



## *Chapter Five*

# Karl Marx and Greek Philosophy: Some Explorations into the Themes of Intellectual Accommodation and Moral Hypocrisy

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In the past two decades, social and political scientists interested in the origins of ideas have begun a careful and enlightened reassessment of the intellectual roots of Karl Marx's thought. Moving away from the somewhat stagnant fields of inquiry in Hegelian philosophy and political theory, they have instead set their sights on the fascinating study program of Greek philosophy that Marx undertook between 1839 and 1841 while a student at Berlin University. The result has been a flowering of serious-minded scholarship that has opened up a whole new perspective on this earliest productive period of his life.

Initially, the studies in Greek philosophy were something of a puzzle to students of his early life and thought and were either deliberately ignored or given a brief mention and then with a sense of embarrassment. His dialectical exposition of the Epicurean philosophy of nature may have presented the surface appearance of having been written in a somewhat tacky style; or else they were unable to make any sense of it, let alone discover its purpose. It was easier and safer to write about Marx's intellectual relationship to the Young Hegelians and go on from there to his political and economic writing. I well recall how my radical views were received at the beginning of the 1970s, when I asserted the importance of these studies in Greek philosophy. Badly in Europe and as heresy in the Soviet Union. It was in the United States that my ideas were welcomed.

This Chapter begins with an overview of some important old ground— a necessary recapitulation before making the jump forward into a new and potentially controversial line of thought. Time has certainly given perspective to my earlier detailed consideration of this material, and Marx's basic purpose for undertaking his research is now quite clear. He was clarifying for himself the historical relationship of the Young Hegelians and their thought to the philosophy of their erstwhile spiritual mentor. Bound up with this was his own personal standing, his sense of place in the history of philosophy. Hegel—to whom Marx had referred in these studies as “our master”—is unfailingly mentioned when the subject under discussion has to do with the place of a philosophy in the history of thought and the intellectual relationship of its adherents to it. The examples are numerous. He had already achieved his own self-clarification concerning the overall historical position of Hegel's philosophy in the preparatory research for his doctoral *Dissertation* made between 1839 and 1840. His evaluation of the complex and contradictory character of the Hegelian school and judgment of its leader's fate, made in the sixth notebook on Epicurean philosophy, is worth quoting:

As in the history of philosophy there are nodal points which raise philosophy in itself to concretion, apprehend abstract principles in a totality, and thus break off the rectilinear process, so also there are moments when philosophy turns its eyes to the external world ... but as Prometheus, having stolen fire from heaven, begins to build houses and to settle upon the earth, so philosophy, expanded to be the whole world, turns against the world of appearance. The same now with the philosophy of Hegel.<sup>1</sup>

A judgment on the future of a philosophy follows:

While philosophy has sealed itself off to form a consummate, total world, the determination of this totality is conditioned by the general development of philosophy, just as that development is the condition of the form in which philosophy turns into a practical relationship towards reality; thus the totality of the world in general is divided within itself, and this division is carried to the extreme, for spiritual existence has been freed, has been enriched to universality. . . . The division of the world is total only when its aspects are totalities. The world confronting a philosophy total in itself is therefore a world torn apart. This philosophy's activity therefore also appears torn apart and contradictory; its objective universality is turned back into the subjective forms of individual consciousness in which it has life.<sup>2</sup>

The subjective forms referred to are the ideas of the various supporters of the Hegelian school of philosophy, a section of whom Marx immediately attacks.

He who does not acknowledge this historical necessity must be consistent and deny that men can live at all after a total philosophy, or he must hold that the dialectic of measure as such is the highest category of the self-knowing spirit and assert, with some of the Hegelians who understand our master wrongly, that *mediocrity* is the normal manifestation of the absolute spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Without understanding this necessary evolution of philosophy from the universal to the particular, says Marx, it is impossible to understand how the post-Aristotelian philosophies of Epicurus and Zeno could appear. This is the “fortunate thing” that emerges from the breakup of a universal mode—“the subjective form, the modality of the relation of philosophy, as subjective consciousness, towards reality.” And in a memorable sentence the relationship of Epicurean to Aristotelian philosophy is made wonderfully clear:

Thus, when the universal sun has gone down, the moth seeks the lamplight of the private individual.<sup>4</sup>

The entire Epicurean philosophy of nature was grounded in an ethical framework specifically designed to appeal to the private individual.

Finally, in this section of the notebook, Marx draws a parallel between the two Greek systems on the one hand and Hegel and the post-Hegelians on the other. The “turn-about of philosophy,” its “transubstantiation into flesh and blood,” varies according to its intellectual birthmark. Those Hegelians who had condemned their spiritual master's philosophy as self-contradictory failed to understand the inner processes going on in the historical evolution of philosophy as a whole. They maintained that his philosophy had pronounced judgment on itself, but were really blind as to the real meaning of the twists and turns in its development.

