

# *The Essence of "Inversion" in Dialectics: From Hegel to Marx*

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**Abstract:** The relationship between Marx's dialectics and Hegel's dialectics has always garnered significant attention. This relationship is not only a manifestation of their respective thoughts, but also an important link in the development of dialectics itself. "Inversion" is a significant philosophical concept proposed by Marx during the process of sublating Hegel's dialectics. A thorough analysis and understanding of "inversion" is a crucial link in fully grasping Marx's "critical nature". The dialectics of Marx's "critical nature" is rooted in idealism, and Marx believed that the consequence of this manifestation was the loss of the critical nature of dialectics. To correctly reveal the essence of dialectics, Marx centered on "human practice" as the fundamental method and completed the "inversion" of Hegel's dialectics. Marx inherited the "rational core" of the narrow sense dialectics, which is centered on negation, and discarded the "mystical shell" of the broad sense dialectics. At the same time, he re-inverted the relationship between spirit and reality that had been inverted in the "rational core", thereby highlighting human subjectivity and giving dialectics a revolutionary and critical nature.

**Keywords:** Dialectic, "Inversion", Marx, Hegel

## 1. Introduction

Philosophy is a theoretical worldview that profoundly reveals the essence of human existence, the nature of the relationship between humans and the world, and the laws of historical development of human society. It is also the fundamental means by which people understand, evaluate, and transform the world. The essential interpretation of the "inversion" issue between Marx's dialectical method and Hegel's dialectical method is a requirement for Marx's dialectical method as a unified worldview and methodology, and it is an important driving force for theoretical philosophy to continuously transcend limitations and move towards reality. Beginning with a fundamental definition of dialectics, this article will delve into its development, tracing its form and substance through the different perspectives of Hegel and Marx, showcasing dialectics' critical and transcendent nature.

## 2. The basic definition of dialectics

Dialectical methodology refers to the unity of thinking and empirical verification. The development of dialectical methodology, which integrates speculative and empirical aspects, follows a progressive

process. The first stage of dialectical development involves the pursuit of truth through debate, representing the speculative phase of dialectical methodology. The second stage aims to reveal the universal laws of cosmic development, representing the empirical phase of dialectical methodology. The third stage, as the synthesis of the preceding two stages, signifies the unity of speculative and empirical aspects. If the first stage can be described as dialectical epistemology and the second stage as dialectical ontology, then the third stage represents a symmetrical dialectical methodology that unifies epistemology and ontology. In summery, we can take dialectic as a philosophical approach that emphasizes the understanding of the inherent contradictions and processes of change within the natural and social world. The essence of dialectics involves the recognition that reality is dynamic and constantly evolving through the interaction of opposing forces.

Dialectics has undergone fundamental changes in its form, content and nature from pre modern times to modern times. In Marxist philosophy, dialectics is combined with materialism to form dialectical materialism, which applies these principles to the understanding of historical and social development, emphasizing the role of class struggle and economic conditions in shaping society. Given the understanding of the development of dialectics, discussing the "inversion" issue now has more references to draw upon.

### 3. Different answers to one question

Both Marx and Hegel address the concept of "dialectics" in their philosophical works. The issue of "inversion" holds a central position in understanding the relationship between Marx's dialectics and Hegel's dialectics. However, whether such an "inversion" is a physical sense of relative transformation of position or a more profound "inversion" in essence remains to be discussed. In my opinion, in order to understand and grasp the essence of Marx's reversal of Hegel's dialectics, we must explore the relationship between dialectics and traditional metaphysics and their different understandings.

It's universally acknowledged that, the relationship between thinking and being is the core of modern philosophy. In Hegel's view, philosophers in the past have mainly adopted three solutions around this basic theme: The first is the dogmatic "old metaphysics" solution, whose essence is based on intellectual thinking, seeking the unity of "thinking and being relations"; The second type is represented by Kant's critical philosophy, which directly denies the unity between thinking and existence in the critical investigation of thinking; The third, in a mystical way, attempts to rely on the "direct knowledge" of intuition and faith to achieve unity between thought and being.

