Herbert Grubes

Metaphors Shaping Research and Knowledge from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment

To study metaphor is to be confronted with hidden aspects of one’s own mind and one’s own culture.

Since my first study of the history of central metaphors (where I was motivated by the work of Ernst Robert Curtius and Hans Blumenberg), the theory and more concrete study of metaphor have been intensively pursued in the fields of philosophy, cognitive psychology, and language and literature, with a steady flow of important contributions ranging from Paul Ricoeur’s *La métaphore vive* (1975), Earl R. MacCormac’s *Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (1985) and the volume *Metaphor und Innovation* edited by Lutz Danneberg, Andreas Graeser, and Klaus Petrus (1995) to the critical anthology entitled *Begriffsgeschichte, Diskursgeschichte, Metapherngeschichte* (2002) edited by Hans Erich Bödeker, Zoltan Kövecses’ study *Metaphor* from the same year, Eckard Rolf’s survey of *Metapherntheorien* (2005), and Ralf Konermann’s *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern* (2007) – to name but a few.

While considered as one of the most precious elements of poetic language, metaphors were long held to be inferior to abstract concepts in the discourses of both philosophy and science until Max Black’s *Models and Metaphors* (1962), Mary Hesse’s *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (1974), and cognitive studies like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) made clear how essential they are for the development and functioning of our cognitive faculty. And wider-ranging studies of the functioning of the mind such as Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s *The Way We Think* (2002) have substantiated this view.

What I would like to do in this article is to show how theory and historical research can profit from each other. More concretely, my choice of topic was prompted by Hans Blumenberg’s remark that “absolute metaphors have

---

a history,” too, and that “metaphorology tries to reach the substructure of thought” by investigating this history.\(^5\) When attempting to frame a manageable task within such a vast project I recalled not only the enormous extent to which the mirror metaphor both enabled and controlled the Medieval and Early Modern knowledge of the world and the self, but also the astonishing frequency of metaphorical anatomy-titles in the 17\(^{th}\) century. Title metaphors are highly significant for my topic because they very often indicate the way in which the knowledge of whatever is being presented was acquired, how it was validated, and with what kind of intention it was disseminated. So I reviewed the metaphorical anatomy-titles of the period until a striking doubling with ‘enquiry’ led me to my title metaphor, and in a similar way I came to include the concept of the ‘essay,’ which, however, few would take to be metaphorical.

My intention is to show that — at least in Britain — the pursuit of knowledge from the Middle Ages to the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century was guided if not determined by these conceptual metaphors, whose relative dominance has changed historically. Until the mid-16\(^{th}\) century it was the mirror that ruled, then the anatomy emerged to flourish in the 17\(^{th}\) century until it gave way to the enquiry after 1660 with ‘essay’ becoming a strong rival to all three from the late-16\(^{th}\) century onwards.

I will begin my account of the historical changes regarding the metaphors guiding research and knowledge by referring to Blumenberg’s view that even in philosophical language metaphors can be more than mere rudiments on the way from mythos to logos, mere preliminary modes of representation that yet have to be replaced by more precise and concise concepts.\(^6\) He holds that there are ‘absolute metaphors’ in the sense that they can never be replaced by conceptual language, though they may historically be replaced by other such metaphors. I largely share this view but am of different opinion regarding the reasons for the historical changes. Instead of pursuing an abstract philosophical argument I will, however, present some concrete evidence for my view that the scholarly and scientific pursuit of knowledge or the ‘truth’ from the Middle Ages to the late 18\(^{th}\) century was guided by the above mentioned central metaphors and that this had a significant impact both on the relation between investigators and their objects and the results of their effort.

The attempt to render such a probing of the dependency of research and knowledge on some central metaphors during several centuries within the space of an article like this may seem presumptuous. Yet at least with regard

---

\(^5\) Blumenberg 13 (my translation).

