

Hans Blumenberg. *Rigorism of Truth: "Moses the Egyptian" and Other Writings on Freud and Arendt.* Edited by Ahlrich Meyer. Trans. Joe Paul Kroll. Cornell University Press 2018. 108 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781501704819); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781501716720).

The book is an impassioned reflection on the power and failure of the rigorous pursuit of truth by two prominent Jewish intellectuals of the 21st century, namely, Sigmund Freud and Hannah Arendt. Blumenberg's posthumously published views, originally taken from his *Nachlass*, opens up important questions: what can truth achieve for our understanding of human political reality? What is the role of myth in the world of human affairs?

As an unintended consequence of the quest for intelligibility, if truth hurts the only consoling idea, viz., the promise of a consoling myth, for an already persecuted people (Jews), should one rather not tell it? Should a writer hold one's tongue if the words are doomed to make people feel unloved or disrespected for their history and mythology in testing times? Blumenberg's response to this quest is: 'Must one tell the truth? Perhaps. Must one always tell the truth? Surely not' (51). Arendt too mulls over the question of the role of truth in politics. In 'Truth and Politics' (*New Yorker*, February 18, 1967), she writes, 'truth has a despotic character.... The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don't take into account other people's opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking' (546). She also makes a distinction between truth and meaning. The search for meaning cannot be completed by science and common sense. Unlike truth, which compels, meaning is not necessary.

As for the role of truth in politics, what can the rigorous pursuit of truth achieve in understanding political reality? Blumenberg is critical of the 'hardness' of the academic scientific profession that burdens people to go to any extent to remove any obstacles that come in the way of their search for truth. He seems to insist on considering the moral and political aftermath of uncovering certain epistemic truths. He believes that one of the most central convictions of European history is 'truth will triumph' (51). He points out that despite such convictions, "'untruth" triumphed in the world, no differently than malice' (58). Even the history of science had phases of 'state-of-the-art-errors' (58). He sounds bitter at Freud and Arendt that they refuse to allow a space for such errors for the Jewish community in their obsessive search for truth. It is rather hard to validate his bitterness.

Both Freud and Arendt, as Blumenberg's two exemplars of 'absolutism of truth' (3), have an ironic critical tone toward Jewish people, despite being one of them. Both are insiders, as well as strangers to the Jewish community, who wanted to analyze why the victims/persecuted Jewish people behaved the way they did: 'why [the Jews] have attracted this undying hatred' (32). Blumenberg argues that one cannot belong to a community and question its history and founding mythology because myth and analysis cannot go together at the same time (9). He puts Freud and Arendt in league with Copernicus and Darwin, whom he characterizes as 'people who delivered a blow to humanity' (1). He accuses Freud of taking away the figure of Moses from the Jews in 1939, the year they were persecuted by Hitler. Freud disregarded Jewish history as 'screen memories' which were used to cover up the murder of Moses in Sinai Peninsula by the Jewish people in his book *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud's work was meant to direct Jews toward the thought 'that they must love and serve the truth.' (3)

Blumenberg disapproves of not only Freud's love of truth *per se*, but his search for naked truth behind the metaphors and myths in political life. Further, he finds that the rigorism of such truths does not fade in the face of resistance or inconvenience, but grows stronger with them. He

points out that this is because the ‘general premise for resistance as a criterion might be [this]: what people gladly accept cannot be the truth’ (59). Contrary to this premise, Blumenberg argues, ‘(n)othing is less certain than that the truth wishes to be loved, can be loved, should be loved’ (13) or more sharply, he declares, ‘there is no love of truth. Maybe because there can be none’ (5).

Blumenberg does not contest or undermine Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann as ‘banal’ by depicting him as some sort of a diabolical Mephistopheles. He agrees with Arendt’s claim and seems to have ‘all respect for the rightness of such considerations’ (8), calling it ‘[h]istorically justified’ (48). He opposes her because of his different analysis of the political situation of the time. He does not approve of the age-old binary between *mythos* and *logos* and he warns us not to be blinded by any belief in the absolute power of truth and science. He emphasizes that in order to understand politics, the symbolic and mythic aspect of things should be taken seriously.

While Arendt’s concern was to uncover the nature of banal evil in a petit bourgeois like Eichmann, Blumenberg was concerned with the symbolic function of Eichmann as a ‘scapegoat’ (51) and as a ‘negative founding figure’ (51) for the state of Israel. He finds Arendt as unresponsive to this ‘mythic necessity of archaic violence’ (46) and the cathartic significance of the official trial in bringing Eichmann in ‘the national myth as the vanquished necessary enemy’ (9). According to Blumenberg, regardless of the actual character of Eichmann as a clown, one cannot call him both a figure of ridicule and a negative founding father. Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann as a family man and a buffoon defies the symbolic and mythic role of a negative founder of the state of Israel. Arendt did a disservice to the political function of myth in this sense. He calls Arendt a ‘rigorist,’ a ‘moralist,’ and says that her thinking ‘in this matter is neither philosophical not politological but sociological’ (9). Blumenberg calls this failure to recognize the necessity of a founding myth both by Arendt and Freud as ‘the refusal to recognize an ultimate and inexorable dilemma in human action’ (9). What the Jewish community could gain from these figures was withheld by Freud’s relentless pursuit of truth, when Moses becomes an Egyptian interloper, and by Arendt, when Eichmann becomes a banal functionary in a larger system of violence.

Instead of juxtaposing Blumenberg to Freud and Arendt, one needs to understand these figures as responding to three different contexts, where each one seems to be doing a favor for the Jewish people in their own way. According to some recent publications like Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (University of California Press 1997), Freud’s criticism of Moses and Jewish history is a response to racist criticism of Jews as feminine by the colonizers. Arendt was not criticizing Jews, but her portrayal of Eichmann was a response to her universalist view that Eichmann’s deeds can be repeated anywhere so he must be judged by ‘a set of human beings’ and not just Israeli citizens. However, Blumenberg’s Zionist views reveal a different motive: a fear of taking away the founding myth of the Zionist state of Israel. Blumenberg’s skepticism of the persuasive power of truth in both Freud and Arendt appears in the context of a humanist response to the plight of Jews in dark times. Unlike Arendt, who is a universalist in her appeal to the Eichmann issue, Blumenberg is a particularist with regard to the situation of the Jews.

Ultimately, Arendt and Blumenberg are not so different. Blumenberg is critical of the metaphor of vision that is dominant in Western discourses about truth. In *Life of the Mind*, Arendt too rejects ‘the unquestioned priority of vision for mental activities ... throughout the history of Western metaphysics and its notion of truth’ (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, 101). She rejects this metaphysical picture, and as a result, she is critical of the Platonic model of grounded on the metaphor of vision. She proposes a model of political epistemology which would be more pluralistic.

What remains unanswered in the book is the question of how to legitimize the role of myth in politics. How do we judge what is the right or wrong use of myth? How do we distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ political myth—for example, the use of myth by the national socialists and by the myth-making of a precarious nation like Israel? Do we need the consolation of myths in dark times? Why can’t bare truth help us in those moments?

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