For the first, Hegel argues that the "old metaphysics" failed to achieve concrete identity, but only stick to abstract identity. Namely, the "old metaphysics" relied on intellectual thinking to establish its own limits by negating the opposite. It separates the finite from the infinite, the universal from the special. The resulting rules of thought and understanding categories are separate from each other, opposed to each other.

Facing with the dogmatic theory of "old metaphysics", Kant tried to solve this dilemma. He attributed the limitation of understanding thinking to the subjectivity of thought, and believed that as long as the concept of subjectivity goes beyond the field of experience to grasp the infinite, it will fall into "Antinomy".[1] Thus Kant distinguishes between understanding and ration. Understanding belongs to the phenomenal world (dominated by finite things), ration belongs to the ontological world (dominated by infinite things), and there is an insurmountable gap between understanding and ration. In this regard, Hegel believes that Kant stands on the standpoint of dualism and subjective idealism, separating the "phenomenal world" from the "ontological world", which undoubtedly breaks the unity between thinking and existence.

Others, such as Schelling, are also trying to save this situation. They put forward the idea of "intuitive knowledge", which is the third solution. They believe that the truth of the unity of thought and existence does not require any intermediary thought activity to achieve it, but can be achieved by faith or by the "direct knowledge" of rational intuition. Hegel believes that this view narrowly limits the activity of thought to understanding thinking, denying the possibility of knowing the truth by thinking ability, and reduces the truth to the form of mysticism.[2]

In Hegel's view, the three solutions above are not desirable, only through dialectical thinking (dialectics) can people realize the true unity of thinking and existence, ration and reality. He negated the limited intellectual thinking through dialectics, regarded "objective thought" as the unity of thinking and existence, and realized the unity of opposites between thinking and existence by means of objective idealism. Hegel divided dialectics into "the broadest sense of dialectics", "broad dialectics", and "narrow dialectics", with these three concepts showing a trend of gradual refinement. "The broadest sense of dialectics" is Hegel's general term for dialectical thought that has appeared in history. For example, he referred to Zeno as the "founder of dialectics" and evaluated Plato's "Parmenides" as "the greatest work of ancient dialectics".[3][4] "Broad dialectics" is Hegel's specification of the general form of dialectics. Regarding "broad dialectics," Hegel believed that "recognizing the essence of thought as dialectics, and recognizing that as understanding, thought is inevitably caught up in its own negation and contradiction, is one of the most important aspects of logic". Hegel summarized the stages of the dialectical process as "Understanding", "Dialectical or Negative Reason" and "Speculation"[5], and the one that includes all three stages is "Broad Dialectics", while the second stage alone is "Narrow Dialectics". This "Narrow Dialectics", which is mainly characterized by the form of negation, constitutes the most important part of Hegel's dialectics. It is precisely when discussing "speculative reason" that Hegel suggests that "the meaning of speculation should be understood as being the same as what was earlier called 'mystical', especially concerning religious rites and their content". From here, we can reasonably infer that Marx used such "mysticism" as a breakthrough to identify the illusions within Hegel's speculative philosophy and the mystical shell constructed within the category of dialectics by this illusion.

#### 4. A way of inversion

Now we come to Marx. On the one hand, Marx affirmed that Hegel's dialectics had achieved the transcendence of traditional metaphysics; on the other hand, Marx believed that Hegel's dialectics had fundamental theoretical limitations. Marx pointed out that Hegel's view of the "result of thought" (a kind of concept) as the essence of things is actually "trapped in an illusion" (For the young Marx, Hegel seeks "the idea in reality itself. If previously the gods had dwelt[lived] above the earth, now they became its centre"). In the process of developing his own philosophy, Marx gradually discovered that Hegel only solved problems within the framework of the old philosophy (In fact, Hegel's dialectical thinking about the relationship between thought and existence is all carried out in the absolute spiritual system), and could not fundamentally overcome the transcendental illusion of the world view. Although Marx at this time was aware of such problems, he still followed the philosophical principles of Hegel. In this stage, Marx was "getting close to Hegel". He needed to dig deeper for knowing the differences between theology and philosophy better.