\(^6\) Blumenberg 10.
to the mirror, I can with confidence rely on an extensive study of my own covering the period from the 13th to the 17th century. It was no wonder that during a time when – as Ernst Robert Curtius has shown\(^7\) – the understanding of the world was determined by the reception and imitation of given conditions the mirror functioned as a ‘basic metaphor,’ as defined by Max Black.\(^8\) The 310 metaphorical speculum-titles from the 12th to the 17th century already sufficiently demonstrate prominence, but there are also an additional 296 metaphorical mirror-, looking-glass and glass-titles from the 16th and 17th centuries. In order to see why the mirror seemed so attractive as a metaphor for the acquisition and presentation of knowledge we need only note the particular features of the real object. Thanks to its smooth, even, and glossy surface it not only reflects but also shows an image of whatever comes before it. Because it does not possess an image of its own, the mirror can show a likeness of all kinds of things, and it is easy to see why it became the basic metaphor of a worldview determined by analogy and correspondences. That the mirror leaves the objects it represents whole and untouched was also highly important at a time when the urge to obtain knowledge was restricted by the religious conviction that God’s creation could be described and imitated but must not be harmed, let alone destroyed, in the process. Yet the most precious and popular quality of the mirror, the ability to let one see oneself in it, very early on also bred the conviction that it might be more generally able to show what otherwise remains concealed, which turned it into an instrument to acquire occult knowledge by magic or divination. It became the most powerful metaphor for the human mind and its ability to grasp even the transcendent or God indirectly, “in a glass darkly,” to quote St. Paul in Corinthians 13:12. “Mans mind a mirour is of heavenly sights,/ A briefe wherein all marvails summed lye” we read, for instance, in John Bodenham’s Belvedere from the year 1600, and as we see the mind is not only granted the ability to reflect but also to produce a summary of everything. This ability we understand better when we remember that up to the 15th century all and for the following two centuries still many glass mirrors were made from segments of blown glass balls and therefore convex mirrors that actually possessed such a contracting quality. It was this quality that most probably also suggested first the speculum and then the mirror titles for encyclopaedias, from the famous Speculum maius of Vincent of Beauvais from 1244 that consisted of a Speculum naturale, Speculum doctrinale, Speculum morale and Speculum historiale to William Caxton’s Mirror of the Worldde from 1481 and John Swan’s Speculum Mundi from 1635. Also the compendia of wider or narrower domains such as the various writings called Speculum ecclesiae that appeared from the 12th century onwards or later descriptions of specific branches of

---

7 Curtius chapter 16, § 8.
knowledge like Thomas Moulton’s *Myrour or glasse of helth* from 1539, William Cunningham’s *Cosmographical Glass* from 1559, Robert Tanner’s *Mirror for Mathematiques* from 1587, Lucas Janssen Wagenaer’s *Mariners Mirrour* from 1588 or John Norden’s *Speculum Britanniae* from 1593 carry the metaphorical mirror-title with some right.

It has already been mentioned that the human mind was held to be able to even indirectly as in a mirror catch a glimpse of God or the Divine. As to the secular uses of the mirror to reveal something hidden, there were the metaphorical equivalents in the shape of satires, polemical pamphlets, or diatribes against vanity that carried mirror titles. The faculty to reveal something hidden seems to have also been the basis for the metaphorical mirrors presenting events from the past or the future. Regarding the representation of the past, I will only mention the famous *Mirror for Magistrates* from 1559 with its ample demonstration of the fall of princes, and for the mirror’s prescience there are numerous prognostic mirror-titles given to the almanacs of the 17th century. What remains to be mentioned is the aspect of reliability that is so important for the gaining of knowledge. Suffice it to point out that after the close of the 16th century the frequent allusions to the distorting, deceiving, or flattering mirror give way to those of the true mirror, which quite logically gained prestige in the emerging Enlightenment.

To summarize the consequences of the choice of the mirror as a basic metaphor for the theory and practice of obtaining knowledge: (1) the aim was imitation in terms of the creation of a most perfect likeness or image of any object; (2) this aim could be achieved by ‘mirroring’ without changing or damaging the object; (3) due to the assumed magic quality of the mirror the domain of possible objects extended far beyond the directly accessible to something hidden or future or even transcendent; (4) the knowledge obtained was collected and represented in writings that were therefore considered as mirrors; (5) as for the human acquisition of knowledge, there was a close connection between the noetic and the ethical: The mirror of the mind or soul had to be kept pure and polished by an ethically upright stance and practice in order to avoid distorted images.

