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The Swerve and Ancient Materialism

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Katerina Kolozova: So, Thomas, I just want to briefly explain. This is an unfinished chapter of a book we're working on with Paul Cockshott and Greg Michaelson, so I'm writing now on what they call continental philosophy in terms of creating a genealogy of materialism, of materialist thought. So, they're working on materialism, mathematics in computing. Paul is fixated on this idea that there is way too much idealism in mathematics, but we can identify certain materialist thinkers. So, I'm doing the same kind of archeological digging out of certain layers of thought that are usually conflated with different concepts, or taken as a unity of this conglomerate of concepts, as we receive it, and have the inertia of understanding them in modernity. I'm trying to unpack them in terms of antiquity in particular. So, not just the language, not just the philosophy of the era but also the era in the historical context itself. I'm kind of doing the philological/philosophical work there and mainly re-reading Marx through these lenses. The two of them are working on a mathematic and scientific explanation... So, whatever I discover in Parmenides or Epicurus for instance, they're looking for it in Boltzmann etc... so it's different. It is an interesting and different process from what I have experienced before. So, this chapter is unfinished, but you kind of have a grasp of what I'm trying to do there. I'm trying here not to repeat myself from the first two classes... not to keep making the same points, for example, the point I'm making here about dialectics is a point that I made in the first two classes I gave as a part of this course... but those points were made through a certain type of close reading of Marx ... Anyway... I presented an analysis of how Marx operates with the notion of dialectics, through a close reading of his different works, from different stages of his development...

So, observing the supposed epistemological break, I try to cover all of the stages in Marx's work and present my reading, according to which dialectics is something different to Marx than what it was to Hegel. I drew my arguments there, mainly from this early text called "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General," but I identify similar arguments, in favor of this reading, in *The German ideology*, in *Grundrisse*, even in *Capital*, and we went through all of those. So, what is the main argument we found, for example, in "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General," which is almost verbatim repeated in the *German ideology*, only in a more succinct form, that supports this thesis? It has to do with something that I called the Marxist critique of subjectivity-centered thinking. Subjectivity as the organizing principle of thought. He [Marx] attacked, he's precisely against, this concept itself, of subject and subjectivity, and his argument there is that subject or subjectivity or the idea or spirit— for an example, take the notion of spirit in Hegel. It's structurally, let me use that word, it is, not a reflection, a product of, or has the constitution of, human subjectivity. It mimes the constitution, the way human subjectivity or subject, and it was conceived, the notion was conceived by Marx back then or, as it was available at that time – the concept of this subject. I think that actually until then, no one used the terms "subject" to denominate the self, the human self, and so much more. No one used it as much as Marx, and it is for a good reason, because, by doing so, he could make this categorical distinction between human-self, supposed objective idealism etc., because the notion of the subject allows him a purely formal analysis of what is going on when Hegel speaks of the 'spirit' or when he proposes, puts forward, the thesis

of some sort of objective ideal. The existence of spirit "in itself" and "for itself." So, the notion of the subject, and as opposed to object, an objectivity, he operates with this contradiction and distinction all the time in this paper, which enables Marx to identify the fact, to recognize the fact that this spirit, this objective idea, this idea embodying of objective actualization of all existence, is nothing but structurally, or by its constitution and mode of operation, mimesis (I'm using this word, he doesn't operate with 'mimesis') of the human subject – human subjectivity. That is why he insists on this in this paper (I'm calling this a paper, it's just one of manuscripts in 1844), and the same argument reappears later on. Some of those arguments are cited in the paper I sent you. The two quotes from *Grundrisse*, I think, support this understanding. Now it will become clear why...by its constitution it could be nothing but human subjectivity. That is why, according to Marx, this spirit, this ideal, this objective ideal embodying everything, reality itself and the meaning of reality and being a sublimation of both existences and essences, [Marx would put it in his dissertation], is nothing but a philosophical projection of anthropocentrism (he doesn't use this word, but I'm using it). It is a projection of human subjectivity elevated to the level of being objective reality itself. This analysis is present in the paper I am citing. I have in mind mainly this "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General," and that is why, he says at one point that (this is a paraphrase) Hegel postulates that there is, primarily, the universal egoist— humanity as the universal egoist or the idea of the human subject as the universal egoist. That is there in that paper but it reappears elsewhere, and that is why, in different words, Marx is a thinker who attacks an-

thropocentrism, even when he advocates most strongly in favor of radical humanism. He is still not anthropocentric, thanks to these reasons. On top of everything, I will arrive to the point of objectivity or third party's perspective, that will kind of shed light as to the quotes that I was mentioning on *Grundrisse* in the paper I sent you for this class. It all makes sense and somehow, they are connected, part and parcel of the same argument I am making here.

