

Dialectical Materialism and its Theory of Knowledge

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Abstract

This article explores the basic tenets of dialectical materialism and its theory of knowledge. It is relevant to identifying the basics of dialectical materialistic philosophy and its cognitive theory. The article addresses the research problems concerning the primacy of thought or matter, the acceptance of the concept of the immutability of the cosmos or motion of matter, the source of knowledge, the validity of truth and morals, stages of cognition, and the utility of knowledge in changing the world. The article deals with the research problems through the review-based analysis of Marxist criticisms of the dialectical materialist philosophy and its cognitive theory. The article reveals that dialectical materialist philosophy believes in the primacy of matter and the motion of matter. The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge regards the objective world as the primary source of knowledge, rejects the idea of absolute and immutable truths and morals, believes in the dialectical relationship between perceptual and logical knowledge, and gives high priority to the application of the gained knowledge in changing the existing world.

Keywords: cognition, dialectics, idealism, materialism, metaphysics & theory

Introduction

Dialectical materialism is the key to Marxism. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels borrowed the concepts of materialism from Ludwig Feuerbach and of dialectics from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and combined them with the unified doctrine of dialectical materialism. The dialectical materialism, after its combination, fundamentally differs from Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's dialectics. The Marxist critics elaborate on the dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge which differs from the cognitive theory of idealism. This fundamentally differs from metaphysics and agnosticism. The dialectical materialist cognitive theory takes the outer world as the source of knowledge and believes in the enrichment of perceptual knowledge to the level of logical knowledge. In this sense, it basically differs from rationalism and empiricism. The dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge is a dynamic theory that comprehends the laws that govern the cosmos and moreover, believes in its application in changing the world. The study has gone through various Marxist critics and revealed the aforementioned tenets of the dialectical materialist philosophy and its cognitive theory.

Dialectical Materialism

The essential issue in all philosophies is how thinking relates to being or the mind to nature. The fundamental question in philosophy is which comes first—mind or nature? The

response has a direct bearing on the world's continued existence. There are two possibilities: either the world in which we live was created by an outside force, such as God, or it has existed forever. The philosophy has been split into two opposing camps: idealism and materialism, in an attempt to address this fundamental question of the world's existence. As Engels notes:

Philosophers were divided into two great camps according to their answer to this question. Those who asserted the primacy of mind over nature and, in the last analysis, therefore, assumed some kind of creation of the world – and this creation often becomes far more intricate and impossible among the philosophers, for example, Hegel, than in Christianity – formed the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belonged to the various schools of materialism. ("Ludwig" 17)

The idealist philosophers include those who promoted the supremacy of thought over nature or believed that God created the world. The remainder of them is classified as belonging to one of the various schools of materialism since they insisted that nature is superior to thought and held to the idea that the world is eternal. Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov adds: "The main distinguishing feature of materialism is that it eliminates the *dualism of mind and matter, of God and nature*, and considers nature to be the basis of those phenomena which, ever since the days of primitive hunting tribes, men have explained by the activity of objectified *souls* or *spirits*" (81). This demonstrates the long-standing triumph of materialism over idealism, as nature was formerly worshipped even by the most primitive nomadic tribes, objectifying souls or spirits.

Marxism is viewed as the philosophy of materialism because it aligns itself with one of these two philosophical schools (Lenin "*Three Sources*" 2). Marx and Engels frequently cite Feuerbach as the philosopher who gave their brand of materialism its due. Feuerbach's materialism is distinct from Marx and Engels' materialism, nevertheless. There are many similarities between Feuerbach's materialism and the materialism of the eighteenth century. Due to its lack of understanding of the cosmos as a process in which matter is engaged in continuous historical evolution, it was mechanistic and anti-dialectic (Engels "Ludwig" 22). Materialism advocated by Feuerbach reflected the notion of the universe's immutability, which made it metaphysical. It acknowledges the superiority of matter over thought but opposes the dialectical change and motion of matter.

