The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate in Light of Recent Scholarship


While Lowith’s and Blumenberg’s books have been the catalysts for the debate, they are not its principal subject. The real topic is modernity, and the controversy centers around the shaping influence of secularization on modernity. Unfortunately, the formulation of the debate around the question of "legitimacy" or "illegitimacy" has led to as much polemical haranguing as it has to scholarly insight into the character of modernity. Fundamental theoretical and methodological issues have, nevertheless, been brought to light by the debate, and they deserve careful consideration from scholars concerned with the nature of modernity and the influence of secularization. The purpose of this essay is to explore some of these issues by: 1) explaining the background to the legitimacy controversy, 2) developing the mainlines of Blumenberg’s theoretical and historical criticism of conventional interpretations of the modern age, and 3) assessing his counter-thesis in light of recent scholarship in Renaissance intellectual history and the history of science.

The Background to the Legitimacy Controversy

An examination of the theoretical issues in the debate must, of course, center on Blumenberg’s criticisms of Lowith’s secularization thesis and his arguments in support of his reinterpretation of the legiti-

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1. Blumenberg had set the stage for the debate in a paper presented at the Seventh German Philosophy Congress in 1962.
2. This English edition has received considerable attention at American professional meetings and in leading scholarly journals. Last year’s APSA meeting, for instance, had a panel on Blumenberg; and major journals of history, religion, philosophy, and political science, have devoted review-essays and articles to *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age.*
macy of the modern age. Before turning to the specific criticisms Blumenberg makes of Lowith’s position, however, it will be useful to set the context for the curiously formulated debate.

The first point to be made is that the questioning of the legitimacy of secular developments in the modern age is not original with Lowith or his generation. Recent concept histories (begriffsgeschichten) have shown that the controversies are at least two hundred years old. The second point to note is that Blumenberg was well-acquainted with the long history of the controversy and fully aware that his attack on Lowith was, in its fullest dimensions, an effort to repudiate a mode of interpretation dating back to the eighteenth century. In fact, it is because Blumenberg realizes how persuasive and influential this controversy has been that he undertakes such a detailed historical and theoretical criticism.

Contrary to what might be expected, the legitimacy controversy does not occur first as an intellectual dispute in the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.” It originates, instead, in territorial disputes between the ecclesiastical leaders and secular rulers. In the settlement of Westphalia (1648), for example, church properties are secularized, viz., turned over to the state. Such action was justified as a rightful restitution of land belonging to the state. The church, on the other hand, argued that it was not legitimate restitution but rather illegitimate expropriation.

While the legitimacy controversy is born out of property disputes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the language is appropriated to characterize intellectual conflicts between the Enlightenment philosophes and the theologians of the Church. The philosophes proposed to secularize knowledge in order to free man from the unnatural and illegitimate control of the Church. The Church and its defenders viewed these efforts as vain, misguided attempts to claim for man and reason realms that belonged to God and revelation.

Karl Lowith’s analysis of the deforming influence of secularization on modern political theory and philosophy of history grows out of this tradition. In his best known work, Meaning in History, Lowith draws parallels between the secular belief in social perfection through reason and the Christian faith in eternal salvation through revelation. Lowith centers his analysis on Voltaire, who proposes his new philosophy of history as a replacement for traditional theology of history. Using Voltaire’s

3. See, for example, Herman Liibbe, Sakularisierung. Geschichte eines ideen politischen Begriffs (1965).
5. See Voltaire’s Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations and La Philosophie de l’histoire.
work as his pivot point, Lowith moves back and forth between secular philosophies of history and traditional theologies of history to show similarities between the modernist account of man's progress toward social perfection and Christian *heilsgeschichte*'s description of God's role in man's salvation. Lowith's intent is to demonstrate that the modern progressivist constructions constitute illegitimate secularizations of Christian salvation history because they eradicate distinctions between the transcendent realm of God and the mundane world. As a result, they illegitimately grant man the power to be his own savior and transform the Kingdom of God into paradise on earth.

**Criticisms of Lowith and the Concept of Secularization**

The first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, some one hundred pages, is devoted to a criticism of Lowith and the concept of secularization. There are three elements to Blumenberg's attack on Lowith's interpretation of modernity. The first challenges the equation Lowith makes between Christianity's concept of a transcendent Kingdom of God and the secularists' dream of world-immanent perfection. According to Blumenberg, the parallels are not as readily apparent as Lowith claims. But more importantly from the point of scholarship, Blumenberg argues that Lowith claims that the secular constructs are transformations of traditional views but fails to document the historical process of the transformation.

