the Indian Rg-Veda, perhaps.

52One has only to think of Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale; Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism; and Claude-Levi Strauss’s Structural Anthropology for immediate counterexamples. Although Blumenberg’s suggestion is original, he actually owes the idea of searching for a morphology to these earlier thinkers -- and in fact his analysis of the progression of myths through their variants and inversions in literature even up to the present day reads like an attempt to rival Frye.
Given his controversial ‘Darwinian’ mythography, Blumenberg can reconcile the survival of certain "substances" or "institutions" in human history with the model he offered in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*: the contents that demonstrate this ‘resilience’ will be just the ones that continue to successfully serve the *one universal function* underlying the development, effects, and reoccurrences of all contingent ‘functional positions’ throughout history. Thus Blumenberg’s "Darwinism of words" theory is clearly more than just an explanation for the first stage in the development of mythic contents: it allows the dynamic processes at work in all later epochs, as new ‘questions’ emerge and give impetus to new answers etc., to be understood as evolutionary processes at bottom, all driven by the same primordial function discovered in *Work on Myth*. The earlier model of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is thus nested within Blumenberg’s complete explanatory account: all human history of ideas, institutions, and culture is nested within the function of the "reduction of the absolutism of reality."

This implies, in turn, that the ‘latent functional significance’ attributed to mythology must be extended to the entire realm of human history and culture. Later developments in human rationality, including epic literature, theory, and technology must all be understood as the result of the continuing selection process. And the figurative analogy between organic evolution and the dynamic processes of change in the history of ideas is ultimately justified because all of "history" and "culture" can be understood as the *sublimated continuation* of natural selection:

...the factors that conditioned the development that produced man were made superfluous and nonfunctional precisely by their evolutionary success. The organic system [i.e. the hominoid] resulting from the mechanism of evolution becomes ‘man’ by *evading* the pressure of that mechanism by setting against it something like a phantom body. This is the sphere of his culture, his institutions -- and also his myths (*WM*, p.163, my italics).

It is this ‘shadow body’ of contents, including philosophical and religious idea schemes, technology, art etc., which now to the ‘evolving’ *in our place*: “it is to these, rather than to their producer, that ‘the survival of the fittest’ applies” (*WM*, p.163). According to this astounding theory, then, the
whole of "history" in the human sense is really one massive ‘reoccupation’ of the function of natural selection: in response to its ‘pressure,’ instead of evolving, the hominoid became human by introducing cultural substances which would reoccupy the position he had held. The entire problem of reducing the absolutism of reality (and the "significance" it creates) then arises as the problem of maintaining and stabilizing that original switch.

These results are summarized in the accompanying Diagram A, which schematically portrays the relation among key components in Blumenberg’s proposed interpretation of mythology and cultural institutions as a whole.

VIII. The Rationality Shared by Mythos and Logos

After presenting the basic elements in his theory of the "Darwinism of Words," Blumenberg goes on to claim that when the model presented in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age is taken in this modified and deepened form, we can see that there is an objective kind of progress in history: "history, whatever else it may be, is also a process of optimization" (WM, p.165); institutions which have survived for ages have a value which requires no rational justification, because their very survival can only be explained as evidence that they continue to perform the one hidden function of all cultural ‘contents’ (WM, p.166). Thus, we might say, Blumenberg’s modified theory claims to vindicate the very notion of a kind of non-teleological progress which he argued arose in the early modern age. The modern idea of progress that "extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history" (LMA, p.30), which Blumenberg defended against charges of secularization, is now exemplified in the very pattern of cultural evolution itself. 53

53 This reveals the ‘hermeneutic circle’ at work in Blumenberg’s defense of progress as a modern idea: its defense from secularization analyses depends upon an explanatory model of historical development that includes the same modern idea of immanent “progress.” The “structure present in every moment” which justifies the prediction of progress is revealed in Work on Myth as the structure of adaptive pressure caused by the hidden function established in the work of myth itself.
This result in Work On Myth shows that Blumenberg really does intend to justify the "modern age" as the product of optimization: if his explanatory account of history is true, then ideas in the modern age must be serving the basic function of all culture in ways that medieval ideas no longer can, for a variety of reasons. This shows, I think, that the distinction between justification and explanation in philosophy of history cannot be maintained -- despite arguments to the contrary from Blumenberg’s defenders.

Consider, for example, David Ingram’s argument against this interpretation of Blumenberg. Ingram argues that critics like Robert Pippin, who have asserted that Blumenberg is trying to legitimize the "modern age" and its belief in progress, totally misunderstand Blumenberg. In Ingram’s view, Blumenberg’s argument for "the necessity and irreversibility of an epochal transformation" which led to the modern age is not meant to validate or legitimate the modern age in any sense, since for Blumenberg, legitimacy itself is a historically constructed "juristic" concept which is simply out of place in historiography. 54 Hence, Ingram says, "the necessity of modern accomplishments" need not imply anything about their "preferability." 55 This view, which leads to a completely historicist reading of The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, leaves Ingram surprised by Blumenberg’s implication in Work on Myth that there is objective ‘progress’ or development over the epochs in history. 56

To escape this difficulty, Ingram has to argue that for Blumenberg, "the existence of functional or adaptational universals" as in the perennial function of myth do not imply "any teleological fulfillment of an archaic cultural heritage". 57 But this ignores the fact that there is a long tradition in philosophy of legitimating outcomes precisely by this kind of explanation in terms of quasi-

55 ibid, p.9.
56 ibid, p.11.
57 ibid, p.11.
teleological process. Moreover, Blumenberg even says "The concept of the legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but from the necessity of those accomplishments" (*LMA*, p.99). Thus Blumenberg himself implies the inference from (functional-evolutionary) "necessity" to "legitimacy."

Thus the "Darwinism of Words" theory does attempt to vindicate the modern conception of progress as an *accurate reflection* of a dynamic actually immanent in history itself. But at the same time, Blumenberg’s "Darwinism of Words" theory also implies an utter rejection of the extreme "rationalistic" component of the Enlightenment, which sought to destroy by criticism any institutions that lack discursive justification (*WM*, p.163-6). On the basis of his evolutionary model, Blumenberg tries to show that his theory, like Hans-George Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment, provides a response to "the Enlightenment’s agitation against myth as the exemplary compound of prejudices" (*WM*, p.163).

Points relevant to this argument are made throughout the early chapters of *Work On Myth*. Theoretical rationality itself is a product of philosophical ideas which functioned to further the reduction already achieved by mythology. By predicting and possibly even explaining events such as eclipses, earliest theories served the purpose of "depleting the power of unfamiliar and uncanny phenomena" (*WM*, p.26). Moreover, since it arises only at a later stage, theory itself is dependent on myth:

> Theory is the *better adapted* mode of mastering the episodic *tremenda* of recurring world events” such as comets, earthquakes, etc. But leisure and dispassion in viewing the world, which theory presupposes, are already results of that millenniums-long work of myth itself which told of the monstrous as something that is far in the past...(*WM*, p.26, first set of italics mine).

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58 Blumenberg seems to fear that all "avant-garde" movements share this rationalist excess (*WM*, p.164); he singles out Baudelaire, Adorno, and late 1960s radicalism for special scorn (*WM*, p.161-2).

Thus Blumenberg can argue, in apparent Gadamerian fashion, "That the course of things proceeded ‘from mythos to logos’ is a dangerous misconstruction..." (WM, p.27). Since theoretical logos ultimately serves the same purpose as mythology, myth itself is vindicated as "rational:" "the antithesis between myth and reason is a late and a poor invention" of the Enlightenment, which "forgoes seeing the function of myth, in the overcoming of that archaic unfamiliarity of the world, as itself a rational function" (WM, p.48). In other words, by connecting theoretical rationality to the same function that produced myth, the "Darwinism of Words" theory makes sense of the enigmatic claim that "the boundary line between myth and logos is imaginary...myth itself is a piece of high-carat ‘work of logos’" (WM, p.12). Hence, after presenting this theory, Blumenberg can announce his reconciliation of modern rationality with mythology (and presumably with "traditional authority" in general): "...with regard to the effort -- which spans all of human history -- to overcome anxiety relating to what is unknown or even still unnamed, myth and enlightenment are allies..." (WM, p.163).

But there is something deceptive about the implied allegiance with Gadamer that runs throughout this argument. It lies in the fact that the kind of ‘rationality’ which Blumenberg makes continuous between mythology and enlightenment science is latent functional rationality. And this is certainly not the kind of rationality Gadamer had in mind when he argued that there is no "unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason." 60 Rather, Gadamer envisioned forward movement in the history of ideas through logos itself: in the dialogical interchange of original individual thought and the cognitive content of traditionary texts, the view that turned out to be consciously more persuasive (in a sense that transcends any ‘methodological’ standards) would prevail. Since this theory envisions contents in human thinking emerging directly from other contents, independently of all latent functions and mediated only by rational evaluation and thought,

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60Gadamer, ibid. p.281.
its attributes a kind of transcendence to reason which seems to be the very antithesis of Blumenberg’s conception.

For Blumenberg’s "Darwinism of Words" theory implies that human creative originality has almost no role in bringing about the ‘objective progress’ for which it claims to have discovered the explanation. This was already evident in the implication that the very first mythic 'contents' introduced in attempt to give concrete expression to man’s primordial antipathetic reaction to the "absolutism of reality" could have been hit on virtually at random: the ones that remain gained their "significance" just because they were the minute fraction of possible contents that survived. Their validity and value is explained by their survival, rather than the other way around.

This principle extends to the whole realm of human institutions for Blumenberg. Imagination, by introducing novelties, has only an extremely small chance of producing something better than current institutions (WM, p.162-3), in the ultimately relevant sense of better. For established institutions and traditional practices must have survived because of their effectiveness in functions that in turn arose because they contribute to the concealed ultimate function of all culture: the reduction of absolutism. Blumenberg argues that this view is not a form of extreme conservatism (WM, p.163), but simply a reaction against rationalist calls for "critical destruction" of traditional institutions and correlate claims of "romanticism" for the productive powers of the imagination:

What we find empirically present -- and not only in organic nature -- distinguishes itself, in contrast to the imagination, by the wealth of unexpected material in its forms and modes of behavior. No imagination could have invented what ethnology and cultural anthropology have collected in the way of regulations of existence, world interpretations, forms of life, classifications, ornaments, and insignia. All of this is the product of a process of selection that has been at work for a long time, and in that respect, in this analogy to the mechanism of evolution, approaches the stupendous variety and convincingness of the forms of nature itself (WM, p.162).

As convincing as this may sound, however, two objections must be mentioned. First Blumenberg implies here that a philosophical anthropology or mythographic theory could only
maintain a primordial role for creative originality in the history of ideas, if it attributed the entire variety of persisting contents and institutions to direct imaginative production. But this is false, since mythographical theories giving imagination an originary role could account for the same perceived variety of mythic contents in ways diametrically opposed to Blumenberg’s theory, but without making human originality the direct producer of every outcome.

To outline just one example, the work of Carl Jung (and other mythographers such as Campbell and Eliade) point to the fact that essentially the same body of ‘iconic constants,’ in expanding multiforms or varitations, appear in thousands of monuments dating much earlier than the appearance of written myths in their respective cultures. All the way back to cave paintings, the earliest megaliths, and the oldest surviving sculptures and artifacts, we find the same archetypal motifs, or at least similar paradigms which are recognizable in the development of different families of symbols. But in advancing the "Darwinism of Words" theory, Blumenberg has simply not considered anything other than surviving mythic narratives (and only Greek ones, at that). Perhaps he could respond to this objection by pushing back the period during which, by trial and error, thousands of different ‘contents’ were tried out and winnowed down, but then his hypothesis would be harder to reconcile with the evidence. For the content-driven hypothesis of archetypal theory suggests that the process from the dawn of culture to the beginning of writing is the opposite of what this modified Blumenbergian hypothesis would suggest: rather than a selection among an abundance of contents, we start with a very small set of proto-archetypal motifs or ‘constants’ (possibly even tracing back to a single superarchetype) that spread out into variant forms in time, being expressed in
new material ‘vessels’ paradigmatically suited to their role as these became available (different ones in environments etc.), combining through internal association in new variations, etc. 61

I mention this alternative structuralist theory simply to point out that one should not assume Blumenberg really has the evidence on his side. More detailed investigations might well be able to prove that the contents of written sacred myths could not have been the optimized result of selection from an enormous earlier plethora of unrelated contents tried in oral tradition.

There is a second, related objection to Blumenberg’s theory when it is extended to cultural history as a whole. The problem is that if anything like ‘natural selection’ occurs in the history of ideas and institutions, then apparently in this process imagination would have to do what chance genetic variation does in the biological evolution of species. As we have already seen, in fact, Blumenberg does assume something like this in the human capacity to arrive at new ‘contents’ based on empirical experience. However, this capacity is conditioned in certain crucial ways. First, experimentation with new possibilities can only take place in a context of historically persisting institutions establishing security: "Thus the selection of constants over long periods of time is, in fact, a condition of the possibility of running the risks of ‘trial and error’ in parts of one’s behavior" (WM, p.163).

But more fundamentally, the projection of new ideas is also conditioned by prior problems to which it responds, and ultimately by a function which by definition obscures itself from view. Thus even to the extent that human reason can project new contents, it never really creates whatever progress in the history of ideas may occur. Blumenberg’s evolutionary ‘progress’ in cultural history operates through ideas and reasoning, but the results are not caused by rational projection of them,

61 See, for example, works such as Carl Jung’s Mysterium Coniunctionis, Joseph Cambell’s The Hero with a Thousand Faces, and Claude Levi-Strauss, The Way of the Masks. If a progression of a few basic archetypes into every more numerous variants and combinations sounds too much like a Neoplatonic process of complicatio emanating from the One, we should realize that NeoPlatonism itself was, among other things, among other things, an ancient recognition of precisely the cultural process outlined here.
or informed intention to realize these results, or rational approval of these results which chooses them deliberately over other possibilities. The results of the process do not in fact even have to be consciously presented, any more than the universal function which drives them, which is always hidden by the very process it causes: "the mechanism of selection is precisely such that, in its results, it does not provide the explanation for their usefulness in life, but rather, so as to shield its function...withholds that explanation..." (WM, p.166). In other words, as we saw previously, the reduction of absolutism ‘covers its own tracks.’ The ultimate moving force in the history of ideas and institutions is external to the content (and hence the ideal validity) of these ideas and institutions: their fate is determined by their success in fulfilling a certain ultimate function that it essentially non-cognitive, since by definition it requires that both expressive awareness and cognitive evaluation be further and further removed from apprehension of it.

