# **Return to the Theoretical Source of Marxist Philosophical System: Reinterpreting Marxist Ontology and Epistemology**

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**For Marxist philosophy, its basic theory is certainly practical ontology**. Different from traditional philosophy which focuses on “how the world is possible”, Marxist philosophy focuses on “how human liberation is possible”. The reason why Marxist philosophy has caused a revolutionary change in the history of philosophy is that its theoretical premise is to transform the theoretical theme of philosophy from “how the world is possible” to “how human liberation is possible”. Human liberation is the real sun around which Marxist philosophy revolves.

　　Marx was a German, but he lived and settled in Britain for 34 years in his 65-year "travail". The epoch-making "Communist Manifesto" was first published in London in English and German in 1848. Marx not only criticized German classical philosophy, but also criticized British classical economics. It was in this dual criticism process of philosophical criticism and economic criticism that Marx founded the philosophy of "new materialism". Marx not only criticized the German system as "the open completion of the old system", but more importantly, criticized the "typical" capitalist mode of production - the British mode of production. "Capital" "mainly uses Britain as an example in theoretical exposition" (Marx). It was in this critical process that Marx founded political economics with capital criticism as its core. Marx was born in Trier, Germany, but he spent a long time writing in the British Museum in London, England, and was buried in London Highgate Cemetery. It can be said that Marx's main theoretical and practical activities throughout his life were closely related to Britain, and he had an "indissoluble bond" with Britain. Therefore, I am grateful to Springer Nature for publishing this book in English (published by Beijing Normal University Press). I dedicate this English version of this book to this German philosopher who is buried in the Highgate Cemetery in London and works at the British Museum in London, to express my deep respect for this "millennial thinker".

The "foundation" of the doctrine

　　Any discipline or doctrine has its own basic theory. If a discipline or doctrine is compared to a building, then the basic theory is the "foundation" of the building, which fundamentally determines the scale, structure and height of the building. The same is true for philosophy and Marxist philosophy. As far as philosophy is concerned, its basic theory is ontology. People live in the world and always desire and strive to understand and grasp the world at the most profound level. According to their "nature", human thinking always tends to this "most profound level", always trying to discover and grasp the "ultimate existence" of the world, and on this basis, make an "ultimate explanation" of the world, thus providing the ultimate basis and highest standard for human existence and activities. As the contemporary American philosopher Watofsky said, "There is a sense of system and a demand for clarity and unity of our thinking - they enter the root of our thinking activities and are completely possible to enter deeper - they are derived from the species we belong to and the world we live in." The problem of "deriving" from the "species" and "nature" of human beings and the world they live in, and "entering the root of thinking activities" is the problem of ontology.

　　In its original meaning, ontology is concerned with the question of "how the world is possible". This is "the cause of critical and systematic exploration of the principles of existence and the origin and structure of existing things" (Watowski). It is a kind of questioning that traces back to the source and gets to the bottom of things. In the words of traditional Chinese philosophy, it is "seeking from top to bottom", "investigating the relationship between heaven and man", and "analyzing the principles of all things". In essence, ontology is to seek the "ultimate existence" or "highest cause" of the world, to find the ultimate basis and highest standard for human existence and activities, so as to provide people with "the basis for peace of mind" or "the highest support point" to realize the ultimate care for human beings themselves. This is the rationality and "legitimacy" of the existence of ontology and its position as a basic theory in philosophy.