Feuerbach's materialism is not all that Marx and Engels advocate. They promoted materialism by tying it to the innovations of German classical philosophy, particularly the Hegelian system (Lenin "*Three Sources*" 3). They used Hegel as a model for their dialectic, but Marx and Engels' dialectic is not the same as Hegel's. Marx asserts:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else

than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. ("Afterword" 29)

Hegel describes the dialectics of the real world as reflections of this or that stage of the absolute Idea, and the process of thinking, or "the Idea," as a producer of the real world. Conversely, Marx views "the Idea" as reflections of the material world because he is a materialist. Engels contends, completely in line with Marx's views on dialectics:

Hegel was an idealist. To him the thoughts within his brain were not the more or less abstract images of actual things and processes, but on the contrary, things and their development were only the realized images of the "Idea", existing somehow from eternity before the world existed. Consequently everything was stood on its head and the actual interconnection of things in the world was completely reversed. ("Socialism" 69)

Hegel, an idealist, believed that the abstract idea had existed all the time before the world's creation. Hegel holds that the contradictions in ideas are what cause thinking to advance, whereas Marx and Engels, who are materialists, believe that concepts are only reflections of the contradictions in the material world. Hegel's dialectic thus "stood on its head," according to Marx and Engels, who then "put it on its feet" (Engels "Ludwig" 41).

Plekhanov explains in simple words how Hegel's dialectic differs from Marx's and Engels' dialectic: "In Hegel the course of things is determined by the course of ideas. With us, the *course of ideas* is defined by the *course of things* and the *course of thought* by the *course of life*" (96). Marx and Engels bring Hegel's dialectics from heaven to earth by integrating it with Feuerbach's materialism. Marxist philosophy, often known as dialectical materialism, is the result of the synthesis of Hegel's dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism. Dialectics and materialism are said to be organically connected in Marxism. Before Marx and Engels, metaphysics held materialism captive, and idealists developed dialectic. Marx and Engels purified dialectics of idealism, reformed it along a materialist axis, and completely reshaped materialism in the spirit of dialectics. Thus, Marx and Engels combine dialectics with materialism to create a unified theory known as dialectical materialism. According to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin: "It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is *dialectical*, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is *materialistic*" ("Dialectical" 1). Dialectical materialism uses the tools of dialectics to study and comprehend natural occurrences while maintaining a materialistic interpretation of them. Dialectical materialism is a scientific theory that primarily studies matter and believes in the motion and the laws of motion of matter in every phenomenon of nature.

Dialectical Materialist Theory of Knowledge

The materialist theory of knowledge acknowledges that the things that our minds reflect exist outside of us. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin highlights: ". . . the materialist theory, the theory of the reflection of objects by our mind, is here presented with absolute clarity: things exist outside us. Our perceptions and ideas are their images." The materialist theory of cognition believes the objective world to be our source of knowledge in contrast to idealism, which

views objects as the reflection of an absolute idea. Our knowledge's scope expands as a result of mental interactions with nature. The material theory of knowledge, in contrast to agnosticism, asserts the presence and knowability of the material world. Lenin points out: “. . . the materialist affirms the existence and knowability of things-in-themselves. The agnostic *does not even admit the thought* of things-in-themselves and insists that we can know nothing certain about them” (“Transcendence” 119, 117). Agnostics question the authenticity of knowledge of the outside world because they believe that the outer world transcends sensations, while materialists hold that our senses accurately represent the outside world.

The materialist theory of knowledge alone cannot answer some fundamental questions. Is it possible to fully comprehend the objective world? Exist any unchangeable, absolute, everlasting, and ultimate truths? It is quite difficult to provide solutions to these problems using merely the tools of a materialist theory of knowledge. In the absence of a dialectical theory, the materialist theory will be flawed. Plekhanov highlights: “. . . *the materialist interpretation of nature lies at the basis of our dialectics*. It rests on this basis, if materialism were fated to fall, it too would fall. And vice versa. Without dialectics, the materialist theory of knowledge is incomplete, one-sided, nay, more, *a materialist theory of knowledge is impossible*” (95). The dialectical viewpoint maintains that nothing in the objective universe is unchangeable. The dialectical theory rejects the notion of absolute, eternal, ultimate, and unchanging truths because everything in the outer world is constantly changing. It also does not acknowledge the possibility of fully understanding the external universe. Engels contends:

Dialectical philosophy dissolves all conceptions of final, absolute truth and of absolute states of humanity corresponding to it. Nothing final, absolute or sacred can endure in its presence. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything and nothing can endure in its presence except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascent from the lower to the higher, of which it is itself the mere reflection in the thinking brain. (“Ludwig” 8)

The human thinking brain cannot fully capture the image of the objective world since everything has a transient nature and there is a continuous process of arriving and departing. When we understand something, another is lost in the process of learning about the real world. This demonstrates why there are no absolute, everlasting, ultimate, or unchanging truths and why we cannot fully comprehend the world.

The dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge acknowledges the possibilities of gaining knowledge of the real world to the maximum possible extent. Unfortunately, we still lack sufficient understanding of the objective world to adequately characterize it and spread its timeless truths. Scientists still have a lot of research to undertake in the areas of “inanimate nature,” “living organisms,” and “the historical ones” (Engels “Morals” 109, 110, 111). In the fields of mathematics, astronomy, mechanics, physics, chemistry, geology, and not to mention the social sciences, there are no unchanging facts. In the sphere of natural science, new discoveries are made daily, and the old are superseded and rendered obsolete. In the

field of social sciences, human conditions, social relationships, and legal and political structures, along with their ideal superstructure of philosophy, religion, and the arts, among others, change with time. As a result, the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge only considers knowledge as a relative concept. Engels clarifies:

Knowledge is here essentially relative, because it is limited to the investigation of the interconnections and consequences of certain forms of society and state which exist only in a particular epoch and among particular peoples and are transitory by their very nature. Therefore, anyone who sets out here to hunt down final and ultimate truths, genuine, absolutely immutable truths, will bring home but little, apart from platitudes and commonplaces of the sorriest kind – for example, that generally men cannot live without working; that up to the present they have for the most part been divided into rulers and ruled; that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821; and so on. ("Morals" 112)

Every truth is contextual to a specific time and place. The truths alter with the passage of time, and they vary depending on where individuals live. Only a few general truths—such as the day Napoleon died, the fact that two plus two equals four, and the fact that birds have beaks—can be declared unchanging and everlasting.

In addition, there are no morals that are timeless and unchangeable. Each moral code is appropriate for the time and place it was created. The first morality was Christian-feudal, which was separated into Catholic and Protestant moralities. Then, modern-bourgeois morality appeared, which would later evolve into proletariat morality (Engels "Morals" 112). Since moral dogmas are not eternal, ultimate, or unchangeable, the dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge opposes any attempt to impose them on us. No moral code transcends human history. Engels insists:

. . . that so far every moral theory has, in the last analysis, been the product of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And just as society has so far moved in class antagonisms, so morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or, as soon as the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its revolt against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. ("Morals" 118-19)

Every morality is a class morality since society is split into oppressor and oppressed classes. Either morality upholds the interests of the oppressed class in a class society or defends the ruling class's dominance. No morality transcends class morality in a society where there are class conflicts.

Understanding the objective reality is the key to gaining knowledge. Through our participation in social practice, we are able to understand the objective world. Mao Tsetung claims: "Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone; they come from three kinds of social practice, the struggle for production, the class struggle and scientific experiment" (502). When a person engages in social activity, ". . . countless phenomena of the objective external world are reflected in a man's brain through his five

sense organs – the organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch” (Tsetung "Where Do" 502). This is the first step of cognition in the process of learning when we pick up sense experiences and perceptions. Man's sense perceptions and impressions are repeatedly experienced while social practice goes on, and then a dramatic shift or mental leap occurs, leading to the formation of concepts. After examining the concepts, one is able to make logical deductions using judgment and inference. The second step of cognition is this. Mao exemplifies:

It can be seen that the first step in the process of cognition is contact with the objects of the external world; this belongs to the stage of perception. The second step is to synthesize the data of perception by arranging and reconstructing them; this belongs to the stage of conception, judgment and inference. It is only when the data of perception are very rich (not fragmentary) and correspond to reality (are not illusory) that they can be the basis for forming correct concepts and theories. ("Practice" 74)

According to the dialectical materialist theory, knowledge is acquired in two consecutive stages; the stage of perception and the stage of conception, judgment, and inference. The theory holds that for knowledge to be considered mature, trustworthy, and scientific, it must successfully complete these two stages. If perceptual knowledge does not advance to the level of rational knowledge, it will be insufficient, and rational knowledge will not be trustworthy if it does not rely on perceptual knowledge.

