The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg
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Abstract: Blumenberg’s phenomenological anthropology replaces the traditional question: What is the human being? with the following question: How is being human even possible? This question expresses a great mistrust over the ability of coping with human life. According to Blumenberg, man can survive only when he keeps distance from the threatening world in a literal as well as metaphorical sense. As an upright animal, who sees and can be seen, he can experience being hunted but also being the hunter in order to bring himself into safety from what threatens him as well as succeeding in hunting. In a metaphorical sense, man takes distance from the almighty reality through myths, religion, science, technology, art, resp. culture as reliable ways to cope with anxiety and threats in this, for him, dangerous and nameless world.

Hans Blumenberg spent many years developing what could be called a phenomenological anthropology, a project which was never brought to final completion. Although he explored many particular aspects of this project in almost every one of the works published during his lifetime, he offered his most detailed contributions to this task in the two volumes, Zu den Sachen und Zurück and Beschreibung des Menschen, which were edited on the basis of his posthumous notes and papers. In both cases Blumenberg begins the discussion with a number of critical reflections on the thought of Edmund Husserl. The aim of Blumenberg’s investigations is both to expose the incoherencies in Husserl’s phenomenology and to reveal the conditions of possibility for the original phenomenological project which Husserl himself overlooked or was unwilling to acknowledge. Blumenberg’s procedure may recall that of Nietzsche’s “genealogy,” Foucault’s “analysis of discourse,” and Derrida’s “deconstruction,” all of which in one way or another to question and challenge manifest forms of conceptuality by tracing them back to latent structures which allegedly precede and condition them. Thus these thinkers claim to uncover some anonymous process of power, or an event of language and the sign, prior to and independent of the subject, which is always already at work behind the back of consciousness. For Blumenberg, on the other hand, the hard rock where our spade is turned, because we are unable to dig down any deeper, is rather different: it is the finite character of the human being, a
creature burdened with a life that is full of cares and is never certain of being successfully accomplished.

Martin Heidegger had already developed a “phenomenology of care” on the basis of his own critical engagement with Husserl. But Blumenberg’s phenomenological anthropology was explicitly conceived as a superior alternative to Heidegger’s approach to the problem. And here Blumenberg dares to take a step which Husserl himself “feared and abhorred above all, namely the step onto the terrain of anthropology.” Although Blumenberg speaks of Husserl’s “phobia with regard to anthropology” in this connection, he also emphasises that this “decision against anthropology” was certainly no “misanthropic act” on Husserl’s part. For it was a decision that was ultimately grounded in Husserl’s unshakeable conviction that no anthropology was capable in principle of furnishing a reliable foundation for our understanding of the world as a well-ordered rational whole, and thus also capable of banishing the twin dangers of relativistic historicism or reductionist naturalism.

1. The Incoherencies of Husserlian Phenomenology

The pre-scientific and the natural-scientific conception of the world furnish the initial point of departure for Husserl’s philosophy. This conception also involves an awareness that consciousness itself is part of the world, as well as the assumption that the latter exists independently of us human beings. This natural belief in the existence of the world is “bracketed” or suspended in Husserl’s phenomenology. What remains is an absolute subject, which each of us fundamentally is, but which nonetheless does not itself belong to the world. The whole of reality is then expressly related to this ego and presented as dependent on the latter. In this respect, the transition from natural to the transcendental-phenomenological view of the world effects a reversal of our ordinary and everyday conception of the relation between ego and world.

Husserl believed he could discover a certain order amongst the things themselves which were not “merely” nature, but rather presented a rational structure that could be intuited as such – just as man himself is not “merely” a natural being, but a rational being superior to nature. And here Husserl ascribed particular significance to the process of “reflection” which, on the one hand, is

2 Ibid., p. 98.
capable of putting everything into question but also promises, on the other, to open up the way to ultimate certainties. For Husserl reflection was a power which could in turn annul the very damage that it produces in the first place.4

Blumenberg shows how phenomenology certainly attempted to gain access to “the things themselves,” i.e. sought to present reality as a rational order that is ultimately grounded in an absolute subject. But he also indicates how Husserl’s efforts in this direction repeatedly encountered difficulties which prevented him from remaining true to the things themselves without effectively distorting their character after all. Thus in the ensuing phenomenological “return” from the things themselves to the subject that constitutes them we are constantly surprised to glimpse reality as an independent and overwhelming world and the ego as that of a finite mortal human being. To borrow the language of Blumenberg’s title To the Things Themselves and Back Again, the movement to the things themselves involves “the absolute ego,” “rational order,” “evidence and clarity,” while the movement back from them involves “the finite human being,” “the real world,” “lack of evidence and obscurity.” The problems Husserl encounters in trying to fulfil his aims kept leading him back to the ultimate phenomena, the “last things,” of human experience, and thus unwittingly brought transcendental phenomenology back to the path which leads to a phenomenological anthropology.

One of the incoherencies which afflict Husserl’s notion of the absolute subject is said to be the following: while on the one hand this subject constitutes and attempts to appropriate the world with all its innumerable objects and human beings, on the other hand the latter remain entirely alien to the world and elude every attempt at appropriation. It is true that to know something, for us human beings, means to possess it without having to be identical with it. But the absolute subject, which reaches into the world through its own creative activity, can only possess the world by becoming identical with it: “What we would possess entirely, that we must be.”5 Yet this must be impossible since we can only accomplish it at he cost effectively renouncing ourselves and our own being. The world thus retains its absolute independence over against the absolute subject.

Furthermore, even the most precise and discriminating perception of an object is something that can never be brought to completion since every such thing is irreducibly inexhaustible. This in turn, Blumenberg claims, is connected with “the fact that the object is always more, and thus also something other, than the consciousness which is occupied with it, and, in the last analy-

4 Blumenberg, Zu den Sachen, pp. 331 ff.
5 Ibid., p. 123, Blumenberg, Beschreibung, pp. 146 ff.
sis, with the fact that there is a world”6 whose independence radically puts in question the alleged absoluteness of the world-constituting subject.

And when we look more closely, we see that such absoluteness cannot actually be discovered in this subject anyway, since otherwise it would already attain the desired transparency and systematic completeness of which of course it continually falls short. For such an absolute subject, at least, there could never be the imprecision, the provisionality, the errors and deceptions that Husserl repeatedly encounters; all such things are only actual and possible for human beings that are finite. But the never-ending contributions and self-assessments of Husserl, all those fragmentary notes and reports in which the phenomenologist attempts again and again to begin afresh, all too clearly indicates that whatever “is and should be to be definitively describable by appeal to intuition again and again demands revision on the part of the same observer.”7 Yet it cannot possibly befit an absolute subject to find itself perpetually dissatisfied with everything it has wrested from experience in years of often desperate labour and exertion. And in fact the phenomenologist was never capable of attaining the systematic order, the illuminating clarity, the ultimate and definitive grounding that he always sought to articulate in his writings, even though he constantly made new and sustained attempts to do so. And this is presumably what explains the disproportionate relationship between the thousands of pages of manuscripts which Husserl left behind and the relative paucity of the books which he actually felt able to publish in his own lifetime.

