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Chance and Deliberate Restraint within Epicurean Science

Abstract

This paper re-examines the scholarly debate on the nature of chance-events within the Epicurean cosmos, through a historiographical critique of key scholars: Jean-Marie Guyau (1878/2022), Philip DeLacy (1969) and A.A Long (1977/2006). While these scholars dispute whether chance-events in the cosmos oppose determinism, their reliance on extratextual speculation renders their disagreement fundamentally methodological rather than exegetical in nature. This observation, as argued by this paper, provides sufficient ground for a new exegetical interpretation. Central to this interpretation is the claim that Epicureans deliberately restraint themselves from a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events, since it is superfluous to the pursuit of 'mental tranquility' (ἀταραξία). In conclusion, this paper maintains that the absence of textual support for the scholarly positions should not be considered as a lacuna requiring to be filled, but should rather be seen as deliberate and consistent with the overall aim of Epicurean science.

Keywords

Chance – necessity – Epicureanism – science – ἀταραξία

The closing passage of Epicurus's *Letter to Menoecus* (*Ep.* 133) has long been debated, with many scholars traditionally interpreting it as containing a formulation of three causes: (1) necessity (ἀνάγκη), (2) chance (τύχη), and (3) volition (παρ' ἡμᾶς).¹ Philip Mitsis's (2024) recent reconstruction of this notoriously lacunose passage challenges this traditional view, in particular the classification of 'necessity' (ἀνάγκη) as a cause. Building on Mitsis, this paper will critically examine another aspect of this passage – the extent of 'chance' (τύχη) as a cause in the cosmos.

Since A.A. Long's influential 1977 paper "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism", the scholarly view that chance-events in the cosmos oppose causal determinism has waned in popularity. Nonetheless, this paper revisits the scholarly debate, tracing its origins to Jean-Marie Guyau (1878/2022) who, in 1878, spearheaded

¹ Epicur. *Ep.* 133.

the issue on how chance-events in the cosmos should be understood within Epicurean thought. Later scholars, like Philip DeLacy (1969) and Long (1977/2006) will also be addressed: Guyau and DeLacy essentially upheld that the Epicureans conceived of chance as an active cause opposing determinism in the cosmos while Long, invoking the *foedera naturae* (covenants/laws of nature), denied chance any causal efficacy of this sort.

This paper undertakes a critical reassessment of the scholarly debate. Through a close examination of the primary texts and a historiographical critique of these three key scholars, two central claims will be advanced:

- 1. The scholarly debate is methodological rather than exegetical:** It will be argued that all three scholars engage in extratextual speculation, detaching the scholarly debate from the extant Epicurean texts, ultimately rendering it a purely methodological dispute. This observation, as will be argued, provides sufficient ground for a new interpretation.
- 2. The Epicureans deliberately restrained from a deep inquiry into chance-events in the cosmos:** The new perspective that will be proposed, is based on the assumption that it is essential to first consider why Epicurus himself might have been interested to pursue a detailed understanding of the subject. From this assumption it will be inferred that Epicureans deliberately restrained from a deep inquiry, instead of having ascribed to one of the theories advanced by Guyau, DeLacy, or A.A. Long.

By foregrounding the pragmatic side of Epicureanism, this paper aims to buttress the claim of the latter point. An argument will be made that a detailed understanding of chance-events in the cosmos is superfluous to the ultimate goal of Epicurean ethics: mental tranquility (*ἀταραξία*). All the knowledge on chance required to warrant *ἀταραξία* is present in the extant texts. Contrary to the mentioned scholars who seek to substantiate or make plausible ideas that are absent in the text, this paper posits that this absence is deliberate and requires no further inference.

Chance as Discussed Within the Extant Epicurean Texts

Before analyzing the concept of chance in extant Epicurean texts, this paper will first establish a framework for its approach. Following historians of philosophy Christoph Lüthy and Carla-Rita Palmerino (2016), this paper concurs that 'chance' is best understood *ex negativo*. They conclude that:

One thing is certain. Time and again, throughout our pages, it has become evident that any of the words [different articulations of ‘chance’] with which we have been engaged could only be understood if we also understood the type of explanation that it attempted to exclude.²

So ‘chance’ can only be understood against the background of what it excludes — whether determinism, teleology, or both. Accordingly, when speaking of chance in the extant Epicurean texts or subsequent scholarship, the excluded element will be made explicit.

As touched upon in the introduction, Epicurus has traditionally been interpreted as formulating three causes that can bring about an event. An event occurs either due to necessity, due to chance, or due to our ‘own volition’. Although extensive research exists on chance in the extant Epicurean texts, this chapter will, for the sake of the overall argument, briefly address the writings and the subsequent ambiguity that emerged within scholarship. Hence, next to being mentioned as a cause, what else does Epicurus say of chance?

At the end of his *Letter to Menocceus*, Epicurus, provides us with some provisional definitions. Firstly, chance should not be regarded as a god, which means that chance should not be viewed as a miracle, an external force which breaches the causal chain of natural events — an idea often invoked by the Greek tragedians.³ Secondly, Epicurus states that chance should not be thought of as an uncertain cause, which suggests that chance does not ‘cause’, but rather provides opportunities upon which one can act rightly or wrongly.⁴

These definitions, however, do not articulate the precise nature of chance-events in the cosmos. It remains that, within the extant Epicurean texts chance is invoked at multiple occasions pertaining to physics. The first instance where Lucretius discusses chance is in connection with the cosmogony, where the cosmos is seen as emerging from compounds formed by perpetually falling atoms. Some of the atoms remain in their perpendicular fall, whereas others ‘swerve’ i.e. deviate from their determined path, causing recoil and collision.⁵ Having no antecedent cause, the swerve is in direct opposition to teleology and determinism, presenting an ontological manifestation of chance.

² Lüthy & Palmerino (2016: 42).

³ Epicur. *Ep.* 134.

⁴ Epicur. *Ep.* 135.

⁵ Lucr. II.216-50.

Although no writings from Epicurus explicitly discuss the swerve, his account of cosmogony describes atoms forming compounds when they ‘chance to be’ (τύχῳσι) interlaced.⁶ Subsequently, ‘as it may happen’ (ἐάν οὔτῳ τύχη), there are junctions, articulations, and irrigations of appropriate compounds until there is a degree of stability capable of additions — constituting a cosmos.⁷ While it would be an overstatement to claim that Epicurus explicitly alludes to the swerve in this passage, he emphasizes chance as a fundamental principle in the formation of *cosmoi*. Lucretius’s more extensive account—with its explicit rejection of both teleological and deterministic explanations—thus appears not as an innovation, but rather as a rearticulation of Epicurus’s initial view

Next to the usage of chance in relation to the cosmogony, chance is at the root of the agency and hence the volition characteristic of animate beings. A salient illustration of this is articulated by Lucretius:

Therefore, you must admit that the same exists in the seeds also, that motions have some cause other than blows and weights, from which this power [i.e. free will] is born in us, since we see that nothing can be produced from nothing. [...] [W]hat keeps the mind itself from having necessity within all actions, and from being as it were mastered and forced to endure and to suffer, is the minute swerving of the first-beginnings at no fixed place at no fixed time.⁸

The swerve exempts animate beings from being causally determined and therefore capable of volition. Hence, both the cosmogony and the volition of animate beings are underlain by the swerve and therefore opposed to (externally imposed) teleology and determinism.

These two facets establish a fundamental difference between Epicurean atomism and Democritean atomism. This follows from Democritus’s idea of an initial ‘vortex’ (δῖνος) which excludes teleology but remains causally determined and reduces all events in the cosmos to happen out of necessity.⁹ In contrast, the Epicureans reject this type of anti-teleological determinism, since the swerve functions as a breach to this determinism. Subsequently, the Epicureans leave room for the rejection of both teleological and deterministic explanations. This divergence has raised an ambiguity

⁶ Epicur. *Ep.* 43.; Lucr. II.216-24.

⁷ Epicur *Ep.* 89.

⁸ Lucr. II.284-93. All quotations from the *De Rerum Natura* are taken from the translation by Rouse & Smith (1992).

⁹ DK.68A8.; DK.67B2.

since, if something happens ‘by chance’ in the cosmos, would an Epicurean understand this as merely the absence of a teleological explanation or, consistent with their view on cosmogony and volition, would it also imply the absence of a deterministic explanation?