In the later 16th century, at least in Britain, the still dominant mirror began to get competition from metaphorical anatomy-titles. The arising question why this came about leads us into the domain of cultural practices and discovery. Just as the mirror craze throughout Europe was instigated by the fact that around 1500 the Venetian glass manufactories had begun with the mass production of cheaper and better mirrors, the career of the anatomy-titles is unthinkable without the upsurge of the medical anatomy at the time of the
Knowledge of the structure and functioning of the human body had for a long time been based on the writings of the 2nd century Greek philosopher and physician Galen and of the Persian physician Avicenna from the early 11th century, combined to the mediaeval Canon medicinae, when their anatomical teachings were displaced in the mid-16th century by those of Andreas Vesalius, a Flemish physician who had gone to Padua where he got permission to dissect the corpses of criminals and therefore was able to acquire an infinitely more precise knowledge of the human body. Thanks to the new print culture this knowledge was soon disseminated all through Europe, above all due to the very detailed plates in his Corporis humani Fabrica from 1543. In England, where anatomical investigations had already been carried out in 1540,10 a pirated version of this work with the plates was published by Thomas Geminus in London as early as 1545 under the title Compendiosa totius Anatomie delineatio, and the number of genuine anatomy books in Britain soon rose from twelve in the 16th century to 79 in the 17th and some two hundred in the 18th century. The earlier ones were almost entirely based on foreign sources, for instance Thomas Vicary’s often reprinted Profitable Treatise of the Anatomie of mans body (1548) on an anatomical treatise by Henri de Mondeville or John Banister’s History of Man (1578) according to the title on the Most Approved Anathomistes in this Present Age (as it says in the title), and the first important English contribution was William Harvey’s Exercitatio de motu cordis from 1628. Notable here is also the application of the anatomical method of systematic analysis to the study of plants by Nehemiah Grew in his Anatomy of Vegetables Begun (1672) and other works and to all living creatures in Samuel Collins’ Systeme of Anatome, Treating the Body of Man, Beasts, Birds, Fish, Insects, and Plants from 1685.

The desire to gain more detailed and reliable knowledge by dissecting the object of enquiry quite early spread to other domains and led to metaphorical anatomy-titles. Not surprisingly in an age of religious controversy, the first one was An Anatomii, that is to Say a Parting in Pecces of the Mass by one “Anthoni de Adamo” (Agostino Mainardi), a compendious anti-Catholic tract published during the reign of Queen Mary in 1556 at Strasbourg. It was, however, from the later 1570s onwards that the career of the anatomy-metaphor really began. As Richard Sugg points out in his recent Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England, “[a]round 1575 the wider English public appeared barely to have heard of anatomy; by 1600 it seemed at times unable to talk about little else”11 – and the pertinent book-titles quite certain-

---


11 Sugg 2.
ly contributed to this change. In this early period we still find cases in which the metaphor of the anatomy equals or replaces the exemplary mirror and means ‘model’ or ‘pattern,’ such as John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), Palmerin d’Oliva’s *Mirrour of Nobilitis, Mappe of Honour, Anatomie of Rare Fortunes* (1588), or the anonymous *Myrrour for English souldiers: or, an Anatomy of an Accomplished Man at Armes* (1595). With this exception, the use of ‘anatomy’ as a title metaphor quite generally indicates that what is being presented has been achieved by a metaphorical dissection and close inspection of the inner condition or structure of the object under investigation. Thomas Rogers, for instance, who was one of the first to resort to the metaphor of ‘anatomy’ in *A philosophical discourse, Entituled, The Anatomie of the minde* (1576), writes in his preface, “I haue named the whole, the Anatomie of the mind, because the minde in them is diuided, and euery part of eyther of them sufficiently manifested.”