But from the philosophical point of view it is important to bring out this aspect, because, reasoning back from the determinate character of this turn-about, we can form a conclusion concerning the immanent determination and the world-historical character of the process of development of a philosophy. What formerly appeared as growth is now determination, what was negativity existing in itself has now become negation. Here we see, as it were, the *curriculum vitae* of a philosophy in its most concentrated expression, epitomised in its subjective point, just as from the death of a hero one can infer his life's history.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the *raison d'être* for a doctoral dissertation on the relationship between the pre-Aristotelian atomic theory of Democritus and the post-Aristotelian Epicurean philosophy of nature:

Since I hold that the attitude of the Epicurean philosophy is such a form of Greek philosophy, may this also be my justification if, instead of presenting moments out of the preceding Greek philosophies as conditions of the life of the Epicurean philosophy, I reason back from the latter to draw conclusions about the former and thus let it itself formulate its own particular position.<sup>6</sup>

Putting this another way, from the life of a philosophy one can infer the *curriculum vitae* of its death. Marx said as much in his discussion a few pages further on when he referred to Plato's philosophy and his positive interpretation of the Absolute.

Where the Absolute stands on one side, and limited positive reality on the other, and the positive must all the same be preserved, there this positive becomes the medium through which absolute light shines, the absolute light breaks up into a fabulous play of colours. . . . This has recurred in recent times, due to the operation of a similar law.<sup>7</sup>

Premonition or prophecy? The breakup of the Hegelian Absolute into a spectrum of fabulous colors had hardly begun when Marx wrote those words sometime between 1839 and 1840, a dazzling display that was soon to become the revolutionary theology of Strauss, the critical theology and philosophy of Bruno Bauer, the humanist anthropological philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, the shattering nihilism of Max Stirner, and, at its most fiery red end, Marx himself—the “subjective form of individual consciousness,” destined to make the longest voyage of all, perhaps, and with the fastest shift in any direction.

There is nothing of this kind of philosophical historiography in the *Dissertation* itself. Why should there be? However, in its foreword Marx does hint at these thoughts from the preparatory *Notebooks*. The post-Aristotelian systems, he declares, “are the key to the true history of Greek philosophy.” But having concluded the *Dissertation*, he incorporated into its Notes a section with the odd heading “General Difference in Principle between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature” in which he now effectively made public his earlier critical views of those elements in the Hegelian school who failed to understand their master. And he hit out with a vengeance. They revealed an ignorance in criticizing certain aspects of Hegel’s system as a desire for accommodation—an immoral act—when only a short while ago, “they were enthusiastic about all his idiosyncrasies.” If they had earlier supported it with such a “naive uncritical trust,” then “how unscrupulous is their attempt to reproach the Master for a hidden intention behind his insight!”<sup>8</sup>

In a penetrating paragraph following this rebuke, Marx contrasts the difference in consciousness toward a philosophical system between the thinker who created it and the disciples that support it.

Suppose therefore 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*. In this way, that which appears as progress of conscience is at the same time progress of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

And a few lines further on, a more indicative judgment:

By the way, I consider this unphilosophical trend in a large section of Hegel’s school as a phenomenon which will always accompany the transition from discipline to freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Remember: this indictment of a large part of the Hegelian school of philosophy was made in 1841—at a time when Marx was long regarded, by the great majority of respected students of his early intellectual development, as having been an uncritical adherent of Hegel’s thought. The re-examination of this period of his life that has taken place in the past two decades has shown this view to be entirely mistaken. Important new evidence glared out at these researchers from the pages of his classical studies. If they chose to ignore or minimize such hard evidence for the sake of holding on to a comfortable, established way of seeing things, then those who are conscientious will judge them accordingly. I took the opposite view and make no apology for quoting this evidence here at length.

By the time he completed the appendix to his *Dissertation*, Marx had achieved a mature assessment of the practical contradictions contained in any “total” philosophy that sought to confront the world. And he is analytically clear in his understanding of how these contradictions affected the evolution of the school that accompanied it. There are two sides to the process. Objectively, the initial reflective relationship of a philosophy to the world experiences tension as it seeks to realize itself practically:

What was inner light has become consuming flame turning outwards. The result is that as the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, any philosophy that engages in a practical campaign to convert the world acquires all the defects of worldliness. Think for a moment of how the kindly wisdom of a one-time

radical Jewish rabbi of the Galilee wound up as holy edict in the torture chambers of the Spanish Inquisition, or how the great humanistic sentiments of Marx's Parisian *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* evolved into the vicious brutality of Stalin's Siberian Gulag. Did Marx remember, one wonders—later on in his life when he set about creating the International Working Men's Association, building his own "school" and actualizing his own philosophy in the world—those strictures and dangers that he had once so penetratingly foreseen as a student?