Within scholarship, two approaches to this ambiguity can be discerned. The first contends that, for the Epicureans, the swerve would have extended beyond volition, framing chance-events in the cosmos as ontological breaches with causal determinism.¹⁰ The second maintains that, within the cosmos, the swerve pertains exclusively to the volition of animate beings, and accordingly chance-events would merely be devoid of a teleological explanation while remaining causally determined.¹¹ The former position, as will be demonstrated, is upheld by Jean-Marie Guyau and Philip DeLacy, whereas the latter is championed by A.A. Long.

As for the former approach, this paper will refrain from discussing the numerous examples — whether from the extant Epicurean texts or testimonia of other authors — that scholars have adduced in support of this position. This follows from the scope of this paper and the contention that the examination of Guyau’s and DeLacy’s positions offers sufficient insight into the underpinnings of this approach. Regarding the latter position, however, a brief examination of the Epicurean concept of necessity proves essential, as it directly informs the position of A.A. Long.

Although this chapter is directed at the concept of chance, it nonetheless dovetails with an examination of necessity. After all, as established at the outset, chance can only be understood against the background of what it excludes. This conceptual interdependence explains why scholars — consciously or not — have avoided treating chance as an isolated object of study, opting instead for an indirect approach through the analysis of necessity.

This strain of scholarship has often focused on terms like *ἀνάγκη* or *necessum* (both denoting ‘necessity’). Furthermore, it is widely argued that the *foedera naturae* — a term frequently used by Lucretius translating into the ‘covenants of nature’, or ‘laws of nature’ — most clearly articulate the Epicurean vision of necessity and regularity. Scholars like A.A. Long read these terms as evidence of the

¹⁰ Alongside Jean-Marie Guyau and Philip DeLacy, who are central to this paper, prominent proponents of this position include Cyril Bailey esp. Bailey (1947: 324–7) and J.M. Rist esp. Rist (1971: 53). To a certain extent, Don Fowler (2007: 308) also does not entirely dismiss the validity of this position.

¹¹ While most clearly articulated by A.A. Long, this position is preceded by earlier scholars such as John Masson (1909), Klaus Sallman (1962), and Benjamin Farrington (1967).

Epicurean's commitment to a causally determined cosmos —except when accounting for volition.

Consequently, this raises the question: what is the ontological status of the *foedera naturae* in Epicurean physics? At its core, individual atoms, in order to form compounds, must conglomerate. Similar to different conglomerations of people, different conglomerations of atoms are characterized by different covenants (*foedera*). For example a family unit is characterized by a different covenant than a group of colleagues in the workspace.¹² Just so are the different species of birds governed by other *foedera* than the different species of trees:

Again, since a limit has been fixed for the growth of things after their kind and for the tenure of life, and since it stands decreed what each can do by the covenants of nature [*per foedera naturai*], and also what each cannot do, and since nothing changes but all things are constant to such a degree that all the different bodies to distinguish their kind, they must also have beyond a doubt a body of immutable matter. For if the first-beginnings of things could be changed, being in any way overmastered, it would also now remain uncertain what could arise and what could not¹³

The observable regularity and perpetuation of species allows for some certainty regarding 'what could arise and what could not'. Lucretius's frequent usage of the *foedera naturae* thus seems to imply a certain extent of necessity and determinism within the cosmos.

Moreover, regarding meteorological and celestial phenomena, both Epicurus and Lucretius emphasize regularity and therefore a certain necessity underlying them:

At a fixed time trees bloom, and at fixed time shed their flowers. No less at a fixed time our age commands the teeth to fall out, and bids the ungrown youth to put on the soft vestures of growth and to let his beard grow equally down either cheek. Lastly lightnings, snow, rain, clouds, and winds come at fairly fixed seasons of the year. For since the first-beginnings of causes have been so, and since things have thus befallen from the first-beginning of the world, with regular sequence also they now come back in fixed order.¹⁴

¹² Asmis (2008: 145-9).

¹³ *Lucr.* I.584-96.

¹⁴ *Lucr.* V.670-9.

Next the regularity of the periods [τάξις περιόδου] of the heavenly bodies must be understood in the same way as such regularity is seen in some of the events that happen on earth.¹⁵

According to the Epicureans, the cosmos is full of phenomena characterized by regularity and certainty. Whether it be the perpetuation of species or the set time of the seasons, it becomes clear that where atoms conglomerate one inevitably finds regularity and order. These — and further — instances of textual evidence gave rise to the scholarly view that, for the Epicureans, once a cosmos has been established, chance-events no longer exist in opposition to determinism.

In conclusion, much can be said about necessity and regularity — c.q. determinism — as integral to the cosmos, excluding indeterminate chance. However, as previously noted and as will be demonstrated in the further, the precise nature of chance-events in the cosmos emerged as an ambiguity within scholarship.

The Three Major Positions and Their Methodological Underpinnings

Subsequently this paper will provide a historiographical critique of three scholarly approaches, highlighting Jean-Marie Guyau, Philip DeLacy and A.A. Long. Special attention will be given to their respective methodological underpinnings, ultimately arguing that their disagreement is methodological rather than exegetical in nature.

Jean-Marie Guyau

This historiographical critique commences with French poet and philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau (1854 – 1888). Within his work *La morale d’Epicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines* (1878), Guyau devotes an entire chapter to the issue of chance as a cause in nature in relation to human freedom.¹⁶ Guyau originally composed his work as the first part of a dissertation eligible for submission in a competition of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politique*. The competition solicited contributions on the history and critique of utilitarianism. By reconstructing ancient Epicureanism and then tracing its ‘evolution’ through the history of thought, Guyau intended to interpret utilitarianism as an accomplished expression of Epicureanism.

Consequently, within the chapter Guyau spearheaded the issue of how Epicureans would have conceived of chance-events in the cosmos. In his reconstruction of Epicurean doctrine, Guyau ultimately argues that Epicurus himself must have admitted the existence of chance-events as occasionally opposing the causal

¹⁵ Epicur. *Ep.* 97. All quotations from Epicurus are taken from the translation of Cyril Bailey (1926).

¹⁶ Guyau (2022: 61–89).

determinism of the cosmos. Although Guyau considers this admission as a shortcoming and characterizes the utilitarian thinkers as modern Epicureans who have successfully abandoned this view, his interpretation sparked nearly a century of sustained scholarly debate.¹⁷

In order to establish his interpretation, Guyau developed a novel argument, which I term the 'solidarity argument'. The argument holds that, since all animate and inanimate nature is made up out of same elements — atoms and void — the power characteristic of animate nature cannot be exclusive to it, but 'must be found in the seeds of all things, within the seeds of life or atoms'.¹⁸ According to Guyau the indeterminacy present in animate beings cannot be totally absent from the cosmos, as they consist of the same elements. In his own words he proposes that:

[N]ature and human beings are solidary and connected to such an extent that we will not find in one of these anything absolutely new with regards to the other and that would be lacking in the other: if we want to recognize a principle of freedom and spontaneity within us, then let us not entirely subtract this very principle from everything else.¹⁹

Additionally, he states that it would be absurd to allow a small undetermined inner world within a completely determined and inflexible external world.²⁰ He even goes so far as to state that chance-events — opposing determinism — complete nature and prevent the world from being subject to an inexorable fate.²¹

Furthermore, Guyau highlights the distinction between volition and chance as causes within Epicurus's system, with the aim of countering an alleged misconception that both are intertwined. Guyau asserts that Epicurus 'poses these two notions in parallel without ever confusing one with the other'.²² They are alike in that they arise from the same origin — the indeterminate movement of atoms — but differ in the fact that chance is external, whereas volition is internal.

Consequently, the exteriority of chance must be understood as the manner in which phenomena present themselves to us and in their relation to our perception. It represents the unforeseen and the indeterminable, which takes place in an undefined

¹⁷ Guyau (2022: 224).

¹⁸ Guyau (2022: 67).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Guyau (2022: 68).

²¹ Guyau (2022: 73).

