

**Foundational Ambiguities:
Metaphor, Translation, and Intertextuality in Hans Blumenberg's Metaphorology**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation contains three distinct texts: 1) an investigation of twentieth-century German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology, which develops a theory of translation based on Blumenberg's theoretical insights into metaphor, 2) a translation of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Protohistory of Theory* by Blumenberg, and 3) a critical apparatus for the translation, consisting of a critical introduction, translator's preface, and annotations. Through their interplay, the assembled texts both exhibit and analyze the ambiguities generated in philosophy texts when metaphoric images substitute for explanations, when polysemous German philosophical language is translated into relatively monosemous English, and when Continental European philosophers omit references to key interlocutors.

The first dissertation chapter outlines the development of Blumenberg's metaphorology while situating it in the context of the intellectual movements that contributed to it, particularly the work of Ludwig Landgrebe, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer, and Arnold Gehlen. The second chapter explicates claims that Blumenberg implicitly makes about Plato, Heidegger, and Arendt through translated excerpts, allusions, and conspicuous omissions in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. The third chapter discusses metaphor's philosophical value by examining translation choices in several English language translations of German philosophy; the examples center around the images of stream (*Strom*), ground (*Grund*), and nearness (*das*

Naheliegende) in works by Husserl, Heidegger, and Blumenberg respectively. The annotated translation marks places in Blumenberg's writing where his own metaphors elude translation.

The Laughter of the Thracian Woman is an extended metaphorological analysis of the humorous anecdote about Thales of Miletus from Plato's *Theaetetus*: as Thales is walking around watching the stars, he trips and falls into a well. This anecdote recurs diachronically in European philosophical, theological, and literary works. Divergent readings reveal authors' period-specific values regarding absorption in curiosity, risk aversion, and the task of philosophy. Blumenberg argues that this anecdote metaphorically expresses notions (such as "common sense") that cannot be adequately modeled or demonstrated, but which prove indispensable to philosophy. This dissertation applies this premise of Blumenberg's metaphorology to translation theory. By making metaphoric language more visible, translation can contribute powerfully to the philosophical task of distinguishing concepts from metaphors.

Introduction: The Tense of Translation

A translation grants access to a third person's thoughts that were foreignly worded before the translation ensued. It exhibits three displacements: time, language, person. But is thought itself not already the mind's self-displacement, a movement away from any one time, person, and language? Mystics deny the mind's autonomous movement: incapable of *moving* itself, it *is moved* to recollection by pre-earthly memories.¹ Contemporary science describes thought as movement across nerve fibers, path-like structures that traverse our brains and bodies—the mind is not the mover there either. Long before neuroscience, the ancient atomist Lucretius described the self-moving mind as the fastest thing that moves: “Nothing is able to happen in such a rapid fashion as what the mind proposes to itself to happen and itself commences. Therefore the mind stirs itself more quickly than anything whose nature is seen right in front of our eyes.”² The mind “stirs itself” in pursuit of the mental object it strives to understand. Phenomenology productively shifts the image of the mind's movement from “stirring” to “reaching,” from stationary action to true motility. Edmund Husserl and his colleagues agreed in a conversation on August 19, 1931 that empathy

¹ Plato calls this passive form of thought ἀνάμνησις: “recollection of the things formerly seen by our soul when it traveled in the divine company” (*Phaedrus* 249b) qtd. in Köpping, “Anamnesis.” Similar beliefs have been found in Manichean, Gnostic, Sufi, and Kabbalah texts, as well as in the folklore of some Australian aboriginals.

² Lucretius, *Lucretius*, 68.

requires an analogy between the “I here” and “another body there,” which begins with “phantasying myself in another place;” it requires that “I have phantasied myself as there.”³

Not all such reaching ends in grasping. When the mind arrives at an understanding of an object, phenomenologists say that “intentionality” is “fulfilled.” Helmut Plessner encountered a keen metaphor for the concept of *unfulfilled* intentionality when he watched Husserl lift his walking cane and press it against a wooden post after saying, “I have been searching for reality all my life.”⁴ While we can grasp the existence of everyday objects and even of other subjects, attempts to grasp the existence of something as *indefinite* as “reality” can leave us anxiously reaching.

Throughout this dissertation, I will discuss the mental moves that reach across a distance when language is markedly *not* literal, domestic, or monological; these types of language are metaphor, translation, and intertextuality. This study draws on Hans Blumenberg’s notion that concrete understanding requires imaginative detours, and because Blumenberg generally understands language as an expression of “intentionality,” I too will adopt this concept as a basis for understanding the expressive potential of metaphor,

³ Cairns, Husserl, and Fink, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, 19.

⁴ Plessner, Patočka, and Landgrebe, *Husserl in Göttingen*, 18. A phenomenologist living today has characterized the human being as “the one who alone is ‘capable’ of events.” He returns from the metaphors of “reaching” to that of “stirring:” “Events are pure ‘mobility’—without anything that moves.” Romano, *Event and World*, x, xi. Events transform rather than transport the “I.”

translation, and intertextuality. All three of these expressive forms mark detours within texts: in order to understand these language types, our thoughts must move beyond the message at hand—so that we acknowledge the message’s dependence on other messages that are *not* at hand.

Let us begin with metaphor, the best theorized among these three forms. There are divergent views on what metaphor does: express a tension between two meanings, construct a hybrid meaning, generate altogether new meanings, or map abstractions onto the concrete and bodily.⁵ But most theorists agree that metaphor moves the reader from the meaning set by the context into a different domain of meaning (as perhaps *any* trope does). Paul Ricoeur writes: “The metaphorical statement achieves its statement of meaning by means of an *epiphora* of the word.”⁶ Aristotle was the first to define metaphor as a kind of *epiphora*, Greek for “movement” or “transference:” “Metaphor is the transference (*epiphora*) of a word of another significance either from species to genus, or from genus to species, or from species to species, or by analogy or proportion.”⁷ Ricoeur offers a phenomenological definition for *epiphora*: “the transposition from one pole to

⁵ These views are catalogued in Taverniers, *Metaphor and Metaphorology*, 89, 169–172. The list above approximates the theories of I. A. Richards, Samuel Levin, Donald Schön, and Mark Johnson respectively.

⁶ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 131.

⁷ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 150. If *epiphora* is metaphor’s *genus*, then first two of the four *differentia* in the definition of metaphor sound like what later Classical and Renaissance definitions would classify as metonymy or synecdoche. See for instance, Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 60–61. And note that Isidore presents the same tropes (metaphor, catachresis, metalepsis, metonymy, etc.) in roughly the same sequence as both *Ad Herennium* and Quintilian.

another.”⁸ This recalls Husserl’s account of intentionality as movement from the I-pole to object-poles and to other me-too-poles (where we identify other people, including non-human people).⁹ Even if Donald Davidson is right that metaphor cannot express any statement that cannot be expressed in literal language, metaphor’s breach of determinate meaning suggests that language sets horizons which can be moved.¹⁰

A translation’s *translatedness* cannot move the reader as long as “the dominance of transparency in English-language translation” renders the translator’s role invisible.¹¹ But to a philologically minded reader the thought of reading a translation elicits a curiosity about the distance traversed. Etymology often exerts the effect of metaphor, it can “set a scene before our eyes” as metaphor generally should, according to Aristotle.¹² The word “translation,” as it appears on the title page of a translated work, sets a scene through its etymology: *trans-latio*, carriage-across, movement across a passage, someone carrying something, not to behold it in solitude, but to deliver it to another. This messenger’s face and uniform is obscured: maybe a delivery person paid a wage, maybe an envoy with a prestigious task, or perhaps an angel opening human ears

⁸ Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 24.

⁹ See Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, passim. Husserl refers to the subjectivity of non-human animals in the incomplete third section of his last major work: Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy.*, 227.

¹⁰ Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 32.

¹¹ Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, 5.

¹² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 136.

to the unheard.¹³ Whoever he or she is, the messenger does not move haphazardly, but takes a path.

But why does *this* person carry *this* cargo on *this* path? Is the translator assigned because of prior knowledge of the path? If the translation process remains unpredictable in spite of translation skills and knowledge of the discourse, if she only learns the path through experience, can her discovery process be narrated? My conviction is that each translation experience has its own story to tell, and this dissertation narrates and analyzes one particular experience of translation, namely my own translation of Hans Blumenberg's *Das Lachen der Thrakerin* into its first English edition: *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. The English book differs from the German in more than just being a translation: it displays my own reaching to arrive at an understanding of a highly allusive work of German philosophy. Intertextuality enters the project here; every time I translate a passage where Blumenberg interprets a text from the past, I retrace his interpretation of the source text. This procedure sensitized me to the text as dialogue, and then I came to notice unannounced dialogues: words that concealed their debt to other authors' words. Blumenberg's explicit dialogue with texts from the past concealed an implicit dialogue with his contemporaries' language. I was

¹³ As with many metaphors, the metaphor of "delivery" broadens the implications in the concept of translation—but at the cost of blurring its definition. Metaphor theorist David Punter paraphrases the Jungian analyst James Hillman on metaphor's way of referring us to the unstable world of the dreaming self: thus metaphor "deepens our understanding," but "this deepening also implies a darkening." Punter, *Metaphor*, 82.

understanding Blumenberg not through his words alone, but by entering the conversation in the background that his word choices suggested.

These are my steps: after I take the first chapter to stabilize my sense of the author as a thinker with a specific position in history and with a distinctive response to it, the second chapter shows the intertextual sources of Blumenberg's own movements of thought. The third is an extended discussion of the process of translating philosophy, particularly focusing on the moments when particular words presented challenging ambiguities. Each focuses on two of the three movement types in different dyadic relations. The first chapter is about intertextuality and metaphor, as it explores how other texts influenced Blumenberg's theory of metaphor. The second is about intertextuality and translation, as it explores the choices Blumenberg makes when he translates, cites translations, and paraphrases source texts within *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. And finally, the third chapter is about metaphor and translation, as I read polysemous German words in the context of philosophical works by Husserl, Heidegger, and Blumenberg.

I restrict my translation theory to the insights garnered from my own experience, and likewise my source texts are restricted to a few prominent figures in the discourse in which Blumenberg wrote: twentieth-century German phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy. Within this context, I notice a tendency not to cite influential recent texts and an insistent reliance on metaphor,

implying that faithful translations of these works ought to preserve the ambiguity of the source texts. It may prove interesting for future scholarship to compare my findings with analyses of the same rhetorical moves in texts whose authors represent other genders and classes, languages, cultures, and periods in hopes of specifying the social forces behind these rhetorical effects.

After these three chapters, I have included a preface to the translation where I justify a few of my translation choices and explore lines of Blumenberg's thought in terms of his diction. The preface is followed by an extended version of the translator's introduction that will be published in the Bloomsbury edition of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. The translation manuscript then appears as it will in the Bloomsbury edition. The only difference between this manuscript and the version set for publication is that I have included a couple dozen more annotations that describe translation choices in this manuscript. I also let some footnotes extend into speculation well after they would break off in the published version. While these extra annotations might have been excessive for most readers of a published translation, they may appeal to the probing reader of a dissertation.

In an article in progress I make use of Freud's concept of belatedness in order to theorize translation's metaphor-like effect on the reader.¹⁴ The act of reading a translation confronts us with our belatedness as readers: we are entering

¹⁴ "Terminology in Translation: The Case of Freud in English."

the reception of a work at a stage when its dissemination has already expanded.¹⁵ We are not first-comers. A similar process occurs when we read a highly referential work, such as Blumenberg's *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*. We realize how much reading went into the writing of the book in the first place. And to the extent that metaphor evokes *prior* embodied experience, it too achieves meaning via a particular recourse to the *past*. In this dissertation, I do not diagnose belated encounters with texts from a psychoanalytic perspective, but I trace both historical and phenomenological effects of belatedness as they pertain to three kinds of movement of thought: metaphor, translation, and intertextuality.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I look at the twentieth-century German philosophical scene in which Blumenberg's theory of metaphor emerged. His influences include movements such as philosophical anthropology, phenomenology, literary reception theory and figures including Ludwig Landgrebe, Ernst Cassirer, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Arnold Gehlen, Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Blumenberg keeps a distance from the concerns of the present,

¹⁵ Other kinds of thought besides these three are belated, such as "uncanny" experiences that evoke what was once familiar in a strange context. Silke-Maria Weineck makes a similar case about the temporal delay between the time when something is perceived as "mad" and the time when a mad thought is revealed to be true or false: "The story of madness must be read in reverse, for the validity or invalidity of mad thought can never be guaranteed in advance by the methods devised to legitimate the operations of rational thought." Weineck, *The Abyss above*, 1. In the cases Weineck describes, rational thought becomes a necessary but insufficient background for mad thought.

and thus he rarely mentions these influences in his writing. Despite his citational reticence, I show that he did indeed think in the paradigms established by contemporary or recent theorists whose methods and attitudes influenced his work. He shares Cassirer's interest in myth as an ordering principle for thought, but he sees it as embedded in linguistic structure, not pre-linguistic as Cassirer does. He shares Husserl's view that philosophy's central concern is with consciousness and the unconscious, the noticed and the unnoticed, theory and the lifeworld, but he regards this problem as enmeshed in language and history. Like Heidegger, he sees language as always already forming our experiences, but he refrains from positing ontological structures behind language, as Heidegger does. He agrees with Gehlen that culture compensates for human beings' lack of true instincts, but does not consider this our essence, just a seemingly universal habit. Finally, like Jauß and Iser, he understands reading as occurring against a historically specific horizon of expectations, but he emphasizes that the least acknowledged elements of texts (metaphors) are the most transhistorically stable. Some of the thinkers who influenced Blumenberg remain influential, and Blumenberg's corrections of some of their excesses establish his relevance to humanistic disciplines today.

These affinities and distinctions between Blumenberg and other philosophers provide the background for my second chapter, where I read Blumenberg's translation choices in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* as his

way of navigating the tension between philosophizing autonomously based on his insights into the vulnerable human condition, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his preference for drawing evidence from the historically mediated, non-experienced past rather than the evidence of recollected experiences. In this chapter, I conceptualize translation to include all of the reception activities contained in a text: paraphrase, quotation, citation, reference to other authors in one's own writing, but also omission of a reference or source, or the suppression of a common word because another famous philosopher has somehow tainted it. The second chapter thus explores the rhetorical mechanisms of the suppression of these influences. The burden of the past is omnipresent in Blumenberg's often historiographical writing. Yet Blumenberg shows his "strength" as a philosopher (to use Harold Bloom's term for the overcoming of influence) through his careful elision of the contemporary in his work. Blumenberg's writing (from his early work on Husserl's *The Crisis of the European Sciences* to the end of his active years) could be read as a translation of Husserl into the Heideggerian idiom of post-war German philosophy.

Also in the second chapter, I expose the implicit dialogue that Blumenberg conducts with contemporaries in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* through borrowed phrases, unannounced references, and paraphrases of other authors' texts. Such paraphrases blend in so seamlessly with Blumenberg's own text that they could pass as original. I explore Blumenberg's reticence about mentioning

Hannah Arendt's work despite the fact that her book *The Life of the Mind* contains a strong reading of the very anecdote around which Blumenberg's whole book revolves. I show how the choices Blumenberg makes when translating Plato's *Theaetetus* conform to Blumenberg's own strong reading of Plato. And finally, I examine the implicit but pervasive Husserlian motifs of Blumenberg's analysis. His claim about the tension expressed in the Thales anecdote hinges on Blumenberg's engagement with Husserl's notions of theory, the lifeworld, and phenomenology's "infinite task" as a "science of trivialities" that exposes the common ground between theorizing and living. I ask what subtextual polemic can be construed both from his use of Husserl's vocabulary and from his lack of explicit mention of Husserl until chapter thirteen of *Laughter*.

The third chapter contains my thoughts about translation as a philosophical activity. Here I discuss implicit metaphors in philosophy texts that readers might take at their word if a translator did not point them out. Streaming, grounding, and lying nearby are all physical images whose basis in sensation makes them problematic descriptors of mental "space." I consider three keywords that present these phenomena and that occur frequently in philosophical texts by different authors: Blumenberg's word for the "obvious" (*das Naheliegende*), whose etymology connotes spatial proximity, Husserl's term for time-consciousness (*der Bewußtseinsstrom*), which uses the concrete sense of the word "stream" to denote the abstract movement of consciousness, and Heidegger's

“ground” (*der Grund*), which can mean both physical “ground” and abstract “reason.” Husserl describes time consciousness as a “stream” with the present moment as its “headwaters” and transcendental reflection as an “island” within it. Heidegger describes existence itself as a “ground” that both supports all existing individuals and recedes from human comprehension like an “abyss.” Blumenberg considers such images ineradicable elements of philosophical writing, Heidegger denies that he uses metaphors, and Husserl considers metaphors like “streaming” necessary only when describing the structure of “absolute subjectivity.”

The third chapter makes use of translations of philosophy texts and translators’ introductions as the primary texts for understanding philosophers’ reliance on metaphor. I interpret the decisions and hesitations that German to English translators make in responding to metaphors embedded in the above mentioned polysemous words in texts by Husserl, Heidegger, and Blumenberg (*Strom*, flux and stream, *Grund*, ground and reasons, and *naheliegend*, obvious and near). The main works under analysis in the third chapter are Edmund Husserl’s “Lectures on the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness,” Heidegger’s *The Principle of Reason*, and Hans Blumenberg’s *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* and *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Scholars and translators claim that translating Heidegger yields insight into his thought. I show how sensitive translators—and comparatists studying translations—can find all three of these philosophers’ metaphoric language revealing of their texts’ non-

conceptual dimensions, such as their figurative language. Blumenberg's use of *naheliegend* alternates between its abstract sense, "obvious," and its spatial etymology, "lying nearby." Translation dilemmas reveal the tension between pre-theoretical imagery and their abstraction in terminology; translators deliberate over the polysemy of words whose meanings evoke the belatedness of theory since the experience of perception precedes our claims to theoretical knowledge.

This introduction sets the stage for these investigations by theorizing translation at the intersection of philosophical language, German language, and Blumenberg's theory of metaphor, which often informs my theory of translation. In doing so, I pay special attention to the specificity of German to English translation, the translation of philosophy, and the translatorly element of philosophical dialogue.

German to English: Translating German difference into the global language

"Because of the growing power of English as a global lingua franca, the responsibility of the translator into English is increasingly complicated."¹⁶ Thus Gayatri Spivak addressed India's National Academy of Letters in 2001. But what is the role of translation from German in the global world? In 2012 she published her 2001 address as part of the volume *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, a title that refers to German philosopher and playwright Friedrich

¹⁶ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, 257.

Schiller's utopian *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.¹⁷ The *Letters* argue that peace and productivity would result from a certain type of education reform: when community members learn to compete with one another in the love and creation of *beauty*, only then they will dispense with their divisive rivalries for personal gratification and for abstract knowledge. Under the heading of "aesthetic education," Spivak adapts Schiller's Kant-inspired, specifically German Enlightenment optimism to the concerns of the globalized twenty-first-century. Her title's allusion to Schiller's eighteenth-century German education reform agenda demonstrates her investment in updating Europe's Enlightenment social ambitions for "the era of globalization," particularly to the cultural, political, and economic travails of today's global South. German to English translation stands at the center of this contemporary update.

She uses two German to English (Kant, Marx) and two French to English (Lacan, Foucault) examples of philosophers whose English translators failed to meet their ethical responsibility, which amounts to choosing language that conveys the texts' contemporary urgency. She describes a responsible translator as follows: "That the translator should make an attempt to grasp the writer's presuppositions, pray to be haunted by the project of the original."¹⁸ The haunting

¹⁷ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*. Schiller's epistolary treatise is an unusual example of a translation-like drafting process. The *Letters* supposedly repeat the content of actual letters he had sent to Duke Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg, which were burned in a fire at the Duke's castle.

¹⁸ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, 256.

she talks about is not foreignizing or nostalgic; it does not separate you from the concerns of your own time. On the contrary, she believes that translation choices determine whether or not a text yields fresh insights for today's problems. For instance, she can see in Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* a worthy contribution to contemporary work on irrational elements within secularism—but she observes that antiquarian translators “psychologize every noun” to present Kant as uncontroversial and conventional: “a rational choice bourgeois Christian gentleman.”¹⁹

The stakes of the wish to be “haunted” during translation rise when the target language readership already anticipates a moving—even an ideologically mobilizing—text in translation. English translations of Marx have this status in India for two reasons: 1) Karl Marx's work has shaped the ambitions of post-colonial Indian intellectuals, and 2) the British Empire successfully instituted English as India's unifying language—thus the language of post-colonial solidarity. Spivak claims that of the four theorists she discusses, only Marx is sure to be familiar to her educated Indian audience.

The English translator of German philosophy has to be aware of a large readership with a range of backgrounds in philosophy. Annotation is one way to help these texts reach their target, and Spivak also recommends annotating

¹⁹ Her example of such a translation error is distinction Kant makes between the practically effective will (*Wille*) and the faculty to direct attention (*Willkür*). She insists that T.K. Abbott misses the distinction when he translates these words as “will” and “whim” respectively. *Ibid.*, 560.

translations of Indian language texts into English. But, for translating German in particular, the indispensable translation technique is to focus on the effect of latent metaphors in words' etymologies. Metaphor has always had an uncertain but persistent place in philosophy; its heuristic effects in aiding comprehension made metaphor indispensable in Plato's philosophy. What Paul Ricoeur calls "delexicalization" is "a favorite [procedure] of Plato's [and also] common in Hegel and in Heidegger."²⁰ It is worth quoting the pithy examples that follow: "When Hegel hears *taking-true* in *Wahrnehmung*, when Heidegger hears *non-dissimulation* in *a-lêtheia*, the philosopher creates meaning and in this way produces something like a living metaphor." Blumenberg goes further to argue that unannounced metaphors sometimes constitute "foundational elements of philosophical language," which he made a life project of detecting and interpreting.²¹ Considering the touted value of metaphors to philosophy (and their proliferation in German texts), translating them so that readers can move as required between semantic fields is of utmost importance.

What are the barriers to being "haunted by the project" of German philosophers when we translate their work into English? Spivak focuses on our tendency to view thinkers from the past through an antiquarian lens that dissipates the power of their insights. Historical background is just one challenge when

²⁰ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 292.

²¹ See especially Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

translating German philosophical texts. German texts generally pose translation problems because the multiple meanings of German words challenge translators. In the third chapter especially, I show how several polysemous German words function rhetorically within specific works. German exhibits a higher degree of polysemy than English for three reasons: 1) German words' etymologies are generally more transparent to native speakers than English words' etymologies are; as a result, many German words reveal a greater number of easily registered connotations. 2) The German *langage*, its set of familiar signifiers, is smaller than English's. This means that German authors generally utilize fewer total words than English ones. And 3) German philosophers exploit the polysemy that prevails in German words as a result of the above two facts. With fewer words to choose from and more meanings entering through transparent etymology, German philosophers can fit more varied meaning into a given concept than English speaking philosophers: hence the frustration of logically-minded English readers with the writings of Hegel and Heidegger.

To explain why German etymologies are more transparent than English ones, it is worth going into some history. As late as 1697, Leibniz wrote that German wrongly suffered from low status compared to French, English, and Latin—the languages of philosophical, theological, political, scientific, and mathematical discourses. Leibniz contributed to all of these discourses: he developed a theory of atomic souls called monads, he advised Louis XIV on his

colonial plans for Egypt, wrote a rationalist theodicy, speculated about natural law, *and* invented calculus. But not in German.²² Some theology professors writing around his time, such as Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff, had similar goals for the status of German, and the latter coined many new Germanic equivalents for Latin terms: for “philosophy,” *Weltweisheit*, whose etymology means “world wisdom” and for “theology,” *Gottesgelehrsamkeit*, whose etymology means “erudition about God.”²³

Leibniz considers German’s concreteness, its words’ referability to material objects, to be its special advantage for philosophy. The concreteness of the language provides a counter-weight to philosophers’ zeal for abstraction. As he says, “no other language is richer and more expressive” for describing manufacturing, mining, and seafaring, and he claims that the other European languages borrow German words to name the winds that come from different directions.²⁴ German etymologies convey images more visibly than English ones.

Secondly, the German language is poorer in vocabulary than English—also for historical reasons. These are too complex to elaborate here, but can be summarized as follows: the ruling powers of the British Empire exerted greater

²² He also advocated for purging French phrases and loan words from spoken German. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. "Epigramm auf die Nachahmer der Franzosen," *Deutsche Schriften*. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966.

²³ „Von der natuerlichen Gottesgelahrtheit,“ „Von der Beschaffenheit einer Weltweisheit (habitu philosophiae), welche zu oeffentlichen und besondern Nutzen tuechtig seyn soll,“ Wolff, *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften*.

²⁴ Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. "Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausuebung und Verbesserung der teutschen Sprache." *Deutsche Schriften*. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966.

linguistic imperialism over their lands than the Holy Roman Empire ever did. The colonizer who communicates with the colonized in the imperial language cannot control the language entirely, and thus a “creolized” English emerged from the communication between colonizer and colonized, and the fact that “ambiguity was necessary for survival” among the latter group.²⁵ After all, English had already taken on roots from Gallo-Romance speaking colonizers and Anglo-Saxon speaking colonized from the time following the Norman Conquest, 1066.

Third, German philosophers post-1700 (that is, Germanophone philosophers who also wrote in German) often embraced the polysemy of their words—where an Anglo-American philosopher would seek to disambiguate the words. English has polysemy too; for example, the word “discharge” can refer to a bodily secretion or to the release of a prisoner (two related, but distinct meanings as one is passive and other active). English has such words, but German speaking philosophers utilize their multiple meanings more freely than English speaking ones. Perhaps the most famous example is Hegel’s use of *Aufhebung*, a word that can mean “cancel,” “preserve,” and “elevate,” where Hegel intends all

²⁵ The desire to have a code that mimics the imperial language while expressing secret meanings motivates such inventiveness. I am drawing on ideas from Edouard Glissant, who writes about the Caribbean plantation context. Glissant, “Creolisation and the Americas.” However, he excludes American English from this process, writing: “in the United States... we cannot yet speak here of creolisation. The ethnic groups live side by side with the others.”

three meanings to describe what happens in the negotiation between conflicting ideas.²⁶

By contrast, the influential Anglo-American philosopher W.V.O. Quine focuses on “analyticity” precisely in order to highlight the difference between sentences with and without the semantic interference that comes with polysemy. His examples focus on the variety of names in order to show how natural language only labels concepts in specific contexts of use; thence the rarity of equivalent translations. He dismisses etymological correspondence in meaning between seemingly related words as “startling coincidences.”²⁷ In his writing on translation, he considers it only a matter of mistaking non-equivalents even to call the same object by a different name; “morning star” and “evening star” would qualify as different concepts because they are not “stimulus-synonyms”—they describe visual events that occur at different times.²⁸ He claims that a sentence in the austere language of logic cannot be translated into natural language without picking up ambiguity—although logic itself can never describe experienced

²⁶ Obviously, exploiting such a polysemous word for conceptual purposes does invite manipulations that deserve criticism. As one author sharply put it: “The sole aim of all the logic of *Aufhebung* is to contain contradiction.” Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 123. And while Denis Hollier’s point is simply that we must notice the optimism implied by holding out a promise of resolution alongside the contradictions processed in any “*Aufhebung*,” we can also ask Hollier whether the word “contain” is not introducing another polemical metaphor to describe *Aufhebung*, which itself may not hope to “contain,” but simply to *describe* the passing thought of contradiction.

²⁷ Quine, *Quiddities*, 105.

²⁸ Quine, *Word and Object*, 55. His example is the “Indian nickel” and the “buffalo nickel,” two words that describe the same type of coin, viewed from its two sides.

events in their particularity. Indeed, where Quine seems to differ fundamentally from Hegel philosophically seems to be in whether multiple meanings can ever be “preserved” (*aufgehoben*) in the translation process that occurs whenever we reformulate an idea. Considering the greater reliance on polysemy in German language and philosophy, this difference is not surprising.

In discussing the examples of polysemy from chapter three and in the examples below, translation history is the lens through which I understand what these philosophers are doing with words. Through the intensive focus on diction that is part of every translator’s work, translators of German philosophy into English are in a position to reveal to readers a range of meanings at play in the philosophical vocabulary that emerges in particular texts and authors. In chapter three, my discussion focuses on the philosophical significance of metaphorically suggestive language for different thinkers and how translators respond to the dual task set by the language and by the philosophers’ explication of it.

The program of this dissertation is precisely to consider the linguistic problems of translation alongside historical and intertextual ones. The historical context includes personal and historical events, but for my purposes I mostly restrict my study to the historical investigation of what Hans Blumenberg read before writing *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, the book of his that I have translated. By determining the scope of likely references within his book (my goal in chapter one), I can better pinpoint his subtler battles with those authors (chapter two), and

his originality, which plays out partly in the sphere of German language use (chapter three).

Metaphors for translation, metaphors in translation

This dissertation develops a theory of translation built on Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology. I take as a starting point that metaphors can express what cannot be expressed otherwise, and that they therefore must be translated when encountered. The etymology of translation evokes the image of movement, of portable meaning. Critics and theorists have figured translation as licentious beauty (Gilles Ménage) and as mover of bodies (Friedrich Schleiermacher), and recently as intimate friendship (Gayatri Spivak), political intervention (Emily Apter), or thought experiment (Lawrence Venuti)—depending on whether the work translated is literary, political, or philosophical.²⁹

Heidegger evokes disparate images to describe the power of interlingual translation. For instance, he claims that to interpret Hölderlin, Kant, and Hegel is

²⁹ On Ménage's suggestive coinage, "les belles infidèles" to describe the inexact, yet appealing 17th century translations of Greek drama into French, see Baker and Malmkjær, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 94. On Schleiermacher's two methods of translating—bringing the author to the reader or vice versa—see *Ibid.*, 242. Spivak writes of her ability to say to an author "I surrender to you in your writing, not you as intending subject." Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," 378. The latter two figures occur in: Apter, *The Translation Zone*; Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*.

to acknowledge that “such ‘works’ are... in need of translation.”³⁰ And he illustrates this need as follows:

It pertains to the essence of the language of a historical people to extend like a mountain range into the lowlands and flatlands and to have its occasional peaks towering above into an otherwise inaccessible altitude.... The peak... must not be worn down through translation. Translation must set upon the path of ascent toward the peak.

In another lecture, he claims that when you translate a truly original thinker, such as Parmenides, “[t]hese newborn words transpose us in every case to a new shore.”³¹ His interest in translation is restricted to translating the original ideas of great men, but the images that he uses to describe this indispensable project range from stasis to movement, from the heights down to sea level.

But a truly original theory of translation, such as Heidegger’s, cannot leave the traditional concept of interlingual translation intact. Heidegger uses the shore image to describe the experience of *encountering* Parmenides in any language, not only of translating his texts between languages:

It is said that “translating” is the transposing of one language into another, of the foreign language into the mother tongue or vice versa. What we fail to recognize, however, is that we are also already constantly translating our own language, our native tongue, into its genuine word. To speak and to say is in itself a translation....

I will discuss the scholarship on Heidegger’s implicit theory of translation in chapter three, but here the most important point to notice is that we are always

³⁰ Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,”* 62.

³¹ Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 12.

translating. Translation is a form of reception—and its phenomenological effect is one of foregrounding as an abstraction what was once concrete experience.

Translation ought to be concerned with preserving imagery because language is prone to a loss of the grounding in the sensory. That is the heuristic reason to preserve imagery—the metaphorological reason to translate imagery is that images might be expressing what cannot be expressed in any other type of language.

The role of historical timing in the capture of metaphor in translations

Translators tend to notice metaphoric suggestion in texts because they are constantly moving between meanings already as part of the translation process. Usually only when a thinker's work has become canonical, or at least familiar to readers, will published translations begin to reflect the play of imagery that creates important ambiguities in a philosophical text. By claiming that successful translations must convey implicit imagery, I mean to encourage translators, readers, and publishers to stop waiting for authors to achieve canonical status before allowing translators to express their insights into the source texts' ambiguities.

The urgency of my theory can be shown through an examination of the normal process by which new translations improve on old ones. Many texts are still too young for this examination: in the cases of Blumenberg and Heidegger,

scholars are in the process of first publishing some of their work in German.³² But German thinkers from before World War II are now enjoying a translation renaissance. Penguin is commissioning a series of new translations of Sigmund Freud's works, and Cambridge Press is doing the same with Immanuel Kant's. But publishers will generally publish retranslations only when that the target language readership has known about the author long enough to begin admiring the author's idiosyncracies.

As Philip E. Lewis puts it: "The closer a translation of a monumental text such as those of Derrida is to the original's date of publication, the more likely it is to be unduly deficient."³³ This view on the timing of a translation resembles Walter Benjamin's sentiment that great works must exist for a while before they find "their chosen translators."³⁴ André Lefevere offers what I find the most persuasive explanation for the theoretical claim that adequate translators come belatedly; he does so in a piece about Brecht translations.³⁵ He explains that the readership in a target language's culture must be familiar with an author's work or style before they will accept a translation that makes the reader work hard to understand. Now that theater-goers know something about Brecht's poetic

³² For instance, just this April, the debate about Heidegger's Nazism received new fodder when his son released his father's diary from the 30's, a publication that links his philosophical ideas with anti-Semitism. Brody, "Why Does It Matter If Heidegger Was Anti-Semitic?"

³³ Lewis, "The Measure of Translation Effects," 273.

³⁴ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*," 76.

³⁵ Lefevere, "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System, and Refraction in a Theory of Literature."

principles, they will witness darker, more “alienating” translations—which are also more precise. Only when a particular author’s work (or work of his or her particular style) has been translated *for a long enough while* will readers tolerate more ambiguous, less “natural” sounding translations.

Furthermore, “adequate” translations will be ambiguous translations. Lewis, whom I mentioned above, notes that translators face a double bind whether they translate belatedly or not: “an adequate translation would be always already two interpretations... and it is the insurmountable fact that these two interpretations are mutually exclusive that consigns every translation to inadequacy.”³⁶ Lewis and Venuti suggest a solution: they advocate translation choices that sound suggestive, alienating, or otherwise “foreign.” But unusual, foreign-sounding translations only reinforce foreign texts’ mystique; I advocate techniques that give insight into a text’s particular foreignness. Paraphrase, words in brackets, and extra-textual annotations are the better choice for accomplishing this effect if the translator is also translating that word differentially throughout the text. But footnotes or annotations are difficult to pull off in translations meant for performance; though, if the drama is one like Brecht’s, which earns its right to a “foreignizing” translation on the grounds that Brecht defies cosmopolitan bourgeois expectations for the theater genre, perhaps a translation with footnotes

³⁶ Lewis, “The Measure of Translation Effects,” 260.

would produce the alienating effect in translation that Brecht sought to produce in the originals.

Blumenberg on translation

The image of translation is capacious enough to provide a figure for the epoch-spanning relationships between authors, and thus to help us picture the mechanism of intellectual inheritance; but the concept of interlingual translation is often quite literally the means by which we receive texts from the past.

Blumenberg's earliest publication, from 1946, addresses this function of translation in philosophy. From that text onward, Blumenberg conceives of translation as an occasion for consequential misconstruals. In a decline narrative reminiscent of Heidegger's, Blumenberg locates a never adequately corrected misconstrual of Greek philosophical insights in the moment when key words from everyday Greek language were translated to become Latin philosophical terms.³⁷

His historical claim is not just about words' forgotten meanings, but about unrecorded events of understanding. It is thus consistent with phenomenology's identification of philosophy with inner achievements, rather than with correct or compelling statements. Blumenberg suggests that the challenges of accurately

³⁷ Blumenberg, "Die sprachliche Wirklichkeit der Philosophie," 430. "[T]he concepts taken on from Greece and translated entered into the splintering lines of thought in western philosophy as a solid code (*feste Chiffren*). These concepts appear in identical verbal form on the ground of diametrically opposed worldviews and understandings of Being."

translating philosophical works only mimic the problems of misunderstanding that arise in any language. As he puts it, in philosophy,

a difficulty cannot be left aside, which is no less pernicious in other realms of science and of poetry: that fundamental achievements... only present themselves for preservation through the medium of a foreign language and that no translation can replace the encounter with the original manifestation. The fundamental problems of philosophy's linguistic reality will need to arise in whichever linguistic form philosophy takes.³⁸

The difficulty described poses interpretation problems—and thus translation problems—for the passage itself. “A foreign language” (*eine fremde Sprache*) could refer to the ancient Greek language, which Blumenberg cites as the often mistranslated source for the whole European philosophical lexicon. Or it could indicate all philosophical language, which is “foreign” to the primary phenomena of experience (intentions, sensations, etc.) that precede significance and thus do not manifest originally in language. “The original manifestation” (*das originale Zeugnis*) could either refer to the philosopher's firsthand experiences of insight or to the text in the original language. The essay's title, “Philosophy's linguistic reality,” suggests that philosophy remains confined to language, even if language does not adequately explain which experiences get coded as significant and which are too indescribable, obvious, or unconscious to make it into language. Given this limitation, language must always translate from a “foreign” realm of experience and will never be a fully adequate device for phenomenological

³⁸ Ibid., 428.

philosophy. Blumenberg would address this inadequacy again and again in his later work, and metaphor would gradually come to substitute for a solution.

Blumenberg's discourse about translation consistently reflects his skepticism that language can ever achieve definitions stable enough to withstand shifts or reversals over time. This becomes striking in later works, such as the entry on "Literality" (*Wörtlichkeit*) in *Begriffe in Geschichten*. The 1998 publication was posthumous, but Blumenberg prepared the manuscript before death and drew it from newspaper editorials published during his lifetime. The entry on "Literality" deals entirely with the translation history of the first word in the Hebrew and Aramaic text of *Genesis*, "*b'reschit*." He discusses the different attachments that different religious and philological traditions have felt about the implications of different translations. He cites an unspecified Hebrew teacher who says: "'*b'reschit*' does not mean 'in the beginning' literally translated, but rather 'in a beginning.' That is how, at one point, God selected a world beginning."³⁹ Blumenberg criticizes this interpretation as follows: "That is designated as a solid literality, for Hebrew knows no definite article, and it is [indeed] lacking here. Except that Hebrew [also] does *not* know the indefinite article, so that cannot be *translated*, but only *implied* from the lack of the definite one." Next Blumenberg offers a discursus on the suppressed definite article in the opening words of the *Gospel of John*: "in the beginning was the word" (*en archè èn ho logos*): "John

³⁹ Blumenberg, *Begriffe in Geschichten*, 242.

wants no other grammar for this higher quality of beginning.... He wants the indistinctness or ambiguity of ‘*en archè*.’”⁴⁰ Blumenberg claims that John wants to imply that God’s beginning occurred before the world began. “But how do we want to translate that?” Here he turns to Swiss Hebraist Otto Eißfeldt’s philologically informed translation of the first line of *Genesis*, which Blumenberg calls “a masterwork of the literal approach,” since it uses a non-idiomatic German preposition for the phrase “in the beginning” (*Im Anfang*) and thus achieves a “sacral tone.” But ultimately, Blumenberg rejects even this. As Goethe’s Faust revises John (“In the beginning was the deed”), Blumenberg leaves theological considerations aside and hears how the words “literally” sound to him. He understands the plurals of “god” and “heaven” to mean “of the sort of”: “Sometime, (someone like) gods instituted (something like) the heavens and this: the earth.”⁴¹ Even philologically sensitive translators cannot fail to express their reverence or irreverence for God’s power. Blumenberg follows his translation with “if I may!” (*Halten zu Gnaden*), more literally, “By your grace!” Blumenberg emphasizes the impiety of his “literal” translation and suggests that most biblical translators are more concerned with the devotion they exhibit than with literality—piety becomes an impediment to receiving God’s word.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 244.

⁴¹ Ibid., 247.

Blumenberg observes the seductions of “literality” in a short piece published posthumously in the volume entitled *The Seductibility of the Philosopher*. The volume consists of many short reflections on Heidegger’s rhetoric, his myopia, and his attractiveness to so many of Blumenberg’s colleagues in post-war German philosophy departments. Heidegger, we learn, was very concerned about foreign language translations of his own work. Blumenberg paraphrases a 1977 “memorial volume” by Hans A. Fischer-Barnicol:

Heidegger said that he could never know what the Japanese have done with his philosophy, but that he was unwilling to accept blind pupils: in so foreign a language, his thoughts could not mean the same thing. Now, though, he has proudly declared that someone is currently making a second translation of *Being and Time*. What makes him expect this new translation could approach more closely what he had wanted his own language to say?⁴²

Blumenberg answers his rhetorical question by describing Heidegger’s excitement upon learning that his newest translator had been a kamikaze pilot during WWII, and who had miraculously survived his suicide mission due to a positioning error. “Unintentionally, we have ‘Being-unto-death’ *in figura*,” by which Blumenberg means that the image of the pilot’s plunge towards certain death graphically depicted a moment of forced confrontation of the finitude of human existence, precisely the insight that conditions authentic existence in *Being and Time*. “Against all probability, now someone had survived, as if the world spirit—alias: Being (*das Seyn*)—had wanted it so, so that Heidegger would be fully understood

⁴² Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, 94.

and could be translated into his language a world apart. A translation not just into Japanese, but into authenticity.” After this ironic flourish, Blumenberg gives a characteristic deflation; he explains that Tsujimura, the supposed kamikaze pilot, was short-sighted and was only assigned as the ground personnel in a kamikaze unit. But he does “not tell this with *Schadenfreude*,” but rather to expose the inescapable influence of images on thought. Heidegger claims that language weds images to thoughts, but Blumenberg doubts that language is a necessary ingredient in this image’s effect.⁴³ Here the image of the once-suicidal translator had an impact that did not require an accomplished translation to count as a philosophical accomplishment.

Blumenberg’s thought on translation recalls his thought on metaphor. He is skeptical that language can ever be free of metaphor, and therefore that philosophical language can ever hope to pursue “the Cartesian teleology of logicization.”⁴⁴ Blumenberg believes that certain obstinate metaphors (“absolute metaphors”) will always stymie the goal of developing a philosophical language rigorous enough to translate into propositions in logical syntax—precisely because there are no “absolute translations” of “absolute metaphors.” There are “ideas” more perceptual than rational that hold sway over us and often erupt into our prose: streams and shipwrecks may sometimes only serve to illustrate a claim

⁴³ For a full exposition of Heidegger’s case about the inextricability of thought and perception, see chapter three, section “*Grund*—ground or reason?”

⁴⁴ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

that can be parsed in logic, but when they illustrate ideas about consciousness or the world, they end up overriding the logic of our claims with their internal logic as images.

Translating the lifeworld into theory

My first chapter discusses Blumenberg's theory of "absolute metaphor" as a translation-like movement between an unconscious understanding constructed in mental images and one that is conscious enough to appear in language. I will discuss it briefly here in order to establish its relevance to my concerns about interlingual translation. Blumenberg traces metaphors through specific genealogies, as if only certain quasi-theological discourses were focused enough on the "big" ontological questions to find a place for absolute metaphors. I would claim further that absolute metaphors obtain their contemporary legacy in the language of Continental philosophy, and that preserving their ambiguity is an urgent matter for translators of texts from this tradition.

I became aware that absolute metaphors still exhibit their tenacity today while I was translating Blumenberg's *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* into English. Blumenberg espouses the theory that absolute metaphors express insights that cannot be expressed otherwise—which implies that adequate translations should let *at least certain* metaphors proliferate. The difficulty is in determining which ones to allow. Once I began reading as a translator, I saw that the often

unannounced presence of “terms” in philosophy makes every word a potential term—and thus discourages differential translation of any word. This is one of the biggest differences between literary fiction and philosophy—a difference which applies even for philosophy texts written in a conspicuously literary style.

Many theories of metaphor focus on the kinds of meaning *created* through metaphor. Blumenberg asks whether there is anything that can *only be expressed* in metaphor: if so, he would call this an “absolute metaphor.” In a treatise on metaphor that he wrote in 1960, he described “absolute metaphors” as “‘translations’ that cannot be rendered back into authenticity and logicity.”⁴⁵ This description draws on a commonality between translation and metaphor, namely the way that both have “sources” that may or may not be recoverable. But what makes absolute metaphors so resistant to reverse translation? The short and speculative answer is: they describe lived experiences that were not conscious in the first place. But before I give a more careful and in depth answer, I want to describe the central metaphoric configuration in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. This example could be called extended metaphor, allegory, or simply anecdote. Here is the anecdote as told by Plato in *Theaetetus*:

While [Thales of Miletus] was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a well, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174A 121.

This little story invites multiple interpretations depending on how we think we would judge a stranger's strange "eagerness" and on how invested we are in activities such as "studying the stars" and "jeering." We may find ourselves moving indecisively between different readings. A metaphoric sentence, according to Roger M. White, requires "bifurcated construal," that is, we read two sentences in one: a primary and secondary sentence.⁴⁷ The primary meanings ascribed to this anecdote vary enough across history that we could easily concentrate on them and miss the significance of a secondary one that Blumenberg believes gives the anecdote its rhetorical impact: its function as "a protohistory of theory," an account of philosophy's place in the world.

But first the primary meanings: for Plato this story is about the scope of the girl's criticism. Her remark implies that Thales is incapable of simple, everyday tasks like walking without toppling, and this perceived failure "applies to all who spend their lives in philosophy." This story is repeated with many variants and different messages (by a cast as varied as Church Fathers Eusebius and Tertullian, early modern philosophers Francis Bacon and Montaigne, and more recent philosophers Kant, Feuerbach, and Heidegger). Immanuel Kant, for instance, tells a variant on this story in which modern astronomer Tycho Brahe is not walking, but being driven in a horse coach. He tells his coachman how to get

⁴⁷ White, *The Structure of Metaphor*.

home based on the position of the stars. And the coachman responds, “Good sir, you may well understand the heavens, but here on earth you are a fool.”⁴⁸

Blumenberg finds dozens of retellings and variants on this story over the millennia. The astronomer’s absent-mindedness makes him prone to every error from damnation to being cuckolded to false conclusions about the stars.

Blumenberg finds that a latent meaning (what White would call a “secondary meaning”) emerges if we observe the story over time. Blumenberg writes that: “The interaction between the protophilosopher and the Thracian maidservant... *became* the most enduring prefiguration of all the tensions and misunderstandings between the lifeworld and theory....” (255)⁴⁹ When I translated this sentence, I felt my task was somehow to mark the philosophical term “lifeworld” as a term, rather than let its suggestive ambiguity go to work on the reader. But after I explain why the lifeworld matters for Blumenberg’s theory of metaphor, I can show why ambiguity matters for one of my other translation choices.

Blumenberg draws on the philosopher Edmund Husserl’s description of the tension between “theory” and the “lifeworld.” I annotated this line in the translation and quoted a description Husserl gives of the “lifeworld.” He writes: “[T]he lifeworld, for us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the ‘ground’ of all praxis whether theoretical or

⁴⁸ Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, 27.

⁴⁹ All in-text quotations refer to pages in the annotated translation of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* included within this document.

extratheoretical.”⁵⁰ The lifeworld is the unquestioned background against which questions emerge.

In his work on metaphor, Blumenberg claims that *unquestioned* thoughts, feelings, and actions will never be expressible through answers to *questions*. For example, I can’t think of any reason to *question* my caution about watching where I am going when I walk. But is it the outcome of a thought process? No, it’s just one of the *practical assumptions that I (unconsciously) take on*. The aggregate of these assumptions is called the lifeworld. And now the connection with ambiguity: Blumenberg indicates that such unconscious assumptions can only be *satisfactorily* “translated” into language as metaphors.

How we walk, how we work, and how we stand: these comprise the background that contemporary phenomenologist Sara Ahmed approaches “from behind” in her “queer phenomenology.” According to Ahmed, in order to understand our source, we need to know what experiential background—which self-concepts and freedoms from family obligation—allow a person to write at all, and especially to write in a way that the writing table can *become the foreground*, that is, that we can write the background out of our consciousness.⁵¹ But to the extent that we succeed, it is urgent that readers, especially translators, recover this background when it slips in through metaphoric language.

⁵⁰ *Crisis*, 142.

⁵¹ Ahmed, “Orientations.”

If imagery embedded in language often expresses a subterranean reference to our working assumptions, our unquestioned practices—in a word, to the “lifeworld,” within which philosophical questioning occurs—then we translators should be very careful with the imagery implied by etymologies. I was very careful to always put *naheliegend* in brackets and to look for occasions when I could translate it with “nearby.” *Naheliegend* means “obvious” but etymologically suggests “lying nearby,” and nearness portrays the bodily, lifeworldly aspect of the well that Thales tumbles down. Blumenberg wants to show the kinship between the concept of “obvious” and the bodily experience of “nearness;” the well’s nearness makes it a synecdoche for Thales’ immediate surroundings, but the theoretical value of the nearby is its obviousness.⁵² And yet these concepts cannot be conflated entirely. When Thales fails to notice the well, we cannot say that it is “obvious” to him, although it is “near” him. This suggestion of nearness in *naheliegend* remains metaphorical to the extent that readers will construe both meanings—even if they perhaps settle on one of them.

Most of the time, there was a reference to spatial distance in a sentence containing *naheliegend*, and the choice was obvious to translate the sentence with nearby. In the following sentence, the superlative of *naheliegend* occurs: “It immediately informs our understanding of Montaigne’s standpoint that he can

⁵² At some points, Blumenberg uses “the obvious” (*das Naheliegende*) to describe what Thales tripped over: “[Thales] does not stick to the obvious, and so that he lets the obvious thereby let it become his downfall, because it is so obscure to him.”

hold astronomy and medicine—as disciplines of the farthest (*Fernstliegenden*) and of the nearest (*Nächstliegenden*)—to the same criterion.” I could have translated those words “most obscure” and “most obvious,” but that would hardly make sense in context. This is an easy case. In the toughest cases, I deviated even from the obvious-nearby dichotomy: “upon setting out toward the edge of the world, coming from what is familiar (*Naheliegendem*), the observer of heaven is on the right path to transcend that edge.” (306) Here “familiar” is my attempt to capture “obvious” *and* to fit the image of leaving the world behind (since the world is not without surprises but is familiar as a context—compared to whatever “transcends that edge”). The translator of Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* switches translations of “naheliegend” based on a similar dichotomy: most often choosing either “obvious” or “near at hand”—but not often does he risk a translation that falls somewhere in between the spatial word “near” and the judgmental word “obvious.” In this sentence, I like how “familiar” implies prior lifeworldly engagement, but when I choose that word, the foreign word must follow it in brackets—because including a third translation is especially deviant in that it further reduces the word’s terminological force.

In chapter three, I discuss how English translations of Husserl, Heidegger and Blumenberg render certain words. *naheliegend*, *Grund*, and *Strom*, are all words that denote multiple English meanings of varying concreteness. For Heidegger, *Grund* refers to both *causal explanations* and *the ground under our*

feet. The existential fact *that existence is possible* “grounds” the existence of particular beings, as the ground supports our feet—but since we can never imagine non-existence as a possibility, the mechanism by which “existence” acts as causal force is unknowable, so Heidegger describes existence as more *ground* than *reason* for the existence of particular beings. For Husserl, *Strom* describes the streaming quality of consciousness, but he considers the image of an actual flowing substance an indispensable metaphor: it is misleading to imagine something physically “flowing” when we experience time. While “flow” is a rare case where Husserl actually notes that the term acts metaphorically—and thus invites the evocative translation “stream,” his student Heidegger does not want to choose one concretion over abstraction. In both cases, the image and the abstraction are both thematized, and I thus advocate translation choices that do not efface the occurrence of abstract terms, but which do preserve imagery when possible, in order to establish the expression of the lifeworld in these texts.

The invisibility of intellectual debt in philosophy

Is reading a dialogue? It is common to describe reading as dialogical, but does this metaphor conceal more about interpretative processes than it reveals? Reading involves an isolation that feels populous; some prefer it to human company. Marcel Proust writes, with minimal misanthropy, about preferring novels over life experiences: “for these afternoons [spent reading] were crammed

with more dramatic and sensational events than occur, often, in a whole lifetime.”⁵³ Proust’s narrator prefers imagining people to encountering them. Blumenberg became like Proust’s child narrator at age 56 when he withdrew from academic and social obligations and turned towards his work. The volume and historiographical nature of his work express a preference for figurative dialogue with the dead over conversation with the living.

One of Blumenberg’s students comments on his failure to notice the “Socratic” within the “Platonic;” that is, he dismisses the mediating role of dialogue within Plato’s visual allegories for knowledge. “[Blumenberg]—like Husserl—tended increasingly towards monologizing.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, Blumenberg is “in dialogue,” we might say, with authors from the past. His own *auctoritas*, his renown as an original thinker, accrues from his learned commentaries on other philosophers. But his monologism infects his philosophy in that he rarely accounts for intellectual debts to his contemporaries. I will explore these debts in chapter one. In this section I will discuss their background: the value placed on solitude throughout European intellectual history. Unfortunately, Blumenberg misses the opportunity to diagnose philosophical isolation—quite likely because he is so invested in it.

⁵³ Proust, *Swann’s Way (Remembrance of Things Past, Volume One)*, 56.

⁵⁴ Niehues-Pröbsting, “Platonverlesungen: Eigenschatten--Lächerlichkeiten,” 354.

Blumenberg's monologism stands within a historical tendency among thinkers to isolate themselves and to ignore "the other." As Plato writes: "For really [a philosopher] pays no attention to his next door neighbor; he is not only ignorant of what he is doing, but he hardly knows whether he is a human being or some other kind of creature."⁵⁵ Autonomous thought, however, frequently occupies the metaphoric field of conversation. Plato has Socrates define thought as solitary conversation: "the talk which the soul has with itself about any subjects which it considers."⁵⁶ Nietzsche captures the moment of the isolated self's division suggestively: "Always one times one—in the long run that makes two."⁵⁷ In this image, the noticing self and the noticed self manifest as two different people. Bakhtin discerns internal dialogue as a lens for interpreting ancient and modern literature.⁵⁸ Even Gilles Deleuze, whose topic is almost never individual experience, describes the solitary act of writing in dualistic terms, as leading the thinker into "encounters" and thus populating the imagination.⁵⁹ But Deleuze

⁵⁵ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174B 121.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 189E 179.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 40.

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 236. In Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, for instance, Bakhtin sees the narrator "cast [his] reproach at the world order... as if he were talking not about the world but with the world." For his analyses of Plato and other historically diverse European texts, see Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

⁵⁹ Deleuze, *Dialogues*, 6. "When you work, you are necessarily in absolute solitude.... It is from the depth of this solitude that we can make any encounter whatsoever. You encounter people (and sometimes without knowing them or ever having seen them) but also movements, ideas, events, entities."

refuses the dialogue with the history of philosophy imposed as a disciplinary model for post-war French intellectuals.⁶⁰

How does the dialogue with history transform the σοφία available to philosophy? For Deleuze, his teacher Jean Hyppolite's influential historicism was an unbearable burden, and he sought to create a new genre for philosophy in his outrage against historicizing presumptions. For Blumenberg, it is not philosophical reception but the conversation in the present that is unbearable. He refuses living peers in the epideictic rhetoric of eulogy for the dead Ernst Cassirer. In the memorial speech (which was also a prize acceptance speech), Blumenberg denounces "the standard-giving quality of the present" and advocates "the consciousness of its unbearability."⁶¹ Blumenberg credits the late Cassirer with this consciousness, and thus deflects the implication of his own personal unhappiness with life in the present. With translatorly invisibility, Blumenberg removes himself from the picture in the act of venerating Cassirer.

Not every philosopher refuses past or present dialogue partners with such vehemence; likewise, the metaphor of the divided self waxes and wanes in its claims to realistic status. Montaigne heralds its zenith perhaps when he advocates "inner solitude," which does not require external self-sequestering: in the state of inner solitude, "our normal conservation should be of ourselves, with ourselves,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁶¹ Blumenberg, "Ernst Cassirers gedenkend," 63.

so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there.... We have a soul able to turn in on herself....”⁶² Montaigne makes an absolute metaphor out of inner dialogue in that the ethical philosophy he advocates cannot be reduced to a prescription for realistic situations, since it describes this imaginary scene of self-counsel.

Hannah Arendt diffuses the absolutism of the metaphor of the “two-in-one” when she writes: “Certainly when I appear and am seen by others, I am one; otherwise I would be unrecognizable....[But] I am not only for others but also for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness.”⁶³ The redoubled self puts autonomous thinking on an ever receding horizon. For her, however, the difference between I and me becomes a template for the return to the interpersonal, whenever thought becomes “action.”⁶⁴

“Inner dialogue” does not name an *a priori* structure of the mind: as Blumenberg claims, metaphors worth studying are retraceable to the contingent experiences of the lifeworld. Far from mapping the domain of thought, this metaphor almost reverses the state of affairs it describes: it depicts solitary

⁶² Montaigne, *The Essays of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, 270.

⁶³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 183. Kant sees autonomy as the nature of solitary thought: our empirical sense of other rational beings is determined heteronomously, but “the supersensible nature” of rational beings is determined by laws which “belong to the autonomy of pure reason.” Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, 31.

⁶⁴ This insight motivates Arendt’s project in *The Human Condition*, a book about the about the theoretical complexity of interpersonal life, which is not merely a foil to the life of the mind, and the notion of a reciprocal relationship between inner and outer dialogue figures climactically into *The Origins of Totalitarianism* when she writes that fascism isolates individuals by forbidding questions about the regime, which *in turn* shuts down inner dialogue.

thought as interaction in company.⁶⁵ By provisionally linking solitude with company, the metaphor has the uncanny power to leave us more aware of a solitude that is *not* identical with company. Yet the metaphorically multiplied voice speaks against autonomous thinking and forces dilemmas between rethinking past thoughts and thinking for oneself anew.

To complicate further this philosophical problem imported through a metaphor, the fact of translation—of receiving texts in foreign languages—presents an embarrassment to philosophers who would like to make the shortest detour possible through the ambiguities of language. Arendt emphasizes how the plague of ambiguous language on philosophy is best illustrated in disambiguating translations. When Wittgenstein says, “‘Philosophical problems arise when language goes on a holiday’ (*wenn die Sprache feiert*)[,] the German is equivocal: it can mean ‘to take a holiday,’ that is, language ceases to work, and it can mean ‘to celebrate,’ and would then signify almost the opposite.”⁶⁶ If language is the bane of philosophical self-expression, it also seems to be philosophy’s chosen

⁶⁵ Blumenberg, “Beobachtungen an Metaphern,” 164. Metaphor often uncannily evokes what is “not there.” Metaphors’ uncanny capacity to evoke absent objects is apparent in David Punter’s excellent analysis of Thomas Hardy’s poem “Lying Awake:” Hardy describes seeing a morning, some beech trees, a meadow, and a graveyard “as if I were there,” and yet “he is ‘not there.’” These things are “*unheimlich* to him, between him and them there appears to an insurmountable barrier.” Most importantly for a comparison with Blumenberg’s understanding of metaphor, he notes that “this distance is gauged and negotiated... precisely through the use of metaphor; through the use of normal, *heimlich* objects, like beech trees.” Punter, *Metaphor*, 89.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 115.

medium, so that laments against language continue to be deflated by the fact that they occur in language.

Two problems, then, plague philosophers' conviction of their autonomy: 1) the crowding of perspectives even in solitude, and 2) the borrowed nature of language, which increases its ambiguity. We are inheritors of perspectives, yet philosophers will erase this fact—if you will permit me the pun—by striking out the past when they strike out on their own.

My goal in chapter two is to show that Hans Blumenberg's philosophical claims (about the vulnerable human condition, about the need for ambiguous meaning which sends us fleeing discourses that demand absolute submission to their criteria, and about the success of images and anecdotes that reappear in different discourses) emerge by inductive steps from his prolix dialogue with other thinkers' philosophical problems. Besides his unannounced reliance on contemporary thinkers, Blumenberg often paraphrases the texts he cites in a manner verging on plagiarism. The effect of his concealment of debt is to make him look like the consummate isolated individual, the true philosopher who—having abandoned philosophical goals of universal truth—has mastered the Skeptical *ἐποχή*: to abstain from all schools and dogmas. Unfortunately, his implicit claim to mastery blocks him from achieving the worldly goal of the Skeptics: to evaluate beliefs in terms of their pragmatic consequences for humanity. Deciding which metaphors are damaging and how “absolutist”

metaphors do violence will require us to evaluate more than the aversion they arouse; it will require a new philosophizing, perhaps indebted to Blumenberg, but with new, more interpersonally grounded motivations.

To conclude this discussion of debt, I will cite Stanley Cavell's account of indebtedness to parents. Familial influence forms intellectual habits and fashions a prototype for future intellectual influences. Cavell divides his debt to his parents into distinct moments of inheritance: 1) the blessing of his birth, which accrued additional meaning with 2) his developed sense of a "right" to life, a sense which he won "by [3)] having intercepted the conversation of [his] parents and translated their words."⁶⁷ Of all of these moments, this *translation* strikes me as having the highest developmental impact: it initiates "a process of passing again into [his] neutrality, which... bears testimony of the world I think."⁶⁸ The "neutrality" he achieves results from the process of finding his voice—a process which sounds all too particular, the opposite of neutral. However, the outcome for Cavell as philosopher is not the neutrality of universal, absolute knowledge, but rather a position neutral enough to allow thinking, and from which to consider the world at hand as an intersubjectively occupied one. Cavell's translatorly approach is to negotiate the autonomy of thought with the fact of intellectual indebtedness.

⁶⁷ Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

Translation's invisibility within philosophy

Interlingual translation has never had the privilege of claiming autonomy. While a little scholarship devoted to translating philosophy exists,⁶⁹ few consider translation a properly philosophical activity. This is perhaps because the philosophical search for precise expression is scandalized more than other genres by translation. Lawrence Venuti's early work *The Scandals of Translation* tells how translations of well known works generate new meaning; an antidote to the view of translation as loss of meaning. In Venuti's chapter on translating philosophy, he writes about philosophers' tendency to deny the ways that translation necessarily transforms meaning. Reviewers of translations tend to focus on errors (a practice sometimes identified as "gotcha" reviewing), and reviewers of philosophy books are no exception. Venuti notes that "gotcha" reviewing denies what translation adds to philosophical understanding and coheres with philosophy's tendency to ignore its beholdenness to the linguistic medium. But a closer look at translation problems in philosophy can overturn this tendency; in Venuti's words: "Translation exposes a fundamental idealism in philosophy by calling attention to the material conditions of concepts..."⁷⁰ Philosophy's attempt to articulate universal concepts will always be scandalized by the materiality of particular pieces of writing.

⁶⁹ Rée, "The Translation of Philosophy"; Groth, *Translating Heidegger*; Schalow, *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking Essays in Honor of Parvis Emad*.

⁷⁰ Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 106.

There are cases where a reviewer of a translated philosophy book remarks that more is going on in a translation than the repetition of ideas, but even so, inventions are not praised; losses are mourned. It is as if the autonomy of thought were under attack in an interpretive translation (especially of Heidegger). In one negative review, the reviewer criticizes the translators' neologism "enowning" for *Ereignis* (which rather unambiguously means "event" in German) and for grammatical irregularities. While these choices are questionable, the last line of the review shows the unquestioned faith in the philosophical authority of source texts. In a different translation that he prefers, "[t]he philosophical interpretation is left primarily to the reader."⁷¹ This disparagement against the inventive translation only holds if we refuse to concede that translators offer their own contributions to philosophy.

Another negative review of a recent Heidegger translation picks up on a fault that I too would criticize: the reviewer observes a suggestive image obscured by a translation choice. It occurs in Tarek Dika's review of Heidegger's *Logic* when Dika notes that "hand" metaphors disappear in the translation:

Readers accustomed to the standard English translation of *Vorhandenheit* by "present-to-hand" are likely to be disappointed by Sheehan's "thereness; out-there-ness; presence" (*Logic* 350), which, although no less vague than the standard translation, removes the internal relation this term bears to the hand, the only part of the human body that plays any significant role in Heidegger's early ontology....⁷²

⁷¹ Polt, "Review: Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)."

⁷² Dika, "Logic."

In criticizing Sheehan's translation, Dika acknowledges that manual references are relevant to an adequate understanding of Heidegger's text; as a careful reader of Heidegger, Dika knows that the imagery implied by German etymologies are important for understanding Heidegger's language. The difficult decision lies in whether the "part of the human body" should be emphasized or the positional significance of *vor*, "in front of," which Sheehan captures in "out-there-ness." Since Sheehan embraces differential translation of *Vorhandenheit*, my criticism would be different than Dika's: Sheehan should have included manual *and* positional translations of *Vorhandenheit*, following the suggestiveness of different passages.

But perhaps the translation review is a limited genre for representing the promise of translation. The translator's introduction (or afterword) expresses the translator's own vision for the work. Introductions to translations often include an interest in what a translation offers, and it is translators who notice ways that philosophers whose work they translate see translation as generative, and catch this spirit in their translation work. For instance, the translators of the Heidegger's *Four Seminars* discuss Heidegger's own assertion of the need to take up Leibniz's German-French interface. They even quote a letter Heidegger wrote to Roger Munier, in which Heidegger thanks Munier for translating his lecture "What is Metaphysics?" into French. His admiration expresses positive regard for what

translation can offer philosophy: “Your translation, which you present without any apparatus, requires our French friends and myself first of all to think through the matter of the lecture anew. This matter is a question.”⁷³ Heidegger sees philosophy as focused on questions and aporias rather than answers and statements, or at least not on statements that restrict more than they permit. Even *Being and Time*, his most systematic work, claims the provisionality of “hermeneutics,” since it is “the interpretation of the being of Da-sein.”⁷⁴ He then claims on the same page that this interpretation is the foundation for all future ontological interpretation, but Heidegger has still conceded that he is only offering an “interpretation” which is limited by perspective. (The historical limitedness of interpretation in general would be the topic of his student Gadamer’s work; ultimately, it leads the latter to deem paralogistic the claim to the universal applicability even of a theory of ontological relativism.) It is not surprising that Heidegger asserts such strong preferences for the German and Greek languages, focused as he is on the specific ways that languages pose philosophical questions. Heidegger justified his attachment to these languages nationalistically by expressing his admiration for these two cultures due to their untranslatability, due to “the autochonic bond of originary *Völker*” as one scholar

⁷³ Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, 88.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1996, 33.

has put it.⁷⁵ According to Heidegger, who drew on the work of Greek philologist Walter Otto, the extraordinary Greek and German populations lost their essence when rationalism dissipated their understanding of the earth and its chthonic gods. Such nostalgia is incompatible with a desire to bridge cultural difference. A translatorly theory of linguistic difference that refuses complicity with the destruction of other cultures' particularity could still learn from Heidegger's insights into linguistic autonomy, but it must resist the violence that restricts authentic expressiveness to those languages with which one identifies.

Politics aside, lack of experience with long translation projects would inhibit a philosopher like Heidegger from developing an experientially grounded theory of translation. Heidegger's intense attention to texts would have a different phenomenological result than the extensive task of translating longer works. Just as Husserl advocates withdrawal from action for the purpose of observing one's own consciousness, the translator abstains from the work of "original" knowledge production and observes another's thoughts. Husserl describes how a series of conscious experiences are necessary in order to observe oneself as occupying a stable position against the world.⁷⁶ While Heidegger can discern a series of thought moments within a single sentence by Parmenides, these would surely only qualify as moments within "subjective time" (Husserl's term for the passing now-

⁷⁵ Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots*, xx.

⁷⁶ Husserl returns to these points throughout his work, but they are expressed succinctly in Meditation I and IV of Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*.

point) as opposed to the “objective time” (the continuum we construct of all potentially recollected time points) that occurs when reading and having to recall having read—precisely what translators do when they edit long projects. But there remains a prejudice in philosophy against the idea that particular activities yield theoretical insight. The invisibility of translation as a philosophical activity has inhibited the circulation of translators’ philosophical insights.

Translating philosophy

I am indebted to the translation theory that prevails at the moment of my writing. A large scale translation project recently completed under Emily Apter’s direction and her theoretical work about it both deal with the ambiguous expressive movements that I discuss in this dissertation: metaphor, translation, and intertextuality. This year, Apter oversaw the completed translation of the monumental *Vocabulaire des philosophies européens* into English. The *Vocabulaire* is an encyclopedic work that circumscribes the historical development of the philosophical language pertinent today, especially in what we call “critical theory.” However, she insists that its scope is not encyclopedic (not taxonomizing all philosophemes), but rather lexical (accounting for the lexical

meanings of a few terms), and thus introduced the *Vocabulaire* in English under the provocative title, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: a Philosophical Lexicon*.⁷⁷

The *Vocabulaire*'s focus is on signs as much as it is on concepts; particular words in particular languages matter for their etymologies and local traditions of use. Many entries demonstrate the debt that European philosophical vocabulary owes to everyday language; English words listed include “bliss,” “flesh,” and “salad bowl,” but the *Vocabulaire* does not leave out the words most dear to theory such as “representation” and “subject.” Barbara Cassin, the original project's director, researches Greek sophistry, and her specialty equips her to notice that words' rhetorical effect in everyday language can decide the span and nature of their career as philosophical terms.

Apter has supplemented her directorial work with a monograph, whose goal, via frequent recourse to the *Vocabulaire*, is “to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature.”⁷⁸ This book, *Against World Literature: The Politics of Untranslatability*, activates translation as the site for various aporias in philosophy. For instance, she writes about the words “sex” and “gender” which appear in the *Vocabulaire* and compares translation choices with gender performance. Eric Fassin coined the hyphenation “trouble-genre” in

⁷⁷ Apter, *Against World Literature*, 122. Although Apter's work and mine are focused on these ambiguities, she focuses primarily on communication failures resulting from interlingual translation.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

introduction to the French translation of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as a description of the book's effect. Apter notes that, because the French word for "gender" (*genre*) denotes the concept of "genre," Fassin sees translation pushing the legibility of gender from the body to the page: "The decisionism of translation—tangible in the hypothetical alternatives that haunt the words that a translator finally selects—registers as a kind of translation-trouble that bedevils trouble-genre."⁷⁹ In order to find an analogy between translation dilemmas and the indeterminacy of gender, Apter makes a translatorly move: she turns to the *vocabulary* of the source she interprets and writes Fassin's word into her thought.

Apter's book commands a wide range of vocabularies and, refreshingly for a "theory" book, she names her sources. There is hardly a page without a footnote, and few of these footnotes repeat a reference to a previously cited source. Her translation theory resembles translation practice in that she adopts and adapts the vocabularies of the authors she reads. What gives this book a translatorly feel is the way that she a) announces her sources and b) dispenses with their language afterwards, as if she did not want to pass off their vocabularies as her own. Many of the chapters are themselves philological and thematize philology, such as *Keywords 1: "Cyclopedia,"* a chapter named after Ephraim Chamber's *Cyclopedia: or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, which Diderot translated as a partial basis for his own *Encyclopédie*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 169.

Emblematic of a defect resulting from Apter's sporadic attention to particular "untranslatable" words, however, is the last line of this chapter: "Perhaps the best English translation of the *Vocabulaire* would be none other than "Cyclopaedia," retrieved from Chambers and assigned new purpose as a name for the Untranslatable animating and exhausting the encyclopedic form."⁸⁰ While it is not surprising that the chapters after this do not refer back to the untranslatable "Cyclopaedia," it is somewhat more surprising that she did not wager more on her "perhaps" as director of the translation of the *Vocabulaire* and picked the familiar word *Dictionary* instead of the archaic *Cyclopaedia* as the title of the translation. If I may borrow the optative mood of her "perhaps," "perhaps" the chapters of *Against World Literature* should not be read like encyclopedia entries. Perhaps they are to be read like a digest of many translators' life-work; a series of translation projects, passing before the reader's eyes in quick succession. Under the godlike gaze of the theorist, we see the grimly disjunctive aspect of the translator's task: she must wrestle with the history of one vocabulary, then forget it and move on to the next.

The experience of translating a citation-rich text like Blumenberg's also includes aporetic moments when we turn the page and a quite vocal new dialogue partner enters the conversation. New vocabulary is indeed the sign of that entrance. The last four chapters of *Laughter* each engage with discourses of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 128.

nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. When translating these chapters, I appreciated the ways that Blumenberg marked these engagements, though he often expressed affiliation only ambiguously. In chapters eleven and thirteen respectively, Blumenberg opens the discussion with philological matters: the originality in Feuerbach's use of the ordinary word "absentmindedness" (*Geistesabwesenheit*) and in Heidegger's use of the equally ordinary "existence" (*Dasein*). But most of the time, other authors' language blends into Blumenberg's prose, requiring familiarity with the source text or at least with Blumenberg's argument about it if the reader is to discern what he is doing.

For instance, Blumenberg speaks of *the* nineteenth-century "perspective" or "view" (*Blickwinkel* and *Blick*) in order to introduce Ludwig Feuerbach's historicism in a metahistoricizing gesture of his own. Friedrich Nietzsche's "conflation of the first and the last" philosophers becomes the critical point of departure in chapter twelve. Heidegger, whose language is one of the most immediate and infectious influences on the German philosophy of Blumenberg's time, prompts especially elaborate rhetorical co-opting in *Laughter*: "Merely letting-himself-be-entertained by the world may be an unjust charge against the protophilosopher, as he does risk falling, but his fall certainly portends his beginning's fallenness, when tarrying in the midst of things gave way to letting-things-be." Here Blumenberg reiterates Heidegger's decline narrative in a parody of Heidegger's own language; his adoption of Heidegger's vocabulary seems

especially ironic considering what he writes elsewhere about the reason that Heidegger is so overrated: “he offers a Dorado for the urge to parody.”⁸¹

The tone of these distancing appropriations becomes the most dismissive as Blumenberg arrives in the post-war epoch where he discusses his own colleagues. Chapter fourteen weaves the terms “interdisciplinarity” and “social critique” into a polemic against his contemporaries who read philosophy texts not as the record of philosophical thought, but rather as a resource for diagnosing social injustice. Blumenberg concludes by giving these doctors of sociology a taste of their own medicine: he dismisses their criticisms as amateurish moral conformism. He rejects readings of Plato’s Thracian maid as a class conscious proto-proletarian; instead, Blumenberg focuses on the vocabulary in which this reading is made. He holds the language of the present (“class-specific” criticism) at the same distance as he holds the language of the past. If I may follow Blumenberg’s lead in finding and pursuing the logic of metaphor, I will remain in the metaphoric field of medicine to describe his criticism of symptomatic reading: he injects his own prose with historical forms of thought as a vaccine against taking any one of them seriously, and does so in order to immunize himself against the conventions of the present.

While the rhetorical effect of Blumenberg’s work compartmentalizes that of other theorists’, it also works, like Apter’s recent book, to place him in

⁸¹ Blumenberg, “Die Suggestion des beinahe Selbstgekonnten,” 91–92.

hesitant dialogue with them. His own voice is diluted by theirs. And his boldest thoughts appear more translatorly than original; for that reason, however, they are all the more integrated into a movement that carries thought belatedly to distant shores (to borrow Heidegger's figure). On the other hand, as we saw in Heidegger's nationalistic theory of untranslatability, moral blindness adheres to a polemic, like Blumenberg's, that dismisses contemporary concerns in pursuit of one's own antiquarian insight. By explicitly thematizing translation as the basis for such a philosophy of dialogue, we can better understand our belated role as thinkers in the era of globalization.

Chapter 1: The Moment of Metaphorology

Hans Blumenberg works against certainty, which makes his project difficult to summarize. The dearth of strong claims in his oeuvre reflects his view that metaphoric ambiguity overpowers logical definiteness in its lasting influence on discourse. One of Blumenberg's best known claims, in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, is that propositions made in different historical periods respond to each other far *less* than they appear to do. What appear to be on-going disputes in discourses from theology to astronomy turn out to be "reoccupations" (*Umbesetzungen*)—Blumenberg's term for new ideas that answer the implicit questions behind established ideas by addressing anxieties that old ideas claim to have already quelled. Blumenberg does not even express resolve *not* to posit claims, and thus it is not Blumenberg but his colleague Odo Marquard who suggests that "relief from absolutes" might be Blumenberg's "foundational thought." In Marquard's words: "Human beings cannot stand the absolute. They must—in the most varied forms—win distance from it."⁸² When Marquard proposed this to Blumenberg, the latter begrudgingly affirmed that this claim does capture the main thrust of his life's work.

⁸² Marquard, "Entlastung vom Absoluten," 20.

Since Blumenberg was invested in discerning the “varied forms” of distance that humans win from the absolute, he does not restrict his sources to other works of philosophy alone. Other modes of thought, such as myth, religion, science, and art, each serve as poles that draw us from one absolute, non-contingent worldview to another. Myth, religion, science, and art draw us into worldviews premised on raw survivalism, divine omnipotence, scientific materialism, and solipsism, respectively. Philosophy can serve as an intermediate space where rationalism only *appears* to prevail, where rhetorical goals are negotiable, and where the absolute can be put at a distance. Thales’ cosmology “everything is water” is a good example of how philosophy can both reinforce and dilute the power of myth:

His transition from myth to philosophy was by no means executed inconsiderately; his “new solution” to the riddle of the world—that everything emerged from the water and is therefore still on top of it—was well attested on Homer’s authority. In the *Iliad*, the river god Oceanus is the “sire of the gods,” just as he is the “origin of us all.”⁸³ Annexing the world that comes from water and rests on it to the world of the gods hardly constituted the first bold move of reason. (255)

Thales’ water cosmology did not contradict Homer, but its language of universalizing theory reoccupied Homeric myth, and thus offered relief from the unpredictable Homeric world. Blumenberg’s major works depict historical cases of relief-seeking inside and outside of the genre of philosophy. In *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), he narrates how late Roman Church theology tried

⁸³ Homer, *The Iliad*, XIV, li. 286, li. 232, 224, 222.

vigilantly to dispel the Gnostic fear that humans do not belong on earth, and only later would the promise made by Enlightenment rationality to empower each individual on earth eventually prove to be a more successful consolation. *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (1975) demonstrates that Copernicus' scientific work was able to persuasively remove humanity from the center of the universe precisely *when* some relief was needed from the overwhelming moral burden of existence at the center of the universe. *Work on Myth* (1979) explores how the fear of existential threats was relieved by myths which categorized powers under the names of specific gods. Monotheism offered a further relief: it is easier to manage contracts with one god. But the fear of one God's omnipotence was only relieved by rational, individual self-assertion. Rationality—ancient and modern—becomes another anxiety-inducing absolute when the ideal of a lawful universe leaves no room for meaning in human life. That last anxiety is assuaged by “fiction:” the self-consciously false, but still comforting myths we encounter in literature, drama, satire, and, nowadays, in film and television.

Besides his refusal to construct global analyses, a harder interpretive problem adheres to Blumenberg's work: he rarely cites other thinkers. Blumenberg's complex and eclectic set of hypotheses sometimes appear to be his inventions. While other authors' theories do form the background of his own thought, his drive for distance also repels him from the encroaching present moment. The moment of metaphorology is thus the unlived, historical past, and it

builds on the work of historians and philologists. By immersing himself in the interdisciplinary environment of the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* group, he escaped the censure of specialists. Not ashamed of this evasion, he even writes about the trust granted to scholars by non-specialists:

Within scientific institutions, everyone is credited *a limine* with pursuing meaningful activity, even when others' high-level specialization makes their work inaccessible: by providing a sphere where everyone is familiar with everyone else's rules of action, scientists have constructed enclosures that prevent the seemingly ritualized foreignness of their procedures from clashing with the outside world. (251)

By displaying his dazzling erudition and mounting the bold hypothesis that “the mind preempts itself in its images,” he created a niche for his observations on metaphors between historical cataloging and philosophical provocation.⁸⁴

Before we trace the development of Blumenberg's thought, it is worth asking: what makes Blumenberg's skeptical and historical work philosophical? Previous scholarship on Blumenberg's work has focused on a variety of themes: the autonomy of modern secular values, the distinctive satisfaction that we receive from mythic irrationality, and his theory of metaphor, to name a few.⁸⁵ There is no question that Blumenberg has contributed to the discourses on secularization, philosophical anthropology, and metaphor. But what major philosophical contribution can his work offer to an age already saturated with cynical, skeptical,

⁸⁴ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

⁸⁵ These themes are notably taken up in: Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*; Pippin, “Modern Mythic Meaning”; Haverkamp, “The Scandal of Metaphorology.”

and otherwise deflationary attitudes? I find that Blumenberg models a way of thinking that renews the promise of the ancient Skeptics, that happiness comes from profound non-commitment.⁸⁶ For instance, Blumenberg concisely conveys his liberating brand of Skepticism in this short sentence offered as a refutation of Nietzsche's claim that we should prefer a prescriptive philosophy to science motivated by value-neutral curiosity: "Such a formula bespeaks almost nothing about the factual relation between philosophy and science, because—as we may deeply regret—the value of a piece of knowledge first becomes evaluable once this knowledge has become known." (457) This brief logical demonstration corroborates what Blumenberg performs in his life work: curiosity alone should be enough to motivate immersion in the history of thought, even if we only learn that history offers neither satisfying conclusions nor ethical protocols.

This chapter looks to the various other thinkers with whom he was in dialogue. Blumenberg cites the thinkers discussed below but, amid the flood of historical sources, these newer ones sometimes seem more marginal to his thinking than they are. By examining these other thinkers' theories on their own and Blumenberg's responses to them, this chapter examines the role of these influences in Blumenberg's thought. After building this background, I will describe the mechanics and development of his "metaphorology" itself. In my

⁸⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Sextus Empiricus*, xxx.

reading, metaphorology is the interpretive procedure through which Blumenberg identifies when and how authors distance themselves from the absolute.

Although Blumenberg engages deeply with Plato and Aristotle, Church Fathers and *philosophes*, Goethe and Fontane, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, his work mentions few of his contemporaries. Blumenberg's twentieth-century influences are worth noting for a fuller appreciation of Blumenberg's contribution. They include Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer, Arnold Gehlen, and his colleague Hans-Robert Jauß—all insightful theorists into the particularity of the human existence. It is easier to classify their influence on him than to rank them. The philosopher he studies the most thoroughly is Husserl, whom he considers the founder of modern phenomenology and thus both a modern rescuer of the internal and a symptom of the aporias that come with speaking about the self. Blumenberg admires Heidegger's assertions that humans must experience a world before a self and that the mortality of the individual gives the world its meaning. He disagrees with Heidegger that reliable ontological implications follow from Heidegger's analysis of subjective experience. Blumenberg's most original ideas, the ones summarized above with regard to when and why metaphors mediate understanding, seem to owe the most to Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms—which allows for the fluidity of explanatory power across times and cultures. Blumenberg shares Gehlen's view of the human being as a creature with demands on culture. Finally, the methods of

reception theory, associated with his colleagues Hans-Robert Jauß and Wolfgang Iser, clearly molded Blumenberg's historical attentiveness and were in turn explicitly influenced by Blumenberg's work. In the following pages, I will discuss each of the above mentioned philosophers and then explore how Blumenberg developed their work and recast their significance for us today.

The teacher: Ludwig Landgrebe

In order to understand why Blumenberg discounts the influences of the phenomenological, existentialist, anthropological, and hermeneutic philosophy that influenced him, it is worth considering his differences from his Habilitation advisor, Ludwig Landgrebe. Landgrebe was an original phenomenological thinker, but he adheres to the scope of the discipline as defined by his own former mentor, Edmund Husserl. Blumenberg prefers to theorize the dependence of the subjective construction of knowledge on *specific details* of history, and the level of *abstraction* with which phenomenologists treat subjectivity make their work almost incompatible with Blumenberg's methods. The analysis of absolute metaphors does more than prove their prominence; it always includes an examination of their historical specificity.

Landgrebe theorized abstract "historicity" in a way that occluded the details of "history." His abstraction is telling of mainstream phenomenology's refusal to consider the historical specificity of the philosophers' works that they

read. Landgrebe draws on Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger to explain how history, as a phenomenon of the mind, exists through a complex mental process: the creation of time out of impressions, expectations, and care along with the sense that the future is under our control. As we attempt to steer our lives or history towards positive outcomes, we must first assemble memories or reports of the past to transform “the original experience of the temporality of our being-in-the-world into the thought of the timeline without gaps as the form of a development of a continuing occurrence that we consider appropriate to the category of causality.”⁸⁷ In order to establish a concept of time, our minds ignore the scattered nature of our impressions and imagine a continuity. We recollect notes from a song, for example, not as discrete moments, but as a melody we heard.

Historical events then assume positions on this temporal continuum *when they matter to us*. When concern over a situation rouses us to act, history emerges in our consciousness as a phenomenon in order to inform us about how to act according to what worked in similar past situations, where people did or did not attend to the conditions of the moment: “In such correspondence or lack of correspondence [to the moment’s demand] emerge the historical events, and, with regard to them and their meaning for the present, the unity of history is fashioned always once again with a memorious attitude.”⁸⁸ This sounds like a similar

⁸⁷ Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Geschichte*, 199.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

proposal to that made by reception studies: a moment in the experience of history only ever occurs against a horizon of expectations, that moment's particular "unity of history." Metaphorological studies benefit from this background idea; it informs Blumenberg's horizon of possibilities.

Unlike his pupil Blumenberg, Landgrebe does not explore the historically mediated consciousness of the philosophers whom he discusses—as if it were a distraction from the universal mechanism of experiencing history. While he has a similar notion of the spontaneous and subjective construction of meaning as Blumenberg does, history only matters to Landgrebe at a level of abstraction that would never make a place for metaphorology—or for any study of specific authors against their horizons of expectations. When he compares Hegel's and Marx's dialectics, Landgrebe opposes the idea of systematizing action in the way that Hegel systematized consciousness. He goes as far as to say that the question of the "correctness and groundedness of [Marx's] calls to action" can only be investigated "philosophically and not through empirical research."⁸⁹ He claims that action in history cannot be logically justified, since innumerable contingencies condition our compulsion to act in history. Here we see most clearly the point where phenomenology diverges from Blumenbergian historicism. For Blumenberg, the context and reception of philosophical propositions prove something more interesting than the "correctness" or

⁸⁹ Ibid., 86.

“groundedness” of those statements; they show how novel philosophies reintegrate old metaphors.

Let us now look into the phenomenological theory that gave Blumenberg a language to develop his ideas. Ultimately, he will use Husserl’s concepts to describe his own less systematic phenomenology, his metaphorology, where the subject is grounded not through one irrepresentable structure of historical consciousness, but through historically specific understandings of specific metaphoric imagery.