Returning to those self-conscious student days, however, this campaigning aspect of a philosophy's evolution formed the objective side of its wider story. Why should this occur though? The answer, perhaps, lies in what Marx described as the subjective aspect of the process:

This is *the relationship of the philosophical system* which is realised *to its intellectual carriers*, to the individual self-consciousnesses in which its progress appears.<sup>12</sup>

Paul and the early fathers of the Church in Rome, or Lenin and his Bolsheviks, seem to be suitable candidates.

This relationship results in what confronts the world in the realisation of philosophy itself, namely, in the fact that these individual self-consciousnesses always carry *a double-edged demand*, one edge turned against the world, the other against philosophy itself. Indeed, what in the thing itself appears as a relationship inverted in itself, appears in these self-consciousnesses as a double one, a demand and an action contradicting each other. Their liberation of the world from un-philosophy is at the same time their own liberation from the philosophy that held them in fetters as a particular system.<sup>13</sup>

The liberation of the early fathers of the Church from that ethic of a kindly wisdom has evolved through Rome and medieval Europe to the hypocrisy of modern Christianity. Likewise, Lenin's liberation from the humanistic side of Marx's great egalitarian ethic evolved through the Bolshevik party to the hell black nightmare of the Lubianka.

As for the evolution of the Hegelian school itself, the comments Marx made in the odd section of the Notes to his *Dissertation* specifically related to developments that had already occurred. The duality of philosophical self-consciousness had appeared as two distinct trends or parties. These were a "liberal party" that held fast to the principle of the philosophy and turned outward to engage the world in a philosophical critique, and a party of "positive philosophy" whose main determination was "the moment of reality." The activity of this second party was philosophizing; the inadequacy of which lay in philosophy itself. "Each of these parties," said Marx, "does exactly what the other one wants to do and what it itself does not want to do." Summarizing the process that leads to this kind of division, Marx is very clear about its effect on the practical evolution of philosophical self-consciousness.

That which in the first place appears as an inverted relationship and inimical trend of philosophy with respect to the world, becomes in the second place a diremption of individual self-consciousness in itself and appears finally as an external separation and duality of philosophy, as two opposed philosophical trends.<sup>14</sup>

The precise identity of the two sides of the Hegelian school to which he refers has been argued over at length. It has been suggested that the liberals were part of the Young Hegelian group associated with Bruno Bauer, a lecturer at Berlin University and friend of Marx, while the party of positive philosophy belonged to the right wing of the Hegelian school. This commonly accepted view is supported by the editors of the Moscow-published *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, who include Ludwig Feuerbach as a member of the Young or Left Hegelians. To my mind, this cannot be correct and reflects a fundamental failure to understand Marx's thought.<sup>15</sup> It was precisely at this time that Feuerbach was developing his crucially important attack on the idealist center of Hegel's philosophy. His activity—thinking of it in Marx's manner at the time—was an attempt to philosophize, and involved the turning in toward itself of philosophy. To repeat what Marx said: "This second side knows that the

inadequacy is immanent in philosophy.” Positive philosophy—this second aspect of the duality—did not receive his sympathy at the time:

only the liberal party achieves real progress, because it is the party of the concept, while positive philosophy is only able to produce demands and tendencies whose form contradicts their meaning.<sup>16</sup>

The practical direction taken by the philosophy of Bruno Bauer and the Berlin Young Hegelian circle was later lampooned by Marx, in *The Holy Family* of 1844, as “critical critique.” This public and highly caustic parting of company with old friends, however, was nowhere accompanied by even the faintest self-reflective admission that, throughout 1842 and 1843, he had been busy on behalf of the liberal-party side of the duality, turning philosophy outward and using it as a critical weapon against the Prussian legal system.

Making the Prussian world “philosophical” during these two years proved to be a somewhat thankless task, and it was perhaps no coincidence that Feuerbach was rediscovered toward the latter part of this period. Feuerbach’s crucially important *Vorläufige Thesen* and *Grundsätze*, overturning the whole idealism of the Hegelian dialectic, was followed by Marx’s own pivotal analysis of the Hegelian dialectic and philosophy as a whole—a joining hands with the party of positive philosophy that saw the “inadequacy” as immanent to philosophy itself.