And here we must also consider the “difficulties with language” which Husserl inevitably encountered “in order to transform his intuitions into description.”8 According to Blumenberg, it is not only that he frequently lacked the ultimate “evidence” that he so desired, but he was often also unable to find the requisite linguistic means to express what he had phenomenologically “seen” in an appropriate manner. It would seem that the power of beholding proved greater than that of saying. At any rate, there seems to be an almost insoluble problem about ascribing univocal and unambiguous meanings to specific words. Today, of course, we are far more likely to encounter the opposite view that language itself is more powerful than any phenomenological “seeing,” the very possibilities of which have allegedly been conditioned by language in the first place. Furthermore, according to Blumenberg, we should already entertain serious doubts whether it is indeed the “res” – the things themselves – which found a voice in Husserl rather than the “verba” – the mere words – which served so well to explain the difficul-

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7 Ibid., p. 35.
8 Ibid., p. 65.
ties encountered in grasping the absolute subject and the world as an ordered structure of reason. The fact that Husserl himself was unable, in any case, to avoid appealing to metaphors is only another indication for Blumenberg that the absolute subject only represents a finite human being after all.

2. The Presuppositions of Husserl’s Phenomenology

Husserl constantly wished us to forget that is we ourselves who pursue and engage in phenomenology: “Self-forgetfulness characterises the specific posture of the phenomenologist and the conditions of success”9 which apply to the latter. In this regard, the project of phenomenology resembles that of scientific research generally: “The very idea of science implies that the human being in his distinctive form, as a specific individual or concrete figure, vanishes from the theoretical scene.”10 What is more, we must also remember that modern cosmology has transformed the human being into an almost entirely insignificant being. It is as if “man seems to vanish before his own eyes in infinite remoteness as soon as he considers the universe deeply enough.”11 Yet however miniscule and insignificant man may be in the context of the world as a whole, this by no means implies that man cannot legitimately be “the focus of his own interest.”12

In Blumenberg’s view, we can no more speak of phenomenology or of science without reference to man, than we can speak of reason “as such,” namely that reason which philosophers are supposed to help to ultimate victory. Man is not an organ of reason for Blumenberg; on the contrary, it is reason that is an organ of man.13 And even as the latter, it is not given to us primarily for the creation of great cultural achievements;14 it is rather a “back door to life”15 that helps us respond to the fundamental difficulties and challenges of life. And the same is true of that self-conscious of “reflection” which our tradition has often regarded as an “exemplary activity of a philosophising subject”16 and to which it has therefore ascribed a special dignity which it does not remotely possess. If we examine the matter more closely, Blumenberg argues, we can see that man is not simply capable of reflection, but is rather ineluc-
tably “driven to reflection” in the struggle to survive at all. And something similar also holds for the disinterested perception and observation of nature for which Hans Jonas coined the striking expression the “nobility of seeing,” and which Goethe captured in the words of Lynkeus the Watchman who spoke of those who are: “Born to see and disposed to behold” (“Zum Sehen geboren, zum Schauen bestellt”). Goethe thought that while man, like all the other animals, usually perceives the world around him from the perspective of its possible utility for his own purposes, he is also capable of beholding things in a disinterested way that is free of all immediate or instrumental concerns. But Blumenberg himself is primarily interested in seeing, and in beholding or contemplating only insofar as this is based on seeing.

In short, Blumenberg’s attempt to develop a phenomenological anthropology undertakes to show, in the first place, that there are no such ultimate powers as the “absolute subject” or “reason as such” that could somehow be conceived independently of human beings themselves, and, in the second place, that all the higher faculties of man, such as disinterested contemplation, philosophical reflection, rational thought in general, are themselves cultural transformations of life-serving and life-promoting instruments deployed by finite human beings in their struggle for existence.

3. How is the Human Being Possible in the First Place?

For all that Blumenberg challenges and goes beyond Husserl’s position, he still remains a phenomenologist who would bring us to see something “that was not, or could not, be seen before, and thus to see more than everyday life or science allow us to see.” In this respect he also finds himself in agreement with Wittgenstein who observed that: “philosophical dissatisfaction disappears when we come to see more.” All three thinkers attempted to replace “explanation” with a method of “description” which involves no appeal to empirical experiments or theoretical demonstrations, but rather helps us, on the basis of plausible descriptions, to understand something that would otherwise strike us as entirely mysterious.

One characteristic feature of Blumenberg’s philosophy, and thus of his text The Description of Man, is the specific way in which he relates to the modern

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17 Ibid., p. 139.
20 Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen*, p. 344
21 Ibid., p. 350.
natural sciences: “The task of philosophy lies neither before, nor above, nor between the sciences; the most acceptable approach, I would suggest, is to locate the place of philosophy after the sciences.” For it is one thing to ground reality in a some kind of philosophy of nature, another to explain it in terms of the natural sciences, and another again to offer an existential interpretation of the reality that is explained by the sciences, which is precisely what Blumenberg does. In his phenomenological anthropology he does not attempt to provide us with insights which add to or compete with the natural scientific explanation of life. What he furnishes is rather an existential description of the human being that science investigates as one particular species of the animal realm. Blumenberg exploits, so to speak, the results of the positive sciences for the elaboration and development of his own distinctive anthropological investigations.

In this regard, however, Blumenberg expressly repudiates the classical basis of what is often described as “philosophical anthropology,” namely the question: “What is man?” For he is convinced that the there is no “essence” of man. One can already read in Jean-Paul Sartre, of course, that man is a being “whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it.” Sartre thus emphasises that there is “no human nature,” or put more concretely and specifically, there is no metaphysical nature or essence of man.

