
Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left. Ernst Bloch. Translated by Loren Goldman and Peter Thompson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. xxvi + 109.

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What is matter? Is it acted upon by other forces or does it have its own laws of motion? Can matter give rise to subjectivity? Materialism is a hot topic in contemporary philosophy and religious studies, with contending positions ranging from new materialism to eliminativism to various forms of speculative realism. The English translation of Ernst Bloch's 1952 monograph *Avicenna und die Aristotelische Linke*¹ (*Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*) is a well-timed event, serving as Bloch's intervention into an earlier iteration of contemporary debates as well as offering "an unsurpassed précis of Bloch's own speculative materialism" (xi). Here, Bloch argues for a materialist interpretation of Aristotle, one that he finds decisively developed in the work of medieval Islamic philosopher Avicenna. This interpretation serves as the basis for a left-wing Aristotelianism that Bloch also finds in the works of Averroes, Avicbron, Giordano Bruno, Baruch Spinoza, and Karl Marx. At the heart of this tradition is an emphasis on the self-actualizing capacities of matter (15–16).

Unpacking Avicenna's own metaphysics takes up a considerable portion of the book. Bloch identifies three main points of interest regarding Avicenna's interpretation of Aristotle: (1) the relationship between body and self, (2) the relationship between individual understanding and universal reason, and (3) the logical relationship between matter and form. It is the matter-form relation

1. For the original publication, see Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna und die Aristotelische Linke* (Berlin: Rütten and Loening, 1952).

that most captures Bloch's attention. For Aristotle, every created thing is a composition of matter and form; matter – as indeterminate and unformed – is potentiality. As potentiality, matter is passive and *only* passes into actuality when combined with form (20). Although Avicenna follows Aristotle in making a distinction between matter-as-passive and form-as-active, this distinction becomes something different in his hands. Instead of emphasizing matter's actualization by active-form (otherwise known as the “unmoved mover” or God), Avicenna argues that form is latent within matter itself, and that God is that which sets matter's self-actualizing capacities into motion (21). For Bloch, this move marks Avicenna's radicalization of Aristotle, as he “sharpens the Aristotelian doctrine of uncreated matter” (21) by making matter, like form, an eternal essence. Avicenna's interpretation and development of Aristotle marks the consolidation of the Aristotelian Left by systematically articulating the active capacities of matter.

What makes this a specifically leftist tendency is that the affirmation of matter's intrinsic capabilities and integrity undermines the need to appeal to divine (or creatural) authority. This position is juxtaposed with what Bloch calls the Aristotelian Right, an alternative interpretation of Aristotle represented by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas draws a strong distinction between matter and form, rendering matter passive and form active to a degree beyond Aristotle himself (24–25). Where the Aristotelian Left emphasizes God's role as the immanent cause of matter's self-movement, the Aristotelian Right focuses on the activity of divine transcendence. Although Aquinas argues that matter has intrinsic causal powers, its self-actualizing capacities are “an exclusive gift of the *divine* Act-Being” (27).

The distinction between left and right versions of Aristotelianism is where Bloch's own understanding of historical

materialism becomes apparent, as he argues that the philosophical differences between the two traditions correspond to different socio-political conditions. According to Bloch's reading, Avicenna's interest in the material world's laws of motion is linked to the scientific, technological, and political-economic sophistication of the society in which he lived. For Bloch, Islamic society "despite its feudal forms and its spiritual wars, was organized according to a different principle than that of medieval Europe," a principle which rendered it a prototype of modern bourgeois society with its "global merchants" and "blossoming manufacturing sector" (3–4). On the other hand, Aquinas' philosophical position corresponds to the hierarchical order of "feudal-clerical class society and its ideology" (24). The hierarchical order of feudal-clerical society runs from the fields to the heavens. These connections between the political and the speculative-metaphysical are one of the most original yet subtle points in the book. While the argument that social relations are intrinsically related to forms of thought is already present in Marx, what is unique about Bloch is the way he reads the speculative medieval theological-philosophical discourses through the lens of a historical materialist method in a way that is generative for contemporary scholarship in both political theology and philosophy of religion.

In the final sections of the text, Bloch discusses the ways that Avicenna's insights are further developed in the wake of the Copernican revolution. The displacement of the Ptolemaic system dissolved the remaining traces of the form-matter hierarchy in medieval Aristotelianism, and made it possible to conceive of the universe as "completely realized matter-potentiality" (40). Despite talking about Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bruno, Bloch has little to say about Marx himself (aside from a quote from *The Holy Family*). It

would have been interesting to see a fuller discussion of Marx as a member of the modern Aristotelian Left, especially given Marx's own proclivities towards Aristotle. Such a move could also open an inquiry into whether it is possible to situate Marx within a larger Jewish-Islamic intellectual tradition. But even with few references to Marx, this is a very exciting translation, one that has the potential to animate discussions across the critical humanities.