IX. The ‘Invisible Hand’ Ideal

In sum, Blumenberg’s complete account of the origin and history of culture through epochal changes can be regarded as a highly developed instance, in the philosophy of history, of what Robert Nozick has characterized as "invisible-hand" explanation. In his Anarchy, State, Utopia, Robert Nozick produces a catalogue of explanations in this genus, including examples from evolutionary theory, ecology, economics, and even Hayek’s account of social cooperation.62 Nozick comments:

There is a certain lovely quality to explanations of this sort. They show how some overall pattern or design, which one would have thought had to be produced an individual or group’s successful attempt to realize the pattern, instead was produced or maintained by a process that in no way had the overall pattern or design ‘in mind.’ 63

63ibid, p.18
To Nozick, these kinds of "invisible hand" explanations are intrinsically superior because they "minimize the use of notions constituting the phenomena to be explained," and therefore function in a fashion approaching the ideal of "fundamental explanations," i.e. they explain a realm of phenomena almost entirely in terms from outside that realm.

In this light, it becomes clearer why Blumenberg considers his ‘absolutism of reality’ analogous to the status naturalis of classical political theories, such as Hobbes’s in particular. For as Nozick suggests in his own chapter entitled "Why State of Nature Theory," the ideal of rational explanation inherent in this type of theory is that of explaining the political fully "in terms of the non-political." 64 Surprisingly, Nozick claims that such theories are revealing (rather than distortive or harmful) even when they are wrong, although in a footnote he qualifies this: "it is plausible to think that an explanation of a realm must produce an underlying mechanism yielding the realm" if it is to be truly explanatory. 65

From the outset of his enterprise in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, it appears that Blumenberg’s own substance-function distinction was motivated by this conception of explanatory success -- which is itself a characteristic mark of ‘the modern age.’ Nozick points out an important difference between invisible-hand accounts as "fundamental explanations," and the kind of explanation we find in conspiracy theories, which focus on strategies of deception:

We might call the opposite sort of explanation a "hidden-hand explanation." A hidden-hand explanation explains what looks to be merely a disconnected set of facts..as the product of an individual’s or group’s intentional design(s). 66

64ibid, p.6

65ibid, p.8; Nozick also adds that his account will be clarified with advances in the theory of explanation, which is ironic because his Hempelian model has since been heavily criticized.

66ibid, p.19

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Interestingly, the secularization theories which Blumenberg set out to oppose seem to fit this description of hidden-hand explanation, at least in the sense that they attribute an intentionally produced *hidden* meaning to certain ideas in secular humanism, such as "inevitable progress."

However, we should realize that *functional accounts* of ‘instrumental’ rationality also generally attribute meanings that are ‘hidden’ -- but in the *latent* rather than intentional, strategic sense. This point is important, because Blumenberg sometimes gives the deceptive impression that he objects in principle to any "critical" discovery of hidden significance in an idea if it seems to undercut the understanding of the idea possessed by its adherents. Thus, for example, Blumenberg objects to Gadamer’s claims that secularization analysis serves a useful hermeneutic purpose by discovering dimensions of meaning hidden within secular concepts such as inevitable progress. He dislikes the way in which a modern idea subjected to secularization critique "is revealed as a consciousness that is not transparent to itself in its substantial relations, a consciousness to which hermeneutics discloses a background" -- a result which depends on the unjustifiable assumption that the secularized result is a "pseudomorph" or "inauthentic manifestation...of its original reality" (*LMA*, pp.17, 18).

But what Blumenberg really objects to in secularization accounts is not the attribution of non-transparent ‘hidden meaning’ *per se* -- for as we have seen, his own attributions of latent functional significance certainly achieve a similar result. Rather, what bothers Blumenberg is that secularization accounts do not attribute the kind of hidden meanings *he* approves of, namely *latent functional meanings*. An account of ‘A’ as ‘B’ *secularized* is really a version of hidden-hand explanation: it suggests that a cognitively present content ‘B’ was intentionally disguised as (perverted into?) ‘A’. As our brief analysis suggests, in this case the "non-transparency" of the original substance is *not complete*: rather, the culture which takes B as A is always involved in a

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*I am borrowing this term from Jürgen Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I.*"
(hidden-hand) conspiracy for self-deception and so an authentic consciousness of the original substance is repressed in a kind of mauvaise foi, but not completely inaccessible. Ironically, then, the "non-transparency" of significances hidden from our cognitive contents can be complete on Blumenberg’s theory in a way that it never can be in secularization theories.

Part Two: Significance and Transcendence

X. Transcendence and Imagination

Blumenberg’s crucial distinction between manifest work on myth and the latent work of myth helps to show why Blumenberg’s theory runs counter to certain conceptions of transcendence and imagination which took their inspiration ultimately from Judeo-Christian sources. Thus Blumenberg criticizes Cassier’s enlightenment view of myth as fundamentally "pre-rational" (WM, p.xii), an interpretation attended by the mythopoeic notion that myths were simply created out of man’s free imaginative expression. As Wallace points out, in a journal article Blumenberg criticizes Cassier

..for not trying to explain why the "symbolic forms" are posited, leaving us to assume instead that man, as animal symbolicum, simply expresses his ‘nature’ in them, as his (apparently) free creations (WM, p.xiv).

In Blumenberg’s model, strictly speaking, the work of myth cannot be understood as a free creation of man against the world. Rather, the latent function of mythic orientation is a primal adaption which is constitutive of man, first allowing him and his ‘world’ of meanings to come into being: "man is always already on this side of the absolutism of reality" (WM, p.9). Thus a transition has to take place before we have "man" as an imaginative ‘symbol-maker’ who forms mythic contents, and in this transition the function of myth as reduction of the hostile terror of reality is already set. Hence, when man begins symbolic creation, he is already working on myth:

..what remains is the setting up of images against the abomination--the maintenance of the subject, by means of the imagination, against the object that has not yet been made accessible (WM, p.10)
Thus in this interpretation of imaginative work, Blumenberg is clearly opposed to one tradition according to which "the power of generating images, the imagining of figures and histories" (WM, p.25-26) is an irreducible and spontaneous part of sovereign human agency, which reveals the divine aspect in human nature.\(^{68}\) Rather, in Blumenberg’s view, the "status naturalis" of the absolutism of reality is prior to the "mythical empowerment" and explains the functional reason why we need "wish, magic, and illusion" (pp.8-9) in the first place. "The absolutism of reality is opposed by the absolutism of images and wishes" (WM, p.8), but they are not equiprimordial, since the latter arises only on condition of the former.\(^{69}\) As Wallace points out, this also puts Blumenberg in opposition to romanticism (WM, p.xxii), which shared and even extended the Enlightenment emphasis on individual human sovereignty, as well as the mythopoetic thesis, i.e. "the postulate--since Vico and Herder--of mankind’s initial childlike poetry" (WM, p.61).

It should not be surprising that romanticism, with its emphasis on the imagination, shared the Enlightenment’s notion of human transcendence and individual value. For it also shared the same "mythopoetic" view of human nature, according to which myth was an entirely unreflective, pre-rational form of expression. As Gadamer points out "the conquest of mythos by logos" is the fundamental schema of the philosophy of history that romanticism shares with the Enlightenment." Although romanticism values its idealized pastoral image of life close to nature over the Enlightenment’s critical "freedom from ‘superstition’,

..the romantic reversal of the Enlightenment’s criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason. All criticism of the

\(^{68}\)This traditional view was an integral part of the enlightenment conception of man, as evinced by the transcendental status and sovereign autonomy accorded to human moral agents in Kant’s ethics. Wallace points out that as an enlightenment thinker, Cassier himself was a "leading heir of Kant" (p.viii).

\(^{69}\)As we will see in section VII, Blumenberg’s demotion of the imagination to secondary status is backed up by his evolutionary theory of the development of culture.
Enlightenment now proceeds via this romantic mirror image of the Enlightenment. 70

As the influence of Kant on Coleridge attests, there are also complex links between the theory of "imagination" in Enlightenment philosophy and its crucial role in later romantic theories of artistic creativity.

The freedom of imaginative expression in Cassier’s Kantian hermeneutics and in romanticism parallels the traditional Judeo-Christian dualism according to which the human "spirit" exists in some sense over against nature and allows individuals to act freely on the physical world. This notion of "spirit" in man ultimately derives from the Jewish doctrine that man is made in the "image" of the deity (Genesis 1, 26). It is original, spontaneous human creativity through which matter is ‘stamped’ with form and meaning.

Notably, Blumenberg makes use of this familiar notion of ‘stamping’ in his own analysis of significance, but he has to invert the traditional meaning of the metaphor to make it fit with his own theory. Thus he associates "pregnance" with Burkhardt’s "royal right of the imprinted form" (WM, p.69), but he does not allow that these imprintings of significance are the result of active transcendence marking, signing, sealing (or appropriating) some substrate. Rather, he reverses Rothaker’s analysis, and says: "Time does not wear away instances of pregnance; it brings things out in them -- though we may not add that these things were in them all along" (WM, 69). This, of course, is a reference to his "Darwinism of Words" theory: through its selection process, the substrate is ‘eroded’ and the ‘imprint’ thus emerges out in the shape of what remains. In other words, significance or the ‘imprint’ emerges through an invisible-hand process, rather than by creative initiative.

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This is a very strained effort to change the meaning of the ‘stamping’ metaphor, however. The problem is, under no plausible interpretation can an ‘imprinted image’ or ‘stamped mark’ be thought of as something that emerges through an unconscious process. This is rather the very paradigm of the active will, the assertion which ‘im-presses,’ leaves its mark, stakes out its claim. Setting a seal as a sign of claim (Song of Songs: 8; 6) is the most primordial notion of active appropriation which we have in cultural history. As evidence of this, witness the fact that seal-script is the earliest (and most archetypal) form of ‘writing’ in every culture. Even Nietzsche understands "coining" meaning in agreement with the active interpretation, against Blumenberg.

Martin Heidegger reaches the same conclusion in Being and Time when he points out that "the idea of ‘transcendence’ -- that man is something that reaches beyond himself -- is rooted in Christian dogmatics." As Heidegger sees, this notion of the transcendence of the free creative spirit originates from one of two primordial sources in our "traditional anthropology" of human nature. The first is the Greek notion of man as "animal rationale," and the second is the origin myth of man in Genesis, as summed up in the words: "'fasiamus hominem ad imaginem nostram et similitudinem'" -- "And God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’." This imago dei is the spirit, the divine "breath" or pneuma with which God makes "Adam," whose very name means "clay" or "mud." In this action we have the archetype of transcendental work on inanimate nature, a ‘stamping’ which makes a living image, thus spontaneously creating something new by

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forming raw material. And since man is made in the image of the creator, he is free and exercises a finite version of the same creative power in his capacity for making new forms and new images.  

Blumenberg relates this Judeo-Christian notion of spiritual or imaginative self-assertion to the psychological idea of projection: man is "the creature who covers up the lack of reliability of his world by projecting images" (WM, p.8). Spirit is the figure for this projective capacity. Thus for Feuerbach, "divinity is nothing but man’s self-projection into heaven" (WM, p.28). Blumenberg holds that this is an appropriate interpretation for the "God of monotheism" (WM, p.28) but not for the gods of Greek myth, because

the relation of ‘being made in the image of...’ is recognizably different from the beautiful anthropomorphousness, with its invitation to artistic embodiment, of the Olympian gods. In them there is always a remainder of the originally foreign element (WM, p.29).

Their "foreign element" is the trace of the terrible hostility, the inhuman horror which has been "reduced" as the gods have been made successively more human. For this reason, Blumenberg asserts that myths are anthropomorphic but not anthropocentric: "while the function of myth does depend on its figures becoming anthropomorphic, the whole accent is on their having become anthropomorphic" (WM, p.135). In other words, in the Greek gods the latent meaning of myth still shows through. It is this ultimate functional meaning which is blocked from view if we start with

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75 Martin Buber is a good example of a thinker who gives primacy to this aspect of creativity, directly contrary to Blumenberg. His I and Thou provides a whole philosophy built around the view that human creativity is the bridge by which spirit enters the world, works on matter, and makes "forms:" "As I actualize it, I uncover it. I lead the form across - - into the world of it" (p.61). In Buber’s philosophy, the existential action of saying "Thou" or standing reciprocally related to another "in the sacred basic word" (p.60) is spiritual. Thus he says, "the You-world has the power to give form; the spirit can permeate the It-world and change it" (p.149). Buber conceives such action as a kind of response: "spirit in its human manifestation is man’s response to his You" (p.89) and "as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life" (p.113). Buber takes this to the point of talking about "the breath of my glance" (p.145). Buber connects the same themes to a Kantian view in his Eranos lecture on "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence in Judaism" (translated in Man and Time), in which he speaks of "the transcendental efficacy of man’s acts...beyond the sphere of logical causality" (p.184). It is this potential which allows humans to imbue something transient with meaning, making it "a real sign sent down into life" (p.168). On this view, all symbolic significance arises from the stamping of matter with spirit: "Symbol is the manifestation, the radiation of meaning in incarnate form" (p.176).
man’s supposedly transcendent symbol-making power as the origin of myths, and ignore what lies behind it.

But if imagination and all work on myth only begin their activities within a framework already defined by the latent function of myth, how does distancing from the absolutism of reality first generate this context in which mythic "meanings" and contents become possible? To provide an alternative to the enlightenment and romantic approaches, Blumenberg develops his own theory which equates this context with a notion of general "significance" drawn from the work of Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger.

XI. Dilthey on Imagination and Significance

Blumenberg introduces the idea of significance to explain the unique attraction of myth as opposed to what is offered by "theoretical, dogmatic, and mystical ways" of viewing things (WM, p.67). In contrast to these other modes, what myth provides "can be designated by the term significance, taken from Dilthey" (WM, p.67). "Significance" in Blumenberg’s sense means roughly the quality of being meaningful, but in no particular articulable way. For example, he notes that "improbable distinctly marked forms become indications of meaningfulness" just because the appearance of such things through physical processes seems unlikely (WM, p.74). In this example, we already see the way in which this general meaningfulness stands out against brute nature. In this sense, significance arises out of

..the suggestion that what is apparently meaningless contains meaningfulness. It does not have to take as much shape as the question, What does that mean? It already means, without any ‘what’ (WM, p.75).

This felt quality of meaningfulness before any specific interpretation or specification is what Blumenberg calls pregnancy. Thus significance includes:
..everything that possesses ‘pregnance’ as opposed to indifference....As with the aesthetic object, part of the definition of significance is the way it emerges from the diffuse surrounding field of probabilities. History, like life, works against the tendency of a situation to be increasingly determined by probability, against the ‘death instinct’ (WM, p.69).