This is a perspective that Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault also share with Blumenberg. Thus Rorty directly rejects the idea “that there is such a thing as ‘human nature’ or the ‘deepest level of the self.’” He repudiates the idea of “mind, spirit, reason, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic nature – one which could be known by a kind of non-empirical super-science called philosophy.” In the Introduction to his Lectures on Logic Immanuel Kant had expressed the task of philosophy specifically in terms of the question: “What is man?” Like Blumenberg in this respect, Rorty claims that the question “what is our nature?” is an entirely obsolete one. In his view there is no central “core to the self,” no “essence” or “nature” of

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22 Blumenberg, Beschreibung, p. 482.
23 Ibid., p. 483.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 4.
man: “We are far less inclined than our predecessors were to take theories
of the human essence seriously.”30 And Foucault agrees with his denial “that
there is any essence or nature of man.”31

Blumenberg’s phenomenological anthropology replaces the old question
of essence, the question “What is man?,” with the question “How is man
possible in the first place?”32 Blumenberg’s question can only be properly
understood in the context of a pronounced mistrust regarding the conditions
of a livable human life.

4. The Life World and the Absolutism of Reality

Blumenberg’s reflections begin from the original hostility and the pitiless
indifference of the world in relation to the desires, interests and hopes of
human beings themselves – or, in Freud’s terms, from the fundamental dispar-
ity between the “pleasure principle” and the “reality principle.” Blumenberg
regards our response to and our reaction against an uncaring, overwhelming,
and indeed originally nameless reality as the ultimate challenge that confronts
all human beings. Blumenberg also describes this overwhelming power of
nature, cosmos and world as the “absolutism of reality” which human beings
have always had to check or challenge in order to survive at all. In this sense
reality can be compared with a kind of absolute master or sovereign – a met-
aphor for the pitiless and unpredictable domination of nature over man, an
image for the unreliability of the world from the human point of view, for the
unknowability which readily provokes fear and panic and can fundamentally
threaten all human life. At the same time, and as a result of this, the absolutism
of reality also stands for our experience of the world as an alien and inhospi-
table place which remains essentially untouched by human suffering, uncon-
cerned for human fate, and indifferent with regard to each and very one of us.

Blumenberg introduces his own specific use of the expression “life world”
(Lebenswelt) as a contrasting and complimentary concept to the absolutism of
reality. In his philosophy, the life world signifies the exact opposite of the
absolutism of reality. It stands for the idea of a life without distressing cares,
an existence without anxiety or disappointment. The life world in this sense
is typically familiar, reliable, dependable, and unquestioned, a world that is
taken for granted and can also be taken in or surveyed as a whole. It resembles

30 Rorty, Contingency.
31 H. Becker and L. Wolfstetter, Freiheit und Selbstdorge, Frankfurt am Main: Materialis Verlag,
1985, p. 10.
32 Blumenberg, Beschreibung, p. 535
a kind of domesticated park in which we can roam around without heed to
the uncanny or the threatening. In this world every expectation is fulfilled,
and every wish is satisfied, since man and his environment are here perfectly
suited and adapted to one another. That is why there are no disappointments
within this life world. All disappointment is essentially unfilled expectation.
But in the life world nothing is expected which fails meet fulfilment. Hence
there are neither disappointments nor surprises here. There is rather a perfect
coincidence between need and its satisfaction. As a realm of self-sufficiency
protected from all disappointment the life world excludes all philosophical
reflection or questioning. In the life world everything effectively corresponds
to our wishing and willing.

Of course, there is no such world. The latter would be equivalent to
paradise, or heaven on earth. Blumenberg’s contrasting and complementary
concepts of the life world and the absolutism of reality are “limiting con-
cepts,” the two polar extremes on a continuous scale. They are theoretical
constructs which characterise directly contrary and opposed worlds in which
no human being has ever really lived. For on the one hand, man has always
already fallen out of the protective security of the life world as a kind of
paradise, while, on the other hand, he must always already have established
a certain distance between himself and the absolutism of reality in order to
be able to survive at all. The human being thus effectively moves between
these two poles. Exposed and vulnerable as he is to the absolute nature of
reality, man strives to construct a life world in which he can live reliably and
unquestioningly, that is to say, attempts to transform the alien and threaten-
ing character of the world into a place of comforting familiarity where one
may establish some kind of livable life.

5. Man the Impossible Creature

Existence is only possible for human beings if they succeed in compensating, at
least in part, for the loss of this original life world. Existence is therefore only
possible for human beings if, at least in part, they check or break the absolutism
of reality. Blumenberg stylises this response to the reality with which individual
is forced to engage as the ultimate task that confronts us all. And he describes
human self-assertion or self-affirmation in the face of the absolute character of
reality as an anxious and ongoing attempt to deal with the experience of lack.
Given the relative powerlessness of man in relation to the overwhelming power
of reality, it is by no means sure that human beings are always able to meet these
demands successfully. The question how man can survive at all is therefore
constantly raised afresh. In this connection Blumenberg even goes so far as to
say that “Man is the impossible being.” It is not just that man seems almost impossible cosmologically speaking insofar as he appears “as a most improbable event abandoned in the physical universe.” Man also appears almost impossible from a biological-evolutionary perspective since it is clear “that the overwhelming number of developmental paths did not lead to man himself.” In short: “Man is [...] a surprising, inconsequential, and incidental solution to the general problem of self-preservation of life on planet earth.” And finally, man is also almost impossible existentially speaking when we simply consider all the defects that characterise his existence and the extreme and distressing situations in which he can often find himself caught up.

In this regard, Blumenberg wholly shares the views of Arnold Gehlen who drew directly on Herder’s earlier insights and specifically defined the human being as a “deficient being” or “creature of lack” (Mängelwesen). As Gehlen put it: “Humans have no natural protection against inclement weather; we have no natural organs for defence and attack but yet neither are our bodies designed for flight. Most animals surpass man as far as acuity of the senses is concerned. Man has what could even be termed a dangerous lack of true instincts and needs an unusually long period of protection and care during his infancy and childhood.” As a species man could only preserve himself by compensating for his own characteristic defects: “he must actively transform his deficiencies into opportunities for survival.”

At first sight, there might seem in this regard to be a considerable measure of agreement between Gehlen and Martin Heidegger who also defined the human being in terms of “care” (Sorge). Both thinkers regarded man as a being who is compelled to shape and organise his own life, who only understands things by understanding how to cope and engage with them. But the comparison between them is nonetheless ultimately misleading. For Gehlen, human life is a task that must be assumed as an urgent and immediate neces-

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 17.
36 Ibid., p. 585.
39 Gehlen, Mensch, p. 33.
40 Ibid., p. 36.
sity, and his version of philosophical anthropology is a philosophy of self-pres-
ervation which is essentially concerned with the elementary question as to
how the human individual can pre-empt or avoid a premature end to its life.
Heidegger’s philosophy of existence, on the other hand, only really begins
where Gehlen’s anthropology ends. Heidegger is principally concerned with
existential questions which only arise once the task of securing and preserv-
ing life itself has already been accomplished. To formulate the contrast in
a rather pointed fashion, we might say that Gehlen wishes to understand
how human life and survival can successfully be achieved, whereas Heidegger
wishes to understand how human existence can be meaningful in the first
place. The former ultimately takes biology as his guiding science, while the
latter implicitly takes theology as his point of reference.

