

# **ACTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MICHAEL MARDER'S *HEGEL'S ENERGY***

## **MICHAEL MARDER, *HEGEL'S ENERGY*: A READING OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT**

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### **/// Introduction**

Michael Marder's *Hegel's Energy: A Reading of The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2021) presents a bold reimagining of Hegelian dialectics and reframes energy as the ontological and material core of Spirit's unfolding. For Marder, energy is not merely a metaphor but the very process through which dialectics operates in actuality. This interpretation situates energy as the driving force of Hegel's system, simultaneously embodying, on the one hand, process (its verbal-subjective element), and on the other, product (its substantive aspect). Marder's concept of energy, however, reaches beyond the confines of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, addressing pressing socio-political and ecological crises. By critiquing modernity's extractive paradigms, which are rooted in the primacy of potentiality, Marder proposes a radical rethinking: a new energetic ontology of actuality that emphasises relationality, interdependence, and regeneration.

This review delves into Marder's ambitious project by examining two intertwined dimensions of his argument. First, it analyses his reframing of energy within Hegelian dialectics, particularly in relation to Catherine

Malabou's concept of plasticity, and uncovers key theoretical limitations in his perspective. Second, it explores the socio-political implications of his work, with a focus on ecological philosophy and his critique of extractivist ideology. It is worth mentioning that Marder is a very prolific author, and his credits include many books on plant philosophy and the environment (see, e.g., Marder 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2023). By drawing on Hegelian speculative thought, this analysis underscores both the strengths and challenges inherent in Marder's approach and ultimately assesses its contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse and its significance in addressing the urgent crises of modernity.

### /// The Energetic Core of Hegel's *Wirklichkeit*

Marder's *Hegel's Energy* posits that energy functions as the underlying mechanism driving Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – the fundamental principle that “speaks and dreams of nothing but energy, which oozes from its every sentence and formulation, albeit under a different name. That name is *Wirklichkeit* – ‘actuality’” (Marder 2021: 6). Through this claim, Marder positions himself within a contemporary strand of Hegelian scholarship that interprets Hegel through Aristotelian frameworks (see, e.g., Ng 2020; de Laurentiis 2021), while simultaneously infusing this perspective with a poststructuralist twist.

Marder's Aristotelianism asserts that Spirit is neither mystical nor spiritual in a transcendent or metaphysical sense. Rather, Spirit is profoundly immanent – it is the world itself, unfolding in the immediate and dynamic process of its becoming. The concept of *Wirklichkeit* (actuality) occupies a central position in Hegel's system, grounding it in direct engagement with being itself rather than confining it to the reflective domains of knowledge or linguistic construction. This interpretation challenges the deflationist positions of thinkers like Brandom (2019) and Pinkard (1994), who privilege the epistemological and discursive dimensions of Hegel's philosophy. In contrast, Marder contends that *Wirklichkeit* is no abstraction, no mere reflection of human cognition, but the very substance of being's self-articulation – a system animated by the energies of life, labour, and contradiction.

Simultaneously, Marder's poststructuralist sensibilities infuse his interpretation with a distinctive methodological nuance. Employing a “symptomal reading” (Marder 2021: 6), he aims to expose energy as a force repressed within the textual unconscious of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This interpretative strategy positions energy as both absent and

omnipresent – an implicit dynamic permeating the work, veiled behind the guise of actuality. In this manner, Marder’s reading itself mirrors the dialectical movement it seeks to reveal: energy emerges as both the overt content of Hegel’s text and its latent undercurrent – a concealed force woven into its structure and rhythms, awaiting revelation.

For Marder, energy embodies a dual nature: it is both verbal-subjective and substantivised – simultaneously *working* and *work*. Hegel, Marder maintains, emerges as the first true philosopher of energy (2021: 14), employing this duality as the driving mechanism of dialectical progression. This energy oscillates between *being-at-work* (active, processual labour) and *being-in-the-work* (momentary stabilisation as determinate actuality). The realisation of Hegelian Spirit in its odyssey through the *Phenomenology* culminates in a dialectical synthesis: “Actualized spirit – energy fully energized and energizing – is a synergic ensemble which, presupposed by though not included in the point of departure, assembles under its umbrella, among other things, the synergy of movement and rest” (Marder 2021: 15). For Marder, energy amplifies as it assimilates relations and synergies into an integrated totality, and it is through this cumulative process that he envisions the Hegelian Absolute.

The trajectory of energy in Marder’s book follows a markedly different path. In the first part, “Prolegomena to the Dialectics of Energy,” Marder lays out his conceptual framework, a structure as intellectually ambitious as it is energetically dense. This section, enriched with references to an eclectic array of thinkers – from Aristotle and Kant to Nietzsche, Marx, and Bergson – functions as an experiment in forging a distinctive “energetical jargon.” This innovative language enables Marder not only to reinterpret Hegel but also to offer an analytical lens for examining transitions and transformations in the contemporary world. At first, the reader is captivated by the craftsmanship and vitality of Marder’s narrative, energised by the wide-ranging connections he weaves. However, as his foundational concept – energy as actuality, “*the recognition of being-at-work in being-in-the-work*” (Marder 2021: 117), and similar formulations – reappears incessantly through reframing and paraphrasing, the initial intrigue gradually gives way to a sense of disorientation and fatigue.

