

MYTH IN HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AS MYTH:
ON THE AMBIVALENCE OF HANS BLUMENBERG'S
INTERPRETATION OF ERNST CASSIRER'S THEORY OF MYTH

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the different interpretations proposed by Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg of the relation between Platonic philosophy and myth as a means of bringing to light a fundamental divergence in their respective conceptions of what precisely myth *is*. It attempts to show that their conceptions of myth are closely related to their respective assumptions concerning the historical significance of myth and regarding the sense of history more generally. Their divergent conceptions of myth and of history, I argue, are at the same time not simply matters of abstract speculation, but spring from fundamental presuppositions concerning myth's *political* significance. The present elucidation aims not only to set in relief one or another of the ways in which Cassirer or Blumenberg understood myth, nor even to present Blumenberg's critical reception of Cassirer's theories, but above all to contribute to the interpretation of the political implications of myth and of its historical potency in our contemporary epoch.

Keywords: philosophy of history, myth, Plato, theodicy, symbolic forms, Cassirer, Blumenberg, political thought

In the opening words of a discourse dedicated to Ernst Cassirer, entitled "In Remembrance of Ernst Cassirer" ("Ernst Cassirers Gedenkend"), presented by Hans Blumenberg in 1974 in Heidelberg during the ceremony that honored him on the occasion of his receipt of the Kuno Fischer Prize, Blumenberg explained to his hearers that his aim in recalling his illustrious predecessor was not to commemorate a man whom he had never personally met. His purpose, rather, was to examine the matters themselves that Cassirer had deemed important. As Blumenberg made clear in the course of his lecture, dealing primarily with Cassirer's conception of the history of philosophy, his attitude toward his predecessor, however important his work might have been, was one of marked ambivalence, for he believed that Cassirer had stopped short of elaborating the profound implications that lay in his insights.¹

1. Blumenberg paradoxically remarked that "what remains to be learned from Cassirer lies most directly in what he was unable to accomplish. . . ." ("Was bei Cassirer zu lernen bleibt, steckt gerade in dem, was ihm nicht gelungen ist. . . ."), Hans Blumenberg, "Ernst Cassirers gedenkend bei entgegennahme des Kuno-Fischer-Preises der Universität Heidelberg, 1974," *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben: Aufsätze und eine Rede* (Stuttgart: Reklam, 1981), 168.

Scrutiny of Blumenberg's assessment of Cassirer, not only in this brief address, but in his published works, confirms Blumenberg's ambivalence toward Cassirer. As I will attempt to illustrate in this essay, this is true above all in regard to that area of Cassirer's thought that was most central to Blumenberg's own preoccupations: the theory of myth and of its place in human history. Cassirer had written on this theme in different periods of his work, extending from the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* published during the 1920s to his posthumously published final book on political myth, *The Myth of the State* (1945). Blumenberg's numerous remarks on Cassirer concerned above all his theory of myth in the different periods of its elaboration, which appeared in a series of his writings on this theme, from his early essay "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos" ("Conception of Reality and Potential Effect of Myth" [1971]), to the books *Work on Myth (Arbeit am Mythos)* and *Höhlenausgänge (Ways out of the Cave)*, up until the posthumously published *Beschreibung des Menschen (Description of Man)*. In these works Blumenberg expressed his admiration for Cassirer's theories, which he intermixed with critical remarks that brought into question a number of Cassirer's fundamental assumptions concerning the significance of myth as a historical phenomenon.

My aim in this essay will be to explore the different interpretations of the meaning of myth in history that Cassirer and Blumenberg proposed and, in this manner, to examine the deeper implications of Blumenberg's ambivalence toward Cassirer's legacy. These implications come most clearly to light, I will argue, in relation to their respective interpretations of a philosophical orientation that each, for different reasons, took to be of central importance for an interpretation of mythical thinking and its historical role: the philosophy of Plato. Their respective analyses of Plato, as I will illustrate, are of decisive importance in that they bring to light not only different assumptions concerning his philosophy, his attitude toward myth, or the historical reception of this attitude; they reveal, above all, dissimilar conceptions of what myth *is* and, in light of these conceptions, different presuppositions concerning both the meaning of myth *in* history and the sense of history more generally. In the final analysis, I will argue, these dissimilar conceptions of myth, and of the articulations of history to which they correspond, draw on fundamental assumptions that are hardly limited to the sphere of merely abstract speculation; on the contrary, the incompatibility of their interpretations corresponds to subtle divergences in what Cassirer and Blumenberg each took to be myth's *political* implications and scope. My analysis aims not only to set in relief one or another of the ways in which Cassirer or Blumenberg conceptualized the phenomenon of myth, nor even to present Blumenberg's critical reception of Cassirer's theories, but above all to contribute to the interpretation of the political implications of myth and of its historical potency in our contemporary epoch.²

