

THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE YOUNG MARX

ACCORDING TO MARX'S APPROACH TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRITUS AND EPICURUS

ABSTRACT

In the History of Philosophy, the atomistic physics of Epicurus and of Democritus have been considered as very similar.¹ Contrary to the more conventional view, Marx considers this similarity

¹ "...while Cicero says that Epicurus worsened the Democritean doctrine, at the same time crediting him at least with the will to improve it and with having an eye for its defects, while Plutarch ascribes to him inconsistency (Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes*, 1111) and a predisposition toward the inferior, hence also casts suspicion on his intentions, Leibniz denies him even the ability to make excerpts from Democritus skillfully." "But all agree that Epicurus borrowed his physics from Democritus", Marx, Karl, *Gesamtausgabe I*, (MEGA), 16/7, 1970. (English translators Dirk J. & Sally R. Struik, *Marx & Engels Collected Works I*, 1975, 38).

as only apparent. He indicates that as an analysis becomes more fundamental and specific, a basic *difference* becomes clearer. At the end of his analysis Marx indicates that there is an *inner contradiction* in each of those theories. Marx also intended to explain the reasons for this contradiction but, regrettably, his explanation has not been found among his writings.² This paper must be considered as an attempt to reconstruct Marx's own philosophical presuppositions in his efforts to interpret ancient atomistic philosophy and to throw light on the beginnings of his critical method.

I

At first glance, it seems that Democritus and Epicurus teach the same science and that they do so in a similar way. Both are atomistic, that is to say, they start from the same principles—atoms and emptiness. On those grounds, it is generally assumed that both theories belong to the same kind or species; therefore, the difference between them becomes merely a marginal and secondary issue. The method that guides such kind of interpretation is the method of comparison, a widely accepted method even today in social sciences.

The method of comparison works by way of abstraction; *i.e.*, by means of ignoring specific qualities in the subject-matter and retaining only common and comparable features. The result of this process of scientific explanation is a single abstract concept.

If the process is reversed and this single and final concept is considered in relation to the variety from which it has been taken, one realizes that this concept has, as it were, a new quality: the concept is “the one in the many”; in effect, it can be referred to any one of the subsumed concepts individually and to them

² Only the titles of the chapters that deal with this issue are known: ch. 4: “General Difference in Principle Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature”, and ch. 5: “Results”.

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all, together. This quality is called “universality”.³ And regarding the specific determinations they are nullified or become something superfluous and fortuitous. What is superfluous and accidental is the difference between the various items subsumed.

The most remarkable consequence of this method is that, once a conceptual hierarchy is reached and a more or less fixed system of concepts (*i.e.*, a theory) is established, new facts are taken as providing an opportunity to ratify a theory by considering those new facts under the category of “exceptions”. Those exceptions are such since they are not deduced from the conceptual principles. If, for example, there are such exceptions included in a philosophical theory, they are considered either as philosophical mistakes of the author or as an accommodation to the philosopher’s times. In both cases, the necessary side of the exception is not taken into account. Mistakes are not explained and therefore philosophers of the history of philosophy renounce their task explicitly, which is to interpret the interpretation. To say that some theory is a mistake is not to explain it but to recognize implicitly that it is unexplainable.

This is in essence Marx’s critique to interpreters of philosophy. Marx opposes Hegel’s disciples in that they “interpreted” their teacher as one who was willing to compromise with the religion and the state even at the cost of contradicting his own philosophy. Marx writes that supposing that

A philosopher has really accommodated himself, then his pupils must explain from his *inner essential consciousness* that which *for him himself* had the form of an *exoteric consciousness*.⁴

The content of the accommodation must, in other words, be found in Hegel’s own philosophy; it must explain his theory from within. The issue of Hegel’s accommodation is taken anew by Marx later. For Marx, accommodation is an expression used by

³ Marx’s critique to this way of conceptualization is expressed in his following words: “It is as hard to produce real fruits from the abstract idea ‘the Fruit’ as it is easy to produce this abstract idea from real fruits. Indeed, it is impossible to arrive at the *opposite* of an abstraction without *relinquishing* the abstraction.” Marx, K., MEGA III, 228 (English transl., IV, 58).