Blumenberg's second criticism is particularly intriguing because he claims that the philosophies of history that Lowith devotes his attention to are not a key part of the modern age. They are, instead, misguided attempts to provide answers to the outmoded questions and problems of the preceding age. Blumenberg's third criticism is that Lowith's overzealous effort to link everything modern to a secularization of Christian thought forces him to disregard a wide and complex range of forces responsible for the transition from the medieval to the modern world.

These criticisms will be examined in some detail later on. For now, however, it is important to examine Blumenberg's analysis of secularization as a category of historical wrong. According to Blumenberg, the concept of secularization has, from the outset, been based upon a wrong-headed assumption that the essence of Christianity is transformed and perverted during the transition from the medieval to the modern period. Blumenberg challenges this position by arguing that medieval Christianity, itself, alters the original substance of Christianity and takes the decisive step in secularizing gospel Christianity. Early Christianity,

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6. This phrase is taken from the title of Part One of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. 
as the gospels clearly demonstrate, was eschatological, i.e., awaiting the imminent end of the world. When the eschaton did not end the world shortly after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, believers had to organize themselves for survival in the world. The need to proselytize the gentile world also made it necessary to translate *a kerygma* conceived in the Jewish tradition into the categories of Greek philosophy and religion. These necessities, according to Blumenberg, are the actual source of secularization because they require that the original Christian substance be modified to conform to the Church’s mission in the here and now (*saeculum*).

Recognizing that the "secularization thesis is an anachronism in the modern age," then leads Blumenberg to challenge conventional patterns of historiographical interpretation. Since the Renaissance, modern historians have drawn epochal distinctions between the classical, medieval, and modern periods. Certainly by the time of Voltaire’s philosophy of history, modernists are claiming to have abandoned the muddle-headed thinking and the pointless pondering of the Christian "dark age." Blumenberg argues, however, that these modern efforts to draw sharp contrasts between the epochs have deformed the understanding of European intellectual history and ignored major developments that occur in the transitions from one epoch to another.

**Blumenberg’s Historical Reinterpretation**

Parts two and three of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* provide a provocative review and reinterpretation of the history of European thought. While ranging from the classical period to the twentieth century, Blumenberg concentrates on developments at the beginning and the end of the medieval period. From the standpoint of historical scholarship, these are the most important parts of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* because they raise fundamental questions about prevailing modes of historical interpretation and open new lines of inquiry into these crucial but most often neglected phases of European thought.

Blumenberg focuses his reinterpretation on two fundamental issues in European thought. The first is the problem of theodicy and the other is the question of the function of curiosity (*curiositas*), which he contends is the key to understanding developments leading from scholasticism and nominalism to the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment views of man and nature.

According to Blumenberg, one of the key developments in Western thought evolves from Augustine’s effort to resolve the problem of theod-
icy. This problem is basic to Christianity because its conception of God presents Him as both the Creator of the world and as its Redeemer: If God is the omnipotent Creator of the world and the world is good, why must this God intervene in history to redeem man from a world that has become a threat to him?

In developing the nature of this basic problem, particularly as it presents itself in the Hellenistic period, Blumenberg offers a stimulating and provocative analysis of Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism. According to Blumenberg, it is the challenge presented by Gnosticism that has the most direct bearing on Augustine’s position. Gnosticism has no problem of theodicy because it separates the God of redemption from the God of creation. It clearly portrays the world as a prison alien to mankind, the result of the efforts of an inferior or malevolent deity. The supreme God who loves and cares for man works to overcome the creation and redeem man from it.

In the gnostic view curiosity about the world is a symptom of intellectual and spiritual disease. To be curious about the world, to be attracted to it, and to attempt to understand it are the marks of profound intellectual and spiritual disorientation. Augustine, who was familiar with the immanentist views of Platonism and Neoplatonism, as well as with Christian thought, realized that curiosity could not be so easily dismissed from the mainlines of philosophy and theology. Curiosity, in these traditions, could either be an impediment to knowledge of God or could lead from recognition of the beauty and the order of the world toward its divine source beyond the world.

Augustine’s solution to the theodicy problem was to redefine the problem of evil and to explain it as a “privation of the good.” According to Blumenberg, Augustine’s theodicy exonerates God by putting the responsibility for evil on humankind. In this view, evil comes from two basic sources, The first and the foremost is in man’s failure to see the world in proper perspective. Man sees the world as an end in itself rather than as a reflection of God. Augustine attributes this wrong-headed orientation to short-sighted curiosity, i.e., fascination with the created thing rather than with the Creator. Augustine characterizes curiosity this way in order to differentiate it from disciplined rational inquiry. Reason prepares the soul for revelation’s ultimate truth. Curiosity without reason is nothing more than an idle, undisciplined, self-indulgent attachment to the things of the world.

