



The Reconstruction of Human Self-consciousness in Marx's Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract: Marx's doctoral dissertation has drawn significant attention from Marxist scholars due to its subversive evaluation of late ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Epicureanism, and its influence on Marx's later thought. This paper focuses on Marx's view of self-consciousness in his dissertation, pointing out that Marx's concept not only inherits but also innovates upon the ideas of Hegel and the Young Hegelians.

Keywords: Marx; doctoral dissertation; self-consciousness; reality; freedom

1. Introduction

Unlike the continuous development of metaphysics during the times of Plato and Aristotle, the turn of late ancient Greek naturalistic philosophers triggered a wave of awakening in self-consciousness. From a historical perspective, Marx keenly observed the convergence of two distinct eras — the late ancient Greek period and the post-Hegelian era — during which thinkers simultaneously shifted their attention to universal skepticism and the study of human self-consciousness. Around 323 BC, as the Alexander Empire gradually declined and collapsed, years of war and social unrest left people without hope in their daily lives, causing them to turn inward for solace. Similarly, during Hegel's time, the collapse of Napoleon's European Union led to social turmoil, prompting philosophers who could not find solutions in reality to revisit theoretical discussions. Marx recognized that these two different periods both focused on the issue of "self-consciousness." Following Hegel's summary of Hellenistic self-consciousness, Marx sought to return to late ancient Greece and vindicate Epicurean self-consciousness. Against this backdrop, Marx's early work aimed to depict Epicurus as "the philosopher of self-consciousness." Marx's doctoral dissertation, starting from Epicurus's natural philosophy, further highlighted the core issues in his philosophical research — the problems of human freedom and the awakening of self-consciousness.

When discussing Marx's early thought or his doctoral dissertation, mainstream research mostly asserts that Marx during this period was primarily influenced by Hegelian philosophy, especially the philosophy of the Young Hegelians, and that under this influence, Marx proposed the concept of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness, originating from subjectivity, is viewed as a subjective idealist perspective on the pursuit of human freedom. Although this view seems theoretically sound, it requires deeper reflection. Was Marx addressing self-consciousness from the standpoint of subjective idealism? While Marx initially questioned earlier theories, how did he employ Hegelian dialectics in his dissertation to propose new insights into "self-consciousness"? It is oversimplified to categorize Marx's early philosophical thought as either fully aligned with Hegel or to declare that Marx was merely a Young Hegelian at this stage.

2. The Opposition Between Democritus and Epicurus

When Marx was writing his doctoral dissertation, he had two potential topics to choose from. One focused on natural philosophy, particularly the differences in approach and details between Democritus and Epicurus in this field. The other would examine a particular school of thought as a case study to analyze the inheritance and influence of Greek spirit in modern times. After careful consideration, Marx chose the former topic for two reasons. First, for a doctoral dissertation, comparing the theories of two contemporaneous philosophers would be more approachable. Second, Marx's reevaluation of Democritus's and Epicurus's natural philosophies revealed significant misunderstandings in their interpretation. Finally, this critical analysis reflected Marx's reconsideration of Hegel's abstract and individualistic view of self-consciousness, as well as Bauer's discussion of it. After much deliberation on the topic, Marx completed his dissertation in early 1841, titled "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," marking the formation of Marx's early philosophical framework.

Before Marx, the predominant view on this issue was advanced by Cicero and Plutarch, who argued that the similarities between Democritus's and Epicurus's atomic theories indicated that Epicurus had simply plagiarized Democritus's natural

philosophy. They went on to entirely dismiss Epicurean philosophy, claiming that later Greek philosophies, such as Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism, were merely mixtures of earlier theories. Epicureanism, they argued, was simply a blend of Democritean physics and Cyrenaic ethics; Stoicism was a combination of Heraclitean natural speculation and Cynic ethics, with a touch of Aristotelian logic. Lastly, they claimed that Skepticism was an inevitable counter to these dogmatic philosophies. On the surface, this conclusion seems reasonable, as Epicurus did borrow from Democritus's physical theories, and both reached the same conclusion — that the world is composed of atoms in a void. However, in Marx's deep study of Epicurean philosophy, he discovered that their understanding of the truth and reliability of knowledge, their attitudes toward the sensory world, and their views on the relationship between thought and existence were entirely different, even opposed. If Democritus resembled more of a physicist or scientist, Epicurus was more of a philosopher. These differences manifested in three main areas.

