

ERNST BLOCH AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF IMMANENCE

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ABSTRACT: In this essay I raise difficulties for both speculative realism and speculative materialism, both fashionable stances. I do not argue against realism or materialism as such, but I suggest that in both cases a more precise delineation of what is meant by ‘speculative’ would be beneficial. I discuss speculative realism in part one and speculative materialism in part two, and then add a brief conclusion in part three.

KEYWORDS: Speculative; Speculative realism; Speculative materialism; Utopian philosophy

I

In contemporary continental philosophy speculative realism is associated with:

- a reassertion of the autonomy of reality and realism (without solving the epistemological problems so raised) and a rejection of the primacy of epistemology and any other form of what Quentin Meillassoux calls correlationism
- the claim that reality does not depend on thought or on human beings and needs to be rethought in philosophy without privileging the human relation to reality of any other form of anthropocentrism
- a re-engagement with the natural sciences and a rejection of any nature/culture dualism
- cosmological atheism for which both humanity and the earth are

cosmically irrelevant and everything is subject to radical caprice. This turn arises from the recognition that continental philosophy based on anti-realism, hermeneutics and the analysis of texts may be exhausted.¹ Speculative philosophy of this sort acknowledges its dependence on extra-philosophical conditions. It re-envisages philosophy as a general inquiry which is not restricted to human realities, language or texts. The contemporary speculative philosophers all react against neo-Kantian transcendentalism and reject both Kantian correlationism and the notion that reality can be reduced to thought.² They then attempt to upstage the rest of the culture from a position of hieratic ascent. This raises the issue of whether it really is possible to dismiss Kantian transcendentalism so easily, and the related problem of what account of immanence would then be required.

It is possible to evade these issues by claiming that speculative realism is merely a label for diverse positions. This is largely true, but it remains the case that a turn back to metaphysics requires some account of how the main objections to metaphysics are to be overcome. Here the term 'speculative' is chronically ambiguous. There is no coherent conception of the speculative in these philosophers' works, apart from the notion that it is important to speculate about the nature of reality in the light of the natural sciences, and even to produce weird models of reality, a thesis widely accepted by physicists. Yet the term speculative has a long and distinguished history in philosophy, not least in the modern writings of Kant, Schlegel and Hegel. In this history there is a crucial distinction between speculative in the sense of a wide view (from *specula* lookout) and speculative in the sense of truth known in an unreal and inverted form but with some reliability (from *speculum*, mirror).³ That is, a strong conception of speculative will theorise the speculative as imaginary and distorted, and also allow for features which precludes theoreticity. In addition,

¹ Major works associated with the speculative turn include Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, 'Speculative Realism' in *Collapse Volume III: Unknown Deleuze* (London: Urbanomic, 2007), pp. 307-450; Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. (Melbourne: re.press, (2011) and Paul J. Ennis, *Continental Realism*. (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).

² Here there is a partial return to Schelling with his emphasis on the primacy of unprethinkable being.

³ For excellent discussion of the term 'speculative' in the history of Western philosophy, see the entry 'Spekulation' in J. Ritter and K. Gründer eds. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995) band 9, pp. 1355-1370.

a strong theory of speculative will explain both the peculiar logic required to explain the speculative and how it reshapes human beings and their cultures.⁴ Hegel's famous speculative philosophy did all these things and included both a theory of the proposition, an account of speculation as an emergent shape of consciousness, and a theory of emergent speculative thinking as pure thinking evident to itself.

In the work of the contemporary so-called speculative philosophers, in contrast, the term 'speculative' does relatively little work.⁵ There is also no common philosophy uniting Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux and Iain Hamilton Grant, let alone the *maestri* from whom they draw: Alain Badiou, Giles Deleuze, Francoise Laruelle, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers. Indeed, in many current discourses the speculative turn functions as a self-promotional myth. Transcendental physics, object-oriented philosophy, abstract materialism and eliminative materialism may all have speculative elements, but they are different. The materialism of these philosophers is also often equivocal. Once it is argued that materialism is not about matter as substance or a substratum, that material reality is non-all, that materialism applies both to nature and to ideas, that materialism is only a dependency or a procedure, then the ground ceded makes the term 'materialist' largely stipulative. Overall, it is fair to suggest that no coherent account of speculative realism is extant, despite the world wide vogue with which this term is associated.

