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Will There Rather Be Nothing Than Something? On Modern Pantheism and Its Aporias in Ernst Bloch

The purpose of this essay is to put Ernst Bloch's philosophy to a test suggested by Hans Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. According to Blumenberg, modernity constitutes the second, successful, attempt at overcoming Gnosticism, after the first attempt, undertaken by Christianity, had failed. However – Blumenberg argues – it was not modern philosophy, but only science which had managed to escape Gnosticism's ontological trap of viewing the world as an illusion bordering on nothing. Modern metaphysics had proved unable to liberate itself from the powerful pull of the Gnostic rejection of being, in spite of all philosophical efforts to affirm the existence of material reality. Even when claiming to be materialist, it had remained, in its core, suspicious about matter as an imperfect and privative mode of being.¹ In the twentieth century,

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1 See H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R.M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 128: "The thesis that I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there

when the Gnostic dilemma was addressed – mostly, but not only, due to Blumenberg’s critical enterprise, which in 1966 made explicit the problem so far implicitly undermining materialist philosophy – many thinkers’ intellectual development may indeed be said to fall under the rubric of *overcoming Gnosticism*: a process that begins with a strong attraction to the Gnostic model, but then wanes and is replaced by an attempt to exit the negative paradigm towards the re-affirmation of worldly existence.

Ernst Bloch, one of the strongest proponents of pantheistic vitalism in late modernity, seems to be trapped in a similar aporia: while he attempts to use – and simultaneously overcome – his early apocalyptic Gnosticism, fully manifest in *The Spirit of Utopia*, for the sake of the material reality and speculative materialism which combines Marx, the Aristotelian Left, and Schelling, he still remains a thinker of the apocalypse, who wishes the world to end in the violent destruction of all matter. His pantheism, therefore, is tinged with an apocalyptic death wish, but – and this is my main thesis here – it is, perhaps, not just Bloch’s idiosyncrasy: it may well be that pantheism *as such* is inherently unstable and aporetic, seemingly affirmative towards material existence, yet deep down mistrustful towards matter *as it is*. This, obviously, has serious political consequences. If, as Bloch claims, early modern pantheism constituted the first step towards materialism understood first of all as an emancipation of singular material things (the Aristotelian concrete: *tode ti*) from the overarching power of universals – be it the Platonic sky of ideas or the Divine Active Intellect – then the doubt concerning the proto-materialist set-up of pantheism also overshadows the whole modern evolution of materialist philosophy, from Giordano Bruno to Gilles Deleuze. I will thus argue that the ‘Gnostic’ element of the negation of matter is stronger in the pantheistic thought than it is usually assumed,

is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism. A presupposition of this thesis is that the first overcoming of Gnosticism, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, was unsuccessful. A further implication is that the medieval period, as a meaningful structure spanning centuries, had its beginning in the conflict with late-antique and early-Christian Gnosticism and that the unity of its systematic intention can be understood as deriving from the task of subduing its Gnostic opponent.’

and, because of that, worldly matter is not as univocally affirmed as it would *prima facie* appear. The most problematic concept in this context is *natura naturans* – and the manner in which Bloch tackles it indeed puts the pantheistic aporia on full display.

It is precisely this aporetic double image – seemingly pro-cosmic, deep down anti-cosmic – which I want to project on Bloch's materialist manifesto: the work on the Aristotelian Left, the concluding part of the *Materliasmusproblem*, a series of lectures which Bloch had already started working on in 1936, fifteen years after the final edition of *Der Geist dr Utopie*. In Bloch's reading of the two representatives of the Aristotelian *kalam* broadly conceived – Avicenna and Averroes – the 'Leftist' inversion of the classical Aristotelian paradigm consists of two major steps:

1) Granting the highest metaphysical privilege not to actuality, but to potentiality which, instead of representing a merely passive principle, as it still does in Aristotle, now acquires prerogatives of active and creative potency.

2) Enriching the concept of matter according to the above transformation, which eventually leads to the pantheistic conclusion: Avicenna's identification of God with matter and, later on, the Spinozist *deus sive natura*, which, according to Bloch, inaugurates modern materialism.

The Primacy of Potency over the Actual

In his materialistic interpretation of the Arabic *Aristotelische Linke*, Bloch deliberately downplays the influence of *kalam* theology on Avicenna and Averroes whom he would like to see as the representatives of an almost secular *falsafa*: the former giving rise to the Aristotelian Right, the latter to the Aristotelian Left, in which he is solely interested. Yet, such a profound change of the category of potentiality would not be possible without the theistic Islamic doctrine of extreme voluntarism, which was grafted by *kalam* theologians onto the Aristotelian system. Due to the fusion of these two very disparate horizons, which occurred in the teaching of the first Mutazilites, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and the Abrahamic religion of God capable of voluntary creation together formed a new system which

radically transformed the meaning of both, *theion* and *hyle*.² In the former, the Unmoved Mover was the ultimate pure form or being in its highest actuality, but precisely because of that could not be conceived as God the Creator, capable of perceiving something else than just itself, that is, lower beings in their not yet-actualised status of potentiality. Instead of making things new, the Aristotelian *theion* could only attract the rest of beings, remaining in the stage of *dynamis* and still on their way towards the final *entelechia*. It was, therefore, the notion of voluntary creation that radically changed the picture and required a transvaluation of the two principal Aristotelian categories: potentiality versus actuality. The innovative step, declaring the primacy of potentiality / potency over the static and already realised actuality, transposed it from Aristotelian passivity into the very opposite: the highest ‘capacity to act’ which, from this time on, began to defy the divine omnipotent willpower. Yet, the Aristotelian identification of potentiality with matter also remained, the result of which was an even more innovative conflation of the highest ‘capacity to act’ with the *materia prima*. The equivocation of Aristotle’s *dynamis* – meaning both passive possibility and capacitating potency – became fused into one no longer ambiguous notion of the material active substance, vividly creating new forms of being from within and, as Bloch would often emphasise, guided by *natura naturans* as the internal *Natursubjekt* (the subject of nature), without any external divine patronage:

Now form does not remain external to matter, as the scholastics of the Right had taught, but rather: *matter and form, the capacity to become and the capacity to act, appear bound up in the same natura naturans*. If anything, they implicate themselves in a reciprocity in which the passive and the active potency ultimately collapse into one, according to their nature.³

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- 2 On the *kalam* transformation of the concept of potentiality into sovereign form of potency and its later theologico-philosophical consequences, see: G. Agamben, ‘Bartleby, or on The Contingency’, in *Potentialities*, trans. D. Heller-Rozen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, esp. the chapter ‘The Scribe, or On Creation’), pp. 245–253.
- 3 E. Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, trans. L. Goldman and P. Thompson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 65 (henceforth as AL). Bloch often stresses the fortunate ambiguity of the potence / potentiality which has been affirmatively embraced by the Aristotelian Left: ‘This occurs thanks to the sea change introduced by Avicenna, one that reveals the form of matter to be inherently both potential and potent, both potent and

Due to this deliberate ambiguation, matter is no longer seen as a passive receptacle which receives forms from beyond through an imprint or imposition. Matter is now a medium and a message: it is inherently predisposed towards in-formation which it actively prepares in itself. All it needs is an awakening impulse: *eductio formae* which, left to the initiative of the divine spirit or God's will, brings out and actualises a 'being-after-possibility' (*kata to dynaton*) out of the potential 'being-in-possibility' (*dynamei-on*). Eventually, however, even this last remnant of transcendence disappears and paves the way to a fully immanentised form which, as Giordano- Bruno's 'helmsman to the ship', works through and leads matter solely from within:

As for us, we call it the 'internal artificer', because it shapes matter, forming it from inside like a seed or root shooting forth and unfolding the trunk, from within the trunk thrusting out the boughs, from inside the boughs the derived branches, and unfurling buds from within these.⁴

Yet, such promotion of potentiality / potency as the higher and now privileged mode of being is not without consequences – especially for the concept of the actual as already materialised. In *kalam*, God is granted the absolute power which is understood more in terms of its potential – 'what He can yet do' – than in terms of its actual achievement – 'what He had already done'.⁵ Later on, in the nominalist scholastics directly influenced

potential' (AL, 39); 'Hence, Averroes, far from inscrutable equivocation, thoroughly embraced the passive-active double meaning of dynamis-matter. Precisely the specific "potency" of form development now pulsates within the general "potentiality" of matter and makes dynamis-matter the womb of the undeveloped yet maturing configurations of form' (AL, 54); my emphasis.

- 4 G. Bruno, *Cause, Principle and Unity*, trans, R.J. Blackwell and R. de Lucca (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 54.
- 5 For instance, William Ockham, very much under the influence of the Asharite *kalam*, says in *Quodlibeta*: 'Deus multa potest facere quae non vult facere' (God does not want to do a lot of things he can do), which Blumenberg interprets as an expression of the infinite rift between the always larger creation *in potentia* and the much more limited creation *in actualitas*: Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 609. The Asharite / Nominalist model of the divine potency / potentiality then travels, via the Reformed theology, into the heart of secular modernity: it formats the Nietzschean Will-to-Power which speaks of itself in the pure Ockhamian idiom: 'Whatever I may create and however I may love it – soon I must oppose it and my love, thus

by the Asharite *kalam*, *potentia absoluta* will be defined solely as infinite potentiality and *opposed* to actuality which, due to this theological reversal, undergoes a peculiar demotion: instead of representing the highest being of *I Am That I Am* (as it still does in Aquinas), it becomes a ‘hindrance’ – an obstacle on God’s way to manifest his unbound *potestas*. While potentiality acquires divine attributes of pure activity, it is now actuality which is degraded to the status of the passive obstacle in the form of inertial material being interested solely in self-preservation at the expense of the not yet-realised creative possibilities. Bloch closely follows the *kalam*-inspired nominalist theology when he, in his conversation with Adorno, states firmly that ‘there is a very clear interest that has prevented the world from being turned into the possible’ and that ‘the *hindering element* is also in the possible.’⁶ In his work on the Aristotelian Left, while praising the romantic artist for being capable of seeing into the dynamic living heart of *natura naturans* and disregarding the shards of *natura naturata*, Bloch writes:

Fully in line with the tradition of pregnant form and painting toward the idea of *liberating matter*, one of Lessing’s observations is apropos. The painter in Emilia Galotti, who brings the prince a commissioned painting, speaks Lessing’s own thoughts and, indeed, in words that recall Aristotle, or rather Avicenna-Averroes: ‘Art must paint the picture as Plastic Nature – *if there is such a thing* – imagined it: without the falling off that *recalcitrant matter* makes unavoidable, without the decay with which time attacks it.’ The *resistant matter* is the material of ‘what-is-after-possible’, *taken as a disruption or constraint* [*Störung und Hemmung*]; the conjectured plastic nature, however, thinking its own image, this is the material of

my will wants it’: F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, eds. A. Del Caro and Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 89–90. But it also forms the idea of the Romantic Genius, very well articulated in Agamben’s musings on Glenn Gould’s genius of playing *as if not playing*: ‘... even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who cannot not-play, and, directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play’: G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 35.