The primary source: Edmund Husserl

Husserl studied mathematics before attending Franz Brentano’s lectures on philosophy of mind—where he encountered the proposition that *a thought that occurs in a mind* is the only named thing or concept that is *of* or *about* something other than itself. It became a matter of certainty to Husserl that observing the most elementary movements of one’s own mind was the proper starting point for philosophy. With that conviction guiding him, he wanted to propose a methodical rigor for philosophical logic with as unshakable a foundation as mathematics—thus he opposed then-prevalent psychologistic theories of mind which considered logic to reflect mental processes corresponding to nothing external to itself. As mathematics relied on basic arithmetic operations, Husserl thought that meaning, language, logic, and everyday consciousness could be traced to an elementary

experience of pre-verbal, pre-social consciousness. From *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology* in 1913 until the end of his life, he advocated starting where Descartes did. Descartes begins philosophizing by “bracketing” the world as given—that is, assuming the non-existence of the entire external world as we have come to understand it—in order to notice and interpret the pre-given, elementary experience: the *cogito*, the fact that thinking creates a seeming internal-external duality, which he dubbed intentionality, following Brentano.⁹⁰ During this bracketing of the world’s existence, the “I” is pure intentionality, an awareness split between the outside world and the first-person perspective on it. In the passage of time, the *memory* of this awareness reveals how the “I” retains its identity and projects its continued existence onto the future. As Husserl elaborates in the Fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, after the subject recognizes itself through this process, then the expressiveness of other “I’s” lets us recognize others as partners in establishing intersubjective knowledge by communicating about what is experienced simultaneously.

Husserl’s phenomenology paved the way for hermeneutics by rejecting the logical positivist view of language as unexpressive, as a closed system with no place for subjective input. Language expresses intentionality and thus receives phenomenological analysis: for the speaker, the experience of a thought worth

⁹⁰ Brentano borrowed the word “intentionality” from the Scholastic term “*intentio*” for the relationship of the mind to objects, a notion derived from Aristotle’s discussion of psychic phenomena. For a helpful discussion of this, see Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 22.

expressing precedes expression, and, for the listener, experience of natural signs (like smoke for fire) precede the experience of artificial signs (the word “fire” for fire). In another’s apt phrase: “Husserl’s insistence on a pre-predicative basis for predication and thought in general, though speculative and at places naïve, points the way to later empirical investigations of psycholinguistics and cognitive science, where a Wittgensteinian would be condemned to silence.”⁹¹ Husserl deems it philosophically justified to assume that others’ verbal expressions signal *some* experience, even when the content of their experiences remains ambiguous.

These views on language support a project like Blumenberg’s which reads anxiety about the absolute into transmitted documents, but it was Husserl’s concept of the “lifeworld” that Blumenberg responds to directly. Husserl first described this term at length in his last published work, his 1935 treatise *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.⁹² The lifeworld is the state that we inhabit whenever we feel competent in our ability to live by rules, whether sensorily given (the properties of matter that govern our interactions with objects), self-imposed (knowing what to eat, for example), or externally imposed (the rules of polite society):

Each of us has his life-world, meant as a world for all. Each has it with the sense of a polar unity of subjectively, relatively meant worlds which, in

⁹¹ Smith and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, 132.

⁹² Blumenberg discovers an instance of Husserl using the world “lifeworld” in a 1924 lecture and understands the lifeworld as the implied counterpoint to “theory” throughout Husserl’s work. Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 10.

the course of correction, are transformed into mere appearances of the world, the life-world for all, the intentional unity which always persists.⁹³

This sentence requires some explication (as much of phenomenological prose does for those of us existing at a distance from its conditions of emergence). First of all, each person's life-world is "meant as a world for all" in that it not allow distinctions between (1) primary and (2) secondary qualities of experience, that is, between (1) the constitutive norms that make for spatio-temporal experience and (2) our understanding of other beings and their actions, of objects and their utility. Even if a (3) tertiary layer of experience is clearly not universal—(3) that of our life-structuring values, schedules, languages, and customs—the failure of the non-phenomenologist is to demarcate the subjective at (3) and not at (2), an error that binds us to the philosophically grave follies of common sense.⁹⁴ Husserl mentions in the quote above that the lifeworld can be corrected, but these corrections happen singularly and arbitrarily—only a new beginning in *prima philosophia*, the proper starting point of philosophy in skepticism, can ground a method in subjective insight. The worst effect of these corrections is that "mere appearances of the world" based on the seeming consensus achieved through corrected error build misleading confidence that one has done enough to understand the world. The right track, Husserl insists, is the sweeping bracketing of certainties, the

⁹³ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy.*, 245f.

⁹⁴ This is outlined in more detail by Barry Smith in Smith and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, 421.

Skeptical ἐποχή, the phenomenological reduction. The only way to achieve the great Romantic goal of unifying subject and object is the experience of external world skepticism: “once in his life every philosopher must proceed in this way.”⁹⁵

In Blumenberg’s first essay publication, he writes admiringly of the audacity in Husserl’s early essay “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” where Husserl shows “certainty of the consciousness that he stood at the beginning [of a discipline] with a method that is qualified—even if ‘in the gray distance’—to fix philosophical conceptuality completely and ultimately.”⁹⁶ Rather than mock this as hubris, Blumenberg calls this a “spur, the measure for what we have achieved thus far.”⁹⁷ Blumenberg might be lenient or ironic here since he would later come down hard on Descartes’ faith in conceptual certainty as the end state for philosophy, a projected future moment when “everything *can* be defined, thus everything *must* be defined; there is no long anything logically ‘provisional,’ just as there is no longer a *morale provisoire*.”⁹⁸ In later writings on Husserl, Blumenberg would extend this line of criticism to Husserl’s overestimation of his ability to achieve certain transcendental knowledge.⁹⁹ He blamed Husserl’s

⁹⁵ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, 76.

⁹⁶ Blumenberg, “Die sprachliche Wirklichkeit der Philosophie,” 431.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 1–2.

⁹⁹ Husserl expresses support for a “Kantian doctrine of inner sense,” but one based on “a truly apodictic meaning which ultimately furnishes the experiential ground (a ground like that of the Cartesian *ego cogito*), [available to us] through a type of experience which is not Kantian

ignorance of his actual place in the history of philosophy: “It was Husserl’s weakness that he took himself for the first person to pose some questions of philosophy seriously and radically. He could only claim that because his knowledge of the history of thought was minimal, or more precisely: proud of its near non-existence.”¹⁰⁰

Yet this self-overestimation barely blemishes Blumenberg’s esteem for Husserl. Blumenberg ranks Husserl alongside Kant among the philosophers who did not need charismatic language to attract readers to their insights: “In a certain sense, it is true that [Husserl’s] language does not contain his philosophy at all. It is a prescription to procure something which does not come up in his sentences—not even in his published works.”¹⁰¹ With this mixture of ironic distance from Husserl’s certainty, admiration for his achievements, and fascination with his historical role in renewing the quasi-religious faith that observing one’s individual experience can expose universal insights, Blumenberg dedicated more pages to Husserl’s theory of the lifeworld than to any other single topic. Blumenberg often seems sympathetic with Husserl’s hope that a method exists for determining if, and how, subjective experience might ever achieve objectivity. In view of Blumenberg’s claim that self-assertion defines the “modern” European character

scientific experience....” Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy.*, 114.

¹⁰⁰ Blumenberg, “Die Fiktion des ersten Menschen und des letzten,” 85.

¹⁰¹ Blumenberg, “Die Suggestion des beinahe Selbstgekonnten,” 90.

in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, we can understand Blumenberg's interest in Husserl's turn to the self as the source of revelation.¹⁰²

The tormented self: Martin Heidegger

Heidegger sets out to destroy a tradition of metaphysical dualism in order to recover the relationship to Being that it concealed. *Being and Time* transforms phenomenology's primary purpose from an inquiry into the *structure of consciousness* into the inquiry into *Being* itself. For Heidegger, ontological truth is non-propositional but can still be thematized within propositional language. It is no surprise that a gifted student of Scholasticism (whose dissertation was on Duns Scotus) would come up with a primarily negative ontology. With rhetorical moves similar to the apophantic language of negative theology, Heidegger describes the unknowable by contrasting it against the knowable, especially against scientific knowledge.¹⁰³

A sketch of the analysis of the everyday given in *Being and Time* reveals its different suppositions from Husserl's theory of the "lifeworld." Husserl believed that we do not need to describe the "natural attitude" before we bracket it and describe the experience of skeptical contemplation. Heidegger believed that

¹⁰² For this interpretation, see "Husserl's Gott" in Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*.

¹⁰³ As Blumenberg says about *Being and Time*, "Here, nonconceptuality consists in our thoroughly learning what kind of thing being is *not*." Blumenberg, "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality," 99.

the natural attitude could only be described negatively from the perspective of the most complete description of everyday consciousness. Thus, book one of *Being and Time* concerns the natural state of consciousness—or rather of *Dasein*, for Heidegger prefers this term to “consciousness” for describing the elemental experience that phenomenology can properly analyze and interpret.¹⁰⁴ *Dasein* refers to humanity which Heidegger defines as the kind of being who (1) has an understanding of being and (2) considers its own being to be an issue for itself. The word “*Dasein*” contains the morphemes “being” (*Sein*) and “there” (*Da*), and Heidegger depicts *Dasein* as the type of being (as opposed to a useful or a present object) that is always out there and never where it is. *Dasein* always already projected away from the interior “here” of the self out “there” in three senses: out of itself in a situation, out of the present in concern over the future, and outside of its stationary spatial existence and inside the immersiveness of activities. “Being there” is so evocative as an image to describe existence that Blumenberg announces its success as an absolute metaphor: “*Dasein* was able to become the very type of the symbol for being.”¹⁰⁵ Its adequacy goes unquestioned due to its illustrativeness.

¹⁰⁴ For Blumenberg’s take on the stakes of this distinction, see “*Dasein und Bewusstsein*” in Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*.

¹⁰⁵ Blumenberg, “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” 100.

Heidegger illustrates the plight of *Dasein* with elaborate spatial imagery throughout *Being and Time*,¹⁰⁶ his other terms draw on Christian diction to describe how confining the world is. We project our hopes into the future, and we view our specific prospects against the horizon offered by the events we suffer that shape our possibilities. This he calls this feature of existence our “thrownness,” our own particular unescapable condition. However, to *only* react to given possibilities is “fallenness” (although he does not specify whether “fallenness” is a specifically post-lapsarian failing). While thrownness is inevitable, fallenness is not; we differentiate ourselves from a collective reaction to the historical and personal moment of life and gain an ontological understanding of ourselves only by confronting mortality.¹⁰⁷ The ethical thrust of *Being and Time* comes in the call to individuate from “the they” (*das Man*): “In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge.... The they

¹⁰⁶ Heidegger’s reliance on imagery becomes bewildering in light of his ban on metaphor in his later work—where he claims its complicity with metaphysical dualism (see my third chapter for more on this). For one scholar’s case that Heidegger does not use arbitrary “imagery” but does indeed rely on “metaphor” where his images bear an “analogical trait” with what they mean to describe, see Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor*, 127–191.

¹⁰⁷ The individuating moment comes for Heidegger when we contemplate mortality, not in the sense of morbidly awaiting death, but rather realizing what the inevitability of death means for our existence. For humanity as *Dasein*, death means: (1) no one can die *your* death for you, the way they can say or do other things for you, (2) it is non-relational, meaning its eventual occurrence is not dependent on your choices, and (3) it is the limit on all possibilities. To turn our fears about the future into anxiety about our finitude allows us to exist authentically with others, not caught in the fallenness of everyday life, but able to notice that one exists finitely among other finite beings. For an excellent summary of these thoughts, see Cerbone, *Heidegger*.

prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.”¹⁰⁸ Worst of all, they ignore the limit-setting nature of death by talking about it in everyday ways: as one life event among others.

As Hans Jonas recalls, Heidegger was more exciting than Husserl as a speaker because “he was more difficult to understand,” which appealed to his youthful ambition to face a challenge, and because Heidegger’s *Dasein* had pathos, it was a “tormented self.”¹⁰⁹ The impression that he outdid his teacher Husserl has survived: Heidegger’s existential interpretation of human experience is widely considered an improvement on Husserl’s genetic logic of skeptical, intentional experience. Many philosophers have found Husserl’s theory of the transcendental reduction and the bracketing of the lifeworld inadequate to describe the complexity of the meaningful and immersive experience of the world.¹¹⁰ While Heidegger persuasively expatiates on the everyday, Blumenberg astutely criticizes the solution Heidegger finds in the solitary confrontation with mortality. As Blumenberg rightly points out, we only know about our own mortality second-hand:

The consciousness described and describable by phenomenology cannot do anything with the concepts of infinity and finitude.... The sentence “all humans are born and must die” is the result of intersubjective experience. It is just ‘exposed’ to every person that they are born, since they were not

¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1996, 127.

¹⁰⁹ Hans Jonas “Heidegger’s Resoluteness and Resolve” in Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, 198–199.

¹¹⁰ Smith and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, 300.

experiencing at the time and it must be taught to them that they will die for their protection, since they cannot think the cessation of consciousness. Whoever falls asleep gives up their spirit under a condition; they pretty much plan to wake up to certain sensory signals.¹¹¹

In other words, we do not know that we must die except by hearsay. If Heidegger wants to make the finitude of life the essence of *Dasein*, then he must either cease to designate his work an interpretation of experience itself. We only learn about death from intersubjectively acquired knowledge, and it is precisely this kind of second-hand knowledge that Heidegger's analysis accidentally elevates over the evidence of pure phenomena. For all of the logical problems of Husserl's transcendental idealism, Blumenberg prefers its premises: that consciousness knows that it has objects and that the transcendental ego is capable of deciding to be skeptical for the sake of knowing what can be known about these objects (and eventually of subjects as well), not just for the sake of solitary resolve towards the fact of death.

Blumenberg also accuses Heidegger in *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* of lacking awareness of the susceptibility of his own analyses of existence to the very historicity that he considered the foundation of all knowledge. *Being and Time* was published in 1927, after the rampant death and mutilation during World War I, when Europeans were particularly aware of their mortality and thus ready to receive a philosophy that presented the finitude of life as humanity's most

¹¹¹ Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 91.

authentic trait. Heidegger supported Hitler's conflation of individual experience and historical epoch-making, and this bit of Hitlerism echoes Heidegger's own proposal that we exist within the unfolding history of Being.¹¹² From Blumenberg's perspective, Heidegger's ontology was blind to its reliance on metaphors that draw on the pathos of his own historical moment.

The world history of the imagination: Ernst Cassirer

Cassirer's diverse interests—Kantian philosophy, Einstein's physics, Goethe's panpsychism, and the ethnology of myth—separated him as much from Husserl's mathematical as from Heidegger's theological background, but his ability to synthesize and syncretize the most opposed worldviews into one philosophical system was his most valuable contribution to philosophy. He published his first writings on scientific and transcendental logic at Marburg under the guidance of the neo-Kantian leading figure Hermann Cohen.¹¹³ While Ernst Mach's influential positivism asserted that science was a cultural continuation of human evolution, which economized sense-data (a sensualism that would be purged when logical positivism redefined the philosophical as what could be expressed in logical propositions), the neo-Kantians were claiming that

¹¹² Ibid., 92–93.

¹¹³ This section derives many insights from Edward Skidelsky's *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, which is largely sympathetic though it provocatively challenges the coherence of Cassirer's concept of "symbolic form."

science is not just adaptive but rational and *creative*, a product of the intellect, not just—as Mach had claimed—the aggregation of sensations into more efficient packages.

Cassirer began by examining Kant’s transcendental logic, which required extension in space as a way of conceiving of *a priori* schemata (such as unities, shapes, and numbers). In order for this to be compatible with Einstein’s relativity theory, the validity of which Cassirer fully accepted, Kant’s logical schemata would have to be psychologically constitutive only—which would make it difficult to accept their validity at all. But Cohen insisted that an *a priori* logic—divorced from sensation and the Newtonian belief in stable matter¹¹⁴—was valid beyond the confines of mere psychology. As a notoriously peremptory advisor, Cohen demanded Cassirer’s conformity with this approach. Only after Cohen’s death could Cassirer expand his own thesis of a singular intellectual pattern undergirding reason and sensation, expression and rationality: “the same universal forms of intuition and thought... constitute the unity of both the mythical consciousness and the consciousness of pure knowledge.”¹¹⁵ Different modes of viewing the world differed in their understanding of fundamental concepts, such as space, time, and number. Mythic thinkers understand spatial extension, for example, completely differently from scientific thinkers. They “project and copy

¹¹⁴ “For Cohen, pure thought is pure because its origin is entirely within itself: that is, it does not depend for its content on an independent faculty of sensibility.” Edgar, “Hermann Cohen.”

¹¹⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 60 Vol. II.

all human reality in the human body” onto exterior space, so that “mythical geography” is neither infinite nor divisible into units.¹¹⁶

At the age of forty-seven, Cassirer began to present a transcendental logic that did not resemble Newtonian physics (as did Kant’s) nor formal logic (as did neo-Kantian updates to transcendental logic). In the words of a Cassirer scholar:

Cassirer’s substitution of the symbol for reason... allowed him to acknowledge a certain plurality within the unity of civilization. For the orthodox Kantian, there can be no such thing as conflict between the various departments of culture; all form part of a coherent structure governed by reason... Such unity of origin is perfectly compatible with a plurality of outcome.”¹¹⁷

After breaking with Cohen’s view of logical objectivity, Cassirer began his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The central thesis was that all forms of understanding—artistic, mythic, religious (the difference between myth and religion matters), and scientific—are structured primarily by symbolic forms. Meaningful information comes in a range of intelligible forms, but they all derive from the one mediating *a priori* principle of the symbolic form. The radical claim that mythic expressions are *as* symbolically mediated as propositional statements did not only challenge formal logic’s claim to a singular form of expression, it also challenged phenomenology’s claim to the possibility of a “transcendental ego” from which to begin a purely subjective inquiry:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., II 93.

¹¹⁷ Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 49–50.

For a glance at the development of the various symbolic forms shows us that their essential achievement is not that they copy the outward world in the inward or that they simply project a finished inner world outward, but rather that the two factors of 'inside' and 'outside,' of 'I' and 'reality' are determined and delimited from one another only in these symbolic forms and through their mediation.¹¹⁸

This quote is from the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* subtitled *Mythic Thought*, wherein Cassirer shows myth's epistemological common ground with rationality. He explains that of all the symbolic forms, myth is the most expressive of perceptions in their immediacy, but that this immediacy bears with it an anarchic tendency (myth need not recognize subjects as individually responsible) and that religion emerges in order to regulate social life through more restrictive systems of understanding.

Myth regulates sensation, while religion *primarily* regulates social behavior. Thus myth's scope is broader, but it also does not need to be as precisely specified in language. While religion seeks to fix its dogma, myth refines its function with oral and textual variation. "For original mythic feeling the meaning and power of the sacred are limited to no particular sphere of reality or value. This meaning is rather imprinted upon the immediate concrete totality of existence and events."¹¹⁹ But myth rarely ever appears "original" or "pure." While the Bible is taken to describe a concrete historical reality that binds its adherents to a specific lifestyle, mythic elements can be found there: "For

¹¹⁸ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 155–156.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75 Vol. II.

[Herder], the narrative of the creation [in Genesis] is nothing other than the story of the birth of light—as experienced by the mythical spirit in the rising of every new day, the coming of every new dawn. This dawning is for mythical vision no mere process; it is a true and original creation...¹²⁰

Although this philosophy gives Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* the same cognitive basis as rain dance rituals, Cassirer still prefers science to myth when a conflict emerges between them. His late work, *The Myth of the State*, would argue that only by acknowledging the superior power of myth to explain emotional experience—and the ultimate inadequacy of science to explain our sense that others live and express lived experience to us—can we be aware of the undying appeal and necessity of the irrational as well as its looming threat to cultural institutions and to human welfare.

Blumenberg agrees with Cassirer that myth structures experience in a manner complete unto itself yet distinct in approach from both science and religion, and that it is ineradicable. Blumenberg only doubts Cassirer's idea that "pure" myths need be primeval in their historical age.

The subject of Hesiod's *Theogony* is not the primeval times but rather the quick passage through them and the overcoming of them in the later age of consolidation. Consequently it is questionable whether Ernst Cassirer is right when he says that the true character of the mythical 'is first revealed when it appears as the being of origins:' 'All the sanctity of mythical being goes back ultimately to the sanctity of the origin. It does not adhere immediately to the content of the given but to its coming into being...'

¹²⁰ Ibid., 97 Vol. II.

The question is whether this ‘original’ quality is not identical with the contents and forms having passed the test of selection, that is, with durability over against time’s processes of attrition. Thus it is not as a result of the fact that a certain content is ‘thrust back into temporal distance’ and ‘situated in the depths of the past’ that it gets its mythical quality, but rather as a result of its stability through time.¹²¹

A myth is not defined by its originality nor its power to explain the origins of being, according to Blumenberg; for a myth to exist, its content need only go unquestioned over time. The products of theory emerge from questioning and will thus always be more vulnerable to rejection than myths, which invite variation, but persist obstinately, since they have only appear to us at this point in history after having already long proven their staying power. In the next section, we will see how Blumenberg treats absolute metaphors as short mythemes of this type that have survived the highly eliminative “selection process” of conceptual language.

Blumenberg’s 1974 Kuno-Fischer-Prize acceptance speech “Ernst Cassirer in memoriam” explains how Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic contributes to the relief from absolutes: “To live with the impact of space-time-contingency does not only mean to abstain from taking the present and its near future as a standard to measure by, it also means being irrevocably conscious of the unbearability of the present.”¹²² The present is unbearable in the sense that we must win distance

¹²¹ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 160.

¹²² Blumenberg, “Ernst Cassirers gedenkend,” 171–172.

not just from delusions we perceive in our historical moment, but from the symbolically-mediated *realism* that allows us to make any sense of it.

What humans want: Arnold Gehlen

Gehlen, like Heidegger, was influential during the Third Reich and afterwards but lost his university position during post-War de-Nazification. Gehlen was a philosophical anthropologist, which means that he took up the question “what is human?” the general question that Kant had posed as a way of adumbrating the subsidiary questions that guide Kant’s anthropological works: What can we know? What may we hope for? And what should we do? Many race theorists also tried to pass as “anthropologists” after the war, so Gehlen stood under a double suspicion: his theory seemed to support the fallen racist, fascist, imperial regime, and he was a German national at an Austrian university, the University of Vienna, at a time when German nationals were being ousted from professorial positions in Austria.¹²³

In his most comprehensive work *Man, His Nature and Place in the World* Gehlen argues that humans are “creatures of deficiency” (*Mängelwesen*) due to our lack of true instincts, our long infancies compared to other mammals, and our bodies’ feebleness compared to those of other apes. He claims that institutions

¹²³ My source for biographical information on Gehlen is Karl-Siegbert Rehberg’s introduction to Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and Place in the World*.

compensate for these deficiencies and “relieve” (*entlasten*) humans of the need to respond to our sensory environment: “This possibility of relieving behavior is specifically human.”¹²⁴ Without institutions, we would still seek relief, he speculates, but in fruitless ways: “If institutions are destroyed, then we would immediately witness a great degree of unpredicatability and uncertainty, a lack of protection in behavior against stimulation that could then properly be characterized as instinctive.”¹²⁵

For the price of naturalizing consciousness and restricting it to humanity, Gehlen achieved an affective phenomenology that integrated evolutionary theory instead of avoiding it. Husserl was unwilling to pay either price, and thus produced a purer phenomenology but one that seemed irreconcilable with both the pathos of human history and the authoritative realism of natural history. Heidegger restricted phenomenology to humanity and systematically described our enmeshment in history, but only vaguely and oppositionally described the human position in the natural world. In that way, Gehlen’s system is a genius-stroke of reconciliation, but we can see we have strayed from the pure study of consciousness. Philosophical anthropology cannot avoid “anthropodicy,” to use Blumenberg’s term for the justification of humanity’s creation of their own world. Gehlen cannot claim to describe humanity from a neutral position the way Husserl

¹²⁴ Ibid., 21–22.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 71.

could claim to describe consciousness. To name “deficiency” as the basis for human achievements is akin to negative theology: what seems empty and impotent from our empirical perspective turns out to be the mystical source of the power most worthy of reverence, whether that is God or humanity.

Philosophical anthropology interested Blumenberg in general. Much of the reception of Blumenberg has been in this vein.¹²⁶ Gehlen is probably the closest to Blumenberg in sentiment.¹²⁷ Gehlen’s predecessor Max Scheler emphasized the remarkable ability of the human to *imagine* a “world” (*Welt*), rather than merely *respond* to an “environment” (*Umwelt*). But Gehlen’s theory presents the products of human imagination as mere adaptations, adaptive responses made by every individual in an intolerable environment. The uniquely human capacity to pursue relief has less to do with superior human intelligence than with a social structure that reinforces habits to compensate for our lack of instinctive responses. Gehlen’s theory appears to Blumenberg to posit another absolute in human reliance on institutions for survival. “With Gehlen’s absolutism of ‘institutions,’ anthropology returns in a sense to his origin in the model of [Hobbes’] state-

¹²⁶ See for instance, a recent monograph dedicated to this aspect of Blumenberg’s thought: *Hans Blumenberg*.

¹²⁷ A possible exception is Paul Alsberg whose theory that the human tendency to “turn off the body” (*Körperausschaltung*) is what led to human uniqueness. Alsberg, *Das Menschheitsrätsel*, 103. This would indeed be a great example of the “distance seeking” behavior that Blumenberg finds pervading the human experience. Angus Nicholls mentioned to me that Alsberg’s hypothetical mode is more akin to Blumenberg’s skepticism than Gehlen’s assertiveness is.

contract. The discussion about this anthropology today has still not explained whether that fatal return is unavoidably binding.”¹²⁸

Blumenberg rarely weighs in on political disputes, but he clearly finds Gehlen’s view, that “institutions” are absolutely necessary, to be one of those absolutisms from which a properly Skeptical philosophy must abstain—in Gehlen’s case, “the absolutism of institutions” all too easily lends itself to justifying Nazi-fascist populism. Despite the fact that it is in the age of “scientific institutions” that the derisive attitude towards theory has ceased,¹²⁹ institutions themselves can take on “absolute” scale and spawn new fears: the fear of an inadequate, unmerciful, or absconded God plagues religion, while the fear of human insignificance plagues the scientifically objectified world. Blumenberg finds relief in skeptical distancing from whatever myth or theory gets too successfully institutionalized and claims too much realism for itself.

Reading the horizons of the past: the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* Group

In 1963, Hans-Robert Jauss, developer of reception theory along with Wolfgang Iser and others, founded the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* research group together with Hans Blumenberg. Jauss had been a member of the Waffen-SS from 1939 until the end of the war, but expressed sharp regret once he realized the full

¹²⁸ Blumenberg, “Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik,” 115.

¹²⁹ Blumenberg, *Das Lachen Der Thrakerin*, 9.

horror of what had been complicit in. He saw his work with the Poetik und Hermeneutik group as a gesture of opposition to hierarchy within academia:

Two attitudes may result from such a feeling of unavoidable national shame, which Jaspers discusses, even among those who have committed no criminal act: either you no longer do anything but mope and sometimes even delight in virtuous indignation or gratuitous self-accusation because it makes no sense to set yourself up as a judge, even a judge of yourself; or you strive to transform the guilt and shame by a collective action that allows you to leave a deadly past behind you. As for myself, I have endeavored to reform the outdated structure of the German university. In creating the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* group in 1963, with Hans Blumenberg and a few other friends, I embarked on an intellectual project that opposed any tendency to return to the idea of nationality or race as meaningful vectors in the human sciences.¹³⁰

As I mentioned in the biographical sketch, Blumenberg was the leading philosopher in the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* symposia and publications for over a decade. The influence of close contact with the founders of reception theory on Blumenberg's work cannot be underestimated. The group's lengthy, detailed symposium publications reveal great differences—despite their common interest in understanding the changing horizons of expectations over the course of history. Titles of their publications include *Imitation and Illusion* (1963), *The No Longer Beautiful Arts: Border-phenomena of the Aesthetic* (1968), *Terror and Play: Problems of Myth Reception* (1971), *the Comic* (1974), and last of all: *Contingency* (1994). The group has also featured prominent philosophers such as English literature scholars Anselm Haverkamp and Wolfgang Iser, philosophers

¹³⁰ From an interview reproduced in Olender, *Race and Erudition*, 144.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Odo Marquard, and Jacob Taubes, sociologist Siegfried Krakauer, the Germanist Peter Szondi, along with Romanists, Slavists, and theologians. They put forwards ambitious theses about literature, aesthetics, anthropology, history, and phenomenology, rooted in the idea that we can reconstruct past horizons of expectations through research on particular texts' reception history along with self-reflective re-reading, but that we can never share others' horizons of expectations. Their most glaring failure was that they did not train young scholars to take over the program, and since 1994 the group has no longer convened.

Jauss' insistence that historical perspectives are irreconcilable with the present perspective differentiates their hermeneutics from Hans-Georg Gadamer's better known "philosophical hermeneutics."¹³¹ Gadamer described interpretation as a circular movement in which the experience of perplexity in understanding a text reveals the reader's prejudices. Exposing these prejudices sometimes dissolves them, while other times it reinforces them as the basis of the tradition that makes texts intelligible in the first place. However, no standard exists for determining which prejudices are inalienable. Jauss denies that we should expect hermeneutics to change us. It is a practice of understanding the source of misunderstanding, not of mitigating it. Instead of the circle, he proposed that we

¹³¹ The difference between Jauss and Gadamer is most clear in the former's interest in differentiating historical "horizons" [Horizontabhebung] and the latter's interest in reconciling them into a fusion of horizons [Horizontverschmelzung]. For a more in-depth comparison of these two thinkers, see Rush, *The Reception of Doctrine*, 111.

engage in a threefold re-reading process that makes the text progressively more and more clearly alien. We begin by trying to understand a text, then we interpret its difference from our expectations, and finally we apply our sense of difference to the task of reconstructing the horizon of expectations of past readers. The hermeneutic movement is entirely centrifugal, and its effects on us as readers can never be brought under our control.

It is this desire to keep the past at a distance as an object of knowledge that we find repeated in Blumenberg's work. A short quotation from the 1974 *Poetics and Hermeneutics* proceedings shows an obvious case where Blumenberg integrates reception theory into his work:

If Plato puts the fable in Socrates' mouth and makes the proto-philosopher into its hero, then the laughter of the maid gets a horrific resonance. For we must, again, following the foundations of a research group for *Poetics and Hermeneutics*, attend to the readers of the dialogue, in which Socrates speaks. They know that this Socrates is already dead and that he came to his end not through the folly of laughter, but through a more severe discipline of folly.¹³²

Here Blumenberg explains how we know that Plato's audience would never confuse Socrates with the maid: because Socrates did not get the last laugh during his own life. Analysis based on readers' historically-contingent expectations is a core part of Blumenberg's interpretive method.

In turn, Jauss unambiguously declares Blumenberg's methods to be transferable to literary reception history:

¹³² Preisendanz and Warning, *Das Komische*, 438.

One can therefore seek to erect for literary history an analogy to that which Hans Blumenberg has postulated for the history of philosophy, elucidating it through examples of the change in periods and, in particular, the successional relationship of Christian theology and philosophy, and grounding it in his historical logic of question and answer: a ‘formal system of the explanation of the world... within which structure the reshufflings can be localized which make up the process-like character of history up to the radicality of period-changes.’”¹³³

Blumenberg’s books tend to outline reception histories in order to demonstrate the prevalence of absolute metaphors. Sometimes he does not need to present a reception event in order to show that an absolute metaphor is recurring. That is because he does not simply derive his method from that of reception theory. He also has his own method for interpreting the prevalence of absolute metaphors.

The new hermeneutics of metaphor

Blumenberg reads the history of philosophy looking for metaphors that represent fundamentally unrepresentable, or in his word, “nonconceptual,” matters. An illustrative image can work as a metaphor for a long time before it is taken for truth in an often unannounced moment of concession to imagery in place of explanation. For instance, Blumenberg claims that Plato’s “background metaphor” of the cave was not “fully taken” as an “absolute metaphor” until the Neo-Platonists. For Plato, cave-like conditions explain the source of the ignorance of sophists. For Porphyry, the cave explains the state of all who exist in a world

¹³³ Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 38.

cut off from the transcendent.¹³⁴ An “absolute metaphor” can be an achievement or an obfuscation depending on the context, and Blumenberg is more generous towards older thinkers than towards recent ones. He praises a piece of proto-metaphorology, for instance, in Heraclitus’ famous aphorism that a person cannot step into the same river twice. “It is an absolute metaphor and as such is one of philosophy’s earliest successes: that no one can grasp reality, because it is not what appears when it appears to us.”¹³⁵

What is an “absolute metaphor?” And when does an image, such as Porphyry’s cave or Heraclitus’ river, function as an “absolute metaphor?” The absolute metaphors that interested Blumenberg have two identifying criteria and one hypothetical function. Absolute metaphors are: (1) *recurrent* images or anecdotes (2) used by thinkers with *different philosophical commitments*.¹³⁶ These metaphors might (hypothetically) function (3) to mark the *perplexed* incapacity to conceive of a thought, idea, or topic within the logic of conceptual language. The controversial step is claim (3), and indeed that is the one Blumenberg theorizes and re-theorizes. For example, in his earliest exposition of metaphorology, he writes of their relation to unconscious existential intuitions:

¹³⁴ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 79.

¹³⁵ Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, 12.

¹³⁶ The inadequacy of such a criterion strikes, for instance, historian Alexander Demandt who notes that Kant, Marx, and Hitler all relied on nature imagery to describe world history: “...but what does this bespeak? Linguistic indices only rise to the level of symptoms in a totalizing theory, as shall not be achieved here and cannot be achieved. Within such a theory, these indices would simply never be lacking” Demandt, *Metaphern für Geschichte*, 435.

Absolute metaphors “answer” the supposedly naïve, in principle unanswerable questions whose relevance lies quite simply in the fact that they cannot be brushed aside, since we do not pose them ourselves but find them already posed in the ground of our existence.... Metaphor, as the theme of a metaphorology in the sense that will concern us here, is an essentially *historical* object whose testimonial value presupposes that the witnesses did not possess, and could not have possessed, a metaphorology of their own.¹³⁷

They are historical non-answers to unanswerable questions, but their phenomenological value was less emphasized in his 1960 treatise than was the practice of detecting them—and the insistence that they will always recur. A decade later, he would claim that absolute metaphors made experience within the lifeworld intelligible from the perspective of the metaphorologist who—like Husserl—has bracketed the lifeworld for the sake of theorizing it:

In light of its objects, metaphorology may not be taken for a precursor or substructure to concept formation, rather it shows the retraceability (*Rückführbarkeit*) of the constructive instrumentarium in the backwards direction from the lifeworldly constitution, from which it does not stem, but which it is manifoldly referred back to. The lifeworld does not deliver the material that it works, rather it has its own differentiated resistance structure against such reworking, also against the recognition of what gets accomplished in it.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 14.

¹³⁸ Blumenberg, “Beobachtungen an Metaphern,” 164.

Here Blumenberg updates Husserl's idea that the lifeworld is escapable: it is conceptually irreconcilable with the concepts of theory, but it still haunts theoretical activity through absolute metaphors.¹³⁹

Over Blumenberg's career, he would examine a diverse array of the metaphors that he found relevant to philosophers' understanding of their world. Leaving the cave, losing one's footing while stargazing, and embarking on a dangerous sea voyage belong to the treasury of anecdotes that emerge in foundational Greek and Roman philosophical works and become proving grounds over the millennia in the on-going rivalry to describe reality correctly. While the anecdotes listed above dramatize humanity's relationships to persistent ideas that refuse satisfactory definition (Truth, God, The Lifeworld, and Fate respectively), simpler metaphors tend to go unnoticed as figurative language and get taken literally. Light, the force of truth, and "being-there" (*Dasein*) got taken literally, according to Blumenberg, when they served as metaphors at certain points in the history of philosophy for absolute knowledge, Providence, and existential human nature respectively. Such simple metaphors are especially sensitive to technological or cultural changes that radically change a metaphor's valence. For instance, divine "light" symbolized absolute knowledge for millennia, but since the advent of artificial lighting, nature has gone "dark," and light signals an object

¹³⁹ For an insightful elaboration of the development that occurred between Blumenberg's first and second treatises on metaphorology, see Müller-Sievers, "Kyklophorology: Hans Blumenberg and the Intellectual History of Technics."

or area marked by humans for human attention.¹⁴⁰ The familiarity of images lends an air of plausibility to philosophical statements about topics too abstruse for anyone to claim single-handed legitimate authority over. Metaphors and anecdotes help us to grapple with the world well enough to get by in it—a task that seems too humble for most philosophers, but which they still accidentally contribute to when their prose rehearses these new and old “absolute metaphors,” which console us with their vividness wherever certainty remains ever beyond reach.

Blumenberg’s 1960 entry in the *Archive for Conceptual History*, ambitiously titled *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*,¹⁴¹ takes on potential objections to his proposition that philosophical language relies on this previously unrecognized class of metaphors that defy conceptual decipherment. One objection might be: why has no one noticed this before? His answer is that philosophers have been too busy planning how to eliminate metaphoric imprecisions to notice the inextricable role of absolute metaphors. The evidence for this requires a glance across the history of philosophy:

Let us try for a moment to imagine that modern philosophy had proceeded according to the methodological program set out for it by Descartes, and had arrived at that definitive conclusion that Descartes himself believed to be eminently attainable. This “end state” of philosophy, which historical experience permits us to entertain only as a hypothesis, would be defined

¹⁴⁰ Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation.”

¹⁴¹ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, n.

according to the criteria set out in the four rules of the Cartesian “Discours de la méthode,” in particular by the clarity and distinctness that the first rule requires of all matters apprehended in judgments. To this ideal of full objectification would correspond the perfection of a terminology designed to capture the presence and precision of the matter at hand in well-defined concepts.¹⁴²

René Descartes promised that concepts would account for everything that can be known or intuited in just a matter of time. The goal of purging philosophy of subjective elements such as metaphors had itself been nearly purged by the rise of hermeneutics in Blumenberg’s West Germany. But over the ensuing pages Blumenberg asks whether a historicist philosophy (as the *Archive for Conceptual History* claimed to undertake) can avoid secretly harboring Descartes’ absurd goal—of fixing conceptual clarity for all time—unless it ceases to examine only *concepts* and turns to a study of *metaphors’* influence on concept formation.

The “end state” of philosophy, as Descartes projects it in *Discourse on Method*, is attainable through the pursuit of “clarity and distinctness.” Descartes’ goal of final clarity specifically demotes the history of philosophical concepts’ use to provisional value. That would deny hermeneutics any future in seeking philosophical meaning in historical or rhetorical interpretation. An end state for philosophy would treat concepts without historically contingent contexts; an ahistorical concept promises an end to the search for revealing interpretations. This final state of clarity about questions, such as the nature and function of

¹⁴² Ibid., 1.

thought in the universe, would entail a purifying of language—whereby metaphors would prove to have been dispensable place-holders.

In its terminal state, philosophical language would be purely and strictly ‘conceptual:’ everything *can* be defined, thus everything *must* be defined; there is no longer anything logically ‘provisional,’ just as there is no longer a *morale provisoire*.... From this vantage point, all forms and elements of *figurative* speech, in the broadest sense of the term, prove to have been makeshifts destined to be superseded by logic.... [T]hey were an expression of the same *précipitation*, regarding which Descartes, likewise in the first rule, states that it ought carefully to be avoided.¹⁴³

After successfully following Descartes’ rules, much of what has passed for truth or for philosophy should give way to the firmer truth of clear and distinct ideas, which will distinguish themselves sharply from “all forms and elements of *figurative (übertragener)* speech, in the broadest sense of the term.” The graspable must be grasped out of duty, and the ineffable is “destined to be superseded by logic” and yields only “transitional significance” for interpretation. Figurative language, at best, expresses “*précipitation*,” a *desire* to know without the necessary *rigor* of logical understanding.

Ancient philosophy had been more tolerant of metaphor, because it had not seen a threat to rigor in figurative language. The early modern discovery of metaphor as a hindrance to certainty, however, was a missed opportunity to discover metaphor’s special role at the absolute limit of certainty when it stands in for philosophical perplexity:

¹⁴³ Ibid., 1–2.

Whether the rhetorical artifice of ‘translatio’ (metaphor) could do anything more than arouse pleasure in the truth to be communicated remained undiscussed [in pre-modern times]. Of course, the fact that this question was not asked and could not be asked does not mean that metaphors had not in fact always already yielded such a surplus of expressive achievement. . . . Our analysis must be concerned with detecting the logical ‘perplexity’ (*Verlegenheit*) for which metaphor steps in, and an aporia of this kind is most conspicuously evident precisely where it is not ‘admitted’ (*zugelassen*) by theory in the first place.¹⁴⁴

How can a psychological state from the past, especially an unstated “perplexity” ever be detected?¹⁴⁵ Theoretists must *admit* (in the sense of “allow”) expressions of aporetic perplexity into their texts, even if their very perplexity requires theorists *not to admit* (in the sense of “confess”) that they are turning to metaphor to mark their perplexity and thus to go on theorizing. This outlook on the function of metaphor in philosophy requires Blumenberg to part ways with those who see metaphors as dispensable “*left-overs (Restbestände)*, rudiments on the path from mythos to logos” and hypothetically consider them “*foundational elements (Grundbestände)* of philosophical language.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁵ Again twenty years later in “Prospect for a Theory of Non-conceptuality” (“Prospect”), “*Verlegenheit*” describes this problem for philosophy and gets translated by Steven Rendall as “difficulties.” Alex Fliethmann understands the German word to refer to a possibly insurmountable psychological problem arising from the affective experience of embarrassment at the inadequacy of speech, and not from a mere technical difficulty (and thus he prefers “perplexity” or “embarrassment” to “difficulties” as a translation). Fliethmann, “Blumen Berg,” 63–64.

¹⁴⁶ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

In Immanuel Kant's critical work, Blumenberg finds a prefiguration of his notion that metaphors orient conceptual thought.¹⁴⁷ In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains how concepts of the understanding (*Verstandesbegriffe*, or simply *Begriffe*), such as number, magnitude and causality, organize our perceptions of physical objects, and thus facilitate all knowledge about the physical world. These concepts give shape to reality through their defining *schemes*; experientially derived concepts, such as cow, hand, and toothbrush, are as useful in organizing perceptions, though the latter are defined by perceiving *examples* and learning ("this is a cow; that is a hand; etc"). Ideas (*Vernunftbegriffe*, or *Ideen*) of pure reason deal with timeless universals; in contrast to concepts of the understanding, these ideas allow for neither adequate examples nor comprehensive schemes. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant asserts that only symbols (*Symbole*) transfer these perplexing objects into objects of intuition. Blumenberg is pleased that Kant also finds imprecise yet illuminating

¹⁴⁷ Blumenberg's attitude towards Kant's epistemology is one of such admiration that he takes up neglected aspects of Kant's thought other than the concept of the symbol that oriented his metaphorology. Already in his habilitation he wrote: "The service that Kant had accomplished to salvage reality's necessary structure should be carried over in the same fashion to history." Blumenberg, "Die ontologische Distanz," 4. Unlike most neo-Kantians, it was not primarily Kant's insistence on a transcendental idealist view, but Kant's *methods* that Blumenberg found worthy of emulation:

Almost no one reads up to the theory of method [in the *Critique of Pure Reason*], and whoever does so, has such great achievements behind them, that they now have hardly anything left over for the methodical part and tend to underestimate it. I cannot remember having heard or read that a seminar on the transcendental theory of method has ever been held. Precisely that would have to be extremely desirable. (Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 47.)

“symbols” necessary to describe matters whose existence we are hardwired to believe; we need beauty as a symbol of “moral goodness” for instance. In §59 of *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant suggests that a hand-cranked grinder provides an image for the strangely human yet dehumanizing mechanics of despotic governments (whereas the metaphor of the *body politic* fits for more humane states). Perhaps most importantly, Kant precedes Blumenberg in demanding that further study of this phenomenon is needed. Blumenberg quotes Kant’s plea for research on these functional symbols: “This business has as yet been little discussed, much as it deserves a deeper investigation.”¹⁴⁸

A decade after Blumenberg published *Paradigms*, Joachim Ritter claims in the introduction to the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*, the planned outcome of the *Archive for Conceptual History*, that the publishers of the dictionary had to abstain from entries on major metaphors in the history of concepts, not in order to reinforce the view that concepts are foundational and metaphors are superfluous adornments, but rather:

The reason for this abstention was the insight that the dictionary would be overwhelmed by metaphors in the current state of research and that it is better to leave them out of this realm, to which one cannot easily be just, than to satisfy oneself with inadequate improvisation there.¹⁴⁹

The implication of this sentence is that, in 1971, metaphorology was still something more anticipated than known, but that metaphor studies had already

¹⁴⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ritter and Eisler, *Historisches Wörterbuch Der Philosophie.*, ix.

shown their significance for the history of concepts. Although Blumenberg's work has recently inspired a *Dictionary of Philosophical Metaphors*, cataloging does not seem to be its profoundest legacy.¹⁵⁰ Blumenberg's work and its reception shows that metaphorology tends against deciphering and categorizing the metaphors it interprets; what it offers instead of a code is a powerful technique for theorizing the gap between philosophical curiosity and philosophical language.

Metaphorology Today

Many well-known recent and contemporary philosophers have articulated theories about how conceptual thought relies on irrational figurative language. Even before the quasi-empirical discourse on metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson,¹⁵¹ post-Heideggerian philosophers Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty made cases for metaphor as an *éminence gris* in the history of philosophy. Blumenberg's historical specificity differentiates his work from that of Lakoff and Johnson, who—as some anthropologists have also noted—are all but blind to historical or cultural differences in their claim that metaphors guide conceptual thought.¹⁵² Rorty, on the other hand, sounds very much in 1979 like Blumenberg already did

¹⁵⁰ Konersmann, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern*.

¹⁵¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*.

¹⁵² The anthropologists Geeraerts and Grondelaers voice their opposition to Lakoff and Johnson's overly universal theories. Their arguments are neatly summarized in Taverniers, *Metaphor and Metaphorology*, 146–152.

in 1960. Blumenberg announces that his metaphorology “aims to show with what ‘courage’ the mind preempts itself in its images, and how its history is projected in the courage of its conjectures.”¹⁵³ Rorty claims: “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.”¹⁵⁴ Like Blumenberg in the essay “Prospect for a Theory of Non-conceptuality” from the same year as Rorty’s book, Rorty sees the problem as a matter of taking metaphors literally, in particularly the metaphor of the mind as mirror of nature. While Rorty’s book dubs Heidegger the one who “lets us see the beginning of the Cartesian imagery in the Greeks and the metamorphoses of this imagery during the last three centuries,” Blumenberg’s essay sees Heidegger’s existentialism as depriving metaphor of the privilege of orienting our understanding of reality while Heidegger takes his own metaphor for humanity literally (“Dasein,” “being *there*,” as opposed to *here*, since the essence of the human is projection outward and forward into the future); thus a new philosophical absolutism is grounded on a metaphor taken literally.

Blumenberg’s idiom is abstemious about metaphors whereas Heidegger’s philosophy is littered with imagery (in *Being and Time*: thrownness and falling, later: the logging path and the clearing). Heidegger also writes in a peremptory, “pseudo-rational” tone (as the neo-Kantian Otto Neurath dismissively called

¹⁵³ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 12.

Heidegger's rhetoric) about these word choices as if they were not functioning by means of historical mediation (as Blumenberg claims that absolute metaphors *do* function); rather, Heidegger presents his verbal images as the only imaginable sites of existential understanding. This masks the rhetorical effect of their religious and pastoral connotations, through which Heidegger implicitly rejects all forms of worldly mediation, especially technology. In our century, where the Web has eclipsed the Bomb as the emblem of technology, we can already begin to see the partiality of Heidegger's metaphors and why earlier twentieth-century thinkers could not resist taking them literally.¹⁵⁵ Studying the metaphors that get taken literally always requires studying historical circumstances, since historical conditions obscure metaphors from their users just as historical change makes them visible to later readers.

Derrida follows Heidegger's lead in developing a mostly negative and skeptical philosophy through an idiosyncratic set of metaphors (*supplément*, *différance*, slippage), but instead of continuing Heidegger's "destruction" of the metaphysical tradition (which supposedly relied on the seduction of metaphor),

¹⁵⁵ With the internet, technology has become such an instrument of access to community, information, and resources that it is hard to think of it as *primarily* a set of oppressive instruments of technocratic control or political mayhem. Like older technology, the internet could be understood as "challenging-[us]-forth" into a world mediated by fluency with its codes, so that it distorts the relationship between the resistant, material earth and the human, spiritualized world, as Heidegger complained in his monitory essay "The Question concerning Technology." Yet that problem may not concern us for its sound philosophical premises as much as for its rhetorical pull on historical, mid-century fears about war and industrial technology as world-destructive (not to say that they may not prove to be so after all).

Derrida submits the old metaphors trusted by philosophers to his “deconstruction.” While Derrida’s work is compatible with Blumenberg’s when the former deconstructs metaphors’ function by finding them overdetermined and unable to arrive at the meanings they propose, he never attempts what Blumenberg does: interpreting the different concepts of reality implied when a metaphor is used metaphorically and when it is taken literally, interpreting the staying power of certain metaphors as metaphors and the tendency of others to get taken literally. Derrida’s own statements imply that metaphor is too enmeshed in the rest of philosophical language for its particular historical functions to be discerned:

...metaphor remains in all its essential features a classical element of philosophy, a metaphysical concept. It is therefore involved in the field which it would be the purpose of a general “metaphorology” to subsume. It is the product of a network of elements of philosophy which themselves correspond to tropes and figures and are coeval with them or systematically bound to them.¹⁵⁶

Indeed, a metaphorology may never achieve the degree of certainty that Derrida assumes that it must seek.¹⁵⁷ Blumenberg is satisfied, however, to approach individual texts inductively, as paradigms only of a metaphorology, which looks for evidence in *one* moment in history at a time rather than claiming to find *the*

¹⁵⁶ Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” 18.

¹⁵⁷ Recent scholarship has noted that Derrida and Ricoeur did little to address one another’s claims in their dispute on the function of metaphor during the 1970s. Pirovolakis, *Reading Derrida and Ricoeur: Improbable Encounters Between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics*, 2. Ricoeur’s theory is more element to Blumenberg’s, as I explain in chapter three. The same case is made in Lawlor, *Imagination and Chance*, 39.

only function of metaphor across the history of philosophy. But while French theory generally operates inductively, offering examples for ground-breaking theories, Blumenberg approaches individual texts deductively as paradigmatic only of *a* moment in history rather than decisively rethinking *the* theory of history. Blumenberg's method of reading individual texts in the context of reception histories may after all be more possible today than ever before. In the internet-age, where anyone with the will to do so (and university database subscriptions) can archive and collect historical materials based on linguistic patterns, the task of metaphorology is not limited to those who dedicate their whole lifetime to the collection phase of metaphor studies.

Chapter 2: Translation and the Suppression of Sources

Metaphor and translation have something important in common: they move the reader outside of the logic of the author's sentences. But they accomplish this through different appeals to the reader. Metaphor promises a forward movement to newly invented meanings, even when the image or thought that it evokes uncannily recalls old concepts or calls on older meanings of words.¹⁵⁸ The movement of translation, by contrast, is markedly retrograde: our imagination is carried back to the source. The translation of poetry greatly contributes to its mystique of inexpressibility, but in a discourse of full disclosure such as philosophy, we often regret the feeling that translations are inadequate and that we would have to retrogress to the source for deeper comprehension.

But translation is not the only barrier to adequate comprehension for readers of philosophy. There are other translation-like effects that pervade philosophical writing. References to other sources tell the reader that this thought is taking place against a background of other writing, which may or may not be required for adequate understanding of the text at hand. Like metaphors that blend in and go unnoticed, we may not always notice such translation-like intertextual

¹⁵⁸ The potential for etymologies to become reanimated as metaphor is what Ricoeur calls "de-lexicalization," which illustrates "the baffling fecundity of dead metaphor." Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 292.

references when they are not cited. It is not unusual for German philosophers to allude to texts only rather than to cite them as sources. Blumenberg uses this conventional restraint to striking rhetorical effect: he rarely cites the theorists, scholars, or translators who have influenced his work, and thus implicitly disavows his position in the German philosophical tradition.

Core arguments in Blumenberg's work imply that he has a motivation for suppressing his sources; he considers philosophy to have erred in its obsession with positing accurate arguments and counter-arguments.¹⁵⁹ He proposes that most texts in the history of philosophy are so invested in grounding claims in the highest possible form of truth that *they suppress the skeptical tradition*—whose hallmark is abstaining from making truth claims and which instead concerns itself with nothing less than a practically valid, anthropological self-knowledge:

But anthropology, whose metaphysical suppression I have briefly tried to localize, became especially urgent in the subterranean tradition of skepticism, which only occasionally flickers up here and there. Its urgency was evident whenever the eternal truths had to be evaluated by the measure of the nearest reliable assumptions and the human being no longer looked like a disguised variant of pure spirit.¹⁶⁰

This passage follows his brief history of suppressed skepticism, which begins by noting that Plato's anti-skeptical theory of forms has always aroused opposition, although "without [Plato's] reception—overzealous here and deprecating there—

¹⁵⁹ Here we can think of Rorty's case for a more literary form of philosophy when he argues that, for "ironist" thinkers, the unit of persuasion is the *vocabulary* not the *proposition*. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 77.

¹⁶⁰ Blumenberg, "Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik," 109.

the European tradition cannot be thought.”¹⁶¹ Already Aristotle showed tolerance for provisional consensus theories of truth, but “with a teleological argument always in the background.” Finally, after “the Skeptics’ destruction of [Aristotle’s] reservations” and their elevation of the question of human happiness over truth, anthropological questions have occupied skeptical minds, including modern skeptics Montaigne and Kant. Skeptics, according to Blumenberg, question both the grounds *and* the practical value of positive claims; in this tradition, philosophy’s purpose is to instruct humanity on how to live with an irrepressible need for meaning and an ever unfulfilled desire for truth.

Through the above detour of reading Blumenberg’s case for a philosophy committed to skepticism, anthropology, and rhetoric (as opposed to metaphysics, ontology, and transcendental logic), we can answer the question of why Blumenberg suppresses his sources. He is less interested in positioning himself in debates than in defining rhetoric as the most important, most neglected intellectual concern in history. In the spirit of Blumenberg’s turn to rhetoric, this chapter will analyze the rhetorical moves by which Blumenberg makes his case. Since Blumenberg’s rhetoric suppresses the emerging debates in his lifetime and the ones inherited from the recent past, the figure of translation—as an often invisible retrograde movement back to sources—will be especially useful. Like any philosopher in a recognizable “tradition,” Blumenberg is walking the

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 106–109.

tightrope of *translatio studii*: receiving the works of masters and philosophizing anew for himself. Rhetorical peculiarity merits attention as a philosophical practice that aligns with a therapeutic problem perhaps even more than with a critical one: his de-emphasis on claims could align with the pursuit of ἀταραξία, the tranquility promised by Classical Skepticism.¹⁶²

Micro-translations in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*

Hans Blumenberg's *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* has a subtext of unstated claims so crucial to a full understanding of it that a serious attempt at translation must take the form of a critical edition. Yet even the critical introduction and annotations I provide cannot suffice to explain the mechanics and effects of the complex play of references that I encountered in the source text. As the book's translator, I am inclined to see these references themselves as inconspicuous micro-translations. Borrowed words, allusions, and uncited translations can easily pass as original due to the lack of context around them. Micro-translations become especially inconspicuous in translated texts since the very act of translation emphasizes the originality of the source text.

The main task of this chapter is to uncover Blumenberg's dialogue with contemporaries as it occurs implicitly in borrowed phrases, unannounced

¹⁶² His prose deserves this attention as a stylistic resistance to idealism even if disguising his influences is not as memorable an effect as the ornamental effects that we associate with the French twentieth-century theory's performance of rhetoric (Barthes' literary pathos, Derrida's irreverent puns, Deleuze's unpredictable nomenclature, etc.).

references, and in paraphrases of others' ideas. Such micro-translations may or may not derive from foreign texts, but they are at least foreign in the phenomenological sense in that they originate in others' consciousness.

Blumenberg incorporates these so seamlessly into his work that they may appear as Blumenberg's original thoughts. The function of these subtexts as a concealed reception event in Blumenberg's 1987 work *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* is the theme of this chapter.

As I discussed in the introduction, Blumenberg argues that interlingual translation not only *involves* interpretation, but *conceals* interpretation. Here, I look first at chapter two of *Laughter*, where Blumenberg omits all reference to theologian and philosopher Karl Kindt, even though Blumenberg's translations of Plato are uncannily similar when not identical to Kindt's extremely abridged translation of Plato's *Theaetetus*. One change Blumenberg makes to Kindt's translation assists Blumenberg's misreading of the dialogue in a 1974 *Poetics and Hermeneutics* proceeding. A doctoral student in Classical philosophy at Münster, Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, had pointed the misreading out to Blumenberg five years prior to the book's 1987 publication date. The translation error and Blumenberg's misinterpretation of the quote indicate that he did not notice the passage in the dialogue where the philosopher laughs at the sophist's attempts to define truth.

Blumenberg's interlingual translations omit reference to the source text as well as to the abridged translation he used, and Blumenberg's omissions elicit micro-translations, insofar as they conceal the very fact that he draws on sources. He omits reference to Hannah Arendt's work, despite her frequent engagement with the very anecdote around which Blumenberg's whole book revolves. Last, I notice the omission of reference to Husserl in chapter one, the uncovering of which is crucial for understanding Blumenberg's position in post-war philosophy. Throughout *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, Husserl's vocabulary orients Blumenberg's descriptions of the experiential background behind the anecdote that he analyzes: theory irrupts from a lifeworld, and laughter erupts back at it— theory and the lifeworld being a central binary of Husserl's late thought.¹⁶³

Blumenberg does not announce *Laughter* as a work of Husserlian phenomenology, but its central claims rely on Husserl's diction (lifeworld, achievement, fulfillment, intentionality), and implicitly reject Heidegger's prominent interpretation of the history of philosophy as a "history of Being." Blumenberg elsewhere shows interest in Husserl's historical argument that philosophy has forgotten to question all certainties (*Selbstverständlichkeiten*), which left it incumbent on phenomenology to recollect the theoretical urgency of

¹⁶³ Theory is a "universal abstention... which puts out of action, with one blow, the total performance running through the whole ... network... of validities," and the lifeworld is precisely that otherwise unquestioned "network," which subsumes all action and even all thought to the extent that it is not theoretical. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy.*, 150.

questioning the empirical sciences' mathematical-geometric premises.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, reference to Husserl might tarnish a highly historical work like *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* because Husserl's "knowledge of the history of thought was minimal, or more precisely: proud of its near non-existence."¹⁶⁵ In my translation of *Laughter*, I mark Blumenberg's references to Husserl in footnotes. In doing so, however, I have subverted Blumenberg's choice to allude only indirectly to Husserl.

Translated quotes and micro-translations comprise Blumenberg's sharpest confrontations with other thinkers in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. The book's rich subtext emerges from Blumenberg's borrowed yet unattributed terms and formulations, from quotations all but plagiarized in the form of paraphrases,¹⁶⁶ and from the translations of foreign source texts that Blumenberg does or does not undertake. The choice to quote, paraphrase, plagiarize, or allude shapes his interpretation: "Whoever quotes already interprets by means of the

¹⁶⁴ For Blumenberg's thorough analysis of the motivations, successes, and failures of Husserl's late turn to history, see the last section of Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*.

¹⁶⁵ Blumenberg, "Die Fiktion des ersten Menschen und des letzten," 85.

¹⁶⁶ Blumenberg often presents exact or near exact quotes as paraphrases. For instance, the following is nearly an exact quotation from Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies* which precedes a quotation announced as such after the colon: "It is the supposed nobility of the stellar objects (*excelsissima*), which distracts us from what lies nearby (*nobis proxima*) and leads to the error of ascribing movement to heavenly bodies, when that movement is actually a property of the earth: . . ." Certain words are registered as quoted via the Latin in parentheses, although he never discusses these word choices. Blumenberg considers his (quite close) translation into German an original enough interpretation not to necessitate quotation marks.

form in which he or she presents the text of the quotation.”¹⁶⁷ Translators often either fail to notice or fail to reproduce all micro-translations, and thus we suppress the derivative features of source texts; beyond not annotating them, many translators—in the interest of presenting readable documents—present derived ideas in language that sounds autochthonous, general, or spontaneous—when in fact it might be cited, historically specific, and/or formulaic. In the following pages, I will discuss the micro-translations that I am aware of in the particular text of Blumenberg’s that I have translated.

Translating Plato

In the second chapter of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, titled “Socrates is transferred into Protohistory,” Blumenberg quotes two translators of Plato’s *Theaetetus* dialogue: Martin Heidegger and Karl Kindt—though the latter goes uncited. Both translate only the parts of the dialogue surrounding the anecdote of Thales and the Thracian maid. As I will show, there were consequences to Blumenberg’s choice to quote from such abridged translations of *Theaetetus*. In 1940, Leibniz scholar and theologian Karl Kindt published a thematically organized digest of German translations of excerpts from Plato.¹⁶⁸ In

¹⁶⁷ Gadamer, *The Beginning of Philosophy*, 33.

¹⁶⁸ Plato and Kindt, *Platon-Brevier, grossenteils in neuen Übersetzungen*, 57–62. With one short exception, Blumenberg only quotes Plato from the range of pages included in Kindt’s digest. Perhaps embarrassed that he is working off of an abridged translation, Blumenberg does not cite

a section of Kindt's Plato-digest titled "What it is to be a philosopher," Blumenberg finds a 5-page excerpt from the *Theaetetus* under the title "Nr. 11 Philosophers' Weaknesses and Philosophers' Greatness." As I will discuss at the end of this section, Blumenberg concentrates on this passage's characterization of philosophers and overlooks Plato's symmetry: the anecdote *first* shows what makes philosophers ridiculous, but *then* Socrates reverses it to ridicule sophists.

His choice of Kindt's translation is conspicuous for another reason: by picking a translation of the Thales anecdote that excludes the rest of the dialogue, Blumenberg treats the dialogue's main topic (the task of defining "truth") as insignificant for a "metaphorological" analysis. Choosing Kindt's translation is all the more conspicuous since Kindt and Blumenberg differed on religious questions religion as much as two contemporaneous German thinkers with backgrounds in theology could. Blumenberg suffered persecution under Nazi Jewish laws due to his ancestry, grew up Catholic in traditionally Lutheran Schleswig-Holstein, and expressed skepticism towards religion and metaphysics in his maturity. Kindt by contrast was a devout Lutheran, a one-time advocate of Hitler as a new prophet whose spiritual mission would shape Germany through "words" as only Luther had done before, and a Platonic Idealist who saw Plato as a forerunner to German piety, and Kant and Hegel as enemies of faith.¹⁶⁹

Kindt anywhere in the text and only cites the name of the translator (never the work) once in his 1974 long essay on which *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* is based.

¹⁶⁹ Kindt, *Der Führer als Redner*, 9; Kindt, *Vorschule christlicher Philosophie*, 86–87.

Although Blumenberg passes Kindt's translations off as his own, he cites a guest translator for the anecdote of Thales and Thracian maid, the main passage under analysis in the chapter and the thematic basis for the rest of the book. Blumenberg cites Heidegger's translation of the Thales anecdote, which Heidegger published in 1962 based on the 1935-36 lecture *What is a Thing*. By citing Heidegger as a translator, Blumenberg begins his polemic against Heidegger as a reader. In chapter thirteen of *Laughter*, Blumenberg polemically opposes Heidegger's definition of philosophy; Heidegger's translation in chapter two opens the dispute about the philosophical meaning of the Thales anecdote.

Before asking why Blumenberg chose Heidegger's translation, we should examine Heidegger's translation of the Thales anecdote. The English translators of Heidegger's 1935 lecture, W.B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch, do not give a precise translation of the word "*verborgen*" although Heidegger considers this word crucial to understanding the *Theaetetus* according to an earlier 1931-32 lecture. Barton and Deutsch translate Heidegger's translation of Plato's anecdote thus: "The story is that Thales, while occupied in studying the heavens above and looking up, fell into a well. A good-looking and whimsical maid from Thrace laughed at him and told him that while he might passionately want to know all things in the universe, the things in front of his very nose and feet were unseen by

him.”¹⁷⁰ A more literal translation into English would reveal Heidegger’s idiosyncratic choice to translate λανθάνοι with “remains concealed” (*verborgen bleibe*). Heidegger famously uses creative translation as a means of discrediting philology and claiming to access what words themselves “utter” (*sagen*) in their original sense.¹⁷¹ Thus when he translates the word λανθάνοι as “concealed” (*verborgen*) here, the hiddenness of the immediate conjures the importance of perception, which Heidegger wants in the background of his Plato interpretation.

A philologist would probably never translate λανθάνοι as “verborgen” or “hidden,” but rather as “unnoticed.” What “escapes notice” is not necessarily hidden.¹⁷² Yet Heidegger was not alone in translating that word this way. Kindt’s 1940 Plato-digest, what Blumenberg quotes without citing for all passages besides the Thales anecdote, follows the unconventional translation choice that Heidegger makes in his 1935-36 lecture, and perhaps Kindt is at least thinking of Heidegger

¹⁷⁰ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3. For reference, below is Heidegger’s German:

So erzählt man sich von Thales, er sei, während er sich mit dem Himmelsgewölbe beschäftigte und nach oben blickte, in einen Brunnen gefallen. Darüber habe ihn eine witzige und hübsche thrakische Dienstmagd ausgelacht und gesagt, er wolle da mi taller Leidenschaft die Dinge am Himmel zu wissen bekommen, während ihm doch schon das, was vor der Nase und den Füßen läge, verborgen bleibe. Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, 2.

Here is Plato’s Greek: ὡςπερ καὶ Θαλῆν ἀστρονομοῦντα, ᾧ Θεόδωρε, καὶ ἄνω βλέποντα, πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ, Θραῦττά τις ἐμμελής καὶ χαρίεσσα θεραπαινὶς ἀποσκῶψαι λέγεται, ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναι, τὰ δ’ ἐμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτόν. Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, 120.

¹⁷¹ See Groth, *Translating Heidegger*, 145. Heidegger’s 1942-43 lecture on Parmenides’ sixth fragment is his most sustained demonstrations of translation as a means of “hearing” texts. Heidegger, *Parmenides*. Various translation possibilities are considered for each word in the fragment. As Heidegger says, “Ongoing intimacy with the word both allows for and demands further translation of it.” In: Groth, *Translating Heidegger*, 171.

¹⁷² Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon.*, 464.

when he writes: "...what lies in front of his feet remains hidden to him."¹⁷³

Because Blumenberg could have had the word whether he cited Kindt's or Heidegger's translation here, his choice to use Heidegger's places an emphasis on Heidegger's extensive recourse to the word *verborgen*.

Heidegger argues repeatedly for translating *λανθάνειν* with "hiddenness" (*Verborgenheit*), *ἀλήθεια* with unhiddenness (*Unverborgenheit*). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger equates truth with the passive experience of letting what is unhidden be seen.¹⁷⁴ Throughout Heidegger's work, from *Being and Time* until his last lectures, Heidegger affirms that the strongest form of truth is the kind grounded in perceptions, since what we perceive as "unhidden" appears to exist. In a 1926-27 lecture, unhiddenness to perception characterizes the experience of objects: "In the statement, 'This chalk is white,' the declaration consists in *bringing into view* something that is already there in the subject matter that the speech is about.... This form of indicating and *uncovering* something that is just there (e.g., the chalk), *bringing it closer and into focus* in terms of what it is as just being there (its whiteness), is what we call determining."¹⁷⁵ While sensing alone does not constitute ontological knowledge, he insists that every perception is always already embedded in the understanding that perceptions present beings

¹⁷³ Plato and Kindt, *Platon-Brevier, grossenteils in neuen Übersetzungen*, 59. "das vor seinen Füßen Liegenden bleibe ihm verborgen."

¹⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1996, §44(b).

¹⁷⁵ Heidegger, *Logic*, 131. (Emphasis added)

to us as existing. In a lecture given in 1955-56, Heidegger expands his claim: “Hearing is a viewing,” and both are fundamentally cognitive, not perceptual.¹⁷⁶ Seeing and hearing together reveal truth: “The concealed unity of bringing-into-view and listening determines the essence of thinking....”

In his 1931-32 lecture, translated as *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Parable of the Cave and Theaetetus*, Heidegger focuses on the two definitions of knowledge introduced in the *Theaetetus* dialogue but does not mention the Thales anecdote. Although critical of Plato’s dualistic Idealism, Heidegger argues that Plato comprehends beings as known when they are “unconcealed.” He shows how Plato’s dialogues reveal the essence of the truth of beings as exposure to perception: “We can now say what in the essence of perceiving constitutes the true.... Unhiddenness is intrinsically unhiddenness of beings; indeed we saw that the Greeks generally use the word unhiddenness to mean nothing else but the beings themselves in their unhiddenness.”¹⁷⁷ Heidegger considers Socrates’ provisional definition of truth, as “true and justified belief,” to undermine the Greek understanding of truth, as “unhiddenness,” and thus he translates Plato’s ἀλήθεια as “unhiddenness” (*Unverborgenheit*) instead of its standard translation as “truth”—to help us understand that this Greek word for truth does not mean the same thing as the German word for truth (*Wahrheit*).

¹⁷⁶ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 67.

¹⁷⁷ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 172.

Heidegger's translation of *λανθάνειν* in the anecdote could have predetermined Heidegger's interpretation of the Thales anecdote, so that he saw an allegory of the concealment of the everyday from the perspective of thought. Yet concealment is not at stake in Heidegger's 1935-36 lecture on Kant, *What is a Thing?* There Heidegger only mentions *Ἀλήθεια*, the title of a book by the influential Sophist Protagoras, in order to imply that his human relativism was the Greek forerunner to Kantian subjectivism. Focused on Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic, he makes no bid to undermine Kant's insistence on the "hiddenness" of things in themselves; rather, he argues that Kant's transcendental objects imply an ontological truth beyond mere knowledge of objects.

If Heidegger translates *λανθάνοι* as *verborgen* in the Thales anecdote primarily in order to uphold a translation code consistent with his arguments about the Greek language, then why would Blumenberg—who disagrees with Heidegger's methods and conclusions in chapter thirteen—take up Heidegger's translation so conspicuously? The choice is all the more conspicuous since it is the only passage from the *Theaetetus* for which Blumenberg cites a translator. Even more perplexing: the word *verborgen* conceals a detail that would have assisted Blumenberg's argument about Plato's innovations—which made the anecdote into "a protohistory of theory." Blumenberg insists that Aesop first composed the fable with anonymous characters, after which Plato inserted Thales and the Thracian maid. Only after Plato's innovation did the story become "a

clash between concepts of reality” where “philosophy’s particular form of ‘realism’” meets against such a total misunderstanding as to make Socrates’ existence intolerable. Does this translation of λανθάνοι even support Blumenberg’s argument? Before we can decide that, we have to observe the different uses of the verb λανθάνειν in Plato’s and Aesop’s versions of the Thales anecdote.

Tellingly, in the Aesopic fable with anonymous characters (astronomer and passerby), a form of the verb λανθάνειν appears earlier in the anecdote: at the moment when the astronomer falls as opposed to when the passerby remarks on it. The Aesopic narrator reports the astronomer’s lapse of attention, which gives it a more realistic status: it is not a judgment by a character within the anecdote but rather information delivered on the narrator’s authority. But what the astronomer is said not notice is not the well, but the fact that he was falling into it: *he failed to notice* (ἔλαθε) *that he was falling into a well* (καταπεσὼν εἰς φρέαρ). (Less provocatively translated: he fell without expecting it; he did not notice when he started to fall.) Aesop’s narrator does not expect attention to the environment, but something more minimal: just seeing it. Aesop’s passerby asks whether the astronomer did *not see* (οὐχ ὀρᾷς) what is on the earth (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). In Plato’s inverted placement of λανθάνειν, we do not learn what Thales paid attention to, just that he *falls* (πεσόντα) into a well after which the maid accuses him of *failing to notice* (λανθάνοι) what is in front of his feet (τὰ δ’ ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ

πόδας). Aesop's passerby makes a less serious indictment: the astronomer is limited by his eyes' performance, not necessarily by his attention. Plato's maid offers a sharper criticism: her word choice implies that attention and inattention were at stake, while Plato's narrator, Socrates, does not even say that Thales fell unawares into the well; he just fell in (πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ). In Blumenberg's reading, Socrates implies that Thales reckoned with disaster in advance when Thales decided to be a philosopher. Blumenberg writes: "For Plato and his public, theory is introduced as fate; fate binds theory's prototype to the figure of its culmination [Socrates], who had become unsurpassable in understanding the world and the human."

Blumenberg's choice to quote Heidegger's translation serves Blumenberg's elaborate reoccupation of Heidegger's interpretation of the anecdote over the course of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. Blumenberg disagrees with Heidegger that this anecdote's paradigmatic function derives from a *real* state of affairs, a real misunderstanding between philosophers and rabble. Instead, it expresses the *desire* among philosophers for an account of the relation between thinking and common sense. As Blumenberg explains in his chapter on Heidegger: "To explain the abyss between lifeworld and philosophy as constitutive of philosophy and to set everyone on the path who wants to arrive from the former to the latter is a dangerous proposal." Heidegger reveals his own dangerous conflation in rendering the cognitive in visual language without

acknowledging that visual imagery serves a metaphorical purpose in philosophy, thus expressing desires, wishes, but *not* structures of ontology.

But Blumenberg does not discuss his choice to use Heidegger's translation. Nor does he affirm the preference, implied by Heidegger's translation, for the spatial-visual metaphors of "concealment" over the cognitive-conceptual category of failed intentionality ("not noticing"); the latter emphasizes that the senses need not apprehend an object for the mind to apprehend it. The Heideggerian translation suggests that the maid thinks of truth in visual terms, as unconcealment. But this visual approach to truth—far from revealing the maid's unphilosophical provincialism—is the approach that Heidegger himself promotes. However, it would be difficult to read appreciation for the maid into the context of *What is a thing?*—where the maid laughs due to her incapacity to reflect on things ontologically: "...the question 'What is a thing?' must always be rated as one which causes housemaids to laugh."¹⁷⁸ Because I consider Heidegger's highly interpretive translation to detract from Blumenberg's interest in (re)occupying various historical interpretations of the anecdote, my translation relies on Harold North Fowler's English translation of Plato's *Theaetetus* (though even his translation does not match my reading of *λανθάνειν* as "not noticing.")¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ In Fowler's translation, the maid's criticism reads: "he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was before him at his very feet." Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, 121.

I also use Fowler's translation rather than rendering Blumenberg's translations of *Theaetetus* into English because Blumenberg's uncited translations by Kindt modify the source texts to fit his interpretations, and I want the reader to judge Blumenberg's arguments on their own merit or provocativeness. In both the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* conference of 1974 and in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, after introducing the Thales anecdote through Heidegger's translation, Blumenberg quotes all further translations from Plato's *Theaetetus* from Karl Kindt's 1940 *Platon-Brevier*. In 1974, he laconically cites the translator, "German by Karl Kindt," but not text. However, in 1987, Blumenberg modifies Kindt's translation which he misreads as a description of philosophers' general unpopularity within society. In 1974, he thus quotes Kindt exactly:

So he becomes the laughing stock—in fact, *not* to Thracian women or to any other uneducated population (for they do not notice it!)—but to all of those who have enjoyed the opposite of a slave's upbringing.¹⁸⁰

In 1987, he modifies the translation:

Thus he becomes a laughing stock (*gelota*) *no longer* to Thracian women or other uneducated people—for they notice nothing—but rather to all of those who were raised to be something completely different from slaves.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Blumenberg, "Der Sturz des Protophilosophen. Zur Komik der reinen Theorie-anhand einer Rezeptionsgeschichte der Thales-Anekdote," 13. "So wird er zum Gespött—*zwar nicht* bei Thrakerinnen oder anderem ungebildeten Volk (denn sie merken's ja nicht!)--, wohl aber bei all denen, die das Gegenteil einer Sklavenerziehung genossen haben." (Emphasis added in this quote and the next)

¹⁸¹ Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, 21. "So wird er zum Gelächter (*gelota*) nicht mehr bei Thrakerinnen oder anderen Ungebildeten—denn sie bemerken nichts davon--, wohl aber bei all denen, die zu ganz anderem als zu Sklaven erzogen worden sind."

In both texts Blumenberg interprets this passage to prefigure how the free population of Athens indicts the philosopher when they voted for Socrates' execution. In 1987, he would discuss the above passage as follows: "His public is merciless, for it is educated. That is the change in conditions which Plato expressly establishes through Socrates." Blumenberg takes Socrates to mean that the *educated* Greek public laughs, but Socrates disregards what others call education: *uneducated* orators are the laughing stock of *educated* philosophers.

In 1982, five years before the publication of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting pointed out to Blumenberg in a conversation that he misread the passage; the ridicule falls on orators, not philosophers. The ones "who have enjoyed the opposite of a slave's upbringing" are the philosophers. They laugh when a rhetorically trained person enters into philosophical dialogue. "...when [an orator] that man of small and sharp and pettifogging mind is compelled in his turn to give an account of ["abstract right and wrong," rather than "what wrong have I done you or you me?"]", then the tables are turned; dizzied by the new experience of hanging at such a height, he gazes downward from the air in dismay and perplexity...."¹⁸² The philosopher laughs at the absurd inadequacy of rhetorical training to prepare individuals who still lack the inner resources to perform at the "heights" of philosophical thought.

¹⁸² Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, 175C–D 125–127.

Niehues-Pröbsting explained Blumenberg's misreading to him in 1982, and even drew implications from his own "correct" reading in his *Habilitationsschrift* titled "Persuasion to Insight: The Relation of Philosophy and Rhetoric in Plato and in Phenomenology," which Blumenberg had approved shortly before the appearance of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. But "that did not prevent Blumenberg from holding tight to his misreading in the book version of his history of the Thales anecdote; on the contrary, he worsened the error by trying to improve it (*verschlimmbessert*) through a false translation."¹⁸³ The passage where Blumenberg did not notice that the philosopher was laughing at the rhetorician was now misleadingly translated: "no longer to Thracian women" replaced Karl Kindt's "not to Thracian women." Niehues-Pröbsting tells how the mistranslation in Blumenberg's 1987 publication serves Blumenberg's interpretation of it as a symptom of the change in conditions that has occurred now that Plato's public is educated. "His public is merciless, for it is educated. That is the change in conditions which Plato expressly establishes through Socrates." Blumenberg misreads to arrive at this conclusion, for the public at large is for once *not* the target of Plato's accusations of slavishness. Niehues-Pröbsting points out that Plato's analogy between sophists and slaves could refer specifically to Protagoras, who was reputedly born into servitude as a porter, who

¹⁸³ Niehues-Pröbsting, "Platonverlesungen: Eigenschaften--Lächerlichkeiten," 363.

impressed the philosopher Democritus with his orderly way of bundling wood; moreover, Protagoras' town of origin, Abdera, was in Thrace.¹⁸⁴

Blumenberg's minor change shows how subtle a strong misreading can be: Plato's text uses a simple negation, "not" (*oú*), in the clause Blumenberg translates "no longer" (*nicht mehr*). There are several implications of Blumenberg's misreading. First of all, rhetorical training was imported through Protagoras from Thrace, and did not represent local Athenian society. Second, Blumenberg overlooks the fact that Socrates had just finished ridiculing Protagoras by pretending that Protagoras thinks truth = perception. Socrates later admits that he was unfair to Protagoras because even a relativist prefers what he calls "good."¹⁸⁵ But Blumenberg would not know that if he only read Kindt and Heidegger. Kindt titles the five page excerpt from *Theaetetus*: "Philosophers' Weaknesses and Philosophers' Greatness"—not a word about sophists. While Niehues-Pröbsting assumes that Blumenberg translates Plato himself, he too noticed that Blumenberg ignored this context and thus missed the relevance of applying the Thales anecdote in scorning sophists' philosophical abilities. This is the likely rhetorical purpose of the anecdote; the Heideggerian interpretation, which Blumenberg also pursues, fixates on the moment when Socrates applies the

¹⁸⁴ Gellius, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, 385–387.

¹⁸⁵ Socrates imagines Protagoras saying that some beliefs are "better than the others, but in no wise truer.... [T]he wise man causes the good... to seem right and honourable." Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, 167B–C 97.

anecdote to absent-minded philosophers, but both men overlook the point when Socrates moves past false humility and laughs.¹⁸⁶

In an article about the Thales “Episode” by Blumenberg’s critic, Niehues-Pröbsting, the latter gives a translation that matches his own correct reading, wherein the “Thracian maid” represents the position of sophists, perhaps Protagoras specifically. He translates Plato’s description of the maid (ἐμμελής καὶ χαπίεσσα) as “ravishing and clever” (*reizend und witzig*) which evokes sophistry’s power to influence more emphatically than Kindt’s “clever and precocious” (*witzig und aufgeweckt*) or Heidegger’s “clever and cute” (*witzig und hübsch*).¹⁸⁷ If Pröbsting the stickler also translates passages to emphasize his arguments, then can any translating scholar be trusted not to misinterpret passages from source texts? As a translator of Blumenberg, I decided “no” and turned to other English translations rather than pass on the interpretive translations in the German source text.

These misrenderings have a crucial function in the text’s genesis. In chapter two of *Laughter*, Blumenberg reoccupies Platonic Idealism by overstating Plato’s Heideggerian celebration of solitary philosophizing. Then in chapter thirteen he discredits Heidegger in order to reoccupy Heideggerian ontology in the name of metaphorology. Heidegger interprets this anecdote as an expression

¹⁸⁶ Niehues-Pröbsting, “Platonverlesungen: Eigenschatten--Lächerlichkeiten,” 364.

¹⁸⁷ Niehues-Pröbsting, “Die ‘Episode’ im ‘Theaitetos’: Verschärfung der Begriffe von Rhetorik und Philosophie,” 18.

of a binary: philosophers/rabble. Blumenberg levies the weight of historical evidence against Heidegger's claim that this binary *determines* philosophy's self-understanding—determinate philosophical definitions being the ultimate expression of false "absolutes" for Blumenberg. Blumenberg gives a "false translation," as his student says, but the deceit serves a worthier purpose than his student grants: reoccupying reception history from Heidegger's absolutist approach.

Gender in translation

Because of German morphology, the Thracian maid's femaleness is announced on the front cover of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* (*Das Lachen der Thrakerin*). German requires the *-in* suffix to mark reference to a female person, but Blumenberg's analysis elides her gender entirely.¹⁸⁸ Although Blumenberg uses the word "spectatress" (*Zuschauerin*) on multiple occasions to indicate that a female spectator beholds Thales' plummet into a well according to anecdote, he also denies that her gender is of much importance to Plato's

¹⁸⁸ German speakers must call attention to gender in cases where English speakers may choose to do so or not do so. This is an example of weak linguistic relativism (of the type clearly articulated by Roman Jakobson in "On linguistic aspects of translation"), rather than the linguistic determinism associated with Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf—which claims that the native language restricts what its speakers are capable of thinking (an unprovable claim since it implies that no one can ever understand a foreign language well enough to assess what a foreign thought). Even Sapir acknowledges that recombinatory power should make all languages inter-translatable: "...both Hottentots and Eskimos possess all the formal apparatus that is required to serve as a matrix for the expression of Kant's thought." Qtd. in Pütz and Verspoor, *Explorations in Linguistic Relativity*, 77.

interpretation. “Not necessarily a female slave, and by no means necessarily a Thracian one.” (*Nicht zwangsläufig eine Sklavin, und schon gar nicht eine thrakische.*)¹⁸⁹ This has caught the attention of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who considers the Thracian woman’s gender very important for understanding why she does not share Thales’ worldview. For her, the gender of the Thracian woman makes her a kind of proto-feminist figure who resists the universalizing ontology already inscribed in pre-Socratic philosophy:

A quick smile can often be seen on the faces of women as they observe the self-absorption of brainy intellectual men.... The ancient female laughter of the maidservant is thus a sign that can be snatched from a context that considers it a mark of ignorance.... The philosophy of the eternal has tried to suppress the sense of life, by relegating it to the unbearable anguish of a becoming haunted by nothingness. It is this sense of life that the female voice redeems, in a tone of liberating laughter.¹⁹⁰

As Cavarero correctly notes: “Blumenberg himself declares the sex of the maidservant in the original Platonic version of the anecdote to be inconsequential and unimportant...”¹⁹¹

Blumenberg also translates the reception of the anecdote as an exclusively male phenomenon and thus entirely conceals Hannah Arendt’s reception of the anecdote. One of Blumenberg’s unpublished notecards reveals his awareness that

¹⁸⁹ Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, 21.

¹⁹⁰ Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 50, 56. The equation of maid with slave is echoed in Dirke Mende’s work on Blumenberg: “Since Thales’ time philosophy has indeed had a tension-filled (*spannungsreich*) relationship with maids.” He claims that this justifies Haverkamp’s observation that Blumenberg was unsatisfied as “metaphorological maid to the conceptual historical lordship.” Haverkamp and Mende, *Metaphorologie: Zur Praxis einer Theorie*, 13. Gender here makes a somewhat insensitive metaphor for male hierarchy.

¹⁹¹ Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 33.

