

Wittgenstein, Marx, and Language Criticism

The Philosophies of Self-Consciousness

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Preliminarily

I must say this paper results from researches belonging to a larger project of study on Karl Marx's philosophy I am carrying out, and that the bringing of Wittgenstein and Marx together here presented does not have the aim of trying to prove or to suggest Marx exerted upon Wittgenstein's philosophy some kind of indirect or second hand influence. My idea is that since they developed their work in dialogue with the same philosophical traditions this fact would make it possible to find out ways of establishing continuity between their philosophies. So, in this work I will bring out some connections I am working on with the aim of trying to read Wittgenstein as a materialist philosopher.

1. The uses of philosophy

During twenty years (1839-1859) Marx dedicated himself to systematic philosophical research and to meditation. In the Preface to his *Criticism of Political Economy*,¹ he exposes an assessment he made of his intellectual development during this period. He declares that through his studies and the essays and other works written during these years he did not have the aim of outlining a new system of thought or a new philosophy, but that he simply was only searching for *the conducting thread* of his studies; and that the works he wrote were *not for printing*, but for his *personal edification*. And, particularly, about the writing of *The German Ideology*, he reports that, when he and Engels decided to write this book, they aimed at developing their *common conception* in opposition to *the ideological views of German*

¹ Marx 1963, 271, 274.

philosophy, and that, in fact, they wanted *to settle accounts with their former philosophical consciousness*.

What is remarkable in his declarations is the position Marx defends regarding the uses of philosophy. Instead of using philosophy as a means to the building of systems and theories, that means, Metaphysics, he uses philosophical investigations as a way to *personal edification* or *self-clarification*. The attitude of Marx can be approached to some of the positions of Wittgenstein, who confessed many times he was not interested in using philosophy for building conceptual pyramids, but for clarification of thoughts and “self-clarification” (in the sense used by Marx) as it seems to me expressed in *Culture and Value*, when Wittgenstein affirms that:

“Working in philosophy... is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them).”²

Marx and Wittgenstein developed their philosophical positions in dialogue with the same philosophical traditions. Clearly, Marx’ philosophical education happened in the idealist tradition of Hegel, his master, the philosopher he always criticized but never abandoned. The relation of Wittgenstein with this tradition was pointed out by Bloor³ who points out that Wittgenstein’s link with idealist tradition can be seen in his intention of *breaking down the distinction between the subject and the object of knowledge* in resonance with *those aspects of the idealist tradition associated with Hegel*; perspective that puts attention *not on the individual psyche, but on history, traditions, cultures, and states*. A tradition in which, he affirms, *discourse and the object of discourse merge into one another*.

Without objection to Bloor’s description, it seems to me that Wittgenstein’s intention of breaking down the distinction between subject and object of knowledge could also be interpreted in resonance with the materialist conception of the philosopher’s work as Marx defines it in his thesis on Epicurus. Thus he asserts that

“In the general relation the philosopher establishes between world and thought he does nothing else than make objective to himself the relation his particular consciousness maintains with the real world.”⁴

² Wittgenstein *VB*, 1988, 16.

³ Bloor 1996, 358.

⁴ Marx 1982, 28.

Wittgenstein⁵ seems to me closer to Marx's idea that in making philosophy the philosopher produces an objectification of his subjective form of consciousness. My suggestion is that this determination appears in Wittgenstein's philosophy when he teaches us our thought is a reflection of our activity, of our belonging to determined *forms of life*. And I would like to suggest that the concept "forms of life" meaning culture or way of living could be seen in the light of Marx' assertion:

"It is not consciousness that determines life, it is life that determinates consciousness."⁶

2. Karl Marx and the history of philosophy

Marx (1982) wrote and defended a Ph. D. thesis on the philosophy of Epicurus, and by means of this work he expected he could elucidate a problem not yet solved in the history of Greek philosophy; a problem he considered Hegel had left out of his book on the history of philosophy. To him, Hegel had correctly defined the general aspects of Epicurian, Stoic, and Skeptical philosophies but could not make a detailed analysis of these systems, on one hand, due to the extension of the book, and, on another hand, because he had a disdain for these philosophies of self-consciousness; a prejudice, says Marx, he shared with other historians: the idea that these philosophies were not very speculative, and which hindered him from recognizing the importance of these systems for the understanding of the history of Greek philosophy as a whole.

