

The “Ontology of Hope” of Ernst Bloch’s Philosophy System

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Abstract: Ernst Bloch is the first Western philosopher to take the concept of “hope (Hoffnung)” as the core of his philosophy system, and to take “hope” as the core concept to construct his own distinctive “hope philosophy”. “Philosophy of hope” is dissatisfied with reducing the human survival structure only to history and reality, so it excavates the existential significance of hope, goes deep into the possibility, potential, and transcendence in the human existence structure, and lays the foundation of the human survival structure with the future dimension of “surpassing the existing and grasping the potential.” By analyzing the “philosophy of hope”, the study can deepen the understanding of people as the “subject of hope.”

Keywords: Ernst Bloch; Philosophy of hope; Ontology

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1. Introduction

Bloch raised “hope” to the level of ontology, proposed a “Niche” from the logic (in the Hegelian sense), and extended to the concept of “not yet” (das-Noch-Nicht) in the phenomenal world. Projected on the human level is the utopian impulse of “hope”, the “most precise emotion” that “overrides all emotions”, and emphasizes that “everyone lives mainly because he seeks the future... The future contains only the elements of hope”^[1]. For man (who exists in the future), hope has ontological significance. The following article will be analyzed from three aspects.

2. The “dialectical matter” as the matrix of the world’s composition and the “No” as the logical starting point of ontology

Bloch’s “philosophy of hope” is a metaphysical system of hope (although it has always opposed the metaphysical “dead” system since Plato), and its view of the matter is derived from the “rediscovery” of Aristotle’s concept of

“matter”, which he calls “Aristotelian left” (Linke Aristotetismus). In *An Introduction to Tübingen Philosophy, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, Bloch identifies the difference between “right” and “left” between “form determines matter” and “matter determines form”, formed after Aristotle explained the matter in the “pure matter — matter and form — pure form” schemata, and from Avicenna (ibn-S. From 980–1037) to Jordanian Bruno (1548–1600), the left of Aristotle “sought the source of production of world movement from the concept of matter, and then replaced the formal role of God with the possibility of the activity of matter, and found the philosophical significance of its own school once and for all”^[2-3]. “In Bruno, matter is the mother of form”, establishing the dynamic view of matter as “the active normative form of matter”^[4]. Bloch accepted this view of matter, thinking that it highlights the inherent openness and dynamics of materials, and clearly states that “materials full of initiative and openness are the source of world movement” and establishes “universal materials” as the fundamental cause of world generation. In Bloch’s view, this universal material is a kind of “being in the possibility of reality”, which contains the dialectic characteristics of “irregularity and openness of the world”, so it is a “dialectical material”^[5]. By emphasizing the agency of matter in matter, Bloch redefines matter as the substrate of the world, that is, a dialectical universal material that contains irregularity and openness of the world, a substrate of possibility with a “dialectical process” (here possibility means “objective-reality possibility”)^[6]. This dialectical substance has the ontological significance of “mother of the world” and is the basis of Bloch’s dynamic transcendental world system.

Bergen Habermas (1929–) once called Bloch a “Marxist Schelling”, referring to the teleological interpretation of nature characteristic of Bloch’s philosophy, whose worldview is a Schelling transcendental idealist cosmology^[7]. Although Habermas’s evaluation is too harsh for Bloch, it also shows the metaphysical color of Bloch’s philosophical starting point and its deep influence on German idealism. The logical starting point of Bloch’s philosophy is the “Niche” of transcendental color. The so-called “no” is an abstract idea that exists at the stage of the basic logic of the world, “No” is at the root, it means what is still empty, undefined, and undecided, it means the starting point towards which the beginning begins^[8]. It is an initial universal capacity for negation and at the same time a creative impulse: “As ‘no’ everything begins and begins, around which ‘no’ everything is constructed... ‘No’ means to lack something, and to escape from that lack. Therefore, ‘no’ means to move towards what one lacks.” Therefore, “no” can describe all the essential impulses of existence, which are derived from the internal formal initiative and creativity of Bloch’s “dialectical matter”, and from the human dimension, it is the impulse, desire, pursuit, especially hunger and other germinal starting sexual activities (in turn, it is a negation of the existing, that is, “not this”). “This ‘no’ is not in ‘this’ (Da), but it is a ‘no’ of some ‘this’, so it is not simply ‘no’, on the contrary, it is at the same time ‘Nicht-Da’. The ‘non-this’ itself cannot bear the ‘no’, on the contrary. To implore the ‘this’ of something.” It all begins with the existential urge of “no”, as Fredric Jameson (1934) points out: “Bloch wishes to establish the positive within the negative itself, to hold the negative firmly, to regard it as the confirmation of the positive as it reveals itself through it”^[9]. Thus “no” is the starting point of Bloch’s ontology, the “ontology that has not yet existed.”

