

The Ontology of Objective Entities: A Study Based on the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844

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Abstract. Marx's new materialist ontological philosophy is not a traditional practice-based ontology or material ontology, but rather a dialectical material ontology emphasising that entities attain their real determinations through self-mediation via objectivity. Objective entities possess three constitutive characteristics: sensibility, contradiction, and movement. Their extension can be categorised into three levels: sensible entities, living entities, and human entities. Sensibility denotes the essential force by which entities must open themselves to objects for their actual existence, thereby acquiring and conferring objectivity. Secondly, this objectifying relationship inherently contains a dual contradiction: first, the contradiction between the entity itself and the real determinations it acquires through objects; second, the contradiction between the object itself and the objectifying image it presents during its constitution. Finally, the movement mediated by the entity itself constitutes a dialectical process of negation of negation: progressing from self-externalisation to the sublation of this externalisation, ultimately reappropriating the essence of objectivity at a higher level.

Keywords: Objective Entity, Material Ontology, Dialectical Materialism

1. Introduction

In his Theses, Marx unequivocally designated his philosophy as New Materialism. This signifies that his revolution in the philosophical sphere was accomplished through a revolution in the determination of matter. It also indicates that the core content of this revolution was initiated and developed on the ontological plane, ultimately achieving the sublation of idealism and old materialist philosophy.

Marx's positive exposition of "new materialism" is concentrated in the Theses on Feuerbach (hereafter referred to as the Theses) and The German Ideology (hereafter referred to as the Ideology). In the former, Marx first introduces the essence of new materialism through a critique of old materialism. He argues that old materialism understands objects, sensibility, and reality solely from the perspective of the object, the intuitive, and the immediate. New materialism, however, understands objects, sensibility, and reality "as the activity of sensuous human beings, as practice," approaching them from the standpoint of the subject. He immediately follows this by clarifying that human activity is objectifying activity [1]. Subsequently, Marx elucidates the distinction between the standpoints of old and new materialism namely, the difference between "civil society" and "human

society or society as human" [1]. Within the latter framework, Marx explicitly designates his materialism as "practical materialism," clarifying that its pivotal concern lies in "revolutionising the existing world, actually opposing and transforming existing things" [1].

Some scholars, based on the above texts, characterise Marx's ontology as a practical ontology. However, Marx never accorded practice or human object-oriented activity the status of an ontological entity independent of and determining the materiality of real beings. Rather, he conceived it as the mediating process through which beings acquire their concrete determinations. Such mediation is not an ontological element or grounding independent of the entities it underlies, nor separate from the active subject-object relationship. Rather, it constitutes an intrinsic negation traversing the polarities of subject and object.

To truly grasp the ontological implications within Marx's new materialism, relying solely on the Theses and The German Ideology proves insufficient and even one-sided. The Theses themselves constitute an immature text, while The German Ideology, though comparatively more complete and systematic, is acknowledged by Marx at its outset as inadequate as a specimen reflecting his ontological research:

"We know only one science, namely the science of history. History may be examined from two aspects, and may be divided into natural history and human history. But these two aspects are inseparable; wherever human beings exist, natural history and human history mutually condition each other. Natural history, that is to say, the so-called natural sciences, we do not discuss here; what we need to investigate deeply is human history, for almost the entire ideology is either a distortion of human history or a complete disregard of it. Ideology itself is merely one aspect of this history" [1].

Firstly, Marx did not deny the objective existence of matter. He merely emphasised that all matter must be regarded as real and historical, inseparable from humanity's historical and practical activity. That is to say, it must be understood as an entity necessarily mediated by human history. Only thus can things be grasped "according to the true nature of things" [1]. Secondly, Marx emphasised that the theme of The German Ideology was to critique, from the perspective of human history, the contemporary German intellectual world's use of ideas to distort real historical reality not to expound on the ontology of the New Materialism, that is, the determination of matter.

