Metaphor of Existence: Seafaring and Shipwreck

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The paper focuses on the metaphor of existence as a way of philosophical talking about life. Metaphorology was introduced by Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996), one of the most important and innovative thinkers of the 20th century. The works of Blumenberg fall generally within the category of the hermeneutics of metaphor. It is, for him, the question of substituting the study of the more hidden work of metaphors, symbols, and myths for the traditional history of concepts and doctrines. One can say there are two inextricable elements of Blumenberg's thought: (1) a theory of nonceptuality as essential to philosophizing and (2) an exploration of culture understood as humanity's unceasing attempts to relieve itself of the weight of the absolutism of reality. Metaphors play an important role in the philosophical language: they are not impediments to clear thinking and clear expression, but rather they are images, iconic constants used by philosophers. Metaphors are able to grasp the reality better than philosophical concepts. According to Blumenberg, metaphors are a kind of reality models, the work of human imagination. One of such models is the metaphor of seafaring/shipwreck and the present article focuses on multiple actualisations of the metaphor in Blumenberg's philosophy.

Keywords: myth, logos, metaphor, existence, care, seafaring, gnosticism, shipwreck

INTRODUCTION

The thesis *Vom Mythos Zum Logos* announced by Wilhelm Nestle in 1919 has become an undisputed part of the Western philosophical tradition. By investigating ancient Greek philosophy, Nestle has noticed a transition from mythical thinking to a rational one and that process was a remarkable feature of the period from the Homer's epoch to the Sophistic movement and Socrates' philosophy as well. Nevertheless, German philosopher Hans Blumenberg has doubted this formula and offered his project of "metaphorology", *viz.* the research on boundaries and interplays between metaphors and concepts, and an intellectually intriguing "work on myth". Blumenberg's metaphorology can be considered as one of the most curious intellectual "projects" in the 20th century philosophy and cultural studies (Waldow 2006; Kirchner 2012; Gabriel 2011; Ragutt 2016; Heidenreich 2005). In this "project" metaphor contrasts with the definition, conception and at the same time solves the problem of grasping reality. It can be assumed that Blumenberg elaborates in some sense the positive philosophy by

Fr. W. J. Schelling. The positive philosophy was introduced as a coping with Hegel's negative philosophy and a coping with the rational, logic Being, and Blumenberg uses the Schelling's notion of "unprethinkable Being" in order to express contingency. Language here plays an exceptional role: metaphors are not just simple figures of language. No doubt, theoretically speaking, myth and metaphor are not equal to each other, and nevertheless, myth as such contradicts a concept which is an abstraction *per se*. It can be said that myths and metaphors are related 'negatively' – both are opposites to conceptual thinking, and yet Blumenberg insists on the differences between them: "The difference between myth and 'absolute metaphor' would here be a purely genetic one: myth bears the sanction of its primordial, unfathomable origin, its divine or inspirative ordination, whereas metaphor can present itself as a figment of the imagination, needing only to disclose a possibility of understanding in order for it to establish its credentials" (Blumenberg 2010a: 78). Myth will be the major theme in his book "Work on Myth" (Blumenberg 1985).

According to Blumenberg, myth appears again and again after the Enlightenment and its critical attitude to mythical thinking, and the famous formula *vom Mythos zum Logos* is misleading (Blumenberg 1985: 49). However, myth and metaphors cannot be a part of philosophical *logos*. Since ancient times, an orator's or poet's language was considered to be incapable of grasping reality because it is not a philosophical *logos*. However, poetic or rhetorical speech has the power of persuasion, but it is only a technical medium which cannot reach the truth. Metaphors elude the logocentric schema that the philosophical tradition had tried to impose upon them ever since Plato. Blumenberg offers to imagine for a moment that modern philosophy has proceeded according to the methodological program set out for it by Descartes, and had arrived at that definitive conclusion (Blumenberg 2010a: 1). Traditionally, clarity and distinctness are the rules for the philosophical language, so the definition is an absolute requirement. All elements of the figurative language and form or, in the broad sense, of the terms, are connected to the logic and, finally, metaphors ought carefully to be avoided.