In his phenomenological anthropology Blumenberg principally draws on
Gehlen whose approach he seems to find more fundamental than that of
Heidegger. For given the original defects and essential vulnerability of man,
Blumenberg too is unwilling to regard his actual survival as if that were
something remotely self-evident. As he puts it: “Man is a risky living being
that can fail in its own task […] Man is an improbability made flesh. He is the
animal that still lives in spite of everything.”

6. The Upright Posture of Man

In answer to the question how man manages to survive in spite of the difficul-
ties confronting him, Blumenberg responds with an abstract formula which
must be read both literally and metaphorically: man survived by means of his
capacity to assume, and to sustain, a distance with regard to the world. “One
answer to the question as to how man is possible might be this: through a kind
of distance.” This in turn presupposes that man is capable of recognising and
perceiving what distantly or even more remotely threatens him, a capacity
that is itself first facilitated by the upright posture of man.

The path leads from the crawling locomotion of reptiles, via the freer move-
ment of four-footed mammals, to the upright posture of man who has thereby
abandoned the quadrapedal for his characteristic bipedal form of movement.
And ever since antiquity philosophers have argued about the specific conse-
quences which effectively derive from this distinctive feature of human beings.

In Aristotle’s view, the reason why man is the only living creature who
assumes this posture is that his essence partakes of the divine. According

42 Blumenberg, Beschreibung, p. 550.
43 Ibid., p. 470.
44 See Ibid., p. 518.
to Ovid, Cicero, the Church Father Lactantius, and the philosophers of the Renaissance, the upright posture of man testifies essentially to status as master of the earth. Again and again, writers appealed to the upright gait of man as evidence of his right to rule over nature in general: “Stand upright, and be the god of the animals,” wrote Johann Gottfried Herder towards the end of the 18th century. Of all the gifts with which God endowed the human body, the distinctive upright bipedal gait was claimed to be the most important. For it is only by virtue of this characteristic feature that human beings were able to gaze upon the heavens, as Herder specifically emphasised.45

And even today the image of man’s upright posture serves as a typical metaphor for human dignity. Immanuel Kant regarded all bowing and scraping before our neighbour as something intrinsically unworthy of man. One who willingly kneels before his fellow human beings, or bends his back and raises his eyes in order to beg their favour, wrongs his own freedom and dignity. It is thus only a life of mutual recognition upstanding self-respect which essentially reveals our upright gait as the only posture of body and spirit which is appropriate to man as an autonomous being. If one treats oneself as a worm before one’s fellow men, we should not be surprised if we are then trodden underfoot in every sense.

But how did it actually come to pass that man, who belongs as a biological species amongst the quadrupeds, rose up on two legs and thereby raised himself above the dust and dirt of the earth? It is now well known that our first ancestors lived in trees, which they only abandoned for the open savannas as the rain forests dwindled and the flesh of the larger animals came to acquire greater importance for them as a means of sustenance. The development which gradually led our ancestors to adopt a basically bipedal posture was directly connected with their abandonment of the primeval forests for the open grasslands and the great ranges of the Steppes. In the woodland and forests with which they were originally familiar they still lived as agile creatures which hung from trees and travelled by swinging from one to another. And even today acrobats and circus artists reveal to us not so much the feats that we human beings can arduously learn to perform as those that we were once all perfectly capable of performing. These individuals thus afford a glimpse of the past which we still bear within us. For our arms, hands, and backbone are fitted for bodies which can hang and swing amongst the branches of trees, and the back problems and problems of posture which often afflict human beings are a painful testimony that the human backbone is perhaps better suited to a life high above in the trees than for a creature that now walks upright.

45 See Ibid.
The erect gait which man assumed on leaving the primeval forests was also linked to what Blumenberg calls “emancipation of the foremost extremities”\textsuperscript{46} i.e. the development of the hand. The ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras had emphasised that man is only the versatile and intelligent animal he is because he possesses hands as well as the intellectual faculty of intelligence. Aristotle likewise described the hand as “the tool of tools” which the thinking human creature can employ for the most diverse tasks and purposes imaginable. That is why human beings can be ascribed essentially universal abilities and capacities. In a similar vein Cicero praised the facility, the literal dexterity, of the human hand which is as well suited for painting and carving, for playing musical instruments of all kinds, as it is for building splendid palaces and great cities. And he claims that the hand is equally indispensable for securing and procuring the necessities of life. It is only with the assistance of the hand that human beings are in a position to create a second nature under the conditions of the first, or create the “culture” on which the philosophers of the Renaissance in particular laid such emphasis.

These thinkers lavished particular praise upon the twofold structure of the thumb and the threefold articulation of the other fingers as bodily perfections which allow us to achieve such remarkable things in art and technology. They described the hand and the fingers with astonishing precision, ascribing a privileged status to the twofold thumb as the “ordering guide” of the hand. For the thumb relates to the fingers, the tips of which it can reach and touch across the palm of the hand, as if it were their lord and master. And it only through the uniquely opposable thumb that the full reach and clasp of the hand becomes possible.

And indeed there seem hardly any limits to the versatility of the human hand. Not only is it capable of producing or fashioning the most works and objects, but it also serves as an organ of expression. It can enhance language by means of gesture, and indeed almost replace verbal language in certain circumstances, as the gestural sign language of the deaf and dumb strikingly indicates. And its tactile sensitivity can serve to compensate for loss of vision amongst the blind or partially sighted. The hand can rightly be regarded therefore as a “brilliant stroke of evolution” which allows us to accomplish the most various acts and movements. That is why the Renaissance philosopher explicitly defined the hand as a kind of “divine perfection.”

7. A Seeing and Seeable Creature

We realise today that the evolution of the human visual system unfolded in the closest connection with the erect posture of man and the development

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 575.
of the hand which we employ to touch, feel and shape the things in our sur-
rounding world. And in this context we should say that the human being
was more concerned to look “about” himself, rather than “above” himself.
The upright posture offered the former forest-dwellers who had escaped into
the open steppes a specific advantage in their struggle for survival, for it now
allowed human beings to recognise their desired prey or the hostile creatures
that threaten them even at some considerable distance in space. This openness
to reality is a necessary presupposition if human beings are to be capable of
pursuing prey or fleeing dangerous predators. “Desire lay at the root of the
hunt, fear at the root of flight,”47 as Hans Jonas observed in a remark which
Blumenberg cites in this connection.