2. Analysis of this theme in studies of Blumenberg is rare. In her stimulating book, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chiara Bottici has directed attention to the importance of this theme of political myth in the work of Blumenberg,

I

To enter into the heart of our topic, let us begin by evoking a myth: the famous myth of Er, which Plato presented at the end of Book X of the *Republic*, and upon which the work itself concludes. After having long preoccupied the Western tradition, this myth was evoked both by Ernst Cassirer and, in somewhat less detail, by Hans Blumenberg and, as we will see, their respective interpretations of it are important in revealing their different ways of addressing the ethical and political implications of myth in the course of its historical elaborations.

The myth of Er recounts the tale of the hero Er, who was slain in battle. After twelve days awaiting burial, to the surprise of all who witnessed the event, he suddenly returned to life. Since, according to the myth, his soul had left his body, he was able to recount what befalls mortal beings immediately following their demise. At this moment of transition, during which the deceased await reincarnation in a new form of life, each of them passes in review before the three daughters of Necessity, clothed in white robes, the so-called Fates: Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos. Each of them sings, Lachesis of the past, Clotho of the present, Atropos of the future. Prior to passing before Lachesis, a prophet (προφήτης) comes out to greet the newly deceased and arrange them in order, after which he takes from the knees of Lachesis models portraying different kinds of lives, and he then speaks to them as follows:

This is the word of Lachesis, the maiden daughter of Necessity. "Souls that live for a day (ψυχὰι ἐφήμεροι), now at the beginning of another cycle of mortal generation where birth is the beacon of death. No divinity shall cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own deity. Let him to whom falls the first lot first select a life to which he shall cleave of necessity. But virtue has no master over her, and each shall have more or less of her as he honors her or does her despite. The blame is his who chooses: God is blameless."³

In his commentary on this myth, Cassirer identified an ethical and a political message that he interpreted in relation to his general theory of myth. Let us examine his reflection more closely, and then consider the way in which Blumenberg's later approach to this myth exemplifies his attitude toward Cassirer's philosophy, as well as his understanding of the ethical and political implications of political myth in the framework of its historical transformations.

The first reference that Ernst Cassirer made to the prophet's declaration in the myth of Lachesis is found in the second volume of his work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *Mythical Thought* (1925). His interpretation of this declaration corresponds to the well-known theory of myth presented in this work, in which mythical thinking, far from constituting a belief system that is incoherent or simply false, represents a specific way of interpreting reality by lending it symbolic form. As a manner of making sense of human existence in the world, the symbolizing activity of mythical thought aims to attain a total explanation of it by

3. Plato, *The Republic*, vol. 2, 617 d-e, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 504-507.

accounting for the origins and purpose of the cosmos as for the provenance and destiny of the creatures that inhabit it. And, the prophet's declaration in the myth of Lachesis, rather than simply propose a tale in the manner of archaic mythologies, marks for Cassirer a decisive moment in the elaboration of mythical thinking as such, leading toward the overcoming of its fundamental tendency. What characterizes mythical thinking, in this perspective, is the manner in which it accounts for primordial phenomena—birth and death, health and sickness, growth and decline—in terms of occult forces that may take hold of individuals and work as mysterious agents that orient their destinies. But the declaration of Lachesis clearly breaks with this mythical attitude. For, as Lachesis explains, it is not the *daimon*, the spirit that inhabits us, that obliges us to choose, thus engendering our peril or our salvation, since *we ourselves* choose the daimon responsible for our fate. And this, according to Cassirer's interpretation, is of momentous importance, for in identifying the agent not with an occult constraining force but with free individual choice, Plato's account of this myth opened the way toward development of the idea of ethical responsibility.⁴ It is this idea that in turn provided an important contribution to the development of religion, making possible its distinction from archaic forms of mythology, and supporting the monotheistic creeds in their spiritual quest to free themselves from the material constraints of idols and of worldly things more generally.

