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A WEAK CHAPTER IN THE BOOK OF NATURE

HANS BLUMENBERG ON MEDIEVAL THOUGHT[*]

Lodi Nauta

In Hans Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* the fortunes of the metaphor of the Book of Nature stand for the story of the human quest for knowledge. In their attempts to attain perfect knowledge of the natural world, men have often compared the natural world to a book or a text, because whatever can be read can in principle be understood. Medieval scholars, for example, spoke about nature as one of the two Books written by God (the other one being the Bible); early modern scholars – and most famously Galileo – spoke about nature as a book written in the language of mathematics; Freud treated dreams as texts to be deciphered and read; and modern scientists talk about our genetic material in terms of genetic codes to be uncovered and deciphered.[1]

Yet, it is an essential part of our quest for knowledge – at least in Blumenberg's view – that the ultimate grail often eludes us. The ideal of perfect knowledge is like the horizon: it recedes as one advances. In particular the advent of modern science has led to a loss of meaning and understanding, which people of earlier periods were still able to draw from a contemplation and study of the natural world. This process of disenchantment is a common theme in Blumenberg's oeuvre.[2] Whatever success men may have achieved in bringing nature under concepts and theories, their immediate and direct experience with reality seems to resist such a conceptualisation, and precisely this direct contact with the world (i.e. with reality) is what constitutes men's high aspirations for knowledge.

Blumenberg's hermeneutic key to discovering the story of men's ideals, aims, aspirations, hope *and* disillusionment is the metaphor of the

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[*] I am grateful to Maaike van der Lugt and John North for their valuable critical remarks.

[1] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, pp. 51-63 (on medieval scholars), 71-80 (Galileo), 366 (Freud), 372-409 (modern molecular biology) – to mention only a few themes of his wide-ranging book. I have taken some liberties in translating Blumenberg's German; my paraphrases are only meant as approximations of his meaning rather than literal translations.

[2] See Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg*.

Book of Nature. It is an example of what he has called ‘absolute metaphors’.

‘Absolute metaphors’ and the writing of history

‘Absolute metaphors’ are more than mere literary ornaments or residues of primitive thinking, which in principle can be translated into plain, non-figurative language. Because absolute metaphors reflect man’s vision of the world – a vision which includes his relationship to the world and to its Creator as well as hopes and aspirations – cannot be analysed away or translated into plain, unambiguous terminology without loss of their meaning. They often defy rational, scientific analysis.[3] In reflecting human experience, presuppositions, convictions and basic attitudes to the world and its Creator, these metaphors not only have a descriptive function but also a prescriptive one: not only do they represent the world or men’s experience of it, but they also structure and regulate their experience, expectations, pursuits, hopes and interests:

> … they indicate the fundamental, basic certainties, conjectures, assessments, from which are regulated the attitudes, expectations, activities and idleness, yearnings and disillusions, interests and indifferences of a historical age.[4]

Reflection on the history of the use of such metaphors and what they stand for is called ‘Metaphorologie’ by Blumenberg. This analysis tells us in what way these metaphors function or rather functioned, because modern man – so Blumenberg argues – has lost faith in the power of metaphors of this kind to encapsulate and structure their aspirations and hopes. Modern science has shown us the world to be only one of many planets, constituted by ‘cold’, physical-biochemical processes. The closed universe, in which man occupied a central position and from which they derived meaning and direction of life, has been replaced by the infinite universe (to borrow terms from Alexandre Koyré’s *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*). In this respect, Blumenberg’s absolute metaphors are not unlike traditional ideologies and grand-scale narratives, which too have lost their appeal on most people. These ideas on absolute metaphors are central to his treatment of the concept of the Book of Nature in the *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*. While he covers almost the entire period of human history, focusing on shifting approaches towards nature, his book is obviously not a history of science or a history of scientific theories and achievements; it is quite unlike, for instance, E.J. Dijksterhuis's *The Mechanization of the World Picture* or P. Duhem's *Le Système du monde*. Blumenberg's story is rather an exploration of our *condition humaine* as we seek after wisdom, knowledge and meaning. His insistence on the importance of metaphors in structuring our thought and experience fits in well with modern theories of metaphor which consider metaphors to be powerful vehicles of new modes of looking at things, re-arranging our preconceived notions and suggesting new perspectives, even though few philosophers would stretch the scope of metaphors as widely as Blumenberg does.

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[3] Blumenberg, *Paradigmen*, p. 23: ‘Absolute Metaphern ‘beantworten’ jene vermeintlich naiven, prinzipiell unbeantwortbaren Fragen, deren Relevanz ganz einfach darin liegt, daß sie nicht eliminierbar sind, weil wir sie nicht *stellen*, sondern als im Daseinsgrund *gestellte* vorfinden’ .