To truly grasp the philosophical innovations, particularly in ontology, that Marx developed during this period, one must ground oneself in his key texts surrounding the Theses, especially the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (hereafter referred to as the Manuscripts), often termed the "secret and birthplace" of his doctrine. Particular attention should be paid to the third notebook, which contains the "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and of Philosophy as a Whole" the logical foundation of the entire Manuscripts and its direct engagement with philosophy.

In the Manuscripts, Marx foreshadowed the exposition of the new materialism found in the Theses and The German Ideology: he did not directly posit labour as humanity's ahistorical essence, thereby establishing the unmediated essence of natural beings. Instead, he conceived labour as humanity's actual objectifying activity a concrete, pre-essential form of self-realisation that retrospectively determines essence. Thus, humanity's true essence is "the result of its own labour" [2]. He did not present humanity's species-being as an abstract, individualistic formal norm divorced from reality, but demonstrated that humanity's species-being is precisely its social character, its socialised humanity. Nor did he understand objects and sensibility from a direct, objective perspective, but explicitly stated that human sensibility and objectivity are absolutely not "directly existing, objectively existing human sensations" [2]. Moreover, the positive sublation of alienation elaborated by Marx in the section on "Private Property and Communism" demonstrates that object-

oriented activity is fundamentally a real negating activity, consistent with "actually opposing and transforming existing things."

This paper aims to clarify Marx's ontological philosophy grounded in objectively existing entities based on the text of his 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. It first clarifies the connotation of Marx's objectively existing entities, namely their three constitutive aspects. It then clarifies their extension, namely the three distinct levels of objectively existing entities.

2. The specificity of objective entities

2.1. Sensibility

"Sensibility must be the foundation of all science" [2]. Marx initially followed Feuerbach in reversing the subordination of sensibility to reason, demanding an exit from any abstract principles independent of real existence.

For Feuerbach, the quest for truth meant returning to human direct existence; all spiritual or scientific endeavours should constitute a return to natural experience. Feuerbach's critique of traditional philosophy can be seen as an initial critique, as he himself argued: "Hegel begins with being, that is, with the concept of being or the abstract concept. Why should I not begin with existence itself, that is, with real existence?" [3]. Real existence here is understood as an existing presence that manifests only within specific spatio-temporal relations an intuition that is already mediated. This mediated direct presence is elevated by Feuerbach to the "first rational determination", the "infinite form of revelation of the real" [3].

Here, Feuerbach commits two errors: firstly, treating the directly present entity as existence itself; secondly, regarding this directness as complete and free from contradiction. This absolute trust in directness means that despite his various critiques of metaphysics, Feuerbach can never alter himself or the world, forever remaining confined to defending the existing. Consequently, the subject in Feuerbach's account requires no reflection, practical struggle, or productive activity. It remains perpetually bound to an acceptance of this directness as the ultimate foundation, believing that "where sensibility begins, all doubt and struggle cease" [3].

The objectivity proposed by Feuerbach remains confined to the principle of man's immediate emotional relations, rather than constituting a thoroughly materialist ontological principle. His philosophy originates from the present, non-historical, individual existence. For sensibility, "nothing is nearer than the present, and the present is regarded as insurmountable, the absolute finality, whereupon the movement of history comes to a halt" [3]. Man's present dependence on man and on the natural foundation the objective natural foundation as an indirect abstraction can only be understood in human feeling and human emotion becomes the first and only fact, "and thus man is man's god" [3]. Feuerbach is not concerned with the actual life of the world and human beings, but rather, on the theoretical level of emotional relationships of mutual human needs, he discusses the essence of objectivity as receptivity and passivity, asserts that only needs are real, and speaks of the most abstract and exalted expression of human relations — love.

Marx did not remain within Feuerbach's directly affirmative concept of sensuousness. Instead, he transcended Feuerbach by reversing sensuousness's subordination to immediacy, endowing it with historical depth and practical significance, and permeating it with internal contradictions. Sensuousness is non-immediate perception, obscure and contradictory. What is apparent is precisely not the concrete and real, but the partial and already mediated by abstract thought.