Just as life emerges from inanimate matter, "significance" emerges in the improbable as opposed to automatic probabilities, and it opposes the return to meaningless determinism. Obviously, "pregnance" is even more literally associated with life as opposed to death. Like the pregnant life-producing womb, in history "pregnance is resistance to factors that efface, that promote diffusion; resistance especially to time." (WM, p.69).

On Blumenberg’s account, significance and its pregnant sense of meaning are associated with life precisely because they are in tension with the absolutism of reality. Unlike timeless and placeless Platonic ideas, "the characteristic differentiation of mythical ‘significances’ stands out as a structuring that is opposed to the intolerable indifference of space and time" (WM, p.97). By giving "outlines to the homogeneous flow of time" (WM, p.99) myth can oppose the "insecurity and lack of confidence" produced by "the unfathomability of time" (WM, p.99). But we have to remember that in Blumenberg’s model, significance (or the mythic orientation in general) is not something directly created and applied to nature by the independent power of human agency. Rather, significance is again the result that arises in the first reduction of the absolutism of reality:

Significance is generated not only by intensification but also by power depletion...as the moderation of something intolerable, the conversion of something unnerving into a source of forward pressure (WM, p.75).

Consequently, in Blumenberg’s view, there must be something passive or involuntary in the origin of significance.

Blumenberg’s connections between "significance" and "life" are evidently inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey’s treatment of these themes in his aesthetic writings. Like Blumenberg, Dilthey
relates "significance" to the connectedness of life that precedes and conditions all poetic creativity. In his 1887 work on The Imagination of the Poet, Dilthey comments on Shakespeare’s Hamlet: "But at least one thing is clear, namely that the lived experience of the poet and its unnerving symbols constitute a dramatic core that cannot be expressed in any proposition."\(^{76}\) Such symbols arising out of lived experience are pregnant with an inexpressible meaning precisely because they make us sense a deep connectedness in life: "everything comes together in the graphic, felt unity of the deepest life-experiences, and that is precisely the significance of poetry."\(^{77}\) Significance is thus related to the unity of lived experience which first makes a lifeworld, a "nexus" that is the medium for meaningful relations. We see this again in Dilthey’s later essay on Goethe and the Poetic Imagination, where he argues that poetry aims to show the "life-value" of things, i.e. their intrinsic value in relation to life, as opposed to their instrumental values as means to conceivable ends:

But life-values are related on the basis of the totality of life itself, and these relations give meaning to persons, things, situations, and events. Thus the poet addresses himself to what is significant."\(^{78}\)

The contrast here is very similar to Blumenberg’s distinction between the contents of myth and its latent functional significance. The relations the poet wishes to express as his contents are first constituted as "significant" by their place in the unified whole of life, the lifeworld.

For Dilthey, as with the romantics who preceeded him in the 19th century, "significance" is related to the creativity of poetic imagination as well as to the lifeworld on which the poet draws. But at this point we must be aware of a crucial distinction between two kinds of imagination, a distinction Dilthey explicitly made in his later works on poetry:


\(^{77}\)ibid

From the function of the imagination in the world of daily life I now distinguish that *productive activity* of imagination through which a *second world* distinct from that of our practical activity is formed...this imagination deliberately fashions such a second world whenever someone strives to liberate himself from the bonds of reality.  

This poetic "secondary world" is created by a productive kind of imagination, which can project possibilities that go beyond the "everyday" lifeworld, as in utopian thought. The lifeworld, on the other hand, is a original "milieu" in which 

..each thing, or each person receives a particular force and coloring from its relations to my life. The finitude of existence, bounded by birth and death and restricted by the pressure of reality, awakens in me the longing for something enduring, changeless, and withdrawn from the pressure of things... 

It is crucial to see that in this description, the lifeworld is *already a world of meaning for me*, but it is characterized by the finitude of existence as well. On the other hand, the productive imagination which forms the poetic world transcends these limits inherent in the lifeworld. As Dilthey comments in a discussion of naturalism, this imaginative capacity to create a new unity held together by a pivotal "point of impression" is limited only by "those conditions which result from the total order of reality within which the freely created image is possible." This creative kind of imagination which "transports the reader into a sphere of freedom" carries the connotations of transcendence in the sense of "autonomy."

This connection between Dilthey’s notion of the "productive imagination" and transcendence in the sense I have called Judeo-Christian is evinced throughout his aesthetic writings. For example, in his "Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics," Dilthey comments that "German 

\[ ^{79}\text{Wilhem Dilthey, Selected Works, Volume V: Poetry and Experience, "Goethe and the Poetic Imagination" (1910), p.242} \]

\[ ^{80}\text{ibid, p.237} \]


\[ ^{82}\text{Wilhelm Dilthey, "Goethe and the Poetic Imagination," p.250-1.} \]
transcendental philosophy rediscovered the *creative capacity of human nature* in all domains," an intuition which he traces through Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, and so on (p.202-3). In "The Imagination of the Poet," he notes that "Goethe and his contemporaries shared Rousseau’s faith in the autonomy of the person and his overall capacities" (p.148). The same notion underlies even more "romantic" conceptions, such as Schiller’s. Thus in his "Goethe and the Poetic Imagination," Dilthey comments that

> The idealism of freedom, which Schiller adopted from Kant, merely served to elucidate Schiller’s great inner experience, in which his noble nature became aware of its dignity and sovereignty through conflict with the world (p.251-2).

But in Dilthey’s view, this transcendent form of imagination is also governed in two ways. First, it has its own internal logic based on something like innate ideas. Anticipating Freud and Jung’s later analyses of unconscious patterns and archetypes, Dilthey writes:

> There exist **stable lawful relations** between *inner states* and *outer images* which manifest themselves in dreams and insanity...comparative considerations show that our psychological nature provides the basis for a sphere of natural symbols found in dreams and insanity, as well as for those found in language, myth, and poetry.  

But secondly, these natural symbols are not *just* unconscious or innate ideas: the "lawful relations" mentioned here are bridging principles that link the "inner states to images contained in the nucleus of lived experience." In other words, the typical patterns and archetypal symbols of poetic imagination are the result of the imagination *working on* tropes and images that already have a connection to feeling and significance in lived experience, the lifeworld realm. For example, a "motif" arises when "the significance of a life-relationship is apprehended in the material of reality through the poetic process." Notice that in this model, a life-relationship must

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84 Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Imagination of the Poet," p.158
already be pregnant with potential meaning before it can be apprehended and transformed through the poetic imagination, in which "the dark ground of lived experience is illuminated, or its significance is at least made partly transparent." 85

In this dialectical model of motif and symbol formation, the ‘productive’ imagination is a kind of "spirit:" "What we call ‘motifs’ are actually phenomena of the human spirit." 86 But it is clear from our examples that the poetic imagination is inevitably dependent on the lifeworld in which certain relations are already significant and awaiting poetic illuminating or articulation.

The limits of poetic imagination manifest themselves in the way the poet’s formative power is rooted in his material...
A powerful tragedy is produced when poetic creativity confronts external states of affairs, reports, stories etc., as inexorable reality. The imagination then strives to give unity, inwardness, and meaning to this reality. To the extent that the recalcitrance of the factual proves invincible, the plot and the characters manifest a special kind of illusion and efficacy. 87

In other words, the unifying power of the productive imagination cannot completely fuse its materials into a secondary world, because it remains tied to the reality of life to and the significance which is already there in lived experience, awaiting expression. This explains one of Dilthey’s comments in his later work on Goethe:

Lived relations govern the poetic imagination and come to expression in it, just as they have already influenced the perceptions of the poet. Here, involuntary and imperceptible processes prevail...This is the point at which the connection between lived experience and imagination in the poet begins to reveal itself. The poetic world is there before any particular event inspires the poet with the conception of a work and before he writes down its first line. 88

85 ibid, p.148
86 ibid, p.147-8
87 ibid, p.139
Again, the world of pregnant significance is "already there" for the poet before the productive imagination begins its work. Poetry can articulate specific relations that arouse strong feelings and freely transform natural images, because the lifeworld is already a potentially "meaningful" whole before this poetic process begins. As Dilthey says, lived experience is "the reality that manifests itself immediately, that we are reflexively aware of in its entirety, that is not given and not thought."  

XII. Significance as the ‘Figurative Synthesis’ of the Lifeworld

The foregoing analysis points to the intermediate position of the lifeworld (or unity of "lived experience") and its "significance." It is more than what is merely given, but precedes the application of thought-concepts; it is susceptible to meaning because it is unified, but it precedes the creative activity through which the productive imagination freely works on it. This in turn explains Dilthey’s reason for distinguishing the everyday imagination that "is inseperable from the whole psychic nexus" from the "productive imagination" of (mytho)poetic creativity. Evidently, on Dilthey’s model, the "imagination of the world of daily life" must be a passive kind of imagination that synthesizes the pre-poetic unity of the lifeworld, as opposed to the active imagination that "produces a world distinct from experienced reality."  

At this point, it is readily apparent that Blumenberg’s analysis of myth parallels Dilthey’s theory of significance and imagination in several ways. Dilthey’s "productive imagination" is analogous to Blumenberg’s notion of work on myth through man’s capacity to project images. The "lifeworld" prior to the poetic process, however, is analogous to Blumenberg’s world of pregnant significance that first arises from the very function or form of myth, i.e. the work of

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myth against the absolutism of reality. As Blumenberg says, just "to have a world" is already "the result of an art" (WM, p.7). The "art" that first creates the web of significance within which mythic contents are ‘worked’ is Dilthey’s passive or everyday imagination, which gives unity to lived experience.

In addition, the pregnant "significance" of the mythic "world" plays the same intermediate role in Blumenberg’s theory as lifeworld significance plays in Dilthey’s aesthetic analysis. Given that it is an ideal or virtual limit-point, as we saw earlier, pure or non-specific "significance" prior to mythic contents could be thought of as an intermediate threshold between what I have called the "latent functional meaning" of myth and the "manifest meanings" (or expressed contents) of myths. Within the mythic world of significance, the contents and manifest meanings of mythology first become possible, but the phenomenon of "significance" itself is founded on the absolutism of reality. This non-specific "significance," which is felt as the pure potential for meaning, is also distinct from the latent functional "meaning" of myth, i.e. myth’s role as a reduction of the absolutism of reality. Significance is the result of the reduction function (or the internal perspective reduction generates) but as Blumenberg says, "without this ‘prehistory,’ the function of what is significant remains uncomprehended, though present" (WM, p.110). The very function or role of myth, which a theoretical ‘prehistory’ describes, is covered over and prevented from becoming evident precisely by the mythic world of pregnant significance to which it gives rise:

The entire need for significance is based on the indifference of space and of time....Myth doesn’t even let indifferences arise. Significance makes possible a ‘density’ that excludes empty spaces and empty times" (WM, p.96).

Blumenberg’s notion that "significance" arises especially out of repression of the indifference of space and time is important, because it points back to the Kantian origins of "significance" as a principle of mediation. In Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, space and time are
the pure forms of sensible intuition in general.\textsuperscript{91} But the concepts of the understanding are only able to apply to the spatial manifold of sensible perception and the temporal manifold of apperception because those manifolds are first unified by what Kant calls the "figurative synthesis." Because this "synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition" gives it a unity which necessarily preceeds and makes possible the application of concepts, Kant calls it "the transcendental synthesis of the imagination," and it plays a crucial (though often underemphasized) role in in his "transcendental deduction." He also says that because this transcendental synthesis is spontaneous, "I sometimes entitle it the \textit{productive} imagination to distinguish it from the \textit{reproductive} imagination, whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws...of association."\textsuperscript{92}

In his section on the "Schematism" of understanding, Kant argues that through synthesizing the manifold of space and time, the figurative synthesis of the imagination produces "transcendental schema" that mediate between forms of sensible intuition and the concepts, allowing the latter to apply to the former.\textsuperscript{93} He also distinguishes between these schema and the kind of concrete images we find in artistic representations:

\begin{quote}
..the \textit{image} is a product of the empirical faculty of reproductive imagination; the \textit{schema} of sensible concepts, such as figures in space, is a product and, as it were, a monogram, of pure \textit{a priori} imagination, through which...images themselves become possible.\textsuperscript{94}
\end{quote}

We can see that Kant’s distinctions parallel Dilthey’s to a certain extent, although their terminology is different. Dilthey’s "productive imagination" is closer to what Kant calls "reproductive imagination," while Kant’s figurative imagination is equivalent to Dilthey’s

\textsuperscript{91}Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, tr. Norman Kemp Smith; B35, p.66.
\textsuperscript{92}ibid; B151, p.164-5.
\textsuperscript{93}ibid; B177, p.181.
\textsuperscript{94}ibid; B181, p.183.
involuntary, everyday imagination of the lifeworld, which gives it its original unity.  

Although Kant's "productive imagination" very closely parallels Dilthey's "everyday imagination," the parallel is much looser between Kant's "reproductive imagination" and what Dilthey calls the "productive imagination" or the intentional processes which art and poetry expresses in new ways the relationships that are already significant in the material of life. As Kant says in his "Analytic of Concepts," this synthesis is the "result of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul."

Finally, just like Dilthey’s "significance of the lifeworld," Kant’s "synthesis of the manifold by means of the imagination" functions as intermediary between the manifold of the given and the concepts of thought. It is the heterogenous unity that allows these two homogenous and disconnected realms to be linked. And if any doubt remained that Dilthey’s notion of significance traces to Kant’s philosophy, it should be removed by the following passages from the Schematism:

The schemata of the pure concepts of the understanding are thus the true and sole conditions under which [the] concepts obtain relation to objects and so possess significance. 

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It is interesting to note that Martin Buber’s own account of "significance" alters this Kantian account in a subtle but crucial way. As he says in *I and Thou*, "It is only from the presence of spirit that significance and joy can flow into all work, and reverence and the strength to sacrifice into all possessions" (p.99). This "spirit" is the relation which is essentially intersubjective from the start, but for Buber, this "You-world" is not a "lifeworld" arising from a passive form of imaginative synthesis. It is reached directly by the active imagination of human transcendence: "this imagination is by no means a 'panpsychism'; it is the drive to turn everything into a You, the drive to pan-relation" (p.78). For Buber, this imaginative creativity directly expresses the meanings of thou-relations. It does not depend on any prior function of a passive synthesis for its possibility.

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XIII. Heidegger and Existential Significance

Blumenberg makes the interesting observation that, "in spite of its derivation from Romanticism, historicism further dismantled history’s profile of significance," because "its increasingly fine-meshed screen" of analysis made it harder to find mythic patterns of significance (such as simultaneity) in historical events (*WM*, p.108). As a result of this more scientific approach to history, Blumenberg argues, "significance as a defense against indifference" was needed in Dilthey’s "philosophy of life" (*WM*, p.109) to restore a sense of meaningfulness.

