‘You are embarked’: Blumenberg’s Shipwreck with Spectator, the Titanic, and globalization

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What can philosophical reflection contribute to an understanding of such an event as the Titanic disaster? In what ways might thinking philosophically about this disaster 100 years ago contribute to an investigation into the theme of this year’s colloquium ‘The Titanic and the first age of globalization’. Most contemporary philosophers convinced by traditional conceptions that argue philosophy is only concerned with perennial questions of a timeless nature would certainly scoff. At first face, the classical branches of philosophy and their fundamental questions appear to have very little to say about a contingent historical event such as the sinking of a cruiseliner, no matter how dramatic. To be sure, philosophers take up historical events and thorny ethical problems in their writings. The aim, however, has mostly, if not always, to use these particular problems as vehicles for testing and illuminating larger principles and philosophical concepts. Inquiry into metaphysics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and ethics appear too abstract and rarefied too illuminate the meaning or consequences of the sinking of a ship one hundred years ago. Even American pragmatism’s most popular and active champion, John Dewey, who was 53 at the time of the sinking lived four decades after this singular spectacle, never saw fit to mention the Titanic in this most concrete, and practical of all philosophies.

In our own time, a time where once again different philosophical traditions engage in a renaissance of cross-fertilization with each other giving rise to new fields of inquiry as ‘comparative philosophy’, and indeed the history of cross-cultural appropriation of different philosophies, the situation is only slightly different.¹

So philosophical inquiry in searching for something to say about such a catastrophe leans on in the first instance, history, the historical record of the disaster. But it also abstracts from particular historical facts and classifies them alongside other such events as it sees fit: in the case of the

¹ Applied ethics, philosophy of technology, and other sub-branches of the main branches have made some forays into discussing historical events. These developments are rather recent and it is unclear if there intent is a practical one or the derivation of principles for further application.
Titanic, shipwrecks. It is an instance of intellectual distancing and abstraction that necessarily accompanies the 100 years since the disaster.

However, and this shifts the event closer to philosophical terrain, it is as much what the Titanic means for humans today as it is the particular empirical features of the size of the ship, the material out of which it was made, the cause of its sinking, the numbers lost, and the numbers saved. The Titanic is much more than the event that initiates a causal series of representations in our culture leading up to and beyond Leonardo DiCaprio arms flung open on the prow of the mammoth studio-constructed model of the ship, to a Broadway musical, to a traveling exhibit whose latest stop was Copenhagen, Denmark. So, it could be that philosophy is not so strange a way to approach this and even the most spectacular accidents that history provides.

Philosophers have made much of the issue of meaning, and theories as to how humans make events meaningful abound. That humans do, or appear to, or want to find some sense, make some meaning of what begins in the first instance as a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’3, is captured in perhaps the boldest recent statement with respect to the presence of questions of meaning in human life: human being ‘is the only being for which the meaning of their being is an issue’4.

The material out of which the Titanic arrives to us today, so laden with meanings, is so much more than the sinking of a large ship. Rather today the Titanic is lodged in our minds as much as a metaphor as anything else. It is regularly used in common analogies of humorous self-deprecation or castigation upon failing at, or suffering, a performance. ‘Well that went over like the Titanic’. It is employed in situations where a heralded project falls flat on its face. And has even become something of a meta-metaphor for those who want to point out the futility of working on the detailed parts or facets of a doomed larger whole venture. ‘This busy work feels like we are arranging desk chairs on the Titanic’. The ‘Titanic’, though is not just any metaphor, according to the late intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg. Rather Blumenberg suggest that looking backwards to retrieve the sunk ship once again for our reflection, is in philosophical terms, nothing other than working with something that is at once a historical event and also a token of a type of experience. Investigating the Titanic today is to participate in the activity at the heart of a metaphor that contains within itself what it means to be human.

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2 And now even this wreck continues to probed for treasure, if illegally: http://www.inquisitr.com/143648/titanic-necklace-nicked-from-exhibit-in-copenhagen/
In fact, in a philosophical manner, generalizing our position in investigating the Titanic across time and space, Blumenberg suggests that the metaphor of a *shipwreck with spectator* is our human condition most exactingly represented.\(^5\) That is, the idea of a shipwreck being watched by those not participating in it serves as an archetypical representation of our position as humans born on earth, the kind of beings we are. We are setting out on doomed voyages, witnessing shipwreck, either drowning or being saved, and musing about what shipwreck means in our position on the shore throughout our history.

