

# On the Philosophical Evolution of Marx the Transformation from Old Philosophy to New Materialism

Min Yang

School of Marxism, Zhejiang Normal University, 321004, China

---

**Abstract:** Marx's ideology has undergone two major changes in his life, one is from idealism to materialism, the second is from old philosophy to new materialism, these two changes make Marx's thought experienced a reborn change, but also make philosophy has unprecedented scientific. Among them, in the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx proposed for the first time that the new materialism is practical materialism, and the fundamental difference between the "old" materialism and idealism lies in the understanding of "practice". The new materialism, which takes practice as its philosophical starting point, can be based on the relationship between "transforming and being transformed", thus drawing the conclusion that philosophy, above all, changes the world on the basis of interpretation, and above all, changes the world. Therefore, using the research methods of induction and deduction, this paper expounds the transformation of Marx from the old philosophy to the new materialism.

**Keywords:** Old Philosophy; New Materialism; Marx; Practice.

---

## 1. Introduction

"Theses on Feuerbach" (hereafter referred to as "Theses"), written in 1845, is a political critical article published by Marx and an important symbol of the process of the transformation of Marx's thought from the old philosophy to the new materialism. In the 1840s, Marx's thought was inextricably related to the thoughts and schools of many writers at that time, especially Hegel's philosophy and Feuerbach's philosophy, which were the most important reference frame for Marx to grasp the world, understand and interpret The Times. Marx also made different degrees of criticism and transcendence to other schools of thought that appeared at that time. The publication of "Theses" in 1845, with the "new materialism" outline of the elaboration, to achieve a violent attack on the old philosophy, and "practice" category to build its theoretical foundation, so as to clear the ideological boundary with the old philosophy at that time. As for Marx, we can see from the Theses that Marx carefully considered and sorted out the whole progress of philosophy up to his date, and he believed that there were two kinds of perspectives for caring for the world, namely materialism and idealism, and these two perspectives for caring for the world also brought Marx almost different and enlightening ways of thinking. Marx made a profound tracing and refutation of the essence of these two different perspectives, so he also showed almost different critical effects. Looking back at the historical trend, Marx's philosophy is a qualitative transcendence of all the existing philosophies at that time, and this transcendence is already reflected in the Theses.

## 2. Refutation: The Essence of Materialism and Perceptual Intuition

Marx divided the materialism at that time into two kinds, the first kind Marx called the essence of materialism, including ancient simple materialism and vulgar materialism. Ancient naive materialism believes that the origin of all things

in the world can be summarized into several material elements, such as gold, wood, water, fire and earth, and all the existing things in the world are composed of one or several elements in the final analysis, and then derived the theoretical thought of Yin and Yang, trying to reflect various natural scenes in the world by looking for some specific physical state. No matter how the thinkers at that time studied this kind of thought, they failed to understand the essential difference between matter and material form, which is also the fatal defect of ancient naive materialism. Vulgar materialism recognizes the objective existence of matter, thinks that matter and consciousness only belong to the connection of physiological structure, thus ignoring the dialectical relationship between the two, and does not skip consciousness from the category of matter. In their view, "consciousness is the bile secreted by the human brain." This completely obliterates the distinction between consciousness and matter. In short, the main point of existential materialism is the primacy of objects. What is object supremacy? That is, object primacy - when we think about what the world is, we mechanically think of the other as what it is in relation to the self. Therefore, the essence of materialism has led to a result, that is, in the process of focusing on the world, it only focuses on the object, which gradually appears the tendency of "hostile to people", resulting in the process of trying to understand the nature of human beings, and gradually away from the original face of human beings.

