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Philosophy as Rhetoric

Johan Siebers (London)

Engagement as a Precondition of Truth

Ernst Bloch's first book, *The Spirit of Utopia*, published in 1918¹, begins with the metaphor of life as a gift, given into our hands, for us to shape and make into something. Throughout the book, the idea that human existence and the world we find ourselves in are incomplete, is explored in themes ranging from architecture and music to philosophy and politics. The spirit of utopia is above all the active appropriation of the awareness that we are open beings in an open world, strangers in a strange land, that might be made into something resembling the memory of a place where no one has ever been: home. The last sentence of the book contains the phrase "truth as prayer", used to be sure in a thoroughly non-theist context.² Truth itself is encountered in the moment of standing out, anticipating, imagining and actively seeking out what might be - and directing one's heart and mind towards it. We might summarise this basic trait of Bloch's philosophical mentality with the help of the concept of the subjunctive: we encounter reality both within ourselves and without when we connect to the tendency in things towards an as yet unknown fulfilment or completion, a teleology without a telos. Rather than speaking of a modal

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, tr. Nasser (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000).

² There is a crucial mystical dimension to Bloch's thinking which reminds us of the association between the mystical and the element of purpose in Burke's dramatist pentad (Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press 1969). It is, however, immanent, as the mystery, the astonishment that the world is at it is: "Bloch's 'Principle of Hope' (...) owes almost as much to the Hermetic tradition as it does to the tradition of dialectical materialism. Sections of the work have a mystical quality as they approach the That-riddle of consciousness that appears behind the drives, but Bloch would not see this as metaphysical speculation incompatible with a materialist approach to the world. He seeks to relocate man's metaphysical aspirations and apotheoses in worldly experience itself, and to reveal the world precisely as the mystery towards which Hermetic thinking has been groping" (Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, tr. by Plaice, Plaice and Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press 1986), Introduction, p. xxx.)

ontology, I prefer to use the term “subjunctive”, taken from syntax, because it gathers together the imagined, the wished-for and hoped-for and the exhortative stance towards these. Being is not neutral, it is weighted towards something, as if a magnetic force is goading it in a particular direction. The world is unfinished, being itself is not full actual presence, but “not-yet being”; a radical incompleteness pervades the world. If we see human culture and experience in its light, our hands into which life has been given, in Bloch’s extended metaphor, can become the fists of life. The world is radically unfinished, and this unfinishedness carries within itself a tilt towards completion although the completion itself is also not yet determined; there is telos awaiting realization, but there is a “realization of the realizing” - *Realisierung des Realisierenden*. This is Bloch’s radical idea. Philosophy is the activity of articulating the general and generic nature of this subjunctive dimension, and by doing so keeping it open. It would go too far to say that for Bloch philosophy is therapeutic - a therapy against our tendency to ignore the subjunctive in favour of the indicative - but it is certainly the case that here philosophy becomes an activity and a process, a practice that allows us to step consciously into the stream of “the realizing”.

Philosophy is “suchend und versucherisch” - searching and seductive/experimenting.³ We become philosophers when we discover this urging creativity in the world and within ourselves and align ourselves with it. Just as the world itself is not yet finished - *unfertig* - so philosophy is necessary for us to become aware of the subjunctive nature of truth. If philosophical truth does not concern what is or always already was but what might be, then it should not surprise that, at least as far as the human sphere of existence is concerned, teleology does not assert itself without

³ Ernst Bloch, “Was ist Philosophie, als suchend und versucherisch?”, in *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1969), pp. 395-401. *Versucherisch*, seductive or tempting can also be read as related to *versuchen*, to try out or to experiment. Both meaning complexes are equally relevant to Bloch’s understanding of philosophy. There is even a bad temptation in philosophy, when it becomes alienated, escapist, estranged from the world; when its insights come “too soon”, as Bloch said of Plotinus in his Leipzig lectures on the history of philosophy.

us playing our part in the process. In Bloch's figurative language: "the wicked, they exist through their God. But the just - there God exists through them". In this vast oeuvre we encounter a mentality at every corner that speaks of the necessity of engagement with the process of changing the world as a precondition for seeing the world in the right way.