Corresponding to this ethical role of the Platonic doctrine, Cassirer also underlined its *political* significance. The fact that the individual, in the context of the mythical worldview, is hardly the master of his or her destiny, but is an instrument of occult forces, reinforces the power of the group over the individual, by lending authority to the group's leader, the shaman or priest who supposedly exercises influence over the occult forces commanded by the mythical deities. According to the detailed argument that Cassirer developed in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, a principal feature of mythical thinking lies in its efforts to consolidate social bonds, requiring the imposition of heavy constraints on all the different spheres of individual activity. And the long historical processes that leads to the overcoming of archaic forms of myth through the germination of the seeds of rationality implicit within them opens the way to the gradual liberation of the individual from the omnipresent demands of the group, introducing a new historical form of individual autonomy, and new possibilities of political liberty.

It is well known that during the final period of his life, above all in his last, posthumously published work, *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer's theory of myth shifted its focus, since in this later period his main interest was less in mythical thought as it manifests itself among archaic or non-European peoples than in the expression of myth in the contemporary world. Admittedly, in the earlier period of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer acknowledged the persistence of myth in the modern epoch but, following the rise to power of Nazism in Germany, and then the Second World War, the expressions of political myth in Germany itself became his chief preoccupation. Nonetheless, in spite of this change in his thinking, accompanied by a more pessimistic outlook in regard to the future prospects

4. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2, *Das mythische Denken* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 206.

of humanity, his interpretation of myth manifests an underlying continuity. This continuity comes to light if we consider Cassirer's analysis of Plato's philosophy at the beginning of *The Myth of the State*. In this work, as in the earlier *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer returned to Plato's *Republic*, and he again evoked the prophet's declaration in the myth of Lachesis. Once again in this later period, Cassirer emphasized the key role of this myth, since its narrative gives witness to the abandonment of archaic forms of myth and the embrace of a philosophy of free choice of the individual in the face of destiny, bringing forth a whole new epoch in the political development of humanity. According to this interpretation of the myth of Lachesis in *The Myth of the State*, not only the individual but also the state, in choosing the evil or the beneficent spirit—the "daimon"—that inhabits it, chooses its destiny. In Cassirer's words:

Not only the individual man but also the state has to choose its daimon. That is the great and revolutionary principle of Plato's *Republic*. Only by choosing a "good daimon" can a state secure its eudaimonia, its real happiness. We cannot leave the attainment of this highest goal to mere chance, nor can we hope to find it by a stroke of luck. In social life as well as in individual life rational thought (*phronesis*) must take the leading part.⁵

According to Cassirer's analysis, Plato was the thinker who took the decisive step in subduing the force of political mythologies that attributed the fate of the state to the operation of occult powers and legitimated the use of brute power by the sovereign in his or her efforts to direct social action in conformity with their purported demands. This challenge to the authority of political myth, according to Cassirer's later doctrine, permitted the development of a new kind of attitude toward political authority in terms of which true political power depends on a just and equitable organization of the state capable of promoting the well-being of its citizens. In this manner Plato introduced an original political theory, promoting the rule of law, and capable of minimizing the arbitrary character of power politics that had earlier been nourished by the oppressive forms of archaic political myth.

II

In examining Blumenberg's interpretation of Cassirer and of political myth, I will set aside the question concerning the ways in which Cassirer might have influenced Blumenberg's conception of myth, and I will focus my remarks on a certain affinity in their respective approaches to this theme. This affinity appears above all where Blumenberg rejected any ready tendency to discount myth in view of its allegedly alogical and primitive character in comparison to modern standards of rationality. More plausible, as Blumenberg noted in his seminal essay "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," is Cassirer's insight into the different forms of perception and the different kind of logic that mythical thinking engages. Blumenberg therefore lauded Cassirer's tendency "to attribute a precatogorical constitution to mythical thinking, to lend to it in this manner a greater space of manoeuvre as well as a lesser degree of strictness in the connection of phenomena."

5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 76.

He then added:

The thesis that will be developed here takes a step farther in this direction. It attempts to elucidate the precategorical structures of myth identified by Cassirer through the difference that exists in the mythical comprehension of reality (*Wirklichkeit*); but it attempts at the same time—as its primary aim—to situate this difference in comprehension at the source of the forms and the intensity of the reception of myth.⁶