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 25.

It is important to distinguish metaphors as they occur in historical sources from metaphors and metaphorical concepts as used by modern historians. Metaphors in historical sources have attracted much attention in recent decades from historians of various disciplines (sciences, law, medicine, politics, art and literature). One may, for instance, think of various metaphors employed to describe the workings of memory. These were often suggested by cultural and scientific artefacts which were available at different periods of history (from the wax tablet to the modern computer).[5] In this case, shifts in the use of metaphors may be used as a barometer of change in the scientific exploration of a particular object of research. Another example (out of an infinite number) is the age-old metaphor of the state as a body, with the head as king, and so forth. Here we have one single metaphor which was used time and again, but its history shows small but significant changes in how it was used and may even tell us something of conceptions of state and society in the past.[6] The concepts used by historians are of a different kind and may not even be metaphors in the strict sense. Concepts as the 'Waning of the Middle Ages', the 'Renaissance', 'Enlightenment', 'Romanticism' or the 'Cold War' are – what has been termed – 'colligatory concepts'.[7] They are essentially the product of the historian's imagination and become – if successful – the common stock of historiographical traditions. Their aim is to bring as many historical phenomena as possible under one concept or idea. They often have clearly metaphorical roots, and their function of bringing many diverse phenomena into a coherent, meaningful narrative is not unlike that of metaphors. Like metaphors, these concepts invite us to see (historical) phenomena in a particular way, highlighting some aspects and downplaying others.

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[5] Draaisma, *Metaphors*; original Dutch title: *De Metaforen-machine* (Groningen, 1995).

[6] See, e.g., Dutton, '*Illustre ciuitatis et populi exemplum*; Hale, 'Analogy' (with further bibliography).

[7] In his *An Introduction*, Walsh introduces the term 'colligation' for this process of making a coherent whole out of the events the historian studies: this 'process of 'colligating' events under 'appropriate conceptions', to use Whewell's term, does form an important part of the historical thinking' (p. 61). There are some first-class observations on this aspect of the writing of history in R. Southern's Rede Lecture, Cambridge 1977, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* June 24, 1977, in which he describes a youthful experience when suddenly he got the idea of seeing

Blumenberg's 'absolute metaphors' seem to have something in common with both categories, that is, with metaphors used by historical actors and by modern historians. The metaphor of the Book of Nature was clearly used by historical actors and is not something which stems from the historian's imagination. As employed by Blumenberg, however, the metaphor seems also to function as a 'colligatory concept' of the modern historian which gives meaning and coherence to the manifold phenomena of a particular period in history; the synthesising activity of the historian is clearly at work in Blumenberg's 'metaphorology'. Blumenberg's account, however, is presented as the story of the metaphor as used in history, and it emphasises that its presence or absence in a certain period is a significant fact, reflecting broader intellectual and cultural developments. Hence, the metaphor can be used as a barometer of changing conceptions of men's views of nature. Thus, Blumenberg's account presupposes (a) that sufficient and convincing material is offered to substantiate claims about the frequency with which the metaphor was used in a particular period, (b) that the interpretation of the intellectual and cultural developments is supported by recent scholarship, and (c) that there is a significant relationship between the occurrence of the metaphor and these developments. To my mind, Blumenberg's account does not always meet these conditions, as I shall suggest shortly.

Another point I would like to make turns on the terms of comparison. If we use a single metaphor as a kind of barometer, we must be sure that we measure similar things. The scope of the 'absolute metaphor' of the Book of Nature, however, is so wide – including men's experience, their aspirations and hope of arriving at full knowledge of the world and possibly of its Creator, their failures and disappointments – that the conclusion is hard to avoid that what we are comparing entire world views (Platonism, Christianity, Aristotelian-scholasticism or early modern mechanist philosophy and so forth). This of course is not an illegitimate or fruitless exercise in itself, but one clearly runs the risk of projecting these world views and their

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Henry VII as 'the first King of England who was a business man' – an example that shows that not only grand concepts such as the 'Renaissance' or 'Romanticism' are so-called colligatory concepts.

differences onto one single metaphor and its more or less frequent occurrence in historical periods: that is, from what one knows about a particular intellectual tradition or historical period one *infers* something about the frequency and use of the metaphor rather than vice versa. Even arguments *ex silentio* – that the metaphor is absent in a particular period – must then be interpreted as telling confirmation of one's general interpretation of that period, as Blumenberg seems to do when arguing, for instance, that the absence of the metaphor in ancient times is explained by the philosophical *contents* of ancient thought.[8] Blumenberg's theory or approach (his 'Metaphorologie') seems not to be free from these methodological flaws.