Marx first demonstrated, through a method distinct from Feuerbach's uncritical acceptance of the given, the legitimacy of proving the reality of human existence both in relation to oneself and to

nature through sensory intuition. Human beings' trust in the reality of themselves and their objects, their capacity to perceive themselves as natural beings and to perceive nature as human existence, stems precisely from the fact that both humanity itself and the real world have been brought into being through human labour: "The whole so-called world-history is nothing but the process of man's creation of man through his labour, the process of nature's generation as human reality" [2].

Here Marx interprets sensibility as an ontological property, no longer an objectively direct affirmative force, but rather the intrinsic openness of an existing entity to its real object a "sensibility open to light, to the sensuous human being" [2]. When an entity is what it is in reality, it must always be defined through something else; otherwise, it can only be "an unreal, non-sensuous entity existing merely in thought, that is, an imagined entity" [2]. A real entity cannot attain its real existential definition through abstract self-identity but must be posited by an object: "it creates or posits the object only because it is posited by the object" [2]. This sensuousness may be described as an entity's intrinsic need for and passivity towards objects, hence "to say that something is sensuous is to say that it is passive" [2]. Marx's assertion here that sensuousness is passivity fundamentally differs from Feuerbach's similar claim.

This sensuousness constitutes the essential power of beings to "possess and endow objectivity" [2]. On the one hand, it requires its own actual objects; on the other, due to this essential need and self-externalisation, it "sets a real yet externalised form of manifestation, thereby creating an immensely powerful world of objects that does not belong to its essence" [2]. Consciousness originates from the sensibility of the being, from the act of objectification. The being that develops consciousness becomes aware of its own self-alienation, whereas "self-consciousness, through its own alienation, posits only materiality" [2]. The direct perception and consciousness of objects constitute the manifestation of objects to beings within this setting, rather than the essential, real relationship between beings and objects. This setting merely "superficially possesses the function of an independent, real essence" [2]. What is truly decisive is the non-conscious process of objectivity operating behind the sensuous relationship. The implication that matter determines consciousness is already discernible here in the Manuscripts.

2.2. Contradictoriness

The sensuous objectification of entities simultaneously establishes the ontological status of contradiction, manifesting in its capacity to possess and confer objectifying essence as follows: first, the contradiction between the entity itself and the real determinations it acquires from the object; second, the contradiction between the entity as object and the posited objectification. Marx's ontology remains materialist, yet this matter is never a self-identical substance. Instead, it is permeated by internal contradictions and mediated by subjectivity, constructable retrospectively only from the residue of its actual determinations acquired through objectifying activity.

Having demonstrated the reality of both humanity and the natural world, Marx subsequently asserts that the actual existence of humanity and nature that is, humanity's objects requires no recognition by a third entity independent of humanity and its objects: "The question of some alien entity, of an entity standing above nature and humanity, which implies the recognition of the non-reality of nature and humanity, has in fact become impossible" [2]. Marx's original intention was to oppose religion, that is, to oppose using God as a third entity to recognize humans and the natural world. However, the core of this argument lies in the notion that humans and the natural world—that is, the objects of humans—as real existents do not require recognition from any basis or source, even if this basis is an intermediary activity, namely object-related activity or the activity of

existence itself. When beings set their own real essence as an alien object through object-related activity, "the setting is not the subject; it is the subjectivity of the essential power of objectivity" [2].

Marx's position is already quite clear. Firstly, no third element or ground exists between subject and object; secondly, starting from the objectively real entity, subjectivity is objectivity's self-mediation. The entity's real existence is directly mediation, and this mediation does not stand independently of the entity and its real object to guarantee their existence, but occurs within them. Moreover, the unity of these two as opposites resides within one of them as the entity that initiates the objectifying activity. Žižek has discussed this in *Less Than Nothing*: "When we have a pair of opposites, their unity is not a third element... but rather one of the two: a genus is its own species, or rather, a genus ultimately has only one species, which is why the concrete difference coincides with the species of the genus" [4].

Contradiction is primarily the self-contradiction of the entity. The entity itself, beyond its real determination, is a necessary abstraction, for it has been proven to exist through real objectifying activity yet does not directly manifest within the consciousness and sensuous relations of objectifying determination. Its essence must therefore be negatively posited, beginning with its already attained real determination that is, with the externalisation of its essence.