A programmatic introduction into Blumenberg's thought can be "Paradigms for a Metaphorology" originally published in 1960. The philosopher carefully examines the relationship between metaphors and concepts. Blumenberg explicates the idea of 'absolute metaphors' by a way of examples from the history of ideas and philosophy. Let us remember that, for example, Paul Ricoeur insists that the metaphorical term caries no new information, since the absent term (if one exists) can be brought back in and hence has only an ornamental, decorative value (Ricoeur 2003: 21). But Blumenberg emphasizes a limited validity to the substitution theory of metaphor allowed by tradition, to which Ricoeur's statement belongs.

WHAT IS METAPHOR?

The main idea of the first text "Paradigms for Metaphorology" was further developed in the works on the metaphors of light in theories of knowledge, of being in navigation (*Shipwreck with Spectators*, 1979) and the metaphors of books and reading (*The Legibility of the World*, 1979). Later Blumenberg introduced another name for metaphorology – nonconceptuality (*Unbegrifflichkeit*) (Blumenberg 1997a: 81). As Blumenberg states, "<…> metaphorology's function has not changed, but its referent has, primarily in that metaphorics is now special case of nonconceptuality" (Blumenberg 1997a: 81).

What do we lose when a metaphor is transformed into a concept? This is the most exciting task for Blumenberg. He argues for the existence of 'absolute metaphor' that cannot

be translated back into the conceptual language. Metaphors, as fundamental elements of language, resist translation into logicality but, nevertheless, it is used in philosophical tradition. Metaphorics can be described as an authentic way to grasp the relations of reality. The fact is that 'absolute metaphor' cannot be changed by other metaphor. According to Blumenberg, in 'absolute metaphor' we have an upside-down perspective: it is not directed to the construction of conceptuality, but rather to the relation with the living world. Myth works similarly to metaphor: "Myth by its nature is not capable of an abstract system of dogma that would leave local and temporal peculiarities behind it. On the contrary, it is oriented specifically toward these" (Blumenberg 1985: 97).

What is more important here – there is no need for a constant use of a definite metaphor. In that sense, metaphors are a kind of fossils which indicate an archaic layer of theoretical curiosity. That layer cannot be described as anachronistic because the return to its authentic experience is not possible and the truth is not available. The mystery of metaphor can be understood as discomfort to formulate a concept. What is this mystery? According to Blumenberg, it is the toleration of metaphor. Rhetoric is using metaphors as ornaments of language, but metaphors are used in objective discourses, and it requires an explanation.

The context in which the metaphor is used "means" a disruption. It seems to interfere with normal consciousness, harmony, and its intentionality. Blumenberg calls it a leap of information, or *Gestalt* of reality (Blumenberg 1985: 131). An image merges into *logos* inside a metaphor, but human imagination is in the first plan. For Blumenberg, the starting point is "an absolutism of reality", otherwise – the pressure or reality. In his *magnus opus* "Work on Myth" Blumenberg describes an indefinite moment in history when humans faced the reality. That was a moment when humanity could not turn away from the dangers of reality and it was the beginning of the intellectual project, as Blumenberg states. The intellectual project expands into many domains: rhetoric, science, and philosophy, but its original form is a particular myth which goes through all the domains – both ways linguistically and conceptually. All these domains are caused by a foundation – contingent formulas, otherwise 'absolute metaphors'. According to Blumenberg, those developing metaphors, such as truth as 'nakedness' and 'light', cosmos as 'eternity' or 'God', exist in the pre-conceptual level. The original mechanism of myth is to humanize aspects of the world in order to apply them to it. Myth easily transforms itself into religion and easily palpable points are generated – Gods. In this way it is easier to explain the reality of themselves. Otherwise, myth conceals an absolutism of reality and here one can see the influence of the philosopher of German Idealism – Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Shelling. He used the expression "the unprethinkable being" for facticity. Due to the contingent existence of apophantic environments or spheres of intelligibility, facticity turns into contingency. The very contingency of a given framework transforms its starting point, its 'terminus a quo', into something contingent. Blumenberg uses the distinction between *terminus ad quem* and *terminus a quo* in his own criticism of the one-sided Enlightenment rejection of myth (Blumenberg 1985: 19).