So, in this early paper "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General," in *Grundrisse*, in *The German ideology*, and in the part where he is criticizing the false materialism of Feuerbach he's advocating for a position of thought that is that of the third party's perspective. We necessarily mime, we cannot but mime the other, the outsideness as a form of cognition. Thus, we form subjectivity and a projection of objectivity – as the indispensable real abstraction. We cannot but mime that stance of the third party's perspective, looking at ourselves as objects, objects among objects. That is how we can be radical humanists instead of radical anthropocentrists. Objects among objects in a certain flat ideology that also sees other objects of discussion and we have this, let's say, legionary alienation available through language (this is my argument) that always already renders the human subject and object to itself. I think that this possibility is implicitly present in Marx's text. This type of analysis is implicitly present, ... indeed, every possibility of such analysis is present in his text. Even without it, we can still arrive to the conclusion about objectivity conceived in the way just presented, and I think it is more than evident that he, and he's explicit in raising the problem, or the epistemological problem, of the centrality of subjectivity,

in all 'hitherto existing philosophy,' as he would say, that has its apex in Hegel. That is what I kept explaining in the first two sessions, so this elaboration as to why this is not anthropocentric thinking, as to why we have to move away from subjectivity, individuality etc. centered-thinking and still be capable of being radical humanists, forging strong links from social solidarity. Seeing ourselves as part of the social relations that Marx talks about is a certain possibility. Therefore, this type of dialectics is what is at the center of Marx's episteme and this radical difference from Hegel in terms of epistemology, in terms of what I've tentatively called a metaphysical choice— even though Marx is not a metaphysician he makes a metaphysical choice. In favor of matter, in favor of idea, in favor of objectivity, in favor of subjectivity-centered thinking etc.

So, this choice that Marx makes and this distancing from Hegel, let's say, at the core, at the heart (he kind of puts a knife in) of Hegel's key argument of phenomenology and the concept and the centrality of the concept's dialectics there, makes Marx so much different and already leads us to a different understanding of the notion of dialectics. Whenever Marx uses thesis, antithesis, synthesis and this type of terminology, his understanding of movement and change, that is described perhaps by Thomas and his kinetic materialism, which is something quite different from dialectical materialism, but, there is a use of dialectics there and I would say that this use of dialectics is mainly methodological. Marx speaks about dialectics in the original Greek sense of the word, I would say... as a method... and when he mentions Hegel once (that is in *The German ideology*, I think) as the great master of the

method of dialectics. He uses the word method, and then, when he attacks the young Hegelians for improperly using the method, the attack is on the method, or what Aristotle would say – the correct way of thinking. So, this chapter tries to... demonstrate that this has been the position of Marx all along since his dissertation. Even in the dissertation itself, he uses the term “dialectics” in the Greek sense of the word, mainly. Even though there is an influence of Hegel there, they are, let’s say, shades of ontologization... Little spontaneous moves of ontologization of what is supposed to be a method, which is dialectics. But, essentially it remains even there a method. Even though, in the German text, we can see that he uses, several times, the words *aufheben*, *aufhebung*, etc. Even though in Hegel *aufheben* and *aufhebung* is not necessarily dialectics, the way we understand them through Dialectic. It’s more like contradiction leading to sublation, leading to a certain type of sublimation. It’s just a tentative use of a word, the last one. So, even in Hegel, *aufheben* is not exactly that, but let’s say that it’s still a phenomenology. The method has been projected outwards onto the outside of reality and it constitutes a universe, just like the subjectivity in Hegel’s thinking according to Marx. So, it’s the same move and the same problem. And it would be the same problem for Marx, because as I argued here and in the previous classes, he mainly operates with the notion in the original Greek sense of the word and mainly as a method. Still, there is influence from Hegel on young Marx and we can see that there’s something which resembles ontologization of the argument, but he still manages to remain essentially materialist and not to ontologize entirely, or not at all. His method remains a method. Why? Because the