²² Guyau (2022: 75).

time and space. While these terms relate to our perception, Guyau nonetheless maintains that Epicureans would not have subscribed to the idea that something is a chance-event purely because of the limitations of cognition. Rather, he asserts that the ‘unforeseen and indeterminable’ chance-events come from ‘a cause that hides itself underneath chance’, which he identifies as the swerve.²³

This proposed solution to the issue he himself spearheaded, was received with both significant admiration and considerable criticism. The prevailing critique centered on the absence of extant Epicurean texts that explicitly support his assertions. It is virtually certain however, that Guyau would maintain that this absence of evidence should not be regarded as evidence of absence. This since Guyau himself believes that he is totally justified in his convictions. Something that can be inferred from his methodological approach to the history of philosophy:

The first thing to do, then, is to search for and grasp the key idea of the doctrine that one wants to expose. The key idea (or ideas, for often there is more than one, which intersect) lends the system its uniqueness, its unity and its life: it is the central point to which everything is tied, and it is what one must reach first. [...] Once the historian possesses these principles and holds them firmly, he can gradually deduce their consequences.²⁴

For Guyau, the assumption that within the cosmos chance breaches causal determinism, is safeguarded. This since such an assumption is not in blatant contradiction with what is found in the texts, as the Epicureans in fact do recognize instances where chance functions in opposition to determinism — e.g. cosmogony and volition.

Furthermore, Guyau offers a critique of what he perceives to be the conventional approach in contemporaneous history of philosophy, substantiating his critique with an allusion to the medical sciences:

Until now the history of philosophy has been conceived above all as an anatomy of human thought, but I hold that one must conceive it rather as an embryogenesis.²⁵

Instead of passively analyzing ideas like an anatomist dissecting a corpse, one should approach them as a process of embryogenesis — i.e. a process of growth and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Guyau (2022: xxvii).

²⁵ Guyau (2022: xxviii).

development. In this analogy, the fundamental components, akin to the sperm and egg cells, are used to slowly develop into something more complex and extensive. Similarly, when engaging with a body of thought, particularly a body of thought that has been transmitted incompletely, one can take hold of the core principles and, through the application of reason, develop a reasonable, extensive, and coherent system.

In conclusion, the methodological peculiarity that defines Guyau's approach is speculation. By reasoning from well-established and fundamental principles, Guyau justifies assuming anything that complies to two criteria: (1) It does not contradict the fundamental principles and, (2) It enhances the coherency of the doctrine, seamlessly filling in the lacunae that are encountered.

Philip DeLacy

The second major position is advanced by the American classicist Philip DeLacy (1913-2006). In an influential article, "limit and variation" published in 1969, he essentially aligns with Guyau. Within the article DeLacy defends the view that Epicureans would in fact have acknowledged the existence of chance-events opposing determinism in the cosmos. In order to make this ultimate assertion, DeLacy firstly aims to establish that Epicureanism is a philosophy of limits. According to him these limits do not exclusively apply to ethics, e.g. the limits of pleasure and pain that accompany every act, but apply especially well to the physics too.²⁶

He proposes that the cosmos can only be a cosmos if there exists a certain order in the form of limitations. These limitations must be understood as fixed while simultaneously allowing for instability:

This instability cannot be in the boundaries, which are fixed; it can only be in the individual things and events that fall within the framework of the fixed boundaries. Here, then is the domain of choice, chance, and the swerve.²⁷

However, the limits/boundaries (πέρας, ὄρος) are not equivalent to the aforementioned *foedera naturae*. This follows from DeLacy's assertion that contrary to the *foedera naturae* the limits are enduring regularities. Examples of which are: the indivisibility of atoms, the infinite quantity of atoms, the finite amount of atomic shapes, *et cetera*. Contrary to scholars who interpret the *foedera naturae* as being

²⁶ DeLacy (1969: 106).

²⁷ DeLacy (1969: 108).

inviolable 'laws of nature', DeLacy argues that they are not eternal but instead pertain to contingent and evanescent conglomerations of atoms.

Furthermore, to establish the idea of chance opposing determinism — while accounting for the limits — DeLacy expands on the conventional semantic understanding of chance. He moves beyond chance's sole association with τύχη to include 'variation'.²⁸ An example that DeLacy provides to illustrate this, is Lucretius's discussion on heredity. Lucretius posits that children may bear a resemblance to their grandfather or great-grandfather due to physical characteristics that are concealed within the parents:

[P]arents often conceal in their bodies many first-beginnings mingled in many ways, which fathers hand on to fathers received from their stock; from these Venus brings forth forms with varying lot [...] for these features come from a fixed seed no less than our faces and bodies and limbs [*venus varia producit sorte figuras [...] de semine certo*].²⁹

DeLacy interprets this passage as reproduction (Venus) producing physical variations '*varia sorte*', not as the result of '*semine certo*'. Which, according to him, means that Lucretius viewed variations in offspring to be by chance and inexplicable by reference to a determinate cause.³⁰

Moreover, DeLacy adduces the 'deep-set' boundaries (*alte terminus haerens*) as the only fixed points within the Epicurean cosmos.³¹ This confirms the idea that chance is limited by the *foedera naturae*, but not excluded. Within his interpretation chance can be in opposition to determinism, but only to the degree that is permitted by the limits. DeLacy substantiates this nuance with a reference to Lucretius's account of the origin of life where the possible existence of the *portenta* (monstrous creatures) is rejected explicitly. Examples of which are humans of the size that they can wade in the sea and the impossibility of regrowing limbs or eyes in the same manner as hair and nails.³²

Although this interpretation implies that chance-events are not completely undetermined, they nonetheless exclude deterministic explanations. DeLacy states that:

²⁸ DeLacy (1969: 108-9).; DeLacy names terms such as the noun παραλλαγή and the adjectives ποικίλος and *varia*.

²⁹ Lucr. IV.1218-26.

³⁰ DeLacy (1969: 109).

³¹ Lucretius invokes this term multiple times: Lucr. I.77.; Lucr. I.596.; Lucr. II.1087.; Lucr. V.90.

³² DeLacy (1969: 110).; Lucr. I.199-200.; Lucr. V.891-900.

Chance, like freedom of choice, presupposes some degree of indeterminacy in the movement of the atoms. Chance is ἄστατος, freedom is ἀδέσποτος. Neither would be possible without the swerve [...] But even the swerve has a limit; it can be no more than the minimum. Its consequences must not disrupt the fixed limits of natural processes but must only add variety within those limits.³³

This entails that chance-events in the cosmos cannot exist without the swerve. Moreover, since the swerve can be no more than a minimum (*nec plus quam minimum*), logically the impact of chance-events is equally minimal, merely adding variety.³⁴

In conclusion, DeLacy fundamentally aligns with Guyau in his acknowledgment of chance-events opposing determinism in the cosmos. However, methodologically, he diverges from Guyau, leading him to a distinct conclusion. What characterizes DeLacy's approach is his adherence to a close reading of the text, typical of a classicist, avoiding the tendency to fill lacunae with speculative interpretation. Still, DeLacy does take some interpretive liberties, particularly when he stretches the semantics of 'chance' to also include 'variety', just for the sake of supporting his interpretation. DeLacy therefore espouses a methodology that is characterized by faithfulness to the text on the one hand and semantic expansion on the other. Ultimately, similar to Guyau, this approach leads him to a detachment from the extant Epicurean texts, employing extratextual speculation.

A.A. Long

The most recent, and arguably the most influential and authoritative position, is presented by A.A. Long (b. 1937). Originally published in 1977 as the article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism", it was republished with minor revisions in 2006 as the book chapter: "Chance and laws of nature in Epicureanism". Long argues, contrary to Guyau and DeLacy, that Epicureans did not envision chance-events as opposing determinism within the cosmos. To establish his argument, Long aims to disprove the speculative position of Guyau in general by means of refuting the arguably more nuanced interpretation of DeLacy.

Regarding the latter, Long asserts the following:

If Epicurus and Lucretius supposed that the manifold varieties within the members of a species were due to the swerve of atoms, they

³³ DeLacy (1969: 108-9).

³⁴ Lucr. II.244.

endowed their system with a degree of indeterminacy that would have made it appallingly vulnerable to attack by their deistic opponents. Critics of Epicureanism fastened upon the atomic swerve, but they are not attested to have attacked it on the grounds of its being an arbitrary cause of natural events.³⁵

Attributing the manifold variety within species to the swerve of atoms, according to Long, leaves the Epicurean doctrine 'appallingly vulnerable' to deistic opposition. For example, this opposition could object that once the swerve is admitted as present in the cosmos, this becomes incompatible with the clearly observable regularity and order. In other words, Long suggests that the Epicureans would have been very hesitant to espouse DeLacy's interpretation. Long maintains that, a focus on explaining the observable regularity in the cosmos by means of a strictly deterministic framework, would have been more coherent and more fruitful for Epicureanism.