First, Democritus's judgment of the truth and reliability of knowledge contained internal contradictions. On one hand, Democritus considered sensory phenomena as subjective illusions; apart from atoms and the void, nothing truly exists. Since sensory phenomena exist outside of atoms, they, too, are not real. On the other hand, Democritus admitted that sensory phenomena are the only real objects. This theoretical contradiction arises because, according to Marx, Democritus "sometimes treats one aspect and sometimes the other as subjective or objective, thereby seeming to resolve the contradiction by assigning the two opposing sides to separate worlds." Democritus attempted to dichotomize the subjective and objective worlds but inadvertently reversed them, leading to a double contradiction of denying the sensory world while being unable to escape it. In contrast, Epicurus regarded the sensory world as an objective phenomenon. Sensory perception has its inherent standard, and even when entering perception with different or similar sensory experiences, its existence cannot be denied. He asserted that sensory qualities are not merely opinions but are inherently tied to the atom, making sensory perception a reliable standard for understanding natural phenomena.

Second, Democritus and Epicurus differed in their attitudes toward scientific knowledge. Although Democritus viewed the sensory world as a subjective illusion, he also saw it as maintaining its independent reality, giving it meaning and value. Democritus was a lover of science and not content with philosophy alone. He traveled extensively, acquiring various forms of scientific knowledge, continuously pursuing new empirical truths. However, in his efforts to avoid having his rationality clouded by sensory experience, he fell into self-doubt, ultimately blinding himself yet failing to attain the truth he sought. In contrast, Epicurus was indifferent toward science and exalted philosophy, believing that freedom could only be achieved through philosophical inquiry, not scientific perfection. From personal experience, Democritus, despite trying to avoid the influence of sensory reality, could not escape it, while Epicurus found freedom and happiness in philosophy, attaining peace of mind.

Third, Democritus and Epicurus differed not only in theoretical consciousness but also in practical activity. Democritus, starting from necessity, focused on understanding and explaining specific phenomena. He reduced everything to necessity, excluding chance from nature, and attributed its appearance to human ignorance. This implied that humans were bound by external conditions and were limited beings, hence Democritus's famous statement, "I would rather discover a new causal link than become king of Persia!" In his view, natural phenomena like causal links and natural deductions were the only real things. In contrast, Epicurus saw randomness everywhere and denied the objective reality of nature. He believed that all objective things were products of chance, with human creativity and reflective thinking behind them. Humans, being created beings with subjective agency, could dissolve the object-subject dichotomy through self-consciousness. This dissolution, achieved through philosophy, sought to understand the possibility of human freedom.

These differences in theory and practice reflected the two philosophers' entirely divergent paths in understanding the nature of the world. Democritus became trapped in the pursuit of science, denying the reality of sensory phenomena while being unable to escape the empirical world, resulting in self-contradiction. In contrast, Epicurus, acknowledging the existence of the objective world, did not confine himself to science. Instead, he turned to philosophy, believing that only philosophy could bring peace of mind. Democritus's skepticism led him to deny the existence of concrete objects like tables and pens, seeking instead a truth beyond the sensory world. Epicurus, meanwhile, accepted the objective existence of sensory objects but focused on constructing an "abstract concrete" concept, such as tables and pens, as representations of specific objects. He established an internal connection between matter and form, where contradictions between them were unified. From the outset, Democritus and Epicurus stood on entirely different philosophical grounds. Through his analysis of the contradictions between Democritus's and Epicurus's atomic theories, Marx proposed that self-consciousness should be understood from the perspective of sensory reality. Epicurus's philosophy, starting from the sensory world, emphasized the process of self-recognition, self-denial, and self-development, ultimately transcending natural constraints and achieving freedom.