concept of atom, for example, is basically meaningless. It doesn’t have a reality unless materialized through properties, as he puts it. So, this predication of properties, of how things are as qualities, let’s say, in Aristotelian terms, as to how they act toward a certain *tò ón* or *tò tí*... Aristotle uses this expression, which means ‘to a certain something,’ the predicates and qualities are always, and even the modes-time and space. That’s what makes Aristotle so much different from all his predecessors and Marx rightly argues that Aristotle was an enormous influence on Epicurus. So, in this argument, in this certain reading of dialectics of the atom, that Marx recognizes in Epicurus’s concept of the atom and his version of atomism, fleshed out in ‘De Rerum Natura’ by Lucretius Carus. So, this understanding and interpretation of the atom, even though sounding a little bit as a certain ontology of dialectics or dialectical ontology, let’s put it that way, because he is talking about the tension between the concept of the atom and the real properties, and I just explained how I think that these real properties are understood. And I believe that they are understood in a way close to the way that I have just explained about Aristotle’s understanding of the relation between the properties or qualities or modes in relation to a *Ousia* or even a sort of *tò ón* or *tò tí*, I think that the uses are very similar and it also remains a fact that Marx never uses so it resembles this move ontologization of dialectics that we find in Hegel, as I said, and I admit that, but it’s not quite so. Especially because Marx is cautious there, and never says, the concept is in this tension with the properties and this tension is then resolved... he says Epicurus postulates this and that, in such a way. There is this, Kantian, let’s say, distinction as to dialectics on this side and Epicurus

does this, but by doing so, by doing this, he correctly explains the atom. And also I began with that, so let's finish with that, let's never forget that the concept of the atom wouldn't be there without the materialization of the concept. Hence this dialectics here, the use of dialectics, does resemble an ontology, I admit. And this dialectics enables the concept to be there, but still, this is a radical and materialist stance because the concept wouldn't be there without properties, without materialization, without the contradiction and the dialectics that this contradiction constitutes. So, that's not the ideal, let's put it that way, or the concept, Marx uses the word concept, wouldn't be there without the materialization and this contradiction, or, let's say, tension or dialectics between that concept or ideal or notion and the material reality of properties. So, I'll finish by reading a quote I have in mind, it is a footnote in the paper I sent you... so this is what I have been analyzing in the past several minutes and this is a quote from the dissertation and I believe this kind of shows that, indeed, Marx never abandoned his initial positions, elaborated or made clear, or let's say, originally postulated but thoughtfully developed, that we find in his dissertation—he has been pursuing the same goals since his dissertation. So to quote, he says,

through the “qualities” [this materialization of properties that's meant by qualities in the Aristotelian sense] the atom acquires an existence, which contradicts its concept. It is assumed as an externalized being different from its essence. It is this contradiction, which mainly interests Epicurus, has, as soon as he posits a property that draws the consequences of the material nature of the atom,

he [Epicurus] counter-poses at the same time the determinations, which again destroy this property in its own sphere and validate instead the concept of the atom. He, therefore, determines all properties in such a way that they contradict themselves. Democritus, on the other hand, nowhere considers the properties in relation to the atom itself nor does he objectify the contradiction between concept and existence [meaning of properties or qualities], which is inherent in them.¹

I am finishing here, there is one short quote, again from the dissertation which dovetails to the quote I just read. It is the following:

The contradiction between existence and essence, between matter and form, which is inherent in the concept of the atom, emerges in the individual atom itself, once it is endowed with qualities. Through the quality, the atom is alienated from its concept but at the same time is perfected in its construction. It is from repulsion and the ensuing conglomerations of the qualified atoms, [endowed with qualities], that the world of appearance [phenomenology], now emerges.²

So, I chose these two quotes as something that I think kind of displace the influence of Hegel in early Marx in the dissertation but also shows Marx's early departure from the

¹ Karl Marx, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Marx-Engels Collected Works Volume 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), s.p., retrieved from the Karl Marx Internet Archive, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>, accessed on 27 November 2021

² Karl Marx, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, s.p., retrieved from the Karl Marx Internet Archive, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>, accessed on 3 October 2022.

general idea of Hegel, especially when it comes to dialectics.

Thomas Nail: Thank you Katerina, that was wonderful. I have questions and thoughts, thanks for reading those last two quotes too, because those two are so important and the dissertation itself is very dense and those quotes are so illuminating. I wanted to read those in my next lectures but I'm glad you read them. I'm going to talk a little about Lucretius and Democritus. I also agree with everything that Katerina is saying. It is very important and some of the quotes I said before about objects align really closely to what she was saying, because they're taken from the same section in Marx's critique of Hegel about subjectivity and objectivity. It is super important, especially about Marxists. A lot of Marxists are anthropocentric. They don't see that this is a problem at all, philosophically. Maybe because they didn't read the dissertation, maybe they didn't read closely the critique of Hegel, but I agree with what Katerina said. It seems to me that Marx was not anthropocentric. He had a place for humans as part of the natural world, as part of the social world. They are metabolic processes like everything else. They are not the basis of everything. Reality is not a projection of their mind. Anyway, so what I want to say in the argument here is to sort of give you some evidence for Marx's reading...in the dissertation. I told you before that he cites Lucretius in the dissertation even as much as Epicurus. It is important to remember one quote from that dissertation, where he says Lucretius was "the only one in general of all the ancients who has understood Epicurean physics," (MECW 1: 48).