It is against the same scientific tendency in historiography that Heidegger tries to restore an existentially meaningful notion of "history" by "tracing a differentiated way in which the world is given to Dasein back to an elementary and unified way" (*WM*, p.109). As Blumenberg says, Heidegger does this by associating significance, "together with ‘involvement,’ with the ‘worldhood of the world’" (*WM*, p.68).

This conclusion emerges through analyses that go right to the heart of Heidegger’s entire vision in *Being and Time*. They begin with his basic analysis of "things" in our environment that have a "pragmatic" character because they "concern" us in some way: "We shall call those

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entities which we encounter in concern, ‘equipment.’” Heidegger contrasts both
"readiness-to-hand" in this sense, and the "existence" of Dasein, with mere "presence-at-hand," which means bare "existentia" in the older scholastic sense. Heidegger acknowledges that something present-at-hand is required for there to be "anything ready-to-hand," implying that the former in some sense ‘underlies’ the latter; but he does not infer that readiness-to-hand is ‘posterior to’ or ‘founded’ on presence-at-hand in any ontological sense.

The problematic relation between these two modes, however, proves crucial to Heidegger’s account of worldhood and its relation to meaning in general. Our relations to equipment are complex, including the "in-order-to" or specific use of the equipment, the "whereof" which points to the natural resources from which equipment is made, the "towards-which" or work to be produced through employing the equipment in its normal usage, etc., but all these relations are pragmatic, rather than reflective or theoretical. Hence, for equipment to be ready-to-hand in the normal way, "in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically.” For this reason, we only notice the general feature of readiness-to-hand when equipment fails to be usable, either through being damaged, or missing, or actually resisting our concernful efforts toward some end.

These dysfunctions of equipment determine what Heidegger calls the modes of "conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinancy," respectively. When our normal relation to equipment is disturbed in any of these ways, "that which is ready-to-hand loses its readiness-to-

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101. ibid, (H69, p.98).
102. ibid, (H42, p.67)
103. ibid, (H69-70, p.99-100).
hand in a certain way." 104 These dysfunctions are disturbing, because through them, we see in our equipment the "pure presence-at-hand of something that cannot be used" which is nevertheless "not devoid of all readiness-to-hand." 105 In the obstinancy we encounter, the sheer inertia of material resistance to our aims, "presence-at-hand is revealed," but exactly because of this, the readiness-to-hand which we are missing in these instances becomes conspicuous in a fuller way, over against the recalcitrance of our would-be equipment. But the would-be equipment never becomes pure presence at hand, because in its unusability, we still have it within a context of "assignments" and "references" that come from readiness-to-hand in general. And it is precisely this larger context, which only comes to the fore indirectly, that constitutes the "worldly character" of readiness-to-hand. 106 When the context of assignments to uses and works is disturbed,

...we catch sight of the ‘towards-this’ itself, and along with it everything connected with the work--the whole ‘workshop’--as that wherein concern always dwells. The context of equipment is lit up..as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself.

This world-totality is obviously closely related to equipment: when equipment is proximally ready-to-hand, it is does not "emerge from its inconspicuousness" and the world itself remains a hidden background. However, this world is not composed like a set out of things ready-to-hand. Rather, the world itself is the ontological ‘foundation’ for the "being-in-itself" of equipment, in which readiness-to-hand "holds itself in" and remains unobtrusive in its usual way:

Only on the basis of the phenomenon of the world can the Being-in-itself of entities within-the-world be grasped ontologically...Being in the world, according to our Interpretation hitherto, amounts to a non-

104ibid, (H73-74, p.103-4).
105ibid, (H73, p.103).
106ibid, (H74, p.104).
thematic circumspective absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment.

In other words, the world is a complete intensional context, a "referential totality" which is prior even to equipment, and which makes possible the pragmatic assignments to functions that are essential to equipment. In other words, we can think of the world as an ‘appropriation sphere’ in which everything appears appropriable for use, and thus potentially related to us in a meaningful way. Even the environment of "Nature" appears to us in the declension of its possible usefulness: "The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power; the wind is ‘wind in the sails.’" 107

These descriptions already suggest that the "world" in Heidegger’s sense somehow comes from the way things are conditioned through Dasein’s being. This becomes even more apparent in the case of "signs," which "are themselves items of equipment whose specific character as equipment consists of showing or indicating." 108 Although every item of equipment by definition has its "'towards-which' of serviceability," and thus essentially ‘refers’ and ‘assigns,’ the sign is also referential in an accidental sense, i.e. in a sense beyond the essential referentiality of every item of equipment. It is sign only because, beyond its pragmatic referentiality, it indicates whatever it signifies as well. Thus "indicating differs in principle from reference as a constitutive state of equipment," and "equipment for indicating gets used in a very special way." 109 Signs show us how to behave relative to other things; they provide "an orientation within our environment" and indicate "what sort of ‘involvement’ there is with something." Thus while other kinds of equipment conceal worldhood, signs do "the ‘work’ of letting something ready-to-

107ibid, (H70, p.100).
108ibid, (H78, p.108).
hand become conspicuous." By indicating, the sign makes conspicuous the whole web referentiality inherent in equipment, which is otherwise the "inconspicuous" totality of the ready-to-hand:

The sign is not only ready-to-hand with other equipment; but in its readiness-to-hand the environment becomes in each case explicitly accessible for circumspection. A sign...functions both as this definite equipment and as something indicative of the ontological structure of readiness-to-hand, of referential totalities, and of worldhood.

The "world," then, is equivalent to the inconspicuous referential totality of equipment which constitutes "everyday" readiness-to-hand, as Heidegger calls it. This everyday "world" clearly parallels Dilthey’s notion of the lifeworld, which "everyday" imagination unifies into a nexus of meaningful relationships. On Heidegger's analysis, this lifeworld nexus is precisely what signs raise to awareness. Heidegger postulates no passive ‘faculty’ of the imagination to unite this totality, no Kantian figurative synthesis to bring the manifold into readiness-to-hand.

But 'having a world' in this sense still remains inevitable in Heidegger’s account, as in Dilthey’s. The reason is that the world of reference/assignments that constitutes the ready-to-hand ultimately stems from Dasein’s being. Something is a tool because it can be used "in-order-to" do something, which is serviceable only as a means to a further end, namely the ‘work’ "towards-which" it is employed. This instrumental chain constitutes the "involvement" of an item of equipment in human projects. Such "involvement" is prior to and constitutive of equipment, and it is this which gives the ready-to-hand its essential referentiality or assignment.

But finally this chain terminates in the "for-the-sake-of-which" of Dasein, i.e. its transcendence, or freedom to project its own telos or end:

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110 ibid, (H80, p.110-111).
111 ibid, (H82, p.114).
112 ibid, (H83-84, p.114-5).
But the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a ‘towards-which’ in which there is no further involvement...rather it is an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs.\textsuperscript{113}

Thus "the world" of involvement/readiness-to-hand has an ontological relationship to Dasein’s "understanding" of the world. While the "phenomenon of the world" itself is that "wherein" things are understood in their involvements, the "worldhood of the world" is the "structure" of this totality of involvements or field of referentiality.\textsuperscript{114}

It appears implicit in Heidegger’s analysis that this \textit{structure} or \textit{worldhood} of the world refers specifically to its \textit{unity} (in a way \textit{similar to} Kant’s transcendental synthesis of the imagination). It is this unified character of \textit{worldhood}, rather than the ‘world’ itself, which comes directly from the transcendence of individual Dasein. Transcendence makes for worldhood precisely by unifying the various modes of "involvement":

These relationships are bound up in a primordial totality; they are what they are as this signifying in which Dasein gives itself beforehand its Being-in-the-world as something to be understood. The relational totality of this signifying we call ‘\textit{significance}.’ This is what makes up the structure of the world--the structure of that wherein Dasein as such already is.\textsuperscript{115}

Pure "significance" itself, then, is "an existential state of Dasein" as the being that \textit{understands} and \textit{interprets}, and this essential "familiarity" with significance is what makes Dasein capable of "significations."\textsuperscript{116} As we saw, signs directly orient us to a totality of involvement, bringing the world directly to attention; this conspicuousness through the indications or \textit{meanings} of signs is possible only because of intelligibility or "significance" as a prior condition. In his more detailed discussion of the hermeneutic circle (in section I.5), Heidegger confirms this analysis of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[113]ibid, (H84, p.116).
\item[114]ibid, (H86, p.119).
\item[115]ibid, (H87, p.120).
\item[116]ibid, (H87, p.121).
\end{footnotes}
meaning as found in signs. He argues that something can have "meaning" or become intelligible in the "fore-structure" of the understanding only because it is first "projected upon the world--that is, upon the whole of significance."\textsuperscript{117}

Thus Heidegger’s "significance" of the "world" of involvements of the ready-to-hand is similar to Dilthey’s conception of the "significance" already present within the lifeworld, mediating its appropriation by the poetic imagination. Meaningful signs, on the other hand, have more than a merely pragmatic referential involvement, since their function is precisely to mean something by referring to it within significance. There is an active element in the making of meaningful signs, as in the associated capacities of understanding and interpreting. Hence, we might compare "signification" and hermeneutic understanding in Heidegger’s account to the "creative imagination" that makes a "second world" in Dilthey’s account.

However, it is crucial to realize that in Heidegger’s analysis, the "significance" or worldhood of the world has not been made into a mediation between understanding and raw experience, allowing the significations of the former to apply to the latter. Rather, existential "significance" becomes the primordial condition for both understanding and experience. In other words, Heidegger, unlike Dilthey, makes worldhood a radically transcendent structure coming from the unity of Dasein’s being as Care.

We see this clearly in Heidegger’s assertion that the world itself is transcendent, which comes much later in \textit{Being and Time}. He begins the section on this topic by saying that "significance" is the "unity" of the involvement-relations which makes a world, and that it in turn is grounded in the temporality which has already been shown to be the ontological meaning of Care as the essence of Dasein.\textsuperscript{118} Therefore,

\textsuperscript{117}ibid, (H151, p.192-3).
\textsuperscript{118}See H326-7, p.374-5.
The unity of significance—that is, the ontological constitution of the
world—must then likewise be grounded in temporality. The existential-
temporal possibility of the world lies in the fact that temporality, as an
ecstatic unity, has something like a horizon [italic deleted].

In temporality "the horizontal schemata of future, Present, and having been" are unified, and it is
this ‘fusion of horizons’ that "makes possible the primordial way in which the relationships of
the ‘in-order-to’ are connected with the ‘for-the-sake-of.’" And as we have seen, this
interconnection of the modes of involvement is "significance."

In light of our preceding analysis, it is clear that Heidegger is alluding back to Kant’s
original formulation of "significance" in his "Schematism of Pure Reason." Like Kant, Heidegger
sees an intimate relation between significance and the "schemata" of temporality. But Heidegger
does not base "significance" and its schemata on any involuntary faculty of figurative
imagination, because he does not accept the Kantian doctrine of the noumenal ‘I’ of
transcendental apperception. On his own very different analysis of individual Dasein and its
freedom for projecting possibilities, Heidegger can ground "significance" and worldhood
themselves on the unified temporal horizon of Dasein’s Care:

Having its ground in the horizontal unity of ecstatical temporality, the
world is transcendent. It must already have been disclosed so that in
terms of it entities within-the-world can be encountered.

This conclusion marks a decisive departure from the earlier explications of significance in
Kant and Dilthey. In Heidegger’s analysis, the world of significance arises not out of any
modification or work on some underlying manifold or substratum, but precisely because of
Dasein’s being in each case a for-the-sake-of-which, with "understanding as self-projective,

\[119\] ibid, (H364-5, p.415-6).
\[120\] ibid, (H365, p.416).
\[121\] ibid, (H366, p.417).
Being towards its ownmost potentiality for being.” ¹²² As Heidegger says in his section on conscience,

In understanding significance, concernful Dasein submits itself circumspectively to what it encounters as ready-to-hand. Any discovering of a totality goes back to a "for-the-sake-of-which." ¹²³

It is precisely because Dasein is constituted by this structure, which Heidegger calls "Care," that "it has in each case already been thrown into a world." And this shows that its facticity or thrownness is not unconditioned by transcendence. Since "Being-in-the-world is essentially care," ¹²⁴ Dasein is always in a world: the unity of worldhood is derived directly from Dasein’s transcendence as Care. Heidegger thus arrives at a more expansive notion of transcendence than we find in Dilthey’s "creative imagination"; Heidegger’s "Care" covers the very constitution of the lifeworld as well, which Dilthey had relegated to a Kantian figurative synthesis. In Care, however, Dilthey’s creative and everyday imaginations are traced to the same root. The more creative "Being-free for authentic existentiell possibilities" and the more passive "Being-alongside" those things ready-to-hand within the world with which one concerns oneself" are both made possible only by Care as the essential structure of Dasein’s being.¹²⁵

Part Three: Towards a Critique of Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth

XIV. Heidegger vs Blumenberg

Blumenberg associates his conception of significance with Heidegger’s notion of the "relational totality of signifying" (WM, p.109) and suggests that "Care, as the ‘Being of Dasein,’..is the source of its wanting significance in the world" (WM, p.110). Blumenberg’s

¹²²ibid, (H191, p.236).
¹²³ibid, (H297, p.344).
¹²⁴ibid, (H192-3, p.237).
¹²⁵ibid, (H192-3, p.237).
analysis of myth also acknowledges the special role of "signs" (such as names) in providing the orientation of a referential totality: "To equip the world with names means to divide up and classify the undivided, to make the intangible tangible, though not yet comprehensible" (WM, p.42). Up to a point, the way in which Heidegger analyzes significance fits very well with the argument Blumenberg wishes to make regarding the function of myth, and so by exploring this notion of significance, he expects to provide a framework for his main thesis.

Upon closer inspection, however, I believe the parallels Blumenberg wishes to draw between his own view and Heidegger’s tend to break down. Heidegger’s analysis may even provide the basis for developing a serious criticism of Blumenberg’s conception of significance and his interpretation of myth in terms of the reduction of the absolutism of reality.

As we saw earlier, in his interpretation of the latent function of myth, Blumenberg regards the projections of human transcendence as ontologically secondary to the significance which is constituted by the involuntary reaction against the absolutism of nature:

   Equipping something with significance is not something that we can choose to do. Even granted that man makes history, still there is at least one of its side effects that man does not make; this is the ‘charging’ of constituent parts of the human world with significance (WM, p.68)

This description agrees with the involuntary synthesis produced by the passive imagination in Kant and Dilthey. But it is already in tension with Heidegger, who thinks that significance/worldhood is involuntary only in the sense that it expresses the prior transcendence of Dasein in its very being.

