INTRODUCTION

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Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left, Ernst Bloch's study of the thinker he affectionately called "my friend Ibn Sina,"[1] does many things. Most evidently, it traces a concept of vital materialism from Aristotle to Karl Marx—one developed by medieval Islamic philosophers Avicenna (980–1037) and Averroës (1126–1198), Jewish Andalusian poet-philosopher Avicebron (c. 1021–1070), and Renaissance pantheist Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) along with other major and minor figures—that ultimately informs Bloch's strikingly unorthodox materialist worldview. In addition to offering an unsurpassed précis of Bloch's own speculative materialism, it also presents itself as a testament to Bloch's extraordinary learning and imaginative genius; as early as 1952, he was insisting on the intertwined nature of Arabic and Western thought in the medieval period and beyond, a perspective that has only become common among specialists in the field in recent years.[2] Moreover, by situating the world's emancipatory possibilities in the Islamic interpretation of Aristotle, this small book provides a provocative reconstruction of the sources of modern philosophy that both confounds standard binaries of East/West and Premodernity/Modernity and makes a strong case for the

ongoing relevance of metaphysics for contemporary critical theory. For Bloch, the issues raised in this volume resonate far beyond the bounds of scholarship as Avicenna's legacy lights a path for inquiry about the very compatibility of utopia and reality. In the works of Avicenna and Averroës, thinkers living nearly a millennium before him, Bloch detects the seeds of a lively view of matter that permits and even invites utopian aspiration.

Despite being one of the most consequential German philosophers of the twentieth century,[3] Bloch (1885–1977) remains in the shadows of better-known contemporaries such as Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin, all of whom were his friends. Reasons for this neglect involve both his substance and his style. Bloch's unapologetic embrace of utopianism and his willingness to seriously engage religion often led to the assumption that his work suffers from mystification, that it is fixated on epiphenomenal appearances instead of essential reality. Thus, Max Scheler wrote that Bloch seemed to be "running amok to God"; Siegfried Kracauer complained that he was "fornicating with God"; and Max Weber reportedly described his relationship to Bloch tartly: "He is possessed by his God, and I am a scientist."[4] Moreover, for the work of an avowed Marxist, not to mention one of the few notable postwar German intellectuals who chose to live in East Germany,[5] Bloch's writings can seem detached from the materialism that is so central to that tradition. His effusive commentaries on Western opera, Chinese fairy tales, and the ancient Egyptian pantheon can overwhelm his dutiful references to economic structures and modes of production. The fact that most of Bloch's work available in English translation concerns aesthetics, culture, and the utopian content of religion can leave his non-German readers with the mistaken impression that he is uninterested in deeper ontological questions.[6] *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* puts paid to this misapprehension, showing Bloch's investment in an account of a material reality in which the possibility of radical social transformation grows in the latent tendencies of matter itself.

Bloch's utopianism and his interest in aesthetic and religious forms of expression partly explain the relative neglect of his work, but his style admittedly serves as another barrier, for his impressive scope is matched only by the difficulty of his writing. The famously abstruse Adorno wrote an essay entitled "*Grosse Blochmusik*" (great Bloch music), a pun on *Blechmusik* (brass-band music, a title composed with a wink, as *Blech* can also mean "nonsense"), and said that *The Spirit of Utopia* seemed to have been written "by Nostradamus himself."[7] Similarly, Jürgen Habermas described Bloch as giving philosophical representation to late expressionism, with its "exploded fragments of a hyphenated terminology, the welling exuberance of a pleonastic phraseology, the strong-chested breathing of dithyrambic plangency."[8] Bloch indeed demands an active reader, perhaps because his writing unfolds according to his notion of the basic human condition: the essential darkness of our lived present is illuminated in flashes by the *not yet* of utopian consciousness. In any event, Adorno, Habermas, and countless others have found the effort of reading Bloch worthwhile.