That is very revealing that he thought that Lucretius understood more than everybody else, or that he was the

only one who actually understood him. That is a way of saying and suggesting that Marx was very much reading Lucretius. I told you that he had two notebooks, of his five or six notebooks, that are just about close readings of Lucretius and translations of his texts. He is reading Lucretius very carefully and he is drawing conclusions, in some ways out of Lucretius's reading and Lucretius's texts about Epicurus, and Marx is partly doing his own thing. Some of the things that Katerina was saying about Epicurus, you really have to read between the lines when you read Epicurus on that stuff. No Epicurean would walk away with what Marx did. It is not obvious, and Epicureans typically don't read Marx, but if they did, they would say "NO." There is no evidence for Marx's dialectical reading. Marx used a lot of other evidence, but he's coming from his own perspective, his own motivations, and like Katerina said, those motivations are his own critique of Hegel and the critique of religion and he is doing this through Epicurus. He is citing and engaging with Lucretius. This is to say, if you track them down, at least half of Marx's citations, and engagement in that dissertation, are from Lucretius, even though Lucretius is not in the title of the dissertation.

What Marx was getting out of Epicurus is much closer to what Lucretius was doing than what people typically think that Epicurus was doing. And even what people typically think Lucretius was doing because they read Lucretius as just having copied the master – Epicurus– so that their reading on Lucretius and Epicurus is totally identical. I have spent the last decade writing 3 volumes of close readings of Lucretius to show the following. I want to give you some key things to investigate further and to think about when

people say that Lucretius was just like their version of Epicurus.

The first idea is so important to Marx's dissertation. It's what makes his dialectical method really, truly different from Hegel's, it is the *swerve*. Hegel does not like the swerve. And sometimes when people interpret the swerve, they think about the swerve as just being random. It is really important that I just have to emphasize that the swerve is not just random. Contemporary thinkers like Alain Badiou and Louis Althusser say the swerve is random. These are people reading Marx's dissertation, but coming away with something completely different that I think is not supported in the text. One extreme version is Quentin Meillassoux, one of Alain Badiou's students, who talks about hyper-chaos. And, for Badiou, it is very important that the event is just completely aleatory. It has no precursors. Badiou claims to have the most materialist philosophy of anybody since Lucretius. And it's funny because Badiou has no materialist philosophy at all, in my opinion. He very much wants to, but his materialism is extremely formalist, mathematical and ideal, but he wants it to be very material, and he wants to be in line with Lucretius, but the big disjunct there for Badiou is that the event has no precursors. It is completely random. It emerges like it can emerge anywhere out of anything, and for Lucretius the swerve is very much relational.

Marx gets that right. Marx sees that the dialectic, because relational, is something that responds to something... there's a back and forth, there's a transformation. It is not just that anything can happen. For Boltzmann just anything can happen out of nowhere. That's not what Lucre-

tius is saying. He explicitly gives examples such as "roses bloom...in a spring, grapes ripe in the fall." Things are relational and things transform and evolve. There is not some kind of radical event, the way that Badiou poses it. I want you to remember, moving forward, if you ever hear somebody talking about the swerve, that the swerve is not random, and what makes it materialist is that it is relational, and what makes it dialectical for Marx are the relations, not that it is just randomly swerving.

It is not that nature is randomly doing something. It is relational, and it is partly the relationality of matter itself—the repulsion and the interaction and so on—that make it iterative and give us patterns of seasons and cycles and natural reality and metabolic patterns. This is stuff that Badiou doesn't care about, but I think that it is really at the core of Lucretius and in Marx's dissertation.