The second source of evil in the world is in the limitations of mankind’s capacity to know and to understand the world because of a funda-

8. Recall that curiositas derives from curio, "to care for."
mental gulf which separates divine intelligence from human intelligence. When men see things that appear to be evil, it is because they do not see with God’s eyes. Here perceived evil is the result of ignorance or a privation of knowledge.

While Augustine provides a resolution to the problems of theodicy for his day, his is not the definitive answer for the Middle Ages. Blumenberg even goes so far as to claim that theodicy is the fundamental problem of medieval theology, and Augustine’s failure to provide a definitive answer in part accounts for what we now refer to as the modern world view. That is, modernity is the outgrowth of Christianity’s failure to deal with and resolve gnostic dualism through an adequate theodicy. Unfortunately, we cannot follow Blumenberg’s analysis of theodicy from Augustine to Aquinas but must skip to the end of the medieval period and crucial developments in nominalism which Blumenberg contends are the result of the abiding problem of theodicy. According to Blumenberg, nominalism preserves the God of salvation by negating the relation of God to the natural world. God becomes a deus absconditus, i.e., a hidden, radically transcendent deity who is known through faith and revelation—not through nature. By removing God from the creation, nominalism breaks from the Platonic and Neoplatonic notion that the natural world is a manifestation (emanation) of divinity and its conviction that human reason could uncover transcendent truth through an investigation of the created order. As a result, the world and man’s understanding of it becomes “secularized,” i.e., independent of theological domination. This secularization, however, is not the result of a defiant act of “liberation” by modernists. It is, instead, the indirect result of theology’s abandoning the world in order to preserve its belief in God as a supernatural, numinous Savior and Redeemer.

These theological developments, of course, do not diminish the importance of the world at the existential level. Man must contend with the world and must, therefore, be able to understand it in a functional if not a substantial way. While this nominal understanding is not to be mistaken for absolute knowledge, it allows man to create patterns of meaning and purpose that permit him to function in the world.

Now, to understand the significance of these nominalist developments more fully, let us return to Blumenberg’s discussion of curiosity. In the Neoplatonic and the Augustinian view, curiosity about the world was distinguished from theoretical knowledge of reality. Curiosity was directed at the created world rather than at the Creator. Now, however, curiosity about the phenomenal world becomes necessary as a form of useful knowledge for contending with the world. It is a subordinate mode of knowledge to faith and revelation, but, nevertheless, an essential form of knowledge.
Blumenberg claims that the changed status of curiosity about nature is a fundamental condition for the development of science. Science looks at nature as a thing in itself and relies on human imagination and reason to be able to construct patterns that make nature predictable and understandable. So, for Blumenberg, the Scientific Revolution, which is so fundamental to modernity, is not a radical break with the medieval tradition but is rather a development that emerges from a basic posture formulated by medieval Christianity, namely nominalism.

The Transition to the Modern World

In the fourth part of his book, Blumenberg returns again to a critical discussion of historiography, focusing specifically on the assumption of an epochal break between the Middle Ages and the modern period. Blumenberg contends that traditional historiographical notions of a decisive event precipitating an epochal break or of a single figure standing as the heroic patriarch of a new age simply does not stand up under the historical scrutiny. On the other hand, there are obvious differences between the medieval and modern conceptions of God, man, world, and society. For Blumenberg, however, these transitions are not developments punctuated by a single, decisive event; they are, instead, the result of a complex series of events that weave together scholasticism, nominalism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. Having made this claim, Blumenberg provides a detailed analysis of two major modern figures, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, to show the complicated interrelation of their traditional religious concerns and their modern scientific beliefs. Blumenberg shows that the Cusan's contribution to science, which is identified with his belief in the infinity of the world, is completely consistent with views emerging in medieval theology. Blumenberg's basic point is that fundamental scientific developments, which are prototypically modern, do not have to be the result of a fundamental deviation from traditional medieval views. Similarly, Blumenberg shows that Bruno's work does not reflect a "modern, scientific" thinker who has moved beyond traditional theological and philosophical issues. The issues that bring Bruno before the Inquisition are not ones that make him a martyr for science against the tyranny of religious superstition. Bruno's scientific position is directly related to his search for philosophical and theological truth. He is condemned because he embraces the Egyptian religion (Hermetism) as the true religion and not because he shares the Enlightenment dream of emancipating (secularizing) science from theology and metaphysics.

While Blumenberg's analysis is not always convincing, this section deserves careful consideration because it does bring to light fundamental problems and issues in historiography and the philosophy of history.
Having established the context for the legitimacy controversy and having described Blumenberg's effort to establish a new interpretive framework, it is now appropriate to move beyond the issues in this famous debate and evaluate Blumenberg's efforts in light of other scholarly efforts to enhance the understanding of the origin and nature of modernity. In this discussion two key contributions and two fundamental shortcomings in Blumenberg's work need to be noted.