Rational knowledge depends upon perceptual knowledge. Mao insists: “Anyone who thinks that rational knowledge need not be derived from perceptual knowledge is an idealist” ("Practice" 74). Knowledge comes from experience since no one can become knowledgeable if they are unfamiliar with the real world. Our knowledge originates from the outer world. If a person professes to learn without experience and solely relies on reason, they are a "rationalist" and their information is unreliable. A person is an "empiricist" and their knowledge is limited and superficial if they solely trust their sense perceptions and do not feel the need to advance their perceptual knowledge to the level of rational knowledge. Empiricism does not accurately portray things and their true nature. The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge, therefore, acknowledges the dialectical relationship between perceptual and rational knowledge. Mao elaborates:

Rational knowledge depends upon perceptual knowledge and perceptual knowledge remains to be developed into rational knowledge – this is the dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge. In philosophy, neither “rationalism” nor “empiricism” understands the historical or the dialectical nature of knowledge, and although each of these schools contains one aspect of the truth (here I am referring to materialist, not to idealist, rationalism and empiricism), both are wrong on the theory of knowledge as a whole. The dialectical materialist movement of knowledge from the perceptual to the rational holds true for a minor process of cognition (for instance, knowing a single thing or task) as well as for a major process of cognition (for instance, knowing a whole society or a revolution). ("Practice" 75-6)

A person who relies on one of these two types of knowledge commits an error of "rationalism" or "empiricism." Empiricism does not elevate perceptual knowledge to the same level as logical knowledge, while rationalism rejects perceptual knowledge. For comprehending and having knowledge of everything from minor to significant issues, the dialectical materialist flow of knowledge from perceptual to rational is essential.

The dialectical materialist process of gaining knowledge does not end only in understanding the dialectical relationship between perceptual and rational knowledge. According to Marxist theory, comprehending the laws that govern the objective universe is less vital than the application of knowledge of these laws in changing the world. In his maxim, Marx makes this point: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" ("Theses"32). The core of the Marxist theory is this. It is worthless to have knowledge or a theory that is not used to alter the real world. The world is changing continuously according to its own rules, but it is our responsibility to quicken this movement in a constructive direction. According to the Marxist viewpoint, a theory is crucial to bringing about social change, as Lenin puts it: "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement" ("Engels" 28). Marxism has placed a strong focus on the value of theory since it could guide action. According to Stalin, the revolutionary theory illuminates the path of revolutionary practice: "Theory becomes purposeless if it is not connected with revolutionary practice, just as practice gropes in the dark if its path is not illumined by revolutionary theory" ("Theory" 22). The link between theory and practice is dialectical. A correct theory is meaningless if we do not put it into practice. "Knowledge begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge which is acquired through practice must then return to practice" (Tsetung "Practice" 76). The validity of the theory developed through practice will not be verified until we apply it to new practice: "The knowledge gained in the first stage is applied in social practice to ascertain whether the theories, policies, plans or measures meet with the anticipated success. Generally speaking, those that succeed are correct and those that fail are incorrect" (Tsetung "Where Do" 503). The theory's accuracy is tested, and it develops as a result of the application in practice. This means that learning and developing knowledge via practice continues unabated throughout infinity. Finally, Mao says:

Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectical materialistic theory of the unity of knowing and doing. ("Practice" 82)

Knowledge does not fall from the sky or originate from God's mercy. Knowledge is not a product of the human intellect apart from practice; rather, it has a living link with practice, and human knowledge only arises and develops from practice. This is the core of the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge.

Conclusion

The study reveals that dialectical materialism is found to be a scientific philosophy that acknowledges the primacy of matter and motion of matter and dialectical materialist cognitive theory focuses on the objective world as the source of knowledge. Marx and Engels remove idealism from Hegel's dialectics and metaphysics from Feuerbach's materialism and make them new and scientific combining them into an organic unity of dialectical materialism. The cognitive theory based on dialectical materialism recognizes the presence and knowability of the cosmos and gathers knowledge interacting with the cosmos. The theory believes in the transient nature of every phenomenon of the universe and claims there are no absolute, everlasting, ultimate, or unchanging truths and morals. It defines two stages of cognition: the stage of perception and the stage of conception, judgment, and inference. This makes it different from rationalism and empiricism. The theory does not stop at comprehending the laws that govern the world but gives especial emphasis to apply those laws in changing the world. The theory holds that the knowledge comes through social practice, it is tested and developed through practice. This demonstrates how dialectical materialism is a revolution against the idealist and metaphysical worldview, and how dialectical materialist cognitive theory offers up new avenues for acquiring scientific knowledge and using it to alter the course of events.

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