Forthcoming in *Political Theory*.
Accepted version (September 2024): may change during the production process.

Blumenberg and Habermas on Political Myths

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The term "political myth" was coined by Georges Sorel (1999 [1908], 20) to capture the ways in which radical political action is often inspired, not by appeals to reason, but by larger-than-life narratives that seize the imagination. Since the time Sorel was writing, myth has become a sprawling concept that has attracted the attention of theorists of culture and society (Cassirer 1946; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), ideology (Barthes 1957; Bell 2003; Flood 1996; Tudor 1972, 65-140), nationalism (Abizadeh 2004; Miller 1995; Mrovlje 2023), institutions and institutional norms (Chock 1991; Crank 1994; Meyer and Rowan 1977), and political communication (Bennett 1980). Lately, scholars and commentators have increasingly reached for the expansive language of myth to talk about a range of pervasive tropes and narratives in contemporary culture that, despite their ubiquitous nature, seem to elude critical scrutiny – from those deeply ingrained preconceptions that form around certain social roles ("the myth of the artistic genius" [Hess 2017]), to the imagery and symbols permeating American immigration policy ("the myth of the border wall" [Grandin 2019]), and romanticized notions around what constitutes the authentic account of a nation's identity and history ("the myth of a 'real' America" [Solnit 2019]), not to mention some of the evocative narratives that have helped buoy the populist movements of the last decade ("the myths of Brexit" [Cromby 2019; Meek 2019]).

Despite wide variance in how the concept is deployed, definitions of myth have typically converged on some common features. Myths are typically *narrative* rather than propositional or argumentative in form (Bottici 2007, 12-13, 112-14; Flood 1996, 44; Tudor 1972, 16, 237). Although they evidently had to have been authored at some point by particular people, most people *inherit* their myths, as culturally significant stories already in wider circulation by the time they encounter them (Bottici 2007, 13, 115; Tudor 1972, 138-39). Myths are also *symbolically dense*, achieving their effects through figurative associations (Bottici 2007, 106-112; Cassirer 1946, 43-47), and for this reason they tend to be especially *intractable* (Archard 1995, 477; Barthes 1957), as they insinuate themselves subtly and durably into the world views and background assumptions that people make about their social environment. The combination of these qualities has led theorists to consistently define myths in terms of their relative *resistance to critical examination* (Abizadeh 2004, 311; Cassirer 1946, 196; Miller 1995, 35; Popper 1962, 50): as Sorel observed in his own definition, they "cannot be refuted" by appealing to facts and reasons (Sorel 1999, 29).

Myths present political theorists with a special problem. They seem to be intractable, but their tendency to elude critical scrutiny also makes them an especially pernicious threat to rational political discourse. It is often taken for granted that myths are epistemically and morally objectionable – particularly when manipulated to interfere with the rational judgment of individuals – and, consequently, that they are antithetical to liberal democratic values like individual autonomy, the rule of reason, and social progress. Political theorists starting from such premises usually arrive at the view that myths are fundamentally undesirable phenomena in modern democracies (Cassirer 1946; see Keum 2020, 9-16; Markovits 2008, 126-27), permissible only in exceptional cases (Abizadeh 2004). Their wariness is especially warranted by

the historic association of myth and authoritarianism that crystallized in the twentieth century – an association captured in Karl Popper's iconic distinction between "open" democratic societies that characteristically foster critical cultures and "closed" authoritarian societies that are upheld by myths impervious to criticism (Popper 1962; 2013). Though we may lack straightforward means of doing so, this view suggests, we should still strive to eradicate myths from our society.

The most optimistic variants of this mainstream position tend to rely on an understanding of myths as simple falsehoods that can be debunked. In recent decades, however, scholars of myth have steered away from this model, arguing instead for treating myths as complex phenomena that cannot be evaluated in terms of the truth or falsity of their contents (Bottici 2007; De Vriese 2017; Flood 1996, 8-9). Pointing to their ubiquity and enduring appeal even in contemporary life, these scholars have suggested that myths might in fact play a more significant role in human cognition than commonly acknowledged (Archard 1995; Bottici 2007; Keum 2020). Their efforts, in turn, resonate with a broader movement within political science and its neighboring disciplines to pay greater attention to the extent to which narratives, metaphors, and other figurative forms of thinking play in shaping the world views of political actors (e.g. Delgado 1989; Hochschild 2016; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Polletta 2006).

This paper contributes to this burgeoning body of scholarship by reconstructing a neglected point of disagreement on the topic of myth between Jürgen Habermas and Hans Blumenberg. I argue that their respective reflections on myth respond to a shared, inherited problem in midcentury German social thought: Can the opacity of myths to critical reason be reconciled with an emancipatory politics? For Habermas, the answer was no: a progressive vision of human freedom required a public sphere in which myths are gradually dismantled by facts and arguments that arise in the course of the deliberative process. Blumenberg, by contrast,

emphasized the agency that we can exercise when we work on our myths, consciously retelling and reshaping them without replacing their fundamentally figurative form. Habermas's position is perhaps the most sophisticated modern statement of the aversion to myth in mainstream political theory. But it is Blumenberg's alternative, I believe, that deserves greater attention and development.

In bringing together the two philosophers' approaches to myth, I also intend to forge a conversation between political theorists and the recent pioneers of what has been hailed a new "Blumenberg Renaissance," whose momentum has yet to flag (Fleming 2017, 199n46). Conversely, I present a new avenue for extending the longstanding effort on the part of Blumenberg scholars to give an account of the political significance of his philosophy of myth, which, despite occupying the greater share of his life's work, has often been eclipsed by his reputation in political theory and its cognate disciplines as a theorist of modernity (Brient 2002; MacIntyre 1995; Pippin 1997, 265-307; Rorty 1983; see Bajohr, Fuchs, and Kroll 2020, 24-5). Ultimately, I aim to recover an alternative to approaches to myth in the theoretical mainstream today. Blumenberg invites us to pay closer attention to the cognitive needs that necessitate the generation of myths, even in modernity, while simultaneously reminding us of our own creative agency to reinvent them.

My argument proceeds in three parts. In the first, I present Blumenberg's and Habermas's theories of myth as two countervailing responses to a long German political tradition of theorizing on the topic, and to the renewed concerns of a generation that had inherited that tradition. In the second section, I suggest their disagreement is best understood in terms of a choice between mythic opacity and political emancipation – a tension crucial to the legacy of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, I discuss what Habermas and

Blumenberg each gain and lose from their respective choices, and I conclude with a sketch of why, in spite of its limitations, Blumenberg's theory warrants more serious consideration by political theorists.