Blumenberg's first contribution is in his provocative historical analysis of the significance of curiosity from classical philosophy through to the beginnings of the early modern period. This analysis brings new insights to three fundamental issues in Western intellectual history. First of all, it helps bridge the gap between classical philosophy and medieval thought by providing a significant discussion of philosophy and religion in the Hellenistic period. His focus on the significance of the knowledge of nature in this "buffer period" between two major epochs provides convincing evidence that there is much work to be done in this area and on this subject. Blumenberg's analysis also opens a new perspective on medieval theology's relation to the development of modern science. The third contribution of this analysis of curiosity is in the new perspective it offers on connections between late medieval theological problems and the emergence of modern "secular" historiography. As we have noted above, his analysis suggests that the conventional periodizations and the claims of epochal breaks, both by modernists and by the critics of modernity, have to be now carefully re-evaluated.

Blumenberg's second major contribution lies in his attempts to expose the weaknesses of established modes of interpretation and then to open new historical perspectives on such fundamental matters as the nature of modernity and the role of secularization. Having acknowledged its importance, however, it is also necessary to note again that much of the attention Blumenberg has received is ideological and there is a danger that the important theoretical questions will remain secondary to the polemical haranguing over the legitimacy question.

Of course, Blumenberg cannot be faulted for the responses and reactions of his readers. In an assessment of his contribution to research, it is appropriate, however, to examine the extent to which he is familiar with contemporary work having direct bearing on the origin and nature of modernity. From this perspective, Blumenberg must be faulted for failing to take account of important work in the history of science and in Renaissance intellectual history that is central to the understanding of modernity and secularization.

In order to establish the importance of these studies for Blumen-
berg’s analysis, it is necessary to discuss three interrelated issues. This discussion must begin with a description of how recent work is altering the standard view of the origins of modern individualism, secularism, and rationalism. At the center of this revision is a new assessment of the components in the Renaissance revival of ancient learning. This discussion will lead to the second topic—the changes in scholarship that opened the new perspective on the revival of ancient learning; and this examination will lead, in turn, to the third issue—why reconsideration of the components in the revival of ancient learning has only recently begun. This last issue will lead to an examination of the patterns of historiographical analysis that have shaped the study of the nature of modernity since the seventeenth century.

The Renaissance Recovery of Ancient Learning

There is a well-established pattern of historiographical interpretation that equates modernity with the decline of theological and ecclesiastical influence and with the consequent emergence of secularism and individualism. This interpretation locates the origins of these modern features in the Renaissance revival of ancient learning and focuses the recovery on the revival of the *studia humanitatis*. The *studia humanitatis* was composed of rhetoric, grammar, logic, ethics, and literature. This curriculum dates back to the Roman period and is associated both with the study of the humanities, viz., the curriculum noted above, and with the study of humanity. The use of this double meaning, both in the Roman period and in the Renaissance, was to emphasize that the rhetorical and other practical skills taught in the *studia humanitatis* were necessary for the full development of human potential, particularly the potential for civic responsibility and for success in public affairs.

Standard textbooks still introduce the discussion of the Renaissance and of the importance of the *studia humanitatis* by explaining the social, political, and economic situation in the Italian city states. In the fourteenth century, they were the sites of extraordinary expansion of trade and commercial development which put wealth and political power into the hands of the new entrepreneurial class. This class, which was struggling against the hierarchical social and political patterns of the Middle Ages, was naturally drawn to a program of education that stressed natural ability and training rather than one’s station at birth. These textbook treatments also (rightly) stress that the practical arts provided in this curriculum were valuable to men of business and political affairs who wanted to take advantage of the opportunity of self-advancement. And, of course, this emphasis on individual ability over against social structure and on the material self-advancement of the new middle
class leads to the second major Renaissance theme, secularization.

Now, the problem with this interpretation is not that it is inaccurate or false. It is a valid characterization of significant social, political, and intellectual developments in the early modern period. The problem is that it is not a complete picture of the forces shaping the intellectual and cultural patterns of the age and, because it is incomplete, it distorts the characteristic features of both the Renaissance and the modern age. More precisely, it distorts the understanding of the factors that shape the Renaissance and modern emphasis on individuality, autonomy, and self-emancipation from ecclesiastical and theological domination.

