

Ernst Bloch's Basic Ideas

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In the following summary the sub-headings are Bloch's reformulations of or variations on the generally familiar terms of the major headings. I comment here only on those subheadings that strike me as most important.

I. Hope

A. Informed Hope

B. Anticipatory Affect

C. The melancholy of fulfillment (disappointment: the paradoxes of becoming real)

I find item C the most interesting of the subcategories because it expresses a fundamental yet often neglected fact of life, the difference between hope or positive anticipation and fulfillment. Bloch doesn't ignore cases in which fulfillment is better than anticipation (or anxiety about outcomes turns out to have been unnecessary), but surely the paradigmatic situation is that in which, as against our hopes, reality falls short.

II. Time

A. Future

B. Past; the unconsummated, "unharvested" past

C. Darkness of the lived (present) moment,
moment: "Stay, thou art so fair"

D. "FRONT"

E. "NOVUM"

F. "ULTIMUM"

Item A here is excessively general; D, E, F, excessively specific and arcane to boot. But B says of every life: "It might have been different." Looking at criminal failure or admirable success, it is essential that we say, "There but for the grace of god (or the vagaries of chance) go I." Heredity as replacement for god or chance may be tolerable but often brands the doer of evil with hereditary defect and the doer of good with the gift of genius in a wholly unwarranted manner.

According to item C, the present moment, the most vital expression of what we are, is dark with the peculiar nonexistence of ceaseless escape, and yet often so ineffably bittersweet that our longing to know it must defy our knowledge that we can't. That Bloch is fully aware of the potential blessings of the present moment's nonexistence, ist "This too will pass!", is suggested by the repetition throughout his writings of "Homo lupus homini" ("Man is a wolf to man").

III. Possibility

- A. Objective possibility
- B. Genuine possibility
- C. Other possibilities

Bloch's language in his discussion of possibility reflects the genuine complexity in the structure and implications of this concept. At once beautiful and horrible, enormously rich and desperately poor, the world constantly realizes and denies the realm of what is thought possible. Because possibility, like many other concepts with which Bloch as a serious thinker must deal, is as complex as it is, his discussion of it ranges from poetic grasp to witches' brew of the expressive potentials and obfuscating temptations of the German language.

IV. Consciousness

- A. The not yet conscious
 - B. The no longer conscious
 - C. The not yet become
- i.e. Being rather than consciousness;

included here as one of the "not yet's"

As little as we in our time did Bloch in his time solve the hackneyed "riddle of consciousness". But Bloch does point to a fact too often ignored: that, namely, the border of consciousness is a closed if blurred curve rather than a straight line behind or before us. Consciousness, as memory, recedes in clarity as its object recedes in time, and consciousness as expectation recedes in conviction as realization "recedes" into the future. And just as important: Consciousness as present awareness decreases in clarity as its present object increases in physical, emotional, or intellectual distance.

V. Utopia

- A. Utopian function

B. Concrete utopia

C. Abstract utopia

D. Optimism, militant optimism

From his university days in the first decade of the twentieth century, Bloch was possessed by the importance of utopian thought, the significance of which emerges from his deep commitment to life and reality as creative process: It is "reality of process alone, and not a reified and absolute factuality torn from it, which can either validate utopian dreams or condemn them as illusions." Concrete utopia is characterized by active commitment, indeed by militant optimism. Abstract utopian confabulation expresses utopian function or drive but by itself accomplishes nothing.

VI. Human nature

While Bloch sometimes comes close to the facile fallacy of Marxist epigones to the effect that human nature is completely malleable, he is simply too wise a person to believe that what we are can be fully attributed to environment. His wisdom, his powers of observation, and doubtless also his Marxist bias lead him to formulate a fine-textured philosophical anthropology which effectively presents a convincing, if general, picture of human nature as interaction among environment, freedom of will and impulse, and at some remove, a substrate of genetic process.

VII. Religion

Atheism and the space that imagination had filled with God

Bloch, a declared atheist, is fascinated by religion. Adopting an historical precedent, he contends that humans construct their deities out of imagination and need; from imagination and need also emerge faith, individual morality, and social ethics with god or the gods as confessors, comforters, and enforcers. Bloch, as fascinated atheist, at times seems obsessed by what happens to faith, morality, and ethics in the absence of god.