II

I now turn to the speculative materialism of the great German Jewish Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, (1885-1977), which is currently receiving renewed

⁴ Cf Andrew Taggart, "On the Need for Speculative Philosophy Today" in *Cosmos and History*, vol. 8, no 1 (2012): 47-61.

⁵ Wesley Phillips argues that speculative realism has misplaced speculation See W. Phillips, 'The Future of Speculation' in *Cosmos and History*, vol. 8, no 1 (2012): 289-302, p. 290. Phillips rightly argues that the speculative realists tend to fall below the level of Hegel and Schelling. Instead of setting German Idealism on its feet and inheriting its attempt to go beyond any subject-object dualism, they return to the externalism of eighteenth century French materialism in some respects.

attention.⁶ Bloch's speculative materialism is set out in his *Das Materialismusproblem Seine Geschichte und Substanz* (1972) and *Experimentum Mundi Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis* (1975), both texts which have not been translated into English.

Following Marx, Bloch insists that materialism must be active, qualitative and praxis-oriented, not contemplative and passive or associated, as it largely is in capitalist cultures, with inorganic stuff, pessimism and resignation. Materialism, for Bloch, means the explanation of the world from itself, not an attempt to close the possibility content of reality by resort to premature ontological characterisations.⁷ Further, against all deflationary materialism, Bloch argues for a materialism which thinks utopia and matter, together. According to Bloch materialism needs to be expanded to take account of what is becoming possible in reality and of real anticipation in the form of utopian function and pre-appearance (*Vor-Schein*), both in the physical universe and in socio-cultural materials. In this context Bloch proposes instead a new *speculative* materialism: that is a materialism with immanent horizon (*speculari*), a qualitative materialism which takes the history of materialism in new directions.

In *Das Materialismusproblem* Bloch provides the most original history of materialism that we have. The history of philosophical concepts of matter, he argues, illustrates the paradox that it is often the idealists who are the best teachers from whom to learn what matter is, just as it is the materialists who are the best teachers from whom to learn about thought.⁸ In the same way, Bloch recognizes that it is necessary to challenge the Eurocentric biases of the standard discussions of materialism and to take account of non-European materials. Hence he devotes a major study to Avicenna and the speculative matter concept of the Aristotelian Left.⁹ According to Bloch Aristotle distinguished between being-according-to-possibility (*kata to dynaton*) and being-in-possibility (*dynamei on*). However, under the influence of Avicenna's doctrine

⁶ For a perceptive comparison between Bloch's speculative materialism and contemporary speculative realism, see C. Moir, 'Beyond the Turn: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Speculative Materialism' in *Poetics Today*, vol. 37, no 2 (June 2016): 328-351.

⁷ *Das Materialismusproblem-Seine Geschichte und Substanz* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1972) p.446.

⁸ *Das Materialismusproblem-Seine Geschichte und Substanz* op.cit. pp. 129-130.

⁹ See Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* trs. L. Goldman and P. Thompson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

of universal matter, Bloch claims that the Aristotelian Left, especially Avicenna and Averroes, interpreted the forms as material. Hence for the Aristotelian Left, matter became self creative, active and form-laden, a fermenting womb which produces new contents as it develops. Against the bulk of the Marxist tradition, Bloch adopts this dynamic activist concept of matter. He rejects traditional materialism as distorted by ontological stasis. Bloch also emphasises that materialism cannot passively take over the ontology of the natural sciences 'abstraction' of the modern natural sciences because they are based on an abstract and alienated relationship to nature.¹⁰ Rather materialists must correct their valid but delimited perspectives with the warm streams of Renaissance and Romantic naturalism, including, following Engels, Oken's theosophical nature philosophy.¹¹ In Bloch's system matter is not confined to what is at hand: it is the womb of possibilities, uncompleted entelechy, activist forward matter that dialectically develops new contents as the process unfolds.