*The Significance of the Ancient Wisdom Tradition*

The elements that have to be added to the traditional picture of the Renaissance center on what Ficino and the Neoplatonists of the fifteenth century called the *prisca theologia* or the Ancient Wisdom. This Ancient Wisdom tradition included a wide range of esoteric religious and pseudo-science, including Hermeticism, Cabala, Gnosticism, Orphism, and Zoroastrianism. While it is appropriate in the present scholarly context to describe these traditions as "pseudo-science," Ficino and other philosopher/theologians of the Renaissance understood them to be the revelations provided by God to the non-Christian wisemen (*magi*) of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean.

Because they were regarded as pristine revelations, these materials were cherished by philosophers and theologians as the key to the recovery of ancient learning that had been obscured or lost during the "dark age" that followed the collapse of the Graeco-Roman civilization. The enthusiasm for their recovery, therefore, paralleled the excitement over the recovery of the *studia humanitatis*. But the focus and function of the two sets of materials are strikingly different. While the *studia humanitatis* focused primarily on the practical arts, the Ancient Wisdom dealt with the fundamental concerns of theology and philosophy. Also, rather than being concerned with the emerging secular features of society, the Ancient Wisdom materials address the fundamental theological and philosophical problems of the relation of the sacred and the secular, the nature of man, his relation to God, and his place in the universe.

Of course, the discovery of materials that are regarded as the record of primary revelation is intrinsically precious, but these materials carried added value because they offered the possibility of resolving fundamental problems and concerns of the age, including the controversies over the reconciliation of various philosophical traditions with Christianity, and the revitalization of Christianity through a return to its primary teachings found in ancient sources.
This emphasis on reconciliation and recovery is apparent in Ficino’s major work, the *Theologia Platonica*, which offers a new perspective on human nature through a reconciliation of Christian theology with Neoplatonic philosophy, and in Pico’s famous *Oration on Human Dignity* in which he boldly announces that he has drawn together all of the ancient sources into one system that will answer any question of a metaphysical nature. Both Ficino and Pico were particularly drawn to the work of Hermes Trismegistus because there was a Renaissance tradition which held that Hermes was the teacher both of Plato and of Moses and could, therefore, serve as the point of intersection for various religious and philosophical points of view.

In order to understand the impact of this Ancient Wisdom tradition on Renaissance thought and on the issues involved in the Lowith-Blumenberg debate, we need to briefly look at Ficino and Pico’s primary writings. The influence of the Hermetic materials on Ficino is obvious in two of his major works: the *Theologia Platonica* and *De vita triplici*. In the dedicatory preface, Ficino explains that one of the primary purposes of the *Theologia Platonica* is "to present a new understanding of human nature." His principal contention is that man is the most extraordinary of God’s creatures because of the unique union of the spiritual and physical in his soul. According to Ficino, proper understanding of the soul’s composition enables man to draw upon the spiritual element to overcome the limitation of the physical and to escape Fate. This process of spiritualization transforms man from a determined creature like all others into the greatest of God’s miracles—a terrestrial god. Ficino’s new understanding of human nature is developed further in *De vita triplici*. Here Ficino describes magical procedures designed to "overcome Fate" and allow man to reform the world. The key to these procedures is a new understanding of the world. Ficino presents a view in which the natural and spiritual elements of the cosmos are linked by the world soul (anima mundi) and the world spirit (spiritus mundi). According to Ficino, the Ancient Wisdom reveals how to draw upon the power of the world spirit to enhance man’s physical and spiritual condition and to control the powers of nature in the way the prisci theologi did. Ficino’s prescriptions for these magical operations extend from procedures for improving physical health and intellectual aptitude to an elaborate operation that allows man to participate directly in the restoration of order to the natural world and to the utopian achievements described in the famous Hermetic text, the *Asclepius*.

It is well known that the purpose of the *Oration on Human Dignity* was to provide a concise statement of Pico’s understanding of human nature and of his epistemological breakthrough that was at the heart of the nine hundred propositions he offered to debate with the doctors of the
Church. It is also well known that this *Oration* has long been regarded as a prototypical modern manifesto because of its criticism of established theological learning and its bold affirmation of human dignity, creativity, and autonomy. It is, therefore, an excellent text to use to show how recognition of the presence and influence of the Ancient Wisdom tradition requires a revision of long-held assumptions about the beginnings of modernity.

Pico begins the *Oration* by indicating that he intends to develop a new perspective on the nature of man and his place in God’s creation. His point of departure is the affirmation by Hermes Trismegistus and other *prisci theologi* that man is the greatest miracle of creation. The difficulty is that conventional views of man do not explain why or how he can be the *magnum miraculum*. In fact, other beings—angels and star demons, for example—appear to hold a far loftier position than does man. In order to set the record straight, Pico offers a new myth of creation. "God the Father, the supreme Architect, had already built this cosmic home we behold, the most sacred temple of His godhead, by the laws of His mysterious wisdom. The region above the heavens He had adorned with Intelligences, the heavenly spheres He had quickened with eternal souls, and the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world He had filled with a multitude of animals of every kind. " Having finished his creation, God longed to have "someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness. " He therefore decided to create man:  He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was not among His archetypes that from which He could fashion a new offspring, nor was there in His treasure-houses anything which He might bestow on His new son as an inheritance, nor was there in the seats of all the world a place where the latter might sit to contemplate the universe. All was now complete; all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders.