Most widely known, however, are probably such early satires as Phillip Stubbes’ *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) and Thomas Nashe’s *Anatomy of Absurditie* (1589), and there are quite a few more from the 17th century, for instance Henry Hutton’s *Follie’s Anatomie* (1619), the ballad *The Phantastick age: or, The Anatomy of England’s vanity* (1634), the anonymous *Anatomy of a Woman’s Tongue, divided into five Parts: a Medicine, a Poison, a Serpent, Fire, and Thunder* (1638), the likewise anonymous *Character of a pilfering taylor, or True anatomy of Monsieur Stich in all his tricks and qualities* (1675) or Savile Halifax’s *Anatomy of an Equivalent* (1688) that ridicules the excessive use of euphemisms. The rather aggressive attitude with which the metaphorical dissection is carried out in the satires is also to be found in the many polemical religious or political books or pamphlets with anatomy-titles. In the 16th century such writings still carry mirror-titles, with the exception of the already mentioned *Anatomie*, that is to say a *Parting in Pecces of the Mass* from 1556. Most of the dozen from the period leading up to the Civil War are also anti-Catholic, like the notorious *Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon*, whose author Thomas Robinson promises in an opening address to the reader that “he hath truly anatomized this handmaid of the Whore of Babylon; laying open her principall veines and sinews.”

There are also some directed against the High Church, such as John Sprint’s *Anatomy of the Controversed Ceremonies of the Church of England* (1618) or anti-Protestant tracts like *The Uncasing of Heresy, or, the Anatomie of Protestancie* (1623). As was to be expected, many of the anatomy-pamphlets from the time of the Civil War and around the Glorious Revolution, for instance, John Taylor’s *Rebells Anathematized Anatomized* (1645) or the anony-


mous Treason’s *Anatomic Or the Duty of a Loyall Subject* (1647) and *Anatomy of a Jacobite Tory* (1690), are political in intent, but there are also religious ones, most of them again anti-Catholic.

Only some of the numerous publications in which the anatomy-title indicates the revealing of some evil are satires or partial pamphlets. Many are just warnings, like James Mason’s *Anatomic of Sorcerie* (1612), or works exposing the vanity of human life, like Robert Greene’s *Anatomic of Fortune* (1584) and John Donne’s *Anatomic of the World* (1611). Yet though many of the moral and religious anatomies of this kind professed to present the ultimate truth, this truth was anything but new, and therefore other kinds of writings are more interesting in the present context. First there are some which, like John Woolton’s *A New Anatomic of whole man, aswell of his body, as of his Soule* (1576) or Samuel Haworth’s *Anthropologia, or, A philosophic discourse concerning man being the anatomy both of his soul and body* (1683), seek to correct the one-sided concentration on the body. Then there are studies attempting a comprehensive or systematic presentation of their subject, like George Strode’s *Anatomic of Mortalitie* (1618), Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) or Thomas Robinson’s *Anatomy of the Earth* (1694), and on a smaller scale also John Davies’ *The Writing Scholemaster, or, The Anatomic of Faire Writing* (1631) or Thomas Crumpe’s *Anatomy of Orthography* (1712). Finally have to be mentioned a few instances in which ‘anatomy’ has taken on the meaning of ‘scientific analysis,’ as in John French’s *Art of distillation […] and of the anatomic of gold and silver* (1651) and William Sampson’s *Hydrologia chymica, or, The chymical anatomy of Scarbrough, and othe spas in York Shire* (1669).

All in all, it can be said that the choice of the anatomy as a title metaphor implied (1) that the professed aim was the revelation of a hidden truth; (2) that this aim could only be achieved by a metaphorical dissection, with the object of investigation inevitably being taken apart; (3) that the method of anatomizing could be applied to any kind of belief system, including even transcendent and religious creeds; (4) that the authors felt obliged to disseminate for truth’s sake what they claimed to have uncovered, and just as in the genuine anatomy books this knowledge was displayed in a fairly systematic manner.