As a living being that walks upright man can see relatively well. But for the
same reason he can also be seen himself. “The capacity to see also implies an
exposed capacity to be seen.”48 It is only once this is clearly recognised that we
can grasp Blumenberg’s phenomenological anthropology in the literal sense, for he is
primarily concerned with the human being precisely as “phenomenon,” namely
as an eminently visible and embodied being. The original insight of Blumenberg’s
anthropology lies in this obvious yet fundamental definition of the human being
as at once a seeable and seeing creature. This understanding of man stands at the
centre of his anthropology and furnishes the essential focus of his reflections.

This high degree of visibility matter is a perilous matter for human beings,
given that they are so susceptible to injury and attack. The upright posture
of man brings a welcome and significant increase with respect to the horizon
of visibility now open to him, but it equally involves a regrettable loss of
protective “cover.” The exemplary indication of our own vulnerability is the
back of the body that is not easily or immediately visible to human beings
themselves. For it stands for the possibility of being seen by others without
seeing the latter ourselves, of being secretly observed without realising it, for
the covert keyhole view, for the danger of sudden death. According to the
traditional understanding, it is of course God who characteristically enjoys
the maximal range of possible vision while remaining wholly invisible him-
self, for the hidden God sees all things: “Big brother is watching you!” Yet as
human beings we can remedy this “flaw of conspicuousness”49 only in part.
The typical human dream of seeing without being seen symbolises the cam-
ouflage which stands both for our curiosity about the world out there and
our need for protective cover. The inconspicuous presence of our own body
in the context of everyday life furnishes a kind of substitute for the invisibil-

47 Ibid., p. 566.
48 Ibid., p. 777.
49 Ibid., p. 203.
ity we yearn to attain. “Inconspicuousness is a form in which man comes to terms with his visibility.”\textsuperscript{50} Yet “pain, disease, self-revulsion at our image in the mirror, all stand, as forms of conspicuousness, entirely on the other side of that is inconspicuously self-evident.”\textsuperscript{51}

But however much the human being may fear his own visibility, he also still desires to show himself and appear before others. Yet to show ourselves is also a precarious and perilous matter: “A plump human being […] is not really any more visible than a weedy-looking one, but his consciousness of visibility is qualitatively different. It becomes a burden to him the moment he is acutely aware of being seen by others. Ugliness […] already represents a crisis in our consciousness of outward appearance.”\textsuperscript{52} Yet the shock that this involves is no longer the shock that one is looked at or appears at all, but that one looks or appears in this or that particular way.

The situation is different again with the promenader or flâneur for example. These are recently developed ways of seeing and being seen that have been relieved of the risks and difficulties once attendant on visibility: they represent a purely “civilised form of pleasure.”\textsuperscript{53}

8. Reflection and Prevention

According to Blumenberg, it was the consciousness of our own visibility which prompted human beings to explicit “reflection” in the first place, for it involves a rupture with the spontaneous or entirely unreflective somatic processing of external stimuli that had earlier prevailed. The explicit awareness of one’s own visibility is itself already a reflexive act which allows human beings to consider their vulnerability and to take specific protective measures to preserve themselves. The ancient Delphic injunction “Know Thyself” is widely regarded as the primordial form of all philosophical reflection, but considered more closely, it is clear that this is a late form of reflection which eventually developed from an original demand that could be expressed in the words: “Remember, if you desire to see, that you too will be seen.”\textsuperscript{54} In this sense, “reflection” is “no pure product of culture at all. It finds its preliminary anthropological form in the elementary self-preserving function that attaches to the replacement of a more passive optical system.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 202.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 690.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 680.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 777.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 140.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 145.
Yet a fundamental anxiety in the face of the world also emerged along with such reflection. For to become aware of one’s exposed visibility within the open horizon of the wild is simultaneously to become aware that “anything” can happen at any moment from every possible side and direction. And this transforms reality into something uncanny and unsettling that immediately provokes anxiety for the vulnerable individual exposed to an alien world.

But “man is an extreme being beset by anxiety precisely because he has become a specialised creature by seeking escape from extreme situations, and for human beings the threshold of absolute unescapability is very high indeed.”56 In this context Blumenberg hails the first beginnings of conceptual thought as a tremendous advance for humanity at large.

Our sense of taste furnishes the most intimate immediate contact between man and the world. It leads to the consumption and appropriation of reality through the internalisation of perceptual processes, through a kind of incorporation of the world. But the sense of touch is almost as important in responding to reality: the hand renders things immediately accessible to us. What the hand touches, of course, is given here and now. But the organ of sight already maintains a certain distance to the seen object that is now perceived from afar. “If we only imagine that this distance is constantly magnified – whether spatially or temporally – then all we can appeal to now is a concept.”57 The concept enables man to advance beyond the immediate proximity of direct perception and thus to transcend the horizon of the five senses. The specific achievement of the concept lies in representing something in its absence. Instead of speaking simply of the concept, we should perhaps today refer rather to propositional language which makes it possible to relate to specific contents which are not immediately present to us. Far from being a human luxury, therefore, language belongs to the self-preserving skills and capacities of man, one which allows him to conceive the appropriate time and place for pursuit or flight as the case may be.

Man is a highly curious as well as constantly threatened living being that must be equally capable of fleeing and attacking in order to survive at all. These capacities also presuppose – in addition to locomotion itself – a heightened degree of alertness and attention. Successful pursuit and flight alike are only possible if man can “anticipate”58 the desired and threatening object, and this depends in turn upon the possibility of representing what is absent, that is to say, upon conceptual thought. For only in this way can man adopt sufficient measures for hunting his prey or averting eventualities that he fears, measures

56 Ibid., p. 565.
57 Blumenberg, Theorie, p. 9.
58 Blumenberg, Beschreibung, p. 693.
which may extend to the planned elimination of an enemy, the ritual sacrifice of an animal to placate the gods, or the scientific prediction of an eclipse—all acts undertaken in order to obviate or alleviate human fear before the sudden and unexpected character of such events. “To this extent the concept is the instrument [...] deployed by a being oriented towards prevention of the untoward: that seeks to control what does not as yet immediately confront it.”