One might object that the actual occurrence of the metaphor and its frequency should be taken as mere indications of a particular vision of the relationship of men and the world or its Creator rather than as crucial, let alone unique testimonies to that vision. Blumenberg seems to hint at this when he suggests that an absolute metaphor such as the Book of Nature cannot be translated into plain language. After all, it points to 'das nie erfahrbare, nie übersehbare Ganze der Realität' ['the totality of reality which can never be experienced or surveyed'] and answers 'prinzipiell unbeantwortbaren Fragen, deren Relevanz ganz einfach darin liegt, daß sie nicht eliminierbar sind'[9] ['principally unanswerable questions, the relevance of which lies simply in the fact that they cannot be eliminated']. It can, however, be substituted or qualified by other metaphors, and these modifications constitute its history: 'absolute metaphors too have their history'.[10] To this, however, I would say that the range of possible metaphors must cluster around one common theme. Thus if it is claimed that the history of the metaphor of the Book of Nature tells us a significant story about men's visions of the world, intellectual hopes and aspirations, one may indeed look in the historical sources for different kinds of metaphors in which the world is compared to a written text of any kind – a book, a text, a code, signs, perhaps even a language, all of which can be read and understood – but not for metaphors of the world as a city, labyrinth, wanderer, lady, witness and so forth. Indeed, as the title of his book makes clear, Blumenberg limits himself to the concept of 'Lesbarkeit', exemplified by the metaphor of the Book of Nature, so that the wording of the metaphor and not just the concept behind it forms the backbone of the argument. In order to see whether his account enables us to interpret the historical uses of it as a barometer of intellectual and cultural change, I shall now discuss some ideas from Blumenberg's chapters on the late classical and medieval contribution to the metaphor of the Book of Nature.

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[8] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, pp. 22, 36-46.

[9] Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, p. 25, 23.

[10] *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13 where he writes that 'absolute' means: 'nur, daß sie sich gegenüber dem terminologischen Anspruch als resistent erweisen, nicht in Begrifflichkeit aufgelöst werden können, nicht aber, daß nicht eine Metapher durch eine andere ersetzt bzw. vertreten oder durch eine genauere korrigiert werden kann. Auch absolute Metaphern haben daher *Geschichte*'.

Blumenberg on medieval philosophy

Without suggesting that they exhaust Blumenberg's discussion, I have distilled three basic ideas from these chapters.[11]

(a) First, the rise of the metaphor of the Book of Nature was made possible, according to Blumenberg, by the defeat of Gnosticism by Christianity. Like most monotheistic religions, Christianity was based on the written word (i.e. the Holy Book and the commentary tradition thereon), and it may therefore seem strange that another book – the Book of Nature – could have come into existence at all. Indeed, the exploration of nature was not important to most Christian thinkers. However, the Gnostics' low opinion of nature presented a threat to the Christian belief in God's beautiful creation. The dualistic world view of the Gnostics, with its gloomy picture of this world here and now, would compromise and dishonour its Creator. Hence, Christians, in their attempt to refute Gnosticism, had to evaluate more positively the world as an expression of the bountiful act of the Christian God. A consequent rejection, however, of this heresy of Gnostic dualism brought Christians close to embracing another heretic belief, namely the Pelagian notion of independence and autonomy of nature versus its Creator, in which nature is almost deified:

> As soon as the defence against dualism was no longer an issue, and Nature, in its unfolding (*Selbstausschüttung*), began to absorb the grandeur of the divinity, it was destined to become anti-Christian, as indeed it did. Each form of Pelagianism has the tendency, in the end, to enlarge without limits the grandeur of nature and to arrive at a pantheistic position of a Giordano Bruno and a Spinoza.[12]

In other words, in a pantheistic world view there is no place for the Book of Nature, because the book and its author have become identical. The proper place for the metaphor of the Book of Nature, therefore, seems to lie between these two extremes – i.e. between the Gnostic denial of the world and the Pelagian identification of the world with its Creator.

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[11] It may be added that Blumenberg wrote his dissertation on medieval philosophy as well, but the book has not been published (*Beiträge zum Problem der Ursprünglichkeit der mittelalterlich-scholastischen Ontologie*, 1947).

[12] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, pp. 34-35.

