GEOCENTRISM AS A HUMILIATION FOR MAN*

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I. A text by Freud

Everybody knows the celebrated essay *A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis* in which the founding father of this new approach in depth psychology explains why some people are reluctant to admit the sexual origin of neuroses. He draws a parallel with the misgivings that some earlier scientific theories are supposed to have aroused in their opponents. In this connection, he mentions two scientific revolutions with far-reaching consequences: Copernicus' heliocentric cosmology and Darwin's theory of evolution. According to Freud, those two thinkers have a common point: both inflicted a wound that it could hardly bear to human narcissism. The former showed man that he does not live at the midpoint of the universe; the latter prevented him from considering himself as the high point of life. As for Freud himself, he is supposed to have shown to proud reason that she is not even the queen of her own home, that she houses in her palace a far more dangerous and compromising rival than imagination, whose traps classical rationalism contented itself with exposing.

In this paper, I will refrain from asking the general question as to what validity we can ascribe to what Hans Blumenberg called a "paratheory,"1


1 I borrow the word from H. Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 316, 762, and 803. Blumenberg sees very clearly that the Copernican revolution was made bearable for Renaissance man through a transposition of anthropocentrism to an ideal ground (a process thanks to which anthropocentrism became far more radical and pretentious than in so-called mediaeval anthropocentrism, in which man had to share his central position with the other inhabitants of the earth), a transposition that enables man to do without the physical dimension of anthropocentrism (see op. cit., pp. 47, 91, 244,

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that is, a theory that claims to be able to explain even the resistance of its own adversaries. E.g. "you reject the theory of capitalistic exploitation because of the unconscious influence of bourgeois ideology on your mind, etc." In the same way, I will only allude to the difficulty it faces with respect to its theory of resistance. For either resistance has a weak cause, and we cannot explain why it held sway so decisively and for so long; or it is a strong cause, and we are hard put to it to explain how it could be removed. Furthermore, I will not even consider the somewhat narcissistic lack of modesty in the person of Freud, who does not hesitate to name himself in the same breath as the greatest scientists of the past in order to focus exclusively on his text. Finally, I will neglect Freud's remarks on Darwinian evolution and Freudian psychoanalysis, because I have nothing very special to say about them. I will concentrate on the meaning of what others, but not Kant, have called the "Copernican revolution."

To begin with, it may be apposite to hear once again the passage by Freud, in order to refresh our memories. I quote only the passage on the first wound, i.e. the one Copernicus is said to have inflicted to man's geocentric pride:

In the early stages of his researches, man believed at first that his dwelling-place, the earth, was the stationary center of the universe, with the sun, moon and planets circling round it. In this he was naively following the dictates of his sense-perception, for he felt no movement of the earth, and wherever he had an unimpeded view he found himself in the center of a circle that enclosed the external world. The central position of the earth, moreover, was a token to him of the dominating part played by it in the universe and appeared to fit in very well with his inclination to regard himself as lord of the world. The destruction of this narcissistic illusion is associated in our minds with the name and work of Copernicus in the sixteenth century (...). When this discovery achieved general recognition, the self-love of mankind suffered its first blow, the cosmological one.²

325, 565). According to Blumenberg, this is only an aspect of the impossibility to surpass every form of anthropocentrism that recurs under other masks as egocentrism or "nostrocentrism," i.e. the primacy of the present over the past (see op. cit., pp. 97f., 108, 201, 272). In the same way, Blumenberg sees clearly that what is humiliating for man in the medieval model includes the fact that the center is not an honorable place but only the place of the Devil (op. cit., pp. 40, 312); the earth is lowly and unworthy, because it is central (op. cit., pp. 162, 215 and 518); it has to undergo all kinds of influxes (op. cit., pp. 166f.); and it represents what can be termed a settling at the bottom of the world (op. cit., p. 793). From time to time, however, Blumenberg lets slip phrases that support the "blow to human narcissism" theory (see op. cit., p. 374: "geborgen in der Mitte der Welt"). See also op. cit., p. 99 (corrected p. 106).