By means of the concept, or of propositional language, it is possible for man to counter or anticipate potential risks, to acquire significant advantages over its biological rivals, to save itself from threats and dangers, but equally to set deadly traps for the prey which he desires. “The concept arises in the life of beings that are hunters, and later nomads, whose behaviour is always directed to something that does not immediately stand before their eyes. Perhaps we may explain most clearly what the concept accomplishes for us if we think of the construction of a trap: the latter is always fashioned in specific relation to the form, the size, the kind of behaviour, and the type of movement that are characteristic of an object which is only anticipated but not yet present, which has yet to be seized and possessed.” In this sense the concept, or language, helps us to find prey and avert dangers, or, abstractly expressed, to develop instrumental thought. The concept, or language, manifestly belongs to our elementary human capacity to establish distance between reality itself and our own body. This capacity “stretches from the first defensive gesture, through stone throwing, to the concept which gathers up the world in the study, without a single grain of that world needing to be present at all.”

For Blumenberg, all the accomplishments of distance are summed up in the power of “reason” which even produces ideas such as “self,” “God,” and “world,” that cannot be present in the manner of an object at all. Ever since the Enlightenment, therefore, the question has repeatedly been raised as to whether we may legitimately transcend the horizon of possible experience, the horizon of what is present. “Only since Kant have we recognised that there is a pathology of reason.” Yet for the clarification of this question there is no other remedy than reason itself, which can draw its criteria only from itself. “The pathology of reason constantly produces and discovers new images of sickness,” such as “metaphysical” or “instrumental” reason, for example.

Yet the noble task of reason – that of critically examining itself – can easily forget its original function which Blumenberg defines in *Work on Myth*

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59 Ibid., p. 611; Blumenberg, *Theorie*, p. 618.
61 Ibid., pp. 10, 110.
63 Ibid., p. 38.
64 Ibid., p. 39.
as follows: “Reason signifies coming to terms with something – and in the extreme case, with the world.”\(^{65}\) Although human reason is merely the contingent by-product of biological evolution rather than its glorious purpose or culmination, and even though it is a highly imperfect auxiliary organ that is subject to error and deception and sometimes even capable of hindering life, it is nonetheless a crucial “device and urgent expedient”\(^ {66}\) for survival in the struggle for existence. One may even suspect, according to Blumenberg, that “reason may have been the last resort and desperate device of this particular organic system for coming to terms with the distressing features […] that characterise the very conditions of its existence.”\(^ {67}\)

Reason thus embraces the concept by means of which the human being prepares for pursuit and flight in the struggle for life, but its achievements are certainly not exhausted in mere conceptual labour: “Man does not delay or hesitate because he possesses reason, but possesses reason because he has learnt to achieve delay and hesitation for himself. Reason is the sum of all presumptive, anticipatory, and also provisional achievements.”\(^ {68}\)

9. Cave, Myth, and Culture

The exercise of his rational capacities in this sense was still highly dangerous for human beings when they lived in the wide savannas beneath the open sky. After initially abandoning their familiar habitat in the primeval forests for a life out in the dangerous steppes, early man now fled the highly unprotected open spaces and surface of the earth into protective holes and hiding places. According to Blumenberg, human beings sought entirely practical refuge in caves in the face of the overwhelming might of reality. But of course they could not permanently stay in their protective caves. For the dilemma of the cave is that while we can certainly live in caves, they cannot supply the means for sustaining life itself. But, at first, it was only the hunters, i.e. the strong and courageous, who dared to venture out of the cave and into the open, while the weaker and more fearful members of the group stayed away from the mouth of the cave. It was they who became the guardians of the cave – or eventually the keepers of the temple and the church – they whose task it was to devise tales and narratives concerning life and the world in general and thus


\(^{67}\) Ibid., p. 520.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 559.
to compensate for the unreliable and unpredictable character of reality. They deprived the alien world outside of its threatening power by devising vivid and imaginative stories which they narrated to the hunters of the group. The guardians of the cave, the shamans and priests, took some control, as it were, of the world outside through the power of their own fantasy and imagination. And the “absolute” nature of the world thereby gradually lost something of its strange and alien character. Human beings came to feel more “at home” in the world. A new world of images and stories was thus inserted between human beings and the absolutism of reality, and abandoning the caves of the earth and the mountains involved embracing the caves of meaning and culture – an achievement of “distance” in a new metaphorical sense of the term.

Myths, religions, and metaphysical systems are just such caves of meaning and culture. They all serve to quell archaic fears and banish terror which the naked facts of the world provoke. On Blumenberg’s account, it is entirely to be expected that weak and vulnerable human beings, homeless and exposed in the great open spaces of an alien and mighty world, should be assailed by a profound anxiety which reveals to the individual that his own life is threatened and the world itself is threatening.

The transformation of a vague objectless anxiety into a specific object-directed fear is one of the earliest achievements of human beings when they still lived within the wide open horizons of the steppes. The indeterminate threat of a frightening reality was thereby replaced by a concrete and determinate fear with regard to specific objects and events which themselves bestowed recognisable and comprehensible features to the otherwise faceless character of the world. Hand in hand with this development, we find human beings giving concrete names to the things that belong to the reality that threatens to overwhelm them – a significant process of introducing some order into the chaos of the unknown, and an indispensable instrument for resisting the flood of sensory stimuli to which we are originally exposed. In this connection Blumenberg speaks of the “atmosphere” of this process in which things “come to language.” Human beings thus develop more and more particular means of substituting the familiar for the alien and the unfamiliar, to replace the inexplicable with some form of explanation, to find names for the unnameable. This produced an entire cosmos of meaning which served to establish distance in the face of the absolutism of reality by concealing the later behind a veil or curtain. When a child has to go and fetch something from the darkened cellar, he sings as loud as he can in order to banish his fear of the threatening silence and darkness below, so too the myths recounted exciting tales which sought to distance the primal fears of humanity before an otherwise nameless, terrifying, and overwhelming reality. We might borrow the terminology of Ernst Cassirer and speak of “symbolic forms” in this
connection. The world of “myth” belongs amongst these forms – but so too do stories and metaphors in general, religion and philosophy, science and technology, insofar as these also serve to ward off the absolutism of reality. For Blumenberg, all these forms of countering human anxiety and dispelling danger are crucial for the development of mankind.

10. A Struggle for Existence, A Struggle for Happiness

For all the poverty of our purely biological constitution, and our lack of pre-programmed appropriate behavioural responses, human beings are nonetheless richly endowed with specific talents which enable us to engage creatively with reality and to secure conditions and circumstances which can serve as a kind of life world. In this sense “culture” can be described as an “urgently needed programme for countering our specifically biological deficiencies.” Our artistic, technical and experimental versatility in particular can be seen, in large part, as a kind of excess or abundance generated by lack and poverty. It was therefore existential needs and difficulties, questions and aspirations, longings and disappointments, which spurred human beings on towards their highest artistic and technical achievements. What is specifically characteristic for human beings is thus both powerlessness and power, poverty and wealth, lack and abundance. Yet however much our “loss of complete biological adaptation drove us to create the cultural sphere of material and institutional forms of adaptation,” human beings are not simply concerned with preserving their bare existence and responding to the most immediately pressing questions, but also with attaining “happiness,” something which we may all too often fail to realise.