Because man could not be given special or unique features, God gave him a composite nature with unlimited potential to be whatever he decides.  He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus:  Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. ~ All other beings, even the celestial demons, have a fixed nature.

9. Quotations are from the Elizabeth Forbes translation, which appears in Ernst Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, and J.H. Randall, Jr. (eds.), *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago, 1948). The citations are found on p. 224f.
Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer...

Pico then devotes a long segment to an explanation of how to move from the present alienated state of existence to the recovery of our full humanity. This path leads from natural philosophy to the *prisca theologia* and magic. If we compare the process for recovering our god-like nature with Pico's creation myth, we begin to understand how central magic is to the fulfillment of human destiny. According to Pico's myth, God created man so there would exist a being who could "ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness." The purpose of magic is the "diligent contemplation of the wonders of God [that] inspire[s] . . . worship and love of the Creator." Therefore, it seems that the being created to know and to appreciate His universe is the magician. It is also the magician, and only the magician, who can attain self-divinization and employ his knowledge to order and perfect society.

It is evident that Pico's myth is indebted to the creation account found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the *Pimander or Poimandres*, Hermes Trismegistus has revealed to him the true nature of the world and of man. The Demiurge created the world, but the divine Father created man. So man is beautiful and shares in the divine power. As primal man looks down on the universe, he expresses his wish to use his divinely given creative powers and obtains permission from God to assist the Demiurge in creation of the natural order. Primal man is taught the essence of the workings of the universe, and he is thus able to become a creator as well. Pico has modified this story, eliminating the Demiurge and having God perform both acts of creation, but the essence of the story remains. Man is a special creation of God with divine powers. When Pico's full narrative in the *Oration* is taken into account, there is a strong suggestion that the magus is the reincarnation of primal man. He has the power to create in the physical world because he has been empowered by God and because the lesser orders of being that control the operations of the natural world taught him nature's secrets.

While Pico's myth closely parallels the Hermetic view, its concept of man contrasts sharply with the Judaeo-Christian creation stories. In

10. Ibid.
Pico’s myth, man has no boundaries to his nature; he can be whatever he wills to be. Also, man’s desire for God-like knowledge serves as a bond between man and God, not as a source of sin and alienation. Moreover, his natural instincts and appetites are not impediments or obstructions to his divinization. They are aids to his knowledge of the world and serve his highest intellectual capacities, which are boundless and equal to God’s. Through knowledge he not only understands the natural world; he can control it and shape it to his purposes. Most important of all, nature and society serve as the means of expressing his God-like creativity.

This brief discussion shows that these materials have a direct bearing on the main themes that standard approaches claim are characteristic features of the Renaissance. First of all, these Ancient Wisdom materials focus on a new understanding of human nature that portrays man with a god-like capacity for self-determination. Secondly, Ficino and the Neoplatonists share the widespread conviction that the recovery of ancient learning marks the beginning of a new age of light that will overcome medieval ignorance and error. This is evident in Ficino’s presentation of a new understanding of human nature that will liberate man to achieve his full potential, and it is implicit in Pico’s claim to have developed a knowledge system that solved the philosophical problems that puzzled men for millennia. Analysis of one of the key texts of modernity also shows why the linking of the modern age with secularization or with science proves inadequate and inaccurate. Modernity’s core doctrines of man as the master of his destiny and of knowledge as the power to create and transform are obviously indebted to the pseudo-science and esoteric religion recovered by Ficino and the Neoplatonists. The presence of these traditions at the foundation of modernity also opens new perspectives on the origins of features of modernity analyzed by Lowith. Lowith finds in modern epochal consciousness a conception of innerworldly fulfillment accomplished by man; and situates the core of modernity around the doctrine of salvation through knowledge and the view of man as the new master of history. The difficulty is that these formulations rest upon the notion that a radically transcendent religious world view has been transformed into an innerworldly one. Critics like Blumenberg have, in turn, challenged the legitimacy of this explanation and insisted that proponents must document the stages at which such a profound transformation can be shown to occur. The research on the influence of the Ancient Wisdom shows that a source of this pattern in modernity is found in the immanentist myths of the priscia theologia tradition, and the key point of assimilation and transmission of this tradition is Ficino and the Platonic Academy.
Renaissance Studies and the Historiography of Modernity