I. Two Theories of Myth

Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* was published in 1979,[1] the culmination of nearly a decade's work on developing a theory of myth, and a milestone in a lifelong project of studying the dynamic processes by which figurative elements in culture like myths, metaphors, and anecdotes acquire and hold meaning. Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* was published two years later.[2] Its central philosophical mission – defending a post-metaphysical conception of rationality capable of serving as the basis of a modern social theory – led him, early on in the two-volume work, to an extended comparison between "the mythical and modern ways of understanding the world." Although the corresponding chapter forms a relatively small part of the work, its account of a distinctly mythical worldview is an important point of reference throughout the *Theory of Communicative Action* and a recurring motif in his later thought, including his most recent *Also a History of Philosophy* (2019).

Even though they appeared only two years apart, these two accounts of myth pointed in opposite directions.[3] In Blumenberg's, myth was presented as a phenomenon that persists in

[1] Hereafter *WOM.*

[2] Hereafter *TCA.*

[3] Habermas and Blumenberg briefly served together as co-editors for a philosophy series for Suhrkamp. Their respective correspondences during this period suggests a lukewarm relationship. Blumenberg's decision to resign, two years into the position, was colored by pent-up frustration over what he perceived to be the publisher's unequal

modernity as a vital resource for organizing reality. Humans impart meaning onto reality, he argued, through dense, symbolically rich narratives that are continually reworked in order to frame the unfamiliar and inexplicable in terms of the familiar and significant. The process by which modernity continues to tell its old stories in new forms was an ongoing project Blumenberg called "work on myth."

In Habermas's account, by contrast, myth was a primal form of thought and expression that societies come to abandon as they become modern. Myth therefore functioned as a "mirror" to his famously discourse-based vision of rational progress (*TCA* I:44). Where modern, "enlightened thinking" seeks to convince through the "unforced force of the better argument," myth does so on the "authoritarian normativity of a tradition" (Habermas 1987, 107).

These works are not often placed in dialogue, but doing so immediately brings two striking observations into relief. First, it throws a spotlight on Habermas's deep preoccupation with myth over the course of a career that has often been caricatured by being reduced to its most rationalist elements. Although myth is a touchstone concept in his thought (Arens 2019), scholars have tended not to give it sustained attention. This neglect is especially surprising in light of Habermas's reputation as the de facto standard-bearer of the Frankfurt School's legacy,

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treatment of him in comparison to the other editors (Blumenberg 1970). Of the four philosophers who made up the editorial team, Habermas was clearly regarded as the most important, whereas Blumenberg was an outlier whose vision for the series was frequently out of step with those of the others (Müller-Doohm 2016, 102-6; Felsch 46-7). Another co-editor, Jacob Taubes, was more explicit in his discomfort with Habermas's influence and the general culture of conformity surrounding the public intellectual: he would go on to write to Carl Schmitt, complaining conspiratorially about the collective "howl of the Haber-masses [*das Geheul der Habermasse*]" among his contemporaries (Taubes 1979, 96; Müller-Doohm 2016, 447n55).

and how central the concept of myth was to that tradition and to what many consider its defining text, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Second, when set in contrast to Habermas's position, we gain a clearer picture of the political stakes of Blumenberg's writings on myth – a longstanding area of contention in Blumenberg scholarship. Blumenberg remains a niche figure in political theory, at best known for *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), his intervention in the so-called "secularization debates" of the 1960s-70s, and the concentrated dialogue it ignited with Carl Schmitt (Bragagnolo 2011; Ifergan 2010). But this can be a misleading point of entry into his larger body of work, which, despite its breadth, consistently gravitated throughout his career to the study of myths and metaphors (Bajohr 2015, 42-43).

There has been a growing effort among Blumenberg scholars to draw out the political ramifications of his philosophy and, in particular, his philosophy of myth. This movement has largely been driven by philosophers who have constructed frameworks for understanding political myth explicitly inspired by Blumenbergian ideas (Bottici 2007; De Vriese 2017). While philosophers in this camp rely heavily on Blumenbergian concepts like *significance* and *work on myth*, they often see their task as the political extension of a body of work that was, in its original form, literary or apolitical (Bottici 2007, 8). By contrast, a new wave of scholarship has begun challenging the paradigm that Blumenberg was not a political thinker, particularly by drawing attention to recently discovered pieces from his *Nachlass* that address contemporary political events (Nicholls 2015, 227-49; Bajohr 2015; Jay 2017). Such work has proved crucial in deepening our understanding of a notoriously elusive philosopher who, unlike many of his contemporaries, was reluctant to comment directly on pressing political issues. However, it is also constrained by the limitations of the material at hand, which – having been taken from

shorter, unpublished works – can give the impression of inchoateness. If the *Nachlass* suggests that Blumenberg did indeed have a political theory, the same material can point us to the verdict that it was at best fragmentary and unsystematic (see Nicholls 2015, 184, 188, 246).

What the literature on both authors can sometimes fail to capture is that Habermas's and Blumenberg's respective theories of myth were ways of responding to questions about the place of myth in politics that had long been in circulation, and that had gained renewed traction in their own time. The German intellectual tradition is unique in having had a relatively unbroken history of focused interest in myth from the eighteenth century through the aftermath of the Second World War (Williamson 2004). Myth, in the context of this tradition, had always been a politically charged concept and, by the time Blumenberg and Habermas were writing, the landscape of the theoretic discourse on it had been shaped by at least three interconnected schools of thought.

The first, which might be characterized as a broadly Romantic approach, singled out myth as a medium that distinctly complemented – and was irreducible to – a critical mode of rationality that had come to define modernity. Recovering the epistemic, social, and political possibilities of this medium lay at the heart of the overlapping projects of the early German Idealists, who saw "a new mythology" as the key to a new world order unified by the ideals of freedom and equality (Author unknown 1996; Schelling 1978; Schlegel 1988). In the cultural realm, Wagner (1981, 85-92, 124-154, 187-199) sought decades later to reinvent Teutonic myths for the modern stage, while Nietzsche (2003, 109-111) identified myth with the lost Dionysian impulse that modern thought had forsaken to its impoverishment.

