

Care Crosses the River

Hans Blumenberg, trans. Paul Fleming. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010.

The power given to humanity in paradise was the power to name, not to define. What mattered was to call the lion and that it came, and not to know what it was when it didn't come. Whoever can call things by their names doesn't need to comprehend them. . . . The tyranny of names is grounded in names having maintained an air of magic: to promise contact with what hasn't been comprehended. (63–64)

This provocative quote, which comes just shy of halfway through Hans Blumenberg's, *Care Crosses the River*, might reasonably be taken as the hermeneutic key to the entire volume. Blumenberg's intent seems to be the unveiling of our lack of comprehension central to our human finitude by leading an insurrection against "the tyranny of names."

The reader conditioned to a more analytic approach to philosophy will most likely find Blumenberg infuriating and frustrating, and perhaps even incomprehensible, for there are no systematic, sustained arguments developed here, nor are there any direct or explicit attempts to comprehend (or help the reader comprehend) any of the things "named" throughout the volume. However, the reader whose background is in the so-called Continental tradition is not likely to have a significantly better interaction with the text, either. It is not just true that Blumenberg evades sustained and linear argumentation; he seems to be committed to a sort of obfuscation as a philosophical strategy for achieving clarity. Written, as the jacket notes suggest, in a style evocative of Montaigne's *Essais*, or Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, the book is structured according to six sections, only indirectly related to one another, each of which is comprised of anywhere from nine to thirteen meditations that make no obviously consistent attempt at continuity, except, perhaps, in their reliance on metaphor. Some of the vignettes are as brief as a handful of sentences, while others range over a few pages. Along the way, Blumenberg's reflections traverse a variety of disciplines in addition to philosophy, including but not limited to literature, history, theology, and psychology.

The book reads, for the most part, almost as though Blumenberg has written it to himself, or perhaps to an old and dear friend, for whom, after many years of shared experience, simply gesturing toward ideas suffices to convey their richness and intent, without their full and clear articulation being required. Although there are resonances not only with Montaigne and Adorno, but also with such works as Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, the

passages in *Care Crosses the River* are not so much aphoristic—although there are some zingers to be found: “The price of reaching safety from gnawing doubt is extreme endangerment” (4); “one’s neighbor is the person whom one only by chance happens not to be” (48)—as they are like extended musings, the philosophical significance of which is rarely directly evident. Moreover, one suspects that Blumenberg is fully aware of the difficulty his manner of presentation gives the reader; he begins the volume, rather ironically, with a section entitled “Maritime Emergencies,” loosely organized around the idea of being shipwrecked at sea. Despite Paul Fleming’s praiseworthy translation, which, one senses, makes Blumenberg eminently more accessible than must be the case in the German original, *Care Crosses the River* is a challenging read. Even those who read Derrida and Heidegger with ease may find Blumenberg tough going. The prose is dense, compact, and shot through with innumerable subtle, obscure, often subtextual references, frequently expressed in an idiosyncratic manner that leaves the reader with only the thinnest thread of recognition, yet nevertheless it is still somehow rather enjoyable. Reading Blumenberg, one regularly senses at certain junctures in the text that an important point is being made, and yet the point remains obscured.

But perhaps the point, or at least one important point, is simply to signal the significance of these junctures, rather than to attempt to actually make or develop a point beyond this heightening of the reader’s awareness. When a book so consistently evades directly making points, it is reasonable, particularly when the author seems to be winking at the reader in the opening section, to ask whether that evasiveness might have a purpose. After several reflections on shipwrecks, storms at sea, and the sea’s lust for figs (yes, figs!), Blumenberg concludes the opening section with a seemingly innocuous shift of emphasis away from the perils of violent shipwrecks at sea and toward the danger of maritime tranquility. 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 a completely clear sky and in a totally calm sea—near death via sea calm” (18–19). Blumenberg adds that for the sailor, “the peaceful, windless sea is worrisome, a ‘deadly dreadful calm’” (19). Perhaps it is a stretch, but if so, I trust not a terribly far one, to suggest that Blumenberg is addressing philosophers here in the opening section of the book. Despite the focus in the popular imagination on the threat of stormy seas, any good sailor knows that fair skies and calm seas also can be deadly, since they can leave you stranded in the middle of nowhere until your provi-

sions are exhausted and you consequently die. Thus, the good sailor remains wary of the calm and the clear. By contrast, arguably the deepest impulse animating the philosopher has always overwhelmingly been the quest to attain clarity and calm through one's efforts of reflection and analysis, whether that be through system building or acts of naming. If I have read Blumenberg rightly, and it is entirely possible that I have not, he seems to be warning philosophers against the illusion, even the deception, represented by the clarity and calm of our systems and namings, lest we die "under a completely clear sky and in a totally calm sea" *of our own making*.