Contrary to this prejudice, Marx was of the opinion that the key of the true history of Greek philosophy could be found in these philosophies. So, in his thesis, he makes a detailed analysis of Epicurus' natural philosophy in confrontation with Democritus' philosophy, with the aim of giving an example of the relation these two systems have with the whole of Greek speculation.

Why, after Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, did there appear new systems that were not settled upon *these rich creations of the spirit*, but went back to more elementary schools? This was the driving question Marx took

⁵ Wittgenstein *TLP*, 1984, 572.

⁶ Marx 1982, 1057.

for writing his thesis.⁷ In his view, as a whole in these philosophies are represented all the elements of self-consciousness, and that this fact did not happen by chance. So, he developed his thesis based upon the argument that if Plato' and Aristotle' systems had *more significance and more interest regarding the background of Greek philosophy*, in its turn the post-Aristotelian systems, and in particular the Cycle of Epicurian, Stoic, and Skeptical schools, had *more significance and interest in what refers to the subjective form*, because, Marx emphasizes, the spiritual fundament of these philosophic systems was exactly the subjective form. This aspect, the significance of subjective form to the character of Greek philosophy, he concludes, had been totally neglected in the history of philosophy in favor of the metaphysical determinants of these systems.

By this movement, Marx changed the focus of his philosophical investigations, taking the focus off the metaphysical determination of philosophic systems, and putting it upon the *subjective form*, a concept he defines as *the form of reflection that expresses the reciprocal relation of thought and being*. And, as a consequence of this change, the focal point of his research became the philosopher's forms of consciousness.⁸

3. ***The subjective Form: Epicurus and Democritus***

Following this conception and in a microscopic mode, Marx analyses the differences between Democritus and Epicurus as determined by subjective form. He describes that, despite the closeness of their own systems of Physics, and the fact that they departed from identical principles: the atom and the void, they arrived at *diametrically opposed philosophical positions in all that concerns truth, certainty, the application of this science, and the relation of thought to reality in general*. And he concludes that these differences appeared as a consequence of their own particular subjective forms of reflecting reality.

So, concerning the identity of principles, Democritus and Epicurus opposed positions are exposed extensively by Marx.⁹ He points out the

⁷ Marx 1982, 20.

⁸ Marx 1982, 28.

⁹ Marx 1982, 32.

difference in the way they determined the relation between the atom and the world of sensible phenomena: the first adopting the skeptic way and the second acting dogmatically. For him, Democritus considered the sensible world as a subjective appearance and dedicated himself to the empiricist science of nature and to positive knowledge. In his turn, Epicurus considered the sensible world like an objective phenomenon; and since he saw the phenomenal world as real, he disdained the empirical; Marx describes Epicurus as incarnating *the peace of thought satisfied with itself; the autonomy, that draws its knowledge ex principio interno*, and extends the opposition much far, because Democritus, he affirms, considers sensible nature *from the point of view of need and makes efforts to explain and understand the real existence of things*. On the contrary, he continues, because Epicurus takes the phenomena as real, he *only sees everywhere the hazard, and his mode of explanation has a special tendency to suppress all objective reality of nature*.

The difference in the forms of reflection appears in the way these Greek philosophers explain particular physical phenomena. In Democritus, says Marx, necessity is itself manifest in finite nature as relative necessity, as determinism that *can only be deduced from real possibility; that means, from a whole of conditions, causes, reason, etc., that mediate this need*.¹⁰ Quite the opposite thinks Epicurus to whom possibility is the reality value of the hazard; the abstract possibility that does not know limits *like the imagination, the possibility that does not care about the object requiring explanation, but it is interested in the explaining person*. To this mode of explanation, it is enough for the investigation *the very possibility of the object, that it could be conceivable*.