3. “Not yet” and “not yet existing ontology”

If “dialectical matter” is the cornerstone of Bloch’s existence, and “no” is the starting point of Bloch’s philosophical logic, then “not yet” (das-Noch-Nicht) is the medium at the intersection of existence and logic. Bloch concentrated on the core concepts of “not yet” and “not yet existing ontology” in his works “The Principle

of Hope” and “Introduction to Tübingen Philosophy.”

“Not yet” is composed of two basic concepts: “experienced moment” and “no”. “The experienced moment” as “that which does not yet exist is in the year zero of the beginning of the world (in Jahr Null des Weltanfang)” itself means “the beginning of everything.” It is just that this “moment”, in Bloch’s view, “as something that exists directly, now lies in the darkness of the moment”^[10]. The “present” is in fact “the darkness of the moment”, because “only things that have just emerged, or have just passed, have a certain distance because to shine, they need the light of consciousness.” This tells us that human knowledge of things can only be formed after or before the completion of things. Just as Su Shi said in his book, “I do not know the true face of Lushan Mountain, but I only live in this mountain.” Only by “having a certain distance” can one come out of “the darkness of the moment experienced” and realize the face of things. And “no” is the impulse of things to emerge from the “instantaneous darkness experienced”, as the indefinite “no”, “no” out of countless possibilities, making things factual, that is, in the “either or”, “no” through the “non-this” to “that.” When this logical “no” rises to the biological realm, impulses are formed, “so that in living things the things that are being stimulated together form impulses, needs, desires, and above all hunger.” Here, “no” finally coincides with “not yet”, “not yet” moves from the logical level to the factual level of “no”, “not yet” becomes the ontological concept of the world process as a medium. Regarding this transformation, Bloch clearly states: “The ‘no’ is manifested as hunger and is connected to the content of inner activity. ‘No’ means what one wants and intends, it means desire, desire, will, daydream, it means all imagination of something lacking... Thus we can identify the ‘no’ in the process as the positive, utopian ‘not yet’, as the negation that continues to be promoted utopically and dialectically.”

In Bloch’s view, the world is a teleological process of dynamic development, and both man and the world are in the generative basic structure of “das Nichts-das Noch-Nicht-das Alles”, and “yet” is either toward “nothing” or “the total.” The difference between man and the world is only the difference between the individual and the total in this structure. In this universal structure, the “not yet” in the state of generation is the central link and content, while the dynamic display of “not yet” is the result of the development and evolution of “no.” Thus, “yet” is formed as a key concept, which directly determines the existence form of the whole world. Therefore, the existence of the world is “yet to exist” in Bloch’s view. “Ontology yet to exist” is Bloch’s explanation of the existence of the world, and is the core category of “Philosophy of Hope”, which reveals the openness, generation, transcendence, and process of the world. It points to the process world of “potential-possibility” and the “utopia” in the world, society, and human spirit everywhere.

4. Concrete utopia and ontological hope

In Bloch’s context, “utopia” is different from “fantasy” and “non-existence”, but a potential ideal dimension, “utopia” has a strong transcendent and negative value orientation to the existing world and the existing social system^[11]. As Bloch clearly points out, “The true utopian will is certainly not an infinite pursuit, but rather a simple desire for immediacy, which ultimately seeks to mediate, illuminate, and realize its actual condition and existence as something happy and appropriate”^[12]. Starting from reality, the idea of setting the future is “utopia.” Based on this, to distinguish the concept of “utopian and abstract Utopia”, Bloch proposed “concrete Utopia”, that is a positive and realizable utopia. “Concrete utopia is located in the horizon of all reality.” In Bloch’s view, concrete utopia is subjected to the “experienced instant darkness” as the starting point of infinite existence and the “utopian ultimate state” as the endpoint, that is to say, its ontological significance is embodied in the

generation of everything and everything, and “utopia” is a kind of “utopian totality” filled with the material world and various fields of human history and culture. Here, Bloch’s world view thoroughly “surfacing”, in this “utopian vision”, the world for Bloch does not exist in the past facts, but in the most forward, that is, the avant-garde existence of the open material towards the utopian movement ^[13]. In other words, the world is not an existing world, but an open, dynamic, future world. In this way, man’s existence as “on earth” also has an open, future attribute.