The other kind of materialism is Feuerbach's materialism. Can Feuerbach's materialism surpass or replace the vulgar materialism that preceded it? The answer is no. Feuerbach's materialism is the representative of German classical philosophy at that time, and is the synthesis of modern scientific achievements. Feuerbach recognized the objectivity of matter, he criticized Hegel's speculative philosophy with his perceptual thinking, refuted idealism with perceptual intuition as a theoretical weapon, and brought materialism back to the mainstream of philosophy. But Feuerbach's thought did not break through the bottleneck of perceptual intuition, he lost dialectics in the simple perceptual intuition,

and could not transition to a "new" system. Feuerbach's materialism, therefore, is still only "half" materialism. Feuerbach's materialism no longer has the element of "hostility to man" in the materialism of the essence. Feuerbach's materialism critically puts forward the principle and starting point of "humanism", but it also brings other drawbacks.

Feuerbach "understands the object, reality, sensibility only in the form of object or intuition", not "from the subject", Feuerbach does not leap out of the boundary between "perceptual intuition" and "perceptual object". First of all, Feuerbach regards the objective world only as the object to be known, and the subject of knowledge, that is, man, as a passive subject. But cognition is only the negative and intuitive reflection of the subject to the object, that is, the object is regarded as the material world after leaving the practice of man. On the other hand, Feuerbach's materialism involves "man", a man who thinks, and whose thinking can be grasped, but the "man" in Feuerbach's materialism is only a product of the long-term development of nature, a natural man and an abstract man, not a living man in reality. Finally, Feuerbach regards the objective world only as an object of knowledge, not as an object that can be transformed and practiced. He excluded practice from epistemology, thus denying the active role of man. Feuerbach fantasized about studying everything about man through the method of natural science, but he did not understand how to correctly reflect objective things in combination with practice, and on the basis of practice, he unified the two acts of man's understanding of the world and his transformation of the world, and did not understand that practice is a unified process of subjective initiative and objective material movement.

### **3. Reason and Self-Supremacy: Idealism in the Fence of Thinking**

Idealism holds that the first origin of the world is spirit rather than matter, that thinking is not determined by existence, but objective existence is determined by subjective thinking, that there is thought before there is existence, and that matter is the product of consciousness. In terms of the contribution of idealism to philosophy, idealism surpasses the old materialism in some respects and takes a big step forward in terms of spiritual initiative. But Marx believes that this agency is exaggerated, and that the distorted consciousness of the agency leads to detachment from reality. Compared with the old materialism, idealism recognizes the subjective initiative of human beings, but unilaterally exaggerates the role of consciousness, inverts the relationship between matter and consciousness, regards initiative as the activity of pure ideas divorced from reality, and thus regards consciousness as the active subject of creating the material world independent of the world. On the contrary, it regards the practical activity of reality as the spiritual activity of human beings.

There are two kinds of idealism theory, the first is objective idealism. Objective idealism puts principles and laws first. From the perspective of objective idealism, man becomes a kind of idea, a kind of material body, God and so on. When people talk about man, it leaves him again, and becomes precisely the representative of a pure idea, a state of perfect perfection. Objective idealism lacks the consciousness of real existence, so that man is an essential existence. Hegelian thought is its typical representative. Hegel believes that the essence of man is in the absolute spirit, if we want to find the

absolute spirit, it is not owned by each of us individually, the absolute spirit is beyond our individual, the absolute spirit is like a field, representing the existence of all the highest realms, people must worship it. A representation of beauty should be fully dedicated to the pursuit of omniscient and all-powerful God, absolutely selfless Jesus, absolutely pure Madonna, etc., and the words absolute, ultimate, perfect mean eternity. The second is subjective idealism. The principle held by subjective idealism is "ego first". Subjective idealism exaggerates man's subjective spirit, such as man's purpose, will, feeling, experience, mind, etc. as the only reality, as the first thing. The objective things and even the whole material world are the products of this subjective spirit. It understands man as the existence of the essential self and self-consciousness, the existence of individuality, or the existence of the one. In the face of the world, subjective idealism only sees the value and meaning of the individual itself, and only understands the objective world from the perspective of self. "So far the advantage of idealism can be seen in the fact that it develops the subjectivity of man, which materialism does not notice." Materialism never pays attention to this subjectivity of man. In fact, compared with subjective idealism, the God advocated by objective idealism is just another aspect of the dual division of human beings, that is, the development of human subjectivity. Idealism takes the subject as the core of the discussion, this subject fits the human theory and psychology, but this subject is divorced from the reality and concrete existence of human beings. In view of the development of philosophy at that time, the philosophical criticism of materialism and idealism has become a major problem that Marx needs to solve urgently.