This interpretation is given further support in an earlier passage when Blumenberg makes the following claim. "For philosophers, this is the obligatory path: How else can one teach about ultimate and penultimate things, if one hasn't been exposed to them? Notorious nonswimmers that philosophers have always been, one clung to a plank from the shattered ship, let oneself be washed ashore, and then continued teaching at the nearest academy as if nothing had happened. And that was the point: one was a philosopher to the degree that one was immune to such interruptions" (4). In the context of the passage, the implication seems to be that this response to "interruptions" is unsatisfactory, that one should not be immune to them and even perhaps that they should be embraced. Blumenberg's style appears to be intentionally performative of his point; if clear skies and calm seas are potentially deadly to "notorious nonswimmers" who nevertheless continue to go to sea, then why not generate some disquiet? Why not try to unsettle the seas a bit? It is in this manner that Blumenberg appears to deploy obfuscation as a means for achieving philosophical clarity. But there is more than one way to take this point. One alternative is to hold that there is a clarity that comes from recognizing that our tidy philosophical explanations, which we take as evidence of our comprehension of the world, are often illusions of comprehension. This interpretation is cynical, and it can morph into the view that all supposed comprehension of the world is mere pretense and illusion. A different way of taking the point would be to recognize that our ideas about the world are fallible and revisable, and that, as John Dewey was so fond of pointing out, we have a tendency to take our explanations for the things explained. It is difficult to tell which, if either, interpretation Blumenberg might hold, although he appears more sympathetic toward the first than toward the second.

This deep suspicion of human comprehension extends beyond philosophy all the way to science as well. In the section entitled "What Is Perhaps Lost," arguably the most straightforward of the entire volume, and certainly one of the most engaging, Blumenberg turns his gaze toward science. This stretch

begins by claiming that there is a growing aversion to science grounded in fears that science is laying the foundations for humanity's destruction. Yet this same science has led to unprecedented flourishing, the "explosion of humanity's fertility," as Blumenberg puts it (49). The irony is that the threat we supposedly face is the result of this fertility. Advances in lifesaving medical procedures, disease-fighting pharmaceuticals, epidemic-thwarting public health programs, to say nothing of advances in food production systems, have resulted in an increasingly populated planet with increasingly fewer and more compromised natural resources, thereby exerting downward pressure on ever-expanding groups of people. Thus, this explosion of humanity's fertility "could lead, without any great weapons, to a permanent conflict for survival with clubs and stones" (49). Again, Blumenberg leaves open more than one way of reasonably interpreting him here; this could be doomsaying on his part, or it could be a sarcastic appraisal of doomsayers. What is consistent with his broader orientation is the implication that our comprehension of the world, which makes possible such remarkable advances in medicine, hygiene, and agriculture, is nevertheless insufficient to have predicted, much less prevented, the negative consequences of these advances. As a result, "[o]ne of our modern world's more or less unexpected, tormenting to painful experiences is that its most beautiful achievements drag behind a train of unpopular things that we have learned to call 'side effects'" (53).

However, even if Blumenberg is not doomsaying in these passages, he clearly holds a rather deflationary view of science, and it is here that his comments on science are most provocative, despite an annoying habit of reifying science (nature also gets consistently reified throughout the text), though, once again, more by way of gesturing than anything else. In what seems to be his own voice, Blumenberg says this: "That science goes to work for truth is not a lie, but also not the entire truth. It may sound like a petty correction if I say that under the ideal of seeking truth through research, science only opposed error and made itself into a means of enlightenment against a world of supposed or genuine prejudices" (50–51). Blumenberg goes further, or may, depending on one's interpretation, suggesting that scientific explanations are "less the triumph of a new truth than access to the possibility of another explanation, one that could not be proven, that didn't even need to be proven" (51). The implications of this passage are exceptionally rich, whether or not one takes Blumenberg to be toying with us, and even if one disagrees with him.