In developing a new concept of matter, Bloch follows the Boehme-Schelling-von Hartmann problematic and posits an objectively unsolved material *prius*. Like Schelling, Bloch models a process which begins with a ground which is a nonground (*Ungrund*), a state of imperfection, characterised by lack and will-like drive to what it lacks. That which exists is not 'irrational', but it is 'a-rational', in the technical sense that its 'thatness' cannot be reduced to logical ideas. It is intensive, tensional and tendential. Existing reality is will-like (*dasshaft*), in the sense that it has an assertive, striving, directional character. It is defined by an intensive relation, present throughout, between the That and the What. For Bloch the process does not begin with a ground in which everything is present *in potentia*, but with a That-ground (*Dassgrund*) with only That-being (*Dass-sein*), an 'empty', 'dark', 'objectively vague' 'nullpoint' of all being, an undetermined x, which because it has not come to be, functions as active lack or directed negation, an objective 'not' in the material cause, both the 'establishing factor' (*Setzungsfaktor*), which sets up the process, and the

¹⁰ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* trs. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) pp. 254-298.

¹¹ Here Bloch is closer to Marx than most readers suspect. As Bloch points out, Marx characterised matter in Boehmean terms as 'drive' (*Trieb*), 'life spirit' (*Lebensgeist*), 'tension' (*Spannkraft*), and 'torment' (*Qual*).

'realising factor', which drives it forward. The unmediated still within itself of being, which does not yet possess itself (*sich nicht hat*), 'has not yet driven itself out of itself,' the subjective or active causal factor (*Dass-Subjekt, das Subjekthafte*), the a-logical driving force (*Dass-Antrieb, Dass-Anstoss*) or insisting factor (*incitare, Insistieren-im-Werdensein*, the *agens* of material being:

What occurs in itself and unmediated as the now, is therefore still empty. The That in the now is hollow, is only at first undetermined, as a fermenting *not*. As the not with which everything begins and establishes itself, around which every 'something' is still built.¹²

The That in the moment is a 'not having'; it is the 'not there' of a something which drives forward to what it lacks as the lack of something and the flight from this lack. The That operates as *nisus* or exigency: as a simple x, an alpha incomplete and unobjective in itself, the not-there of each present moment, which is still veiled to itself.

Bloch's matter is processual: an active substratum of developing possibilities with *dynamei on*. Hence matter is not exhausted by what has already come to be. Instead, Bloch develops a futurological materialism for which reality still has its essence before it as an *open* system, not only in the sense of a system which allows for new contents still to come, but in the sense of a system which takes such new contents as intrinsic to the character of the world, and attempts to rethink the fundamental categories of philosophy as a result. Bloch posits an *experimental world* of developing open coherences, the laws and structure of which change as it develops. There is no settled substratum, in which everything is contained *in potentia*; no already finished substance, no concluded entelechy, or decided essence; no fixed world spheres; no concluded specification of nature; and no subordination of details to a decided pattern of arrangement.

Bloch's speculative materialism also implies a futurological logic. Bloch breaks with Leibniz's principle of identity according to which what emerges in the predicate is present in the logical subject (*praedicatum inest subjecto*) and argues that S is not yet P, subject is not yet predicate. Further, Bloch addresses the crucial issue of modern nominalism and argues for a new primacy of particulars in materialism which takes account of *aporiae* and antinomies

¹² Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1954-5), p.356.

between particulars and universals which cannot be currently resolved. Further, Bloch addresses the crucial issue of modern nominalism and argues for a new primacy of particulars in materialism which takes account of aporiae and antinomies between particulars and universals which cannot be currently resolved.