The Second World War, however, vaulted myth into an especially fraught conceptual landscape. In the years leading up to and during the war, as fascist ideologues made overt

appeals to mythological traditions to represent their cause, myth came to be explicitly associated with Nazism in particular and with the political toolkit of authoritarian governments more generally (Cassirer 1946; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Popper 2013; see Rosenberg 1933). For those critics who consolidated what might be called the antifascist approach to the concept, myth remained something that was fundamentally distinct from and opaque to critical reason. But in identifying Nazism as an exemplary form of modern myth, they definitively rejected any Romantic hope of a restorative mythology to counteract the ills of modernity, and instead called for the eradication of myths from politics (Cassirer 1946).[4]

If the antifascist framework drastically raised the stakes of the very idea of allowing myths to mix with modern politics, this was a possibility that loomed uneasily over a growing body of work constituting a third, what we might call postmodern, approach to myth. This was a wide-ranging movement in midcentury European and American social thought – in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1955; 1964-1971), psychoanalysis (Jung and Kerényi 1949), religious studies (Eliade 1949), and the newly energized field of comparative mythology (Campbell 1959-1968; Dumézil 1959) – that increasingly presented myth as a universal, perhaps inescapable, feature of all societies, an outgrowth of the human condition and our need for meaning. Where, then, an assumption of the antifascist school of thought was that, like Nazism, modern cases of myth were exceptional and dramatic deviations, the postmodern approach suggested that modern society and culture were already rife with their own distinctive myths (see Barthes 1957).

[4] While the full-throated condemnation of "the modern political myths" of Nazism at the end of Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* (1946) offers the clearest – and most canonical – articulation of this view, the case has been made that the published version of the work in fact misrepresents a more complicated position on the place of myth in politics and society (Bottici 2017).

It was against the fraught background of these overlapping traditions that Blumenberg and Habermas each turned to the subject of myth. The convergence of the antifascist and postmodern discourses in the German postwar, in particular, had brought to the fore a question that caught the attention of both philosophers: how to think about and respond to the traces of myth in modern life that elude our critical scrutiny?

II. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the Problem of Myth

It's worth acknowledging that we've come some distance from the ideas of "myth" with which this paper opened. The paradigmatic model for myth in the Romantic tradition was ancient Greek mythology: an effectively extinct cultural phenomenon that was ripe for modern reinvention. (Ancient Teutonic mythology was often recruited as a potential resource for such a project.) Both the antifascist and postmodern camps, however, tended to approach myth on the back of an early anthropological tradition centered on reconstructing a distinct "primitive" mentality through the analysis of the myths of aboriginal cultures in the Americas, Africa, Oceania and the Pacific (e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1923; Malinowski 1926; Tylor 1920). The anthropological framework offered a way for antifascists to condemn myths in such terms. If Nazi ideologues had successfully clad their movement in mythological overtones, this was something that marked an aberration in the trajectory of Western civilization: a regressive turn to primitivism that ought not to have happened. At the same time, for postmodern theorists of myth, the early anthropological premise that the study of myth held the key to understanding human culture also gave fodder to the suspicion that the cognitive and social forces behind myths had in fact been, and continued to be, ubiquitous in modern life all along, manifesting in subtler, more everyday forms than Nazism.

All these ways of thinking about myth – as an idealized image of ancient Greek mythology, as "primitive" mentality and as its modern counterpart in Nazism, and as a much more indeterminate constellation of everyday norms, expectations, and representations in the background of modern culture – had been loosely, unsystematically absorbed into the concept by the sixties. Certainly, the dramatic bloating of the concept of myth in midcentury German social thought is reflected in Habermas's and Blumenberg's disparate understandings of it. Habermas tended to conceive of myth in a traditional anthropological vein, as a type of worldview-framing narrative, whose predominance in archaic societies accounted for their fundamental difference from modern societies. Blumenberg, by contrast, adopted what might be best described as a hybrid approach: his treatment of the concept throughout *Work on Myth* was unmistakably tethered to the model of ancient Greek mythology and its legacy in European culture. But – partly through the convoluted influence of a separate, German tradition of "philosophical anthropology" that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century – it simultaneously preserved a broadly anthropological interest in the primal condition of humankind in which myths are generated, as well as the commitment, shared with a more expansive swath of postwar social theorists, to insisting on the continued presence and relevance of myths in contemporary society.

From our perspective, where the question of myth has receded from this level of prominence, such conceptual differences can appear exceedingly vast. But it deserves emphasizing that Blumenberg and Habermas were writing from within a shared intellectual context in which myth was viewed as a broad but coherent category of analysis, defined – in varying degrees of abstraction – in terms of a powerful cultural narrative somehow opaque to critical reason. The political ramifications of this opacity, in particular, constituted a puzzle at the

center of the most famous text of the Frankfurt School, and it was arguably the most important driver of Habermas's investment in the topic of myth.

A. Emancipation without opacity

For Habermas, an important precondition for a fully emancipated society was the gradual elimination of myths from the "lifeworld" – that is, the shared reservoir of beliefs and cultural practices in the background of our social interactions (*TCA* I:43-44, 70-74, II:191-197). In societies where mythical forms of discourse predominated, he argued, myth's linguistic features obstructed both social change and the capacity of individuals to reason freely (*TCA* I:44-53). Borrowing from Karl Popper and the criterion of refutability that he used to define science against myth (Popper 1962), Habermas suggested a contrasting ideal. A fully rationalized lifeworld would require transforming society's myths into criticizable validity claims: speech with propositional content, which is inherently available for dispute and critical evaluation (*TCA* I:49-53). This work of translation and replacement was what drove the defining cultural revolution of modern politics – a transition from a "representative" to a "critical" culture (Habermas 1991), the continuation of which constituted an integral part of what Habermas considered the "unfinished project of modernity."

Both the core question, of whether the rational tools society makes available to individuals can in fact free up their thinking, as well the idea that myth somehow represented the precise opposite of this ideal, had unmistakably been inherited from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this landmark work that in many ways defined the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno presented myth as a kind of fatalistic orientation, a perception that the world as is is beyond change. Their focus on what might be described as the

spirit of myth, rather than its formal features or the content of particular individual myths, set up the book's polemical thesis: that the products of Enlightenment reason had trapped contemporary society in the same spirit of unfreedom, and, as a consequence, were themselves myths (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xviii).[5]

While Habermas did not share this pessimistic prognosis, he remained committed to Horkheimer and Adorno's definition of the Enlightenment project and its central values. Myth likewise figured in his work as a force fundamentally opposed to human freedom and, in particular, as a concept against which he could sharpen his ideal of discourse structured by criticizable validity claims. He emphasized how the formal structures of myths made it difficult to open their contents to analysis. Myths characteristically made "insufficient differentiation" between what is a genuine claim about reality and an imaginative elaboration of the story being told, and consequently encouraged worldviews that are not understood "as interpreted systems that are … connected with validity claims – and thus exposed to criticism and open to revision" (*TCA* I:52-3). Because individuals cannot meaningfully say "no" to it in the way they might reject or affirm a propositional claim, a myth effectively "binds" or "stops up" the "critical potential of communicative action" (*TCA* II:159; see Lesch 2019, 865; McCarthy 1991, 136-37).