### **4. The Category of Practice -- The Transformation of Marx's "New World View"**

Based on the observation and understanding of the world, Marx began to discuss materialism with the category of "practice" as the theoretical origin, and absorbed the "rational core" of idealist dialectics, and completed the transformation of "new world outlook".

Marx's practical principle embodies his unique advanced nature. First, the subject and object embodied in practice are in an interactive movement. It does not place subject and object outside the cloud, but places both subject and object at the same time in the basis of "practice". Of course, the subject or object in practice is never invariable, but one side determines the other, and embodies the absoluteness of each other. And this determination is in a dynamic and interactive state, which restricts each other. There is no specific relation between the determinism of subject and object and its time of appearance. The existence of subject affects the existence of object or not, and the existence of both is in a unified interactive movement. Second, the resolution and development of the contradiction between subject and object in practice. There will be contradictions between the subject and the object, and the solution of the contradiction is gradual, can not be achieved overnight. The real conditions of development will prompt both the subject and the object to relate and reflect. When the state of the subject and the object does not meet the conditions of the real development, the subject will put forward some demand for the object, but this demand must be satisfied within the scope of the conditions of the object. Correspondingly, the change of the object also

draws out the new demands of the subject's own power. From this, we can see that the interaction process of subject and object is the basis of practical activities, and at the same time, the practical process is not talked about by many philosophers, but in the real life of human beings, in the concrete activities of human beings.

In view of this, Marx's materialist philosophy has initially realized the theoretical innovation of transcendental metaphysics. Marx abandoned the way of thinking of returning to the subject individual, but moved towards a more realistic path. Marx's materialism does not mean that it does not study man, that it is not a man who has retreated to the abstract form of materialism, but a man who is in reality and in an active state. Why does Marx refer to man as a "sensible, real activity" instead of using the word "being"? "Existence" is a rigid, static and lifeless state, and the starting point of the so-called philosophy is the "perceptual" activity of reality, from "existence" to the explanation of "activity", so it involves the unsolved problems about the nature of man, which can be solved by returning to "activity".

As for the question of the origin of the world, Marx believed that only the combination of the abstract origin and the basis of reality when caring for the world can be regarded as true philosophy. Neither materialism nor idealism did this at that time, and they only lingered in the world of subjective conjecture, which was still an abstract theory lacking scientific basis. In fact, only the way of thinking based on practice can better understand the relationship between subject and object, existence and consciousness, and further explore their own basis and solution. Practice, however, requires the active subject to return to the real objective world, rather than relying on subjective creation. The practice proposed by Marx does not belong to the life of some individual and individual, but to the life of the general population, which constitutes the majority of the people in the social group.

Thus, Marx's way of thinking began to change, he believed that the original philosophy should be renewed by itself. It turns out that the construction form of speculative philosophy needs to define a philosophical principle and create another core category on the basis of this principle, and then deduce the framework of the whole philosophy. Thus, with the advancement of theoretical construction, this structure evolved to become more and more large and complex, and all the content and deducing principles of its philosophy itself came from non-philosophy. On the contrary, it is practice that determines the understanding of the problems and the solution of the problems in the content of philosophy itself. Therefore, different from the previous philosophy, the philosophy understood by Marx mainly deals with the relationship between man and the world, and this relationship between man and nature must constantly change its form and content with the change and development of practice. Only this philosophy can form an interactive relationship with society. The original philosophy of a very static logical structure at the top of the theoretical system and tends to be a closed system should be replaced, and give way to a very dynamic philosophical force, which should keep the dynamic change of content and the goal state of open structure and transformation with the changes of The Times, so as to exert its unique philosophical theoretical effect. In the classification of philosophical schools in the 1840s, Marxism should be classified as materialism, but it is different from the materialism of Marx's time. So he classified his ideas as "new