As Blumenberg’s dizzying mastery of ancient texts in this text shows, seafaring is a common theme and metaphor in describing human existence, and referred to as one of the fundamentally paradoxical facts of how we understand ourselves: “Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence.” (7). And so Blumenberg wants us to retrieve something about this metaphor by seeing its roots, by actually digging up the sedimented ruins of our culture that shows that to be watching or suffering a shipwreck, is one of the most basic human positions to be in, literally and metaphorically.\(^6\)

It might help to acknowledge that, with what Richard Rorty immortalized as the twentieth century’s “Linguistic Turn”, metaphor has been the subject, as a particularly slippery aspect of language even for philosophers who were convinced that language is really the sole and foundational object of philosophizing.\(^7\) This is nicely captured in the subtitle to the philosopher Richard Boyd’s paper “Metaphor and Theory Change: *What is “Metaphor” a Metaphor for?*”\(^8\). However, let us take metaphor in its most classic philosophical sense as articulated by Aristotle. Hannah Arendt in her discussion “Language and Metaphor” from Vol. 1 of her last work *The Life of the Mind* describes the structure this way:


\(^6\) In the background of this essay is an entire approach to intellectual history and philosophical anthropology that Blumenberg refers to as ‘metaphorology’. Blumenberg posits that the fundamental activity of our position as creatures with minds is making meaning out of metaphors. It is not my intention to touch upon this position with respect to the structure of our meaning making. For an interesting, and advanced discussion of Blumenberg’s understanding of ‘metaphorology’ in comparison with the American tradition of pragmatism, see my colleague Anthony Reynolds article, “Unfamiliar Methods: Blumenberg and Rorty on Metaphor” In *Qui Parle*, Vol. 12, No. 1.


Every metaphor discovers an “intuitive perception of similarity among dissimilars”
And, according to Aristotle, is for this very reason “a sign of genius,” “the greatest thing by far”. But this similarity, for Aristotle, too, is not a similarity present in otherwise dissimilar objects but a similarity of relations as in an analogy which always needs four terms and can be presented in the formula B:A=D:C. “Thus cup is in relation to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares. The cup accordingly will be metaphorically described as the ‘shield of Dionysus.’

In this paper I would like to present a basic schematic of this metaphor for human existence according to Blumenberg, and to ask the question, in a more meditative and perhaps existential vein, What constitutes spectatorship today and what counts as a shipwreck? What position are we in with respect to a disaster one hundred years old? and What position with respect to the ‘shipwrecks’ all around us? And, finally, to see if ‘Shipwreck with Spectator’ can be enlisted as a useful metaphor for human existence under conditions of globalization, if we can employ our intuitive perception of ‘similarity among dissimilars’ today, if we can locate ourselves in this metaphor as spectators of a shipwreck in the past.

Shipwreck
Seafaring has not always been seen as the adventure of the bold and the brave. Rather, the natural shore that the sea formed with the edge of land was understood as a certain sacred boundary against which no one should transgress. The element of Earth provides for necessities and moving beyond the near shore into the unknown depths, the dangerous depths, is forbidden. The attraction of seafaring is simple enough to understand. The sea perhaps holds untold fortunes, excitement, adventure. In short, the prohibition against seafaring, of setting off onto the ocean is tied up with an understanding of human being’s rightful place in the natural order of the cosmos. We after all, do not have gills, we do not swim very naturally, very far, or very fast. In fact we drown. Thus to articulate in the imagination an intention that motivates someone away from land is to go against the ‘natural order of things’. This order holds throughout a variety of ages and lands and is easily transferable between distinct eras. Sources of the idea of a natural law that is divinely commanded are found in polytheistic environment in ancient global history, and monotheistic and medieval environment in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam up through today. Nature becomes a text where one can read (the) God(s)’s intentions off of the ‘book of nature’ if one uses the gifts humans are given. This particular gift is a power any individual could claim as their own, and that constitutes us as the special kind of being we are, our reason. The power of reason in discovering the natural law, allows humans to set a limit to our rightful domain of activity. If the natural order includes boundaries to habitable elements, leaving us with just one, earth, this carries with it normative obligations with
respect to the other three. Our limitations with respect to the sea are noted, but we also cannot fly in the air nor withstand fire. Earth is our natural home.