Soon he joined the Club of Doctors (Stronghold of the Young Hegelians). In the long accumulation process, different from the young Hegelians' criticism based on the Hegelian system, he directed his criticism directly at the philosophical foundation of Hegelian speculative idealism. Thus, the famous "inversion" came out officially.

The issue of "inversion" grew out of Marx's repeated use of the word "inversion" (or the word "invert"). Marx mentioned "inversion" in "Introduction of Critics of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", and "On Capital" and other texts[6]. In his work, especially in "The Poverty of Philosophy" and "On

Capital", Marx criticized Hegel's dialectics for being abstract and divorced from the concrete material conditions of society. In "On Capital", Marx provided examples of how capitalism operates, illustrating how the dialectical process unfolds in the field of economic relationships. He analyzed how capitalism inherently generates contradictions between capitalists and workers, leading to exploitation, alienation, and economic crises. These examples served as a departure from Hegel's abstract philosophical dialectics, emphasizing the concrete material conditions and class struggle as the driving forces of historical change.

First, Marx revealed the inversion in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel's dialectics are often infused with a mystical quality, as is reflected in his view of dialectics. According to Hegel, dialectics, or the Absolute Spirit, is the foundation of the existence of all things and makes the existence of the entire material world possible. Society and nature are both externalizations of the Absolute Spirit, and the emergence of the material world is attributed to the movement of the Absolute Spirit. However, the Absolute Spirit is essentially a form of thought and is unrealistic when it comes to the evolution of society and nature. This is also why Hegel's dialectics remain at an abstract level and cannot fully capture the true essence of dialectics. In order to fully understand dialectics, it is necessary to move beyond the abstract and delve into the concrete realities of society and nature.[7] Distinct from Hegel, Marx placed the "perceptual world" in the field of philosophy and affirmed the reality of "objective phenomena" (He really did "stand on the ground"). Marx argued that Hegel's dialectics were focused on ideas and the field of thought, neglecting the role of material conditions, production, and social relations in shaping history. For Marx, history and social change were driven by material forces, primarily economic factors like the mode of production and class struggle. In the stage of his Doctoral thesis, young Marx realized the initial reversal of Hegel's philosophical view and disintegrated the substantive existence of the "kingdom of reason". In Marx's philosophy, thinking and being are united in existence, and the existence here is "reality" and "matter". Immediately afterwards, Marx changed the way of thinking about the problems of that era, from the abstract Kingdom of Reason to the real world. He transformed the criticism from the theoretical field into the social reality field, that is, the theoretical criticism of Hegel's philosophy into the practical criticism of feudal autocracy.

During the entire process of studying dialectics, what is always worth analyzing and paying attention to is Marx's dualistic method of analysis. Marx appreciated the logicity of Hegel's dialectics but did not fully agree with its scientific nature. In response to the "mystical form" of Hegel's dialectics, Marx constructed a "rational form" of dialectics through the "rational core". Marx accurately grasped the part of "negative reason" in Hegel's dialectics, bringing "negation" from the external to the internal. Just as in his study of the laws of capitalist operation and the development of human society, he based his research on the internal aspects of things, exploring the inherent and original driving force of development. This transformation of Hegel's "negation" by Marx, which is the "negation of negation", is the dialectical negation that not only includes the negation of affirmation but also the negation of negation. Only when things develop to the stage of "negation of negation" can they fully reveal their content.

Marx understood practice as the mode of human existence and material practice as the foundation of the relationship between humans and nature. Thus, in Marxist philosophy, the dialectics of negation becomes a "rational form" of dialectics, embodying the dialectics of the unity of opposition between the "measure of things" and the "measure of man". In this way, Marx realized the **"inversion"** of Hegel's philosophy. He overcame the limitations of Hegel's philosophy, and reconstructed the relationship between philosophy and reality.