Secondly, contradiction arises between the identity of the entity and the object within the mediation of objectifying activity, and the irreducible alterity of the object that cannot be identified with objectification. This is addressed in the Manuscripts as the negation of externalisation: "This determination itself is merely an appearance, an act contradictory to the essence of pure activity; therefore, this determination must also be sublated, and materiality must be negated" [2].

Here Marx genuinely insists on treating existence as real activity rather than some abstract ground, insisting that the historical determination situated in this time and place constitutes the mode of existence that is both real and actually unfolding, or *Dasein*, always precedes and determines existence. Prior to any cognition or intuition, we have already secured the guarantee of the reality of entities, without needing to rely on any concept, a priori logic, or empirical construction, nor to appeal to primal nature or authenticity to justify our real existence. The reality of the real is something we already possess (in our activity) within or through reality, rather than something that should possess us.

The ontological philosophy of the new materialism naturally no longer proceeds from some ground or principle some absolute being including an abstract principle of historicity but necessarily from the concrete determinations of real entities. There is no need to inquire into the foundation of what exists, for this foundation is realised through its actual historical activity. Only by consistently understanding the material determination of entities as essentially the concrete determination of the manifold aspects of their historical development, and as the inherent contradiction between this determination and the entities themselves, can one truly remain faithful to the entities' own sensuous, actual existence.

2.3. Movement

The inherent contradictions within objectively existing entities perpetually place them within a cyclical movement: proceeding from negation, through the negation of negation, to self-affirmation. Marx succinctly outlined this process in the section "Private Property and Communism": "The overcoming of self-alienation follows the same path as self-alienation itself" [2]. In his critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this movement received a more comprehensive theoretical exposition. According to Professor Zhang Yibing's latest research findings on Marx, the young Marx likely precisely "transformed Hegel's dialectics using Feuerbach's discourse on materialist

philosophical anthropology" here, establishing his first dialectical model, "more precisely, it is a critical negative dialectics characterized by the ordering of subjective labor dialectics as its essence" [5].

The starting point of this movement is negation. Objective activity, as an activity reflecting itself in an object, first entails setting one's essence as an object distinct from oneself through self-objectification. For beings, this constitutes self-externalisation the 'form of alienation' that must first be traversed. In the critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the theoretical primacy of the negative moment is elucidated: the greatness of Hegel's dialectics, as the "negativity that serves as the moving and generative principle," lies in his view of human self-creation as a process, seeing "objectification as non-objectification, as externalization." Furthermore, the realization of humans as species-beings is "possible only in this way: humans must actualize all their species-powers... and treat these powers as objects, which initially can only be achieved through the form of alienation" [2].

This is followed by the "sublation of this externalisation" the stage of negation of negation where the entity affirms itself within the object. This affirmation is realised through the actual appropriation of the object. This appropriation is real: firstly, the object appropriated is real, not merely an unreal object posited by sensuous desire and appearing within sensuous relations; secondly, the act of appropriation itself is real, meaning the entity must grasp the real determination of both object and self in reality, not merely in thought, through practice. Hegel's dialectics emphasizes this process of sublation, namely externalization and the supersession of this externalization, thereby grasping the essence of labor and understanding the objective human being as the result of their own labor [2].

Affirmation constitutes the provisional outcome of this movement. It is an outcome because, through the process of real appropriation, the entity comprehends the real determination of its own existence, thereby accomplishing self-affirmation. Yet affirmation remains provisional, for the real determination of both self and object attained through object-oriented activity the unity achieved between self and object in practice does not exhaust the entity itself and its real object. Rather, a residue always persists.

Affirmation does not signify the once-and-for-all, thorough realisation of the entity itself, but rather affirms the separation of the entity from itself and from its object, enabling it to uphold its essence to the end within eternal motion. In this movement, subject and object are no longer perceived as opposites; rather, the subject is in the object, and the subject and object are both in the subject and in the object. Alienation is recognised and accepted as a temporary externalisation arising from the subject itself, just as the real determination is recognised and affirmed as the subject's temporary essence. For humanity, this stage constitutes communism the "genuine resolution of the contradictions between man and nature, and between man and man" the "answer to the riddle of history, and the knowledge that it is this answer" [2].