Throughout his long writing career, Bloch stayed true to the intuition of the primacy of the subjunctive. In his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*⁴, it is generalized into the ontological constant of hope: a contingent movement towards an open goal, that is not guaranteed but also not already refuted by history; desire as the "only honest human characteristic", without which an unalienated existence is unthinkable. But also in many other places we find the idea of the primacy of the subjunctive. There is an explicit discussion of the partisan nature of truth, distinguishing it from pragmatism (approvingly referring to Lenin's remark that ideas are not true because they work, but they work because they are true)⁵; in Bloch's last book, *Experimentum Mundi*, a categorial scheme that has the tendency-latency of process at its heart is worked out in detail. In his aesthetics, Bloch elaborates the concept of "vorschein", pre-illumination or pre-appearance. Art articulates a premonition of what might be, in all spheres of existence. In this way Bloch positions his aesthetics as a further development of the idea of appearance, Schein, as it passed from the classical idea of mimesis via the Hegelian idea of art as the appearance of truth. Politics for Bloch becomes a utopian activity, where it is precisely the subjunctive nature of the real that makes political action possible and necessary, and that keeps it from becoming totalitarian. Only a disavowal of the subjunctive process could lead to the

⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1959).

⁵ Ernst Bloch, "Eine andere Seite bei William James" and "Ad Pädagogica: zur parteiischen Weisheit", in *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1969), pp. 60-65 and 224-411.

conviction that we already know what the telos in being, and consequently also in our being, is. A thoroughly Blochian way of thinking recognizes the unknown, the non-place, the “darkness of the lived moment” at the heart of every act of realization, which is a “transcending without transcendence”. “thinking”, Bloch writes, “means venturing beyond”.⁶ In this way we can understand that the often voiced critique of utopian thinking, that it becomes exclusionary and totalitarian, is based on a misrecognition of the radical nature of the idea of the utopian, in Bloch’s philosophy at any rate. There is an “unplacedness”, we might say, in being as such - a lack that constitutes the drive that I have characterized here as the subjunctive nature of the real. When philosophy contemplates this constitutive lack, human praxis remains open and creative. Bloch speaks of the human need of learning how to hope, *docta spes*, in a phrase that is an obvious reference to Cusanus’ *docta ignorantia*. The classical, Socratic idea of knowing our ignorance is, in Bloch’s philosophy, inherited and reformulated in the structure of engagement as the precondition of truth.

Bloch’s writings have exercised a significant influence on the messianic and utopian strands in the thinking of Benjamin and Adorno, although they have placed different emphases and have also articulated very different philosophies of history. But for the most part it is fair to say that Bloch has been neglected as a philosopher in his own times. For the Marxists he was too metaphysical, for the academic philosophers he was too Marxist - and too subjunctive. I claim that one of the consequences of Bloch’s ontological position is that philosophy, especially philosophical writing, changes in nature. It becomes as engaged as the process of the world itself is, it acquires the hue of the spontaneous creative process of realization as improvisation; the

⁶ *The Principle of Hope*, p. 4. The German has “überschreiten”, which perhaps is more powerfully translated literally as “to transgress”.

philosophical writer who, in his or her texts, sets out to get close to being as subjunctive process and to communicate - in the literal sense of impart - the awareness reached to his or her readers, can do so only if their writing becomes like the real itself. An open goal, a venturing out into the not-yet, aware of ignorance and hope, becoming creative by being responsive to the question posed to us by the world. Such a writing, although it expresses a formal or generic philosophical position, is incurably local, involved with style and the expressive possibilities of language (itself an unfinished site of realization) and it is engaged. If truth is “prayer”, philosophical writing will acquire the tone of a (secularized) sermon. Bloch’s writing do what Benjamin mused about as a far-off possibility: that philosophy would shake off the form of the treatise, as much as its counterpart, the personal essay or tentative aphorism. I can think of only one analogue to the peculiar character of Bloch’s writings: the improvisation of free-style jazz music. There are motifs, licks, creative extensions, solos but also a continuous bass line that sometimes itself takes off in sudden flight. There is endless practice of the same themes and the instrument, language, and then the sudden break-out performance in which an unexpected new form or horizon is opened up.