Habermas also shared Horkheimer and Adorno's view that the way to counter myths was through criticism. Following the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer, Adorno, and their colleagues developed a vigilant philosophical practice of "immanent critique" directed at all aspects of society and culture, including all forms of contemporary myth, broadly understood. The paradoxical entanglement of myth and conventionally rational institutions – like the

[5] Whether Horkheimer and Adorno advance a coherent definition of myth in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a less straightforward question than it might appear. For a nuanced perspective, see Clavey (2023).

institutions of scientific knowledge – meant that myths may not be immediately recognizable as such prior to critique, and consequently, they called for close, highly contextualized critical engagement. It was a nuanced account that departed from efforts to challenge myths with isolated facts and arguments, which might well be foreign to the contexts in which they operate and carry meaning. It conceded, furthermore, that our social world was unlikely to be entirely rid of myths. Rather, it was the perpetual task of the theorist to apply old critical tools to each new myth that hardens over society.

But where Horkheimer and Adorno appeared to leave open the question of what the critique of myth would look like, Habermas adopted a more narrow, teleological vision. The goal of progressively converting society's myths into criticizable validity claims meant that the criticism of myth ultimately had to conform to the standards of rational argumentation. Myths, once criticized, had to be replaced with discourse that audiences could recognize as a kind of claim that could be taken apart, and which demanded replacement if a better one came along. This stipulation was, for Habermas, a way of rescuing Critical Theory from what he saw as the aporetic consequences of accepting the bleak conclusion of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In an essay containing his most direct response to that text, Habermas objected to Horkheimer and Adorno's unanchored characterization of critical reason in a work that nonetheless claimed to be a project of criticism. If they "still want to *continue with critique*," he concluded, "they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria" (Habermas 1987, 126-27). That criterion had to be found in the legitimizing power of deliberative procedure: only a discourse structured around the "unforced force of the better argument" offered an escape from "the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment" (130).

Habermas's insistence on converting myths to criticizable validity claims, then, was a matter of necessity, not rational triumphalism. It was an answer to a broader set of concerns about the need to protect a fragile idea of reason, and no vision of politics guided by reason could afford to relinquish those standards without devolving into cynicism. Myths were linguistically impoverished in ways that risked lowering critical standards everywhere. By privileging the implicit posture of openness built into argumentative discourse, Habermas sought to defend deeper habits of mind and speech that empower us to continually revise our assumptions about the world.

The ideal character of Habermas's discursive rationalism, and the spirit of necessity behind it, are features of his philosophy that Habermasians regularly find themselves having to remind his critics of. Habermas does not advocate the end of storytelling; nor does he want us to speak in syllogisms (Moon 1995, 146-153; White and Farr 2012, 43-47, 55n40). Rather, his account of the evolution of public discourse – an arc that progresses away from myth and toward criticizable validity claims – functions as a regulative ideal, giving structure to the notion of a public sphere as a continuous, collective project. Against recurrent criticisms that this goal asks too much, alternately, of people or of language – that it is too detached from how discourse is actually practiced, that it cannot adequately counterbalance existing power structures that regulate what voices and experiences are represented in the public sphere (Benhabib 1992; Meehan ed. 1995; White 1991; Young 2000, 63-4, 66; see Fraser 1990, 64, 69) – Habermasians have countered that his teleological model is only an ideal, albeit a painfully necessary one, and the burden is on its detractors to propose a better alternative (Baxter 2011, 16-20; see Benhabib 1986).

B. The compatibility of myth and freedom

Blumenberg's relationship to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is less straightforward. Not only was his own intellectual genealogy rooted in a different, and at times overtly oppositional, tradition – the aforementioned school of philosophical anthropology headed by the likes of Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen (Nicholls 2015, 79-93; Pavesich 2008) – he was famously iconoclastic and tended to stay out of mainstream academic debates. Nonetheless, as scholars have lately begun to show, his reputation as an intellectual maverick has in many ways been overstated. He kept close tabs on the intellectual currents of his day, including the disputes over the Nazi legacy that preoccupied his generation (see Blumenberg 2014), and he engaged with them in a characteristically oblique manner, often by using historical figures as stand-ins for the positions of his peers (Nicholls 2015, 10). Although Blumenberg does not cite the work, echoes of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* permeate *Work on Myth* – an observation that was not lost even on contemporary reviewers (Nicholls 2015, 196-97; Yack 1987, 245-56). The point of convergence, in fact, can be stated more precisely. Like Habermas, Blumenberg was exercised by the problem of reconciling the opacity of myths with an emancipatory political vision, in which we have agency over our cognitive and communicative tools instead of being in thrall to them. Unlike Habermas, however, Blumenberg believed these two things were mutually compatible. Rather than excising myths through criticism, Blumenberg proposed approaching them as stories that could be reevaluated and reworked as necessary.

Blumenberg's point of departure was markedly similar to the account of myth given in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 5), he speculated that myths originated from existential anxiety and the impulse to gain mastery over one's environment – a framework Habermas also shared (*TCA* I:47). Moreover, Blumenberg saw both myth and

Enlightenment reason, or what he sometimes called "theoretic" reason, as complementary approaches to reducing that same anticipatory anxiety we'd otherwise have toward the unprocessed totality of our world. As such, he often appears to share Horkheimer and Adorno's polemical project of exposing the extent to which myth and Enlightenment have in fact been intertwined (Nicholls 2015, 197).