   The deepest differences between Blumenberg and Heidegger only become evident, however, when we consider how each regards the world of significance in relation to facticity or finitude. Blumenberg claims that Heidegger’s "fundamental ontology" offers "foundational relationships" for understanding his own concept of the "work of myth" (WM, p.110), i.e. the
latent function that first produces significance/worldhood. But because Blumenberg’s analysis of myth also involves a philosophical anthropology, he does not acknowledge Heidegger’s dictum that "The existential analytic of Dasein comes before any psychology and anthropology." 126 Blumenberg completely reverses this priority by trying to provide a completely naturalistic explanation for the origin of Dasein and its essential structures out of a ‘prehistory’ or prior state of nature:

If significance was the quality of the world as it would not originally have been for men, then it is wrung from a situation that produced anxiety, the forcing of which into concealment is brought about and confirmed by that very significance. Significance is the form in which the background of nothing [des Nichts], as that which produces anxiety, has been put at a distance (WM, p.110).

In Blumenberg’s theory, it is clear that the entire complex of man’s ‘humanity,’ man’s transcendental capacity of projection, and the unifying of the manifold into a world of potential meaning or significance--three aspects which are equiprimordial for Heidegger--are all to be explained as three interlocked outcomes of the same primordial reaction against the horror of Nothingness, the absolutism of reality. Blumenberg equates this ‘nothing’ or meaninglessness of man’s environment prior to significance with the facticity or finitude of Dasein. Thus, "'Significance' is related to finitude" (WM, p.67) just as "the value of the goal or action" is intensified by its ‘resistance’ or difficulty (WM, p.76).

Blumenberg’s connection between significance and difficulty clearly parallels Heidegger’s account of the obstinancy of the ready-to-hand which raises the conspicuousness of the world of referential totality. The obstinancy and obstrusiveness of equipment "makes a break in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers. Our circumspection comes up against emptiness.." 127 In such breaks or gaps in the world-context, the ‘indifference’ of what resists

126Heidegger, Being and Time, (H45, p.71).
127Heidegger, Being and Time, (H75, p.105).
meaning becomes disturbingly evident: "The presence-at-hand of entities is thrust to the fore by the possible breaks in the referential totality." Thus the very notion of presence-at-hand carries the connotation of a material facticity, a bare existentia with inertia that resists ‘meaning’ and shows through as nothingness in the gaps of the world. If the conspicuousness of this presence-at-hand were pure and infinite in a state of nature, would that not be a state in which one would have no ‘world’ but face "reality" in its absolute form?

But as we have seen, for Heidegger, there never can be pure presence-at-hand, because as it is revealed so is the world unity itself. As "the ready-to-hand becomes deprived of its worldhood so that Being-just-present at hand comes to the fore," simultaneously the world is "lit up." The reason is that the present-at-hand only appears as a gap or advent of ‘nothing’ precisely because the world of significance is there as a prior anticipation. In other words, if it were not for the presence of Dasein as Care and its transcendence, there would be no anticipation of significance against which a moment of resistance would even appear as a void, a gap, or a break. For this reason, Heidegger classifies both "readiness-to-hand" and "presence-at-hand" as "categories" for kinds of being unlike Dasein, which can both only be discovered in the first place because of Dasein as the unifying "worldhood of the world." Thus Heidegger would probably resist Blumenberg’s implication that significance arose as an involuntary primordial act of ‘interpretation’ against ‘reality,’ thereby first establishing human/transcendence/worldhood. For Heidegger, there can be no ‘reality’ which is entirely prior to and unconditioned by the transcendental expectation of meaning which makes significance, and hence:

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128ibid, (H76, p.107).
129ibid, (H75, p.106).
130ibid, (H88, p.121).
..the significance-relationships which determine the structure of the world are not a network of forms which a worldless subject has laid over some kind of material.  

On Blumenberg’s model, however, the latent function of myth is precisely to cover up the *status naturalis* of the pre-human hominoid by covering it over with significance. Thus for Blumenberg, it must be the fear of discovering the original nothingness and the initial deception that endows every perception of indifference with "uncanniness" (*WM*, p.98). Out of the deepest instinctual fear of undoing the distance gained from the chaotic absolutism of reality, "life continually deprives itself of an immediate relation to abysses, to what would make it impossible, and thus refuses to obey the summons of its terrifying ‘authenticity’" (*WM*, p.110).

But for Heidegger, the authenticity of factual Dasein *does not* imply any recognition of a worldless absolutism of reality, an abyss of non-meaning beneath all meaning. Dasein’s facticity does imply a finitude which means that we can encounter resistance but it does not refer to a worldless ‘material existence’ which transcendence can never fully overcome. This polarity is not accurate because facticity and transcendence are *equiprimordial* for Dasein, and hence even the everyday inauthentic life of Dasein has worldhood: "Thrown into its ‘there,’ every Dasein has been factically submitted to a definite ‘world’--its world."  

In the authenticity of resoluteness, Dasein moves even farther away from pure presence-at-hand, resolutely emerging from the everyday lifeworld of *das Man* ("the ‘they’"), and taking responsibility for the situation in which it is thrown. The uncanniness of anxiety is precisely the conscience that calls us to active concern for everything and everyone in the totality of relationships which were already meaningful to us in the lifeworld. Thus "resolute Dasein frees itself for its world" and *authenticity consists precisely in actively "being-in-the-world."*

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131*ibid*, (H366, p.417).


133*ibid*, (H298, p.344-5).
XV. Eliade vs Blumenberg

As we saw at the close of the last section, authenticity in Heidegger’s sense does not point back to any prior ‘reality’ opposed to worldhood and life, and it provides no basis for Blumenberg’s view that myth covers up and avoids the "terrifying authenticity" of recognizing such a ‘reality.’ Despite outward similarities, then, Blumenberg cannot legitimately appeal to Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s being-in-the-world in support of his own theory.

In fact, Heidegger’s insights into the subtle relationship between "presence-at-hand" and significance define a perspective from which the very foundation of Blumenberg’s theory might be called into question. As we have seen, on Heidegger’s analysis, even presence-at-hand as resistance to meaning comes with a prior relation to significance. As Heidegger comments in his section on Conscience and Authenticity, "the discoveredness of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand is based on the disclosedness of the world.”

Thus even though presence-at-hand is utterly unlike Dasein, and "essentially devoid of any meaning at all," it still only appears as "the absurd" because it stands out against the background of Dasein’s prior expectation of meaning:

And only that which is unmeaning can be absurd. The present-at-hand, as Dasein encounters it, can, as it were, assault Dasein’s Being; natural events can break in upon us and destroy us. [my italics]

In other words, only because it is encountered by Dasein in its transcendence can what is present-at-hand even appear as "unmeaning" and absurd.

From this point of view, Blumenberg’s treatment of transcendence as derivative from the absolutism of reality would become untenable. In Blumenberg’s account, the capacity for creative projection and all the imaginative content of myth, are entirely secondary to the latent

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134ibid, (H297, p.344).
135ibid, (H152, p.193).
functional work of myth, the "situational leap" which first created significance. The pre-human hominoid was forced to this "super-accomplishment" because in its pre-human state, it perceived "the absolutism of reality" through a "pure state of indefinite anticipation" (WM, p.4). Yet, how could a hominoid with no transcendence perceive a hostile ‘reality’ as absolute in its hostility, in order to produce the infinite anxiety required for the leap? Blumenberg agrees that the mere "coercive power of fear" as felt by an animal could not produce the "dominating condition of anxiety" until it became pure of all actual threat, and referred "to the entire horizon" (WM, p.5).

But the unity of a horizon already defines a world, and is only possible for a being with transcendence. For a hominoid to perceive a unified horizon in which terror could become absolute, that hominoid would necessarily have had to have an expectation of significance and meaningfulness (or "care"). Only against such a prior anticipation could any ‘indifference’ in nature stand out as absurd unmeaning, or a conscious perception of absolute hostility.

If this is true, then Blumenberg’s theory cannot supply an adequate naturalistic derivation for all that we associate with transcendence, including creative imagination, autonomy, and the significance or worldhood of our world. From a Heideggerian perspective, we would have to acknowledge the equiprimodiality of facticity and transcendence, and take seriously the irreducibility of this dyad. In that case, how might the implications of such a Heideggerian position be worked out in a mythography? Fortunately, we already have one credible attempt along these lines in the work of Mircea Eliade, who presents an illuminating contrast to Blumenberg.

In his essay on "Mircea Eliade’s Hermeneutics," Adrian Marino points out that for Eliade, "in the final analysis, significance reveals a reality that is ultimate and sacred." This position derives from Eliade’s view that the most primordial form of ‘meaning’ in sacred mythology and archaic religion is to be found in narrative and ritual escape from cyclic time, the ‘return’ to the
ultimate reality of the cosmogonic beginning. Mythic significance is thus intimately linked to transcendental capacity to initiate this return, which myth and ritual themselves help to foster and develop:

According to Eliade, the realm of significance is established by the "spiritual sense" of a document, by the "traditional sense" of a science. A "spiritual," "traditional" sense means essentially a magical, metaphysical, prophetic sense, all that expresses a sacred, transcendent significance [my italics].

This transcendent, cosmogonic significance is also inextricably related to facticity as the "profane." As Marino realizes, for Eliade these opposites are reciprocal and complementary, but not in a sense that would imply any reductive monism or synthesis of meaning. Rather,

For Mircea Eliade, exegesis begins with a fundamental dissociation of sacred and profane meanings. The dissociation and opposition of the sacred-profane constitutes the deepest and broadest hermeneutical relationship possible.... the sacred appears and is defined by its opposition to the profane; the profane appears and is defined by its opposition to the sacred.

In this model, then, significance itself turns out to contain two opposite potentials for meaning, which are always present. Just as for Heidegger and Gadamer, "in Eliade’s hermeneutic vision, the world reveals itself as language"; worldhood itself is dialogical because all primordial significance is "communicated meaning," i.e. expressed meaning and its interpretive response.

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136See my summary of this theme in "The Essence of Eschatology," §IV. This theme is found throughout Eliade’s study of myth. For example, it is elucidated in the following: The Sacred and the Profane, tr. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959); The Myth of the Eternal Return, tr. Willard R. Trask (Bollingen Foundation / Princeton University Press, 1974); "Time and Eternity in Indian Thought," in Man and Time, Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks (Vol. 3), tr. Ralph Manheim (Bollingen Foundation/Pantheon Books, 1957); Images and Symbols, tr. Philip Mairet (Harvill Press, 1961); Myth and Reality, tr. Willard R. Trask (Harper Torchbooks, 1963).


138ibid, p.37.

139ibid, p.22.

140ibid, p.27.
Finally, in deep accord with Heidegger, Eliade regards mythic significance, with its double-possibility, as inherent in the very structure of Dasein. As Marino puts it, Eliade "presupposes that the human spirit is capable of ‘fundamental intuitions,’ that it is our nature to define man’s existential situation and position in the cosmos." 141 Thus Eliade portrays mythic significance not as the result of a latent reduction function, but as "a primordial, elementary, spontaneous spiritual experience which is combined with the first sacro-metaphysical revelations of humanity." For first meanings, then, no purely naturalistic explanation can be adequate: "their origin is not--if we may so express it--‘physical,’ but rather the result of a ‘creation’ of the human spirit." 142 If this represents an accurate interpretation of Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein, it has moved very far from Blumenberg’s model of the reduction of the absolutism of reality.

XVI. The Absolutism of Reality as Profane in the Mythic Sense

This brief look at Eliade’s approach to myth provides a more penetrating way to formulate the problem with the asymmetry in Blumenberg’s theory, an asymmetry which is crucial for all the foundational components of Blumenberg’s argument, including the distinction between "work on myth" and the "work of myth," and the associated separation of the proposed function of myth from all mythic content. This asymmetry consists essentially in privileging the alienating indifference of "reality" over transcendence and significance, which then become secondary to this prior "reality" from which they are derived by reduction. Because of this asymmetry, significance becomes monological: it is equated with the lifeworld, and all that supports life and meaning, while the underlying "absolutism of reality" opposes all "life" and significance. For example, in examining epic literature, Blumenberg concludes:

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141 ibid, p.26.
142 ibid, p.27.
Significance also arises as a result of the representation of the relationship between the resistance that reality opposes to life and the summoning up of energy that enables one to measure up to it (WM, p.75).

Significance results from the way the "energy" of "life" opposes and reduces the "reality" that "resists" meaning, the ‘nothingness’ or a chaotic gap in the referential totality.

On Blumenberg’s account, this "reality" whose absolutism is so oppressive cannot itself be meaningful, since it is prior to all significance, but it is nevertheless associated with death precisely by being opposed to life. Far from being just a status naturalis utterly prior to every condition of meaning, as Blumenberg portrays it, the absolutism of reality derives its horror by association with several symbolic dimensions of the profane.

In a recent paper, I have given a new analysis of the profane archetype in terms of a family of motifs for the chthonic. This term ‘chthonic’ derives from a Greek word for the dark ‘depths’ in or below the earth, but it stands more generally for chaos as the opposite of form, order, and intelligibility; the anti-vital power by which death draws life into the ground; the passivity which an active principles ties down, binds, or controls. In particular, in my analysis, I illustrate four different dimensions of the chthonic: (1) metaphors for the underworld as a deathly womb; (2) metaphors for the matter which ‘ties’ down the forms that limit and bind it, but which is in itself utterly chaotic in the sense of unintelligible, impenetrable, anti-being as pure formlessness; (3) symbols of chaos as complete unpredictability, vulnerability, violence, and lawlessness; (4) expressions of absolute fate, crushing necessity, inescapable mechanism, which denies, dismembers, or destroys life. My broad phenomenological study independently establishes the significance and long symbolic history of these different strands of chthonic expressions for the profane. Against this background, it is easy to see that Blumenberg’s "absolutism of reality" has

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144 Ibid, p.205.
a chthonic meaning: its exposure to absolute meaningless and contingency is still meaningful for us, precisely because it trades on archetypal metaphors of the profane. There is something right in Blumenberg’s thought that myth aims to overcome this chthonic sense of pure contingency: "Myth is a way of expressing the fact that the world and the powers that hold sway in it are not abandoned to pure arbitrariness" (WM, p.42). But this is because the ascendance of the sacred over the profane is the primary content of myth, not because reducing the initial absolutism is a function behind (and invisible within) the entire system of mythic contents. On the contrary, Blumenberg’s description of the "absolutism" seems so compelling only because it distills part of the essence of one primary mythic content: it is a case of the chthonic par excellence.

Blumenberg’s success in linking so many figures, symbols, and motifs to his "absolutism of reality" derives from the keen intuitive sense of the profane archetype which is unintentionally articulated in this hypothesized ‘original position.’