The performative, exhortative style is thus an essential element of the truth-process of Bloch’s writings. In a lecture for the East-German Writers Association from 1956 Bloch speaks of the “Glut des Sagenmüssens”, the “glow of having-to-say”, as a precondition of art and philosophy, on one hand and the unison of “natural voice” and “clarity” on the other⁷ As he distinguished between the cold stream of the hard economic, historical materialist critique of ideology on one hand and the warm stream of the inspired recognition of the human longing for an unalienated

⁷ “Naturstimme und Klarheit” in: Ernst Bloch, *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1978), pp. 171-179.

existence in Marxism, and emphasized the need for both of these, so in his discussion of writing, he emphasizes the need to give the urge to express oneself free reign without “interference by schoolmasters from above”, and that if we do this, the need for conceptual clarity and criticality will turn out to be simply a part of this creative drive.⁸

It is easy to see what is going on here: we have the *ethos* of the person, the thinker, speaking, writing, thinking for themselves. Indeed, Benjamin had written perceptively to Scholem after reading *The Spirit of Utopia*, that one of the best aspects of it was that the author of it stands fully and personally for what he has written, even if Benjamin rejected the philosophy of history implicit in the book.⁹ We also have the *logos* of the need for rationality and clarity, amid undiminished *calor* of expression, as a condition of or any kind of philosophy and indeed any kind of persuasive utterance. And we have the *pathos* of the embodied, lived moment, the spontaneous creation that puts the writer and the reader in the tendency-latency of the process of the real. In other words, and this is the main claim of this article, in Bloch’s oeuvre philosophy becomes rhetoric and rhetoric becomes philosophy. The originality of Bloch’s philosophy of indeterminate being lies in the fact that here, in a self-conscious way, the culturally institutionalized split between philosophy and rhetoric, which has been a defining feature of the

⁸ There is a relation between Heidegger’s late reflections on the centrality of “saying” for the thinking of being (the form of thought that comes after metaphysics for Heidegger) and the rhetorical reading of Bloch, but this is a topic that must await a future exploration. See Knappe (2013) for a discussion of Heidegger’s relation to rhetoric. I concur, however, with his assessment that the “attempts of some German philosophers (Martin Heidegger (...)) have been unable to newly contour the theoretical understanding of the specifics of an independent discipline of rhetoric”. (p. 1)

⁹ Benjamin, Walter and Gerschom Scholem, *The Story of a Friendship*, tr. Zohn (New York: The New York Review of Books 2003)

self-understanding of philosophy since Plato, is overcome.¹⁰ In this way we can get an understanding of the nature of Bloch's style. We can also understand what he is trying to achieve with his sermon-like texts, which mostly operate at the level of what we might call *deep rhetoric* or *critical rhetoric* - the level underlying ideas, frames, assumptions and attitudes with which we make sense of things. We can also begin to see the importance of the philosopher, the thinker or speaker, rather than treat these texts, as our current critical and interpretive practices and our current conception of philosophy implicitly exhort us to do, as independent artefacts. They are, to use a dangerous phrase, strategic communications that aim to show their audience something the author deems to be important. By doing so he aims to change the world by changing the way his audience thinks. Philosophy becomes a full-blooded creative practice, in which the critical, axiological, speculative, public and existential functions of philosophy are transformed but remain preserved.

The Philosopher-Rhetorician

It would be good if I could capture the overcoming of the split between philosophy and rhetoric - metaphysics here, persuasion there - in a new term that would replace the two. This would do justice to the what is going on in Bloch's texts. To be sure, he himself did not reflect on his work in this way - he is concerned to present himself as a philosopher throughout, just not a "university philosopher" (here the obvious echoes of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche can be heard) and in the few places where he uses words like "rhetoric" or "sophist" he simply follows the long-established practice of the connotation of empty verbiage, ideology, demagoguery and special pleading that the centuries have let accrue around them. So salvaging Bloch - he himself

¹⁰ The later return to the sophists, which underlies much of what is called postmodernism in philosophy, is actually a regression behind the position Bloch had reached in his writings.

speaks often of the need to rescue the utopian and unfinished elements of not-so-utopian and settled past in all forms of human activity - means in this case moving beyond his self-understanding. By way of kind of Cartesian hyperbole I will therefore speak of Bloch's work as a rhetoric.