(b) The development of Christianity also had to cope with another influential philosophy, namely Platonism. The metaphor of the Book of Nature presupposes an author who, in an entirely autonomous act, invented the world; any external influence would have detracted from his free creation. Blumenberg suggests that in this respect Christianity departs from Platonism. The Platonic Forms, on the basis of which the Demiurge created the cosmos, may be considered as already existing prototypes; gazing at these Forms was enough for the Demiurge to create the cosmos. The principles of the cosmos, therefore, contain no intrinsic mysteries for a Platonist and their intelligibility can be discovered by any rational person. Hence, the metaphor of the Book of Nature is virtually absent from ancient thought: For understanding the world, contemplation of the Platonic Ideas suffices, being rather like looking at pictures (*Aufnehmen von Bildern*).[13] The Christian story of creation, on the other hand, shows a God who gives imperatives ('Let there be light!'), and who is solely responsible for his creation, not by way of gazing at Platonic Forms, but by thinking: 'Die Welt ist durch Denken, nicht dur Anschauung entstanden'.[14] This, so Blumenberg argues, gave room for the metaphor of the Book of Nature: 'Darin liegt, daß die Natur erfaßbar wird für die Metaphorik des Buches, indem die nicht durch Anschauung, sondern durch Denken verstanden, nämlich "gelesen" werden kann'.[15] Because God created the world out of nothing and in the unfathomable depth of his own mind, the world can be known to men only in so far as God decides to reveal something of this mystery. The metaphor as used by medieval authors served to refer to the Creator of the world – to his greatness and mysteriousness – and to the fact that he himself wrote the book with his own hand.[16] For a Christian thinker, therefore, the Platonic account was incompatible with Christian dogma in at least two important points. First, the Platonic Forms as exemplars or blueprints jeopardise God's autonomous and free act. Second, they jeopardise the mysterious and divine character of God's act, because the Platonic account presupposes the accessibility and intelligible transparency of the Platonic Forms to human reason.[17]

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[13] *Ibidem*, p. 22: 'So ist der platonische Kosmos der Ideen alles andere als ein Buch, das gedachte Verhältnis zu ihm wie zur Welt der Erscheinungen alles andere als Einstellung und Leistung von der Art des Lesens. Viel eher wäre hier der Vorgang der Erfassung aller gegenständlichen Verhältnisse mit dem Aufnehmen von Bildern vergleichbar'.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 48. Cf. Crombie, *Styles*, vol. 1, pp. 24, 314.

[15] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, pp. 48.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 60.

(c) The third idea which I have distilled from Blumenberg's account is that scholastic thought was less suitable for the metaphor of the Book of Nature than medieval platonising, Christian thinking. This is due not only to the 'dogmatischen Systematisierung' of scholasticism,[18] based as it was on the works of Aristotle, but also to Aristotelian doctrines such as the substantial forms of things and the eternity of the world, which hindered the occurrence of the metaphor of the Book of Nature. By having brought down the Platonic forms to the realm of created beings, viz. as their substantial forms, Aristotelian philosophy stimulated the view that this world was the only possible one. This deterministic world picture made it more difficult to see the world as an expression of a creative act by a free Creator, bound only by his own thoughts: 'Es wurde schwieriger, die Welt aus dem Gedanken Gottes hervorgehen zu lassen'.[19] Scholastic Aristotelianism emphasised the eternity of the world as expression of its intelligible unity and uniqueness, by which it is implied that God's thinking act is assigned a less prominent role. Even the Creator was bound by (Aristotelian) laws, and could not have created a world different from the existing one. Scholasticism did not have any use for the idea of an emanation of the world out of the free, thinking act of God:[20]

> High scholasticism, with its duty to rationalising Christian dogma's, had to reject the notion of the founder of the world (*Welturheber*) as the only form of all forms of creation and, consequently, the notion of the enfolding of creation from its origin (*Selbestentfaltung ihres Ursprungs*).

Hence, scholasticism represents a blind alley in the history of the metaphor ('Sackgasse des Metapherngeschichte').

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[17] *Ibidem*, p. 50: 'Mit den Augen des christlichen Denkers gesehen, wäre der platonische Ideenkosmos das entäußerte Weltgeheimnis des göttlichen Schöpfers gewesen … Diese platonische Prämisse der Allzugänglichkeit der Ideen war mit dem Schöpfungsdogma unvereinbar, wenn Gott die Welt in der Tiefe seines Geistes *erfunden* hatte und sie ihm kein niederes Wesen rivalisierend streitig machen sollte … Zugleich damit ist aber auch der Mensch als Erforscher der Natur auf das eingeschränkt, was der als eifersüchtig gedachte Schöpfer von seinem Geheimnis preisgeben wollte. Sobald es für die Handlung der Schöpfung keine Vorlage mehr gibt, ihr Erdenken und Erschaffen eins geworden sind, ist die Welt im Prinzip zum nicht mehr von außen einsehbaren Faktum gemacht'.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[20] *Ibidem,* p. 56.