Arendt had commented on the anecdote, but the notecard only cites a *festschrift* on Arendt, not Arendt's actual work.¹⁹² For Arendt, perhaps far more than for other philosophers that Blumenberg cites, this anecdote epitomizes philosophy and her reasons for rejecting the label "philosopher." In 1964, in an interview on the German television program "Zur Person," she explains that her problem with "intellectuals" is that they come up with ideas and "fall into a trap through their own ideas" (*durch ihre Einfälle in die Falle kommen*). That trap is the incapacity for political action which prompted her to publish *The Human Condition* in 1958. She was alarmed at how thinkers had treated the *vita contemplativa* as so important that "all other differences between the various activities in the *Vita Activa* disappeared. Compared to [the silence of thought], it was no longer important whether you labored and tilled the soil, or worked and produced use-objects, or acted together with others in certain enterprises."¹⁹³

¹⁹² "VORSOKR. THALES: 6 HANNAH ARENDT" Blumenberg, "Zettelkasten 14: T-V (Titel von Bearbeiter/in) [Nasenkarten:T, Theologie, Schöpfung, U, V]." Blumenberg discusses Arendt's thoughts on Heidegger in the posthumous *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*. He disagrees strongly with her position that Heidegger's "turn" occurred between the two volumes of his study on Nietzsche, when Heidegger ceases to embrace the "will" and begins to condemn the opacity of willing without thinking. Blumenberg, by contrast, sees Heidegger as having never embraced the will as such, since his terms were always about self-preservation: "self-assertion," what Heidegger promotes in his Nazi-themed rectoral address, is "nothing other than that old 'care,' in which self-preservation is concealed as the definition of life." Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, 60. If Heidegger's Nazi audience had read *Being and Time*, Blumenberg claims, they would have seen his Nazism as mere opportunism: "That Being would have to have been suspected of possessing an indeterminacy selected so precisely, and later so embarrassing, for occupations by the *zeitgeist*." *Ibid.*, 61. In his criticism of Heidegger, he accuses Arendt of failing to see the continuity in Heidegger's relativism: "But did the politologue, turned so late back to philosophy, invent a sinner, in order to greet—even celebrate—his forgivability and repentance?"
¹⁹³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 7.

She mentions the anecdote at least three times in her oeuvre, always to make a similar point. First she cites it in 1969, in a radio address for Martin Heidegger's 80th birthday. There she discusses how philosophers who make their "home in thought" make consequential misjudgments of character on earth: Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis and Plato's with the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius. The fact that both identify with Thales in the anecdote of his tumble in the well is thus explained by their firm decision to *think* but not to *judge* their own actions' political consequences.¹⁹⁴ Then, in 1971, she published the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, where she explains Plato's interpretation of the anecdote as a projection of "the intramural warfare between thought and common sense"

¹⁹⁴ Arendt does not mention Heidegger's reception of the anecdote, only the fact that Plato warned of "the dangers of such an abode" as philosophy, conducted at a remove from worldly concerns. In that context she cites the anecdote as a simple illustration. "It is also [in Plato's *Theaetetus*] that he tells, apparently for the first time, the story of Thales and the Thracian peasant girl who witnessed how the 'wise man,' his gaze upward to watch the stars, fell into a well. She laughed that someone who wanted to know the sky should be so ignorant of what lies at his feet. Thales, if we can believe Aristotle, was immediately very offended—especially since his fellow citizens used to make fun of his poverty—and wanted to prove by a large speculation in oil presses that it is easy for a 'wise man' to get rich if he only really sets his mind to it (*Politics*, 1259a 6ff.). And since books, as everyone knows, are not written by peasant girls, the laughing Thracian child was later subjected to Hegel's statement that she just did not have a sense for higher things." Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, 215. Arendt finds fault in philosophers' rejection of the Thracian girl's response. Could this have been the incitement to Blumenberg's whole project? Arendt considers Plato's attempts to "help set the tyrant of Syracuse straight by giving him lessons in mathematics" "considerably more comical than Thales' misstep" "seen from the peasant girl's perspective." Of course, Blumenberg would question the inhabitability of this perspective, but she ends with a provocation to understand what it is about thinking that makes "thinkers... ill disposed towards laughing" and "what laughter is good for." *Ibid.*, 216. Her implication is that amused misunderstanding has yet to be legitimated as a kind of insight. Blumenberg's book shows, however, how frequently thinkers identify with the laughing maid. Laughter has proven indispensable among the rhetorical tools used by philosophers to correct others' errors.

onto imagined scornful observers.¹⁹⁵ Finally, in 1973, in a lecture series on Kant, she discusses Hegel's reading of the anecdote (also curiously ignored by Blumenberg—but not quoted by Arendt either) in order to show how philosophers have always considered their insights rare and unsharable, since the majority is incapable of relating to their pursuits and thus only laughs at them.¹⁹⁶ It is in opposition to such self-exceptionalism that Arendt writes, "I have neither the claim nor the ambition to be a philosopher."¹⁹⁷

If Blumenberg wanted prominent fellow skeptics of ontology to help him mount his response to Heidegger, Arendt would provide him with an interesting interlocutor. The two thinkers express similar dissatisfaction with systems of thought that ignore the complex intersections between motivation and understanding. But Arendt expresses distaste for philosophers' self-isolation, which Blumenberg embraces. The closest he comes in *Laughter to* acknowledging the merits of Arendt's approach is when he discusses the line of thought he calls "social critique:"

In a style of observation fondly called "social critique" a generation ago, the Thales anecdote becomes exasperating, no matter how often the reception history makes concessions to the Thracian maid. What bothers the critic is that the one laughing has herself become laughable in the end—which expresses a self-consciousness that theory has so successfully accomplished its task that it is now easily bearable that, in the beginning, somebody had laughed at theory.

¹⁹⁵ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 80.

¹⁹⁶ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 35.

¹⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 3.

“Criticism” and “theory” are emblematic words in Hannah Arendt’s lexicon. The latter reflects how she identifies herself: “I am not a philosopher. I am a political theorist.”¹⁹⁸ “Criticism” she associates with Kant—whom she considers exceptionally socially conscious as an ethical philosopher.¹⁹⁹ Blumenberg’s allusion reads as an interpretive paraphrase of Arendt’s reading of the anecdote, which implicitly also translates between languages since she had articulated her reading primarily in English.²⁰⁰ It is not a very close paraphrase—Arendt would not find Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger exasperating, had they merely laughed back at the maid. What bothered her was the stridency against the maid’s laughter, especially in Plato: “...the fact is, there are hardly any instances on record of the many on their own initiate declaring war on philosophers.”²⁰¹ Thus: “laughter rather than hostility is the natural reaction of the many to the philosopher’s preoccupation and the apparent uselessness of his concerns.”²⁰² Arendt is not bothered by the fact that philosophers might now laugh at having been laughed at, but rather she is concerned at “the entirely serious way in which [Plato] tells the story of the Thracian peasant girl....” It seems to me that Blumenberg has missed

¹⁹⁸ *Hannah Arendt*.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ An adaptation like Blumenberg’s can be understood as a hybrid of interlingual and intralingual translation. Roman Jakobson refers to “rewording” in general as “intralingual translation,” in order to emphasize how equivalence remains inexact when we paraphrase just as it does when we translate between two foreign languages. Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” 261.

²⁰¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 81.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 82.

the spirit of Arendt's "social critique." She is not discouraging laughter, but discouraging the escalation of the "innocent" laughter of misunderstanding into a serious threat. Arendt does not even take this as a gender difference, the way Cavarero does, but simply as a matter of self-awareness of one's social function that seems to her beyond the capacity of most philosophers.

As a translator intimate with Blumenberg's argument and as an admirer of Arendt's brand of theory, I find Blumenberg's omission unsettling. But it would not be fair to note only the issues Blumenberg submerged that I find worth uncovering. Blumenberg has also performed a more productively subversive translation by preventing Heidegger, the dominant philosopher within his academic discourse (still resonating in American comparative literature today), from exerting more than a minimal influence on his diction. He translates his phenomenological insights into the language of Edmund Husserl and deviates as much as possible from Heidegger—whereas Arendt did much to legitimate Heidegger's thought through frequent and admiring allusion and citation.

It is always inadvisable to read motivations into someone's work—even more so to read into someone's omissions. Blumenberg does however express clear scorn towards Arendt's work in one piece, posthumously published in 2014, about Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her irreverent *New Yorker* report on Final Solution author Adolf Eichmann's war crimes trial. There Blumenberg disapproves of her "universal moralism" in opposing the death penalty for

Eichmann since “mythic necessity” demands his execution as a “scapegoat.”²⁰³ Perhaps it is not misogyny or opposition to Heidegger but outrage, as a victim of Nazi persecution, that motivates Blumenberg’s disapproval.

Rich in implication, however, is his metaphor of scorn as duplicated vision, since Blumenberg employs a similar *figura etymologica* in *Laughter* when he refers to the Thales anecdote’s climax as “the laughter of the spectatress at the spectator” (*das Lachen der Zuschauerin des Zuschauers*). In his Eichmann response, he writes in scorn for Arendt: “On the surface, observing the observer (*die Beobachterin zu beobachten*) only represents a display of one’s eminent acumen. She sees everything juridically because she recognizes no state of exception and also need not do so, as a citizen of the USA.” Blumenberg assents that, by Israeli law, Eichmann may not have earned the death penalty, but asserts that to deprive the meaning-seeking Israeli people of a sacrificial ritual would “damn [her] critique to meaninglessness.” Israelis cannot redirect the pathos associated with the destruction of European Jewry towards any rigorous analysis, according to Blumenberg. So much pathos cannot be reoccupied spontaneously and certainly not through light-hearted ridicule.

More so than in his published works, Blumenberg enters the fray of theorizing, laughing, and scolding, but his rhetoric maps him neither onto Thales’

²⁰³ Blumenberg, “Eichmann – der «negative Held» des Staates Israel.” This is of course not the first time he criticized her. See note 189.

position nor the maid's. He criticizes Arendt for wanting "to see the negator of her right to existence as a ridiculous figure," and thereby implies that she is laughing from an ignorant position—as Plato thought about the Thracian maid. And, while Arendt and Blumenberg both interpret Plato as linking the Thracian maid's laughter with aggression, here Blumenberg aggressively rebukes Arendt for not respecting the seriousness of the Israeli people's need for ritualized violence.²⁰⁴ Here, as in *Laughter*, Blumenberg stands at the third degree in the tableau of *theoria*: first, instead of Thales the protophilosopher contemplating the stars, Eichmann the ideologue oversees an unfolding genocide; then, instead of being mocked by the common sense wielding maid, he is mocked by Arendt the sharp-witted political scientist; and instead of Blumenberg historicizing her engagement with language, Blumenberg checks her insistence on legal realism—and her lack of *Realpolitik*.

Affiliation as translation

The first chapter of *Laughter*, titled "Theory as Exotic Behavior," is the richest chapter in Husserlian terminology. Many of these terms are marked by quotation marks. In his foreword, Blumenberg writes: "At some point, an

²⁰⁴ Arendt occupies the position of the critical Thracian maid so vividly that Jacques Taminiaux titled his book on the philosophical differences between Heidegger and Arendt: Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*. While Taminiaux does not expand on his title's implicit analogy between Arendt and the Thracian maid, he does consider Arendt's focus on human beings in the plural to lead her to conclusions even further removed from their Heideggerian bases than she acknowledges. She is, in that sense, foreign from her teacher.

‘attitude’ develops, a purpose that pervades many particular activities, . . .” This refers to the “theoretical attitude” that Husserl opposed to the natural attitude. The first chapter focuses on “theory,” “theorists” and “theoria” and their place in the world: a perennial concern of Husserl’s—and distinctly not one of Heidegger’s. Towards the end of the first chapter, Blumenberg introduces the concept of the “lifeworld,” Husserl’s term for the pre-theoretical state of immersive activity which is both the origin of theory for Husserl and the ultimate object of theoretical interest for Blumenberg. For Blumenberg, the anecdote of Thales and the Thracian maid represents “the most enduring prefiguration of all the tensions and misunderstandings between the lifeworld and theory, tensions which would determine both realms’ inexorable histories.” (255) The tension that Husserl discussed in his late *Crisis of the European Sciences* becomes the tension most worthy of metaphoric figuration in the Thales anecdote.

And again in chapter one, the word “full” occurs in quotation marks when Blumenberg interprets Thales’ second cosmological saying, “everything is full of gods:” “Thales knew what he was talking about and what he meant by ‘full.’ (*erfüllt*, literally ‘fulfilled’).” The concept of “fulfillment” pervades Husserl’s descriptions of intentionality. As Kant understands sensation to fulfill concepts, so Husserl claims that sensation fulfills intentions.²⁰⁵ But while Kant thought of

²⁰⁵ The word “fulfillment” in Husserl’s use is alternately translated “intuitional saturation,” which gives a clearer sense of its cumulative nature: *Erfüllung* occurs after a certain duration of conscious perception. Husserl, *Ideas; General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 410.

concepts as potentially fulfilled by single moments of sensate experience (e.g. the concept of horse is fulfilled whenever we see a horse), Husserl understood intentions as fulfilled only after a series of sense experiences (e.g., we see a cup in the light, but only once we have looked at it from several angles, or it least looked at how the light is falling around it, can we gauge its three-dimensional status accurately). These serial sense experiences function as clues about objects of our attention, and thus Husserl evocatively dubbed them “adumbrations” (*Abschattungen*). In the passage cited from Blumenberg above, it is clearly Husserl’s and not Kant’s use of “fulfillment” at play, since he is referring to the cumulative effect that a street full of divine statues has in inspiring Thales to state that everything is full of gods. While neither Kant nor Husserl would seriously maintain that an intuition or series of intuitions could fulfill a predicate for “everything,” it is more distinctly Husserlian to posit the need for a series of impressions in order to affirm that particular qualities belong to objects.

While the other chapters of the book have fewer instances of covert Husserlian terminology, the translator cannot miss the message. If it were not for this subtext, it would be very easy to interpret this book as a Heideggerian project: the tendency of philosophers to laugh along with the maid at the philosopher shows the folly of the metaphysical tradition, which failed to recognize the call of the distant and the irrelevant as a sign of unspeakable Being, the origin of all worldly cares. The history of the Thales anecdote is a history of an

unconsciousness, and as such it could narrate the self-concealment of Being. This concealment could have left such a confusion in its wake that the theorist's object could only be heard faintly through this anecdote. The theorist's object would then be Being, for which the stars were only a metaphor. And to represent transcendence through metaphor indicates the ultimate misunderstanding: "The metaphorical exists only within metaphysics."²⁰⁶ The historical inversions of the anecdote—whereby different authors alternately honor Thales or laugh with the maid—always find a way to valorize the nonsensible: the spiritual for Tertullian, the methodical for Bacon, the inward for Montaigne, the future for Feuerbach. In most cases, Thales' empiricism—his attention to the sensible—makes him laughable.

From a Heideggerian perspective, it would also be no coincidence that Plato inaugurates this anecdote's metaphorical interpretation, since Plato made, described, and evaluated the distinction between the sensible and nonsensible realm, which was "normative for the Western world... What emerges as essential in [Plato's] thought is that the nonsensuous, the realm of the soul and of the spiritual, is the true actuality, and that the sensuous realm is a preliminary and subordinate stage."²⁰⁷ The folly of this distinction is not the problem that Blumenberg discusses in *Laughter*, but it could be interpreted as such, if it were

²⁰⁶ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 48.

²⁰⁷ Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* 17.

not for the fact that Blumenberg sees a quantitative, not a qualitative, difference at stake in the anecdote: the obvious and the obscure are displaced onto the metaphorical axis of the near and the far.

When we finally arrive at the thirteenth chapter “How to recognize what matters,” the chapter on Heidegger, Blumenberg’s position on the rivalry between these phenomenologists becomes even clearer. The basic contention is that Heidegger’s phenomenology is overdetermined by theological assumptions, and that phenomenology cannot derive from fundamental ontology (or hope to arrive at any ontology). “Phenomenologists must take paths, not make leaps.” And Heidegger tends to advocate leaps that define their adequacy by their distance from everyday common sense. Husserl also claims that phenomenology begins with a leap, the *ἐποχή*, the bracketing of all beliefs in order to examine knowledge skeptically. But for Heidegger the difference between the everyday and the true becomes the criterion for the truth.

Blumenberg thus takes up a question raised and dismissed by Gadamer in a *festschrift* to Heidegger, as to whether Heidegger meant Thales or Adam by “the first man” for whom “the world was there” when he raised his head. Blumenberg claims that Adam is the better answer for the late Heidegger who considered pre-Socratic philosophy to represent a closing chapter to a period when Being revealed its nature freely to humans. However, Blumenberg considers Heidegger to have latched onto Thales and his mockery by the Thracian maid in order to

make this turn to history, which still valued the pre-Socratics very highly as unconscious witnesses to the historical moment of Being's retreat from view:

history, not nature, would have played out in that original event (*Urereignis*) of ontology. For this purpose, Thales appears to fit more precisely. It would not be accidental, therefore, that Heidegger turned vehemently back to Thales during the late changes to his treatment of Being.

For Heidegger, the everyday is still the point of departure, but the lifeworld is ultimately not the domain that provides theory with its objects, as it does for Husserl.

Husserl describes the "lifeworld" as a realm constituted by unquestioned activity—the lifeworld, by definition, misunderstands theory. Blumenberg accepts this definition but not Heidegger's rhetorical move to locate Thales' exemplarity as a philosopher in Thales' disconnection from the world. A philosophical attitude cannot be defined only by difference—it must also have its own purpose.

Blumenberg explains in a posthumous book of essays about Heidegger how obfuscating it he finds Heidegger's unspecified philosophical ideal: "Something is coming if only no one prevents it from happening... With this kind of philosophy, we prepare for events whose quality must be unspecified (*gleichgültig*) and which are only measured by their distance from whatever

condemns itself by having already been (*was als Gewesene nun sich selbst*

verurteilt).”²⁰⁸ Similar criticisms occur in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*:

In 1962, under the title *What is a Thing?*, Heidegger published the text of a lecture from the winter semester of 1935-36, at whose beginning he mentioned the Thales anecdote. He used it to illustrate the irrelevance of a question “that one can really do nothing with,” as appears to be the case with the question of the thing.²⁰⁹ This peculiarity does not burden the question and questioner, but rather develops into the very criterion for their philosophical relevance and propriety.

Blumenberg concludes that Heidegger has abandoned the phenomenological task.

But he makes the claim by analyzing Heidegger’s reading of the Thales anecdote through the Husserlian binary of theory and the lifeworld.

The second to last chapter of *Laughter* enacts a muted polemic against Heidegger’s philosophical priorities. He is using Husserl’s terminology although his topic is far more akin to Heidegger’s work—the entanglement of metaphor, metaphysics, and history. Blumenberg champions the philosophical value of lifeworldly metaphors, by pitting vocabulary against vocabulary. Like an “ironist” of the kind Rorty praises, Blumenberg carefully selects vocabularies and rhetoric and avoids philosophically binding propositions: “Ironists see [libraries] as divided according to traditions, each member of which partially adapts and partially modifies the vocabulary of the authors whom he has read.”²¹⁰ Often without mentioning his sources or explicating his claims, Blumenberg’s

²⁰⁸ Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, 88.

²⁰⁹ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 2.

²¹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 75–76.

philosophical vocabulary reflects a complex reaction to the values and tensions of post-war German philosophy: a focus on history caught between *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and conservative Heideggerian ontology. The indirectness of his approach makes it vulnerable to the criticism that it only responds to images and ignores explicit claims, as Lodi Nauta argues, when he says that Blumenberg's whole metaphorology "seems to control the historical evidence even to the extent that it can predict when and in which intellectual tradition the metaphor occurs."²¹¹ Nauta compares Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* to Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, saying both offer valuable insights but can be condemned "for having attempted to bring too many diverse themes from too many diverse periods of history under the umbrella of a single expression." It is by assuming the continuity of the Thales anecdote's meaning that *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* conveys Blumenberg's various philosophical tastes through the genre of a historiography, and more so through omissions than through avowals.

²¹¹ Nauta, "A Weak Chapter in the Book of Nature : Hans Blumenberg on Medieval Thought," 150.

Chapter 3: On Translating Polysemy in Twentieth-century German Phenomenological Texts

This chapter presents a “problem-restricted theory” of translation that addresses a problem familiar to translators of philosophical texts.²¹² I discuss three ways to approach sentences in philosophical texts where key words exhibit polysemy, that is, multiple, associated meanings, such as when Attic Greek authors use the same word, “ὄρνις,” for “bird” and “omen” on the basis that birds conveyed omens from the gods.²¹³ In the cases under discussion, the translator must find an equivalent in the target language that elides one of two meanings.²¹⁴ One of these meanings is always concrete and illustrative while the other is abstract by comparison. For instance, Heidegger uses the German word “*Grund*” to mean “reasons why,” but elsewhere he evokes its other meaning, “the ground beneath our feet,” as when he asks of Kant’s transcendental deduction, “does not

²¹² Holmes, “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies,” 188.

²¹³ These relations are closer than the relation between homonyms (e.g. “bear,” the animal and “to bear [suffering],” the verb). In fact, polysemy sometimes masks the fact that difference in meaning exists between its exemplars. Who thinks of “knight,” the medieval gentleman soldier, as distinct in meaning from “knight,” the chess piece that moves in an L-shape? It is not surprising that we would mistake such closely related categories for monosemy. For an interesting discussion of the “family resemblances” behind semantic categories related by polysemy, see Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 83.

²¹⁴ For a linguistic study that explains how linguistic context helps translators determine which meaning of a polysemous word to select by looking at several Croatian to English translation examples, see Schmidt, “Polysemy in Translation.”

this ground-laying lead us to an abyss?”²¹⁵ This image of ground as “footing” introduces an association that could not be justified on logical grounds.²¹⁶

Three contexts determine how I translate polysemous words: the most likely meaning given the syntactic context, the meaning of that sentence implied by claims surrounding the sentence, and meaning implied by the imagery surrounding the sentence. By “surrounding the sentence” I mean the rest of the publication under scrutiny but also other related texts. This study will look at the arguments and rhetoric of the texts where the metaphors are found and also at the authors’ oeuvres. This expanded context reveals more about specific uses of words. A recent study suggests that translators marshal more creativity in translating polysemous words the longer the text is in which they find the words.²¹⁷ Professional translators, the study finds, tend to agree on how to translate polysemous words in the context of single sentences, but they respond

²¹⁵ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 117. This becomes even more conspicuous where he theorizes the “groundless” nature of human freedom: “The appearance of the groundless in transcendence is instead the primordial ‘move’ which freedom makes with us.” Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons.*, 129.

²¹⁶ There are other problems as invisible as polysemy in translating philosophical texts. For instance, the playful register of Wittgenstein’s German is transferred to the specificity of Englishness for American readers of G.E.M. Anscombe’s translation of *Philosophical Investigations*. He uses colloquial British expressions such as “to fancy” for “*sich vorstellen*” and “to go on a holiday” for “*feiern*.” The rarity with which translation questions arise in philosophical discussions is probably a symptom of the embarrassment that such an unwieldy “remainder” from translation arises in the target text. After making the above observations Laurence Venuti explains: “Translation remains the dark secret of philosophy precisely because the remainder shatters the bedrock assumption of this project in its modern academic form: the stability and authority of the philosophical subject as an autonomous agent of reflection.” Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 115.

²¹⁷ Rydning and Lachaud, “The Reformulation Challenge in Translation: Context Reduces Polysemy during Comprehension, but Multiplies Creativity during Production.”

less uniformly to polysemous words encountered in longer text passages. This chapter outlines implicit rules behind the creative choices that translators of major works of Continental philosophy make.

I will discuss three cases where different criteria prevail in determining when to render a polysemous word in its concrete sense. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger both rely on metaphorically suggestive words as philosophical terminology, for instance Husserl's hydrological "stream of consciousness" (*Bewußtseinsstrom*) and Heidegger's topographical "abyss of Dasein" (*Ab-grund des Daseins*).²¹⁸ Since Husserl considers "stream" a metaphor only, he can allow some interference from the connotation of "stream" as liquid flowing along dirt, whereas Heidegger avoids the concrete connotation of missing dirt in the word "abyss." By contrast with those two cases, Hans Blumenberg's non-terminological use of *naheliegend* alternates easily between its abstract sense and its spatial etymology, "obvious" and "lying closeby" as the syntactic context dictates. As I show below, Robert Wallace and I both translate this word's polysemy as the sentence determines since Blumenberg does not mark it as a term with a fixed meaning. Yet this word's polysemy is rich in implications for Blumenberg.

²¹⁸ Husserl, *Späte Texte Zur Zeitkonstitution (1929-1934)*, 269; Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons.*, 128.

Since I confronted many polysemous German words in the process of translating Blumenberg's *Das Lachen der Thrakerin* into English, my translation work informs this study. But I also examine other English translations of texts by seminal German twentieth-century philosophers in the phenomenological tradition. Polysemy must be approached case by case, and so I discuss a range of cases where other translators dealt with polysemous words in texts by Blumenberg and other German philosophers. Translators' strategies differ depending on the varying deployment of polysemy in works by Blumenberg, Husserl, and Heidegger.

The way we respond as translators to metaphors in philosophical texts reveals our position regarding the limits of terminological precision and the function of metaphorical language in philosophy. Terminology demands precise translation, since philosophical terms must not overly dilute the philosophical goal of using abstraction to arrive at statements with universal scope. As Rudolph Gasché reminds: "Philosophical thinking is not philosophical without the pretense to universality."²¹⁹ And the pursuit of universal truth remains inextricable from philosophical language, including that of most twentieth-century German philosophers no matter how inclined they are to qualify, deflate, or disavow that

²¹⁹ Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking*, 248. In Blumenberg's very first publication, he calls philosophy "the science of general validities," thus also defining it by its breadth of scope. He also complains that philosophy's language lost a lot of its "general validity" through "the translation of philosophical terminology" from everyday to specialized language. Blumenberg, "Die sprachliche Wirklichkeit der Philosophie," 429. A translation can thus only hope to expand the resonance of a philosophical text to find occasions to render abstract terms in concrete language.

pursuit. Metaphor has often been treated as the opposite of concept, and thus as exterior to philosophy. Yet philosophers often rely on metaphors to represent concepts if we define metaphor as “de-determined” (*entdeterminiert*) language that evokes unexpected meanings in a given context.²²⁰ For instance, Weinrich observes that even the briefest comparison of love to hunting, war, fire, or sickness opens up a whole range of associations with goals and dangers specific to each of those.

Besides the familiar and non-committal uses of metaphor in philosophy, as heuristic example or as merely provisional catachresis, Heidegger advocates a more committed use of graphic language. Heidegger writes images into his arguments (clearings, paths, earth, etc.) in efforts to reject any dichotomy between sensory and supersensory phenomena, which would reinforce metaphysical dualism. Because metaphors imply a detour through sensory imagery in order to arrive at meanings beyond the realm of the sensory, Heidegger denies that his images are metaphors. That is, when we compare love to a fire, we *imply* that love is abstract while fire is concrete. Working against this implication, Heidegger evokes both abstract and concrete meanings of polysemous words without distinguishing between conceptual and metaphoric language. That distinction, he

²²⁰ Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 61. Here Blumenberg has modified his colleague Harald Weinrich’s notion of metaphor as weak determination. According to Weinrich, a break in semantic context is all that it takes to produce a metaphor, but a whole metaphoric field of imagery (*Bildfeld*) is usually called up as a consequence of that break. Weinrich, *Sprache in Texten*, 311–313.

argues, belies a fundamental kinship between sensation and thought. Heidegger claims that there is nothing metaphorical in the statement, “[t]hinking brings into view something that one can hear.”²²¹ Heidegger defends the non-metaphorical character of describing thought with synesthetic language. We must not, Heidegger claims,

precipitously take the talk of thinking as a listening and a bringing-into-view to be mere metaphors and thus take them too lightly.... The idea of ‘transposing’ and of metaphor is based upon the distinguishing if not complete separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own. The setting up of this partition between the sensible and nonsensible, between the physical and nonphysical is a basic trait of what is called metaphysics.... When one gains the insight into the limitations of metaphysics, ‘metaphor’ as a normative conception also becomes untenable.²²²

In contrast to Heidegger’s insistence that metaphors mislead us into metaphysical dualism, Husserl makes free use of metaphor when discussing indeterminate notions. For Husserl, as for Blumenberg, the inextricability of sensation and thought does not render concepts and images equivalent. When Husserl announces metaphors as such, the translator does not confront the same dilemma as when she finds a polysemous word in Heidegger.

²²¹ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 46.

²²² Ibid., 48. Ernst Cassirer finds an epistemological explanation for the fact that abstract language draws on sensory language: “Even the most abstract formations in language still clearly evince their context in perception, as their primary basis in which they originally take root.” Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Vol. I, 146. However, he does not allow the distinction to collapse because, as David Hume first noted, there is no perceptual evidence for causality. He speculates that it is “possible that language can only ever advance to expressing purely ‘intellectual’ relationships, when it dissolves its tie with the spatial and ‘distinguishes’ itself from the latter.” Ibid., 159.

Before turning to examples of polysemy, it is worth noting that a particular notion of metaphor guides this analysis. As Paul Ricoeur rightly points out, many philosophers are led astray in their statements about metaphor when they treat metaphors as a) single words and b) substitutions for other words.²²³ Theories of metaphor generally agree that whole sentences establish the semantic context within which we construe metaphors. Max Black famously argued that metaphors require sentences as frames: a metaphor comes into “focus” within the “frame” of language around it that we construe as literal.²²⁴ My analyses below consider metaphors not as *words*, but as *meanings* available within the syntactical, textual, or historical contexts that allow ordinary words to be construed as images. Each metaphor under analysis stems from a discussion of particular German words that exhibit polysemy, where the word can refer either to a physical or to an

²²³ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 290.

²²⁴ Max Black gives the following as an example of a metaphoric sentence: “The chairman ploughed through the discussion.” And he explains his terms: “Let us call the word ‘ploughed’ the focus of the metaphor, and the remainder of the sentence in which that word occurs the frame.” Black, “Metaphor,” 275–276. Since Black’s text from 1955, the theory of metaphor as full sentence has evolved, so that one “focus” cannot be isolated within a metaphoric sentence. Roger M. White explains that metaphors require “bifurcated construal” of the whole sentence. White, *The Structure of Metaphor*, 21. According to White’s theory, we unconsciously differentiate between “primary” and “secondary sentences” in every metaphorical utterance. For instance, when Iago describes his scheme to persecute Othello by arousing his jealousy, Iago uses the following metaphoric sentence: “His unbookish Ielousie must construe poore Cassio’s smiles, gestures and light behaviours quite in the wrong.” The word “unbookish” must be connected with “construe” in order to make sense of the “book” metaphor. While we could eliminate the transferred epithet “unbookish” and have a “primary sentence,” we could also eliminate the literalizing nouns from the literal sentence and have the following “secondary sentence:” “Unbookish x must construe y quite in the wrong.” Ibid., 77. We understand the two sentences simultaneously when we read the hybrid sentence, remember the plot, and recall some Venetian history. White explains that “the metaphor rests upon a comparison between court etiquette and language,” in order to propose that Othello is illiterate in that language due to his foreign origins. Ibid., 69. White demonstrates how syntax, textual context, and history are all at play in the construal of metaphor.

abstract notion. However, we construe these meanings in contexts even if these contexts are unconscious to us as readers or translators; as Heidegger reminds: “Polysemy is always an historical polysemy.”²²⁵ The word for “knight” can only refer to a chess piece in a historical context where a “knight in shining armor” refers to a medieval cavalryman. I thus interpret the metaphors embedded in polysemous words in the syntactic, textual, and historical contexts where I find them.

***naheliegend*, obvious or just close at hand? (Blumenberg)**

Translators generally let the sentence context determine how they address the polysemy of the word “*naheliegend*,” which appears so often in Blumenberg’s prose. This word has philosophical meaning for Blumenberg, which we detect by contrasting his use of it with his use of other German words for “obvious.” In German, several words are kindred in meaning to the English word “obvious.” One is “*selbstverständlich*,” literally “self-understandable,” and related to the German phrase “*es versteht sich von selber*,” literally “it is understood out of itself.” Following Husserl, Blumenberg uses this word to describe an axiom, belief, or cultural construct that remained unquestioned before receiving theoretical attention. In a footnote to a translation of Husserl’s last major work, David Carr describes how Husserl uses this word: “Selbstverständlichkeit is

²²⁵ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 96.

another very important word in this text. It refers to what is unquestioned but not necessarily unquestion-able. ‘Obvious’ works when the word is placed in quotation marks, as it is here. In other cases I have used various forms of the expression ‘taken for granted.’”²²⁶ In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg describes Socrates’ turn away from natural science after “his experience with Anaxagoras’ world reason:” “he was blinded ...to things that he had earlier found quite obvious and easily intelligible (*ganz selbstverständlich und unmittelbar*).”²²⁷ *Selbstverständlichkeit* indicates the most misleading form of obviousness.

There are other German words whose meaning is close to “obvious,” but which match other English words more closely. These words are polysemously overcoded with visual appearances (*offensichtlich, ersichtlich*, literally “openly to sight” and “sightably”). These sometimes translate as “obvious,” but more often as “apparent,” “evident,” or “clear.” The only other German word regularly translated as “obvious” is *naheliegend*. Robert Wallace translates this word as “obvious” in a passage from *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* that describes

²²⁶ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, 24. As a predicate, this word indicates the lack of preconditions necessary for understanding the subject which it affirms. Blumenberg uses this word throughout his oeuvre, and it usually relates conceptually to Husserl’s pursuit of absolute subjectivity as a basis for apodictic truth about reality since subjective experience can persist independent of its objects: “Thus no real thing, none that consciously presents and manifests itself through appearances, is necessary for the Being of consciousness (in the widest sense of the stream of experience).” Husserl, *Ideas; General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology.*, 137.
²²⁷ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 250; Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 220.

how Augustine rejected Gnosticism because he was impressed at the more accurate “astronomical predications of the ‘philosophers.’”²²⁸ That could wrongly suggest that Augustine recommends philosophy, “[b]ut Augustine does not want his reader to be led to this obvious inference (*[a]uf diese naheliegende Konsequenz*).”

It would be implausible to claim that *naheliegend*, literally “lying nearby,” has as strong a theoretical valence for Blumenberg as *selbstverständlich* does. But the word occurs throughout Blumenberg’s work in connection with the Thales anecdote, in which concrete language is precisely what bears strong theoretical valence; the anecdote namely evolves within intellectual history “to depict the confrontation between theory and the lifeworld.” When he analyzes the Thales anecdote, he uses *naheliegend* to describe the “obvious” surroundings that Thales ignores when he tumbles into a well. He even modifies the German Plato-digest that he quotes without citing in order to insert the word “palpably obvious” (*Handgreiflich-Naheliegenden*) into the Theaetetus dialogue where the Greek just has “close” (ἐγγύς) and Kindt translates as “palpably close” (*Handgreiflich-Nahen*).²²⁹ That is because Blumenberg wants to conflate the concept of “obvious” with the bodily experience of “nearness;” the well’s nearness makes it

²²⁸ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 309–310; Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 295.

²²⁹ Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, 18; Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, 121; Plato and Kindt, *Platon-Brevier, grossenteils in neuen Übersetzungen*, 58. The passage is about how the philosopher studies essences of things “never lowering himself to anything close at hand.”

a synecdoche for Thales' immediate surroundings, but the theoretical value of the nearby is its obviousness.²³⁰

On the same page as the earlier quoted passage from *Legitimacy*, the superlative form of *naheliegend* refers to what was “lying nearest” to Thales. Robert Wallace does not translate this second instance with “obvious,” as he did with the first; instead, he translates it as “nearest at hand” following the etymology that the sentence so strongly evokes: “The antithesis that pervades the tradition of *curiositas* since the anecdote about Thales between on the one hand what is nearest at hand (*des Nächstliegende*) and essentially urgent and on the other hand the humanely remote matters (*das menschlich Fernliegende*) that conceal the former is reoccupied here (*bekommt hier eine neue Besetzung*).”²³¹ Wallace's choice to conceal the primary meaning of the word *naheliegend*, as “obvious,” is hard to question since the next clause utilizes the notion of physical proximity to describe the source of obviousness in the sense of spiritual importance, of what should not be missed: “Now what is nearest at hand is the perception and acknowledgement of the dependence of one's own capacity for truth upon illumination.” The concepts “obvious” and “near” prove oddly fungible in describing the history of the Thales anecdote, and, without an English

²³⁰ At some points, Blumenberg uses “the obvious” (*das Naheliegende*) to describe what Thales tripped over: “[Thales] does not stick to the obvious, and so that he lets the obvious thereby let it become his downfall, because it is so obscure to him.”

²³¹ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 310; Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 295.

word with the same polysemy as *naheliegend*, this becomes difficult to convey in English translation.

The language of distance and proximity is implicit in the German words that refer to what is “obvious” (*naheliegend*) or “obscure” (*fernliegend*). Blumenberg’s *Das Lachen der Thrakerin* often makes use of the etymologies of these two words: “lying nearby” and “lying far away,” respectively. Blumenberg draws on these meanings at different points, and these implicit meanings function as metaphors in conjunction with the words’ explicit meanings. What is near is different for every being at every moment, but proximity is a necessary condition for certain kinds of relationships to objects or beings. I must be extremely near food in order to eat it. And another being cannot be too far away for me to consider him or her as present company. However, we can only metaphorically speak of knowledge as close, and the more abstruse the knowledge, such as mathematical string theory, or Husserl’s convoluted late theory of “experiencing the other” (*Fremderfahrung*), the more we hear the metaphoric connotation of the German word “obscure:” such obscure knowledge “lies far off” (*fernliegt*) from the potential knower. It lies far from the sphere of immediacy where we interact with objects, where we eat food and recognize friends.

By using these metaphors, Blumenberg does not simply want to equate what is near with the “obvious,” and what is far with the “obscure.” Instead, he shows how different philosophers rely on the pathos that near and far connote.

Blumenberg relies on the obvious/near conflation in order to portray the cause of Socrates' downfall in his ignorance of the obvious: "What Socrates had discovered, after abandoning natural philosophy, was the sphere of *conceptuality* for things human, but even from this perspective the reality of the obvious (*Nächstliegenden*) was missed and therefore turned into a pitfall." (265)

Conceptuality differs from "reality" here as the far from the close: "reality" is what we affirm with the certainty of physical objects in front of us, but what is close also limits our horizons. The alternative, "the sphere of conceptuality," lies in the metaphorical distance, which implies that it can only be reached by heroic effort, or that it is irrelevant to our lives. Blumenberg explains how Heidegger champions the former association and refuses "relevance" as a value:

At the other end of philosophy, furthest off from its Milesian origin, the alternative between near and far, between obvious and obscure (*Nächstliegende und Fernstliegende*), is no longer resolved by the fact that the far off is determined by the nearby and can be understood as a projection from here; quite to the contrary, the nearby is precisely a form of displacement and concealment of what matters. (483)

In these quotations from the second and thirteenth chapters of *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, Blumenberg has drawn out a contrast between Plato and Heidegger on the basis of their views of relevance and of the importance of their metaphorical understanding of distance in defining which questions matters to philosophy.

In the above two quotations, it made sense to translate those close cognates of *naheliegend* with "obvious." How do we translate this word if we

want to preserve the implicit distance metaphor because its polysemy matters to its meaning? Blumenberg uses it in the following paragraph about the Christian attitude towards transcendence; here I translate the nominalized form of *naheliegend* three different ways:

If the Latin Patristic still accepts Ovid's account that humanity was bound to an upright gait with lifted head in order to observe the sky, then it becomes a metaphor: upon setting out toward the edge of the world, coming from what is familiar (*Naheliegendem*), the observer of heaven is on the right path to transcend that edge. His plummet would represent the downfall of someone who had not wanted to go high enough, who grew weary already at the pagan foreground of the cosmic inner surface, and therefore failed to attain transcendence. The problem was not that he failed to understand the importance (*das ihm Naheliegende*) of the massiveness of the earth lying in front of his feet, but rather that he failed to understand the importance of caring about the base of all cares, his eternal salvation. Here the metaphors of the distant correspond to those of the nearby (*Nächstliegenden*), which no longer has any external reality; it has become the internal horizon of the truth seeker, who must now worry about himself.²³² (308)

I translate the first occurrence of *naheliegend* with “familiar,” rather than “obvious,” since what is familiar is obvious as a result of past experience—which includes sensory experience. Here “familiar” is my attempt to capture “obvious” *and* to fit the image of leaving the world behind (since the world is not without

²³² Wenn dennoch die lateinische Patristik Ovids Wort von der Bestimmung des Menschen zum aufrechten Gang mit erhobenem Haupt zwecks Betrachtung des Himmels akzeptiert, wird dies Metapher: mit der eingeschlagenen Richtung vom Naheliegenden fort zur Grenze der ist Welt ist der Himmelsbetrachter auf dem rechten Wege zu deren Überschreitung. Sein Sturz wäre der dessen, der nicht hoch genug hinausgewollt hatte, am paganen Vordergrund der kosmischen Innenfläche träge geworden wäre und die Transzendenz verfehlt hätte: einer, der das ihm Naheliegende nicht verfehlt als die vor seinen Füßen liegende Massivität des Irdischen, sondern als die Sorge um den Kern aller Sorgen, sein ewiges Heil. Da entspricht der Metaphorik des Fernstliegende die des Nächstliegenden, das nun keinerlei äußere Realität mehr hat; es ist der innere Horizont des Wahrheit Suchenden geworden, dem es zunächst um sich selbst gehen muß.

surprises but is familiar as a context—compared to whatever “transcends that edge”). Two sentences later, *naheliegend* occurs and means “importance,” in a context where “in front of his feet” is already given and “obvious” would not capture the valence here: *das ihm Naheliegende* is what he *should* have seen. Only the third instance does “nearby” fit since distance is explicitly contrasted with *das Nächstliegende*. A translator must be flexible even with key words in order to capture the imagery at play in polysemous language.

However, my method entails a risk: if we translate words differentially by context, then we reduce the chance that they will ever be thematized as a term in later reception. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis notes that Freud himself had never treated his word for “belatedness” (*Nachträglichkeit*) as a philosophical term, but that Jacques Lacan discovered Freud’s reliance on a concept of “belatedness” to describe how it is not the infantile past that shapes our self-concept. Instead, “Freud had pointed out... that the subject revises past events at a later date (*nachträglich*) and that it is this revision which invests them with significance and even with efficacy or pathogenic force.”²³³ Laplanche and Pontalis thus lament the inconsistency with which French and English translators have translated that term since inconsistency makes it “impossible to trace its use.”²³⁴ But translators do future reception a service if we both translate

²³³ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 112.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

polysemous words differentially *and* give the original word in parentheses. By revealing the word's polysemy in our translation choices, we implicitly demand future work to prove or disprove the unity of the concept behind the word. Differential translations comprise a reading of the source text where this unity is not yet evident.

Grund, ground or reasons? (Heidegger)

The difficulties posed by Heidegger's language for translators have already received critical attention—unlike the language of the other two philosophers discussed here. This has not only to do with Heidegger's exceptional impact on philosophy inside and outside of German-speaking lands, but also to his own emphasis on translation questions. An edited volume has recently appeared, dedicated to the translation of Heidegger, and around the same time a book-length description of how to translate Heidegger according to Heidegger's own "paratactic method" has been published.²³⁵ Translation theorist Laurence Venuti has commented on the fact that the task of translating Heidegger has attracted accomplished philosophers who "allowed Heidegger's philosophy to increase their translatorly self-consciousness as well as inform their own

²³⁵ Schalow, *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking Essays in Honor of Parvis Emad*; Groth, *Translating Heidegger*.

philosophical research.”²³⁶ This section will focus on one translation choice which almost every translator of Heidegger has to face, a choice which almost every translator has commented on: translating the polysemy of *Grund*. As we will see, Heidegger’s disavowal of metaphor as a figure complicit with the mistakes of metaphysical dualism leaves translators with difficult decisions when Heidegger relies so heavily on concrete images that do not bear their concrete meanings—what is difficult to avoid calling metaphor.

Blumenberg positions his own theory of metaphor in opposition to Heidegger’s ban on metaphor and in concurrence with Husserl’s concessions to metaphor.²³⁷ Enough of the latter two philosophers’ works has been translated by different translators that there is a variety of choices and of commentary to consider when comparing translation strategies. I will begin with the ways in which translators have received Heidegger’s language of “grounding.” The language of “ground” or “reason”—both of which are captured in the German word *Grund*—has an even more permanent place in the Western philosophical lexicon than does the language of the “near” or “obvious.” *Obviousness* inheres in no object, and thus exists only as a judgment. By contrast, philosophers often speak—skeptically or affirmatively—of a non-mind-dependent *ground*, cause,

²³⁶ “Translators of Martin Heidegger’s texts have been particularly effective in developing new translation strategies, not only because his neologisms and etymologies, puns and grammatical shifts demand comparable inventiveness, but also because his texts address translation as a philosophical problem, exploring its decisive role in constituting the meaning of concepts.” Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 119.

²³⁷ See my introduction to *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* for more on this.

foundation, or reason behind certain ideas, relationships, or phenomena. The German word *Grund* stands for the concept of objectivity in the context of “the principle of sufficient reason” (*der Satz vom Grunde*), etymologically, “the setting of the ground.” Gottlob von Leibniz states the principle as “nothing is without a reason” (*nihil sine ratione est*). Leibniz considers the principle of sufficient reason valid for explaining truth and existence. As a logical principle, he called it the “wonderful secret” (*arcanum mirabile*) that governs the laws of identity and non-contradiction, because it explains how subjects connect to their predicates.²³⁸ As an ontological principle, Leibniz understood it to explain that existent beings have an ultimate cause (in God), but that the existence of animate beings is the proximate cause for the accomplishment of their wills. Later, Heidegger would claim that the principle’s function in logic does not obtain in ontology.

What does Heidegger hear in the term *Grund*? In a lecture course from 1927/28, the same “early” period when Heidegger conceived of *Being and Time*, Heidegger is as suspicious as he would ever be of *metaphysica specialis*, the division of beings into sensible and supersensible types—which differentiates God from nature and man. He does however endorse *metaphysica generalis*, the science of Being in general, which Kant conducts in the first transcendental deduction in *The Critique of Pure Reason* before the transcendental logic, wherein non-transcendent objects imply the more tainted form of dualistic metaphysics

²³⁸ Leibniz, “First Truths.”

practiced since Plato. But Kant's transcendental deduction at least suggests the possibility of the thinking that Heidegger esteems, ontology: "Laying the ground for metaphysics as a whole means unveiling the inner possibility of ontology."²³⁹ When Heidegger writes about Kant, he praises Kant's insight into the subjective basis of all propositional knowledge. Kant's insight laid the ground for ontology, according to Heidegger, and "[l]aying the ground as the projection of the inner possibility of metaphysics is thus necessarily a matter of letting the supporting power of the already-laid ground become operative."²⁴⁰ Here Heidegger has shifted from talking about a "ground" that Kant laid to a "ground" that preceded Kant, a ground whose status surpasses that of mental objects—whether or not Heidegger would call it "transcendent."

It is clear why the translator chose "ground" and not "reason" in the sentence above, even though the word "ground" in the last clause could mean "reason," in the sense of the reason why metaphysical entities affect physical or mental ones. It is not a merely mental "reason," but a real object whose existence cannot be restricted to its understanding by human "reason." Implicitly, the above quotations refers to architecture and to the natural surface on which it occurs: when human beings go about "laying the ground" (*Grundlegung*) for a building, they rely on the "supporting power" (*Trägerschaft*) of the earth that preceded

²³⁹ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 8.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

them. This further polysemy within the physical meanings of “ground” allows Heidegger to imply a continuity not only between the sensible and supersensible, but between the artificial and the natural.

Now we arrive at the most frequent and enigmatic extension of the metaphor in Heidegger, and the one which can only be translated with an image: Being as an abyss. Being itself is both the ground (*Grund*) of beings and an abyss (*Abgrund*) of Being in that it offers no explanations for the origin of beings.

Heidegger believed that Kant saw but rejected this truth:

Will not the *Critique of Pure Reason* have deprived itself of its own theme if pure reason reverts to the transcendental power of imagination? Does not this ground-laying lead us to an abyss (*Abgrund*)?

In the radicalism of his questions, Kant brought the ‘possibility’ of metaphysics to this abyss. He saw the unknown. He had to shrink back. It was not just that the transcendental power of imagination frightened him, but rather that in between [the two editions] pure reason as reason drew him increasingly under its spell.²⁴¹

In these two short paragraphs, Heidegger begins explaining why Immanuel Kant modified his transcendental deduction in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the first edition two deductions are given: a progressive one, which describes how sensory information enters into schemata, which together form a sense of “objective” reality, and a regressive one, which narrates the analytical judgments that reveal the elements within our sense of objective reality. The second edition contains only the latter. Heidegger considers the omission a

²⁴¹ Ibid., 117–118.

sign that “reason drew [Kant] under its spell,” so that Kant moved away from establishing the “possibility of metaphysics.” Translating *Grund* with “ground” illustrates the significance of what Kant missed in the second edition.

Throughout this text, Heidegger does not emphasize the relationship between *Grund* and *Abgrund*, as he later will, by hyphenating the latter term. The translator, Richard Taft, still treats *Grund* as a key term and uniformly renders it as “ground” (not “reason”). Heidegger was already conscious of the metaphoric suggestions of *Grund* at this phase of his thought. In *Being and Time*, he equates Being as *Grund* with *Abgrund* to offset its metaphoric solidity: “The meaning of Being can never be contrasted with entities, or with Being as the ‘ground’ (*Grund*) which gives entities support; for a ‘ground’ becomes accessible only as meaning, even if it itself is the abyss (*Abgrund*) of meaninglessness.”²⁴² The translators of *Being and Time* mark this passage with a footnote: “Notice the etymological kinship between ‘Grund’ (‘ground’) and ‘Abgrund’ (‘abyss’).”

Translators of Heidegger’s later works would render the relationship between *Grund* and *Abgrund* even more complexly. In his later texts, Heidegger does not find the etymology of *Abgrund* adequate to express its distant, but non-negative relationship to *Grund*. To emphasize that, he hyphenates the word as *Ab-*

²⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 2008, 193–194.

grund.²⁴³ Heidegger's translators could neither select one word nor even choose different words for different occasions, as the translators of the early Kant lecture and of *Being and Time* did respectively. Instead the translators of late Heidegger often paraphrase the word *Ab-grund* with several English words. The hyphenated German word for "abyss" refers the fact that Being does not have any reason to support it, and the metaphor of support becomes increasingly indispensable for Heidegger. One word was no longer adequate to translate a concept so reliant on German polysemy.

In a 1955/56 lecture entitled "The Principle of Reason," Heidegger confronts the polysemy of *Grund* directly. Heidegger traces the etymology of the German word *Grund*—which, we recall, can indicate both reason, in the sense of explanation, and the earth's surface—to the Latin *ratio*, which had a different polysemy, both the faculty of reason and reason in the sense of causal explanation. *Ratio* is often a translation of the Greek *logos*, which Heidegger interprets not just as speech, but as "let[ting] something appear," the meaning that

²⁴³ Richard Rojcewicz uses paraphrase to translate *Ab-grund* in the recently published translation of posthumous notes by Heidegger from 1941-42 ("a private pondering, never intended for publication" as the translator warns). Heidegger, *The Event*, xix. In these texts Heidegger uses both *Abgrund* and *Ab-grund*, and the translator renders them differentially with the words "abyss" and "abyssal ground" respectively. *Ibid.*, 301. Earlier translations of published work from the same phase of Heidegger's work choose neologism over paraphrase. "*Ab-grund* cannot be translated with 'abyss,' or 'non-ground' because neither of these renditions reflect that *Ab-grund* is a ground that prevails while staying away." Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, xxxi. In both cases, the figurative meanings of "ground" (as "foundation," "motivation," or "reason") disappear.

the German word *Grund* distorts most of all.²⁴⁴ Reginald Lilly, the translator of this text, finds it necessary to translate *both* meanings, ground and reason. He varies the translation between “ground,” “grounds,” “reason,” “reasons,” and, when the ambiguity is too essential to allow to the reader’s recollection of the polysemy being evoked, “ground/reason” is selected. Heidegger maintains throughout that a kinship exists between *ist* and *Grund* in the statement “Nothing is without reason” (*Nichts ist ohne Grund*). That kinship expresses the ontological understanding embedded in the principle of sufficient reason: “Being is akin to grounds, it is ground-like.”²⁴⁵ By the end of the book, the image of the ground becomes even more important to understanding the principle: “Being *qua* being remains ground-less. Ground/reason stays from being, namely, as a ground/reason that would first found being, it stays off and away. Being: the a-byss.... being ‘is’ the a-byss insofar as being and ground/reason: the same.”²⁴⁶ As in the Kant lecture, ground and abyss are identified with one another. Heidegger transparently evokes a paradoxical extended metaphor. In the earlier case, when Kant’s progressive transcendental deduction describes the receptive mind as capable of generating reality by imagination, that “lead us to an abyss.” In the second, the identity relationship between being and *Grund* leads us back to the conclusion already stated in *Being and Time*, that absolute Being is abysmal in that it does

²⁴⁴ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 107.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

not offer a supportive ground for human beings. As Blumenberg has suggested, “The closer Heidegger seems to come to his goal of answering the question of the meaning of Being, the more he needs to leave descriptive partial achievements behind him and to let metaphorical orientations shine through.”²⁴⁷ Indeed, the late Heidegger even excuses some of his own favorite metaphors (that of hearing and seeing as thinking) by insisting that knowledge and sensation cannot be severed.²⁴⁸

When the young Terrence Malick (before he began his film career) translates an early work of Heidegger’s concerned with the principle of sufficient reason, he is as rigorous as other translators of early Heidegger in his rule. Malick claims that the word “reasons” approximately covers the core meaning of *Grund* in Heidegger’s text:

Grund has a wide range of meanings, most of them adequately expressed in its derivatives or in other German words: ‘reason,’ ‘cause’ (*Ursache*), ‘basis’ (*Grundlage* or *Basis*), ‘motive’ (*Beweggrund* or *Motiv*), ‘origin’ (*Ursprung*), ‘foundation’ (*Gründung* or *Grundlegung*). ‘Reason,’ as in the phrase ‘the reason he came,’ would be the best translation, except that in philosophical contexts it can too easily be understood in the sense of a faculty or mental process—a sense reserved for the word *Vernunft*. To avoid such a confusion, we have abandoned Heidegger’s singular as often as possible and, in the first two sections, have written ‘reasons’ for Grund; in the last, due to the presence of the verbs *gründen* (‘ground’) and

²⁴⁷ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 125.

²⁴⁸ Heidegger denies the place of metaphor in philosophy, because, he claims, if we take “a listening and a bringing-into-view to be mere metaphors and thus take them too lightly. If our human-mortal hearing and viewing doesn’t have its genuine element in mere sense reception, then it also can’t be completely unheard of that what can be heard can at the same time be brought into view, if thinking views with an ear and hears with an eye.” Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 48.

begründen ('found'), we have written 'grounds.' Where Grund occurs as a prefix, for example in Grundcharakter and Grundsatz, it translates as 'basic (character/principle).'²⁴⁹

Malick includes this endnote to compensate for the restriction of polysemy in his translation of *Grund*. But his choice is consistent with the metaphor theory of the early Heidegger, who claims to use terms consistently. Malick's list resembles Heidegger's in *The Principle of Reason*; Heidegger lists meanings of *Grund* from "heavy, fertile soil" in the Allemanic-Swabian dialect to "bottom" of the sea in the compound *Meeresgrund*.²⁵⁰ But because Heidegger does not make the polysemy of *Grund* explicit when he *uses* it, and because Malick reads Heidegger as Heidegger wishes to be understood—using words non-metaphorically—Malick lets the philosopher's disdain for metaphor compel him to relegate the image of "the ground" to a footnote. This stands in stark contrast to the translator of the late work, who justifies his choice to paraphrase rather than choose a single word in the translator's note: "...when Heidegger uses the word Grund, he sometimes means the reader to hear it more saliently in the sense of 'reason' and at other times in the sense of 'ground.'"²⁵¹ Malick's interpretation of this text implicitly permits late Heidegger his metaphors on his own grounds, namely that he does not mean his concrete language metaphorically, but rather as a commentary on the false differentiation between perception and cognition: "...thinking as a listening

²⁴⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons.*, 133–134.

²⁵⁰ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 96.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

and a bringing-into-view [are not] mere metaphors.”²⁵² This is what I referred to in the introduction as Heidegger’s peculiar use of metaphor.

At one point, Malick lets the metaphor be heard. The hyphenated word *Ab-grund* opens up too many meanings to be translated with a single one-word equivalent in English. Thus Malick writes the following: “...freedom is the abyss of Dasein, its groundless or absent ground. (...*Freiheit [ist] der Ab-grund des Daseins*)”²⁵³ Malick translates one word with six, where apposition and disjunction loosely equate “abyss,” “groundless,” and “absent.” *Ab-grund* becomes “abyss” and “groundless [ground]” or alternately “absent ground.” Heidegger’s metaphors push Malick to paraphrase and ambiguity—even against Malick’s own stated principle of consistency. Translation must become commentary (embracing annotation and paraphrase) when the author fluctuates as Heidegger does between provoking the imagination and describing universal structures.

Strom, stream or flux? (Husserl)

This section of the paper involves metaphoric language that does not particularly plague translators of Husserl. Husserl’s “stream” language, like Heidegger’s “ground” language, involves extended metaphors, in which the physical properties of a different state of matter (solid, liquid) are called on.

²⁵² Ibid., 48.

²⁵³ Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons.*, 129.

Etymology opens up associations between these abstract terms and concrete objects. Husserl not only likened internal time consciousness to a stream, he pursued its semantic implications: headwaters, safe shores, and beings as swimmers.²⁵⁴ As Paul Ricoeur explains, when authors explicitly draw on words' etymological associations new metaphors emerge: "The reanimation of a dead metaphor... is a positive operation of de-lexicalizing that amounts to a new production of metaphor and, therefore of metaphorical meaning."²⁵⁵ In Husserl's case, the word *Strom*, usually translated as "stream," could also be translated as "flow"²⁵⁶ or "flux,"²⁵⁷ which describe instability and movement without implying that *water* is what moves. Paul Ricoeur comments on the difficulty of construing Husserl's sudden use of this word in *Cartesian Meditations*: "Rapidly, and

²⁵⁴ In his lecture series on internal time consciousness, the headwaters, or "original source" (*Urquelle*) of internal time consciousness is the "primal impression" (*Urimpression*) that "constantly rises up" in the present moment. Qtd. in Tymieniecka, *Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos. Book One*, 367. In a posthumously published note, Husserl describes the lifeworld as "the living stream in which I swim." Qtd. in Blumenberg, *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, 38. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl develops the metaphor of the shore or island as the perspective of the split ego, which allows the phenomenologist to observe and theorize his or her own stream of consciousness.

²⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 291.

²⁵⁶ Dorian Cairns suggests that "flow" would be the second best translation for *Strom* in Husserl's work. Cairns, *Guide for Translating Husserl.*, 108.

²⁵⁷ In Colin Smith's translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Husserl's notion of internal time-consciousness is rendered "temporal flux," but the verb for the process in which all reflection is caught is left untranslated: "... (they *sich einströmen*, as Husserl says)..." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, xv. These two translation choices: first, the less aquatic "flux" over "stream" and then, parenthetically, the untranslated German verb for "to flow in," together show Merleau-Ponty's ambivalence about the status of Husserl's stream metaphors. These metaphors' ambiguous status poses a translation challenge both for translators of full texts and in such passing mention.

without giving justification, *Husserl* posits that the multiplicity is a flux (*Strom*), that this flux is the life of the identical ego.”²⁵⁸

Ricoeur’s statement implies that the multiplicity of conscious moments need not flow at all—neither as a flux nor as a stream. Many philosophers have noted the static nature of perceptions. David Hume discusses the fragmentary nature of experience in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and he calls consciousness “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”²⁵⁹ Although Hume mentions the “flux” of consciousness, this flux was not a feature of consciousness itself but only describes its ever-changing nature. Already we see how a relatively abstract word like “flux” does not carry the strong sense of continuity implied by the word “stream.” The continuity of “stream” may come from experience of observing the undifferentiated fluid in creeks, rivers, and even in pouring water. Ernst Mach mixes the metaphors of “chain” (*Kette*) and “stream” (*Strom*) to describe what links consecutive sensations. William James and Henri Bergson use the metaphors of zoetropes and

²⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *Husserl*, 93. The exact cognate word “flux” is used in the French text: “Husserl propose rapidement et sans justification que le multiple est un flux (*Strom*)...” Ricoeur, *À l’école de la phénoménologie*, 202. However, *flux* has more aquatic connotations in French, especially since it is the word for “ebb” or “incoming tide,” whose opposite, the outgoing tide, is called *reflux*. While “flux” can simply mean “stream” in French, its polysemy generates the sense of the primary tidal movement, the tide’s approach as opposed to its recoil—which the imagination figures as secondary (and which the French *reflux* marks as derivative). Does this metaphor naturalizes the streaming of consciousness, or does it present the temporal stream as reversible?

²⁵⁹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 188.

films, respectively, to describe the ways in which images do not actually stream, but only appear to stream due to their rapid succession.²⁶⁰ Although James gave the term “stream of consciousness” its currency in the English-speaking literary world, he was skeptical about its adequacy as a description.

Husserl explains his choice of the word *Strom* in the 1905 lecture on internal time consciousness discussed below. There Husserl explains that he describes consciousness as a “stream” (*Strom*) in a deliberate catachresis, that is, as a well-known word transferred to signify an erstwhile inadequately designated concept. This section will focus on how translators should respond to Husserl’s meta-commentary on his own use of the word “Strom.” This will illuminate the range of uses that philosophers make of metaphor, insofar as Husserl’s particular case for the catachretic use of *Strom* differs both from Blumenberg’s assessment of “absolute metaphor” as a limit marker for possible understanding and from Heidegger’s use of perceptual metaphors while calling them “non-metaphorical.” If Husserl’s “stream” metaphor is deliberately chosen *as* a metaphor, and not as a fixed term, should translators accentuate or silence its aquatic character?

In contrast to Heidegger’s historical, humanistic, and etymological ruminations, Edmund Husserl insisted that phenomenology’s scope includes non-

²⁶⁰ These comparisons occur in James’ *The Principles of Psychology* and in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*. Recent research in neuroscience also understands perception as static and fragmented; this research is reviewed in Sacks, “In the River of Consciousness.”

human, non-linguistic consciousness.²⁶¹ The scope of his project determined his different relationship to metaphor. Husserl was committed to describing acts of consciousness in the most conceptual language possible, and thus every metaphor had to be marked as such. Husserl was aware of the need for catachresis when no names are adequate. This was how he first approached the concept of internal time-consciousness:

It is absolute subjectivity and has the absolute properties of something to be denoted metaphorically as ‘flux,’ as a point of actuality, as a primal source-point, from which springs the ‘now,’ and so on. In the lived experience, we have the primal source-point and continuity of moments of reverberation (*Nachhallmomenten*). For all this, names are lacking.²⁶²

By declaring “flux” a metaphor, Husserl would delimit the sphere of metaphor to those words announced *as* metaphor. The way in which time can be said to flow

²⁶¹ He first appears to relent from this scope in his last major work: Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*.

²⁶² Husserl, *Husserl, Shorter Works*, 286. Derrida notes this concession of indeterminacy in Husserl and finds it unpersuasive: “What is unnamable, according to Husserl, are only the ‘absolute properties’ of this subject; the subject therefore is indeed designated in terms of the classical metaphysical schema which distinguishes substance (present being) from its attributes....” Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs.*, 84 f.9. According to Derrida, the present moment could be understood through its difference from other moments—rather than through its enmeshment in a subject-object relation. This expands Heidegger’s case that Husserl’s phenomenology has merely replaced the Cartesian God with the transcendental ego and thus continues to endorse metaphysical assumptions. As Blumenberg shows, however, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology demands that we quit expecting to discover the structure of experience and decide that we already know the meaning of being: “[Heidegger’s] reformulation of the question of being avoids Platonic anamnesis’s path through the concept, by making the understanding of being the essence of Dasein, without having to say what logical ‘form’ it takes.” Blumenberg, “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” 99. Relegating subject-object relationships to “inauthenticity” not only shuts down important philosophical questions as secondary to the question of being, it conceals the ethically crucial challenge of distinguishing subjects from objects within the intersubjective realm.

has no precise basis in experience, according to Husserl, but he considers time consciousness to resist more precise description.²⁶³

Blumenberg has written extensively about Husserl's caution with metaphor, and thus Blumenberg finds Husserl singularly insightful in his admission that he is indeed working with a metaphor when he speaks of the "stream of consciousness" as early as *Logical Investigations*. Blumenberg quotes admiringly from that work: "thus consciousness in the phenomenological sense 'implies nothing more than that certain contents are composite parts in one unity of consciousness, in the phenomenological unified stream of consciousness of one empirical I.'" ²⁶⁴ *Logical Investigations* uses "stream of experience" and "stream of consciousness" interchangeably, according to Blumenberg, because "[t]he metaphor of the stream allows exactly those contents to appear as a real whole, wherein whatever consciousness experiences is *its* experience, in a way that posits no difference between conscious content and experience." But does this metaphor

²⁶³ Philosophers dispute over which phenomena allow for description. Time has been treated with varying degrees of describability for various reasons. Augustine saw an antinomy in the nature of time, which led him to dispute the real existence of time: "...if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity. If then, in order to be time at all, the present is so made that it passes into the past, how can we say that this present also 'is'? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be. So indeed we cannot truly say that time exists..." Augustine, *Confessions*, 231. Kant, for all of his skeptical destructions, considered time one of the two "forms of intuition" along with space, and as such an absolutely undeniable foundation of transcendental knowledge. However, in Heidegger's interpretations of Kant, we are reminded that time is precisely our barrier from "things in themselves." Time marks our limit, if it is the condition for the finite and non-real form of knowledge that Kant considers to be the human lot. Husserl does not concede to limitations on *knowledge* of time as Augustine does. Husserl only proposes sets limits on the *terminology* that can describe the temporal quality of experience adequately.

²⁶⁴ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 109.

sidestep Husserl's claim to have demonstrated the internal unity of consciousness?²⁶⁵

The question would not escape Husserl's attention. The second edition of his *Logical Investigations* appeared in 1913, as did his next major work, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. According to Blumenberg, both of these publications explore a problem that had gone unnoticed in the first edition of *Logical Investigations*: the tension between defining the ego as *streaming* and as *polarized* against the external world. "The ego may stream onward, but the stream of consciousness does not primarily bear the unity of the ego; instead, it furnishes the production of time."²⁶⁶ Husserl takes on Paul Natorp's claim that the *content* of consciousness may be described as a unified stream, but that the *ego itself* cannot be identified with this stream. Between the first and second editions of *Logical Investigations*, Husserl had developed his account of internal time consciousness, in which he describes three moments in time as equally present in any intentional state of consciousness: "Constantly flowing, the *impressional* consciousness passes over into an ever fresh *retentional* consciousness."²⁶⁷ Husserl describes this co-presence of the recent past with new impressions as the temporal equivalent of the visual field. In other words, consciousness contains

²⁶⁵ Kant after all had disproved the possibility of apodictic knowledge of the self as an objective unity in the "Transcendental Dialectic" in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. And the apodictic necessity of the Ego's endurance across time was an important component of what Husserl's phenomenological works set out to prove.

²⁶⁶ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 110–111.

²⁶⁷ Husserl, *Husserl, Shorter Works*, 280.

multiple moments at once, just as the eye can perceive multiple objects in front of it at once. The slightly less recent past moments are constantly fading into “Objective time” where they are only available through recollection—just as we still consider objects present in the room with us when they fall outside of the field of peripheral vision.²⁶⁸ This collation of conscious moments (*Retention*) from a now-point (*Impression*) coheres with the third co-present moment, a primordial form of anticipation (*Protention*). As Husserl explains: “Every primordially constitutive process is animated by protentions which voidly

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 281. The capitalization of “Objective” is explained in a translator’s note at the beginning of the translation of “The Lectures on Internal Time-Consciousness from the year 1905:” “Following the practice of Dorion Cairns, the translator of Husserl’s *Cartesianische Meditationen* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1960), to differentiate the terms *Objekt* and *Gegenstand*, both of which are used by Husserl, I have chosen to translate the word *Objekt* by *Object* and *Gegenstand* by *object*. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of words derived from *Objekt* and *Gegenstand*.” Ibid., 277. Hence, “Objective time” must have been *objektive Zeit* in German. It is extremely telling that translators use capitalization to illustrate a crucial difference in Husserl, between “Objectivity” as the fulfillment of intentionality, where objects (*Objekte*) appear to transcend subjective appearance, and “objectivity,” as the mere fact of intentionality, where objects (*Gegenstände*) stand across from the subject. Capitalization has a different function for translators of Heidegger: to illustrate his distinction between Being (*Sein*), as the foundation for the possibility of existence, and being (*Seiendes*), the mere fact of a given existence. Many disputes between the two philosophers can be understood by comparing how capitalization functions differently as a translation strategy in these authors’ works. Husserl’s Objectivity only produces the felt quality of objects’ reality, which still requires intersubjectivity to be grounded outside of an individual consciousness. Heidegger considers intersubjectivity (*Mit-Sein* in his language) a starting point of consciousness. For him, beings should be interested in understanding their reliance on their relationship to Being itself, not merely with their pre-given certainty of the world. While Husserl would not disagree that the world is pre-given to an unreflective consciousness (as the *Lebenswelt*), he believes that philosophy’s task is to interpret our understanding of this world, not to its existential conditions. Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time* relies on the “ontological difference” (the difference between Being and beings) as Husserl’s project does on the far more *worldly* distinction between objects as collections of momentary sense impressions and Objects constituted by recollection. Crudely put, Husserl maps our entry into a shared world, and Heidegger charts our escape.

constitute and intercept what is coming, as such, in order to bring it to fulfillment.”²⁶⁹

Husserl articulates this structure of internal time-consciousness in a 1905 lecture, the same text from which I quoted earlier, where Husserl expresses that describing subjective time as a “stream”²⁷⁰ is nothing more than a provisional metaphor. Blumenberg was interested in the dilemma that Husserl confronted about applying the expression “stream” to consciousness in his works from the first decade of the twentieth-century:

From the tumult of sensations, consciousness produces a formal structure, as ‘time’ and through time, which is now no longer flowing, although it carries itself forward in a single direction from the ‘standpoint’ of momentary consciousness and its primary impressional experience.... How does such talk of the stream of consciousness come about with all of the perplexities of its interfering metaphors of interwovenness and stream and pole?²⁷¹

While the “stream of consciousness” metaphor provided a way to picture the transcendental realm of consciousness (as an alternative to Ernst Mach’s model where sensations flowed, but consciousness itself occupied a fixed position), it also undermined any attempt to describe consciousness as possessing structural stability. Blumenberg explains that fluid metaphors interfere with the possibility

²⁶⁹ Husserl, *Husserl, Shorter Works*, 283.

²⁷⁰ Husserl also uses words related to *Strom* to describe the temporal movement of consciousness as a unity. “River” (*Fluß*) allows for an admission of perplexity when modified as “an eternal Heraclitean river.” Qtd. in Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 114. If Husserl wants to show his efforts to minimize metaphoric polysemy, then he may select “flow/flux” (*fluxus*), where Latin amplifies the effect of the word’s abstraction (at least from the materiality of water). Husserl, *Husserl, Shorter Works*, 286.

²⁷¹ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 112.

of establishing phenomenology as a method, since all of Husserl's conceptual categories, moments, and objectivities blur together in the flowing movement of consciousness.

Blumenberg explains that, since Husserl never purged the stream metaphor from his phenomenology, he ought to have discovered how fluidity presented methodological advantages, and not just problems:

the river only has the amorphous structure of a fluid when approached superficially and for the first time, but closer analysis shows essential classifications of parts and part clusters; or the thematization of the river leads its observer to the origins, to the sources, where the whole can be observed in its purity before it surges into formlessness.²⁷²

Instead of embracing such possibilities, Husserl considered consciousness a problematic fluid, which retained its formlessness even at its sources, since these were sometimes empty and sometimes fulfilled "intentions," and thus, as with time consciousness, the movement between objects and categories flowed in both directions, and thus in no easily schematized way.

All of this brings Blumenberg to the conclusion that "inconsistencies and interferences are to be expected everywhere in phenomenology."²⁷³ Husserl would later extend the "stream" metaphor to include a metaphorical "island," which would also allow "the possibility of imagining the streaming of the stream

²⁷² Ibid., 115.

²⁷³ Ibid.

of consciousness as observable.”²⁷⁴ The *Cartesian Meditations* describe reflection as the “splitting of the Ego” where “the phenomenological Ego establishes himself as ‘*disinterested onlooker*,’ above the naively interested Ego.”²⁷⁵ The trouble with this, however, is the same as the problem that plagues Heraclitus’ stream metaphor, as Blumenberg explains: “One cannot step into the same river twice, but one returns to the same shore, even when one has let the river carry him or her, in order to remain one and the same as it at least for a time.”²⁷⁶ The word choice “for a time” bespeaks all of the metaphoric inexactitude of identifying with the stream of time: it is only “a time” not all of time that we are ever caught up in. The metaphor fails insofar as we never escape time to an island of reflection. A disjunction emerges: consciousness is a stream *or* an island within that stream.

Many abstract terms contain implicit metaphors, but not all metaphors are easily incorporated into conceptual language. With a shrewd awareness of this problem, Heidegger would reject the fluidity of consciousness in favor of fixity. As Blumenberg describes it,

Heidegger’s ‘consciousness’ does not *flow*, it *stands*. It also does not stand *by* itself and not bent *over* itself; it is *outside* itself, as it finds itself to be pre-given in being-always-already with what it is not: the world. The unavailability of expressing the time concept in a spatial metaphoric—

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁷⁵ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 35.

²⁷⁶ Qtd. in Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 103; Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, 12.

which is in no way avoided in the metaphors of the stream—receives a fundamentally static character.²⁷⁷

Heidegger's language animates the spatial separation between here and there in order to show how *Dasein*'s etymology, "being there," characterizes the essence of existence as we know it: we only *are* outside itself since our attention is always grasping into the future, towards the results of activities, and within the parameters set by the past. He does not follow Husserl in apologizing for the inadequacy of spatial metaphors for describing such abstract relations. Instead, he embraces them and dubs them non-metaphorical.

Conclusions

How should translators respond differently to Husserl's lifelong ambivalence about metaphors and to Heidegger's full embrace of polysemic words, which he claims are not metaphors? If Heidegger has picked less conspicuous, but more polysemic metaphors, then we have a much more difficult time deciding whether or not to translate them. Blumenberg's reliance on suggestive polysemy makes his language more akin to Heidegger's than to Husserl's. Robert Savage requires a paraphrasing strategy like the one Lilly and Malick employed with Heidegger when Savage translates chapter eight of Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. The chapter title in German is four words: "*Terminologisierung einer Metapher: Wahrscheinlichkeit*." In

²⁷⁷ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 126.

English it doubles to eight words: “Terminologization of a Metaphor: From ‘Verisimilitude’ to ‘Probability.’”²⁷⁸ Savage explains in a footnote that historical differences in the German word’s meaning inform his translation choices: “*Wahrscheinlichkeit* literally means ‘verisimilitude’ or ‘truthlikeness’ but today has the primary meaning of ‘probability’; the difference is that between the *likeness* and *likelihood* of truth. My translation of the term varies depending on context.” When we translate philosophers’ work on historical meanings, we must translate words in their historical meanings. Some words revert to archaic meanings in a careful translation even though they may not necessarily do so for readers of the source text.

As a theorist of metaphor, Blumenberg preferred to think of absolute metaphor as a limit to knowability, rather than as a rhetorical effect that could be disavowed by declaring oneself a monist and by then asserting that only metaphysical dualists would use metaphor (when in fact, as Paul Ricoeur reminds, metaphor by no means must be complicit in metaphysics).²⁷⁹ We still must register in Blumenberg a stylist whose language draws from Heidegger, and translate him as delicately as we translate Heidegger. This is the case even though Blumenberg clearly sympathizes far more with Husserl’s philosophical treatment

²⁷⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 81.

²⁷⁹ “The same metaphors can contribute to a Platonism of the invisible or glorify the visibility of appearance.” Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 311. Indeed, Ricoeur is right to describe metaphor as dialectical: it may be required to express abstraction, but abstract language users eventually seek *new* metaphors (“living metaphors” in his words), rather than rest content with the achievement of de-concretized meaning.

of metaphor than with Heidegger's concealment of the problem under more cleverly obscure writing. As Blumenberg laments:

It is no coincidence that Husserl's rhetorical means of fortification (*Befestigungsmittel*) can be rendered over (*herauspräpariert*) more succinctly than Heidegger's, who simply has the linguistically stronger armament (*Bestückung*) and does not easily allow glances into the handwork of his linguistic abilities, with which he instigates and builds the internal opposition of phenomenologist against phenomenologist, of the epigone against the founder. By contrast, Husserl's self-disclosures (*Selbstentblösungen*) are metaphorologically unmistakable.²⁸⁰

In translating the two sentences above, the presence of extended metaphor guided my choices. I have emphasized the military overtones of the first sentence. In the second one, I could have also translated *Selbstentblösung* as “self-exposure” and thus emphasized even more strongly the metaphorical subtext that Blumenberg implicitly builds here: Heidegger is attacking Husserl—but not just metaphorically, in the idiomatic sense where “the normal way for us to talk about attacking a position is to say ‘attacking a position.’”²⁸¹ Blumenberg extends the military metaphor of “fortification” with “rendering over,” “armament,” and “exposure,” in order to demonstrate how the consistency of a philosopher's semantic fields, the lack of mixed metaphor, renders their claims more persuasive, even if the subject matter should not allow such consistency. According to Blumenberg, Heidegger was not attacking Husserl by debating his claims, but by outdoing him in rhetorical impact. It is not only that Heidegger's metaphorical

²⁸⁰ Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 128.

²⁸¹ Johnson and Lakoff, “Conceptual Metaphors in Everyday Life,” 289.

innovations are polemical—in that they present his own theories as incompatible with his teacher’s—but that Heidegger conceals his weaknesses better, and thus, success in this figurative battle, as in many military battles, becomes a matter of seeing without being seen. Blumenberg theorizes this explicitly elsewhere:

The human, the creature which stands up and leaves perception’s immediacy, which crosses the horizon of the senses, is the creature of *actio per distans*. . . . Concepts arose out of *actio per distans*, out of acting in spatial and temporal distance. . . . The turning point situation in this development can only be one in which flight could not voluntarily continue, where the threatened animal saw itself as up against the necessity of having to subsist despite its lack of physiological equipment for the fight body-to-body against its persecutor. The compromise consists in acting from a distance, of *actio per distans*, in handling projectiles. It is no coincidence that throwing devices and guns dominate the history of human actions.²⁸²

Not only does rhetorical mastery thus depend on concealing one’s rhetorical arsenal, but mastering concepts can only be achieved at a distance from physical threat, which may require withdrawal from a threat. Flight, or at least delayed approach, must precede fight for the *action per distans* of conceptual thought to succeed. Although not all concepts are *metaphysical*, we do experience linguistic expression as *less physical* than other forms of action. And in this less physical space, we may still plan for conflicts and other imminent problems, but philosophers, especially the three discussed above, refuse to reduce their claims to calculated attacks against opponents.

²⁸² Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 10–13.

Despite the desirability of reproducing exactly what a philosopher means by his words, this chapter has shown that philosophers' theories of metaphor are not the prevailing criterion for deciding how to translate the metaphors they use. These theories are incredibly important for thinking through the philosophical question of what metaphors can and must express, what they express best, and how and why we might be strategic in their use. However, translators cannot become distracted by philosophers' purported stance on metaphor. Blumenberg's engagement with Husserl's thought and language far exceeds his sporadic statements about Heidegger, where his terseness seems to express impatience. But Blumenberg's metaphor use is more Heideggerian than Husserlian. And the translator of Blumenberg would do best to take notice of his metaphoric subtexts. But Blumenberg does not make his preference for certain images as conspicuous as Heidegger does. The translator must therefore be alert to the ways that Blumenberg competes against Heidegger's coded and covert polemics against phenomenology, against his *actio per distans*. Blumenberg does this through his own polysemous language.

On the other hand, Blumenberg's polysemy should not be translated as gratuitously as Heidegger's. Too much paraphrase would ruin the effect of simplicity that Blumenberg sometimes seeks. I would rather choose one word to render any word of Blumenberg's than several, as Lilly rightly does in perplexity with late Heidegger, translating polysemous words by disjunction (*Lichtung* as

“lighting or clearing”).²⁸³ Let us try to maintain the implied space for imagination expressed in different philosophers’ language—some wish to restrict that space and some wish to open it. Only if we translate polysemous words in philosophical texts to reveal their metaphoric meanings can readers assess how closely a philosopher’s metaphor use aligns with that philosopher’s theory of metaphor.

²⁸³ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 88.

Appendix: *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Protohistory of Theory* by Hans Blumenberg, translated, with a critical introduction and annotations, by Spencer Hawkins

Translator's preface: Blumenberg's Tropes

Blumenberg is not an ornamental stylist; the most marked feature of his prose is the alternation between short, elliptical sentences and long, recursive ones.¹ In *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, this conspicuous syntactic alternation masks a subtler lexical one: Blumenberg repeats ordinary German words to denote different concepts in different passages. In my third dissertation chapter, I discuss the polysemy of *naheliegend*, whose meaning in *Laughter* oscillates between concrete and abstract: “nearby” and “obvious.” Below I narrate the encounter with three polysemous signs in *Laughter*: Blumenberg’s varied use of the morpheme “understand” (*-verstand-*) in various lexical and syntactic contexts, the figurative implications of “reoccupation” (*Umbesetzung*), and the varied quantifying effect of the word “one” (*ein-*) in Blumenberg’s prose. While the effects are not ostentatious, the repeated *-verstand-* compounds caused translation difficulties wherever a cognate of “-understand-” did not fit. The background meanings of *Umbesetzung* were not easy to render. And I had to analyze the distinction between “a” and “one,” which English grammar requires, in order to discover the polysemy in the German word *ein-*.

¹ Contrast: “Theory is what we do not see.” (*Theorie ist was man nicht sieht.*) and “But at the same time the theory of forms restores universality to the interest in the world, within which the human appears only among other things, as an answer to the question of the possibility of knowledge.”

Understanding and its others

For Blumenberg *Verstand*, the German word usually translated as “understanding,” describes both an everyday experience and the goal of philosophy, as it does for Kant and Husserl. In *Laughter*, Blumenberg refers indirectly to Immanuel Kant’s use of “understanding” to delineate the scope of the knowable. According to Kant, when we understand objects, even abstract ones like geometric shapes, we relate an abstraction to a concrete perception; in Kant’s language, we fulfill empty concepts through perception (*Anschauung*). Non-metaphysical thinking relies on the faculty of understanding, whereas properly metaphysical thinking relies solely on the faculty of reason. In Kant’s “Doctrine of Transcendental Method” from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he advises against pursuing ontological definitions of metaphysical entities, such as God and the soul. Blumenberg emphasizes that the Thracian maid’s simple-mindedness is often the condition of her worldliness and thus puts her in the proper position to grasp the (Kantian) limits on understanding. Even “absolute metaphors” can only offer non-metaphysical understanding of metaphysical entities, according to Blumenberg. Absolute metaphors marks places where understanding reached a limit, “the logical ‘perplexity’ for which metaphor steps in.”²

But we must be careful to look at context to see what kind of “understanding” he evokes in specific passages. Blumenberg’s reading of the anecdote of Thales and Thracian maid often hinges on the morpheme meaning “understanding” (*-verstand-*). Blumenberg interprets the anecdote as a display of various sorts of “misunderstanding”

² Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

(*Mißverständnis*). He refers to the maid as “a paragon of misunderstanding,” the anecdote as “the image of the well-plummet and of its misunderstanding,” the maid’s response as “the outbreak of misunderstanding,” and the anecdote’s historical function as “the most enduring prefiguration of all the tensions and misunderstandings between the lifeworld and theory.” (291, 448-9, 491, 255)

Blumberg finds so much philosophical resonance in the *-verstand-* morpheme that he emphasizes its multivalence with a *figura etymologica*, that is, the use of differently inflected words containing the same morpheme together in one phrase or clause. I will give two examples. Plato (and the Church Fathers a half-millennium later) used simple-minded figures to suggest the innate universality of certain truths. Even if the Thracian maid misunderstands Thales’ astronomical ambitions, her naïve understanding has the merit of being natural. She plays a Parsifal figure in many versions of the anecdote. Blumenberg captures the disjunction at the heart of her character as a wise simpleton: “The Thracian woman betrays more than a knowing kind of ignorance (*verständiger Unverständigkeit*).” (294) The two words derived from *-verstand-* show a split within the concept. Failure to understand Thales is still “knowing” for Plato, who especially reveres the insights that even the simple-minded can display.³

Elsewhere in the book Blumenberg disapproves of a modern attempt to endow misunderstanding with the exalted status of its opposite. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker’s writes about one of Heidegger’s lectures: “That is philosophy. I do not understand a word. But that is philosophy.”⁴ Blumenberg replies that to reduce philosophy to incomprehensibility is to posit confusion, or obtuseness, as the essence of philosophical

³ For a clear case of this in Plato, see the geometric inductions achieved by the slave Meno in the eponymous dialogue.

⁴ Weizsäcker, “Begegnungen in Vier Jahrzehnten.,” 241.

understanding. “What else if not obtuseness (*Unverstand*) would be the essential kind of understanding (*Verständnisart*) in this form of thought?” (472) In this case, the maid’s “knowing kind of ignorance (*verständiger Unverständigkeit*)” returns to designate not the simpleton but the irrationalist philosopher. In both cases, the positive terms “verständlich” and “Verständnisart” respectively, recall Kant’s notion of “understanding” as faculty of mind of grasp fully, whose limits philosophy can thematize. But in both cases Blumenberg finds cases where theological ardor wagers its own truth on the side of ignorance, misunderstanding, and obtuseness.

In chapter thirteen of *Laughter* and in other works, Blumenberg contemplates the implications of Edmund Husserl’s use of the morpheme *-verstand-* in the compound “self-evident” (*selbstverständlich*). A chapter in his posthumous *Theorie der Lebenswelt* is entitled “To understand the self-evident” (*Das Selbstverständliche verstehen*). Such self-reflexive understanding is Husserl’s goal in describing the lifeworld, that realm of familiar experience that Husserl characterizes as self-evident: “The concept of self-evidence as homogenous descriptive determinant of the lifeworld is not as harmless as it sounds.”⁵ The danger comes when Husserl claims to understand *what* is self-evident to *everyone* and to be able to state the rules that govern the transcendental ego’s self-constitution. By juxtaposing the verb “to understand” (*verstehen*) and “self-evidence” (*das Selbstverständliche*), Blumenberg shows how Husserl’s term reveals a central tension in philosophical thought: we cannot properly imagine alternatives to our understanding without thereby having a different understanding.

⁵ Blumenberg, *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, 106.