Discussion of the importance of the Ancient Wisdom materials and the new perspectives they bring to the Renaissance and to modernity poses a fundamental historiographical question: Why have these materials only recently been given the attention that they deserve? After all, Renaissance scholars have long known of these materials and of their influence on leading figures in the Renaissance. To answer this question adequately will require a much more thoroughgoing analysis of modern historiography than is presently available. Nevertheless, it is clear that the scholarly approaches to the Renaissance, especially that of Burckhardt and other nineteenth-century writers, are directly connected to ideological convictions about the nature of modernity and its quantum leap away from the medieval "dark ages." As Theodor Mommsen has aptly noted, the historiographical pattern that divides Western history into ancient, medieval, and modern emerged amidst an ideological battle in which "modernity" served as a battlecry to rally those who subscribed to the Enlightenment ideals and its criticism of the medieval theological and ecclesiastical traditions. From this point of view, the Renaissance was looked at as the beginning of modern humanism and individualism. Therefore, treatments of the Renaissance focused on these elements and ignored the features that did not fit the pattern. Or, religious, esoteric, and pseudo-scientific components were classified as vestiges of the pre-modern period that had to be outgrown and overcome in subsequent stages of modern progress.

This being the case, we find ourselves confronted with another basic historiographical question. How and why does this pervasive pattern of historical interpretation break down and a re-evaluation of the Ancient Wisdom in the Renaissance and in modern thought begin? Again, no complete answer can be given because there has not been a detailed study of the scholarly developments that opened this new perspective. Nevertheless, there are at least three fundamental developments that can be credited with playing a key role.

The first and by far the most important is the work in the history of science that has changed the understanding of both the internal history of science and its role in Western culture. From the time of "the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns" down to the present, modernists have regarded science as a new mode of knowledge that could overcome the superstition and naivete of the preceding age. Recent research, however, makes such a view impossible to defend. Lynn Thorndike's

pioneering study, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, offered conclusive documentation of the close interconnection between the origins of science and the influence of magic and alchemy. Moreover, subsequent studies by Betty Jo Dobbs and others have shown that Newton and other great scientific figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not distinguish between science and pseudo-science in the way that is presently done. Newton carried on alchemical experiments as well as the "scientific" experiments that he is famous for. Moreover, Paolo Rossi, Frances Yates, and others have shown that Francis Bacon, one of the greatest of the moderns, drew heavily upon the Ancient Wisdom and upon Judaeo-Christian millenarianism to present his picture of the utopian order that science could achieve. This reevaluation of the history of science makes it necessary to reevaluate the intellectual traditions and historiographical patterns that draw so heavily upon this now outmoded, positivistic conception of science.

The second primary source of the re-examination of the influence of the Ancient Wisdom comes from studies by E.H. Gombrich and others of the iconography of Renaissance art. These studies have shown that Neoplatonic and Hermetic ideas were prevalent in the intellectual traditions that the artists were familiar with. Moreover, recent studies have shown that a significant part of the art produced during the Renaissance had a thaumaturgical or talismanic purpose. That is, the function was magic. The importance of these studies is that they indicate that these Ancient Wisdom traditions, particularly magic, were a fundamental part of the revival of an ancient or a classical iconography and were part of the intellectual milieu during the Renaissance. The third source for a changing perspective on the importance of these materials in the Renaissance was the growing interest in parallels between ancient Gnostic religion and modern thought and experience. A key figure in opening this line of inquiry was Carl Jung who saw striking parallels between the dreams of his patients and the myths and symbols of Gnosticism. Another was Hans Jonas who found in the Gnostic materials the key to understanding modern existentialism. More recently, literary critics have found within the Gnostic material a new mode of literary analysis and interpretation. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the most important of

these pioneering scholars is Eric Voegelin, who saw close parallels between the ancient Gnostic doctrine of saving knowledge and the modern dream of using science as the soteriological means of creating a utopian social order.

This widespread interest in Gnosticism and modernity led naturally to an interest in the transmission of ancient Gnosticism into the modern epoch, and this led to interest in the Corpus Hermeticum, which is a key source for Hermetic and Gnostic materials. This interest in the Corpus Hermeticum leads directly to Ficino and the Neoplatonic Academy, which is directly responsible for preserving the Hermetic materials, translating them, and devising commentaries that explain their value in correcting distortions and errors in philosophy and theology.

As these various lines of inquiry were opened, Renaissance specialists including D. P. Walker, Eugenio Garin, and Frances Yates began to conduct a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of these materials and their place within the Renaissance tradition. As a result of their work, it is now evident that an adequate and accurate understanding of the Renaissance must incorporate these materials and by extension an analysis of the epochal consciousness that emerges from the Renaissance must take the influence of these materials into account.