As a historical contextualization, it is worthwhile to bring to mind the fact that the revival of rhetorical studies at the University of Tübingen from the 1960s was closely related to Bloch's presence there. He lived and worked as a visiting professor in Tübingen from 1961, when he fled East Germany, to his death in 1977. Walter Jens (to whom Bloch dedicated the lecture on *Naturstimme und Klarheit* cited above) was appointed to the first Chair in Rhetoric to be established in many centuries at Tübingen, and at the time the only Chair in Rhetoric in Germany. Bloch's assistant, Gert Ueding, succeeded Jens and made decisive contributions to the renewal of rhetorical studies.¹¹ This work continues to this day.¹² Although there was no direct involvement of Bloch himself in the re-emergence of rhetoric as a field of study in post-war German scholarship, there is a proximity or contiguity which is not out of character with the nature of this philosophy. He also had a reputation for being an impressive orator and spoke out publicly on many occasions.¹³

With the help of Tübingen rhetorician Joachim Knape's general theory of modern rhetoric we can delve deeper into the reading of Bloch's texts as constituting philosophy as rhetoric. Knape

¹¹ The monumental *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (Frankfurt: Niemeyer Verlag, 1992-2013). Also the standard textbook Gert Ueding and Bernd Steinbrink, *Grundriß der Rhetorik: Geschichte, Technik, Methode* (Berlin: Springer 2011 (1976)).

¹² Joachim Knape, *Modern Rhetoric in Culture, Arts and Media* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2013).

¹³ See Peter Zudeick, *Vom Hintern des Teufels*,

proposes a general definition of rhetoric, in which the concrete utopian dimension is clearly audible:

Rhetoric is the communicative possibility for man to assert the social validity of an issue that is important to him (his oratorical telos) and, in doing so, to free himself, at least in the moment of communicative success, from social determination. Rhetoric has, from the beginning, always been about the emergence of man from social voicelessness, and the rhetorical imperative is: *perorare aude!* Have the courage to use your expressive capabilities!¹⁴

Rhetorical activity is thus a highly specific form of communication; there are many others. Rhetoric, in this view, is a practice of liberation, if not of freedom. The Kantian reference is unmistakable and Knape reinforces it by placing this conception in the context of Kant's categorically imperative requirement of publicity for political (persuasive) action.¹⁵ Rhetoric, persuasive discourse, is fundamentally different from manipulation because it requires us to "act openly", instead of having "secret goals" and using communicative "tricks".¹⁶ The standard of critique that is thus given remains open to interpretation and application to specific contexts, as our understanding of what it means to act openly is to some extent open to change and development, but it is nevertheless a criterion that can be used practically to critique communicative interactions and institutions that lack equality of rhetorical opportunity. It is a specific instance of the general nature of the categorical imperative, namely that we must assume that it obtains in order for it to be efficacious. The situation is analogous to the function

¹⁴ Knape (2013), p. 2.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *On Everlasting Peace*, [REF].

¹⁶ Knape (2013), p. 6.

of the counterfactual assumption of the ideal speech situation in Habermas' theory of communicative action.¹⁷ In other words, publicity or openness is a constitutive value or regulative idea that acts as a condition of possibility for rhetoric as distinct from manipulation. Those who are interested in preventing openness might use the denial of the substance of this distinction as a defamation of rhetoric to impede freedom of speech.¹⁸ Knappe concludes that the orator as strategic communicator, trying to influence others (communicative context) by words, gestures, images or other expressions (text), is the element in the communication process that is central to rhetoric as a theory and as a practical art. The various genres and forms of rhetorical action can be further analyzed and categorized, each with their respective forms of orator-audience relation, use of media, socially acceptable means of persuasion, stylistics etc. We can think of the differences, for example, between monologues and dialogues, sermons and treatises, essays and political speeches, scientific communication and mass entertainment, digital communication and face-to-face communication. We can also try to understand the variety of rhetorical situations or communicative contexts, and again we see that wide scope of rhetoric, from relationship rhetoric to classroom rhetoric to rhetoric in the public sphere, the art gallery, the political party to even a rhetoric of nature and our relation to nature.