Reoccupation, a catachresis for catachresis

Umbesetzung is a catachresis, not a coinage of Blumenberg's own. It is normally the substantive of the verb *umbesetzen*, which means something like "to re-administer," that is, to assign a person to a position, role, or post, which was formerly assigned to someone else. Blumenberg uses *Umbesetzung* catachretically, so that it refers to the reassignment not of persons, but of *ideas*, and not to social positions, but to positions of prominence as legitimate answers to questions. In *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, the word is primarily used to refer to reinterpretations made over the ages to the basic structures of the Thales anecdote. He also uses *Umbesetzung* to describe the underlying cultural changes that show up as revisions to the anecdote.

Blumenberg uses the word in six different chapters of *Laughter*, chapters five, eight, nine, ten, eleven, and twelve. In each of these chapters, Blumenberg notices epochal changes that influence how authors understand the anecdote. Chapter five, entitled *Umbesetzungen*, offers a telling variation on Blumenberg's best known example of the concept "reoccupation" in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. In *Legitimacy*, the term refers to the act of providing new answers to philosophical questions that mattered at a certain historical moment, in the spirit of clearing the way for a qualitatively different line of questioning. This happened when Enlightenment-era secular humanism replaced medieval Christian theology, according to Blumenberg: "What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as the *transposition* (*Umsetzung*) of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* (*Umbesetzung*) of answer positions that had become vacant and

whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.”⁶ In chapter five of *Laughter* the reverse process occurs: the Church Fathers reoccupy questions about the nature and movement of the stars that arose in the context of Greek theoretical curiosity. For instance, Church Father Tertullian has mystical soteriological insight reoccupy the position of the maid’s common sense.

The concept of “reoccupation” functions similarly in chapter eight, when Blumenberg discusses the early modern historians, who evaluated the anecdote for its historical veracity. Pierre Bayle, the preeminent French encyclopedist before Denis Diderot, does a reception history of the anecdote in which he accounts for its erotic variant (the cuckolded astrologer). Blumenberg writes: “The erotic moment is not just poetic license. It represents the ‘realism’ of what gets in the way on earth, and it completes the ‘reoccupation’ of the position occupied by various antitheses to obscurity within the whole tradition of the anecdote.” (378) In the early Enlightenment, critical historians reoccupied the question that Church Fathers reoccupied from the pagans: what value is the antithesis to irrelevance? Tertullian’s answer was salvation, and Bayle’s answer is historical truth. His answer has the force of a reoccupation in that he asserts its universality—not even as universal truth, but as *the* universal meaning of the anecdote.

The concept of reoccupation is then stretched beyond the meaning it had in chapters five and eight; in chapters nine through twelve, it refers to replacement *anecdotes*, not new interpretations, and ones that loosely fulfill the “parameter” of the original. Chapter nine thematizes reoccupation generally when it ends with a note about the anecdote being reoccupiable. “What matters is that in the original configuration of the Thales anecdote, a

⁶ *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 65.

parameter is pre-given, whose positions are reoccupiable (*umbesetzbar*).” (225) This possibility is noted again in the opening of chapter ten: “We have shown that an imaginative potential was available in the Thales anecdote that permits us to expect not only distortions of its pool of figures, but also reoccupations.” (408)

These two chapters both deal with versions of the anecdote that would not qualify as reception events: alternatives that did not exhibit the tableau of fallen astronomer and mocking observer. Chapter eleven deals with an even more deviant “reoccupation;” the story of a Polish police officer who mistakes Alexander von Humboldt’s astronomy for insurgent operations. “Due to this ‘reoccupation’ of the archaic schema, it is worth looking into the police report in its entire scope.” (433) While the scene has changed dramatically, the story does evoke “the archaic schema” in that it involves astronomy and misunderstanding—the biggest change is that, in the scientific age, the onlooker’s misunderstanding is laughable, not the astronomer’s work.

Even Nietzsche, the focal figure in chapter twelve, reoccupies the anecdote without retelling it; instead, Nietzsche discusses Thales’ political influence. As Blumenberg notes, “Nietzsche was too fascinated with the first proposition ever spoken in philosophy to have been able to turn a comparable attentiveness to the night scene of the well-plummet.” (462) For all of his concern with rhetoric, that would be a distraction from his interest in political effects, the grandest goals of rhetoric. Nietzsche would have had to vary the story dramatically to suit his own reoccupation of dogma with art: “We may wish to flesh out how he would have needed to transform this story in order to procure a creative expression for his ‘reoccupation’ of the place of the dead God through the *Übermensch*.” (463) In Blumenberg’s chapter on Nietzsche, the concept of

Umbesetzung itself is set adrift, if not reoccupied, in that it no longer serves anything like reception history.

Within *Umbesetzung* is *Besetzung*, a word with a long tradition of use in German, especially by Freud, whose uses of it have been translated into English as “cathexis,” “investment,” “charge,” and “occupation.”⁷ In *Legitimacy* and in *Laughter*, *Besetzung* is the word Blumenberg implicitly links to the questions and concerns that “occupy” the minds of a period, as the question of the meaning of the totality of history occupied the minds of the medieval period.⁸ In non-mythic periods where humans make claims about nature, the authority of these claims can be challenged, and questions can be “reoccupied.” Against the background of Blumenberg’s catachresis, *Besetzung* could exhibit a Freudian meaning: “The mythic world was not a world where changes occurred regularly; as one filled with gods, it was one where occupations (*Besetzungen*) lasted, occupations which, however clement and influenceable they may have been, did not offer assistance for predicting solar eclipses or oil harvests.” (450) In the mythic worldview, as presented in this passage, reoccupation was unthinkable: “occupations lasted” because gods held the only valid answers to all of the lasting questions. *Umbesetzung* describe a historical shift, which like Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shift,⁹ is only legible in a context of human empowerment to effect history.

⁷ For an interesting discussion of the connotations of *Besetzung* as Freud uses it, see Hoffer, “Reflections on Cathexis.”

⁸ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 48.

⁹ Blumenberg himself declines Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shift” because it disregards the cultural continuities that make reoccupation necessary. Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 512.

Ones of a kind

Blumenberg often uses the indefinite article to indicate a possible plurality where a definite unity was assumed, since the German word “a” can mean “one,” as in “one among many.” In the preface of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* Blumenberg emphasizes the indefinite article: “Given that this is only *a* protohistory, there could also have been a different one.” (246) *A* protohistory, this one at least, falls short of the standards of history on many accounts: the Thales anecdote is a minute fragment of a story, for millennia no one had dared to call it factual, and no eyewitness has announced him or herself—not to mention a second witness to give it intersubjective corroboration. But the form only adds to the story’s power: *evoking* the story of an unconfirmed, singular event metaphorically portrays the speculativeness and autonomy of theory.

Considering the repetitiveness of the book’s structure—one interpretation of the Thales anecdote after another—it is understandable that Blumenberg would emphasize the singular features of each repetition of the anecdote. He uses *ein-* and *eigen-* words to do so. These words mark the singular and unique within the pattern, the difference within the repetition. In chapter five, for example, Blumenberg writes, “Tertullian alone (*als einziger*) furnished the Thales anecdote with the variant where it was an Egyptian who laughed when the philosopher fell into the cistern.” (318) Here Tertullian’s originality is not only signaled against the background of what has come so far, but against what will come later. In this way, these announcements of the uniqueness of the variants reinforce the totalizing rhetoric of the study: the Thales anecdote—in its full historical effect—renders us with *the* protohistory of theory. “Montaigne created a distinctive variant (*eine einzigartige Variante*) of the Thales anecdote, which broke from the atomistic

transmission of fables and emblems, so that he could fit it consistently within the genre of his *Essais*.” (352) Such sharpened rhetoric indicates that it was a singular event when the anecdote appeared in Montaigne’s *Essais*. Does this variant qualify as a reoccupation? While he does not use that word here, it is clear that Montaigne made a *motivated* change to the anecdote’s structure.

Blumenberg’s readings focus on the disjunctions in a seemingly continuous reception history. When discussing Feuerbach, for instance, Blumenberg directs our attention to the former’s novel use of a word, which will provide insight into the novelty of Feuerbach’s version of the anecdote: “The expression ‘absentmindedness’ has an unprecedented (*eigenwillig*) meaning in Ludwig Feuerbach’s language.” (419) In this rhetoric of the singular, we discover a tension at the heart of Blumenberg’s thought: ancient metaphoric systems persist, but the ideas expressed through them are often unprecedented.

To summarize the results of this glance at Blumenberg’s rhetoric, “understanding” always forms anew, but through engagement with the past, not through willful ignorance of convention. What is “reoccupied” in new metaphors and stories is the imaginative topos, not the story itself. And the “unique” text is still always “one” among many. Rhetorical inventions may be radical in terms of the new understandings, purposes, and values that they inaugurate, but they do not break easily with the inherited images that make them intelligible. When reading *Laughter*, and especially when translating it, we find Blumenberg’s vision of history *in figura*. Polysemous words become sites of reoccupation; the analogy breaks down if we think of Blumenberg the author as a unified source of meaning. However, we see the folly in reducing the

meanings produced by the polysemous German language to the thoughts of particular authors who write in German or to any particular moment of understanding within the temporally extended experiences of writing, reading, and translating.

Critical Introduction to Hans Blumenberg's *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*

A philosopher trips and falls. A slave, who is watching, laughs. Intellectuals have remembered this fabled encounter for over two millennia. Generations of European philosophers repeat the ancient anecdote. Hans Blumenberg finds in this story's many retellings the long story of philosophy's uneasy relationship to life, and *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* discusses its philosophical significance across history.

Metaphors succeed where conceptual language fails: they can illustrate ideas that elude conceptual definition. When we portray the world as a book, history as a march, being as a dwelling, or life as a stream, metaphors make these abstractions appear thinkable. Some concepts have reliable formulae, such as triangles (the shape created by three intersecting lines), or describe demonstrable objects, such as metals or electricity. Philosophy, however, cannot proceed without ideas whose full scope defies conceptual definition, requiring metaphors to recollect their basis in lived experiences. With this understanding in mind, Hans Blumenberg explored the philosophical potential of images such as lions, shipwrecks, and caves,¹⁰ the metaphoric background of conceptual language, and the role of anecdotes within philosophy.

Since Blumenberg died on March 28, 1996, little has been published about his life. We know that he was born in Lübeck, Germany, on July 13, 1920. In 1939, he graduated with highest honors from the Katharineum zu Lübeck, a 500-year-old, humanistic secondary school. The principal refused him a ceremonial handshake. This

¹⁰ Blumenberg, *Löwen*; Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*; Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*.

may have been among the first of the public humiliations that would later mount to threats against his life, as the Nazis persecuted him for being a “half-Jew” due to his father’s Jewish ancestry. Upon graduation, he was barred from attending regular universities and thus began his studies at theological seminaries in Paderborn and Frankfurt. Once he was forced to quit attending seminary, he returned to Lübeck and worked at the *Dräger-Werk* manufacturing plant. In 1944, he was interned in a concentration camp; his previous employer, Heinrich Dräger, managed to have him released, as Dräger had done for a number of his employees. Blumenberg immediately went into hiding with the parents of his future wife, where he remained until the war ended.

After the war, he forewent sleep for one night every week, reading and writing—so deeply did he regret the lost years at seminary, in forced labor, and hiding from the Nazis. As he explained to Odo Marquard: “you have lost no time in your life. I lost eight years that I need to make up.”¹¹ At age 25, Blumenberg began his academic career by studying philosophy, German literature, and Classical philology at the University of Hamburg. In nearby Kiel, he finished his first degree and his dissertation on medieval Scholastic ontology in two years (1947) and his *Habilitationsschrift* on Husserl’s phenomenology three years later (1950). Afterwards, he became a professor in Kiel, transferred to Hamburg (1958), and moved three more times to universities in Gießen (1960), Bochum (1965), and finally Münster (1970), where he retired as professor emeritus in 1985. Many of his case studies on metaphors, including the text translated below, appeared in print during the prolific final decade of Blumenberg’s life.

¹¹ Marquard, “Entlastung vom Absoluten,” 25.

Throughout his career, Blumenberg participated in interdisciplinary pursuits. About his first university appointment, he wrote, “in a university as small as the Christiana Albertina in Kiel—which had to survive every winter without the amateur sailors of the summertime—interdisciplinarity did not need to be expressly invented.... Almost everyone knew almost everything about almost everyone.”¹² After leaving Kiel, he contributed in 1960 and in 1971 to Erich Rothacker’s journal series *The Archive for Conceptual History: Building Blocks for a Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*, which consisted of “monographic pre-writings” for “a future dictionary” on philosophical terms and notions from past and present global philosophical trends.¹³ In this series, Blumenberg published his first work on metaphor’s foundational role in the history of concepts. He worked closely with the “Constance School” of European literary studies, headed by Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, a group that applied existentialist theory to literary reception studies decades before the rise of French post-structuralism. Between 1963 and 1974, Blumenberg worked with these colleagues to organize the annual symposia of the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* group, whose interdisciplinary syncretism and philosophical rigor attracted leading scholars from literature, sociology, philosophy, and other fields. During the group’s 1974 symposium, Blumenberg contributed a manuscript that later became *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*.¹⁴

¹² Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, 547.

¹³ Rothacker, “Geleitwort,” 8. The first volumes of the dictionary appeared in 1971 and continued to appear until 2007. The first volume includes an apology for its exclusion of metaphor from its scope. The *Archive*, however, still exists as a journal series today and has expanded its scope to include influential metaphors among its concerns.

¹⁴ Preisendanz and Warning, *Das Komische*. I discuss this particular symposium further in the section “From Spatial to Temporal Distance.”

Blumenberg's work was highly regarded throughout his career; he became director of the Commission for Philosophy in Germany from 1965 to 1974. Honors he earned over his lifetime include the Kuno Fischer Prize (1974), the Sigmund Freud Prize for *Work on Myth* (1980), an Honorary Doctorate from University of Gießen (1982), and Honorary Citizenship of the city of Lübeck, the latter serving as gesture of apology for Nazi persecution (1996). He died several days before that award could be conferred.

Blumenberg was a tremendously prolific writer. His publications spanned several thousand pages, and his posthumously discovered writings, which continue to be published in intervals of several years, will rival that number once they are counted. Blumenberg draws on the history of philosophy to support his claim that an anecdote (such as the Thales anecdote) can reveal a concern that pervades all of European thought. His learnedness made an overwhelming impression on his students. Contemporary philosopher Volker Gerhardt recalls the humbling experience of attending Blumenberg's lectures: "he could produce such laughter in his audience, and no one else could produce such bad conscience."¹⁵ The "bad conscience" resulted from the feeling that no one else in the room had read enough to grasp Blumenberg's thoughts in their full scope. According to another anecdote recalled by Gerhardt, one student after another, intimidated by Blumenberg's erudition, would fail to attend his seminar on the very day he or she was scheduled to give a presentation. In the end, Blumenberg decided to quell his students' fears once and for all: he quit teaching seminar-style courses altogether and began to deliver only lectures.

¹⁵ "Blumenberg's Philosophische Anthropologie," 2011

Over the last three decades of his life, Blumenberg gradually withdrew from other academic activities, such as conferences and academic collaborations. During these years, he almost categorically refused all invitations to leave his house in Altenberge, a village near Münster. Karsten Harries interprets Blumenberg's responses to an invitation to speak at Yale:

The Philosophy Department at Yale extended its invitation; [Blumenberg's] first response was positive. But as the date at which he would have had to leave Germany approached and as with every passing week the possibility of leaving home threatened ever more insistently to become reality, his brief communications became more discouraging. In the end he did not come at all. Were there health problems that interfered? I don't remember. But somehow this change of heart seemed to fit quite well the mental image I had already formed of him from his work: first the lure of the far away, the fascination with journeying, far away from Münster, from Westphalia, from Germany; in the end the decision to content himself with just thinking about such journeys and to stay at home. Here, too, centrifugal and centripetal forces were at odds. The centripetal forces won out. And something like that seems to me to hold also for his thinking. Expressed in hyperbolic terms: Blumenberg was always unwilling to trade astroethics for astronautics. I share his unwillingness.¹⁶

Harries refers here to Blumenberg's preference for stationary speculation over investigative experience, a preference encapsulated in Blumenberg's term "astroethics," the pursuit of thought experiments related to space travel. Rather than traveling anywhere, he preferred to stay at home and ponder whether it would "be easier to be good on other planets."¹⁷

Blumenberg's work had a significant impact on German philosophy. From the time when he published *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* in 1960, Blumenberg

¹⁶ Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 318–319.

¹⁷ Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, 156.

maintained that figurative language undergirds all philosophical thought.¹⁸ *Paradigms* and his later works demonstrated a method for analyzing specific metaphors, and this method influenced the work of intellectual and literary historians, such as Reinhart Koselleck and Hans-Robert Jauss. After initiating a correspondence in letters with Carl Schmitt beginning in 1971, Blumenberg expanded the second edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* to include his criticisms of Carl Schmitt's secularization hypothesis, which states that "the political concepts of modernity are all secularized theological concepts."¹⁹ By contrast, Blumenberg contends that we are heirs to the uniquely modern challenge of taking responsibility for our liberated curiosity.²⁰ In his phenomenological writings, Blumenberg endorses Husserl's contention that metaphors are necessary for describing absolute subjectivity and rejects Heidegger's position on metaphor on the basis that Heidegger's ban on the use of metaphors disguises their indispensable function

¹⁸ In 1971, Blumenberg responds to the decision by the editors of the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy* not to include metaphors among its entries: "Metaphorology achieves a helping service to conceptual history, by bringing it into proximity with a genetic structure of concept formation, in which the demand [Cartesian] for distinctness is not fulfilled, but which allows us to recognize the distinctness of the result as impoverishment of imaginative background and lifeworldly continuities." Blumenberg, "Beobachtungen an Metaphern," 163. Blumenberg considered the conceptual history movement not to have taken their historical, anti-teleological approach to philosophy far enough; the next stage for research would have to be research on which metaphors enabled concepts to become intuitive enough to be widely received.

¹⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 44. Their correspondence has also been published as Blumenberg and Schmitt, *Briefwechsel 1971-1978 und weitere Materialien*.

²⁰ The second edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* responds to Schmitt's influential claims in the first section "Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong." After Blumenberg describes the history of the concept of "secularization" in recent centuries to refer both to the iconoclasm of Enlightenment thinkers and to the legally sanctioned seizure of Church property after the French revolution, he takes issue with Schmitt's definition of the term: "[Quoting Schmitt:] 'Secularization, that is to say, the detachment of spiritual or ecclesiastical ideas and thoughts, and equally the detachment of spiritual (consecrated) things and people, from their connection to God.' . . . The connection to the juristic process that stands in the metaphorical background seems to be softened, rendered harmless, or neutralized by the term 'detachment'; though when in the end the correlate of this 'detachment' turns out to be a 'connection to God' then this expression's weight of meaning makes it evident that a sanction must be thought of as having been violated and that a character of forcible injustice must be included in the concept." Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 23. Blumenberg considers Schmitt's definition to sneak a matter of faith into a seemingly philosophical definition.

in his work.²¹ Blumenberg's work on these topics has had its largest reception in Germany, but his books—including the present one—have been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and English. This decade has seen two other English translations: *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* and *Care Crosses the River*.²²

Blumenberg's self-isolation has a formative impact on his later work. In his last decades, when he was simultaneously writing notecards by the thousand, drafts for several book projects, and occasional opinion columns for the *Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeitung*, he not only spent little time among others but also refused to contribute to the left-liberal philosophy that increasingly occupied contemporary German thought. Political philosophy in general was of little value to Blumenberg; he never commented explicitly on the state of the world under late capitalism, the taint of Nazism in German philosophy of the twentieth century, or the loss of traditional culture with the rise of mass production and new media—the contemporary issues promoted as relevant by leading post-war German philosophers Jürgen Habermas, Karl Jaspers, and Theodor Adorno.

In many of his works, including the present book, Blumenberg turns his attention from his living colleagues' concerns towards forgotten problems from the history of philosophy. If he had engaged the topical philosophy of his time, he may have been more

²¹ This argument against Heidegger appears *in nuce* in Blumenberg, "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality," 100–101. The argument about Husserl is developed in the opening chapter of the posthumous Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*. A posthumous work is also especially clear about Heidegger's unconfessed reliance on metaphor: "Metaphorology tries or can try to resolve or undermine false incomparabilities, to produce relatibilities, even against the will of those involved. The closer Heidegger seems to come to his goal of answering the question of the meaning of Being, the more he needs to leave descriptive partial achievements behind him and to let metaphorical orientations shine through." Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 125. As with Schmitt and Ritter, Blumenberg takes issue with Heidegger's failure to admit that he has been passing metaphors off as concepts all along. (I discuss more of Blumenberg's major philosophical claims further in the section "Blumenberg's Thought.")

²² Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*; Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*.

influential during his lifetime, but he relished his independence from the philosophical fashions of his place and time. He refused “the present as a standard bearer” for deciding which philosophical questions to consider.²³ Blumenberg’s work remains, in many regards, a reflection on his own reclusive lifestyle: a highly documented account of a life spent apart from the world, suspicious of all common understandings, and in pursuit of the lessons of solitude.

The evolution of an anecdote

The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Protohistory of Theory explores one anecdote through its long history of adaptation. Its meanings change as it is retold in various historical circumstances. The anecdote’s first iteration may have been the following Aesopic fable, wherein astronomy stands for any impractical activity that prevents people from noticing their surroundings:

An astronomer made a habit of going outside every evening to observe the stars. And one time when he reached the edge of town and had all of his attention on the sky, he accidentally fell into a well. But as he was screaming and crying, someone nearby heard his groans. After the passerby came and learned what had transpired, he said, “Sir, does trying to watch things in the sky make you unable to see the things on earth?”²⁴

Aesop’s fable ends as many fables once did, by suggesting how to use it in a public speech: “this story can be applied to people who are proud of the unusual things they do, but who cannot accomplish the ordinary things for people to do.”²⁵

²³ Blumenberg, “Ernst Cassirers gedenkend,” 172.

²⁴ My translation from the Greek: Aesop, *Fabulae aesopicae collectae.*, 35–36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Over a century later, Plato cites the anecdote in the *Theaetetus* dialogue, where the anonymous astronomer has become Thales of Miletus, the legendary inaugurator of Greek science and philosophy, whose “renown for wisdom reached the skies.”²⁶ Instead of a nondescript passerby who questions the safety of the astronomer’s protocols, Plato has a Thracian servant girl burst out laughing at Thales “because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet.”²⁷ Blumenberg calls attention to Plato’s departure from Aesop in labeling the astronomer and the maid: “The figures of the confrontation have gained concreteness and background.” (261) The astronomer becomes the epoch-defining protophilosopher Thales, and the anonymous moralizer remains nameless but receives three marks of subordinate status in Greek society: barbarian, female, enslaved.

Plato also replaces Aesop’s general criticism of doing “unusual things” with a specific one: “The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy.”²⁸ According to Blumenberg, Plato construes the maid’s laughter as a signifier of the brutality of philosophy’s opponents. Her amusement becomes analogous to Athens’ antipathy for philosophers, which the dialogue’s readers would know had already led to Socrates’ death sentence.²⁹ Plato establishes the notion that laughter prefigures hatred

²⁶ Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 41. The questionable philosophical value of Thales’ achievement is a topic that Blumenberg discusses in *Laughter* and elsewhere. Thales successfully exhibits the fear-reducing effects of theory: offering explanations for what exists (everything is made of water) and predicting what will come (a solar eclipse). However, the water cosmology had no staying power the way that more abstract cosmologies would. As Blumenberg says: “But the turn to water was not a lucky turn, as we see immediately in the Ionian philosophical school. One could insert air with same right, or, after a few false starts, retreat to saying that at the beginning stands the indefinite (τὸ ἀπείρον).” Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, 127.

²⁷ *Theaetetus*, 174A 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174A-B 121.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt accuses Plato of mistaking an internal tension for an external hostility. She thinks that philosophy so far has under-theorized the “*intramural warfare* between man’s common sense, this sixth

again in the *Apology*, where he has Socrates claim to know only one of his accusers by name, “a playwright,” meaning Aristophanes, whose comedy *The Clouds* had ridiculed Socrates as a dangerous swindler.³⁰ Blumenberg finds that Plato’s sensitivity to philosophy’s opponents equipped his version of the anecdote for its many appropriations throughout the history of philosophy: “a lot could be projected onto the Thracian woman as enemy of theory, as unproclaimed, prototypical antagonist to Socrates.” (295)

In its various versions, this anecdote has inspired European intellectuals in every historical period since Greek antiquity; for over two and half millennia, it has been repeated in canonical and obscure texts by ancient and modern philosophers, theologians, preachers, and other intellectuals, from long forgotten early moderns to luminaries such as Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, and Ludwig Feuerbach. As a fable, it first circulated in handbooks for orators, after which ancient authors used it to illustrate a wide range of arguments. Some texts conjure the maid’s laughter while condemning the impracticality of rival theories; others recall Thales’ tumble as an example of self-sacrificial commitment to the contemplative life.

Plato emphasizes the grim fate of the philosopher in this little story, in order to turn it into a *protrepticon*—a call to engage in philosophical theory at all costs. By contrast, most citations of the fable in the interval between Plato’s Athens and nineteenth-century Germany identify with the maid’s laughter at the astronomer. In these cases, the

sense that fits our five sense into a common world, and man’s faculty of thought and need of reason, which determine him to remove himself for considerable periods from [the common world].” Instead of seeing the self as divided between common sense and individual thinking, “the philosophers have interpreted that intramural warfare as the natural hostility of the many and their opinions toward the few and their truth.” She derides “the entirely serious way in which [Plato] tells the story of the Thracian peasant girl” where “the traditional persecution mania of the philosopher” leads Plato to misinterpret her “innocent” laughter as akin to the sentiment behind Socrates’ jury. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 81–82.

³⁰ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, 18d 41.

maid usurps the protophilosopher's position as the authentic theorist. After all, while Thales observes the stars, she observes his observation; she can thus claim to have a perspective that assesses both his behavior *and* what he saw.³¹ We notice that retellers of this story always take sides with one figure or the other: philosophers *either* join the maid in mocking Thales, while claiming to be exceptions to theory's absentminded excesses, *or* they lament the astronomer's tragic tumble and humiliation, while claiming their own membership in Thales' guild, the rare and misunderstood class of philosophers.³² No consensus emerges about whether it is better to fall or to laugh, perhaps because, as Arendt says, even the absent-minded philosopher "shares the 'common-ness' of all men, and it is his own sense of realness that makes him suspect the thinking activity."³³

We may imagine ourselves free from external demands when we think, but thinking occurs within time and thus physical and social life circumstances do not pause for us. Our research-oriented society has carved a place in society for theory; Blumenberg considers theory's status to have benefitted enormously from the scale and budgets of the academic institutions committed to supporting theoretical work, but theory must match expectations of professional decorum: "professional theorists are most readily accepted when they approach the phenotype of the now universally familiar bureaucrat and thereby

³¹ According to Blumenberg, this anecdote portrays "theory," whose Greek etymology is "seeing," as an activity constituted by *being* seen. Rodolphe Gasché interprets Blumenberg's analysis of the anecdote as revealing theory's fundamentally "theatrical" quality: "Blumenberg's archeology of theory, as a history of scenes in which theory offers itself to view, suggests a much deeper internal connection of theory and theater than is commonly assumed." Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking*, 197. Thales' spectator becomes a crucial stand-in for the divine spectator, who would affirm to the theorist that he has indeed discover the highest possible object to theorize.

³² Blumenberg himself does not valorize Thales' heroic presumption. As Robert Savage notes, the maid's laughter has important consequences for theory: it exposes theory's constitutive blind spots and removes the illusion of a "safe spectatorial distance" from its objects. Theory can only persist by acknowledging the apparent ridiculousness of its own errors and thus laughing "along with the maid without relinquishing its vision of the whole." Savage, "Laughter from the Lifeworld," 128.

³³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 80.

lay claim to the seriousness that comes with dealing in large amounts of money.” (7)

Professional theorists suffer little harassment today, but now must submit to the practical demand of proving mental labor worthy of funding.

Theorists’ alienation from others is a transhistorical condition, according to Blumenberg. He reads the persistence of the fable as an indication that practitioners of theory unconsciously desire a narrative explanation for “the strangeness that something like ‘theory’ exists at all,” this “exotic behavior” which remains uncommon because it is threatened from inside and out, by its own recklessness and by derision from unsympathetic onlookers. (247, 252) The story portrays theorists as they imagine themselves: exceptional within their own type, but ridiculous to others, perhaps internally divided between their curiosity and practical necessities. But Blumenberg does not reiterate his point about the anecdote’s function as the transhistorical reflection of theorists’ self-image, and thus it is difficult for the reader to discern what comes of that claim over the course of *Laughter*. The reader is instead struck by a seemingly disconnected series of new interpretations of the figures of Thales and the Thracian maid.³⁴ However, most chapters of *Laughter* draw attention to the mechanism by which the Thales anecdote expresses theory’s status in every epoch: the distance between the theorist and the stars. It is in this distance that Blumenberg locates the theorist’s metaphorical alienation.

³⁴ Blumenberg reads Thales’ misstep as providing more than an image of errant astronomy; it is a step that decides history. Fleming has argued that anecdotes are uniquely poised to represent historically decisive moments due to “the contingency captured in anecdotal thought.” Fleming, “The Perfect Story,” 82. Fleming shows that even the shortest myths, metaphors, and anecdotes that Blumenberg analyzes must portray accidents or mishaps if they are going to depict the entry point of contingency into history.

The stars' distance means something different in each historical period. The sky represented heaven within Christian symbolism, and thus Christian authors viewed Thales' tumble as "the downfall of someone who had not wanted to go high enough." (52) In order to uphold the Christian principle of charity, Christian versions of the anecdote do not display cruel laughter, even at a sinner's injury. The distance that Thales falls also takes on historically specific meanings. For most Christian authors, the fall must be portrayed as physically harmless, and only symbolically fatal: "the abyss turns into the pit of sin." (42)

The anecdote continued to prove useful for criticizing presumptuousness even within the context of less conventional religious views. During the French Renaissance, the skeptical philosopher Michel de Montaigne makes a proactive pedagogue out of the maid:

I feel grateful to the Milesian wench who, seeing the philosopher Thales continually spending his time in contemplation of the heavenly vault and always keeping his eyes raised upward, put something in his way to make him stumble, to warn him that it would be time to amuse his thoughts with things in the clouds when he had seen to those at his feet. Indeed she gave him good counsel, to look rather to himself than to the sky.³⁵

The stars stand in a misleading direction from the philosopher, according to Montaigne, but so does the ground beneath his feet. Everything exterior is already too far away to yield the most valuable kind of knowledge: self-knowledge attained through self-reflection. The hope of bridging the metaphorical distance between mind and object, and of discovering the absolute truth immanent to the individual, animates Montaigne's

³⁵ Montaigne, "The Apology of Raymond Sebond," *Essays, The Complete Works*, 488.

skeptical philosophy.³⁶ As Blumenberg explains, Montaigne is able to use the Thales anecdote to express skepticism that insight would result from any experience, besides that of solitary self-examination.

During the nineteenth century, the laughter in the anecdote switches sides in a way that reflects science's new supremacy in European culture. In 1874, the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Narodow* publishes a fraudulent journalistic article mocking the Russians' lack of familiarity with science, by describing how a police officer in Tobolk, Russia wanted to arrest the famous German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt when the latter "seemed suspicious and very dangerous" for setting up his telescope on a hill: "a long tube that seemed to me and to the whole society to be a canon." (148) (Everything about this publication becomes absurd when we consider that Humboldt had died 15 years earlier.) Blumenberg explains that this new anecdote retains the old antagonism between those who understand theory and those who do not, although the sides have reversed: "For a civilization familiar with the ritual activities of the theorist, the work-related annoyance of a state officer towards the sky observer has no chance of being taken seriously." (147) Blumenberg takes this excursus from the anecdote's place in intellectual history to describe its place in cultural history; it shows that, in nineteenth century Poland, and *a fortiori* everywhere west of Russia, theoretical work had become so familiar that it had become laughable to distrust the activities that comprise scientific theory.

³⁶ Blumenberg's *Habilitation* claims that the metaphor of distance allows both scientific and philosophical rationalists, like René Descartes, to imagine objects of inquiry as *spatially* distant from the mind: "Not that Descartes would first have to be 'created' this ontological distance through an 'act' of self-distancing; rather, he found himself in this distance." Blumenberg, "Die ontologische Distanz," 17–18.

Less than a full century later, sympathy with Thales also proves compatible with critical positions against scientific rationalism. In Freiburg, Germany of 1935, Martin Heidegger evokes the Thracian maid's failure to grasp the philosophical value of absentmindedness—in the context of a lecture on Kant's notion of the "thing." After paraphrasing Plato's version of the anecdote, Heidegger defines philosophy as "that thinking with which one can start nothing and about which housemaids necessarily laugh."³⁷ Plato had analogized the maid's laughter to the Athenian jury that executed Socrates. With a similar tone of alarm, Heidegger warns his students that anti-philosophical Thracian maids are ubiquitous, and that philosophers must embrace philosophy at risk to their personal safety. Engaging with the central questions of metaphysics "signifies only that procedure during which one runs the danger of falling into a well."³⁸ For Heidegger, Thales' absentmindedness represents his misunderstood goals, and thus legitimates his lack of practical engagement with everyday concerns.

Blumenberg notices that Heidegger's use of the anecdote reflects Heidegger's radical revision of the phenomenological program initiated by his one-time teacher, Edmund Husserl. (195) Conceptually, Husserl and Heidegger differed as to whether their attempts to describe the general structure of conscious experience yielded knowledge only about consciousness or also revealed the relationship between consciousness and Being. Metaphorically, this constituted another dispute about whether close up or far off objects should matter more to human beings: "Husserl's programmatic statement that

³⁷ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3. It is a rare that Blumenberg even mentions Heidegger, although his focus on the unrepresentable in philosophy was a major influence on Blumenberg's work. Helmut Müller-Sievers notes that a "subterranean engagement with Heidegger... modulates the argumentative path" in many of Blumenberg's works published and posthumous. Müller-Sievers, "Kyklophorology: Hans Blumenberg and the Intellectual History of Technics," 159.

³⁸ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 4.

phenomenology is the science of trivialities signifies nothing more” than that he is only articulating for those less accomplished in philosophical introspection the same familiar truths that “they saw as well.” (195) Husserl’s phenomenology meant to describe what always already matters to everyone, but whose essence had not been adequately articulated before. Blumenberg accuses Heidegger of exaggerating the extent to which he had surpassed Husserl’s “science of trivialities.”³⁹ By announcing absolute Being as the proper object for phenomenology, Heidegger could frame his own work as more exemplary of philosophy’s defining exoticism.

The distance of the stars from earth can metaphorically represent theory’s self-understanding as an exotic phenomenon, because distance in general metaphorically represents knowledge not yet known. As Blumenberg interprets the story’s many permutations, his analyses repeatedly return to the claim that what occurs outside of our sphere of familiarity is represented metaphorically as that which stands at a distance.⁴⁰ This insight into the foundational role of a distance as a metaphor had already emerged in Blumenberg’s *Habilitationschrift* from 1950 about the function of distance metaphors in the self-understanding of modern disciplines that aim to be exact sciences: “...the idea of rigorous scientific work is bound up inextricably from its starting point at the beginning of modernity with the notion of being as possible pure objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*,

³⁹ Blumenberg often reminds us that Husserl conceived phenomenology as a “science of trivialities,” which explains how the self-evident became so, rather than undertaking to explain unfamiliar phenomena. See, for instance, Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, 349.

⁴⁰ In Phillip Stoellger’s published dissertation on Blumenberg, he argues that *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* analyzes this anecdote’s reception history *abductively*, that is looking for causes for its persistence; each case of the anecdote’s persistence serves as evidence that the anecdote expresses a tension pervading theory. Furthermore, Stoellger clarifies, this anecdote’s epistemological significance would go unnoticed for millennia because the anecdote must pass as trivial in order to present itself as an account of theory’s place in the lifeworld. The anecdote makes theory visible, which overcomes its ridiculousness, but theory’s invisibility is preferred since it is “understood as a completion” of its intentional structure which aims towards abstraction, not perceptible manifestation. Stoellger, *Metapher und Lebenswelt*, 284.

literally “externality”), as what can be grasped from out of the distance and across a distance ‘clearly and distinctly’ ...”⁴¹ Despite the procedural requirements of “rigorous scientific work” (a high number of observations, precise methods of quantification, control of variables), the notion of rigor requires the metaphor of distance: we imagine a distance between the rigorous investigator and the object of investigation, which he or she metaphorically pursues across space. We imagine this distance shrinking whenever the investigator achieves more thorough understanding of the object. Throughout *Laughter*, it is implied that the Thales anecdote persists over millennia because it expresses the discomfort that theorists feel about their objects’ “distance”—and their discomfort with the fact only distance metaphors can describe theory’s mental labor. However, this discomfort is not explicitly stated in the texts Blumenberg analyzes, and elsewhere Blumenberg would highlight the implicit and subtextual quality of metaphors’ power: “Time and again, this implicit questioning has ‘lived itself out’ in metaphors, and it has induced from metaphors different styles of relating to the world.”⁴² Because our concerns are always with things as we think they are, we fail to notice that inexact, but compelling metaphors render things conceivable to us.

How to take the ridicule against philosophy seriously

In *Laughter*, Blumenberg does not explicitly divulge whether he identifies with Thales’ absorption in thought or with the maid’s skeptical outburst at the sight of theoretical activity. His unpublished notes pertaining to the anecdote reveal ambivalence towards both positions. Since his death in 1996, hundreds of boxes, each containing

⁴¹ Blumenberg, “Die ontologische Distanz,” 19 (italics mine).

⁴² Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 15.

several hundred index cards, have been made available for researchers to view at the German Literature Archive in Marbach. This record includes many ideas that do not directly figure into this book, into his 1974 study on the anecdote,⁴³ or in the sporadic mentions of the anecdote in other works. Blumenberg's restraint from taking clear and decisive philosophical positions has often been noted,⁴⁴ but his unpublished notes show that he did indeed have his own interpretation of the anecdote: the only way to usurp our hecklers is to be aware of the ridiculous appearance of philosophy.

Among the cards with the heading "THALES," Blumenberg reveals his affinities for each of the two figures in the story. Two of the cards develop the argument that the maid not only lacks philosophical qualifications, but that she would not even qualify as a sophisticated orator, because her laughter cannot measure up to the ancient rhetorical ideal of speaking the truth while laughing (*ridendo dicere verum*). For she does not claim to articulate a general truth when she criticizes Thales, but only "articulates her Schadenfreude,... [whereas the] truth in what she says can only be discovered if we forget her laughter for a moment."⁴⁵ However, he asserts the maid's great figurative

⁴³ Blumenberg, "Der Sturz des Protophilosophen. Zur Komik der reinen Theorie-anhand einer Rezeptionsgeschichte der Thales-Anekdote."

⁴⁴ Blumenberg's refusal to assert strong claims in writing has been noted in Odo Marquard's "Entlastung vom Absoluten." In: *Kunst des Überlebens*. Most recently it was thematized by Kirk Wetters in "Work on Philosophy: Hans Blumenberg's Reformulations of the Absolute." This piece points out that when Habermas tries to read Blumenberg's political detachment as a symptom of "the German theoretical tradition," Habermas has failed to see that Blumenberg's entire goal is to show how exaggerated the unity of that tradition is. "It is ironic that the implicit targets of Blumenberg's polemics are precisely those who are most predisposed to overlook them." Wetters, *telos*, 104.

⁴⁵ The claim that the maid's laughter does not coincide with her truth-telling occurs on the card entitled "PRESOCR. THALES: LAUGHTER AND THE RIDENDO DICERE VERUM." The maid cannot be a philosopher, according to Blumenberg, because she does not reflect on the principle behind her laughter, and philosophers' statements must promote ideals: "The Thracian maid's weakness consists of her inability to reflect on her own 'position of advantage,'" as he explains on the card "PRESOCR. THALES: THE MAID IS NOT THE OBSERVER FROM LUCRETIUS' PROEMIUM." All citations in this section are from Blumenberg, "Zettelkasten 14: T-V (Titel von Bearbeiter/in) [Nasenkarten:T, Theologie, Schöpfung, U, V]."

value to philosophy on the card entitled “PRESOCRAT. THALES: THE MAID RECOGNIZES THE PHILOSOPHER’S NEUROSIS.” This card describes how Thales needs to stumble over the well in the maid’s proximity, so that they will establish intersubjective understanding by both paying attention to the same object, the well: “It is important that intersubjectivity enters as an escalation of reality at the moment in which a witness is there; they have a common object.... The well he fell into was a common reality—what he had observed before, the stars, was only his own.”

However, “the escalation of reality” towards intersubjectivity does not change the fact that the realistic attitude is inherently antagonistic to theoretical interests, as another card explains: “PRESOCRAT. THALES: THE RIDICULOUSNESS OF THE UNREADY-TO-HAND (*UNZUHANDENEN*) AS AN OBJECT & THE PRESUMPTION INHERENT IN THE BARBARISM OF RELEVANCE.”

The scene’s comedy is founded on the sheer distance of the mental, on the sheer unreadiness-to-hand of the stars, on the senselessness of just-wanting-to-see.... Wholehearted, undeceitful theory must demonstrate that it embodies the deceit of pragmatism, in order to bring the laughter to rest. What a tableau of the European history of the attitude towards theory in this first enumeration of its possibilities in the form of an apocryphal event! Comedy demands a gaping hiatus, an abyss of incommunicability: here [in the misunderstanding of theory] is the greatest of all [gaps in understanding]! Socrates & his judge, Archimedes & the Roman soldier, etc.

Although the maid’s laughter corroborates Thales’ reality after he falls, this card describes how, as a comic figure, Thales cannot share her reality unless he disguises theory as something practical. The narrative structure hinges on portraying Thales’ confidence—that he can close the gap between his mind and the stars—as opening up new gaps right in front of him: both in the ground and in communication, in the form of the well and the maid, respectively. The “sheer distance of the mental” recalls the

“ontological distance” that Blumenberg wrote about in his *Habilitationschrift*; in that work, he explains that many thinkers implicitly evoke the metaphor of distance between an object of knowledge and its knower in order to express the separation of the knower from the not yet known. The image of ontological distance also metaphorically promotes hope that a mind could possess its object by reaching for it. However, the notecard points out that Thales’ failure to reach across the astronomical distance to the stars offers philosophy no hope; rather, it justifies the maid’s amusement at the philosopher’s errant curiosity.

While that card criticizes all of “European history” for its many episodes of scornful ridicule against whatever appears irrelevant to its momentary purposes, another card, entitled “PROTOTYPICAL RECKLESSNESS TOWARDS REALITY,” redeems the willingness to laugh at one’s own absent-mindedness as a philosophical virtue:

Can we say that conducting pure theory is fun? No. We cannot even say that we conduct it—for self-evidently theory—and perhaps theory alone—is not that kind of conduct. But we can laugh at ourselves while we conduct it. The pure theorist as comic figure, like Thales of Miletus, that is usually a self-infatuated, self-constructed, self-styled figure. For Thales is already the absentminded professor of the anecdote in pure form (*Reinkultur*), whose absentmindedness takes itself as the indicator for his recklessness towards reality—for the sake of truth...

This card identifies Thales’ tumble as a reminder of theorists’ most pervasive personal fault, absentmindedness, but it also redeems that weakness as amusing, rather than tragic.

The Thales anecdote exists not to condemn theory, but to help theorists legitimize their own narcissism, and the maid laughs because self-importance prevents theorists from laughing at themselves. Blumenberg does not put it so sharply in his published works, where he chooses instead to present the anecdote’s historical function, which he can prove more cogently. His meditations on the anecdote in these notecards draw on less

historical evidence than his interpretation of the fable's long reception history does. The book thus offers an interpretation for the anecdote's enduring appeal, namely its ability to "recall what has eluded us" and to explain why theory remains such an "exotic behavior" after all this time. (246, 252)

The published version of *Laughter* explains the book's guiding claims briefly in its short preface without giving a sense of the intervention it seeks to make, whereas an unpublished page of writing, typed on hotel stationery from Hotel Mainzer Hof, outlines Blumenberg's purpose in writing this book in passionate detail. As with most of the documents left unpublished at Blumenberg's death in 1996, this one is undated, but its enthusiasm about what this book offers may indicate that he wrote it shortly before publishing the book. I have translated it in its entirety below:

If it were announced today that the quite bitterly foregone protohistory of theory would soon be given over to outstretched hands, would that not be one of the high-flown ambitions that have already become habits in the theoretical scenery of the "Scientific Society" so plagued by the burden of evidence. It will not, however, promise a protohistory of theory as finally written or about to be written; more simply rather, only one protohistory of apparently unclaimed originality will be held up to view—neither one to write nor one to invent, a protohistory solely to remember and to illuminate. Everyone knows it—or almost everyone—without having experienced the excitement of all of its facets and layers, an excitement that this exposition claims to be provable and even hopes to have proven. The indefinite article is... program! It is a matter of luck, a lucky stroke, though no accident, that we find this story in the thin collection of our oldest texts and only need to accept them as ours. There is nothing to construct—for all of the pedantic passion for the constructed—for this protohistory has enough destiny to just be told. Whoever considers "storytelling" too meager may hew closely to the analytic describability of a reception event that, after reading, should have become clearer, more penetrating, and more informative about the problem with the problems that are posed to us under the heading "theory."

That it is only *a*, and not *the*, protohistory of theory being offered should not come off as a downside, but as an advantage—instead of "reconstructing" what allows no access, only something most humble, if not contemptible, is being done: a reflection is being provoked here about what there ever was and how it

first provoked such reflectiveness and then did so again and again in mutant forms—not without the threat that we will ultimately forget it when the work of the concept, of the original foundation (*Urstiftung*) of the European sciences, is finally uncovered so much more precisely, as cannot be avoided, that we takes it seriously enough and ever more seriously. Seriousness certainly must not be lacking, and it is the misfortune of the “protohistory” at play that it lacks some seriousness—although it is unmistakable that pains have been taken to turn it into something serious whenever retouching occurs without corroding the duty towards loyal transmission. Whoever keeps in mind that theory—as an attitude and not just as an accumulation of propositions—should have to do with human happiness to such an intensive degree that over two millennia the epitome of happiness could be seen in the eternal “theory” of the pure truth, untarnished intuition, *visio beatifica*, will not be surprised that its first misfortune would do more than disappoint, it would hurt. The laughter in this story was on the wrong side. And over the course of this story’s history (*im Verlauf der Geschichte dieser Geschichte*) it has never ended up on the right side. Even this little book cannot achieve that. Although it does encourage wishing for that in utter secrecy behind folded hands.⁴⁶

The ring composition of the note, beginning and ending with the image of reaching or praying hand gestures, gives a sense of Blumenberg’s hopes for how people will receive his book: eagerly and reverently. This first paragraph presents the book’s task as merely “to remember and to illuminate” a story. But why even remind us of this story if “everyone knows it?” The anecdote does even not exhibit the magic associated with myth or the intricate twists associated with brilliant storytelling, but rather it only has the whimsy of a simple joke, or, as Blumenberg puts it, the anecdote “lacks some seriousness.” Furthermore, he claims that the book will disappoint readers who seek realistic accounts of the past, since the history of this anecdote and its variations can only reveal “an excitement that this exposition claims to be provable.” In the late 1980’s, when post-structuralism’s “pedantic passion for the constructed” had swept Europe, and no humanistic scholar would dare consider authorial intentions knowable, Blumenberg

⁴⁶ Blumenberg, “Das Lachen der Thrakerin (Drucktitel) [verschiedene Fassungen: Vorstufen, Manuskript, korr. Druckfahne, Materialien zum Buch].”

claims to know about “excitement” felt by long dead authors! If the eager reception he wants seems so implausible, why did he write the book at all?

Laughter presents Blumenberg’s analyses of the anecdote without much theoretical scaffolding, but this unpublished note’s second paragraph discloses the book’s rhetorical aim: to persuade contemporary scholars in the humanities that they could learn from the anxieties implicitly expressed by their predecessors. *Laughter* goes beyond extracting a lesson from a story seems. If we imagine along with Blumenberg that a recurrent story is the evidence of an irrepressible thought, then the story could serve as a warning to all theorists: “the laughter in this story was on the wrong side.” The fable implies that the theorist who seeks happiness through knowledge ends up ridiculed. Meanwhile, “on the wrong side,” the pragmatic attitude, which believes it has progressed beyond theory’s futile desire for “pure truth,” locates our historical moment beyond theory, in a more serious epoch, where we can laugh at the pursuit of intellectual gratification. The difference between abstract theory and bodily, familial, or economic practices are reconcilable in many people’s lived experience, but the moment of tension must be acknowledged, and this anecdote has provided, as Blumenberg writes in *Laughter*, “the most enduring prefiguration of all the tensions and misunderstandings between the lifeworld and theory.” (255)

From spatial to temporal distance: astronomy and history

In 1974, 14 years prior to the publication of *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, Hans Blumenberg presented his first extended analysis of the Thales anecdote in the form of a long essay to the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* symposium. The essay appears

with the title “The Tumble of the Proto-philosopher—on the Comedy of Pure Theory, with Recourse to a Reception History of the Thales Anecdote”⁴⁷ alongside other pieces by Blumenberg and his colleagues (Hans-Robert Jauß, Wolfgang Iser, Odo Marquard, and Jean Starobinski among others) in the publication of the symposium’s proceedings entitled *The Comic*, which includes topics ranging from the structure of comic literature to the social and psychological functions of humor. The published proceeding opens with Blumenberg’s essay, which begins by describing how “Plato compares the fate of his teacher Socrates with the figure of protophilosopher Thales of Miletus” in words that will be copied verbatim in *Laughter*’s second chapter.⁴⁸ Yet the two texts do differ significantly in scope. The book claims that this anecdote replaces our lacking knowledge about the origin of theory, by evoking problems that Thales confronted at the origin of theory’s history. “The Tumble of the Protophilosopher” does not discuss the story’s place in history—and does not even mention “protohistory.” Instead, the earlier essay emphasizes Copernicus’ influence on astronomy and how the quarrel between geocentrism and heliocentrism impacts the reinterpretations of Thales’ fabled stargazing.

Blumenberg’s essay reflects on Copernicus’ geocentric detractors’ supposed failure to notice remnants of geocentric thinking in recent history. For instance, by “[recognizing] the most obscure (*Fernstleigede*) only in the most obvious...., Francis Bacon was, in spite of his decided rejection of Copernicanism, one of those Copernicans

⁴⁷ Paul Fleming has compared this 1974 title with the 1987 book title *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* and notes that the latter shifts the focus from Thales to the maid, and thus from theory’s task to the unquestioned “lifeworld” in which theory always constitutes itself. “...[B]y titling the book version *The Laughter of the Thracian Maid*, Blumenberg draws the perspective back, placing the reader on the edge of the scene, observing the tension, the composition of elements, and the necessary laughter (which, for example, is not in Aesop) shooting through the field of philosophy and its literal pitfalls.” Fleming, “On the Edge of Non-Contingency,” 31.

⁴⁸ Blumenberg, “Der Sturz des Protophilosophen. Zur Komik der reinen Theorie-anhand einer Rezeptionsgeschichte der Thales-Anekdote,” 11.

in spite of himself, who could not let go of the principle whose consequences he dismissed.”⁴⁹ Bacon as a “Copernican in spite of himself” not because he adopted Copernicus entire system, but because he adopted its principle: that we should not “scrutinize the highest things” but be “ignorant of those nearest to us.”⁵⁰ In the essay’s final sentence, Heidegger’s willful disregard for the obvious in favor of obscure revelations leads Blumenberg to characterize him as an atavistic anti-Copernican:

That is the post-Copernican anachronism, that the eccentric position, which is exposed to laughter, still allows the access that was presumed to exist at the cosmic center before Copernicus, namely access to knowledge of whether thought has extended its reach beyond the graspable over to the ‘thing,’ to the ‘essence of reasons,’ to ‘Being.’⁵¹

The concluding passage from “Tumble” about the earth’s continuing status as “cosmic center” is reduced to one claim among others in *Laughter*, which opens and concludes by discussing problems of temporality. In *Laughter*, the concern with *when* Thales fell (perhaps in theory’s undocumented past and perhaps in the phenomenological moment before we become conscious of any concept of theory) subsumes the concern in “Tumble” with *where* he was (the earth as vantage point). The anecdote has two functions: first, in “Tumble,” as a metaphor for the synchronic—social and spatial—position of the theorist, then, in *Laughter*, as a myth about the imaginative underpinnings of theory’s self-image.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41. The focus on Copernicanism is more central in “Tumble” and requires additional justification when similar sentence appears in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*: “This excursus on Copernicus’ underlying principle does not amount to a history of influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) as normally conceived; this is clear when we observe how a decisive opponent to Copernicus such as Francis Bacon could not resist applying the principle whose consequences he rejected in order to become a kind of latent Copernican in spite of himself.” “The principle” ascribed to Copernicus is central to both of Blumenberg’s works, as summarized in *Laughter*: “the furthest away (*Fernstliegende*) can only be recognized in what is at hand (*Nächstliegende*)....”

⁵⁰ Copernicus, *On The Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres*, 12.

⁵¹ Blumenberg, “Der Sturz des Protophilosophen. Zur Komik der reinen Theorie-anhand einer Rezeptionsgeschichte der Thales-Anekdote,” 64.

In the last chapter of *Laughter*, Blumenberg reflects back on the 1974 *Poetics und Hermeneutics* symposium and positions himself and his colleagues within this anecdote's history:

Actually one can only laugh at the philosophers or enjoy laughter at their expense, if one considers oneself to be their exception. And in this discipline—I remain silent as to whether also in others—everyone evidently considers him or herself to be the exception to all others. But that was already the intention, with which Plato adopted the Aesopian fable from the mouth of his Socrates. . . . One can always be or remain the exception, if one is the first or the last: Thales or Socrates—or Heidegger. For as soon as the first has been, according to this scheme, one can only still want to be the last. (494)

Whenever theorists after Plato cite this story, they claim to know what philosophy *was* about and therefore to be qualified to stand at the end of its errant career. The book analyzes the anecdote beyond the protophilosopher's faulty spatial vantage point—it discusses the faults within the tradition that he inaugurated. The metaphor of the philosopher who stares up and falls down is spatial, but it grounds a historical understanding.

Blumenberg's turn to the anecdote's historical function was both a turn towards and a turn away from the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* focus on text reception. Their symposia featured broad, abstract topics like mimesis, modern art, identity, negativity, myth, and individuality, and the 1974 symposium on the comic treated the topic with the usual range: thinking about the cultural function of fools, clowns, irony, and satire, laughter's character as healthy, conformist, or revolutionary. But, unusually for a *Poetics and Hermeneutics* symposium, an entire chapter entitled "The Comic in Philosophy," focuses on the Thales anecdote in response to Blumenberg's essay—an amusing gesture in light of the anecdote's brevity and whimsy.

Three of the 1974 symposiasts offered their own readings of the anecdote's place in history. In "Philosophy, Literature, and the 'Comedy of Pure Theory,'" Karlheinz Stierle claims that recent philosophers have found a way to make philosophy's failure less comic: they make their philosophy self-reflexive and literary. After listing some names (Montaigne, Pascal, Lichtenberg, Nietzsche, and Valéry), he gives Baudelaire's poem "The voice," as an example where the lyric speaker "falls into holes, his eyes on the sky," but, instead of a scolding onlooker, he hears an inner voice that consoles him, "Protect your dreams; sages have nothing more beautiful than madmen do!"⁵² After this description of the recuperated value of the "eccentric" and his "subjective world," Manfred Fuhrmann notes in "Height of the Fall—Taken Literally for once" that literary tales about tumbles—figurative or literal—are usually tragic, but that the Thales anecdote sits ambiguous between comedy and tragedy because he is removed from view after he falls. "We cannot see how deeply he falls."⁵³ Fuhrmann is thinking of Aristotle's notion of the tragic fall in *Poetics*. Harald Weinrich also turns to the *Poetics* in his eloquent "Thales and the Thracian maid: *Schadenfreude* on all sides." Aristotle had said that common people were the stuff of comedy and noblemen the stuff of tragedy. "Our fable's ambivalence is thus grounded in its mixed, 'tragicomic' personnel."⁵⁴ The common thread of the three interpretations is the anecdote's ambiguous effect. This fits neatly with Blumenberg's arguments in "Tumble" and in *Laughter*; both present the anecdote as reoccupiable, as a topos with high philosophical stakes, whose meaning remains plastic.

⁵² Preisendanz and Warning, *Das Komische*, 432.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 434. This particular ambiguity of the anecdote is the topic of *Laughter*'s fourth chapter.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 437.

But Blumenberg is not happy to see the fable read as literature—nor to see the antagonistic element neutralized or reversed (as when Weinrich credits the maid with enlightened disdain for astrological superstition). In Blumenberg’s passionate “rejoinder” to Weinrich, he insists that the maid’s wisdom cannot be recuperated. She only represents “blindness” towards the insights of philosophy. But since Blumenberg too must reckon with more than just Plato’s use of the anecdote, he ends by agreeing with Weinrich that it is disconcerting that so many philosophers laugh along with the maid. We can interpret the last line of *Laughter* in this context: “[T]he interdisciplinary reception of the reception upholds the diagnosis: philosophy announces its own end by wanting to know how to interpret its beginning.” (496) Blumenberg cannot reasonably claim an outsider position in the reception history of this anecdote from which to argue for a Platonic interpretation (philosophy is misunderstood). Instead, when he publishes *Laughter* he argues that the secret behind the anecdote’s success has always been the fact that it so perfectly contains the pathos that appeals to him: namely, that philosophy is misunderstood.

Blumenberg’s thought

The Thales anecdote plays a key role in philosophers’ unconscious self-understanding, according to Blumenberg. This role can be better understood with some background in the rest of Blumenberg’s work. In this context can we adequately comprehend statements such as these ones at end of chapter nine of *Laughter*: “But in the original configuration of the Thales anecdote, a parameter is pre-given, whose positions are reoccupiable (*umbesetzbar*). Thus it takes on the function of something that can

neither be exhausted by itself nor by its reception.” (408) What remains and what is changed in the reception of this “reoccupiable” configuration? Other works in Blumenberg’s corpus discuss the historical conditions that make a metaphor or an anecdote reoccupiable and the desire for significance that draws us to reoccupy sites of meaning.

The breadth of Blumenberg’s corpus makes it difficult to perceive the connections between the diverse aspects of his thought. He does however establish connections, for instance, between his early work on theology and his later studies on myth, since he describes myth’s inherent flexibility and theology’s foundational dogmas as conflicting forces that shape cultural understanding. Blumenberg considers metaphor a subterfuge for myth’s flexible meanings, which preserves mythic function in discourses that pursue certainty. And Husserl’s phenomenology provides Blumenberg with an explanation for why metaphors become indispensable. Below I examine the connections more closely between the core components of Blumenberg’s work: theology, mythography, phenomenology, and metaphorology.

Blumenberg’s first academic training was in medieval theology, and *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, his best known work in the United States today, describes Christian theology as an unstable precursor to modern rationalism. Theologians invented rationalistic theology primarily as a means of suppressing Gnosticism, a widespread line of early Christian thought, which claimed that spiritual knowledge negates all knowledge derived from sense experience.

The Gnostic trauma of the early centuries of the Christian era is buried deeper than the trauma of bloody persecutions that contributed to the glory of the

testimony to the new faith. . . . [Gnosticism] was ensconced at Christianity's very roots, the enemy whose dangerousness resided in the evidence that it had on its side a more consistent systematization of the biblical premises.⁵⁵

As Blumenberg describes, early Christian theologians could not surpass Greco-Roman polytheism as an account of the human condition, since polytheism never had a theodicy problem. In other words, a polytheist never needed to ask "how could an omnipotent and benevolent God create evil?" For a Greek polytheist, the nearly omnipotent Zeus barely tolerated the existence of humans, and humanity owed what blessings it had to its occasional benefactor Prometheus, a benevolent, but far from omnipotent, non-Olympian god. During the first formations of the Christian Church, a wealthy and influential Church supporter, Marcion of Sinope, endorsed a mythical narrative solution to Christianity's theological problem: the Hebrew God cruelly created this physical world so that embodied life would make Spirit forget its origin. The Hebrew God thus did not send Jesus. Jesus tricked the Hebrew God in order to appear on earth and preach about how to escape the world-prison. Other Church Fathers derided Marcion's Gnostic myth as a misinterpretation of the bible; after all, the distance of the Gnostic God from human worldly affairs would leave the Church no authority to regulate human affairs.

By Augustine of Hippo's lifetime, the Christian biblical canon had eliminated all traces of stories perceived as Gnostic, but Gnostic sects still thrived. Augustine helped achieve the suppression of Gnosticism by inventing a non-heretical solution to the theodicy problem which made evil entirely original to humanity; all of the evil we encounter is either directly or indirectly a product of human delusion. The idea that delusion was the source of evil recalls the Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge,

⁵⁵ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 126.

but in order to assimilate the virtue of knowledge into Church doctrine, rationalist theology had to be invented, in order to regulate *which* knowledge could be condoned as the type that leads to salvation. Rational methods, however, would prove to be theology's most fatal invention: "Natural science and the historical attitude... were still weapons that the Middle Ages had sharpened against itself, useful as means for winning a new freedom, and which were not to be treated as having their own purpose."⁵⁶ The particularity of the modern age consists precisely in its valorization of rational inquiry for its own sake.

In the second edition of *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg argues against Carl Schmitt's notion that "the political concepts of modernity are all secularized theological concepts."⁵⁷ On the contrary, Blumenberg claims, the perseverance of religious motifs in Renaissance thought belies what is specifically modern about such thinkers: their conception of reason as an end in itself. According to Blumenberg, the discussion of divine omnipotence in writings by early modern thinkers, such as Nicolas of Cusa and Galileo, do not reveal their debt to theology, but rather show them reopening the theological *question* of the purpose of human knowledge, with the intention of changing the *answer* from one centered on God's power to one centered on the individual: "The continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances, but in the inheritance of problems which obliges the heir... to know again what was known once before."⁵⁸ "Reoccupation" is Blumenberg's name for the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 141 (translation modified); Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 95.

⁵⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 44.

⁵⁸ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 48.

obligatory return to a recently past epoch's concerns in order to shift the cultural focus onto new ones.

The modern "reoccupation" of salvational history replaced the idea of God's power in history with that of human-driven scientific progress and thus paved the way for a culture that would consider the pursuit of curiosity an end in itself, not a distraction to salvation. When understanding God's nature was no longer the greatest moral concern, moral responsibility could turn to the new question of how to exercise forethought when pursuing our newly liberated curiosity. This particular epochal shift is one of many to be reflected in the Thales anecdote: in general, medieval authors laugh with the maid, whereas modern ones sympathize with Thales and by doing so reoccupy the question implicit in the anecdote: that of theory's place in the world.

After Blumenberg completed his influential work on the historical conflict between theology and rationalism, he focused on myth as a separate mode of thought in conflict with both medieval and with modern concerns. The 1971 *Poetics and Hermeneutics* symposium dealt with the topic of myth's function in post-mythic culture.⁵⁹ There Blumenberg claimed there that myth was rejected in the European intellectual tradition first by ancient philosophy and then by Christian theology. "The splitting caesura, which the biblical and ancient traditions had in common, would be to approach the topic of polytheism by demonizing its freedoms or denouncing its irrationality."⁶⁰ However, these two rejections of myth differed in how they misunderstood myth's cultural function. "Philosophy, on the one hand, misunderstood

⁵⁹ Fuhrmann, *Terror und Spiel. Probleme der Mythenrezeption*.

⁶⁰ Citations refer to the reprint of this piece in Blumenberg, *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*, 334.

myth and wanted to make it a prototype of metaphysics and demonstrate that relationship through allegorical exegesis. Christian Apologetics also misunderstood myth, and saw a fundamental rival in it—by taking the contradictions and frivolity of mythology absolutely seriously....”⁶¹ Theology demands the exclusive providence over answers to the fundamental questions, and therefore it must master the same falsification techniques as philosophy. Blumenberg’s intervention is to show that both philosophy and theology have been naïve in their hopes to bring myth to an end by replacing it with answers.⁶²

Philosophy differs from myth due to its inclination to offer explanations, to eliminate false beliefs, and thus “to bring myth to an end.”⁶³ Of course, the difference between philosophy and myth can be difficult to discern. Thales’ great “transition from myth to philosophy” shows remnants of Homeric myth: “his ‘new solution’ to the riddle of the world—that everything emerged from the water and is therefore still on top of it—was well attested on Homer’s authority. In the *Iliad*, the river god Oceanus is the ‘sire of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶² This is similar to Wittgenstein’s skepticism that philosophy can answer any metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetic questions. How can philosophy answer such questions when, as Wittgenstein says, “most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical?” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.003 22. Like Wittgenstein, Blumenberg sees the medium of language as incapable of being tamed completely by the goals of logical analysis. Wittgenstein uses the term “grammar” to describe the techniques that facilitate interaction, formalized by language but derived from the hope of sharing a perception. Blumenberg calls that “non-conceptuality,” and shows that it is so ineradicable that even a definition of the world, like Wittgenstein’s, as “everything that is the case”—through the etymology of the German word for “case” transparent in English-speakers (*der Fall*)—hints at a theory of gravitation: “The world is everything that is the case (*der Fall*), because there cannot be anything in it but what falls (*was fällt*).” Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, 47. As Wittgenstein stated in the *Tractatus*, language leads ultimately to the sense of sharing a picture, in this case, a picture of a world bound by gravity. Blumenberg meditates further on Wittgenstein’s metaphors in a book chapter that reflects on Wittgenstein’s view of language as a frustrated temptation to transcend itself—a view that he expresses through the multiple images of voluntary self-confinement, imprisonment, and seeing through glass, as metaphors for language. “In the fly jar” (“*Im Fliegenglas*”) Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 752–792.

⁶³ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 263.

the gods,' just as he is the 'origin of us all.'⁶⁴ (255) While Blumenberg argued in *Legitimacy* that rationality could and did escape from religious influence, he considered mythic imagery unavoidable in both rational and religious discourses.

When mythic imagery occurs in the midst of rationalistic discourse (as in the above example where the myth of Oceanus the Creator provides the prototype for Thales' "all is water"), Blumenberg calls this surreptitious form of myth "absolute metaphor:" "The difference between myth and 'absolute metaphor' would here be a purely genetic one: myth bears the sanction of its primordial, unfathomable origin, its divine or inspirative ordination, whereas metaphor can present itself as a figment of the imagination, needing only to disclose a possibility of understanding in order for it to establish its credentials."⁶⁵ Whether we willingly embrace the world constituted by myth or we receive particular myths critically, myth comes across as more autonomous than metaphor. The metaphors that interest Blumenberg emerge in contexts of non-metaphoric language. It comes across as heuristic, auxiliary, and at worst misleading within a philosophical text. The anti-metaphorical bias of dogmatic and rationalistic discourses, according to Blumenberg, obscures the function of absolute metaphors. But before we examine the concept of absolute metaphor more closely, we must understand the importance Blumenberg placed on the "lifeworld," as theorized by Edmund Husserl. For the lifeworld is the realm of experience from which absolute metaphors draw and yields raw material for myths.

⁶⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, XIV, li. 286, li. 232, 224, 222.

⁶⁵ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 78.

The lifeworld is a state of mind where we accept pre-assigned meanings without seeking explanations. “The life-world, for us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the ‘ground’ of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical.... To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world.”⁶⁶ We become conscious that we normally live in the lifeworld when we exit it in order to conduct *theory*, defined as the state of mind committed to seeking explanations. Unexpected outcomes interrupt lifeworldly experience and prompt *thinking*, but it takes *theory*, characterized by an attitude of willful reflection, to reveal the structure of assumptions that forestalls thinking.

Like Husserl, Blumenberg sets himself the task of articulating theory’s relationship to the lifeworld. Husserl’s work aims to theorize the lifeworld by composing and analyzing precise narratives of his own experience of consciousness. Blumenberg takes the riskier route of narrating a history of consciousness as understood through revealing metaphors and anecdotes in historical publications and letters, but almost never explicitly draws from his own experience of consciousness. Blumenberg treats *metaphors* as sources of knowledge about the lifeworld, while Husserl considers memory the source for such knowledge. Husserl is interested in pursuing *self-reflection* to its origin before words, judgments, and thoughts, back to the structures that constitute them. Blumenberg finds that it takes the feeling of familiarity evoked by metaphor; thus Thales’ embarrassment at falling down a well can make us conscious of the everyday, unnoticed embarrassment that we feel, for example, when we are too immersed in what we are reading to hear someone talking to us or to remember an upcoming appointment.

⁶⁶ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, 142.

Considering how fundamentally they differ in their objects of study, what affinity drove Blumenberg to write more pages on Husserl's phenomenology than on any other topic? I believe that it was Husserl's emphasis on the source of conscious knowledge in an unconscious substructure that inspired Blumenberg. The relationship that Husserl discerns between the lifeworld and theory is similar to the relationship that Blumenberg discerns between myth and rationality. And metaphorology operates precisely in the context of this relationship. Blumenberg never endorses Husserl's belief that the lifeworld can be escaped through skepticism, then described in language, and used as the proper foundation for objective knowledge about the relationship between subjectivity and the world.

As many and varied as Blumenberg's insights were, his legacy lies in his metaphorology, a sophisticated metalanguage and technique for analyzing the historical function of metaphors in philosophy.⁶⁷ Blumenberg devises the term, "absolute metaphors" for the metaphors whose objects cannot be described literally. After considering the hypothetical existence of such metaphors, Blumenberg declares it the task of conceptual history to research them, in order "to ascertain and analyze their conceptually irredeemable expressive function."⁶⁸ They do not represent other concepts with different definitions, but rather they recollect "the substructure of thought, the

⁶⁷ The first three books of Blumenberg's to be translated into English are not explicitly metaphor-studies, while the last four (including this one) are. In Germany, the interest is also running high: there was recently an edited volume of studies about Blumenberg's "metaphorology" and a *Dictionary of Philosophical Metaphors*, which credits Blumenberg with the idea and methodology. See Haverkamp and Mende, *Metaphorologie: Zur Praxis einer Theorie*; Konersmann, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern*.

⁶⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

underground, the nutrient solution of systematic crystallizations.”⁶⁹ By this function, the distance of the stars helps philosophers contemplate ineffable qualities of abstract ideas.

A decade after announcing absolute metaphor as an important object of philosophical inquiry in *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Blumenberg began to relate metaphor to the lifeworld. In “Observations on Metaphors,” he describe how absolute metaphor draws from experience in the lifeworld: “In light of its objects, metaphorology may not be taken for a precursor or substructure to concept formation, rather it shows the retraceability of the constructive instrumentarium in the backwards direction from the lifeworldly constitution, from which it does not stem, but which it is manifoldly referred back to.”⁷⁰ In other words, absolute metaphors give the impression that we can be reminded of the lifeworld retroactively, even though we cannot reflect on it while we experience it. This notion unites the various moments in Blumenberg’s thought. Absolute metaphor, like myth, functions unobtrusively to provide a feeling of familiarity, when contemplating abstractions—whether theology’s all-encompassing God or theory’s indefinite ideas, such as moral goodness. Blumenberg compares successful myths to stories that a child wants to hear again and again: they beg for repetition whether or not we can say “where they came from and what they meant.”⁷¹ Since the origin of myth is concealed both by our own dogmatism or rationalism and by the obscurity of history, we cannot discover its source. Metaphorology makes reading the occasion for self-reflection: noticing the familiar feeling elicited by absolute metaphors offers us a conscious glimpse of the lifeworld.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Blumenberg, “Beobachtungen an Metaphern,” 164.

⁷¹ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 159.

Blumenberg's metaphorology explores the non-conceptual, pre-logical domain whose existence Kant's critical project implies, but marks as unknowable or at least non-discursive. According to Blumenberg, interpreting absolute metaphors can disclose otherwise inaccessible aspects of experience, which would lead neither to improved skill with metaphors nor to self-knowledge, but to an understanding of how authors accidentally express what they cannot know and of when expressing the unknowable becomes unavoidable:

We must bear in mind here that a metaphorology cannot result in any method for *using* metaphors, or for addressing the questions that announce themselves in them. On the contrary: as students of metaphorology, we have already deprived ourselves of the possibility of finding 'answers' in metaphors to those unanswerable questions. Metaphor, as the theme of a metaphorology in the sense that will concern us here, is an essentially *historical* object whose testimonial value presupposes that the witnesses did not possess, and could not have possessed, a metaphorology of their own.⁷²

When we read philosophical texts from the past, absolute metaphors announce questions of great historical—often transhistorical—importance, but they usually will not answer these questions to our satisfaction. Each particular occurrence of an absolute metaphor does not transcend the historical answers to big questions that were available to their users. The Thales anecdote can *express* felt dangers of astrology or the perceived exoticism of philosophy, but it does not *inform* us about these. The Thales anecdote's capacity to be reoccupied lets it function as an absolute metaphor.

Absolute metaphors may be sites of reoccupation, but they do not disclose any particular content outside of their particular uses; this makes evaluating their "testimonial value" an extremely subjective matter. Blumenberg's metaphorology may only persuade

⁷² Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 14.

readers who read philosophy like literature and thus find that the constructed “worlds” presented in philosophy texts appear as seemingly self-evident as the unquestioned “lifeworld” that Husserl discovered lurking behind his own experience of consciousness.

Why read metaphorology

Well-known recent philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, have theories that articulate conceptual thought’s reliance on figurative language. Shortly before George Lakoff and Mark Johnson successfully launched the quasi-empirical discourse on “conceptual metaphor,”⁷³ post-Heideggerian philosophers Derrida and Rorty made cases for metaphor as an *éminence grise* in the history of philosophy. Blumenberg’s work is far from redundant in this context. Rorty discusses metaphors’ function in expressing *beliefs*: “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.”⁷⁴ Blumenberg claims that metaphors drive intellectual history by helping us imagine new *questions*. His metaphorology “aims to show with what ‘courage’ the mind preempts itself in its images, and how its history is projected in the courage of its conjectures.”⁷⁵ Blumenberg and Rorty also diverge in their handling of Heidegger: Rorty praises Heidegger’s insight that metaphors introduce metaphysical distortions into thought, while Blumenberg distrusts Heidegger’s ambition to write an ontology that forgoes metaphor.⁷⁶ Derrida’s statements

⁷³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*. This line of thought, which claims that metaphors structure our understanding of abstractions, has expanded over the decades into the dominant model in cognitive linguistics known as “embodied cognition.” See Lakoff, “Explaining Embodied Cognition Results.”

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 12.

⁷⁵ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

⁷⁶ While Rorty’s book dubs Heidegger the one who “lets us see the beginning of the Cartesian imagery in the Greeks and the metamorphoses of this imagery during the last three centuries,” Blumenberg’s essay sees Heidegger’s existentialism as depriving metaphor of the privilege of orienting our understanding of

in 1972 about metaphorology imply that metaphor is too enmeshed in the rest of philosophical language for its particular historical functions to be discerned: “In its barest and most abstract form the problem would be the following: that metaphor remains in all its essential features a classical element of philosophy, a metaphysical concept. It is therefore involved in the field which it would be the purpose of a general ‘metaphorology’ to subsume.”⁷⁷ Derrida describes the impossibility of a purely non-metaphorical language, whereas Blumenberg’s metaphorology does not purport to expose the fundamentally metaphorical nature of all philosophical language. He only approaches individual metaphors inductively, with *a* metaphorology, which looks for evidence in *one* moment in history at a time, rather than claiming to find *the* only role that metaphor can play within philosophy.

Blumenberg’s metaphorological writings have long been of interest to German-speaking scholars in various fields, and over the last several years, interest in metaphorology has risen steadily among humanistic scholars in the United States. Blumenberg’s treatise on his method, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, has recently appeared in English translation and roused interest in metaphorology among Anglophone readers.⁷⁸ The surge of interest in Blumenberg’s metaphorology is attested by the fact that in the last two years, two critical theory journals, *Thesis Eleven* and *Telos*, have dedicated entire issues to scholarly treatment of this among other aspects of

reality while Heidegger takes his own metaphor for humanity literally. Ibid. “Dasein,” etymologically, “being there,” is one such metaphor that Heidegger takes literally and uses to found an absolute definition of humanity as always already projected outside itself “there” in the future. Blumenberg, “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” 101.

⁷⁷ Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” 18.

⁷⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*.

Blumenberg's work.⁷⁹ Despite all of this recent attention, only two translations of Blumenberg's book-length analyses of specific anecdotes and metaphors were available before this one: the other two are *Shipwreck with Spectator* and *Care Crosses the River*.⁸⁰

The 1980's were a prolific period for metaphorological publications. Two lengthy and important books of Blumenberg's from this period have yet to be translated:

Höhlenausgänge and *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*. In 1989, Blumenberg published *Höhlenausgänge (Exits from the Cave)*, a book about the historical function of the cave as a metaphor with flexible meanings: first of all, the darkness found there suggests both unconsciousness and freedom from distraction; second, the myth of prehistoric cave dwelling humans represents our unconsciousness of our own origins. The book title *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt (The Legibility of the World)* takes its name from the image of "the book of nature," which occurred frequently in medieval texts and experienced a revival among the German Romantics. The book of nature evokes a basic hope of hermeneutics: that the texts we read correspond at least *metaphorically*, if not metaphysically, to reality, which would legitimize our passionate questions about them.

The metaphors described above valorize the philosophers who use them and implicitly encourage philosophy in general. In these case studies, philosophers identify themselves as the ones who recognize when to enter or exit the caves of consciousness or unconsciousness, and who may learn how to read the book of nature.⁸¹ Among

⁷⁹ *Thesis Eleven* (102: 1, Feb. 2011); *Telos* (158, 2012)

⁸⁰ Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*; Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*.

⁸¹ *Shipwreck with Spectator* also present images that fundamentally present the philosopher in a position of power. The book centers around an Lucretius' image of the philosopher who has mastered fear: "Sweet it is, when the wind whips the water on the great sea,/ to gaze from the land upon the great struggle of another,/ not because it is a delightful pleasure to be distressed,/ but because it is sweet to observe those evils which you lack yourself." Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III-4 31. *Care Crosses the River* deals

Blumenberg's studies, only *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* monitors the discrepancy that theorists notice again and again between theorizing the world and living in it. In the anecdote of Thales' absent-minded star-gazing, his tumble into a well brings him no joy or honor, but only mockery. From Plato to Heidegger, theorists who cite this anecdote still manage, of course, to salvage their own theoretical positions: when they laugh at absent-mindedness along with the maid, they believe themselves to be exceptions to theory's excesses, and thus safe from oversights for which their own projects could be ridiculed. In all of these studies, Blumenberg reminds us that our unconscious reliance on metaphoric indeterminacy frames our inquiries in a way that lets us imagine ourselves on the right side of the laughter: being laughed at or laughing depending on which seems more justified. Such metaphors allow us our good conscience about our own position in the world—whether we are theorizing that world or living in it.

Note on the Translation

In order to write a readable translation, I resolved some ambiguities in Blumenberg's diction. For instance, I reduced the polysemy of "*Grund*," which means "ground" both in the sense of rationale and of the earth's surface. While the English word "ground" shares this double meaning, fluent rendering into English required me to select different words. Throughout the book, Blumenberg uses the word "*Grund*" to show the metaphorical relationship between Thales' loss of contact with the ground during his plummet and the rationale for his fall, his astronomy, or for alterations in the story. For

with a less explicitly philosophical myth about the creation of humans out of mud, a soul, and "Care," so that Care would have a form with which to cross the river. (It only becomes philosophical for Heidegger when he calls it a "preontological testimony" to his existential analysis of human beings' essence as "care." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §42.)

instance: “The well has become similar to the pit of sin, and not without reason (*Grund*)....”⁸² To recall this word’s polysemy, I have marked ambiguities involving “*Grund*” either with the German word in parentheses or with a footnote.

An even more important German polysemy that did not fit into the translation is the frequent use of the words “*naheliegend*” and “*fernliegend*,” which mean “obvious” and “obscure.” Etymologically, the words mean “lying nearby” and “lying far off.” They represent understanding as spatial, in a way that recalls the historical stigma against investigating objects as far away as the stars. Sometimes Blumenberg relies on the embedded spatial image in these words: “upon setting out toward the edge of the world, coming from what is *familiar*, the observer of heaven is on the right path to transcend that edge.”⁸³ (308) I find it important to preserve the sensory connotations in “*naheliegend*” when possible, since distance is something perceived, and Blumenberg prizes the Thales anecdote for the way it expresses the difference between theory and the lifeworld metaphorically as a tension between the value of distant and proximate objects. In his words: “Relations of distance and proximity repeatedly seem to demand the apostrophe to the nameless Thracian maid and her criticisms....” (327)

Blumenberg’s is a philosophy of language, and he works with the subtlest aspects of the German language to express it. Blumenberg often italicizes the indefinite article when it is used to indicate a possible plurality where a unity was assumed, since the

⁸² I translate “*Grund*” as “reason” here, even though “not without grounds” exists in English, because that rendering would both be less accurate (grounds always denote conscious reasons, which is not what Blumenberg means here) and would even elide the connotation of the ground as fundament (“grounds” in the plural can only denote “earth” as farmland or real estate).

⁸³ (Emphasis added) Here I translate “*naheliegend*” with “familiar” rather than “obvious,” since what is familiar is obvious as a result of past experience—which includes sensory experience. Declaring a notion obvious is a judgment and thus always expresses more than sensory experience (“the apple is obviously red” can only mean “I judge the apple *obviously* red.”)

German article “a” (*ein, eine*) can mean “one,” as in “one among many.” The German indefinite article often signifies a metonymic incarnation of an abstraction: *a* love (*eine Liebe*) means a particular romantic relationship, an attentiveness (*eine Aufmerksamkeit*) means a small gift.⁸⁴ The preface of *Laughter*, for example, uses *a* protohistory (*eine Urgeschichte*) to refer to the Thales anecdote: “Given that this is only *a* protohistory, there could also have been a different one.” (246) Blumenberg stresses the importance of indefinite articles in this book by asserting that they constitute a kind of agenda, when he writes in the unpublished note about this book cited above: “the indefinite article is... program!” I do not translate the indefinite articles in a uniform manner, precisely because they make for an ambiguous “program,” wherein the very word for “one” is used to express the possibility of a greater number. When “*ein*” means one among many, I translate it “a.” When singularity signifies unrepeatability, I translate the article as “one.”⁸⁵

German articles also express gender, which can either emphasize or trivialize it. In the title of *Laughter*, the German feminine suffix expresses “Thracian woman” in one word: *Thrakerin*. The separate word “woman” in the English title emphasizes that figure’s gender, which Blumenberg does not subject to analysis.⁸⁶ Since the whole,

⁸⁴ I thank Manfred Sommer for this instructive example and for other insights through dialogue about Blumenberg’s thought and language.

⁸⁵ Here is another instance where the choice between translating “*ein*” with “one” and “a” clearly matters: “The tragedy of philosophy results from the fact that the situation of its beginning is simply unrepeatable. If the decisive aspect of this story could not be completed in a situation or in a process, but rather had only been acute in *one* moment of *one* single person, then no genetic derivation helps in the comprehension of the leap, the hiatus, the assumption; instead, it is an image, a scene, an anecdote.” (194)

⁸⁶ As Adriana Cavarero notes: “Blumenberg himself declares the sex of the maidservant in the original Platonic version of the anecdote to be inconsequential and unimportant...” Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 33. She is probably referring to the discussion of Plato’s rendering the passerby in the anecdote a slave: “Nicht zwangsläufig eine Sklavin, und schon gar nicht eine thrakische.” Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, 21.

extensive bibliography of *Laughter* excludes female authors (although one notecard on “THALES” reveals Blumenberg’s knowledge that Hannah Arendt employs the anecdote),⁸⁷ and the Thracian woman always emerges as a feminine anomaly in a patriarchal discourse, I hope that such emphasis suggests that gender should be considered in subsequent reflections on the anecdote. I have also tried to resist the impression that only men conduct theory by replacing Blumenberg’s masculine pronouns for indefinite persons. When German demands the use of “he” to refer to someone, the reader, every theorist, etc., I prefer to find gender neutral plurals, such as “they.”

The reader should also note the frequency with which Blumenberg uses words out of the phenomenological lexicon. These are the most frequent cases for footnotes in my translation. Some of these words are clearly terminology, such as “historicity,” “ready to hand,” and “lifeworld,” but many are everyday words with a particular meaning for Blumenberg, such as “evidence,” “achievement,” “event,” and even the word “theory” itself. For a more thorough exposition of these terms as they relate to Blumenberg’s work, I recommend work by Blumenberg’s advisor Ludwig Landgrebe, by his student Manfred Sommer, or by Husserl.⁸⁸

Wherever I have not cited an English translation, I have translated from the original Greek, Latin, German, and French sources. Blumenberg always leaves quotations from Latin in the original and only cites their standard paginations, although he provides

⁸⁷ Blumenberg’s exclusion of his thoughts on Arendt’s interpretation from *Laughter* may have more to do with his general avoidance of writing about his contemporary milieu than with any possible misogyny. “VORSOKR. THALES: 6 HANNAH ARENDT” Blumenberg, “Zettelkasten 14: T-V (Titel von Bearbeiter/in) [Nasenkarten:T, Theologie, Schöpfung, U, V].”

⁸⁸ Below are relevant works by these authors that have been translated into English: Landgrebe, *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl*; Sommer, “Husserl on ‘Ground’ and ‘Underground’”; Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*; Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*; an *Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*.

page and edition information consistently for texts that originally appear in German.

While I have translated the Latin that appears within the body text, I have left some of his footnotes in Latin untranslated. I follow Blumenberg using standard paginations for ancient sources. When I cite a published English translation, I conclude the citation with a page number.

I quote from English translations when they are available for the works Blumenberg quotes because particular works require special insights from their translators. Translating an entire book has given me an intimate knowledge of Blumenberg's style and vocabulary. His prose often ironically endorses others' philosophical positions, suddenly oscillates between complex and simple syntax that mark turning points in the text, and employs passive constructions that often call attention to the limited agency of individuals over their role in history. Moreover, no word's connotation can be ignored in this book, considering that Blumenberg never divorces philosophical language from its metaphorical connotations since he considered metaphors themselves "*foundational elements* of philosophical language."⁸⁹

Blumenberg's earliest publication from 1946 addresses the role of translation in philosophy. He warns that translation can mislead us into an unwarranted sense of understanding.⁹⁰ This sentiment conveys the phenomenological premise that philosophy begins with inner achievements, rather than with correct or compelling statements. He suggests that the challenges of accurately translating philosophical works only mimic the problems of misunderstanding that arise in any language. As he puts it, in philosophy,

⁸⁹ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 3.