According to Blumenberg, human being must wage a war on two fronts at the same time: the “struggle for existence” and the “struggle for happiness.” From the perspective of our basic “needs for self-preservation,” it is quite true that our “needs for a satisfying form of existence” may seem to be a superfluous luxury, but we must also seriously ask: “Can we dispense with the superfluous? One answer here is the following: only if the necessities, or which suffices for our needs, is not enough to make us happy.” But this is indeed the case. For “happiness” signifies more than a release from the constant search for food, for protection from the elements, for safety in general. We may find happiness

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69 Ibid., p. 552.
70 Ibid., p. 553.
71 Ibid., p. 552.
72 Blumenberg, Theorie, p. 22.
73 Ibid.
simply in strolling around without haste or any necessary destination, something which marks an incipient sense of “somatic dignity” in its own right, or again in the disinterested delight we may take in the nature around us. It may well be that reason and the realm of concepts essentially arose from the human need for self-preservation, but the very distantiation from reality which they facilitated has also allowed us to return once more to reality in order now to draw enjoyment from it. If the “concept” thus initially leads us away from the vivid and sensuous contact with reality for specific purposes, or rather to cope with the threatening character of the latter, then the various forms of release or “unburdening” which this facilitated also opened up in turn a certain leeway for relations in which we may enjoy aspects of life and the world in general. Thus human beings who originally clothed themselves for protection from the cold, for example, came at some point or other to use clothing as a means of “adorning the body and proclaiming a certain status.” In a similar way, Blumenberg suggests, the “need to perceive less,” originally developed by rationality and conceptuality in order to anticipate potential problems and difficulties, could now come to serve the “ability to perceive more”, namely that aesthetic experience of satisfying contemplation which Jonas recognised as the “nobility of seeing.” And technology, for Blumenberg, also brings a surplus, opens up “greater time” for “spending time,” that is, for more sensuous enjoyment, for more leisurely reflection, for philosophical theory.

But this release and unburdening, this surplus of time, this access to a life world, also generates the possibility of “boredom.” And this in turn, Blumenberg suggests, gives rise to a need for diversion and distraction, and in the extreme case, for “euphoria, ecstasy, intoxication,” or for the pursuit of meaningful activities which allow one to forget the passage of time insofar as they absorb us inwardly upon what we are doing, such as “extreme sports” where we freely test our own limits and success is rewarded with intense feelings of happiness.

The “concept” which is capable of representing something in its absence, also presents the individual with his or her own finitude: with the ineluctable approach of death which vividly reveals the precious and irreplaceable character of life. Death is capable of sharpening our sensitivity for the

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75 Blumenberg, *Theorie*, p. 89.
77 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung*, p. 615.
78 Ibid., pp. 707 ff.
79 Ibid., p. 721.
80 See Ibid., p. 722.
81 See Ibid., p. 591.
“shortness of a lifetime”\textsuperscript{82} – an immemorial thought which has repeatedly made itself felt since the ancient Greeks. From this perspective, the finitude of our “lifetime” can heighten the intensity of our human life on earth, and the transience of the beautiful can enhance the unique value of this life and our enjoyment of it – and especially so after the demise of any “metaphysical consolation”\textsuperscript{83} beyond this world.

11. Consolation

The less we are able to reduce human suffering and thereby come to the succour of our fellow human beings, the more our need for consolation grows. There is no lack of examples with regard to the unalterable miseries of life, which why Thales already renounced any personal posterity precisely out of love for children,\textsuperscript{84} and Montesquieu felt prompted to write: “We should grieve for human beings at the moment of birth rather than that of death.”\textsuperscript{85} Sigmund Freud expressed the same idea: “The life that is imposed upon us is too hard for us.”\textsuperscript{86} Human beings need consolation precisely because they cannot change the world at will or easily flee in the face of life – in the face of pain, suffering and sickness, or of loss, abandonment, and death. There is no doubt that man is “a being in need of consolation,”\textsuperscript{87} but is man “a being that is capable of consolation”?\textsuperscript{88} Blumenberg answers this question in the affirmative. A certain “reduction of emotion through expression”\textsuperscript{89} is always possible, as pain for example may be relieved through crying. But more significant than this is the support in the everyday difficulties of our life in the world. “A person in pain will turn to specific individuals” from whom he or she expects “sympathy, response, consolation.”\textsuperscript{90} It is a distinctive feature of consolation that it attempts to share in something that cannot really be shared. Yet such sharing consoles the sufferer with the feeling that he has given something of his own pain away to the other. “Consolation depends on our universal human capacity for transferring or delegating, on the fact that we do not have to shoulder or perform what may be expected or demanded of us entirely on

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 620.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 231.
\textsuperscript{84} See Ibid., p. 648.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 643.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 655.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 623.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 624.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
our own […] That others can simulate our own suffering offers a means of delegating this suffering.”

Other means of coping with existence – apart from sleep or laughter – include religious interpretations of life which provide us with consolation rather than truth. Such means of consolation help us, step by step, to work through pain, suffering, disappointment, and loss. “Consolation is something that makes it possible for us to carry on living even after a point that seemed to make this quite impossible: man is the being capable of living “despite” everything.”

It is clear from all these considerations that consolation is another “means of distancing ourselves from reality.” For it allows us “to approach reality from a distance,” whether it be a matter of “evading” the naked facts, or veiling them over, or responding to them in some other way. But these strategies of distantiation are not always possible. And then “inconsolability” – despair as an extreme anthropological case – will have the final word.

12. Self-Display

It is striking that Blumenberg’s work contains no explicit discussion of ethics or political philosophy. He is primarily concerned with our symbolical and cultural engagement with reality, convinced as he is that human beings require such “unburdening” institutions of myths, rituals, stories, and metaphors in order to survive at all. Of course, he also talks in detail about the caves which offer us an entirely practical refuge from the overwhelming absolutism of reality, and about the scientific-technological civilisation whose achievements he tends to regard as a blessing for human beings. But when all is said and done, his philosophy is less concerned with concrete forms of action than it is with the general cultural forms of orientation and interpretation through which human beings attempt to make themselves at home in the world.