While the dominance of the mirror-titles lasted several centuries, that of the anatomy-titles hardly persisted for longer than half a century, because already in the period from 1661 to 1700 the nevertheless remarkable number of 94 metaphorical ‘anatomies’ was already topped by some 299 ‘enquiries’ that were published during that time. This is astonishing, given the fact that there are no more than two enquiry-titles known from the late 16th century, only five more from before the Civil War, and only 23 from 1640 to 1660. The popularity of enquiry-titles in the late 17th century was thus quite sudden. It
continued into the 18th century, during which no fewer than 1017 ‘enquiries’ were published (with a peak around the mid-century and no significant drop towards the ending).

Yet what kind of metaphor are we dealing with in the case of the ‘enquiry’ – or, rather, are we dealing in this case with a metaphor at all? The question is significant, because the OED presents as the first and oldest meaning of the word “[t]he action of seeking, esp. (now always) for truth, knowledge, or information concerning something; search, research, investigation, examination” or “a course of inquiry, an investigation.” Listed second is “[a] question, an interrogation, a query,” and, third, “[c]ourt of Inquiry, a court legally constituted to inquire into and investigate any charge against an officer or soldier of the army, or any transaction in which the conduct of persons may be found to call for proceedings before a court-martial,” so that there are, fourth, terms like “inquiry-office” or “inquiry rooms” to be found.14 However, when we look more closely at the early examples that are listed, we will notice that they all indicate that ‘inquiry’ originally signified not just any kind of “seeking […] for truth, knowledge, information,” but specifically a formal and thorough investigation carried out by a superior authority or an official body. “It langis to youre lordshippe […] As souereyne youre selffe to sitte of enquery” reads a quotation from a York Mystery dating around 1440, “[t]he Kyng […] ordeyned, that the processe with diligent inquirie should be furnished” – one from Aurelio & Isabel (1556), “To call the empanelles, for the enquiry, as the use and order is” – one from Hall’s Chronicle (1548), and “[e]ach Jury of enquiry ought to conteine twelve in number at the least” – one from Abraham Fraunce’s Lawiers Logike from 1588. The earliest instance of ‘enquiry’ as a title metaphor, dating from 1537, The enquirie and verdite of the quest panneld of the death of Richard Hune which was founde hanged in Lolars tower, also supports my view, and the fact that three of the five ‘enquiries’ from the period 1601–1639 are Articles of enquiry issued by a bishop of the Church of England for his diocese on the occasion of a visitation, as well as the considerable number of such titles from the later 17th century, show that the quite concrete or ‘literal’ meaning indicated here persisted. Thus an early ‘enquiry’ like George Langford’s Search the Scripture: Or, An enquirie after veritie Discouraging of, and discussing the Scriptures sufficiency, Perspicuity, Necessitie from 1623 can with good reason be considered as being metaphorical, with the only aspect transferred in this case being the seriousness of the search for the truth. Not much more of the early concrete meaning can be found, for instance, in Joshua Childrey’s Indago astrologica: or, a brief and modest enquirie into some principal points of astrology (1552) or in an early example of a rigorous rejoinder like Henry Stubbe’s Clamor, rixa, joci, furta, cachini, or A

severe enquiry into the late oneirocritica published by John Wallis, Grammer-reader in Oxon from 1657.

It comes as no surprise to find that by far the most frequent later ‘enquiries’ from the time of the Civil War and the Commonwealth are either religious or political or both, and the revived fear of a return of Catholicism, the quarrels with the Dissenters, and the political turbulence connected with the Glorious Revolution may explain why this remained so until the end of the 17th century and beyond. Typical, for instance, are John Tickell’s A Sober enquiry about the new oath enjoyned on non-conformists according to act of Parliament (1665) and William De Britaine’s A Sober enquiry, whether it be lawful for subjects without royal authority to take up arms in defence of the Protestant religion, to prevent popery (1684), where the attribute ‘sober’ stands, of course, in direct contrast to the obvious bias of the work, and we also often get the attribute ‘impartial’ in quite partial pamphlets like the Earl of Warrington’s An impartial enquiry into the causes of the present fears and dangers of the government being a discourse between a lord lieutenant and one of his deputies, summoned to hold a lieutenancy for raising the militia (1692). Yet at that time already the ‘enquiries’ pertain to a wide range of cultural domains, from science, medicine, political economy, or language learning to spectacular events.