This shows that the complete separation of the "critical movement" from the "critical form" is **not** the essence of Marx's reversal of Hegel's dialectics. That is to say, in the reversal of dialectics, Marx does not place the "mysterious shell" and the "rational core" at opposite poles, but merges them into a single problem. In other words, the abolition of the "mysterious shell" is itself a transformation of

the "rational core". Marx's real intention is to disintegrate the internality of "self-consciousness", to destroy and break through the mysterious prison of speculation in a revolutionary way. In Marx's view, simply dissolving the internality of "self-consciousness" by "words against words" cannot achieve the purpose of change, because the solution of the theoretical opposition is only possible by means of practical means and practical forces (rather than pure "self-consciousness").

Marx subverted and established a philosophical way of thinking that was different from the old philosophy: The field of philosophical research is no longer "the other world" (the so-called "super-perceptual world"); The task of philosophical research is no longer to construct the "perceptual world" into the object of the "super-perceptual world"; The purpose of philosophical research is no longer to construct a priori system based on abstract ideas and categories. Different from Hegel, Marx's dialectical analysis of the contradictions of things is not to achieve "rational contemplation", not to pursue spiritual tranquility, but with a fundamental and strong practical orientation to change the real world. (The conflicts and contradictions in thought are conflicts and contradictions in reality and, therefore, must also be fought/resolved in real world. Namely: not only in a philosophical but also in a social and political /revolutionary way.)

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Marx's dialectics, often termed "dialectical materialism", emphasizes the role of material conditions, economic relations, and class struggle in shaping history and social development. In Marx's dialectics, Marx inverted Hegel's "impersonal rationality" with the practical activities of real people, inverting Hegel's history of speculative movement with the history of material production, and inverted Hegel's mode of thinking about "explaining the world" with the practical way of "changing the world". In other words, Marx always stood in the position of "man" and made up for the lack of "man" in dialectics by reversing the relationship between civil society and the state, the relationship between thinking and existence, and the relationship between logic and history in Hegel's dialectics.

Based on the analysis from both Hegel's perspective and Marx's perspective, we can now determine that Marx's critique and development of Hegel's dialectics is a gradual evolution from form to content (from "shell" to "core"). With this understanding, we can also respond to the question raised at the beginning of this article (what does "inversion" mean in what sense). In comprehending this issue, we cannot, like Althusser, simply understand "inversion" as a metaphor where the vehicle remains unchanged; this metaphor precisely points to the change that occurs on the premise of inheriting the rational core of Hegel's dialectics. In other words, inheritance is carried out precisely under the premise of "inversion". Only by closely focusing on the starting point of practical application to explore the essence of Marx's dialectics can we truly reveal the practical and revolutionary significance of Marx's dialectics in addressing real-world issues.

Now we can understand the essence of "inversion" in dialectics: Marx's inversion of Hegel's dialectics is not a simple inversion of position in the physical sense, but from practical activities in the real world, overcoming the abstract and incomplete nature of Hegel's dialectics, and exposing the illusion of Hegel's dialectics. Since its inception, Marxist dialectics has not been a purely conceptual topic, nor should it only serve the special knowledge within the "phenomenon" category of philosophical research. It is a comprehensive product of Marx's philosophical research and the political-economic study of the operation of capitalism, and it has always been carried out in the theory and practice of human critique and critique of real society. Purely theoretical approaches cannot yield a correct understanding of the world's totality. The correct approach should involve immersing theory itself into the real world, integrating it with human practical production and actual practical activities. In this way, as it accompanies the development of social history, it breaks its own closedness and achieves the "spiral ascent" and "wave-like progress" in the sense of Marxist

philosophy. History is no longer covered by the Absolute Spirit and finally has become a "living" history. The essence of human beings and the mode of existence of human society have also been fundamentally clarified. In summary, the issue of "inversion" in the development of dialectics is a substantive "inversion", and the philosophical world did not fall into chaos because of the "inversion". Instead, through such a transformation, the spirit and principles of dialectics were thoroughly realized. Marx's dialectics not only helps us to further understand the critical and revolutionary connotations of Marxism but also guides the direction of human progress with strong vitality, standing firm in the long river of history.[8][9]

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