It is equally striking that while Blumenberg is ready to bid farewell to all mythical, religious, and metaphysical meaning-giving narratives as obsolete forms of orientation, he nonetheless maintains that – in addition to science and technology – rituals, symbols, images and stories are still indispensable if we are to overcome our archaic fears, our sense of abandonment, our feeling that we may be overwhelmed by reality, in a world that is alien and indifferent.

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91 Ibid., p. 625.
92 Ibid., p. 633.
93 Ibid., p. 627.
94 Ibid., p. 628.
95 Ibid., p. 630.
96 Ibid., p. 641.
to us. Blumenberg has presented a philosophy of human “self-assertion” – of the human art of survival – that takes the confrontation between frail and vulnerable human beings and a mighty and uncaring reality as its essential point of departure. In his phenomenological anthropology Blumenberg pursues and develops this basic thought in relation to the findings of evolutionary biology. Starting from the fact that all natural beings are oriented to self-preservation, the origins of almost all the cultural expressions of human beings may be interpreted as attempts to create circumstances favourable to their own survival in the general struggle for existence. Blumenberg teaches us that human self-preservation demands more than an efficient provision of food, a successful exploitation of limited resources, and a way of dealing with competing social groups. Myths and religions in the first instance, and subsequently art and literature, science and technology too, effectively serve the self-assertion of the initially helpless human beings who find themselves thrown into this world, and can readily be interpreted as a kind of adaptation to nature. Even what we call “higher culture” helps us to cope with the demands of life. Nonetheless, such culture may easily seem to be a mere luxury, a simple waste of time, energy and money, and its myriad forms can appear entirely superfluous. Blumenberg expressly challenges this widely shared view of culture. On his view of the matter, culture allows us to compensate, at least in part, for our own powerlessness, and to distance ourselves from the overpowering character of reality. But the outward splendour of culture all too frequently conceals this evolutionary-biological and existential-philosophical truth beneath its magnificent appearance or “semblance” (Schein).

It is a distinctive feature of Blumenberg’s philosophy that it traces the phenomenon of culture back to our engagement with the overpowering character of the “world outside,” rather than our response to the challenging character of the “world within.” Formulated rather strongly, Blumenberg ultimately only seems to recognise the threat which the “absolutism” of the “outer world” poses for the visible vulnerable creature, rather than that posed by the “inner world” of the psyche in the form, for example, of socially unacceptable instincts and desires. Blumenberg largely ignores the dangers to themselves which human beings produce from within.

And in this connection we may note that Blumenberg’s philosophy also lacks an explicit account of what Gehlen called “instinctual excess” (Antriebsüberschüsse): the human impulse to an abandonment of all limits – an impulse which the social rules and cultural institutions that govern behaviour and encourage self-control have sought to hold in check from time immemorial. But culture does not merely testify to the human desire for “unburdening” forms of relief and assistance, but also to our need for exciting stimuli of one kind or another. Culture is not merely a way of responding to lack or
deficiency, but also a way of responding to excess and abundance. But the powerful outbreak of feelings in everyday and public life must of course be limited and restrained. And here we are principally concerned with the control of affect and regulation of instinctual life upon which culture is grounded. Yet culture also harbours enclaves which preserve a space for the expression of powerful and urgent feelings, for enjoyable stimuli, for forms of excitement, for wild temptations, and for intense sensual pleasures.

Blumenberg says nothing about these aspects of human experience in his phenomenological anthropology, although the issue of “visibility” also plays a very significant role in these cases. One need only consider the joy and sensuous delight which the face, or any feature or gesture, of one we love or desire can provoke as soon as our gaze falls upon them. Human beings are devoted to the captivating sight of bodily beauty, just as they take considerable pains to cultivate the erotic appeal of their own appearance, thereby attempting to rival anything which the sensuous world has to offer. If Blumenberg largely ignores the restless human search for intense sensuous pleasures, he also overlooks the countless ways in which we successfully present and display ourselves before others, as we do on the dance floor for example.

In socio-biological terms, we could say that Blumenberg concentrates almost exclusively upon the various human strategies of self-preservation, without paying sufficient attention to the mechanisms of sexual selection and biological propagation, where the sight of physically attractive bodies, the overt self-display of striking strength or beauty, the conspicuous exhibition of wealth, power and possessions all play an important role. The origin of such overt displays of impressiveness lies in the struggle for sexual recognition which is governed, according to socio-biology, by the individual’s attempt to pass on its own strengths and advantages as successfully as possible. Sexual selection compels individuals involved in the struggle to find mating partners to engage in overt self-display with shows of strength intended to indicate perfect health, outstanding fitness, and an uncompromised immune system. The elaborate nests constructed by tropical birds, the fan tail of the peacock, or the striking coloration of tropical fish, all of these so-called epigamous characteristics communicate information about the living beings in question: they are so strong, healthy, virile and vivacious that they can afford such striking displays that would otherwise represent a simple waste of vital energy. This increases their attractiveness as possible sexual partners for the female of the species which can thus expect strong and healthy offspring from the chosen male. This mechanism also survives in us human beings, however deeply it has subsequently been shaped by cultural factors. Our human preoccupation with physical beauty, displays of wealth, or conspicuous leisure, correspond to the seemingly useless feathers of the peacock, the pheasant, the bird
of paradise. This luxurious display originally served the natural purpose of rendering covert but biologically advantageous characteristics effectively visible and thus secure a stronger position in the competitive struggle to excite and attract a mate by means of sensory stimuli.

Blumenberg overlooks these aspects of visibility whose *phenomenological anthropology* concludes instead with some rather extreme reflections on the fundamental opacity which characterises human life: “Visibility and opacity intersect at a single place in the human body: in the face.”97 While the face is “the organ that betrays ageing and decay, foolishness and superiority, desire and disgust,”98 one may also hide behind it as a veil. There are few authentic means of deciphering its meaning, according to Blumenberg, and the alleged art of “physiognomics,” a “prejudice transformed into a skill,”99 is not one of them. The practices of confession or psychoanalysis probably come closer to the individual than anything else as attempts at revealing the self in the presence of another. Ultimately, however, not only every attempt to fathom the reality of others, but also every form of self-examination soon encounters its limits. The more intimately we strive to know ourselves and the more deeply we peer within, the more alien and opaque to ourselves we become: “The crisis springs from the inaccessibility of the subject to itself, in the startling realisation of its own opacity, and not only or even primarily its opacity in the eyes of others.”100

*(Translated from German by Nicholas Walker)*

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97 Ibid., p. 859.  
98 Ibid., p. 865.  
99 Ibid., p. 873.  
100 Ibid., p. 895.