But to return to the above quotation and its tantalizing suggestion that “positive philosophy is only able to produce demands and tendencies whose form contradicts their meaning.” What is Marx getting at here? At whom is he pointing an accusing finger? Establishment figures in the Karl Marx industry claim that the criticism is directed at the orthodox, right-wing tendency in Hegel’s school. This is a lightweight notion. The criticism Marx made in 1841 was directed at what he would certainly have then regarded as a renegade position taken by the independent-minded Feuerbach, who—while never a member of the Young Hegelian circle—had already published a number of important articles highlighting the serious weakness in the relationship of Hegel’s dialectic to reality. For Feuerbach, the inadequacy lay in Hegel’s philosophy; but why, for Marx, did the form of this criticism contradict its meaning?

What Feuerbach’s opening attack on Hegel in the years between 1839 and 1841 sought to achieve was an exposure of the uncompromising idealism of the Hegelian dialectic, showing that the master’s philosophy as a whole had no practical positive relationship to the world. By implication, the essential determination of his criticism of Hegel’s idealist unreality was reality itself, or what Marx described as “the moment of reality,” the “non-concept” of philosophy. The content or meaning of Feuerbach’s attack directed at Hegel was “the attempt to philosophise.” Its appearance or external form, however, was the intention to redirect Hegel’s philosophy toward reality.<sup>17</sup>

Marx’s judgment in 1841—that the relationship between Feuerbach’s intention and its consequences was inverse and contradictory—was no doubt further irritated when the latter subsequently expressed a deliberate disinterest in the social and political problems of an emerging Germany and retired to his wife’s farm deep in the countryside to write “introspective” criticism of philosophy. These judgments were to change. His attempt to make the Prussian world a trifle more philosophical between 1841 and the end of 1843 having failed, Marx’s attitude toward Bauer’s liberal party of the concept underwent a drastic revision, as did his attitude toward Feuerbach. In an article he wrote for Arnold Ruge’s journal at this time he returned to some unfinished business. Referring to the relationship of German philosophy to German history, he now supported the efforts of those he now described as “the practical party” to criticize or negate philosophy, but condemned the means

by which the negation was to be achieved. In words pointedly directed at Feuerbach, he said that turning one's back on philosophy achieved nothing.

You demand that real living germs be made the starting point but you forget that the real living germ of the German nation has grown so far only inside its cranium. In a word—you cannot supersede philosophy without making it a reality.<sup>18</sup>

This time, there was no accusation of a contradiction between demands and tendencies. In its place, a powerful suggestion. Actualize the tendency!

The main themes of this chapter are intellectual accommodation and moral hypocrisy—ugly notions in any study of a man who stood on the high ground of so many great moral issues. Why, then, introduce them into an essay concerning his early researches in classical philosophy? For many students of Marx, an admiration for the lifelong struggle of this great nineteenth-century philosopher and humanist on behalf of those he saw as oppressed can lead to a certain blindness. Perceptions become clouded. Difficult questions are neither raised nor explored. My consideration of these themes here was provoked by a small but significant aspect of his early work, centering on the issue of justice and leading by implication to the question of slavery.

Let us be very clear about this matter of moral high ground. Much time has been spent searching for a critical point in Marx's life and thought from which his judgments on individuals and societies can be dated. The development of his materialist philosophy of history in 1845 and the evolution of his conception of political economy in the 1850s are two prime candidates. This sort of speculation just will not do. There is enough evidence to show that he sought to stand in judgment on others right from the start. In his studies in classical philosophy, he had judged a large part of the Hegelian school to have an incorrect understanding of Hegel's philosophy—accusing its members of abysmal indigence and ignorance, of being naively uncritical and unscrupulous, and of lacking in the kind of conscience he claimed for himself in defending Hegel.

More indicative, though, was the judgment pronounced on Max Stirner's understanding of Epicurean philosophy. In a manuscript of 1845 that he failed to publish despite strenuous efforts, and which later became known as *The German Ideology*, he informed Stirner that the real basis of Epicurean philosophy was social justice and that the idea of the state resting on the mutual agreement of people was first proposed by Epicurus himself. This echoed a quotation from Diogenes Laertius on Epicurus that Marx wrote in his first Notebook during 1839:

*Justice is not something existing in itself, it exists in mutual relations, wherever and whenever an agreement is concluded not to harm each other or allow each other to be harmed.*<sup>19</sup>

This is indeed a noble sentiment, and was sufficiently important for Marx to have remembered it some six years later, proudly using Epicurean ethics in a battle against Stirner for the moral high ground of post-Hegelian philosophy. Yet if one reads on in this Notebook, there are two further quotations pertaining to justice immediately below. Marx did not use them against Stirner, but they are worth mentioning here because this matter of the moral high ground becomes a far more complex issue, perhaps even twisted into its opposite.