While stating his general accord with Cassirer's interpretation of myth, above all in regard to Cassirer's depiction of the discrepancy between mythical and scientific conceptions of reality (*Wirklichkeit*), Blumenberg added that he intended to "take a step farther in this direction." However, in relation to Cassirer's theory of myth, where did this "step farther" lead? As I see it, Blumenberg took much more than a step, which, moreover, hardly followed in the direction toward which Cassirer had set out. And, we find an important indication of the new orientation that Blumenberg pursued several lines farther in the same essay, where he evoked the philosophy of Plato. According to Blumenberg, "Platonic metaphysics brought the mythical conception of reality to its end," and it is here, as Blumenberg noted, seemingly close in this assumption to the initial position of Cassirer, that we can identify the sources of his hostility to poetic myth. But Blumenberg went on to remark that it is also for this reason that we can situate in this metaphysics "the immanent necessity to . . . find its own myth."⁷ According to my interpretation, the Platonic myth plays an entirely different role in Blumenberg's thought than in the philosophy of Cassirer, leading him to radically reformulate his theory of myth more generally, in a way that would have significant implications for the interpretation of myth in history, and of its relation to politics.

An important indication of the way in which Blumenberg reformulated Cassirer's orientation toward myth appears in the interpretation Blumenberg proposed of the prophet's declaration of the message of Lachesis in the myth of Er. Blumenberg had already made a cursory reference to this myth in *Arbeit am Mythos*, and its importance for his general theory of myth is underscored by the fact that he evoked it again in a similar sense and in greater detail in later works such as *Höhlenausgänge* and *Beschreibung des Menschen*. In the last of these works he cited the prophet's sentence: "No divinity shall cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own deity," while noting the importance that Cassirer attributed to this passage in the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.⁸ He then

6. "eine präkategoriale Verfassung zuzuschreiben, ihm also hinsichtlich der Verknüpfung der Erscheinungen einen grösseren Spielraum und geringere Stringenz beizumessen. Die These, die hier verfolgt werden soll, geht in dieser Richtung einen Schritt weiter und versucht, die von Cassirer nachgewiesenen präkategorialen Strukturen des Mythos aus der Differenz des in ihm angelegten Wirklichkeitsverständnisses begreiflich zu machen, zugleich damit aber und als vordringliche Absicht, aus dieser Differenz Formen und Intensität der Rezeption des Mythos herzuleiten.," Hans Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 362. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

7. "Die platonische Metaphysik hat den Wirklichkeitsbegriff des Mythos zu Ende gebracht, und darauf beruht sowohl ihre Feindschaft gegen den poetischen Mythos als auch die ihre immanente Nötigung, ihren eigenen Mythos zu finden," *Ibid.*, 363.

8. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 469; Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1996), above all chapter 7, "Der kosmische

added that the essential meaning of this phrase resides less in Cassirer's understanding of it in terms of the individual's capacity to choose his or her destiny, than in another possible interpretation, which corresponded in his mind to the more fundamental intention of Plato's *Republic*: the quest to exonerate the Deity from any responsibility for the destiny the individual might choose. As the prophet exclaims in the mythical narrative: "The blame is his who chooses: God is blameless."⁹ In this manner Plato's *Republic* introduced in original form what the Christian tradition would later term *theodicy*.

In his commentaries on the myth of Er at different periods in his work, Blumenberg stressed a central motif that runs throughout his interpretation of myth as a whole: the declaration of Lachesis prepared the ground for a wholly new form of myth that, as *theodicy*, set myth on a novel, monotheistic foundation. In the twentieth century the traditional basis of this myth began to weaken, for it began to lose all plausibility and, to support this statement, Blumenberg cited as an example Freud's assertion concerning the impossibility of *theodicy* given the unjustifiable difficulty of life on earth.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the potency of this myth first introduced by Plato, as it reoccupied similar functions in the course of ancient and modern history, re-emerged in surprising ways, which Blumenberg evoked in relation to Cassirer's approach to myth and to the ethical and political implications of myth in the modern world.

If, according to Cassirer's interpretation, the rise of monotheistic religions confirmed and surpassed Plato's legacy through the elaboration of the idea of individual autonomy in light of superior justice and a higher good emanating from beyond the ephemeral things of this world, Blumenberg contested this assumption through his reformulation of the relation between myth and Christian theology. Blumenberg's new orientation in regard to myth began to appear in his early essay "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos." In this essay, emphasizing a motif he later reaffirmed in *Arbeit am Mythos* and in later works, myth is hardly overtaken or surpassed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, nor was it sufficient to claim with Cassirer that traditional religion contains a residue of myth; on the contrary, myth was intimately intertwined with certain fundamental tendencies that emerged in that tradition. Myth, as Blumenberg wrote in his early essay, is essentially characterized by its "Umständlichkeit," its tendency to follow circuitous, sinuous paths.¹¹ By contrast, if it is possible to distinguish between religion and myth, this is because the theology of the early Christians evoked an eschatological principle, with its expectation that the end of the world was

Hintergrund der politischen Qualifikation," 170-181; Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 643.