This follows from the swerve being a fundamental breach with antecedent causes. According to Long, the assumption that such a breach is ubiquitously present in the cosmos, would disproportionally complicate the explanation of regularity. Some of these regularities have already been addressed — e.g. the waxing and waning of the moon, the set times (*ordine certo*; τὰξις περιόδου) of the seasons, the fixed time (*tempore certo*) of sunset and sunrise, *et cetera*.³⁶

Moreover, Long claims that ancient critics of the swerve are not attested to have attacked it on grounds of being an arbitrary cause in nature.³⁷ This further strengthens his assertion that Epicurus and Lucretius, in fact, did not envision any form of indeterminacy, akin to the swerve, to underlie events in the cosmos. Based on these arguments, Long deems DeLacy's account of variation within limits as very unlikely to have been upheld by the Epicureans.

After proving DeLacy's interpretation to be unlikely, Long provides his own analysis of how the Epicureans would have conceived of chance-events in the cosmos. Starting with an analysis of τύχη within the extant Epicurean texts:

Chance (τύχη) occurs several times in the surviving works of Epicurus, generally in ethical maxims that can tell us nothing about any technical use he might have had for the concepts in this theorizing about nature. His Letter to Menoecus also treats of ethics, but it

³⁵Long (2006: 158-9).

³⁶ Epicur. *Ep.* 97.; Lucr. V.731-61.; Lucr. V.1183-5

³⁷ Long (2006: 159).; Which is not entirely true see for example: Plotinus (Plot. *Enn.* 3.1.1.14-20.) and Cicero (Cic. *Fat.* 22).

concludes with a passage (133-4) which has been thought to imply that he took chance to be a causal power in nature.³⁸

Contrary to 'what has been thought', Long argues that chance as described in the concluding passage of the *Letter to Menoecus*, must be conceived of as a common-or-garden luck or uncertainty, characteristic of human life.³⁹ This implies that Epicurus's idea of chance ought to be viewed through an Aristotelian lens, in which 'luck' offers an individual meaningful opportunities to pursue happiness (εὐδαιμονία).⁴⁰ Within this interpretation, a chance-event does not oppose determinism, but merely implies the absence of a teleological explanation.

Moreover, Long proceeds to review a slew of other passages 'from which scholars have concluded that Epicurus admitted chance as a quasi-physical force operative in the world'.⁴¹ Upon reviewing these passages Long concludes that all passages that have been adduced in favor of the Guyau/DeLacy position, can be interpreted as exclusively rejecting teleological explanations. Long — taking into account the broader context of these passages — does not see any justification for the inference that Epicureans viewed chance-events in the cosmos as opposing determinism. Instead he posits that the scholars who maintain such views, rely on extratextual speculation.⁴²

In addition to his assessment that the Guyau/DeLacy position is untenable with regard to the extant Epicurean texts, he aims to prove that the Epicureans actually subscribed to a strict determinism within the cosmos. He aims to focus especially on Lucretius's frequent invocations of the 'laws of nature' (*foedera naturae*). He adduces several instances where Lucretius invokes *foedus* and dubs it a *leitmotif* running throughout the entire poem. Subsequently, Long interprets the term *foedera naturae* as denoting inviolable 'laws of nature'. This interpretation, in conjunction with his view that the Guyau/DeLacy position lacks textual evidence, leads him to conclude that:

Our world originated from structures formed by the completely aimless motions and aggregations of atoms, and, according to Lucretius, at least one spontaneous motion or swerve was necessary precursor of world formation. Yet, within our world, as we know it, law-like regularities hold good and will continue to do so as long as

³⁸ Long (2006: 161).

³⁹ Long (2006: 162).

⁴⁰ Arist. *EN*. 1099^a30-^b8.

⁴¹ Long (2006: 164).

⁴² Long (2006: 175-6).

the world's basic structure remains intact. This causal sequence can be traced back to the world's original condition. Human actions, thanks to the mind's responsiveness to random swerves of atoms, are not predetermined by any sequence of antecedent causes.⁴³

All cosmic events are thus causally determined in accordance with the *foedera naturae*, except for those pertaining to the mind or soul.

In order to substantiate this latter part of his assumption, he alludes to the following passage from Lucretius:

Now I shall go on to explain to you, of what body this mind [*animus*] is, and of what it is formed. First I say that it is exceedingly delicate [*persubtilem*] and formed of exceedingly minute [*minutis*] particles.⁴⁴

This description of the soul being formed out of extremely delicate and minute particles is deliberate according to Long. While nowhere in the extant texts it is underscored that precisely these properties enable atoms to swerve, he nonetheless deems it more than reasonable and in line with the overall Epicurean view to assume so. Consequently his position can be reduced to this: within the cosmos, the swerve exclusively pertains to the volition of animate beings. Accordingly, chance-events in the cosmos are devoid of a teleological explanation while remaining causally determined.

Long's argument is ingenious and lends coherence to the Epicurean doctrine, but he commits the same error he criticizes in Guyau and DeLacy. When he proposes that Epicureans 'could maintain with much plausibility', that the swerve merely sorts perceivable effects in the soul, due to its peculiar make-up. He posits an argument that cannot be corroborated by textual evidence but can only be inferred — 'with much plausibility'. Essentially, in this argument, Long fills in a lacuna by means of extratextual speculation, mirroring Guyau and DeLacy.

Moreover, a closer examination of Long's initial argument concerning deistic criticism reveals no clear indication on how this precisely challenges or problematizes DeLacy's position. Long asserts that DeLacy's concept of 'variation within limits' is incompatible with the characterization of the swerve as 'breaking the chain of antecedent causes at no determinate time or place'.⁴⁵ Yet, why must these notions be

⁴³ Long (2006: 176).

⁴⁴ Lucr. III.177-80.

⁴⁵ Long (2006: 158-9).

incompatible? This alleged incompatibility is based on the assumption that the swerve is entirely without limits, capable of a radical breach with regularity and order.

However, in the extant texts it is attested that the swerve can be no more than a minimum (*nec plus quam minimum*).⁴⁶ Moreover, even if 'minimum' here should be interpreted as a relative term, the fact that the atoms can only move downwards because of their weight, would theoretically constrain the swerve within an angular range of: $0^\circ \leq \theta < 90^\circ$. At last there is good reason to assume that the Epicureans upheld the idea of David Sedley, who compared a swerving atom to a car switching lanes, implying a breach but no more than a minimum.⁴⁷ Assuming that the swerve inherently poses a radical breach capable of disrupting any form of regularity and order — as Long does in his argument — therefore seems at odds with what can be inferred from the extant texts.

Ultimately, Long seeks to resolve the ambiguity surrounding chance-events in the cosmos through a careful review of extant texts. However, on two notable occasions, he diverges from this textual focus. First, he introduces deistic criticism as a significant complicating factor, making a textually unfounded assumption about the swerve. Based on this unfounded assumption, he speculates that the Epicureans would likely have committed to a causally determined cosmos in order to counter this deistic criticism. Secondly, he appeals to the composition of the soul in order to establish that, within the cosmos, the swerve pertains exclusively to the volition of animate beings, there being no strict textual support for this assumption.

General Observation on the Scholarly Debate

In conclusion, despite Long's aspiration to remain faithful to the text — adhering to this principle throughout the majority of his analysis — both his initial problematization and his eventual conclusion are based on extratextual speculation. His disagreement with the Guyau/Delacy position is therefore essentially methodological instead of exegetical in nature.

The key difference between these three authors lies in the extent to which their methodologies permit extratextual speculation. Guyau openly embraces it as a valid approach; DeLacy attempts to justify some of it by arguing for an expansion of semantics; while Long, despite rejecting the idea of extratextual speculation in word, implicitly employs it at two crucial points within his argument.

⁴⁶ Lucr. II.244.

⁴⁷ Sedley (1976: 25).

This observation warrants a new interpretation that instead of substantiating or making plausible ideas that are absent in the text, places its focus on exegesis. This exegetical interpretation however, will not adduce textual evidence in favour of the positions of either Guyau/DeLacy or Long. Instead it will, in light of the extant texts, contend that the absence of textual evidence for either view is deliberate, suggesting that scholarship hitherto essentially rests on the flawed assumption that the Epicureans desired an answer to the issue.

The Theoretical Framework for Examining Aspects of Epicurean Physics

In this last part, it will be argued that, rather than the likelihood of Epicureans upholding either position – whether Guyau/DeLacy’s or Long’s – it is most plausible that they would have restrained deliberately from a deep inquiry into the issue. This because the issue holds little significance for Epicureans, as the scientific accuracy implied in the positions of the three scholars is ultimately superfluous to achieving ‘mental tranquility’ – *ἀταραξία*.