But in that case, contrary to Blumenberg’s claims, the hypothesis that myth exists to ‘reduce’ the absolutism of reality cannot provide the promised demythologized explanation of myth. Instead, this explanation defines myth as a reaction against the profane -- one of the two fundamental mythic contents, as Eliade’s analysis suggests. Blumenberg’s hypothesis has intuitive appeal only because it covertly reappropriates the profane-vs-sacred opposition in a functional hierarchy. In short, the postulated status naturalis is already mythic; hence the opposition between the absolutism of reality and ‘significance’ is simply another version of the profane-vs-sacred dialectic that Eliade recognized at the most primordial content of cosmogonic and eschatological myth. Blumenberg thus fails to provide a ‘fundamental explanation’ (in Nozick’s sense) for myth, because his account does not identify a functional cause of myth which is itself free from mythic significance. Blumenberg does not trace the mythic notion of
transcendence to a naturalistic origin, because his ‘absolutism of reality’ is nothing but another expression for the transcendent meaning of the profane, as absolute lack of the sacred.

XVII. The Paradoxical Meaning of ‘The Closed Circle’

Since the absolutism of reality and the needs it generates are not a pre-mythic explanation of the genesis of sacred mythology, the real effect of Blumenberg’s theory is thus to make the profane (in the form of an original experience of absolute horror) prior to the sacred (as the idea of divinity introduced in cosmogonic myth). This hierarchical asymmetry, which makes the revelation of the profane the most primordial force behind the developmental structure of human history, leads to several distinct difficulties in Blumenberg’s explanation of myth. A review of problems resulting from this asymmetry lends credibility to Eliade’s opposing thesis of the historical and existential equiprimordiality of the sacred and profane.

In his analysis of general motifs for "significance" in myth, Blumenberg links "the concentrated improbability of the appearance of symmetries" with the cycle motif, "the self-closing of a circle of vital events, or in the latent identity of things" (WM, p.74). However, his extended analysis of the ‘closed circle’ motif finally leads him to portray Freud’s death instinct theory as another instance of this significance-pattern: it expresses "the most perfect consistency of the closed-circle pattern of the instinct to return, in psychoanalysis--the complete figure of the flight from contingency" (WM, p.89). Yet in light of our preceeding analysis, this conclusion appears highly paradoxical. Blumenberg claims that even in the case of the death instinct, the "point returned to" expresses "absolute non-contingency in pure form," but the truth is precisely the reverse: it expresses the most profane end, the return to which is the horrifying cycle of autochthonic iron law.
The problem for Blumenberg’s theory can be posed another way. According to his analysis, all significance is posterior to the absolutism of contingency, which it opposes. All cyclic patterns of significance, then, must then accord with meaning as a flight from contingency. Myth and the lifeworld arise out of chaos precisely by producing a "life-stabilizing quality: the inadmissibility of the arbitrary, the elimination of caprice" (WM, p.127). But how, then, can we account for the significance of mythic motifs which seem to point precisely in the opposite direction, i.e. towards the profane? The answer is to be found in the asymmetry of a latent function, as Freud’s formulation of the death instinct theory already demonstrates:

Freud did not invent the total myth. He found it, in the process of interrogating the instincts with regard to their functional meaning, when he finally came to the death instinct. At that point he demoted the instinct for self-preservation and the instincts for mastery and self-assertion to the level of importance of aspects, and incorporated them into the pattern of ‘detours to death’ (WM, p.91).

The unequal standing of negative and positive moments is totally unambiguous in this theory, as Blumenberg acknowledges: "The death instinct is not symmetrical and of equal rank to the pleasure principle, for it reduces the power of the latter to an episode" (WM, p.91). And this supposedly allows us to see "a common source and basis for the death instinct and the Oedipus complex," allowing Blumenberg to claim that Narcissus and Oedipus "are representatives of the significance of myth itself" (WM, p.91-92). But, in fact, Blumenberg has not overcome the problem: the narcissistic death instinct becomes a closed-circle pattern of significance only if we regard its moments as asymmetrical, which contradicts Blumenberg’s own closure = symmetry equation.

The problem, then, is that Freud’s theory already contains the same reductive pattern of analysis that Blumenberg expands into an entire theory of myth. Mythic significance, as a whole, is the positive moment only achieved through the sublimation of the prior negativity of reality. This is exactly how life can be explained on Freud’s theory of the death instinct: "Under the
primacy of the death instinct, the function of the subordinate component instincts for self-
assertion, power, and self-preservation becomes one of ‘ensuring that the organism will follow its
own path to death.’ (WM, p.93). Meaningless biological matter cannot return to its natural state
directly, but is forced into the "detour" of life: "Not to choose the shortest path back is already the
basic pattern of sublimation. It substitutes for the goals of instinctive energy other goal
conceptions that are marked out by culture" (WM, p.93).

Blumenberg regards this as a "story," Freud’s production of a total myth. But, as we saw in
section V, his own analysis requires the very same logic of sublimation. On his theory, motifs
expressing "the longing to sink back..to the level of impotence, into archaic resignation” can be
present in mythic motifs only because the true terror of the original state has been "forgotten"
precisely "through ‘work on myth’ itself" (WM, p.9). In other words, motifs for negative
significance are never absolute and only become possible "on this side of the terror, the
absolutism of reality" (WM, p.9). This is still paradoxical, however, because it implies that
mythic symbols for the profane could never mean or signify the ‘prehistory’ of the absolutism
itself. Yet once again, if all such symbolic patterns are already conditioned by significance as a
‘detour,’ why does the description of the absolutism exactly correspond to them, and how could
such absolutism ever naturally force an animal living completely ‘within’ the cycle of unmeaning
existence into the ‘detour’ of culture?

This eventually takes us towards the most inscrutable questions. I can see no way of
explaining how meaningless matter alone could ever force meaningless matter into a ‘detour’ of
meaning. An animal which unconsciously lives in the cyclic processes of nature can never see it
as horror (and indeed, for it, the cycle really is not a horror). That perception is possible only
because myth expresses the cycle and so makes us conscious of it; to be aware of it as cycle to
begin with is already a perception of significance simultaneously attended by the transcendent
capacity to imagine escape, and only possible for a creature who is more than just an animal. Thus it is impossible for any naturalistic explanation from anthropology to reduce this hermeneutic circle in the origin of mythic meaning to an evolutionary process.

Moreover, Blumenberg functional approach to significance and its motifs leads him to attribute essentially the same form of significance to all mythic schemes of cyclic closure, which generates some highly questionable interpretations. In its most primordial form, significance is unification of experience into a world through the cyclic pattern of the nostos. The "return" to home "is the successful assertion of the world’s familiarity, in opposition to the embodiment of its uncanniness" (WM, p.119). Accordingly, Blumenberg makes a convincing argument that, throughout the history of literature, Odysseus’ homecoming is "presented according to the pattern of the closing of a circle, which guarantees the tenor of the world and of life as order against any semblance of accident or arbitrariness" (WM, p.76). However, Blumenberg goes on to extend this interpretation to tragedy:

The reliability of every path and of each life -- fulfillable, after delay, however much it may be impeded by the gods’ division of powers -- is imprinted in advance in the pattern of the closed circle. Even in the horror of returning to an unknown origin, as in the Oedipus myth, there is an element of the impossibility of missing it, which points, even as a degenerate form, to the fundamental pattern of a deeper precision. (WM, p.86).

But to say that this pattern Oedipus tragedy reduces absolutism by guarenting the assurance of closure against chance and arbitrariness is an absurd distortion. Such a structuralist reading entirely ignores that, in this case, the closed circle represents the horror of fatalistic necessity, the chthonic iron law. Far from reducing absolutism, in this case necessity expresses it--something which Blumenberg would have us believe is impossible.

Not perceiving this contradiction, Blumenberg goes on to say that although it is "delusion" to adhere to the doom decreed by the gods, such doom is "the agency by which meaning is
established through hidden processes—a delusion that seems a mockery of all meaning only to those who are also subjected to such dooms” (WM, p.86). But this assertion increases the distortion rather than correcting it: it is precisely the horrifying "mockery" which is *the meaning* for the audience as well, just as for any audience to whom cyclic necessity in its negative form is expressed by a mythmaker. This problem cannot be overcome by implying an asymmetry between the person ‘in’ the cycle experiencing unmeaning vs the observer ‘outside’ the cycle for whom it is meaningful. Such a dichotomy, so characteristic of functionalism, is hopelessly unconvincing because man is always both living in the cycle and yet transcendentally aware of it: mythology as a whole is essentially *consciousness and expression of the circle*, which an animal living wholly absorbed in it must lack. There is no horror in an animal or plant following the giddy round of fate: it is horrifying only when its victim is a human who is aware of it. 145

Clearly, then, for both Oedipus the character and for the audience, it is the ‘mockery of meaning,’ the revelation of a horrible *unmeaning, which is itself meaningful* in the tragedy. Blumenberg’s monological formulation of significance, however, must rule out such cases, or the mutually exclusive relation between the absolutism of reality and significance could not be maintained.

To his credit, Blumenberg does recognize that necessity can sometimes have a negative or profane sense. He points to Epicurus’ opinion that "it would be better to accept the myth about the gods than to become a slave of the necessity of physicists" (WM, p.13), since this kind of necessity does not help in the reduction of the absolutism of reality. Instead, ancient atomism "saw ‘accident’ as opportunity" (WM, p.13). This helps Blumenberg make his point that theories can function to provide significance, but he does not seem to grasp its deeper implication. For he

145 I suspect that this also explains why metamorphosis into an animal form is a powerful motif for horror in myth. Rather than inadvertently marking a vestigial trace of reduction, it is a deliberate and potent expression of the horror of complete absorption into the cycle.
continues to hold that all forms of closure must have the latent functional significance of reducing the absolutism: "Freud recognized the ambivalence of ‘significance’ in the coercive and fateful way in which the closing of the circle is accomplished: the uncanny as the inescapable, the meaningful as the unmistakable" (WM, p.87). It is undeniable that Freud read seemingly fateful closures this way, but he was making the same error as Blumenberg.

For similar reasons, it seems unsatisfactory to say that Freud’s myths can effectively serve the need for mythic ‘significance’ partly through "a decrease in the expectation of freedom, a decrease in what is conceded to candor and ultimate self-knowledge, since these come under the protection of the unrecognized preestablished patterns" (WM, p.95). Blumenberg seems to agree with Freud that return to the "primeval state" of death, as expressed by symbols of the chthonic, will provide the required mythic significance. Blumenberg holds that death-instinct motifs can function to reduce the absolutism of reality by assuring us of the required closure, thus giving these motifs the same latent functional significance. But motifs which tell a man that "He is only a particle in the stream of the great return that life as a whole...passes through" (WM, p.90) do not (and never would have) functioned as reassurance for security. Precisely because this supposed medium of "life" completely absorbs the human person in this process, to archaic man it would have symbolized the horrible cycle of iron law, the profane destruction of Dasein.

What Blumenberg has not recognized is the equiprimordiality and irreducibility of the sacred-profane complementarity for significance in general. As I have shown, both contingency and necessity can stand for the chthonic/profane,⁴⁶⁶ and again, both can stand for the sacred. Against the profane as fatalistic necessity, an element of chance can symbolize a sacred moment of freedom. And against the profane as unlimited fortuna or complete contingency, necessity can symbolize divine or sacred salvation. Any attempt to identify one side of such

⁴⁶⁶See Davenport, "The Structure of the Profane: A Phenomenology of the ‘Chthonic’ in Myth and Existential Philosophy," pp.190-195 ??
double-significance with a latent original state and the other with a secondary function of reducing the former, is bound to level off their full significance.

XVII. Blumenberg vs Otto on the Problem of Origin

At this point, it may be possible to draw some conclusions on the overall structure of Blumenberg’s explanation of myth by looking more closely at one of its most complex aspects: namely, Blumenberg’s critique of competing theories of myth and his corresponding attempt to contrast them with what he takes to be his own radically different kind of myth theory. In closing, I would like to suggest that because of difficulties engendered by asymmetry, Blumenberg is not entirely successful in assimilating competing theories, like that of Rudolph Otto’s, to his own.

We have already seen (in sections VI and IX) that, given his functional distinction between the ‘work of myth’ and ‘work on myth,’ Blumenberg must regard all substantial contents of myth as secondary to the pure function or orientation of myth as such, which constitutes its significance. For this reason, Blumenberg claims that, in the traditional sense, at least, "theories about the origin of myth are idle" and he regards himself as engaged in a different kind of project altogether (WM, p.45).

To understand Blumenberg, we need to be precise about several different senses of ‘origin.’ The first would be the state of nature itself, the hidden situation which is the cause or origin of the latent function of myth, i.e. the function of reducing/covering over the state of nature. The second is the ‘origins’ which are portrayed in the contents of myth, i.e. cosmogonic origins. The third is the origin of the contents of myth, including these cosmogonic contents. Theories that purport to explain the origin of myth (i.e. mythic contents) in this third sense, Blumenberg dubs "mythogonic" theories. This is a pejorative term for Blumenberg, because mythogenies in this
sense are theories that try to explain "what we are not going to know, namely how myth came to exist and what experiences underlie its contents" (WM, p.59). Like interpretation of myth’s "figures and contents themselves," mythogonic theory is itself "a regeant having an effect on a way of working on myth" (WM, p.59). For that reason, Blumenberg tends to assimilate our second and third senses of ‘origin,’ even to the extent of referring to them both together in various passages.

But Blumenberg usually distinguishes ‘origin’ in his special first sense by using some other term (except when speaking ironically):

> To speak of beginnings is always to be suspected of a mania for returning to origins [sense 2]. Nothing wants to go back to the beginning that is the point toward which the lines of what we are speaking of here converge. On the contrary, everything apportions itself according to its distance from that beginning. Consequently, it is more prudent to speak of the “pluperfect” rather than of "origins." This pluperfect is not that of an omnipotence of wishes..(WM, p.21).

This sharply distinguishes the absolutism of reality from the sacred paradisical ‘beginnings’ found in many cosmogonic myths; Blumenberg regards these contents as products of the projective imagination, and it is to these origins that we desire to return ‘in illu tempore’ (as Eliade puts it).

This is the context in which we must take Blumenberg’s claim that his project is "not to devise theories about the origin of myth" (WM, p.54). He criticizes several "alternative mythogonies," including the mythopoetic (or ‘wonder’) theory of myth as a response to an ‘inundation of stimuli’ and the "culture-circle theory" of direct Proto-Indo-European inheritance.

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147By this, I believe he is referring to historical theories like that of Max Müller, who tries to account for cross-cultural similarities in myth content on the basis on actual linguistic descent. Others have tried similar theories not with language, but with social organization (Proto-Indo-Europeans are supposed to have had a three-tiered class system inherited by their descendent cultures as the ground of all their myths, etc.), or other anthropological bases for explaining comparative similarities.
Beyond this, he thinks we are forced into "Platonic" theories of innate ideas (or "archetypes") to explain cross-cultural comparisons, if we pursue the project of mythogony (WM, p.53).