While prospective readers of *Care Crosses the River* would do well to be forewarned about the text's difficulty, nonetheless, they should not let these warnings frighten them away. Despite the very real difficulties of the text,

there is much of value to be found throughout. Two examples are worth citing in particular. First, as noted, the book opens with a series of reflections on shipwrecks; it closes with a section inaugurated by a reflection on Hyginus's myth of Cura (Care), borrowed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, in which Care crosses a river and ultimately makes humanity in her image from river clay in the process. The key to the myth, on Blumenberg's interpretation, is a detail not made explicit in it, namely, that what accounts for Care's crossing the river, rather than walking alongside it, is her desire to see herself reflected in the water (this also accounts for the shape of her creation). In addition to the theme of shipwrecks, which implies voyaging, and Care crossing over the river, in the section called "Something Like a World Order," roughly midway through the book, Blumenberg devotes some attention to the significance of detours. In each of these reflections, travel is centrally involved, and indeed, travel is one of the sustained themes throughout. Those interested in recent work on philosophical aspects of travel, as for instance in some of Celia Bardwell Jones's work, may find *Care Crosses the River* a useful source for new metaphors and problematics, especially since none of the passages involving travel explicitly focuses on travel as such.

The other example worth noting is the theme of simulation. There is a passage in the final section of the book that in some respects can be seen as anticipating Žižek's philosophical riff on the virtual reality craze, in which he draws our attention to the "reality of the virtual." Blumenberg's discussion centers on the increasing pervasiveness of simulations in the contemporary world. Citing what he refers to as the "grotesque side of astronautics" (yet another connection to travel), Blumenberg notes that what made space flight possible was the ability to simulate it first. "All the planning's reliability, all the crew's vital peace of mind, rested on the fact that almost everything could be tested in simulations" (144). At first this might seem like approbation, but recalling his warning about clear skies and calm seas, it is no surprise when it is revealed that Blumenberg finds simulation deeply disturbing. Noting that "reality is difficult, but staging it is easy," he contends that simulation "begins to fatefully cloud one's sense of reality through technical wish fulfillments" and that the tendency toward simulation suggests a "convergence point . . . in a not all too distant future, where reality's compression ratio loosens and dissolves, because the new *genius malignus* achieves the same by human hand. It is not a matter," he continues, "of predicting that someone will ultimately fill this vacant position and stage the now uninterrupted *Gesamtkunstwerk* called 'reality.' Rather the reverse: the view of reality suffers from the observer's ulterior motive—the thought that reality's necessary

pushing and shoving, noise and torment is too big to *not* think about its replacement” (144). Blumenberg very briefly foreshadows this discussion and his position on it as early as the second section, where he claims: “We live in a world of simulation; this even allows the world to be adapted to philosophical ‘systems’” (38). Connecting the dots, it seems quite clear that philosophical systems, like scientific simulations are, in Blumenberg’s estimation, the sort of things that “fatefully cloud one’s sense of reality through technical wish fulfillments.” Tellingly, in this earlier passage, Blumenberg makes an off-the-cuff remark about Husserl, whose students “considered him a realist and placed all their expectations in the promised return ‘to the things themselves.’ The confusion was consequently great when the master of the phenomenological school published his agenda for a transcendental idealism in 1913 in his book *Ideen [Ideas]*” (34). It is clear from Blumenberg’s tone that he would prefer the “interruption” of the things themselves to the smooth simulation of it at the hands of a philosophical system.

In light of all of this, one wonders what is to be done. Blumenberg is, like Rorty, an apparent ironist, a philosopher keen on pointing out philosophy’s shortcomings and dangers. Is it all criticism and no melioration? The solution Blumenberg would have us pursue is care for Being, though just what that entails is no more straightforwardly clear than the rest. Those readers who appreciate criticism, but require the proposal of workable strategies of remediation to be satisfied, may be disappointed. But, then again, perhaps not. Given the form of the criticism, one’s expectations for clear solutions are not likely to be very high.

All in all, this is a compelling and surprisingly enjoyable book, but it is a book that one must dwell with to understand at all. Even having only a limited time frame in which to read it before submitting this review, it is clear to me that this book is perhaps best read as one would read Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: it must be read front to back several times to get some bearings and make notations, but once this has been done, the really fruitful readings will be those bypassing a linear approach and focused instead on tracing out the individual themes in their nuance, plumbing them for their suggestiveness and insight, and then looking for connections and interactions between the various other themes. This is a book I imagine coming back to repeatedly over the years and finding something new, intriguing, and rich upon each return.

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