⁴ Marx, MEGA I, 63-64 (English translation I, 84).

interpreters when they fail to understand its origins in the motives of the philosophy at issue.⁵ Interpretation is not, according to Marx, an excuse. Excusing, instead of interpreting, consists in taking the content of the issue to be interpreted not from its inner essential aspect but according to some external claims. The question that must be asked is why some philosophy is inclined, by its very nature, to accept real or apparent accommodations.

The same rule of interpretation must be applied in those instances where contradictions are found in a philosophy. In those cases, it is widely accepted to appeal to the formal logical device of labelling a theory as inconsistent or, at worst, there is an attempt to ignore precisely those parts of a theory which give rise to problems. Marx answers those attempts by quoting Spinoza's saying, that ignorance is no argument. And adds that "if one was to delete the passages in the ancients which he does not understand, how quickly would we have a *tabula rasa!*"⁶

Therefore, Marx adopts a different philosophical method of conceptualization. Instead of searching for the identity or similarity he directs his attention toward difference and the exceptions. In what is taken as secondary and accidental, he seeks the general rule to which the "accidental" is subordinated; and therefore accidental is not therefore taken as accidental but as necessity.

Following this pattern of thought, Marx tries to show that the theories of Epicurus and Democritus are not dissimilar, but opposite. They do not share common principles. Marx begins with a discussion of three specific determinations common to both theories: (A) The problem of truth and certainty in human knowledge, (B) the problem of practice of the theory, and (C) the relation of thought to being.

THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH AND CERTAINTY IN HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

There is a contradiction in Democritus' theory. Aristotle said that

⁵ See for example in his "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole", MEGA II, (English translation III, 339).

⁶ Marx, MEGA I, 32 (English translation I, 54)

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“Democritus posits soul and mind [*Verstand*] as one and the same, since the phenomenon is the true thing.”⁷ And in his metaphysics it is said that “Democritus asserts that nothing is true or it is concealed from us.”⁸ Marx asks: “Are not these passages of Aristotle contradictory? If the phenomenon is the true thing, how can the true thing be concealed? The concealment begins only when phenomenon and truth separate.”⁹ It seems that this contradiction brings Democritus to skepticism.¹⁰ The sensible reality is taken as a subjective phenomenon. But the skeptic who takes reality to be only a subjective appearance, does not give up over the existence of principles and with the aspiration to know them; those principles are the atoms that can be apprehended by reason only: “The principles can... be perceived only through reason, since they are inaccessible to the sensuous eye if only because of their smallness. For this reason they are even called *ideas*.”¹¹

So it can be realized that Democritus’ contradiction between truth and evidence obliges him to make a clear distinction between reason and sensation. This solution, however, does not satisfy him. Moreover, it puts him in a permanently restless situation. Marx does not discuss this contradiction further but merely indicates Democritus’ skeptical consciousness about truth and evidence.

With regard to Epicurus, he is taken by Marx as appealing to dogmatism instead of skepticism.¹² Nothing, not concepts nor senses, can refute sensations. Therefore, “... while Democritus turns the *sensuous world* into *subjective semblance*, Epicurus turns

⁷ Quoted by Marx from *De Anima* I (404 to 27-29), in MEGA I, 17, (English translation I, 38).

⁸ Quoted by Marx from *Metaphysica*, book 5 ch. 4, (1009 b, 11-18) in MEGA I, 17, (English translation I, 38).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “In reality we know nothing, for truth lies at the deep bottom of the well”. Quoted by Marx from Diogenes Laertius, book 9, MEGA I, 18, (English translation I, 39).

¹¹ Marx, MEGA I, 18 (English translation I, 39).

¹² “All senses are heralds of the true”. Quoted by Marx from Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I, XXV [70], MEGA I, 18 (English translation I, 39).

it into *objective appearance*.”¹³ Thus Epicurus is a dogmatist who believes in the senses. His affection for the senses is rooted in his extreme rationalism, and it is precisely his belief in truth that obliges him to believe in senses.

THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE OF THE THEORY

The question can arise: what are, if there are, the practical consequences of the different theoretical approaches of both Greek thinkers? Marx answers that

Democritus, for whom the principle does not enter into the appearance, remains without reality and existence, if faced on the other hand with the *world of sensation* as the real world, full of content. True, this world is subjective semblance, but just because of this it is torn away from the principle, left in its own independent reality. At the same time it is the unique real object and *as such* has value and significance. Democritus is therefore driven into *empirical observation*. Dissatisfied with philosophy, he throws himself into the arms of *positive knowledge*.¹⁴

The skeptic thus lacks a criterion for the decision between truth and falsehood. Democritus is consistent in his belief concerning the lack of a criterion, and does not believe in its applicability to reality even in those cases where such a criterion may be available. Therefore, lacking a theory, his only attitude toward reality is practical; he becomes extremely empiricist, since his denial of the reality of a principle is radical. It is worth noting that empiricism, at least in this case, is regarded by Marx as a direct practical consequence of skepticism, as “scientific behavior” derived from skeptical assumptions. In addition, the theoretical contradiction reveals itself as a practical contradiction. In effect, Democritus’ conduct is full of contradictions. It is related about him that he travelled half-way round the world, that he reached Persia,

¹³ Marx, MEGA I, 18 (English translation I, 40).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 (English translation, *ibid.*).

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the Red Sea and even India; that he studied from the Egyptians. The contradiction in theory has been translated into practice; his will to know and to study has not given him calm. But together with this, it is

... dissatisfaction with true, *i.e.*, philosophical, knowledge that drives him far abroad... Democritus is supposed to have blinded himself so that the sensuous light of the eye would not darken the sharpness of intellect. This is the same man who, according to Cicero, wandered through half the world.¹⁵ But he did not find what he was looking for.¹⁶

Epicurus, on the other hand, found satisfaction and happiness in philosophy. Contrary to Democritus, who was an empiricist, Epicurus despised positive sciences. Unlike Democritus, who studied from Egyptians, Persians and Indians, Epicurus prided himself on being self-taught. Democritus, lacking a theory, sought it in every fact in the world, whereas Epicurus, since he was well-grounded in philosophy, had no need of empirical research:

While Democritus is driven into all parts of the world, Epicurus leaves his garden in Athens scarcely two or three times and travels to Ionia not to engage in studies, but to visit friends.¹⁷ Finally, while Democritus, despairing of acquiring knowledge, blinds himself, Epicurus, feeling the hour of death approaching, takes a warm bath, calls for pure wine and recommends to his friends that they be faithful to philosophy.¹⁸

Thus the belief that nothing can refute sensation, *i.e.*, the belief in its truth, cannot label its object as “appearance”, since appearance is taken as something behind which there is still something to be revealed; appearance is taken in this case as something that hints at something else; it is essential, different and occult. And according to Epicurus, there is no such occult reali-

¹⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V, 39.

¹⁶ Marx, MEGA I, 20 (English translation I, 41).

¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, X, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, X, 15, 16. Marx, MEGA I, 20-21 (English translation I, 41-42).

ty. This is the source of his philosophical calm in contrast to those who run around the world without finding what they are seeking for. Marx indicates here that rationalism is the direct practical consequence of dogmatism. Rationalism here means scientific behavior derived from dogmatic assumptions. Thus, dogmatism brings about rationalism whereas skepticism brings about empiricism.

THE RELATION OF THOUGHT TO BEING

From the point of view of the modal status of reality, Democritus supports necessity.¹⁹ As opposed to him, Epicurus, according to Diogenes Laertius, asserts that

Necessity, introduced by some as the absolute ruler, *does not exist* ...it would be better to follow the myth about the gods than to be a slave to the destiny (*heimarmene*— εἱμαρμένη) of the physicists.²⁰

Democritus defends necessity whereas Epicurus defends possibility. Democritus makes no distinction between possible and real in a determinist way, *i.e.*, he refers only to real possibility. This real possibility is the opposite of abstract possibility. If, for example, a thirsty man satisfies his thirst, the cause of his drinking is his thirst and not any eventual abstract possibility.²¹

But Epicurus, on the other hand, refers only to the abstract possibility. Abstract possibility is an indication of one turning one's back on the given facts. If Democritus, starting from the

¹⁹ Cf. Cicero, *On Fate*, x [22, 23], *On the Nature of the Gods* I, xxv [69], Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* I, pp. 23 seqq., Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, V, 8 (789 b, 2-3). All those taken from Marx's notes, MEGA I, 61. Also quoted from Stobaeus: "Men like to create for themselves the illusion of chance—an excuse for their own perplexity; since is incompatible with sound thinking." (*Ethical Selections*, II [4], in MEGA, *ibid.*, note 36).

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius, X, 133, 134. Quoted by Marx in MEGA I, 21 (English translation I, 42-43).