The crucial difference that set Blumenberg apart was his conviction that the enduring presence of myths in modern life was still congruent with an emancipatory vision of human possibility. For Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, myths were ultimately a misguided coping mechanism, a knee-jerk reaction to the unfamiliar that instantly trapped their authors under the power of their newly imagined deities and demons (Horkheimer and Adorno 2020, 6-7, 10, 11). The creation of a myth – say, a story about an anthropomorphic being that casts thunderbolts – might render the natural world more comprehensible and familiar, but this was inevitably accompanied by the treacherous tendency of such just-so stories to close up the very window of agency opened in this creative act. Now, humans might find themselves with a new thunderbolt-wielding entity to fear, feel compelled to make sacrifices to it, or worse, accept the arbitrary rule of leaders claiming descent from it. For this reason, Habermas concluded that any sense of control myths offered was merely "imaginary" (*TCA* I:48, also 47), and served only to cover up actual conditions of unfreedom (McCarthy 1991, 136-37, 150).

For Blumenberg, however, even an imaginary sense of control should not be dismissed too hastily, because it furnished the existential stability that humans require to navigate their world. Being able to name and describe even a mythic object of fear, like a thunderbolt deity, was still a dramatic improvement on the "pure state of indefinite anticipation" imposed by a totally alien environment "abandoned to pure arbitrariness" (*WOM* 4, 42; see Pavesich 2008,

440). It was also an act of cognitive compartmentalization: by redirecting an all-consuming anxiety toward specific objects, myths allowed humans to demarcate separate spheres for things that do and do not need to be feared. Only where such frameworks are in place are humans released from the constant flight-or-fight mentality triggered by an unknown, potentially hostile world, and able to begin acting as free agents over their lives. Where Habermas, then, preserved Horkheimer and Adorno's account of myth as fundamentally opposed to human freedom, Blumenberg saw the availability of myths as a precondition for it.

To be sure, even this sympathetic theory of the origin and function of myths is still compatible with the claim that, as societies progress, they ought to be discarded for more transparent forms of reasoning and speech. But Blumenberg also insisted the cognitive needs that myths addressed were an enduring feature of the human condition: however subtle, the framing work they performed in the background of our mental lives was indispensable even in modernity, and it specifically complemented the critical nature of theoretic reason. Blumenberg ascribed to theoretic reason a certain unrelenting quality in the way it approached philosophical questions: its very "rationality" consisted in "the fact that it did not shrink from further question or from any logical consequence of possible answers" (*WOM* 257). Theoretic reason set off chains of inquiry that only terminated when rational answers were found. But when it came up against questions it cannot definitively settle, it only generated further anxieties (Brient 2002, 33-35; Wallace 1985, xi). Myth's figurative features, by contrast, made it a natural medium for managing those situations where humans find themselves "striving to give a rational basis to something that does not need a rational basis" (*WOM* 232). As received narratives that are already structured after familiar patterns, and dense with symbols and images that already carry resonant meanings, myths offered their creators and audiences a way to address existential

questions without necessarily attempting to resolve them, but also without putting a stop to inquiry altogether (Fleming 2012, 27). Instead, "myth lets inquiry run up against the rampart of its images and stories: One can ask for the next story – that is, for what happens next, if anything happens next" (*WOM* 257).

If myths addressed unanswerable questions by provisionally allowing inquiry to rest in familiar images and stories – neither aggravating the anxieties triggered by a restless mode of reasoning nor ruling out the possibility of "the next story" – this presented a twist to the opposition between myth and Enlightenment that propelled Horkheimer and Adorno's argument. Rejecting the traditional dichotomy between enlightened criticism and mythic dogma, Blumenberg asserted myth as a distinct third category of reasoning that was neither critical nor dogmatic (*WOM* 257; Pippin 1997, 288). Viewing myth as a necessary complement to theoretic reason in our toolkit also meant it was a mistake to underestimate the medium's inherited, timeworn resources. Thus Blumenberg rejected Habermas's conception of myth as falling on a lower rung of linguistic sophistication than rational arguments. Nor did he share the worry that myths degrade discursive norms. Myths weren't inferior, just different: it was misguided to imagine that the various forms of social discourse formed a single, one-dimensional continuum of evolution, with myths on the primitive end and arguments on the opposite end. In particular, the expectation that modern societies should leave myths behind was counterproductive, even "dangerous" (*WOM* 27), as it risked alienating us from our existential and psychological needs by spurning our primary system for expressing and coping with them. The longstanding associations of myth with primitivity, otherness, and underdevelopment – associations to which Habermas wasn't immune (Rees 2017) – constituted for Blumenberg an ironic "myth of myth" in modern culture (*WOM* 351).

Embracing the value of myths for a certain kind of mental freedom, of course, is not the same thing as an account of genuine freedom. But Blumenberg's second, most original, reason for believing in the compatibility of myths and human freedom lay in the capacity of their narratives, symbols and motifs to be revised into new myths. (Political theorists more familiar with his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* might recognize in this process echoes of the dynamic and emphatically non-teleological model of cultural change suggested in his account of the "reoccupation" of epoch-defining concepts.) He tracked how, throughout the long reception of the myths in our cultural inheritance, different elements of the same stories were emphasized, dropped, or added as they were retold in shifting contexts. This adaptability, for Blumenberg, was not incidental to myth but a defining feature (*WOM* 34). Crucially, it was in fact also something humans already understand about myths when they encounter them: far from being a dead inheritance to be received passively, myths are "handed down and known to us in no other condition than that of always being *already* in the process of reception" (*WOM* 216-7, emphasis mine). That is, we encounter myths as the products of a dynamic process in which real people, making real efforts to make sense of their lives, have actively selected, interpreted, and adapted the narratives that were meaningful to them, and it falls on us to do the same.

Where Habermas, then, associated myths with a linguistic poverty that leads its audience to receive them passively – as just-so stories about the way things simply are – Blumenberg insisted that this precisely missed their essential character. Just as arguments, for Habermas, possessed a built-in openness to revision, so too did myths on Blumenberg's account, and participating in the creative process of reworking these stories likewise had to be understood as an act of human agency.

The active relationship that individuals and communities have with their myths is something that can get lost in interpretations of *Work on Myth*, which commentators often read as an essentially conservative text. This stems in part from Blumenberg's silence on the kinds of structural conditions of unfreedom that exercised Habermas – a difficulty I will return to below – and a tendency for work on myth to be conceptualized at the scale of the kind of epochal time frames taken up in works like the *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Blumenberg 1985; 2020). But it also stems in no small part from the disproportionate weight early readers gave to Blumenberg's description of the cultural dynamics governing myths in terms of a "Darwinism of words" (*WOM* 150). First thematized as a core Blumenbergian concept in Robert M. Wallace's introduction to his English translation of *Work on Myth* (Wallace 1985, xix-xx), the term has since remained a prominent touchstone in introductory overviews of Blumenberg's thought (Yack 1987), and it has often led critics to read an unsettling impassiveness into Blumenberg's account of myth. As one reviewer understood it, the evolutionary metaphor implied that the myths in circulation at any given time are the result of "unintended historical selection" that is "beyond human control" (Kelley 1987; *contra* Nicholls 2015, 170-75).

