Thought and reality in Marx’s early writings on ancient philosophy

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Abstract

There is little agreement about Marx’s aims, or even his basic claims, in his *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* and *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. Marx has been read as an idealist, or as a materialist; as praising Epicurus, or as criticizing him. Some have read Marx as using ancient philosophers as proxies in a contemporary debate, without demonstrating how he does so in detail. I show: that Marx’s dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism aims at transcending the dichotomy between idealism and materialism; that on Marx’s reading Epicurus deserves praise for thinking through atomism to its “highest” conclusion, but criticism for not embracing this conclusion; and that Marx’s intervention in contemporary debates takes the form of revealing a dialectical relationship between “liberal” and “positive” philosophers. I conclude that the importance of these texts is to be located in their original stance on the problematic of the relation of thought to reality, common to what Marx finds in ancient philosophy and in his contemporary environment.

Introduction

There is widespread agreement that Marx’s *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* and *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* are of great importance.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is often claimed, in particular, that these texts provide a key for understanding Marx’s later development—although the reasons for thinking so, and the interpretations of the texts on which the claim hinges, vary widely.[[2]](#footnote-2) More worryingly, there is little agreement on what the texts themselves are about, or what their philosophical aims are.

What is clear is that a principal aim of the *Difference* is to show that, contrary to received opinion among ancient commentators and at the time Marx was writing, Epicurus was far from a “plagiarizer” of Democritus who simply replicated his predecessor’s atomistic doctrines. Marx presents Epicurus, instead, as departing in radical ways from Democritus. Beyond this, however, there is little agreement. As Martin McIvor has commented, the *Difference* “has given rise to an extraordinarily diverse array of differing interpretations, one might even say, a near-exhaustive matrix of just about every logical possibility” (2008: 400). Issues on which these interpretations differ include: whether Marx was, at this stage, an idealist or a materialist; whether Marx intended to praise Epicurus or to criticize him; to what extent Marx’s texts are a vehicle for an intervention in contemporary debates among the successors of Hegel.

It is understandable that some have supposed that Marx’s principal interest in the ancient atomists is in their materialism, which he intends to emulate.[[3]](#footnote-3) After all it is a commonplace that the mature Marx was a materialist of some kind. But, as we shall see, Marx is committed neither to reading Democritus nor Epicurus as materialists, nor does he present himself as a materialist in these texts. Others take it that Marx is, in this early phase, an idealist in some standard sense.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Some commentators have argued that Democritus and Epicurus stand proxy for Kant and Hegel, and that for Marx the discussion of these ancient figures is merely a vehicle for discussion of the relation between Kant and Hegel. One takes Marx to endorse Epicurus because his thought manifests contradictions that are Hegelian rather than Kantian (Fenves 1986). Another (McCarthy 1997) takes Marx to offer a Hegelian critique of Epicurus (here cast as a Kantian). There is, however, no evidence, however circumstantial, that Marx seeks to engage with Kant’s overall philosophical position in these texts.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Other readings, even if they do not construe Democritus and Epicurus as mere proxies, similarly disagree about whether Epicurus is being praised or criticized. One reader takes Marx to endorse Epicurus’s idealism while criticizing the materialism of both Democritus and Aristotle (Pike 1999).[[6]](#footnote-6) Another takes Marx to criticize Epicurus for his atomism, in light of the Aristotelian “holism” that he supposedly favors (Meikle 1985).

There is greater agreement on the idea that Marx’s choice of topic is prompted by an analogy between his own conjuncture in the history of philosophy and another in the history of ancient philosophy.[[7]](#footnote-7) The idea here is that the Epicureans (and also the Stoics and Skeptics) stood in a relation to Aristotle analogous to the relation in which the successors of Hegel stood to Hegel. Aristotle had produced a “total” philosophy that could not be further developed: it could just be elaborated further (as, for instance, Theophrastus did by extending Aristotle’s biological research within the framework he had set out). Similarly with Hegel. This meant that Hegel’s successors, like Aristotle’s, were faced with an existential question of how to carry on in the face of such a “total” philosophy.[[8]](#footnote-8) Now it is often said that Marx took over this problematic from a group of Hegel’s successors called the “Young Hegelians,” in particular Bruno Bauer, and that the *Difference* is an exercise in Bauer’s “philosophy of self-consciousness.” But there has been little effort to spell out how exactly what Marx is doing constitutes a contribution to such a Bauerian “philosophy of self-consciousness.” It is also sometimes said that Hellenistic philosophy was important for Bauer himself. But there seems, on closer examination, to be little evidence of sustained engagement with Epicurus by Bauer or others usually grouped among the “Young Hegelians” except for a passing reference in Carl Friedrich Köppen’s book on Frederick the Great (a book Marx cites in the Foreword to the *Difference*).[[9]](#footnote-9)

The overall impression left by the literature is, then, a confusing one. On the interpretation offered in this paper, it will turn out that there is good reason for confusion as to whether Marx is here a materialist or an idealist: he is seeking to overcome the very dichotomy between the two. I will show, further, that his assessment of Epicurus, too, is properly read as double-edged: he thinks Epicurus comes to the brink of a great insight, but fails to embrace it. Again, Marx’s intervention in the contemporary intellectual scene is more complex than has often been assumed. I shall argue that what remains constant throughout, however, is Marx’s pursuit of the problematic of the relation of thought to reality.

In Section 1 I briefly consider the fragmentary nature of the texts themselves insofar as this bears on the substantive issues of interpretation I go on to tackle in the remainder of the paper.

In Section 2 I demonstrate the way in which Marx revises Hegel’s history of ancient philosophy, and takes over from it the crucial notion of *Knotenpunkte* (“nodal points”). Hellenistic philosophy has to be understood as issuing from the *Knotenpunkt* constituted by Plato and Aristotle, who together represent the height of speculative philosophy in Greece; post-Hegelian philosophy must be understood as issuing from the *Knotenpunkt* constituted by Hegel, who represents the height of speculative philosophy in Germany.

In Section 3 I outline Marx’s dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism, culminating in Marx’s account of Epicurus on the celestial bodies. There is, according to Marx, an “antinomy” in Epicurus: he takes us to the brink of an insight of great importance, but then retreats from it. The insight has the celestial bodies, *qua* the highest actualization of the atom, figure as the realization of an adequate conception of self-consciousness. Epicurus’s felt need to retreat from it, by contrast, reveals that the principle of his atomism is an inadequate conception of self-consciousness: abstract individual self-consciousness. This has an important practical upshot. Such a philosophy precipitates a retreat into the individual subject. While Marx’s own conception of self-consciousness remains implicit in the text, and his attention is directed toward the contrast between Epicurus’s glimpsing of an adequate conception and retreat into an inadequate conception, his implied original position is significant in indicating that Marx is already, at this stage, thinking of our self-conscious nature as humans as involving the interdependence of individuality and relationality.