The interplay between science and *ἀταραξία*, has been profusely addressed in the extant Epicurean texts and thoroughly explored in scholarly literature. Epicurus’s perspective on science, truth, and the accuracy one must strive for in both, is captured especially well by Abraham Wasserstein (1978):

Epicurus does not pursue truth for its own sake. What he seeks is the truth that shall make us free. [...] All truth we cannot have, and some truths may be irrelevant. Indeed, in reading the Epicurean remains we are made to feel what makes us free is not truth so much as the dissipation of error; and not of all error, but only that which stands in the way of *ἀταραξία*.⁴⁸

Wasserstein, within this statement, seamlessly articulates the Epicurean sentiment and perspective on science. Because, for the Epicureans, science serves the fundamental purpose of liberation from irrational fears. Subsequently, science does not need to adopt a positive attitude toward the world, in the sense of exposing truth. Rather, science suffices when it prevents Epicureans from maintaining false beliefs about the world – beliefs that ultimately thwart the pursuit of *ἀταραξία*.

As mentioned, multiple examples of this attitude can be found within the extant Epicurean texts, of which this paper will highlight two:

⁴⁸ Wasserstein (1978: 484).

If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science [φυσιολογίας].⁴⁹

And for this very reason, even if we discover several causes for turnings and settings and risings and eclipses and the like, as has been the case already in our investigation of detail, we must not suppose that our inquiry into these things has not reached sufficient accuracy [ἀκρίβειαν] to contribute to our peace of mind and happiness [ἀτάραγον].⁵⁰

Regarding the latter passage, the articulation of the concept of ἀκρίβεια ('accuracy' or 'precision'), is pivotal to the eventual thesis of this paper. This paper aims to demonstrate that all that can be found on chance within the extant Epicurean texts, is by itself sufficiently accurate to support an Epicurean in their pursuit of ἀταραξία. Other interpretations that seek to fill in a supposed lacuna — whether by expanding on the nature of chance-events as opposing determinism in the cosmos (Guyau & DeLacy) or conceiving of the cosmos as being governed by causal determinism (Long) — overstretch the required accuracy, rendering themselves scientifically superfluous.

A substantial body of textual evidence and scholarly analysis supports the view of scientific accuracy and ἀταραξία being integrally connected. However, scholar Pierre-Marie Morel (2024) challenges such an instrumentalist reading; he views this connection as just one part — albeit taking precedence — of Epicurean science and posits that merely addressing the pragmatic end of science, does not do justice to Epicurean epistemology as a whole:

Epicurus, in accordance with his rational empiricism, has real and consistent scientific commitments, whose immediate justifications are above all epistemological and that these commitments are not entirely reducible to the search of happiness and preservation of *ataraxia*, even though this goal is the ultimate *telos*.⁵¹

Morel's view presents a compelling argument against a purely instrumental reading of the interplay between science and ἀταραξία. However, this paper ultimately posits

⁴⁹ Epicur. *Sent.* XI.

⁵⁰ Epicur. *Ep.* 79-80.

⁵¹ Morel (2024: 43-4).

that accuracy on the issue of chance-events in the cosmos, proves untenable for epistemological reasons.

Therefore, the key question remains: What makes a scientific statement sufficiently accurate for an Epicurean? What distinguishes 'required for ἀταραξία' from 'superfluous scientific erudition'? In the first fragment one can find a clear outline of Epicurus's expectations: the end of science is to dispel false assumptions regarding the meteorological phenomena and death, while also adequately defining the limits of pleasure and pain. Epicurus states that, were it not for humanity's inherent ignorance regarding these aspects, there would be no need for 'natural science' (φυσιολογίας).

Stripped to its fundamentals, the nature of chance-events in the cosmos must be examined in this light: before engaging in an analysis of any aspect of Epicurean physical theory, it is essential to first consider why Epicurus himself might have been interested to pursue a detailed understanding of the subject. This ultimately forms the theoretical framework from which to examine aspects of Epicurean physics. This paper has established that Epicurean science is (largely) in the service of ἀταραξία, by means of eliminating false beliefs. Now it will be assessed whether the perspectives of Guyau, DeLacy, and Long, align with the practical aims of Epicurean science, or whether they overstep the bounds of what is required for ἀταραξία.

The Three Authors and Their Vision on the Scientific Value of the Issue

To fairly reflect the perspectives of the three discussed authors —and before presenting the central thesis of this paper—it is necessary to examine whether the three authors conceived of a detailed understanding of the role of chance in nature as being instrumental to the pursuit of ἀταραξία. While the three authors do not explicitly argue for their standpoint with reference to ἀταραξία, they nonetheless harbor implicit views on why clarity on the issue would be of importance to an Epicurean. Commencing with Guyau:

The idea of the miraculous or the marvelous is what Epicurus and Lucretius seek to attack. We know that they have a deep aversion both towards the miraculous power of divinity and the rational power of necessity. It is these two powers that they want to suppress. To introduce in the realm of phenomena enough regularity so that miracles could not find space, and enough spontaneity so that necessity loses all its absolute, primordial and definitive character.⁵²

⁵² Guyau (2022: 70).

According to Guyau, Epicurus sought to eliminate all animism that was characteristic for the religion of his time. Also the concept of a *deus ex machina* which the miraculous implies, must have been eliminated by reaching a great scientific accuracy on the nature of chance-events in the cosmos. It can thus be inferred that Guyau considers a deep inquiry into the issue as fundamental to the pursuit of ἀταραξία.

Guyau thus considers the issue to be of critical significance for Epicurean theology. Moreover, as described in the earlier adduced fragment, theology, in turn, is pivotal to the pursuit of ἀταραξία. However, it is debatable whether Epicureans deemed it necessary to dismiss the existence of miracles by means of a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events. Because why would Epicureans feel compelled to strengthen their argument against the ‘miraculous power of divinity’ when their cosmogony is already free of any elements suggestive of intelligent design or teleology?

By inverting Guyau's aforementioned ‘solidarity argument’, one could even contrapose that if a cosmos originates devoid of divine intervention, such intervention logically cannot emerge *ex nihilo* once a cosmos is formed. The idea that Epicureans need a natural explanation for chance-events to exclude miraculous divine intervention, is based on flawed assumptions. Ultimately, even if Epicureans had sufficient ground to provide a detailed explanation of the nature of chance-events, the purpose of such an explanation would not be to exclude divine intervention.

Secondly, Philip DeLacy, within his article, adumbrates the importance of the issue for Epicurean physics and the pursuit of ἀταραξία:

Moreover, the Epicureans must know what these boundaries are, since they insist on the absolute certainty of their teachings. Their beliefs are unshakable, the conclusions that they reach by their reasoning are necessarily true; their wise man never changes his mind about anything; they are εὐπαγεῖς πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν, solid in respect to happiness. They must have exact knowledge of what can and cannot happen.⁵³

DeLacy thus explicitly links the issue of limits and consequently knowing what can and what cannot happen to ἀταραξία. However, his focus lies exclusively on knowledge of the limits, rather than the nature of chance-events. Once the boundaries of possibility are established, the range of potential outcomes becomes clear. In analogy, while one cannot predict the result of a dice throw with certainty, one knows

⁵³ DeLacy (1969: 110).

it will yield a number between 1 and 6. In conclusion, DeLacy does not recognize the importance of an accurate understanding of chance-events for ἀταραξία, as he does for the concepts of limits and necessity.

Lastly, Long asserts that it is most reasonable to focus on what can be gleaned from the extant texts. The main question, according to him should be if Epicurus envisioned ‘a random or chance element in nature’:

If the answer to that is negative, as I shall argue, there is no reason to give the swerve a larger role than that explicitly accorded it by Lucretius.⁵⁴

This statement seems to articulate the supposition that a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events in the cosmos is superfluous to the Epicureans. However, Long does not explicitly assert this; rather, he offers methodological grounds for avoiding excessive extratextual speculation, contending that everything can be explained through a careful reading of the extant texts.⁵⁵ Long's overall argumentation is ultimately grounded on a methodological inclination rather than reference to Epicurean ethical theory, with ἀταραξία as its end.

Epicurean Scientific Restraint

As established, any analysis of any aspect of Epicurean physical theory must first consider why Epicurus himself might have been interested to pursue a detailed understanding of the subject. In good faith, possible answers to this question have been distilled from the three discussed scholars, but it is clear that they all fail to engage with the Epicurean pursuit of ἀταραξία. However, merely demonstrating that the three scholars fail to establish this connection is insufficient, a positive case must be made for why a deep inquiry into chance-events is superfluous to an Epicurean.