3. Marx's Concept of Self-consciousness Based on Sensory Reality

As mentioned above, the reason Democritus was continually disappointed in his inability to attain truth was his failure to acknowledge the objective reality of sensory phenomena. He sought to construct an irreconcilable dualism between subject and object. Epicurus, on the other hand, started from the recognition of objective reality, using the movement of atoms — the interaction of atoms with themselves—to reflect on how humans achieve freedom through the interplay between self-consciousness and the empirical world in real life. This is the core theme of Marx's doctoral dissertation: how humanity attains freedom in reality. Self-consciousness, in this context, has a dual meaning. First, self-consciousness is realized through the atom's interaction with itself. Second, freedom is achieved by transcending reality at the level of direct engagement with the empirical world.

3.1 Atoms Interact with Themselves

Atoms in the void exhibit three forms of motion: straight-line motion, mutual repulsion, and deviation. First, the process of atomic descent resembles the scattering of countless universal points. There is no qualitative difference between them; as long as an atom exists in the void, it moves in a straight line. Second, while straight-line motion reflects the universality of atoms, deviation from the straight line represents the atom's unique characteristics, the qualities that distinguish one atom from another. Third, these three forms of motion occur simultaneously, not sequentially. The atom does not first move in a straight line and then collide with other atoms to divide or combine. These motions happen concurrently. Atoms do not realize themselves through their relationships with external things; rather, these three movements simultaneously affect the atom itself. Matter and form come to know existence itself through the relationship between the atom and itself. Atoms can only collide with themselves because any relationship they establish with external entities negates their relative existence. The external opposition of matter and form represents “relative existence,” while the internal opposition of matter and form represents “the existence of the being itself.” This negated relative existence is seen in the atom's straight-line descent. Self-consciousness does not aim to eliminate this relative existence but instead realizes itself by continually breaking the materiality of its relative existence. In this process, the opposition between straight-line motion and repulsion is negated, allowing existence to be understood as existence itself, rather than merely relative existence. Epicurus explained the materiality of the atom through its straight-line motion and its form through deviation from the straight line. These opposing determinations are seen as movements in direct opposition. As atoms move in abstract void space, they exist as matter while also embodying a form of existence that contradicts their materiality — form itself. Matter is revealed through form. This direct opposition in motion manifests only through internal contradiction, not external opposition. The being realizes itself not through external relations but through the continual negation of its own self. The process of self-negation leads to self-renewal. No atom exists independently of deviation; no form exists without matter, and no abstract form exists without matter. Until deviation occurs, the atom cannot be called an atom; at least, it has not yet realized self-consciousness.

3.2 The Realization of Self-consciousness

The characteristics inherent in the atom include matter, essence, and existence, which together form the atom's self-consciousness in its natural form. The repulsion between atoms represents the initial realization of self-consciousness. The process of the atom transforming from raw material to form and then to the concept of the atom itself mirrors the process of self-consciousness realizing itself. Both Epicurus and Marx were interested in the relationship between essence and existence within the atom. Through matter, the atom attains a form of existence that contradicts its concept, becoming externalized and distinct from its essence. The contradictions between matter and form are resolved in the system of celestial bodies, as matter incorporates form. In this process, abstract self-consciousness is objectified through its struggle with abstract matter, becoming an independent, universal, and perceptible self-consciousness.

The manifestation of self-consciousness involves not only the self but also how the phenomena of the natural world manifest. Epicurus did not view phenomena as subjective illusions in the empirical world but as alienations of essence. The relationship between phenomena and essence must not be completely separated, nor should they be conflated. If phenomena are understood through essence, the result is confusion between the two; if understood through concept alone, the essence and phenomena are entirely severed, reducing phenomena to subjective illusions. Time reflects the phenomena themselves and serves as the form of sensory existence. For Epicurus, time arises when the accidental nature of an object perceived by the senses is considered as an accident. If accidents reflect the changes of things in general, then time represents the changes within those changes. It is not a specific objective entity but manifests through the continuous transformation of entities into new entities.