In Section 4 I relate Marx’s concern with Epicurus as a “philosopher of self-consciousness” to his contemporaries, in particular Bruno Bauer. I show, contrary to those who simply equate the Marx of this early period with Bauer, that Marx is already thinking through a problematic in which he sees Bauer as enmeshed. This problematic comes out in the dialectical nature of an opposition between a “liberal party” and a “positive party” among Hegel’s successors (a diagnosis that is original to Marx and does not map onto, e.g., the standard distinction between “Left” and “Right” Hegelians). Not only is Bauer’s proposed “terrorism of true theory” impotent in the face of reality (just as Epicurus retreats back into subjectivity rather than bringing subjectivity into the world): the “liberal party” threatens to turn into its opposite, and vice versa.

In Section 5, I draw these various strands together. What we are now able to see is that Marx has been animated throughout by the problematic of the relation of thought to reality. He has been concerned, in his reconstruction of ancient philosophy, to show how, following upon a *Knotenpunkt*, thought may *enter* the world, and no longer stand over against it. His reconstruction of Epicurus sought to show that the atoms, in their highest realization, transcend all dualisms between form and matter (even if Epicurus fails to follow through on this insight). And again, the “actualization of philosophy” sought after by Bauer must, in order to be successful, take the form of philosophy becoming active *in* the world in such a way as to overcome the dichotomy between thought and reality. So long as thought stands over against the world, all that can happen (as the dialectic of “liberal” and “positive” parties enacts) is a retreat inward or a *mere* criticism of reality without practical effects; but each of these outcomes fails to deliver what the *actualization* of philosophy demands.

1. The texts

The texts under consideration are fragmentary in ways that will have a bearing on the substantive discussion in the following sections. The version of the *Difference* that has come down to us is not the text that Marx submitted as his doctoral dissertation to the University of Jena in April 1841, but a fair copy (with corrections in Marx’s hand) from which two chapters of Part One are missing. Judging by their titles, these chapters made an important contribution to the overall argument—Chapter Four: “General Difference in Principle Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature”; Chapter Five: “Result.” (The endnotes to these chapters have, however, survived.)[[10]](#footnote-10) In the case of the *Notebooks*, it would appear that the seven notebooks that have come down to us represent Marx’s earliest work on ancient philosophy, in which he begins to develop his approach to Epicurus through a combination of excerpts and original reflections. These can be dated to the period early 1839–early 1840.[[11]](#footnote-11) But this leaves another year until Marx submits his dissertation to the University of Jena, during which period it seems highly likely he produced further notebooks that are now lost (including, at the very least, material on Democritus similar in nature to the preparatory material on Epicurus contained in the *Notebooks* that we see reworked in the *Difference*).

The fragmentary status of the texts is relevant in a number of respects when it comes to the interpretation of Marx’s evolving project on ancient philosophy. One is the obvious consideration that important sections of the *Difference* have not been handed down to us. Another is that it remains unclear what role Marx intended to ascribe to Stoicism and Skepticism, in addition to Epicureanism, in his picture of Hellenistic philosophy. In the Foreword to the *Difference* Marx puts his relatively narrow study there in relation to a larger project, never carried out, that would “present in detail the cycle of Epicurean, Stoic and Sceptic philosophy in their relation to the whole of Greek speculation” (MEGA2 I/1: 13/MECW 1: 29). He again speaks of a project encompassing all three Hellenistic schools in a draft preface for a planned (but never executed) publication of the *Difference*: “The treatise that I herewith submit to the public is an old piece of work and was originally intended as part of a comprehensive exposition of Epicurean, Stoic, and Sceptic philosophy” (MEGA2 I/1: 92/MECW 1: 106). It is sometimes claimed that the remit of the *Notebooks* is wider than that of the *Difference* in just this respect: that the *Notebooks* are concerned with the Stoics and Skeptics as well as the Epicureans.[[12]](#footnote-12) But the surviving notebooks all bear “Epikuräische Philosophie” on their title pages in Marx’s hand (except Notebooks V and VI, whose title pages are lost), and contain little mention of Stoicism and Skepticism. This leaves it unclear, as will become important later, how or in what way Marx regarded his account of how *Epicureanism* issues from the *Knotenpunkt* of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy as standing in need of supplementation by Stoicism and Skepticism.

A further important consideration is that we know that Marx in the period for which notebooks are lacking was working on a study of Hegel’s Logic.[[13]](#footnote-13) This may help to explain the considerable development that occurs from the *Notebooks* to the *Difference*: in the latter text, we are presented with a dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism that goes beyond anything found in the *Notebooks*. Nevertheless an assessment of the precise nature of Marx’s engagement with Hegel’s Logic in this period has to remain conjectural. For this reason, my approach will be to connect Marx’s reading of Epicurus’s atomism with Hegel’s Logic only in a general way, rather than attempting to “map” it onto specific stretches of the Logic. Suffice to say that, here again, we must not fall into the assumption of treating the *Notebooks* and *Difference* as straightforwardly one unit, but allow that intervening between them there is a period of rapid intellectual development, characteristic for Marx during this period as during others. It is likely that in this period Marx’s engagement with Hegel was intense, even if we cannot now reconstruct its details.

2. Hegel and Marx on the history of ancient Greek philosophy

Before turning to the reconstruction of Epicurus’s philosophy, and of its advances over that of Democritus, which forms the main focus of the extant texts, we need to consider Marx’s more general treatment of the history of ancient Greek philosophy. This general treatment is heavily indebted to Hegel. Marx is explicit about his high esteem for Hegel’s history of philosophy, “from which alone the history of philosophy can in general be dated” (MEGA2 I/1: 13–14/MECW 1: 29–30). Throughout the *Notebooks* and the *Difference* a primary concern of Marx’s is to revise and improve Hegel’s history of ancient Greek philosophy.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Effectively, Marx, first, wants to take Hegel at his word when he claims that the entirety of the history of philosophy can be rationally comprehended as the unfolding of the Idea. He will, he thinks, implement this approach more rigorously than Hegel himself had done. In so doing, he will demonstrate how Epicurus’s philosophy can be read as a proper conceptual development of the philosophy that preceded him (i.e. Plato and Aristotle), rather than as a falling back behind Plato and Aristotle into a mixture of Democritean physics and Cyrenaic ethics (cf. MEGA2 I/1: 21/MECW 1: 34).

Secondly, Marx will take seriously Hegel’s notion that there are “nodal points” (*Knotenpunkte*) in the history of philosophy. In these nodal points the strands constituted by previous philosophies, previously held apart (in Hegel’s terminology, “abstract”), are held together in a concrete unity. He will seek to explain the phenomenon of Hellenistic philosophy (and, analogously, that of post-Hegelian philosophy) in terms of what must issue from such nodal points.