- 6 E. Bloch, ‘Something Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing’, in: *Utopian Function of Art and Literature. Selected Essays*, trans. J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1988, pp. 6, 17; my emphasis).

‘what-may-become-possible’, which the artist further actualizes [...] The modern artist thus now steps into the scene as *both the liberating and perfecting force*, such that he clearly and distinctly brings out, exposes, *the shape of matter predisposed within matter* (AL, 43–4; emphasis mine, translation slightly altered).⁷

The actuality which is *nach-der-Möglichkeit* or *kata to dynaton* emerges both according to (*kata*) and after (*nach*) what is possible, by realising only one of the possible paths and once it is established in actual existence, it thus blocks the realisation of other alternatives. As the secondary effect of the potential, it is an objectified reality the interest of which is ‘to stay, to remain’⁸ in its constituted form and in this manner repress the other possibilities, by preventing them from coming to the ontological fore. A serious problem thus emerges in Bloch’s pantheistic strategy: an *overestimation of possibility* paralleled by the *underestimation of actuality*, which should be a worrying consequence for a materialist. For, when Bloch wants to *liberate and perfect matter*, doesn’t he risk the destruction of matter as the already actualised ‘recalcitrant’ and ‘resistant’ materiality? This would be precisely the Gnostic-apocalyptic remnant in his pantheistic reasoning: the same ambivalence which pertains to *apocalypsis* as simultaneously redemption, perfection, liberation and destruction, also applies here.

Thus, if Neoplatonism suffers from the all-too-negative view of actual creation as merely privative, and if the Aristotelian Right demotes the material world to the role of the ontological vassal, the Aristotelian Left –

7 For the German original, see: E. Bloch, *Avicenna und die Aristotelische Linke* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten und Loening, 1952), p. 76. Loren Goldman and Peter Thompson translate *kata to dynaton* as ‘what-is-considered-possible’, which very aptly reflects Bloch’s subjective approach to the wilful aspect of *Natursubjekt* – a will-to-progress entangled in a conflict with the will-to-remain – I, however, want to revert to his earlier proposition to translate *kata* as simply *after*, both in terms of the temporal sequence (actuality post potentiality) and in terms of ‘taking after’ something as a model. In harmony with Bloch’s nominalist tendency, the constituted actuality is no longer perceived as an active achievement, as in the traditional Aristotelianism, but as a secondary epiphenomenon.

8 F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. B. Galli (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 10. I quote the famous phrase opening Rosenzweig’s *opus magnum* – ‘wishing to stay, to remain’ – as a slogan of those modern Aristotelians who opposed the nominalist tendency to give primacy to potency and sided firmly on the side of the actual.

from Avicenna, through Bruno, to Deleuze – does not fare better here; by overestimating the material ‘being-in-possibility’, it turns the actual *natura naturata* into a mere negation of the former. ‘Instead of the self-realization of many world-forms in matter itself, the pure active form rules on high, and its annex, the world, is at best a vassal’ (AL, 25): this objection, which Bloch levies against the Aristotelian Right, could actually be addressed to Bloch himself whose declaratively pro-cosmic speculative materialism may not be as welcoming to the *actual* material world as it wants to appear. The world as a *vassal* is precisely what he is against, but the sources he draws upon also tend towards the world’s vassalisation, although in a less explicit manner. Seemingly without a contrastive transcendence, immanence splits again according to the old hierarchical pattern: naturing nature detaches itself from the natured nature which appears as a deadened product of the vibrant *All-Leben*, to be discarded as soon as it emerged.⁹

In all Gnostic systems, the Highest Life is a pure energy which *detests* the botched world of creation as a ‘lump’ [*Klotz*] of inertial, lazy matter.¹⁰ This is the strongest possible variant of metaphysical dualism, but its version can also be found in the seemingly monistic materialist pantheism which Bloch associates with the Aristotelian Left. The idea that the creative

9 The extreme form of such an ontological oscillator can be found in Gilles Deleuze whose speculative materialism often resembles the Blochian one, even if, in the end, the decisive difference between them is that Deleuze rejects the idea of the ‘subject of nature’. Just as for Bloch, for Deleuze too, life must be a Great Life: pure, immediate, pleromatic, unmarked by any alienation. Beneath the deadened, rigid, territorialised forms of life bound / imprisoned, there flows a life full and uncastrated, a pure unbound flux of constant self-overcoming and self-transformation which does not stand or rest even for a millisecond and where ‘everything springs up only to disappear immediately’. And while death is inscribed into the natured bound forms, the explosive ‘pure fluxes of desire’ belong to the ‘sphere of virtuality’ which is the pure living matrix of all actual life and, as such, a late avatar of the Gnostic / nominalist *potentia inordinata*: G. Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, trans. M. Taormina (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 44.