Therefore, this paper intends to adduce arguments for why exactly detailed knowledge on the workings of chance is by no means conducive to ἀταραξία. In other words, arguments on why Epicurus would have refrained from dedicating any writings to it. The main argument essentially rearticulates Long's vision, which has been discussed earlier: namely that Lucretius provides sufficient explanations for Epicurean ends. Contrary to Long however, this paper will not maintain that the absence of a further inquiry into the nature of chance-events, entails that the Epicureans instead adhered to a causally determined cosmos.

⁵⁴ Long (2006: 160).

⁵⁵ Long (2006: 175).

The extant Epicurean texts provide two explicit mentions of chance opposing determinism: in relation to the cosmogony and volition. Within the cosmogony, indeterminate chance functions as a fundamental difference with Democritean necessitarianism but shares the rejection of teleology, excluding divine involvement. Subsequently, this primordial breach with determinism — in some way — reoccurs in animate beings, endowing them with the capability to deliberately pursue *ἀταραξία*. Both instances constitute *sine qua non* conditions for this pursuit. Leaving the question: would an inquiry on the nature of chance-events in the cosmos be of any relevance to an Epicurean?

The possible superfluity of this inquiry follows from Epicureanism essentially being an inwardly focused, pragmatic philosophy that foregrounds ‘self-sufficiency’.⁵⁶ Epicurus recognizes that not all events can be foreseen and that one must cultivate both mental resilience and material preparedness to bolster oneself for adverse events.⁵⁷ These events, however, are external and whatever may be their underlying cause of coming to be — antecedent causes or the swerve — does not alter the practical means by which *ἀταραξία* is ought to be achieved. Since the ability to prepare and bolster oneself for these events — volition — is preserved, there would be no further need to inquire deeper into the nature of chance-events.

Nevertheless, regarding the exteriority of these events, one might still advance an argument similar to that of Guyau: a deep inquiry is essential for refuting divine intervention. In other words, one might argue that a deep understanding of chance-events is pivotal to Epicurean theology. Hence, merely asserting that indeterminate chance applies to the cosmogony and volition would not have assuaged an Epicurean sufficiently. By dint of which the interpretations of Guyau, DeLacy, or Long would have been conducive to the pursuit of *ἀταραξία*, and could possibly have been corroborated in a text that is now lost to us.

However, the Epicureans in their formulations of the nature of the gods do not rely on the concepts of chance or necessity. In fact, Lucretius explicitly appeals to the imperfection of the world as evidence for the absence of divine involvement.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Epicurean theology is ultimately grounded on the axioma of the gods perfect bliss and the corresponding implications.⁵⁹ In short, there is no textual evidence to suggest that the Epicureans required, or relied upon, an accurate understanding of

⁵⁶ Epicur. Fr. 202 Us.; Epicur. *Sent Vat.* 45.

⁵⁷ Epicur. *Ep.* 130.; Epicur. *Sent Vat.* 77.

⁵⁸ Lucr. V.195-234.

⁵⁹ Epicur. *Sent.* I.; Epicur. *Ep.* 123.; Lucr. I.44-9.; Lucr. VI-68-79.

chance-events to refute divine intervention or design. Except in the cosmogony where the swerve also functions to exclude teleological explanations.

Another counterargument could be that a thorough understanding of necessity and chance could enhance the ability of an Epicurean to anticipate and deal with unforeseen adversities more effectively. In this sense, knowledge on the subject could expedite the pursuit of ἀταραξία significantly, hence being of scientific relevance. This argument, however, is far from watertight: Epicurus generally prioritizes the present and even discourages worrying about the future.⁶⁰ While a deeper understanding of causality may appear valuable, it risks overemphasizing the importance of future events at the expense of appreciating past pleasures or embracing present contentment.⁶¹ And even if Epicureans would embrace knowledge of future events as essential for ἀταραξία, this knowledge would most likely pertain to limits and inevitabilities — as per DeLacy — rather than chance-events.

These two arguments can be viewed as the main critique on deliberate scientific restraint, yet they are unsubstantiated. Moreover, aside from being unsubstantiated, these claims demonstrate that a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events would be excessively laborious and even risks the disruption of ἀταραξία. Consequently, Morel's assertion that Epicureans occasionally pursued knowledge for pure epistemological reasons, becomes unlikely with regards to this specific inquiry.

Consequently, the absence of textual evidence on any deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events is most likely deliberate taking into account the overall aim of Epicurean science. Ultimately, Guyau, DeLacy and Long all have a blind spot for this pragmatic side of Epicureanism. Guyau and DeLacy, by expanding the role of chance as actively opposing determinism in the cosmos, and contrarily Long, who argues for a strict causal determinism, fill in a lacuna without first considering if this lacuna could be deliberate.

However, a final methodological concern remains: this paper, like the discussed scholars, also departs from the extant texts. This since there is no explicit statement that the Epicureans deliberately restraint themselves from a deep inquiry into the issue. But this critique is misplaced. What sets this paper apart from the works of the authors discussed is that, whereas they seek to substantiate or make plausible an idea that is not present in the text, this paper argues that the absence of these ideas is deliberate and requires no further inference. Ultimately, this paper imposes no burden upon itself to posit a claim lacking textual support, instead it attempts to explain this lack of textual support in light of the extant texts.

⁶⁰ Epicur. *Ep.* 122.; Epicur. *Ep.* 127.; Epicur. *Sent.* 20.

⁶¹ Epicur. *Ep.* 125.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has critically reassessed the scholarly debate surrounding the nature of chance-events in the cosmos, focusing on the interpretations of Jean-Marie Guyau, Philip DeLacy, and A.A. Long. It has demonstrated that their arguments are to differing degrees based on extratextual speculation and detached from the extant Epicurean texts.

This paper advances the view that the disagreement among these scholars is therefore fundamentally methodological rather than exegetical in nature. Guyau's speculative reconstruction, DeLacy's semantic expansions, and Long's attempt to ground his argument in textual evidence, all ultimately rely on extratextual speculation. None of these interpretations align conclusively with the extant texts, suggesting that the ambiguity within scholarship, has not emerged because of a failure to deal with the matter on the Epicureans part, but due to a deliberate scientific restraint. Therefore, rather than seeking to resolve the ambiguity, this paper has proposed that the Epicureans saw no need for a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events, beyond what is found in the extant texts.

Epicurean science is pragmatic, predominantly aimed at dispelling false beliefs that hinder the pursuit of *ἀταραξία*. The existing discussions of chance in relation to the cosmogony and volition suffice to eliminate fears of divine intervention and deterministic fate — the two primary obstacles to *ἀταραξία*. A deeper inquiry into the nature of chance-events in the cosmos would be superfluous, as it is not conducive to Epicureanism's ultimate aim.

This paper challenges the assumption that Epicureans desired a deep inquiry into the nature of chance-events. Instead it is far more probable that the Epicureans deliberately restrained from further inquiry. Ultimately, scholarship hitherto has had a blind spot for the idea that the absence of textual support could be deliberate. However, when considered in light of the extant texts, a deliberate absence of this support can be considered as consistent with the overall aim of Epicurean science.

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The Epicurean Foundations of Marx's Thought: A Historical and Philosophical Reassessment

1. Main Objective and Summary of the Project

Karl Marx's 1841 doctoral dissertation, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (*Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*), was originally intended as the first part of a broader study on Epicurean, Stoic, and Skeptical philosophy. However, Marx's research led him to a radical reassessment of Epicurus, whom he came to regard not just as an important thinker, but as the 'pinnacle' of Greek philosophy, an 'enlightener' (*der größte griechische Aufklärer*) who elevated human self-consciousness as the highest philosophical principle (MEGA 1975: 1.1:57).

Despite extensive scholarly engagement with Marx's early work, the specific influence of Epicureanism on his overall thought remains underexplored. This lacuna exists primarily because most existing analyses have been conducted by Marxist theorists rather than specialists in ancient philosophy or historians of philosophy in general. Classicist Cyril Bailey (Bailey 1928) was among the first to note Marx's interest in Epicureanism, but subsequent analyses — such as (Althusser 2006), (Fusaro 2018), (Nail 2021), (Bajema 2023), (Cockshott *et al.* 2024) — have often appropriated the Marx-Epicurus connection to construct a materialist lineage to underpin contemporary (Marxist) political theory, rather than subjecting it to more historical academic scrutiny.