Some criticisms of Blumenberg's interpretation

To criticise such a wide-ranging study as Blumenberg's for its neglect of this or that historical source may be considered pedantic, springing from the narrow-minded views of the specialist who is unable to appreciate the wider vistas a generalist can offer. Nevertheless, in this case one cannot help being struck by the discrepancy of Blumenberg's far-reaching conclusions and the textual basis on which they rest. Even though he did not have the resources of digital databases at his disposal such as CETEDOC (late-antique and medieval Latin texts) and *Patrologia Latina* (221 volumes containing Latin texts from the second till the early-thirteenth century) on CD-ROM, the four or five citations, for which he is indebted to Nobis's article in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, from the entire medieval corpus of texts, form an extremely meagre textual basis.[21] I searched the afore-mentioned databases using key terms such as *liber naturae*, *naturae liber*, *libri naturae* and so forth, including those cases where the two terms are separated by one, two or three words. I also used *mundus* or *universus* in combination with *liber*. The results are not impressive (less than ten hits), although I certainly do not claim that the metaphor, in all its varied expressions, did not occur more frequently, for example in vernacular texts which are not covered by these two Latin databases. It was invariably used, if used at all, in an eschatological or broadly theological context, for instance by Ambrose, Augustine, Isaac de Stella, Thomas de Chobham, and Raymond Lull.[22]

This is not to say that one cannot find more expressions of the belief that God may be known or at least approached through a study of his creation. In fact, this belief was universally held in the medieval period and long afterwards, and was supported by biblical quotations such as Romans 1:20: 'from the foundations of the world men have caught sight of God's invisible nature, his eternal power and his divinity, as they are known through his creatures'. But Blumenberg's argument is not that it is this idea of dependency of creation on its Creator which was wide-spread in the Middle Ages and which continued in the modern period – for that is common wisdom – but that this particular metaphor of the Book of Nature and of nature as something which can be read and understood was important in bringing about certain aspects of this mentality, and that the occurrence of the metaphor depended on intellectual and cultural traditions (for instance that Christian-Platonic thought stimulated it, while Aristotelian scholasticism worked against it). This latter claim, however, is not supported by searches in the databases of Latin texts nor by the handful of passages adduced by Blumenberg.

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[21] Nobis, 'Buch der Natur'. Blumenberg also quotes the pages Curtius devotes to the theme in his *Europäische Literatur*, pp. 323-329.

[22] E.g. Thomas de Chobham from the thirteenth century writes in his *Summa de arte praedicandi*: *Totus enim mundus, diuersis creaturis plenus est; quasi liber scriptus uariis litteris et sententiis plenus in quo legere possumus quicquid imitari uel fugere debeamus*.

Blumenberg limits his discussion to the occurrence of this specific metaphor in four thinkers, namely Alan of Lille (d. 1203), Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141), Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), and Bonaventure (d. 1274), while Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) is presented as a counter-example of an Aristotelian scholastic who had no use for the metaphor. In Alain of Lille's famous lines *Omnis mundi creatura / Quasi liber et pictura / Nobis est et speculum*, the world is not as much compared to a book, but rather each individual creature is said to be *like* a book, but also like a picture and a mirror – the idea clearly being that they all refer to their Maker. Blumenberg rightly stresses the word *nobis*. Nature points to its Creator, and we as humans are directed through a consideration of it to prepare ourselves for the life to come.[23] Alain's verses thus confirm the common idea that medieval people saw the world in a symbolic way. It is however not without significance that the metaphor of the book is combined with that of a picture and a mirror, which are not things which can be 'read' in the usual sense of the word and which are even on Blumenberg's own account averse to the metaphor of the Book of Nature (cf. his description, quoted above, of Platonism: 'Viel eher wäre hier der Vorgang der Erfassung aller gegenständlichen Verhältnisse mit dem Aufnehmen von Bildern vergleichbar'). This may not upset a 'metaphorologist', who may be said to look for the attitudes which are expressed by the metaphors rather than their actual occurrences. Blumenberg's argument, however, clearly hinges on the notion of '*Lesbarkeit*'; hence, as I have already said, the metaphor itself should form the backbone of the argument.

The next quotation comes from Hugh of St. Victor. The text is not authentic, but that of course is not relevant here. Working in the tradition of Augustine, who saw traces of the Trinity in the capacities of the human soul, Hugh writes that nature is a book written by God's finger, that is, created by the divine virtue (*liber est scriptus digito Dei, hoc est virtute divina creatus*), and the individual creatures are like 'signs' (*figurae*). Here too the emphasis is on the moral lessons that should be drawn from a contemplation of the creatures of the world. As visible signs, they direct men's attention to the invisible hand of God.

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[23] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, p. 51.

Bonaventure uses the metaphor to the same effect. Because the Book of Nature had become a closed one as a result of Adam's sin, another book, that is the Bible, was needed to teach mankind the *metaphoras rerum*, the deeper meanings of the visible things in this world, which point to their Creator.