A more accurate frame for capturing how Blumenberg himself viewed this process of cultural selection is what he called the "agency of reception": the idea that, even in such long-term developments in the transformation of culture, it is individual agents who, after all, evaluate and reinvent myths. It was to our "agency of reception" that Blumenberg credited, in a critical passage, the "entire stock" of "mythical materials and models that has been handed down to us" (*WOM* 168). On this account, the enduring resonance of the myths we have inherited stems not from a thoughtless attachment to tradition, but from deliberate choices by our predecessors in the chain of reception on what to preserve, discard, or reinvent.

Modern agents of reception, then, had not only the power to continue this work but also an attendant responsibility to do so. Crucially for Blumenberg, the process by which individuals and groups come to select and agree on this store of narratives, symbols and metaphors produced its own kind of mutual understanding, whose legitimizing pull was comparable to the "kind of acceptance that goes with objectivity." The Habermasian ring of this claim is difficult to miss. The provisional places of agreement we settle on in the course of working on myths may be categorically different from those that we reach through argumentative reason, but myth has, as Blumenberg stipulated in an evocative phrase, "nevertheless an intersubjective 'communicability'" (*WOM* 168).

III. Political Ramifications

Insofar as Habermas and Blumenberg share a commitment to human emancipation, their respective theories of myth can look more similar than either might care to acknowledge. One could argue, for instance, that the inherited but reworkable stories that Blumenberg calls "myths" are already a permissible form of discourse for Habermas, who ties his definition of myth to a medium that inherently closes off the possibility of constructive revision. What Blumenberg calls "work on myth," then, Habermas might simply view as a critical process of rationalization by which citizens work out the values and worldviews they can agree on. Furthermore, key features of Blumenberg's vision appear to be built around values more commonly associated with Habermas's thought: an understanding of public discourse as communal works in progress; the responsibility of participants to be open to revising shared frameworks of meaning; a persistent recognition of the goodwill and patience that such processes require. Habermas has, moreover, qualified his vision in important ways since the publication of *Theory of Communicative Action*.

Crucially, scholars have noted a distinct "turn" to religion in his later thought (Harrington 2007), which shows increased deference to sacred sources of meaning that persist in modern life, and to the possibility that they may never be fully subsumed into a rationalized public sphere (Chambers 2007; Finlayson 2021, 451).

But to the extent that the two philosophers disagree on whether to embrace or reject the characteristic opacity of myths, their political prescriptions are ultimately incompatible. Although Habermas may often appear to run the two concepts under the common heading of "the sacred," he does not extend to myth the special recognition he grants to religion. This stems specifically from a deep conviction that the unbridled, undifferentiated quality of mythic narratives makes impossible the universal vantage point from which ethical generalizations are drawn in religion.

To this day, Habermas has yet to waver from his commitment to a teleological ideal of criticizable discourse, even if this remains an ideal toward which human societies must always strive imperfectly.[6] Building on explicit parallels, or "homologies," with the cognitive development of individuals (*TCA* I:46), he has consistently represented this trajectory in openly evolutionary terms, casting myths as a primeval prelude to the ethical wellspring of religion at best. To be sure, Habermas credits the proliferation of myths in archaic societies as a crucial

[6] What is new in Habermas's presentation of this progressive trajectory in *Also a History of Philosophy* is his emphatic insistence that his account offers a "genealogy" rather than an empirical claim (see Habermas 2021, 72, 74). While the ramifications of this move are still being worked out, it does appear to signal a crucial softening of the normative teleology that he had formerly attributed to language, and it appears to retract, in particular, the priority he has once placed on the "action-coordinating" function of language over its "world-disclosing" aspect. I am indebted to Stephen White for this insight.

advancement in human communication (Habermas 1979, 105-106; McCarthy 1991, 139-51). But the breakthroughs represented by the advent of the world's major religions were ultimately necessary in his view to "liberat[e] the human mind from the grip of the narratively ordered flood of occurrences under the sway of mythical powers" (Habermas 2011, 18; see Dege 2023; Rees 2017). However unfinished the project of modernity may be for Habermas, making room for unconverted myths is not one of its tasks. In his latest statement on this project, Blumenberg is invoked as a thinker who initially came to similar ideas about the progressive trajectory of the modern age, only to "then retreat into the rhetoric of a 'Work on Myth'" (Habermas 2019, 41; see Bajohr 2022, 131).

For his part, Blumenberg's embrace of the opacity of myths meant that his understanding of the "intersubjective communicability" made possible by working on them differed from Habermas's vision in a number of ways. Rather than being primarily a matter of agreement between contemporaries, Blumenberg's ideal is overtly also a conversation and reckoning with a cultural inheritance passed down from one's predecessors. Nor does this process aim at consensus. Echoing the classical critiques of theorists who have sought to emend the Habermasian picture of communicative ethics (e.g. Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1990; Warnke 1999, 134-158), Blumenberg argues for pluralism about what myths are acceptable within a community, which may be simultaneously available to the same audience, without contradiction and without any need for the "force" of a better story to defeat the others. His attachment to the figurative form of myth similarly recalls the emphasis many of these same theorists place on rhetoric (Bohman 1988; Rehg 1997), and in particular narrative, as sources of moral insight and identity-expression that cannot be productively separated from our ideas about rational speech (Benhabib 1986; 1992, 5, 137). Just as these critics caution against the epistemic, moral, and

practical pitfalls of excluding narrative forms of discourse (Benhabib 1992; Young 2000, 70-80), Blumenberg is averse to drawing overly narrow prescriptions about the form myths should take when they are worked on. Myths, for Blumenberg, do not "come to an end" when they are distilled into arguments; rather, the process by which they get reworked into new myths always leaves open the possibility that they may come up again for revision (*WOM* 623-633).