To assert that objectual activity constitutes the essence of beings is to maintain that beings cannot possess a pre-determined, abstract essence solely within themselves. Rather, they always derive their actual essence from real objects. This essence, being actual, is necessary but not eternal or total. Beings always transcend their actual determinations, yet this transcendence does not rely on some external ground but is in fact their immanence. The essence of a being can only be grasped negatively within this movement of immanent transcendence. Similarly, to say that labour——human object-oriented activity——is the essence of humanity implies that humans possess no pre-established essence, but are always necessarily the result of their actual social activity and always transcend this result.

3. The levels of objective existence

In discussing humanity's distinctive existential determination, Marx distinguishes between levels of being:

"Man as an objectively sensuous being is a passive being; ... because he feels himself to be passive, he is a passionate being. ... Man is not merely a natural being, but a human natural being" [2].

The most fundamental level comprises sensuous, object-like entities, encompassing all beings including humans. Marx describes these in this passage as "passive entities." Based on preceding analysis, this passivity denotes the essential sensuous force through which entities must open themselves to objects to affirm their existence a relational property mediated by objects and situated within history and practice. Secondly, this object-relatedness inherently contains a dual contradiction: firstly, the contradiction between the entity itself and its actual determination gained through the object; secondly, the contradiction between the object itself and the object-related image it presents during its constitution. This indicates that material reality is not self-identical, but rather driven by internal contradictions and necessitates continuous mediation through activity. Finally, in terms of the movement of mediating activity, objectivity is essentially a dialectical process of negation of negation: from self-externalisation to the sublation of this externalisation, ultimately reappropriating the essence of objectivity at a higher level. Entities always retain transcendence beyond their actual determinations.

Secondly, there are living entities, which Marx defines as "feeling themselves to be passive" and "passionate". Sensibility itself constitutes the essential power by which entities possess and confer objectivity, establishing a relational field encompassing the entity and its object namely, "a real, yet externalised form of manifestation, thus not belonging to its essence, an immensely powerful objective world" [2]. The object is thereby constituted and revealed as an object-like image. Upon this foundation, an entity's perception of its own passivity indicates its capacity to recognise this image and the sensuous relationship between itself and its object though solely at the level of desire and passion. Such an object-like image constitutes the most fundamental content of consciousness, namely meaning, while the experience of this image represents the most basic form of consciousness: sensuous cognition and attitude. We may observe this awareness of the sensuous relationship between self and object in the utilitarian behaviour of organic beings, particularly animals. Yet animals can only recognise the image of the object as it appears to them, discerning what is "beneficial" or "harmful" to themselves, "food" or "danger", without grasping the object itself. Consequently, they cannot form any non-intuitive relationship with the object. This point finds resonance in contemporary analytic philosophy's exploration of intentionality. For instance, Brandom suggests that meaning can be understood through animal desires: "An animal's 'orectic awareness' of things embodies a tripartite structure composed of three elements: an attitude (a desire), such as hunger; a responsive activity, such as eating; and a significance, such as food. This 'act of apprehension' directly constructs the obscure 'noumena' into 'phenomena.' Furthermore, within phenomenal consciousness, a meaningful 'world' is disclosed. Simultaneously, through the direct 'cognitive relation' to things based on desire—by determining what is useful for the 'self—an initial form of self-consciousness is constituted" [6].

Finally, there is human existence. Marx defines this as "existence for itself, and therefore as a species-being." The mode of existence for itself implies not only direct existential experience, but also "the affirmation and manifestation of itself in its own knowledge", that is, the capacity for thought [2]. This thought does not remain fixed upon the object-like image as it appears; it is also

self-reflective, a reflection upon human existence, and furthermore a reflection upon the totality of real existents. Self-consciousness is consciousness that takes its conscious self as its object, and furthermore, is capable not only of becoming aware of objects, but also of becoming aware of its own setting of objects, thereby taking as its object the non-immediate object-relationship between itself and the object, and fixing the real determination of itself and the object as knowledge.

