

Daniel Weidner: TRANSITIONS, THRESHOLDS, TRADITIONS. Hans Blumenberg and Historical Thought

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Like identical twins, philosophy and history seem to be tied together in an uneasy way. On the one hand, philosophy is very concerned to engage with the history of philosophy. There are not many other branches of knowledge so preoccupied with continually referring back to their own 'classics'. On the other hand, quite a few of these classical authors did not hold history in high esteem. Aristotle, as is well known, even preferred drama to history, arguing that the latter merely concerned contingent issues. The marriage between history and philosophy quite often results in monsters like Hegelian philosophy of history: grand narratives that are all too easy to criticize and to debunk.

If we want to better understand this complex relationship between philosophy and history, it might be worth turning to the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg. In many of his voluminous books he traces, with utmost erudition, a certain philosophical idea or motif from antiquity to the present – the idea of 'myth', the metaphor of 'reading' the world, the motif of the cave. Upon being accused of being a historicist, Blumenberg replied once that he would carry such a title with pride.[1] Occasionally, he described his approach as a "phenomenology of history" – not an unproblematic self-characterization since phenomenology, here understood in the Husserlian sense, belongs to those philosophical disciplines that are not particularly friendly with history. Precisely these frictions, however, made Blumenberg particularly conscious of the difficulties inherent in conceiving a history of philosophy as distinct from a philosophy of history.

One of his seemingly very simple approaches proved to be remarkably efficient. What if we no longer try to answer the question of what history is as a whole, or what the 'essence' of history's major epochs is. What if we instead focus, more modestly, on minor changes and transitions? Even though we might not be able to fathom the entirety of what antiquity was, we may well be able to describe what happened when it came to an end. As Blumenberg argued in a review article from 1958, such historical thresholds provide the most intriguing areas for research:

"If Hellenism and Late Antiquity, 'the autumn of the Middle Ages' and the dawn of the Modern Age have become attractive recently, the big question of what 'history' is always lingers silently in the background. What is an 'epoch'? What is the structure of 'epochal change'? How should we understand and objectively handle the incongruence of testimonies and events? These are the intricate questions necessary to release the problem of *history* from its daunting massiveness and transform it into something graspable." [2]

What we observe in these transitions is neither plain continuity nor clear-cut rupture, rather something in between, a certain overlapping where issues, questions, and concepts are still in place but have begun to change their meaning. As Blumenberg puts it – where answers may be found whose questions have become irrelevant. Such is not an univocal change but rather a threshold situation in which it is possible to look in both directions, to understand the new from the perspective of the old and vice versa. Later, in his magisterial book on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg set up a sort of differential test comparing the metaphysical conceptions of Nicolas Cusanus and Giordano Bruno. Despite the fact that their ideas are quite similar and the authors, at times, even make near identical statements, Blumenberg argues that on closer inspection they point in different directions: one to a medieval horizon of thought and the other towards a modern understanding of the world.

It is not by chance that this epochal threshold concerns the emergence of what Blumenberg calls “the Modern Age” (“die Neuzeit”, literally “the New Age”). Another fruitful approach ventured by Blumenberg is to ask more specifically about the history of this Modern Age. This history must be different from all previous ones for modernity understands itself as a new beginning that breaks with its past. Does not this claim contradict the very project of a history of the modern? This, at least, is the suspicion voiced in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* where Blumenberg vigorously criticizes the so called theories of ‘secularization,’ arguing that essential modern ideas and attitudes were nothing but transformed Christian heritage. E.g. when Max Weber claimed that the capitalist work ethos emerged out of the Puritan search of salvation, or when Karl Löwith described the modern philosophies of history as a mere continuation of Christian theologies of salvation. If this were true, Blumenberg argues, modernity’s self-declared claim to be autonomous or to be the beginning of something truly new would have been an illusion.

Both approaches – questioning epochal thresholds and the genealogy of modernity – not only put forward interesting perspectives on the problem of history. They also relate to areas of knowledge other than those usually discussed in relation to history and theory. For instance, when discussing Late Antiquity, Blumenberg refers to Hans Jonas and Rudolf Bultmann, among others, who developed complex models for how paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism interacted with each other. These scholars were anything but positivists, rather they were major contributors to the hermeneutic debates of the 1950s and beyond. As such, their historiography was one of ideas more than of facts and belonged to the history of dogma and the history of religion. Though this is a very important field, historical theology having been ranked among the most admired disciplines of the German university, it has since been oddly overlooked in more general discussions of the history of knowledge. In *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg describes dogma as a form of knowledge that aims less at answering questions than excluding and eliminating them. A more comprehensive approach to history, thus, would be aware of the divergent historicities of different forms of knowledge, such as myth, metaphor, concept, or dogma. Arguably, no tradition would be complete without recourse to the complex interplay and overlap of these different forms of knowledge and expression.

In the *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg refers to the history of dogma to develop not only his own notion of historical change but also his own account of early Christianity. This also allowed him to re-narrate the history of the Modern Age. Ironically, this work not only refutes the erroneous genealogies that claim modernity to be the secularization of Christianity but replaces it by a – no less complex, nor less far-reaching – story about modernity being the second overcoming of Gnosticism. It was, according to Blumenberg, not Christian eschatology that brought about modern philosophy of history, as Löwith had argued. Rather, Christian eschatology collapsed in the early phase of Christianity when the expected second coming of Christ was delayed, a breakdown that contributed to the formation of Christian dogma. The solidification of this dogma entailed the Gnostic assault on it that, in turn, was only overcome by a reevaluation of the world, worldly knowledge, and curiosity, which Blumenberg marked as characteristic of the Modern Age. As Löwith himself remarked in his review of the *Legitimacy*, readers might eventually wonder: “[W]hy all this effort of precise distinction, broad historical erudition, and polemical invective against the scheme of secularization if such criticism, in the end, is so close to what it criticizes?”[3]

The debate about secularization was a very German one, thus Blumenberg’s work, though translated early, was not broadly received internationally. Nor did his defence of modernity fit well into the discussion on postmodernism. Even today, the growing interest in secularism and secularization seems to rest on premises so different from Blumenberg’s that it is difficult to connect him to it. Even so, his thinking allows us to criticize and differentiate the genealogies of modernity currently under scrutiny – from Jean Luc Nancy’s “deconstruction of Christianity” via Charles Taylor’s story of the emergence of a secular age to Jan Assman’s recent engagement with the “Axial Age”. Moreover, Blumenberg’s meticulous histories of problems show that we must reflect on what we actually do when we historicize and try to represent the subtleties of historical change. The history of philosophy – and maybe also the philosophy of history – may indeed be richer if we were less concerned with the concluding answers or grand narratives than with formulating questions that allow us to work out the transitions, thresholds, and traditions of history.

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His text was originally published on the blog of the Journal for the History of Ideas.

[1] Hannes Bajohr has recently dealt with Blumenberg’s remark on the ZfL Blog.

[2] Hans Blumenberg: Epochenschwelle und Rezeption, in: *Philosophische Rundschau* 6 (1958), p. 94–120, here p. 94–95.

[3] Karl Löwith: Review of Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in: *Philosophische Rundschau* 15/3 (1968), p. 195–201, here p. 200.

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