After making these distinctions, Marx concludes that Epicurus was not interested in the research of the real causes of particular physical phenomena.¹¹ To his explanation procedure all the opinions of the former physicists could be exact and should not be rejected; his sole interest was in the *possible*; and the problem for him was the reassurance of the explaining subject. This idea that “all is possible”, a proposition which is correspondent to the abstract possibility, makes evident, for Marx, that in Epicurus:

¹⁰ Marx 1982, 30, 31.

¹¹ Marx 1982, 31, 32.

philosophy, *the hazard of the being was simply translated into the hazard of thought*; and that the limit of this procedure was the only prescriptive rule he stated: *the explanation must not contradict sensitive perception*. And Marx ends up his description by means of a passage from Diogenes Laertius where he affirms that the aim of Epicurus' procedure was *the ataraxia of the self-consciousness, and absolutely not the knowledge of nature in itself*; the freedom from all explanations the ataraxia would bring.

This opposition: the search for the "causes" versus the interest in the possibilities of opinions, and the distinction between the two orientations is to my view clearly expressed to our times by Wittgenstein when he asserts:

"Physics differs from phenomenology in that it tries to set up laws. Phenomenology sets up only possibilities. Thus, phenomenology would be the grammar of the description of those facts on which physics builds its theories."¹²

Marx claims that, despite the discordances between Democritus and Epicurus they are linked one another by their adherence to just the same theory and because they shared the spiritual fundament of Ancient Greek philosophy as a whole: the philosopher's subjective form. This concept was developed by Marx in his Studybooks,¹³ through an examination of the definition of the *sage (sophos)*, and taking Socrates as the conscious personification of what philosophy was for the Greek life: *a purely inner fact, as well as purely outward appearance*.

According to Marx,¹⁴ the first sages were the very spirit of substance, incarnations of knowledge, but due to historical changes in ancient Greek philosophy the substance was transformed into ideality, the pure abstraction. And from this moment on it will be *the very ideality, in its immediate form, the subjective spirit that becomes the principle of philosophy*. By this fact, ideality is deprived of the substance itself and the consequent abandon of substantial life, and the destination imposed by this ideality means for the individual a foreign power to deal with. In this situation, Socrates appeared and gave a name to the ideality that is transmitted from the substance into the person's inside: the demon (*daïmonion*): *which is the substantial mode of substance that merges itself in the subject*. The demons give the destination

¹² Wittgenstein *PR*, 1975, 51.

¹³ Marx 1982, 820.

¹⁴ Marx 1982, 819, 820.

of the subject, *determined as an empirical individual, ... and in consequence determined by nature*. In this sense, like the earlier philosophers Socrates is a *substantial subject too, but in the mode of the subjectivity*, not like a divine figure or a seer but entirely as a *social character*.

Marx defended the recognition of the importance Epicurian, Stoic, and Skeptical philosophies had for the history of Ancient Greek philosophy in general. He emphasizes they should be seen, from one side, as its *heroic death*, and from another, as the philosophies immediately received by Romans as representative of the philosophical spirit, ideas and theories, of Greek tradition; and as such they played a part in the building of Western Christian Society. In this sense, it is remarkable that these philosophies of self-consciousness give fundament for today's theories of Psychology, particularly psychoanalytic discourse, and for ethical discourse.

Marx established the difference between Ancient and Modern philosophy.¹⁵ So, he argues that while the point of departure for the Ancient philosophers is *an act of nature*, to the Modern it is *an act of the spirit*. And, if the Greek broke nature *in order the spirit could recover its inner unity*; and the Roman *plunged his two-edged sword into nature's heart, and the people perished*; in its turn, Modern philosophy *breaks the verb sealing-wax*; it consummates the verb *in the sacred fire of the spirit*; and the modern philosopher is described by Marx *as a combatant of the spirit against the spirit, not like an isolated decayed apostate of the gravitation of nature*. To him, modern philosophy *acts universally and dissolves the forms that hinder the universal of rising up*.