**Implications of Blumenberg's Analysis**

The recent work on science, pseudo-science, and esoteric religion in modern thought has direct implications for Blumenberg’s analysis, particularly his claim that modernity is associated with man’s self-emancipation from religious and ecclesiastical authority and his effort to dismiss the work of Lowith and others because they fail to demonstrate how the eschatological language of religion becomes immanentized into doctrines of progress. From the brief discussion above, it is clear that the emphasis on self-emancipation is closely tied to the root notion of man as a terrestrial god; and this symbolization has its origins in Hermetic magic and religion. Moreover, the Ancient Wisdom traditions are im-

16. Jung’s contribution includes several major publications and the Eranos Conferences, which brought prominent scholars together to discuss the implication of this material. Hans Jonas, the famous pupil of Heidegger’s, has said that he found in ancient Gnosticism the key to understanding modern existentialism and nihilism. See Jonas, *Gnosis* and *spatantiker Geist*, 2 vols. (Gottingen, 1934-54); and Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (2d. ed.; Boston, 1963). Several of Harold Bloom’s works have explored Gnostic themes in literature, and he has even written a Gnostic fantasy: *The Flight to Lucifer* (New York, 1979). Eric Voegelin has written extensively on this subject. His major studies include *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952); *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1964); and *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell (Durham, 1975).
manentist and provide precisely the demonstration of the formal and historical ties that Blumenberg has challenged Lowith to produce.

What is more, these materials have a direct bearing on Blumenberg’s analysis of curiosity and the transition from medieval theology to early modern science. The fact that he overlooks or ignores these materials and their implications marks a fundamental shortcoming in his work.

Of course, it would be unfair to fault Blumenberg for failing to take into account the results of scholarship done after the second edition of his work appeared in 1973 through 1976. Major work on these matters, however, had already appeared even before the first edition of Blumenberg’s book in 1966. There was, for example, the appearance of D.P. Walker’s book *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958) and Frances Yates’s widely discussed book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). This book is particularly important not only for its synthesis of Renaissance specialized studies of some two decades but also for its lengthy discussion of Giordano Bruno, who is one of the chief figures in Blumenberg’s argument. The revisions under way in the history of science by Lynn Thorndike and others were also evident at the time that Blumenberg was writing and revising his text.

The second major shortcoming in Blumenberg’s work lies in his facile dismissal of Lowith’s analysis of modern philosophies of history as ersatz forms of Christian salvation history. Blumenberg discounts the importance of Lowith’s analysis for two reasons. First of all, he rightly notes the fundamental difference between Christian salvation history, which distinguishes between salvation provided by God in the afterlife, and worldly perfection attained by mankind. His second criticism is far less legitimate, however. He discounts the importance of these progressivist philosophies of history because he claims they are not fundamental elements of modernity but are rather efforts of modern figures to address problems formulated in the preceding age. While Blumenberg’s criticism does level an effective attack on a flaw in Lowith’s work, it does not offer an adequate response to the analysis of what is a fundamental dimension of modern thought and experience—indeed, many would argue the fundamental dimension. This is the rise of a utopian political tradition, which is at the heart of the doctrine of historical progress. Francis Bacon, a patriarch of modernity, for example, outlines a program of social reform and attempts to persuade his king that this reform will enable man to attain his full humanity and allow England to become the political and intellectual center of the world. The dream of social reform and perfection also dominates the work of such major eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers as Voltaire, Turgot, Comte, and Marx. Therefore, this element of modern thought is not as easy to dismiss as Blumenberg would like for it to be. Moreover, as we
have already noted, recent studies in the history of science and related areas are demonstrating that science contributes directly to the modern dream of innerworldly fulfillment and perfection. These studies also show that many of the patriarchs of modern science saw the developments in science as part of the ushering in of a new age that was described either as the millennium or as the apocalypse or as the recovery of paradise lost. Therefore, it is now obvious that this new research speaks directly to the criticism that Blumenberg made of Lowith’s failure to be able to explain the apparent dichotomy between the world transcendent Christian salvation and the world immanent forms of salvation found in modern philosophy of history. The Ancient Wisdom tradition supplies the formal and the historical documentation that Blumenberg called for.

Conclusion

If we are to summarize the significance of Blumenberg’s work, then, it would be necessary to say that it marks an important contribution to the effort to bring a new theoretical perspective and to reintroduce new historical data into the probing of the basic character of the modern age. Its limits are found in: 1) its inclination to strengthen its own position by dismissing as irrelevant elements of modernity that it cannot accommodate into its system and 2) its ignorance of fundamental shifts in intellectual history and the history of science that have a direct bearing on his analysis.

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