

# The Interpretation of Freedom Thought in Marx's "Doctoral Dissertation"

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**Abstract:** The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature is the first philosophical treatise published by Marx and the starting point of Marx's philosophical thought. In the comparative analysis of Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature, Marx explicitly states his views on freedom of consciousness. Through the interpretation of the freedom thought in Marx's "Doctoral Dissertation", it is of great theoretical significance for us to understand the transformation of Marx's view of freedom, and it is of great practical significance to guide the practice of China's development.

## 1. Introduction

As the first philosophical treatise published by Marx, The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature is the starting point of Marx's philosophical thought. Although the trace of Hegel's thought can be clearly seen from this "doctoral dissertation", it is undoubtedly an important witness to the formation of Marx's philosophical thought, which has academic value and research significance that cannot be ignored. Among which, thinking about freedom is not only an important topic of this dissertation, but also the theme of Marx's lifelong theoretical exploration. It can be said that the "doctoral dissertation" constitutes the beginning of Marx's thought of freedom, and taking it as the starting point of research is helpful to deeply understand the profound humanistic care of Marx's philosophy.

In the history of Greek philosophy, Epicureans is often regarded as an appendage without attachment. Instead of absorbing any beneficial nutrients from the great glory of the three sages of Greece, it is rather dull. Therefore, Epicurean philosophy is taken as a syncretic combination of Democritean physics and Cyrenaic morality. As far as Epicurean physics is concerned, it is purely plagiarism of Democritean physics, whether it is considered in history or demonstrated by modern writers. It is on this basis that Marx dares to find out and put forward problems, discover the differences between the two, and demonstrate them through a series of differences in details, because "what can be demonstrated in the small can even more easily be shown where the relations are considered in larger dimensions". [1] (p18) Hence, Marx critically analyzes the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature and their mutual relations, thus establishing the concept of freedom centered on self-awareness.

## 2. What is Freedom: The Declination of the Atom from the Straight Line

Epicurus assumes a threefold motion of the atoms in the void, namely, the fall in a straight line, the deviation from the straight line, the repulsion of the many atoms. Democritus only admits the existence of the first and third movements, therefore, "the declination of the atom from the straight line" became Epicurus's original creation. Although this theory is ridiculed, in Marx's view, the deviation movement contains free will.

In "doctoral dissertation", Marx makes a detailed investigation on the deviation movement of atoms through a large number of citations. He thinks that only in the deviation movement can an atom realize itself, and it is the completed atom. As for Cicero and Bayle's attacks on this movement, they

believe that "Epicurus is supposed to have assumed a declination of the atoms in order to explain the repulsion on one occasion, and on another freedom." [1](p32) This leads to a logical contradiction. "As far as the relationship between declination and meet is concerned, either the atoms do not meet without declination, or the atoms meet without declination. If the atoms do not meet without declination, then declination as an explanation of freedom is superfluous; but if the atoms meet without declination, then this is superfluous for explaining repulsion. Therefore, either using declination as an explanation of freedom is superfluous or using declination as an explanation of repulsion is superfluous. The conclusion is that declination cannot be used to explain both freedom and repulsion." [2] For this point, Marx explains that the reason for this contradiction is that "the causes for the declination of the atom from the straight line are understood so superficially and disconnectedly." [1](p32)

Marx makes a more in-depth consideration of the declination itself. If atoms only move in a straight line, just as the point is negated in the line, atoms will lose their independence and individuality in the motion of falling. As a result, atoms will disappear in a straight line because of their eternal motion of falling. Therefore, the atom, insofar as its motion is a straight line, "is determined only by space and is prescribed a relative being and a purely material existence." [1](p33) However, "we have seen that one moment in the concept of the atom is that of being pure form, negation of all relativity, of all relation to another mode of being." [1](p33) Here, "the relation to another mode of being" refers to the motion in a straight line, and the negation of the motion in a straight line forms another kind of motion, that is, the declination from the straight line. As Lucretius maintains that, the declination breaks the rules of being, the "fati foedera", the bondage of inevitability and struggles with it. Although some people blame Epicurus's deviation movement for no reason, physical reasons will only drag the deviation movement back into the circle of determinism, while the deviation movement is to break determinism. Only in deviation motion can the atom have a "real soul". Only when the atom is liberated from a straight line and gets rid of the being of limitation, can it obtain abstract individuality and appear with its "highest freedom and independence".