²¹ Cf. MEGA I, 22-23 (English translation I, 44).

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real possibility arrives at the necessity, Epicurus arrives at contingency starting from the abstract possibility; contingency is a mere possible reality and, in order to maintain consistency, the realization of possibility must be avoided. Contingency turns its back on the objective world and refers to the world of thought alone:

Real possibility seeks to explain the necessity and reality of its object; abstract possibility is not interested in the object which is explained, but in the subject which does the explaining. The object need only be possible, conceivable. That which is abstractly possible, which can be conceived, constitutes no obstacle to the thinking subject, no limit, no stumbling-block. Whether this possibility is also real is irrelevant, since here the interest does not extend to the object as object.²²

Thus it becomes clear that rationalism brings about dogmatism. Epicurus also supports contingency and possibility as his modal criterion and he refers only to the thought, ignoring the real world. On the contrary, empiricism, that brings about skepticism, supports necessity as its modal criterion and refers to reality as such, to the world of objects.

On these grounds, what are the conclusions reached by Marx? He now makes clear that he who *believes* in truth has no interest in it. He despises positive sciences and is strongly dogmatic. And all this is compatible with his basic belief; that is to say, nothing can refute sensible perception according to his belief in the truth of sensual perception. Moreover, in order to be loyal to his point of departure, he must assume contingency and, in order to be loyal to contingency, he must turn his back on the world, that is to say, to the very sensation that was assumed as the truth!

On the other hand, as in the case of Democritus, the skeptic, he who does not believe in truth, is the true empiricist. Being an empiricist he seeks what he cannot find; as an empiricist he must assume necessity and thus becomes a perfect determinist. A determinist is therefore, one who does not believe in truth, *i.e.*, the skeptic.

²² Marx, MEGA I, 22-23 (English translation I, 44).

Each one of the above theories has done what had been intended by the other; neither has done what he, himself, intended to do. The one who considers sensible-perception as the truth, is precisely the rationalist theory, whereas the skeptic is empiricist; whoever believes in truth assumes contingency; and it is the skeptic who assumes necessity.

II

By what methodical device does Marx arrive at the former results? How are those metamorphoses possible? What are the principles that guide him in his analysis?

1. In the light of his results, it is clear that he is critically denying the basis of old categories, such as the opposition between rationalism and empiricism, between liberty and necessity, between sensation and reason, between thought and reality.

2. We should realize that Marx does not consider a philosophical system only from the point of view of its declared principles. That would mean for him to stay at an abstract level of discussion. Moreover, according to him, in order to understand the meaning of those principles, there is a need to seek for the way by which a “theoretical mind” turns into “practical energy.”²³ Theory is, *per se*, still abstract; it is something that must be fulfilled. That does not mean that there are theories that do not reach such fulfillment. The realization of a theory is an inseparable part of it. But a reservation must be made to this last statement; the fulfillment of a theory means that it has always a practical expression. This is not to assert, however, that the practical expression coincides with the explicit, formal and conscious content. On the contrary, the practical significance of a theory, its real content, can be its opposite. What becomes real may contradict the declared intention. In *Deutsche Ideologie* Marx warns against

²³ Cf. Marx, MEGA I, 64 (English translation I, 85).

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the possibility of someone depreciating the value of trains since there is a need for flight in the circumstances that this need has not real conditions to be fulfilled, *i.e.*, airplanes. In this case, however, there is a practical aspect. Translated into practice, the will to fly without wings that depreciates what is available—*i.e.* trains, means the request for oxcarts.²⁴ The oxcart is the practical expression of the theoretical need for flight, and it is its necessary result. And regarding philosophy, when it assumes a universal character, and when the real conditions for its realization are not yet in existence, this philosophy is not infertile. Moreover, it suffers a change; it degenerates and regarding, for example, the philosophy of enjoyment when there are no conditions for its fulfillment, it sinks “to the level of edifying moralising, to a sophisticated palliation of existing society, or it is transformed into its opposite, by declaring compulsory asceticism to be enjoyment.”²⁵ Moralising and asceticism are the expression of the philosopher’s despair faced with a world incompatible with his concept. And the “imaginary rising above the world is the ideological expression of the impotence of philosophers in face of the world.”²⁶

3. Marx points out in his analysis that there is not only an opposition between Epicurean and Democritean philosophies, but also that there is an inner contradiction in each one taken individually. How do those contradictions arise? They appear, firstly, if the interpreter does not limit his analysis to the search for the conscious principles that constitute the starting-point of the analyzed theory. On the contrary, he aspires to analyze the way in which such principles crystallize in the specific determinations that are deduced from them. This claim turns the principle into a merely formal aspect of the theory. This formal character of the principle reveals the irrelevance of the theory, taken abstractly, regarding its real determinations. Now it is realized that oppo-

²⁴ Cf. Marx, *Deutsche Ideologie*, MEGA V, 282 (English translation V, 303).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 396 (English translation V, 417).