Blumenberg's notion of the 'absolutism of reality', which has to be overcome by the work of *logos* in both the form of myth and of science, corresponds to Schelling's unprethinkable Being (Gabriel 2009: 59). Just like Schelling, Blumenberg postulates an 'intentionality of consciousness without an object' (Blumenberg 1985: 4), i. e. anxiety (*Angst*) which precedes the fragile stability of symbolic practices distancing the object from consciousness so as to let it grasp its own contingency.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND FABLE OF CARE

Blumenberg's thinking can be considered as a critique of Heidegger's claim to have a relinquished metaphor: "Metaphorology tries or can try to resolve the will of those involved. The closer Heidegger seems to come to his goal of answering the question of the meaning of Being, the more he needs to leave descriptive partial achievements behind him and to let metaphorical orientation shine through" (as quoted in Hawkins 2015: 137). Heidegger in "Being and Time" (Heidegger 1962: 242) also discusses the myth and encourages us to turn our attention to Blumenberg's analysis of it.

The myth (fable) of Care (lat. *Cura*, germ. *Sorge*) lies at the center of Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*. Blumenberg in his book "Care Crosses the River", which was originally published in 1987, critically analyses this myth. For him, Heidegger's decision to retell the fable of Care is quite strange and, in order to improve the clarity of this issue, he describes the circumstances of introducing the fable into Heidegger's philosophy: "One of the Hyginus's fables has grown beyond all possible notoriety in its genre by being taken up in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Meanwhile, we know that Heidegger read it aloud to his audience in 1925 during the summer semester in Marburg. Through this fable, that analysis of Dasein connects to Goethe's *Faust*. Heidegger had read Konrad Burdach's essay "Faust und die Sorge" [Faust and Care], which appeared in 1923 <…>. In it Burdach proved that Goethe had taken the figure of Care from Herder's adaption of Hyginus's "Cura" fable in the poem "Das Kind der Sorge" [The Child of Care]. This fundamental concept for the determination of the "original structural whole" of Dasein is thus not so thoroughly theological as Heidegger's reference to Augustine makes it seem" (Blumenberg 2010b: 139).

The fable turns Care into an allegorical figure and lets her, as she crosses the river, catch a sight of some clay and take its piece in order to shape it. But Blumenberg is genuinely suspicious about the fable of Care, because something is not right in the course of the fable, and not only something provisional. "Rather, it looks as if the core element were cut out, the element could explain how Care arrives at precisely the shape. What is missing is connected to the appearance of arbitrariness that disturbs the fact that Care crosses the river – when she, in order to come across clay, could just as well walk along the river. It doesn't seem as if this were insignificant to the story" Blumenberg (2010b: 140). According to Blumenberg, lacuna at the centre of the fable proves that the fable concerns a Gnostic myth, and "precisely what provides the peripeteia for the majority of Gnostic myths is eradicated from the fable: Cura crosses the river so that she can see herself mirrored in the river" (Blumenberg 2010b: 140).

Mirrorings belong to the Gnostic founding myth and they replace the Platonic element in which the demiurge looks at the Ideas and is moved by them to make a world while also is learning how it must be made. In the Gnostic mythologem, the highest hypostasis, such as Sophia, views itself in a mirror. "One has to imagine that is her pleasure in herself, indeed, a bit of vanity that brings her to produce something like herself and, in this way, to put the entire disastrous process of duplications in motion" (Blumenberg 2010b: 140). Blumenberg in this analysis has used the method of *terminus* a *quo*, which provides the answer to the question what myth seeks to solve, rather than what it is told or what it symbolizes. So this Gnostic myth of Care seeks to assume the place of Prometheus. Blumenberg writes: "If the fable's poet left out mirroring as the reason why Cura crosses the river, then it was perhaps because one could no longer use the motif of vanity for an allegory of Care, who has to be imagined as morose rather than all-too-beautiful. But also perhaps because the poet wanted his lowly heroine to assume the place of Prometheus, who was familiar to all the readers and had also