This sense of exhaustion intensifies in the second part, “*The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the Question of Energy: An Exegesis.” Here, Marder applies his theory of energy to a meticulous rereading of Hegel’s opus. While his exegetical rigour is evident, the repetitive nature of his method undermines its impact. Having already grasped Marder’s conceptual toolkit,

the reader frequently predicts how each subsequent dialectical shift will be framed. What begins with fully actualised intellectual energy dissipates over the course of the book's development. By the conclusion, rather than arriving at the promised dialectical synergy, the reader is left with scattered potentials – an impression of unrealised possibilities rather than fully charged actuality.

This formal dissonance, where the execution of the book appears to contradict its central claim – the primacy of actuality over potentiality – presents an intriguing paradox. While Marder's argument extols energy as a fully realised actuality, the structure and progression of his text seem to mirror the very dissipation of energy that he seeks to critique. For now, however, I will leave these formal concerns aside to concentrate on his interpretation of Hegel's dialectics as energy-*Wirklichkeit*.

Is energy genuinely a novel contribution to Hegelian thought, or does it merely reframe Hegel's concept of mediation under a different guise? Furthermore, what are the implications of this reinterpretation for understanding the dialectical process, especially when examined through the lens of contradiction and its socio-political ramifications?

### **/// Energy and Plasticity: A Dialectical Encounter**

Marder's claim that energy functions as the driving force of Hegelian dialectics positions it as both the process and the substance of *Wirklichkeit*. This perspective is compelling in its attempt to highlight the materiality and dynamism of Hegel's system, anchoring it firmly within the realm of material existence. However, it invites a critical question: is energy genuinely distinct from Hegel's concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*), or does it merely reframe the established interplay of negation, resolution, and preservation that already underpins the development of Spirit?

To elucidate the internal logic of energy – conceived as an “energising-energised” movement – Marder relies on the very categories of Hegelian dialectical logic that he aims to reinterpret. Energy is depicted as a self-moving circle, turning inward and outward, a motion that mirrors Hegel's conception of Spirit as a process of self-relation and self-reconciliation. In this framework, energy becomes a rearticulated expression of Spirit, intended to reveal its latent dynamism. Marder's project thus transforms into an exercise in Spirit's self-explication through an energetic lexicon. However, this seemingly tautological endeavour of interpreting *idem per*

*idem* remains closely aligned with the speculative structure at the heart of Hegelian thought.

Marder's approach bears a notable resemblance to Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity in Hegel (Malabou 2005), as both pursue the shared objective of grounding Hegel's dialectics in materiality. They emphasise the transformative processes inherent in *Wirklichkeit* and Spirit, highlighting the dynamic interplay of opposites that propel dialectical development. Both Malabou's plasticity and Marder's energy challenge portrayals of Hegel as an abstract idealist and instead present his philosophy as deeply engaged with material and relational actuality. However, while they share a commitment to affirming Hegel's contemporary relevance, their methodologies diverge significantly, with Malabou providing a far more incisive interpretation of Hegel as a thinker of contradiction.

Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity emphasises the liberating power of relinquishment as central to the destructive creativity inherent in Hegelian dialectics. For Malabou, Spirit's development is not characterised by a harmonious synthesis of opposites but by a process of rupture, where each stage must annihilate its autonomy to integrate into the totality. *Aufhebung* (sublation), in her reading, is not a smooth reconciliation but a violent transformation marked by loss and reconstitution. At the core of this process lies the act of letting go – to relinquish (*ablassen*) and to release (*weglassen*) – a negation that simultaneously preserves. This dynamic tension between release and preservation captures the essence of Hegelian contradiction: a generative antagonism that brings forth new forms while retaining the imprint of what has been negated. For Malabou, each phase of Spirit must “mourn” (*faire le deuil*) its autonomy, surrendering its independence to facilitate transformation and integration into a larger whole. This act of letting go is not passive resignation but a radically transformative gesture, embodying the productive violence essential to Spirit's self-development (Malabou 2005: 159).

In contrast, Marder's concept of the *absolute-as-energy* emphasises the harmonious integration of opposites, envisioning Spirit as achieving a synthesis of activity and rest, labour, and result. While this perspective successfully captures the relational dynamics central to Hegelian thought, it underplays the disruptive and transformative power of negation within the dialectic. The negative moment is acknowledged as pivotal, yet it is swiftly subsumed into a synergistic system of mediation, thereby tempering its radical capacity to unsettle and redefine. As Malabou illustrates, transformation in Hegel's philosophy is not merely a productive interplay of opposites

but a destructive creativity that fundamentally reshapes the very foundation of being. This focus on rupture and the violent relinquishment of autonomy, central to her concept of plasticity, offers a reading more faithful to Hegel's speculative core – particularly his materialism of contradiction, wherein the impossibility of seamless sublation drives historical and conceptual development. Similar radical reinterpretations can be found in Slavoj Žižek's exploration of Hegelian dialectical materialism (Žižek 2012, 2014, 2020) and Todd McGowan's concept of Hegel's "contradictory revolution" (McGowan 2019). For Hegel, Spirit does not sustain itself through relationality alone; it consumes, negates, and transforms. Contradiction, far from representing a tension to reconcile, operates as a generative force that destabilises and reconstructs reality itself.