⁹⁰ Blumenberg, "Die sprachliche Wirklichkeit der Philosophie," 430.

a difficulty cannot be left aside, which is no less pernicious in other realms of the arts and sciences: that fundamental achievements... only present themselves for preservation through the medium of a foreign language and that no translation can replace the encounter with the original manifestation. The fundamental problems of philosophy's linguistic reality will need to arise in whichever linguistic form philosophy takes.⁹¹

The difficulty described burdens this passage itself. "A foreign language" (*eine fremde Sprache*) could refer to the ancient Greek language, which Blumenberg considers the origin of the European philosophical lexicon. Or it could indicate all philosophical language, which is "foreign" insofar as its esoteric style makes its purposes appear unfamiliar and alienating. "The original manifestation" (*das originale Zeugnis*) could either refer to the philosopher's firsthand experience of understanding or to the text in the original language. Does "philosophy's linguistic reality" still allow the possibility that philosophy might originate outside of language? And does language conceal certain qualities of an idea's original manifestation? Even when philosophers narrate the moments of their consciousness, we do not necessarily understand *why* certain ideas felt surprising or obvious, thrilling or relieving, easily communicable or indescribable. Although the ambiguities in Blumenberg's prose can be frustrating, they sometimes mark reflections on ineffable philosophical experiences. I have preserved ambiguities in *Laughter* wherever I perceived such resignation in the original.

Spencer Hawkins

⁹¹ Ibid., 428.

About this book

We will have to continue to do without the protohistory of theory because we cannot know anything about it. There was no desire on the part of theory to leave a record of it. *A* protohistory of theory cannot replace *the* protohistory of theory.⁹² It can only recall what has eluded us.

Given that this is only *a* protohistory, there could also have been a different one. But another one would not easily have claimed the vacant position with a better fit—and thus nothing claimed it so obstinately. This obstinacy against fading, against merely lasting without value,⁹³ indicates the “quality” of

⁹² *Urgeschichte*. Blumenberg’s argument about theory’s constructed “protohistory” counters Edmund Husserl’s proposal that theory began with a real event, an “original foundation” (*Urstiftung*). The book Blumenberg published before *Laughter* offers an explanation for Husserl’s preference for words beginning with “*Ur-*”: “the use of the prefix ‘*Ur-*’ served as much to call up the beginning-and-ground-giving as to deepen its meaning, such as in the extreme case of the ‘original founding’ in his late work.” Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 11. According to Husserl’s late work *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the “original founding” was the historical moment (which he dates to Galileo’s physics) when theory questioned all previous foundations of knowledge. Subsequent theory failed to live up to its origins: “...all modern sciences drifted into a peculiar, increasingly puzzling crisis with regard to *the meaning of their original founding* as branches of philosophy, a meaning which they continued to bear within themselves.” Husserl, *Crisis*, 12 (emphasis added). Husserl’s *Crisis* sets out to recover this meaning: “The meaning of the original founding, although broken by Galileo according to Husserl’s accusation, proves to have become ‘reconstructable’ from out of nothing but its supposed failures.” *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 318. In the present book, Blumenberg sets up a rival thesis: what if theory never *lost sight of* its founding moment, but never *had* a single defining moment or meaning? If theorists only have stories about this unknowable moment, then the “original founding” would be nothing but a “protohistory” taken literally.

⁹³ *das bloße Nachvorhandensein*. Heidegger characterizes useless objects with a long word similar to Blumenberg’s: “The more urgently we need what is missing... all the more obtrusive does what is at hand become.... [T]he helpless way in which we stand before it [exposes our deficient mode of engagement with] the mere objective presence (*das Nur-noch-vorhandensein*) of what is at hand.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68 §16. For Heidegger, an object’s obtrusiveness,

the moment that followed thinking itself and does not cease to go after it. It is a story that has stood the test of history. (*Es ist eine Geschichte, die sich in der Geschichte bewährt hat.*) Instead of offering to tell what no one can know, this story can at least offer an account of what sustains the strangeness that something like “theory” exists at all—an account of how theory lacks self-evidence.

At some point, an “attitude”⁹⁴ develops, a purpose that pervades many particular activities, and from this attitude emerges a stream of claims and teachings, collections of teachings and schools, along with all manner of rivalry against theory as a whole—all together this comprises a movement of history that perpetually releases products. This movement continually harkens back to the attitude of the *theoros*, the spectator of world and things, as it was originally branded. It is he, not his product, that protohistory exhibits: the alienating,

conspicuousness, and obstinacy (*Aufsässigkeit*, connoting impudence) render it “mere objective presence” (also translated “presence at hand”). An object’s presence at hand strips it of its utility for human activity, but it can also serve to reveal that the object exists independently from its witness. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195 §43. As Blumenberg explains in this passage, this anecdote’s very obstinacy (*Hartnäckigkeit*, connoting insistence) prevents it from becoming mere objective presence: it obstinately retains its function within the human activity of theorizing. It inconspicuously but effectively depicts theory’s confrontation with other activities.

⁹⁴ *Einstellung*. Husserl too claims that a particular “attitude” is responsible for theory’s presence in the world: “But in addition to the higher-level practical attitude (which we shall soon meet [again] in the religious-mythical attitude) there exists yet another essential possibility for altering the general natural attitude, namely, the theoretical attitude. To be sure, it is so named only by anticipation because out of it, according to a necessary development, philosophical *theoria* grows and becomes an end in itself or a field of interest. The theoretical attitude, though it is again a vocational attitude [like the practical attitude], is totally unpractical. In the sphere of its own vocational life, then, it is based on a voluntary *epoché* of all natural praxis, including the higher-level praxis that serves the natural sphere.” Husserl, “Vienna Lecture,” 282. Blumenberg’s reception history of this anecdote suggests that the self-identified theoretical attitude may not have a history, but only a story to tell.

nocturnal world-spectator who clashed with reality, reflected in the laughter of the spectator's spectator. The fact that all theorists up to the present day still could recognize themselves in this story (though neither do they all, nor must they) constitutes the underhanded test to which theory's strangeness can be subjected in every "realistic"⁹⁵ world.

That it happens to be a story about the putative first philosopher, Thales of Miletus, is only an accident of history, but this accident yields the benefit of knowing the two propositions between which logic allows a space for the origin of theory: "everything is full of gods," reads one. "Everything is from and on the water," reads the other. That everything is full of gods can just as well be a declaration of satisfaction as one of burnout. Were it of satisfaction, then there would be no need for the other proposition. Its existence betrays that the world's divine saturation was experienced as an excess that no longer explained anything. Propositions of another type than those with divine names in them had to arise, and one model was the general thesis of water. In the port city of Miletus,

⁹⁵ *realistisch*. The words "realistic" and "realism" often occur in quotation marks within this text since Blumenberg uses the word "realism" to describe the results of a mental selection process, whose primary selection criterion is that a claim go unquestioned during the activities of everyday life. Realistic claims do not derive their status from rational justification, but they prompt subsequent rationalizations: "...we possess no other reality than the one we have interpreted. It is real only as the elementary mode of its interpretation, in contrast to what is excluded from it as 'unreal.'... [S]ignificance must have its own relationship to reality, a basis that has the status of reality. *Status of reality* does not mean empirical demonstrability; the place of the latter can be filled by taken-for-grantedness, familiarity, having been part of the world from the beginning." Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 1985, 63, 68. When facts, practices, or notions are established, they achieve "realistic" status; when still unfamiliar, "theoretical;" when already surpassed, "mythical;" etc. For Blumenberg, "reality" derives exclusively from durability over time.

someone just had to open his eyes—and during the day at that—to come upon the new proposition.

What “happened” between the two propositions is the business of protohistory: the philosopher does not look at the water during the day; he falls into it at night because he renders even the starry sky the concern of the world-observer. That is not coincidental. The one looking at the sky, after all, had also achieved theory’s very first “success” by dispelling, in a new way, his fellow citizens’ fear of a natural event: he had managed to predict a solar eclipse. That theory works well against fear would remain valid across the millennia up through to the discoveries of Halley’s comet, Pasteur’s microbes, Röntgen’s rays, and one day even Hahn’s uranium fission. But the Thracian woman’s distrust of theoretical machinations, her laughter at theory backfiring against its practitioner—transferring her exoticism to his, this basic relationship would still find its martyr in Socrates. It will not disappear from this world, even if one day the number of theorists should grow to a majority. They will always find their Thracian women where they had not expected them.

The modern creators of the product “theory” are much more laughable indeed than their ancient ancestor, and they become more so to the degree that the means of pursuing their “attitude” become more abstract. Watching the spectators of a sporting event, if we do not know its conventions or rules, can provoke

laughter, and only a culture of respect prevents us from perceiving the zeal among adherents of an unfamiliar religion as a comedy of the absurd. The domesticated theory in the midst of our world usually offers us nothing to watch, because it occurs within enclosures that resemble our bureaucratic ones closely enough to be mistaken for them. As to theory's non-concealable forms of behavior, professional seriousness marks them as an integral part of a reality whose existence relies on so many unknown conditions that our wisdom and way of life include the preference not to laugh at what is peculiar.

“Ihr müßt mehr Brunnen bauen!”

—Heinrich Lübke

I Theory as Exotic Behavior

Theory is something that no one sees. While the behavior that constitutes theory does consist of actions that follow intentional rules and lead to complex systems of statements in regulated contexts, these actions are visible as “procedures” only on their surface. To someone uninitiated in their intentionality, who perhaps does not even suspect that they fall under the category of “theory,” these actions must remain puzzling; indeed, they can appear objectionable or even laughable.⁹⁶ It does not even take the bewildering toil that drives the institutional apparatus of highly specialized scholarship to give that impression. Since the Enlightenment, with its thought experiments about inhabitants of alien worlds who come to visit earth—as an imaginative step beyond the fictional travel narratives by exotic travellers arriving at the European metropolises—we have become used to imagining the appearance of those procedures that characterize the “modernity” of our life as seen by visitors from other stars. In fact, the more

⁹⁶ The action known as “theorizing” has no particular physical activity linked to it, and the bodily movements performed while the mind theorizes, such as pacing or staring, may appear purposeless to onlookers. Between the invisibility of thinking and the fact that onlookers do not categorize purposeless movement as “action,” the spectacle of theorizing can arouse intolerance against theory. This was already a thesis of Blumenberg’s at the 1973 *Poetics und Hermeneutics* symposium: “Perhaps I enter into triviality when I recall that one cannot see actions at all. They consist of that rule by which physical events obtain a determination. When we believe we are seeing actions, we interpret physical appearances by reference to the identity of such a rule. Pure theory, whose intentional context does not seem to end up in a useful product, offers the observer of its manifestations no help in recognizing the rule that guides it.... The outlandishness of an action that is not recognized as an action by a third party, is the reference point for intolerance, which can lie on the whole scale from head shaking to murder. Laughter is just one segment on that scale.” Blumenberg, “Wer Sollte Vom Lachen Der Magd Betroffen Sein? Eine Duplik,” 439.

improbable such visits have become, the more some of our contemporaries have decided that they can barely wait for them—so intensely have we imagined them. If extraterrestrials did observe earth, theory—as organized and conducted in masses—might appear as the least intelligible of the rituals that follow the law of our unknown deity.

To those who live in the scientific world and age, the exoticism of the phenomena we call science (*Wissenschaft*) has indeed become everyday, or concealed from view. Within scientific institutions, everyone is credited *a limine* with pursuing meaningful activity, even when others' high-level specialization makes their work inaccessible: by providing a sphere where everyone is familiar with everyone else's rules of action, scientists have constructed enclosures that prevent the seemingly ritualized foreignness of their procedures from clashing with the outside world. The figure of the scatterbrained professor has functioned at best to promote tolerance towards theorists, as it presents the fossil of their type to an environment that smiles respectfully, even forgivingly, at them; theorists could largely remove themselves from the public and remain, in every sense, bound⁹⁷ to their instrumentaria. Even if they produce no “theory” as aggregates of

⁹⁷ *gebannt*. Its meanings here include “bound” and “spellbound,” that is, both physically fixed to a location and psychologically fixated on an activity.

propositions, the transitive sense of the Greek *theoria*⁹⁸ authorizes us to think of them as constantly at work on theory.

Another development accompanies this. The more a scientific discipline approaches the “ideal” of exact empiricism, the more exclusively it operates on specimens and measured data that make it independent from the haphazardness of its objects’ appearance. Under the pathologist’s microscope, the sick patient is not to be seen. Our imagination projects the astronomer nightly into his fortress of instruments while he is quietly sleeping and allows the illuminated plate to wake up by itself—when he does not even sit at the display terminal of an overflowing data stream, not even in the next step. No one would perceive the frenzy of arcane and disconcerting activity in him; he can perform his work during normal office hours, while instruments, parabolic antennae, or orbiting satellites deliver him what was once called a “star” but no longer bears any resemblance to the classical “object” of study, because it cannot be grasped by sensory means and can no longer be located from the surface of the earth. As many a mathematician no longer calculates, many an astronomer can no longer point out the old

⁹⁸ *theoria*. Blumenberg implies that to conduct *theoria* “in the transitive sense” makes every visual object perceived into a theoretical one. The substantive “*theoria*” derives from a Greek verb that means “to see” which usually carries a transitive sense: not just seeing but seeing a thing *as* that particular thing. Husserl indicates that engaging in phenomenological theory does indeed transform a person’s total experience, not just of sensing, but of existing, in that it effects “a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such.” Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, 137.

constellations. For him the object has positional data, which are fed into the controlling computer of the instrument: whatever the instrument reports back is then the object.

With the separation of instrument and observer, the outward appearance of “theory” as a procedure becomes more normal, and this trend increases the more science intentionally withdraws from the field of what the average person is willing and able to comprehend. Most importantly, this also means that the everyman can no longer empathize with what it is about those “objects” that can absorb a working life. To counteract this divergence from people’s familiar experiences, growing swarms of publicists try to keep theory and theorists “interesting” to a paying public. Meanwhile—how could it be otherwise?—professional theorists are most readily accepted when they approach the phenotype of the now universally familiar bureaucrat and thereby lay claim to the seriousness that mainly comes with dealing in large amounts of money.

None of this lends support to apocalyptic sentiments about science’s finalisms.⁹⁹ Science may wither from disinterest, ascend to its apex or, as befits

⁹⁹ *Finalismen*. Here Blumenberg is in conversation with thinkers in Continental philosophy, especially Heidegger, who argued in his later works that scientific culture and technological progress degrade the understanding, value, and cohesion of subjective life. Already in 1933, Heidegger declares science doomed, in words similar to those in Blumenberg’s next sentence, if scientists do not develop a proper understanding of Being: “Should there still be science for us in the future, or should we let it drift it toward a rapid end?” Heidegger, Martin “The Self-Assertion of the German University.” (1933) In: Ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering. Trans. Lisa Harries. *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: questions and answers*, 6.

its practice, continue on and on—this book is concerned only with the view science offers of itself, in light of its distance from the time and world of its beginning's *imago*, about which Heidegger, in his unhappiest hour, said that “the beginning of this greatness remains what is greatest.”¹⁰⁰

To put it more simply, this beginning has less formative (*prägende*) than memorable (*einprägsame*) force through the *imago* that it offered or, more correctly, drew towards itself. The interaction between the protophilosopher and the Thracian maidservant *was* not, but rather *became* the most enduring prefiguration (*Vorprägung*) of all the tensions and misunderstandings between the lifeworld¹⁰¹ and theory, tensions which would determine both realms' inexorable histories.

¹⁰⁰ “The beginning still is. It does not lie behind us, as something that was long ago, but stands before us.... The beginning has invaded our future. There it stands as the distant command to us to catch up with its greatness.” *ibid.*, 8. Heidegger spoke these words at the ceremony for his promotion to rector of Freiburg University on May 3, 1933. The speech commends German nationalism and marks the period of Heidegger's most evident complicity with Nazism. In a 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger hedges on these statements by explaining that the previous two rectors were dismissed for their unwillingness to post a notice discharging all Jewish faculty. He too was reluctant to post it but ultimately did so under threats of dismissal and of the university being closed. “Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger,” *ibid.*, 41-43.

¹⁰¹ *Lebenswelt*. In Edmund Husserl's “Vienna Lecture” and *Crisis*, the term “lifeworld” indicates the world of working assumptions built on social *and* sensory information, which only phenomenology has properly called into question. “[T]he lifeworld, for us who wakenly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the ‘ground’ of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical.” *Crisis*, 142. According to Husserl, the lifeworld's influence on theory can only be diffused by the most radical “reduction:” observing consciousness itself while granting its content no validity. Blumenberg, however, sees the lifeworld as the source of the “anthropogenic” metaphors that constitute the basis for any philosophical thinking process. “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” 84-85. For instance, without the lifeworld's “distance” metaphor, Husserl would have no “place” to retreat from assumptions.

There are no beginnings in history; they are “assigned” as such. When Thales of Miletus turned into the protophilosopher, he might have recommended himself for the position, by marking myth’s finale with the proposition that now “everything is full of gods.” This was not pulled out of thin air in Miletus, for a city with the renowned oracle of Didyma nearby could afford many gods; at the May procession honor was rendered continuously to the divine statues mounted alongside the “Sacred Street” between Miletus and Didyma for no fewer than sixteen kilometers. So Thales knew what he was talking about and what he meant by “full.”¹⁰² His transition from myth to philosophy was by no means executed inconsiderately; his “new solution” to the riddle of the world—that everything emerged from the water and is therefore still on top of it—was well attested on Homer’s authority. In the *Iliad*, the river god Oceanus is the “sire of the gods,” just as he is the “origin of us all.”¹⁰³ Annexing the world that comes from water and rests on it to the world of the gods hardly constituted the first bold move of reason. If we knew more about how Thales had done it, we would perhaps be

¹⁰² *erfüllt*. The German word here literally means “fulfilled.” Thales statement “everything is full of gods” marks a quantitative saturation point, but it also signifies a qualitative change in Greek culture; the world’s fullness with gods mark the moment when non-mythological language becomes necessary. This is likely another reference to Husserl, who, in *Ideas I*, describes notions about external objects (intentions) as being either “empty” or “fulfilled.” They attain fulfillment when a series of sense impressions confirms an object’s presence. However, no series of impressions would fulfill our intention about “everything.” As Blumenberg notes in this paragraph, Thales’ statement, “everything is full of gods,” sounds pre-philosophical because it boldly universalizes what can only empirically be said of *one* street full of gods.

¹⁰³ Homer, *The Iliad*, XIV, li. 286, li. 232, 224, 222.

reminded more of the exegesis of a canonical text than of the founding of a philosophical system.

What became more important for the future and for the reputation of the protophilosopher was that he had presented theory's first spectacular success to the Greeks—though he may have hailed from Phoenician stock—by announcing a solar eclipse before the fact. No matter which facts and methods may be attributed to the prognosis (above all, how he determined the eclipse's site of visibility)—once the position of protagonist fell to him he simply had to attract significances of all sorts. Reception would thus smile on him, but also leave him exposed. In this regard, it can remain open what was primary and what was secondary material in equipping this inaugural figure. In any case, Thales the astronomer had become important for appraising what a philosophical implementation of theory could mean; theory's "achievement"¹⁰⁴ could be identified as the reduction of human anxiety. It is precisely for that claim to succeed that a successful beginning became necessary.

¹⁰⁴ *Leistung*. Both myth and theory achieve the reduction of fear, according to Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*. Here Blumenberg is giving a phenomenological term a weaker sense. "Husserl very frequently uses the German word *Leistungen* (plural of *Leistung*, translated as 'accomplishments,' 'achievements,' 'performances,' 'results') to characterize the process by which knowing subjects engage in intentional acts involved in the constitution of intentional objects of all kinds (including natural and cultural objects and the world itself)... By achievement, Husserl means not just the outcome or result but the constitutive process itself." Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 26–27. The achievement of consciousness that interests Blumenberg is not consciousness achieves a world, but how it reconstitutes what seems unbearable about the world as bearable after all.

We can determine what the astronomer had to see, in order to provide progress for his science; what he actually saw in order to be shackled to his *theoria*, we do not know. We can only think abstractly about this beginning or idealize it; how it is intertwined with the world's divine saturation remains inaccessible to us. For the Thracian maid, who sees the Milesian wandering around at night in the most inadvisable posture, it would be obvious to assume that she had spied him caught up in the cult of his gods. Then, he fell down justly, since his gods were the wrong ones. That unintelligible behavior could be a symptom of seeing a god—and even had to be if the degree of bizarreness escalated to the point of madness—was common knowledge not only among the Greeks, who were reminded repeatedly by Homer that a god can become visible to just one person and no one else, as when Athena restrains Achilles from drawing his sword against Agamemnon. Everyone else resists the exclusivity of the relationship of an individual to his or her special vision, the modern public just like the Thracian maid. In the direction of the starry heavens, where Thales had fixed his gaze, there were no gods that she knew from home. They were down there, where the Greek would now tumble. On those grounds, her *Schadenfreude* was allowed.

II. Socrates is transferred into protohistory

“Theory” already had a history—just a short two centuries—when it came across an activity beloved again and again over the course of this history: returning to its origins, or at least reexamining them. It had just begun to be worthwhile to measure contemporary luminaries by their archaic prototypes at the point when Plato confronted the fate of his teacher Socrates by comparing him to the figure of the protophilosopher. In the corpus of Aesopic fables, which were familiar to every Greek from childhood, and which the condemned Socrates had still taken up from within his cell before death, a pertinent morsel appears concerning an astronomer who meets his downfall through the self-forgetting entailed by his theoretical activity:

An astronomer (*astrologos*) made a habit of going outside every evening to observe (*episkopēsai*) the stars. And one time when he reached the edge of town and had all of his attention (*ton noūn holon*) on the sky, he fell into a well without even realizing what was happening. But while he was screaming and crying, someone nearby heard his groans. After the passerby came and learned what had transpired, he said, “Sir, does trying to watch things in the sky make you unable to see things on earth?”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Aesop, *Fabulae aesopicae collectae.*, 35–36. [Blumenberg’s footnote: The *epimythium* runs: this story can be applied to the sort of people who make themselves conspicuous through unusual behavior, but bring nothing of common utility (*nichts Gemeinsinniges*) to humanity.] I would translate the Greek differently: “This story can be applied to people who are proud (*alazoneuōntes*) of the unusual things they do, but who cannot achieve the ordinary things (*ta koinà*) for people to do.” Aesop, *Fabulae aesopicae collectae.*, 36. Depending on the meaning of *ta koinà*, “common things,” Aesop either accuses the astronomer of being useless to others or of being helpless for himself. This version of the fable dates back to the Augustana recension of Aesopic fables. The oldest copy of this text is from the 10th century, and the text it claims to copy is from the late fourth century BC, when it was recorded by a student of Aristotle’s and antiquarian scholar, Demetrius of Phalerum. While that is supposedly the oldest extant collection of

In the *Theaetetus* dialogue, Plato lets his Socrates transfer this story to Thales of Miletus. The formerly unnamed astronomer turns into the founder of philosophy; the equally anonymous witness of his fall becomes the Thracian woman in the status of domestic slave for Milesian citizens. The figures of the confrontation have gained concreteness and background:

Why, take the case of Thales, Theodorus. While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a well, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet.¹⁰⁶

As befits the structure of the fable, to which Plato unmistakably refers, he lets himself immediately supply the moral of the story: “The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy.”¹⁰⁷ This *epimythium* cannot have been the fable’s original one;¹⁰⁸ the wisdoms tacked on after fables are generally not

Aesopic fables, Plato’s version of this particular fable predates it. In this chapter, Blumenberg makes an intriguing case that Plato must have known the version with anonymous characters and been the first author to dub the anonymous astronomer “Thales” and the passerby a “Thracian servant girl.” The burden of proof is on Blumenberg, since Plato does not claim authorship for this version of the anecdote (which appears in later so-called “Aesopic” collections). (Cf. footnote 18 in Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*, 269.) However, it helps Blumenberg’s case to recall that Platonic dialogues often credit other luminaries (such as Socrates, Aristophanes, or Lysias) for Plato’s own inventions.

¹⁰⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174A 121. (translation modified; I have replaced Fowler’s “pit” with “well” for the Greek *phrear*.) Blumenberg quotes Heidegger’s translation from the 1935-6 lecture *What is a Thing?* which he discusses in chapter thirteen.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 174A-B 121.

¹⁰⁸ Fables were first recorded in handbooks for orators to draw from, and thus they did not have morals at the end (*epimythia*), but rather began with short descriptions of their potential purpose within a speech (*promythia*). Fables were often indexed by *promythia* in order to guide the reader to an apt metaphor for the point he sought to prove. A sample *promythium* runs: “To a man who is rich, and also a scoundrel, the following fable applies.” (Cf. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, xi-xv.).

original components.¹⁰⁹ There is no basis for reading anything into Plato's version about humanity in general, but only about the philosopher's bizarreness on its way to becoming tragic.

Of course, it is not Thales who is the reference point in the Platonic context, but Socrates. When the dialogue was written, the philosopher's unbearability had already reached its limit among Socrates' contemporaries, and the polis had punished him with death. What had been announced in the laughter of the maid reached its conclusion in hatred. At this point, the Socrates of the dialogue cannot be identical with the historical figure whom the reader and author have in mind; as a literary figure, he still has his end ahead of him and does not even imagine it when he makes fun of himself and philosophy's particular form of "realism" through the image of the Milesian philosopher. For Plato and his public, theory is introduced as fate; fate binds theory's prototype to the figure of its culmination, who had become unsurpassable in understanding the world and the human. From Plato's perspective, in that comedy at the well's edge, as in the tragedy at the civil court, a similar clash of worlds is at stake: a clash between

¹⁰⁹ *gleichursprünglich*. In Blumenberg's characteristic dual attention to phenomenology's experiential evidence and to historical, text-rooted evidence, he applies this term from phenomenology to literary history. In more explicitly phenomenological cases, the word is translated as "co-original" or "equiprimordial." This phenomenological term indicates the presence of two causes for one effect, neither of which precedes the other as the "original." Heidegger claims the equiprimordiality of contingent causes behind particular experiences and of ontological causes behind existence itself. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 124. For Blumenberg, the *non*-equiprimordiality of the fable and its moral show that both the fable's existence *and* its interpretation are both contingent.

concepts of reality,¹¹⁰ whose unintelligibility to one another can manifest as the emergence of laughter or the effect of deadliness. In the dialogue, Socrates still accepts the ridicule alongside his prefiguration, as he would accept the cup of poison in jail and reject offers of escape.

In his projection onto Thales, Socrates only indirectly hears the servant's ridicule. At the end of the *Protagoras*, when ironic cluelessness turns out to be the result of all dialectic, Socrates hears the ridicule of Failure personified: "The recent outcome of our speeches is, like a human being, accusing and ridiculing us; and should it attain a voice, it would say: 'You two are strange, Socrates and Protagoras.'" ¹¹¹ The futility of the philosopher's primary occupation, however, is not the only image of ridiculousness that he displays, but his practical behavior in its entirety appears ridiculous as a consequence of philosophical eccentricity. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates tells Polus, not without satisfaction, about the time when the lot had appointed his *demos* to count the votes in the public assembly, and when he found no way to deal with the task at hand, he drew general ridicule to himself. It is no accidental bad luck; ridicule follows him, even confirms to him

¹¹⁰ *Wirklichkeitsbegriffe*. Blumenberg's repeated description of the scenario in the anecdote as a clash between "concepts of reality" could only indicate a clash between a conscious and an unconscious concept of reality. According to his Husserlian premises, the lifeworld's concept of reality should only be recognizable upon reflection, that is, only through a form of theory. This anecdote, thus, dramatizes a clash between two forms of unconsciousness: the theorist is unconscious of what his body doing, and his heckler is unconscious of the concept she is defending.

¹¹¹ Plato, *Protagoras*, 65.

that he has long abandoned the position of the everyman. In Kierkegaard's dissertation on the concept of irony,¹¹² he argued that Aristophanes approached the truth in making Socrates a comic figure of the comedy *The Clouds*.

Aristophanes had ridiculed Socrates in the comedy, at a time when the latter was still pursuing natural philosophy in Thales' tradition and investigating the celestial phenomena with Anaxagoras as his model:

Socrates, who otherwise did not visit the theater often, partook eagerly this time. He said to those who sat near him that it seemed to him as if he were attending a funny dinner party, where one was making an artful joke out of him. As even some strangers wanted to know just who this Socrates was, he stood up and let his original be seen against his copy, which was presented on the stage.¹¹³

Plato's Socrates recounts his turn away from natural philosophy and his flight to the "logoi" in the *Phaedo*. The stargazer, whom Aristophanes still mocks in the comedy, can no longer be detected in the narrator of the Thales anecdote, although the young Socrates in *The Clouds* is indeed much more similar to the Milesian. But Socrates does not lay claim to the fable as an heir to Thales' natural philosophy. His claim concerns the theorist's eccentricity, no matter what the object, although it was the choice of philosophy as his object that cost Socrates all sanction and endangered his life. This all bespeaks an immanent logic: in the two

¹¹² Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, II*.

¹¹³ Fénelon, *Abrégé des vies des anciens Philosophes* (from a German translation: J.F. Fleischer: *Kurze Lebensbeschreibungen und Lehrsätze der alten Weltweisen*. Frankfurt: 1762, 204). [My translation. This section does not appear in English or in the original French versions, and I could not locate the German version. Blumenberg may be (mis)quoting from memory here.]

centuries since Thales, it had become more evident what was actually laughable about theory. The anecdote must be read with the knowledge that Socrates had turned away from the interest in nature, which prevailed during his youth, in favor of probing human life and behavior. Then it becomes clear that the spatial distance and inaccessibility of the objects in the starry sky—in comparison to the nearness of his practical existence’s pitfalls—did not *constitute* the theorist’s exoticism, but only *represented* it.

What Socrates had discovered, after abandoning natural philosophy, was the sphere of *conceptuality* for things human, but even from this perspective the reality of the obvious¹¹⁴ was missed and therefore turned into a pitfall. For the theory of practice is no less theory than the theory of the stars. That is apparent in the philosopher himself—not as he was represented in the anecdote, but as the Platonic Socrates portrays the philosopher—the figure whose theoretical peculiarity unmistakably marked him as a being captivated by the “essences.”¹¹⁵ “For really such a man pays no attention to his next door neighbor; he is not only ignorant of what he is doing, but he hardly knows whether he is a human being or

¹¹⁴ *naheliegend*. This word literally means “lying closeby.” Its opposite is “fernliegend,” “lying far off.” Blumenberg frequently uses these words for in their figurative senses of “obvious” and “obscure,” which emphasizes the metaphorical function of distance to describe a notion’s comprehensibility. (See introduction.)

¹¹⁵ [*ein*] *von den “Wesen” erfasst[es] Wesen*. This philosophical term for “essence,” can also refer to any particular “being” or “creature.” By repeating the word for creatures to refer to essences, Blumenberg implies that Plato’s concept of the forms requires living beings as its metaphoric substructure.

some other kind of creature; . . . ”¹¹⁶ Here the Thracian maid’s scorn is decoupled from the Milesian astronomer’s object, which is noble (*erhaben*), but ultimately arbitrary; no further information is necessary about the content of his nocturnal machinations to position him as eccentric. The “Socratic turn”—which was supposed to have fetched philosophy down from the sky and given it over to the most obvious of all interests, investigating “what a human being is and what is proper for such a nature to do or bear different from any other . . .”—had not changed theoretical behavior by a hair. It had only removed its object from everyday familiarity and thrust it into the distance, so that the everyday would appear as bewildering as the stars.

The philosopher’s new position thus did not result from his change in object, but from theory’s changing demand on its practitioner: the Socratic type of philosopher does not recognize a human being in his neighbor, while—and because—he is preoccupied with studying the essence of the human. Everyone else’s laughter, represented by the Thracian maid’s, became the indicator for a philosopher’s successful concentration on the theoretical object at hand. Awkwardness, when it accompanies behavior that theorists have picked up off of others, advances to the status of proof that a theorist has attained unprecedented access to an object of inquiry.

¹¹⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174B 121.

What had played out at the cistern¹¹⁷ of Miletus occurred on the scale of a private misunderstanding. Between Thales's time and Plato's writing came the polis, which showed suspicion towards the philosopher's machinations in the market. Theoretical success becomes an offense within the state's reality:

The leaders [among philosophers], in the first place, from their youth, remain ignorant of the way to the agora, do not even know where the court-room is, or the senate-house, or any other public place of assembly; as for laws and decrees, they neither hear the debates upon them nor see them when they are published; and the strivings of political clubs after public offices, and meetings, and banquets, and revelings with chorus girls—it never occurs to them even in their dreams to indulge in such things.¹¹⁸

A deficiency sticks to Socrates and to his self-description as philosophy's shaping force; the avant-garde of practical philosophy appears not to have really tested their leading man's commitment to the cause: for his deficiency is in his socialization. In this depiction (*Zeichnung*)—perhaps a distortion (*Verzeichnung*) or caricature (*Überzeichnung*)—the Platonic Socrates prefigures the *chorismos*¹¹⁹ of forms conceived by his greatest pupil, not yet as a doctrine, but still as a way of life. For only in his corporality does Socrates belong to the community, and he even yielded that up to them as a kind of tax. Philosophical objects will not yet

¹¹⁷ *Zisterne*. The scene of Thales' tumble in *Theaetetus* may be less tragic than the repeated reference to a "well" makes it sound. The Greek word for "well," *phrear*, can also mean the shallow "cistern" that feeds a fountain (but always refers to a man-made water-filled structure). See Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 123.

¹¹⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 173C-D 119.

¹¹⁹ *chorismos*. "separation, gap." *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 899. The separation here between Socrates' theoretical eccentricity and the polis' worldly savvy prefigures the *chorismos* that Plato describes between ideal forms and the material world.

have claimed timelessness as their exclusive quality, at the point when the philosopher already made timelessness into his own quality. “Well, Socrates, we have plenty of leisure (σχολή), have we not?”¹²⁰ asks his interlocutor Theodorus. With a little hesitation, Socrates agrees.

No criterion for differentiating between theory and “realism” will prove more precise than their dispositions towards time as infinite or finite, respectively.¹²¹ Only later will the theorist trade leisure for industry, when everyone must demonstrate how little time he or she has. In Plato’s time, the sophists were already coached and coaching others to watch the water-timer during a court trial; rhetoric generally meant standing under time pressure—the temporality of slaves.

One last thing must still be withheld from the philosopher, if he has not already lost everything in the abyss of his broken relationship to the polis: “And all of these things the philosopher does not even know that he does not know....”¹²² He does know, as Socrates says, *that* he knows nothing; but in the knowledge of *what* he does not know he is badly informed. Otherwise he would

¹²⁰ *Theaetetus*, 172C 115.

¹²¹ In the book he published immediately before this one, Blumenberg describes how “the bitterest of all discoveries” is the world that will survive our deaths. Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit Und Weltzeit*, 76. The desire for the world to end along with our own deaths is his explanation for the popularity of apocalyptic sermons. He also considers historically popular alternatives: the various attempts to live outside of a lifetime—whether through accessing eternal ideas, knowing history, or leaving behind ambitious creations.

¹²² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 173E 119–120.

not be so fundamentally deficient in life's realism. Astronomy, which Thales supposedly brought to the Greeks, was now nothing but an exceptional case where engaging with fundamental problems looked bizarre; it was nothing but a metaphor for bizarreness when he went "studying the stars, and investigating the universal nature of every thing that is, each in its entirety...."¹²³ The accusation of the Thracian maid, about which we know neither how the philosopher answered nor whether he really felt touched by it, is now accepted as a professional stigma: "never lowering [his thoughts] to anything close at hand." This is the context in the dialogue where Socrates introduces the Thales anecdote.

It remains disputed whether Plato was the first to name the figures in the fable from Aesop's corpus and to link the piece with Thales, in order for Socrates to shine forth by outdoing Aesop. Alternately, Plato could have found Thales' name already there in his *Aesopica* and had his Socrates faithfully cite what he had read. The anonymization would only have come about later: in other words, the anecdote could have fallen victim to the fable genre's obligatory typification.

The case for this objection rests on two premises: both Thales and Aesop belong to the same century, and both come from Miletus. Behind the anecdote stands the real situation of the astronomer observing the stars—although the fable account of this promotes the misunderstanding that this only happens at night and

¹²³ Ibid., 173E-174A 121.

that his stay in the cistern could only be considered an accident, while in fact astronomers also had to determine the position of stars during the day in order to calculate the calendar cycle, and the optics at the bottom of a well served that end best.¹²⁴

And yet both sides of the argument do not fit together properly. Aesop is not established as a historical figure; even if one thinks of him as an on-site observer of Thales, or even just as a collector of local gossip about him, it remains unconvincing that Aesop should have violated the rules he gave the fable genre, which he had imprinted if not invented. But that would be the case if the piece were equipped by Aesop himself with the name of the unlucky hero. Then again, Plato could have encountered a story regarding Thales of Miletus elsewhere, such as among the treasury of anecdotes about the Seven Wise Men. In that case, his Socrates would only be imitating the fable form ironically—and the whole argument about Aesop’s possible relationship to Thales would become unnecessary. This possibility cannot be entirely excluded; but it is unlikely because Plato characterizes Socrates as so intimate with Aesop’s fables that he reaches into his memory bank from prison and—acting as an author for the first time and the last—puts Aesop’s fables into verse. Through the report on his

¹²⁴ On page 51, Blumenberg cites a philological article, which explains how Thales would have needed to enter the well voluntarily in order to block out ambient light during the day and observe the stars: Landmann and Fleckenstein, “Tagesbeobachtungen Von Sternen Im Altertum. Eine Philosophisch-astronomiegeschichtliche Rekonstruktion Der Thalesanekdote. Plato Theatet. 174 A.” See note 71 on that page for Blumenberg’s own footnote about this article.

imminent death in the *Phaedo*, a connection between Socrates and Aesop was established for Plato's public; we then receive an inverted view of Socrates' reworking Aesop when Socrates applies the stargazer fable indirectly in the *Theatetus*. Between the two pieces, we witness the skill and desire to compose. Only a literary stylist like Plato was up to the task of changing the fable for his purposes, and these changes involved more than just naming the anonymous astronomer-type, who is foreign on his home planet.

Plato's sources matter if we want to determine how the configuration would have been available to be placed in Socrates' mouth. In the historical background of two centuries, a misunderstanding may have caused astronomical protocol from the depth of a well to look like the result of an accident, and that may have influenced the invention of the little piece—without the sky watcher's tumble, the story would not have its premise. The view of the man in the cistern must have come after the perception of strange behavior, so that its consequence would draw taunts and lessons to him; or the man crying for help from the depths would have needed to announce the sequence of events to the passer-by from out of nowhere, so that the latter could render the wisdom of the extant fable. In comparison to the story we consider Aesopic, Plato made a masterpiece of liveliness by staging the immediate perception of the event. As he hurried from out of nowhere towards the cries for help, the passer-by in the fable, who could not have been a spectator, could have concluded from the pitiful situation that the

inattentiveness of an air-gazer had prompted it; but he could hardly have suspected the intensity of an astronomical theorist. In that form, the story was a general warning against the danger of nocturnal accidents, since such threats could just as well befall lovers sneaking around. It may not then be overlooked that the passer-by in the extant fable announces himself to the fall victim after the fact (*mathōn ta symbebēkota*). The fallen astronomer verbally delivers the information required for the reprimand imparted to him.

Even without considering the invention of the female figure, it is now clear how much the fable would still be lacking, if it were supposed to depict the confrontation between theory and the lifeworld. Taking the tale as a reference to Thales of Miletus would not be enough. The path was not one from fact to type, from namedness to anonymity, from anecdote to fable, but rather the reverse. Plato was interested in the identity of the astronomer and the protophilosopher, in order to let Socrates project his identity onto that of the protophilosopher, while the poet of the fable could not utilize the stargazer's identity to make his point. Anyone was acceptable for him; and because everything in the fable rushes towards the epigrammatic ending, he even misses the chance to make the bearer of wisdom into a witness of the event. For that effect as well, the Thracian woman will be much more suitable.

The public that ridiculed Plato's hero could no longer be called barbarian; the Sophistic Enlightenment, which was blossoming in Athens, had mastered the art of exposing weakness and rendering it contemptible. In order to speak in a prefigurative way about Socrates' fate from Socrates' own mouth, long before the cup of hemlock, the focus must be on martyrdom for the cause of pure ideality. The blood of the witness to truth is not yet spilt; it rises to a blush in his face, whenever he is supposed to speak in court or anywhere else about the things "at his feet and before his eyes[.] He is a laughing-stock not only to Thracian girls but to the multitude in general...."¹²⁵

The one-time tumble down the well puts no end to the problem. Socrates masters rhetorical augmentation at the very point when he speaks about philosophers' rhetorical incapacity; he grasps onto the plural of wells and tumbles, so that his philosopher—and thereby he himself—"falls into pits and all sorts of perplexities..."¹²⁶ His public is merciless, for it is educated. That is the change in conditions which Plato expressly establishes through Socrates: "...he stammers and becomes ridiculous, not in the eyes of Thracian girls or other uneducated persons, for they have no perception of it, but in those of all men who have been brought up as free men, not as slaves."¹²⁷ In order to complete this

¹²⁵ Ibid., 174C 123.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 174C.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 175D-E 127.

viciously sharpened paradigm, in which the opposite of a slave's upbringing is made into the precondition of the philosopher's imminently fatal situation and thereby of Socrates' fate, the nameless-unspecified passerby from the fable—who do not need to be anything more than that before—must now become a slave.

Not necessarily a female slave and by no means necessarily a Thracian one. But a Thracian slave woman could do more than provide a mocking joke to contrast with the theorist's gravity; she also had the background—which Plato evokes again elsewhere—of a world of alien gods, feminine, nocturnal, subterranean. The thought that she would be silently thinking of these gods when she sees the philosopher plummet into the earth should be thoroughly permitted to the reader. Plato by no means needs to tell the Athenians to which goddess Socrates has just prayed at the opening of the *Republic*, when he is making the return trip from the Piraeus; there the first festival for the Thracian goddess Bendis was celebrated—which would have allowed Plato's contemporaries to date the dialogue's events. And Socrates remarks about how particularly impressed he was by the ceremonial procession of the Thracians, who had built a strong merchant community at the Athenian city's harbor. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff recalls this context to his father-in-law Mommsen, who was interested in the peoples of the late Roman Empire, by emphasizing the Thracians' role in greater Athens: "And the race was good. Thucydides, Aristotle, Antisthenes have Thracian blood. This nation, which was not destroyed until the

assaults of the Byzantine Period, particularly from the Bulgarians, certainly deserves an epitaph.”¹²⁸

This means that the Athenians did know something about what may have passed through that Thracian woman’s mind two centuries earlier. She was certainly not the one who let the protophilosopher fall, yet she was in league with those who had staunchly expressed disapproval of anyone who interrupts nocturnality and worships the heavenly. For them, during the night’s silence, even the city gods of Miletus lost some of their standing and authority. And once again that reveals a subterranean link between the anecdote and Socrates’ case. The recipients of Plato’s text would have noticed this link if we impute to them any rudimentary form of “hermeneutics.” For they would know the following: the Attic polis always considers the gods of their civic cult, or at least acts that way. The polis thus cannot find a philosophy harmless that first says virtue is knowledge and then teaches them to know that they know nothing. Plato invented that laughter as a response to the sight of the Milesian philosopher, in order to associate it with Socrates’ death sentence. And it would have been no stretch for Plato’s public to see the tragic aspect of the comic figure, even long after Socrates’ execution and even without the author’s insinuation. The Socrates of the dialogue lets the gods fade into the background; in their place the conflict

¹²⁸ Mommsen and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Mommsen und Wilamowitz*, 205.

between concepts of reality, the hopelessness of their ever reaching consensus, rises to the fore as the crisis of which the laughter then, and the death sentence now, were just the symptoms. Over the anecdote's reception history, it has retained an ambiguous position between comedy and tragedy; the equivalence that Plato evokes, between a case of state violence and a fall down a well, has lost its significance.

III. Knowledge about heaven¹²⁹ and competence on earth

The figure of Socrates does not exhaust its polysemy in Socrates' departure from natural philosophy and his turn to the question of the human and of human virtuousness. Socrates, or Plato through him, laid a trap right at this turn by determining virtue through knowledge. Cicero's formula has since become imprinted on Socrates' historical image: "Socrates was the first who brought philosophy down (*devocavit*) from the heavens, placed (*conlucavit*) it in cities, introduced (*introduxit*) it into families, and obliged it to examine life and morals, and good and evil."¹³⁰ This, in turn, has become a common expression through the formula: what is "over our heads" has nothing to do with us.¹³¹

Yet precisely this change, philosophy's transition to the thesis of virtue as knowledge, drove philosophy back out of human houses and turned its sights to a different sky, one still higher and farther than that of the stars: the heaven of

¹²⁹ *Himmelskenntnis*. The second part of this word, *-kenntnis*, means "knowledge," but in the sense of experiential knowledge, not factual knowledge, *Wissen*. This word choice recalls that both mystics and rationalists lay claim to knowledge about the sky. *Himmel*, the German word for "heaven" is even more polysemous than the English one: besides meaning the residence of God, the blessed, and other numina; it is also *the* word for "the sky." My translation oscillates between "heaven" and "sky," since Blumenberg uses the word both for a physical and an imaginary place in this chapter, for example, Plato's "heaven of forms" (23) and "Newton's physics of the sky" (30).

¹³⁰ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V 10, 166 (translation modified).

¹³¹ "[Socrates] held the following proverb in high esteem: 'what is above us is irrelevant to us.'" Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 208. [Blumenberg's citation: "*Celebre hoc proverbium Socrates habuit: quod supra nos, nihil ad nos.*"]

forms.¹³² In the forms lay the explanation for why the norms of virtuous behavior are binding. The first step down the path shows up in the Platonic dialogues as the qualification that not *all* virtues can rely on knowledge, for instance, not that of courage. Yet the question of how knowledge is possible at all remains, and it raises greater difficulties than ever, now that virtue is expected to be founded on it. The generality of the problem once again drives the philosopher back from the human things whose proximity he had sought when he turned away from natural phenomena. The question of knowledge cannot be posed differently for morality and for physics if knowledge is to be captured within the brevity of this heading. But at the same time the theory of forms restores universality to the interest in the world, within which the human appears only among other things, as an answer to the question of the possibility of knowledge. In that context, the Thales anecdote also illustrates how objects' nearness or farness—the criterion that gives the Thracian maid something to taunt—cannot be a disjunction that matters for the philosopher's work.

Calling philosophy down from the sky to settle among humans had proven to be Socrates' too simple dream, and it remained his student Plato's dream in the

¹³² *Ideen*. The German rendering of “*eideia*,” familiar as “Platonic forms” in English, means “ideas” in other contexts. In other writings, Blumenberg describes “ideas” as the kind of thoughts that always require metaphoric mediation, because they elude all terminological codification. He is following Kant's notion of “idea.” Kant distinguished “ideas”—for which human understanding has neither examples nor schemes and required symbols, in order to speak about them—from “concepts,” which could be named more easily, because their content could be verified by examples, definitions, or formulae.

early dialogues about the virtues. Not so easily could he extract himself from comedy, from being made a mockery by Aristophanes. Again and again, philosophers want to pass collectively as “practical” people, when theory has alienated its appearance too much. This too reflects the anecdotal placement of the protophilosopher. There is no challenge in imagining Thales, standing in the reverberation of the Thracian maid’s laughter, as someone who believed that his reputation in the city of Miletus derived from a solid piece of “realism.” In keeping with Miletus’ character as a port and trade city, this could only be evidence that knowledge about celestial phenomena could enable someone not only to cast off the fear of solar eclipses, but also to be more successful than others in business.

It is extremely telling, particularly of the difference in the profiles of the two philosophers, that Aristotle transmits a counter-anecdote to Plato’s:

He was reproached for his poverty, which was supposed to show that philosophy was of no use. According to the story, he knew by his skill in the stars while it was yet winter that there would be a great harvest of olives in the coming year; so, having a little money, he gave deposits for the use of all the olive-presses in Chios and Miletus, which he hired at a low price because no one bid against him. When the harvest-time came, and many were wanted all at once and of a sudden, he let them out at any rate which he pleased, and made a quantity of money. Thus he showed the world that philosophers can easily be rich if they like, but that their ambition is of another sort.¹³³

¹³³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 111 Part A Book XI; 1259 a9-18.

We must note how far away we have already come from Socrates, who would not have said that philosophers could easily be rich if they only wanted to, but do not try to be. In this respect, Aristotle has already integrated sophism into philosophy: the philosopher can too, but he just does not want to. Thales could not have been as strict as Socrates because Thales was not in the position to say he knew that he knew nothing. He knew something and exploited it. “What does this story mean to teach?” asks a recent philosopher, who then asks, “the capitalist relationship of exploitation in bourgeois science? It is not that; for Thales gave away the wealth he made...”¹³⁴ Thus the protohistory of theory obtains a turn to morality, which seems to have become indispensable upon its first transfer to Democritus. Pliny had put a sanction on restituting the costs of verification in his *Natural History*: theory should prove itself, not pay for itself.¹³⁵ Far be it from the ancients, indeed, to exclude star-interpretation from the star-knowledge that lead to the protophilosopher’s weather prognosis; when, however, Jakob Brucker brings the anecdote into the modern historiography of philosophy, he presumes that the demonstration by the Milesian “was thought up by idle people to strengthen the value of the good-for-nothing star-interpreting-art.”¹³⁶ In that case, abstaining from profit would have been considered respectable only within a later,

¹³⁴ Lübke, *Endstation Terror*, 185.

¹³⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*. Blumenberg does not cite a particular passage.

¹³⁶ This is presumably a quote from Brucker, *The History of Philosophy, from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Present Century*. However, it does not appear in the extant text. Blumenberg deals with Brucker’s work at greater length in chapter eight.

superfluous confabulation, which meant to justify the previously confabulated evidence of theory's competence. The story, of course, would still be told with relief from that point on; Socrates would not be the first to remove any suspicions about philosophers' moneymaking practices, since philosophy's first exemplar had already proven his generosity.

Pure theory's right to exist stands in question here as it will again and again; drawing no material advantage from it helps it to prove its immaculate "purity." Thales needed to be unambiguously protected by the explanation that he conducted this drastic type of speculation in order to prove the achievement of newly burgeoning theory: the motive is pure, the result is pure, and only what lies between them unfortunately had to occur because others would not be convinced otherwise.

As for Aristotle, did he know the Thales anecdote? The mere detectability of a counter-anecdote does not speak to that. And students do not always read what their teachers have written, so Aristotle was not necessarily required to read Plato's *Theaetetus*, since his knowledge of the theory of forms could derive just as well from other sources than the dialogues. The required evidence is lacking that he knew the fable or the anecdote. Just one passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the name Thales has just occurred, continues by exalting practical insight (*phronēsis*) and disdaining the representatives of natural philosophy, who may

have been wise (*sophoi*) but not insightful (*phronimoi*). They apparently do not recognize what benefits them; they only recognize what is extraordinary, amazing, hard to understand, and divine (*daimonia*), what is useless indeed for living life, because they fail to investigate what is good for humans.¹³⁷ This accusation sounds completely Socratic and, for that very reason, it carries an even sharper case against natural philosophy, because Aristotle's distinction would be a logical consequence of questioning humanity's privileged position within nature and thus would thus call into question the anthropocentric tendency to relate all insight into nature immediately back around human concerns. Aristotle's case does not support the claim that politics and ethics are the highest forms of knowledge; it is precisely because human beings do not rank highest that they must be concerned with themselves and their needs.¹³⁸ The stars, which humanity has expressly privileged as divine beings, need no "praxis" and no intelligibility. Already, therefore, they and their circular motions are objects of "pure" theory, which the human can only afford in moderation—unless theory itself could make the theorist as free from needs as a god. Therein lies the deeper reason for what looks like "unsuccessfulness."

¹³⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI 7; 1141 b3-10.

¹³⁸ ...*der Mensch muß sich... um sich selbst und seine Bedürfnisse kümmern*. This interpretation of Aristotle recalls a view of human life that Blumenberg elsewhere links with Arnold Gehlen's philosophy. Gehlen posits that human ingenuity has been a complex response to humanity's lacking adaptation to the physical environment. See Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric."

Had Aristotle been contemplating the anecdote in its Platonic variant, then Thales would have done just the right thing as a theorist by striving for the most noble objects. However, he would still have failed blatantly to conduct himself with the right moderation, since he forgot his frailty, literally,¹³⁹ and the consequentially necessary caution. The counter-anecdote about oil-press speculation portrays Thales as in right to pursue his theory, but Aristotle's anecdote is insufficient to validate the claim that even the act of theorizing¹⁴⁰ requires ethical moderation or that theory must be moderate in touting its objects' supremacy.

The biographer of the Greek philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, asserts that Thales not only evinced his usefulness through weather predictions—as the Greek word for “conducting astronomy” can also mean “seeing past the clouds”—but also accomplished exceptional services for the city of Miletus with his political

¹³⁹ *Hinfälligkeit*. The transparent etymology of the German word translated “frailty” (usually reserved for the elderly) suggests a susceptibility to falling down.

¹⁴⁰ *die theoretische Handlung selbst*. Blumenberg implicitly rejects the idea of applying ethical norms to thoughts. He does this in another piece where he expresses skepticism that the term “action,” which he considers to be a “metaphoric” projection of agency onto physical behavior, can ever be applied to mental events. He presents this view in the form of questioning Immanuel Kant's description of mental events as actions: “In view of the concept of action in the theory of practical reason, can [the synthesis of transcendental apperception] already or still be called ‘action?’ The theory of practical reason can and must presuppose the identity of the subject, which is the condition of all possible responsibility and imputability; the theory of theoretical reason cannot do this—it shows the identity of the subject precisely in *statu nascendi* [being born].” Blumenberg, “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” 101–102.

foresight and counsel. To claim that Thales' theory was useful is to take the step that Aristotle, who separated wisdom and insight, was not yet ready to make.¹⁴¹ Secretly, philosophy always yearned for such competence in the polis, for the reliability of being "realistic." The Socratic line of thinking, as portrayed by Plato, ended up by failing to convince. Ludwig Börne would bring that to its pithiest formulation: "Socrates has been cherished because he took philosophy down from the sky, and thus he became a teacher to humanity. If we want to please him, we have to drag politics earthward from the sky."¹⁴²

After Socrates and Plato, there is an unmistakable effort to return a certain degree of realism to the philosopher; that could no longer permit the anecdote to retain its most pointed form. It is tempting to understand Aristotle's allusion to Thales as a hesitation to let Plato's story emerge yet another time. The theorist's eccentric position became indelibly marked from Plato's theory of forms and was retraced again by Aristotle's critique of it.

Plato's *Theatetus* dialogue does not mention a single word about the theory of forms; the astronomer's bizarreness, which inspired the Thales anecdote and prefigured Socrates, remains completely reliant on the nocturnal undertaking of the sky observer who could *see* what he wanted to *know*. The critic of the

¹⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1 I 25, 27; See also "De Republica" Part I 7 and 9 in Cicero, *The Republic and The Laws*.

¹⁴² Börne, "Ankündigung der Zeitschwingen" *Gesammelte Schriften von Ludwig Börne*, 37–38.

theory of forms did not need to resent, though he does mention, that astronomy suffices least for the requirement of a science of experience if it needed to settle for “saving the phenomena.”¹⁴³ In Aristotle’s overview of the whole course of the Platonic theory of forms including its ascent to transcendence, its sharpening of the *chorismus*, and the resulting epistemology of a higher intuition than the empirical one, what made the astronomer suitable for allegorization must be modified in order to typify the philosopher.

In the anecdote, the stargazer’s ridiculous appearance to the Thracian maid consisted in the fact that his ridiculousness allowed him to fall over the lower realities in front of his feet, while he was oriented towards unreachably distant objects, which he could simply never have for himself. In the Platonic context, falling down distinguishes the philosopher as the one in possession of truths that matter, even though they transpose him into a position of ridiculed foreignness in the world. This inversion accompanies theoretical success as a seemingly

¹⁴³ *Rettung der Phänomene*. From the Greek: *swzein ta fainomena*. This pre-Copernican research paradigm—attributed to Plato, but more likely first conceived by Eudoxus of Cnidus—meant finding a physical explanation for the apparent irregularity of the stars’ and planets’ movements. Ptolemy was so vexed by the problem of finding any order in the star movements that he simply considered the truth about stars’ movements beyond human comprehension. Even “saving the phenomena” was too presumptuous, according to Ptolemy. Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, 214. The problem disappeared with the gradual acceptance of heliocentrism, which retained Eudoxus’ idea of “homocentric” circles, but replaced the sun with the earth as their center. In addition to the confusion about which globes move around which, no one could ever succeed in reconciling the observed star movement patterns with the Pythagorean idea (adopted by Plato, then Aristotle, then the Church) that heavenly bodies must move in perfect circles. The fallacious assumptions underlying the efforts at “saving the phenomena” were only put aside decisively for scientific history by Johannes Kepler. Surprisingly, the phrase has nothing to do with Husserl’s phenomenology.

unavoidable side-effect: its symptom, not its essence. But foreignness in the world cannot remain accidental within the inexorable consistency of the theory of forms, which may not produce an astronomy of the invisible, but does postulate one. For historical hindsight, this duplication of the sky is reflected in the constellation of the Milesian astronomer and the Thracian maid, in that her laughter must now meet the vain expectation of recognizing truth through optical experience, a recognition which could only be made by an intuition¹⁴⁴ and which does not require anyone to wander nocturnally and tumble into cisterns. What the astronomer aims to accomplish by relinquishing his bodily well-being has not only become worthless from the standpoint of lifeworldly ignorance about astronomy: its empirical objects can no longer compete with the ideality of a “true” astronomy. Moreover, Thales had given a hint of such a science, when he announced something that everyone would see without knowing its contexts, before anyone could see it: a solar eclipse.

In the seventh book of the *Republic*, Plato has his Socrates argue with Glaucon about whether astronomy shall belong to the contents of an education

¹⁴⁴ *Anschaung*. Often translated with the Latinate calque “intuition,” this polysemous German word can simply mean “seeing.” Blumenberg seems to be evoking Kant’s use of the word to refer to the ability to perceive objects. For Kant, “intuition” enables the awareness of any *particular* object, concept, or judgment—as mediated by time (for *a priori* intuition) or by time and space together (for empirical intuition). This faculty separates knowledge from speculation. We can only know what is present to our “intuition.” Whenever philosophers recalls the maid’s anecdotal wisdom, as we shall see, they borrow the legitimacy of common sense for their claims that without some practical way of assimilating “intuition” into our theory, we fall into the errors of ungrounded speculation.

within their recently outlined regime. Glaucon affirms that agronomy, sea navigation, and military leadership demand a background in astronomy. Socrates answers with a sentence which could derive from any education reform discussion: “I can’t help being amused... by your apparent fear that people will see no practical value in the subjects you are putting in your curriculum.”¹⁴⁵ At that, Glaucon gives in; he wants an astronomy precisely of Socrates’ type. Its advantage must lie in the fact that the soul needs to look upwards, away from any objects here and over to the ones beyond.

That would still be the case for the astronomer from the Thales anecdote, with whom the Socrates from *Theatetus* had compared himself. Here Socrates decisively contradicts that comparison; when astronomy is conducted by those who want it to lead to philosophy, it brings about the exact opposite of astronomy: steering the gaze away from the stars. The perceivable direction of the empirical astronomer’s gaze is not that of reason, for only the invisible can be an object of understanding. In retrospect, doubt and derision from the Thracian maid do not so much prove her shortcoming in comparison to the astronomer, much rather that she comprehended his shortcoming, although she could not have had any sense of it.

¹⁴⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, 527d 236.

The true reality does not lie this side of astronomical objects—in proximity to things over and into which one can fall—rather just beyond everything still graspable by the senses, beyond even the light-spots given in the starry sky. Plato presages Hegel’s disparaging assessment of the view towards heaven: the visible cannot be the reasonable.

This situation unexpectedly recalls the laughable Socrates-figure in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* once again. Anyone initiated into the Platonic transcendence of forms would perceive a ridiculousness in this figure, which they may not have noticed before; Aristophanes portrays Socrates lying in a hammock and gaping open-mouthed, resembling a swimmer lying on his back. For a Platonist, any putative “theory” conducted by observation has nothing to do with science. As Glaucon says, “[Anyone trying to learn about objects of perception by gaping up at the sky or frowning down at his feet can never learn anything, I would say—since no object of perception admits of knowledge.] His soul is looking down, not up, even if he makes his observations lying on his back—whether on land or floating in the sea.”¹⁴⁶ The confrontation has reached a new stage, where the lifeworldly realism of the Thracian maid has lost its role. The anecdote is still memorable, but has lost any function in the revolt against the hypertrophy of “pure” thought.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 529c 238. The bracketed sentence was added here by the translator from the Platonic text and appears as a paraphrase in Blumenberg’s original.

Can anyone still laugh at it then? As the *Republic* approaches the climax of the cave analogy, the philosopher returns from the sight of the forms, at which point he surrenders to the laughter of his one-time fellow prisoners, who amuse themselves over his inability and their experiential advantage in anticipating shadows, at his helplessness in the competition for supremacy in “realism,” with the deadly subtext that always relates to Socrates’ fate. But shortly afterwards, it is Socrates himself who switches roles and mocks the lower form of theory that Glaucon would like to introduce into the curriculum.

Admittedly, nothing justifies Socrates’ laughter. The “real astronomy”¹⁴⁷ that he postulates and whose possibility Glaucon concedes and sees in front of himself as if through a magic spell—we never learn any of it. The viewers of the ideal, the owners of the actual, have constantly found it easier to deride others who wanted to see with their own eyes than to show them what they could gain if they ceased to want only what is available physically. Indeed, an astronomer who no longer looked up—that is more than just Plato’s last answer to the derision of the Thracian maid and to that of Aristophanes; it is a type with a future.

Proposing a new system did not require Copernicus to make any observations of his own. Beyond that, all of the empirical data that could

¹⁴⁷ *Astronomie im eigentlichen Sinne*. (literally “astronomy in the authentic sense”) Socrates describes a type of astronomy based not on star movement patterns, but on “true motions”—which the stars and musical ratios exemplify—but which can only be grasped mathematically, and not through observation. *Ibid.*, 529c 239.

contribute to founding the solar system were known since antiquity. First, Tycho Brahe will be the great observer, who achieves the precisions of empiricism in spite of a false system, which would lead to Kepler's laws and, with those in mind, to Newton's physics of the sky. Of course, all of this happens under the precondition of the Copernican interpretation of the observations. Copernicus himself, certainly not without humanistic remorse, declared his reform to be the completion of a warning directed to the astronomer not to forget the earth in front of his feet for the stars high in heaven. In an ironic way, the Thracian maid should once more be right to indict the philosopher if she means: to the extent that he aims to fathom the farthest phenomena, what the nearest remains hidden from him. Copernicus accuses the traditional geocentric system precisely of that: the earth evades that system with its gaze on the heavenly bodies, in so far as the earth too is a heavenly body. Above all else, the behavior (*habitudo*) of the earth towards the starry sky must be observed because it is our standpoint for observation (*nobis a terra spectantibus*) and from that follows everything that optics has shown about perspectivistic conditions (*ut in Opticis est demonstratum*). Because optics itself allows the determinants of rest and movement to alternate between the observer and his object for phenomena of movement, the traditional conclusion about the stationary earth and the heavenly bodies' movements must have prerequisites besides empirical ones. It is the supposed nobility of the stellar objects (*excelsissima*), which distracts us from

what lies nearby (*nobis proxima*) and leads to the error of ascribing movement to heavenly bodies, when that movement is actually a property of the earth: “not... to attribute to the celestial bodies what belongs to the Earth.”¹⁴⁸

The theoretical breakthrough, here for the first time as so often afterwards in the history of science, is a shift in the direction of attention: drawing notice to the unnoticed. Here, for the first time, an element of reflection is exposed in the moralizing words of the anonymous passerby in the Aesopian fable as in the derisive speech of the Thracian maid: not only preferring what lies nearby to the farthest and noblest, but making the nearby into the essential condition for distant objects to appear as they do.

There is no trace of this thought in Plato’s appropriation of the fable through his Socrates. Socrates had taken the Thracian woman as a paragon of misunderstanding with regard to the astronomer’s right to theoretical purity and, as Socrates transferred that right onto himself, found philosophy’s peculiarity reflected in Thales’ notion that nothing in the environment mattered. By then Socrates had long turned his gaze from the sky and directed it towards human things. This shift of attention, towards concepts and finally towards the ideas¹⁴⁹ that determine human behavior, could alter nothing about the transcendence of the

¹⁴⁸ Copernicus, *On The Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres*, 12. [Blumenberg quotes in Latin: “*nec... quae telluris sint, attribuamus caelestibus.*” *De revolutionibus* I 4]

¹⁴⁹ For the distinction pursued here between “concepts” and “ideas,” see footnote 46.

norms that were found in that beyond: the philosopher remained the man with his gaze set on too distant objects, who now more than ever tumbled from one well into another, from one embarrassment into another, and, instead of having just one Thracian woman, had the laughter of the whole crowd against him.

Copernicus' procedure could imply a model of reflection completely different from the one that prevailed during the epoch he introduced: the phenomena of heaven mimic the center of complex movements whose "actual" reality belongs to the terrestrial globe. Right with Copernicus, the triumph of the Thracian woman may have been completed; for she had indicated the earth's reality with the implied meaning that the real gods are right here.

IV. The theorist between comedy and tragedy

The connection founded by Plato, between the Milesian's tumble down the well and the Athenians' killing of Socrates, did not survive after his dialogue's subtle art. Later quotations, references, and variations reduce the story to its kernel. Insights emerge from the contexts, the avowals, and the changes. New implications are conceived for the story from within and without: from outside, when its function is no longer understood or is organized into other intentions; from inside, when situations and figures are brought into a presumed or actually more precise compatibility. Fables, like their adaptation by Plato, think neither in characters nor in motives; therefore the image stands open to such "refinements," such as when Luther gives the Aesopian fable of wolf and lamb the heading "Hate"—an emotional valence completely out of place in the authentic genre.

Was the Thracian maid really *emmeles kai chariessa*, in Schleiermacher's translation: "crafty and witty" ("*artig und witzig*")? That unnamed man in the Aesopian fable, as Plato may have found it, has friendlier traits, despite his indefiniteness; he hurries up to the whimpering and cries for help from the cistern, and then he only moralizes (did he even come to help?) upon learning the circumstances of the accident from none other than the unfortunate man.¹⁵⁰ If he

¹⁵⁰ Blumenberg resumes comparing the Aesopian fable with anonymous characters to Plato's anecdote as he did in chapter two. In the prior analysis, he showed how little motivation the anonymous characters needed for the fable-teller to admonish the astronomer. In this analysis, he

only pursues the audible, he could not know how things had come to the point where someone needed help out of the depth. Indirectly, we are also led to understand that the fallen astronomer is still capable of returning to land. From Plato we learn nothing more about Thales' fate, and that tells us enough. Between the maid and the Milesian, no contact occurs; that prompts the reader to assume something vile: she could have disparaged him all by herself and for her own sake, without concerning herself with his predicament any further. Nowhere does the text let us assume that it was Thales' own maid. More likely it was just some stranger; otherwise she would hardly have been surprised at the bizarreness of what had happened.

To the question, *on what account* Plato transformed the unnamed man of the fable into the Thracian woman of his anecdote, only conjecture can answer. A conjecture would be telling, however, because the reception overwhelmingly either observes this moment without showing interest or accepts the result without understanding where that leaves things standing. Plato loved the figure, which first became a type through Tertullian's "idiot" and will be made into the functionary of the "docta ignorantia" by Nicolaus of Cusa; the slave boy in *Meno*

claims that Plato has heightened the animosity, by expanding the character descriptions but reducing the characters' contact (no response to crying from the well).

exemplifies it, as does the figure of the Pamphylian Er in the final myth of *The Republic*.¹⁵¹

The Thracian woman betrays more than a knowing kind of ignorance.¹⁵² From Thrace come two known figures of the Hellenic world: the god Dionysus with his epithet *Chthonius*, the Subterranean, and Aesop the slave, who brought over the fable—a Phrygian, according to other sources. More importantly for the Greek consciousness, the Thracians had a great deal of what Jacob Burckhardt ascribes to the Greeks as their own: pessimism—but in a hardened version, of which Schopenhauer had found an example that disconcerted even him: “It was a Thracian custom to receive people at their birth with mourning and lamentation.”¹⁵³ Thence had come the god of the Bacchae, the Zeus of women, as it was said, and a lot could be projected onto the Thracian woman as enemy of theory, as unproclaimed, prototypical antagonist to Socrates.

¹⁵¹ The time lapse between Plato and Cusa is nearly two millennia: Nicolas of Cusa wrote *De Docta Ignorantia* around 1440. The figure of Er, who dies and is restored to life by the judges in the afterlife “to act as a messenger to mankind, to tell them what was going on there,” so that he may report on how virtue is rewarded with rebirth into fortune, and vice is punished with a future life of slavery or squalor. He qualifies as an “idiot” because Plato does not describe him as having any aptitude except for being a foreigner, “a hero from Pamphylia... killed in battle.” Nicholas and Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance*; Plato, *Meno*; Plato, *The Republic*, 337 614b.

¹⁵² *verständiger Unverständigkeit*. This phrase comprises a *figura etymologica* containing two words derived from the verb “verstehen,” to understand. The faculty of understanding is the sphere of non-metaphysical thinking for Kant, whereas, in his discussion of “transcendental method,” Kant, like Plato’s Thracian maid, considers metaphysical speculation ungrounded. It is imaginable that, for all of the Thracian maid’s simple-mindedness, her worldliness would put her in the position to intuit the proper (Kantian) limits on understanding.

¹⁵³ Böckh and (Crotoniensis), *Philolaos des Pythagoreers Lehren nebst den Bruchstücken seines Werkes*, 181 [Blumenberg’s note: note found in Schopenhauer’s copy of this book, taken from Schopenhauer’s handwritten unpublished writings, ed. A. Hübscher, III 57.].

Just some maid-stupidity, that would be too low profile for Plato; the enjoyer of Schadenfreude should simultaneously be the wronged party for Plato's public, and, in her hasty misjudgment, she had already exposed herself for all eyes over the course of the century—just as Plato wanted to display the Attic republic in its decline through the wronged Socrates, in that he drafted a republic, which could only have received wellbeing from a Socrates. Not only for us is theory a completely Greek matter, only accessible to us through them; Plato himself also insisted on this exclusivity, and naming the unnamed indeed gives the fable the uncanny trait of presenting animosity towards the first theorist's embrace of the world. Even if the fable had been invented by Aesop in a way that stigmatized the stargazer sitting at the depth of the well for having fallen, Aesop would already need to have give up on transmitting the content with the fable; to impute such a misunderstanding to the inventor of fables would misestimate this genre's artistry.¹⁵⁴

In the anecdote's reception history, these connotations lose their meaning to the degree that the onset of Hellenism dilutes the opposition between Hellenes and barbarians, Olympians and Subterraneans, and that the apostrophe to Socrates

¹⁵⁴ Landmann and Fleckenstein, "Tagesbeobachtungen Von Sternen Im Altertum. Eine Philosophisch-astronomiegeschichtliche Rekonstruktion Der Thalesanekkdote. Plato Theatet. 174 A.," 98–112 This article's title translates: "Observations of the stars by day in antiquity. A philosophical-historical reconstruction of the Thales anecdote. [Blumenberg's note: Michael Landmann wrote to me (January 13, 1977) with his case against my thesis that Plato was the first to refer the anonymous fable to Thales of Miletus (as found in *Poetik und Hermeneutik VII*. München 1976, 11-24). I hope that I have portrayed his argument fairly.]

brings an end to the laughter. That is so, even if the seriousness that spreads over the scene does not yet demand that theory's victim sacrifice his life for theory¹⁵⁵ in order to help theory blend in with the monumental concepts of humanity and of history. Offering sacrifices requires neither polis nor populus—they just accept the results of sacrifices.

In this reception, the depth of the earth also goes lost on occasion: the well or cistern (*phrear*) becomes the unspecific dip of a hole (*bothros*) for Diogenes Laertius or of a ditch (*barathron*) for Stobaeus. The cute, young maid turns into the old hag, worry grasps at her, even concern for her own salvation; the abyss turns into the pit of sin,¹⁵⁶ and above all the theory of the stars into mere means of exploring astrological curiosity about the future.

And the most important artistic device becomes the role reversal. Among the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period, that of the Cynics is most disposed to put itself in the derisive maid's position and, from there, to make the theorists of all other denominations contemptible. In the first half of the third century before Christ, Bion of Borysthenes put "philosophy in a clown suit," as

¹⁵⁵ *Auch wenn der Ernst... noch nicht das Opfer der Theorie zum Opfer für die Theorie befördert.* The German word "Opfer" means "victim" as well as "sacrifice." Here the distinction between a "victim" lacking agency and the agency involved in "self-sacrifice" recalls the notion that actions are purposeful, whether or not successful. Only "self-sacrifice" can save the theorist from the prejudice against passiveness that damns him for being absent-minded.

¹⁵⁶ *Sündenpfuhl.* German uses this word, literally meaning "pit of sin," to refer to a physical location or state of mind where vice reigns. The fact that sinking down into depressions in the ground can metaphorically represent the failure to behave properly—just as it does in the Thales anecdote—shows how philosophical and everyday metaphors sometimes intersect.

Nietzsche will say,¹⁵⁷ by ridiculing whichever philosophers wanted to maintain the seriousness of their subject matter. But Bion himself only differed in his rhetoric from those who indulged in writing catalogues of contradictions (*Isosthenien*) between schools and sects, in order to elevate nothing but theory's self-denial to the epitome of theory. Philosophy has entered its skeptical phase. Not only in the Academic and Pyrrhonian schools, which expressly define themselves thus, also in the Stoic *atarxia*, especially in Epicurus' general dictum that all theoretical thinking winds up in the same place, namely, having nothing to do with human well-being.¹⁵⁸ Nothing paradoxical then, if that laughter now becomes professionalized within philosophy itself. The counterpoint at its beginning has become the conclusion at its (first) end.

¹⁵⁷ *Philosophie in der Hanswurstjacke*. Published posthumously from Nietzsche's notes taken between March 1868 and May 1869, in which Nietzsche expresses his perplexity at the seemingly unphilosophical way that Bion "translated Socratic irony crudely into his life" and into a humorous literary style. "Ueber die Cyniker und ihre Bedeutung für die Literatur" in Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke*, V 471.

¹⁵⁸ Epicurus' actual thought on the matter appears more complex than this paraphrase; he only condemns the study of the details of celestial phenomena, not all inquiry into them: "But when we come to subjects for special inquiry, there is nothing in the knowledge of risings and settings and solstices and eclipses and all kindred subjects that contributes to our happiness." Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 2 X 79, 609. However, he takes the study of ultimate causes of celestial phenomena (what we would call "pure theory," or even speculation, today) to be quite preferable to studying their particular movements: "...happiness depends... upon knowing what the heavenly bodies really are, and any kindred facts contributing to exact knowledge in this respect." *Ibid.*, X 78, 607. For Epicurus, the essential qualities of celestial bodies function like materialized Platonic forms, insofar as understanding them yields liberating wisdom.

It fits Bion's image well that he himself had been a slave and only [left the Academy]¹⁵⁹ when his master's inheritance put the notorious school switcher in good enough stead to associate with "cynicism."¹⁶⁰ It was not his theoretical curiosity that had let him traverse all schools, but rather his stylized expression of low esteem for them in contrast to life experience. As founder of the hedonistic branch of the Cynics, he emphasized the cheerful calm that comes from letting ourselves rely on opportunities and nature to provide our necessities and letting truths rely on themselves—the theory of a gatherer's existence. A variant of the Thracian maid's statement from the mouth of this philosopher is no longer surprising by this point: "Bion said, 'the most ridiculous are the astronomers, who do not see the fish on the beaches in front of their feet, but claim to recognize them in heaven.'"¹⁶¹ Modified theory contrasts with observing heaven, represented through the constellation of the fishes, Pisces; the Cynical way of life is registered in their attention towards how to subsist on what nature has put

¹⁵⁹ Added by the translator. According to Diogenes Laertius, Bion of Borysthenes associated with Plato's Academy, then briefly followed "Crates" before becoming an especially cantankerous Cynic. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1 IV 51–52, 429–431.

¹⁶⁰ *Zynismus*. This German spelling of "cynicism" here implies the contemporary understanding of term: sarcastic, derisive attitude or behavior. In German, all nouns are capitalized, which means that they cannot use capitalization to differentiate the Greek philosophical school, "Cynicism," from dismissive sarcasm, "cynicism;" thus, instead, they indicate the Greek school by spelling the word with a "C" or "K" and the modern sense with a "Z."

¹⁶¹ Stobaeus, *Ioannis Stobaei Florilegium* LXXX 3. [Blumenberg's footnote: Even the head Cynic Diogenes of Sinope applies the "formula" of the astronomy fable; he scorns grammarians, mathematicians, musicians, rhetoricians for the discrepancy between their technical educations (*Kunstfertigkeiten*) and their self-betterment (*Selbstbildung*): "That mathematicians should gaze at the sun and the moon, but overlook matters close at hand." Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 2 VI 28, 30–31. For the grammarians, the analogy is temporal: Odysseus' foible they discover; their own remains hidden from them.]

within human reach and made attainable without strain. The punch consists in choosing a food with a likeness in heaven. The epigram's form was known since Aesop.

Another little detail about Bion deserves mention: the Cynical effort to establish the Thracian woman's scorn within philosophy itself and to make theory's departure ridiculous instead of its beginning—which had the right to demonstrable failures—no longer evokes the image of foreignness between the free man and the slave woman; very much, though, he shoves the heckler, who “transcended” philosophy through philosophy, into the role of the pimp of philosophy, over which he pulled the “floral-patterned fabric,” (*anthina*), the harlot's robe, as Theophrastes and Eratosthanes would describe it. What Thales of Miletus had demonstrated in all seriousness to his fellow citizens is now shoved onto the stage of comedy, in that the Cynic who maligned philosophy showed that he could still live off of it.

A half-millennium later, the anecdote is withdrawn from relevance to any discussion about the philosopher's place in the world by a biographer in the third century after Christ, Diogenes Laertius. It is not while he is walking around and watching the stars that Thales fall into a well; he falls into a ditch, right when he leaves the house to go watch the stars. An old woman, with no further characteristics, accompanies him and calls to the crying one: “How can you

expect to know all about the heavens, Thales, when you cannot even see what is just before your feet?”¹⁶² His accompaniment, who evidently comes with him from the house, does not have the freedom to laugh; that much is understandable. But to what end must Thales *be* accompanied on the astronomical trip? The question is so obvious, and yet, as far as I can see, it has not yet been posed.

Information comes from an epigram, which Diogenes had posited as his own, as is his custom, in his biography of Thales. He thanks god for the philosopher’s death because god lifted him closer to the objects that *he could no longer have seen* from the earth. Here it becomes clear: this constellation evokes no head-lifting initiator of heavenly theory, but rather a blind man. Driven by his urge for theory, he only finds pity, hardly the scorn of a woman, whose age indicates nothing other than the philosopher’s frailty, which makes it more pitiful that he has still not arrived at the place that reminds him of his observational acts—thus before theory’s objects could not even distract him from noticing what lies before him.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1 I 34, 35.

¹⁶³ [Blumenberg’s footnote: When laughter is no longer possible, it becomes clearer what had been laughed at and that the maid must have been young. The protophilosopher is a neurotic; otherwise, what he set in motion could not approach paranoid madness as the highest form of the “system,” as Freud could not have denied seeing it. The astronomer’s “reality” is a fantasy world (*Sonderwelt*), like that of the neurotic. And why does the maid ridicule him? Because she recognizes the nocturnal wanderer’s neurosis in the fact that he is not sleeping with her at that hour.]

Now we have the anecdote in yet another version by Diogenes Laetrius. It occurs in the apocryphal correspondence between Pythagoras and Anaximenes, which includes a short biography of Thales.¹⁶⁴ In this testament of the Milesian school's piety towards its founder, the anecdote turns into a legend about Thales' death. The old man is still pursuing his lifelong habit and leaving home with his maid at night in order to observe the stars. Sunken into the act of observing heaven, he falls down a slope. Connecting the last effort towards theory with the deadly tumble serves to reinforce Thales' bequeathal through his consecrating death. It justifies the letter's admonition that every collective investigation should begin with Thales. In the meantime, the city of Miletus had fallen into the hands of the Persian king Cyrus, with relatively mild consequences—mild precisely because the citizens followed Thales' advice to dispatch an offer of annexation to the Lydian king Croesus. The astronomer's foresight maintains its force throughout his life.

The city has lost its freedom. This enables Anaximenes, in his second letter, to recall that freedom is a precondition for any theory of heaven, the free man's domain. For his school, Thales, the lifelong star observer, at once becomes a monument to the lost conditions for inaugurating theory: "How then can Anaximenes any longer think of studying the heavens when threatened with

¹⁶⁴ Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1 II 4, 133–135.

destruction and slavery?”¹⁶⁵ The Thracian maid has disappeared from the scene; opposing her unfreedom to the free Milesian citizen’s theory has lost its transparency. In this altered condition, the clash between her lifeworldly concept of reality and the philosopher’s understanding of the world now only finds its reflection in the political fate of the city—whose servitude has rendered it impossible to continue and fulfill the theory founded by Thales. In 494, the city at the mouth of the Meander River is destroyed by the Persians, the inhabitants pronounced slaves. With that, the inaccessibility of theoretical behavior for the female Thracian observer turns into the elimination of everyone’s chance at a theoretical existence.

Going blind and falling to his death, impotence of the eye and finitude of the drive to knowledge—it is Faust’s end that is announced in Thales’ fate. And not by accident. To posit theory is to posit the possibility of its tragedy: in the physical organ’s failure to endure this previously unexperienced strain on the senses, and more cuttingly in the world’s supremacy over any life lived within space and time. Although the Greeks had combined theory and *eudaimonia* so tightly that Christianity still had to determine its concept of otherworldly happiness as theory of God in a literal sense,¹⁶⁶ the Greeks have a static concept of theory and a stationary concept of the theorist, who does not leave behind

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 135 II 5.

¹⁶⁶ The literal sense of the Greek “*theoria*” (seeing), in this case, would be blissfully observing God’s image. Its figurative sense would be something like understanding His divine nature.

directions and assignments, but rather writes down his teaching and hands it over to a school, which must foster and cultivate it. The static and doctrinaire state of theory appears to suit the finitude of the human lifetime; at the same time, however, that state is sensitive to the rise of new schools and their growing inventory of contradicting positions (*Isosthenie*).

Yet the conflict of theories does not turn into one between theory and *eudaimonia*. The latter retains the superior rank and defines indifference as the outcome of the first theoretical epoch: if uncertainty is sufficient for living and acting, then virtue is not knowledge. In a *cosmos*, if there even was one, every theory yielded the same result for humans; it informed their hopes as little as their fears. While Eudoxus of Cnidus had said that he only needed to look precisely at the sun one time, in order to gauge its size and shape, Heraclitus transmits the paradox that the size of the sun is the breadth of his foot. Indeed, after the direction that theories had headed, no one could still call that a disregard for objectivity any more. Epicurus' methodical attitude varies only the impediment of theory's primacy, in that he would prove— regarding all of the familiar theories about nature and the size of the sun—that they came out the same for humanity: we remain spectators of the world. Given the path that Greek theory took,

Protagoras' proposition, that the human being is the measure of all things, reveals the deeper commonality in the Greeks' conception of theory.¹⁶⁷

Greek theory is also a culture of haughty indifference towards circumstances, from Heraclitus to the Stoic Ataraxia to the Skeptical *epoché*¹⁶⁸ to Epicurus' sage, whose prototype, the gods, were not imagined as laughing, only because they did not look at the worlds for assurance of their insouciance and happiness. The same Thales of Miletus, who tumbled into the well and ended up being mythologized as the man who died by conducting theory, did not prefigure the Epicurean sage, but rather the laughing maid. She most closely resembles the spectator-type as Epicurus conceived it and Lucretius put into an image: he stands on the precipice of the shore and looks indifferently at the shipwreck in the raging sea of the world; he does not laugh, but he enjoys his uninvolvedness.

¹⁶⁷ Plato and most philosophers after him portray Protagoras' sophism as unphilosophical. Blumenberg disagrees, as he explains here, since Hellenistic philosophy understood something about the true potential for theory better than Plato's and Aristotle's more seemingly influential truth-seeking. Hellenistic philosophies (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Cynicism, to name the best known schools) reject the pursuit of absolute knowledge in favor of discovering the good life. Blumenberg (closest to the Sceptics of the above four) sees the Hellenistic trend as bearing an insight into the real limits set by the requirement that humans make choices with insufficient knowledge. In an essay on Philosophical Anthropology, Blumenberg explains the Hellenistic insight in terms of the suppressed role of rhetoric in Greek thought after the Sophists: "...*consensus* is rooted at the basis of what we call "real:" "what all are convinced of we call real," says Aristotle with a teleological argument in the background. Only the skeptical destruction of this line of thought makes the pragmatic underground of *consensus* visible again." Blumenberg, "Anthropologische Annäherung an Die Aktualität Der Rhetorik," 108–109.

¹⁶⁸ *epoché*. This term refers to the moment in which the status and existence of the external world are "bracketed" for the sake of examining states of consciousness immanently. The term dates back to Greek Skepticism, but was first revived for the 20th century by Husserl's *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*.