BLOCH'S PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE

Because Bloch's general philosophical concerns are hope and utopia, understanding his intellectual project is helpful background for *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. Scheler's and Kracauer's quips reflect the perennial suspicion of unreality that confronts utopian thinking. This challenge is, of course, reflected in the word "utopia," coined by Thomas More by joining the Greek *οὐ* (*ou*: no, not) with *τόπος* (*topos*: place), yielding "no-place," a convenient homonym of *εὖ-τόπος* (*eu-topos*), "good-place"; More's narrator, not coincidentally, is named Hytholyday, "nonsense-peddler."[9] Hope poses a similar problem, for it orients us toward an uncertain future and toward imaginary constructs that may threaten to distract from the exigencies of the present. And although hope now has a generally positive valence,[10] the ancient Greeks viewed it with ambivalence: in

myth, Pandora kept hope from escaping its home in her jar of *evils*,[11] and the epithet most commonly associated with it was "blind."

Bloch does consider hope to be a basic principle of human experience, but he does not suggest its blind embrace or that we hope willy-nilly *for anything*. Rather than being entranced by reality's mystical shell, Bloch focuses his attention on aesthetics and religion in order to reveal what he believes to be their secular and human inner utopian core, the germ of real longing for what he called "the fulfilled moment" of genuine emancipation.[12] The beatific state spells a qualitative transfiguration in human relations, and Bloch calls it the *Novum*, or the genuinely novel, to distinguish it from the *Neue*, or the new that we have come to expect, a new that is merely a repetition of the old—a "new and improved" blender, for instance.[13] The cultural products of human expression are not (merely) epiphenomenal echoes of material dynamics but rather provide "anticipations" (*Vorscheine*: "pre-appearances") of utopian possibilities. While it is true in one sense to say that utopia does not exist, Bloch insists on a further qualification: utopia does *not yet* exist. In another sense, then, utopia is real, albeit latent and in process. As Bloch explains, "So far does utopia extend, so vigorously does this raw material spread to all human activities, so essentially must every anthropology and science of the world contain it. *There is no realism worthy of the name if it abstracts from this strongest element in reality, as an unfinished reality*."[14] Because reality is always in the process of becoming, utopian aspiration may have traction and may even aid in the utopia's realization. Ultimately, and notably in the closing chapters of *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch attributes reality's processual nature to Marx's basic insight that human labor produces and reproduces the world, thereby (in Bloch's reading) identifying free, creative agency as the motor of historical development.

Many futures lie dormant in the present, however, and not just any of them can, should, or will come to fruition. How to distinguish between effective utopias and pipe dreams becomes a crucial part of Bloch's project, and he divides utopia and hope alike into "abstract" and "concrete" species. Simply put, an abstract utopia is

unrealizable while a concrete utopia is realizable. Unlike an abstract utopia, a concrete utopia is predicated on an understanding of reality's underlying tendencies—a technical term in Bloch, meaning "the energy of matter in action."[15] This distinction is central, for Bloch viewed himself as a partisan of a concrete utopia and inveighed against an abstract utopia as passionately as his own critics attacked him. When Bloch explains that he wants his readers to "learn to hope,"[16] he means both that they must grasp their utopian aspirations as essential to their selves *and* that they must come to discern and embrace concrete utopia.

Bloch's understanding that concrete utopia reflects active tendencies in the world is further illuminated by his description of the various "layers" of possibility, particularly his distinction between what he calls "the fact-based object-suited possible" and "the objectively-real possible" or "real possibility."[17] The first relates to what is considered possible *given the present worldly state of affairs*; the second relates to what is possible *given the latent tendencies of the world and the fact of ongoing human agency*. From the first perspective, motorized travel was impossible in ancient Babylonia and medieval Strasbourg alike, as both the technology and the know-how to create it were lacking. From the second perspective, however, motorized travel was always possible, but the tools to bring it to fruition had not yet been harnessed. The first type of possibility, in other words, reflects the current state of knowledge about the world; the second type, by contrast, reflects the fact that new facets of the world regularly come into being. Bloch holds, finally, that modern science trucks solely with the first type of possibility, in which the present constellation of facts is accepted as immutable. To this, he contrasts a "Real possibility" that takes stock of the forces operating in the process of becoming, chief among which is human freedom in fashioning self and world. As Bloch put it, reality consists of "the events produced by working people together with the abundant interweaving process-connections between past, present, and future."[18] Thus, utopian thought presupposes a world capable of being radically different from its current state. Bloch accordingly