Out of all competing theories, Blumenberg seems to think Rudolph Otto’s phenomenology of the divine or ‘the holy’ as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is closest to the truth. While Feuerbach’s theory on the origin of religion corresponds only to the imaginative power of projection which performs ‘work on myth’ only in a later stage, Rudolph’s Otto’s notion of "an a priori and homogeneous original sensation of the ‘holy’" is closer to the "originally foreign" element of uncanniness in the absolutism of reality (WM, p.28).

But Blumenberg still believes that by identifying this despecified "affect" of "the holy" Otto has not reached the true origin of myth (i.e. ‘the pluperfect’) nor explained its function, for "affect is the inclusive bracket that unites partial actions that work against the absolutism of reality" (WM, p.21). This explains his earlier claim that "the holy" is too late an anthropological point of departure since it is "the already institutionalized mode of reduction of the absolutism of reality, of that sheer inimicalness to life and *unobligingness*..." (WM, p.14). In other words, the primordial "holy" is roughly equivalent to ‘significance’ itself, the unifying orientation resulting from the ‘work of myth,’ that rises against the absolute "present-at-hand."

We can see this more clearly in a description in which Blumenberg offers something like the hierarchy of anthropological ‘stages’ in his theory:

"The holy" is the primary interpretation of the undefined ‘power’ that is assumed to exist on the strength of the simple fact that man is not the master of his own fate...When the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power’ is understood in this way, rites and myths are always secondary interpretations. Even if the subsequent interpretation of myth is termed "secondary" in its turn, as a "secondary rationalization" -- as a rationalization it tends...still in the direction of what had already been accomplished by the primary interpretation of undefined ‘power.’ (WM, p.63).

By taking the numinos as already an expression of significance, Blumenberg allows himself room to say that the quality of "fear" and dependence Otto sees in the numinos or holy is *not* the
pluperfect terror of the absolutism -- the undefined ‘power.’ These divisions can perhaps be summarized in the following scheme:

(1) **Pluperfect status naturalis:** Absolutism of Reality

| | Undefined ‘power;’
| | pure ‘Other’
| | Involuntary uncanny/terror

(2) **Primary interpretation:** Unified ‘Significance’

| | Numinos/Holy
| | (imaginative projection/distribution)

(3) **Secondary interpretation:** Mythic Ritual content

| | Names, auras, pantheons, geneologies, taboos..

(n) **Later theoretical rationalization:** ‘Mythogonic’ theories

| | genesis stories for myth contents

In this model, as Blumenberg says, "the reduction function relates to what was originally and involuntarily uncanny," and hence the numinos is "the sign of what was originally and involuntarily terrifying." But, as we saw earlier, stage two must be regarded as a ‘virtual’ level that is never expressed in its pure form. The matrix of significance is the liminal intermediate transition point between the ‘work of myth’ and the forms of ‘work on myth’ which follow it. Thus numinos significance is always expressed in some determinate fashion: "the center of the numinos sphere not only has form and name, but above all is strictly localized" (WM, p.63).

Through this determinate localization, rites and myths, or the actual content of the mythic, follow by further reducing or transforming "the original emotional tension of a "savage terror" into distance (WM, p.62). These operations include the everything in the stage of ‘secondary interpretation,’ such as the distribution, transfer, and simulation functions in rites and myths which record the result of work done on the numinos: it is distributed into pantheons, regulated into institutions, transferred to whatever is taboo, simulated in monsters which are then overcome, and so on. Eventually, we can even add theories aiming to account for the origin of mythic
‘substances’ themselves to this progression. Hence myth and theory of myth can have essentially the same function.

On the basis of this scheme, which we might call a metatheory of myth (to distinguish it from "mythogony"), Blumenberg believes that the antithesis between "poetry and terror" as two fundamental "ideas of the origin and originative character of myth" poses no problem for this account. This antithesis can be found as a symmetric tension within myths, which express beginnings both as edenic paradises and monsterous strife. And the same antithesis is expressed in mythogonic theories:

At the beginning stands either the imaginative extravagance of anthropomorphic appropriation of the world and theomorphic enhancement of man or the naked expression of the passivity of fear and horror, of demonic captivity, magic helplessness, utter dependency (WM, p.59).

For example, Blumenberg notes that Friedrich Schlegel began with the romantic conception of primeval mythopoesis, but later changed his mind: "the first presentiment of the infinite and the divine, he wrote, had filled man 'not with joyful amazement, but rather with savage terror'" (WM, p.62).

Blumenberg argues, however, that this theoretical antithesis between "Poetry and terror as the original realities of myth" is itself based on "projecting backwards," since we find both idyllic creatures of poetic beauty (muses, nymphs etc.) and monsters of terror, such as gorgons, in myth (WM, p.66). Thus the antithesis is only problematic, he argues, for theories of myth that identity myth "with 'its’ primeval epoch" on the basis of one or another philosophy of history (WM, p.67). In his functional model, on the other hand, the "original state, prior to all history" is not equated with the content of myth at all, and can explain the conflicting elements in its content on a functional basis.

But we know in advance that there are likely to be several problems for this attempted resolution of the antithesis. We have already seen that Blumenberg’s functional explanation has a harder time accounting for negative motifs which actually express the profane, than for positive
motifs which can be said to express some movement away from what is terrible. Blumenberg’s theory thus has to treat sacred and profane paradigms in the content of myth asymmetrically. At the same time, it becomes hard to maintain the distinction between motifs for "terror" in the content of myth and the "involuntary terror" in the pluperfect prehistory, the absolutism of reality, which gives rise to the reductive purpose of myth itself. Blumenberg himself shows a tendency to blur this distinction. For example, he speculates of Schlegel: "Could it be that he considered the early poetic phase...as a condition that is already at a distance from the ‘savage terror?’" (WM, p.62). Blumenberg seems to be suggesting that, by reflecting further on motifs (of the profane) in the cosmogonic content of myths, Schlegel somehow realized the existence of the pluperfect "terror" which all myth tries to distance from human life. But in that case, the terror which myth expresses must be very similar to the terror which it flees. The breakdown of this distinction would not be surprising, though, if the absolutism of reality has all the characteristics identified by the archetypally profane in the content of myth.

These problems suggest that the attempt to project a state of nature prior to all mythic content has not succeeded. If so, then Blumenberg’s diagnosis that "the theory of myth transforms itself into myth" (WM, p.61) applies to his own metatheory. In comparison to the distortions produced by the functional metatheory, in fact, Rudolph Otto’s explication of the numinos may even seem superior. Despite what Blumenberg says, Otto is not driven by any philosophy of history to take sides in the poetry versus terror antithesis. His phenomenology of ‘the holy’ explicitly emphasizes the paradoxical doubleness of its awe-inspiring "Otherness" and its ecstasy-inspiring "beatitude beyond compare." For Otto, the "mysterious" as the form of the numen contains both "the daunting and the fascinating" simultaneously in a "strange harmony of

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contrasts." In other words, both the moments of "terror" and "poetry" are present in the equiprimordial symmetry which Eliade ascribes to the dialogical relation of the sacred and profane.

For Blumenberg, the simultaneous unity and balanced equality of these moments, which may actually be found in sacred mythology, is in principle impossible. Blumenberg defines the original experience of the absolutism of reality as the experience of pure undifferentiated/non-personified alienness: it is "the single absolute experience that exists: that of the superior power of the Other" (WM, p.21). Put this way, though, the absolutism of reality takes on an unintended similarity to the ‘Wholly Other’ of Karl Barth’s theology. This is ironic, not only because Blumenberg criticized Barth in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, but also because God as the Wholly Other seems almost identical with the intolerable "absolutism of transcendence" (WM, p.141), which is Blumenberg’s diagnosis for the Ockhamian conception of divinity in the late medieval period. This proportional analogy ‘the modern idea of progress is to Ockham’s divinity as mythology was to the absolutism of reality’ established our initial comparison between The Legitimacy of the Modern Age and the Work on Myth. But in the end, the very possibility of this analogy (not itself explicitly acknowledged by Blumenberg) seems to constitute an objection to Blumenberg’s theory: the absolutism that supposedly cannot appear or be expressed seems to reappear in the end of the middle ages, on Blumenberg’s own account.

Unlike Otto, then, Blumenberg must give precedence to the daemonic terror of the absolutism of reality over the divine aspect of ‘the holy,’ which is equated with significance and meaning per se, and given a secondary status. In Blumenberg’s view, "What is decisive for the function of myth is that something that one could call the ‘quality’ of the divine is represented as not originally being given, from the beginning, or from eternity" (WM, p.113-114). When it is

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149Ibid, p.31
seen in these terms, however, there appears to be little difference between Blumenberg’s *theory* of myth and the Gnostic *myth* itself to which he so often refers. After all, the Gnostics also told the story that the original god was a profane demon, and that a (monological) sacred being only arrived later on.

In the last analysis, the history of philosophy itself is inconsistent with Blumenberg’s philosophy of history. Although Blumenberg tries to claim Heidegger as an ally, Heidegger spent his whole philosophical career trying to restore to its original significance the ultimate question of the meaning of Being. Insofar as Heidegger thought the entire history of metaphysics consisted of covering over and hiding the original Being of beings, he might appear to agree with Blumenberg that all culture has been an exercise in distancing this experience of absolutism and forcing it to recede. But if the true origin is what Blumenberg hypothesizes, then why would many people find something profound and valuable in Heidegger’s attempt to recover the meaning of Being? Surely if Blumenberg were right, our reaction to Heidegger would instead be like our reaction to someone bent on releasing a world-destroying virus from a government laboratory.

Heidegger is not the only person, however, who has made an impact by raising problems that take us back, if Blumenberg is right, ever closer to the absolutism of reality, to questions which should not even be able to have *meaning* for us if culture had done its Darwinian work. In his *Confession*, Leo Tolstoy says of metaphysics, "This science clearly raises the question of what I am and what the universe is, the question of why I live and why the universe exists." ¹⁵⁰ This is the *seinsfrage*, the question which Heidegger says it is Dasein’s essence to ask. But how is this possible, if Blumenberg is right? Are Heidegger’s attempt to "destroy" the history of metaphysics to recover Being and Tolstoy’s ardent effort to put the question of existence in its

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starkest terms merely aberrations, perverse attempts to produce a recidivism of the spirit that returns us to the stage at which there is no distance from the absolutism of reality? But it is not just Heidegger and Tolstoy. The same question is present in Kierkegaard, Pascal, Aquinas, Augustine, Aristotle’s *Eudaimonion Ethics*, Plato’s *Apology*, Heraclitus, the Book of Job, Genesis, and *Gilgamesh*, to name but a few. It would seem that the history of philosophy, at least until the period of the Enlightenment and scientific empiricism, had been more a matter of *preserving* the ultimate question, and saving its significance for each generation to learn anew, than a matter of distancing it. If Blumenberg were right, how could we possibly find something valuable in these manifold attempts to bring us nearer to the infinite anxiety the repression of which supposedly *makes us human*?

This analysis suggests that there is a kind of performative contradiction in Blumenberg’s own theory of history, which claims to reveal to us the dark secret it has been the essential function of entire culture to conceal. For if the theory is right, then its invention would also be a terrible aberration, an eruption of anti-culture. If Blumenberg were actually right, we would have to be literally unable to find *any meaning* in the notion of the absolutism of reality. For if it could be *that easy* to recover and understand the type of absolute anxiety Blumenberg has in mind, and to understand the function of myth in terms of it, than ten thousand years of culture are so far from having done their job that a person with a modest college education needs to read only a few chapters of a book to be able to find the grain of sand under all the cultural layers of pearl deposited on it. Blumenberg scoffs at "mythogonic" theories for claiming to explain what we can never know, namely how the *contents* of sacred myth originated. But in fact, if his philosophy of history were true, it would be Blumenberg’s own "pluperfect" origin behind the fabled origins which would *in principle* be impossible for our reason to reach. Rather, our great
facility for deciphering the origins of specific contents of myth should always keep us distracted, and completely unable even to approach perceiving the possibility of that most primal of horrors.

In short, if Blumenberg were right, the existence of his theory would be impossible. We can understand Blumenberg’s thesis because it is wrong: we grasp the absolutism of reality because it follows the archetypal paradigms of the profane as chthonic. As we have seen, this meaning is as perennial as the question to which the duality of the sacred and profane is mythology’s original answer.

XIX: Summary: Why Blumenberg’s Theory Failed

At this point, let us sum up all the evidence against Blumenberg. In §XVIII, we have seen that Blumenberg theory is such that, in principle, it is impossible to establish any warrant for it from the evidence within myth itself. Rather, even the materials of Greek myth, considered (unsatisfactorily) in almost total isolation from the rest of world mythology, only appear to support Blumenberg’s hypothesis if they are interpreted according to the very strong dictates of his scheme to begin with. Moreover, the materials may have to undergo substantial distortion in the process for this interpretation to be possible at all. This is not easy to perceive at first, because the asymmetry of the profane over the sacred is so systematic throughout Blumenberg’s work, and is applied so consistently in all contexts, that from an internal perspective the overall analysis may seem unproblematic. This is why it was advantageous to gain some distance from Blumenberg’s theory through an examination of “significance” in the history of philosophy.

On this historical basis, however, it became possible to spell out several additional difficulties for Blumenberg’s functional reading of myth. In the last analysis, these difficulties all seem to stem from the fundamental assymmetry in Blumenberg’s account between the function of myth as a whole, and the significance of patterns and paradigms in its contents. As
we saw at the start, this functional approach is motivated both by Blumenberg’s
e-function/substance distinction in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, and by the model provided
by sociofunctionalist mythography. Blumenberg saw that these forms of analysis could be linked
up with the question of "significance" in philosophical hermeneutics deriving from Kant, if a
state of nature could by hypothesized from which "significance" itself could be derived. This
idea launched Blumenberg’s new synthesis in *Work on Myth*.

But we can see a deeper motivation at work here. Blumenberg’s strategy of explanation is
aimed to accomplish two basic aims: (1) to provide an account for the very first stage of ‘history’
which can serve as the baseline for the model of historical change developed in *The Legitimacy
of the Modern Age* (by preventing both an infinite regress of stages and any ultimate break
between ‘mythos’ and ‘logos’); and (2) to formulate the requisite explanation on wholly
naturalistic premises consistent with a ‘modern age’ that can do without any religious ‘meaning’
for the whole of history. For unless the theory has a naturalistic basis, then the ‘functional
position’ once occupied by eschatology might turn out to have persisted just because it was the
basic and "humanly universal" one, which would vindicate Löwith and the theory that progress is
secularized eschatology after all. It is this result which Blumenberg wants to avoid at all costs.
In the last analysis, then, "the reduction of the absolutism of reality" is an alternative not only to
mythic *substances* with transcendent origins (innate archetypes, for example) but also to an
‘eschatological position’ that is hermeneutically absolute, determining the horizons which our
ideas can never get beyond.