What might a philosophical rhetoric, philosophy as rhetoric, look like in this framework? If rhetoric can free us from our social determination at least in the moment when we are successfully communicating, this is so because even if we do not succeed in achieving our

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tr. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press 1981).

¹⁸ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. Ashton (London: Routledge 2004), p. 56: "It is in the rhetorical quality that culture, society, and tradition animate the thought; a stern hostility to it is leagued with barbarism, in which bourgeois thinking ends. The vilification of Cicero and even Hegel's aversion to Diderot bear witness to the resentment of those whom the trials of life have robbed of the freedom to stand tall, and who regard the body of language as sinful."

objective, the successful communication implies being recognized as a free speaking agent and thus having one's autonomy at least in principle recognized. How far this recognition might go, what the extent of our freedom is, what the rhetorically acting human community might become, and who and what it might come to include, is something we do not know. It is precisely the open process of hope that Bloch talks about that is the only guide we have here. So rhetorical practice, at the level of its conditions of possibility, refers to a horizon of finality that remains unarticulated in full but approximated in part in the imagination, the longings and hopes of the rhetorical actors. If we see philosophy as *docta spes*, and if we take the primacy of the subjunctive as providing the basis for the rhetorical recasting of philosophy we can be specific about assigning philosophy a place in the field of rhetorical activity. The idea of a utopian philosophy now speaks to a central idea in the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke: "Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural conditions by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense order), and rotten with perfection".¹⁹ The stylistically rich antithetical phrase reaches the same point as Bloch's idea of the not yet. Perfection is not given as a goal that is already there and just has to be realized, but as a negativity or lack in being, as a not-yet, potential being or possibility. The organic metaphor of decay jars with the favorite vocabulary of Bloch but it shares the concrete, embodied and organic semantic coordinates, and also for Bloch it is mostly by seeing what could be better, what is not as we want it, that we can make the utopian concrete. Bloch introduces the concept of the *Realsymbol*, real symbol, to indicate moments in reality where we encounter the utopian

¹⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press 1966), p. 66.

openness (the mountain, the sky, the bridge, etc.).²⁰ The spirit of utopia is not a spirit of hierarchy, to be sure. But we can correct Burke with Bloch and vice versa. What is important here is the fact that the primacy of the subjunctive, if we accept it (which is something I have not argued for explicitly here), leads to the possibility of seeing philosophical reflection as a foundational part of a generalized rhetorical practice. This perspective provides a hermeneutical principle with which to interpret Bloch's texts.

Death and the World as Experiment

In turn, this interpretation should also make Bloch's philosophy relevant for rhetorical theory and practice. In the final part of this article I will draw out some of the implications for our understanding of rhetoric by briefly considering death as a rhetorical theme and by discussing the categorial structure Bloch developed in *Experimentum Mundi* as an elaboration of not-yet-being.

The significance of death for rhetoric follows from two circumstances: as Aristotle points out, rhetoric has three branches, forensic, epideictic and deliberative, which correspond to past, present and future. In many textbooks on rhetoric since antiquity the obituary or eulogy is one of the main examples of a rhetorical text; speaking concerns life as it is lived. It puts into words how a life was lived, what was part of it and what wasn't. Without speaking a human life would not persist through time and would be forgotten after it was lived. Speech is the medium of remembrance. A life that passed away is maintained in its finitude in speech. Hence the human need to speak in the face of death as a recognition both of death as the negation of life, death as loss, as well as of something in life that, though life passes, remains forever. This is the function of mourning a lost one, so that life can continue. "You all did love him once, not without cause:

²⁰ *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1.