4. Marx, Wittgenstein, and language

Marx fought against these combatants using critical analysis of language as his weapon, and the way he used this tool was fully exposed in *The German Ideology*, the book in which he offers many remarks on nature and functions of language, and describes a large collection of abused language examples connected to a series of tricks used for language bewitchment. From all this material I will bring here only a few words on his understanding of language.

¹⁵ Marx 1982, 814.

Consciousness and language are united in Marx, and human consciousness cannot be “pure”, he says, because from its origins the *spirit* is infected by matter, which presents itself in this case *under the form of rough air-waves, of sounds, briefly, the form of language*.¹⁶ For him, language is as old as consciousness; language is *real consciousness, practical*; and like consciousness it is present for both: to the other men and to myself, and, *in the same way as consciousness, language was born of a sole wish, from the need of exchanging with other men*. Language is a practical need and the immediate reality of thought; and being social by definition, language expresses the social reality of thinking.

Wittgenstein is close to this view when he claims that language has the function of depicting reality and is a system of representation but that language may serve different needs and that primarily it is a ‘system of communication’.¹⁷

Marx accepted Hegel’s postulated identities of human being and self-consciousness, and its translation into the identity between alienation of the human being and alienation of self-consciousness. But Marx gave to this identity a methodological materialist orientation defining Phenomenology as the science *that apprehends the manifestation of the real human being, of self-consciousness*.¹⁸

One of the most difficult tasks to philosophers, adverts Marx,¹⁹ *is to get down from the world of thinking to the real world*. So, in order to get the problem clear he explains: *Language is the immediate reality of thought*. But: *In the same way philosophers have set up thought as an independent subject, they were also obliged to set up language as an independent realm*. And so, he points out that in this independence philosophers could find *the secret of philosophical language where the words have as words a content of their own*. And finally, he indicates the direction for dissolving the problem of coming down from the world of thoughts into the real world, by changing this problem into another one: *how to find a way out of language in order to get down into life*.

¹⁶ Marx 1982, 1061.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein *BB*, 1965.

¹⁸ Marx 1968, 127.

¹⁹ Marx 1982, 1324.

And, as if we were listening to Wittgenstein, we find Marx advising philosophers that if they could *simply dissolve their language in the ordinary language*, they would recognize in themselves *the language of the real world* and they could also *understand that ideas and language do not constitute an independent universe*; that ideas and language, he emphasizes, *are nothing but real life expressions*.²⁰

Another question for Marx refers to the reason why an individual needs a fundament for constructing his philosophy.²¹ To him, the reason is because a fundament has the power of changing a subjective certainty into an objective truth. In the essay on the sage, he explains this fact when he analyses the process of the transformation of substance into ideality, from the appearance of the discoverers of the ideal forms of substance, particularly Anaxagoras' concept of *nous*. Let us follow Marx: *Wherever there is no natural certainty, the nous intervenes actively. It is the very non ens, the natural's not being, the ideality*. But the intervening *nous*, he continues, is the philosopher's *nous*, and due to this identity the action of ideality only manifest itself when philosophers are in lack of natural explanations; when they do not know anymore how to make objective their activity. So, *the subjective nous reveals itself* in its power as ideality of real certainty.

Throughout his life Wittgenstein (1984) reflected on questions concerning the problematic self or the deeply mysterious I. He attacked the idea of a substantive self;²² the idea of a Cartesian self; and also the perceiving subject of Gestalt psychology; briefly, he broke the sealing-wax of the modern conception of the subject, as indicated by Sluga,²³ the absurd idea *that a simple self could also be a representative self*. In this connection, he questioned objectivism. He fought against the objectivism and recognized we cannot think of ourselves and of others in fully objective terms.

²⁰ Marx 1982, 1324.

²¹ Marx 1982, 819.