As for the relationship between man and the world, most modern philosophers advocate the integration of man and the world. For example, P. Tillich (1886–1965) said: “The self without the world is empty, and the world without the self is dead”, proposing the “self-world” structure ^[14]. Heidegger proposed the “being in the world” structure of “this being — the world” more representative. Husserl’s “intersubjectivity” is a more complete structure of the human world. Different from Tillich, Heidegger, and Husserl, Bloch absorbed Engels’s views on natural philosophy and believed that the world has a preexistence relative to man, who is the product of the development of the world-historical movement to a certain stage, and the laborer is the highest form of material movement, the result of quantitative change accumulation to qualitative change. “Nature and man are united, but in this unity, man has an ontological priority as the bearer of natural entity and self-consciousness” ^[15]. Thus, Bloch’s world is a world of open development for the purpose of “man”, which is clearly influenced by Schelling. Bloch’s relationship between man and nature is a combination of materialism and teleology. In such a world existence structure, the development of the whole world is a process of dynamic opening to new things. Conversely, the world that man faces is an object world that constantly develops from low level to high level and from imperfection to perfection. The development of this imperfect world to perfection is through the power provided by the “not yet” connected with the fact, which provides a power for the world to transform and change. This kind of power is inherent in the world and people, when people’s consciousness is generated, people begin to exhibit “utopian impulse” or “daydream” because of the inner “not yet” drive. “Daydream” is different from Freud’s oppressive and unconscious “night dream” and the opposite of “daydream”, that is, a beautiful, active, and realistic dream, reflecting people’s positive attitude of yearning and pursuit. This dream is what Bloch called “Das Prinzip Hoffnung” (The Principle of Hope), the original title of the Principle of Hope, “The Dream of a Better Life.”

At this point, “hope” was born as a dream exclusive to human beings. “Daydreaming even contains a kind of bubble from which sometimes Venus rises. No animal is aware of such a dream under any circumstances, and only man can dream of utopia.” In other words, man is the subject of hope. From “no” to “not yet” to “utopia” to “hope”, it is a “cross-sectional structure” rather than a progressive structure, and “no” has a metaphysical meaning for hope. The concept of “hope” is that “no” is derived from the parallel of “the experienced instantaneous darkness” and is formed in combination with “preconceived consciousness (das antizipierende Bewußtsein)”, and therefore has ontological significance in the dimension of human existence. Based on this, the connotation of hope has two aspects, one is the fundamental structure of objective reality as a whole, and the other is the unarrived ideal as an end. “This philosophy of hope lives in the future, in future thinking, in social existence.”

5. “Hope” from infinity to finite transcendence

Infinity is the initial characteristic of hope. Bloch’s concept of “hope” was born from the “no” in the sense of

basic existence (Bloch believes that this is one of the three basic concepts of the existence of the world, the other two are “nothing” and “all”), “no” can be regarded as a universal and essential link in everything, “as a progressive, this ‘no’ is the eternal principle of existence, by means of which, the material movement creates the reality of the all-encompassing world material and utopia in this world”^[16]. “Not yet” is the product of the continued development and extension of “no.” If “no” still remains in the basic abstract stage of ontology, then “not yet” has already possessed the intermediation from “no” to “existence.” The “not yet”, as the externalization of “no”, is contained in all objects, making utopia the uncompleted real object of the object. In other words, although “no” generates all things, it still has a strong abstract universality, while “not yet”, as “not yet” in history, is contained in the directional development of the object, and has a clearer reality. “No” is only the concept of ontological meaning, and “not yet” is further developed into the motion impulse of all material objects. The result of this impulse is that “in all that has been formed, the ‘not yet’ also destroys or dissolves contradiction.” The contradiction in “what has been formed” has both subjective and objective aspects. In the process of resolving the contradiction, “yet” puts forward objectively solvable tasks, and the more tasks it puts forward, the more certain it will be and the stronger the trend of realizing a certain kind will be. That is to say, “not yet” makes the things to be realized more and more clear and definite by constantly refining and clarifying the development impulse of things. From “no” to “not yet”, although from the abstract impulse of ontology to the stage of integration with the real object, “hope” is still infinitely open and universal in this stage.