　　Because of this, any kind of philosophy has its own ontology, and on this basis, it builds its own theoretical system. Although modern Western analytical philosophy "rejected" ontology in the early days, believing that the "only task" of philosophy was logical analysis and language criticism, as it moved from the field of syntax to the field of semantics, analytical philosophers became increasingly aware that the meaning of words and the conscious activities of word users were closely related to the life world, and that language issues were closely related to ontology. Therefore, analytical philosophers "mutinized" in the later period, not only proposing "ordinary language philosophy", but also proposing "ontological commitment". Quine clearly pointed out: "When I explore the ontological commitment of a doctrine or a set of theories, what I ask is what exists according to that theory... The question of the ontological commitment of a theory is the question of what exists according to that theory." Quine's "ontological commitment" actually changed the early position of analytical philosophy on "rejection" of ontology. In fact, it re-explored the ontological problem in the way of analytical philosophy and reaffirmed the fundamental position of ontology in philosophy. From "rejecting" ontology to "committing" ontology, this major change in analytical philosophy once again shows that no matter how far philosophers wander driven by their imagination, returning to the basic theory of ontology is their universal destiny, just as the "wanderer" will eventually return to the "loving mother's" hearth.

Revolutionary Change

　　For Marxist philosophy, its basic theory is practical ontology. Different from traditional philosophy which focuses on “how the world is possible”, Marxist philosophy focuses on “how human liberation is possible”. The reason why Marxist philosophy has caused a revolutionary change in the history of philosophy is that its theoretical premise is to transform the theoretical theme of philosophy from “how the world is possible” to “how human liberation is possible”. Human liberation is the real sun around which Marxist philosophy revolves.

　　The exploration of human liberation must be expanded and deepened to the exploration of human existence and ontology. According to Marx's point of view, the "first premise" of human history is the existence of living individuals; for living individuals to "exist", they must engage in material production activities and produce their own means of subsistence; "as soon as people begin to produce their own means of subsistence... people themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals." Therefore, people's "first historical activity" is material production activities, and the "first fact that needs to be confirmed" is the relationship between man and nature. "Any historical record should start from these natural foundations and their changes in the course of history due to human activities."

　　It is from the "first premise", "first historical activity" and "first fact that needs to be confirmed" of human history that Marxist philosophy discovered that practice is a unique life activity of human beings, which constitutes the way of human existence and the ontology of survival; "consciousness can only be the existence that is realized at any time", it is not consciousness that determines "people's existence", but "people's social existence determines people's consciousness"; "people's existence is their real life process", and the essence of social life is practical, "the mode of production of material life determines the process of the entire social life, political life and spiritual life", therefore, "ideas should be explained from the perspective of material practice" (Marx).

　　People always live in the real world, and "people are the world of people" (Marx). To change people, we must first change the world. As Marx said, "the problem is to change the world." Therefore, the exploration of human liberation must be expanded and deepened to the exploration of the foundation and ontology of the real world. The "real world" or "existing world" mentioned by Marx certainly includes the natural world, but this natural world is not the "original ecological" natural world, but the "anthropological natural world" (Marx). According to Marx's point of view, for human history, the natural world has a "priority", but "the natural world that exists before human history" or "the natural world that has not yet been placed under human rule" is "non-existent existence" for people. This is because only after being transformed by human practical activities can nature obtain reality for people and constitute the real world in which people live; through practical activities, people not only transform natural existence, but also enter natural existence themselves, and give natural existence the connotation of social relations, and the physical objects embody "the social relationship between people." In this sense, nature is a social category, and "people's existence" is essentially social existence.

　　The existing world is the objective world of human beings generated in human practical activities. Practice is like a converter. Through practice, people infuse their own purposes into nature, making nature the nature of society and "historical nature"; at the same time, nature enters society and becomes an internal element of society, making society a natural society and "natural history". The real world, that is, the existing world, has thus become a world of "two-in-one" nature and society. The existing world certainly cannot be attributed to human consciousness, but it also cannot be reduced to "original" nature. Human practical activities are the basis for the formation and development of the existing world, that is, people "establish their minds for heaven and earth" through their own practical activities and rebuild the world on the basis of material practice. In other words, practice is the true ontology of the existing world. This is an ontology that is constantly developing and generating. Therefore, the existing world has become an open system that is constantly forming a larger scale and more levels. Precisely because of this, Marxist philosophy "understands objects, reality, and sensibility as practice".