saw the need for an account of the latent potential of the world that allows us to envision the growth of genuinely new social forms out of our material existence without the aid of the supernatural. The explanation and possibility of concrete hope lead Bloch to the philosophy of nature in general and to the concept of matter in particular.[19]

UTOPIA AND DIALECTICAL MATTER

The Avicennan narrative notwithstanding, Bloch's reflections on the philosophy of nature grew more immediately out of the *Materialismusstreit*, a debate in nineteenth-century German letters about whether matter was inert or self-generating, a controversy that revived the determinism/freedom and theism/pantheism controversies of the eighteenth century in the language of then-contemporary science.[20] Friedrich Engels's and Vladimir Lenin's respective interventions, *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature* on the one hand and *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* on the other,[21] indicate the interest this question held for followers of Marx, whose first thesis on Feuerbach calls for a materialism that recognizes reality not merely as an object of contemplation but as "sensuous human activity, practice."[22] The early Marx also served as an inspiration for Bloch, who sought to make sense of Marx's description of a society free from alienation as "the essential unity of man and nature, . . . the genuine resurrection of nature, the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature."[23] This glimpse of utopia suggests a world in which human activity is, as Bloch later described it, "co-productive" with nature.[24] Such a state of affairs would signal the end of humanity's exploitative relationship to nature—a relationship Bloch associated with capitalism—and mark the beginning of a collaborative one that would entail (again following early Marx) the end of the alienation of humanity from nature and, by extension, of humanity from itself.[25] Such an emancipated world would, indeed, be genuinely unprecedented—*Novum*, not

merely *Neue*—and so Bloch argues that we need an account of matter that permits truly novel possibilities.

Bloch rejects what he considers to be the "narrow, ossified" view of matter in modern science,[26] writing, "Mechanical materialism can have no utopia. Everything is present in it, mechanically present."[27] In failing to acknowledge reality as unfinished, the mechanistic view threatens utopia altogether. If matter is fixed, change becomes unthinkable, and hope pointless—put in Bloch's terms, mechanistic matter makes utopia "abstract." Bloch thus worries that "confronted with the future-state which stands like an agreed consequence in the so-called iron logic of history, the subject can just as easily lay his hands in his lap as he once folded them when confronted with God's will."[28] Instead, we need to think of the world as becoming, for only when possibilities remain latent is it possible to imagine the realization of a "concrete" utopia. A world of becoming requires a dynamic conception of matter, however, which allows "new shoots and new spaces for development" against the completed world of inert matter.[29] To invoke Bloch's aforementioned layers of possibility, mechanism reflects "the fact-based object-suited possible," while dialectical matter alone is able to convey the Real possibility of a concrete utopia in process.

Bloch calls his conception of matter "neo-Aristotelian," and Aristotle's discussion in the *Metaphysics* provides the four key terms for Bloch's own analysis: matter, form, potentiality and actuality.[30] For Aristotle, all subjects are compounds of matter and form, the former providing the material (say, wood), and the latter providing the essential substance (say, chairness or bedness);[31] Aristotle privileges form because it lends the thing its essence—a bed is a bed whether made out of wood or metal. There is a closely linked distinction in Aristotle between potentiality (*δύναμις*, *dynamis*) and actuality (*ενέργεια*, *energeia*, or *ἐντελέχεια*, *entelechia*).[32] Matter exists in a state of potentiality—it has the capacity to become many things—which attains actuality when combined with form.[33] The precise relationship between matter, form, potentiality, and actuality has been a source of debate among Aristotle scholars from his

earliest commentators in the ancient world to philosophers of the present day.