Although, through most of the 18th century, many ‘enquiries’ are still about religious questions or politics, the range of objects becomes even wider. In the domain of religion there is new trouble with the ‘natural religion’ of deists like Charles Gildon and his Deist’s manual: or, a rational enquiry into the Christian religion (1705) and some early freethinkers like Samuel Pycroft who in 1713 published his Brief enquiry into free-thinking in matters of religion; and some pretended obstructions to it, […]]. In politics, there are also new themes, as in John Roebuck’s An enquiry, whether the guilt of the present civil war in America, ought to be imputed to Great Britain or America (1776), and some topics of perennial actuality, as that of The important question discussed; or, a serious and impartial enquiry into the true interest of England with respect to the Continent (1746). There are social ‘enquiries’ like Arthur Young’s An enquiry into the state of the public mind amongst the lower classes: and on the means of turning it to the welfare of the state (1798) or substantial legal ones like Robert Plumer Ward’s An enquiry into the foundation and history of the law of nations in Europe: From the time of the Greeks and Romans, to the age of Grotius (1795). Many of the numerous medical ‘enquiries’ are about the popular water cures; in the realm of science there are more general ones like Thomas Vivian’s Cosmology: An enquiry into the cause of what is called gravitation or attraction […] (1791) as well as more specific ones like John Smeaton’s Experimental enquiry concerning the natural powers of wind and water to turn mills and other machines depending on circular motion (1794). We find historical inquiries like the anonymous Prejudice detected by facts: or, a candid and impartial enquiry, into the
reign of Queen Elizabeth, so far as relates to Mary Queen of Scots (1740) and among the considerable number of philosophical ones are David Hume’s An enquiry concerning the Principles of morals (1751), Edmund Burke’s A philosophical enquiry into the origin of the sublime and the beautiful (1764), and Frances Reynolds’ An enquiry concerning the principles of taste, and of the origin of our ideas of beauty (1785) — not to forget some early discussions of literary genres like Pierre-Daniel Huet’s The history of romances: An enquiry into their original […] from 1715 or Thomas Purney’s A full enquiry into the true nature of pastoral (1717).

What is typical of almost all metaphorical ‘enquiries’ is (1) their professed aim to discover the whole truth about a matter; (2) their achievement of this aim by an investigation whose results depend on the questions with which a subject is approached; (3) that they may concern any domain of nature, culture and society or the transcendent; (4) that their authors render the ‘truths’ they have discovered rather than the process of investigation and that we therefore get a more or less systematic and sometimes very detailed description of the results of their search.

So far I have been able to show the shift over time from one dominant title metaphor to another: mirror to anatomy and anatomy to enquiry, though there are overlapping phases and the earlier one does not entirely disappear. While searching for enquiry-titles, some which additionally featured ‘essay,’ like John Cockburn’s An enquiry into the nature, and evidence of Christian faith, in several essays (1699) or James Taverner’s An Essay upon the Witham Spa, Or, a brief enquiry into the nature, virtue, and uses of a mineral chalybete water at Witham in Essex (1737), for example, made me look for the ‘essay’ as a title metaphor that could have constituted a possible competitor to both the ‘anatomy’ and the ‘enquiry.’ My main reason for doing so was the suspicion that with the unmistakeable growth of an inquisitive, searching attitude together with the multiplying of publishing outlets the monopoly of any single guiding metaphor for the obtaining and dissemination of knowledge might have been over.