The next scholar he considers is Robert Grosseteste, who had not only translated and commented on works by Aristotle but also developed a light metaphysics in which the cosmos was unfolded, along Neoplatonic lines, out of one simple form. All forms in the world derive in the end from this primeval form. Blumenberg then suggests that in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* Grosseteste compares this process to the writing of a hand which must know the formal characteristics of all the letters in advance. Without going into details, I think that the context in which the comparison occurs clearly shows that Grosseteste does not refer to a Neoplatonic process of unfolding, which indeed would be strange in a commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*.[24] Grosseteste here explains the Aristotelian process of cognition of universals out of sense experience. Blumenberg must admit that the reference to the writing hand does not have much to do with '*Lesbarkeit*' or with a book as a unified whole. He seems to think (but his interpretation is not easy to understand) that Grosseteste's comparison suggests that nature determines how the hand writes, which indeed would be a totally different use of the metaphor, for far from being a book, nature itself would be the scribe. This must be due, according to Blumenberg, to 'die aristotelische Metaphysik der prägenden Form' which resulted in a blind alley in the history of the metaphor; consequently, it comes as no surprise to find that in Thomas Aquinas the metaphor 'hat keinen Platz'.[25]

Thus, Blumenberg emphasises the theological uses and theological implications of the metaphor – the Book of Nature as a book written by God –, giving the impression that the medieval study of nature essentially took the form of natural theology, that is, a search for God through his creation. But *if* the metaphor indeed functioned predominantly in a theological context, its occurrence loses its potential role as a barometer of change towards the natural world and modes for exploring it because important developments in twelfth-century natural philosophy did not occur in, for instance, the school of Hugh of St Victor, but in what traditionally has been labelled the School of Chartres.[26] Such scholars as Bernard of Chartres, William of

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[24] For a discussion of this passage see Crombie, *Grosseteste*, pp. 55-56.

[25] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, p. 56.

[26] This is not meant to diminish the importance of Hugo of St Victor as theologian and defender of the liberal arts, even though as propaedeutics for theology. On natural philosophy in the twelfth century, see Gregory, *Anima mundi*; Burnett,

Conches, Adelard of Bath, Thierry of Chartres and Hermann of Carinthia formed a golden generation of philosophers, who were highly interested in natural philosophy, influenced by Platonic texts as well as by the writings of the Arabs, which were translated at that time. Their writings show the rise and development of natural philosophy and the emergence of a rational approach to nature. This approach was characterised by a search for first principles and elements out of which the cosmos was believed to be constructed, and which were conceived as still governing the natural processes. The cosmos was no longer seen as only an *opus restaurationis* – a work of redemption (as it still had been for Hugh of St Victor) – but also and foremost as an *opus creationis*, that is, a work of creation by God who, after having set the *machina mundi* in motion, let the natural processes do their work. Of course, these scholars took for granted that God had created the cosmos, but they wanted to know *how*. They read the cosmos *secundum physicam*, stressing the autonomous character of the physical processes, which had once been installed by God.[27] This new approach towards nature is not marked by a heightened use of the metaphor of the Book of Nature – there is hardly any instance of the phrase.[28] More telling evidence of the new approach is the occurrence of such terms as *ordo naturae*, *lex naturae*, *opus naturae*, forces, elements, and causes – terms which were not new but came into prominence and took on a new life in twelfth-century natural philosophy.[29]

I do not mean to suggest that Blumenberg thought that the medieval world view was primarily governed by theological considerations, encapsulated by the theologians' use of the metaphor, but when he goes on to discuss the early modern use of the metaphor, by Galileo for instance, the implication is clearly that the different uses of the metaphor suggest fundamentally different visions of the natural world. This point, however, could be made only if one compares early modern *natural* philosophy with its medieval equivalent, that is medieval *natural* philosophy, and this medieval equivalent is not discovered through a consideration of the use of the metaphor, simply because medieval natural philosophers – also those living

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'Scientific speculations'; Speer, *Die entdeckte Natur.* The 'School' of Chartres was not a school in any institutional sense.

[27] *Secundum physicam* is a phrase used by Thierry of Chartres in his *Tractatus de sex dierum operibus*' Cf. Häring, *Commentaries*, p. 555.

[28] I have not found it in the works of Bernard of Chartres, William of Conches, Adelard of Bath (confirmed by Charles Burnett of the Warburg Institute in private correspondence), Thierry of Chartres, and Hermann of Carinthia. William often used the Calcidian phrase *naturae opus*, which compares nature with an active, self-regulative agent rather than with a 'passive' book.