To turn first to Marx’s general appropriation of Hegel’s approach, we see this reflected both in methodological commitments expressed in the *Notebooks* and in extended passages in which he gives his own markedly Hegelian narrative of the development of ancient Greek philosophy. On the methodological side, in Notebook VII Marx makes clear that the task of historians of philosophy is to extract the conceptual development that drives philosophy, purifying this of its external manifestations:

Philosophical historiography is not concerned either with comprehending the personality, be it even the spiritual personality of the philosopher as, in a manner of speaking, the focus and the image of his system, and still less with indulging in psychological hair-splitting and point-scoring. Its concern is to distinguish in each system the determinations themselves, the actual crystallizations pervading the whole system, from the proofs, the justifications in argument, the self-presentation of the philosophers as they know themselves; to distinguish the silent, persevering mole of real philosophical knowledge from the voluble, exoteric, variously behaving phenomenological consciousness of the subject which is the vessel and motive force of those elaborations. (MEGA2 IV/1: 137/MECW 1: 506)

In two passages in the *Notebooks*, Marx sketches out his own version of such an account for the history of ancient Greek philosophy as a whole.

The first such passage, in Notebook II, interrupts Marx’s excerpts from Plutarch on Epicurus and provides a long historical digression on the role of the *sophos* (“sage”) in Greek philosophy (MEGA2 IV/1: 39–47/MECW 1: 432–440). A shorter historical passage, which takes up again some of the elements of the Notebook II passage, occurs in Notebook V (MEGA2 IV/1: 99–102/MECW 1: 490–93).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Marx’s history of ancient philosophy as outlined in Notebook II charts the fortunes of *nous*, which was at first immersed in substance, then detaches itself, and finally becomes hypostatized in its own right. In the beginning, philosophers were immersed in the substance in which they participated—the substance of the cosmos and the substance of ethical life. In these philosophers *nous* was nothing but an oracle of nature. They were “unreflective, naïve,” “living trustfully within ethical reality” (MEGA2 IV/1: 40/MECW 1: 435). The Pythagoreans, who had “number” as their “principle,” developed an inner life, but remained intermediate between this new ideality and philosophers’ previous sheer trustful immersion in the ethical community. But with Anaxagoras, ideality became the supreme principle as *nous* took on its own reality, becoming the “*non ens* of the natural.”

This reversal, which occurs only potentially in Anaxagoras, is fully realized in the Sophists and in Socrates. “Now it is ideality itself which, in its immediate form, *that of subjective spirit*, becomes the principle of philosophy” (MEGA2 IV/1: 42/MECW 1: 436). Whereas the earlier sages absorbed substance into themselves (including ethical and political reality), “it is now, on the contrary, ideality itself, pure abstraction which has come to be for itself, that appears in face of substance; subjectivity, which establishes itself as the principle of philosophy” (MEGA2 IV/1: 42/MECW 1: 437). Substance now, as Marx puts it, “loses itself in the subject,” as exemplified by Socrates (MEGA2 IV/1: 43/MECW 1: 438).

Socrates is concerned with determination of the good, as well as determination of what is, but this determining remains abstract. When in Plato this determination becomes concrete, it is, however, evacuated into a separate realm, the realm of the Forms, “hovering over” the world. “The determination of this world and its organization in itself is therefore to the philosopher himself a beyond, the motion has been removed from this world” (MEGA2 IV/1: 44/MECW 1: 440). Marx now quotes Aristotle’s criticisms (*Metaphysics* Α 9, 991b4) of Plato’s Forms as motionless, but still requiring something to set them in motion.

The Notebook V passage resumes, in more compressed form, a portion of the narrative of the Notebook II passage, including specific textual resonances.[[16]](#footnote-16) Notebook V reprises the idea in Notebook II about *nous* taking on its own life in Anaxagoras, becoming “objective in the daimon of Socrates” and then “ideal” in Plato, so that “νοῦς expands itself into a realm of ideas” (MEGA2 IV/1: 99/MECW 1: 490). What is new in Notebook V is the importance ascribed to the Hegelian thesis that the development of philosophy involves, at certain junctures, *Knotenpunkte* (“nodal points”). At such nodal points, the usual development—the succession of philosophical systems—is interrupted, because a range of positions, previously only put forward in an abstract manner, come to be held together in a concrete unity. Hegel himself had given Plato’s philosophy as a chief example of such a coming-together of previous philosophies in a *Knotenpunkt*:

[…] Plato’s Dialogues are not to be considered as if their aim were to put forward a variety of philosophies, nor as if Plato’s were an eclectic philosophy that emerges from them; it forms rather the node [*Knoten*]in which these abstract and one-sided principles have become truly united in a concrete fashion. In the general representation of the history of philosophy, […] such points of union, in which the true is concrete, must occur in the onward course of philosophical development. The concrete is the unity of diverse determinations and principles; these, in order to be perfected, in order to come definitely before consciousness, must first of all be presented separately. Thereby they of course acquire an aspect of one-sidedness in comparison with the higher principle which follows: this, nevertheless, does not annihilate them, nor even leave them where they were, but takes them up into itself as moments. Thus in Plato’s philosophy we see all manner of philosophic teaching from earlier times absorbed into a deeper principle, and therein united. It is in this way that Plato’s philosophy shows itself to be a totality of the Idea: his contains the principles of others in itself.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While Hegel here focuses on Plato, the point should be interpreted as applying to Plato and Aristotle together as the most “speculative” philosophers of antiquity. For Hegel, it is a mistake to think of Plato and Aristotle as “opposed”; in Aristotle speculative philosophy is raised to its highest power.[[18]](#footnote-18) Hegel contends that Epicurus’s philosophy must be understood as a falling back behind the *Knotenpunkt* constituted by the speculative philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Marx offers a different reading. Taking seriously the idea that the *Knotenpunkt* is a concrete totality, Marx takes it that this totality requires its own release back into the world so as to manifest the practical energy inherent in it. Thereby it generates something new rather than a mere reversion to the *Knotenpunkt*’s ancestors. Although Marx never delivers on this project, he thinks that Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism together go to constitute the “philosophy of self-consciousness” that issues from the *Knotenpunkt*. In the *Difference* he assures us that “these systems in their totality form the complete structure of self-consciousness” (MEGA2 I/1: 22/MECW 1: 35), without seeking to make good on this claim.

Marx lends considerable importance to the notion of *Knotenpunkte* in this passage.[[19]](#footnote-19) He draws an explicit parallel between the *Knotenpunkt* constituted by the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, in ancient philosophy, and that of Hegel, in his own time. As he simply puts it: “The same now with Hegel’s [philosophy]” (MEGA2 IV/1: 99/MECW 1: 491). The notion of the *Knotenpunkt* explains, he says, not only “how after Aristotle a Zeno [of Citium], an Epicurus, even a Sextus Empiricus could appear” (i.e., a Stoic, an Epicurean, and a Skeptic) but also how “after Hegel attempts, most of them abysmally indigent, could be made by more recent philosophers” (MEGA2 IV/1: 100/MECW 1: 492).