Bloch's materialism also implies an activist conception of metaphysics.¹³ As constitutive imagination (*Phantasie*) which interprets the world in terms of ideas which have no 'place' in it (*u-topia*), it is philosophy as *theory of what needs to be* which mobilises optatives and suppositionals: *concrete philosophical architecture*, which represents the world as open to the possibility of concrete utopia. But this conception of activist metaphysics transforms what metaphysics has traditionally been taken to be. Consistent with this transformation of metaphysics into a metaphysics of the good 'meta' which the world contains, Bloch's metaphysics has no ontology of a traditional sort. It is based on hope as the principle or source of its final metaphysical grade. It is a *metaphysics forwards*, for which the real is not located *ante rem*, an immanentist-transcendentalist metaphysics which links human subjective experience of fulfilment with a finalism of the object. Here Bloch anticipates more recent anti-mentalist accounts of thought and consciousness by arguing, following Abelard's *conformitas*, that the logical in human consciousness can find what corresponds to it in the world. Bloch's aim is to overcome the traditional dualisms between spirit and matter, thinking and being, reason and sensuousness, and to insist, in the spirit of Schelling, that the subject belongs to the world.

Bloch makes matter the whole of reality, not merely the manifest forms that currently appear, and then makes process central to matter, and so replaces static ontology with a radical emphasis on change. Most contemporary materialisms, in contrast, are still staticist. Despite bows to process philosophy and Whitehead, there is relatively little in the literature on how process modifies materialism. Bloch, in contrast, shows that materialism can be strengthened by being rethought in genetic terms. Like Schelling, Bloch posits a process in which matter comes to be, and of which human life is a part. For him human life and consciousness are also material: there is no dualism

¹³ For an overview of Bloch's political metaphysics, see my *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Macmillan, 1982) especially ch.s 3 and 4.

between matter and consciousness or thought, as was largely the case in French materialism.

Again, Bloch makes matter open to the new, with the result that matter becomes a futurological concept: what matter will be. In this way Bloch adds a new dimension to materialism. Here Bloch's materialism has the potential to provide model ideas for a future philosophy of physics which draws from Spinoza and Schelling precisely because it does not confuse present process forms with nature, *natura naturans* with *natura naturata*, the noumenal with the process forms which appear.¹⁴

All this amounts to a conception of matter with no precedent in the Marxist tradition. Bloch's matter has futurological features. For Bloch, there is a direction giving principle in matter, at least as a placeholder to which no content is yet adequate. Matter is form-laden and contains an energetic drive (*Formtrieb*) to higher forms, based on the driving tendency and entelechic latency of the process. The whole of matter is open to developing finality and has an invariant direction towards entelechy which is not yet. For Bloch matter is not without direction and structure. Rather *Logikon* is an attribute of matter.¹⁵

Bloch's speculative materialism is problematic, however, because it remains to some extent within an Aristotelian teleological framework as well as close to a form of subject-object identity influenced by Schelling. Bloch's materialism also lacks adequate methodological controls. Bloch's maximalism subverts the negativity or disillusion which is part of the force of a coherent materialism, and tends to include counterfactual materials within process matter. Again, materialism is usually taken to imply a prevalence of what is actual now. However, Bloch's 'materialism forwards' means that the world is explained in

¹⁴ Here Bloch's work has been taken up and extended in the transcendental materialism of the German physicist Rainer Zimmerman and by Bloch's son, Jan Robert Bloch. The term 'transcendental' here refers to the fact that the cosmological model is based on positing a primal ground which transcends space and time. This primal ground is alleged to explain the character of reality as process-like, tendential and in need of completion. See R. E. Zimmermann, *Subjekt und Existenz. Zur Systematik Blochscher Philosophie* (Berlin: Philo, 2001) and 'Natursubjekt' in Beat Dietschy, Doris Zeilinger, and Rainer Zimmermann (eds.). *Bloch-Wörterbuch: Leitbegriffe der Philosophie Ernst Blochs* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) pp.374-403.