formed humans out of clay from time immemorial. As a Titan he didn't need a model to work from. Care needed one – that was certainly narrated not without a diminishing ulterior intent for the origin of humans" (Blumenberg 2010b: 141). The fact which Blumenberg grasps here is an even more interesting question than just simple Heideggerian preference to Hyginus and, nevertheless, it is still not evident why Heidegger decided to recount this fable in "Being and Time". Probably it would be useful to turn our attention to a wider context of Gnosticism in Western culture and try to find another explication of Heideggerian Care's figure critique. Blumenberg explores the theme of Gnosticism in his book "The Legitimacy of the Modern Age", which was originally published in 1966. For Blumenberg, modernity is an overcoming of Gnosticism for the second time, 'but in the price that had to be paid in order to overcome Gnostic dualism within the medieval system' (Blumenberg 1983: 31). So, Heidegger's *Dasein* – analytic "existentiale" of "care" – contains key Gnostic elements. In his book "The Legitimacy of Modern Age" Blumenberg focuses on the theoretical position, curiosity as the main characteristics of Modernity. Theoretical activity was responsible for the progress in science and the beginning of the Modern Age. Overcoming of Gnosticism, i. e. resolving the question of Evil, has had a positive effect in theology, since it has completed the task of theodicy: by bestowing upon the mankind the status of a real actor in history, it has in reality absolved God of the production of evil. In Hyginus' fable Care creates the human of its own image, as a reflection of its narcissism. Care is an opposition to theory as contemplation. Practical concern and chores become a care dominating in one's life and curiosity turns into an illegitimate position. This becomes more frequent, as the theoretical attitude every time allows itself to be affected by the 'obscurity' of particular realms of objects more strongly.

However, here Blumenberg sees another myth which influenced Heidegger's philosophy. As he says, "the ultimate myth", and this is the German Idealism and myth about the subject, as final for the entity in charge of everything (Blumenberg 1985: 266).

"The final myth of subject", which was created by German Idealism, is a kind of close self-consciousness. Care can be a metaphor for such subject and the fable of Care plays a role of myth in Heidegger's philosophy. In order to understand this issue we should turn our attention to Franz Rosenzweig and his critique of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. It is based not only on the I-Thou relation, but also on I-It, a notion that Rosenzweig rejected. He thought the counterpart to I-Thou should be He-It, namely "as He said and it became": building the "it" around the human "I" – the human mind – is an idealistic mistake.

SHIPWRECK AS METAPHOR OF EXISTENCE

Metaphor in which imagination shows itself plays a role of a life model for living. One of such models, according to Blumenberg, is "a paradigm" of seafaring. This model is open to multiple possible actualizations and the philosopher analyzes them. In antiquity, as Blumenberg notes, seafaring was seen as a transgression of natural boundaries that was likely to result in punishment. From the outset it was associated with a certain presumption that was not content with the human domain marked out by nature and that sought to go beyond it. What drives a man to cross the high seas is the same idea of crossing the boundaries of his natural needs, Blumenberg observes, although some classical and medieval writers from Hesiod to the Scholastics warned that this transgression exposed men to shipwreck and disaster. "The sea has always been suspect for cultural criticism. What could have motivated the move from land to sea but a refusal of nature's meager offerings, the monotony of agricultural labour, plus the addictive vision of quickly won rewards, of more than reason find necessary (the latter being something

the philosophically inclined are always ready to provide a formula for) – the vision, that is, of opulence and luxury? The idea that here, on the boundary between land and sea, what may not have been the *fall* but was certainly a misstep into inappropriate and the immoderate was first taken, has the vividness that sustains lasting topoi" (Blumenberg 1997: 9).