10 On this, see the ‘Complaint of Life’ in Hans Jonas’s *Religion der Gnosis*: ‘Who has cast me into the affliction of the worlds, who transported me into the evil darkness? asks the Life; and it implores, Save us out of the darkness of this world into which we are thrown. To the question the Great Life replies, It is not according to the will of the Great Life that thou hast come there: That house in which thou dwellest, not Life has built it: This world was not created according to the wish of the Life’: H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and The Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 63.

matter as *natura naturans* may in fact *detest* any stable form which it itself produces and may wish to remain in its potentiality as ‘an eternal womb of creation’ – then repeated by Nietzsche and, even more explicitly, by the German *Lebensphilosophie*, wholly based on the asymmetrical notion of ‘hatred’ between life and its objectified products – appears first in Giordano Bruno. Bloch presents him as the true pantheist who for the first time envisaged the idea of the full ‘autarchy of matter’ (AL, 32). And then he quotes Bruno himself:

[Matter] does not desire those forms which daily change on its back [...] There is as little reason to say that matter desires form as that it hates it [...] By the same line of reasoning, according to which it is said to desire what it sometimes receives or produces, *it can also be said to abhor whatever it throws off or rejects*. In fact, *it detests more fervidly than it desires*, for it eternally throws off that individual form after retaining it a very short while. On the other hand, *the source of the forms cannot desire what is already within it, for one does not desire what one already possesses*.¹¹

In the next move, however, Bruno talks about the symmetrical hatred which the actual things feel against the ever-new and changing naturing nature: the actualised matter is too ‘lazy’, ‘inertial’ and ‘inept’ to desire the prospect of being formed and to identify with its given shape – hence, transience and death as the fate of all flesh, too weak to contain the infinite creative power. Unlike in Aristotle, therefore, the material world not only does not feel attracted towards the highest form, but, on the contrary, shows its autarchic and anarchic ways by repulsing it. The Brunian ‘autarchy of matter’, therefore, is precisely the moment in which modern pantheism dovetails into two very different directions. On the one hand, Bruno, disgusted with the inertia of material things, is fully prepared to *side only with the infinite potentiality of the matter-womb, pure natura naturans*, now detached from its products and no longer coerced to bring them forth in actualisations which always fail, because the inept *natura naturata* ‘hates’ forms and shakes them off. The way the forms are already ‘possessed’ by *natura naturans*’ potentiality / potency (‘possession’ being yet another term belonging to the family of words centred round the *potestas*) is sufficient in itself. To force the womb of matter to give

11 G. Bruno, *Cause, Principle and Unity*, p. 86; my emphasis.

birth to scattered and 'ungrateful' entities goes against the rule of matter's autarchy which, when seen as *natura naturans*, should let matter be what it is and as it is, with no pressure and no external factor of the discipline, imposed on the creative matter to *produce* beings. Bruno is thus the first to challenge the 'productivist paradigm' as an illegitimate compulsion forcing *natura naturans* to throw out new products of *natura naturata*. If matter is indeed all that is – and what truly *is* the strongest is the creative nature – then why should it be forced to make things? Cannot we think about *natura naturans* without *natura naturata*, which is nothing but the inertial 'hindrance' and 'obstacle' to the former's creative energies? Cannot we have pure creation without created beings? For, why should *natura naturans* 'desire' to make new beings if it 'already possesses' them in itself?

On the other hand, however, the 'autarchy of matter' can lead to quite opposite conclusions – taking the side of *natura naturata*, the inertial realm of already actualised things which, in turn, hates forms and shakes them off in their choice of transience (for Bruno, even finitude and death is a matter of choice). Exactly the same argument in favour of matter's autarchy understood as *natura naturata* and its inherent right to be *whatever* will emerge in Agamben's *Coming Community*, where the whatever-beings finally realise their 'hatred' for the forms imposed from the outside, and let themselves be in the manner of *quodlibet* – 'whatever' and 'as you like it', that is, without pressure exerted by the higher creative instances, be it Platonic Ideas, Aristotle's *morphei*, God's Active Intellect, and – last but not least – *natura naturans*, the last avatar of the oppressive supreme power over matter as actually being what it is. The only cost of this ultimate liberation / redemption of matter is a full acceptance of the 'rhythm of transience' and the *gelassen* embrace of death as the natural fate of all things material. Yet for Agamben, it is a small price to pay for the freedom from the oppression of the form: the liberated matter is indeed an 'abandoned child', thrown into a limbo of things irreparable, but when it finally shakes off the parental guidance of *natura naturans*, it transforms rejection and abandonment into liberation.¹²

12 See G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 1–4, devoted to the concept of 'whatever'. Agamben's portrayal

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Thus, depending on which side of this dualism we take – either *natura naturans* that ‘detests’ what it made or *natura naturata* that ‘detests’ what made it – we will see the ‘autarchy of matter’ differently. But this is dualism, and no monistic rhetoric can soften the rift: it is *matter against matter* and the ‘hatred’ here is as severe as in the case of all emphatically dualistic Gnostic systems.

Bloch is the opposite of Agamben, but is already within this new pantheistic divide. Although rejecting the idea of the pressure from without – the disciplining divine rule extolled by the Aristotelian Right – he nonetheless expects matter to have a will and *desire* of its own, a positive force opposed to mere ‘hatred’, which will exercise an inner pressure, not allowing the world to rest on its laurels. The issue of the *internalised pressure*, standing in stark contrast with Agamben’s total autarchy of natured matter – the right to be ‘whatever’ and ‘hate’ all external forms – is absolutely crucial here: thus enters *der Natursubjekt*, the subject of nature, or *der Subjektkern der Natur*. In *Experimentum mundi*, one of his latest works, Bloch asks: ‘From the perspective of the philosophy of nature, there emerges a question: parallel to the working subject which produces a history, is there a subject of nature, which could be a motor