After all of the Epicurean cultural criticism, the spectator can only see one thing in the shipwreck in front of his eyes: the end result of the undertakings and industries, whose extravagance appears to him as the epitome of risks that expose human beings so that the world can impact and injure them. Had not Glaucon said in Plato's *Republic* that astronomy must be conducted for its value to navigation? In such a line of justifications for theory, the shipwreck necessarily stands as counterevidence. Theory leads people to become unnecessarily vulnerable to the world, to lower their guards, as Thales had done. Whoever tumbles made himself too heavy. The Epicurean knows how to exclude whatever does not concern humans by reducing theory to *joie de vivre*. This *theoros* on the high shore does not tumble into the depths, and, above all, he enjoys the fact that he does not fall.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ [Blumenberg's note (modified): Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 26–28 “3. Aesthetics and Ethics of the Spectator.” On the Proemium of Lucretius Book II.] The cited book is an extended study of the shipwreck metaphor within European philosophy. Lucretius' version of the metaphor came to represent the human condition pictured as that of a spectator onshore, whose perspective represented various qualities from sagacity (Lucretius) to cruelty (Goethe, Voltaire) to historical consciousness (Hegel). The sea-faring metaphor, he explains, contrasts this in that it implies the pragmatic value of picturing the human condition as forever at sea and confined to limited, practical perspectives (Pascal, Nietzsche), and a modified variant, involving a ship that must be repaired on the sea without ever docking, serves as a metaphor for the human reliance on language (Carnap).

V. Reoccupations¹⁷⁰

We would not expect the Fathers of the advancing Christian epoch to interpret the Thales anecdote such that the heaven observer's tumble would remind him that what lies at his feet is more urgent than heaven. That would have implicitly settled the competition between the heavenly and the earthly abruptly to the advantage of the lower affairs. On the contrary, the theorist of the stars must now appear as someone who proceeds too much in the foreground and stops too early in the direction in which he set out. Instead of giving oneself over to the being of beings (*Seiendseindem*) behind the appearances of heaven, as Plato had already demanded in the form of a second astronomy of invisible heavenly bodies, the theorist declines what is still visible as long as it remains visible to him. The blinded Thales is no longer a figure for the tragedy of theory as a finite one due to the decay of the organ, but rather for the tragedy of mistaking visibility for the medium of knowledge-acquisition in the first place. When Cicero, philosophy's representative so quickly canonized by Latin Christendom, recalls

¹⁷⁰ *Umbesetzungen*. This chapter offers a telling variation on Blumenberg's best known example of the concept "reoccupation" in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. For Blumenberg, the term refers to the act of providing new answers to philosophical questions that mattered for a certain historical moment, in the spirit of clearing the way for a qualitatively different line of questioning. This happened when Enlightenment era secular humanism replaced medieval Christian theology, according to Blumenberg: "What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as the *transposition* (*Umsetzung*) of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* (*Umbesetzung*) of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated." *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 65. In this chapter the reverse process occurs: the Church Fathers reoccupy questions about the nature and movement of the stars that arose in the context of Greek theoretical curiosity.

Democritus' self-blinding, the self-purported Platonist is evoking the representative of atomism so assiduously persecuted by Plato, only to be revived by Epicurus. Epicurus did not balk at the claim that the sharpness of the spirit would only hinder the eyes from seeing. And there is doubtless a recollection of the Thales anecdote and of the maid's mocking words: "While others often do not even see what lies in front of their feet, he traversed the whole of infinity without stopping at any limit."¹⁷¹ Although this infinity only refers to the negatively determined space of atomism, it is still available to aid in constructing a concept, which can surpass the finite universe of the astronomical theorist, in order to create space for new realities where salvation matters, realities for which the earth in the middle of the world would no longer be the preferred arena.

If the Latin Patristic still accepts Ovid's account that humanity was bound to an upright gait with lifted head in order to observe the sky, then it becomes a metaphor: upon setting out toward the edge of the world, coming from what is familiar, the observer of heaven is on the right path to transcend that edge.¹⁷² His

¹⁷¹ [Blumenberg's note: Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* V 114: atque hic vir impediri etiam animi aciem aspectu oculorum arbitratur, et cum alii saepe, quod ante pedes esset, non viderent, ille in infinitam omnem peregrinabatur, ut nulla in extremitate consisteret.—Suddenly, we realize how close Democritus stands to the late Plato, if only based on both parties. This proximity yields an exemplary case of "narcissism of the smallest difference."] The theory of "narcissism of small differences" claims that the lack of a distinct identity drives people to define themselves in terms of small differences with their rivals. It occurs in Freud's "On Human Sexuality." Freud, *On Sexuality*, 271.

¹⁷² The first tale that Ovid tells about metamorphoses between life and non-life and between one life form and another is about the creation of an orderly, living universe out of total chaos. The apex of the order and of life is human beings: "And even though all other animals / lean forward

plummet would represent the downfall of someone who had not wanted to go high enough, who grew weary already at the pagan foreground of the cosmic inner surface, and therefore failed to attain transcendence. The problem was not that he failed to understand the importance of the massiveness of the earth lying in front of his feet, but rather that he failed to understand the importance of caring about the base of all cares, his eternal salvation. Here the metaphors of the distant correspond to those of the nearby, which no longer has any external reality; it has become the internal horizon of the truth seeker, who must now worry about himself.

And yet the observer of heaven has not come under suspicion of wanting to exalt himself as the incarnation of his purposes to the point that the mysticism of receptivity (*Anschauung*) allows the delighted observer of divine objects to become similar to them. Too little distance from the earthly corresponds to too much autonomy in reaching for the object: theory has become only the precursor stage to being ready to hear and accept a revelation about what extrapolation from the limits of theory can reveal to be the Unknown. In contrast to such readiness, the sky observer receives the traits of libidinal obsession and of intemperance in

and look down toward the ground, / he gave to man a face that is uplifted / and ordered him to stand erect and look / directly up into the vaulted heavens / and turn his countenance to meet the stars; / the earth, that was so lately rude and formless, / was changed by taking on the shapes of men." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 18. The Christian view, however, whereby human knowledge must be oriented towards salvation, could not abide by a literal understanding of Ovid's suggestion that merely contemplating the sky was enough to complete the order in the universe.

his pure desire for knowledge; he plummets because he seems to attain access unrightfully to the sphere of his yearning, while disregarding divine rights to set limits and, *a fortiori*, disregarding the urgency of his own salvation. The suspicion, under which he is now placed, can thus be put ungenerously: instead of going the way of grace, he conducts transposition magic.

This suspicion, that theory could be contaminated with magic—a justified suspicion—allows the intermediary between Judaism and Hellenism, Philo of Alexandria, to warn everyone, who has participated in astronomy or wishes to do so, to come back down from the sky.¹⁷³ Augustine would find the rhetorical expression for the danger lurking in the back of theory and would transmit it with his authority into the Middle Ages. He imputes to astronomers, as the demand inherent to their discipline, that they claim to have already achieved with their own means what can in fact only be won through the newly emerged salvation procedure: so great a pride is thus begotten “that one would think they dwelt in the very heavens about which they argue.”¹⁷⁴ The accusation of conducting

¹⁷³ Philo of Alexandria, *De migratione Abrahami* 185.

¹⁷⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, I. 38. “ut in ipso eolo, de quo saepe disputant, sibimet habitare videantur.” [Blumenberg’s note: This is passage is cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II 2 q. 167 a.1.] Aquinas’ citation is from the summa “Of curiosity” and the full quote from Augustine is about investigating the earthly too avidly. It is indicative of the early Christian attitude that Blumenberg describes wherein theory is not just excessive, but inadequate to human needs: “Some there who are forsaking virtue, and ignorant of what God is, and of the majesty of that nature which ever remains the same, imagine they are doing something great, if with surpassing curiosity and keenness they explore the whole mass of this body which we call the world.” English in text and here from: Thomas, *The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas* /, 287(Pt. 2, Vol. 2, No. 5).

transposition magic prefigures the notion that the human standpoint in the cosmos could no longer incontrovertibly be the privileged one—it can already no longer be so if we take seriously the future implications of all the truth that entailed as much. An epoch later, with dwindling prospects of attaining transcendent truth, there will be nothing contrary to human nature or to the world itself about procuring another systematically articulated central point for the orderly movements. The imaginary center becomes the constructive means for astronomy to pierce through its perspectivistic illusions, before it takes the further step of criticizing its own presuppositions, and thus of foreclosing every apparent center of the cosmic movements.

For the Enlightenment, it will be a pretense for the study of the human world to alienate the gaze on the earthly as if one possessed none of the rules of the game that work there—and that then again the Thracian maid, now as traveller from the orient, as indigenous Huron or as astronaut of the Canicula. In the introduction to the *Traité de Métaphysique*, Voltaire will demand that thinkers leave their sphere of interests and prejudices, in order to experience humanity as if they were observing humans from Mars or Jupiter. Voltaire is required as a Copernican to see the astronomical phenomena, “as if I were on the sun.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Voltaire, *Traité de Métaphysique*, Introduction. “comme si j’étais dans le soleil.”

It would stretch of the concept of “reception history” too far, if we claimed the ability to determine in the disconcerted (*befremdet*) gaze on the action of theory something like a precursor to the defamiliarized (*verfremdet*) gaze of theory itself. Its concern is much rather to find a pattern made out in the Thales anecdote, a pattern which cannot be shaken off in the history of theory. Even when using the concept indulgently, reception means something else, and it goes wrong, when we leave the guiding thread of names, words, and images.

Among the authors of the early Christian period, only Eusebius has transmitted a complete extent version of the Thales anecdote, as Plato gave it in *Theatetus*, and he also repeated the genuine interpretation of the philosopher’s foreignness in the world.¹⁷⁶ Scholars always strain to demonstrate their high degree of literacy, in efforts to avoid the crime of neglecting or distorting extant textual material; this was also the case for the Apologist, who is to preserve the good Alexandrian scholarship of the learned fourth century.

A century earlier, at the beginning of the Latin Apologetics, a completely different approach was taken by the jurist and master of a mighty rhetoric, Tertullian. To him the Greek philosophers as a whole appear as patriarchs of the heretics.¹⁷⁷ The protophilosopher Thales’ fall into the well is at once established

¹⁷⁶ Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XII 29, 4-5 (ed. Mras, 120)

¹⁷⁷ Tertullian, *De anima*, c. 3. [Blumenberg’s note: See also: Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 282ff.]

as the example that goes to the root of the offense. Tertullian disdains the path of Apology supported by literature; he feels himself enough of a master to speak his own language. Under no circumstance would he like to present the evidence for the truth of Christianity from heathen sources. It would have matched his style entirely to ridicule the philosophical worldview from the standpoint of the Thracian maid. She anticipates what comes to replace of Greek authority for Tertullian: the “simple soul,” his “*anima idiotica*,” which he had introduced to the Apologetic rhetoric with his *Testimonium animae*. But he did not perceive the opportunity to let it speak from out of the Thracian maid.

Maybe it lay in the fact that Tertullian—against his juridical colleague and rival in the literary “praxis” for the new cause, Minucius Felix—sought to build up a contrasting image to Greek philosophy and, with that, to show greater toughness. Minucius Felix had written with well-meaning ambiguity about Thales of Miletus that Thales should be called the first because “he was first of anyone to discuss heavenly objects.”¹⁷⁸ What results from that ambiguity is a conflation of water, as the first philosophical protomatter, with the waters found in the biblical creation account, over which God’s spirit hovered; that could mean nothing other than that He created everything from water. Thus, the protophilosopher already agrees completely with the Christian teaching. And not by accident, for if he

¹⁷⁸ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 19,4. “primus omnium de caelestibus disputavit.” [Blumenberg’s quotation: “eo altior et sublimior aquae et spiritus ratio, quam ut ab homine potuerit inveniri, a deo traditum; vides philosophi principalis nobiscum penitus opinionem consonare.”]

connected water and spirit, then that would be too profound and too noble for a human to have been able to invent; it is just a “delivery from God” (*a deo traditum*). This exculpation of Thales first acquires its meaning in that the heathen counter-figure Caecilius in the dialogue is, not accidentally, an academic Skeptic and would like to give probability the advantage over truth in every matter; precisely from this philosophical position, he accuses the Christians of wanting to explore the heavenly spaces and the worldly secrets. In addition, he makes recourse to the Thracian maid’s formula, “it is enough to see what is in front of your feet,”¹⁷⁹ in order to cross over to the formula, by which Socrates answered questions “of the heavenly objects” (*de caelestibus*)—as Minicius Felix was already so close to Socrates in content: “What is above us has nothing to do with us.”¹⁸⁰

The advice, which the academic Skeptic gives the Christian, to leave the heavenly objects behind, must be understood just as metaphorically as Octavius’ praise of Thales of Miletus for being the first to have concerned himself with heavenly things; to leave those things alone and instead to hold fast to the things in front of his own feet means, according to the Skeptical premise, not to look for truths in things, in favor of satisfying oneself with probabilities. It is precisely that

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.* “satis est pro pedibus aspicere...”

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* 12, 7-13,1. “Quod supra nos, nihil ad nos.” [Blumenberg’s quotation: “Proinde si quid sapientiae vobis aut verecundiae est, desinite caeli plagas et mundi fata et secreta rimari; satis est pro pedibus aspicere...”]

premise, however, that the Apologist does not want to let the philosopher get away with because, as an Apologist, Minicius Felix believes that he can offer truths—with the prophesied success at the end.

It is easy to see how the lines of argumentation in the dialogue *Octavius* cross each other in the use of the expression for “the heavenly” (*caelestia*). Exactly this soft indeterminacy of the object, to which the first philosopher had already turned, Tertullian does not admit. For him, one of the roots of polytheism lies in the deification of the stars. Not the stars themselves, but their maker and mover is the divine; one must consequently investigate the invisible, in order to know what the visible is. As evidence that the familiarity with heaven won by Thales was worthless, Tertullian ignores its legendary accomplishment, to predict the arrival of a solar eclipse, and holds up such a darkening of the sun as a divine sign to warn the Roman proconsulate of the African province against persecuting Christians. The special threat of divine rage for the provincial authorities, which had newly set out on the harassment of Christians, mingled with the threat lurking generally around the world of its demise. It was a concern among Christians to announce the indications of God’s rage, but also to restrict themselves in their prayer to a provisionally only local influence. Only by that means could enough time be won to construe the prefigurations of world-destroying divine rage in *everything* accurately and punctually.

“You have the astrologers,” (*Habetis astrologos*) cries Tertullian with great fanfare to proconsulate Scapula. Should his astrologers tell him what the darkening of the sun means on the Day of Judgment in Utica? Not even hardly. Tertullian will not rely on established astronomy, when he seeks confirmation of a future event that is only known through the Book of Revelation. Even if today we accept the premise that a visible total eclipse of the sun in Utica on August 14, 212 must have been meant in Revelation, by no means do we then need to presume that Tertullian knew that eclipses arise due to natural laws or that he presumed such knowledge in the addressee of his writing. The addressee should rather ask his astronomers, in order to have it confirmed that this occurrence in heaven was extraordinary and, on top of that, to hear the astronomers confess that it was a sign from Heaven.¹⁸¹ The astronomical normalcy of solar eclipses is neither forgotten nor denied; otherwise the harsh cry to turn to the astronomers would not make sense. Instead, the God of great threats, in keeping with His

¹⁸¹ Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* III 3. [Blumenberg’s quotation and note: “All these things are signs of God’s impending wrath, which we must needs publish and proclaim in every possible way; and in the meanwhile we must pray it may be only local. Sure are *they* to experience it one day in its universal and final form, who interpret otherwise these samples of it. That sun, too in the metropolis of Utica, with light all but extinguished, was a portent which could not have occurred from an ordinary eclipse, situated as the lord of day was in his height and house. You have the astrologers, consult them about it.” Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III 106.—On dating the solar eclipse and the fragment “To Scapula,” see J. Schmidt, “Ein Beitrag zur Chronologie der Schiften Tertullians und der Prokonsuln von Afrika. In: *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* N.F. XLVI, 1891, 77-98. Schmidt does admit the “possibility of a rhetorical exaggeration” by Tertullian. But although Tertullian successfully dates the eclipse in Utica and thus the text, Schmidt overlooks the fact that Tertullian cannot have intended to predict the ordinary “due date” of the event—if that were the case, everything would have arrived at the goal with an astrological authorization. Let us remember that the Gnostics wanted under no circumstances to consider the star of Bethlehem as an astrological constellation of cosmic inevitability, but rather as a sign of Fate interrupting the cosmic order.]

mercy towards Christians, could also satisfy himself with the smaller threat of such a sign to the world, in lieu of the apocalyptic prefiguration, like the one he had made with the darkening at Jesus' death. Tertullian interprets that event in the manner of Mark's and Matthew's indeterminate account: solely as general darkness (*skotos*), not expressly as solar eclipse as in Luke's version. That could only have been misunderstood by those who did not know the prophecies about Christ; with that knowledge, they would have reported this "world-portent" (*mundi casum*) in their national archive.¹⁸² Solar eclipses are evidence for Tertullian against the divinity of the stars, on the one hand; for they demonstrate that "even the sun itself was often affected by failure." On the other hand, having pre-determined such darkenings shows that they are no "proofs of self-willing power" among the heavenly bodies; instead, they must be regarded as "standing as if under one law."¹⁸³ But then a God still stands over them, a God to whom they are subservient and who can use them against their own lawfulness, in order to give His signs. Thales is in the wrong here, and this time in a higher sense. Against the "normalization" of phenomena in the sky, a process which Thales

¹⁸² Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 21, 19. [Blumenberg's quotation and note: "In the same hour, too, the light of day was withdrawn, when the sun at the very time was in his meridian blaze. Those who were not aware that this had been predicated about Christ no doubt thought it an eclipse. You yourselves have the account of the world-portent still in your archives." Ibid., III 35.—On this passage, see: A. Demandt, "Verformungstendenzen in der Überlieferung antiker Sonnen- und Mondfinsternisse." Mainz 1970 (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, Jg. 1970 Nr. 7, 19). Demandt does not draw any comparison with *Ad Scapulam* passage c.4.]

¹⁸³ Tertullian, *Ad nationes* II 5, 16; II 6,3.

introduced, Tertullian salvages a repertoire of pre-apocalyptic signs. His God has a powerful rhetoric—after his own image. Tertullian considers divine rhetoric capable of striking fear into Roman state power, so that they let the arm fall, which they lifted against the Christians.

Tertullian alone furnished the Thales anecdote with the variant where it was an Egyptian who laughed when the philosopher fell into the cistern. Rightly did Thales tumble so ignominiously into the well when he examined and traversed all of heaven with his eyes, and he was laughed at forcefully by that Egyptian, who asked Thales, do you still believe that heaven is given for your discernment (*Anschauung*), when you cannot see anything distinctly on the earth? Thus Tertullian lets Thales' tumble imagistically characterize the philosophers as those who turn their obtuse curiosity to the things of nature, instead of first to its Creator and guide, and thus they grasp at emptiness.¹⁸⁴ Here the key word

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* II 4, 18-19. [Blumenberg's quotation and note: "It therefore served Thales of Miletus quite right, when, star-gazing as he walked with all the eyes he had, he had the mortification of falling into a well, and was unmercifully twitted by an Egyptian, who said to him, 'Is it because you found nothing on earth to look at, that you think you ought to confine your gaze to the sky?' His fall, therefore, is a figurative picture of the philosophers; of those, I mean, who persist in applying their studies to a vain purpose, since they indulge a stupid curiosity on natural objects, which they ought rather (intelligently to direct) to their Creator and Governor." Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III 133. "*Merito ergo Milesius Thales, dum totum caelum examinat et ambulat oculis, in puteum cecidit turpiter, multum inrisus Aegyptio illi: 'in terra,' inquit, 'nihil perspicuens caelum tibi speculandum existemas?, Itaque casus eius per figuram philosophos notat, scilicet eos, qui stupidam exercent curiositatem, in res naturae quam prius in artificem eius et praesidem, in vacuum laborandum habituros.*"—On this passage, see: L. Alfonsi, "Taletè e l'Eglizio." In: *Rivista di filologia classica*. 28, 1950, 204-222.]

“curiositas” occurred, with which a restriction of theory’s scope would be erected for the Middle Ages.

How does the Egyptian enter the picture? For a Christian author of the beginning third century—and even for a Tertullian—the change to the treasury of figures cannot be an accident: Egyptians, in the Greek tradition, are representatives of ancient wisdom. Fetching something back from them belonged to the obligatory program of any Greek philosopher’s biography. From the position of the Bible, Egyptians are certainly representatives of the most despicable form of the idolatry, worshipping animal-shaped idols, from whose fascination the power of Moses and the forty year desert diet had not sufficed to liberate the world.¹⁸⁵ Defending Egypt thus always belongs in the argumentation of the philosophers against Christianity. Origen, for instance, tells how his opponent Celsus accused the Christians of laughing unrightfully at the Egyptians and their animal deification, because they did not know the secret teaching associated with them; this cult was, in truth, one of the eternal ideas itself.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ *sich befreien*. Literally “to liberate itself.” The fascination with animal gods is the grammatical subjective of this reflexive verb, which implies that the evidence of God’s power, as presented in *Exodus*, should have persuaded the Egyptians to give up their gods. Blumenberg here intends an ironic jab at Christian universal history.

¹⁸⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* III 19. [Blumenberg’s note: Another passage is unclear in its reference: *Contra Celsum* VIII 15: “why do many go around the well and no one into it?” (“pôs polloi peri to phrear, kai oudeis eis to phrear;”). Celsus summoned a Gnostic source, the “Heavenly Dialogue” of the Ophites, as evidence that the Son of God is not more powerful than God himself (as the Christians had claimed). Why does Origen not go to the source?]

Tertullian evidently knows nothing of that; the Egyptians surface in his work in an even more nebulous form than as representatives of animal worship. For Tertullian, they are those who committed the mistake of deifying the stars due to their capacity for self-movement, as “objects moved by themselves” (“*per se mobilia*”). Yet in his variant of the Thales anecdote, the Egyptian, as representative of ancient wisdom for the Greeks, is juxtaposed with the Greek, as typical of a novel impertinence. He does not laugh out of a lack of understanding, but out of better knowledge. The element of a trip to Egypt had been transferred to Thales as well; from thence he should have connected his geometrical and astronomical teachings. Then Tertullian could intend to pit the authority of the teacher against the immaturity of the pupil. The Greek inauguration of theory, in any case, is revealed as nothing but a badly adapted import. By thus denying Greek theory’s originality, not only is an all too autonomous accomplishment of human reason shoved earlier in time, but the possibility is also kept open that it had its origin in the same divine revelation from which Moses had drawn. This reversal of the influence and priority relations between the bible and Greek philosophy plays an important role again and again in Apologetics, and we easily see in retrospect that it ultimately had to do with measuring the scope of reason.

A Thracian woman would have been of no use for Tertullian’s purpose because her laughter could not have had a definitive judgment behind it; Tertullian could not use any figure, who watched and mocked the astronomer

from the lowly standpoint of realism. Much more, he needed one, who was able to devalue the beginning of philosophy, as defined by the Greeks, “from a higher standpoint.” The wise Egyptians, from whom travelling Greeks fetched advice and lessons, were, after all, priests, and that is also to be presupposed in the pealing laughter of Tertullian’s Egyptian, no matter who his gods may have been and what derogatory things one could say of those gods. If the maid laughed in Plato because Thales seemed to her to have reached too high, then the Egyptian laughs in Tertullian because Thales had not reached high enough. Given its position in the world, the spirit would need to have turned upwards, not downwards into the uncertain: “It were better for one’s mind to ascend above the state of the world, not to stoop down to uncertain speculations.”¹⁸⁷

To presume that the Egyptians partook in the divine knowledge of Moses and the patriarchs is not only to claim Truth’s exclusive right to revelations; it is also a suggestion about the contents of possessions from a higher origin.

Tertullian does not only want to know truths considered in the smaller sense of the state of awareness necessary for salvation, but rather those considered a help for reason’s knowledge-seeking about the world. Expressed otherwise: Egyptians

¹⁸⁷ Tertullian, *Ad nations* II 4,13-15 “Sursum mens ascendere debuit de statu mundi, non in incerta descendere.” [Blumenberg’s quote: “Epicurus, however, who had said, ‘What is above us is nothing to us,’ (*quae super nos, nihil ad nos*) wished notwithstanding to have a peep at the sky, and found the sun to be a foot in diameter. Thus far you must confess men were niggardly (*frugalitas*) in even celestial objects.”] Translations from Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III 133.

and Christians have something in common like a secret science. Measured by that standard, whatever is achievable in Thales' fall seems worthless. Thales' goal becomes especially laughable when we apply two Classical quotations to Epicurus: the first is the statement otherwise attributed to Socrates, that what is above us does not concern us; then, Heraclitus' proposal that the investigation of heaven has yielded nothing but that the size of sun equals the width of a foot. To that Tertullian adds laconically: lack of ambition even can get you that far towards understanding Heaven.

Tertullian overlooks the Thracian maid from the Thales anecdote even where she seems to fit undeniably into his conception: as he rejects the Platonism of the soul. Against the metaphysical overextension of Nature's foreignness and the soul's particularity, Tertullian posits an idiosyncratic realism, in which he accepts their subtle materiality—a theory borrowed from the Stoics, where the soul copies the bodily form as ethereal matter; in this way, the difficulties of the dualism of mind and matter are avoided. Above all, though, this makes it imaginable that human beings inherit the damage wrought through sin—which is so indispensable for the history of salvation. In this context, the mention of Thales must be made, who represents the philosophical escalation with his gaze towards heaven, which overlooks what lies before his feet—here the nature of the soul as most personal—and thus falls into the well. The one short sentence has all the impact, of which Tertullian is capable: “Such, however, is the enormous

preoccupation of the philosophic mind, that it is generally unable to see straight before it. Hence (the story of) Thales falling into the well.”¹⁸⁸

The transformations of the position of the Thracian maid in the anecdote could derive from a harmless deformation, which we get to comprehend right where the denomination of the maid’s origin has become her own name. When she is introduced in Hippolytus’ *Philosophumena* as a “maidservant named ‘Thracian’” (“*famula Thratta nomine*”), the corresponding attribute in Plato’s text has evidently been misunderstood.¹⁸⁹ This error could have aroused the feeling that simply imparting a name offered too little characterization; thus Hippolytus’s contemporary, Tertullian, could have conceived his Egyptian solely in order to amplify the maid’s significance. In Hippolytus’ work, an immediate link is established between the events of the anecdote, observing heaven and falling down—and his allegation that Gnostic mythology, which he fought, sprung from philosophy and especially from the Greeks’ astronomy. The Gnostic speculations are now the equivalent of the distant: they neglect the pursuit of salvation as a consequence of overreaching desires for knowledge.

¹⁸⁸ Tertullian, *De anima* VI 8. “Sed enormis intentio philosophiae solet plerumque nec prospicere pro pedibus (sic Thales in puteum).” *Ibid.*, III 186.

¹⁸⁹ Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* I i. [Blumenberg’s quote and note: “...eumque deridens quaedam famula, Thratta nomine: quae in coelo sunt, inquit, scire gestientem, eorum quae ante pedes sunt notitia fugit.”— In the fifth century, Stobaeus’ *Florigium* still shows how the Greek text must have looked, back when Hippolytus misunderstood it: “*therapaina thrâta oûsa...*” (ed. C. Gesner, 420).]

Where the quotation shrinks to a mere reference (or, better said, where it is *refined* to one) the author must presuppose the reader's familiarity with what is supposed to be awakened in memory. Epochs of compendia and readers, of transmitting simplified elements of knowledge from second and third hand sources, promote the consciousness of assured ownership and tend to avoid sources that would unsettle that consciousness anew. Tertullian knows exactly what Platonism is and what a Platonist is, but he does not give the impression that he has ever read a text of Plato's. Asserting this does not imply a disparagement; it could be said for many greats of philosophy, even for Kant. This tendency does have consequences for texts' quality: any refined discussion of the positions represented is invalid due to ignorance of the genuine literature, because only seeming confrontations arise against the doxographical resolutions of the opponent; -ism's stand against -ism's, as we would say today. With regard to the reception of the Thales anecdote, a degree of familiarity with the story does still appear in the background, a familiarity which the patristic authors evidently presume by making mere references without reviewing the event for their readers.

As a Syrian, Tatian construes the new opposition between pagans and Christians according to the old model of Greeks and barbarians in his *Speech to the Greeks*. He cultivates barbarian pride against a cultured world, which seems empty and dilapidated to him, whereas he masters their rhetorical toolkit professionally with a sophist's skill. This new wave, the "barbarian philosophy"

to which he first found his way at a mature age, combined with his weariness over his own educational experience. That provides an insight for every theory about the occasions for reception: weariness with the given is a stronger motive than attraction to novelty, reaching for which takes even weaker forces of attraction in the case of weariness. For Tatian even this novelty was just an episode in the transition to a radical re-establishment of Gnostic sensibility and one with far more decisive barbarisms. Modern admirers of ancient civilization have paid back this disdainer of ancient values with harsh judgments and called him a “sad original,” an “Oriental anti-intellectual,” a “wild stylist.”¹⁹⁰

That would not require mention here, had Tatian not taken on the role of the Thracian maid in his reference to the Thales anecdote. Within the framework of a barbarian tirade against the Greeks, spanning from their language to their poetry all the way to their philosophy, the reference to Thales’ mockery by a barbarian woman fits as closely as possible. In addition, Tatian expresses laughter, apparently at those who still clung to Aristotle’s doctrine that there is no predicting anything underneath the moon’s sphere of movement—a doctrine which becomes even more laughable when the same people (closer to the earth

¹⁹⁰ Blumenberg is citing a somewhat dated work by Greek philologist Johannes Geffcken. Geffcken, Aristides, and Athenagoras, *Zwei Griechische Apologeten.*, 105–113. Geffcken’s 1907 edition of Aristides and Athenagoras included a monograph-length introductory section on early Christian Apologetics, in which Geffcken considers each early Christian author in terms of their success in impacting the future a Christian Church, a measure which Blumenberg would explicitly reject in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, where Blumenberg claims the cultural impact of anti-dogmatic thinking from ancient Gnosticism to the Enlightenment.

than the moon and lower than its path) play at prediction in the same place where they deny its possibility. Aristotle also deceived when he claimed there is no happiness for those who were denied beauty, wealth, physical strength, and nobility. Here Tatian polemically infers that the cosmic God of philosophy, made into the mover of the heavenly spheres, could mean nothing other than the arbitrariness of humanity's natural conditions for happiness. Tatian's purpose in referring to the Thales anecdote is to notice the lack of concern for the potential happiness of all human beings by the philosopher concerned with heavenly things.¹⁹¹

Surprisingly, he goes so far as to incorporate inquiry about God when cursing philosophers for their neglect of human affairs. Falling into the ditch is radicalized from the viewpoint of that "barbarian philosophy:" "You investigate who God is; thereby you are unaware of what is in yourselves. You gape with open mouth (*kechenotes*) at heaven and meanwhile fall into the ditch." Throughout his work, he reminisces on readings from heterogeneous origins: "The contradictions in your books resembles labyrinths, and their readers resemble the tub of the Danaids." With his pleasure at grotesque exaggerations, Tatian belongs to the few authors of the time for whom laughter, even if it is ferocious, at the least ought to be overheard on occasion. For other early

¹⁹¹ Tatian, *Ad Graecos* II 8-9; XXVI i.

Christians, what John Chrysostom had claimed about Jesus was considered exemplary: he never laughed. But did Thales? Was that not rather the privilege of the Thracian maid?

Without names, it cannot always be determined how definitely the anecdote stands in the background at the mention of theory's self-elevation and resulting tumble into the depths. In the case of Irenaeus of Lyons, the issue is with those truth-seekers, who still believe that they have can find the truth until they tumble into the hidden ditch of ignorance; evidently, nervous feelings during the search for truth raise the probability of such accidents. Horizontal movement now suffices to enhance the risk.¹⁹² Relations of distance and proximity repeatedly seem to demand the apostrophe to the nameless Thracian maid and to her criticisms—and the implied interpretation of what is near or far from humanity presents itself as a decision spanning the epochs. What lies before one's feet is still only the metaphor for that which is more internal and closer to the self than it is to itself: "closer than the spirit is to itself," as Bonaventura would say and

¹⁹² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereticos* V 20, 2. [Blumenberg's quote and note: "...iuste cadent in sublatentem ignorantiae foveam, semper quaerentes, et nunquam verum invenientes..." The search cannot yet enjoy the advantage of the finding first attained much later. The movement is still the self-worth that yields the "side-benefit" of everything else attained "on the way" along the endless path to the ultimate—which simply does not yet matter or which still promises nothing.]

thereby exceed everything familiar to the Church Fathers including Augustine a millennium later.¹⁹³

Augustine had worked on redefining the close at hand. When he promotes reflection on to the concept of *memoria*, he finds that memory and forgetting are not simply antithetical, because there could not have been consciousness of having forgotten otherwise: *memoria* is consciousness of memory itself and of its opposite.

With the application of *memoria* to reason (*ratio*) and will (*voluntas*), not only did Augustine indulge his Trinitarian passion by devising an anthropological Ternar,¹⁹⁴ but he also thematized a structure that undergirds the intentionality of reason and will; that would not be forgotten about him even by his detractors in the dark Middle Ages. And as he described it: “With resolve, Lord, I work here, and I work within myself; I have become a patch of earth that requires trouble and a lot of sweat.”¹⁹⁵ Already fully present in that statement is the connection, uncommon in antiquity, between theory and work, reflection and effort, whose

¹⁹³ Bonaventura, *Sententiae* I conclusion. “*intimior animae quam ipsa sibi*” Blumenberg does not cite this source. Objects of knowledge are consistently theorized through spatial metaphors of distance or proximity to the knower, according to the central thesis of Blumenberg’s untranslated, unpublished habilitation “Die Ontologische Distanz.”

¹⁹⁴ *Ternar*. Theosophist Franz Xavier Baader (1765-1841) coined the term “Ternar” to describe the three aspects of humanity; the divine Trinity inspires the consciousness of the human condition as tripartite (body, mind, and soul), wherein the existence of the finite, mortal body signals to the mind that the soul is meant for a different plane than the world.

¹⁹⁵ Augustine, *Confessiones* X 16, 25. “Ego certe, Domine, laboro hic et laboro in meipso: factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii.”

rhetoric Husserl would finalize;¹⁹⁶ but also present is the play on the biblical sweat of the brow, with which the earth should be worked. Here sweat becomes a metaphor for the close at hand and cries out for the confrontation from the Thales anecdote.

There is no longer any need to speak of a fall, because the self-explorer and -knower gazes upwards from the depth reached from the standpoint of *memoria*. He already acts within the closest at hand possible and has moved beyond probing heaven's spaces, measuring the distance between the stars, and inquiring about the equilibrium of the earth. He is completely by himself because he stands in the immediacy of self-exposure before his Creator. He does not need to be reminded to remember himself and that everything else is at a distance from him: "It is no wonder that I am not that which is far away from me. But what is closer to me than myself?"¹⁹⁷ Although closest to himself, if the power of memory traverses beyond this nearness, it cannot be comprehended: "...although I could not call myself without memory." Those who desire knowledge, out on

¹⁹⁶ Blumenberg often refers to Husserl's characterization of theory as "endless work." Since his Habilitation, Blumenberg has been highly critical of this characterization for its ignorance of historical beginnings and dead ends in theory's development. He sees it has a questionable result of Husserl's fixation on establishing a perfect method: "'Method' entails bracketing thought's historicity and thus winning a 'pure' dimension of independence; it allows the human to understand and take on the task of building certainty as an endless one." Blumenberg, "Die Ontologische Distanz," 185.

¹⁹⁷ *Confessiones* X 16. "Non ita mirum, si a me longe est quidquid ego non sum. Quid autem propinquius meipso mihi?... cum ipsum me non dicam praeter illam." [Blumenberg's quotes: V 3,5: "...putant se excelsos esse cum sideribus et lucidos; et ecce ruerunt in terram..." A propos: *Sermo* 241,3: "Quantam quaerentes in superna erecti sunt, tantum cadentes in profunda demersi sunt."]

the other side, are already firmly lodged in the catalogue of vices under the heading of “curiositas.”¹⁹⁸ They can and must fall because they relocated themselves to be under the stars and consider themselves enlightened by the stars; thus they only ever arrive back on earth—which has turned into a metaphor for self-knowledge—at the moment of their fatal fall.

If Augustine is supposed to have killed off ancient philosophy by reformulating the command to know oneself in his own rhetoric, then he may have inaugurated—or at least greatly contributed to—ancient philosophy’s notorious uniqueness: even when overcome and ostracized, it never fails to be rediscovered and never lacks a rousing effect. Ultimately, Scholasticism is nothing but a resumption of the interplay between Christianity, now firmly established, and the antiquity that had been “overcome” a millennium earlier. The enthusiasm, with which it was rediscovered and newly recognized, derives largely from the intellectual situation of the previous century, of the Dark Age (*saeculum*

¹⁹⁸ Blumenberg’s early monograph, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, includes a chapter on Augustine entitled “Curiosity is enrolled in the catalogue of vices.” What makes curiosity such a pernicious source of “impious pride”—and the only vice to receive a whole chapter (XXXV) in Augustine’s *Confessions*—is that curiosity takes pleasure in the mind’s connection with appearances, while the mind should sever its connection with earthly things. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 310. “Such self-enjoyment on the part of the cognitive drive [as experienced in curiosity] is always facilitated by the degree of difficulty and remoteness of its objects...” Ibid., 312. Therefore, astronomy especially tempts sinners to commit the vice of curiosity. Although Augustine claims to have broken with Gnostic derision towards the world of appearances and instead claims that the beauty of God’s Creation should guide us towards faith, he seems entirely Gnostic when he cannot recommend contemplating even the most remote stars, instead claiming that curiosity’s counterpart, *memoria*, should have no object, but be like God’s thoughts, “thought thinking itself.” Ibid., 315.

obscurum). That enthusiasm explains the Scholastic love of overstatement, which increases under the name of “dialectic” and produces the figures of wandering “sophists” and “peripatetics.”

With the revival of philosophy in the eleventh century, the conflict reemerges about theoretical behavior’s place in the world; with it, the figure of the heaven observer returns. Reactionary theology sees a danger in him, which represents the threat of the dialectician. Moreover, a topic comes to the foreground, whose threat shall surface first in its entirety centuries later: that of divine omnipotence with its destructive potential against rationality—not so much *of* theology as *in* theology. Tertullian had already enlisted this procedure against Scapula, when he marshaled the metaphor of the lawfulness of world events against the divinity of the stars. The heaven watcher has become the representative of the conflict between theology and dialectic, to the extent that the latter insisted on the universality of reason’s laws and did not want to treat omnipotence as an exception. The astronomer was the prototype because his theory could never abide by conceding the durability and order of its phenomena to the prerogative of a higher power: it refused to incorporate signs and miracles, acts of omnipotence, into its calculations. Constitutively, astronomy formed itself in an essential connection with a metaphysics, which, if not derived from admiration of the world’s order, could not surrender its admiration to extraneous assumptions without self-loss. The observer of heaven is not imbued with the

thought of divinity's limitless possibilities and cannot be. In this respect, he remains anthropocentric.

In light of this conflict, it will no longer appear accidental when the heaven observer's plummet down a well occurs in a tract "On divine omnipotence" from the eleventh century by Peter Damian.¹⁹⁹ As in the Aesopian fable, the philosopher remains anonymous; in a new turn, the maid receives a name, Iambe, which puts her in a surprising relationship with the origin of iambic meter and thus of poetry. Iambe had a supporting role in the myth of the earth goddess Demeter, whose daughter by Zeus, Persephone, the underworld god, Hades, had abducted in secret contract with her father and had made into the queen of his shadow kingdom. The inconsolable Demeter tirelessly seeks her missing daughter, when she comes upon early humans in the forest, who live by hunting and to whose hospitality it belongs that this very Iambe seeks to cheer Demeter up with funny and taunting verses, whose "iambic" meter is devised on this occasion. At the very least, iambic meter proves its value at this point, since, according to Pausanias' report, Demeter thanks these primordial humans with the gift of grain, through which they turn from hunters into sedentary farmers. In a variant version, Iambe belongs to the founding myth of the mysteries of Eleusis, in whose royal court Demeter takes respite; there the serving girl Iambe's poetry

¹⁹⁹ Damian, *The Letters of Peter Damian (Letters 91-120)* Letter 119.

makes her smile and even brings her to laughter. The founding myth refers to the cultic function of poetry to assuage the raging divinity, even through whimsy like Iambe had mastered. The barbarian maid's mockery at the Milesian cistern is moved over into art, when the one who remained nameless for so long—with the exception of Hippolytus' false attribution—is called by the name of Iambe and thus poetically combines mockery and consolation.

The way in which the astronomer figures into this tract about omnipotence results from a special quality, which involves the relationship of omnipotence to time. The astronomer works over time and especially with the future; for him, the past is the absolute limit of omnipotence, which cannot make undone what is once done. Questioning any capacity of the Omnipotent Being is an irritation for theology indeed as soon as it is spoken; moreover, time belongs to created nature and its order cannot be an impediment to the divine will.²⁰⁰ The astronomer of the fable is the metaphor for the objection that philosophy takes with the unlimitedness of omnipotence over time. For the theologian, the philosopher is more unknowing than ever when he understands that which he admires and studies as a law and not as reason's obedience.

²⁰⁰ Implied here is the medieval distinction between creative nature (*natura naturans*) and created nature (*natura naturata*), a distinction which delineates the sphere of human knowledge: we can hope to understand what God has created but not who He is or why He has created it.

Damian forces dialectic, as a mere way with words (*ars verborum*), into an irreconcilable opposition with divine power (*virtus divina*) as the true reality. Even the principle of contradiction, for him, belongs in the realm of matters that only emerge through the means of language and remain confined to the lawfulness of language, because such matters rely on the temporal condition of simultaneity, inexorable within language. The concept of time renders the link to human arrogance—which is represented by the philosopher who conducts astronomy and falls into the slimy well (*in limosum repente lapsus est puteum*)—beyond the ancient grotesquery of foreignness to the world, which took on traits of prostration by someone possessed by a spirit. The figure of the maid is raised to unique dignity, since she does not just mock and laugh, but rather poetically articulates (*poetata est*) the misfortune of her master and the lesson to learn from it. If the female inventor of poetic meter is thus ranked against the inventor of philosophy, we might attribute this to an unknown tradition, but we must, above all, understand that he no longer judges the woman as a fool across from the philosopher, but rather in the image of the “*idiota*.”²⁰¹ Her new traits give urgency and credibility to her warning that sacrilegious efforts to access the secrets of heaven through investigation violate the measure²⁰² of the human

²⁰¹ *idiota*. Tertullian’s term for the uneducated, but insightful Christian. (See page 52.)

²⁰² *Maß*. The German word for “measure” is the same as the word for poetic “meter,” which emphasizes the two areas of expertise for Damiani’s *Iambe*: poetic form and the limits of the knowable.

power to comprehend: “My master did not know what was under his feet and fell into some foul mud, as he was trying to investigate the secrets of the heavens.”²⁰³

The author of that tract against dialectic in support of omnipotence employed the Thales anecdote in another context. In a missive to Archbishop Andreas, Cardinal Peter Damian complains about the coarse and libelous use of his own statements from the pulpit. Here, he claims, one must proceed by vulgar means (*rustice*). In order to dramatize the situation, he gives an adorned version of the philosopher’s tumble: as a philosopher carefully observed the paths of the planets and the course of the stars at night, he fell by accident into a ditch, which, as Damian says, yawned enormously deep and stank of disgusting muck. Now this philosopher had a house maid named Iambe, who frankly and skillfully (*libere ac prudenter*) assaulted her master in iambic verse (which would later be named after her), and she said the following about him, which deserves applause (*plausibiliter*): “‘My master,’ she said, ‘did not know the filth lying under his feet, as he tried to learn about the stars.’”²⁰⁴ This application, which heightens the drama of the scene by drawing the contrast between filth and stars, is alien and uniquely ambiguous; about the transition to the statement that it could happen

²⁰³ Pietro Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, c. 12 “Dominus meus ignorabat id quod sub pedibus eius iacebat vile lutum, et investigare tentabat arcana coelorum.” [Blumenberg’s quote: (Migne, patrologia latina CXLV 615): “Animadvertant hoc, qui modum suae capacitates excedunt, et ad ea, quae super se sunt, superbe tentanda prorumpunt...”]

²⁰⁴ Pietro Damiani, *Epistola V 1* (Migne, Partologia latina CXLIV 336 sq.) “Dominus, inquit, meus ignorabat stercora, quae sub euis pedibus errant, et nosse tentabat sidera.”

even in our times, one could take the maid's lack of understanding as appropriate to the high caliber of the philosopher, although she had just been praised. What the correspondent seizes on, in a crude turn, is the theology of the unknowing, of those *rustici*, who have hardly learned anything else but how to till the land, to watch over pigs and over grazing animals' fold yards. They do not hesitate to dispute about the Holy Scripture on streets and intersections in front of wenches and fellow plebeians. As degrading as it is to say it, they would spend the whole night between wenches' thighs and not be ashamed during the day to deal with the conversations of angels and to decide in this way about the proclamations of holy teachers. In exhibiting such beautiful neighbor love towards the abusers of pearls from his sermons, the Cardinal lost sight of the anecdote's structure. He still owes his addressee an account of how he wishes to have the collapse of the philosopher be understood as comparable with the self-overestimation of those who believe that they are allowed to rise to angels' conversations after their lowly days' and nights' work. The reader shall be not at all able to avoid equating the pilfered rhetorical gems of the writer with the preciousness of illicitly overheard heavenly conversations. This language of the letter is one of a harsh theology, as has repeatedly been spoken in the Christian tradition, where the distance between the world and God shall appear so hopeless that it can neither be traversed by falling nor by elevating oneself.

In both uses of the anecdote, its disfigurement is recognizable. For the indeterminable secrets of heaven, to which the movement of the stars only stands in the foreground, the earthly is not confronted as the reality close at hand and belonging to life-skills, but rather the lowly muck, into which he falls, who does not declare himself satisfied with the offer in the Revelation. The well comes to resemble the pit of sin, and not without reason (*Grund*), since the sky explorer's theory has been written up in the catalogue of vices as curiosity. Then, in light of the repellant circumstances of the sinner's fall, the figure of the maid appears particularly excessive with her lyric. Lacking a precise function in the anecdote, she gains that of poetic invention, in order to keep her role at all. It becomes clear how heterogeneous this is when one considers that crediting a poetic meter with her name does not make her into the saintly figure who could then present the true contrast to the philosopher who fell in the filth.

VI. Astrological Predominance

The reference to astrology is the most important contribution that the Thales anecdote tends to receive from medieval reception. This reference does not depend on how the stargazer's profession is designated; despite the differentiation declared by Peter of Spain, the Middle Ages apply the terms "astrology" and "astronomy" synonymously in most cases. Practicing the latter art became the precondition for the former ability. Formerly the astronomer was the figure for depraved curiosity, for whom objects at a spatial distance distorted his relationship to those in earthly proximity, but that figure became the astrologer in the specific sense: someone who penetrates the future's distance, reserved for divine wisdom and foresight, and therefore appears baffled in his contact with realities in temporal proximity to his present time. Temporal futurity substitutes for spatial distance as the negatively marked direction, a change which appears on first glance to signify intensified derision towards that figure within the Christian system; however, a further analysis of the epoch's characteristics reveals that not to be the case. Tolerance towards astrology expressed an ineradicable need, whose gratification was determined by nature's libidinous underground. There was greater tolerance towards astrology than towards the purely theoretical urge, which had come to be seen as arrogance and as alienation from the elementary concerns of human beings (*Daseinsbesorgnisse*). Sometimes, when the Thales

anecdote does turn against astrology, the transition from astronomy's spatial reference to astrology's temporal one only emerges in the "moral" of the story, appended in the style of fables.

One example is the version from Venice of 1520 printed in Gaspar Schober's fable collection: the nameless astronomer is found in the well by a likewise nameless pedestrian, who hears his cries for help, and the Aesopian allegation is imparted: "He said, 'hey! You endeavor to perceive what is in the sky, and you cannot discern what is on earth, not even near your feet.'"²⁰⁵ After this ancient moral comes the new lesson to draw from the fable: that most people claim to know the future right when they do not know what is happening in the present: "The fable contains a hint for the many who claim to know the future while ignorant of the present."²⁰⁶

Plato's version of the Thales anecdote gained influence later than the Aesopian fable and also later than the version by Diogenes Laertius, whose work

²⁰⁵ *Aespoi Phrygis Fabulae* CCVIII e Graeco in Latinum conversae, Venetiis 1520. Fab. XIII: De Astrologo et viatore. "Heus, inquit, tu quae in caelo sunt conspici conatus quae in terra et prope pedibus sunt non cernis." [Blumenberg's quote: "Consuevit quispiam siderum corporumque sublimium contemplator singulis diebus prima nocte sidera et caelum suspicere et meatus eius diligenter explorare..."] The large number of concise readings presented in this chapter offers a glimpse of Blumenberg's archive. The brevity, density, and autonomy of the coming paragraphs closely resemble the short, thoughtful readings that he typed on notecards and filed in his card catalogues.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* "Fabula innuit quod plerique, quom praesentia nescient, future cognoscere gloriantur." The qualitatively new lesson (*die neue... Lehre*) described here does not seem to be a "modern" lesson, but the German word for modernity (*Neuzeit*) can mean "modern" or "new." Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* clearly connects modernity with tolerance towards the *desire* for knowledge, but Schober's tale only shows intolerance towards the *claim* (gloriantur) to knowledge—an intolerance that could still be compatible with modernity.

was already extant in Latin translation in the twelfth century and determined ancient philosophy's image along with Augustine and Cicero. Already before the middle of the fourteenth century, Walter Burleigh, the "clear and transparent teacher" (*doctor planus et perspicuus*), transmitted a version of the anecdote in his history of the philosophers' lives and lifestyles first published in 1472 in Cologne and then in many editions afterwards; that version tells the tragedy of the philosopher who was blinded after being led out of his house by an old lady.²⁰⁷ The old lady advised him to let his misfortune convey the insight that the theoretical urge reaches its limits in time rather than space—rather through age and the loss of sight than through its objects' mere unattainability. As an opponent to the nominalists, the old lady warns philosophers, more to convince than to deride; this may have worked as an admonition that such a desire to know was incompatible with the finitude of life. For in the future's lap there still lies an idea of method, which will make theory's program invulnerable against the disappearance of the individuals who conduct it.

Walter Burleigh's *On the Lives and Deaths of the Philosophers* also found its way into German. We must recall how starkly such a depiction of the

²⁰⁷ Walter Burleigh, *De vita et moribus philosophorum*. Ed. H. Knust, Tübingen 1886, 6. [Blumenberg's quote and note: "Ferturque de ipso quod, cum nocte duceretur extra domum a vetula ut astra consideraret, incidit in foveam, eoque lugente, dixit vetula: 'Tu quidem, o Thales, que ante pedes sunt videre nequis, quo modo que in celis sunt posses agnoscere?'"—German versions of the late Middle Ages: R. Wedler, Walter Burleys 'Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum poetarumque veterum' in zwei deutschen Bearbeitungen des Spätmittelalters. Heidelberg 1969 (Phil. Diss.).]

philosophers contrasted with the characteristic impersonality, even facelessness, of Scholastic theory production, in order for us to imagine both the interest in the wealth of anecdotes and its influence on the concept of philosophy in the following centuries. In Hans Lobenzweig's version from the mid-fifteenth century, the Thales anecdote reads as follows: "One time, he left his house and wanted to see the night sky, thereupon he fell into a wolf trap. Thereupon he screamed and cried. Thereupon came an old wench and spoke: 'O dear Thales, thou wouldst see what standeth in Heaven. Why hast thou not also seen the wolf trap before your feet on the firmament?'"²⁰⁸ The transition to the following statement from the threefold thanks by Thales is charmingly procured with the expression: "Thales says thanks to the fortune..." which we can relate to the previous scene and to the following sentiment. The three privileges worthy of gratitude are: having become a human and not an animal, a boy and not a wench: "For the third, that I have become a Greek and not a German." Moreover, the untranslated "barbarus" from the original is left to the side; Lobenzweig

²⁰⁸ Burley, *Walter Burleys "Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum poetarumque veterum" in zwei deutschen Bearbeitungen des Spätmittelalters*. "Ains mals gieng er zu nacht aus seinem haws vnd wolt das gestyern schawen, da viel er in ain wolfsgruebenn. Da schray er vnd wainet. Da kam ain allt weyb vnd sprach: 'O lieber Tales, dw wild sehen, was an dem himel stat. Warumb hastu nicht die wolfsgrueben vor dein füessen auch an dem firmament gesehen?... Tales sagt danck dem gelück.... Zw dem dritten das ein Kriech pin worden vnd nicht ein Dewtscher.... Tales der ist gar arm gewesen, wann von grosser liebe der weishait mocht er nicht haben die weyl, das er dem guet nachstellet. Also ward er vmbgetriben in spotliche wets. Vnd die lewt sprachen, sein kunst wer nicht nützlich.... Wie er ettlich spotter zu schanden prächt.... Vnd dornach lange zeyt so solt kain öle mehr werden.... Mit solhem list bracht er vil pfening zusammen vnd zaigt das gelt den spöthern vnnnd sprach: 'Weyshait ist nutz. Ein weyser wirt reich, wann er wil, aber weishait ist edler dann guet. Dorumb hab ich lere vnd weyshaitt auserwelt.'"

“germanized” it. His rendition of the oil press story also deserves attention: “Thales, he was totally poor, when from great love of truth he did not want to have the weal that he deemed secondary to the good. Thus he was harangued in a mocking way. And people said his practice was not useful.” That is his paraphrase of the opening situation. Thales contemplated “how he would bring his hecklers to shame forever.” The stars do not promise him just a fat oil harvest for the next year, but something beyond that, which would not be inserted into the story anywhere else: “and afterwards for a long time, no more oil shall come.” For the first time, the philosopher’s triumph through public demonstration comes from a long-term speculation: “With such deceit, he brought together many pennies and showed the money to the hecklers and said: ‘wisdom is useful. A wise man gets rich, when he wants to, but wisdom is nobler than goods. Therefore I have selected learning and wisdom.’”

Chaucer enlisted the anonymous fable in *Canterbury Tales* for an attack on astrology. The knight’s narrative, with its anachronistic mixture of ancient and courtly elements, makes a burlesque contrast with the story that it follows about the drunken miller who follows the pilgrim group. The story is about an Oxford carpenter and his very young wife, who have rented a room in their house out to a student—with the inevitable consequences. The poor student, called the “fine Nicolas” (*heende Nicolas*), does not just distinguish himself through his weakness for secret love affairs, but also through passion for astrology. With the laboratory

of almagest, astrolabe, and mechanical calculator, which he maintains in his attic room, he promises himself and others answers to all possible questions. The amorous and the astrological element get artfully interwoven in accordance with the motto of the prologue: “a husband should not stick his nose too deep in God’s secrets and also not in his wife’s secrets; for whoever asks much gets many answers.”²⁰⁹ The motif of *curiositas* presents eroticism and astrology parallel with one another, makes the astrologer the doppelgänger of the erotic hero. For the student, the halo of his clairvoyance helps him huckster the prognosis of a second Deluge to the carpenter. The skillful performance of an astrologer, who stands transfixed as he watches the apocalyptic signs from heaven, awakens fears in the simple mind of the carpenter, fears which he articulates through the story of the ancient astronomer and his tumble:

I thought ay wel how that it schulde be!
 Men schulde not know of Goddes pryvety.
 Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man,
 That nat but oonly his bileeve can!
 So ferde another clerk with astronomye;
 He walked in the feeldes for to pryve
 Up-on the sterres, what ther schulde bifalle,
 Til he was in a marle pit i-falle;
 He saugh nat that.²¹⁰

The carpenter is another *idiot*. He is in the right when he predicts the outcome of Nicolas’ astrological trick. Despite his gullibility towards what is

²⁰⁹ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 126. “An housbond shal not be inquisityf, / of Goddes pryveté, ne of his wyf.”

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

preached to him, he is a representative, like Plato's maid, of a realism free from illusory perspectives. For reality is what can be ignored, on the one hand, but what then returns as inescapable all the more painfully. The condition for our ability to observe heaven is the earth under our feet.

The image of the star observer who falls in the well might have appeared too harmless, too private, too idyllic to illustrate the arrogance of the astrologer who wants to see the future. This is understood when Icarus' crash from his flight near the sun procures the appropriate image in André Alciato's emblems: "Icarus falls down into the sea by raising himself too high. Whoever wants to master Heaven is too full of presumption. According to this fable, the astrologers should beware, lest their overweening investigations take them where God brings rogues."²¹¹ Only the unhappy father Daedalus sees what happens; no unaffected or mocking spectator would be commensurate to the demonic yearning and the deathly image. This is a matter of cursedness (*Unheil*), not misfortune (*Unglück*). Alciato seeks the same effect when he alters Aesop's fable of the bird catcher and the viper; that fable also mentions the astrologer who overlooks present danger on earth as he scrutinizes heavenly objects and studies their significance for the future.

²¹¹ Les Emblemes de Maistre Andre Alciat. Paris 1542. 116 sq.: LIII. "Icarus cheut dedans la mer / Par trop grande exaltation: / Cil qui ueult le ceil entamer, / Est trop plain de presumption: / Doncques sur ceste fiction, / Doibuent garder les astrologues, / Que leur haulte discuſsion, / Les mette ou dieu reduit tous rogues."

The transmission of the story about the heaven watcher's plummet noticeably separates into two types: one type stigmatizes metaphysical overreaching, and another deals with the realist-moralist contrast. The sin of desiring knowledge ends in a different dimension than the offense against the rules of everyday temperance. The return of the anonymous passerby from the Aesopian tradition or of the maid from the Platonic one is primarily an indicator that the theologically reprehensible has been traced back to the realistically and morally inadvisable. This is the case when Guicciardini begins the story with the moral: researchers who study the future almost never comprehend anything about the present.²¹² He is not so much defaming something reprehensible as offering a maxim for prudent deliberation in the face of our restricted access to the world, where we must decide for this or that option, since we cannot have both as one person. Moreover, well-intended lectures about human nature tend to be accorded increasing validity in this period, and universal validity can only be had at the expense of content, which "morality" (*abfabulatio*) levels into mere platitude: "This can be applied to those who gloat of their absurd deeds, without being able

²¹² Francesco Guicciardini, *Detti et fatti piacevoli et gravi di diversi principi, filosofi, et cortigiani*. Venedig 1566, p. 27: "I professori del future, ignorer quasi sempre il presente. Vn'astrologo contemplando, et squadrando il Cielo, cadde in vna fossa: il che veduto la moglie: disse: egli tis ta molto bene, poi che tu vuoi uedere et sapere quel che è in Cielo, et non vedi, et non sai quell che tu hai innazi a' piedi."

to do the things people do normally.”²¹³ Thales’ name even appears in collections that expressly claim the title *Aesop’s Fables*.²¹⁴

It is obvious how the story about the astronomer’s plummet coincides with Skepticism: risky, fruitless overreaching for truth is illustrated and shown to carry disastrous consequences. The Middle Ages, although in possession of at least one translation of Sextus Empiricus, took little interest in doubt; when truths were literally “summed up”²¹⁵ like an inventory of possessions, it is not obvious to ask the question of whether truth itself is attainable or compatible with human nature, whether we might not live more calmly with less certainty. Furthermore, no one will be able to say that the turn away from the Middle Ages bore predominantly skeptical traits: indeed, Descartes is no thorough skeptic because he already knows what certainty he stands to gain when he takes on the horrors of the most pervasive doubt. Only his provisional morality—although it maintains the

²¹³ [Blumenberg’s note: I. N. Neveletus, *Mythologia Aesopica*. Frankfurt 1610. p. 226, is a dual language text that does not mention Thales’ name: “Astrologus moris id habebat, vt singulis versperis egressus stellas contemplatetur. aliquando autem in suburbium cum iuisset totoque esset in coelom animo intentus, ignorans in puteum decidit. Gementis vero et clamantis illac praeteriens aliquis audita voce. Et quod accidisset cognito ait, ô tu, intro coelom videre qui conabaris, quae in terra sunt non videbas.” The ‘moral’ (adfabulatio) is very non-specific: “In eos qui absurd gloriabundi, ne quidem ea quae hominibus sunt obuia, praestare possunt.”]

²¹⁴ [Blumenberg’s note: C. Barth, *Fabularum Aesopiarum libri V*. Frankfurt 1623, p. 49: “XIII. Thales. In astra dum superna totus excubat / Viasque siderum exigit. / Lacu patente ponè decidit, Thales, / Ibique penè perditus, / Inepte dixit, et polos dein studes / Videre, non potens humum.” The moral uses the formula: “Superna saepè cogitation catos / Scientiâ exigit sui.”]

²¹⁵ *im wörtlichen Verstande ‘summierem.*’ “literally summarized” means treated in the form of the medieval “summa” most famously pursued in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*. That book treats theological questions systematically. Each is answered in the following form: a question is raised, an objection to the eventual answer is entertained, the objection is briefly contested, the answer is given, and then a more thorough refutation of the initial objections follows.

promise of future definiteness—participates in that type of skeptical satisfaction with what is reliably present as probable, normal, and reputable.²¹⁶

Moralism is the earliest modern movement to be saturated in skepticism; it no longer observes the human as an utterly well-conceived, privileged creature. Reason itself becomes satisfaction. Forms of doubt about science of the Scholastic type that remain medieval include Nicolas of Cusa's revival of the *Idiota* and the justifications of magic as a form of resignation towards theory. Magic is the subversive exploitation of the human's privileged position in the universe, of his participation in the elements and stars, of his attribute as microcosm in the macrocosm.

Magic attempts to undermine nature's regularities, and how closely that relates to skeptical resignation can be detected in Agrippa of Nettesheim's satire "On the uncertainty and vanity of the sciences" from 1527. Criticism of scholarship has almost always was and remains a domain of scholarship. An argument is raised, which contains the hidden motivation of the idea of method—

²¹⁶ Descartes discusses his "provisional" morality in the third part of his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducted Reason*. These are three principles that Descartes applies and recommends to skeptics, during the period within which they are still testing the veracity of their beliefs by abandoning all convictions. In short his rules were: abide by social, legal, and religious conventions when non-restrictive, maintain choices even if arbitrary, and avoid worldly ambition. The rules were meant as temporary, but they exceeded his expectations: "Since I had begun using this method, I experienced such great happiness that I did not believe any more charming or innocent one could be found in this life...." Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, 23. As Blumenberg mentions, the goal of Skepticism in its ancient Pyrrhonic form was not to arrive at truth as Descartes sought to do, but simply to experience a more peaceful and happy life: "...we come first to suspension on judgment and afterwards to tranquility." Sextus Empiricus, *Sextus Empiricus*, 4.

which becomes the core of the modern problematic a century later—in that it rigorously dispenses with the medieval expectation of achieving the attainable whole of knowledge: the disproportion between knowledge’s demand for time and life’s propriety over time.²¹⁷

But astronomy and astrology, theory and occult wisdom, part ways precisely over this dilemma. Although astrology depends on the reliability of astronomy, time never grows short for the astrologer; he is the master of time. Agrippa understands astrology as interpreting the sky’s effects and thereby smashing apart confusions in astronomy about cycles and epicycles, which are consequences of theory’s inability to catch up with its object in time. He has been acquainted with astrological practices since childhood, but has known for as long that “this art is based on nothing other, and stands on no other ground, than on outright hearsay and poetic fancy, and has made me regret the effort and work that I have put into it heretofore. And I have only wished to contemplate it no more.”²¹⁸ The only difference between astrologers and poets is supposedly that they do not share an opinion about the morning and evening star; the poets would insist on letting both morning and evening star rise on one and the same day. For

²¹⁷ [Blumenberg’s note and quote: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque atrium* c. I (*Opera*, Lyon 1600, II 4): “Tam est scientiarum omnium cognition difficilis ne dicam impossibilis ut prius vita tota hominis deficiat quam vel unius disciplinae minima ratio perfecte investigari possit.”]

²¹⁸ [Blumenberg’s note: Agrippa, *Declamatio*. XXX De astronomia (German translation by F. Mauthner, Munich 1913, 116-123; Mauthner uses an old translation: Cologne 1713).]

that, they too met with trouble, according to Agrippa, since unlike the astrologers, who could get rich with their art, poets suffered hunger and anxiety from theirs.

What is expressed here—almost simultaneously with the first draft of Copernicus' system modification, with the same pathos, and with nearly the same formulations—is scorn towards others' confusion about heaven, which they evoke through constructions that are unnatural and unworthy of the divine Creator's objects, through “mathematical monsters and poetic hearsays,” as a consequence of both corrupt philosophy and poetic fabelries. That is how astrology builds a false connection between heaven and earth. It presents itself in the form of the ancient theorist from the anecdote, which is taken up with double attribution to the masters of the Ionian School: “A maid met and chided the stargazer; for as she first strolled around with her master, Anaximenes, and he wanted to observe the stars, who also left the house very early for that purpose and gazed at the stars, he fell in a ditch. There the maid told him: ‘Master, I am perplexed that you want to know what is in Heaven, and do not know what is under your feet.’” The transference of the story onto Anaximenes is otherwise unknown; its genuine attribution to Thales by Plato follows immediately: “And with the same joke, one says, the Milesian Thales was also mocked by the Thracian maid.” Cicero supposedly makes almost the same point; and Agrippa knows about it from life experience: “I myself learned this art from my parents as a child....”

This variant of the tradition is dear to us because it borders so closely on Copernicus. Not only the date, but the subject matter, since what Aggripa disregards and scorns is not so much the astrologers' excessive zeal to see the future as their "careless curiosity"—their initiated action, "as if they had just recently fallen down from the sky and had been there for a long time"—that is to say, he sees their art's constitutive befuddlement as concomitant with astronomy's monstrous degeneration and sees astrology as the demise of astronomy. It is evident that he still would not give astrology a chance, if that were not the case; but the stronger argument against it is that no good wisdom for human needs can be built on top of a bad theory.

Authors who take up the encyclopedic task show the least consideration as they transmit the story's content. A nice example occurs in Sebastian Franck's *Chronicles* from 1536. Here the anecdote is equipped with every transmitted fact available about Thales as one of the seven Greek wise men; on the same level as the preciously Christianized statement, "the world was haunted and full of devils."²¹⁹ The anecdote is then delivered in accordance with Diogenes Laertius' version, but it pulls an inconsistent element out of Plato's version: that the old woman makes her statement while "laughing," which makes little sense in the tragic revision of the scene. It speaks against esteeming encyclopedic and

²¹⁹ Sebastian Franck, *Chronica Zeitbuch und Geschichtlibell*. 1536 (Ndr. Darmstadt 1969). 28.

chronologic works any more highly in reception histories that they almost completely give up on determining the context of the very element that reception history seeks to observe. In the case of Franck's *Chronicles*, as a result of the slackened context, there is hardly any further insight to win. Such widespread and widely utilized "handbooks" must still be considered reception events, for their part, albeit ones with uncontrolled material.

VII. Applause and Scorn from the Moralists

Montaigne created a distinctive variant of the Thales anecdote, which broke from the atomistic transmission of fables and emblems, so that he could fit it consistently within the genre of his *Essais*. Plato's maid has now crossed over from berating Thales verbally after the fact to helping instigate the philosopher's plummet. Plato's skeptical successor shows himself agreeing with her duplicity:

I have always felt grateful to that girl from Miletus who, seeing the local philosopher Thales with his eyes staring upwards, constantly occupied in contemplating the vault of heaven, made him trip over, to warn him that it was time enough to occupy his thoughts with things above the clouds when he had accounted for everything lying before his feet. It was certainly good advice she gave him, to study himself rather than the sky....²²⁰

Here it looks as if Montaigne too wants to set up the alternative between studying nature and knowing oneself; for him, however, the futility of astronomical exertions are only the paradigm for skeptical resignation towards every kind of truth. Our human peculiarity includes understanding that what we hold in our hands lies beyond our grasp and above the clouds, just like our knowledge of the stars.²²¹ Astronomy is no longer the epitome of an overshooting

²²⁰ Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, 604. [Blumenberg's citation and quote: *Essais* II 12, ed. Didot 274 AB: "Je scay bon gré à la garse milesienne qui voyant le philosophe Thales s'amuser continuellement à la contemplation de la voulte celeste, et tenir tousiours les yeulx eslevez contremont, lui meit en son passage quelque chose à le faire bruncher, pour l'advertir qu'il seroit temps d'amuser son pensement aux choses qui estoient dans les nues, quand il auroit proueu à celles qui estoient à ses pieds: elle lui conseilloit certes bien de regarder plutost à soy qu'au ciel..."]

²²¹ [Blumenberg's citation and quote: *ibid.*, 247 B: "*Mais nostre condition porte que la cognoissance de ce que nous avons entre mains est aussi esloignee de nous, et aussi bien au*

curiosity, which one only needed to relinquish in order to gain the ability to turn one's attention to a realm that promised more than hypotheses and assumptions: the nearby. That message of the Thales anecdote is misleading. The maid's attendant has good intentions, and the maid does not even laugh any more. Yet her realism is not that of the moralist who sees—prefigured in the form of the astronomer—that even self-knowledge is hopelessness. The study of the sky is not the exception to the situation of human knowledge, there is no near-transcendence of the far off; astronomy does not interrupt the normality of the human situation regarding an unknown nature. Even he remains unknown to himself, however much literarily authenticated self-knowledge the moralist might acquire.

It is immediately informative for understanding this standpoint of Montaigne's that he can hold astronomy and medicine—as disciplines of the farthest (*Fernstliegenden*) and of the nearest (*Nächstliegenden*)—to the same criterion. For both, the object of their toil is unattainable, whether outward or inward. It offers reason no advantage to be the object oneself which is also supposed to be given over to reason.

The philosopher should only stumble, not fall; and certainly not into a well, for that has completely disappeared from the story. In lieu of *Schadenfreude*,

dessus des nues, que celles des astres...] “But in fact the human condition is such that, where our understanding is concerned, the things we hold in our hands are as far above the clouds as the heavenly bodies are!” Ibid.

the somewhat obtuse—perhaps intentionally understated—reproach emerges: to try it first with easier matters. We notice clearly that Montaigne undertakes these changes so that he can still agree with the maid. Among the changes belongs the most important virtue of the moralist: punctual intervention.

Here medicine enters the picture and removes all possibility of misunderstanding what Montaigne could have meant by taking sides with the maid's procedure. The danger of both disciplines lies in doing what would characterize any thinking as philosophy, taken in its broadest sense: supplying fictions for irresolvable problems. Philosophy supposedly offers us nothing that *is*, not even what the philosopher *holds to be*, but rather whatever stimulates an impression, especially a pleasing one: "Certainly, philosophy is poetry adulterated by Sophists."²²² The philosopher would be greatly deceived, if he thought philosophy had mastered even one single object properly according to its essence; and when he departs the earth, he will leave behind ignorance even greater than his own was. This conclusion about philosophy also goes for our knowledge of humanity's closest concerns (*was... am nächsten liegt*), our own selves and our bodies:

Philosophy does not only impose her ropes, wheels and contrivances on to the high heavens. Just think for a while what she says about the way we humans are constructed. For our tiny bodies she has forged as many

²²² Ibid., 602. "...la philosophie n'est qu'une poésie sophistique."

retrogradations, trepidations, conjunctions, recessions and revolutions as she has for the stars and the planets.²²³

Montaigne both mourns and mocks the helpless state of medical knowledge of the human body. The limits of medicine also present him with the surest indication that knowledge of the world—of the whole and of the part that humans represent—is a hopeless undertaking, so that the starry sky's inaccessibility only repeats itself in our close range knowledge. Rejecting cosmology for its complications is therefore not identical with realism that focuses on the earth. Despite expressly evoking Socrates, no reference is implied to the Socratic turn towards questions of human nature:

As Socrates says in Plato, you can make against anyone concerned with Philosophy exactly the same reproach as that woman made against Thales: he fails to see what lies before his feet. No philosopher understands his neighbor's actions nor even his own; he does not even know what either of them in in himself, beat or Man.²²⁴

Here Montaigne is not referring to the figure of Socrates who asks different questions than Anaxagoras had asked, but rather to the Socrates who claimed to know that he knew nothing. Knowing nothing became all the more difficult once the world around us started believing it knew so much, when in fact it had just begun to make gains in knowledge that could be hoped to endure; such gains could still only be measured against the first glimpses of an unknown land.

²²³ Ibid., 603.

²²⁴ Ibid., 604.

At another point Montaigne quotes from Diogenes Laertius that Thales responded to the question, “what is hard?” with the answer “to know oneself.”²²⁵ This assertion, supposed to be historically plausible for the founder of natural philosophy, could only have meant that he devoted himself to observing the sky because another knowledge, that of himself, was too hard for him. That sounds exactly like someone revising history in ones own image by insisting on positing self-knowledge as *the* topic for philosophy precisely in opposition to branching out to natural philosophy—and by insisting that *he* could achieve self-knowledge. Montaigne recommends drawing the opposite consequence from Thales’ statement: that he wanted to call knowledge of human nature hard, while claiming that the knowledge of everything else is simply impossible. Then, the task ahead of him consisted in combining skepticism and moralism: we do not need to know anything, but we do have to know a little about human nature lest we come to ruin.

Montaigne is not a dogmatic skeptic.²²⁶ Not once does he come near the thought that everything might be purposefully designed to rebuff humanity’s

²²⁵ Ibid., 628. “When Thales reckons that a knowledge of Man is very hard to acquire, he is telling him that knowledge of anything else is impossible.” [*Quand Thales estime la cognoissance de l’homme tres difficile, il luy apprend la cognoissance de toute aultre chose luy estre impossible.*]

²²⁶ A “dogmatic skeptic” is a provocative oxymoron—at least in the skeptical tradition from Phyrro to Kant. Skepticism is defined by an abstention from taking *any* position, while dogmatism is defined by refusal to consider any *other* position than the one taken. However, the skeptical position always requires a defense of one’s choice to abstain, which may conceal a less explicit dogma.

knowledge-hungry nature by exiling humans in the realm of their illusions about the world. Likelier to him (*liegt ihm... nahe*) is the thought of a merciful sheltering from the abysses of natural secrets: if we knew what we longed to know, it would hardly sit well with us. Nature favors humanity by denying its most insistent wish. It would be a cheap modernization of Montaigne to have him predict or even imagine what consequences and implications knowledge about the natural world would have in store within a few centuries. His foundational thought is rather that of economizing the short and precious lifespan: not using it on second rate goals and pursuits.

Because he is no dogmatic skeptic, he does not let the stargazer plummet into the abyss. Because all knowledge appears only arbitrary and incidental due to his skepticism, which removes him from every linear process, his sympathy goes out to the maid's intercession, as she just lets the philosopher stumble with a little trick and interrupts his concentration on his work to remind him of something else. Carefully conducted mischief, not a prank that evokes metaphysics and conflicts over gods. For: "human understanding in its strivings to plumb the

depths of everything and to give an account of it, destroys itself, just as we ourselves, tired and exhausted by life's long race, fall back into childishness."²²⁷

Even before theory could programmatically settle on a method, Montaigne would have advised humanity against endowing theory with independence by crafting a method that would apply to all of the lives under its purview. In place of the theoretical seeker, he places a "new character" (*nouvelle figure*): that of a demurring, patiently attentive sage, "a chance philosopher, and not a premeditated one!" (*philosophe imprémedité et fortuite*).²²⁸ Truth, if there should be any, can only come from life already lived, not from life turned into an instrument for truth—as the *Essais* themselves show. Philosophy does not preempt life, does not form it with norms, but descends from it like a fruit. That beginning of all things theoretical was therefore justly disrupted, if not even prevented.

The realist regarding the finitude of individual life permits the Milesian maid to see what he finds amiss in the rigorous discipline of the sky watcher: a history of error begins here. Theorists are forced away from the object of their theory into a wide-cast toil overextended to span all lifetimes; whoever completes the portion of work they can do for this project must forego its benefits. This insight was still foreign indeed to the ancient sky watcher. It first emerges from the vantage point of an astronomy that already has access to recorded data by

²²⁷ Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, 626.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 614.

which it can measure its hypotheses. Astronomers thus benefit from the pioneers of a future knowledge and reject them. That is not yet the form of skeptical abstention that Montaigne recommends for elevating the value of individual life in its incomparability, which he brings to the formula: it is all about exposing humanity to itself, that is, exposing our reason to our reason.²²⁹

A century after Montaigne, La Fontaine took up the Aesopian fable in the first part of his collection. It stands out as strikingly out of place among the other fables. As an explanation for its erratic placement, one scholar has suggested that the great comet of the winter 1664-5 was the contemporary occasion for an attack on astrology, since it roused the interest in star interpretation among a broad public and the susceptibility to charlatanry.²³⁰ Despite the winter chill, the streets and plazas of Paris at night were packed with people who wanted to see the spectacle of the heavenly body. An almost automatic connection was made to political events of the day, especially the trial against Foucquet and its possible outcome.²³¹ It was an instruction on how to see (*Anschauungsunterricht*) what

²²⁹ Ibid., 628. “This suffices to demonstrate that Man has no more knowledge of his own body than of his soul. We have shown Man to himself—and his reason to his reason, to see what it has to tell us. I have succeeded in showing, I think, how far reason is from understanding even itself.”

²³⁰ Jasinski, *La Fontaine et Le Premier Recueil Des “Fables,”* 359–365.

²³¹ Nicolas Foucquet (January 27, 1615 – March 23, 1680) was the Superintendent of Finances for Louis XIV. His extravagant spending on personal luxury, such as his château whose splendor would only later be rivaled by Versailles, led to his arrest. His three year trial was a major public spectacle due the king’s heavy involvement with the prosecution.

the new science could procure for reason's benefit: once again the sky could manifest itself unimpeded as the canvas for the great sign.

Theorists at that point had not yet suspected this comet of drawing a consistent path around the sun and thus of lacking any role in the course of history. As soon as 1682, Halley would summon evidence that this year's comet was identical with the one from 1607, 1531, and 1456 and returned along its path. In Halley's *Cometographia* of 1705, the appearance of the same comet in 1758 was predicted and its symbolic meaning destroyed along with every relevance to human fear. It was reason repeating its achievement of predicting a solar eclipse, an achievement initially connected to the name of Thales. Shortly after reason's optimism had taken its hardest blow from nature with the earthquake in Lisbon of 1755, the announced arrival of the comet in the sky emerged as the triumph of that same reason and took on the name "Halley's."

La Fontaine—known as the tree that fables grow on—could not yet know in 1668, when he published the first issue of his collection, that these discoveries would neutralize the sensitivity to signs from heaven. The "moral" of his astrologer fable was ahead of its time in striving to demystify the putative signs from Heaven. The success of this effort must not have met his expectations. At the arrival of the next comet, whose adherence to scientific law Halley demonstrated in 1682, it was evidently necessary to make a royal edict denying

right of residency in France to all persons who engaged in astrology and clairvoyant predictions. This was not just a matter of craft fairs or swap meets, as shown by the fact that even the statutes of the Academy of Sciences had to explicitly forbid their members from including astrology among their objects of inquiry.

La Fontaine's quatrain, which presents the fable laconically, reads like the explanation of an emblem only showing the result of an accident that occurred "one day:" an astrologer at the bottom of a well. It is a faceless and genderless "moral" that speaks to him like a banner hanging over the scene: "Poor dog, you cannot even see what's in front of your feet and you think of reading what is over your head?"²³² This plain story is not applied to the astrologer in the well and his trade; the contemporary charlatan, who had edged his way into the courts and academies, did not lend himself to comparison with a figure lacking realism. The target is the majority of people, those who think they can master their fate and yet still tumble down the well shaft of chance or of their foreordination.

²³² La Fontaine *Fables II* 13, Pléiade edition, 62:

Un astrologue un jour se laissa choir
Au fond d'un puits. On lui dit: 'Pauvre bête,
Tandis qu'à peine à tes pieds tu peux voir,
Penses-tu lire au-dessus de ta tête?'

My translation: "An astrologer took a fall to the bottom of a well. Someone told him: 'poor beast, while you can barely see to your feet you think you can read what is over your head?'"
Blumenberg translates "poor beast" into a German idiom, "poor dog" (*armer Hund*).

Providence did not inscribe the future on heaven's outer surface. That would have offered no use to humanity since inevitable evil was still inevitable and knowing about it in advance would even ruin the anticipation of future pleasures. To comprehend heaven's disinterest in human life, one does not have to be a Copernican or even to speak like one:

The firmament goes silent, the stars make their paths,
The sun lights all of our days.

Because the heavenly movements are homogenous, they are too monotonous and dull to be able to foretellingly depict earthly life in its color and complexity:

Why responds in ever varied ways to the process
so steady by which the universe moves?

As a reader of La Fontaine's fables in verse, Voltaire expressed dissatisfaction with the astrologer bit. He takes umbrage at the curses addressed to the tumbler. Voltaire evidently no longer takes the attack on astrology seriously. Past the fallen astrologer of the previous, still unenlightened century, he sees the astronomer of ancient tradition reappear. As evidence that astronomers can "read" what is over their heads very well, he names Copernicus, Galileo, Cassini, and Halley; the last of whom just because Voltaire saw in Halley the one who had depotentiated the relevance of La Fontaine's fable. The best astronomer, according to Voltaire, could tumble once and still not be a poor dog. Astrology was a most ridiculous quackery indeed, but not because it had made heaven its

object, but because it believes or wants to spread the belief that one can read in the sky what is not written there.²³³

Did Voltaire remember, when he wrote this addendum to his dictionary article on the fable, that he himself had been in the situation of the fallen star observer in the years of his friendship with Emilie Du Châtelet? Indeed, he discovered in her an observer whose enlightenedness was more refined than the ancient astronomer's. Their witness recorded the night scene in his own memoirs. Voltaire's coach broke apart underway to Cirey, Emilie's estate, in 1747, and the travelers were flung outside. While Voltaire's secretary, Sébastien Longchamp, was going to the next town for help, he saw a constellation whose ridiculous lack of realism was matched by its exquisite disregard for earthly realities: Voltaire and his friend were sitting side by side on the coach cushions that they had taken out and laid in the snow and observed the beauties of the starry sky. He knows, writes the memoirist, that astronomy was always one of the preferred interests of both philosophers; but even now they are enraptured by the greatness of the spectacle over their heads and around them, shivering with cold in spite of their furs and still conversing about nature and the stars' courses, about the orderliness

²³³ 1771 addendum to "Fables" article in Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, 317. "[La Fontaine's] astrologer, again, who falling into a ditch while gazing at the stars, was asked: 'Poor wretch, do you expect to be able to read things so much above you!' Yet Copernicus, Galileo, Cassini, and Halley, have read the heavens very well: and the best astronomer that ever existed might fall into a ditch without being a poor wretch. Judicial astrology is indeed a very ridiculous charlatanism, but the ridiculousness does not consist in regarding the heavens: it consists in believing, or in making believe, that you read what is not there."

of the countless globes in space's expanse. Compassionately, the secretary adds that they were only missing their instrumental fortifications for their full happiness: "They were only missing telescopes to be completely happy. With their spirit lost in the depth of the skies, they did not even notice their sad position on earth, or rather on the snow and surrounded by ice."²³⁴ Only their much needed rescue interrupts the cosmic contemplation and conversation over worlds. The connection between theory and happiness (*theoria* and *eudaimonia*) has become anachronistic and no longer has its ancient self-evidence; this lost connection is recognizable in the strangeness of its conditions here: a mishap must precede happiness in order to induce it.

Voltaire must have thought of the scene of our anecdote a quarter-century later when, taking offense at La Fontaine's fable, he reclaimed the fallen astrologer as a legitimate sky watcher and sheltered him from his onlooker's barbaric curses. He had experienced firsthand what an enlightened century he lived in when not even a servant had found cause for laughter in people's enthusiasm for the starry sky. Theoretical reason was established, and so much so that its self-styling as humanity's rightful interface with the world was effective even in the most eccentric (*ausgefallensten*) situation in the world.

²³⁴ Longchamp et al., *Mémoires Sur Voltaire, et Sur Ses Ouvrages*, 166–169. "Il ne leur manquait que es telescopes pour être parfaitement heureux. Leur esprit égaré dans la profondeur des cieux, ils ne s'apercevaient plus de leur triste position sur la terre, ou plutôt sur la neige et au milieu des glaçons." [Blumenberg's note: See also: Strauss, *Voltaire*, 78.]

If we endorse the strong probability that humanistic Copernicus knew the fable of his astronomical colleague's tumble down the well, then we would hardly leave that probability's horizon if we accepted that he conceived the foundational thought of his system reform as dependent on its "moral." As I have tried to show already, he could have formulated it thus: the furthest away (*Fernstliegende*) can only be recognized in what is at hand (*Nächstliegende*); the truth about the sky can only be attained through a true theory of the earth and its movements.

Everybody knows nowadays that this was not modern theory's last word about the universe. Next, Galileo's telescope opens up an epoch of reflexive optics that see in the heavenly bodies what must also be valid for the earthly body. Modern theory will only exceed these triumphs through spectral analysis when it stumbles upon the discovery of nuclear fusion while explaining the sun's energy production.

This surprising step away from the principle grasped by Copernicus is not its dismissal: the sky becomes the mere detour for understanding what is no longer or not yet occurring on earth. To read something like an *epimythium*²³⁵ into Copernicus' theoretical fable in this way, or to append one, is obviously just a metaphorical construction meant to illustrate how the tendency of the upcoming

²³⁵ The moral appended to Aesop's fables. See note 21.

epoch is latent in the simplest remark made during the theoretical action of one of its protagonists.

This excursus on Copernicus' underlying principle does not amount to a history of influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) as normally conceived; this is clear when we observe how a decisive opponent to Copernicus such as Francis Bacon could not resist applying the principle whose consequences he rejected in order to become a kind of latent Copernican in spite of himself. The way that Bacon expresses his irritation at the configuration forged in the Thales anecdote reveals more about him than does any doxographical evidence from the vague collection of his supposedly empirical science.

In the autumn of 1624, while Bacon was recuperating from a serious illness, he dictated a set of apothegms from memory; among them, a variant on the Thales anecdote. It emphasizes the polysemy of Thales' doxographically eminent relation to water: he did not need to fall into the water to observe the stars; looking at the water and seeing their reflection would have sufficed. Doing what he did, however, he would not have been able to learn anything about water since he only looked upward at the stars.²³⁶ The impression is barely avoidable that Bacon alters and extends the anecdote through associations that evoke the

²³⁶ Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, Vol. I 111. *A Collection of Apophthegms, New and Old* Apophthegm §57: "Thales, as he looked upon the stars, fell into the water; whereupon, it was after said "That if he had looked in the water he might have seen the stars, but looking up to the stars he could not see the water."

protophilosopher's double character: both as the star gazer who dismisses the mediated optics of reflection and as the inventor of the first cosmogony from one unifying principle, that of water, the confirmation of which he experiences in a crude way, by falling into it.