### **/// Conclusion: Beyond Extractivism – Actuality as a Dialectical Alternative**

Marder's *Hegel's Energy* invites a reconsideration of both the philosophical mechanics of Hegelian dialectics and their ethical and ecological implications. Although Marder's interpretation of energy as the driving force of dialectical movement has theoretical limitations – particularly when measured against the radical readings of Malabou, Žižek, or McGowan – it nonetheless brings to light a pivotal philosophical tension: the dominance of potentiality as the guiding paradigm of modernity versus the regenerative possibilities embedded in Hegel's concept of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*).

At its core, extractivism epitomises the ascendancy of potentiality over actuality. It treats the world as a repository of latent possibilities, extracting resources, energy, and value from what is in order to actualise a narrow vision of potential. This process annihilates the present – its material integrity, temporal continuity, and relational synergies – by subordinating it to an abstract, short-term future, a logic intimately tied to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation. Fossil fuels, for example, are consumed to perpetuate the illusion of endless potentiality, depleting finite reserves and destabilising ecosystems vital to life. This "murderous potentiality," as Marder aptly describes it, operates through one-way extraction, severed from the reversible and regenerative dynamics of dialectical energy. As Marder notes, "The extractivist ideology that saps the earth's 'natural resources' is, by way of contrast, irreversible, while the relations it prescribes between what is used and the users are set in stone (or in shale rock). Its

energy, hopelessly depleting itself, nourishes the irrationality of world-destruction” (Marder 2021: 53).

Hegelian dialectics, however, present a fundamentally different paradigm. In Hegel’s philosophy, potentiality and actuality are not mutually exclusive but are mediated through a dynamic interplay, where potential is not merely consumed but transformed into something concrete and self-sustaining. *Wirklichkeit*, as Marder highlights, is not a static state but a self-relating movement shaped by negation and sublation (*Aufhebung*), in which what is negated is simultaneously preserved and elevated into a more integrated totality. Unlike the unidirectional, extractive logic that prioritises consumption, this dialectical process honours and incorporates the temporal, material, and relational dimensions of existence, fostering regeneration rather than depletion.

By juxtaposing extractivism’s unidirectional, destructive focus on potentiality with the regenerative capacity of Hegelian actuality, Marder re-frames energy as a relational, self-renewing process: “Dialectical energy does not extract resources from a world it construes as initially too abstract, too bare and vacant, to provide any fuel for being or for thought. Rather than extract, it extends and rhythmically contracts to come out of itself again” (Marder 2021: 54). This cyclical and self-sustaining dynamic aligns with Hegelian *Wirklichkeit*, where – echoing the Aristotelian *energeia* – destruction and preservation coexist, driving the dialectical unfolding of being.

The opposition between extractivist potentiality and Hegelian actuality reveals deeper philosophical tensions in late modernity. Extractivism, with its fixation on potentiality, reflects dominant paradigms of abstraction, unrestrained capital accumulation, and perpetual growth. By reducing the world to a mere substrate for human ambition, it neglects the material and relational conditions essential for sustaining life. Hegelian actuality, in contrast, insists on grounding freedom and transformation within the concrete realities of relational being. True change emerges through a dialectical movement that prioritises regeneration over depletion.

The lesson of *Hegel’s Energy* is twofold. First, it urges us to confront the destructiveness inherent in extractivist logic and its philosophical foundations. Second, it calls for the adoption of Hegelian actuality as a framework for regeneration. By redefining energy as a relational, self-renewing process, Marder critiques the shortcomings of modernity while offering a speculative pathway towards sustainability. In this vision, energy transcends the notion of a resource to be extracted and consumed, emerging

instead as a dynamic movement of becoming – one that simultaneously transforms and preserves, consumes and renews.

Yet, this vision is not without its challenges. Malabou's plasticity and Žižek's concept of "non-reconciliation" with reality offer more radical alternatives, emphasising rupture as essential to dismantling the systems driving ecological collapse. Plasticity's destructive creativity resonates with the pressing demands of the Anthropocene, where systemic transformation requires not gradual regeneration but decisive breaks with entrenched paradigms. While Marder's energy inspires a vision of harmonious renewal, it may lack the disruptive force needed to confront the violent realities of the ecological crisis.

Despite these limitations, Marder's political conclusions remain profoundly significant. By uncovering the energetic core of *Wirklichkeit*, he provides a compelling counterpoint to the extractivist logic of depletion and abstraction that defines our age. His call to rethink energy, time, and relationality resonates as both a philosophical insight and an urgent intervention in the crises of late modernity. *Hegel's Energy* reminds us that the path to regeneration lies in the dialectical sublation – the dynamic interplay of negation and preservation – a movement that refuses to sacrifice actuality on the altar of potentiality but instead seeks to transform both in the service of becoming.

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