From the infinite to the limited, from the world to people. The concept of “utopia” is the reflection form of “not yet” in historical activities, and also the extension of “no.” Compared with the universality of “not yet” in the objective material world, “utopia” tends to express human activities more. Bloch believes that “utopia” is a kind of “preconceived consciousness”, and utopia is “understood as a new concept in the proper sense of forward dream, preconceived and so on.” With its relationship to ideology, to the front, to the new, to the present, to the again, Utopia “has its core subject and strives towards the world: beyond the natural course of historical events.” This gives utopia revolutionary potential and power. In Bloch’s view, utopia is both realistic and revolutionary. “Utopia is the idea of those groups that destroy and break the existing society or are ready to break it, and dream of a better world”^[17]. Therefore, utopia has influenced the course of history in the form of revolution and promoted people to an ideal state. In this regard, the definition of utopia and communism as “a movement to eliminate existing conditions” is inherently consistent. Therefore, Bloch called Marxism “concrete utopia” and pointed out the “finiteness” of utopia. “The real desire for utopia is certainly not an infinite pursuit, rather, it is just a desire for simple immediacy.” When further analyzing the ubiquitous utopia of human society, Bloch analyzed the concrete reality of movies, dramas, fairy tales, travel, and other aspects of human life, and elaborated the reality and universality of utopia. He pointed out that the “real utopia” is “plan utopia or outline utopia”, and then stated the medical utopia, social utopia, architectural utopia, technological utopia, and so on, “the desire of people beyond the established reality.” In this way, from “not yet” to “utopia”, Bloch step by step from the abstract to the concrete, from the world to people, from reality to the future, and pointed out the relationship between “utopia” and “hope”, “in its best sense, the concept of utopia is a core concept, it contains hope and human dignity content.” Utopia is the “known hope.”

Pointing to the hope of the future “Heimat.” In Bloch’s “philosophy of hope” system, “hometown” is an ultimate concept and the purpose of teleology. From “no” all the way through “not yet” to “all” is “hometown”, “the connection between” no “and” all yet “means the positive utopian content, that is, the hometown”^[18]. “Hometown” is “the environment in which the objective hope image is completely mediated”, that is, the

direction of the achievable hope picture of human beings. In this regard, Bloch raises it to the level of the basic topic of the philosophy of hope, “The basic topic of philosophy is the unformed and unsuccessful ‘hometown’, and how the hometown is formed and shaped in the dialectical and materialistic struggle between the new and the old”^[19]. How do people get to their future homes? Bloch pointed out that both man and society are in the “pre-history” of creation, “but the root of society is the man who labors, creates, transforms reality, and transcends reality.” When man grasps this root, and at the same time lays his existence on true democracy without renunciation or alienation, there comes into the world a place which appears only in childhood and which no man has ever reached: home”^[20]. In other words, the form of a communist society in the Marxian sense is the “home” of Bloch’s ideal and the “hope” of human spiritual history, that is, the “dream of a better life.” The theme of the whole of the Principle of Hope is also “the dream of a better life”, but this dream is not a dream, but a lucid dream, a strict dream, a dream that is still waiting for the urgent need of the only dream. And the philosophy of this dream is the philosophy of hope, “Philosophy will be the conscience of tomorrow, the party spirit of the future, with the knowledge of the future, or will no longer have any knowledge.”

From the theoretical evolution of Bloch’s “Philosophy of Hope”, it can be seen that he enters the material world from the abstract ontological logic, combines “dialectical matter” with “not yet”, interprets the operation of the whole world based on “ontology not yet existing”, and finally enters the human world with the concept of “utopia”, that is, human history, living world and spiritual history. Finally, point to the “hometown” with the ultimate purpose meaning. From the abstract and infinite concept to the concrete and limited concept, the final landing point is the ultimate direction of the “hope picture” of “hometown.” This is a way to point vertically to the future, and it is also a mechanism from infinite to finite ontological hope.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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