[29] See my 'The *Glosa*' and my introduction to *Guillelmus de Conchis*.

before the rise of Aristotelian scholasticism – did not use the metaphor, or hardly so. When it was used in the medieval period it was meant to denote the theological-eschatological context in which the world must be viewed. The metaphor then cannot be used as a barometer of important changes in approaches to nature, because it does not measure the same things.

Further, Blumenberg's argument that it was the Augustinian-Platonic view of the cosmos as the unfolding of the entire cosmos out of one form rather than Aristotelian scholasticism which stimulated the use of the metaphor, implies that it finds its proper home in the earlier period, the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, which was characterised by an intense study of Platonic texts such as Plato's *Timaeus* (and Calcidius' commentary on it), Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Macrobius' *On the Dream of Scipio*. Apart from the lack of textual evidence, this suggestion runs counter to another claim by Blumenberg, namely, that Platonism, too, was not amenable to the metaphor. In addition, it is unclear why God's thinking would eventually be amenable to the idea of the Book of Nature, while this was not the case with God's gazing at the Platonic Forms. After all, the Christian-Platonic tradition had identified the Platonic Forms with the divine ideas, and Plato's myth of the creation of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* could easily be reconciled with the Christian creationism.

Blumenberg's brief remarks about scholasticism, for instance, that Aristotelian philosophy stimulated the view that this world was the only possible one, do not take into account the existence of a strong tradition in later medieval thought which stressed God's *potentia absoluta* versus his *potentia ordinata*, a tradition which plays an important role in another book of his, namely *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.[30] In particular, Franciscans such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham emphasised God's absolute freedom in creating the world and sustaining it. According to this thesis, which is known as the radical contingency of the world, the existing world was accorded with the rules God had chosen to apply to this particular world (his *potentia ordinata*), but it was only one out of many possible worlds. God's absolute freedom should in no way be compromised by Aristotelian laws. Thus, the claim that scholastic thought tied God to his own creation is not valid for scholastic thought *tout court*. Blumenberg indeed acknowledges the nominalist and voluntarist tradition in late medieval thought, but instead of arguing that it was this tradition – rather than Aristotelian scholasticism – which invited thinkers to compare the world as an expression of God's inscrutable will with a book, he argues that precisely this form of voluntarism was not amenable to the metaphor of the Book of Nature. Nicholas of Cusa had recognised the dangers of voluntarism, because a voluntarist conception of God emphasised the distance between God, who was entirely free to create the world out of an infinite number of possibilities, and his creation, leaving no possibility for men to discover the meaningful *ratio* behind the cosmos.[31]

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[30] Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität*. Blumenberg's interpretation of late-medieval nominalist voluntarism is highly questionable. Few scholars, I think, would agree with descriptions such as that the God of the nominalist voluntarists is a hidden God, 'und ein verborgener Gott ist pragmatisch so gut wie ein toter' (p. 404), or that 'Der nominalistische Gott ist der überflüssige Gott, er kann durch den Zufall … ersetzt werden' (p. 165). To shift fake from true certainty – which is an important epistemological consideration in the use of the distinction – has nothing to do with a conception of a whimsical God, which is alien to Ockham and other voluntarists. For a good discussion of the distinction see Courtenay, *Capacity*.

Neither was Thomas Aquinas's rationalist-Aristotelian scholasticism amenable to the Book of Nature, so that in effect medieval thought did *not* leave much room for the metaphor of the Book of Nature, in spite of the overall impression one gets from Blumenberg's account. Only a moderate form of voluntarism such as Bonaventure's was amenable to the metaphor, as Blumenberg seems to suggest in another passage:

> This still moderate form of voluntarism which distinguishes between possibility (contingency) and reality will soon be exacerbated to the effect that the real will become an element of the infinite possible (*Unendlichkeit des Möglichen*). This hiatus gives the metaphor of the Book of Nature its room. [32]

Again, textual evidence, apart from two passages in Bonaventure, is not forthcoming to substantiate these claims, which – in the absence of further clarification and support – even to some extent seem contradictory.