We don't have any text where we find Epicurus talking about the swerve. All of the places where you think that he would say it, if it was so important to him, he doesn't. There were three letters that he wrote to Herodotus that were meant to teach students about what Epicurean atomism is, the word "Παρέγκλισις," or swerve does not appear. He writes a complete philosophical system and there's no swerve. We have no text where Epicurus talks about "Παρέγκλισις" or describes anything like a swerve. There are reasons why people think that there was a swerve in Epicurus and I think that he probably said something, at some point, about it, and I think it was probably later on in Epicurus's work. We have fragments of his collected work—thirty something volumes called "On Nature." My guess is that in the next decade we will get some other fragments,

but right now it is in none of those fragments. We have the titles of the chapters of his book on nature, Epicurus's lost book on nature. But the book itself is lost. The fragments themselves mention nothing that suggests something like the "Παρέγκλισις."

However, Philodemus was a contemporary of Lucretius, but Philodemus was a true Epicurean. He studied in Athens and wrote everything in Greek. Lucretius was not an Epicurean scholar. He was not part of the indoctrinated orthodoxy of Epicureanism. He read it, but he took it as an inspiration for something else, and he's definitely modifying it. Anyway, my point here is that Philodemus does say, in only one place, that "Epicurus mentions "Παρέγκλισις." Probably it was a response to Aristotle's criticism of Democritus that there was no freedom in his philosophy. And Epicurus' response may have been something about the swerve. Does all matter swerve for Epicurus? Who knows! Is it just the human soul that swerves? Who knows! It's not clear. We just don't have the text.

So, if anyone starts talking to you about Epicurus's theory of the swerve, you should raise an eyebrow and say – where are you getting that? Because we have almost nothing about it. Nothing from primary sources. People writing after Lucretius might be making inferences about Epicurus. Meaning that they might have what Lucretius said and he said 'I'm sure Epicurus said something like that' because surely Lucretius was a good Epicurean. Was he? We don't know. I'm flagging this for you because the swerve is super important. Marx is pulling a lot on the swerve in his theory of dialectics. Where is he getting it? Lucretius! Not Epicurus! Marx has never read a single word about Epicurus'

swerve because it's not there! If it's out there, we don't have a record about it. Whatever Epicurus did, Lucretius takes the swerve and he makes it really important. He puts it all over the place. Turbulence and swerving and contingency and all these things end up in Lucretius and that is a key source for Marx.

The second thesis is about the atom. This is another interesting moment that is very consistent with Marx's reading. You know, Marx is not an atomist, just like Katerina said, the atom is just a concept. Nature is a process, but humans look at it and think "atom." But that is just one dialectical aspect of what is going on. And you know, Marx's answer is absolute immanent motion. Transformation, change, material processes...that process itself is what's going on. And then as the process emerges and produces humans, they look at the process and say 'oh it's like atoms, bouncing around, emerging and converging,' but that's not what is happening.

That was an idea that we had about the process, which is inadequate to the material process itself. Now, Lucretius knew that. This is consistent with Lucretius's position, and Lucretius never says the word "atom." There is not a Latinization of the Greek word in *De Rerum Natura*. He never uses the word "particle" to describe matter. Lucretius did not say anything about billiard balls bouncing around against one another. He uses many different words to talk about "matter." Also, there's never matter in the singular. He always uses "matter" in the plural. This is only obvious, when you start digging into the Latin. If you look at the English translation, they put the word "atom" in there. But it was never there! They've singularized matter, and this is a bias of English translators, who are influenced by the

history of modern reception, thinking of Bacon, Newton and so on...

These were scientists who were thinking about mechanistic causality and wanting a world that is definable by natural laws. So, they kind of had a bias when reading Epicurus and Lucretius. If you go back to the Latin text, without that modern bias, and just bracket it for a moment, that Lucretius was some kind of Epicurean fundamentalist, things look different. I give you the following 3 words, which have nothing to do with the particles, billiard balls, etc., of the modern scientific revolution in Europe... Instead of saying "atom," Lucretius says "semina."

"Semina" is a Latin word that can mean sprout, branch, graft – like when you graft a tree branch into the tree and it starts to grow. It is a kind of outgrowth. It can also mean seed... seeds are not billiard balls. If you know anything about biology, you know that seeds are not billiard balls. Seeds are insanely dynamic processes that fold out of themselves. I mean, Marx loved seeds. It is totally dialectic; you know he has these images in *Capital*, especially in Chapter 1, where he is very poetic. He gives these images of kinds of plant growth, and eggs, like he's talking about eggs, you know, they're dynamic. They are not just billiard balls that are causal and self-identical. The idea of the atom, the way that most people think about it – 'oh, it's this perfectly harmonizing thing.' You know, that's not possible in physics, it is also not true for Lucretius either.