Because one can go seafaring, of course, does not mean that one should. The sea is unknowable in its vastness and power. Blumenberg notes that in Works and Days “Hesiod berates his brother Perses, who, with his heart full of foolishness.” Has turned away from working on the land toward the opportunity of a sea voyage along the coast, just as their father, ‘in search of a better life,’”. Even if one does voyage it should be in the safest season, not spring, when sailing is ‘hasty and audacious’. (p. 9).

Tying together this ancient version of the idea of our cosmos as divinely ordered, with the idea that we are creatures who can self-consciously understand this order, it is a familiar step to turn seafaring into something prohibited. Seafaring is best understood as an impulse rooted in other natural inclinations that ought be disciplined for the sake of a moral life. The sea, then is off-limits for to venture out upon it shows someone to be greedy, foolhardy, and upsetting of our natural position. The moral prohibition of seafaring and tying it to greed and riches lives on in a variety of registers. A newspaper article chronicling the experiences of China under the then new conditions of market liberalization and privatization of certain sectors of the economy detailed a conflict arising in the habits and trajectories of Chinese citizens. A surprisingly large contingent of public servants and educators were choosing to leave their posts for lucrative opportunities in the expanding market in the major urban centers. The Chinese referred to this as ‘going to the sea’.

So strong was the prohibition and negative judgment of the human transgression of the boundary of the sea, that Blumenberg writes that shipwrecks served as a ‘legitimate’ reordering of nature that results from seafaring. ⁹ That is, a shipwreck was often commented on as ‘just deserts’ for those foolish and undisciplined enough to give way to their passions and venture forth. Even as oceanic travel began to formalize and maps begin to be circulated, used along with the stars for expedience and safety, there still exhibited the prohibition of voyaging further into the unknown, ‘uncharted waters’. Add to this the numerous legends and myths of various sea monsters and a picture emerges that still supply culture with representations attractive enough for profit, the dangerousness of the sea at the same time apparently having been erased from our commercial culture by any means, even as cosmology advances.

But for Blumenberg, the sea only serves as one element of his entire metaphor for human existence, that of a shipwreck with spectator. These are ancient roots no doubt rising partly from limitations upon technologcal capacity that might strike the most daring among today us as passé. Certainly

⁹ [S]hipwreck is something like the “legitimate” result of seafaring, and a happily reached harbor or serene calm on the sea is only the deceptive face of something deeply problematic. P. 10.
on the way to our current state of globalization some visionaries believed technology could solve the problem of human suffering to a great degree and with it eliminate the superstitions about seafaring through sheer productive sophistication. And indeed it is true, we have and are able to sail and power our way across oceans safely. Yes some ships sink now, but hardly any. Blumenberg is aware of this: “It is the task of technology, of science, to deal with the problem of steering a ship. Since that is so, the shipwreck metaphors can now stand for the prudence of public administration and its opposition to every sort of passion.” (41). The large majority reach their port safely. Or do they? That we can set sail, and now more powerfully and safely than ever still does not, it seems, mean that we should. Or that we ultimately will. I will come back to this in the conclusion.

**Spectator**

Imagining ‘Shipwreck with spectator’ as the fundamental metaphor for human existence calls upon our imaginative projection of ourselves into a scene and the roles therein. In shipwrecks there are three options: to drown, to be saved, and to witness. Each of these positions has their own complexity in working out the meaning of the metaphor. Regardless of the rightness or wrongness one takes with regard to seafaring, it is still a fact that one witnesses the perishing of fellow human beings when one witnesses a shipwreck. The position of spectator has its own ‘ethics and aesthetics’ according to Blumenberg, and he draws out possible positions we can take with respect to watching a shipwreck. One position suggests that human being take pleasure in witnessing other people’s anguished end.

'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds
Roll up its waste of waters, from the land
To watch another’s labouring anguish far,
Not that we joyously delight that man
Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet
To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;\(^{10}\)

This passage from Lucretius is brought to a sharper point, and perhaps twisted a bit, by Montaigne, who discusses this passage of Lucretius as part of a larger argument concerning our human constitution. Montaigne is not afraid of recognizing the “pathological qualities” of humans as that

\(^{10}\) Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Translated by Martin Ferguson Smith (Hackett Classics Series) Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Press, 2001, p. 34.
which sustains our lives. Thus the spectator in Montaigne’s sense, is in some sense delighted in the shipwreck, and not for the fact that ‘there but for the grace of the gods go I’:

Montaigne does not justify the spectator of shipwreck by his right to enjoyment; rather, he justifies his pleasure, positively described as malicious (volupte maligne) by his successful self-preservation. By virtue of his capacity for this distance, he stands unimperiled on the solid ground of the shore. He survives through one of his useless qualities: the ability to be a spectator. The spectator’s enjoyment no longer has the existential success it had in ancient theory, where it led to happiness (eudaemonia) as the pure form of the relationship to the world. Rather its comfort...sets a premium on taking as little risk as possible with one’s life and rewards distance with enjoyment. (17)

In tracing the position and disposition of the spectator, Blumenberg is offering different hypotheses for us to consider. What is the source of human spectatorship? From what well does the intentional stance towards shipwreck spring? Are we bemused, frightened, smug, delighted, in witnessing the demise of others from our safe, dry perch? To fill out other possibilities for our consideration Blumenberg looks to the Enlightenment for two more thinkers’ responses to this question: Voltaire and Ferdinando Galiani.

Curiosity, is Voltaire’s response to the question of the human impulse to watch the shipwreck:

People hasten to witness such a drama out of curiosity, and curiosity is “a natural feeling in man” (un sentiment naturel a l’homme). Voltaire claims that not one fo these sightseers would fail to undertake the most difficult measures to save the shipwrecked passengers if he could. In the same way, when someone is publicly hanged, curious people do not rush to their windows out of malevolence, as would be true if, on reflecting, they took pleasure in their own lack of involvement. Those are the alternatives not by comparison with one’s self...but by curiosity alone” (ce n’est pas par un retour sur soi-meme...c’est uniquement par curiosite). (36)

But Ferdinando Galiani asks a question that is quite rooted in the experience of shipwreck itself. He posits the possibility that it is not so much a trait of our passions as to be at once curious and observant once the fact of our inability to change the course of events is judged to be attendant. Rather, Galiani, suggests that curiosity, being the privilege of the rational animal, is secured by being secure. That human curiosity does not emerge under conditions of necessity, both in terms of meeting the needs of our material nature, nor in our moments of joy or suffering. We are curious when our needs are met; we are safe, unthreatened and not suffering. We have the chance to muse

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and investigate when we are spectators: dry and safe on land, and apparently unaware of the identities of those who might be struggling for survival in the waves on the horizon. (40) These brief sketches of spectatorship are presented for our reflection. What possesses the witness to watch? What are the sources of our response to disasters unfolding others before our eyes? What are the constituent elements of ‘shipwrecks’ today? What spectacles do we witness from what shores? Does the technology of a globalized world fundamentally change what it means to witness shipwreck, disaster, catastrophe? With the liquidity of money and aid, are we ever in Voltaire’s position, released into our curiosity by the inability to intervene in the shipwrecks of globalization? Are shipwrecks in any way seen by us as the legitimate result of human transgression of moral boundaries?

If we are to take up shipwreck with spectator as not just a culturally rich, ever-present representation in human culture’s past and present, it is still necessary to inquire in a more systematic manner. That is, it is fine to assemble example after example of the ‘shipwreck with spectator’ metaphor from the ‘wreckage’ of prior human symbolic production. However, to attribute the constellation of ‘ship’, ‘wrecking’, ‘sea’, and ‘spectator’ as the structural metaphor for existence, deeper commitments to describing human beings ‘right’ requires theories of human agency, philosophical anthropology, and other types of accounts of ‘human nature’. Even the idea that humans have no nature, no essence, and so no account of a general structure of human meaning may rest on such a foundation are still philosophical arguments. It is in this sense that philosophy can perhaps illuminate Blumenberg’s claim in terms of our human condition. These general questions lead us back to the theme of this year’s colloquium

**Titanic and Globalization**

In considering the Titanic as one more in a long line of shipwrecks, and philosophically considering the power of Blumenberg’s metaphor for our human condition, let us look in closing at what the Titanic might mean in light of a longer view of globalization.

It is not just that the Titanic was huge, thought powerful almost beyond measure, captured by expressions of *hubris* as to people’s confidence in it. 11 But when we compare our spectatorship from those ancients described above, already we have deep differences in the intentions and anthropological location of the actors. How are we to compare the passengers, crew and survivors of the Titanic with those ancient original adventurers like those chastised by Hesiod? The actors in this scene are different in many ways.