of the limbo – the middle realm between salvation and damnation, populated by the souls of unbaptised children – offers a perfect metaphor of material beings released from the forming efforts of the spirit and abandoned to themselves: ‘The greatest punishment, the lack of the vision of God, thus turns into a natural joy; irremediably lost, they persist without pain in divine abandon. God has not forgotten them, but rather they have always already forgotten God [...] Their nullity [...] is principally a *neutrality with respect to salvation* – the most radical objection that has ever been levied against the very idea of redemption. The truly unsavable life is the one in which there is nothing to save [...] The light that rains down on them is that irreparable light of the dawn following the *novissima dies* of judgment’ (*ibidem*, pp. 5–6; emphasis mine). Unlike in Bloch, who imbibes matter with an ‘objective tendency’ towards salvation, Agamben sees the liberation of matter as a process of gaining ‘neutrality with respect to salvation’, and the total rejection of the messianic perspective of the repair of the world. While for Bloch, *dies novissima* is the first day of matter released from the ‘obstructive realm’ of the negative – for Agamben, on the contrary, it is the first day of matter released from the messianic pressure to be released.

of the dialectics of nature?¹³ – and then answers it in the positive. But it only means that Bloch lands on the other side of the pantheistic aporia: by investing in *natura naturans* as the subjective-desiring force of creative nature, he *nolens volens* disinvests in *natura naturata*, which eventually ends up as nothing but *der schädliche Raum*, ‘the obstructing realm,’¹⁴ worth only to be destroyed (according to the famous line of Goethe’s Mephisto, the Gnostic Spirit of the Abyss: *es ist nur wert, dass es zugrunde geht*).

Faced with Bruno’s autarchy of matter, Bloch cannot accept it: the former’s untroubled immanentist naturalism of substance which, as Hegel remarked on Spinoza, does not yet know the Subject, would mean to abandon the ambition to ‘finish the world’. Bloch merely signals this problem towards the end of his book, by invoking the Hegelian dialectics that would be able to transform the speculative materialism of the Aristotelian Left into a properly dialectical one, where the goal-oriented subjectivity emerges as one of the crucial forms educted from matter. Bloch sees the eduction of forms as a historical process, and, if not simply teleological and unproblematically progressive, then at least ordered temporally, evolving according to its ‘objective fantasy’ and the accompanying anticipation and desire: the Subject, in which the latent tendency of the ‘humanisation of nature’ reaches its *Ultimum*, is a privileged form where matter achieves a higher level of plasticity, malleability and possibilitisation, thus closer to the ‘matter’s utopia’, in which it will have shed for good its solid necessitarian form.¹⁵ Writing about Bruno, Spinoza, and their vitalist aftermath, Bloch states:

13 E. Bloch, *Experimentum mundi. Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis*, Gesamtausgabe Band 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 218.

14 *Ibidem*, 16.

15 The complex relationship between the telos of the history, the *Novum*, and the *Ultimum* in Bloch’s system, where the concept of the new forms a strong figure of the overcoming of the Gnostic tendency of *reversio*, is very well explained by Johan Siebers: ‘*Novum* is only possible as an attempted *Ultimum* at the front of the history; the *Ultimum* is a new attempt at something that never yet existed and not a mere repetition of the lost origin [...] In the conclusion of his elucidation of the notion of the *Ultimum*, Bloch uses the term “promised land”: the Kingdom of Freedom would thus be a “land promised by the process”. By resorting to religious language, Bloch wants to emphasise that the relation between history and its final goal has a form of

And yet the human in the *natura naturans* is missing in it; the entire aspect of the labour and history that effects the progress of nature is missing; above all, character – limited by class status as well as the completed Pan of Pantheism – is missing: *an unfinished world* [...] Therefore we can now say: Hegel is important because of the dialectical method (and everything connected with it), but Aristotle and his Left are important because of their concept of matter. Not only Hegel; the Aristotelian matter-concept and its radicalising (penetrating to the roots) Avicenna-Bruno metamorphosis are alive in dialectically conceived materialism, an especially noteworthy ferment. They promote the development of the world-image, better yet, the true *meta*-physics of activity and hope, in contradistinction to the purely or impurely mechanical, that of stasis and the absence of qualities. Spirit, moreover, as the highest bloom of organic matter, would not be able to arise from it [matter] and transform existence if it were not required and called forth by it, thus, if it were not predisposed within it, and lastly, autochthonous [...] Rather, the problem facing the left Aristotelians, still unsatisfied, remains more pressing than ever: how, in material events and their forms, transformations do not to lose the Topos, in which colours as well as the qualities of things do not become corrupted, in which life, consciousness, the path of human history, and its creations have a place against and within this enormous inorganic background. In one gesture, we can say *that material utopia is not really a paradox, that dynamei-on matter implies a total concrete-utopian content, and we can hold its latent form as a foundation*. Avicenna and Averroes themselves, having unbound themselves and embraced transformation, had bestowed on their *eductio formarum ex materia* not only a hylozoist but also *hylokryphe*, thus latent form, an ‘incomplete entelechy’. For all formations are attempts to shape the not yet-actualised treasury of matter itself – without an inert mechanical block standing against it and without a prime mover floating above it. This is, or rather this is helped by, *the speculative materialism of the Aristotelian Left, which is certainly not yet at its end, despite all its talk of the completed seventh day and its pantheistic claims that we have reached our final day of rest in the dynamei-on itself, as though Pan were both good and all that were needed*. Yet there is no way out of this closed system, in particular in its surplus dimensions: *eschatological profundity* cannot be fulfilled without Bruno and Spinoza, and without this other thing, namely, a conscience that is turned outward against both subjectivism and mechanistic dogma. (AL, 65–67; my emphasis)

a creaturely manifestation and a hopeful expectation and not of an effective or teleological causality, even if it constantly calls for the continuous revolutionary progress [...] But the process itself does not produce the solution, just as the final goal remains extriteritorial to it. What mediates this paradox [of simultaneously effecting and *not* effecting the *Endziel* – A.B.R.] is, precisely, the category of hope’: Johan Siebers, ‘Das Ultimatum’, in *Bloch-Wörterbuch. Leitbegriffe der Philosophie Ernst Blochs*, eds, B. Dietschy, D. Zeilinger and R.E. Zimmermann (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 583, 588.