9. "Nicht wird euch ein Dämon erwählen, sondern ihr selbst werdet euch euren Dämon aussuchen [footnote: Plato, *Politeia*, 617d; cf. E. Cassirer, *PSF*, II, 206]. Diese präexistente und dem betroffenen Individuum niemals mehr erinnerliche Identifizierung mit seinem eigenen Lebensbild und Lebenslos ist aber nicht primär der Versuch einer mythischen Versöhnung mit dem ungewollten Dasein, sondern die Entlastung der Gottheit von dem Vorwurf, für diese Identität des Ich mit seinem Los verantwortlich zu sein: Die Schuld liegt bei dem Wählenden; Gott ist ohne Schuld"; Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 643.

10. *Ibid.*, 642-643.

11. Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," 373-392; Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 159, 271-275.

immediately at hand, which was directed against the ambiguity and sinuosity of mythical forms of explanation. This straightforward and unequivocal theological approach predominated until the period of Saint Augustine and, in a certain measure, even beyond his theology. As Blumenberg wrote:

In the radical eschatology of the New Testament expectation of salvation, the 'margin of manoeuvre' of the circuitousness of myth is at its minimum level; it is promised that the junction between the need of salvation and the advent of salvation will occur as quickly as possible, and it is expected that divine power will show its effects in a basic and immediate way.¹²

The victory announced by this eschatological principle never materialized. The end of the world and the Last Judgment did not come and, as Blumenberg noted, early Christian religiosity eventually had to give way to theodicy, with its mythical call for justification of the Deity and divine creation despite the presence of evil in a world that continued to exist. If myth was therefore transformed in the Christian era through its retrieval of a motif inaugurated by Platonic metaphysics, this was precisely because, as theodicy, it followed the sinuous, roundabout modes of explanation that are characteristic of myth.

This conception of Plato, not as the philosopher who overcame the fundamental tendency of myth, but as the formulator of a new kind of myth, manifestly cut against the grain of Cassirer's basic orientation. Ernst Cassirer's interpretation of Platonic myth was indeed remarkable for its entirely *favorable* attitude toward the legacy of Platonic philosophy, which, as we have seen, is typical not only of Cassirer's writings of the 1920s, but even of the *Myth of the State*, where he investigated the sources of the perverse political myths of the twentieth century. Blumenberg, however, proposed a more nuanced approach to Platonic philosophy, above all of its ethical and political implications, and, in Blumenberg's perspective, Cassirer's unalloyed affirmation of Plato betrayed not only a one-sided tendency in his interpretation, but a blind spot in his philosophy as a whole.

Blumenberg's critical attitude toward Cassirer is set in a particularly clear light in his comments at the beginning of the book *Höhlenausgänge*, where Blumenberg focused on Cassirer's interpretation of Plato. Blumenberg cited in this context a sentence taken from Cassirer's late work, *An Essay on Man*, published in 1944, a year before *The Myth of the State*. In an *Essay on Man* Cassirer wrote: "Without symbols the life of man would be like that of the prisoners in the cave, according to the famous allegory of Plato." And Blumenberg added: "nothing is less correct (*richtig*)" than this statement of Cassirer.¹³

Blumenberg's critique in this passage identified a paradox in Cassirer's analysis. In Cassirer's view, as is well known, we structure the experiential world in relation to symbolic forms such as myth, religion, art, or science. Since symbolic forms are necessary preconditions of all human experience, it is impossible, as Blumenberg emphasized, to appeal to any form of comprehension outside the realm of symbols. It is equally impossible, in Cassirer's perspective, to set symbolic thinking on a plane comparable to the supersensible realm of the Platonic

12. Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff," 375.

13. Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 167.

ideas. And yet, in comparing the realm of symbols with that of truth beyond the cave, this passage would seem to admit a Platonic distinction between the cave's illusory realm and supersensible truth—a distinction that Cassirer's own philosophy hardly authorized. Here Blumenberg manifested a certain suspicion of what appears to be Cassirer's tacit subservience to the fundamental assumptions of Platonic idealism, a subservience that proved so compelling that it at times conflicted with the fundamental tenets of Cassirer's basic insight.