²² Wittgenstein *TLP*, 5.631.

²³ Sluga 1996, 326.

5. The fallibility of our self-consciousness

The idea of a *sociological Wittgenstein* was defended by Bloor,²⁴ who considered that in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein dealt with the problem of specifying the relation between the individual and society. So, he argues that in writing this book Wittgenstein had two aims: first, the concern *to reinstate the neglected social and interactive dimensions of meaning*, which were passed over in his own earlier works, and, says Bloor, are still today neglected in many quarters; the second aim was to show that our self-consciousness is fallible, demonstrating it by means of a sort of language games materialist analysis.

According to Bloor,²⁵ the many examples of language games Wittgenstein constructed in the *Investigations* were intended to enrich the picture of language far beyond the narrow approach that focuses abstractly on the correlation of words and things he rejected; and, the whole variety of analogies he conveys: styles of painting, economic relations, the use of money, the institution of the gift, etc. were designed *to show how the connection between words and things is mediated by patterns of interaction*.

In this sense, Bloor suggests that Wittgenstein's discussion of the process of ostensive learning and the use of *paradigms* or models, and of the central role they play in the teaching of words (for example, the ascriptions of color and the concept of colors), demonstrates he was calling our attention to the relation between individual and society.²⁶ So, he argues, that ostensive learning *requires us to learn about objects and properties and about the people we have commerce with*, so that we must be receptive to information on these two channels simultaneously. And also that: *The information that is transmitted to us, by the use of such samples or paradigms, is social information, ostensive learning being by paradigms enculturation or socialization into the local practices of reference*.

Why did Wittgenstein not connect explicitly his insights on social dimensions of meaning to the data of political, legal, and economic history? Pitkin answered this question by saying Wittgenstein was not a political theoretician but a philosopher that presents us a clear vision of the current

²⁴ Bloor 1996, 363.

²⁵ Bloor 1996, 367.

²⁶ Bloor 1996, 369.

state of affairs.²⁷ She sees a kinship between Wittgenstein and Marx, which is based upon the fact that they both consider that as human beings we should to interpret and change the world.

Bloor gave a more interesting answer to this question by saying Wittgenstein did not care about this connection and even personally abstained from such pronouncements; because by avoiding these sorts of self-commentaries he was acting coherently with his antiscientific and anti-causal aims to philosophy.²⁸ To expect these pronouncements of him, adds Bloor, is to misunderstand Wittgenstein's work, and not knowing that philosophical problems for him are nothing other than *entanglements in the misleading forms of self-commentary that we are prone to give on our practices*. In this way, Bloor concludes that *the Investigations are a veritable monument to the fallibility of our self-awareness*.

To conclude, after reading the insightful sentences of Bloor's article, I can do nothing but see a continuation between Marx and Wittgenstein. Marx described the subjective form as being exactly the spiritual fundament of the philosophic systems incarnated in the philosophies of self-consciousness and tried to dismantle the ideology it generates through critical analysis of language.²⁹ Marx made explicit the aim of his ethics: the full development of human personality, having as condition for its accomplishment the premise that work should be considered as an end in itself; and, in consonance with this premise he defined the aim of his political intervention: to propose the abolition of alienated work in its modern form: the salary. However, because of these propositions and in spite of his materialism, Marx can be treated as a philosopher of self-consciousness.

And where Wittgenstein is concerned, Bloor rightly concludes that, by showing through his materialist language games analysis the fallibility of self-awareness, Wittgenstein provided us with the methodology for the deconstruction and the ending-up of the philosophies of self-consciousness (or metaphysics), not the end of philosophy as defended by many. Similarly, Marx was always accused of decreeing the end of philosophy, but, this accusation sounds false when we read in *Liberté de la presse et liberté*

²⁷ Pitkin 1992, 339-340.

²⁸ Bloor 1998, 377.

²⁹ Marx 1968, 65.

humaine his defense of philosophy and what he means by the expression philosophical activity: *the exercise of free reason*.

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