*Injustice is not in itself an evil, but the evil lies in the fearful anxiety over its remaining concealed from the guardians of the law appointed to deal with it. . . . For whether he [the transgressor of the law] will remain undiscovered until death, is uncertain.*<sup>20</sup>

*In general, the same justice is valid for all (for it is something useful in mutual intercourse); but the special conditions of the country and the totality of other possible grounds bring it about that the same justice is not valid for all.*<sup>21</sup>

The meaning of the first quotation is plain. The real evil lies in an injustice remaining undiscovered—*not* that injustice itself is an evil thing. We have an interesting problem here. Epicurus had said that justice existed in mutual relations where there was agreement not to harm each other or allow each other to be harmed. This sounds fine until one recalls the fact that in Epicurus's time, a great majority of social relationships were based on compliance supplemented by force, rather than mutuality or equity. I refer of course to the master-slave relationship, which was neither a creation of mutual agreement nor just. Yet, according to Epicurus, this injustice would itself not be an evil thing, because—given “*the special conditions of the country*” and “*the totality of other possible grounds*”—the same justice was not valid for all.

Epicurus had no use for a Platonic Absolute of justice, or an overall universal conception. Justice was to be a determination of pragmatism—a thing that made individuals feel most comfortable, that which least disturbed their peace of mind. Marx himself had made it clear in his *Dissertation* that the highest goal of Epicurean philosophy was *ataraxy*, or inner calm. To oppose institutionalized slavery in ancient Greece would have meant adopting a political career—the very thing that Epicurus so keenly discouraged. The happy contemplation of philosophy and the world from the security of an Athenian garden was much to be preferred. And slavery was not in itself evil simply because it was unjust, a thing not based in mutual relations. Why consider it as such when one had up one's sleeve an apology for all seasons—that it was the special conditions or circumstances that determined a differentiated structure of equity?

Maybe this was how Epicurus himself justified his ownership of slaves. But then how would Marx, seeking that sacred moral high ground against the challenge of Stirner's anarchic individualism, have failed to react to the monstrous statement that injustice was not itself an evil? He had, after all, copied out these very words in his Notebook; so would he not in all conscience have condemned Epicurus for them? There is no adverse comment on this point to be found anywhere in his writing. Later, when he sought to inform Stirner that the real basis of Epicurean philosophy was social justice, the notion of social justice he had in mind was one based on *agreement*. What slave, one wonders, was able to form an agreement with his master on a basis of mutuality?

Any inherent injustice in the relationship between master and slave would not itself have been regarded by Epicurus as an evil. Justice also depended on conditions and circumstances and was not valid for all. These precepts represent not merely an acknowledgment of the realities of the time, but also an accommodation. How then, one wonders, could Marx have held up against Stirner a single quotation from his early classical studies at the expense of ignoring what was essentially a can of worms? The fact is that his action can be judged as an accommodation of conscience. In essence, the Epicurean concept of justice was blatantly lacking in equity. Rather than admit the truth of this and forge it into a powerful analytical weapon, he used the quotation that looked good on the surface. It was more convenient.

In preparation for his doctoral *Dissertation*, Marx wrote extensively about the famous Epicurean hypothesis that atoms swerve in their motion, copying commentaries from classical sources and adding his own thoughts. In the *Dissertation* itself, he sought to clarify the significance of this swerving atom, suggesting that it was the central principle of the entire Epicurean philosophy of nature, representing abstract individual self-consciousness or freedom. The swerving atom of Epicurean philosophy, said Marx, was the highest expression of ancient atomic theory and expressed the principal point of difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature. His statements in this respect are clear and unambivalent.

In his illuminating study *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, Norman De Witt discussed the connection between these themes of freedom and the swerving atom in a manner that was all the more remarkable for the fact that he had never seen Marx's classical material.<sup>22</sup> De Witt took the view that one of the main reasons for the hostility of Epicurus toward the Democritean philosophy of nature was that it maintained the principle of physical determinism. Determinism was central to Democritean atomic theory, consisting of the view that the downward motion of atoms in a straight line was the only causation in the universe. Any deviation or freedom was precluded. Epicurus, said De Witt, was essentially a moral reformer whose entire philosophy was based on ethics. A deterministic philosophy would not be offensive to intellectuals but to moral reformers it would certainly be intolerable. Moral reform was synonymous with converting others to one's way of thinking, and conversion presupposed free will. In order to escape from what he took to be the inexorable necessity of the physical scientists, Epicurus created a free play in atomic motion to permit freedom of will, thus introducing a new form of causation: human volition, a necessity of both thought and action.