　　Precisely because practice is not only the way of human existence and the ontology of survival, but also the foundation and ontology of the existing world, the change of environment is consistent with the self-change of human beings, and can only be regarded and reasonably understood as "revolutionary practice". Marx and Engels clearly pointed out: "For practical materialists, that is, communists, the whole problem lies in revolutionizing the existing world, actually opposing and changing existing things", so as to construct a "union", "where the free development of each person is the condition for the free development of all people". In my opinion, this is the "ontological commitment" of Marxist philosophy. Practical ontology constitutes the basic theory of Marxist philosophy that aims to change the world, realize human liberation and the free development of human beings. Without practical ontology, constructing a Marxist philosophical system can only be like building a building on the beach.

From Ontology to Epistemology

　　The problem is that the establishment of ontology depends on the exploration of epistemology, otherwise, ontology will become dogmatism and its conclusions will be unreliable. The reason why Kant's philosophy caused a "Copernican Revolution" in the history of philosophy is that Kant raised the question of "how knowledge is possible" and believed that the exploration of the source, ability and limit of human knowledge is "the necessary preliminary preparation for promoting a thorough metaphysics." This is indeed the case. Once any effort to understand the external world continues, it will at a certain moment turn into reflection and criticism of this cognitive activity, and an "epistemological turn" will occur. Not only did Western philosophy undergo an "epistemological turn" in modern times, but Western historical philosophy also underwent an "epistemological turn" in modern times, that is, from historical ontology to historical epistemology, and from speculative historical philosophy to analytical historical philosophy.

　　The same is true of Marxist philosophy. In its founding period, Marxist philosophy focused on ontological issues, and to a certain extent, it “ignored the formal aspect for the sake of content, that is, the way and method in which these ideas, etc., were produced” (Engels), that is, the issue of epistemology. Therefore, in the later period, Marx, Engels and Lenin explored the problem of epistemology in a comprehensive and in-depth manner, and elaborated on the "most immediate and essential basis" of thinking, the relationship between ideas and matter, the dialectical method of cognition, the relationship between the "nature" and concreteness of cognition, the sensory concreteness in cognitive activities, the relationship between abstract provisions and concrete thinking, the relationship between the thinking process and the historical process, the relationship between narrative method and research method, the relationship between "the life of material" and "a priori structure", the relationship between intellectual thinking and dialectical thinking, the relationship between formal logic and dialectical logic, the relationship between "self-criticism" and "objective understanding", the relationship between conceptual dialectics and cognitive dialectics, the relationship between "logical format" and "practical format", as well as typical analysis method, "hindsight" method, scientific abstraction idea, dialectical thinking mode, dialectics is Marxist epistemology, etc., thereby supporting practical ontology with a thinking mode of practical viewpoint that includes active reflection theory and dialectical thinking mode.

　　"All social practice is essentially practical. All the mysteries that lead theory to mysticism can find their rational solution in human practice and in the understanding of this practice." (Marx) If Marxist ontology is practical ontology, and the essence of practical ontology is to "understand objects, reality, and sensibility as practice", then Marxist epistemology is the way of thinking of the practical viewpoint, and the essence of the way of thinking of the practical viewpoint is "the understanding of this practice", which is the explanatory principle of philosophical significance. Precisely because of this, Marxist epistemology provides effective epistemological support for Marxist ontology, that is, the way of thinking of the practical viewpoint provides effective epistemological support for practical ontology. In this sense, epistemology also belongs to the basic theory of Marxist philosophy.

　　Therefore, "Research on the Basic Theories of Marxist Philosophy" not only "studies" the ontology of Marxist philosophy, expounding the ontology of the existing world and human existence, the human existence and the essence of social life, social structure and historical laws, the practical basis of dialectics, and the dialectics of ontological criticism, but also "studies" the epistemology of Marxist philosophy, expounding the criticism of consciousness and ideology, the essence of cognition and the contradictory movement, the construction and reflection of thinking, dialectical thinking and the principle of subjectivity, and finally "studies" the original contradiction between freedom and necessity in human existence and development, expounding human liberation and the free development of each individual, and time is the space for human development, thus explaining that Marxist philosophy is a highly unified and integrated practical materialism, dialectical materialism, and historical materialism, and explaining the "new" of new materialism.