Marx's concept of "contingency" acknowledges both the freedom of individuals (atoms) and the freedom of the absolute other (celestial bodies), although this freedom depends on the conditions of its realization. Freedom, emerging from reality,

has objective external constraints and the limits imposed by entities themselves. Whether it is individual freedom or the freedom of others, it is realized through human sensory experience. Human sensory existence is grounded in something, and that foundation is the absolute change determined by time. Through the interaction between time and sensory experience, external objects stimulate the sense organs, generating content that the sense organs can recognize. For instance, in hearing, one hears oneself; in seeing, one sees oneself; in smelling, one smells oneself. This process allows the object to reflect itself. Through this reflection, phenomena are no longer merely subjective. For Epicurus, sensory experience is the reflection of the phenomenal world, embodied in time. Time is the boundary of sensory existence. Marx used this absolute concept of time to illustrate the historical changes in human freedom, thus demonstrating humanity's ability to act upon the material world, as human beings are historical agents. In the process of the philosophization of the world and the realization of philosophy in the world, human freedom is manifested through continual self-development and self-recognition.

4. The Theoretical Significance of Marx's Concept of Self-consciousness

By comparing Democritus's and Epicurus's natural philosophies, Marx revealed the universal modes of atomic motion and re-established the concept of self-consciousness from a natural perspective. He linked self-consciousness and the freedom potentially achieved through it to the material world, bringing self-consciousness back to reality. During the writing of his doctoral dissertation, Marx had already keenly recognized that philosophy, after undergoing the refinement of German classical philosophy, must transcend itself to find a new path. If philosophy only discusses abstract content, it becomes meaningless and ineffective. Marx realized that after Hegel, philosophy, in some sense, had already come to an end. At this point, Marx understood that to overcome this predicament, philosophy had to reexamine the dualism of matter and spirit. As Marx explained, the task of philosophy was not simply to understand nature but to solve the problem of how human spiritual freedom is realized through the creation of the world. Freedom is not an abstract utopia detached from the material world. Freedom can only be realized through human engagement with objects, where the subject's free will is constantly exercised through interactions with the world. Marx's dissertation contributed significantly to humanity's pursuit of freedom. As he noted in the dedication of his dissertation, Marx always maintained a strong resolve in his quest for truth. He aimed to restore philosophy's authority and elevate the position of humanity in the material world, guiding people on how to enhance their subjective agency. In his dissertation, Marx drew upon late Greek philosophy's emphasis on human free will to redefine human subjectivity and the authority of philosophy. Freedom lies in overcoming dualism, integrating practical action with dynamic life, and linking thought to the material world.

Marx departed from Hegel's path of seeking self-consciousness in abstract individuals and consciousness alone, turning instead to sensory experience and the material world. He sought to find a way, from a philosophical perspective, for human freedom based on the material world. Marx believed that philosophy should not be limited to theoretical contemplation of the world, as this would only separate science from philosophy, and theory from practice. Experience exists within philosophy and in opposition to it. By reconciling experience and philosophy, and integrating philosophy into practical life, it becomes possible to achieve self-negation and self-overcoming. What Marx opposed was not the belief in spiritual freedom but the notion that freedom could be attained by disregarding the material world. He rejected the idea that the key to spiritual freedom was independence rather than creativity. Spiritual freedom cannot exist independently of the world; its hallmark is the realization of self-liberation through the creation of the world. Spiritual freedom must be connected to reality, and spirit cannot exist independently. To escape the constraints of nature, the spirit must return to the material world and find its meaning by creating the world within it. In Marx's dissertation, there were already elements of practical philosophy, which were entirely different from the views of the Young Hegelians or Hegel. Marx later never abandoned the concept of self-consciousness but deepened his understanding of it from a materialist perspective, exploring the relationship between philosophy and reality. Marx's exploration of the path to human liberation has continued to inspire Marxist philosophers and Western Marxists, who, following Marx's approach, seek to reconcile self-consciousness with the empirical world and explore the path to human liberation and freedom from a practical perspective.

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