The second term is "corpora." So, again, these all are used in the plural and they are singularized afterward in the English translation. So, "corpora" in Latin can mean body

(which means bodies or bodyness)... like corporeal in English. We have this word "corporeal," which just means bodily. This may be the best way to think about matter instead of a single homogeneous body. It can also mean tree trunk or ... under the bark of the tree.

The other word is "materies." This is the closest word to the English "matter." I have a lot to say about this particular word. The Latin word "mater" is related to our English word "matter" but also to the word "mother." So, matter means mother; this word is also matrix, which is tree. So, this connection between tree, mother and matter, you might think-what the heck, tree is associated with matter...and the Latin answer it comes from the Greek usage which was Aristotle's. Prior to Aristotle, there was not a Greek word for "matter" in general. Aristotle was the first person who tried to do that with the Greek word "hyle"; and "hyle" just meant tree or forest or woods. This has to do with the archaic Greek tradition and even pre-Greek tradition of tree worship. To sum up, about the atom, there is no atom for Lucretius. There are trees and sprouts and branches and growth. That's the image of matter for Lucretius. Not billiard balls knocking around. Trees, branches and growth, those are the words that he uses, and that is what they mean.

Ok, next concept- stasis. This is a bit different. So, in Epicurus, there's a lot of usage of the word "atom" and that's a whole separate thing. What did he exactly mean by that? You could take that to mean continuous and indivisible, or you can think about an atom as particles, bouncing around. Lucretius has a very different idea, which is much more consistent with what Marx was saying. The next idea,

which is much different between Epicurus and Lucretius, is stasis. So, for Epicurus, there are two different types of pleasure. There are static pleasures and kinetic pleasures. Epicurus is against the kinetic pleasures. He wants static pleasures, which for Epicurus is the ethical ideal of contemplation. The highest kind of pleasure that you can have is just the elimination of pain.

For anything beyond that you're risking engaging in something that is going to cause you pain. You are desiring something that you might not or can't have; something that can result in pain, and the best thing is to eat bread and drink water, and hang out in the garden and contemplate the gods. That is very important, it is a kind of immobile pleasure that happens through the mind. Epicurus was a rationalist. That is part of the ethics, part of the structure of contemplation.

For Lucretius, this is very obviously not what is going on. In fact, there is a handful of wonderful passages that I would love to go through, if I had the time to show you, but I'm going to highlight just one, which is the beginning of book 3 "De Rerum Natura" in lines 32 or 36, where Lucretius is saying, ... I am like a bee that buzzes around in the field of flowers when I read Epicurus' books on nature. Lucretius says that he is like a bee, drinking from the flowers, and he is spilling it...he is kind of getting intoxicated off of the pollen from the flowers and he's getting intoxicated from Epicurus' writing.

There is a great footnote in the Harvard Loeb edition of De Rerum Natura that says "Lucretius could not possibly mean he is spilling the nectar," because this would imply

that he wasn't taking Epicurus' pages seriously. It seems weird because Lucretius is doing something Epicurean, like yeah, that should be a red flag for you that more is going on than just him as a receiver of Epicurus. Anyway, so he reads all of these pages and then he goes into this absolutely ecstatic rapture, and the entire universe unfolds before Lucretius's eyes, and he starts to shake in all of the universe. And like, NO. If Epicurus knew that Lucretius wrote that, he would have said-that's not what I've intended, that's not the purpose. When you read my text, you should be a good rationalist, contemplate the unchanging peaceful gods outside of the universe and just chill out! Anyway, there's a million things we could say, but that is my favorite and most traumatic, that no Epicurean would ever say, no Epicurean could ethically support that.

So, this is my last point about the gods. Epicurus believed in gods. You know, people think that Epicurus is a radical materialist, and for Lucretius too, but they often say things like- Epicurus believed in the gods and also Lucretius believed in the gods. So, Epicurus definitely believed in the gods. There's a special word, it means between the worlds. So there are many worlds and gods live between the worlds. It's really funny and it's actually kind of crazy that people still use this word *intermundia*. Marx actually does it in *Capital*. There's a footnote about Epicurus and *intermundia*. But the thing is that *intermundia* is a Latin word. Not a Greek word. The idea is that Lucretius also believed in the gods living between the worlds. Just like people talking about the Clinamen in Epicurus. No, there is no Clinamen in Epicurus. That's a Latin word which is never used by Epicurus. Παρέγκλισις would have been the Greek