This argument strangely coincides with Marx's own ideas. Furthermore, De Witt's perception of Epicurean philosophy being grounded in ethics is also strikingly familiar. Hadn't Marx informed Stirner that the real basis of Epicurean philosophy was social justice? Freedom and human volition were undoubtedly of crucial significance to Epicurean philosophy as a whole; and it is with this in mind that I propose introducing the second ugly theme of this chapter: moral hypocrisy.

Reading Marx's doctoral thesis, one senses a powerful degree of admiration on the part of its author for a man who was the brilliant bad boy of classical philosophy—opposed by Stoics, Sceptics, followers of Plato, and fathers of the Church alike. After all, hadn't Epicurus been hailed by Lucretius as the man of Greece who'd braved the challenge of dreaded religion and crushed it beneath his feet, lifting man level with the skies? And hadn't Marx himself quoted that adoring paean of Roman poetic praise at the end of his *Dissertation*, having already hailed Prometheus as "the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar" in its Foreword, thus associating the mythical bringer of light with the greatest luminary that any Athenian Garden has ever seen? It's an odd kind of deification for a man whose keenest personal maxim was "Live unknown."

I have shown elsewhere the real significance of Epicurean philosophy in Marx's early intellectual development.<sup>23</sup> In brief, I argue that the evolution of the new materialist philosophy owed at least as much to Epicurus as to anyone else—Hegel included. It has long been my point of view that Marx initially sought to discover mechanisms in Epicurean philosophy that would clarify his intellectual relationship to Hegel and Hegelian thought. Later, these mechanisms eventually help father the *German Ideology* manuscript of 1845. Key among them was the notion of freedom. By this I mean a freedom of consciousness that would enable the critical self-reflecting mind to progress beyond a "total" philosophy. Was it not the free self-reflecting philosophical consciousness to which Marx referred when he accused Hegel's followers of failing to understand how it was possible for philosophy to progress after the appearance of total systems such as those of Aristotle and Hegel himself? In Epicurean philosophy Marx discovered a linkage mechanism between the physical principle of a swerving atom and the propensity of the intellect for self-conscious theorizing. The element common to both was freedom.

To my mind, however, there is another side to Epicurean philosophy in which freedom figures as a problem for ethics. This is the side where freedom has to do with the motion of real human beings rather than real or imagined atoms. And, moreover, a motion toward

certain fundamental human rights and values such as justice and happiness. Before considering this humanistic aspect of Epicurean ethics, the qualification offered by De Witt to supposedly unwary readers is worth noting. He warns us to be on guard against the error of anachronism, and to keep any discussion within the historical context.

No doctrine of a divine and benevolent creator was current in the time of Epicurus, and for this reason there was no thought of human equality or the rights of man. So far was any belief from prevailing that man was born for freedom that the Greeks thought of the greater part of mankind as born for slavery. Neither was the determining context for Epicurus of a political nature but rather social and ethical.<sup>24</sup>

This statement may indeed be true, but I am also inclined to think that De Witt offers it at the beginning of a chapter headed “The New Freedom” as a kind of qualifying apology for the Epicurean views on freedom and justice that he is soon to discuss. This is the ancient in whose system of thought, according to Marx, classical philosophy was to achieve a high point in abstract individual self-consciousness. Yet how different was the view of this great moral reformer from that of his Greek contemporaries on the issue of slavery?

One of the central pillars of the entire Epicurean philosophy is his extant tetrapharmakon “It is impossible to live pleasurably without living according to reason, honour and justice.” For Epicureans, justice meant voluntary obedience to the written law, for example, of the Athenian city-state. Epicurus had himself written, “As for us, let us sacrifice reverently and properly where it is required and let us do everything properly in accordance with the laws.” Written law involved no infringement of freedom, provided that the laws themselves were just. This was an interesting state of affairs for a great moral reformer whose starting point, according to De Witt, was the freedom of the individual. Law was synonymous with freedom so long as it was just. Unjust law, however, created a twofold problem: while contrary to freedom, it constrained the Epicurean to obedience. Epicurus’s statement, “Laws are enacted for the sake of the wise, not that they may do wrong but that they may suffer no wrong,” is a justification for such obedience.

Athenian law institutionalized slavery. In its outward manifestation, Epicurean philosophy preached obedience to the law and thus, by implication, supported and helped to justify the institutionalized abrogation of freedom. How could this be? If Epicurus placed freedom at the center of his philosophy of nature—and if freedom, as self-consciousness, enabled his thought to achieve an ascendancy over classical materialism—why had he failed to extend it into the sphere of human relations? Was not slavery as determined a mode of being as the motion of the Democritean atom?