**"Ballast Stone" and "True Face"**

　　"The history of philosophy shows neither the stagnation of simple content without any increase, nor the process of adding new treasures to the existing foundation quietly" (Hegel). In order to better understand and grasp the basic theories of Marxist philosophy, "Research on the Basic Theories of Marxist Philosophy" places the basic theories of Marxist philosophy in the context of the history of philosophy to "study". It not only explains the true relationship between Marxist philosophy and Hegel's philosophy and Feuerbach's philosophy, but also explains the true relationship between Marxist philosophy and modern Western philosophy and postmodern philosophy. It shows that the revolutionary changes caused by Marxist philosophy in the history of philosophy are initiated and developed from the level of the basic theory of ontology, which shows that Marxist philosophy is "late philosophy". In Hegel's words, this "late philosophy" "is the most developed, richest and most profound philosophy. In it, everything that seems to have passed at first glance is preserved and included - it must be a mirror of the entire history", so "what we study in the history of philosophy is philosophy itself". "A Study of the Basic Theories of Marxist Philosophy" attempts to illustrate that Marxist philosophy, with its theoretical profundity and great advancement, has transcended the opposition between Western modern philosophy and modern philosophy, and between postmodern philosophy and modernist philosophy, thus achieving a revolutionary change in the history of philosophy and completing a "huge synthesis", which is "the way of cognition we use today to restore the relationship between ourselves and existence" (Jameson).

　　The "basic theory" of Marxist philosophy is related to the "basic viewpoints" and "basic ideas", that is, the "basic principles", but they are also different. The basic principles of Marxist philosophy, including the basic theory, are the views that appear repeatedly in the philosophical texts of Marx and Engels and have regular generalizations. These views generally support the theoretical system of Marxist philosophy. The basic theories of "material practice" and "revolutionary practice" certainly belong to the basic principles of Marxist philosophy. The conclusion of "Das Kapital" is "the basic principle of the great movement of the working class", and the economic production of each era and the resulting social structure are the basis of the political and spiritual history of that era; the entire history since the disintegration of primitive public ownership of land is the history of class struggle; and this struggle has now reached such a stage that the proletariat can no longer ultimately liberate itself if it does not also free the entire society from exploitation, oppression and class struggle forever, which constitutes the "basic idea" of the "Communist Manifesto" (Engels). Engels believed that this "basic idea" was a summary of the "law of development of human history", an idea that Marx "maturedly considered", and a view that he himself "repeatedly said". It can be said that without these basic principles constituted by the views that Marx and Engels "maturely considered" and "repeatedly stated" and have regular generalizations, the theoretical edifice of Marxist philosophy would only be a "mirage."

　　That is to say, the basic principles of Marxist philosophy include basic theories, but they are not equal to basic theories. In other words, the basic theories of Marxist philosophy belong to the basic principles, but they cannot cover the basic principles. They are only a component of the basic principles. To borrow Aristotle's words, basic theories are about "the basic principles of the highest cause". Therefore, the basic theories of Marxist philosophy are only a component of the basic principles. Of course, they are the foundation for the establishment of other basic principles. Basic theories are the "ballast stone" of the ocean-going giant ship of Marxist philosophy, or the "foundation stone" of the theoretical edifice of Marxist philosophy, which fundamentally supports the magnificent theoretical edifice of Marxist philosophy.