Above all, this also means that any normative prescriptions Blumenberg's theory can offer in the way of adjudicating between different myths are minimal at best. A healthy myth, on his capacious definition, is one that provides some kind of existential meaning to some audience, and does not definitively close off the possibility of further reworking. Arguably, this pair of stipulations still sets a crucial standard by which to differentiate such myths from those that capitulate to the medium's vulnerability to authoritarianism – myths that often appear to derive their power and appeal from projecting monolithic claims to definitive truths. It is also through the framework suggested by these guidelines that we might better understand Blumenberg's contrasting valuations of two contemporary events that represent the most concrete examples of political myth to have emerged from his *Nachlass* in recent years. His account of the Eichmann trial – and his peculiarly harsh criticism of Hannah Arendt for her supposed insensitivity to Israel's need for a myth in the figure of Eichmann – turns on the insight that it is inappropriate to extinguish, in the harsh glare of truth, a myth that meets that need for significance on the part of the nascent state before it has even had a chance to be worked on (Blumenberg 2018; see Bajohr 2020). Conversely, in his diagnosis of the myths of historical repetition that Hitler both promulgated and subscribed to, Blumenberg underscored their apocalyptic nature: in equating Hitler's downfall with the end of the world, the myths in question stifled their audience's

capacity to imagine a future in which the reworking of myths can take place at all (Blumenberg 2014; see Nicholls 2015, 231-38).[7]

All the same, in insisting that myths retain their mythic form when they are worked on, Blumenberg ends up in a much more extreme position than most critics of Habermas who are similarly committed to the idea of narrative meaning. Because myths – unlike narratives more generally – are laden with especially thick symbolic content operating in a purely imaginative realm, work on myth will invariably yield myths that are just as opaque as the versions that preceded it. They cannot, as narratives often do (Young 2000, 72-80), function as starting points into more transparent discourse, aimed at reaching a better informed, more inclusive, or otherwise richer common understanding. One critical consequence of this is that, for Blumenberg, work on myth is less a matter of adapting them to align with values we communally agree on, and more a matter of selecting and reinventing myths so that they answer what he identifies as our need for "significance" (Bottici 2007, 116-130).

From the standpoint of political theory, there are distinct tradeoffs to the answers that Blumenberg and Habermas give to their shared problem. In imposing a critical standard on how we should engage myths, Habermas offers a theory of myth that has immediate, powerful political purchase. The superseding of myths by forms of thought and expression open to criticism is what allows Habermas to model not only a rationalized lifeworld, but also a generalized political-social program for protecting it. In particular, his call for vigilance against systemic forces that threaten to "colonize" this vision of the lifeworld shines an important light on the structural conditions that prop up our freedom. Considered through this lens, the dangers of myth come into starker relief: it is easy to see how, when coupled with market forces, the

[7] I thank both reviewers for pushing me to develop this point and for their suggestions toward that end.

drivers of systemic inequality, or the logic of mass media, myths have the potential to deal irreversible damage to the health of the lifeworld. For all the idealism of Habermas's solution, it helps us acknowledge a reality in which myths are especially vulnerable to being manipulated to serve the interests of the powerful.

This comes, however, at the countervailing risk of subjecting myths to a standard of critique that may not be suited to their medium and, in the process, undermining Habermas's commitment to preserving what makes them meaningful. In a telling moment in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas takes up an example drawn from Evans-Pritchard's description of an encounter between an anthropologist and some members of the Azande people. Whenever the anthropologist subjected the Azande's myths to a "stubborn consistency check," they tended to "evade" the questions (*TCA* I:60). Habermas takes the case as an opportunity to present an alternative to the cultural relativist position that the anthropologist's line of questioning is "illegitimate." Instead, he seeks to preserve a standpoint from which it is possible to evaluate the capacity of myths to enable or inhibit rational practice: "Isn't this refusal, this higher tolerance for contradiction, a sign of a more irrational conduct of life? Must we not call action orientations that can be stabilized only at the cost of suppressing contradictions irrational?" (Ibid).

Here, Habermas makes plain the cost he is willing to pay for this critical standpoint, and the episode, in turn, helps cast into relief the uncompromising corrosiveness of the process of translation he envisions for myths. If we were to assume, as Habermas generally seems to do, that certain individuals and groups, but not others, more consistently draw on myths to shape their world views, the translation requirement raises similar challenges as those that have long trailed his views on the place of religious individuals in Western liberal democracies. However

well-intentioned, it is difficult to convey respect toward another person while relentlessly pressing them, as the anthropologist does to the Azande in his example, to iron out the inconsistencies in a myth they happen to find meaningful. Habermas would be the first to acknowledge that such a task places an unequal burden of translation on those put in the position of acting as spokespersons for those myths. Even in the most accommodating version of this process, any discussion of myths is likely to remain *unwelcoming*, so long as the parties to the discussion can anticipate that the myths that resonate with them will eventually be subjected to a form of critical scrutiny they won't be able to withstand. This is a lesson that can be turned inward as well. If we embrace Blumenberg's premise that myths inform the world views of all humans, and not just those of other people, we can see that anticipating the eventual translation of myths into argumentative discourse can similarly result in the counterproductive suppression of those parts of our own thinking.

Blumenberg, on the other hand, sought to protect those formal qualities that made myths distinctive, and so prioritized opening up creative avenues for myths to be revised on their own terms. But the sensitivity to form that gives Blumenberg's theory of myth this flexibility is also what makes it difficult to cast in recognizably political terms. In attempting to reconcile political emancipation and mythic opacity, he has to place enormous – perhaps unrealistic – emphasis on the agency of the individuals involved, and on the responsibility they bear to receive and to work on myths in a way that is truly emancipatory. The lack of moral safeguards on this process can be all the more unsettling because Blumenberg does little to account for the structural conditions that facilitate or inhibit it. There is no equivalent reckoning in Blumenberg's theory with the concerns about the culture industry that animate the latter half of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94-136, 209-213), or with the alarms Habermas raises about

structural forces that can undermine the conditions for rational discourse. Rather, for Blumenberg, the processes that determine which variation on a particular myth will be taken up more widely remain a cultural black box. Skeptics might argue that this already dooms the model to a degenerative trajectory, whereby the consumers of myths ultimately gravitate toward increasingly sensationalist – even dangerous – stories that happen to provide greater comfort. Moreover, Blumenberg's is a lonely voice running against the grain of a long theoretic tradition that singles out passivity, not active agency, as precisely characteristic of the affective orientation that myths elicit in their audience (Cassirer 1946; see Hochner 2023). Humans may have agency over how they receive and work on myths, but there is no guarantee that they will in fact exercise it.