At the *Knotenpunkt*, “philosophy, expanded to be the whole world, turns itself against the world of appearance” (MEGA2 IV/1: 99/MECW 1: 491). Marx notes that there is something inherently paradoxical about the idea of philosophy “expanding” to be the whole world (that is, all of reality), for this reality must include its own relation to philosophy within it. And it will split itself into multiple manifestations; in an evocative image Marx employs, what results is the “carnival of philosophy” (*Fastnachtszeit der Philosophie*), in which philosophy must “wear character masks.” We will turn in Section 4 to Marx’s handling of this paradox and to the question of how, precisely, philosophy is conceived of as confronting the world in this picture, when we consider the further development of this theme in a key endnote to the *Difference*. For now, it is clear that Epicureanism (among other philosophies) emerge from the *Knotenpunkt* so as to release what is tied up in the *Knotenpunkt*.

Marx already signals in the *Notebooks* that the emergence from a *Knotenpunkt* can issue in misfortune as well as fortune. On the whole Hellenistic philosophy is an “unhappy and iron epoch” (a reference to the last of Hesiod’s “Five Ages of Man”): “the spirit of the time, the spiritual monad, sated in itself, ideally formed in all aspects in itself, is not allowed to recognize any reality which has come to being without it.” But within this misfortune there is also a fortunate element: “the subjective form, the modality in which philosophy, as subjective consciousness, stands to reality.” Philosophy is rendered practical; but this takes the form of a retreat from the world: “the moth, when the universal sun has gone down, seeks the lamplight of the private individual” (MEGA2 IV/1: 101/MECW 1: 492). Section 4 will be concerned with the specific account Marx gives of the combination of fortune and misfortune in Epicurus’s thought. What we have seen, for now, is that Marx’s offered improvement on Hegel’s history of ancient philosophy relies on his taking seriously Hegel’s own conception of *Knotenpunkte*. For Marx, such *Knotenpunkte* do not simply unravel, but demand to be released. This release may turn out in both fortunate and unfortunate ways; and it will issue in a multiplicity of forms (e.g., in the ancient case, Epicureanism and Stoicism and Skepticism).

3. Marx’s dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism

In order to get clearer on the place of Epicurus in Marx’s historical narrative and, relatedly, the senses in which he intends to extol Epicurus on the one hand and to criticize him on the other, we must begin by reconstructing Marx’s dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism. As we will see, Marx’s own stance on Epicurus emerges directly from this reading.

In Notebook I we see Marx beginning his study of Epicurus, unsurprisingly, with excerpts from Diogenes Laertius, whose *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* provides the largest extant bulk of quotation from Epicurus’s writings. From there on he excerpts Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, Lucretius, Seneca, Stobaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Cicero.[[20]](#footnote-20) Notably Marx can still write in Notebook IV that “it goes without saying that but little use can be made of Lucretius” (MEGA2 IV/1: 74/MECW 1: 466). Soon, however, Marx comes to see Lucretius as the most philosophically insightful source on Epicurus’s philosophy.[[21]](#footnote-21) Marx’s reading, not least due to the emphasis it puts on the “swerve” (*clinamen*) of the atom, for which Lucretius is the principal source, will be distinctively Lucretian in flavor.[[22]](#footnote-22) (This is one way in which Marx’s reading of Epicurus diverges from that of Hegel, who makes no use of Lucretius in interpreting Epicurus.)

In Part One of the *Difference*, Marx is concerned to show, *contra* a received view that he finds in the ancient sources, that Epicurus is no mere plagiarist of Democritus’s atomism (MEGA2 I/1: 24/MECW 1: 37). Marx’s reading not only presents Epicurus’s philosophy as distinct from that of Democritus, but presents the two philosophers as opposed on a range of fundamental issues. Marx presents Democritus as an empiricist skeptic, Epicurus as a dogmatist. Democritus takes sense perceptions to be subjective, where Epicurus takes them to be objective. Democritus is driven to an endless searching for causes (hence his restless travels), where Epicurus retreats into tranquility. For Democritus, everything happens of necessity, whereas Epicurus allows for chance.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Part Two of the *Difference* sets out Epicurus’s philosophy of nature in detail, so as to show how it advances beyond that of Democritus. Here Marx elaborates his distinctively dialectical reading of Epicurus. Epicurus’s atomism is portrayed as a dialectical working out of Democritus’s basic idea (so as to produce an appreciation of that idea of which Democritus himself remains completely innocent). This interpretation is, as Elizabeth Asmis says, “entirely new,” but Hegelian in character.[[24]](#footnote-24) What I will now offer is a basic outline of Marx’s Hegelian reading of Epicurus’s atomism. Although there is a clear debt here to Hegel’s Logic, I will not attempt to map this reading onto any specific stretch of the Logic.[[25]](#footnote-25) Marx’s reading is dialectical, in the following sense: it integrates the three movements of the atom (fall, swerve, and repulsion) by showing their dialectical interconnection. By contrast, Democritus’s account is presented by Marx as providing a mere aggregate of atomic movements, without any account of their interdependence.

The dialectic begins from the basic thesis of atomism. This thesis states that two things exist: atoms and the void. Thus the thesis, as it stands, says nothing more about the distinctness of the atom than its being not-void. But as such (as merely not-void), the atom thus far lacks any determinacy. (To put it another way, the atom is not yet what it claims to be—a singular item—for there is nothing to distinguish it from the void.) The atom has so far been conceived as a mere point; it has not been ascribed extension or any other determinate characteristic. The determinacy that it thus far lacks it gains in its first movement: falling. By falling it ceases to be a mere point and becomes a line. Now the fall is a movement, but a movement, Marx says, of “non-self-sufficiency” (*Unselbstständigkeit*). And so the line that the atom now is still falls short of the determinacy and distinctness promised in its concept. The picture that we have thus far attained is one of all atoms falling in just the same way, without true “independence.” In ancient discussions the problem here tends to be portrayed as that of the atoms never colliding (since they all fall, presumably, in perpendicular lines). On Marx’s reading, however, the problem seems to be that the fall still leaves the atom short of the determinacy that it claims to have. In order to gain this determinacy the atom requires a further movement, and this is the swerve (or deviation from the straight downward line). For this reason the swerve is the formal principle of the atom: it is what makes it, for the first time, an *atom*—a distinct entity with individuality. The individuality thus attained remains, however, merely abstract individuality. It is only in the final movement—repulsion—that the abstractness of its individuality is overcome, and the atom is fully actualized (is fully what it is). By uniting within itself the materiality of the atom (enshrined in its fall) with its form (enshrined in the swerve), the movement of repulsion produces the “*first form of self-consciousness*” (MEGA2 I/1: 39/MECW 1: 52). Here the dualism between form and matter (and between concept and existence) that has plagued the dialectic thus far is overcome. The atom is fully what it is: an independent, “self-conscious” individual.