The deepest question arising from our critical evaluation of *Work on Myth* is whether it is
really possible to achieve both aims (1) and (2) at once. In trying to do so, the theorist seems
driven to pack into the so-called "state of nature" at least a substantial part of the meaning or
significance which is supposed to be derived from it. In these theories, we always begin not from a naturalistic "state of nature," but rather from a well-disguised "state of transcendence."

The desire to derive meaningful intersubjective relations from a purely naturalistic standpoint has led to similar attempts at explanation in the realm of ethics and political theory, and it would be profitable to compare these different state-of-nature theories to the structure of Blumenberg’s model for myth. When carried through, I believe this line of analysis would show that Blumenberg shares with several other state-of-nature theorists a particular ideal of rationality which is reflected in the type of explanation sought. If successful, this line of inquiry would suggest that the kind of ‘rational’ continuity Blumenberg wants to posit between ‘mythos and logos’ is only one of several possible kinds. A very different, non-functionalist interpretation of mythology might also imply that mythology is rational and has validity even in the modern day -- but in a sense of ‘rational’ and ‘valid’ distinguished from the functionalist sense Blumenberg begins with.

XX. Conclusion: The Metaphilosophy of History

The failure of Blumenberg’s functionalist approach has very general implications for the philosophy of history and its connections to theories of rationality and explanation. As we saw in Part I, Blumenberg’s distinction between the form (or functional role) and content of ideas in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age becomes the basis for an explanatory model -- a philosophy of history -- which is neither a "teleological" story of development towards an ideal end, nor a purely "historicist" conception that rules out development in favor of each age having its own unique value in isolation from others. Rather, we saw that Blumenberg’s account of development in the history of ideas is evolutionary, in a broad sense. Like evolutionary adaptations, new ideas arise as ‘solutions’ to the problems that themselves arose out of solutions to
earlier problems, and so on. On this model, what continuity there is across changes in epoch and worldview can be explained by an invisible-hand process, extending backwards ultimately to the genesis of culture.

The belief that history can successfully be made intelligible through such an invisible-hand model reflects Blumenberg’s faith that human nature is basically Hobbesian. At the beginning of Work on Myth, Blumenberg announces that he must start with "an initial situation that serves the purpose of the old status naturalis of philosophical theories of culture and state" (p.3). As Robert Wallace notes, Blumenberg’s "absolutism of reality" turns out to resemble "not primarily Locke’s or Rousseau’s ‘state of nature’..but rather that of Hobbes" (WM, p.xv). Human beings, in Blumenberg’s Darwinian model of the history of ideas, do not ultimately value their institutions, concepts, and theoretical contents for their own sake, but maintain them because they play certain required roles, or satisfy certain pragmatic needs. Moreover, the first problems and questions which generate the demand for mythology and significance only arise because man’s natural state changes in a way that is not physically but emotionally intolerable. In the absolutism of reality, anthropoids become the first human beings by realizing, in a sense, ‘that they are naked;’ they become aware of the fragility of their life and the nasty brutishness of their condition in an overpowering Nature. Were it not for this awareness, all would be well, but because of it, these primordial humans had to form a kind of unwritten cultural contract with one another. They had to agree, however tacitly, to begin trading among themselves the noblest of all lies, the greatest of all repressions: namely, expressions of the mythic significance of cosmic patterns. By its very nature, this had to be the least public of all possible contracts, because its highest priority was to erase all awareness on the part of its participants that they shared complicity in something that was essentially artificial, a project of desperation.
We have seen in Part III why this model fails to provide a convincing hypothesis as to the origin of religion. It assumes that *horror at the chthonic* is something that can be produced naturally, whereas in fact, such horror is already requires openness to and expectation of transcendent significance. The *profane* is horrifying only in contrast to an idea or awareness of the sacred or divinity *in illo tempore*. If this is right, it has devastating implications for the Hobbesian conception of rationality in general. For as Blumenberg has helped us see, Hobbes’s premises require an explanatory paradigm of history according to which culture can be reduced to naturalistic grounds, and what appears to be the work of reason is really the work of will to power. Yet this paradigm turns out to be incapable *in principle* of providing an adequate theory of the origin of mythology. And this amounts to failing a fundamental requirement for any complete conception of rationality and explanation. At first sight, this might look like an extreme claim. Philosophers have offered many conceptions of reason over the years, some based on an ‘externalist’ Hobbesian notion of motivation in which reason is slave to end-giving ‘passions’ and communication is never free of coercion, others based on a teleological conception of mind, others based on fundamental hermeneutic principles of interpretation, and yet others in terms of an ‘internalist’ capacity for motivation by a *sense of justice* which deliberates through a kind of ‘reflective equilibrium.’ But never -- at least since the preSocratics -- have philosophers felt compelled to show that their theory of reason is consistent with an explanation of the origin of mythology. Why is this necessarily an issue at all?

This omission is a symptom of what might be called the fundamental myth of philosophy, namely the myth that *logos replaces mythos*, that with philosophy, mythology is no longer needed, no longer important. Another reflection of this primary philosophical myth is the common drive to separate the validity or rationality of ideas from their ‘genealogy,’ their history. One problem with this drive is that conceptions of validity and rationality themselves have a
history -- although admitting this need not mean that they have no other transcendental conditions which are expressed or revealed in their historical development. Another problem is that even if such a transcendental ideal is possible, our mode of access to it may turn out be mediated by the temporal forms of human practices. It is for this reason that the philosophy of history must be regarded as the final proving ground in which competing, even incommensurable conceptions of rationality must be tested. And to be complete, a philosophy of history must not only anticipate the (eschatological) limit of human possibility; it must also extend back beyond the origin of traditions to the origin of history itself, the origin of human ideas and language in their primordial mythic mode, which is the ultimate ground of the possibility of tradition. 151

On any plausible account, we will have a history of human ideas and institutions, a vast complex of developing traditions and novelties, works and ideals, all of which were motivated in various ways. Any attempt at "explanation" in this sphere of human religion, cultural and social institutions, and their development within the history of ideas and practices, always involves philosophical commitments of the deepest sort. Before the 20th century, the attempt to offer explanations of such historical and cultural phenomena came broadly under "philosophy of history." The philosophy of history was understood as the attempt to explain (and perhaps to justify) features of one’s contemporary institutions and conceptions in light of the development of culture and dramatic changes in historical epochs.

But today we can see even more clearly than the 19th century the central role philosophy of history must have in philosophy generally. Theories of rationality and philosophical models of history are themselves an outcome in the most recent phase of this ever-growing complex. No theory of reason can afford to relegate all of this to blind chance: it must tell us what if any

151 Heidegger failed to conceive his own project of disclosing the meaning of Being in these terms not because the seinsfrage did not require a mythography by its own logic -- Mircea Eliade saw most clearly that it did -- but because his hostility to the reductive sociofunctionalist mythographies of his day made him suspicious of "ethnography," and his desire to be understood as a phenomenologist made him fear being taken as a mere "anthropologist."
relation reason has to human motivation, and to what extent this can *make sense* of the basic mechanisms and processes by which developments in the history of ideas took place. It must tell us how the very ground it claims for its standards of validity influence, shape, and account for the history of ideas and institutions. The project of philosophy of history is thus coeval with the basic aim of all theories of rationality: to establish an objective standard of validity. It is also coeval with the basic task of philosophical anthropology: to understand what "persons" are, and what possible relations between motivation, freedom, and reason personhood allows. In a sense, the philosophy of history is the point at which these two tasks meet: it is the point where theory cannot avoid the full comprehensiveness of *system*, or the "jointure" of the transcendentals, as Heidegger called it in his Schelling lectures.

At this point in 20th-century philosophy, more than one of our best thinkers has recognized this need to develop their conception of reason into a philosophy of history to demonstrate its full coherence. This is true for writers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Hans-George Gadamer, Leo Strauss, Jürgen Habermas, and Alasdair MacIntyre. But it is Blumenberg who has shown himself more insightful than all of them by recognizing that ultimately, a *complete* philosophy of history will require that its explanatory paradigms themselves be extended to an account of the origin of mythology and the nature of the transition to *logos* and *theoria*. Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth* is precisely such an attempt to complete a philosophy of history. If it fails, as I have argued, it certainly fails in attempting a task which is *unavoidable* for a complete philosophy, however much philosophers have sought to avoid it. And for this Blumenberg deserves much credit. He has shown us what philosophy of history must be if it is to ground a theory of reason with explanatory power.

In this light, we can sketch in summary form a *metaphilosophy of history* which outlines the basic requirements for any satisfactory philosophy of history. These can be divided under several
headings. First, the metaphilosophy of history must treat the metaprocesses of self-reference to which any systematic philosophy of history is subject. Paradigms of explanation in the philosophy of history must be *consistent* in the sense that they are capable of explaining, among many other things, (a) how they themselves arose; (b) why other paradigms for rational explanation arose; and (c) how different expectations for what counts as adequate philosophy of history have arisen and changed over time.

Second, Blumenberg has drawn attention to the metarequirement of *completeness*: an ideal philosophy of history must in principle be capable of extending to explanations of the entirety of cultural history, from its origins. What counts as "historical," of course, will depend on the philosophy of history itself. But to be complete, any set of explanatory paradigms for history must be able (a) to justify its division of history from the pre-historical; (b) to explain the origin of the historical from the pre-historic; and (c) to include an explanation for everything "historical" by its own standards (i.e. to locate its division between history and any "end of history" it projects).

Third, any philosophy of history must be *metaphilosophically adequate* in the following sense: it must provide some appropriate explanation for the existence of these and other "metarequirements" themselves, which will constitute the metaphilosophy of history. The metarequirements themselves will be justified as being absolutely unavoidable (in Habermas’s "transcendental-pragmatic" sense), and any philosophy of history must explain the roots from which their unavoidability arises. Perhaps, for example, they arise from nothing more than the logical demand of consistency and the most pre-theoretical experience we have of temporal flow, but even then, would they not suggest the existence of a *prior*, transcendental ideal of logical adequacy or completeness which our reason brings to experience?
I start from the assumption that we are given at least the metarequirements I have started above. If this is granted, perhaps the problem of deciding between different paradigms of explanation in the philosophy of history is not impossible. Many possible theories of how historical development is to be explained are ruled out by these metarequirements themselves, without anything more substantive being required. For these metarequirements are much more demanding and difficult to satisfy than they might seem at first. Yet for a theory to fail to satisfy them is for a theory of history to be inconsistent with respect to its own status as a theory, in a way we find quite unsatisfying in any genealogical account. And perhaps this explains why there are only a handful of basic paradigms in the philosophy of history: these few have survived because it is at least not certain or apparent to everyone that they fail the primary metaconditions of consistency. Suppose then that we are left with a small set of explanatory paradigms which seem to be able to ‘explain’ most developments in the history of ideas in empirically incontrovertible fashion (i.e. as ‘complete’ interpretations), while also explaining their own genesis and the existence and errors of the other paradigms, although in terms that would conflict with those of offered by other such complete paradigms. Would they not also be incommensurable?

While this is commonly supposed, it is supposed in error. Within a theory of history, the interpretations given of developments in the history of thought and institutions may be incommensurable with the parallel interpretations of similar developments in competing theories of history (in fact, they will carve up the divisions between traditions and revolutions in different ways). But the hermeneutic exposition in favor of using one paradigm is not incommensurable with the hermeneutic exposition favoring another. This is assured by the meaningfulness of the metaconditions of the philosophy of history for both theories.
Fourth and finally, there remains one other metarequirement for all philosophies of history, to which Blumenberg has also drawn attention. I will call this the condition of "maximal fundamentality." The most fundamental paradigm will be the one which most nearly describes the irreducible dynamic process (or sparse set of processes) on which all the other processes we recognize in more limited contexts supervene. This is closely related to the third requirement of completeness. It suggests that the most fundamental paradigm in the philosophy of history must (at least) pass the test case of mythographic application. If a universal paradigm claims to capture the basic patterns or processes which also account for the limited validity of other explanatory paradigms, whose operation in certain spheres supervene on the operations of the basic pattern(s), then this paradigm must apply first and foremost to an adequate explanation of the origin of myths and rituals -- presuming that no adequate account would propose that its basic patterns all begin *sui generis* at a point later than this origin. Since it turns out that it is an enormously difficult task to propose accounts of the origin of myth that are even possible, given the (pre-interpreted) ‘evidence’ gathered by comparative anthropology, even sophisticated paradigms for a philosophy of history which pass every other metarequirement may fail this last and most crucial test.

Blumenberg’s is one of the most sophisticated and well-worked out explanatory models in the philosophy of history to date. Yet as we have seen, when he tried to extend his version of the “invisible hand” theory to mythology, his model failed. This suggests the possibility of using mythographic application in helping to decide between paradigms which are competing to be recognized as the ultimate or most encompassing explanation in the philosophy of history. Blumenberg’s failure thus counts decisively against any philosophy of history taking Blumenberg’s paradigms of rationality and motivation as its foundation. The reason is evident: no "invisible hand" account will ever be able to satisfy the metacondition of fundamentality.
Given the similarity of any invisible hand explanatory strategy to Blumenberg’s, the likelihood is high that by parity of reasoning, any such theory would fail the mythographic application test in similar fashion.

Given the limited range of basic explanatory paradigms in the philosophy of history that are serious contenders for the unique position of being ‘maximally fundamental,’ we may in time be able to examine how the strongest examples of each of them fare in the attempt to explain the very origin of mythology. The prospects are good, in that case, for actually deciding which (if any) of our current basic paradigms is the most likely to survive as the fundamental one for the philosophy of history.

This investigation would no doubt be an extensive one, however limited the range of contenders. Even so, we may even have some reasons for predicting in advance which of the basic paradigms in the philosophy of history would be ‘most likely to succeed’ in this test. For one of our basic explanatory paradigms, namely the ‘degeneration-resacralization’ or ‘decay-renewal’ model, actually starts within *mythology itself*. This model is exemplified in Mircea Eliade’s mythography, with its implication of a transcendent origin for the most primordial mythic archetypes: this is in fact the archetypal self-explanation we find within every substantial cultural collection of sacred myths. If our metarequirements for the philosophy of history are what they seem to be, then surprisingly, this explanation (terminating in transcendence) may well be the most likely of all the fundamental paradigm for the philosophy of history to sustain its claim to maximal fundamentality. If so, a philosophy of history recognizing the irreducibility of religious significance in the origin and growth of human experience will be vindicated.
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