This seems to be the real *crux* of *Materialismusproblem*, the problem of materialism itself: a triple intersection between mechanicism, which perceives matter as a senseless mechanical lump [*Klotz*] given over to external forces (first, the will of God – then, the force fields described by Newtonian science); Bruno’s autarchic pantheism, which relies on matter as a spontaneous mode of being ‘whatever’; and Bloch’s subjective form of vitalism, which requires an almost personified concept of a willing *Natursubjekt*, coinciding with *natura naturans*, in order to guarantee the progressive movement of *Materie nach vorwärts*. Bloch’s solution, which emphasises the leading role of the ‘subject of nature’, avoids the extreme positions of mechanicism and Bruno’s pan-vitalism by fostering the vision of the spirit as internalised by matter, intrinsic to its own desire. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch insists that one should not approach the subject of nature as something ‘psychical prior to *natura naturata*’, but rather as a ‘creative form of matter’ deriving from the teaching of Averroes.¹⁶ At the same time, however, such decisive subjectivisation of matter tends to dissolve all the hard contours of material existence, leaving us with a living flux, dangerously reminiscent of the *materia spiritualis* from Plotinus’s *Enneads*.¹⁷

16 ‘In this stratum, therefore, in the materially most immanent one that exists at all, lies the truth of that which is described as the subject of nature. Just as the old concept of *natura naturans*, which first of all signified a subject of nature, is of course still half-mythical [...] but by no means posits (in an idealistic way) a psychological element as prior to *natura naturata*. On the contrary, the concept of *natura naturans* was from the very beginning, from its originator, the ‘naturalist’ Averroës onwards, applied to creative matter. Even if the remnants of mythology cited above are not lacking, which may return as a pantheistic bogeyman, and which have long accompanied the problem of the subject of nature at least as a secularised Isis’: E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice and P. Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 673–674.

17 Writing about Ibn Gabirol’s *materia universalis*, a concept that led him to the equation of God with matter, Bloch derives it from Plotinus: ‘Thus Avicbron’s highest matter composes itself within universal matter: the *materia spiritualis*, taken directly from Plotinus, namely his *hyle noetike*, spiritual or intelligible matter (*The Enneads* 2.4.1-5), high above, with the One. In Plotinus’s system of emanations, from the One down into the darkness of common matter, the very principle of matter he otherwise vilifies is surprisingly ennobled. This happened because matter became linked with the second-highest thing in Plotinus’s world, *nous*, or World Spirit, and so, in the heavenly sphere, lay at the feet of the Highest, the One. And indeed, this was accompanied by the emphatically positive reversal of its absolutely miserable connotation in the lowest

What, then, happens with matter when it becomes so thoroughly 'spiritualised'? The apocalypse of matter – the redemptive annihilation of its current form – is to occur at the end of the natural history: *das Ultimum*, the last day. On this final day, all shards and hindrances will have been removed, releasing the creative spirit from within: Bloch calls it *die Realisierung des Realisierenden*, the 'realisation of the realising', in which the *Experimentum mundi* culminates. This complex formula implies that such realisation cannot by any means be understood as *Aktualisierung* (actualisation); it is an expression of the potentiality / potency *as such*, that is, as *das Realisierende* – without the passive result of *das Realisierte*, that is, of a power which no longer exhausts itself in any external production that betrays its living energetic nature. The *dies novissima* of the *ultima materia* is conceived here as the messianic day of pure *natura naturans* which will have finally recognised the error of self-objectification and learned the mode of being just *für sich*, for itself and for its own sake. Yet, in spite of Bloch's appeal to the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic and the *Natursubjekt*, this vision does not really differ from the one painted by Bruno: the 'seventh day' is indeed the day of matter's independence, on which it is finally allowed to return to the state of autarchy as an eternal womb of creation.

Bloch is adamant in emphasising that the *Ultimum* does not entail a standstill or 'rest in peace' of the being at its end. On the contrary, it is supposed to be a pure *Bewegung*, the movement of matter liberated from all *Störungen* (hindrances) slowing down its free *Gärung* (fermentation) now 'without limits'. As Bloch puts it in *The Principle of Hope*: 'there are no limits to this self-activating possibility. New shapes always come from the forming material womb, from the matter which, as a substance, remains conditioned, but as a possibility is limitless and inextinguishable.'¹⁸ There

world: to be an empty, dark abyss. Precisely this emptiness, impersonal and without quality, could serve as a foil to the most sublime emptiness, qualityless, impersonal, of the One' (AL, 57; my emphasis). In Bloch's rendering, therefore, the *kalam* reversal prioritising potentiality over actuality, has a strong precursor in the founder of Neoplatonism: the *kenoma* of matter – 'empty dark abyss' – inverts here into a vibrant *pleroma* of the material origin of all things.