The result of the search for titles bearing the word ‘essay’ immediately proved overwhelming. With a very modest beginning their number rose already in the course of the 17th century to 643 and there are no fewer than 3,460 extant from the 18th century, not counting all those that make up the numerous collections of essays, of which we have eight from the 16th, 186 from the 17th, and 1,390 from the 18th century. Yet, even though these numbers demonstrate the popularity of the signifier ‘essay,’ the more important question is whether any metaphorical meaning was at least in a number of cases still involved, especially in view of the fact that in more recent times an ‘essay’ is considered to be merely a prose genre of a “composition of modera-
te length on any particular subject.”¹⁵ That this cannot have been so from the 16th to the end of the 18th century can, however, already be gathered from the fact that the size of published texts called ‘essay’ ranged from a single page (as in the case of An Essay upon His Royal Highness the Duke of York his adventure against the Dutch from 1672) to no fewer than the 848 pages of Robert Gell’s Essay toward the amendment of the last English-translation of the Bible from 1659 and that many of the books called an ‘essay’ right up to the end of the 18th century are several hundred pages long.

My conjecture that in a significant number of cases ‘essay’ still meant more than just ‘treatise’ or ‘book’ or some such was supported by the fact that the first seven (and oldest) meanings listed in the OED are —though all now obsolete—all metaphorical. Derived from the Latin ‘exagium,’ which means ‘weighing,’ the early French ‘essai’ already referred to any kind of testing or examining, an attempt or experiment, and a sample or specimen, and in 17th century Britain we find not only all these meanings but also “the result of an attempt,” “a hostile attempt,” “[a] first tentative effort in learning or practice,” and “a rough copy; a first draft.” As it is all too evident that most of these earlier meanings are significant in terms of obtaining, validating, and disseminating knowledge, it appeared to be rewarding to trace them in the essay-titles.

The result of the investigation of a large number of ‘essays’ from the 17th and 18th centuries proved to be even better than I had expected. In some titles — for instance, The truth of our times revealed out of one mans experience, by way of essay by Henry Peacham (1638) — the early metaphorical meaning of ‘trial,’ ‘testing’ or ‘experiment’ cannot be overlooked. There is also a significant number of titles in which ‘essay’ obviously means ‘attempt,’ as in the case of the first extant collection of essays dating from 1584, The essays of a prentice, in the divine art of poesie by James I or in that of the much later anonymous A Bridle for the tongue: or: The trial and condemnati on of Whispering-Backbiter. Being a profitable and pleasant discourse designed as an essay to detect the sin of detracti- on, an evil too common in this age (1700). Even more important in the present context are the numerous titles in which the attempt indicated by the term ‘essay’ is more specifically “[a] first tentative effort in learning or practice,” as in Bassett Jones’ Herm’aelogium or, an essay at the rationality of the art of speaking (1659) or Daniel Defoe’s An essay at a plain exposition of that difficult phrase a good peace (1711). Sometimes ‘essay’ also means a mere proposal, as in An essay for the regulation of the practice of physick upon which regulation are grounded the composure of all differences between physicians and apothecaries […] from 1673 or in George Berkeley’s An essay towards preventing the ruine of Great Britain (1721). There are some works, such as Nahum Tate’s An essay of a character of the late Right Honourable Sir George Treby Kt. Lord Chief Justice of His

Majesty’s Court of Common Pleas from the year 1700, where ‘essay’ indicates that what we are getting is merely a first draft or an inevitably incomplete rendering, and there is, further, the legion of titles in which we find ‘on,’ ‘upon,’ ‘of’ or ‘concerning’ attached to ‘essay’ and where what we get is simply a shorter or longer treatise on any more general or particular subject. In these cases we cannot be sure whether there is any specific metaphorical meaning involved and will only be able to come to a more adequate conclusion by considering the relationship between title and text in each particular instance. I suspect, however, that the indication that what one is offering is ‘a mere attempt’ may have been implied in the choice of the essay-title more often than not because it is, after all, in the shape of ‘being a first draft’ still around today.

All in all, I gained the impression that quite frequently the authors of an ‘essay’ at that period (1) aimed at a presentation of some knowledge they had acquired; (2) intended to express the fact that, though they were well-informed, their work was merely an attempt to render the truth; (3) ranged widely regarding their themes, and especially in the 18th century sometimes chose titles like “Essays upon several subjects” or “Miscellaneous essays;” (4) quite obviously felt the urge to disseminate their knowledge and even quite personal views; (5) sometimes used the term ‘essay’ as a mere gesture of modesty, as, for instance, John Locke in his 484 pages long Essay concerning humane understanding in four books from the year 1700.