And again in the nautical metaphor of existence resounds the question of evil, or the Gnostic theme which has been previously mentioned. It is worth quoting the following major fragment:

"Two prior assumptions above all determine the burden of meaning carried by the metaphorics of seafaring and shipwreck: first, the sea as naturally given boundary and the realm of human activities, and, second, its demonization as the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless, in which it is difficult to find one's bearings. In Christian iconography as well, the sea is the place where evil appears sometimes with the Gnostic touch that it stands for all-devouring Matter that takes everything back into itself. It is part of Johannine apocalypse's promise that, in the messianic fulfilment, there will no longer be a sea (*he thalassa ouk esti eti*). In their purest form, odysseys are an expression of the arbitrariness of the powers that denied Odysseus a homecoming, sensessly driving him about and finally leading him to shipwreck, in which the reliability of the cosmos becomes questionable and its opposite valuation in Gnosticism is anticipated" (Blumenberg 1996: 8).

The metaphor of seafaring opens the sphere in which a human being lives, and as Blumenberg writes, humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. "Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphorics of existence [which] is very rich. It includes coasts and islands, harbors and the high seas, reefs and storms, shallows and calms, sail and rudder, helmsmen and anchorages compass and astronomical navigation, lighthouses and pilots" (Blumenberg 1997: 7).

Sea is viewed as an embodiment of matter which always threatens humans and where the earthshaker Poseidon rules: he acts in accord with his own decisions. So as Hesiod in "Work and Days" suggests – it is better to stay on the dry land. Hereby the contraposition of the dry land and the deep sea as the primary frame of reference for the paradoxical metaphorics of existence might lead us "to expect that, going beyond the ideas of storms at sea and sinkings, there must also be, as it were, emphatic configuration in which shipwreck at sea is set beside the uninvolved spectator on dry land" (Blumenberg 1997: 10).

So the life-as-sea-voyage includes a spectator who observes the distress of those at sea from the safety of dry land. Talking about aesthetics and ethics of a spectator, Blumenberg insists that Lucretius was the first who "introduced" this figure (Blumenberg 1997: 26). At the beginning of the second book of the poem "De Rerum natura" Lucretius writes *e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*. The pleasantness that is said to characterize this sight is not a result of seeing someone else suffer but of enjoying the safety of one's own standpoint (Blumenberg 1997: 26). Such standpoint is clearly philosophical – a spectator gains this supremacy through Epicurus' philosophy. For Blumenberg, the spectator embodies theory (the Greek word *theoría* derives from *theoros*, spectator) and thus raises the question of what a theoretical perspective on the world entails.

Shipwreck has a genuine relation with philosophy and it can be called an initiation to philosophy. Blumenberg observes a few stories narrated by Diogenes Laertius. In all stories the metaphor of shipwreck is combined with becoming a philosopher. "Shipwreck, as seen by a survivor, is the figure of the initial philosophical experience. It is said the founder of the Stoic school, Zeno of Cition, was shipwrecked with a cargo of Phoenician purple dye near Piraeus

and was led thereby to philosophy, summing up: *nyn euploeka, hote nenauageka* – "I was first fortunate in seafaring when I was shipwrecked" (Blumenberg 1997: 12). Later Pascal expressed human's existentiality in the nautical metaphor – "you are embarked". Blumenberg cites a fragment from the "Gay Science" where Nietzsche follows Pascal with this thought: "We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out!... and there is no longer any 'land'" (Blumenberg 1997: 19).

Franz Overbeck, a German Protestant theologian and a friend of Friedrich Nietzsche, saw Nietzsche and his thought in the perspective of the shipwreck metaphor. "Desperation seized him during his voyage, and he abandoned his vessel itself" (Blumenberg 1997: 20–21). Shipwreck is threating to private existence and if you escape this perils, there still remains the great sinking of the state. Blumenberg observes a few nautical metaphors of Horace and Montaigne. It is political *Lebenswelt*: "Horace introduced the "ship of state" into the political rhetoric, where it plays its role down to the present day" (Blumenberg 1997: 11).