word. But again, no evidence of usage in Epicurus, either. It is really a kind of crazy oversight, in my opinion, in the scholarship that it could be so distorted. In any case, the word *intermundia* does not appear in “De Rerum Natura.” Lucretius never says that gods exist or that they exist outside of the world. Here’s what he actually says, he’s giving a kind of history, where humans came up with this idea, and he says that it was in dreams. Humans had dreams about gods, and they imagined that they were gods. They are just images that are in our heads. The gods are not outside of the world. They are our ideas that we’ve come up with, and they are very naturalistic... There is more to say about the mythology that Lucretius evokes, but Lucretius is very explicit in Book V that the gods do not exist, and that we came up with them in our dreams. The other thing to say about the gods is...but it also changes the ethical possibilities for Lucretius – if there are no gods outside the world, then there is nothing static to contemplate. Again, for Lucretius everything is moving, everything is swerving. If that is true, you cannot have Epicurean ethics, because Epicurean ethics is a rationalism about stasis and peace. Gods are peaceful, they have everything they want. They don’t care about anything, and that’s why when you contemplate them, you don’t care about anything either and just feel good. You feel ‘not bad’ and that is the highest pleasure for Epicurus. But if you don’t have static gods, and you don’t have static bodies, and you don’t have a static rational soul to contemplate those gods outside of the world, you do not have Epicurean ethics. So, Lucretius cannot have Epicurean ethics, because there are no gods, there are no stases, there’s only swerving. We can have moments of ecstasy, there are a lot of things that

are going on, but I can’t get into them at this moment, but one last thing and I will stop, which is about Epicurus. One of the consequences of Epicurus’s belief in the gods is that Epicurus himself, and he instructed his followers, is to participate in religious rituals of sacrifice and honoring the gods and Epicurus said that this is an important thing that we should do, even though the gods will never reward or punish us, because they are outside the world and they don’t care about us and they are just fine on their own. *Ataraxia* is this peaceful idea, the unpainful world of the gods. Epicurus says even though the gods don’t care about us and they cannot affect us, we should still participate in religious rituals and sacrifices and so on, just to keep up the social fabric of society. Now, Lucretius is extremely against it, this is what happens in Book I with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia when Agamemnon has to go out on a big storm with his troops to go in this Trojan war, but the storm is keeping them from leaving. He says, you know, actually a seer says, this is Artemis and she is upset and you need to appease her by sacrificing your daughter. Agamemnon goes to sacrifice his daughter on the altar actually he says she is going to marry a guy, she was very excited and she shows up and he is like – sorry we are going to kill you instead, and you are not getting married. So, that was a dark moment for her, but the good news is that at the very last moment, Artemis swings down, saves Iphigeneia and gives her quasi-immortality. One story is that she is quasi-immortal, and the other is that she became the lover and companion of Artemis. But anyway, she is rescued from her horrible father and sort of given a place. I mean, it’s weird that she is awarded in that way. Anyway, it’s complicated, you have to read the passages

by yourself. The point is, Lucretius's whole story is – look what believing in gods does to you, you start sacrificing to them. When you think that gods will reward or punish you, you start doing crazy stuff like sacrificing your daughter. Religious worship, in terms of the idea that the gods will reward or punish you, if you keep doing that, it is going to lead you to terrible consequences. And this is very weird, Lucretius is very against it, Epicurus is very much for it, in his life.

Now I am going to stop...

Katerina Kolozova: Are you sure, don't you have closing sentences?

Thomas Nail: No, these were the closing fragments. The whole point is that the things I've just said – no gods, no stasis, no atoms and the swerve is very important. These are all features of Lucretius's work that very few people have seen, and Marx was one of the people who saw them. And this is just my hypothesis about it, is that Marx read Lucretius like crazy, and when he says Lucretius is the only one who understand Epicurus, it is kind of like, he's saying – I'm really reading Lucretius here, I'm reading Epicurus through Lucretius, but I'm reading Lucretius in a very different way. That's why I think Marx has a wonderful contribution and inspires his version of materialism. It comes out of a very unique, and I think thorough, reading of Lucretius.

Katerina Kolozova: So, we are moving through this part of the discussion, but before that I would like to ask you something. I don't know if you've studied this closely, we

have examined the dates, the fact whether Lucretius appears in "The Nature of Gods" by Cicero, where he accuses Epicurus of inventing the swerve, and therefore distorting Democritus, and through science, or what is good in atomism? Do you believe that's perhaps Lucretius's influence, or the influence of the Epicureans in Rome? That he does not get it directly from Epicurus or earlier fragments in Greek?