What can we learn from these historical observations in regard to the theoretical aspect of our theme? Blumenberg held that even the metaphors he called ‘absolute’ have a history and that “the human spirit is ahead of itself in its images.”

I think we can now share these views with more confidence, yet have to add that the images, which through their operation as basic metaphors guide this historical process, do not come out of nowhere, and are not the result of pure speculation but instead are closely linked to the changes in culture at large, technology, and social formations and practices. As Rüdiger Zill has already mentioned in his article on Blumenberg’s conception of metaphorology, “even more than with concepts […] metaphor is the place where the social and cultural practices come into play.” There is certainly no crude causality at work, but without the mass fabrication of glass mirrors, the innovation and spread of human anatomy, the increasing role of enquiries in the religious and secular judicial system, and the enormous enhancement of

16 Blumenberg 13 (my translation).
the dissemination of writings by print culture ‘mirror,’ ‘anatomy,’ ‘enquiry,’ and ‘essay’ could never have become so central that they could function as basic metaphors in the domain of the acquisition, validation, and dissemination of knowledge. At the same time, we need to register the changes of attitude these metaphors implied. Once confident that a mere mirroring of phenomena was sufficient, those searching for the truth from the 16th century onwards found it necessary to dissect and destroy in order to know, and were ready to do so. Soon, however, they must have realized that the unilateral process of anatomizing had its limits and that research is more like an inquiry, because one only gets answers to the questions one asks. At the same time, however, both of the latter procedures were the result of a new sceptical stance, an awareness that the search for truth will finally remain an ‘essay,’ a mere attempt that often results in no more than a first draft.

Regarding the connection between the changes in material culture, cultural practices, mental attitudes regarding research and knowledge, and ideas about the truth that we were able to observe, it becomes clear that the mediators quite obviously were basic conceptual metaphors. To be more precise, the mediation relied on a constant shifting between the wealth of manifold features of the image underlying these metaphors, the limited number of features selected for use as quasi-concepts, and the single dominant one reduced to an abstract concept. As I have already shown elsewhere with respect to the mirror, let us take the ‘enquiry’ as an example instead. The concrete image of the process of an enquiry by an authorized body implies, first, a lack of knowledge regarding a matter of some importance, the hope of obtaining that knowledge by means of a thorough investigation that includes a judicious sifting of evidence, the asking of the right questions as well as a directing of those questions to those who might be able to contribute to finding the truth. It further implies that those carrying out the enquiry are qualified to do so and have sufficient authority to be trusted. All these, or some, or only a single one of these features of the image can be brought into play when a text is offered as an ‘enquiry,’ but it is likewise possible to do without all of them and employ ‘enquiry’ as an abstract concept for a ‘search for the truth.’ More often than not, the authors of the ‘enquiries’ I have looked at do not decide for the one or other of these possibilities but combine them by shifting between them or by operating in a fuzzy zone of interference. Of course, the title metaphors I have investigated lend themselves to such a procedure thanks to their imagistic base and potential for being conceptualized. In the terminology of cognitive psychology, the image-schematic structures of the mirror, anatomy, enquiry, and essay as source

---

domains were chosen for some time as models for the structure of the target domain of the acquisition and presentation of knowledge. Yet there are certainly more source domains with image-schematic structures that qualify for such a metaphorical mapping, and some got a chance later. Just think of the role of ‘development,’ or ‘growth,’ or ‘evolution’ in the 19th century, of ‘structuring’ and ‘construction’ in the 20th, and ‘net’ in more recent decades. Quite obviously, their incidence was also linked to cultural, technological, social, and ideological changes – and therefore the history of the metaphors guiding the search for truth can tell us much about what was held to be valid knowledge of the world and the self and the beyond and also about cultural history at large.
Works Cited