Bloch's interpretation mobilizes the ambiguity of matter's potentiality against the primacy of form that Aristotle implies. Bloch finds in Aristotle's *dynamis* both structured and unstructured types of potentiality, which are differentiated by their capacity to receive form. The first, structured type of potentiality, *kata to dynaton*, Bloch renders as *Nach-Möglichkeit-Sein*; the second, unstructured type, *dynamei-on*, Bloch renders as *In-Möglichkeit-Sein.* Literally translated, these terms become "Being-According-to-Possibility" and "Being-in-Possibility," a distinction as confusing in English as it is in German. Peter Thompson and I have opted instead for "what-is-considered-possible" and "what-may-become-possible." The latter phrases more clearly convey Bloch's meaning, which can be gleaned by reference, again, to the layers of possibility. What-is-considered-possible, the kata to dynaton, denotes that which is possible given what we know now while what-may-become-possible, the dynamei-on, is that which may become possible whether or not it accords with currently accepted notions of possibility. For Bloch, this fecund material basis of form approximates the real objectivity whereby reality is inscribed in the process of becoming. To put this explanation in more concrete terms, in the ancient world, a world without slavery would have been considered impossible by most, for the institution and the assumption of natural inferiority that underlay it were widespread. To argue for its end would have seemed foolishly utopian, for, in a refrain one still hears constantly, that was just the way things were. And yet the abolition of slavery was possible (had there been the will to abolish it) and remains so today; it is not a natural fact that humans *must* be enslaved to other humans even if it is an undeniable and morally abhorrent reality that human beings have been so enslaved since time immemorial. To look to what-may-become-possible rather than just what-is-considered-possible is to appreciate the possible that transcends the bounds of accepted possibility, the possibility that there are possibilities we have not yet

actualized; this is why Bloch prefers the more "open" possibility of the Aristotelian dynamei-on.

This openness is crucial for Bloch's concept of matter and for his thought as a whole—he regularly called his philosophical project an "open system."[34] It is reflected, furthermore, not only in his preferred understanding of potentiality in the dynamei-on but also in his preferred understanding of actuality, the *energia* or *entelechy*. In Aristotle, entelechy is the principle that propels something's development from potential to actuality. This is almost always toward a determinate end, leading to the formal development of matter into particularly predisposed shapes, an entelechy whose telos is defined and whose realization will spell the actualization of said telos in the world. Bloch, however, draws on a different type of entelechy that Aristotle mentions—"open," "incomplete," or "unfinished entelechy"—and occasionally uses this phrase to define his notion of matter.[35] For Aristotle, unfinished entelechy describes progress in motion: the entelechy of a train approaching Philadelphia, for example. Bloch interprets unfinished entelechy as being related not only to motion but also to ends themselves, for—in his view, at least—matter itself is in the process of development. What develops it, moreover, is human agency, itself rooted in openness by dint of the human capacity for freedom.

It may be helpful, finally, to add one last distinction. Bloch sees Marxism as a story of the fruitful interaction of a scientific, analytical impulse and a visionary, utopian impulse. These "cold" and "warm" streams of Marxism represent complementary needs: the former combats Jacobinism and extravangantism while the latter combats "the danger of economism and of goal-forgetting opportunism."[36] As Bloch sees it, his doctrine of coldness relates to what-is-considered-possible, operating with a conventional understanding of possibility. His doctrine of warmth, by contrast, is "solely related to that positive what-may-become-possible, not subject to any disenchantment, which embraces the growing realization and the realizing element, primarily in the human sphere."[37] "Dialectical

matter" is what Bloch's ontology ultimately seeks to illuminate, a negotiation between the poles of coldness and warmth, between the kata to dynaton and the dynamei-on, between the categories of what-is-considered-possible and what-may-become-possible, as it is realized in concert with human action.