Conclusion

From this brief discussion it may be concluded that Blumenberg's claims about the presence or absence of the metaphor in a particular period or intellectual tradition do not seem to be derived from a survey of the actual occurrence of it but rather from his interpretation of the development of intellectual traditions. For instance, his conclusion that scholastic thought was inimical to the metaphor is based on his interpretation of scholasticism rather than on a search for the actual presence of the metaphor. Such complicated historical processes as the ‘defeat’ of Gnosticism by orthodox Christianity, the rise of nominalism in the later Middle Ages and the replacement of scholasticism by mechanistic philosophy and science are said to be responsible for the presence or absence of the metaphor, but this is not substantiated by a representative sampling of texts. At most we can conclude that the idea behind the metaphor was that we may come to know the Creator through his creation, but then this idea was independent of Platonising Augustinianism, Aristotelian scholasticism or early modern science. One need only think of Thomas Aquinas’ five ways of ‘proving’ God’s existence from a consideration of the workings of nature in order to see that for so many writers – before, during and after the Middle Ages – God’s traces are visible in his creation, and that these *vestigia* need to be pursued if we want to know our Creator. Created things reflect the divine order: hence, created things can be compared to books, but also to mirrors and pictures; and nature can be compared not only to a book but also to a witness, a lady, a goddess, a quarry to be sought, a dark labyrinth, a mysterious wanderer, a workshop, an opaque body or a recalcitrant witness to be interrogated, or whatever metaphor captures the idea of a dependency of the world on its Creator.[33] All these images were used by writers in the past, not only in the medieval period. These metaphors are often literary topoi, which is not to say that they are trivial. They may at times embody deeper feelings about the human world or the cosmos as a whole, expressing views of the cosmos which may be called ‘symbolical’, or they may simply point to the fact that nature has secrets which are there for the natural philosopher or the scientist to unlock. This symbolic mode, however, should not be confused with more advanced explorations of nature of which medieval scholars were quite capable. To use these as a barometer of change in approaches towards the natural world – let alone cultural change – is to put too much weight on them, resulting in a comparison of like with unlike, when held to the light of later developments in modern times.

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[31] Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit*, pp. 61-62: 'Wenn sich in der Schöpfung kein anderer personaler Wille als der zu ihrer bloßen Existenz bekundet – weil, was diese Existenz enthält und ausmacht, noch immer die vorgegebene Fraglosigkeit des antiken Kosmos umschließt – kann nach dem, was sich etwa in Gestalt und Wesen der Natur "ausdrücken" mag, nicht gefragt werden'; *idem*, *Die Legitimität*, pp. 164, 173 and elsewhere.

[32] *Die Lesbarkeit*, p. 56: 'Dieser noch gemäßigte Voluntarismus der Differenz von Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit wird sich alsbald so verschärfen, daß das Wirkliche zu einer Partikel der Unendlichkeit des Möglichen wird. Dieser Hiatus gibt der Metapher vom Buch der Natur ihren Spielraum'.

This idea of the dependence of the natural world on its Creator was so general that natural philosophers and scientists had not much use for the notion, except when they wanted to advertise and perhaps even legitimise a new approach, as did Galileo when he found the metaphor useful for defending the importance of mathematics for the study of nature. The metaphor was used both in the medieval period and long afterwards, and thus its occurrence does not tell us very much about changed conceptions of nature or changed views of how to study the natural world, which took place during the ages. As discussed above, scholars in medieval times, too, aimed at studying the natural world on its own terms, and they tried to find causes, explanatory mechanisms, first principles and elements of macroscopic phenomena. Platonic philosophers such as Adelard of Bath and William of Conches, and Aristotelian scholastics such as Nicolas Oresme and John Buridan, did not differ in this respect. They would not deny that everything ultimately refers to God, but this notion was of no great help in explaining concrete natural phenomena.[34]

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[33] Crombie, *Styles*, vol. 1, pp. 313-314 and pp. 719-720, note 1.

Blumenberg's absolute metaphor of the Book of Nature, though found in historical sources, becomes the vehicle of his 'Metaphorologie', and in fact it is this hermeneutic theory – if this is the right term– which seems to control the historical evidence even to the extent that it can predict when and in which intellectual tradition the metaphor occurs. No attempt, however, is really made to verify whether there is textual evidence to support these conclusions. His approach may be compared to another grand project in which one single metaphor was studied throughout the ages: Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*.[35] Lovejoy's importance for the history of ideas is beyond question, but his book on 'the great chain of being' has rightly been criticised for having attempted to bring too many diverse themes from too many diverse periods of history under the umbrella of a single expression.[36] In a similar vein, such a criticism can be levelled at Blumenberg's book. But because his interpretation of the history of the metaphor is an illustration of his wider hermeneutic ideas, it is vulnerable to the more fundamental critique of squeezing history into the straightjacket of apriori historiography.

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[34] In their *Before Science*, French and Cunningham have argued that we should not speak of medieval *science*, since medieval natural philosophy primarily deals with God's creation and God's attributes. In their view, medieval natural philosophers were thinking of God and His creation the whole time when doing natural philosophy. For a conclusive refutation see Grant, 'God, Science, and Natural Philosophy'.

[35] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.

[36] See for instance the pertinent criticisms by North, 'Some Weak Links in the Great Chain of Being'. My title is obviously modelled on his.