As a jurist Bacon was acquainted with practice to citing case history. The purpose of his own collection of sayings was not to produce rhetorical ornaments but rather "precedent cases" for an everyday citizen's practice (*ad res gerendas etiam et usus civiles*).²³⁷ He saw before him a canon of human situations conditioned by the return of standard cases (*occasiones autem redeunt in orbem*). A selection of preserved solutions can orient us to whatever returns, and the power of human nature reveals a resemblance between whatever returns and what Bacon called nature's "common course" (*cursus communis*); in keeping with his empirical theory of nature as a whole, Bacon treated nature as if it observed customary legal procedure. The astronomer's plummet into the water illustrates both the punishment for metaphysical speculation and a practical rule for life: better to prefer the indirect path when the direct one comes along with risks. Since it comes down to this harsh bit of wisdom, the figurative situation is neglected; wisdom is not expressed within the scene itself through the eye-witness or the

²³⁷ English: *Ibid.*, 192. Latin: Bacon, *Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, 517.

laughing maid, but rather by clever people who ponder the event in retrospect with an interest in its general applicability.

Unfamiliarity with the anecdote is not the issue here; Bacon knew it well and for a long time. Already twenty years before his collection of sayings, he used it in the piece *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* to call for the study of mechanical arts (*artes mechanicae*). As applied knowledge of nature, the mechanical arts represent the realism of the claim that knowledge is power (*nosse = posse*) against a theory of objects, which left no possibility of mastering them and which could not contribute to humanity's hope of reacquiring Paradise as an earthly one. It seems to Bacon that it would injure the pride of learned people if they were expected to take on the investigation of mechanical phenomena, unless the investigation were also simultaneously about secret arts or irrelevant, hairsplitting objects which could win their investigator scholarly honor. The best and surest instruction cannot be found among the great paragons (*grandia exempla*). Precisely that fact is given expression in the widely known fable—and not unemphatically (*non insulse*). Bacon does not name the philosopher who falls in the water. But in place of it, he claims to impart his own opinion what he later lets someone else say to the sufferer: the sky watcher would have been able to observe the stars in the water reflection if he had directed his gaze downward,

whereas he could not see the water while directly viewing the stars in the sky.²³⁸

This is supposed to mean: cosmogony from water could not be corroborated in the place where the philosopher had gazed so self-forgottenly.

What unites the generation that founded modernity, that of Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes, more than any dogmatic characteristic, is their reevaluation of liberal and mechanical arts. They did not reevaluate in the same direction by any means: Galileo and Descartes discover a thesaurus for still unacknowledged pure theory in known and established technical powers, particularly the defensive use of ballistics and arsenals; Bacon pushes in the other direction, for the deconstruction of theoretical “purity” in favor of the norm of its applicability, of equating the most useful (*utilissimum*) with the most true (*verissimum*).

Unmistakably, this is a form of anthropocentrism once again: if paradise consists in laying truths bare for humanity, then whatever is supposed to help humankind return there must have the highest truth status. The Thales anecdote need not be taken as a figure for pure theory; it does, however, illustrate the contempt for instruments devised through mechanical engineering in favor of an

²³⁸ Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, Vol. I 188. *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human II*. “But the truth is, they [ancient sages] be no the highest instances that give the securest information; as may be well expressed in the tale so common of the philosopher, that while he gazed upwards to the stars fell into the water; for if he had looked down he might have seen the stars in the water, but looking aloft he could not see the water in the stars.”

unarmed theoretical orientation that brings the image of the fallen Greek up to date. Astronomy stands for *artes liberales* and their distance from their objects.

Let us not forget that the programmatic thinker out to recuperate paradise has in mind that paradise was a garden and not a world—even if he did not yet know that there was no starry sky over this garden, because the light of the newly constructed fixed stars did not have enough time to reach the earth. Astronomy transcends the provenance of magic—to which Bacon still largely belongs—even of magic transformed into the scientific. The stars are the negative of the unity of science and power that hovers before Bacon: “for man cannot act upon, change, or transform the heavenly bodies.”²³⁹ Reflection has a magical trait in this context: *making* the far off (*Fernliegende*) into the near at hand (*Naheliegende*) instead of playing the one against the other as in the traditional anecdote. Bacon’s own reading of the Thales scene is that small, close things assist more in recognizing large, distant ones than the other way around. He believed that he could appeal to Aristotle, who recommended leaving one’s family in order to recognize the essence of the state; he could just as well have thought of Plato’s *Republic*, which recommends fathoming the concept of justice by observing it magnified in the polis.

²³⁹ Ibid., Vol. III 373. *New Organon II* “neque enim ceditur homini operari in caelestia, aut ea immutare aut transformare”

When Bacon extols the compass as one of the great inventions—the one that had allowed him to evoke the image of transcending the *Plus Ultra*, of sailing beyond the Pillars of Hercules, for the new science —the magnetic instrument also comes to illustrate indirect methods of conducting theory.²⁴⁰ Had someone spoken before the invention of the compass about a device with which we can precisely determine the poles of heaven, without looking up at it itself, then people would have thought of wacky astronomical instruments and speculated long about how such a thing could be invented since they would consider it impossible for its movement to coincide with the heavenly movements although it does not come from heaven, but is just an earthly substance of stone and metal.²⁴¹ On the one hand, only mechanics can set theory in motion: as the example illustrates, unfree skill (*unfreie Fertigkeit*) brings liberal arts (*freie Kunst*) to life; on the other hand, the paths opened up by technical trickery only lead to more and

²⁴⁰ Ibid., Vol. I 192. Bacon conflates travel and progress—taking literally the image of transcending the ancient boundary of the world, the Straits of Gibraltar, where the ancients named the columnar cliffs the Pillars of Hercules, which supposedly marked the end of the world: “nothing further beyond” (*non plus ultra*). Bacon quasi-allegorically interpreted recent expeditions by Europeans around the globe as evidence that the modern age was ready for a new relationship to the world: “But to circle the earth, as the heavenly bodies do, was not done nor enterprised till these latter times; and therefore these times may justly bear in their word, not only ‘further beyond,’ (*plus ultra*) in precedence of the ancient ‘nothing beyond’ (*non ultra*)... but likewise ‘imitation of heaven’ (*imitabile cœlum*).”

²⁴¹ Ibid., Vol. III 358. *New Organon I* §85

more technical tricks. Dominating nature amounts to a kind of obedience but no longer one that stems from bowing to the higher power.²⁴²

Bacon's paradox could read: the sky observer fell in the fable because he failed to realize that he was already fallen. Bacon is pervaded with the loss of paradise and only therefore interested in human possibilities: paradise could become ours again because it was already ours once. In the interim between exile from paradise and its recuperation pure theory has no place; theory is tied to the demand for happiness, whose conditions are unsatisfied—if they are satisfiable at all. In Bacon's language, the philosopher lost in the image of the sky would typify whoever does not want to admit that paradise is lost; he makes it his task to recuperate theory's leisure, a lost, but nevertheless recoverable constitution of humanity. Bacon describes our lost paradise as a region where man still worked, but the work had not been conducted out of necessity: "man was placed in the garden to work therein."²⁴³ The world as garden is a site of culture, not of wild growth. Not even in paradise is nature completely willing to comply on its own; after our exile more so than before it, nature offers itself for the taking since it is now in the clutches of our necessary way of proceeding with it: "the passages and variations of nature cannot appear so fully in the liberty of nature, as in the trials

²⁴² Probably *Ibid.*, Vol. III 370. *New Organon I* §129. "Now, the empire of man over things is founded on the arts and sciences alone, for nature is only to be commanded by obeying her."

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I 175. *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning II*. This is the only passage that Blumenberg quotes in English. Blumenberg cites Bacon's original Latin for all other quotations.

and vexations of art.”²⁴⁴ Between science and its objects there exists a tense situation, in which glances towards the sky always bear the risk made known by the Milesian astronomer.

The ancient concept of theory stands within a horizon of optical metaphors, approximately in the range spanning between the uninvolved spectator and the self-forgotten observer. Bacon favors an acoustic orientation for his concept of knowledge, across the variety of tolerances between impartial listening and stressful, forced interrogation. Science comes to resemble the archiving of whatever nature—willingly or unwillingly—gave as protocol.²⁴⁵ Even when Bacon seeks to win *The Wisdom of the Ancients* for his side in 1609 through the method of mythological allegoresis, that wisdom is hidden fortuitously in names and stories that have something to do with nature becoming audible. As if by accident, a relationship to that strange element in the transmission of the Thales anecdote emerges: the moment when Peter Damian named the Thracian maid “Iambe.”²⁴⁶ There she was brought into connection with the origin of iambic meter. Iambe, according to Bacon, is a daughter of Pan,

²⁴⁴ Ibid., Vol. I 189. On this passage, see: Wolff, *Francis Bacon Und Seine Quellen*, 52:1 26; I 204f.

²⁴⁵ Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit Der Welt*, 86–91.

²⁴⁶ See chapter five, page 92.

whom the only mortal god conceived with his spouse Echo. She is supposed to have pleased visitors with her laughter-inducing banter.²⁴⁷

The hinge that would link the daughter of Pan and Echo to the Thracian woman in the Platonic anecdote: the incidence of laughter. A notable reference to the mythic background of the astronomer's plummet can be construed: if the laughing maid is supposed to be the daughter of the god Pan in an otherwise lost transmission, the conflict would be between the sky observer's world and her world of pre-Olympian deities, of the earth, of caves, of the Arcadian landscape and of the heaviness still surreptitiously present in a heaven forsaken by earth. This link invites association between Plato's mention of the Thracian woman and the fable by a Phrygian or Thracian Aesop. In Bacon's allegoresis, he identifies Pan's daughter with philosophy, whose chattiness produces endless, fruitless theories about the essence of things.²⁴⁸

Daughter Iambe only signifies what she does for Bacon in contrast to mother Echo; in Echo's name he construes the idea of an empirical philosophy that makes itself the echo of nature. Pan already stands for the universe according to his name, which leaves nothing further beyond itself that could be linked with

²⁴⁷ Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, Vol. I 290. *The Wisdom of the Ancients VI*. "...a little girl called Iambe, that with many pretty tales was wont to make strangers merry."

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. I 292. "... for by her are represented those vain and idle paradoxes concerning the nature of things which have been frequent in all ages, and have filled the world with novelties; fruitless, if you respect the master; changelings, if you respect the kind; sometimes creating pleasure, sometimes tediousness, with their overmuch prattling."

him. Only the echo provoked by the whole turns into its equal: Echo still lasts solely to be conjugally united with the world, in which she represents philosophy. Her truth is the most faithful copy of the voices of the universe itself: “for that alone is true philosophy which doth faithfully render the very words (*ipsius voces*) of the world.”²⁴⁹ Had Thales the sky observer lost his right to theorize because he walked around as if in an unlost paradise, then there would be nothing to laugh at in Thracian woman’s chatter about him—not if she had been called Iambe. True philosophy, the wisdom of the ancients (*sapientia veterum*), was already lost by the time Thales turned away from the world too full of gods, instead of depleting and then renewing the wisdom hidden in mythical names and events. The original suspicion of all Romantics—the end of truth entered with the beginning of history—runs throughout modernity since modernity claims to know how to go about beginning anew.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

VIII. As adopted by historical critique²⁵⁰

At this point, whoever still considers the wisdom of the ancients attainable, even recoverable, must be sure that he is working with well-transmitted sources. This condition, under the name of “criticism,” will definitively separate the early Enlightenment—even before the end of the century that Bacon introduced—from the assurance about historical materials during the Renaissance. Criticism will relinquish the possibility of wisdoms hidden within historical transmission by developing suspicion about “history’s lies.” History becomes whatever makes it through criticism.

Astonishingly, the Thales anecdote passes this test. In the article “Thales” from Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* of 1697, it claims the rank of approved historical fact. Even the typesetting of this most consequential dictionary of historical criticism showed how little remained leftover when the full ledger of methods had been applied: below the thin, often only two-line entries of ascertained facts hung the forceful, much-admired critical apparatus. The version that Diogenes Laertius had given of the anecdote of the fallen astronomer stood clearly in the best stead according to Bayle’s penetrating gaze:

²⁵⁰ The German word “Kritik” means both “criticism” and “critique.” For later philosophical uses of the term, see note 12 in chapter twelve.

“an old woman bantered him (*se moqua*) very merrily, for having gone abroad with her (*étant de son logis*) to look at the stars, and falling into a ditch.”²⁵¹

In the early stage of historical criticism represented here, it is characteristic that the optically observable event, the raw fact of the philosopher’s accident, gains entry into the catalogue of the reliable, but not the maid’s comment. The unity of the anecdote is torn apart. The accompanying adage, which does not seem to be an “event” in the physical-phenomenal sense, is suspected of contamination because its wording is not transmitted consistently, and the disparities between the versions are not sufficiently explained by the diversity of positions held by observers and reporters.

Historical transmission and fictitious amplification interpenetrate by a mechanism recognizable when we see imaginative elements enter precisely where a hole had remained in the authentic material, and the result meets the later critic’s criteria for fabrication. The Milesian incident requires a witness to mark the disparity between theory and the lifeworld because no criticism would believe that Thales himself spread the story of his misfortune. But the witness does not need to give meaningful statements about himself or herself. Bayle’s finding thus

²⁵¹ Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Vol. IV 2864.

includes leaving it open as to whether the philosopher's accompaniment actually spoke out at all what she thought: "This thought has been turn'd several ways."²⁵²

Bayle refers next to Alciato's *Emblemata* (Augsburg, 1531) where he finds an epigram by Thomas More against a "horned" astrologer (*contre un Astrologue cocu*). This epigram takes up Chaucer's tradition again insofar as it thrusts the anecdote into the association between astrology and eroticism totally foreign to antiquity. This version could be called the oriental one, since already in 1258 in the *Gulistan* of Sa'di had introduced the astrologer, who finds his wife with a stranger when he returns from a trip; the surprise has professional ramifications for the astrologer because the future is not supposed to have kept anything unknown from him. Bayle is discernably glad to mock the humanist Alciato, who is totally unsuspecting to criticism and who depicts astrologers seeing entire erotic constellations play out in front of them among their mythical star-images in the sky without ever knowing how to interpret and apply the signs in the sky to their own marital situation. The effect of historical criticism and its peeling away towards the hard kernel of facts is to free up the soft surroundings of history's variability for aesthetic demands.

The erotic moment is not just a poetic touch. It represents the "realism" of what gets in the way (*im Wege Liegenden*) on earth, and it completes the

²⁵² Ibid. A more accurate translation: "People have twisted that woman's thought in many ways."

“reoccupation” of the position occupied by various antitheses to obscurity (*Fernliegenden*) within the whole tradition of the anecdote.²⁵³ The sky is not just distant and unattainable to the grip of human hands, it also stands there indifferently and in contemptuous unmovedness over the fates of human beings, which matters to humanity most of all (*am nächsten gehen*). Thomas More’s epigram, which Bayle quotes with the appreciation of someone who had to fight against the fear of comets, portrays the sky as keeping silent about the problems so obvious to the astrologer, for whom it is otherwise so informative: “Hence when the wife receives her lover,/ the stars, so taken up, can ne’er discover.”²⁵⁴

Precisely because Bayle was passionately committed to the historical destruction of this side of the tradition—whose subtraction required him to excavate the rest of the history in order to write it off as unacceptable—he could have produced a kind of reception history of every mocking statement that had ever been put in the maid’s mouth with regard to the philosopher’s tumble. But for him, it is neither about establishing a context nor about the epochal significance of such products of free variation, but it is rather about their

²⁵³ Here the concept of “reoccupation” returns after Tertullian had mystical knowledge reoccupy the position of the maid’s common sense in chapter five. These “positions” are questions, according to *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. In the early Enlightenment, historical critique reoccupied the same question as the Church Fathers did from the pagans: what is the antithesis to irrelevance? What matters? Bayle’s answer has the force of a reoccupation in that he asserts the universality of his answer—not even as truth, but as *the* meaning of this anecdote.

²⁵⁴ Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Vol. IV 2864. “Hinc factum, Astrologe, est, tua cum capit uxor amantes, / Sidera significant ut nihil inde tibi.”

fungibility as an indicator for their tradition's lacking reliability. Reading this as material for a reception history—which manifests the potential of an inaccessible moment of inaugural invention and updates that invention for ever new applications—requires a precondition of appropriate distance from the historical “criticism” of the early Enlightenment.

Once we perceive the anecdote's deformities in light of the materials Bayle cites, the counterposition to astronomy and astrology stands out as crude. Bayle recognizably favors one formula for the maid's statement, and it is useful for him to look back over the available body of texts in order to give a profile of this preference. Plato's version had the maid charge the philosopher with desiring knowledge of the things in the sky while what lay at his feet remained concealed to him. No association gets made between the success of astronomical efforts and any struggle for the earthly; there does not seem to be any skepticism about the *possibility* of higher knowledge. Problematic is that version's demand for exclusiveness. For Diogenes Laertius, the sequence of both perspectives is reversed. In the context of a skeptical turn, one perspective's failure becomes an argument for the other's illusory supposition: “O Thales, when you cannot discern what is at your feet, do you think to make discoveries in the Heavens?”²⁵⁵ An *argumentum a fortiori*: earthly clumsiness is the indicator of celestial

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

hopelessness. The only one who formulated or reported the anecdote neutrally in this regard is Stobaeus in his *Florilegium*; he only has the Thracian maid say that the tumble served the man right who watched the sky while he overlooked what lay at his feet.

Here it is characteristic that Bayle selects Laertius' statement by the "woman of ripe age" (what he calls a "*bonne femme*") out of possible versions on offer. It suits his purpose to befriend, even to intensify, the explicitly skeptical formulation, so that the ability to recognize stellar objects appears completely discredited by the accusation of inability to perceive what is close at hand (*Nächstliegende*): "How can you know what passes in the heavens, said that good old woman to him, since you do not see what is just at your feet?"²⁵⁶

A connection between theory's archetype and theoretical curiosity's guiding concept first gets established in one of the early encyclopedias by Johann Heinrich Alsted in 1620, in that it marks the Thales anecdote with the keyword *curiositas*. From a purely formal point of view, the encyclopedist's attention turns to making a comparison between problems of theory's origins in distant times (*Zeitenferne*) and the problems of justifying the rise of scientific curiosity in recent times (*Zeitennähe*). The bounty of aphorisms presents the reader with the medieval repertoire as well as the ancient texts that were familiar again since the

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Renaissance. The finding—unexpected for the encyclopedia’s contemporary user—is that divine will can account for an object’s natural inaccessibility in the world, and this finding demands that one quit submitting it to inquiry; the manifest clarity of circumstances warns against ignoring them in our haste. The world is no longer just the order of its members’ ranks and values, but also the guide to accessibilities and clarities for theoretical observation: “God wanted some things to be hidden; however, He made other things manifest, and those are not to be neglected.”²⁵⁷

This maxim, delivered the beginning of the seventeenth century, makes the Thales anecdote sound thoroughly medieval. The text is repeated in Bruson’s *Facitiae et exempla* and resembles Stobaeus’ terseness. Only one hint of deformation is recognizable. The maid also indicts the sky observer here and says that it serves him right, but not for making the wrong choice of object in the face of other possibilities to consider, but for not noticing the state of things in front of his feet *before* he starting observing the sky. In this *non prius* lies the charge that he made a mistake that would best be called methodological; for a philosopher, a considerable shortcoming, but no longer a metaphysical offense.²⁵⁸ What the

²⁵⁷ Alsted, *Cursus philosophici encyclopaediae*. “quae Deus occulta esse voluit; quae autem manifesta fecit, non sunt negligenda.”

²⁵⁸ *non prius*. “Not first.” The phrase, borrowed from Aristotle’s *On Truth*, serves as shorthand for the so-called Peripatetic Axiom, that nothing is present to intellect that was not first present to the senses. Alsted’s interpretation of the Thales anecdote is unusual for prioritizing sense experience over intellection.

maid utters is burgeoning moralism: good advice rather than scornful *Schadenfreude* across the abyss of misunderstanding. There is no trace left of the gap between pantheons; the one God stands for them all since He made His Creation to express what He allows and what He forbids.

Philosophy's early historiography loves anecdotes. One reason why is that it counts all reports that withstand historical criticism as equally valid: statements and stories, biographical and doxographical accounts alike. Inevitably, the Thales anecdote appears within the work of the first and most influential historian of philosophy of the whole eighteenth century, whom even the philosophy-disparaging Goethe claims to have read diligently and on whom all knowledge of the history of philosophy depends into the following century—mostly without acknowledging him: the great “second hand,” Jakob Brucker.

The way Brucker sees Thales the protophilosopher fits the context of his more general question of how the Greeks came to acquire the beginning of philosophy. As befits the type of his work, which seeks to give short and formulaic answers, he dubs the quality of that philosophical beginning: “pretty slight, and moreover very dark.”²⁵⁹ This lowly qualification is the price for the fact that the otherwise so gladly perceived Greek dependence on the Orient, especially on Egypt, is devalued in favor of the stand alone Hellenistic

²⁵⁹ Brucker, *Kurze Fragen aus der Philosophischen Historie*, Vol. I 350, 354.

achievement. For Brucker, derivations cannot be said to reveal much because he sees a totally foreign principle of thought at work in the philosophy of the barbarians: that of received philosophy (*philosophia traditiva*). This consists of a trusted and erudite relaying of fixed answers to constant questions. By scrutinizing this dogmatic type of thought, the Greeks were able to set up their new beginning. Philosophy's Oriental inheritance need not be denied, but its effect has a different specificity than putting Greek philosophy's origin in the context of a tradition: the Oriental tradition became a spur to original thought, something to object to, rather than something to adhere to.

Brucker diverges from one of the Greeks' most persisting self-interpretations regarding the beginning of philosophy, that it originated in the astonishment at the cosmos and from the discovery of hidden allegorical meanings in myth. Instead, Brucker evokes "the curiosity of the Greek nation" and highlights the way that political circumstances supported this trait. In a "form of government in which everyone may think, say, and teach what he wanted," genuine curiosity's impulse towards science flourishes.²⁶⁰ In the "Addenda and Improvements" that accompany the second volume of *Short Questions from Philosophical History*, the theoretical-political complex is clarified: with the beginning of original thought and of theory formation that consisted not only of

²⁶⁰ Ibid., Vol. I 221 f.

claims, but of justified connections between sentences, the investigation of truth among the Greeks came “down from the priests and eventually landed among *politicos*.”²⁶¹

Brucker does not discernably fall in line with the traditional report that Thales secured freedom for the city of Miletus by offering political advice, and that, when this freedom fell to the Persians, philosophy too was over. Philosophers saw the theoretical orientation as contingent on leisure; they needed no other public conditions than the negative one of freedom from the compulsion of needs. They did not grasp the need for a further condition, that of satisfying their desire to know in the context of political matters which would provide everyone the protection they needed to question everything. No one had thought of a way to guarantee science its freedom. The figure of Thales revealed the energy of the authentic beginning rather than the success of his astronomical and mathematical inventions; these were “pretty poor and meager by the standards of our time.” Brucker’s repeated emphasis on philosophy’s minimal initial value goes together with his decoupling its origin from all predecessors and influences; wherever something is supposed to have emerged by itself, it can only come to light in the smallest early successes. Only when an inheritance is being claimed does the wealth arise in the beginning.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II 880–883.

The maid's lack of understanding refers to the originary difficulty of something strange coming to light, according to Brucker. She is the public for the as yet unforeseen about Thales: "he lusted so much for study that he not only gave the management of his property to his sister-son, but also dug in so deep that he fell into a ditch once while ardently watching the sky, and got laughed at for it by his maid." In a comment, completely in Bayle's style, the exaggeration gets turned back into tragedy so that the first adventure of newly founded theory turns deadly. That Thales "tumbled down from a height and broke his neck is openly a fable." This disqualification follows from the source's inferiority relative to all others—though no version allows the philosopher to speak a word after he tumbles. But how do such "fables" come about on the other side of fable? We learn through Brucker's judgment that Anaximenes' letter to Pythagoras, retained by Diogenes Laertius, transmits just such an embellishment of the anecdote's ending. What goes too far and ends up contradicting an otherwise reliable transmission "is only drafted *exercitii gratia* by sophists." The sophists, who fabricated documents with beautiful twists on the facts for the sake of practice, play a large role in purifying the tradition through "historical criticism." They create leeway around the core material of the historical and make the latter provable through the recklessness of their inventions.

Brucker makes no use of the possibility of finding confirmation, in the apocryphal correspondence presented by Diogenes, for his thesis that philosophy

requires the precondition of freedom. Negligence towards the standards of criticism could no longer be afforded; that is so even if Brucker means to demonstrate how the life and death of philosophy's founder seemed to his pupil Anaximenes to have occurred in a circumstance of politically secured leisure because he could only regard the past from the altered situation that emerged when the threat of the Persian king hovered over Miletus. That stands in contrast with the situation at theory's starting point with Thales. Faced with the choice between death and servitude, no one could dream of a life devoted to researching the sky. And yet it was through applied astronomy that Thales foresaw the right path among the political options.

To show an example of how formulae that Brucker forged get brought into circulation by "multiplicators," I exhibit Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Universal Lexicon of All Sciences and Arts*, which presented itself as "complete" and appeared in a total of 68 volumes with 67,000 pages between 1732 and 1754 which adopted Brucker's passage—about Thales' dogged study and the accident that accompanied it—almost verbatim in the article "Thales" from volume 43 in 1745. Recognizably, the anecdote is there to cleanse the autodidactic sky observer of the suspicion that he primarily took his knowledge from Egypt: "And he may have build his erudition upon such first foundations, even though the destitute quality of Egyptian knowledge may leads one to believe that he had his own

thought and diligence to thank most.”²⁶² That is also why he takes the account seriously that was transmitted by Plutarch, Pliny, and Diogenes Laertius. In that account Thales showed the Egyptians how to measure the height of a pyramid and wins their great admiration. That can only be taken relative to the low estimation of Egyptian measuring abilities; Thales’ own inventions in this field are seen as “poor and meager,” in Brucker’s words, due to their primordially.²⁶³ But just making that argument required the self-oblivious objection that brings into view the event in the anecdote. To sharpen the case, Brucker is almost quoted verbatim; the only thing left out is the sophists’ forgeries. Instead, Zedler speaks up about the anecdote of Thales the astrologer’s fortune with oil tree speculation: that the philosopher “made an uncommonly large capital gain is a fiction that is told one way by some and other ways by others.”

For this critique, Zedler’s *Universal Lexicon* refers to another standard work, Thomas Stanley’s *History of Philosophy*, which had first appeared in 1655 in London and then in 1701 in the third edition. The protophilosopher’s financial success roused the acumen of the first English historian of philosophy to a Puritanical defense, although he too considered it to be invented for the sake of

²⁶² Zedler, Ludewig, and Ludovici, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, Vol. 43 372–382.

²⁶³ Ibid., Vol. 43 374. “He was so set on his studies that he not only left the management of his property to his sister’s son, but also plunged himself in so deeply that he once fell into a ditch during the assiduous observation of the sky, and was laughed at by his maid, who put the accusation to him that he wanted to know what was in the sky and yet could not see what lay before his feet. That he tumbled down from a height and broke his neck... is obviously a fable.”

vindicating philosophy against the accusation that it lacked realism. The astrologer's nocturnal tumble had not awakened him to reflect on the contradictory transmissions; he privileges Diogenes Laertius' version, but adds without qualification that the old woman was a Thracian—although her inventor, Plato, had imagined her as still young. After reconstructing the maid's age and origin, Stanley gives the event a turn towards cruelty of his own invention. The old lady conducted the philosopher where he would have to fall in the ditch: “wherein she purposely led him.”²⁶⁴ There we see the thought introduced by Montaigne—that the maid actively participated in the philosopher's stumbling—transposed into a crudified form: at play was cruel duplicity and not just rousing him to pay attention. Wherefore does the old lady do it? Stanley gives us a clue: Thales had drawn the disdain of some people by practicing astrology (“became obnoxious to the Censure of some Persons”). We can see her resemblance to the woman in Montaigne's version: the dissembling woman had a mission to carry out, either to wreak revenge or to issue a harsh warning.

For modern historical criticism, the anecdote seemed generally less malleable than the doctrinaire element whose changes they attributed to readers' misunderstanding and to distorting or harmonizing disciplinary practices rather than to the narratable occurrence, the life event. But then besides Stanley, Bayle,

²⁶⁴ Stanley, *The History of Philosophy*, Part I chap. VIII Sect. 5. “Thales, said she, do you think, when you cannot see these things that are at your feet, that you can understand the Heavens?”

and Brucker, there emerged a specialist in the critical treatment of the philosopher anecdote. Christoph August Heumann demonstrated his mastery in this area with the treatise *On Diogenes the Cynic's Keg*, in which he made the—admittedly still long disputed—case in 1716 that whichever texts accuse the protocynic “with the greatest seriousness...” of this more comfortable form of living are “ridiculous and untrue.”²⁶⁵ One is eager to see how the Thales anecdote will fare at such a tribunal.

Heumann comes to Thales' plummet in an eminent place: in the introduction to his *Historica Philosophica* of 1715. In short, the history of philosophy instructs about the method of philosophy. Above all, its history encapsulates the guidelines for avoiding mistakes: “Wherever we find that philosophers before us crashed, we see where and how we have to pay attention.”²⁶⁶ And there he draws an analogy with the turn Socrates executed against the Ionian philosophers' wrongheaded disregard for morality: that the Cartesians went on the same wrong path of the Ionian confinement to nature “and thus simply stand in need of a Socratic correction.” It is just this correction that is already seen, without any critical reflection, preformed in the Thracian maid's behavior towards the first philosopher: “for even Thales' maid can teach us that the following applies to those who let the field of philosophical practice lie

²⁶⁵ Qtd. in: Niehues-Pröbsting, “Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus,” 218f. Note 12.

²⁶⁶ Heumann, *Acta philosophorum*, Vol. I 29f, Einleitung I 14.

untitled: they are senseless with reason: they act comprehending, while they comprehend nothing.”

The anecdote is taken for so familiar that no introduction to its scene is deemed necessary. Nevertheless, Heumann has Thales’ predicament in mind, when he transitions immediately to discussing contemporary philosophy’s lack of a method “for drawing the truth from out of Democritus’ well.” The association connects the two accounts where something fell in a well philosophically: for Thales, the philosopher himself; for Democritus, “just” the truth.²⁶⁷ The Thracian maid became symbolic for a constantly returning problem of philosophy: not dissipating into theory self-forgottenly, not using reason to produce nonsense. The maid is now a philosophical figure herself, meant as a complaint against forgotten wisdom²⁶⁸ and morality. A century after Descartes, the Thracian maid is against his consequences, against the all-pervasive new interest in nature—she has even become Socratic.

We can already see from here that Heumann has decided on the historical reliability of the anecdote about the philosopher’s tumble and would not

²⁶⁷ Democritus claims that truth is not in front of our eyes, but at the bottom of a well in a less dramatic anecdote than Thales’. Blumenberg discusses the Patristic reception of the Democritus anecdote in Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 34.

²⁶⁸ The word for wisdom here, *Weltweisheit*, was the seventeenth-century German word for philosophy. See especially Christian Wolff’s use of the term in widely-read treatises that connected philosophical logic with mathematics and ethics. Composed of the German roots meaning “world wisdom,” the etymology presents a less esoteric concept than *Philosophie*, since the roots are German, not Greek, and they suggest that this form of philosophy is primarily ethical, that is, knowledge to apply for existence among others in the world.

contradict Bayle on this. That becomes even clearer when we consider the two Thales anecdotes, that of the well-tumble and that of the speculation-win, in a reversed relationship. At the site of its original source in Aristotle, Thales' prescience about the olive trees' fertility is the exact antithesis to the well-tumble: the evidence of concrete service to life in whatever had been accomplished by founding philosophy and could go on being accomplished. The errant nocturnal wanderer's misfortune comes across as the painful fee for proving himself a realist to the citizens of the polis by day. Moreover, it was pretty insignificant which theoretical instrument Thales had used, and it was pretty obvious that everyone would assume the prediction was a piece of astrology. In the meantime, however, Thales' prediction came under the most scandalous suspicion, as Heumann quotes from Carl Owen's *Theater of Deceptions* from 1715, namely, the suspicion that Thales had received his foreknowledge from "the Devil's revelation." Therefore, the lucky anecdote can only be historically false—that is imperative—in favor of unlucky history. Only if Thales had not been able to draw any daytime utility from his nocturnal affair, would it be unobjectionable as the beginning of philosophy, would his act be astronomy in its later implemented distinction from astrology.

The question now emerges in the midst of the rivalry between the two anecdotes for the prize of critical approval: "Because our Thales is a diligent astronomer and also attests to his tireless *stellatim* with the present account

(*Historie*), since his maid mocked him, when he accidentally fell into a ditch while watching the stars, and she took it for foolish to see more above than nearby oneself; therefore, it is not an irrelevant question whether he was an astronomer or an astrologer.”²⁶⁹ There he is to contradict his predecessor Stanley most decisively: nothing proves Thales’ astrological errancy (*Abwegigkeit*) besides the story of the oil press success, and this is the kind of story “that one recognizes at first sight not to be true, but rather a fable invented by astrologers to honor their art.” Due to the poverty of sources for this anecdote, no work can be done with the discrepancies between transmissions, and it is indicative about a form of thought that is gradually developing under the name of “criticism” that Heumann had already crafted his case in the theoretical introduction to his *History of Philosophy* with the argument that “this fiction grew in the brain of astrologers and calendar-makers, who have sought to make a reputation for their vain art through Thales’ authority.”²⁷⁰ This postulated astrologer is someone out there who had an “interest” in Thales’ success; he specifies this success as astrological and discredits it in the same instant as unhistorical.

Emerging unscathed from criticism, the anecdote does not win its rhetorical shimmer from the plummeting philosopher, who now falls as a pure astronomer; it wins it rather from the maid’s resolve. Emphasizing her resolve

²⁶⁹ Heumann, *Acta philosophorum*, Vol. III 173f.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. I 16f. Einleitung I 8.

permits even the offence with which the sophists are charged elsewhere, that of embellishment. In the chapter of *Acts of the Philosophers* entitled “Characteristics of False Philosophy,” Heumann recommends Agrippa of Nettesheim’s book on the “Vanity of the Sciences and Arts” so that the reader may get a picture of the possibility of strictly theoretical errors in arithmetic, algebra, alchemy, and astronomy, as well as in physics; along with these, another figure of theoretical “narcissism” comes into the picture: “And if it is still true that Archimedes concerned himself with nothing but his Circle drawing during the siege of Syracuse, then I can praise him as little as that maid did her master when he fell into a hole while observing the stars, and almost broke his neck.”²⁷¹ Even the neck that is only *almost* broken should be disqualified if we consider the anecdote an exact account, as Heumann does; but here his concern is—now that he has already disclosed the anecdote of the astrologer’s deal with the Devil—to strengthen the maid’s position rhetorically in opposition to *pure* theory as well.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. III 173. [Blumenberg’s quote and note: Note M: “The famous Gronovius committed his clever error of conceiving of the maid’s origin designation in Attic dialect, “Thratia,” as her personal name (as already in Hippolytus’ “Philosophumena”)—but even greater is the sophist’s error, who takes up the letter found in Laertius... and reports of it that Thales had such a bad fall at that time that he broke his neck and had to give up his spirit.” On Gronovius’ failure, see Heumann, *Parerga Critica*, 111f.]

IX. From cursing sinners to scorning Creation

The Baroque pulpit orator Abraham a Santa Clara wields rhetoric of a totally different caliber through the Thales anecdote in his folksy encyclopedia of social classes and trades, *Something for Everyone*. Under the rubric of “the Scale and Sign Master,” he enhances the short, ancient vignette into a circuitous philippic against astrology’s “meddlesomeness:” “Thales of Miletus, an impeccable philosopher, once went walking on a cool evening, and while he trod, he scrutinized the sky with his yawning mouth, thus he spoke to himself: look, there’s the mid-heaven circle, where the sun goes through by with fiery steeds. There is the sign of Libra, whoever is born under it is fated to be a lawyer, as he should be a lover of justice. See, over there is the star called Venus, whoever has this sign in his birth is suited to chastity like a sickle in a knife rack.”²⁷² The folk preacher savors one more tidbit of this sort so that he can paint the plummet as deserved and drastic when he gets to it: “While he continued on with eyes raised to the sky in observation, he tripped a bit and fell in a deep manure lagoon, so that the brew climbed over him; that was an odd rabbit in the pot. After he lifted his head up from the desolate sow bath, he heard an old woman mocking him. Her nose had a wild crystal on it, like the icicles on straw roofs in the winter, and she

²⁷² Abraham a Santa Clara, *Judas der Erzscheml für ehrliche Leut’, oder eigentlicher Entwurf und Lebensbeschreibung des Iscariotischen Böswicht*, 355. That text gives the anecdote under the following heading: “Here is answered in brief the Welsch Perche, the Latin Quare, and the German Why (*Warum*).” Blumenberg cites a different text: *Etwas für Alle*. Dritter Theil. Würzburg 1733, 819-821.

shamed him with her unarmed mouth, so much so that, since she didn't have a very upright back before, she laughed herself a hunchback.”

The following defamation speech transfers directly from the ancient heckler's mouth to that of the Baroque preacher, who addresses his “smart-alecky brother Curiosity” and “overconfident sister Impudence,” in order to excuse them for their rudeness in brooding over God's immeasurable work. Here for once theory's special vice takes on general human traits. His vitriolic rant almost makes a little meddling seem harmless even if it means not acquiescing to the reliable enough but untransparent higher plan for humanity and the world: “O, since your understanding is so empty and poor that it cannot fathom natural matters, why then do you want to anatomize natural and Divine Judgment?”

If the Thracian maid's opposition to the Milesian astronomer may still have been suitable to renew its entreaty at a time when still growing knowledge about nature delayed the announcement of a “definitive morality,”²⁷³ the figure of the ancient sky observer must have appeared too harmless to continue giving figural expression to the new science's access to its objects. Above all, this figure did not hold up in the situation that followed Leibniz's failure to unite theory and

²⁷³ This refers to Descartes' claim in *Discourse on Method* that certainty about moral law was attainable but would require further scientific research. Blumenberg refers to the historical impact of Descartes' scientific view of morality elsewhere in this text (103, 148). He also questions its implications about the stability of concepts in the introduction to his *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. More so than other chapters, this chapter looks forward and backward historically in order to show how the legacies of religion, natural science, and philosophy competed for hegemonic influence, but often found consensus over ethical questions.

theodicy, a situation which generally made science into the organ of dissatisfaction with the factually given world. It would have been more obvious (*eher nahegelegen*) from the Thracian maid's standpoint than from that of the Milesian astronomer not to see the world as that which ought to be and as how it ought to be—to unleash scorn on the cosmos would have been that much more difficult because there was no authority to whom Thales could have been directed. Authorities make complaining easier.

It was compatible with theory's failure to redress such complaints, which culminated under the name "theodicy," that the world appeared to be the product of divine incompetence (or, as Voltaire put it, degraded omnipotence). Using inventiveness to bring the world to the standard of convenience was no longer merely a matter of hope for the human equipped with theory; rather, he was already on the way to proving that it would succeed. The later invented anecdote, where Thales is so arrogant to the Egyptian priests that he tries to show that they mismeasured the pyramids—which could only have been built by measurement—betrays the necessity of a more aggressive style of theory. This style demands to know, and even begins to explain, how the world must have been made.

The figure that stands for applying the principle that all knowledge implies feasibility, is Alfonso the Wise of Castile (deceased in 1284); he competes with the Thales anecdote in the modern imagination's world of figures. He takes over

its function as a theoretical self-assessment bordering on self-consciousness. He would have been able to advise God on how to set up the universe better, went the blasphemous statement of the king's supposedly, had he been around for the Creation. He is not yet the Demiurge himself, who needs to be able to have made what he wants to have known;²⁷⁴ but he is also no longer the ancient theorist type, for whom the farthest objects (*die entferntesten Gegenstände*) are the most suitable because they exclude the thought of ever laying a hand on them. That would have unintentionally turned the free citizen's "art" into a matter of the unfree. The Thracian woman would have had nothing to laugh at. But scorning the world lay outside of the scope of ancient relations with the cosmos. In any case, what happened between gods and humans in his anti-theodicy could call the critique of philosophers to life.

The theorist, not the moralist, destroys theodicy at its core; he rivals Creation by using its own principle. Humanity takes matters into its own hands, not in order to relieve God, but in order to replace Him. Alfonso of Castile had only wanted to advise an unreal God (*nur im Irrealis*). Leibniz was of the view that Alfonso spoke in the absence of better theory. Leibniz's syncretic mind

²⁷⁴ In ancient Gnostic accounts, the Demiurge (Greek for manufacturer) is the name for the malicious god who created the material world and imprisoned souls within bodies so that they would be fooled into the misery-inducing believe in the existence of separate individuals. Blumenberg sees Gnostic thought as having indirectly provoked the modern overthrow of the theological worldview. See "The Failure of the First Attempt at Warding Off Gnosticism Ensures Its Return" Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 127–136.

(*irenischer Geist*) found the excuse for blasphemously scorning the Creation: the Castilian king just did not know about Copernicus yet.²⁷⁵

It became more important than the historical excuse for the royal haughtiness that the king was seen as exemplifying the conflict between theory and realism. Again, it was Bayle's preliminary work on the sources for this prefiguration that established modernity's viewpoint: on the one hand, the generous, royal sponsor of astronomy who ordered the restoration of Ptolemy's astronomic tables and esteemed that work; on the other hand, the scorner of Creation who had to pay the political price of decline and failure for his turn to the starry sky and now incurs the afterworld's scorn through the pen of the most influential historical critic. Even for the honor of the sciences, he would have had to rule his people with more fortune and wisdom: "It were to be wish'd, for the Honor of Learning, that a prince who was so adorn'd with it had governed his people more fortunately and more wisely."²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Leibniz, *Die Werke von Leibniz gemäss seinem handschriftlichen Nachlasse in der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, 153. [Blumenberg quotes (in French) the following excerpt from Leibniz's letter to Sophia Charlotte of Hanover, the first queen of Prussia: "...all of our complaints come from our lack of knowledge, somewhat as King Alfonso, to whom we owe the astronomical tables, thought to recast the system of the world since he did not know Copernicus' system, the only the one capable of allowing sane judgment on the greatness and beauty of God's work." Blumenberg's note: For more on this passage, see Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, 259–263.]

²⁷⁶ Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Vol. II 902. From the article "Castile, Alonso X King of) [Blumenberg's note: For the current state of research on the astronomer Alfonso the Wise, see Cesare Segre in: *Grundriß der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters VI/I*, Heidelberg 1968, 124f.]

Bayle musters all of his perspicuity to relieve Alfonso of the accusation that he wasted resources on his astronomical passion. He proves that the sum spent on research for the astronomical tables is based on a printing error if it totals forty thousand ducats—four thousand would hardly be worth mentioning. The king lost a portion of his wealth evidently, not due to his astronomical dilettantism alone, but due to his disinterest in the duties of his station altogether. To show this, Bayle quotes the rant by a contemporary that most precisely befits a follower of the Thracian maid: “he was skilled in letters and managed civic affairs, but when he sat and watched the stars in the sky, he parted from the earth.”²⁷⁷ The disjunction, *heaven or earth*, stands only as an example, or even as a symbol, for the plain state of affairs that the king found *everything else* more interesting than his office and duty.

What Bayle does not utter with the same clarity is the state of affairs, easily perceptible when conducting historical criticism, that the king’s political collapse—like Thales’ plummet from the Thracian maid’s perspective—was also seen as a punishment for a misstep that could only be an insult to divine majesty from a king’s status, as if from throne to throne. There is no source for the king’s notorious statement, ascertains Bayle; “For the whole Proof of this Fact,

²⁷⁷ Ibid., Vol. II 901. “litteris potius quam civilibus actibus instructus, dumque caelum considerat observatque astra, terram amisit.” This quote, like most references in Bayle’s entry on Alfonso X, refers to the prolific and controversial Jesuit historian Juan de Mariana. Bayle questions many of Mariana’s claims and judgments about Alfonso.

[Mariana] alledges but a vulgar Tradition that has been preserv'd from hand to hand."²⁷⁸ By considering the state of the sources, it was easy to salvage a little piece of historical reality by taking the statement as merely modifying the earnest conclusion that has since become permissible to draw: if God had made the world the way Ptolemy's system had presumed, then He could indeed have been given better advice. Although Bayle articulates this harmless variant, which Leibniz evidently had under his eyes, Bayle gives own accusation against the king its sharpness with the rebuke that the king would have needed to manage his affairs better if we wanted the sciences he sponsored to deliver evidence for their compatibility with the highest office.

Bayle knows very well, of course, that a medieval ruler neither conducted astronomy nor let it be conducted for its own sake, but sought advice and help by applying it to the future. It belongs to the image of the haughty king that his collusion with this dubious art earned him odium for distrusting Providence and let his political misfortune come as punishment for that. That is how the case of Alfonso of Castile shows the most beautiful similarity with that of Thales of Miletus.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. After doubting the quality of Mariana's quotation, "that if God had asked his Advice when he made the World, he would have given him good Counsel," Bayle presents the conciliatory revision of Alfonso's statement cited in this paragraph. By adjusting this statement, writes Bayle, "you will diminish the scandalous Boldness of Alphonsus very much."

The historian cannot permit thus conflating breach of faith and world history; he makes it into a psychological showpiece to reveal the link between character and action. The story goes that, after the prediction that he would lose his throne, the king became so distrustful and monstrous that he made a innumerable host of enemies. That was precisely what led to his downfall; and that sort of thing was well possible if a divination, nothing but raving in and of itself, turns into a real misfortune through the behavior it causes. From that follows a very general law of historical criticism: “The Examples that are alleg’d of Predictions that have been accomplish’d are almost all built on that Foundation.”

Nearly all of the concerns raised by the Castilian king’s point of view, which historical criticism rationalizes, amount to concerns in the modern period that theory is getting away with something. The effort now dissipates that once sought to dispose of the medieval astronomer’s blasphemy or to excuse it, and the effort expands that divorces his political failure from his reputation in the history of astronomy. Fontenelle commemorates the king in “The First Evening” of his *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* as a great mathematician, but clearly one lacking humility, and considers his thought of Creation’s ability to improve too free-thinking since the contemporary reader also has to admit that the disorder

of the world system of his time presented an opportunity for the sinner.²⁷⁹

Fontenelle's fundamental thought on the matter would still persuade the Göttingen mathematician Abraham Gotthelf Kästner, who dealt with the Castilian king more fundamentally than anyone.

In keeping with the now further advanced Enlightenment, Kästner did not feel satisfied to let mitigating circumstances explain the king's dissatisfaction with the world; instead, he tracks down the source behind the folk transmission that Bayle used for the king's judgment: Alfonso had retracted the Archbishop of Compostela's ecclesiastical assets. There is the solution for Kästner: "When I read this, I thought I knew what Alfonso's insult to God consisted of. Indeed, with this engagement with ecclesiastical assets, Alfonso did so well that people could only say that against him; or rather, it is convincing evidence of Alfonso's impunity that nothing nastier can be told about a king, who had done business with popes and archbishops, than a funny notion, which a strict moralist rightfully derides, but what he did that only insulted clergy is made into an assault on God."²⁸⁰ What

²⁷⁹ "The thought is too libertine, but it's amusing to think that the system itself provoked his sin because it was too complicated (*trop confus*)." Fontenelle, *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, 14. [Blumenberg's note: Bayle already quotes Fontenelle's *Conversations* in his 1695 Castile article and corrects his mistake that Alfonso was the King of Aragon, as Fontenelle emends.] Fontenelle himself changes the title of the heretical astronomer from "King of Aragon" to "King of Castile" in the second edition the *Conversations*. Ibid., 76 f6.

²⁸⁰ Kästner, *Gesammelte poetische und prosaische schönwissenschaftliche Werke*, Vol. II 131. [Blumenberg's note: Even in his 1751 essay content entry for the Berlin Academy of Sciences, entitled "Treatise on the duties, which unite us in the knowledge that no blind chance occurs in the world; rather, everything is ruled by divine foresight," Kästner treats the Alfonsian verdict on the Creation. Ibid., Vol. III 63.]

Kästner found is a piece of history as priests' deception; it was not the political mistake of a king, who did evidently run into other mistakes.

In addition, Kästner poses the simple question as to whether the accusation was valid that the passion for astronomy fated Alfonso's fate in politics. The standing accusation runs that this king, "to the extent that he watched the sky, lost sight of the earth (the German Kaiser's honor)."²⁸¹ But this, Kästner maintains, "is the joke of a historian who is glad to mock a science that he does not understand." Indeed, the Göttingen colleague of Lichtenberg also only knows the single and for him persuasive evidence that such could not have been the case: Julius Caesar, between battles, took up the study of stars, according the witness of Lucan the poet—and with astrology won a greater kingdom than that which the Christian king Alfonso later lost: "There are indeed examples of kings hunting their lands to death, wrecking, and bedeviling (*verjagt, verprasst, verh-t*) them, but not easily of a king ruining his land by observation (*verobserviret*)."²⁸²

²⁸¹ Kästner, *Gesammelte poetische und prosaische schönwissenschaftliche Werke*, Vol. II 133.

²⁸² [Blumenberg's quote and note: "Julius Caesar, whom Lucan has say:-- --'I was always free, in the midst of battles, in the regions of the stars and sky above,' whose calendar lasts much longer than the Alfonsian tables, won an even greater empire through his revelries than the one Alfonso lost." —It is illustrative of the emphasis put on the royal astronomy's political background that the French *Encyclopedia* includes an article on Alfonso without mentioning the anecdote until its supplemental part (Vol. I, 1776, 321), while maintaining the airiness of his imperial aspirations outside of any association with his theoretical passion: "It started with murmurs in Castile, then conspiracy.... He returned to his estate, won over the malcontents with gifts and promises; but he left a germ (*levain*) of rebellion in their spirits." The point worth noting is that the article (about all Spanish Alfonsos) comes from Diderot.]

Here an antagonism takes shape, which the following century will first be able to name when the great unifying titles “natural science” (*Naturwissenschaft*) and “human science” (*Geisteswissenschaft*) become available. Kästner’s lament targets historians’ careless misunderstanding about what natural science can or cannot do when they assign astronomy the blame for the king’s unwelcome political end. Yet again the cruelty of invention is afoot; it attributes to theory the failure of a practice that cannot at all be traced back to it. This invention portrays the former as a mere distraction from the latter and makes the royal astronomer’s scorn for Creation into an expression of his lack of political realism.

It is historiography that does not abide when its figures, consigned to acting, participate in anything more deeply than making their history. If they clash with this postulate, they are punished with invented history: “A great lord’s love of astronomy alienated the unastronomical historiographers; therefore they write this love off as connected with how war and the rulers’ deaths relate to comets. And the whole story of Alfonso’s scorn for Creation is a totally unfounded saga.” If we could still see the Milesian primal scene (*Urszene*) shining through here, then the historical orientation’s entire disdain for the triumph of the natural sciences would have manifested on the side of the Thracian maid.

Kästner does not wonder what there is that remains unwarped by his discipline and what must be punished such that history keeps the tool of

inexhaustible invention readily available. His interpretation of the anecdote about Alfonso is displaced into the position of the theoretical alternative between giving nature or history primacy as an object (*den Primat der Gegenständlichkeit*).

Through this transcendent dimension, the process is inhibited whereby a configuration arises from the king's apotheism like the configuration that belongs to the anecdote. No one ever discovered to whom Alfonso of Castile and Leon said what he is supposed to have said. He is no Job, who holds his complaints and accusations to God, as to a perceptible partner. The anecdote about scorning Creation remains incomplete because the situation in which Alfonso would have or could have had an addressee is impossible; the Creation took place without him, and a future one is not in sight.

If the analogies with the Thales anecdote are nevertheless accessible in the reception of this anecdote, that is the case because the fragmentary residue of the Alfonso anecdote reflects the modifying of ancient preconditions. The maid can scold the observer of the cosmos because he is not fair towards the reality that matters to her; but the observer of the cosmos would have had no one to scold if his research had given him the chance. Thales saw the world filled with gods and saw himself urged to a timely philosophical epiphany by them—but these gods only filled the world in, they did not answer for it. Alfonso of Castile is observer of the sky (*Himmel*) and scorner of heaven (*Himmel*) in one. He goes as far as

imagining the situation in which he would have made the world differently or prompted it to be different than it had become. By having his political demise cited in connection with his scorning Creation, Alfonso becomes the very thing that history attacks from the position of realism: having failed the world's demands while he thought that he could live in a world other than the real one.

Just this conjoining of two originally unrelated elements, the statement and the plummet, creates the full congruence with the Thales anecdote because the same principle of realism dominates the discussion on the side of the scornful. Kästner chose an unsurpassable case to make that point: disputing the existence of the king's scorn for Creation on the basis of one of his political mistakes and presenting evidence for a calculated historical lie about him. What matters is that, in the original configuration of the Thales anecdote, a framework is pre-given, whose positions are reoccupiable (*umbesetzbar*). It thus takes on the function of standing for something that can neither be exhausted by itself nor by its reception.

X. Tycho Brahe's coachman and the earthquake in Lisbon

We have shown that an imaginative potential was available in the Thales anecdote that permits us to expect not only distortions of its pool of figures, but also reoccupations. Kant thus narrates approximately the same story, this time about Tycho Brahe from whose *Vita* an association with Thales is induced insofar as Brahe only made his turn to astronomy, away from his vocation to become a jurist, because someone's prediction of a solar eclipse had affected him. Kant then tells about Tycho that he once felt himself capable of finding the shortest way for his coach to travel by the stars; at that point his coachman set him right: "Good sir, you may well understand the heavens, but here on earth you are a fool."²⁸³ No scorn, but reconciliation through a division of competences.

In making this variant on the Thracian maid's speech, Kant refers to the presumed talent in metaphysics that claims the power to go beyond experience by perceiving spirits as symbolic manifestations of the invisible. The symbolic nature of ghosts would not be worth mentioning and relating to metaphysics, were there not "certain philosophers," who called on comparable abilities for themselves when they "assiduous and engrossed, train their metaphysical telescopes on distant regions and tell of miraculous things there." Although to be imagined as better equipped than the ancient astronomer through the metaphors of the

²⁸³ Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, 27.

telescope, they have still remained the addressees of a realist scorn that is rerouted towards them from the mouth of Tycho Brahe's coachman. Metaphysics of such a sort can only be conducted at the price of losing reference to the world. For Kant, "intuitive knowledge (*anschauende Kenntnis*) of the *other* world can be attained here only by one losing some of the understanding one needs for the *present* (*die gegenwärtige*)." This formulation has been available since 1766.

Fifteen years later, Kant found an extension of this main idea in an unforgettable footnote to *The Critique of Pure Reason* to the effect that the ignorant can have no concept of their ignorance. The consciousness of their shortcoming must thus be delivered to them from outside, in that they bump against a reality which it could not have occurred to them to consider. Now the roles are indeed reversed; not the earthly reality giving the unexpected shove towards realism, as with Thales' well plummet, but the theory of heaven, now taken for science, takes the person towards believing in the paltriness precisely of the reality of the closest at hand (*des Nächstliegenden*):

The observations and calculations of astronomers have taught us much that is worthy of admiration, but most important, probably, is that they have exposed for us the abyss of our ignorance, which without this information human reason could never have imagined to be so great; reflection on this ignorance has to produce a great alteration in the determination of the final aims of the use of our reason.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 555f.

“Abyss of ignorance” (*Abgrund der Unwissenheit*)—almost a Pascal formula. How does this enter Kant’s language if not as pure rhetoric of admitting suspicions tending towards faithlessness? Is it a caption for an experience? We must go back to the thirty-year-old Kant, who is executing that stroke of genius, known as *General Natural History and Theory of The Sky*, and there we find an experience that exemplifies the tension in the antagonism between heaven and earth, as it had been illustrated in the Thales anecdote and returns in the warning of the coachman to Tycho Brahe. It was the most sensitive year for reason, which had just started considering itself capable of anything when the earthquake in Lisbon sufficed to send it plummeting into the most extreme doubt towards the quality of the world²⁸⁵ and towards itself at the same time. In a certain sense, Kant’s *Theory of the Sky* had been a document of reason’s one-time self-assurance that it could encompass objects and problems spatially and temporally distant from itself with *one* broad grasp and to explain it in *one* natural history of the world.

²⁸⁵ *die Qualität der Welt*. “Quality” and “world” have specific meanings in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (which Blumenberg is about to discuss). “Quality” is the type of cognitive category that establishes an object’s reality. “The world” stands for “the cosmos” and was subject to doubt because it represents totality, and totality cannot be experienced, therefore it cannot be subject to any determinate predicate. The world does have a quality according to the “System of cosmological ideas” in the First Critique, although he must invent a new category beyond the three “qualities” introduced earlier: reality, negation, and limitation. The world is “unconditioned” (*unbedingt*) because it is neither equivalent to the real objects, nor does it separate from them or limited by them; rather, it contains all real (and limited) objects unconditionally. But its reality cannot be established in the way that the reality of particular objects are. In that sense, the doubt that Blumenberg discerns here about “the quality of the world,” did not go away in Kant’s later work.

This was the vulnerable intellectual moment when nature itself could take on the role of the Thracian maid and remind the theorist what was under his feet and belonged among the overlooked givens (*Selbstverständlichkeiten*) of the lifeworld, as long as it remained at rest. In three treatises on earthquakes Kant sought to salvage what could be salvaged. In attempt to console the widely upset European temperament, he forced unrest into the habitus of reason, showed it as an expression of theoretical curiosity: “Great events that affect the fate of all mankind rightly arouse that commendable curiosity, which is stimulated by all that is extraordinary and typically looks into the causes of such events.”²⁸⁶ Theory remains in the right, even if mankind’s is affected at the core with regard to its assurance about the world and seems to demand everything else but the explanation for the far-reaching causes of its unhappiness.

Kant not only explains what emerges from the fact that “the ground under us is hollow;” he immediately draws consequences for the application of reason against blind submission to the hardness of fate. Lisbon would then have to be rebuilt where it was, but this time with attention to the earthquake’s recognizable assault lines. But then he does not even spurn the consolation that he can grant his Prussian countrymen from the insight—which certainly cannot be brought into harmony with the intention to improve morals through fear—that the surface of

²⁸⁶ Kant, “On the Causes of Earthquakes on the Occasion of the Calamity That Befell the Western Countries of Europe towards the End of Last Year (1756),” 330.

their flat country did not show foresight any indication that it intended to treat its residents to such strikes.

That such a treatise would also have to contain a chapter called “On the uses of Earthquakes” is nearly self-evident (*versteht sich fast von selber*).²⁸⁷ Kant sees their utility in the renewal of the soil materials, which in turn enable plant growth and mineral development. But above all he sees humanity exposed to a lesson that it undergoes with difficulty: not being the purpose of all things and thus not being able to make a valid claim to possessing the Castilian King’s insight as to how it would have been able to be made better. In Kant’s formulation: “we imagine that we would better regulate everything to our advantage, if fate had asked for our vote on this matter.”

When the aftershocks of the tragedy in Lisbon refused to relent, Kant reached for his feather once again in April of 1756 and began: “The fire of the subterranean vaults has not yet subsided.”²⁸⁸ Above all, though, the minds and spirits of humanity have only just begun to process the events that gripped all of Europe; speculative minds wanted to make the sun, comets, and planets into causes of the tellurian unrest. Kant’s third earthquake-writing thus also serves to put a damper on theory’s cosmic folly. That is now the point at which he stands

²⁸⁷ Kant, “History and Natural Description of the Most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake That Struck a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year 1755 (1756),” 359.

²⁸⁸ Kant, “Continued Observations on the Earthquakes That Have Been Experienced for Some Time (1756),” 368.

up against reason's lust for explanations that connect the nearest at hand to the farthest off (*das Nächste mit dem Fernsten zu verbinden*). He can take on the role of the Thracian maid and vary her classical formulation of the scorn towards theory: "It is a common extravagance to import the source of an evil from several thousand miles away when it can be found in the neighborhood (*in der Nähe*)... People are reluctant to perceive something that is merely close at hand. To detect causes at an infinite distance is a only proper proof of a astute understanding." The topos of the Thales anecdote—that it does not matter what can be seen in the sky, but what lies at our feet—thus found an pressing occasion to be staged anew in the very event that should have killed off the link between theory and theodicy. And not by accident is it Kant, in the same year as his youthful cosmogonic feat, who "applies" (*anwendet*) the formula to the earthquake as the most threatening announcement that human and earthly reality ranks highest.

He also applies the formula to himself. Now the composer of "Universal natural history and theory of the heavens" has need of relief and begs his readers' pardon that he "for having led them so far around the firmament to enable them to judge correctly the events that have taken place here on our Earth."²⁸⁹ Viewing comets and planets only distracts from the one elementary fact that can be validated against all of the lifeworld's consistency: "the fragility of the ground we

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 371.

stand on (*unseres Fußbodens*).”²⁹⁰ In light of the turn from speculation to realism, from the universe to the earth—almost the Socratic turn again—the experience of the year 1755 sets the standard for Kant’s own further work, for which the earthquake could have become the foundational experience (*Urerlebnis*). He cried out soberingly into the speculative discussion about the earthquake: “Let us therefore look for the cause in our place of habitation itself, for we have the cause beneath our feet.”²⁹¹

Could this possibly have been the imaginative background by whose orientation the path could ultimately have led to the *Critique of Pure Reason*? Indeed, that must remain an unprovable conjecture. Such conjecture might lie precisely on the margin of what could be allowed through “a certain good taste” in philosophy, as Kant had accepted and validated that taste for natural science precisely in order not expose himself to the “humbling reminder, which is where [man] ought properly to start, that he is never anything more than a human being.”²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 372.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 371.

²⁹² Ibid., 373. Despite his expressed concern with the plausibility of his interpretation, Blumenberg gives his conjecture plausibility by distorting Kant’s claims in this passage. He misquotes the original text by setting off “a certain good taste in philosophy” as a quotation, although Kant does not refer to philosophy per se in that passage. Kant’s original mentions “a certain correct taste in natural science (*in der Naturwissenschaft*).

In the meantime, after a whole century of historical criticism introduced by Bayle, criticism received a second thrust: criticism towards the critics. Almost simultaneous with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Dietrich Tiedemann's *First Philosophers of Greece* appears. He also uses Thales to show how to proceed with an autodidact's understanding in the absence of the great apparatus of educated role models. The oil-press story cannot be reliable, which follows neatly from the fact that "even today, after so many thousands of years of new experiences and so many failed calendar prophecies, we still cannot predict the fruitfulness of particular years at all, not to mention knowing about particular crops in advance; how much less must they have known back then?"²⁹³

The main anecdote too gets dignified by considerations not derived by confronting sources: "Plato's reputation proves the antiquity of this account; but not its truth." It seems to have come about more for the sake of the humorous idea than the other way around, the idea coming out of the event. The demonstration regards the realistic events at that time and place, in order to show what could be expected so that such a thing could be possible: "For Thales could very well have known the wells at his birthplace, and the wells were also not so completely unfenced."²⁹⁴ That Thales lost his life through his tumble is also the rhetorical escalation of a sophist, who had found it meaningful "even to let him die

²⁹³ Tiedemann, *Griechenlands erste Philosophen*, 120.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

watching the stars.” More reliable, according to Tiedemann, is that he died of old age from heat and thirst as a spectator at the Olympic Games, as Diogenes reports. It is improbable that someone die abnormally; that even goes for people that are significant enough to be treated in books.

One last observation more on the eighteenth century reveals that the Aesopian fable of the fallen stargazer made an entry into pedagogy, specifically by way of Samuel Richardson’s widespread collection *Young Man’s Pocket Companion*, introduced to German by Lessing. Considering the author’s and publisher’s influence on *Werther* and Rousseau, that is, on youthful sensibility with its background in the Puritan family novel, then the piece “The Astrologer Admonished” must be attributed secondary influence, which the publisher’s of widely known works exert with whatever they produce on the side.²⁹⁵

The hero of the story is no longer as “a certain star-gazer,” the one who stumbled into a fairly deep ditch during his business and who tries to help himself out again. A “sober fellow” (*nicht unvernünftiger Mann*) passes by and chides him with a combination of nearly all the usual variants of the anecdote’s tradition: “make a right use of your present misfortunes; and, for the future, pray let the stars go on quietly in their courses, and do you a little better to the ditches; for is it

²⁹⁵ Aesop and Richardson, *Aesop’s Fables*, 61. Blumenberg makes use of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s German translation, which occasionally deviates wildly from the English. I have put the German in parentheses in these cases.

not strange, that you should tell other people their fortune, and know nothing of your own?" The surprising conclusion particularly recalls the cuckolded stargazer, who meets with scorn for not having recognized his own marital misfortune in the stars.²⁹⁶ The story's lesson follows the fable's self-reference: just punishment comes to those "who neglect their own concerns to pry into those of other people." In addition to the lesson, there is another "Reflection," which deals with prophecy of various types; that is one of the "one of the most pernicious snares in human life." This goes especially for gullible women and children, among whom imagination is so strong, since imagination is like soft wax that takes on every impression. Evidently the "Reflection" is intended for the education workers pedagogically engaged with the fable. They are told to take the precaution to heart to protect the spirits entrusted to them against "the impudent pretensions of fortune-tellers" (*angemaßten Kennern der Zukunft*). The quality of this eloquent warning is far removed from the appeal of the twist that Richardson gave to the fable himself. Looking back from the peak of pedagogism's epoch, it was Montaigne who had first found an educational principle in the fable's moral; do not teach children about the eighth sphere before they know about their own:

²⁹⁶ From *Canterbury Tales* (cf. p.65)

“There is great folly in teaching our children... about the heavenly bodies and the motions of the Eighth Sphere before they know about their own properties.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, 179.

XI. Absentmindednesses

The expression “absentmindedness” (*Geistesabwesenheit*) has an unprecedented meaning in Ludwig Feuerbach’s language. He designates Idealism’s exoticism as a way of life: between the *risk* that Idealism distorts reality and the *humor* of its involuntary distance from life. The writer is the professional incarnation of this way of life that Feuerbach describes as “humorous-philosophical.”²⁹⁸

From a perspective situated in the year 1834, that very absentmindedness lands him near the configuration that has shown up in the ridiculed misstep of equating existence and mind since Thales and the Thracian maid. By no coincidence, Feuerbach chooses, instead of someone tumbling into a well, someone drifting out onto high sea with risky prospects as a metaphor for what has also been called losing-the-ground-under-one’s-feet (*Den-Boden-unter-den-Füßen-verlieren*). Where the loss of reality and of realism is supposed to be lamentable, the ground under one’s feet is the most common metaphor; if this is meant to describe leaving the lifeworld, it turns into the metaphor for the

²⁹⁸ “The Writer and the Human: A Series of Humorous-Philosophical Aphorisms” 1834 Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I 263–366. In another piece entitled, “On my ‘Thoughts on Death and Immortality,’” Feuerbach describes “The Writer and the Human” as an attempt to reach a broader audience since the abstract language of his *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* presented atheism as a “thought held at a distance from the rabble.” Ibid., I 213. In a witty formal invention, the “writer” and the “human” communicate in letters, and when they do so admiringly without condescension, Feuerbach suggests that they become identical: “Thus, in a real author, the human corresponds (*korrespondiert*) with the writer.” Ibid., I 360. While the writer’s “life is nothing other than the state of absentmindedness,” Feuerbach’s “human” also becomes “absentminded” as a symptom of his “sickness,” his passionate love for a woman. Ibid., I 341, 362.

inconspicuous assurances which comprise the syndrome of lifeworldliness—the thematizing of which will be one of philosophy’s latest insights. Feuerbach thus prefers to describe his authors’ “absentmindedness” with the unfathomability (*Unergründlichkeit*) of the sea rather than that of the well: “On the high sea of mental productivity, where the idea of infinity is present to the human,... he loses sight of those landmasses on which the human otherwise sets a firm foot and builds his petty Philistine world.”²⁹⁹

For those absent *through* their mind or *with* it, the real, the usual life is nothing but a burdensome and shameless beggar; that beggar rips them out of their imaginings and meditations with his impertinent demands at the most inconvenient time. A great portion of these people’s actions turns into a kind of disengagement in attempts to get such pestering off their throat.

Here is the passage where the association with Thales and the maid comes in. The protophilosopher’s “absentmindedness” is the early parable for the relationship to reality of the theorist’s latest professionalization in the form of the writer: “Thales, with whom the light of science rose over Greece, as he observed the stars, once did not notice a ditch in front of his feet and fell in. An old woman, who was his maid or possibly just happened to be there completely by chance (which I no longer know, though it is completely insignificant), mocked him for

²⁹⁹ Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, I 341. [Blumenberg’s note: On the metaphor of the ‘high sea,’ see Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 7–10.]

it, and did well to do so, for it was an old woman, and common folk still mock him today for it, and she has the indisputable right to do so as common folk.”

The right to laugh goes to the maid; yet this no longer instantaneously means that the philosopher rightly plummeted into the ditch and got mocked. The situation has become perspectivistic, can no longer be measured by one standard. That is the perspective of the nineteenth century; in its pure form it is dismissively called historicism.

Common folk, who laugh and take it as their right, are called into the archaic scene for their realism; but the absentminded one has his own right that no longer needs to be confirmed by fulfilled solar eclipse prognostications or oil mill successes. It is grounded in his willingness to abstain from success and applause of all kinds of realism and to withdraw himself from the pestering of common life. The theorist is a humorous sort, but laughing at him cannot do him justice—that is the laughter of another kind of absentminded people. Thus the prototypical scene, still in Bayle’s wake, gets treated like a piece of history (*Historie*); but now only in order to dispense historical amnesties to all parties involved.

To ask for the moral of the story now means: the moral for whom and when? The case in the absentminded one’s defense now lies in the temporal sequence of his absences and presences—he is not permitted to be observed synchronously in relation to the reality of those who mock him, but diachronically

related to the reality that will always only become shared in the future and will eventually become everyone's common reality. An object of experience cannot be everything at every time—a triviality that will be time-intensive and painful to discover. What makes the star observer as ridiculous as the philosopher is his view towards “realities” beyond the reality *of today*. To put it otherwise: what had passed for transcendent until then proves for him to belong in the horizon of future experience.

That has to do with the unique time relation between seeing and thinking. The protophilosopher is the following state of affairs, manifest in anecdotal form: one can think without seeing, but cannot see without thinking—this most consequential original fact (*Urfaktum*) of philosophy. The first philosopher is not defined by his still being far (*Noch-Entferntsein*) from becoming all head, but by his getting away (*Sich-entfernen*) from being all eye. Something happened there, which Feuerbach first described towards the end of his life as the ultimate intensification of “absentmindedness” through an example from his own experience: “When I once suddenly noticed a majestic meteor while observing the starry sky, I wanted to call over the people in the nearby room to share the pleasure, but I could not call out; I was speechless.”³⁰⁰ There you have the ridiculously absentminded person whom no one laughs at; not just by chance, for

³⁰⁰ “Spiritualismus und Materialismus” 1863-1866 Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, X 211.

his bodily absence protects him from the odium of speechlessness, to which an observation condemns him, an observation that compels attention with no prophetic knowledge. The objectively trivial experience of the meteor can become what the solar eclipse could no longer be since Thales.

Feuerbach too sought to relate his philosophical achievement to astronomy's exemplary historical track. Almost inevitably, he saw this as explaining his outlook on the Thales anecdote: "I made an object of empirical science out of what was considered until now to lie beyond knowledge, even by the better ones only as a matter of uncertainty, of faith. To make what did not pass for an object—first of *real*, then even just of *possible* knowledge—into an object of knowledge, as in the case of astronomy, is the course of science itself. First comes physics, then pneumatics. First the sky (*Himmel*) of the eye, then the heaven (*Himmel*) of the spirit, of desire."³⁰¹

The relationships of far and near (*Ferne und Nähe*) that play against each another in the Thales anecdote are still the conceptual aids by which Feuerbach's realism determines the beginning of philosophy and its distance from this beginning. No longer is what lies in front of the feet and gets overlooked there the epitome of the real, but something more brutish, what is "incorporated" (*einverleibt*): breathing and eating. The nearest comes so close that it can only be

³⁰¹ "Nachgelassene Aphorismen" Ibid., X 343.

the farthest in time: the last approach by human wisdom to humanity itself, that “you are what you eat.”³⁰² The Thracian maid would never once have thought of that: “The near is precisely the furthest from humanity, because for us it does not qualify as a secret, and just for that reason it is a secret to us, because it is always, and thus never an object.”³⁰³ Near and far are not ultimately disjunctives: the starry sky’s unreality, as reflected in the Thracian maid’s laughter, is the future reality, still meaningless at that beginning point, but with its meaning assured in the turn to theory.

Feuerbach could not once divine theory’s “nearness,” entirely still awaiting construction by theory. What matters to him is that, before the stars become scientific objects, they had been “beings (*Wesen*) that reveal themselves as untouchable, unfeeling, only optical, only for the eye as light, purely mental, superhuman, divine beings, i.e. beings of the imagination.”³⁰⁴ This imagination is akin to an intellectual instinct; it is no longer the organ for mounting the rudiments of past perceptions into new collages; rather, it is the organ for

³⁰² Blumenberg refers to the well-known saying that Feuerbach develops in “Das Geheimniss des Opfers” 1850 *Ibid.*, X 59. There Feuerbach claims that humans understand themselves and their differences from others through their dietary choices. Love and religious devotion are expressed figurative consumption: kissing and the Eucharist. But some forms of hatred may rest on the notion that “whoever does not eat what I eat is not what I am.”

³⁰³ “Einige Bemerkungen über den ‘Anfang der Philosophie’ von Dr. F. J. Reiff” 1841 Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke*, II 144.

³⁰⁴ “Die Unsterblichkeitsfrage vom Standpunkt der Anthropologie.” 1846 Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I 125.

preconceiving the expansion upon sensation (*Sinnlichkeit*), the organ for anticipating reality.³⁰⁵

If humanity is “the living superlative of sensualism,” a concept of perception would not befit humanity if it explained perception as a system of adaptation to an environment comprised of preservation signals; rather, perception should make “the world, the infinite” into the referential whole of the senses “and purely for its own sake, i.e. for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment.”³⁰⁶ The difference between the gaze raised to the stars and attention turned to the earth in the interest of self-preservation—the dualism of theory’s Milesian primal scene (*Urszene*)—is negated (*aufgehoben*). Sensation’s end in itself and its self-enjoyment are manufactured only more purely “through the purposeless gaze at the stars” and thus anticipate the wide-ranging purposiveness of the drive for knowledge as it extends across history. What divides the protophilosopher and the Thracian maid is a hiatus, which time would close with sensibility’s reach outward, a reach which over time becomes an end in itself.

If a person is ridiculed at the beginning of a particular history, and that person represents the impetus for that history, then the ridicule comes across differently in that we must ascribe to the ridiculed person that he pursued his

³⁰⁵ [Blumenberg’s note: On Feuerbach’s concept of the “drive for knowledge” (*Wissenstriebes*) as precondition for a new notion of “beginning” in philosophy, see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 440–447.]

³⁰⁶ “Wider den Dualismus von Leib und Seele” Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, II 349.

goals according to the traits of the human species³⁰⁷ and is thus determined by the species' prescience about its own future. Realism, like that of the maid, is then only a matter of dull simultaneity. The true realist is the one who is already caught up in time, stands in the unrecognized service of history. Thales' ridiculousness in the maid's eyes is based on the fact that he does not live in simultaneity with her concept of reality. Humanity, according to its species, does not want to know "what it cannot know," as we could hear and construe in the maid's laughter.³⁰⁸ Humanity only wants to know what is "now not yet" factually known and can be. The drive for knowledge does not want to intrude ahead into the inaccessible, which is meaningless to the human; the human wants to insight into the perspective on what is possible in time: "Humanity has nothing less than a supranatural drive for knowledge, as Christianity or Platonism muses; it has no drive that steps beyond human nature's measure, which is indeed not finite, not measurable with the circle of a philosophical system; his drive for knowledge extends just to the knowable for the human, that is, to human objects, to objects that achieve their effect in the course of history."

³⁰⁷ *Gattung*. In the following paragraphs, Blumenberg relies on Feuerbach's notion of *Gattung* as species, as collective humanity, which is central to Feuerbach's atheist value system: "...the species is the ultimate measure of truth..." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 131. Feuerbach derives altruism from love of the species, where any "other [human] is the representative of the species." In Christianity, God metaphorically replaces human representatives of the species, and thus dissipates our commitment to love the members of our species.

³⁰⁸ "Der rationalistische und ungläubige Unsterblichkeitsglaube" Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, I 172–174.

The model articulated here only repeats what Feuerbach had discovered about the relationship between theology and philosophy: just as theology is the historical form of an anthropology still to come, which for now is only metaphorical, so Classical astronomy is the projection of an ideal of comprehending the reality of the unattainable and thus of “pure” admiration. The view (*Anblick*) of the stars is the prospect (*Ausblick*) of retrieving the metaphor that has become enacted in that viewing. The Thracian maid laughs because she cannot perceive that it is her concern that Thales almost breaks his neck for.

The jeopardy within a history of covert projections—occurring behind humanity’s back, through the species of metaphors that steers the reader deceptively—jeopardizes the possibility of human independence: the absolutism of metaphors, as Platonic forms or divine attributes, ultimately ensconces the lasting forgottenness of those metaphors’ retrievability. The Thracian maid’s role remains occupiable (*besetzbar*) again and again, in order to make new distances of ridiculousness palpable. In his enthusiasm for astronomy, Feuerbach almost feels caught in the old thought that astronomy has to do with a higher reality, with a more pure reality, with the part of nature closer to thought itself (*gedankennäher*).

It is fitting to remember the lower gods wherever the tendency arises to take Idealism at its word. The present has its analogy with Copernicus' cosmic call to order, to seek the conditions of the furthest removed phenomena in the unnoticables nearest at hand: nutritional science as quasi-ontology that equates being and eating. It enables contemporary philosophy to come forward in *one* person on both positions: the position of presumption and of the call to order: "But why do I presume to go to the far sky of astronomy, in order to denounce the natural sciences for their revolutionary tendencies in our governments? We have a much more relevant, urgent, timely case for natural science's universal, revolutionary meaning in a newly published piece: *Theory of Nutrition: For the People* by Jacob Moleschott."³⁰⁹

And the philosopher—plummeting into the depth of reality, because he is called back as species-being (*Gattungswesen*) from his somnambulism—can still call out between astonishment and outrage: "Thus it is a matter of eating and drinking when we question the ideality or reality of the world?... what commonness!"

From the other wing of Hegelianism, Eduard Gans, having just been promoted to juridical professor in Berlin against Savigny's protest, built the Thales anecdote into his lecture on natural rights in the winter semester of 1828-

³⁰⁹ "Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution" 1850 Ibid., X 11.

29. The nocturnal loneliness of the protophilosopher under the stars and the barbarian laughter at his plummet down the well now stand for the traits of the Greek world—and of history and theory themselves along with it—as it emerged from the Oriental world. “Before Greece there is no philosophy.”³¹⁰ That is not its misfortune, but the precondition of the rupture that is inevitable if more is to become than the immediacy of the human being’s meaning in the world (*der Sinn des menschlichen Daseins in der Welt*).

The Thracian maid is not some Oriental woman, but she does come from Europe’s crossroads with the Orient and can imagine the anecdotally fixed moment when the worlds separate. “The Orientals are in themselves still all in being. But no thought about their being has come to them yet. They are not yet divided within themselves (*zerrissen*), they are pure children.” The first philosophy is natural philosophy; humanity has not yet arrived at the idea “of observing itself as nature.”

This state of affairs is legible in Thales, and Socrates himself ironically strengthens the case against this connection of philosophy with nature, since he first invented metaphor of the fallen and ridiculed Thales. It is not self-evident to Eduard Gans that the citizen of Miletus and the political advisor for his polis overlooks his state in order to see the stars, because he is a philosopher. For in the

³¹⁰ Gans, *Philosophische Schriften*, 47. [Blumenberg’s note: (From an anonymous postscript to the lecture on natural right).]

meantime that state has become the epitome of what the maid claimed for the most obvious concern (*das Nächstliegende*), as little thought as she may have given to state affairs. Thales “is not troubled by the state, but by water, the ground of all things.... Yes, how little he thought about the state is witnessed by the anecdote where he, looking at the stars, fell into a wellspring.” If we do not expect playful language from Eduard Gans even a little, then we would have to regard falling (*Verfallen*) into the water—without falling (*Nichverfallen*) for the state—as a fall into the ground of all things; we would be attributing a lot to the ongoing play of the image that lets the philosopher fall on the water that is here *called* “wellspring” (*Quelle*) and is supposed to *be* the “ground” (*Grund*).³¹¹ The spring instead of the cistern—that cannot come from pure linguistic chance in a moment at the lectern.

The laughing maid is of no interest to Eduard Gans. And yet she is thoroughly present. The quality of her non-understanding as a historical role is insinuated such that the figure is not even necessary. She supposedly does not understand individuality confronted with nature and laughs rightfully, although this right must remain hidden to her—as Feuerbach’s Thales had his right hidden from him at the beginning of history, because beginnings with consciousness of

³¹¹ The word “spring” (*Quelle*), also means historical “source” in the sense of origin. The word “ground” (*Grund*), also means logical “justification.” The notion that historical truth precedes the possibility of logical truth is a core element of Hegel’s phenomenology, and it is thus not surprising that the Hegelian Eduard Gans links source and ground allegorically. See Taylor, *Hegel*, 131.

what they begin and set in motion would be false beginnings. Eduard Gans is already dead when Feuerbach writes the following, and it does not refer to Thales, but to Luther: “Whoever already preemptively sets as his goal from the beginning that which can only be a purposeless, non-arbitrary result of the development misses his goal.”³¹²

Eduard Gans gives the maid’s laughter its late articulation; as an observer more than a little familiar with the historical attitude, he deemed the following formula appropriate to describe the founder of natural philosophy and his turn to the starry sky: “the first philosopher was outside of all reality.”³¹³ He went his own way outside of the neighborhood of the polis without Gans having to make any use of the other, seemingly trivial trait from the tradition: Thales “left the city” at night to conduct his theory. That the maid was also outside of the city, in order to be able to become a witness to the scene, that is excused from the opposite direction. She had not yet acquired the free realm of the state and of the conditions of thought created in it alone: “without free individuality, there are no thoughts. A slave is not capable of free thoughts.”

Behind the historically given hiatus at the origin of natural philosophy, another one already stands, which robs laughter of its juvenile harmlessness, if

³¹² “Fragmente zur Charakteristik meines philosophischen Curriculum Vitae.” 1846 Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, II 385.

³¹³ Gans, *Philosophische Schriften*, 48.

one may say so. In the eyes of the Berlin legal philosopher, it only follows logically that the maid's gracefulness gets lost in the course of the anecdote's tradition. Grown old, she is now just the blinded philosopher's angel of death.

With a late demand, if not the latest, for a totality in the image of nature (*Naturanschauung*), Alexander von Humboldt practiced unprotected, risk-prone observation of the sky on his great travels, where he was exposed to irate glances from the unenlightened outside of the observatories that had already become bulwarks of theory. He only became a legendary figure as a sky observer in the end: through a political satire that had appeared for the first time in 1874 in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Narodowa* in the form of a report, that was probably fraudulent, though it did not neglect a core reality. Then it was taken up in the same year in the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* and from this source wandered right off to the German magazine *Aus allen Weltteilen*, only to turn back to Russia finally in 1889, whence it must have emerged.³¹⁴ It deals with an episode that is supposed to have occurred in a small city of the Tobolsk government during Humboldt's trip in 1829 to the Ural and Altai Mountains and to the Caspian Sea. In the satirical text, the episode turns into the content of a report by the local police officer to the general governor.

³¹⁴ Humboldt, *Gespräche*, 103. [Blumenberg's note: On the historical truth content, see: Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 122. "It could be precisely that the place names, which are evidently incorrect were purposefully forged in order to conceal the story's originator."] (translation varies from cited edition; citation not found)

If we view the episode as a variant on the configuration of the Milesian philosopher with the Thracian maid, then the insinuation changes. The establishment of science in the modern world has proven decisive: the laughter that unfailingly erupts is that of the imagined observer of the nightly scene, the reader of the fictional piece. For a civilization familiar with the ritual activities of the theorist, the work-related annoyance of a state officer towards the sky observer has no chance of being taken seriously. The satire—or the satirical exploitation of a real event—targets a public whom one can no longer expect *not* to place themselves on the side of theoretical action. Especially this action has decisively removed itself from the suspicion of ruling class leisure, has long been recognized as solid “work.” What plays out is the switching of sides through realism’s concession to theory on the one hand and its doubt over what constitutes healthy understanding on the other.

Due to this “reoccupation” of the archaic schema, it is worth inspecting the police report in its full scope:

A few days ago, a German by the name of Humboldt came here, frail, of short stature, insignificant by all appearances, but important... Although I showed him deference as duty requires, I must still note that this person seemed suspicious and very dangerous to me. From the very beginning I did not like him.... The whole time he granted the higher personages of the city no regard and occupied himself with the Poles and with other political criminals whom I keep under surveillance. I dare report that the sort of conversation he had with the political criminals did not escape my attention, especially since after his long conversations he went to the peak of a hill that dominates the city. They dragged a box up there and drew an

instrument from it that had the look of a long tube that seemed to me and to the whole society to be a canon. After he had steadied the tube on three feet, he directed it right at the city and everyone went over to him to see if he had aimed it properly. Since I see a great danger to the city in all of this (for it is completely made of wood), I promptly ordered the garrison, which consists of a deputy and six common men, to head for the same spot with loaded weapons, not to let the German out of sight, and to observe his shenanigans. If the fraudulent deceptions of this person justify my suspicion, then we will give up our life for the Czar and Holy Russia.³¹⁵

Although the exaggeration of the police action and the pathos in the language of the report are definitely for satirical, the core of the distrust towards the expedition and its activities is reflected in a journal entry from May 1851, where Karl August Varnhagen von Ense notes about the Czar's visit to Berlin: "The Czar did not speak a word with Humboldt while in his presence, which the latter took badly, but which [would have been] a delight for a courtier..."³¹⁶

For Humboldt, the experience of 1829 could not have been surprising if he had considered past experience in addition to the absolutist zeal for the state. The theorist's position as eccentric in a cultural sphere held back from scientific progress at the turn of the nineteenth century was in fact already familiar to him from his first great trip from 1799 to 1804 through the viceroyalty of pre-revolutionary South America. There as here, the equipped sky watcher was a

³¹⁵ [Blumenberg's note: The fact that it was not unobjectionable everywhere in the world to engage in the astronomical theorist's stance and to use the appropriate instruments, comes up in the travelogue of G. Rose regarding his contact with a Chinese border-guard in Bachtu on the Irtysh River in the same year of 1829, where Humboldt takes special precautionary measures in order to arouse no suspicion among the Chinese with his procedures for determining the height of the sun. Humboldt, *Gespräche*, 108.]