This PhD project will address this lacuna by conducting a systematic, and historically grounded analysis of Epicureanism's impact on Marx's thought. With the aim of moving beyond ideological appropriations, it will critically assess:

- 1) The philosophical and methodological parallels between Epicurus and Marx:** (e.g., their critiques of determinism, emphasis on human agency, and conceiving of matter as the fundamental constituent of reality.)
- 2) The development of Marx's thought and the possible perpetuation and transformation of key Epicurean concepts.**
- 3) The broader historical significance of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism:** (i.e. situating it within 19th-century debates on Enlightenment, materialism, Hellenistic philosophy and Hegelian dialectics as well as the social-political context of the *Vormärz* period.)

By bridging Epicurean philosophy and Marxist theory, this project aims to provide a more nuanced and academically sound understanding of the development of Marx's thought while contributing to ongoing debates in the history of philosophy.

2. Background to the Project

As mentioned, to date, research on the influence of Epicureanism on Marx's thought has largely focused on establishing a materialist lineage, often with the intent to underpin contemporary (Marxist) political theory. Nevertheless, this does not preclude these authors from offering extensive analyses, however, their focus on doctrinal continuity goes at the expense of deeper historical and philosophical reflection. Thus while such studies have traced broad thematic affinities, they frequently neglect the nuanced intellectual tensions and historical factors that shaped Marx's engagement with Epicureanism.

Recent contributions, such as Fusaro's *Epicurus and the Origins of Historical Materialism* (2018), foreground significant philosophical questions but lack historical depth, providing only a limited analysis of key concepts and contexts. Though provocative, Fusaro's analysis overlooks key aspects of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism—particularly the relationship between chance and necessity, as well as the ethical implications of Marx's materialism. Similarly, Thomas Nail's *Marx in Motion* (2021) attempts to pigeonhole Marx into a new-materialist framework that, according to him, originates in Epicurean philosophy. With this approach Nail, offers an anachronistic reading that obscures the specific historical and philosophical dimensions of Marx's thought. Meanwhile, Althusser's late coinage of 'aleatory materialism' (Althusser 2006) — and its subsequent elaborations by disciples like (Bajema 2023) and (Cockshott *et al.* 2024) — gestures toward Epicurean themes of chance and indeterminacy, yet it does so in a manner lacking any historical contextualization.

At the other end of the spectrum, scholarship has tended toward narrowly focused investigations of Marx's doctoral dissertation— examples of which are (Stanley 1995), (van Ree 2020), (Asmis 2020), and (Schuringa 2022)—which, while valuable, isolate this early text from the broader development of Marx's thought. This bifurcation in the existing scholarship —between elaborate but historically thin appropriations and very narrow textual analyses— has left significant gaps in the understanding of how Epicureanism influenced Marx's overall thought. As demonstrated by multiple sources, Marx never abandoned his study of Greek philosophy, and there is compelling evidence to suggest that Epicureanism remained a latent but enduring influence throughout his life (Foster 2000).

This project seeks to anticipate this division in scholarship by providing a historically grounded and philosophically rigorous reassessment of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism. It will interrogate why Marx chose the difference between Epicurean and Democritean atomism as the focal point of his dissertation — a very daring and novel approach for his time — and what this reveals about his evolving conception of religion, agency, materialism, and dialectic method. Moreover, it will situate Marx's reading of Epicurus within the broader 19th-century reception of Hellenistic thought, clarifying how key Epicurean concepts were understood in Marx's immediate intellectual milieu. By integrating contextual precision and philosophical analysis, this study aims to explicate the Epicurean dimensions of Marx's overall thought.

3. Theoretical Framework

This PhD-project will adopt a twofold historical approach, integrating *contextualist history* and *reception history*. This dual approach will effectively situate Marx's dissertation and engagement with Epicureanism in the German intellectual milieu of the first half of the 19th century, elucidating how contemporaneous debates on materialism, Hegelianism, and Hellenistic philosophy shaped his early philosophical development. Moreover, next to the intellectual milieu an emphasis will be placed on the socio-political context of the *vormärz* period in which Marx — who grew out to be a major political theorist— composed his early writings, all in order to give an as much informed as possible contextualization of Marx's early engagement with Epicureanism.

Simultaneously, the reception-historical approach traces the perpetuation and transformation of key Epicurean concepts across Marx's later works. By integrating these approaches, this project not only reconstructs the historical basis of Marx's early philosophical positions but also demonstrates how his critical engagement with Epicureanism informed his later critiques of religion, political economy, and dialectical method. In conclusion, this twofold historical approach not only uncovers the historical significance of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism, but also reveals how key Epicurean concepts were adapted to serve his later critiques.

4. Research question(s) and expected finding(s)

Research question:

How has Epicureanism influenced the development of Marx's thought, and what are the philosophical and historical implications of this relationship?

Sub questions:

Why did Marx elevate Epicurus (rather than Plato, Aristotle or other Hellenistic thinkers) as the "pinnacle" of Greek philosophy in his dissertation?

How did key Epicurean concepts inform Marx's theories of religion, agency, materialism, and dialectical method?

Why has the Marx-Epicurus relationship been predominantly analyzed through doctrinal (rather than historical-philosophical) lenses, and what distortions has this produced?

Why has the Epicurean influence on Marx been underexplored or distorted in Marxist scholarship?

Tentative hypothesis:

Marx's engagement with Epicureanism was not merely a youthful phase but Epicureanism remained a sustained influence which shaped his core concepts of religion, agency, materialism and dialectical method. Under the influence of Epicureanism, Marx developed a distinctive materialism that transcends a pure mechanistic framework, while it simultaneously dismisses Hegelian idealism.

5. Methods and research ethics

The study focuses primarily on Marx's writings from 1839 to 1857, beginning with his early notebooks on Epicurean, Stoic, and Skeptical philosophy (1839) and extending through the *Grundrisse* (1857), while also considering later works such as *Capital* where relevant conceptual continuities may emerge.

A related ethical consideration is the responsible handling of fragmentary evidence. Since Marx's later works do not directly reference Epicurus, any argument for conceptual continuity must be carefully substantiated through intertextual analysis and contextual corroboration, avoiding speculation. To mitigate the risk of overinterpretation, this research will incorporate **N-gram analysis** as a methodological tool to empirically trace the perpetuation and transformation of key Epicurean concepts, initially articulated in his doctoral dissertation and other early writings explicitly engaged with Epicureanism.

6. Proposed dissemination

This doctoral project is designed with a structured dissemination plan to ensure its contributions reach both specialized and broader academic audiences. Key chapters will be developed into standalone articles and submitted to peer-reviewed journals in the field, including *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* and *Rethinking Marxism*, given their prominence in debates on Marxist philosophy and history of philosophy.

Upon completion, the dissertation will be revised into a monograph, engaging with contemporary scholarship and adhering to the highest academic standards. The monograph will be positioned for publication within established book series such as Brill's *Historical Materialism Book Series* (given its focus on critical Marxist theory and classical receptions) or Cambridge University Press's *Ideas in Context* (due to its emphasis on historically grounded philosophical analysis). These venues are particularly suited to the project's dual focus on the development of Marx's thought and the reception of Epicureanism.

7. Progress plan

This doctoral research project will be structured according to a three year plan that accordingly will accommodate a threefold strategy: 1) Data collection and preliminary work, 2) Analysis and interpretation, and 3) Synthesis and dissemination.

Year 1: Data collection and preliminary work

The first year will focus on systematic archival and textual research, laying the groundwork for the project's historical and philosophical analysis. Key tasks include:

Review of the primary sources: Close reading of Marx's doctoral dissertation, his Notebooks on Epicurean, Stoic, and Skeptical philosophy (1839), and related early writings (1839–1845),

alongside key Epicurean texts (e.g. the extant Epicurean texts and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*).¹

Review of secondary literature: Critical engagement with existing scholarship on Marx's early philosophy, 19th-century reception of Hellenistic philosophy, and the socio-political context of the *Vormärz* period.

Contextual groundwork: Mapping the 19th-century German debates on materialism, Hellenistic philosophy and Hegelianism to situate Marx's engagement with Epicureanism.

Drafting: Completing the dissertation's introduction and methodology chapter, as well as preliminary outlines for the core chapters.

Year 2: Analysis and interpretation

The second year will shift to detailed analysis of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism and the perpetuation and transformation of key Epicurean concepts within his overall thought. Key tasks include:

Comparative philosophical analysis: Examining parallels between Epicurean and Marxist concepts (e.g., critiques of determinism, theories of agency, materialist foundation).