Yet this fixation does not arise from consciousness's own power; the sensuous openness of things constitutes consciousness's true origin. Though human thought is reflexive, it can only attempt to unify itself with its object through the power of separation inherent in the determined image of the entity. Such consciousness can never attain Hegelian Absolute Spirit. It is precisely on this basis that Marx opposes Hegel's equation of human essence with self-consciousness, asserting that "the entire alienation of human essence is nothing but the alienation of self-consciousness" and that "it is not regarded as the manifestation of the real alienation of human essence" [2]. Ultimately, humanity's real appropriation of objects becomes rational absolute knowledge of objects rather than real labour production and revolutionary practice. Therefore, the species-essence of human beings is merely the natural intentional structure of humans, which includes two forms of intentional activity: "The first is the capacity for consciousness or cognition, which enables the processing of things in the natural world as objects of consciousness. The second is the capacity for practical transformation, which allows the conversion of natural objects through labor into forms that meet their life needs" [7].

Objective reality implies existence independent of human consciousness; that is, the objective existence of an object signifies the remainder that cannot be objectified. Thus, the real existence of entities does not depend on conditions of objectification closely tied to subjectivity or consciousness. This does not imply, however, that objects cannot be apprehended by subjects, thereby descending into agnosticism. Such a correction cannot be achieved by confining consciousness to the realm of cognition, for consciousness's recognition of meaning as the result of the sensuous objectification of entities already constitutes an element traversing ontology and teleology. Practice, as the form of humanity's distinctive objective activity, thus runs through both ontology and teleology. "The particularity of practical activity lies in the fact that it injects the link of human purpose into the objective chain of cause and effect, forming a unique objective activity of cause-purpose-effect, where subjective purposes are realized in the objective world. This constitutes human existence, the essence of social life, and the foundation of the existing world " [8]. To genuinely transcend idealism and dismantle the myth of consciousness's immanence, one must fundamentally reveal matter's determinative role over consciousness. Consciousness reflects matter, yet matter is not that which consciousness reflects; what appears in consciousness is merely the image of objectification. It is never the ground of a being's existence that gives rise to thought, but rather the being's actual activity. Meaning is endowed by the activity that originally objectifies it and is ultimately determined by the existing thing. Only in the course of real practical activity does man engage in truly rational cognition and appropriation of his object as a being, while the subjective existence of man as self-consciousness is merely the effect of objectifying activity.

Finally, the realisation of humanity's species-being that is, humanity's self-confirmation in knowledge with regard to its own objects and nature necessitates, first and foremost, the apprehension of the entire natural world as an object within concrete objectifying activity. The subject of such activity cannot be the isolated individual, but only the social human being; this activity is not the solitary life of an individual, but solely the productive activity of society. This distinction is not absolute, but demonstrates that the origin of self-consciousness is not individual consciousness. An individual capable of contemplating both its own humanity and the entirety of nature is already a totality, "a totality of ideas, a self-conscious social subject that is both thought

and sensed" [2]. A self-conscious individual is already a social being, whose self-consciousness is already objectified within the social totality. Humanity's species-being is not an essence inherent to the individual, but rather the very sociality of the individual.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the core of Marx's ontological philosophy lies in establishing a dialectical material ontology centred upon objectively existing entities. This ontology thoroughly overcomes the intuitionism of old materialism and the abstract voluntarism of idealism. It proceeds from real entities, understanding their determinations as arising through the dialectical process of sensuous disclosure, internal contradictions, and the negation of negation within historical objectifying activity. This not only provides textual grounding for understanding Marx's "new materialism" but also offers a concise theoretical framework for comprehending existence, thought, and human essence. Ultimately, this ontological perspective lays a solid foundation for the significance of communism as the real liberation of humanity. It signifies humanity's genuine appropriation of its objectifying essence and the conscious mastery of its own existential destiny. This study hopes to contribute to the research on the philosophical foundations of Marxism.

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