What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?"²¹ Rhetoric as saying well what needs to be said mediated between love and death; the death of a loved one is a rhetorical situation. Despite the fact that words are experienced in their starkest inadequacy in this situation, they are here also most indispensable. This should give us an indication of the intimate connection between life, death and speech. But even when the goal of the orator is a practical one without much reference to ultimate horizons, the recognition that he or she requests by giving it to his or her audience includes a recognition of time as the field in which human life takes place. For many philosophers this has meant first and foremost a recognition of the finite nature of human life. Plato speaks of philosophy as a preparation for death and truth as something we apprehend when we leave life behind as much possible, when the soul returns to where it was before it was born into a body. For Heidegger Dasein's mortality, the unavoidable personal end of all meaning, functions as the condition of significance. Speaking would be unnecessary and impossible in a world without mortality and without horizons. As Lévinas has pointed out in his discussion of Bloch's philosophy of death and dying is, for the philosophical tradition, first and foremost my death and it is equated to nothingness or non-being. The fear of death is constituted by the fact that death is the negation of my desire to be.²² For Bloch, Lévinas argues, it is different. Here death is not the end because death is not conceived in terms of nothingness but in terms of not-yet-ness. The fear of death is the fear that my work is not completed. But there is for Bloch no problem with my finitude. Utopian fulfilment is larger than the individual. As I come to realize

²¹ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.103-4.

²² Emmanuel Lévinas, *God, Death and Time*, tr. Bergot (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000). A good example of this claim is the short story *The Mountain* in Bloch's *Traces*, tr. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006), p. 171, in which a hunter loses his way on a mountain. When he comes out after a few hours, years have gone by and he finds he is presumed dead. He entered a space that was extraterritorial to the process of the world, a space that is just as much removed from life as from death, that cannot be put into words (he stops speaking) and is the source of hope (he dies content). The mountain is the real symbol here.

that your affairs are my affairs - *tua res agitur* - it concerns you, when your neighbor's house is on fire, in Horace's line, which is one of Bloch's many staple quotations, I come to realize that creating the world as a home, a *Heimat*, is not a personal project but a process in which I am taken up with others, with all the world in the final instance, so that what concerns me in the end more than my own death is the death of others. Death, for Bloch, is neither Heidegger's precondition of meaning, nor is it Adorno's scandal of philosophy. Death at once loses its sting in the utopian philosophy and it is a real symbol of hope. The rottenness that Burke speaks of shines through in Lévinas reading of death in Bloch:

Time is pure hope. It is even the birthplace of hope. This is hope for a completed world in which man and his work shall not be merchandise. A hope and a utopia without which the activity that fulfills being - that is, humanity - could neither begin, nor continue in the long patience of its science and effort.²³

It is in the real symbols of culture and nature mediated by culture that the utopian state of fulfilment occasionally breaks through the dark core of subjectivity, that "the completed world is *glimpsed*", and can become a "source of courage".²⁴

The occasion of death summons speech. This speech is a speech that is situated in time as pure hope, rather than the time of forensic, epideictic and deliberative rhetoric - these now appear as reifications of the underlying process that is material hope. In the face of death speech is a medium for the process of mourning; it does not remove the unacceptability or the pain of death,

²³ Lévinas (2000), p. 96.

²⁴ Lévinas (2000), p. 96.

but shows death as not just the negation of being, nothingness, but as a glimpse in what is extraterritorial to life and time and thus not subject to rot. The redrawing of the relation between time, death and speech in the light of the realization that time is pure hope informs rhetorical practice in this limit-case of rhetorical situations, where what is achieved in speech is never enough and inadequate but necessary for life nonetheless.

The second illustration of the implications of Bloch's philosophy for rhetorical theory and practice is the categorial framework that is presented in *Experimentum Mundi: Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis* (The Experiment of the World: Question, Categories of Bringing Out, Praxis).²⁵ This is the last book that Bloch wrote, more than fifty years after *The Spirit of Utopia*. In it he presents the groundwork for his entire body of work, which he had come to see as a unity spanning an arch from concrete to universal and back again, much like a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a materialist incarnation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Again, language plays a central role. Thought begins with questions, but being itself is given to us as questionable or standing in question. There is in being an "inconstructible question", a questionability that cannot be given a specific form yet, cannot be put in terms of a potential answer yet but is experienced as an abyssal astonishment. Bloch had identified this aspect of existence already in *The Spirit of Utopia*; here it becomes the starting point for the "theory-praxis" that philosophy becomes; no longer only a theory of the world, but an active, performative participant in making, creating, being. Again we see a reformulation of a classical philosophical motif under the sign of immanence: philosophy starts in wonder.