materialism." After combining the scientific basis of materialism and idealism, "new materialism" has formed a theoretical construction completely different from the old materialism in terms of the origin of the world, consciousness and existence as the first, dialectics and other contents. Marxist materialism is based on dialectic thought and takes practice as the theoretical origin. From the scientific aspect, it surpasses the defects of idealist theory system which is separated from practice and only abstract. American Professor Rockmore also put forward that "Marx, after inheriting the scientific dialectic core of idealism, surpasses the basis of materialism, which is similar to a very combined existence of humanism and materialism."

Ideology is an ideological system that systematically reflects social and economic forms, political systems and cultural patterns. Ideology is a subvocabulary that describes philosophical categories, representing a collection of ideas, and belongs to a neutral noun. Marx believes that the interpretation of the word "ideology" in the German Ideology is not the sum of the existing ideas and values at that time. Marx used "ideology" to describe the theoretical faction represented by the young Hegelians and Feuerbach, which reversed the relationship between social consciousness and social existence. This purely ideological and theoretical activity is completely divorced from reality, completely separates the thinking of the ruling class from that of the ruling class, completely disregards the conditions of production at the time, and mixes ideas with speculative concepts.

Marx then began to understand the way of thinking of philosophy and philosophy itself, and re-reflected on the role of "philosopher". Marx believed that individuals who only call for a single life experience around ideological and theoretical activities cannot meet the standard of "philosophers". Language is the physical shell of thought, and theory is only the actual structure of consciousness, which does not produce the power to change the world. Therefore, the philosopher's field of activity should not be simply limited to speculative philosophy, but should include the actual destiny and prospect of the whole human being while engaged in ideological and theoretical activities, and listen to the common demands from the standpoint of the public, not only representing the interests of a small number of people, but should express the general will of the majority of people in society. Only this can be called a philosopher. Therefore, Marx believes that all philosophers, including young Hegel, used to try to explain the world in different ways, looking for a logical consistency, and it is important to change the world on the basis of explanation, and the most critical is to change the world. Philosophy only gives methodological enlightenment to people from the way of thinking, and it must take it as its inescapable responsibility to transform the world and bring human beings towards a better reality. Therefore, even if human beings appear in the field of philosophical speculation how amazing works, show how remarkable achievements, in fact, can not replace any concrete practical operation in reality.

Marx's critical process of idealism and old materialism inherited the abstract core of idealism and the perceptual concrete of old materialism, and unified the two scientifically, thus initially forming a brand new world view derived from "old materialism" and constructing a philosophical system of "new materialism" with practice as the theoretical core. It also clarified the philosophical boundary between idealism and

old materialism, and realized the unprecedented profound transformation and historical transcendence of philosophical thinking mode.

## References

- [1] XIE Daohua. Ancient Natural science and naive materialist worldview [J]. Theoretical Construction,2006, (05):5-7.
- [2] Zhang Yiming. Crossing the perplexities of the old philosophy: Reading the last two Theses on Feuerbach [J]. Journal of Harbin Polytechnic,2013.
- [3] Wu Tingting, Zhang Tongtong. Engels' Criticism of Vulgar materialism [J]. Journal of Harbin University, 2019,41(05):6-9.
- [4] Wang Zhijun. On Marx's Criticism of Religion [D]. Doctoral Dissertation of Heilongjiang University,2005.
- [5] Ministry of Education senior high school ideological and political course standard experimental textbook compilation group. People's Education Press,2004.
- [6] Collected Works of Marx and Engels: Volume 1 [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009.
- [7] Bao Dawei. The "Rematerialization" of historical materialism as the task of The Times [J]. Modern Philosophy, 2021 (03) : 1-9.