Reception-historical tracing: Tracking Epicurean themes in Marx's later works using close reading, aided by **N-gram analysis** to identify conceptual perpetuations and transformations.

Contextual analysis: Investigating how Marx's immediate intellectual environment (e.g., Left Hegelians, Bruno Bauer, Feuerbach) shaped his engagement with Epicureanism.

Drafting: Completing 2–3 core chapters where central arguments will be developed. Possibly resulting in a standalone article eligible for submission to a peer-reviewed journal or conference talk.

Year 3: Synthesis and dissemination

The final year will focus on synthesizing results and preparing the dissertation for submission. Key tasks include:

Thesis integration: Revising chapters into a cohesive argument, ensuring the integration historical and philosophical elements.

Refinement: Refining analyses based on feedback.

Journal submissions: Adapting 1 or 2 chapters into standalone articles eligible for submission to peer-reviewed journals.

Monograph planning: Outlining a book proposal for Brill's *Historical Materialism Series* or Cambridge's *Ideas in Context*.

¹ The PhD project will account for the more limited availability of Epicurean texts in Marx's time compared to modern scholarship.

Completion: Completing the conclusion, abstract, and revisions for submission.

Summary for non-specialists:

This PhD project explores the often-overlooked influence of Epicureanism on the development of Karl Marx's thought. While Marx's early engagement with Epicurus—particularly in his doctoral dissertation—has been noted, most studies have either treated it as a minor curiosity or appropriated it to underpin contemporary Marxist theories, rather than subjecting it to more historical academic scrutiny. This project seeks to fill that gap by conducting a historically grounded and philosophically rigorous analysis of how Epicurean ideas shaped Marx's thought, from his early writings to his later critiques of religion, political economy, and dialectical method.

The research will investigate why Marx regarded Epicurus as the "pinnacle" of Greek philosophy, and how key Epicurean concepts — such as critiques of determinism, theories of human agency, and materialist foundation — resurfaced in Marx's overall thought, and why this connection has been underexplored or distorted in existing scholarship. By situating Marx's reading of Epicurus within the intellectual and socio-political contexts of 19th-century Germany, the project aims to provide a more nuanced and academically sound understanding of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism.

Methodologically, the study combines close textual analysis of Marx's writings with historical contextualization, tracing the perpetuation and transformation of key Epicurean concepts throughout his works. It will also employ **N-gram analysis** to track these conceptual perpetuations and transformations, mitigating the risk of overinterpretation. The findings will be disseminated through academic articles and a monograph, contributing to both Marxist studies and the history of philosophy by bridging Marxist theory and Epicureanism.

Ultimately, this project seeks to demonstrate that Epicureanism was not just a passing interest for Marx, but must rather be seen as a lasting influence that shaped his later critiques of religion, political economy and dialectical method. By clarifying this relationship, this PhD project aims to offer fresh insights into the development of Marx's thought and, as mentioned, a more nuanced and academically sound understanding of Marx's engagement with Epicureanism.

Key words

Marxism — Epicureanism — Materialism

Literature references

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Curriculum vitae
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Education

2021-(2025) Research Master Philosophy at *Radboud University: Center for the History of Philosophy and Science*

(Current average: 7.8, expected graduation date: June 2025)

2017 - 2021 B.A. Philosophy at *Radboud University*.

(Average: 7.9)

2014 - 2016 Mechanical Engineering at *Windesheim University of Applied Sciences*.

Relevant work experience

2020 -2021 **Mentorship at Radboud University:** Chairing bi-weekly readings of philosophical texts with first-year and pre-master students in philosophy.

2023- 2024 **Teacher of *Tutorials* at Radboud University:** I facilitated weekly group sessions for B1 philosophy students, guiding them in reading and analyzing fundamental texts in the history of philosophy. Furthermore, I played a role in the general academic support of first-year students in this yearlong course.

2023 **Substitute teacher of *The Human Right to Health* at Radboud University:** For the course "The Human Right to Health," I substituted for Prof. E.A.V. Matthies-Boon. In this third-year bachelor's course, I extensively taught on the "right to health" and its relationship to geopolitics and global institutions. I also lectured on various philosophical perspectives on illness and how it is dealt with, including *Critical Disability Studies* and the *Phenomenology of Illness*.

- 2024** **Teacher and course coordinator of *Philosophy of the Management Sciences at Radboud University*:** I taught ethics and philosophy of science to first-year students in Public Administration, Business Administration, Economics, Political Science, and Geography, Planning, and Environment (GPM). Additionally, in the final phase, I took over the coordination of this course, which was followed by approximately 550 students, and gained experience with the administrative aspects of teaching. This included composing both the (re)takes of exams, processing grades, and resolving disputes in consultation with the examination board and study advisors.
- 2024-2025** **Course coordinator of *Psychological Ethics at Radboud University*:** I coordinated the English taught course *Psychological Ethics* for approximately 550 third-year psychology students. I was responsible for appointing workgroup lecturers, preparing lectures, the (re)takes of exams, and leading weekly ‘team meetings’ with the lecturers. Moreover, I carried the responsibility to solve any problems that arose during the entirety of the course
- 2025** **Teacher of *Philosophy of Mind, Brain, and Behavior at Radboud University*:** I taught Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of Science to four groups of B2-Psychology students.
- 2025-present** **Lecturer at Radboud Pre-University College of Society:** As a lecturer at the Radboud Pre-University College, I visit secondary schools to provide information to final-year students about academic research within the humanities.

Conference papers

- 2023** Presentation of my paper: ‘*The Cosmological Extent of Chance as a Cause Within Epicurean Physics,*’ at the 25th Nijmegen-Groningen colloquium.

Language proficiencies

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Dutch | (Native language) |
| English | (C2) |
| German | (B2) |
| Latin & Ancient-Greek | (Basic reading skills) |



Scope

Founded in 1988 by Conrado Eggers Lan (Universidad de Buenos Aires), *Méthexis* (*MET*) seeks to promote studies and research in the history of ancient philosophy (throughout the course of its development), so as to offer scholars a venue for discussing and comparing their results. Within this general framework, the journal stands out on account of two distinguishing features: 1) it welcomes, or indeed solicits, contributions reflecting different schools of thought and methodological approaches, be they analytical, hermeneutical, historical or chiefly philological contributions; 2) the journal values the wide range of national traditions, including – as far as this is possible – from a linguistic perspective, as it accepts contributions in five languages (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish); by doing so, the journal seeks to present itself as an "international" publication, in the strictest sense of the term.

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θ → *th*

κ → *k*

ρ → *rh*

υ → *y*

φ → *ph*

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ω → *o*

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Book reviews should be organized as follows: Author/Editor(s) [surname, followed by initial(s)]. Year of publication. Title (including subtitle) in italics. City: Publisher, number of pages, cover (HB or PB), price, ISBN. This information is followed by a line of white, after which the review starts. The reviewer's name (flush right) and affiliation (flush left) should be placed at the end.

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Notes and chronics should not exceed 4000 words. There should be no abstract or footnotes. Notes (unlike the articles) are intended for the discussion of very precise and circumscribed issues or problems, including philological aspects of philosophical (Greek and Roman) texts. All notes will undergo double-anonymous peer review prior to acceptance. The Editors reserve the right to reject any note that does not meet the requirements.

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References

The journal uses in text references and a reference list at the end of the manuscript. In the text, the reference should be: Author (2021: 105).



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Reference List

Journal Article

Author, A. (2021), "The Title of the Article", *Journal Title* 28: 1–15.

Gabbe, M. (2008), "Theophrastus and the Intellect as Mixture", *Elenchos* 29: 61–90.

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Ancient Greek and Latin Quotations (Main Text and Footnotes)

Some examples:

68 B 119 DK = VII 27 D274 LM

Pl. *Resp.* I 327c 1-2

Plat. *Soph.* 254d–255c

Aristot. *Metaph.* A 9, 991b 3-4

Epicur. *Nat.* XXXIV (*PHerc.* 1431), col. (coll.) XXIV 4-6 Leone

Cic. *Fin.* III 42-44

Aet. IV 11, 1 M-R (*SVF* II 83)

Diog. Oen. Fr. 5 Smith

Plutarch. *Quaest. Conv.* III 6, 653F-654B

Diog. Laert. X 34 (260 Usener)

Plot. *Enn.* II 6 [17] 1, 1–3

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