Where does this leave us? We may throw up our hands at this point and declare that, whereas Habermas's rejection of the opacity of myths throws the baby out with the bathwater, Blumenberg's embrace of it still presents us with an incomplete and unpersuasive account of emancipation. But if these represent the options that a politics of myth confronts us with, I want to suggest, nonetheless, that Blumenberg's solution is one that should be taken as seriously as Habermas's – at least as a starting point. Blumenberg leaves us more exposed to the myriad perils of myths, but likewise expands the range of political theory, offering, ultimately, a more ambitious politics: a way of being attentive to the rich, figurative substratum of human thinking – not just in others but also in ourselves.

Concretely, this means that whenever we encounter a myth circulating in culture – however distasteful it may be at any point – Blumenberg would have us begin by giving it appropriate standing as a narrative that, as a minimum threshold, evidently addresses some human need for some people. But this initial position of charitable recognition also has to be

complemented by a heightened awareness of its limitations: for instance, that the feel-good effect of a myth cannot be confused with an objective picture of reality; or that there are particular representational distortions to which narratives generally tend to be susceptible, such a tendency toward neat narrative resolutions, or toward putting individual protagonists at the center of stories. And if need be, Blumenberg would then have us work on the myth in question, by either revising it or developing a counter-myth to better address our shifting needs. There is considerable berth in the role that externally worked out values might play at this second stage. Falling in line with a preestablished set of communal values may not be the point of a myth, but this also does not mean that such values are irrelevant to our evolving sense of what constitutes a significant myth. At the very least, Blumenberg suggests that, when we engage myths that appear in tension with our values, any extra-mythic solution would be incomplete without an attendant confrontation with those existential impulses that lead some of us to find meaning in such myths, and working through the question of what alternatives might also address them.

To keep this up is to constantly assume a principled, and even rigorous, posture of openness, and sustaining it will inevitably require more comprehensive systems of support at a societal level, notably in political culture and education. While the finer details of a Blumenbergian politics of myth may not be fully sketched out, its overarching framework can open up a rich theoretic terrain for further exploration and development. The creative process of working on myths, it suggests, better equips us to understand them, and the more we participate in it, the better we understand the tasks ahead. It is in this spirit that Blumenberg insists that "only work on myth" is what "makes the work of myth manifest" (*WOM* 118).

Conclusion

Later in his life, Blumenberg famously began to withdraw, declining invitations to socialize or give academic talks (Hawkins 2015, 135). This reclusive period also spanned some of his most productive years, during which he threw himself into the study of particular mythic motifs and conceptual metaphors recurring in literature and philosophical writing – the exit from the cave, the star-gazing philosopher who falls into the well – and their transformation over the course of their reception. Both the subjects and the allusive style of these studies contributed to cementing Blumenberg's reputation as a literary, rather than political, thinker. It is certainly tempting to interpret his late work as the natural culmination of an apolitical theory of myth, where the dynamic possibilities of reception are consigned to the narrow sphere of high literary culture. Indeed, as a much younger – and more sociable – Blumenberg began circulating the central ideas of *Work on Myth*, Jacob Taubes privately complained to Carl Schmitt that Blumenberg's account seemed to diminish "the potency of myth, turning it into a story … letting it, as narrative, drift off into the maelstrom of the aesthetic" (Fuhrmann ed. 1971, 539; ctd. in Kopp-Oberstebrunk 2012, 133).

However, when his theory of myth is understood as an effort to present an alternative to mainstream accounts in the political theoretical discourse of his time, a different framework for interpreting his late writings also comes into view. If Habermas seems to point us toward taking apart our myths one by one with facts and arguments, we might say that this prescription has an unlikely parallel in Blumenberg's late oeuvre, which takes up individual threads of our inherited cultural vocabulary to demonstrate their variability over time and the contexts in which they have served as sources of significance. On this reading, deepening our awareness of the convoluted

trajectories of individual myths, in particular, can function as exercises that help us sharpen those very imaginative faculties that help us become more creative consumers and agents of myth.

Today, the rise of mythic phenomena in global politics – from state propaganda trading in impossibly romanticized pasts to citizen movements that pay outright homage to fascist symbols – has raised alarm bells of a new irrationalism threatening the health of liberal democracies. The latest examples to thrust the concept of myth into political relevance can seem far removed from those that interested Blumenberg and Habermas, and even from the abstractions of the debates to which they were responding. But if we take seriously the question they shared – how to respond to the deep-seated narratives in our culture that defy criticism? – we can also see how Blumenberg teaches us not to recoil from what is figurative and opaque in the seeming myths of our own times. Indeed, it may be especially in the context of our contemporary problems that his insight becomes most pertinent.

Present-day concerns about the encroachment of fantastical narratives into political discourse are often underpinned by an acknowledgement that traditional forms of reasoned argument are not very effective at countering them. Blumenberg's understanding of what gives rise to and sustains myths invites us to shift our approach. On this framework, symbolically charged narratives that are authoritarian, scapegoating, racialized, and otherwise toxic do not represent the essence of political myths as such, but more resemble pathological forms that have taken over vacuums where the cognitive needs that myths address are not met – vacuums that, when left to fester untreated, are ripe for being exploited by malignant interests. Expanding our working conception of myths beyond just their most extreme, pathological manifestations helps open up theoretical space for exploring their possibilities and limits, including by attuning us to, and better positioning us to learn from, more constructive examples of cultural work on our

inherited narratives and symbols (e.g. Dowd 2016; Naylor 2016; Scudder and White 2023, 137-43; Threadcraft n.d.). In turn, this framework also brings into focus the need to engage with harmful myths from a more holistic and long-term perspective. Rather than seek quick fixes for myths that have already metastasized into toxic forms, it prescribes that we aim to identify and target their underlying problems, and to cultivate cultures that foster imaginative ways of addressing them.

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Acknowledgements

For comments or conversation on various previous versions of this paper and its offshoots, I thank Carmen Lea Dege, Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, Sean Ingham, Simon Sihang Luo, Darren Nah, Shalini Satkunanandan, Tessy Schlosser, Torrey Shanks, David Wiens, and Sam Zeitlin, and to workshop organizers and participants at Corpus Christi, Cambridge, the Duke Kenan Institute, KU Leuven, the NYU Remarque Institute, Oxford, the Princeton University Center for Human Values, UC San Diego, Stanford, and Yale. I am particularly indebted to Ed Baring, Malachi Hacohen, Jon Templeman, Stephen K. White, and the reviewers and editors of *Political Theory* for their extensive and helpful feedback.