As we continue further in our reading of *Höhlenausgänge*, we realize the full scope of Blumenberg's suspicion, which, in uncovering in Cassirer's philosophy a one-sided approach to Platonic myth, engaged a broad interpretation of the historical significance and political implications of myth more generally. Blumenberg's attitude comes to light if we briefly consider what he took to be two contradictory tendencies in Plato's thought. First, in dialogues such as the *Meno*, Plato based his argument on the famous theory of anamnesis, of reminiscence of innate truth, which was for him at the source of all knowledge. Since in this dialogue Socrates demonstrated his theory of innate knowledge by eliciting comprehension of the elementary rules of geometry in the reasoning of a barbarian slave boy, he underlined the fact that truth, at least potentially, is available to each and everyone. "Everyone," as Blumenberg wrote, "is endowed with a share of anamnesis."¹⁴ On the other hand, another and very different tendency came to expression in the *Republic*, where, in comparison to the *Meno*, anamnesis no longer played a central role. In this dialogue, and above all in the allegory of the cave in Book VII, Plato directs our attention not so much to innate truth that all have a capacity to recognize, but to the need for a kind of enlightenment that can only be brought from outside the cave. In this allegory, indeed, the prisoner must be forced to leave the cave in order to learn a truth that cannot be comprehended in its somber depths. Only after attaining this insight is he led back into the cave. Since truth depends on a revelation that the prisoners cannot recognize in terms of what appears in the cave, enlightenment, if it is to be had at all, depends upon a source beyond the cave emanating, as we are brought to understand, from the superior authority of the philosopher. Here we comprehend, as Blumenberg emphasized, the implications of this shift in emphasis from a certain measure of epistemological equality, as formulated in the *Meno*, engaging the autonomous quest for truth, toward subsequent insistence in the *Republic* on the *political* need to insure the stability of the state, calling for inequality of citizens in light of a superior philosophical authority. Moreover, this orientation in the allegory of the cave is anticipated in Book III of the *Republic* by another myth, the famous myth of Phoenician origin, according to which the magistrates in the ideal state must introduce a ruse or noble lie, a *mechane* (μηχανή), by means of which the citizens are to be convinced that they are naturally born into three unequal classes. It is this rigid social hierarchy that permits the authority of the philosopher to reign without being questioned, thus insuring the stability of the state.¹⁵ Hence, against Cassirer's

14. "schlechthin jedermann die Mitgift der Anamnesis besitzt"; *ibid.*, 311.

15. As Socrates relates the myth (415 a-b): "While all of you in the city are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious—but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the

unalloyed approval of Plato as the herald of political liberty, Blumenberg emphasized the fundamental *ambiguity* of the Platonic ethical and political legacy, which only became more acute over the long course of its historical reception. Blumenberg succinctly summarized what he took to be the ambiguity in Plato's attitude toward the human capacity for autonomy in *Höhlenausgänge*, where he wrote: "The more importance one accords to influences emanating from outside, or even from a higher source, the more anthropological elements are weakened which come to expression in anamnesis, innate ideas or natural illumination and which tend toward autonomy."¹⁶

Where Cassirer, in his reading of the *Republic*, identified an essentially ethical message, engaging the notion of personal responsibility and of political liberty, Blumenberg thus found a more equivocal orientation in Plato, gravitating between natural equality in the domain of epistemology and strict inequality in politics, and calling for an authoritarian exercise of power. The importance Blumenberg accorded to Plato's increasing emphasis on truths "coming from outside and even from a higher source" directly contradicted Cassirer's interpretation of Plato's philosophy as the origin of a new vision of individual autonomy and freedom. And, Cassirer's manifestly one-sided approach to the Platonic legacy raises once again the issue concerning his unwavering allegiance to the orientation that Plato inaugurated. Curiously, Blumenberg did not elaborate on what would appear to be a blind spot in Cassirer's interpretation of the ethical and political implications of Plato's philosophy. Nonetheless, his critique was hardly limited to one or another aspect of Cassirer's interpretation of Plato, and, if we seek to place in a more complete perspective the reasons for this critique, opening the way toward comprehension of his own attitude toward the ethical and political implications of myth, we must turn our attention toward another and broader facet of his reticence concerning Cassirer's philosophy, which at the same time places his critique of Cassirer's Plato interpretation in a clearer light. Like the initial articulation of Blumenberg's reinterpretation of the myth of Lachesis as a form of theodicy, this broader facet came to the fore in *Arbeit am Mythos*. What Blumenberg resolutely contested in this broader censure of Cassirer was the presupposition that history