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 357/358 (English translation V, 379).

site determinations can be deduced from this same principle. And, since the principle is not concerned directly with any real determination, it is revealed as something non-real, as something abstract and sterile in regard to the content of the philosophy in question.

This result does not only show that the formal and pure principle is irrelevant to the content, but shows that the principle itself is influenced by the concrete result and contradicts itself. The *raison d'être* of the principle consists in its concrete results, of what is deduced from it. The function of principles is to be a device in order to deduce some results. And only by taking into account those results are there grounds for reconstructing the true principles. Thus, in regard to the philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus, both start, apparently, from the same principles: the atoms and the emptiness. In fact, however, regarding the results, the philosophy of Democritus is revealed as one of merely lacking awareness of consciousness, and the philosophy of Epicurus, on the contrary, as one of self-consciousness. In all events, the common principle cannot help us to fully interpret the real philosophical attitude.

4. Marx also shows that each theory contradicts itself. The theory that regards a sensuous world as a subjective semblance, devotes itself to empirical natural science. And the theory which considers the phenomenal world as something real, rejects empiricism; it embodies in itself “the serenity of thought satisfied in itself, the self-sufficiency that draws its knowledge *ex principio interno*.”²⁷ In this result the contradiction in which the philosopher falls is revealed. Practical consciousness is aware of its goals and interests; theoretical consciousness is aware of its presuppositions. The ways they act are different and even in opposition to one another. The philosophical consciousness starts from theory, from concept, and creates from within an entire world. On the other hand, practical consciousness, or practical reason, is not aware of the motives that guide its activity; it is not aware of the grounds of its activity; those grounds are rather

²⁷ Marx, MEGA I, 24 (English translation I, 45).

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taken as self-evident and therefore are not thematized. But theoretical consciousness, occupied with the presuppositions, ignores the real conditions in which it acts, ignores practical activity, and first of all, it ignores the necessary connection that exists between a theory and its consequences.

Marx stresses the practical force of a theory; it is the key in order to understand the historical importance of a philosophy.²⁸ It must be remarked that by practical force of a theory is not to be understood only a practical relationship to the world, but also *theory*. The “*practice of philosophy is itself theoretical.*”²⁹ Thus, Democritus’ empiricism and Epicurus’ rationalism do not constitute the theoretical aspect of their philosophies. The theoretical aspect is revealed in their consideration of truth and certainty: Democritus’ skepticism and Epicurus’ dogmatism. Their empiricism and rationalism are their practical force, but with the reservation already stated: they are also theoretical, it is a theory about practice.

Thus, the assertion, *i.e.*, that the philosopher is not aware of the practical consequences of his theory, means that he does not consider all the theoretical judgments that must be deduced from his presuppositions. So, an advanced self-consciousness would urge the philosopher to make changes in his theory, and first of all his own presuppositions. A theory that does not become its realization, in the theoretical meaning, is an abstract theory, since it is unaware of even itself. This ignorance means only a partial self-consciousness, since it includes a non-required real result from which contradictions arise. The source of the contradictions lies in this half-awareness, in this abstract character of the theory. Philosophy is, in this case, inclined to put in the hands of practical consciousness what it might realize itself in theory; therefore, the concreteness of the real conditions is separated from the abstract character of the principles.

Under such circumstances, theory begins to be separated from the concrete totality. It becomes a kind of knowledge uncon-

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 64 (English translation I, 85).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

scious about its dependency on this totality. And this unawareness about its dependency is precisely the reason for its being dependent. The fact that theory depends on conditions external to the sphere of consciousness, causes it to become an *expression* of those conditions. Now those conditions are the key to explain the theory instead of theory being the explainer of reality. In such fashion, we take from philosophy its main claim: to interpret and to explain. Instead it becomes an ideological *a posteriori* justification that needs in itself to be explained.

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