11 Though it was never said by any official publicity at the time that it was ‘unsinkable’.

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Think of the passengers who already had the surplus means from their labor (or the labor of their employees), to buy their tickets and reserve their place on the Titanic. The Titanic was a place where people went for luxury. The Titanic was a cruise liner, not primarily understood as a venture for accumulating wealth for its passengers but for spending it. The sea became a scene for display of how unnecessary the sea's treasures were to those winners lucky enough to afford the fare and leisure time to sail on the sea merely because one could. The divine order had undergone its own transformation, along with cosmologies and theological innovations such that the earth was no longer enchanted as it was in the world of those earlier sources Blumenberg looks to. This is quite crucial to understanding our attitude today. It seems inappropriate for us today to say 'Serves them right, for going out on a boat far from land in the first place.' But this of course is a huge shift from the times and places Blumenberg presents to us. I want to suggest that the ancient prohibition, in light of the succeeding eras of increasing hope for progress through the mastery of nature for our purposes, is still speaking to us.

It is worth pausing here to take in the consequences of the changing order that should in turn order our actions as human communities under conditions of globalization. While some scholars, especially in fields of economic history, have taken a shorter view of globalization, referring to its first age as taking place in the late 19th to early 20th century, a recent popular work reiterates a suggestion that globalization began with the fleet of seafarers under the sponsorship the Spanish empire in the late 15th century. In these readings, globalization has a long and storied history, beginning with the seafaring voyages that culminated with the circumnavigation of the globe in 1522. Perhaps from our long view, taking globalization as a centuries long process, human venture can be redescribed as taunting the 'sea', of transgressing the boundaries of, if not a sacred, at least a morally instructive notion of 'natural order'. The boldness and speed with which the sea was stormed with advances in technology in the past century has also had its consequences in terms of our understanding of our position with respect to the rest of nature.

So beyond Blumenberg’s theories of spectatorship, what position are we in today with globalization having accelerated not only the spectacle of shipwreck, but with it our power both to travel the seas (and the air) with relative impunity, and increased power to intervene in those disasters that befall our fellow humans? And in addition, even if we agree with Voltaire that human curiosity in disaster that befalls humans is without malignant pleasure, what does it mean to be watching the Titanic go down yet again?

Further, and this is perhaps a temptation better resisted with respect to our prospects, in what ways is the Titanic itself a metaphor for the processes of globalization? Are we witnessing a voyage into

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12 Charles C. Mann, 1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created New York: Knopf 2011.
the unknown horizon of unchecked consumption, production, expansion of markets, and technology? Even if technological answers emerge to some of our greatest problems, what is the cost upon the ecosystem until, and if, we get to a safe port? What of the scientists who tell us each year in different registers that the results of globalization’s impact on nature sends species 20cm away from the equator every hour?  

Are we sailors or spectators? Contrary to R. Buckminster Fuller’s idea of “spaceship Earth” perhaps we are better understood as seagoing vessel rooted in the four elements whose natural limits, if not boundaries, have been transgressed. After all it is the sea that is once again having its way even with us today, as it begins to advance along our coastlines, swallowing islands whole. In an earlier time, like those mentioned above when the natural law could be read off of the book of nature, the meaning would be clear as to why this is happening; revenge or retribution for our transgressions, whatever the scientific causes. 

I offer this quick glance at the fact of nature’s systemic problems at the hands of human industry to keep before us the perils of globalization. But often narratives of globalization are either Pollyannaish or pessimistic, that is they are fatalistic. It is more accurate and faithful to the metaphor Blumenberg submits for our reflection, and more philosophically honest with respect to how little we know of our species’ future, to end upon a different position than a rarefied and resigned conscription of globalization to a ‘Titanic-like’ process. This even given the evidence with respect to climate change and the varieties of indicators we have available. Rather than relaxation in the prospect of progress, or resignation in the inevitability of decline we turn to someone Blumenberg mentions in passing, Pascal. When we muse as to our position, it may seem as though the days of seafaring adventure into the unknown are quite behind us. The Earth is circumnavigated and then some, with GPS systems, interplanetary travel of our technology, etc. However, we are still in a certain position with respect to the past, living in a present and moving towards an unknown future. On a more existential note struck by Pascal, according to Blumenberg, and relevant to the unknown and ultimate questions before us (and with respect to the effects of globalization), there is an in media res character of our position in life, always in the middle of things. In Pascal’s most popular writing, Pensees #272 he develops his wager for believing in God. It is here that he captures the existential condition in terms of seafaring: “You are embarked.” (18). That is, the decision has been

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made, the champagne has crashed the hull, and the voyage is now. We are retrieving the Titanic even as we ourselves are sailing from port, towards the deeper waters, and it is perhaps most important now to figure how to keep the ship afloat now, given our indicators, our available compass, and our still unclear destination.