Thomas Nail: It is a good question. I think, ultimately, we don't know, we don't have enough textual evidence but here's what I would say, just based on what we do have is that Philodemus was a serious Epicurus scholar. If he said it, it's probably true. It would be pretty unlikely, again, we cannot say for sure, that Philodemus would have invented Παρέγκλισις and then contributed it to Epicurus. That would be very uncharacteristic of Philodemus. So, the fact that Philodemus says that Epicurus had this idea, it is the closest that we are going to get to believing it. In my opinion, Philodemus as a B source, that is the most reputable, that is the closest that we're going to get to saying Epicurus actually had this idea about the swerve. Then, after Philodemus and after Lucretius, you get Simplikias, Cicero, Plutarch... all of them are going to be both aware of Philodemus and of Lucretius, and that's when I think it becomes much messier, because they are writing after Lucretius and they might have assumed that Lucretius was just echoing Epicurus, when that's not obvious. We don't have evidence to suggest that that's what is going on because we don't have any direct evidence of Epicurus talking about the swerve, so we can't say 'here is Epicurus's idea of the swerve' and 'here is Lucretius's.' We just don't know. All we have is Lucretius's idea of the swerve.

Katerina Kolozova: But Cicero is older than Lucretius, right?

Thomas Nail: Yes, and that's why I'm saying it. Once Cicero is writing about the "swerve," even though he's saying 'Epicurus's swerve,' it's not obvious to me that he is not necessarily not just reading Lucretius and assuming this. All of the sources after Lucretius are to me slightly more problematic, because we don't know how much they are just attributing to Epicurus, based on Lucretius. That is why Philodemus to me is the real source...

Katerina Kolozova: Philodemus is which century?

Thomas Nail: He is first century BC. He is a bit older than Lucretius but they are contemporaries. They are living at the same time. So, Philodemus was living in Rome but he was a Greek scholar of Epicurus. The truth is nobody is actually sure how accurate that is. It is a good point that you bring up that nobody likes the swerve. And in his dissertation Marx is like, looking at these people, who totally didn't understand the swerve. He hated it... and these are people from ancient times, writing after Lucretius like, this is the worst idea in the history of philosophy. It makes no sense, there's no way that matter can just swerve on its own, how dare you undermine science, knowledge? The project of totality is impossible now, because of the swerve, and it doesn't have any sense to them. I think that this is one of the things that attracts Marx to the swerve, and that for him what makes it a truly materialist idea is that it is not about mechanism, cause, causality, billiard balls etc., and, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx has a very large section about the history of materialism. If you want to see what

Marx thinks about the history of materialism, that is a very good section to read, because he just goes through the history of materialism, and he is like, 'here's why all the other materialists are wrong,' and he is not saying that Lucretius was right but it is in the dissertation. If you read the dissertation, you are like –oh, because Marx doesn't spell it out in *The Holy Family* – here is my theory of materialism. He mainly just criticizes everybody else and then you have to know that he wrote the dissertation, which was his theory about what matter was, based on Lucretius, but he does say things like, these other readers totally misunderstand Epicurus and Lucretius, but he doesn't say – I wrote a whole dissertation about it, or anything... you just have to know that he did. But I think that it is crucial that very few materialists have ever been able to seriously affirm the swerve, and I think that people that got the closest, I mentioned it before: Deleuze, Badiou, Althusser. They took it seriously. They read it, they saw that it is important, they see it as a part of the materialist tradition, as a part of Marxist tradition, which is great. They are in the minority of people who think that the dissertation and the swerve is really important to Marxism, but their interpretation is that they are just willing to affirm the thing that Cicero thought was bonkers, which is that matter just swerves randomly, out of nowhere... and this is what it is for Badiou. And I don't think like that. Read Marx's dissertation. He doesn't think that it is random. He says that it is about the swerve and the repulsion. It's matter moving within itself; against itself; transforming itself. It's a constant imminent dialectic. Importantly, an imminent dialectic. Which is not at all what Badiou says, Badiou does not have an imminent dialectic. It's something completely fragmented, for-

malist, mathematical, that he calls dialectic, for reasons I can't possibly imagine. His explanation is very unsatisfying. Anyway, Katerina, maybe you have some questions or points about Badiou or Althusser. I would like to hear them.

Katerina Kolozova: Well I don't know enough about Badiou and his stance on the swerve. Actually, I don't know. I have never encountered it but never really noticed, but it is interesting. I learned a lot. I'll probably read what he has to say about the matter.