³¹⁶ Ense, *Tagebücher*, IX 232–233.

suspect figure. For determining his geographical position, Humboldt preferred the mirror-sextant in whose artificial horizon the sun was reflected more clearly as a star and which enabled easier reading during the day. Moreover, it made it possible to decide how to determine his position at night, according to Humboldt's own report, when a certain population had a distrustful orientation towards operations performed during the day.³¹⁷

When Humboldt embarked on his South American expedition in 1799, he must have waited until nightfall the first time he made observations, due to the population's distrust:

I have observed the sun and the stars of the first magnitude as often as circumstances have allowed. In the Kingdom of Valencia, I have had to suffer a lot of nasty hisses from the rabble... I have often had the pain of seeing the sun go down without being allowed to unpack my instruments. I was required to wait for the quiet of night in order to satisfy myself with a star of the second magnitude, which showed up sadly on an artificial horizon.... In Martorell, I made observations in the middle of the road surrounded by 30 onlookers, who cried that I was praying to the moon.³¹⁸

The Thracian maid had already perhaps mistook the theory of the stars for their cult—and may have supposed her gods to be the stronger ones on this basis.

After the strange rituals of theory were long integrated into the lifeworlds of Europe's cities, as misunderstood as these rituals may have remained or still

³¹⁷ Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 56.

³¹⁸ Beck, *Alexander von Humboldts Amerikanische Reise*, 90. [Blumenberg's note: Humboldt reports this in his observation journal to the Gotha astronomer Franz von Zach, who had introduced the mirror sextant in Germany and had instructed Humboldt in its use. *Ibid.*, 35.] (citation found in a different text from the one cited by Blumenberg)

would for a while, the theorist's outlandishness was renewed again as soon as he left the secure positions of his mustered instruments and the daily discipline of their use and set off on an expedition. Here he did not just find the unfamiliar, but became it as well. Humboldt's passport to visit the Spanish colonies contained the precautionary note that he was allowed to use his instruments "with full freedom" and could "conduct astronomical observations in all Spanish territories."³¹⁹ The alienated response to the alienating behavior (*Das Befremden über das Befremdliche*) takes on alternating forms and degrees. It is comparatively harmless among the young ladies of Quito, who do not see the gallant cosmopolitan dally longer than is necessary to pay them compliments and to satisfy his appetite, only in order to return immediately to looking at the rocks outside again and to collecting plants: "At night, when we had long gone to bed, he was staring at the stars. We women could understand that all much less than the Marquis, my father," one of those beauties, Rosa Montúfar, tells the geographer Moritz Wagner more than a half century later.³²⁰

Humboldt came closest to the Milesian philosopher's situation in 1801 in Bogotá when all sorts of gossip and rumors about himself were shared with him just outside of a reception held for him by the local nobles. In a sketch of his lost journals, he notes the discrepancy between the beautiful speeches about the

³¹⁹ Beck, *Alexander von Humboldts Amerikanische Reise*, 100.

³²⁰ Humboldt, *Gespräche*, 24.

scientist's self-sacrifice for the interest of humanity and the disappointment that he did not meet the expectations directed toward him of a stiff and awkward scholar about whom the reputation had circulated all around that he observed the stars from the depth of a well.³²¹

The century of the Enlightenment had fundamentally ended. Not only had it never penetrated these parts of the world, it had not even penetrated the traveling scholar's motivations, who perceived no opportunity to enlighten the surroundings, particularly not the ladies' world, as he attended to his procedures; so little did the thrill of teaching seem to surge in him. It would only take a quarter century for Humboldt's lectures in Berlin—the precursor to *Cosmos*—to become the talk of dinner tables and salons. But that was Berlin, where people felt the need to enlighten the world so little that they thought they could give themselves over to the pleasure of the whole. Humboldt's success becomes one of the last highpoints of satisfaction where the theorist satisfies expectations, his plummet becomes impossible, the laughter decisively falls silent.

³²¹ [Blumenberg's note: Quote from Schumacher, *Südamerikanische Studien*, 102–104. “Now people from all corners were making beautiful speeches about the interest of humanity and the sacrifice for science; compliments flowed in the names of the viceroy and the archbishop. Everything sounded so endlessly grand, only they found the man himself very small and very young. They have imagined instead of a thirty-year-old, a fifty-year-old, someone stiff and awkward. Besides, the most contradictory reports had been spread from Cartagena: I could not speak Spanish well, I always observed the stars from inside a deep well, I had a chaplain and a mistress as part of my entourage....”]

XII. Where Thales had failed, according to Nietzsche

“How was it even possible for Thales to renounce myth? Thales as statesman! Something must have occurred at this point.”³²² Nietzsche expresses astonishment rather than explicating a question when he drafts his notes on the problematic of the protophilosopher in 1875. By looking back on the first member of his guild, he already sees the last of them: the last philosopher, whom he had already envisioned in 1872 as the one who would relinquish philosophy for a new myth of art.³²³

Combining the first and the last in this way only made sense if there was something like a teleology for the story between beginning and end, which would

³²² Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*, 145. “Pre-writing for a text about philosophers,” 1875, *Gesammelte Werke*, VI 118. This quote comes from “Science and Wisdom in Conflict,” one of a group of seven “pre-writings” (*Vorarbeiten*) for book Nietzsche never wrote about philosophers’ impact on culture. Perhaps the best known and most complete of these unpublished pre-writings from 1872-1875 is “On Truth and Lie in the Non-moral Sense.” Throughout this chapter, Blumenberg cites the 1920 *Musarionausgabe* edition of Nietzsche’s works, although a more complete and accurate *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* edition of Nietzsche’s works had been underway since 1967. Blumenberg might have preferred the outdated edition, since it combines these thematically related writings under one heading, while the newer edition sacrifices thematic unity for completeness and chronological order.

³²³ Here Blumenberg has paraphrased several lines from one of Nietzsche’s outlines for the never finished philosophers’ book: “Tragic resignation. The end of philosophy. Only art has the capacity to save us.... Culture as the antidote.... God knows what kind of culture this will be! It is beginning at the end.” *Ibid.*, 153, 154. The preliminary title for this outline was “The Last Philosopher,” written in 1872, the same year that Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy*. In his notes for “The Last Philosopher,” Nietzsche urges philosophers to strive for cultural impact, as opposed to accuracy. Thales’ statement, “everything is water,” exemplifies such irrational philosophy: “Here we have a transference:... The whole world is moist; *therefore, being moist is the whole world*. Metonymy. A false inference.” *Ibid.*, 48. Blumenberg finds that Nietzsche models an irrational way to read the history of philosophy: rather than reconstruct the figure of Thales from historical information, Nietzsche imputes mythic irrationality to Thales’ character. On this premise, Nietzsche finds it astonishing that Thales could have rejected myth.

have to be recognizable at the beginning, at least as an insinuation. The same Thales of Miletus, whose break from myth had been the entire purpose of his more rebellious than insightful water-cosmogony, held himself to a criterion for a realism, whose concept of reality made him incomprehensible to the maid. She cannot perceive “profundity” in Thales’ forceful turn from the cosmos followed by his plummet into the sole primal element. Modernizing that aspect of this construction does not require Nietzsche to mention the anecdote of the well plummet, whose Platonic version he had traced back, during his philological days, to a collection of Thales’ sayings (*apomnemonemata*). The anecdote must have been “very old” and was treated “as plausible” by Aristotle.³²⁴ For Nietzsche, then, the Platonic version was more faithful to its source than what is found in Diogenes Laertius, whom he simply took for a dubious hack. He forges no connection, however, between the anecdote and the aspect of the figure of Thales most important to him, an aspect contained in one sentence of that early treatise:

³²⁴ *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 29. *Gesammelte Werke* IV 268-275 [Blumenberg’s note:; a lecture series beginning in 1872. “Finally that there was a set list of attributions to Thales is proved by Plato” in *Theatetus* 174 A. *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 29. It is clear: what Aristotle possessed must have been available to Plato as well, and “Aristotle is the only reliable source of Thales’ fundamental principle.” *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 27. A reminiscence on the anecdote could be contained in the poem “Declaration of Love” printed in the appendix of *The Gay Science* and whose subtitle reads “(whereby however the poet fell into a ditch).” Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 253. The poem appeared in 1882 and on the whole portrays the contraposition to the subtitle’s stance, for instance, in the second strophe: “Star and eternity, / he lives now in the heights that living shuns, / forgives all jealousy—: / Who see him fly, they too are soaring ones.” (ibid. 254) The Thales configuration is even more clearly marked if one adds the strophe that Nietzsche crossed out in the manuscript before the one quoted above: “He flew to the highest— now the sky / lifts him in glorious flight: / Now he rests motionless and hovers by, / forgetting glory and who is glorified.”]

“[Thales] must have been an extremely influential man politically,” for he putatively advised the Ionians to unite as a confederation in order to repel the Persian threat.³²⁵ The connection with the turn away from myth is then only established in the text through juxtaposition; the impulse is still expressly connected with the fundamentally mathematical orientation: “It was a great mathematician who gave rise to philosophy in Greece. Thence comes his feel for the abstract, the unmythical, the unallegorical.”³²⁶ Nietzsche found it peculiar that he remained in Delphi “despite his antimythological sentiments.”

Nietzsche brings two testimonies into conjunction with Thales’ great “departure:” the assumption of his Phoenician ancestry among the Alexandrian scholars, an assumption that achieved foundational significance, and the legend of his time spent in Egypt. The decisive trend against claiming the autochthony of theory and philosophy is marked impressively by two short sentences: “Now, for the first time, Greek philosophy is said to have not originated in Greece. The Phoenician still had to seek education among the Egyptians.”³²⁷ It is almost tempting to read in: and to be laughed at by a Thracian woman.

It thus remains undecided whether Thales found myth repugnant primarily as a mathematician or as a politician, who wanted to extinguish the particularizing

³²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, 24.

³²⁶ Ibid. Translation modified.

³²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, 25.

effect of the local myths with the goal of achieving higher unities. Nevertheless, the only reliably transmitted sentence from Thales, that the origin of everything is water, can also be read as a unifying ersatz myth for the Ionian coastal cities. It should not only have presented them with their common origin, but also with the condition of their common survival. Nietzsche places weight on the rationality of this one sentence as “a hypothesis of the natural sciences of great worth.”³²⁸ He also considers that worth to justify the persistently upheld association between that sentence and the image of Thales the astronomer: the facts would have proven him right in so far as the present day celestial bodies must have derived from less stable aggregate states, back to the gaseous primeval form of the world, familiar from the hypothesis of Kant and Laplace. The natural philosophy founded by Thales was then “certainly on the right path.”³²⁹ Something had been done there, which would neither require a complete correction nor be possible to repeat or supersede at a later time: “To conceive the entirety of such a multifarious universe as the merely formal differentiation of *one* fundamental material belongs to an inconceivable freedom and boldness! This is a service of such a magnitude that no one may aspire to it a second time.”

For Nietzsche, Thales was a realist, but not as the man behind the oil-press speculation, which Nietzsche does not mention once in his early treatise; nor is

³²⁸ Ibid., 27.

³²⁹ Ibid., 28.

Thales a realist in foretelling the solar eclipse, which Nietzsche appreciates as the only stable point for dating Thales' lifetime, but which he sees as unrelated to theory's importance for consoling human fears. That Thales was successful with his prediction, but failed in his vision to confederate the Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor, did not hinder Nietzsche from accentuating Thales' character as a statesman. His statement of burnout, that everything is full of gods—whose universally quantifying form competed with the new founding sentence about the ubiquity of water—showed up as an indicator of a stronger fact: the first philosopher failed right away with the first political concept that emerged from philosophy's first step.

Nietzsche says Thales failed due to the endurance of what he believed he had left behind him: "he failed due to the old mythical concept of the polis."³³⁰

The only way in which theorists stay successful in the long run is in their

³³⁰ Nietzsche, *Science and Wisdom in Conflict, Gesammelte Werke* VI 118. [Blumenberg's note: The last drafts date from 1875.] In this text, Nietzsche explains most clearly why Thales makes such a polysemous inaugural figure: the statement that "everything is water" is mythical, scientific, and philosophical. It is mythical "because the sentence pronounces something about the origin of things, [scientific] because it does this without image or mythical fable, and finally [philosophical] because it contains the thought 'everything is one'—even if only in larval form." Ibid. Nietzsche also believes that Thales only inaugurated philosophy for a political purpose: by presenting a hidden ontological unity in nature, Thales tried and failed to introduce the concept of political unity to the Greeks, so that they would accept the idea of a Pan-Hellenic Confederacy for the purposes of defending against Persian invaders. Like Blumenberg, Nietzsche understood that "To know something is only to work within the most popular metaphors, that is, nothing more than imitation of an experienced imitation." Nietzsche, "The Last Philosopher," *Gesammelte Werke*, VI 57. Unlike the other writers that Blumenberg has cited, Nietzsche allows himself the freedom to invent new accounts of the founding of philosophy. Nietzsche need not make recourse to the Thales anecdote, because he seeks artistic inspiration, not "knowledge," and thus does not need to "work within the most popular metaphor" for theory—what Blumenberg calls theory's protohistory.

perspective towards cosmogonies, according to Kant; the statesman had underestimated what he had gotten into and overestimated what he was able to offer with his ersatz myth. The precondition for his vision was simultaneously the impediment to its realization: “If the polis were the cutting edge of Hellenic will, and had it relied on myth, that would mean giving up myth along with giving up the old concept of the polis.” That was what philosophy was not able to accomplish. The universalizing power will either come from a place where myth is genuinely weak, namely from Rome, or it will arise from the dogmatism of the great religions, which legitimates the reckless forces demanding unity.³³¹

We do not know to which segment of Thales’ biography the anecdote of the well plummet refers. Only late is the elderly and blind theorist brought into view, whose demise Nietzsche translates according to Anaximenes’ alleged letter: “he fell from a cliff at night.”³³² His fascination with the composite of philosopher and statesman—no less with the reason why this composite failed—is relevant. Thales, who watched heaven and was mocked by the maid, could be a figure for resignation; he who fled into the nights of star observation also fled into philosophy as the long-term instrument for grappling with myth, since it was still

³³¹ For Blumenberg, myth and religion represent different ways of addressing human fears. Myth is not universalizing: its principle is that of “division of forces,” so that no particular environmental or emotional force (wind, lightning, rage, war) is overwhelming to humanity. By contrast, the great religions subsume everything under the power of one god, so that we may address one sole representative for all of nature. In religion, we know which god to make contracts with. See Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 1985, 23.

³³² Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, 30.

not overcome. When Plato showed Thales his highest reverence, in that he blended him with his image of Socrates, the Persian wars had already taken place; Athens had already exhausted its success with its hegemony; philosophy had failed in the political once again in the person of Plato himself.

Nietzsche called the Greeks “the counterpiece to all realists.” They supposedly only believed in the reality of humans and gods, whereas they observed “all of nature equally only as a disguise, masquerade, and metamorphosis of these god-people.”³³³ With the sentence, *everything is full of gods*, Thales must have meant that for nature—or for something like a nature—there was no more room; to accomplish this, he reduced the cosmogonic instrumentarium to a single element. What Nietzsche attributes to the Greeks and where he lets Thales go against the grain is nothing other than the anthropomorphism of his own assessment of the world: the disappearance of nature, or of that which she would have been, among the projections which humanity cast over her and in which humanity recognizes nothing other than itself in nature.³³⁴ Nietzsche has once again followed the overwhelming Docetism, which resides in Greek myth *and* lives on in Greek philosophy—even in that of a

³³³ Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 41. 1873, *Gesammelte Werke* IV 165-167.

³³⁴ Nietzsche was not the first in the nineteenth century to think thus about the Greeks. Wilhelm von Humboldt also describes the Greeks as having projected themselves onto the world, whereas moderns have the task of constructing themselves out of the world, via education. Unlike Nietzsche, Humboldt considers the Greek projection model outdated. (Cf. Humboldt’s *Bildung und Sprache*)

Parmenides, who had only agreed to the unity of the one existent reality, who returned everything to what it was in the form of “belief” (*doxa*), and who presumably treated it all with disproportionately more thoroughness than he had treated that which had been said about that one being.

The failure of the contradictory approach towards myth taken by Thales of Miletus is only superficially his individual catastrophe; the miscarriage of Thales’s demythologization only exhibited more drastic consequences than elsewhere, because the Ionian cities were subordinated immediately following their philosophical hardness of hearing and their stubborn refusal to see themselves as exceptions in history. The beginning of philosophy already decided what would not be possible for it—even with more nuanced distinctions between appearance and reality.

Nietzsche’s earliest surviving encounter with the Thales anecdote occurs in a text which does not belong in the repertoire of classical philology and not even in that of the Diogenes scholar. Nietzsche counts as one of those not so rare intellects who appear to exist only in order to write about themselves.³³⁵ Already

³³⁵ “*nur über sich selbst... schreiben.*” Nietzsche’s self-referentiality may not be purely exhibitionist, if, as he wrote to Erwin Rohde, he writes books *for* himself as audience: “*mihi ipsi scripsi.*” Qtd. in Blumenberg, *Ein Mögliches Selbstverständnis*, 83. That Nietzsche only writes about himself is not meant to dismiss Nietzsche’s writing. In fact, self-analysts may be precisely the most revealing writers for Blumenberg’s metaphorology, which seeks to catalogue the language of philosophical perplexity. Blumenberg’s bibliography is full of self-analysts, including Nietzsche and Montaigne, whose whole philosophy is an extended self-exploration. Blumenberg’s book *Der Mann vom Mond* focuses on the compulsive journal-keeper Ernst Jünger. And finally

as a thirteen-year-old, he wrote “From my life,” and we also have the fortune of another early self-thematization in the “Retrospective on my two years in Leipzig.” The latter describes his second winter there, from 1866 to 1867, when he entered a writing contest with an essay on Diogenes Laertius’ sources.³³⁶ In the retrospective, he reports about a discovery in the Leipziger Rathsbibliothek, whose mention already sheds light on his later interest in the anecdotal within philosophy: “From the rich mass of older prints, a Walter Burley stood out to me, which the bibliographic handbooks do not know: Walter Burley, *De Vita Philosophorum*.”³³⁷ At an early age, Nietzsche ran into evidence of the late medieval interest in ancient philosophers’ famous situations and sayings, an interest which had died out by his own century despite the revived historiography of philosophy—or precisely because of its preoccupation with concepts.

Of Pierre Bayle it could be said that his excisions from the inventory of extant literature formed part of the precondition for overrating its historical

although Blumenberg takes Husserl as a starting point for his own philosophy, part of his fascination with Husserl’s thought precisely derives from its limited application only to “the phenomenologist,” that is, to Husserl himself: “Others cannot be mere ‘phenomena’ in order to be transcendental subjects; they must, to put it trivially, be phenomenologists for their part. But how can one verify that?” Blumenberg, *Beschreibung Des Menschen*, 91. However, precisely because self-description can hardly claim to apply to others, it is the privileged site of metaphors that seek to establish understanding by triggering the imagination.

³³⁶ Nietzsche, “De Laertii Diogenis fontibus,” *Gesammelte Werke* I 299. This contest entry by the twenty three year old Nietzsche is 92 pages long and written entirely in Latin (except for the frequent quotations in Greek). While he enjoyed the thought and research that went into this project, he was unhappy to see it published because of the “stammering” and “foolish” language. Nietzsche, letters to Deussen and Rohde, quoted in *Gesammelte Werke* I 452-453. It seems that his school-taught Latin did not allow him to express his life-affirming insights as adequately as German would.

³³⁷ Nietzsche, “Retrospective on my two years in Leipzig,” *Gesammelte Werke* XXI 59.

accuracy, a misjudgment cultivated through the Renaissance. And thus freedom from contradiction sufficed for transmitted anecdotal material to achieve historical credence, according to Bayle; for Nietzsche, the guiding premise of the historian's work starts exactly the other way around. For every datum and fact, the burden of evidence already lay completely within the historian's evaluative work. It is was thus inevitable that Nietzsche attributed the Thales anecdote in its Platonic version to the source of the protophilosopher's statements, from which Aristotle had produced the most reliable of Thales' dogmatic propositions. Moreover, the anecdote's narrative quality can hardly be characteristic of such sketches: even during the Milesian well plummet, the philosopher is not allowed a single word.

With this construction, Nietzsche had authenticated the historicity of an event, which could have amounted to the Greeks' first tragedy, their real tragedy, the only tragedy of their philosophy. The figure of Thales, in Nietzsche's view, bore sole responsibility for the decision about how to introduce the new form of thought successfully: whether the unity of reason could ever prevail over the pluralism of myths. That would take more than the weak motivation of thought alone. No situation could render political survival such a powerful motivation for philosophical thought about the origin and unity of reason than when the Greeks came under threat of enslavement by Asia.

The foreignness of theory in the lifeworld did not only mean its foreignness in front of foreigners from Thrace. Even the Greeks had not comprehended what was ascribed to them there, nor what had been offered them. Plato's correctness in seeing Socrates prefigured in the protophilosopher's plummet has become part of the history of the philosophical genre from Nietzsche's perspective. The tragedy of philosophy results from the fact that the situation of its beginning is simply unrepeatable. If the decisive aspect of this story could not be completed in a situation or in a process, but rather had only been acute in *one* moment of *one* single person, then no genetic derivation helps in comprehending the leap, the hiatus, the assumption; instead, it is an image, a scene, an anecdote.

In the initial lecture of his Basel professorship in May 1869, Nietzsche defended classical philology with the paradigm of the Homeric question against the accusation of having set out in "a destructive, iconoclastic direction."³³⁸ It is recognizable that he not only wants to win back this figure against the Romantic misunderstanding of folk poetry (and other folk accomplishments). Without naming any other names, the text reads thusly: for Thales, who clashed with myth and failed due to its power, the image of the well-plummet and of its

³³⁸ Nietzsche, *Homer and Classical Philology*, 1869, *Gesammelte Werke* II 7.

misunderstanding witness may not go lost for the sake of something like
“historical criticism.”

Nietzsche views Thales of Miletus as an erratic occurrence among the Greeks. He is the realist, not the Thracian maid. In that claim, Nietzsche performs the reception-technique of switching sides within anecdote. Thales is the realist, because he “began to look into the depths of nature without fantastic fables about it,” in that he recognized a requirement for the survival of his polis. Again, a form of “unconscious” beginning: someone founds philosophy and science, although he only wants to find the organ against the loss of freedom. The sentence, “everything is full of gods,” will be read differently depending on whether we see the ultimate goal of *logos* as demolishing *mythos* or as only serving to replace myth’s distaste for unity. It should have been the closing sentence of myth and the link to its replacement, but instead it became the beginning of an endless chain of new claims, which distanced themselves again from radical restriction and all of which operated with the expression “everything.”

As Nietzsche saw it, this “everything” only works in the sense that Thales intended if a “nothing” remains included as part of it. The philologist’s attitude makes it understandable that Nietzsche did not bother with a different and very late, thus poorly verified Thales anecdote, which first added a sharp antithesis to the statement of god-filledness: when King Croesus asked Thales what he thought

of the gods, Thales repeatedly requested time to think, and finally answered laconically, “nothing.”³³⁹

Against our preferences perhaps, we may only relate both statements to one another fittingly, if we think back to the Thales of the oil-press speculation and the earthly condition for his competence: only because, over the years, there were differences in the scarcity and abundance of harvests in the world, could he observe and exploit intermittency—the business cycle—in a way that was useful and led to income. The mythic world was not a world where changes occurred regularly; as one filled with gods, it was one where occupations lasted, occupations which, however clement and influenceable they may have been, did not offer assistance for predicting solar eclipses or oil harvests.³⁴⁰ Achieving that did not depend on saying what everything was already full of, but rather saying whence it all came forth and how everything obtained the guarantee of its lasting concern for human affairs (*Daseinsstoff*). It was therefore “efficient” in the highest degree to assign nothing to the gods, in order to adorn the question of “whence” with one answer: “from the water.”

³³⁹ Tertullian, *Ad nationes* II 2,11: “Thales Milesius Croeso sciscitanti, quid de deis arbitraretur, post aliquot deliberandi commeatus, ‘nihil’ reuntiavit.”

³⁴⁰ *Besetzungen*. “Occupation” is the word Blumenberg uses to describe questions and concerns that “occupy” the minds of a period, as the question of the meaning of the totality of history occupied the medieval period. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 48. In non-mythic periods where humans make claims about nature, the authority of these claims can be challenged, and questions can be “reoccupied.” In the mythic worldview, as presented in this passage, reoccupation was unthinkable: “occupations lasted” because gods held the only valid answers to all of the lasting questions. (See note 443.)

Whoever considered—as the descendants of Thales did in the Ionian natural philosophy—that this answer depended on the content and one needed to test more closely whether water deserved this rank, had already distorted what had or should have been won in that statement. The Athenians may at least have grasped this fact when they sought a beginning for their philosophical tradition that was simultaneous to that of the Ionians and let their protophilosopher, Musaeus, say: “all things proceed from unity and are resolved again into unity.”³⁴¹ This sentence—still exemplary today as a theory of the universe—makes clear it what Nietzsche was devising. In turning to Thales the statesman and his relationship to myth by way of the transmitted sentence in its singularity, Nietzsche found a satisfying demonstration for the fact that no further sentences were necessary to understand the restrictive function of philosophy for the return of myth. The factual failure of philosophy, as again on much later occasions, appears unable to overpower the impressive force of its self-presentation as lacking any historical confusion about its beginning.

Indeed, in order not to obfuscate the origin’s manifestation, Nietzsche makes no use of Herodotus’ nuanced defense of Thales’ ambitions as a statesman.

³⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1 I 3, 5. Diogenes Laertius evokes Musaeus in order to claim the autochthony of Greek philosophy in Athens (against claims that it originated in Egypt or in the East): “It is said that [Musaeus], the son of Eumolpus, was the first to compose a genealogy of the gods and to construct a sphere, and that he maintained that all things proceed from unity and are resolved again into unity.” Musaeus’ life is more mythologized and his output more mythic than Thales’. Ancient authors considered Musaeus either a relative or a teacher of the legendary musician Orpheus, and Musaeus supposedly composed the first mythological poems about the origin of the gods.

The historian tells how the Ionians gathered in the Panionium after their defeat and the loss of their freedom in order to hear the speech of Bias of Priene, who gave them the advice to sail together to Sardinia and found a single all-Ionian city there. In so doing, they would escape servitude, come into well-being, and additionally win rule over others from the position of the largest of all the islands. Had they followed this advice, Herodotus adds, they could have become the happiest and richest people in all Greece. But they only needed this advice in the first place because they did not listen to Thales of Miletus before their oppression: for he had advised them to found a single political midpoint (*bouleuterion*) and to make all cities dependent on it.³⁴²

Herodotus simply does not say why the Ionians followed neither that advice before their misfortune nor his other advice after it. Nietzsche explains it with his insight into Thales' way of thinking and its relationship to Ionia's political reality. This gives the first philosophical treatment of myth its situation-specific edge: in order to establish the *one* center of political power, Thales sought to eliminate the local stubbornness about gods by means of *one* theory of the world from and on water.

Nietzsche did not find anything comparable in the other report we possess through Herodotus about Thales, although the first of all historians gives free rein

³⁴² Herodotus., *The Histories* I 170.

here as well to the finesse of his affinity for depicting human relationships.³⁴³ Only indirectly does he show what meaning it must have had that a citizen of Miletus had been able to predict a solar eclipse. It is explained through the case of the barbarians: with the same darkening of the sun, the Medes and Lydians, who had been waging war with one another for years, were seized with such a panic that they immediately made peace. Granted, the side-effect of conquering fear had been a good one this time, yet an accidental one resulting from lacking insight. Thales had effected the lasting transformation of the human conception of the world by liberating his fellow citizens from this very fear.

When Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* appeared at the beginning of 1872, and in the same year the young Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff spoke out, against Erwin Rhode's exuberant advertisement of the work, under the disdainful title "Future Philology!" in which he concluded by demanding no less than that the author resign "from the position in which he supposedly teaches scientifically," Thales of Miletus was not the topic.³⁴⁴ That within the dispute over the origin of tragedy and the context of its demise with Socrates a tragedy of philosophy itself could be discerned, would first be recognizable a quarter century later, when Nietzsche was already long silenced and Wilamowitz, having arrived

³⁴³ Ibid. I 74.

³⁴⁴ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Zukunftsphilologie! Eine Erwiderung Auf Friedrich Nietzsches "Geburt Der Tragödie."*

at the top rank in his discipline, had to hold the speech for the Kaiser's birthday, which bore the wide-ranging title, "World Periods."

Wilamowitz's speech revealed that the beginning of philosophy on the coastal edge of Asia Minor already grasped what Wilamowitz' contemporaries believed was only first grasped during the age of Hellenism, which colonized the cosmos to replace the declining *polis*: the view of the world as a whole was attained by foregoing a political whole. Where Nietzsche saw in Thales' account of the world's origin precisely the founding act, though futile, of a state constitution ready for implementation against the polycentrism of myths, Wilamowitz takes the developing natural philosophy as consistent with that finally lacking possibility. The interest in the sky becomes the expression of earthly homelessness.

The Milesian watching the stars did not become the laughingstock of the Thracian woman without reason (*Grund*): "The Ionian men, who first turned their gaze to the sky, not to banish the spirits or to read the future, but in order to learn the laws of the sky's phenomena, and for them the order and harmony of nature, the unity of all life emerged from that study. This founding of natural science had no fatherland, and would have hardly otherwise been able to observe the world as a whole."³⁴⁵ Effortlessly, the Sophistic sentence, "man is the measure of all

³⁴⁵ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Neumann, *Weltperioden.*, 9.

things,” is projected towards Ionia and made into the expression of an individualism only thinkable as stateless, an individualism which those Ionian men would not have dared, “if they had not been world citizens and only exerted a destructive effect on the existing states.” In anticipation of the judgment of his historically oriented contemporary colleagues, Wilamowitz immediately adds: “Who could hold it against the political historian if he reviles the fatherlandlessness of these Ionians?” Here at the beginning of philosophy resides a conflict, which even “the greatest Athenian,”³⁴⁶ to whom Wilamowitz would dedicate so much life energy and lifetime, could not negotiate.

“...[O]f everything else...”—says Nietzsche in the lecture from 1872 about the pre-Platonic philosophers, after he showed his esteem for the preliminary philosophy of water as protomatter—“[w]e must be suspicious of everything else that one wishes to know about Thales.”³⁴⁷ The philologist still does not know what the philosopher will find important about this state of affairs. Next comes the concentration on dispelling myth in one single sentence, which replaces it ironically. Nietzsche finds it problematic that the old collection of sayings, from which he construes the reliability of Aristotle’s quotation and the

³⁴⁶ *der größte Athenier*. This may refer to the historian Herodotus, the influential ancient historian who became a citizen in Athens as an adult. Herodotus writes about Thales’ political influence on Miletus at several points in *Histories* I.74, 75, 170. The idea of prizing Herodotus simply because he started the genre that Wilamowitz practices is precisely the kind of “antiquarian” interest in the past that the freelance philosopher Nietzsche derides in

³⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, 28.

anecdote by Plato, should not once have been repeated afterwards. Where Aristotle reports, Seneca actually quotes word for word, and, moreover, in both cases a plausible connection with the central doxogram is given: “the earth swims on water” allows Aristotle to extend Thales’ proposition, and “earthquakes come about from the motion of these waters,” as Seneca quotes word for word. For Nietzsche Seneca’s version is just “a noteworthy passage.” It is not yet recognizable what effect his discomfort with such extensions will have. But finally we see that it will not have been for any other motive than to deem inauthentic the *Nautical Astronomy* attributed to Thales. That book title, on the other hand, seems, in a way that is palpable for everyone, to unify both of Thales’ theoretical passions, for stars and for water: in all of these cases, it is about the secondary acquisition of explanatory accomplishments from that one primal principle, which is meant to set a great image (*Anschauung*) apart from myth, without providing the detail of answers to questions.³⁴⁸

We recognize with little effort that a not yet fully ripened problem of Nietzsche’s comes along with the conflict between that originary proposition and its “applications:” that of the antagonism between philosophy and science. On the

³⁴⁸ “Myths do not answer questions; they make things unquestionable.” Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 1985, 118. That rationality achieves its persuasiveness not by denying myths but by providing answers to questions left by myth is a central thesis of Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*. Here Blumenberg is reiterating his point from the beginning of this book: “Annexing the world that comes from water and rests on it to the world of the gods hardly constituted the first bold move of reason. If we knew more about how Thales had done it, we would perhaps be reminded more of the exegesis of a canonical text than of the founding of a philosophical system.” (12)

one hand, in the philosopher-lecture of 1972 he says explicitly that as a mathematician and as an astronomer Thales stands “at the peak of Greek science;” yet the defense against any extension of the authorized transmission shows that Nietzsche is set on having the scientist Thales step down behind what Nietzsche wants seen as the philosophical in him. His direction of orientation is not the *cosmos*, but the *polis* and its relationship to *mythos*. With that, it also becomes understandable why Nietzsche lets the anecdote fall so easily within the authorized collection of “apomnemonemata;” it shows science as the wrong turn of the philosopher, who does the wrong thing at the wrong time generally or once withdrew prematurely into the night’s protection out of resignation from his failed warnings to the *polis*. Even if the contrast is not yet fully displayed, it is still already recognizable that Thales of Miletus should not stand at the beginning of the history of science, but at the beginning of philosophy, and that these are everything but one and the same.

When Plato manufactured the connection between the beginning of philosophy and its fulfillment, by projecting the Thales anecdote onto his Socrates, he neglected the discrepancy, which was supposed to have been so important to Socrates: the retreat from natural philosophy and his new definition of the theoretical task centered on humanity and its morality. Nietzsche has followed this line of Plato’s: his Thales of Miletus is the first opponent of myth in favor of the self-assertion of the Ionian cities, and his Socrates is the perfecter of

destroying myth, particularly in the form of tragedy. Thales, like Socrates, supposedly stood against myth, except that Socrates no longer understood what it was about when he did it—and even if he had understood, it would have been too late. Thus the death of Socrates no longer functions within the archaic reservoir of images as epigonal delay on completing a decision, which had been pronounced by Thales under the compulsion of naked self-assertion. The decision was philosophy; the historical consequence, science. Socrates pulled philosophy down to the bourgeois sphere, privatized its public spirit and prepared it to become an assisting organ in the long run for the realization of Christianity.

Philosophy and science stand in a broken relation to one another. If Thales was “a creative master,” who began to see nature in its depths, without being reliant on fantastic fabelry, then he stands indeed unmistakably across from nature in the attitude of science, yet only in order to leave it behind him just as soon: “If in doing so he used and then passed on the methods of science and of proof he but demonstrates a typical characteristic of the philosophic mind. if he indeed used science and the evincible, but soon surpassed them, then this is indeed a typical hallmark of the philosophical mind.”³⁴⁹ Thales uses all calculability, as solar eclipses and pyramid measurements are proven, advances past them just as fast in the direction of the unusual, astounding, difficult, divine, and at the same time

³⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 42–43. *Gesammelte Werke* IV 163–168.

useless, because it was not about human goods according to Aristotle's claim as quoted by Nietzsche. The drive for knowledge, which stands behind science, is as such blind: "Science rushes headlong, without selectivity, without 'taste,' at whatever is knowable, in the blind desire to know all at any cost. Philosophical thinking, on the other hand, is ever on the scent of those things which are most worth knowing, the great and important insights."³⁵⁰ For this differentiation, Thales simply yields no evidence. His astronomy, conducted in a sea trade city, could hardly be opposed to mastering the calculable facts nor even be worthy of reverence for surpassing mere calculation. It seems more likely that it was about assuring others that nature was calculable so that they could reliably put nature's calculability in service to economic goals for their own livelihood.

Nietzsche's proposition about the difference between science and philosophy sounds good and formulates an expectation that has remained alive

³⁵⁰ Ibid. 43. This criticism of Nietzsche's claim—that philosophy is more discriminate than science in its pursuit of knowledge—ushers in the next chapter, where Blumenberg questions Heidegger's opposition to science in the name of recovering a natural relation to things. Heidegger claims that the modern natural science "holds us captive and makes us unfree" to ask what a thing is, a question which he claims would enable humanity to undergo "a change of questioning and evaluation, of seeing and deciding; in short, of the being-there in the midst of what is." Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 50, 51. (*Frage nach dem Ding* 49.) Such rhetorical gestures by Heidegger arouse intense skepticism in Blumenberg. In the essay "How would things be if Heidegger were understood?" Blumenberg describes Heidegger as disguising the demand for religious faith in his claims as a matter of "understanding:" "Understanding has entered in place of faith as the condition for a specific promise of salvation after the end of the current circumstance." Blumenberg, *Ein Mögliches Selbstverständnis*, 35.

under the changing name of lower and higher “critique”³⁵¹ up until the present day and that lives on today more than ever. But the proposition exposes an ease of differentiation, which does not work: science as industriousness about everything knowable and thus about everything, insofar as it is knowable; philosophy as infinite refinement in the choice of objects solely by the norm of their worthiness of being known. Such a formula bespeaks almost nothing about the factual relation between philosophy and science, because—as we may deeply regret—the value of a piece of knowledge first becomes evaluable once this knowledge has become known. For that reason, setting everything knowable on equal footing at the outset always precedes the act of profiling what is worth knowing. This fact can indeed bring belated “critical” evaluation to a halt and reduce it to empty complaining. For to act as if the standards for the worthiness of being known were only arbitrarily set after the fact and could just as well have been set before the fact is simply misleading a public, which has become nearly illiterate in such elementary states of affairs through its losses of history.

A few years after the exciting interpretation of Thales’ only authenticated sentence, Thales becomes an example for Nietzsche of how philosophy grasps and condenses the dignity of its objects, an example targeted against the drive for

³⁵¹ *Kritik*. Heidegger notes that critique meant isolating a concept for special scrutiny in the 18th century when Kant wrote his three Critiques. *Frage nach dem Ding* 121. “Critique” here refers to isolating a matter as important and worthy of special attention, what Nietzsche claims as the special task of philosophy. Its Greek root, “krinein,” can mean to *condemn* or to *privilege*, that is, any evaluative act: “to pick out, choose.” *A Greek-English Lexicon* 450.

knowledge as a case of lower movement and thus as the drive responsible for the nocturnal scene in Miletus and its interruption. Now philosophy begins “by legislating greatness.”³⁵² Here a sentence like Thales’ does not so much express a theoretical explanation of origin and union as it provides a name for that greatness—an naming act that displays superiority over facts and the drive to gather them. Philosophy corrals this drive, particularly when it “considers the greatest insight, that of essence and core of things, to be attainable and attained.” Nothing more happened, when Thales said, “Everything is water.”

In the moment when that was said, “man is stung up out of the wormlike probings and creepings-about of his separate sciences. He intuits the ultimate resolution of all things and overcomes, by means of such intuition, the vulgar restrictions of the lower levels of knowledge.”³⁵³ What justifies “standing quietly and becoming serious” after Thales’ dictum, is the state of affairs that in the sentence, “everything is water,” only metaphorically concealed by the other, “everything is one,” as Musaeus left it behind for the Athenians, according to legend. The pertinence of the Thalean dogma to the situation of the Ionian polis is thus dispensed with; in lieu of the concentration on the singular, but futile decision against myth, Nietzsche now finds the decision for the aesthetic finality of philosophy. Water does not stand for Thales’ perception, but for the lack of

³⁵² Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 43.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44.

early philosophical capacity to come up with an expression for perception: “Thus Thales had seen the unity of all that is, but when he went to communicate it, he found himself talking about water!”³⁵⁴ Regarding this last sentence of the Thales chapter, we only need to go one step further: in order to look at the unity of being, Thales turned his back to the city nightly and saw the starry sky; at that point, he fell into the water.

Nietzsche was too fascinated with the first proposition ever spoken in philosophy to have been able to turn a comparable attentiveness to the night scene of the well-plummet.³⁵⁵ If this anecdote, to whose historical license he had testified, could not have met his taste for what should have happened in order to suit the beginning of philosophy, then one will have to raise the question of whether the modern substitution for this anecdote, derision towards the Creation story by the Castilian King Alfonso the Wise, would not have fit more exactly

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 45.

³⁵⁵ Nietzsche does in fact reoccupy the Thales anecdote in “On Truth and Lie in the Non-moral Sense,” perhaps the most polished essay from the unpublished notebooks from the early 1870’s to which Blumenberg refers throughout this chapter. Rather than describe Thales specifically, Nietzsche polemically claims that “the intuitive man” (who orients himself in the world through metaphors instead of concepts “as was perhaps the case in ancient Greece”) “suffers more intensely, when he suffers; he even suffers more frequently, since he does not understand how to learn from experience and keeps falling over and over again into the same ditch. He is then just as irrational in sorrow as he is in happiness: he cries aloud and will not be consoled.” Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth* 90-91. *Gesammelte Werke.*, VI 91. Intuitiveness, according to Nietzsche, is not as adaptive as science for living in the world, but it is the attitude best suited for achieving cultural impact and is the most philosophically sound since it allows us to remain skeptical about the applicability of generalized concepts. In the upcoming chapter, Blumenberg cites Heidegger’s similar argument about the philosophical significance of Thales’ tumble. Heidegger asserts for philosophy what Nietzsche implies about “the intuitive man:” that failure to accomplish ordinary things is a necessary sacrifice for success in attaining rare and unforeseeable goals.

into Nietzsche's concept. We may wish to flesh out how he would have needed to transform this story in order to procure a creative expression for his "reoccupation" of the place of the dead God through the *Übermensch*. But we do not need to strain our imagination; he did that, or even more precisely: he found what suited him.

In the third treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the topic is the bad reputation, that of just letting things be, into which contemplative people easily fall—a reputation to which they react in turn by learning "to arouse a decided fear of oneself."³⁵⁶ The oldest philosophers, here incarnated by the Brahmins, would have needed "to fight down every kind of suspicion and resistance" against the rise of the philosophical in themselves and did this with the training methods of brutal eras. They had to rape the gods and received ideas within themselves "so as to be able to *believe* in their own innovations." That is the point at which Nietzsche recalls the story, which he calls famous, of King Vishvamitra who—as the product of such a tradition of self-discipline—"through millennia of self-torture acquired such a feeling of power and self-confidence that he endeavored to build a *new heaven*."

The story of the king belongs within the inquiry into the meaning of ascetic ideals. It is not a theoretical head start, like the one that the Castilian king

³⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, "Third Treatise: What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?" §10, 115. 1887, *Gesammelte Werke* XV 392f.

had achieved through his astronomical tables, that makes the Indian king into the prototype for the boldness that he articulates. Recklessness against himself legitimates him for another kind of theory, which approaches post-Christian modernity and its transformed asceticism as opposed to antiquity and its ideal of *theoria*. The Indian king only represents an exotic exaggeration of theory.

The Castilian king had derided the Creation story because it refused theory by withholding the precise descriptions that appeared appropriate for a god's work. After Nietzsche had stumbled upon Thales' proposition as an ersatz-myth for the Ionian unification, he saw the unity of the world at stake, which could not be expressed in any of the propositions about it. It remained open to intuition, which, admittedly always metaphorical, always has to be anthropomorphic, as all science had become "an attempt to humanize things" in the end for Nietzsche.³⁵⁷ Renunciation of the self, which marks the ascetic ideal, means renouncing immediate access to oneself, without mediation from an anthropomorphic world, aesthetic enjoyment of which—according to the scheme invented by Romanticism and Idealism—is only the rediscovery of the I in the other. In any case, the enjoyment of the world could be understood as an elemental form of aesthetics, as opposed to Kant's disinterested agreeability, since he always referred back to the I on the detour around the world. This is how deriding the Creation story may now

³⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §112 "Cause and effect," 113. *Gesammelte Werke* XII 147.

be understood, as a position which considers everything oppositional about the world as disparaging to the I, whose projection is nonetheless the only order in the world, and, due to the depth of this disparagement, sees no other way out than to build another heaven.

Not one among all of the Creation story's detractors noticed the eschatological trait that their gesture belies: even the Apocalypse of John had put "a new heaven and a new earth" into view for the promised end of days. The eschatology of the bible was—what it could not articulate without becoming Gnosticism—the preformed derision towards the Creation story: with the proclamation of His Revelation, God himself repealed what he had confirmed to Himself about His Creation, that it had become good. The biblical God had nevertheless been the one who had drawn the consequence of that derision, which neither the Castilian king nor any of his protégés in modernity had dared to draw explicitly: whatever is as decrepit as the world must first be destroyed, so that it can develop anew and immutably and better.

Nietzsche's Indian king comes close to proposing as much. He is a pragmatic Gnostic or a Gnostic practitioner, as Nietzsche himself was with the *Übermensch*, who is also based on nothing other than the ability to withstand the death of God or even to have killed God himself. This means taking the apocalypse into one's own hands. It reminds us of Thales who supposedly

believed that changing a single sentence would be enough to set the Ionian world free from its oppressor.

What came about from the modern derision towards the Creation story according to Nietzsche's view of things? The will to violence towards the world becomes technical will, which does not accept things as they are and not at all as a Creator may have made them: "Our whole attitude towards nature, the way we violate her with the aid of machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers, is *hybris*...."³⁵⁸ This sentiment stands in immediate vicinity with the legend of King Vishvamitra and his self-certainty created by means of asceticism.

³⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* III 9, 113.

XIII. How to recognize what matters

The world was there “when the first man raised his head.”³⁵⁹ A formulation as trivial as it is ambiguous, reported by Hans-Georg Gadamer from Heidegger’s early Marburg years; Heidegger used it in order to find a language for the conjunction that occurs in the word “Dasein,” between the human’s “there” (*Da*) and “Being” (*Sein*),³⁶⁰ before he later came to distrust language so much more fundamentally. It is telling of the insecurity that Heidegger’s indeterminacies unleashed that his entourage of students had “disputed for weeks” at the time about whether he “had meant Adam or Thales by this first man,” a confusion which Gadamer explicates with the addendum: you see from that question that those who asked it were “still not very far advanced” with their insights.³⁶¹ Maybe today we will be allowed to say, on the contrary, that few questions so astute would ever be posed to Heidegger in all of the years that followed.

³⁵⁹ Gadamer, “Being, Spirit, God,” 65.

³⁶⁰ *Dasein*. Heidegger’s term for the existential status of humanity without any of its naturalistic or anthropological particularities. Dasein’s hallmarks, according to *Being and Time*, include having some explanation for its own existence and being concerned about its own existence. Throughout this chapter, Blumenberg echoes and explains Heidegger’s peculiar use of language, while sometimes deliberately deviating from Heidegger’s word choices, as if dissatisfied with the presumption to truth in Heidegger’s language. In a posthumous piece, Blumenberg accuses Heidegger’s philosophical arguments of being so reliant on unintuitive word choices that they lure people into a sense of “complete understanding in advance” before even reading anything (“*das Ganze in den Vorgriff zu bekommen*”). Blumenberg, *Ein Mögliches Selbstverständnis*, 91.

³⁶¹ Gadamer, “Being, Spirit, God,” 65.

The old formula, that man's raised head shows him practicing his essential destiny, to behold the universe,³⁶² proved too static once Heidegger had articulated, through a slight variation, that a time would come in which Dasein and Being would emerge as a unity. The intelligence of the seemingly simple problematic does not consist in the foregrounded confrontation of the theological protagonist with the philosophical one; it seems instead that they want to know whether the understanding of Being granted to the human being is an anthropological state of affairs or a philosophical one, one arising with the history of the human or with that of philosophy.³⁶³

It would first be revealed how justified that debate had been at the late Heidegger's turn, when he located Being's prior unconcealment in its history with the *pre-pre-Socratics* and wanted to recognize the traces of its possession, now just meagerly remaining and difficult to decipher, which were already

³⁶² Blumenberg points out that, for most of human history, astronomers like Kepler who "put forward a construction that is asserted to be real" defied the ever prevailing symbolism of the stars for that which can be seen but not mastered. Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, 16. For the Stoics, for instance, "the heavens are essentially an object of pure theory, because they are at an absolute distance from man." Ibid., 18. Ptolemy "experienced vexations with the previous history of astronomy" and "drew from them the... conclusion... that the human intellect was inadequate, in principle, for cosmological questions." Ibid., 213. Even Kant's antinomies echo the attitude that the cosmos is visible overhead only in order to fill us with wonder: as a verifiably known unknown.

³⁶³ Husserl and Heidegger both considered the anthropological question ("What is human?") to distract from the goal of discerning what objective truth our intentionality points towards or what Being our essence implies, respectively. They prefer to come to the question of objectivity or of "what is?" respectively. Blumenberg insists that their work implies a theory of the human—namely theirs is a creature willing and able to fathom eternal essences or to notice human finitude. See Blumenberg, "Ist Intersubjektivität ein anthropologisches Thema?" *Beschreibung des Menschen*.

disappearing into concealment when the documented history of philosophy began with Thales. By that point, Thales was already among those who wanted to pass a being (*Seiendes*) off as Being. Completely unaware of the fact that now “Being” would no longer be that of the being at hand, he consequently ushered in our fate, the oblivion of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) from the beginning onward, along its course, which has since left everyone—and us most of all—nothing but the unjustifiable expectation of its retrograde return.

If one sees the early student debate in light of the late “history of being,”³⁶⁴ then the answer “Adam” would be the more accurate one for sure. That said, we must spare ourselves from thinking that the raising of the head as imprinted by Michelangelo is bound up, for those who came later, with the melancholy conclusion that stars no longer stood in the heaven of Paradise, just because only the three outer planets at most occupy the sky at midnight after the fall of the evening star or before the rise of the morning star. As watchers of the sky, Adam and Thales must have been very dissimilar; but they were at least metaphorically comparable through the immediate consequence of their self-

³⁶⁴ *Seinsgeschichte*. Heidegger’s “history of Being,” wherein Being occurs (*ereignet*), by revealing and concealing itself within human history, is part of Heidegger’s later ontology, after the “turn.” It is described in most detail in Heidegger’s posthumous *Contributions to Philosophy*. Blumenberg, who was comparable to Heidegger in his knowledge of medieval ontology (both men wrote their dissertations on it), thought that Heidegger’s “history of Being” drew on a medieval concept, the “objectum voluntarium:” “an object that only depends on its own will to be recognizable, to hold itself from concealment.” Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit Und Weltzeit*, 94. Blumenberg’s background in theology equips him well to recognize Heidegger’s concealed debt to theology.

elevation: their fall. One does not need to overestimate such associations; yet, with Heidegger's introduction of the "history of being," the fateful dimming of a one-time clearing (*Lichtung*) for humanity has taken primacy for this event, in order to make human beings all the more permanently into the ones affected by the displacements and troubles for which they can no longer bear the responsibility—no different than if he were still the wrong-doer from the first day of his head-raising.

That the one who first lifted his head, according to the formula as debated in the Marburg seminar, did not do something which was common practice in the human world by force of human nature, but abandoned the path of the habitual and removed himself from useful traffic in the world, may be understood as phenomenology casting its dismissive verdict against anthropology: history, not nature, would have played out in that original event (*Urereignis*) of ontology. For this purpose, Thales appears to fit more precisely. It would not be accidental, therefore, that Heidegger turned vehemently back to Thales during the late changes to his treatment of Being.

In 1962, under the title *What is a Thing?*, Heidegger published the text of a lecture from the winter semester of 1935-36, at whose beginning he mentioned the Thales anecdote. He used it to illustrate the irrelevance of a question "that one can really do nothing with," as appears to be the case with the question of the

thing.³⁶⁵ This peculiarity does not burden the question and questioner, but rather develops into the very criterion for their philosophical relevance and propriety.

The risk involved in being a philosopher was unknown to Thales of Miletus; that much is conceivable. But it is that ignorance that always returns “since philosophy always starts from an unfavorable position.”³⁶⁶ At that point, the reader implicitly hears that something like philosophy did not start once and for all. This is different from the sciences, where there is a “direct transition and entrance” from everyday notions. This difference, the lack of access to philosophy from within the everyday, has the effect that “philosophy is always something deranged (*verrücktes*).”³⁶⁷ If the protophilosopher had thus been targeted by the laughter of the Thracian maid, then it emerges from these premises that Heidegger must not have considered Thales the founder of science, not even of astronomy, but of philosophy. From the maid’s lifeworld, there can never be any insight into the purposiveness of his activity.

Heidegger takes over the “little story” from Plato’s *Theatetus*—where it is “preserved (*aufbewahrt*)” according to his careful word choice—and he appends Plato’s elucidation to it:³⁶⁸ “This jest also fits all those who become involved in

³⁶⁵ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 2.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

philosophy.”³⁶⁹ He continues what Nietzsche had started: playing science and philosophy off of one another. But is the Thales anecdote appropriate for showing the philosopher as someone who asks or even could ask the scientifically useless question, “what is a thing?” It is apparent that Plato does not want the story in Socrates’ mouth to refer at all to the natural-philosophical sins of Socrates’ youth. It refers instead to what would have him put to death: the brutal consequence of the foreignness of introducing a new theory of the human into a lifeworld that had already become somewhat accustomed to natural philosophy. If there had to be a link between the pathos of plummeting and that of death by the hemlock cup, then the Platonic Socrates would undoubtedly be relating his death to his philosophy’s truth, and indeed going so far as to say that one could only die in this way if one had this philosophy. He is also claiming to be vulnerable because only with that philosophy can someone become far enough removed from the polis’ lifeworldly common sense to appear as its alien and enemy, against whom it has no other means than deadly detachment.

For Heidegger—to remain within his picture—the philosopher’s plummet has become the criterion for knowing that he is on the right path. It enfeebles the point a bit that so much is said about the maid’s laughter and so little about the philosopher’s plummet; however, it cannot be forgotten that the Thracian woman

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 3.

perceived the plummet and would have nothing to laugh at without it. Would the one who plummeted only first realize after the maid had laughed that he was up to something above and beyond what could prove its utility in a statement such as the prediction of a solar eclipse? Heidegger's work with the anecdote tends towards this reversal.

Philosophy is when somebody laughs. And when someone laughs out of obtuseness. The young physicist comes to mind, who finds an opportunity one single time to hear a lecture from Heidegger in the late thirties; the topic was "logic" and the discussion that day was about Heraclitus. He held his breath, according to his published account, and his reaction was: "That is philosophy. I do not understand a word. But that is philosophy."³⁷⁰ That might not be meant to say that philosophy is when somebody does not understand; however, that cannot be very far from what was meant if it should ever be possible for something that someone has not understood to qualify as philosophy with such plain evidence. What else if not obtuseness (*Unverstand*) would be the essential kind of understanding (*Verständnisart*) in this form of thought?

We see that the Thracian woman with her exotic distance from the Milesian citizen has become superfluous. Even someone just like him would have to laugh at him. And it does not matter that he had chosen the highest and most

³⁷⁰ Weizsäcker, "Begegnungen in Vier Jahrzehnten.," 241.

obscure object there could be in the universe in order to become the laughing stock of the maid. The proof: since he could have and did become the laughing stock, his question must have been philosophical, that is, absolutely inaccessible from the perspective of the lifeworld.

Phenomenology aroused the expectation that its way of philosophizing could restore the lost connection from the positive sciences to the lifeworld, through descriptive achievements of their passageways and through intuitive foundations for conceptuality. Granted, Heidegger did not originate in phenomenology, but only passed through it; nonetheless, *Being and Time* had justified the expectation that the deficient mode of the theoretical attitude could be understood as deficient from the point of view of the unfolding constitution of Dasein. *What is a Thing?* shows the opposite tendency: philosophy recedes back from every passageway leading from the lifeworld into the world of its own particular attitude, whereas the sciences have only gradually cut themselves off from the everyday through the distances placed upon them by history and specialization.

To explain the abyss between lifeworld and philosophy as constitutive of philosophy and to set everyone on the path who wants to arrive from the former to the latter is a dangerous proposal. It contains the danger of overturning philosophy's prestige, of attributing the distinction of philosophical transcendence

to every kind of junk as long as it just achieves sufficient inaccessibility:
“Philosophy, then, is that thinking with which one can start nothing and about which housemaids necessarily laugh.”³⁷¹ Anyone can see indeed that the reversal is forbidden, where the philosopher shows up every time a maidservant laughs, but the statement never gets withdrawn to the extent that would be necessary if rhetorical extravagances were going to be opposed.³⁷² Does this not demand that philosophers seek out the question—if it is not yet known—at which laughter can be expected most surely and heard most loud? “And genuine housemaids must have something to laugh about.”³⁷³ An encouragement for professional hecklers to mock unintelligible propositions?

Heidegger could hardly have asserted by accident that it is “not a mere joke” to define philosophy by the laughter it provokes and in partnership with the laughing woman.³⁷⁴ To reflect on this definition requires us to deepen it, and for the kind of depth that must enter the picture—perhaps a depth without

³⁷¹ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3.

³⁷² Heidegger’s “definition” could be defended as merely heuristic, since Heidegger does not pursue the ridicule-test throughout the rest of the book. The point he insists on later in the book, though, sounds equally risky for philosophy’s prestige: the consequences of how we envision “the thing” may arrive centuries later, and we ought to trust a mysterious, historical process to reveal the value of asking “the question of the thing.” See §10 “Historicity of Defining the Thing.” (“Geschichtlichkeit der Dingbestimmung”) Heidegger, *Die Frage Nach Dem Ding*, 37–43.

³⁷³ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

bottom³⁷⁵—the cistern from the Thales anecdote comes to mind: “We shall do well to remember that by our strolling we can fall into a well whereby we may not reach ground for quite some time.”³⁷⁶ Here an abrupt disappearance of harmlessness must be attested. The fallen Milesian astronomer must be imagined at a moderate depth of the cistern shaft, if he is supposed to be reached alive and in one piece by the maid’s laughter and folk wisdom. In Heidegger’s scene it is no longer imaginable that anything could arrive at the still living body of the fallen man—certainly nothing from out of the lifeworld, which would neither comfort nor help him in that state. Once again, as before in the case of its ancient formulation, the “little story” has become mortally dangerous. This time, Thales does not need to be wizened with age to be seen as susceptible to the gravest danger; it suffices that he has involved himself with “depth” and “ground”—perhaps groundlessness—for the imagination to reach the limit at which laughter could become inhumane.

³⁷⁵ *vielleicht eine grundlose Tiefe*. This phrase could also be translated: “perhaps a profundity for no reason,” especially since Heidegger insists that he has none of the familiar everyday or scientific reasons for asking about the essence of the thing. In this paragraph, Blumenberg uses many words containing the German root “Grund” which can mean either the grounds for an argument or the physical grounding of the earth. The “Grund-” words in this passage include words such as “ground,” “bottom,” and “founding.” By exposing the etymological link between rational argument and physical groundedness, Blumenberg reminds us that these philosophers rely on metaphors that relate not to obscure passions but to the human condition in general. He makes these semantic observations explicit in the section “Foundation and Soil, Bottom and Ground: Hitting Bottom, Getting to the Bottom of Things, Standing on the Ground” in Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 67–69.

³⁷⁶ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3.

Consequently, the unapproachability of the one who fell down into the morass of the ground,³⁷⁷ for anyone in the lifeworld, is the twist on the story; for it makes the Thracian woman laughable, who commentates and laughs at the drama of the question of the thing. She believes in a fall where there can only be a plummet. The external harmlessness of the question of the thing can only be interrupted by the most extreme exaggeration of the risk involved in the movement commenced on the impulse of the question.

Asking about the essence of the thing means getting to the bottom of that very thing, the return to which had been the founding call of phenomenology.³⁷⁸ It was not to become metaphysics at any price and could only have become that for the price of losing its reputation with the philosophy departments of the time.

³⁷⁷ *Unwesen des Grundes*. Due to the double meaning of “Grund” for both the physical “ground” and logical “grounding,” “the morass of the ground” could also mean “the morass of reasons,” to echo Terrence Malick’s translation of “Grund” in Heidegger’s 1929 publication title, *Vom Wesen des Grundes*. That book could easily be accused of conflating metaphoric and literal meanings of “ground.” In that book, Heidegger explains that human beings transcend the very world that they constitute through their concern with it. There, the material implies the metaphysical as its precondition; transcendence is “a basic constitutive feature of Dasein that happens prior to all behavior. Of course, since human Dasein exists ‘spatially,’ it can, among other things, spatially ‘surpass’ a spatial boundary or gap. Transcendence, however, is the surpassing that makes anything like existence and thereby movement in space possible in the first place.” Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, 37. Heidegger’s notion, that our spatial existence implies a non-spatial “transcendence” as its precondition, confronts the spatialized perspective in the lifeworld with a perplexing “morass of reasons.”

³⁷⁸ Blumenberg often refers to the words “Zu den Sachen!” (“To the things themselves!”) as Husserl’s motto, as the slogan or program title for phenomenology. Blumenberg, “Die Sprachliche Wirklichkeit Der Philosophie,” 430; Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge*, 9. Blumenberg does not follow Husserl in advocating the pursuit these “things,” since, according to Husserl’s account in *Crisis*, they only exist in when they are being ignored. He still prefers Husserl’s “sentences about things” to the positivists “sentences about sentences,” since Blumenberg does ultimately ascribe the meaning of sentences to an origin in experiences worth trying to recollect and describe. Blumenberg, *Zu Den Sachen Und Zurück*, 339.

It did very quickly become metaphysics, whatever else it may be called. And metaphysics (of the type that Aristotle founded, perhaps even named) always oversteps a boundary; but it does this under the pressure to continue questioning—a pressure which receives its energy from the lifeworld and from those elements of a situation that remain inescapable even after leaving it.

That work, which would later indeed take on the name *Metaphysics*, assures itself this unbroken context right in its first sentence: “all men by nature desire to know.”³⁷⁹ Not by accident, the one who claims this must speak in the same breath about Thales of Miletus—as a procedure consistent with this putatively simple state of affairs; and Aristotle does just that when he conducts the genealogy of his question.

It could be said that everyone who philosophizes must understand the first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* in his or her own way. Heidegger translates it in his own way entirely: “The care for seeing is essentially inherent in man’s being.”³⁸⁰ Appended is the point that the nominalized infinitive *eidénai* may not be translated with “knowledge.” Through “seeing,” combined with “care,” the reference back to the lifeworld that this sentence introduces seems even closer; the passageway becomes even shorter. But this is deceiving. Seeing gets defined as “perceiving the distance”—which suits the “little story” well, but moreover it

³⁷⁹ Aristotle., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1552.

³⁸⁰ Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 275.

fits the claim that the story is about the un-ready-to-hand (*Unzuhandene*). The formula “care for seeing” is thus a paradox: it makes the elusive object (*das Fernliegende*), which can “only” be perceived, into what matters to the human beings (*nahegeht*).

The parenthesis where Heidegger translates the Greek word for knowledge with the root for “seeing” distracts from a ruse, which makes up the entire argument in Heidegger’s version of Aristotle, and thus covers it up; the Marburg lecture of summer 1925 introduced the definition of Dasein as “care” in the first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* without uncomfortably justifying that he can only have extracted that meaning from the Greek word *orgesthai*.³⁸¹ “Care”—if one may quantify such a matter—is even less present in the text than “seeing.”

The expression “care” for trivial “striving” disempowers the innate tendency towards knowledge and brings it down to something like an anthropological status. As if Aristotle had already recognized the essence of Dasein in *orgesthai* and let restful “seeing” come to the foreground through a kind of retarding shut-down: the theoretical attitude as minimal form of care, as

³⁸¹ This lecture has been translated as Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*. The problems that Blumenberg finds in Heidegger’s philology are both philological and methodological. The philological problem is that Heidegger has distorted Aristotle’s sentence about the “desire to know,” so that the desire has turned from the active principle of philosophy to a mere emotional state “care” that prompts a passive behavior “seeing,” and distracts from fundamental ontology. The methodological problem is that Heidegger claims to extract a case for fundamental ontology from reading Aristotle, and has thus deviated from the self-examination method of phenomenology, at least as expressed by his teacher Husserl.

depletion of Dasein's care (*Entsorgung des Daseins*), as deficiency of its Being-in-the-World. Thence also the conclusion that Aristotle "actually reversed" this account at the start of his metaphysics.³⁸² Here it appears that Heidegger has not decided what he will decide in *Being and Time*: in the theoretical attitude, Dasein does not rise to its constitutive totality, but is disempowered to the point of gaping indifference.

In the distinction of "seeing" lies an ambivalence about its implications. The "concern (*Besorgen*) for distance" as "a leaping over and a leaping away from the everyday world of work" leads near the reprimand of the Thracian maid: to "[tending] not to tarry in what is nearest" and to expanding the distance out towards the still completely unexperienced, into curiosity as "not tarrying (*Unverweilen*)," as "leaping off from one to another."³⁸³ Curiosity calls something to mind "solely in order to have seen it," but it holds itself back by "not having to get involved," in the form of a "merely being entertained by the world."³⁸⁴ That statement unleashed a whole arsenal of possibilities for cultural criticism. It contrasts with the delirious statement about what seeing supposedly meant for the Greeks, given that their "highest form of knowing is that which is related to the being that truly and properly is," which meant nothing other than:

³⁸² Ibid., 275.

³⁸³ Ibid., 276.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 277. A similar analysis of curiosity also occurs in §68(c) of *Being and Time*.

“pure, visual relatedness to the thing itself.”³⁸⁵ Whenever Greeks come up, the unwitting switch from optical to tactile metaphors helps achieve the status of higher—even of the highest—seriousness.

Merely letting-himself-be-entertained by the world may be an unjust charge against the proto-philosopher, as he does risk falling, but his fall certainly portends his beginning’s fallenness, when tarrying in the midst of things gave way to letting-things-be.³⁸⁶ For care is the “nature” of a being (*Wesen*) that cannot maintain itself as nature and is thus “by nature” in a state of care about itself. The claim that such a being must see and wants to see, rests on this premise.

Theory gains independence from its existential reliance on Dasein’s fundamental constitution as care, and this independence reaches its completion in the course of European history, not when theory purifies itself of its earthly remainder and ascends to the heights of its purity, but rather when it loses its ground, its root lattice, its nutrients, its justification. But this critique of the supposed terminal phase of the positive sciences, which could be construed from

³⁸⁵ Heidegger, *Logic*, 102.

³⁸⁶ *Verfall seines Anfangs*. This phrase ambiguously links Thales’ “tumble” to his “decadence.” *Verfall* could specifically mean his “fallenness,” as Heidegger uses the term *Verfallenheit* in *Being and Time* to mean the failure to acknowledge death as one’s most authentic concern. Letting things be (*Auf-sich-beruhen-Lassen der Dinge*) is also ambiguous in its valence here, since such a release seems to result from Thales’ inauthentic fallenness, although late Heidegger advocates releasement (*Gelassenheit*) towards things when he recommends that modern communication, transportation, and entertainment technology should be made use of, but not be allowed dictate the human purpose on earth (*auf sich beruhen lassen als etwas, was uns nicht im Innersten und Eigentlichen angeht*). Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, 24.

Being and Time and has been since 1927, is no longer the starting point for the consequences that Heidegger draws a decade later. The starting point's lostness is not an existential fact, out of which restitutive recollections can be deduced, but a rift in historical consistency, which—as in the case of Ariadne's thread—can augment the degree of error and loss with every attempt to repair it. In the language of the ancient anecdote: the figure of care, the Thracian woman, has disappeared from the scene; without her, there is not the faintest possibility that, through her laughter, anyone could even come to consider caring for the philosopher who plummeted into the well.

The interrogator of the thing's essence moves in a dimension in which the tumble into the depths is no longer the mishap arising from a forgetful-unidirectional glance. The title "metaphysics," at least according to Heidegger, designates "that procedure during which one especially runs the risk of falling into a well."³⁸⁷ That is not just "maybe once," but "especially"—a risk that is far removed from all of the assurances that were otherwise supposed to have emerged from theory's successes to the benefit of the human Dasein-movement. Considering that the theoretical attitude had still been characterized in *Being and Time* as care, in light of its relationship to Dasein's self-preservation, deficiency no longer sufficed to vaunt the special status of that attitude and whatever is only

³⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Die Frage Nach Dem Ding*, 3. I use my own translation here, since the published English translation of the lecture does not translate the word "especially" ("besonders"), which Blumenberg makes use of in this interpretation.

accessible from that attitude, if the interest is in the “thing.” Metaphysics can only be the washed-out derivative of the understanding of Being presiding in Dasein as care. What it takes to escape the grasp of metaphysics—that is, to slough off whatever content of metaphysics has been determined by history—is only determined purely formally by recourse to the origin scene (*Ursprungsszene*) represented in the Thales anecdote: in what relationship to the lifeworld are we put by the question “what is a thing?” The perplexity over the thing question in the lifeworld is supposedly greater and different than theory’s unusualness is for the lifeworld. To the philosopher’s benefit, the bizarre presumption of being right proves valid, in so far as it must be a powerful force that allows him to go on thinking against the habitual—and not just far from the habitual—when laughter, in the midst of the everyday concern with errands (*Besorgungen*), lambastes the one thinking. At the other end of philosophy, furthest off from its Milesian origin, the alternative between near and far (*Nähe und Ferne*), between obvious and obscure (*Nächstliegenden und Fernstliegenden*), is no longer resolved by the fact that the far off is determined by the nearby (*das Ferngelegene am Nahegelegenen*) and can be understood as a projection from here; quite to the contrary, the nearby (*das Naheliegende*) is precisely a form of displacement and concealment of what matters. Therefore, all paths can only lead astray from the obvious: “We ask about what is all around us and can be grasped

(*Handgreiflichen*), and yet we alienate ourselves from those immediate things very much more than did Thales, who could see only as far as the stars.”³⁸⁸

“Only as far as the stars”—when would this leveling of the longtime highest and still outermost theoretical possibility, of penetrating what was never accessible to humanity, allow itself to be rendered with such a deprecating clause? Metaphysics, under the title of transcendence, wanted to compel theory beyond the cosmological limit, beyond the stars; but it is impermissible after Kant to speak as if that goal still needed to be avoided today: “But we want to pass beyond even these things to the unconditioned, where there are no more things that provide a basis and ground.”³⁸⁹

The maids—that is Heidegger’s plural—laugh at the philosopher; they cannot grasp that he does not stick to the obvious, and thereby lets it become his downfall, because it is so obscure to him. The late Heidegger, for whom the names of “thing” and “Being” became so close to one another, no longer recalls the elementary result of his early analytic of Dasein, although it could be taken to signify an escalation of the philosopher’s own experience with himself, which is emblemized in the Thales anecdote: indeed, the obvious, what lies at his feet, is so obscured to the Milesian that he tumbles over it; but the realism evoked in the tumble and the laughter provoked by it cover and silence the fact that there is a

³⁸⁸ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 9.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

further beyond the obvious over which we tumble. Heidegger pronounced that succinctly as a facet of his early ontology's hermeneutic window: "The being that we ourselves always are is ontologically farthest from us."³⁹⁰ Already for the fundamental ontology, not just first for the late "thing," is the Milesian well plummet only a prelude to the difficulties of philosophy, with its concern for achieving the right distance from the "worrying understanding (*besorgenden Verständigkeit*)."³⁹¹ The distrust towards everything not yet at the farthest position becomes methodical, because the experiences of transcendence's self-exceeding gives no criterion for this limit-concept. What was thus already there in the history of contemplation can hardly be "true" in a conclusive sense, because it could not be laid far enough away for that, as is indeed always first proven after the fact, when people can detach (*ent-fernen*) themselves again.

The study of Being must constantly detach itself, particularly from everything that has already been there before. That also goes for the historical distance in which Thales belongs: the pre-Socratics, to the surprise of those who considered them to represent starting points—as well attested by written transmission—prove to be a mere afterglow of what came before them. The mythology painstakingly reworked by them, perhaps more concealed than overcome, is also just such a sunset view of something withdrawing itself

³⁹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1996, 287.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

irrecoverably from us. And withdrawing mercifully, because we would simply not be up for its unconcealment, as has always been the case with whatever yields the highest privilege to the survivor capable of documenting what he may only perceive fading behind him.³⁹² Pre-Socratics and myth become as virulent as anything that has nothing to do with the rationality of care. How could people have expected to approach Dasein and its everydayness on the way to the beyond? As if they had wanted to learn something about the maid from the starry sky. The distrust—that one has removed oneself far enough from the everyday, or even worse, that one has leapt away from the everyday without leaving any continuity to follow back—must be transformed into a method and articulated in the formula: one’s own tendency to hide is to be studied *on the way out* of hiding. While the “distance” had stood far away, but in the same direction as the “nearness,” from the center of its object-referent, this methodical rule is precisely for reversing the direction already being pursued by lifeworldly action at any given moment; it is for reading against the grain and hammering against it.

Heidegger performed a destruction of the history of metaphysics. The way he treated the Thales anecdote shows what the “residuum of destruction” is, as

³⁹² The disappearance of the pre-rational, pre-metaphysical worldview is described with language similar to that of the passing of a traumatic event. It is worth drawing attention to the one point in this book where Blumenberg identifies “survivor” status (perhaps recalling Blumenberg’s own Nazi persecution) with a relationship to history that Heidegger disdains.

there had been a “residuum of reduction” for phenomenology’s originator.³⁹³ The founding model, which had always appeared valid across the history of philosophy, remains apparent: at every stage, philosophy was about proving that we are captivated and determined by the foregroundedness of an appearance or a manifestation. Even the anecdote discussed in this book emerges against a wider background, multiplies its polysemy: on the one hand, the Thracian woman is acceded to, insofar as she makes a case based on the urgency of the obvious against the philosopher’s passion for the farthest; but she is only right to laugh once her laughter reveals a kind of ignorance that can no longer be made fun of, because it is a symptom, which reveals that something essential is happening, something either not understandable or not yet understood. Neither does the philosopher understand her laughter nor is her laughter understanding, although it would one day be understandable as such. But in order to interpret this beginning, it is valid to say that they *both* do not know what they are doing—that is, they do not know what philosophy is and why it makes an exception of itself so ridiculously from the standpoint of the lifeworld. That this beginning is already an end and only introduces the ignorant wait for another beginning, which would be

³⁹³ *beim Urheber der Phänomenologie*. Edmund Husserl, “phenomenology’s originator,” spoke of absolute subjective consciousness as that which survives all skeptical doubts. Its indestructability makes it a “phenomenological residuum”—after all else is questioned by “phenomenological reduction.” Thus, this residuum is “a region of Being which is in principle unique and can become in fact the field for a new science—the science of Phenomenology.” Husserl, *Ideas*, 63. For all of Heidegger’s innovations, his destruction had a similar aim as Husserl’s reduction: to ground philosophical understanding in absolute subjectivity.

called “metaphysics,” and which still, in the question of beings’ “meaning of Being,” only forms its last resistance to the question of the “essence of the thing”—all of this is supposed to become apparent for the first time through Heidegger’s gaze on the Thales scenario, from this terminal point in the destruction of its history.

Despite the turn against the metaphysical tradition, this explication has an anachronistic element that builds pathos for the inaccessibility of thought still-to-come, whose arrival is still not uncertain. It lies in the way that the subject of the necessary laughter at philosophy and its definitive uselessness has long disappeared from reality. The plural, with which the one Thracian maid of Miletus has been made into an indefinite quantity, is no accident; for the philosopher’s position has become once more, through a most circuitous route indeed, the center from which everyone who feels like laughing has been thrust into eccentric positions. The question of the thing’s essence was supposedly asked so simply, so unpretentiously, so originally. It is thought of as a vantage point that, from the perspective and position of the lifeworld, can only be alienating, revolting, impossible; it is no longer a matter of a large or small correction, but rather of the exception, the selection, the state of grace, from which one cannot teach and initiate others and for which no one can train with the classical tools of philosophy. You awaken and see “the thing” just like that, or you will never comprehend it.

Historically speaking, the connection to modernity and its Enlightenment is torn off at that point, judged as finished; phenomenologically, the reduction of all philosophical questioning is given up at the lifeworld's horizon, called off, cancelled. The criterion for determining who measures up to this renunciatory demand is that no one else can confirm that for him. The comprehending one is recognized in that no one comprehends that person. He stands there as the "factum brutum" that detached itself from every effort at persuasion and consensus. That explains the plural maidservants: everyone has joined in the laughter. Nothing authenticates the one laughed at besides his own claim, which comes in the form of paradoxical evidence: this is philosophy, but no one understands anything. That is how the factual³⁹⁴ became the criterion for the essential.

At this point, we can formulate Heidegger's divergence from phenomenology: in the method founded by Husserl, others' reaction to the philosopher's thought (which Heidegger considered necessary, insofar as it poses the question of the thing's essence) would neither be significant nor permissible at

³⁹⁴ *Das Faktische*. This German word can mean "factual" in the conventional sense of corresponding to facts (as opposed to opinions or fantasies). But in Heidegger's lexicon it is often translated "factual" and refers to the particulars of Dasein's self-understanding that define individual concerns, but are *contingent* on life circumstances, as opposed to the *necessary* structures of Dasein's existence (such as care about the future, thrownness out of the past, and death as the horizon of existence).

all. The essential lies in triviality;³⁹⁵ it precisely does not require anyone to detach from the lifeworld to eccentric positions, but rather to describe what foundational achievement within the lifeworld is concealed in any such position—that is, in the eccentric positions of the positive sciences. Phenomenologists must take paths, not make leaps.

This is explicit: Husserl's late *Crisis* treatise, which bore no knowledge of Heidegger's development after *Being and Time* and perhaps could not acquire it,³⁹⁶ is oriented against something like a tendency to leap in the European history of theory and develops the program of the restoration of one path's continuity, a path still considered viable. It is not the phenomenologist that the maids laugh at; in a close brush, he only needs to say something to them concerning what they themselves must say that they saw as well, but cannot say. Husserl's programmatic statement that phenomenology is the science of trivialities signifies nothing more. Now philosophy too has finally become what morality has been forever: that which is understood to be self-evident—but philosophy also possesses the concealment of everything self-evident precisely for that reason.

³⁹⁵ Blumenberg often reminds us that Husserl conceived phenomenology as a “science of trivialities,” which explains how the self-evident became so, rather than undertaking to explain unfamiliar phenomena. See, for instance, Blumenberg, *Zu Den Sachen Und Zurück*, 349.

³⁹⁶ This probably refers to the Nazi-imposed limitations on Husserl's ties with German academic activities after 1933. He was only able to publish the first two sections of *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* in Belgrade in 1936, after which he grew ill and died before completing the third part, which his assistant Eugen Fink brought to press.

From the perspective of this premise underlying phenomenology, it cannot be permitted to let philosophy's idiosyncrasy be indicated precisely through the outbreak of misunderstanding: "the question 'what is a thing?' must always be rated as one which causes housemaids to laugh."³⁹⁷ From the phenomenological outlook on the relationship between lifeworld and essentiality, this becomes a sentence of incomprehensible arrogance. It certainly does not astonish the one who had already seen the Thales anecdote as evidence of a conceit of this sort.

³⁹⁷ Heidegger, *What Is a Thing*, 3.

XIV. Interdisciplinarity as repetition of protohistory

Does all of this anecdote's history and reception involve a specific form of presumption, which characterizes philosophy, as an attitude towards reality, and its professional mandataries, since their beginnings and over the course of their mounting self-consciousness?

It is indicative of an answer that the question could only be posed under two conditions: at some point, the history of this anecdote's reception must have been presented, at least in its outlines; then, there had to be an unsatisfied public, which felt that the moment of arrogance expressed in the story required further explication. That public must have thirsted to make this history into an organ for disclosing a state of affairs, so that the story could definitively terminate the anecdote's service to philosophers' self-consciousness—now that the story had achieved the ultimate by serving Heidegger. What is happening now is no longer the reception of the anecdote, but the reception of the reception.

Such conditions play out within the modern methods of interdisciplinarity. With the help of a model, we take the history of the reception into account, and then take a stand on it: "I can only read the story of Thales and the maid, who delights in his pain, as well as the history of this story's success from Plato to

Heidegger with a certain unease, which rises at points to a feeling of embarrassment.”³⁹⁸

Interdisciplinarity means that the eccentric position receives a new label: there are spectators outside of the scene, who regard this scene as an object of discussion. They discuss the philosopher’s behavior and the maid’s behavior, measure the height of the fall, which gets reassessed from a cistern to a simple ditch in the various versions of the story.³⁹⁹ All of this occurs from a distance, which, for its part, is neither philosophical nor does it regard philosophy as anything other than a literary genre. In the same way that literature scholars study social history, one could conduct the psychopathology of the figures discussing this anecdote—especially if they reveal a persistent interest in recognizing themselves or something else in this story: “I get irritated here and elsewhere by the keenness, with which this story gets retold precisely by those persons who should actually be fellow objects of the maid’s laughter.”⁴⁰⁰ Letting the laughter at the first philosopher “raise its voice” repeatedly, proving the legitimacy of the

³⁹⁸ Preisendanz and Warning, *Das Komische*, 435. Instead of citing the article of Harald Weinrich's, "Thales and the Thracian maid: Schadenfreude on all sides," where this quote appears, Blumenberg cites a swatch of pages (429-444) from the conference proceedings, in which four different authors including himself write about "The Comic in Philosophy" for the *Poetics und Hermeneutics* symposium on "The Comic." Throughout this chapter, Blumenberg seems to want to lend anonymity to Weinrich's statements, by claiming that they aptly portray the prevailing sentiments of not just of this group, but of *any* modern, interdisciplinary research group (as if they were so widespread).

³⁹⁹ Manfred Führmann's three page contribution to this piece of the symposium publication is called "The Height of the Fall, Taken Literally for Once." Ibid., 432-435.

⁴⁰⁰ This and all further citations are of Weinrich's entry. Ibid., 435.

eccentric position through him, that cannot be called anything but an “unique masochism.”⁴⁰¹

Actually we can only laugh at the philosophers or enjoy laughter at their expense if we consider ourselves to be their exception. And in this discipline evidently—I cannot speak for other disciplines—everyone considers him or herself to be the exception to all others. But that was already the intention, with which Plato adopted the Aesopic fable for his mouthpiece, Socrates. At the time, the guild members were called sophists, at least by Plato, who invented the distinction “philosopher” for the individual who wanted himself known as an exception from whoever viewed wisdom as the etiquette for what they could get away with. Anyone can become or remain the exception, if one is the first or the last: Thales or Socrates—or Heidegger. For as soon as the first has been, according to this scheme, one can only still want to be the last. And that is why so many people want that, again and again.

For the others, who do not make it to being first or last, this statement applies: “They only apparently enter into complicity with the maid and laugh only for a moment, rather torturedly at that, with the Thracian maid, in order to laugh

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

immediately afterwards along heartily with their colleagues about the dumb maid.

Who actually falls in the ditch here?”⁴⁰²

In a style of observation fondly called “social critique” a generation ago, the Thales anecdote becomes exasperating, no matter how often the reception history makes concessions to the Thracian maid.⁴⁰³ What bothers the critic is that the one laughing has herself become laughable in the end—which expresses a self-consciousness that theory has so successfully accomplished its task that it is

⁴⁰² Ibid., 436.

⁴⁰³ *gesellschaftskritisch*. In this sentence, Blumenberg refers to the Frankfurt School perspective without naming it, as he referred to the *Poetics und Hermeneutics* group earlier in the chapter. Leaving them anonymous implies that Blumenberg finds the group’s methods so homogeneous that its individual members need not be named, and that he finds the group itself so well-known that it need not be named. This sentence may refer specifically to Hannah Arendt’s reading of the Thales anecdote. She complains that philosophy (unlike critical theory, in which she includes Immanuel Kant’s work) remains aloof from collective human concerns. She complains that when Hegel sympathizes with the Thales in the anecdote (a reception left out of this book), it reflects his failure to live up to Kant’s politically engaged critical work: “If we are thinking in terms of progress, [Hegel’s philosophical exceptionalism] certainly is a ‘relapse’ into what philosophy had been since its beginning, and Hegel repeats the story Plato told about Thales, with a great show of indignation at the laughing Thracian peasant girl.” Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 35. She elaborates this reading in a radio address given on Heidegger’s 80th birthday. There she names political *mésalliances* philosophies most laughable blunder. When Plato taught a murderous tyrant mathematics in hopes of improving his mind: “[Plato] did not notice that this venture, seen from the peasant girl’s perspective, must seem considerably more comical than Thales’ mishap.... Evidently, human beings have not yet discovered what laughter is good for—perhaps because their thinkers, who have always been ill disposed toward laughing, have left them in the lurch in this respect, although some of them have racked their brains about the immediate causes of laughter.” In Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, 216. She goes on to compare Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazis to Plato’s political error. If Arendt’s implication is correct—that discovering “what laughter is good for” could reduce the seductive power of tyranny and fascism that draws thinkers into foolhardy attempts at political heroism—then Blumenberg is on the right side of the laughter. In this paragraph, Blumenberg distances himself from the Arendtian “socially critical” perspective, but in the book’s final sentence he ironically turns her sort of critical lens on his own *Poetics and Hermeneutics* group. Blumenberg, having distanced himself from the group for over a decade at the point when he published *Laughter*, notes that the group’s sociological interest in philosophical reception history only reinforces their lack of interest in actual philosophical questions.

now easily bearable that, in the beginning, somebody had laughed at theory. And when I say that, I mean: somebody laughed at a behavior that theoretical goals perceptibly inscribe on the theorist. If offense is taken at how philosophers interpret the anecdote, then that would also be a symptom indicating that they shall never be accepted again; laughter can be tolerated because it no longer needs to be taken seriously. A lens—glad to portray itself as class-specific—sees the self-satisfaction with which philosophers have referred to this piece of imagery as a reason to position them within the class condemned to die out, the class which could not or still cannot handle the laughing maid from Thrace.

From that perspective, the interdisciplinary reception of the reception upholds the diagnosis: philosophy announces its own end by wanting to know how to interpret its beginning.

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