This reading of Epicurus’s atomism has a number of remarkable features. First, it treats the swerve as an integral part of the doctrine, as opposed to a questionable add-on. Second, it explains the difference between Democritus and Epicurus in systematic terms. It is not merely that Epicurus adds the swerve to Democritus’s two movements (fall and repulsion), but that he produces a dialectically cogent, internally unified doctrine in place of Democritus’s mere assemblage of assertions. Third, the reading, while basically Hegelian in approach, and reflecting to a degree the way Hegel himself relates atomism to his own Logic (in particular the Doctrine of Being),[[26]](#footnote-26) is strikingly novel in the way it integrates the Lucretian concept of the swerve which plays no role in Hegel’s account of atomism.

The most difficult, but also the most intriguing, feature of Marx’s reading of Epicurus’s atomism is that he both praises Epicurus for an insight that emerges from his thinking through his atomism to its final conclusion, and condemns him for shrinking from this very insight. This claim comes to play a crucial role in the final chapter of the *Difference*, Part Two Chapter Five. Here Marx carries the logic of this dialectical reading of atomism to its culminating point, in his treatment of Epicurus on the celestial bodies.[[27]](#footnote-27) He effectively, in presenting the celestial bodies as the highest actualization of the atom, reprises the dialectic of the atom already offered, in order to show what is ultimately at stake in it. He writes: “The atom is matter in the form of independence, of individuality, so to speak weight represented. But the heavenly bodies are the highest actuality of weight” (MEGA2 I/1: 55/MECW 1: 70). In the celestial bodies, “all antinomies between form and matter, between concept and existence, which constituted the development of the atom, are resolved; in them all the determinations that had been required are actualized.” We saw in the dialectic of the atom, at each stage, that the atom was not what it purported to be. In other words, its existence did not match its concept; there was a disparity between matter and form. In the celestial bodies such mismatches are resolved: the atom is made *actual*. Each of the movements traced in the dialectic are present in the celestial bodies, without demanding further dialectical development. They one and all, as part of the system they together compose, “swerve from the straight line” in a “system of repulsion and attraction.” As eternal, Marx thinks, they generate time out of themselves as “the form of their appearance.” (Marx had argued that time is the “form of appearance” of the atom in Part Two Chapter Four.) “*The heavenly bodies are therefore the atoms become actual*” (MEGA2 I/1: 55/MECW 1: 70).

Epicurus has here, according to Marx, achieved his greatest insight. However, his philosophy is marked by an “antinomy” (MEGA2 I/1: 55/MECW 1: 70). The two sides of this antinomy are: the insight that Epicurus attains, and the position that he nevertheless recoils to. Epicurus, in his “greatest contradiction,” blocks his own insight. He has glimpsed that the heavenly bodies eternally move in the same ways. But to admit this is to ascribe to them a divine status that he thinks engenders harmful mythmaking and superstition, which in turn will have deleterious consequences for humans’ prospects for attaining *ataraxia* (tranquility). In order to prevent this, he instructs us to view the heavenly bodies as multiply explicable, and to eschew all efforts to fix on the one correct explanation.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The key to Marx’s double-edged appraisal of Epicurus (praise for his insight; condemnation for his failure to embrace it) is the contrast between an adequate and an inadequate conception of self-consciousness. Epicurus, in his insight, glimpses that the self-consciousness implicit in the atom, outlined in its efforts to realize itself through the dialectic of atomism, is in its actuality *concrete*. As such, the individuality of self-consciousness is a *relational* individuality: it has the individuality it does only in relation to other instances of itself. (This echoes Hegel’s account of self-consciousness as inherently relational in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.)But Marx takes himself to reveal that Epicurus’s conception of self-consciousness remains, in the end, one of *abstract* individual self-consciousness. What Epicurus has glimpsed is that “matter, having received into itself individuality, form, as is the case with the heavenly bodies, *has ceased to be abstract individuality; it has become concrete individuality, universality*” (MEGA2 I/1: 56/MECW 1: 71). Here Epicurus has managed to get the adequate conception within his sights. But what Epicurus’s failure to embrace his own insight reveals is that in his philosophy “abstract-individual self-consciousness is posited as an absolute principle” (MEGA2 I/1: 57/MECW 1: 72; cf. MEGA2 I/1: 51/MECW 1: 65; MEGA2 I/1: 58/MECW 1: 73). Epicurus had glimpsed that the celestial bodies offer an image of a system of entities whose independence is bound up with their interdependence: they are not self-sufficient in the sense of retreating into themselves. The position that Epicurus recoils to, by contrast, is one that is, after all, content with individuality as retreat into the self.

Marx’s own conception of self-consciousness remains merely implicit here. But whatever the interpretative difficulties over Marx’s own position, one thing that this discussion ought to have made clear is just why commentators have been pulled in opposite directions on the question whether Marx is here an idealist or a materialist. Among Marx’s aims in the *Difference* is that of demonstrating that atomism—that materialist doctrine par excellence—is a philosophy of self-consciousness. This is brought out in a passage that Marx italicizes in its entirety, and in which he contrasts a deficient atomism (in the first sentence) with the fully thought-through atomism he advocates on behalf of Epicurus but which Epicurus could not quite bring himself to endorse (in the second sentence):

*Thus as long as nature as atom and appearance expresses individual self-consciousness and its contradiction, the subjectivity of self-consciousness appears only in the form of matter itself. Where, on the other hand, nature becomes independent, self-consciousness reflects itself in itself, confronts nature in its [seiner = self-consciousness’s] own shape as independent form*. (MECW 1: 72)

The most basic tenet of materialism—the thesis of atoms and the void—has here come to speak the language of idealism. Only a poorly conceived atomism has self-consciousness appear “in the form of matter.” Where atomism is properly conceived, by contrast, self-consciousness confronts nature in its (self-consciousness’s) own shape. The individuality of self-consciousness, and the individuality of material atoms, are a mirror of each other: in each, individuality requires interdependence.

4. The liberal party and the positive party

There is no doubt that Marx saw a connection between Hellenistic philosophy and the intellectual situation of his own time. It is also evident that there is some connection, specifically, between Marx’s reading of Epicurus as a philosopher of self-consciousness and Bruno Bauer, who was concerned precisely to advance what he called a “philosophy of self-consciousness.” Marx’s proximity to Bauer can, however, be exaggerated; in the literature it is often, misleadingly, treated as an identity.[[29]](#footnote-29) Instead, as I will argue here, Marx already at this stage recognizes what is problematic in Bauer’s approach.[[30]](#footnote-30) Furthermore, he wants to take on, and transcend, a problematic in which Bauer among others are caught up, as is manifest in his subtle discussion of a dialectic between a “liberal party” and “positive philosophy”.