The gods get rid of the bondage of being and get the happiness of peace and freedom. "For man as man to become his own real object, he must have crushed within himself his relative being, the power of desire and of mere nature." [1](p37) The rejection of the decisive power and the resistance to the inevitable fate have entered the ideal side and formed self-awareness; free will comes into being when we escape from the "forced movement" and strive for a "natural movement".

### **3. Why Freedom: Acknowledge Self-consciousness as the Highest Divinity**

Marx gives Prometheus high praise in the [Draft of a New Preface] of his "Doctoral Dissertation", and recognizes him as "the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar." [1](p12) This is because Prometheus opposes all gods, while the gods do not acknowledge that human self-consciousness has the highest divinity.

In the demonstration of the differences between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of nature, Marx affirms Epicurus's deviation movement, in which the concept of atoms is realized and the abstract individual form is obtained. "Repulsion is the first form of self-consciousness", [1](p37) which means the realization of self-awareness and the acquisition of freedom. This kind of repulsion exists not only at the ideal side, but also in the political and social domain in a more concrete form. Marx demonstrates the important position of self-consciousness through rational analysis of Epicurus' atomism, thus achieving his rational confirmation of the highest divinity of self-consciousness.

Freedom is established on the basis of self-consciousness. Only when we consciously realize that we exist for ourselves, can freedom be realized. Therefore, self-awareness inherently contains the essence of freedom. "Abstract-universal self-consciousness has, indeed, the intrinsic urge to affirm itself in the things themselves in which it can only affirm itself by negating them." [1](p63) Because of the existence of self-consciousness, atomism and all its contradictions are comprehensively combined. On the one hand, self-awareness is an absolute principle in the form of abstract

individuality; on the other hand, it is the ablation of abstract individuality. Democritus' atomism falls into the hypothesis based on empirical observation and cannot be truly realized; Epicurus's atomism is based on self-consciousness, objectifying the contradiction between the form and material, concept and being of atoms, thus providing us with scientific atomism which has been realized and completed.

In Marx's view, advocating the absolute principle of self-awareness and freedom is the most valuable thought in Epicurean philosophy. In Epicurean philosophy, every link of self-consciousness has been expressed in detail. Due to Epicurus' personal style, that is, he likes to take the different stipulation of the same concept as an isolated individual form, each link of self-consciousness is independent as a special being, which forms a complete structure of self-consciousness together. Epicurus affirms and pays great attention to self-consciousness, aiming at comforting the subject of interpretation. What he pursues is a kind of "peace of self-consciousness", happiness and satisfaction of thinking, but he is indifferent to whether he gets knowledge of nature or not.

It can be seen that Marx's understanding of freedom in this period does not go beyond the stereotype of idealism, and the influence of Hegel's thought on Marx is clearly revealed here. However, Marx's philosophy of self-consciousness is not blindly indulging in the spiritual world of ego, but criticizing and improving it, which is a sublated ideological system. "Human's spiritual strength is higher than the established material being, but when it is divorced from reality and becomes abstract, it also loses its ability to resist the surrounding environment, and also loses the fighting spirit of the original pursuit ... If self-consciousness can only keep the peace of mind in the abstract situation, then the critical spirit of self-consciousness is not worth mentioning." [3] Therefore, precisely speaking, what Marx wants to establish is the highest divinity of self-consciousness based on reality. At the same time, human freedom is also realized.