It is true to say that much of the lifework of Epicurus—indeed, the ultimate goal of his philosophy—involved disseminating his thoughts on what constituted a good and happy life to as wide an audience as possible. His admirers, both past and present, also claim that he sought to change the way people thought and behaved; and in this sense, he can be described as a moral reformer. How much, though, was Epicurus in any real sense a reformer of morals? A reforming philosopher would clearly perceive the significance of determinism for human conduct and character. Athenian law fostered such determinism in legitimizing a rigid social structure that incorporated a paralyzed, unjust morality. The approach of Epicurus to this ethical dilemma shifted the judgment of what was good or evil in conduct from the action to the effect. His response emphasized the advantage or disadvantage to the recipient, not the justice or injustice of the issue. This is why he recommended obedience to the written law. It offered a practical correlation between judgment and deed. Conflict over the really fundamental question of “right” was thereby avoided, and peace of mind maintained. Ask how much a man supposedly so replete in self-consciousness could be quite without any conscience on the issue of slavery, and his admirers will offer this specious reply: he was a utilitarian!<sup>25</sup>

A good deal has been written about the correspondence of thought between Epicurus and Aristotle. The Italian scholar Bignone wrote a two-volume study on the subject. More recently, De Witt among others has suggested that the best preparation for Epicurean ethics is to be found in Aristotle. The *Nicomachean Ethics* indeed does contain various parallels with the extant teaching of Epicurus, but of particular interest are Aristotle's comments on what for him were the related topics of friendship, justice, and slavery. In *Ethics* VIII.11, "Corresponding Forms of Friendship and Justice," he discusses these subjects within a context of deviant constitutions, the worst of which is specified as tyranny. Here, justice and friendship exist least.

But neither is there friendship towards a horse or an ox, nor to a slave qua slave. For there is nothing common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave. Qua slave, then, one cannot be friends with him. But qua man one can; for there seems to be some justice between any man and any other who can share in a system or be a party to an agreement; therefore there can also be a friendship with him in so far as he is a man. Therefore while in tyrannies friendship and justice hardly exist, in democracies they exist more fully; for where the citizens are equal they have much in common.<sup>26</sup>

There is a marked degree of expediency in broaching the difficult issue of slavery in such a context. For its time, there is a certain radicalism in what he says; but then Aristotle was no ordinary Greek. On the other hand, he was very much like most other men, then and now. All too well aware of what he could or could not say. Yet there is another kind of expediency implicit in his statement that really cannot be excused in a man of such powerful perception. For one thing, slavery is linked with justice in a framework of worst-case scenarios, where constitutional arrangements such as monarchy, aristocracy, and timocracy have become perverted. As though slavery and injustice then never existed under the best forms of such arrangements.

There is nothing here, though, of which Epicurus would have disapproved; and that is a good second reason why the statement requires further examination. Justice and friendship exist in democracies because men can share in a system of law and be party to an agreement. One wonders to what democracies Aristotle is referring? As the Greek city-state did not include slaves among its citizenry, neither then could Aristotle. How, therefore, did slave and citizen share the same system of law or be "party to an agreement"? The slave's agreement to be a slave, for example? What the slave was, was not of his choosing. He was unfree—unable to enter into any mutually binding agreement, let alone accept or reject it. As a slave, he could not be a party to mutuality so far as his legal status was concerned. The very relationship is itself a tyranny, and Aristotle's treatment of it a conceptual monstrosity. Human beings are considered as bifurcated entities—slave and man, slave and human—for to relate to a slave as a slave is to relate to him as though he were unfree, a lifeless thing, something not human. Humanity implies freedom—freedom to be, to exist for oneself as a free being. To relate to a slave as though he were a man is to relate to him as a human and therefore a free being. Such an act is a negation of his slavery. A slave cannot be a man qua man in any real sense; he is only a man in a utilitarian sense: human in the abstract, slave in inhuman reality. George Orwell had a name for this kind of conceptual juggling. He called it doublethink.

An altogether different reflection on slavery is to be found in *Ethics* X.6. Discussing happiness, Aristotle is unequivocal:

And any chance person—even a slave—can enjoy the bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one assigns to a slave a share in happiness— unless he assigns to him also a share in human life.<sup>27</sup>

Over and above the words, there is something special in the second part of this statement, making it more than a mere reflection of ethical predisposition. There is a request here—a call for a comradeship of equals heard only on special occasions down historical time. It is far in

advance of the utilitarianism of Epicurean ethics. There is no doublethink reasoning here. In essence, it is a call to action.