AVICENNA AND THE ARISTOTELIAN LEFT

Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left is Bloch's first published work dedicated to materialism. Although it appeared in 1952, its origins date back decades earlier: in 1936 Bloch sent Horkheimer a letter enthusiastically describing a notebook he had compiled of passages from energetic materialists, including Averroës, Avicebron, and Giordano Bruno, which he hoped to publish with an introduction.[38] Both the compilation and the manuscript for *Avicenna* are now lost, but the present work presumably has its roots in that early project; this origin would also explain the book's unusual structure, a twenty-one-thousand-word essay followed by an extensively annotated collection of primary sources that is nearly half that length. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* provides a summary of Bloch's metaphysics, but as its title suggests, his main goal in the work is to identify and revive the materialism he finds in a particular interpretation of Aristotle derived from medieval Islamic philosophy in contrast to what he perceives to be the dominant idealism of the West deriving from the Aristotelianism of Christian Scholastics such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

The general contours of the story can be put succinctly. As Bloch understands the tradition, the dominant interpretation of the form-matter relationship characterizes form as the essential element that is impressed upon matter, thereby relegating nature to a passive and subordinate element in the world. For Bloch, this interpretation bespeaks a fixed world in which ideas are sovereign at the expense of concrete reality, labor is institutionally denigrated, and clerical authority is made absolute. Bloch calls this strand of thought

"right-wing" Aristotelianism. Against this interpretation, Bloch sees a "left-wing" version of Aristotle that gives matter its due, supposing it to be not passive but an active collaborator without which form has no traction. He traces this tradition of Aristotle interpretation through Islamic philosophy, and he sees its seeds being laid by Avicenna before it comes to maturity in Averroës and reaches its apotheosis in Renaissance pantheism.

In "Aristotle-Avicenna and the Essences of this World," the book's central conceptual section, Bloch specifies the three main tendencies characterizing the Avicennan-Aristotelian Left. Avicenna's first major innovation was in arguing that because the body does not outlive death, the soul cannot be seen as sentient. As Bloch sees things, this philosophical step removed the "metaphysical whip" of the notion of hell in both Christianity and Islam, thereby undercutting clerical authorities' greatest weapon for keeping the masses subordinate: fear of eternal punishment. The second tendency concerns Averroës's teachings on the unity of human intellect. As Bloch reads them, Avicenna and Averroës both refuse to restrict reason to a cognitive elite, situating its capacity instead in all human beings as possible participants in active intellect. This move, too, democratizes access to truth, contrasting it against an Aristotelian Right that claimed privileged epistemological insight. The third and final tendency takes up the bulk of Bloch's reflections: the reshaping of the relationship between form and matter. Aristotle, Bloch explains, had written of a prime matter out of which anything could be formed, which contains only "passive" potentiality and hence exists incompletely. Everything that exists is a combination of this matter and form, however; as such, it has something collaborative about it. Aquinas and the Aristotelian Right emphasized the externality of form to matter, thereby making the active component in the combination something that is brought to or impressed upon matter from the outside, in this case by God and, by extension, absolute clerical-cum-political authority. By contrast, Bloch reads Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left as espying active or effective form *within* matter. The Aristotelian Left allowed that matter might

be predisposed in certain ways, which Bloch interprets as opening up the space of allowing the world upon which we have imposed a particular way to be different than it actually appears. The political importance of this transformation of Aristotle maps onto the distinction between Bloch's layers of possibility: *perhaps* the world is not fixed according to the categories that God or some supernatural being has imposed upon it (as the Right Aristotelians claim), and instead human agency can educe different ways of being out of them (as the Left Aristotelians claim). The world may be pregnant with new forms that we have not yet discerned and developed.