18 The German original reads: 'der so sich aktivierenden Möglichkeit sind keine Grenzen gesetzt. Immer neue Gestalten kamen und kommen aus dem bildenden materiellen Schoß, aus der Materie als dem Substrat stets bedingter, doch noch nie begrenzter, erschöpfter Möglichkeiten': E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Gesamtausgabe Band 5 (Frankfurt am Main:

will therefore be no ‘completion’ (*Gelungenheit*) crowned by an absolute peace. Rather, what we are dealing with – Bloch maintains – is the liberation of the process itself which, freed from the necessity to actualise itself in a reified manner, will have obtained perfect spontaneity. And if the matter’s spirit of utopia incarnates itself best in the human spirit and its Marxian readiness to change the world, it is also the ‘self-consciousness of the working man’ which allows the closest approximation of the will driving the *Natursubjekt* or *natura naturans* of the *Materie nach vorwärts*. Work, after Marx, should no longer be conceived as a *homo faber* activity, orientated towards the production of external things that merely add to and perpetuate the view of matter as *ein ahistorischer Klotz*, an unhistorical lump.¹⁹ Rather, it should be a transformation of nature, fusing with its most progressive fluid tendencies from within. Once again tūm.elaborating on Marx’s double prophesy – the humanisation of nature, the naturalisation of man – Bloch writes:

In history it is the self-consciousness of historical actors as working people, whereas in nature it is the realisation of that which was hypothetically called *natura naturans* or the subject of material movement, which constitutes a problem that until now has hardly even been touched upon, although it clearly belongs to the expectation comprised in Marx’s slogan of the ‘humanisation of nature.’²⁰

In the Omega-point, therefore, *actus purus* and *materia ultima* – the two concepts that Bloch borrows from the Thomistic scholastics – should finally coincide. One way of understanding this coincidence is to see form as so intrinsic to matter that it no longer forces matter to appear as formed, as no longer a step forward in the series of natured products.

Suhrkamp 1990), p. 232. This fragment is missing from the English edition of *The Principle of Hope*, so I offer it in my translation.

19 E. Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*. Gesamtausgabe Band 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1970), p. 227.

20 The German original reads: ‘In der Geschichte ist sie die Selbstergreifung des geschichtlichen Täters, als des arbeitenden Menschen; in der Natur ist sie die Verwirklichung dessen, was man hypothetisch *natura naturans* oder *Subjekt der materiellen Bewegung* genannt hat, ein noch kaum berührtes Problem, obwohl es [...] in der Verlängerungslinie der Marxschen “Humanisierung der Natur” liegt’: E. Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*. Gesamtausgabe Band 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972), p. 235.

Just as Agamben's *forma-di-vita* (form-of-life) is to such degree internal to life that it is no longer disciplining and rigidifying the spontaneous living flux,²¹ Bloch's 'form-of-matter' will be so perfectly fused with the material substance that it will no longer generate alienated results. Once all the remnants of the *eductio* of matter from without and above are removed – from God's creative *fiat* to the demiurgic making of forms out of passive matter – the only material way of being will consist in an infinite and uninhibited *eductio* or *Hervorbringen*, forming strictly from within and hence without the alienating effect of isolated appearances. The true meaning of *nos ipse erimus* – the final, prophetic phrase of *Experimentum Mundi*: 'we shall be ourselves' – is therefore *to be and not to appear*.

But what does this really mean? Is it at all possible to be and *not* to appear, especially if our ambition is to construct a pro-cosmic materialist metaphysics which would no longer resort to the concept of the spiritual Absolute, as in the case of the Gnostic Great Life? Even if we are willing to ignore the aporias intrinsic to Bloch's concept of the *Ultimum* and grant it metaphysical validity, we still cannot be sure *what matter really wants* and what is the true content of its 'objective phantasy': the question remains as 'dark' as the living moment of our present *Ich bin* (I am), which Bloch describes in the opening section of *The Spirit of Utopia*. Is the *hylokryphe* – the hidden tendency of matter – tinged with the Gnostic *reversio* which dreams about *natura naturans* without *natura naturata*, that is, without the compulsion to create? Perhaps deep down, in its deepest latent tendency, matter dreams of its own redemptive annihilation?²²

21 See most of all G. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), where the Franciscan 'perfect life' is derived from the same progressive scholastic formation advancing the notion of *natura naturans* and the world's immanent vitality. This affinity also demonstrates that Bloch, despite his reservations with regard to Bruno's autarchy of matter, remains captivated by the latter's idea of matter refusing to step out of the mode of potentiality. Yet, whereas for Agamben such refusal – the gesture of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* ('I would prefer not to') – allows for a relaxed regression into a state of *impotenza*, for Bloch it only announces an intensification of the power / potency aspect of *natura naturans*, which can finally achieve a status of pure 'unbound' energy, unhindered by its 'bound' products-limitations.

22 Bloch should have taken into account the Hegelian warning against following the dreams of matter till the end, since the *hylokryphe* – the hidden striving of all material beings – could

Habermas's characterisation of Bloch as a 'Marxist Schelling' would then appear very apt if taken to be pointing to the Schellingian therapeutic scheme underlying Bloch's philosophy of process, but arguably wrong in attributing to Bloch a genuinely Marxian materialism.²³ In spite of his investment in Marx's and Engels's dialectical and speculative materialism, with which he sought to overcome his early spiritual leanings, Bloch is not a materialist at all. Regardless of all his criticism of Neoplatonism and the Aristotelian Right, he still maintains a fundamental hierarchical asymmetry between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, which renders the speculative-materialist concept of a 'vibrant matter' one-sided. In his pursuit of *materia spiritualis*, Bloch attempts to eliminate everything negative: transience, finitude, and death. By trusting in matter's vital Real-Potential, Bloch rejects all the elements of material existence that inhibit the utopian process as belonging to *der schädliche Raum* (the obstructing realm), and ultimately ends up with nothing but pure spirit. With all the negative features of the fall dissolving – alienation, exile, dispersion, the inertial lumpiness of the *Klotzmaterie* – matter dissolves as well. For what if 'failure, futility, nullity'²⁴ are the indispensable attributes of material being as such?