#### **4. How to Get Freedom: "Freedom in Being "and "Freedom in Chance"**

##### **4.1 "Freedom in Being"**

Epicurean philosophy is full of the being out of limitation in order to realize the thought of abstract individuality and independence. This is his progressiveness compared with Democritean Philosophy, whose atomism has never been divorced from the hypothesis of experience. In Democritus's case, atoms are firmly pinned down by "being".

Epicurus believes that "abstract individuality is freedom from being, not freedom in being. It cannot shine in the light of being." [1] (p50) In his view, the atom bound by "being" can only be reduced to the material basis and exist in the phenomenon world; only when the atom enters the abstract individuality can it become itself, complete its own character and realize freedom. Similarly, the realization of man's freedom must break his relative being, get rid of the power of pure nature, and become his only real object. By negating the state of being, people can achieve freedom, get rid of pain and confusion, and get spiritual peace. "The good is the flight from evil, pleasure the swerving away from suffering." [1] (p35)

To this, Marx's view is just the opposite. Marx believes that only "freedom in being" is the freedom in reality. "Being" is a factor that makes the atom lose its individual abstraction and becomes a material. "Freedom in being" fully shows that "freedom can never be realized in ideas and self-consciousness without the existence of material set by self-consciousness." [4] Although self-consciousness has the highest divinity, it cannot get rid of the influence of being. Once it is out of being, the pursuit of freedom will escape into the pure spiritual world and become a pure spiritual activity, which cannot be truly and realistically realized. In a word, the pursuit of freedom should not only stay at the ideal side conceived by self-awareness, but also enter into the material world, grasp the phenomenon under the guidance of self-consciousness, and rely on rational power to change "being" instead of being enslaved by "being". Without "being", the realization of freedom is simply unimaginable.

##### **4.2 "Freedom in Chance"**

Democritus, in his investigation of the real world, attributes everything to inevitability. He denies any chance, and thinks that chance is an illusion made up by people and a manifestation of powerlessness to the phenomenon world. Therefore, he is always keen to find reasons for everything. In his eyes, finding a new causal link makes him happier than getting the throne of Persia. It is the reflection form of inevitability that makes Democritus fall into the determinism of experience.

Epicurus is just the opposite of him. According to Epicurus, inevitability does not exist, and there must be an accidental side to the existence and development of things. He even believes that "it would be better to follow the myth about the gods than to be a slave to the heimarine [what has been decreed, destiny] of the physicists. For the former leaves hope for mercy if we do honour to the gods, while the latter is inexorable necessity." [1](P26) It can be seen how much Epicurus hates inevitability.

Democritus pays attention to inevitability, while Epicurus pays attention to chance, both of which fall into an extreme. The realization of real freedom is to "do as you please, not exceed the rules". On the basis of fully understanding and respecting the inevitability, we should consider all realistic and abstract possibilities, and grasp the chance. "It is a misfortune to live in necessity, but to live in necessity is not a necessity. On all sides many short and easy paths to freedom are open. Let us therefore thank God that no man can be kept in life. It is permitted to subdue necessity itself." [1](P26) In inevitability, everything is determined, and there is nothing we can do about it and there is no freedom; the acquisition of freedom must admit chance, which is unstable and fast-changing. Only in "change" can all possibilities be created, and only in "change" can the divinity of "self-awareness" be highlighted, and then freedom is come true. In other words, freedom is realized by chance based on inevitability.

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, "Doctoral Dissertation" is a representative work of Marx's thought in youth. From Marx's view of freedom in this period, it can be seen that there are obvious traces of Hegel's thought and distinct idealism tendency. However, at the same time, it can be seen that Marx has not become a thorough idealist, and "Freedom in Being" profoundly shows the practical trend of Marx's freedom view and the theoretical purport of pursuing realistic freedom. Marx's view of freedom is formed in his "doctoral dissertation", and from then on, it has been continuously improved and finally completed the transformation of materialism. As the birthplace of Marx's concept of freedom and philosophy, it is an important theoretical task that we need to solve urgently to interpret the "Doctoral Dissertation" and guide a series of practical problems in the process of China's development.

## References

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