　　"Research on the Basic Theories of Marxist Philosophy" is the crystallization of collective wisdom. Professor Yang Geng of Beijing Normal University wrote the first, third, fourth, fifth, eighth, tenth, eleventh and thirteenth chapters, Professor Yu Wujin of Fudan University wrote the second chapter, Professor Sun Zhengyu of Jilin University wrote the sixth and seventh chapters, Yang Geng and Sun Zhengyu wrote the ninth chapter, Professor Wang Nanxi of Nankai University wrote the twelfth chapter, Professor Wu Xiaoming of Fudan University wrote the fourteenth chapter, Professor Yang Haifeng and Yang Geng of Peking University wrote the fifteenth chapter, and Professor Feng Ziyi of Peking University wrote the sixteenth chapter. In the Chinese philosophical community, this is a special group of researchers. They were born in the 1940s or 1950s and have not only experienced the "passionate years" and the "cold rain in the morning and wind in the evening" of the Republic, but have also personally experienced the era of reform and opening up and the tremendous historical achievements it has brought to China. They have not only witnessed the tremendous historical setbacks that socialism has suffered in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but have also seen the "arrogance and prejudice", willfulness and power, hypocrisy and tyranny of Western capitalism... This special and complex life experience has enabled them to have a special and profound understanding of Marxist philosophy and its basic theories, and they have tried to use "objective understanding" as the criterion in this work, and to present the basic theories of Marxist philosophy in concise language, appropriate narration and reasonable logic.

　　However, we do not think that this "Research on the Basic Theory of Marxist Philosophy" completely restores the "original appearance" of the basic theory of Marxist philosophy. These explanations are completely in line with the text of Marxist philosophy, because we are well aware of the rationality of hermeneutics and the "time gap" and "cultural gap" between us and Marx and Engels. The problems contained in the basic theory of Marxist philosophy are universal, but people always live in a specific historical environment and carry out understanding activities in a specific ideological atmosphere. Therefore, our understanding of this "universality" must have a specific historical nature. The irreproducibility of historical events, the irreversibility of historical processes, and the irreproducibility of historical environments make it impossible for us to completely return to the specific historical context in which Marx and Engels lived, and it is impossible to completely "change their perspectives" on the philosophical texts of Marx and Engels, and therefore it is impossible to completely restore the "original appearance" of the basic theory of Marxist philosophy.

　　At the same time, the study of any object or any thought is subject to the constraints of the researcher's values, knowledge structure or cultural structure. Marx once said, "Merchants who sell ore only see the commercial value of minerals, but not the beauty and characteristics of minerals"; "For ears without a sense of music, the most beautiful music is meaningless and not an object." The reason for this is determined by the values ​​and cultural structure of merchants and "ears." This is true for commercial activities and music appreciation, and it is also true for ideological research. When people study any kind of thought or choose any kind of doctrine, they are constrained by their established knowledge structure and values. As Fichte said, "What kind of person you are, what kind of philosophy you choose." Before any researcher understands a text, studies a certain thought, or chooses a certain doctrine, there is a "pre-structure of understanding" in his mind. It is this "pre-structure of understanding" that dominates the researcher's understanding dimension, the breadth and depth of research, and the ideological orientation. "Even the most unprejudiced observer cannot look at the world around him with unbiased eyes." (Griet) If you see it wrong, you will think wrong; if you think wrong, you will see it wrong. This seems to be a "paradox", but it is an objective contradiction. Understanding is always historical. It cannot go beyond the historical background and practical activities behind the researchers, nor can it go beyond the researchers' established knowledge structure and value concepts. Therefore, this book's "research" on the basic theories of Marxist philosophy is also inevitably constrained by the authors' "pre-structure of understanding".

　　The key to the problem is that we should base ourselves on contemporary practice, integrate our perspectives as researchers with the perspectives of Marx and Engels as the subjects of research, so as to transcend the traditional framework of understanding and constantly approach the "true nature" of the foundation of Marxist philosophy. "I have searched for him among the crowd for thousands of times, but when I look back, he is standing in the dimming lights." (Xin Qiji) Of course, for us, this is not only a long road of thought, but also a long road of life. To borrow the words of the British literary giant Shakespeare, this is a "glorious and narrow road". On this "glorious and narrow road", we will "seek up and down", and life and mission will go hand in hand.