What then of Epicurean fellowship and moral reform? Epicurus's approach to justice was quintessentially pragmatic. The true advantage of obedience to the law was peace of soul—a central objective of his entire ethics. The bottom line was to live within the law and retain your sanity. Accompanying this objective was the obligation to cultivate goodwill and love toward mankind. According to De Witt, this in itself signified a love of justice. If this was the case, one must then ask how this love of justice and mankind was manifested in acting against injustice? Did the Epicureans begin a struggle against slavery? Were they concerned with social inequality? Did they stand up publicly and denounce tyranny? Where was the Epicurean love of courage and virtue? There must have been endless discussions about the reality of justice and the importance of its practice—this love of real justice—inside the famous Athenian Garden; but where did they seek to actualize this professed love outside, in the real world? Where indeed? Epicurus's own strictures against "the political career" precluded such concerns just as surely as the entire logic of Epicurean ethics was ultimately circular. The garden of happiness and tranquility is the perfect place for the convalescence of moral castrates. Send for the Athenian policeman? Love and peace man!

And this is why Spartacus the slave had a greater wisdom and deeper humanity than Epicurus and his entire school. While Epicurus sought to publicize his philosophy of freedom but never to actualize it, Spartacus sought to free the slaves of Rome and Italy. While Epicurus urged safe compliance, Spartacus fought against injustice. While Epicurus rejected the political career for the sake of happiness, Spartacus was happy fighting for justice and freedom. While for one man a happy just life of obedience to the law—"not distressing ourselves over popular opinions in matters regarded as the highest and most solemn"—was "marked by the greatest quietude", for the other, peace could only be a luxury item. Anyone who stands up for justice can never have a peaceful life, but to seek peace for oneself and be blind to the misery of others is to belong among the living dead.

If there was a powerful degree of freedom in the Epicurean philosophy of nature, it was compensated for by the powerful degree of constriction in his ethics. Epicurus, Hegel, and Feuerbach—all were pushed aside by the early months of 1845 when Marx wrote the words that took up the challenge of Spartacus:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.<sup>28</sup>

It is from this time on that the spirit of a broad and active campaign for social justice appears in his life. The Epicurean atom and a philosophy of self-consciousness had borne him on wings of freedom through metaphysical pathways of the mind and out into the sunlight. Gone forever is the propensity for accommodation with a passive ethic. In its place a flame of wrath and a life dedicated to ensuring a share in human life and more for the wage slaves of the world.

## Notes

1. *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy*, vol. 1 of *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-76), p. 491.
2. *Ibid.*, ll. 19-26, 28-34.
3. *Ibid.*, ll. 37-42.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 492, ll. 34-35.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 493, ll. 2-12.

6. Ibid., ll. 13-18.
7. Ibid., p. 497, ll. 31-35, 38-39.
8. *Doctoral Dissertation, Notes*, vol. 1 of op. cit., p. 84, see ll. 17-18, 21-23.
9. Ibid., ll. 36-40.
10. Ibid., p. 85, ll. 4-6.
11. Ibid., p. 85, ll. 27-29.
12. Ibid., ll. 38-41.
13. Ibid., pp. 85-86.
14. Ibid., p. 86, ll. 36-41.
15. See note 22 to L. Baronovitch, "Two Appendices to a Doctoral Dissertation: Some Light on the Origin of Karl Marx's Dissociation from Bruno Bauer and the Young Hegelians," *Philosophical Forum*, Boston University, 8, 2-4
16. *Doctoral Dissertation, Notes*, p. 86, ll. 32-35.
17. See Baronovitch, "Two Appendices," op. cit., p. 239, see also pp 229-30.
18. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction*, vol. 3 of *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, op. cit., pp 180-81.
19. *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 410, ll. 5-7.
20. Ibid., ll. 8-11.
21. Ibid., ll. 12-14
22. Norman Wentworth De Witt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (Westport, Conn. Greenwood Press, 1976).
23. See L. Baronovitch, "Marx, Hegel and Greek Philosophy: A New Approach to the Subject of Karl Marx's Early Intellectual Development" *Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy*, Oberlin College, Vol. VII, No. 2 (May 1976); L. Baronovitch, "Pierre Bayle and Karl Marx: Some Reflections on a Curious Connection" *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Fordham University, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (June 1981); L. Baronovitch, "German Idealism, Greek Materialism, and the Young Karl Marx" *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Fordham University, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (September 1984).
24. De Witt, *Epicurus*, op. cit., p. 171.
25. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 297, ll. 21-24.
26. *The Works of Aristotle*, W. D. Ross, trans., Vol. 9, *Ethica Nichomachea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 1161.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 1176, secs. 25-29.
28. *Theses on Feuerbach*, Vol. 5 *Marx-Engels Collected Works* op. cit., Thesis 11, p. 5.