The concluding section of the work makes a sharp turn toward poiesis, hinting at the reason aesthetics took up so much of Bloch's intellectual energies: art enables us to glimpse the "excerpt shapes" of our potential futures. This final section's expressive original title, "*Kunst, die Stoff-Form entbindend*," is difficult to render in English. *Entbinden* means both "to unbind" and "to birth," and hence, art is portrayed as something that can deliver form from matter's womb; one could as easily write that Bloch intends art to birth, or emancipate, matter *and* form. At first glance, this is identical to a solution often found in the writings of contemporaries like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, both of whom saw art as a potential site for resisting the hyperrationalization of instrumental reason under capitalism.[39] Bloch differs from his aesthetically minded Frankfurt contemporaries insofar as he allows art a positive function in realizing the future. In practice, both Adorno's elite aesthetics of emancipation and Marcuse's "Great Refusal" are difficult to distinguish from quietist resignation in which resistance is manifested by a rejection of the contemporary world. By allowing art to trace the utopian future within matter, Bloch, by contrast, encourages his readers to grasp its latent possibilities. For this reason, art offers a model of the future not merely as a dream image but, as he writes in *The Principle of Hope*, a "pre-appearance, circulating in turbulent existence itself, of what is real."[40]

Bloch acknowledges that *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* is not meant to be a definitive study of Avicenna, and specialist readers of topics

he discusses will undoubtedly find fault with certain aspects of his presentation.[41] For this reason, it is all the more important to remember that Bloch does not aim to give a scrupulous scholarly treatment; rather, he *means* to offer a tendentious interpretation. The work is (benignly?) tendentious in the normal sense of reflecting its author's particular ethical and political commitments, and Bloch's idiosyncratic perspectives on utopia and Marxism indisputably color all his writing. Yet *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* is also tendentious in a more literal and less pejorative sense: it illuminates *tendencies* in bygone thought that can only be properly grasped from a later temporal perspective. Bloch's investigation of Avicenna and others as progenitors of self-germinating matter thereby enacts what it claims to discover in those thinkers; it draws out the latent tendencies of Avicenna and his intellectual descendants for present emancipatory needs. Put otherwise, Bloch's treatment of the conceptual matter of Avicenna mirrors the Avicennans' treatment of physical matter in Aristotle, invigorating it with possibilities that its original author may have overlooked.

Attentive readers will notice that Bloch's exposition reflects this attempt to reveal the tendencies that are at play within the natural and social world and that rarely creep into consciousness. For one, the work's curious structure mirrors the texts he tackles, with a substantive primary monographical discussion followed by a compendium of annotated passages from relevant authors. In what may be a nod to his notion of the noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous,[42] Bloch revives the medieval practice of gloss traditions that assemble and comment on writings of accepted past authorities.[43] Bloch's language in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* also embeds the social world within matter. In the big picture, this is mundanely evident in the text's Marxist insistence on the rootedness of ideas in concrete material foundations: Arabic philosophy comes into being, on Bloch's reading, thanks to the vivacity of commerce; Stoicism's approach to universal reason "reflected the melting pot of the Roman Empire";[44] and orthodoxy gains the upper hand as the latter's commercial fortunes decline. More granularly, Bloch's language

paints a world teeming with fecundity and dynamism, one which is often difficult to translate into English: not only does art "birth" what inheres, but remembering Avicenna is "due" (as in pregnancy), the manufacturing sector of the medieval Islamic lands was "blossoming," cloister schools "spawned" universities, Eastern reason "aborted" the letter of the text, tendencies "showed themselves" without any assistance from without, a feudal-clerical damper "laid itself atop" a vibrant materialism, the form-matter relationship itself "ripened," and things do not "begin" but are rather "put in motion." In short, the world of *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* is literally animated.