farmers and other craftsmen. And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the ruler is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honor such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of guardian, some to the assistanceship, alleging that there is an oracle that the state shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian"; Plato, *The Republic*, vol. 1, 166-167. Blumenberg's commentary on this Phoenician myth illustrates that it represents for him "Den Typus des sowohl mit dem zulässigen Gottesbegriff Vereinbaren als auch des für die Wohlfahrt der Stadt, für die politische Gesinnung der Bürger Nützlichen. Er lässt zugleich erkennen, was zu solchem Gesinnungsnutzen gehört: die Idee der gleichen Abkunft aller, der gleichen Pflicht aller gegenüber dem Land wie der natürlichen Verschiedenheit aller in dieser Gleichheit"; Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 114-117.

16. Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 312.

might be construed as a process in which the overcoming of myth constituted a necessary stage in the movement toward human rational self-consciousness. Here it is evident that Blumenberg's reservations concerning Cassirer's interpretation of Plato concerned not only Plato's philosophy, or even its purported influence, but above all the idea of history itself as an overarching process that lent to Plato's legacy its decisive importance. Clearly at issue in his remarks on Cassirer in *Arbeit am Mythos* was the way in which Cassirer assigned to history a telos, a *terminus ad quem*, through which meaning is conferred on history as a whole. This, however, is the standpoint of the "philosophy of history."¹⁷

The term "philosophy of history," as Blumenberg construed it in his different writings on this theme, must be understood according to the specific connotation he attributed to it. His characterization of philosophy of history most immediately recalls not only Cassirer's theoretical orientation, but above all the Hegelian sources from which Cassirer explicitly drew.¹⁸ According to Blumenberg's characterization, philosophy of history, far from a neutral perspective from which myth might be elucidated, itself expresses a modern form of myth. In the philosophy of Hegel, indeed, logos gradually subdues what Hegel took to be the dark forces of myth, but this account of myth itself unwittingly reoccupied the mythical function to the extent that it set out to *justify* the long and roundabout course that history had taken. Just as myth persevered in the monotheistic guise of theodicy, lending to theodicy its sinuous structure of explanation, so it persists in the modern period as philosophy of history. In occupying its function it assumes the mythical mode of explanation by detours. "The attempts characteristic of theodicy and metaphysics of history," as Blumenberg wrote, "necessarily reassume the structure in detours of mythology."¹⁹ The philosophy of history is essentially a form of myth that Blumenberg identified in what he termed its "rationalized sinuosity."²⁰ In Hegel's system, as Blumenberg pointed out in commenting on the emergence of this new mythology of history, philosophy of history and theodicy were explicitly joined: it is here that "the mythic category of sinuosity, disguised in the speculations of the philosophy of history," came most forcefully to expression. It was indeed Hegel who stated, as cited by Blumenberg, that one must not be impatient due to the "considerable amount of time required by the Spirit to proceed in self-conscious progression."²¹ At the deepest level of a modern reformulation of the function of Platonic myth, philosophy of history assumed the form of a modern theodicy.

Cassirer's post-Hegelian conception of history as a total process was for this same reason brought within the ambit of Blumenberg's critique, above all Cas-

17. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 186.

18. In the introduction to the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer stated that his philosophical orientation might be characterized as "phenomenology," if one took this term according to the fundamental Hegelian sense of "phenomenology of the Spirit"; Ernst Cassirer, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), III, vi.

19. Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," 375.

20. *Ibid.*, 376.

21. *Ibid.*, 377. It is noteworthy that Blumenberg referred to Cassirer's understanding of the unfolding of myth in history in the sentences of "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," which directly preceded his reference to the "Umständlichkeit" of Hegel's philosophy of history; *ibid.*, 377.

sirer's reflection in the period of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.²² Cassirer's interpretation of historical development as a process of emergence of scientific rationality, calling for liberation from the predominance of myth as a necessary prerequisite for the development of political and ethical liberty, recalls the philosophy of Hegel, even where it has been set within the open-ended horizon of a philosophy of the symbolic construction of reality and divested of any Hegelian claim to absolute foundations. By characterizing Cassirer's theory as "philosophy of history," which imposes on history the presupposition concerning the intelligibility of its ultimate destination,²³ Blumenberg characterized Cassirer's theory in terms that closely corresponded to the critical comments he leveled against what he took to be the mythical aspects of Hegel's philosophy of history.