Marx’s enthusiastic talk of “human self-consciousness as the highest divinity” in the Foreword to the *Difference* (MEGA2 I/1: 14/MECW 1: 30), and his (mitigated) praise of Epicurus as completing “*the natural science of self-consciousness*” in its final section (MEGA2 I/1: 58/MECW 1: 73),[[31]](#footnote-31) can be linked, albeit in a loose way, to Bauer’s “philosophy of self-consciousness.” For Bauer, what this meant was the replacement of Hegel’s Absolute by human self-consciousness. Most significantly, Bauer in his books on the Bible felt enabled by this view to replace God with the totality of human self-consciousness, realizing itself in history. Bauer can be seen, however, to retreat into subjectivity in a way analogous to what Marx found problematic in Epicurus. For instance, in a letter to Marx of 28 March 1841, Bauer tells Marx that “the terrorism of true theory must clear the field,” with unmistakable Jacobin overtones (MEGA2 III/1: 353). Thinking must carry out an act of self-purification. Once this self-purification, which takes place entirely on the side of thought, is complete, Bauer thinks, this will be sufficient to bring about the desired practical, political upheaval. As soon as the transformation of self-consciousness is complete, the revolution will take place, without any need for the involvement of the “masses,” for whom Bauer can barely disguise his contempt.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Marx, however, presents a picture of the “actualization” of philosophy that seeks to overcome a dialectical situation that he diagnoses as existing between the “liberal party” to which Bauer belongs, on the one hand, and a “positive party” on the other.

We have already, in Section 2, considered the Notebook V passage on the “carnival of philosophy.” This passage (plausibly interpreted as a draft for Marx’s originally planned Berlin dissertation) receives a further elaboration as the endnote to Part One Chapter Four of the *Difference*.[[33]](#footnote-33) Both the Notebook V passage and the endnote deal with what in the endnote gets called, by turns, the “realization” (*Realisirung*) and “actualization” (*Verwirklichung*) of philosophy. This is what issues from a *Knotenpunkt*. What is new in the endnote is that Marx now presents the realization of philosophy in his own time as ultimately producing a “double trend,” engendering a split into what he calls “the liberal party” on the one side, and “positive philosophy” on the other (MEGA2 I/1: 69/MECW 1: 86). For philosophy (grown to be an integrated, “total,” world of ideas, as in Plato and Aristotle) to actualize itself in the world, it must set itself in relation to the world. It can do this in two ways, as manifested in the split into a “liberal” and “positive” party: it can engage in a *critique* that measures the world against philosophy’s realm of ideas (as the liberal party does), or it can seek to rationalize what it finds in the world as already in line with itself (as the positive party does). Marx’s identification of the dialectical conflict that ensues between these two tendencies is key to his diagnosis of the situation of contemporary philosophy.

It has been assumed by some scholars that Marx simply identifies himself with the “liberal party,” and also (usually) that this liberal party is to be equated with the “Young Hegelians.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Neither assumption is correct, however. As Inge Taubert notes, Marx, in dividing Hegelians into liberal and positive, and not into left and right, is drawing a distinction not in terms of doctrine, but in terms of *relation to the world*.[[35]](#footnote-35) Again, the distinction between liberal and positive parties is not supposed to capture specific groups of individuals (although clearly the “liberal” label will apply to many on the Hegelian left, and the “positive” label fits well those who self-applied that very term, such as Savigny, Stahl, and the Schelling of this period), but trends that Marx thinks of as more deeply rooted.

Marx certainly expresses greater affinity with the liberal party, which “achieves real advances [*Fortschritten*],” whereas in the positive party “the madness appears as such” (MEGA2 I/1: 69/MECW 1: 86). Nonetheless he finds *both* approaches problematic. Each party, in fact, fails in that it ends up engaged in the task that the other has set itself. The liberal party finds that it has no critical bite against the world, because mere conceptual critique is powerless to impact the world in any way. It thus ends up impotent to do anything other than describe the *status quo*. The positive party, on the other hand, although it intends merely to describe the world, ends up, in showing up the many contradictions and deficiencies in the world—critiquing it, in spite of its aspiration to merely describe.

The importance of this passage is in the way in which it points beyond the explicit concerns of the *Difference* and elaborates a theme running through the *Notebooks*. Marx has seen, in a way that Bauer and others have not, a problematic that afflicts the attempt to think the relation between thought and reality. As soon as thought is conceived of as self-contained and sealed off, separate from reality, it necessarily reveals itself as impotent in the face of reality. As Marx puts this, for philosophy to actualize itself in the world, the world must become philosophical, just as philosophy must become worldly (MEGA2 I/1: 68/MECW 1: 85).

In the next, concluding section we will consider the lessons that Marx draws from this dialectical situation. For now, we have seen that Marx cannot possibly see himself as standing exclusively on one side of this dialectic. He strives, instead, to distinguish himself from each of these trends, so as to open up space for a position that overcomes the dialectic between them.

5. Thought and reality

Marx’s texts are admittedly fragmentary and in numerous places difficult to interpret. There is room for dispute as to just how to understand his argument, particularly when he is at his most ambitious (for instance in his discussion of Epicurus on the meteors). Nevertheless we can now get into view the fundamental problematic that Marx has been concerned with throughout, as it runs through his revision of Hegel’s history of ancient philosophy, his dialectical reading of Epicurus’s atomism, and his assessment of his own intellectual context. This is the problematic of the relation of thought to reality.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This problematic animates Marx through a series of questions that we have been considering in turn. If the Hegelian notion of *Knotenpunkte* in the history of philosophy is to be appropriated as Marx proposes, the question arises just what it is for a *Knotenpunkt* to be “released” so that philosophy can now “enter the world.” What does “entering” the world mean? Again, what is the insight that Epicurus glimpses but then recoils from, and in what sense does his post-*Knotenpunkt* philosophy fail to enter the world? And how does Marx think that philosophy is to be actualized in such a way as to halt the oscillation between “liberal” and “positive” parties?

These issues are connected. The fundamental problem is the same in each of the post-*Knotenpunkt* cases Marx is concerned with. What is salutary about the insight that Epicurus achieves (but then shrinks from) is that it overcomes the idea that thought is situated outside reality. Again, the dialectic between liberal and positive parties does away with a certain way of trying to get the relation between thought and reality into view. This dialectic dramatizes what happens when thought is characterized, erroneously, as something that stands in relation to reality. It is this misconception that generates the problems with each approach. The liberal party can make no dent on reality precisely because it is held back from seeing that the *actualization* of philosophy would be the entry of thought *into* reality, in such a way that they no longer stood apart. And again the positive party’s attempts at *mere* description fail because its attempts to merely stand over against reality contemplatively fail.

