



Michael Marder, *Energy Dreams: Of Actuality*

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A Philosophical Theory of Energy

Michael Marder's new book sets a goal even more ambitious than his previous works that were ambitious enough: he endeavors to analyze and describe the concept of *energy*, and applies it to current affairs. This concept, invented by Aristotle, was once central to premodern European theory. In the nineteenth century it was reinvented and redefined by physicists, only to regain its former weight, this time not in philosophy but in politics, economy, psychology, and in everyday spontaneous metaphysics. "Energy" is everywhere, it is often presented as a higher value of life, above the good and the true. And its cult involves the ever-present anxiety of its loss.

However, philosophy has generally had a hard time approaching this subject (with the notable exception of the great Russian philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin, author of the book *Energy*, still untranslated, which influenced Marder). This is so for three reasons:

1) Great figures of continental thought, such as Heidegger and Lacan, expressed disdain for this overly metaphysical (i.e., absolutist, optimistic) and overly technological notion.

2) The current vulgar usage of the word actually inverts its original meaning (as usually happens to great Modern concepts). Therefore, philosophers are at a loss as to which meaning to discuss: the proper, classical one, or the diametrically opposed metaphorical one accepted in physics and in popular culture. What we normally refer to as energy is an indeterminate quantifiable resource for eventual activity, or, in Aristotelian terms, precisely possibility, *dynamis*, and not *energeia*, or actuality.

Some, myself included, would hesitate to discuss today's "energy" as energy in the philosophical sense.

3) Already in Aristotle, the term lacks clarity or a univocal definition; it appears as a virtuoso invention rather than a rigorous analytic instrument. It is not always easy to understand why we cannot simply distinguish between possibility/force and reality/actuality, without attributing to reality an additional name that Marder literally translates as "*enworkment*."

Marder takes these questions seriously and responds to them by undertaking a heroic effort to reconstruct what he rightly believes to be a key problem, and a theoretical blind spot, of our epoch. The book synthesizes huge material from the history of philosophy and present discussions; it does this powerfully (energetically?), in a great style and with a lot of wit. Whether it results in a new theory of energy should become clearer by the end of this review.

In spite of the aforementioned inversion in meaning, Marder does take the contemporary usage seriously and implies a continuity between the energy we use (nuclear, solar, etc.), or we often lack (energy to do our work), and Aristotle's *enworkment*. He thinks there is still a germ of the original "energy" in today's word, and that it is not by chance that "force" had been rebaptized as "energy." However, it is clear from the book why modern science departed from the original meaning of energy and assimilated it into force. It is less clear why they wanted to use "energy" and were not satisfied with force or potential. It seems as though Modernity is conflicted between its "passion for the real" (Badiou) and its will to capitalize on the real as an objectified resource. In any case, according to Marder, this leads to a "crisis of energy," where the more "energy" is produced, the less *energy* there remains, so that there emerges a sense of depression, fatigue, and apathy, in economics, in politics, and even in God himself.

Energy, for Marder, has not only a practical and ontological meaning but also a cognitive (phenomenal) one. Energy brings "dreams" and is itself inseparable from a dream: the ecstatic condition transforms the world around us and fills it with a play of unbound images, which should be distinguished from mere fantasies. They recall Platonic dreams that produce ideas. This certainly does not mean that energy is a fiction, but presents it as a complex auto-referential entity that is never simply out there, but which has to be practiced to be understood.

The book is structured horizontally by disciplines into which the author goes respectively: ontology, theology, psychology, economics, and physics. Therefore it is not always easy to summarize the argument. I will try to do so:

1) Since Aristotle and until today there has been a malignant tendency to perceive energy as something sharply divided from factual

things/matter and as something hidden in the depths of nature. The fatal steps to this interpretation were made by the saints: Augustine and Thomas, who attributed energy to God's acts, while materiality was left to the creatures. Preferable was the Orthodox tradition, central to which was Gregory Palamas: God's essence did not coincide with his energies, he said. So energies were on the side of God's material expression, not his hidden core. Marder picks up on Bibikhin's use of Palamas but inverts his argument (Bibikhin disagrees with Palamas). In the end, the idea of energy hidden in the depths of being, in its immaterial essence, is spiritualist and metaphysical. It is responsible, says Marder, for the current approach in which to attain energy, one has to break the material thing that feeds on it. Thus, "energy production is world-destruction" (83), and, "our energy unfurls the force of negativity actualized not in being but in the decimation of being" (19).

2) What is here lost and what should be recuperated, is three-fold:

A. *Energy of rest.* This understanding of energy is present in Aristotle, who attributes it to God the immobile mover, and was, again, powerfully defended by Bibikhin. In some sense, the existence of this energy is implied in the modern oxymoronic notion of "potential energy" (a thing hides its movement without moving). But Aristotle meant something opposite: not the lacking potential but the force that is preserved in its very realization, so that it does not hide anything or produce anxiety, but, in a sense, enjoys itself. Marder gives a further example of *strikes*, in George Sorel's and Walter Benjamin's understanding of affirmative political acts.