If we consider Blumenberg's critical appraisal of Cassirer's philosophy of history, there is a striking consistency between this critique and Blumenberg's rebuke of Cassirer's interpretation of Plato: what appears in Blumenberg's perspective as Cassirer's one-sided approach to Plato may be traced to his tendency to discount those aspects of Plato's thought that did not conform to the overall pattern of history he projected. Moreover, Cassirer's subservience to Plato, reworked in the wake of the philosophy of history, nourished his paradoxical interpretation of symbolic truth capable of reaching outside the confines of the cave, and most clearly betrayed his tribute to the mythical function of the Platonic orientation. This tribute comes to light above all in Cassirer's emphasis on the decisive role of the Platonic legacy in the ethical and political development of humanity, which, in adopting the perspective of a philosophy of history for which history as a whole constitutes an intelligible process, sought to justify its course, and tacitly followed in the wake of mythical assumptions that the Platonic theodicy had established. Here, however, the "work on myth" that Blumenberg proposed took its distance from all such standard aspirations to "overcome myth."

At this final point in our analysis, however, we must nuance our interpretation of Blumenberg's remarks in order not to exaggerate their critical thrust. If Cassirer had succumbed to the illusions of the philosophy of history, Blumenberg hardly cited this aspect of his theory, either in *Arbeit am Mythos*, *Höhlenausgänge*, or *Beschreibung des Menschen*, in his detailed explorations of the specifically mythical elements of modern thought. He reserved such analysis for other modern forms of reflection, which were for him so many offshoots of the presuppositions concerning history typical of German Idealism. In this regard, Blumenberg explicitly characterized as abstract expressions of myth in the modern period Schopenhauer's postulate regarding the transmigration of souls, Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return of the same, Scheler's "integral project of Divine becoming," or Heidegger's history of being. Each of these "total projects" (*Totalentwürfe*) were mythical to his mind precisely because they "dispelled any desire to ask further

22. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 185-186. In this same passage, Blumenberg drew attention to the irony implied in the title of Cassirer's late work *The Myth of the State*. The irony, indeed, lies in the fact that Cassirer, during the last, more pessimistic period of his thinking, was brought to acknowledge a perseverance of myth in the modern period that his earlier work had not anticipated. Given the permanence of the state as an organizing principle of human affairs, the title itself ironically bears witness not to the subduing of myth in the modern world, but to its ongoing force.

23. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 186.

questions” and acted as if “there were no more questions to ask.”²⁴ Each of these expressions of modern mythology referred history to an ultimate principle from which its manifest movement supposedly drew its inner sustenance. Evidently, Cassirer’s philosophy of myth, in spite of its entrapment within the confines of philosophy of history, did not lapse into the closed horizon of the mythologies inspiring such modern projects. Indeed, Blumenberg’s reluctance to explicitly equate Cassirer’s philosophy with a form of modern myth undoubtedly stemmed from his tendency to view this philosophy, in spite of all critical reservations, as a source of an original kind of reflection on myth upon which he drew for his own conception of “work on myth.” In light of his ambivalent attitude toward Cassirer, therefore, the implications of his interpretation of Cassirer’s political thought, and of political myth more generally, may be enunciated as follows: Blumenberg’s insistence on the ambiguity of Plato’s ethical and political legacy questioned any attempt, such as that Cassirer had elaborated, to depict this legacy in light of what was alleged to be its place in a total historical process, and this in turn radically excluded any possibility of formulating in terms of that place a specific political agenda, be it even that of liberalism, which the philosophy of history could be called on to justify. Far from proposing a specific political program or political philosophy, Blumenberg limited his own task to the resolute criticism of all presuppositions concerning the meaning of history as a process that might be marshaled to serve political ends.

Toward the end of his Heidelberg address, “In Remembrance of Ernst Cassirer,” to which I referred at the beginning of this essay, Blumenberg made the curious statement that he had always taken the accusation of historicism to be an honorable epithet. He considered it to be a fortunate characterization, as he wrote, since it implied the abandonment of any conviction concerning an ultimate purpose of history. This, in turn, liberates us from any need to look for such a purpose, even a provisory one, in order to “place ourselves in its service.”²⁵ This leads me to conclude that Blumenberg sought above all to liberate the profound contribution made by Cassirer’s reflection on myth from its imprisonment in the assumptions of the philosophy of history, in other words from the mythology that lies in the belief that in overcoming myth we might set ourselves on the straight path leading toward ethical responsibility and political liberty.

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24. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 319.

25. *Ibid.*, 168-170.