I adverted at the beginning to the multiple temptations to see these early Marx texts as prefiguring or pointing towards his mature intellectual project. On the whole these temptations are to be avoided. Marx’s project here is highly distinctive when compared with his later work. And Marx will certainly later have no truck with anything like a Hegelian reconstruction of Epicurus’s atomism. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to suppose that these texts are highly formative for Marx in one important way. This is that he can here be seen to be wrestling his way towards an appreciation of what it would be for philosophy to be praxis (and thereby to overcome its restriction to a contemplative thought that has the defect of thinking of itself as standing over against reality). For Hegel philosophy notoriously remains contemplative and retrospective. And Hegel’s successors had encountered difficulties—masterfully diagnosed by Marx in his account of the “liberal” and “positive” parties in the *Difference*—developing a conception of the “actualization” of philosophy that does not collapse into practical impotence of either a progressive variety (in the case of the “liberal party”) or a reactionary one (in the case of the “positive party,” whose efforts at mere description fail to be that and turn over into critique). Although Marx has not even begun to work this out in the *Notebooks* and *Difference*, he arguably has in his sights here a conception of the actualization of philosophy in which thought does not remain set over against reality, but which promises to turn philosophy itself into praxis by being no longer thought about the world, however radical in intent, but the *thinking transformation* of the world itself.

This promise—and that is all it is at this stage—is certainly not easy to make sense of, and Marx’s arguments are frequently difficult to make out (not aided by the fragmentary nature of the texts). But what I hope to have shown is just how radical Marx’s project is in rewriting the history of ancient philosophy so that among its culminations is a philosophy that grapples with the insight that the atoms are the highest actualization of self-consciousness. (We do not know, with any reliability, would Marx would say about the other culminations: Stoicism and Skepticism.) And thereby it should have become clear why previous readings have not managed to do justice to Marx. It seems here impossible to choose between an idealist and a materialist reading, for Marx aims to close off that choice. And there can be no question of Marx camouflaging a debate about the doctrines of Kant and Hegel by the use of proxies—for something very different from a Kantian or Hegelian view is aimed at. And again, Marx has already advanced the argument well beyond the parameters of Bruno Bauer and others in his immediate intellectual environment. Marx has already set out on a highly distinctive road of his own, whatever its precise contours.

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MEGA2 *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin: Dietz, 1975–.

MECW *Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004.

MEW *Marx-Engels-Werke*. Berlin: Dietz, et al., 1956–.