Its stylistic virtues aside, the substance of *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* is insightful and provocative. Already noted is the fact that long before the recent recovery of Islamic and Jewish thought from the shadows of Christian Scholasticism, Bloch wrote a brief for understanding the latter as deeply marked by the former. Bloch's naturalistic turn also foreshadowed the even more recent reinvigoration of matter as a conceptual concern for political philosophy and the philosophy of science. To speak of matter as a "womb of nature" will be suggestive to those taken with Gilles Deleuze's rhizomatic worlds and Hannah Arendt's conception of freedom as natality, and Bloch's insistence on reality in the process of becoming intersects with the emergent approaches to matter found in the work of William Connolly, Jane Bennett, and other contemporary vital materialists just as it intersects in significant ways with theorists of object-oriented ontology like Graham Harman and Timothy Morton and with assemblage theorists like Bruno Latour and Manuel Delanda.[45] Furthermore, Bloch's identification of an Aristotelian Left has much in common with the "aleatory materialism" of another iconoclastic Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, whose late writings sketch a "materialism of the encounter" that he similarly locates in an "underground current" of thought leading up to Marxism.[46] In philosophy of science, finally, something akin to Bloch's neo-Aristotelian conception of matter also has its adherents. Nobel Prize–winning physicist Ilya Prigogine and philosopher

Isabelle Stengers have written that it has become evident to modern scientists that "the natural contains essential elements of randomness and irreversibility. This leads to a new view of matter in which matter is no longer the passive substance described in the mechanistic world view but is associated with spontaneous activity." This transformation in thinking about matter allows us, they continue in the vein of Bloch (albeit without mentioning him), to "really speak about a new dialogue of man with nature."[47]

Critical questions abound, of course, although it is beyond the remit of an introduction to address them in detail. One issue involves who (or what) exactly might be the agent of the eduction of form out of matter. Alfred Schmidt's trenchant criticism of Bloch came along this line; he saw Bloch as foolishly introducing a nonhuman natural subject into his vision of a world that is pregnant with possibilities, and this invention of a *natura naturans*, he claims, far from being the contribution to dialectical materialism that Bloch thought it was, "leads directly away from it" insofar as it reduces the human transformation of nature to a subordination to the latter.[48] This worry leads to another concern, namely that if matter *does* possess latent tendencies, how exactly does one discern them or—assuming that there are multiple possibilities in the dynamei-on—distinguish between them? To put this point another way using Bloch's categories, how does one distinguish the "not yet" from the "not" and the "never"? Art might very well describe, sketch, or enable us to espy a bright alternative future, but it can also just as easily bring us to entertain fantasies whose pursuit might lead to oppression. Without dismissing this important concern as unfounded, Bloch might respond that it ultimately misses the significance of his call to rethink the matter of our facts. The point is to prepare the world and *us* for the possibility of something new, to keep the possibility of a better world *alive*. To accept only the kata to dynaton is to resign ourselves to the prospect that the world's potential is exhausted and that things will remain as they are. Bloch's emphasis on the inexhaustible, if improbable, creativity of the category of dynamei-on directs our vision to the fact that the world *does* change: the Roman

Empire fell, polio was (largely) conquered, and the category of morally equal "human" has (conceptually) expanded beyond white, male, Christian property owners. The bounds of the possible have transformed and will continue to transform, and human agency has, in fact, drawn these new possibilities out of the potential that is latent in the world.

In a 1972 letter to Bloch, economist Adolph Lowe asked in regard to a neo-Aristotelian matter, a revolutionary matter, "Who is now really the completer [*Vollzieher*] of this process, after the proletarian has become a false myth? What has become of the basic dynamics of the historical process, since recent technology has led in all areas to a pseudoempire of freedom on this side of the revolution—put another way: what is revolution today?" In response to this all-important question, Bloch demurs, saying that the two will discuss it in person, and yet he remarks (also with a wink), "I believe in surprises."[49] Even if a neo-Aristotelian conception of matter cannot ultimately answer all our queries, and even if it raises new ones in the process, it may nonetheless permit us, too, to believe in surprises.

AVICENNA AND THE ARISTOTELIAN LEFT