¹⁵ These claims are advanced in an accessible form in the collection *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978). Johan Siebers is now working to refine our understanding of Bloch's central categories. See his entries in Beat Dietschy, Doris Zeilinger, and Rainer Zimmermann eds. *Bloch-Wörterbuch: Leitbegriffe der Philosophie Ernst Blochs op.cit* pp. 242-247, 403-412, 412-416, 582-589.

important respects by what is 'not yet' and still future. Again, materialism is usually thought to imply objective limitations on hope. So far from accepting that the world lacks meaning, Bloch argues that the meaning of history has a worldly basis, even though it has first to be built. Bloch's equation of matter with developing real possibility, with matter open to the *Novum*, reduces the power of the actual to negate human hope to the point where one might argue that it is possible to think too highly of matter. Bloch's materialism also fails to include an account of human embodiment. It is also very short on technical social or economic analyses. As a result, it is fair to conclude that Bloch does not show that matter is defined in his system with sufficient precision for it to be the bearer of his utopian hopes, while the speculative immanent horizon he explores requires sharper specification if it is to be integrated with a form of materialism. Of course, it may be unreasonable to ask a utopian philosopher to justify his or her utopian perspectives by reference solely to the reality at hand. The point of utopian philosophy is to alert us to the possibility that central features of the reality at hand may be defeasible. Bloch's achievement is to reassert a speculative utopian challenge to whatever in existing reality is inadequate to human hope and to offer an horizon in which Marx's naturalisation of man and humanisation of nature may come to be realised. Here, as elsewhere, Bloch envisages a profound engagement with both nature and technology of the kind that Western Marxists largely failed to envisage.

III

Both so-called speculative realism and Bloch's speculative materialism are attempts to escape from the distortions imposed on Western thought by neo-Kantianism. In both cases there is a return to metaphysics. In both cases, the fact that the way we imagine the world to be has causal effects is taken seriously. In both cases the philosophical power of imagination and thinking otherwise are re-valiorised against neo-Kantian school philosophy, to use the German expression. In both cases, however, the term 'speculative' is a stand in for analytical work that needs to be done. The so-called speculative realists do not provide 'speculation' in the strong German sense, and remain closer to current common sense than they pretend. None of them faces the productivity of fiction and mythology in the coming to be of the world. Against Romantic excess, they offer argumentation and even at times analytical rigour.

Nonetheless, most analytical philosophers are not convinced. Nor do these philosophers resort to higher logics or category theory, even though both might make their claims more persuasive, both to professionals and to the wider audience that reads continental philosophy.

Bloch the utopian philosopher is arguably more realistic in crucial respects. He does not show, however, that the immanent horizon he finds is immanent, but only that various data could be so construed in terms of an immanent horizon if we assume a single world process with directionality. Current science and philosophy, however, do not provide uncontested support for either assumption. This is not fatal to Bloch's position because his utopianism aims to inspire praxis that leads to the conditions needed for the realisation of the utopian indications to which he refers. However, a philosophy of immanence must be able to specify what immanence entails, and this cannot be done simply by ruling out 'transcendence' or the causal activity of supernatural beings. Bloch himself understood this, and probably believed that a qualitative materialism could meet such demands for criteria-based coherence. It is not clear, however, that he strengthened his position by arguing for speculative materialism since materialism loses coherent definition if it cannot set limits to what in the long term future matter might be. Bloch's turn to the speculative deepened his utopian philosophy in several respects, but it needed much clearer specification if it was to be reconciled with a coherent form of materialism, a materialism going beyond the philosophically loose dicta of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Put differently, a more coherent notion of 'speculative' would contribute to the program of speculative philosophy which current philosophy arguably needs. There is almost certainly a need for a form of speculative philosophy grounded in philosophical analysis, empirical studies and the contemporary natural sciences. For a range of purposes utopian speculation may also be required, but there may be merit in distinguishing speculative philosophy in this utopian sense from speculative philosophy as a program to reconnect a wide range of rational inquiries which the twentieth century treated as separate, sometimes with harmful consequences.

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