²⁵ Ernst Bloch, *Experimentum Mundi: Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1975).

The question asks for a response and is experienced in first instance as a lack that motivates or irritates, as something that is lacking and thus motivates a process. The subject quite literally cannot stand itself. The figure of the question and response means that the ontological situation is conceived here as a rhetorical situation. In the beginning no more than a terse murmur, “ein knappes Raunen”, is possible but the urge of wanting to understand and put into words is there, unstoppable.²⁶ Speaking well begins with the recognition of the near-wordlessness of all beginning. Subjective experience now engages in a praxis of objectification in which contents, words, forms come to stand over against the subjective, creating a relation between the “that” of existence and the “what” of the forms that have been “brought out”. But the gap between the two remains, its endpoint is identity or Heimat, when the “that” will have become identical with the “what”. The categories of this process of intelligibility, of coming to know, are the following: 1) *dimensioning categories*, time and space and their dependents; 2) *transmission categories*, causality, finality and substantiality; 3) *categories of manifestation*, such as forms, archetypes, horizons (“exodus figures”) but also quantity, quality and measurement; 4) *communication categories*, regions and principles, religion, nature, values, spheres and epochs. The third element is the resulting praxis in which knowledge informs action and identity grows in the world via the categorically structured process of the realization of the realizing (*Realisierung des Realisierenden*), of purpose.

Rather than attempting to map this succinct structure onto well-known schemas of rhetorical structure, which would yield no more than an intuitive plausibility in terms of what we already know (although a relation to Burke’s pentad is easily drawn), we can use it to conceptualize in a new way the rhetorical situation. Rather than seeing the structure as an alternative checklist for

²⁶ *Experimentum Mundi*, p. 3.

inventio, we can point out that rhetorical action arises as a creative response to a question, a situation that asks for a response. This response is dimensioned in space and time; it has a transmitted efficacy, which includes its substance; it makes certain content manifest as imaginations, anticipations, fixed meanings or dynamic, historical processes and it communicates in the sense that it establishes a common cause within a shared sphere. These elements make up the rhetorical act when we conceive of it against the background of the utopian perspective on the world and ourselves as unfinished, not yet fully “brought out”, as subjunctive. This model of rhetorical action is strategic, not in the sense that is often associated with this terms these days, of serving self-interests in a world in which the winner takes all, but strategic in the sense of the word that derives from its root, *stratos*, the expanse or spread, as in the spread-out sky, the expanse or stratosphere, or the street as a way that we can go. For the purposeful speech of rhetoric to be the genuinely open action that marks off persuasion from manipulation, these dimensions articulate eloquence, speaking well, in tune with the utopian tendency-latency of the world as unfinished process.

Bloch’s philosophy has many difficulties; of these I have only mentioned one that is particularly pertinent to my claims, namely that Bloch himself holds on to the classical opposition between philosophy as the search for truth and rhetoric as empty word play meant to deceive or manipulate. But there are other problems that would have to be dealt with if one were to fully develop the position I have explored here. How is it possible to have a teleology without a telos? Can the ontology of indeterminate being be rendered consistent? How closely is Bloch’s project tied to a nineteenth-century version of historical materialism? Is the resurgence, in many places, of theological modes of thought incompatible with the materialist foundations Bloch commits

himself to? All these questions I can only indicate here. However, the perspective on cultural production as engaged hopeful practice seems promising today, as we seen and need new, creative ways of moving beyond the divisions of past philosophy, cultural theory and indeed rhetorical theory. In his powerful prose, Bloch performs a rhetoric of hope perhaps even more than a philosophy of hope. But he shows along the way that, under the sign of hope, that distinction itself turns out to be one of the most persistent and pernicious ideological traps. The categorial scheme of *Experimentum Mundi* can help us to draw the contours of engaged free speech in a world beyond nihilism, in which purpose, harmony with nature and collective emancipation can be real dimensions of becoming a speaking being. In doing so it can be read as a groundwork for a contemporary rhetoric that can give new meaning to the practice of liberation through speech.

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