Yet the calm sea can also be dangerous. Blumenberg in the book "Care Crosses the River" reflects the danger of maritime tranquillity. In the context of discussing the biographical episode of Goethe's sea voyage from Messina to Naples in May 1787, Blumenberg zeros in on a passage from a letter written by Goethe to a friend in Weimar in which the great author, describing his voyage, claims he "almost perished in the strangest way: under the completely clear sky and in a totally calm sea – near death via sea calm" (Blumenberg 2010b: 18–19). Blumenberg adds that for the sailor, "the peaceful, windless sea is worrisome, a deadly dreadful calm" (Blumenberg 2010b: 19). Any good sailor knows that fair skies and calm seas can also be deadly, since they leave you stranded in the middle of nowhere until your provisions are exhausted and you consequently die. A deadly calm of the sea was experienced by Thomas Mann in Germany in summer in 1919. A writer shipped out into the Baltic in a heavy fisherman's boat and was surprised by a calm. The wide boat was too ponderous to row (Blumenberg 2010b: 24). Sea travel is risky for anyone because the safe distance is collapsed and, nevertheless, we are embarked as thrown in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Metaphor and myth work in the same perspective, on the side of human imagination, but, nevertheless, they are not equal to each other. However, myth and metaphor are not only figures of language – they do their secret work, and in the case of myth, as a result opens a distance to breathe for humanity, or in the case of metaphor, the iconic constant in "cultural consciousness" is settling (Blumenberg 1985: 150–151).

Blumenberg criticised M. Heidegger's position, his (and his disciples) effort to describe an oblivion of Being. The fact is that both – Blumenberg and Heidegger – have worked in the field of language but their positions are very different, however, this is not the scope of this paper. It is worth mentioning that Blumenberg critically analyzes Hyginus' fable of Care, which was employed in Heidegger's "Being and Time". By describing the fable of Care, Blumenberg shows a suspicion to the augustinian sources of Heidegger's philosophy, as it is traditionally declared.

Care's crossing of the river is a Gnostic myth and in that way we are discovering it in a wider context of Blumenberg's philosophy. We have in mind Blumenberg's statement that modernity is an overcoming of Gnosticism for the second time. Furthermore, the author of the myth had an intention to replace Prometheus by the figure of Care. A more appropriate

metaphor for describing the existence would be the metaphor of seafaring and shipwreck. Seafaring has always been considered as a transgression, stretch of boundaries, and it was punished. However, this metaphor also includes a spectator who observes the distress of those at sea from the safety of dry land. They are fundamental iconic constants but they do not need being repeated constantly. They can appear in various contexts and Blumenberg analyzes those actualizations. We are embarked, we are always in danger, and sometimes we experience a shipwreck after which we survive and start to build a new life. Sometimes we observe the distress at the sea but without the feeling of joy. Rather it is a philosophical position in life, because philosophy is not a doctrine but the way of life.

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Egzistencijos metafora: kelionė jūra ir laivo nuskendimas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje egzistencijos metafora nagrinėjama kaip filosofinis kalbėjimo būdas apie gyvenimą. Metaforologiją į filosofinį ir kultūrologinį diskursą įvedė vienas garsiausių ir inovatyviausių XX amžiaus mąstytojų Hansas Blumenbergas (1920–1996). Jo darbus galima paslėpti po bendra metaforos hermeneutikos kategorija. Tai metaforos, simbolio ir mito visumos analizė, kuri pakeičia tradicinę sąvokų ir doktrinų istoriją. Galima teigti, kad H. Blumenbergo mintis sudaryta iš dviejų pagrindinių elementų: nekonceptualumo teorijos, kaip esminės filosofijai, ir kultūros interpretacijų, kurios suprantamos kaip žmonijos pastangos išsivaduoti iš tikrovės absoliutizmo. Metaforos atlieka svarbų vaidmenį filosofinėje kalboje: jos nėra tik kliuvinys aiškiam mąstymui ir aiškiai ekspresijai, greičiau jos yra vaizdai, ikoninės konstantos, kurias vartoja filosofai. Metaforos geba geriau pajausti tikrovę, nei tai pajėgia padaryti filosofinės sąvokos. Pasak filosofo, metaforos yra savotiški tikrovės modeliai, žmogiškosios vaizduotės darbas. Vienas iš tokių modelių yra kelionės jūra (navigacijos) metafora ir straipsnyje pristatomos šios metaforos aktualizacijos H. Blumenbergo filosofijoje.

Raktažodžiai: mitas, logos, kelionė jūra, rūpestis, gnosticizmas, metafora, mitas, laivo nuskendimas