B. *Energy of surface.* If energy is *in actu*, then we do not need to search for it in depths, and it is not subject to the "iron" law of energy conservation. An actualizing act does not exhaust but produces its own energy. Plants (Marder's favorite topic) feed by the surface and from the surface, while animals tend to go into the depths and destroy. How is this possible? This leads to the third form of "good" energy, which is:

C. *Synergy.* A word with a dangerous affinity to "synergetics," a New Age positivistic fashion in provincial countries (we are still sometimes fighting against this endemic language in Russian academia), here it acquires a rigorous and productive meaning. Energy is produced not inside a body, but only in an interaction between the two. In some interactions, one body destroys another, and we feed on the energy of their collision. In others, one body reacts to another, the motion is transmitted, not through a mechanical push, but through a coincidental simultaneity that gives rise to a rhythm. Marder argues that such harmony, predetermined or not, produces an intensity of resonance. He gives a beautiful quote from Gregory Bateson that I will reproduce here as well:

When one billiard ball strikes another, there is an energy transfer such that the motion of the second ball is energized by the impact of the first. In communicational systems, on the other hand, the energy of the response is usually provided by the respondent. If I kick a dog, his immediately sequential behavior is energized by his metabolism, not by my kick. [...] He may turn and bite (161).

Such a relationship of motions is, I would add, structured counter-rhythmically, via a caesura. A “synergy” should not be imagined as an exact harmony, but where a new force picks up in medias res, while the former one has not yet exhausted itself. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam compared this energetic machine to “an airplane [...] which in full flight constructs and launches another machine. Furthermore, in the same way, this flying machine, while fully absorbed in its own flight, still manages to assemble and launch yet a third machine” (Mandelstam 2001: 60).

In psychology and phenomenology, Marder continues, a model for this correlational energy is *attention*. Being a surface phenomenon of consciousness, attention is its energetic drive. It proceeds not from one’s will but from contact by consciousness with an external object, it exists between the subject and object. Marder further notes how attention, like any energy, may exist in its unbound (distracted) and concentrated forms. The unbound energy causes tension and eventually produces negativity, but it accumulates itself for an act of concentration, in a way different than an accumulation of force from absorption.

Now, what can we say in general of this approach, having said what I said about the brilliance of its presentation and having recommended to read the book in its entirety?

1) It looks like this is a fruitful revision of certain *existentialism*. Kierkegaard, Sartre, Gilson, and at times Heidegger have already advanced the crucial topic of *realization*, of being in opposition to the ideal. The return to the raw reality was on their part something analogous to the plea for energy that is common for us today. But, since they relied on the Catholic version of Aristotelianism, these authors largely ignored the theme of energy. Heidegger even thought, in his famous reading of the Metaphysics *Theta*, that potentiality, *dynamis*, was the key to human authentic existence. Marder returns to this discussion (after a “postmodern” digression into a new version of idealism) in a more productive way, relying on Aristotle and on a certain tradition of Eastern Christianity: energy is like existence in the sense that it actualizes, but it is also an active movement of realization that takes place as a part of an oriented motion, which has a meaning, and which builds on relations between things. As with existence, it surpasses the idea, but only to realize it, not to emerge as a brutal and alien “facticity.”

2) Still, there is a certain implicit reference to Heidegger in this analysis. Heidegger explained what we now call “a crisis of energy” by the notion of *Gestell*. *Gestell*, he thought, was a drive of self-realization at any price, a cult of the real, which doomed Modernity, because it wasted and exposed all its hidden potentialities. What Marder depicts is a similar picture but presented in almost contrary terms. The permanent activity, or rather pseudo-activity, disregards not the possibility, but the moments of accomplishment — a stance that is closer to Lacan (whom Marder portrays rather critically) than to Heidegger. For the same reason, Marder’s theory goes counter to Agamben who treats potentiality in a more orthodox Heideggerian way and comes to a certain ethics of inactivity that does appear a bit decadent. I think that in both juxtapositions Marder is absolutely right, and he could have stated his antagonism even more directly.

3) Speaking of antagonisms. Marder’s book opposes synergy to destruction and is in this sense “affirmationist” (to use Benjamin Noy’s felicitous term). This, in turn, corresponds to Marder’s environmentalist preferences: they are more than a tribute to fashion but represent a long-standing conviction. Here, as a Hegelian, I would not agree with him fully. A world of harmony without negativity may become a dangerously repressive utopia, because negativity is just simply there from the very start. Even if you are peaceful toward things and subjects, they may not be as peaceful toward you. Sometimes synergy with viruses or terrorists may work, sometimes not, and when they treat your attempt at synergy as an attack, what do you do, forbid them their destructionist approach? Much of our interaction with things, and with ourselves, is conflictual, and this is at times depressing, at times energizing (such as when you fight and win). Even Bateson’s example quoted above is about a conflict with a dog. Discussions of Freud and Schmitt in the book make it clear that internal discord energizes — of course when it falls short of complete destruction. Hegel, rightly seen by Marder as a philosopher of energy (*Wirklichkeit*) resolved this through a theory of negation of negation alias *Aufhebung*, which negates but preserves. But *Aufhebung* is not a harmonious coexistence. Here, it is not as if Marder’s theory is wrong, but it certainly deserves an elaboration and would benefit from a dialogue between the phenomenological and dialectical schools.

Overall, to conclude, this is a very successful book, maybe the best book of this very prolific author up to this day. It hits the nerve of the contemporary historical moment, connects it with the key problem of metaphysics, and does so on a splendid breadth of sources including the rarely used Byzantine/Russian tradition. I hope that it will give rise to a new series of books, discussions, and possibly even ethical transformations.

References

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