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1. I cite the *Notebooks* as follows: MEGA2 IV/1: 5–152/MECW 1: 403–509. I cite the *Difference* as follows: MEGA2 I/1: 7–92/MECW 1: 25–107. Translations from MECW have been tacitly emended where needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paul M. Schafer writes that “Marx’s dissertation, together with the notebooks he prepared in advance of the work, constitutes nothing less than the genesis of his philosophical worldview” (2003: 127). Some go further, and claim that the *Difference* in some way provides a blueprint for Marx’s later method. Gary Browning goes so far as to claim that “Marx’s mature explanation of capital follows a course charted in the dissertation’s discussion of Democritus and Epicurus” (2000: 132). For others, as we shall see, the point is that the early writings prefigure a materialism taken to be crucial for the later Marx. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to John L. Stanley, “the various critics have all underestimated the materialism of the dissertation,” and “the logic and content of the dissertation are already further along the road towards historical materialism than either the ‘humanists’ or ‘proto-materialists’ would have us believe” (2002: 91). John Bellamy Foster speaks of Marx’s “own emerging materialist outlook” (2000: 32). Gary Teeple insists, reasonably enough, that “Marx is intent on pursuing the principles of self-consciousness, of ‘mind,’ not as abstractions but as principles whose ground lay in material reality” (1984: 9). It may be questioned, however, whether the stark opposition between idealism and materialism assumed by both Foster and Teeple helps to illuminate Marx’s position. As I will argue, it is part of Marx’s remit in the writings in question to challenge the supposed obviousness of such an opposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the view of Tony Burns, who writes (despite the title of his paper) that “in the dissertation, Marx remains very much a disciple of Hegel and of Hegel’s idealism” (2000: 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is not to say that Marx does not manifest his familiarity with Kant on specific points, as in the discussion of the ontological argument in the endnotes to the Appendix to the *Difference*, MEGA2 I/1: 90/MECW 1: 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stedman Jones also claims that Marx took Epicurus to be an idealist, but in order to protect Epicurus himself from accusations of materialism and determinism (2016: 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is a pseudo-question in the vicinity here, namely whether Marx intended his study of Greek philosophy to be a scholarly exercise *or* a contribution to a contemporary debate (as if these options were exclusive). It is admittedly frustrating that, in a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle in which Marx comments on his motivations for the project, there is a lacuna just where the apparently crucial word would have been: “[Later] philosophy—Epicurus (him in particular), Stoa, and Skepticism—[I] had made the object of *special* study, but more out of … than philosophical interest.” (Marx to Lassalle, 21 December 1857. MEGA2 III/8: 223/MECW 40: 226.) However, whatever else Marx’s interest was in the project, his philosophical analysis of ancient Greek philosophy is crucial in realizing it. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Versions of this story are told in, e.g.: Sannwald 1957;McLellan 1972; Rosen 1977; Kołakowski 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “A more profound indication of their [the Hellenistic systems’] connection with Greek life can be found in the essay of my friend Köppen, *Friedrich der Grosse und seine Widersacher*” (MEGA2 I/1: 14/MECW 1: 30). It is often pointed out that Köppen’s book is dedicated to Marx, in order to emphasize its apparent importance for the project of the *Difference*. Köppen’s commentary on Epicurean philosophy, however, seems to be confined to the following statement: “Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism are the nerve-muscles [Nerven-Muskel] and guts [Eingeweidesysteme] of the ancient organism, whose immediate, natural were conditioned by the beauty and virtue of antiquity, and fell apart with the perishing of the latter” (1840: 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Appendix mentioned in the Foreword to the *Difference* (MEGA2 I/1: 14/MECW 1: 30), and on its contents page (MEGA2 I/1: 20/MECW 1: 33), is also missing, although endnotes to Part I of the Appendix (which consisted of two Parts) have survived. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. MEGA2 IV/1: 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g. Markovits 1974: 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bauer to Marx, 11 December 1839, MEGA2 III/1: 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Marx was familiar with Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* as published by his student Michelet in 1833 (Vols. I and II) and 1836 (Vol. III). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The editors of MEGA2 have convincingly argued that MEW (which is followed in this respect by MECW) reversed the order of Notebooks V and VI, which lack title pages. I here follow the order established in MEGA2. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Compare e.g. the “*non ens* of the natural” at MEGA2 IV/1: 41/MECW 1: 435 and the “not-being of the world” at MEGA2 IV/1: 99/MECW 1: 490. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hegel, *Werke*, 14: 181–2/*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, II: 13–14 (translation modified). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hegel, *Werke*, 14: 299/*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, II: 118–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The passage is plausibly taken, judging by Marx’s effort to translate this portion of his own text into Latin, to be a draft passage for the dissertation that Marx had planned to submit in Berlin before settling on the plan of submitting it in Jena, where it could be examined *in absentia* (see Marx’s correspondence with Bauer, MEGA2 III/1: 342). In Berlin, unlike Jena, a Latin dissertation was necessary (and the oral defense was also required to be in part in Latin). In the Latin passage (omitted from MECW), Marx connects this notion of *Knotenpunkte* in the history of philosophy with that of *Knotenlinien* (“nodal lines”) exploited by Hegel in the passage on “Measure” in his *Science of Logic* (“a Hegelio ‘Knotenlinien’ dicta”, MEGA2 IV/1: 99)*.* It is difficult to decipher, from this cursory allusion in a draft text, what exactly Marx took the connection between *Knotenpunkte* and *Knotenlinien* to be. But he makes the allusion to Hegel’s logic of “Measure” explicit when he goes on to write: “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 fall into “measureless pretension” (MEGA2 IV/1: 100/MECW 1: 491–92). Note that the logic of Measure is the culmination of Hegel’s Doctrine of Being; to regard it as the “highest category” is effectively to block the transition to the Doctrine of Essence. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It has been noted that Marx does an extraordinarily impressive job working with ancient materials first-hand. See the appreciative remarks from two leading Epicurus scholars of different periods: Bailey 1928 and Asmis 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See e.g. the following comments in the *Notebooks*. “Lucretius, fresh, keen, poetic master of the world, differs from Plutarch, who covers his paltry ego with the snow and ice of morality.” “We shall also see how infinitely more philosophically Lucretius grasps Epicurus than does Plutarch” (MEGA2 IV/1: 79/MECW 1: 468, 469). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The only sources we have for the swerve are Lucretius and Cicero. See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 2.216–93. For Cicero, see the texts cited by Marx (*On the Nature of the Gods*, *On the Highest Goods and Evils*, *On Fate*) in the notes to Part Two Chapter One of the *Difference*, MEGA2 I/1: 72–74/MECW 1: 89–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See the excellent outline of these contrasts in Asmis 2020. As Asmis points out, modern scholars tend to agree with Marx on the first contrast, but not on the other two. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The reading I will provide draws on those of Schafer 2003 and Asmis 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For a case that the Doctrine of Essence is particularly important for Marx here, see McIvor 2008. The issue is complex, however. Hegel himself deals with atomism in his Doctrine of Being, and Marx’s account has resonances with Hegel’s treatment of Being at the very opening of the Logic. Furthermore, an excessively close mapping of Marx’s reading of Epicurus onto the Doctrine of Essence involves portraying Epicurus as a philosopher breaking through into the Doctrine of the Concept in a way that raises difficult questions about the status of his predecessors, Plato and Aristotle—who then have to figure (contra the stated views of both Hegel and Marx) as philosophers of Essence. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Gesammelte Werke* 21: 153–155/*The Science of Logic*, 134–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. MECW uses the translation “meteors” for *ta meteōra* (“the things above”). While the Letter to Pythocles (reproduced by Diogenes Laertius) that serves as Marx’s source for Epicurus’s views on this topic covers a range of heavenly phenomena—much wider than the translation “meteors” would suggest and including (in our modern sense) “meteorological” phenomena such as thunder and lightning—the interest in Marx’s chapter is in Epicurus’s account of the heavenly bodies specifically. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Marx’s reading of the multiple explicability thesis is evidently idiosyncratic. Epicurus can be much more straightforwardly read as claiming that, since settling on the one correct explanation is beyond our capacities, we ought to acknowledge that such a final settling of accounts is beyond our powers. Such recognition of our powers, and thus our resting content with having multiple explanations on the table, accords with the demands of *ataraxia*. On this, see Asmis 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. David McLellan goes so far as to say, of the *Difference*: “There are, indeed, passages of vivid writing, but they contain no ideas that are peculiar to Marx.” And: “Finally, Marx’s view of the relation of theory and practice is precisely the same as Bauer’s”; “there is nothing at all in Marx’s dissertation that shows him to be other than an ordinary Young Hegelian with a close sympathy for some of Bauer’s ideas” (1969: 72­–73). For an excellent account of the complex developing relationship between Marx and Bauer in the years 1839 to 1842, see Kangal 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. It seems that Bauer acted as something like an informal dissertation advisor for Marx’s project. However, fissures appeared early on in their relationship. While Bauer and Marx were supposed to work on a co-authored project on the philosophy of religion, Marx’s contribution never materialized and Bauer went ahead to publish without him. By 1844, Marx was highly critical of Bauer in “On the Jewish Question,” and by 1845, *The Holy Family* (co-authored with Engels), was explicitly directed against “Bauer and associates.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Mitigated because, as Marx says, this science has merely “abstract individuality” as its “absolute principle” (MEGA2 I/1: 58/MECW 1: 73). (The way MECW breaks up Marx’s original sentence obscures this point.) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For Bauer’s conception of intellectual self-purification as possessing revolutionary power, see Sass 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The endnote is not only closely related to the Notebook V passage in general thematic terms. There are also more specific commonalities, such as the parallel references to the “transparent kingdom of Amenthes” (*dem Durchsichtigen Reiche des Amenthes*) at MEGA2 IV/1: 99/MECW 1: 491 and to the “shadowy empire of Amenthes” (*dem Schattenreich des Amenthes*) at MEGA2 I/1: 67/MECW 1: 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Zvi Rosen thinks Marx identifies himself completely with the liberal party. “The Liberal Party obviously symbolizes the Young Hegelians of whom Marx was part and therefore Marx identifies himself completely with it” (1977: 160). The “therefore” is telling: it is there only because Rosen has *assumed* that Marx will take whatever view the Young Hegelians (“of whom [he] was part”) take. Gary Browning writes: “Marx’s remarks on the break-up of the Hegelian school into two parties is elliptical, but he is by no means clearly endorsing the liberal party of Young Hegelians. While he appears sympathetic to Young Hegelian goals, he observes that a more rational standpoint requires a less contradictory relationship between theory and practice” (2000: 135). The gist of Browning’s point is correct, even if the assumption that the liberal party can be straightforwardly identified with the Young Hegelians is to be challenged. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Taubert 1978: 212. Carlo Natali recognizes that Marx’s position among the Young Hegelians is a distinctive one and that he declines to fully take sides with the “Left” against the “Right” of the Hegelian movement (1976: 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. I am not the first to suggest the importance of the question of the relationship of thought to reality for Marx in this period. See, apart from the detailed exploration of this theme in Natali 1976, the passing remark by Martina Thom: “At the center of [Marx’s] interest stood problems of the relation of thought and being” (1986: 108). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)