To conclude. Instead of overcoming the Gnosticism of his early position and choosing the materialist one, Bloch merely transposes the Gnostic dualism of the Great Life and the afflicted worlds, the life spiritual and the life material, onto the plane of matter itself. If I chose Bloch's system as an example, it is because it constitutes a *pars pro toto* of the major aporia underlying modern pantheism: the tension between its overt monistic

actually turn out to be detrimental to matter itself: matter has to be careful of what it wishes. See Hegel: 'Matter has weight insofar as it strives toward a central point outside itself. It is essentially composed of parts which are separable. It seeks its unity, which would be its own negation, its opposite. If it were to achieve this, it would no longer be matter but would have perished. It strives toward the ideal, for in unity (i.e., in being self-determining, self-moving), matter is idealized': G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. L. Flauch (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1998), p. 20, emphasis mine.

23 See Habermas: Habermas, Jürgen (1969–1970). 'Ernst Bloch – A Marxist Romantic', *Salmagundi*, no. 10–11 (Winter 1969–1970), pp. 311–325, 324.

24 E. Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem*, p. 469.

and materialistic declaration of the ‘autarchy of matter’, on the one hand, and its hidden dualistic and anti-cosmic tendencies, on the other. What initially seemed as a tiny rift introducing a possibility of dynamism, life, and change – the difference between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* – eventually grows into a dualism as rigid as in all metaphysical models of the relation between the form and the particular, the potential and the actual, the creative energy and its material product. Bruno leaves us at the crossroads, whereas Bloch and Agamben can be seen as choosing one of the paths which he outlined as a *Hassliebe* oscillating between desire and hatred: Bloch on the side of the fully emancipated *natura naturans*, which eventually drops the compulsion to produce and form – and Agamben on the side of the fully emancipated *natura naturata*, which eventually drops compulsion to be formed.

But what if matter is, well – *both*? What if it is not so ‘vibrant’ after all – as well as not so hopeless in its inertial mechanistic determination? If so, then the elimination of either of these factors would simply mean the elimination of matter itself: the Blochian investment in the ‘Spirit of nature’ at the cost of its objectified products would lead to the disappearance of matter as we know it – just as the Agambenian investment in the spiritless nature at the cost of creative energy would lead to the disappearance of the ‘principle of hope’ which, for Bloch, is the only force driving material nature towards a ‘concrete utopia.’ Bloch attempts to eliminate from the promised land of his ‘Omega-Point’ / *Ultimum* all the negative, but the final result is a Gnostic *reversio* to the vibrant nothingness of potentiality. Agamben, on the other side of the pantheistic divide, accepts all the negative features of the actualised material being – transience, finitude, inertia, amorphia and anomia of matter as *natura naturata* – but deprives it of all hope as the ‘eternally irreparable.’²⁵ While the intention of early modern pantheism was to ‘liberate *and* perfect’ matter, its execution

25 The irreparability of the material condition, which cannot be perfected, but can be liberated as the sovereign ‘autarchy of matter’, comes to the fore very strongly in Agamben’s treatment of Saint Paul whose messianic *klesis* / calling he interprets as a call to ‘contemplate salvation only to the extent that it loses itself in what cannot be saved’: G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 42.

transformed conjunction into disjunction: Bloch's ultimate *perfection* of matter, destroyed in its actuality and regressed into the 'eternal *womb* of creation,' on the one hand and Agamben's *liberation* of matter 'as-it-is' without any prospect of repair, on the other.

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Will There Rather Be Nothing Than Something? On Modern Pantheism and Its Aporias in Ernst Bloch

The purpose of this essay is to put Ernst Bloch's philosophy to a test suggested by Hans Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. According to Blumenberg, modernity constitutes the second, successful, attempt at overcoming Gnosticism, after the first attempt, undertaken by Christianity, had failed. However – Blumenberg argues – it was not modern philosophy, but only science which had managed to escape Gnosticism's ontological trap of viewing the world as an illusion bordering on nothing. Modern metaphysics had proved unable to liberate itself from the powerful pull of the Gnostic rejection of being, in spite of all philosophical efforts to affirm the existence of material reality. Even when claiming to be materialist, it had remained, in its core, suspicious about matter as an imperfect and privative mode of being. Ernst Bloch, one of the strongest proponents of pantheistic vitalism in late modernity, seems to be trapped in a similar aporia: while he attempts to use – and simultaneously overcome – his early apocalyptic Gnosticism, fully manifest in *The Spirit of Utopia*, for the sake of the material reality and speculative materialism which combines Marx, the Aristotelian Left, and Schelling, he still remains a thinker of the apocalypse, who wishes the world to end in a violent destruction of all matter.

Keywords:

MATERIALISM, PANTHEISM, GNOSTICISM, MODERNITY, ERNST BLOCH, HANS BLUMENBERG, GIORGIO AGAMBEN.