



## THE ISSUE OF TRUTH IN MARXIST COGNITIVE THEORY

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### **Abstract:**

Truth is an issue that has been mentioned a lot in the history of philosophy. However, before Marx's philosophy was born, no school of philosophy had a complete and correct conception of truth. In this article, the author analyzes the point of view of Marxism - Leninism on the issue of truth.

**Keywords:** truth, cognitive theory, Marxism-Leninism

### **1. Introduction**

The Communist Party of Vietnam takes Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought as the ideological foundation and guideline for all revolutionary actions. This requires each cadre and party member to understand deeply, comprehensively, apply flexibly the principles and laws of Marxism-Leninism into the reality of a rapidly changing society. One of the very important issues that need to be further studied is the issue of truth in Marxist cognitive theory.

### **2. The issue of truth in Marxist cognitive theory**

Cognition is a person's cognition of the world, society, and himself. Whether or not they can properly perceive the world and themselves, that is the content that most philosophical systems seem to deal with because of its importance and complexity.

The truth, according to Hegel, *"is in the very process of cognition, in the long-term development of science from a lower level of knowledge to a higher level of knowledge"*<sup>ii</sup>. However, referring only to Marxist philosophy, the new truth problem is solved from the standpoint of dialectical materialism with the method of dialectical materialism and achieved scientific value.

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<sup>ii</sup> C. Marx and Ph. Engels, full volume, Hanoi Truth National Political Publishing House, 1995, vol. 21, p. 394.

Truth is knowledge whose content is consistent with the objective world it reflects. Truth is objective, not because it exists somewhere outside and independent of human cognition, but because its reflected content which is consistent with the perceived object. For example, the natural world existed long before man appeared. That is objective reality, not truth. But the conclusion is that, "nature precedes man" is an objective truth, because this conclusion is consistent with objective reality.

Truth is absolute and relative. Absolute truth is knowledge whose content is completely consistent with the real world it reflects. A question often asked is: Can human cognition ever give us such a completely, fully consistent knowledge with the object? According to Marxist philosophy, if we admit the objectivity of truth, we also admit, in one way or another, the absoluteness of truth, admit the absolute truth. In fact, because people perceive the world and the content of knowledge as objective; in term of its nature, in its conclusion and in its long historical development, human perception (through successive generations of people in history) in principle is able to fully and accurately reflect things in their wholeness and concreteness, in their nature.

V.I. Lenin wrote: "*Human thinking can and is providing us with an absolute truth which is only the sum total of relative truths. Each step in the development of science adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth, but the limits of the truth of each scientific proposition are relative, now expanding, now shrinking with the growth of knowledge.*"<sup>iii</sup>. *In cognition as well as in history... it can never reach an ultimate perfection in an ideal state of human perfection; a perfect society, a perfect "state", that is only what can exist only in the imagination*".<sup>iv</sup>

Relative truth is knowledge that is correct but incomplete. The conformity between the content of knowledge (which is the relative truth) and the object is partial, in some aspects, in some fields.

The relativity of truth manifests itself in the fact that it covers conditionally and approximates the laws of the natural world. The relativity of truth is determined by the "non-supreme and limited" nature of the cognition. The cognition of people as well as a generation of people and even of the whole of humanity, at any given time, is always limited by historical conditions and circumstances, by the level of development of society reality. Meanwhile, the things and phenomena of the surrounding world are diverse, constantly moving and developing, always revealing new attributes and relationships.

The relativity of truth does not eliminate its absolute objectivity. The content of the relative truth is only partially compatible with the object, but it also reflects some aspects and certain attributes of the object itself. The modern picture of the atom is clearly much more specific and precise than the conceptions of Bo and Rhodopho in the early twentieth century. However, the atomic model built by the two these men in the years 1911-1913 also contained an objective content. It is atom made up of a positively charged nucleus surrounded by a cloud of negatively charged electrons; electrons and atomic nuclei are very insignificant in size compared to atom. The subsequent development of science has and will not eliminate this absolute, objective element of truth. The history of philosophy

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<sup>iii</sup> V. I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1980, vol.18, p.158.

<sup>iv</sup> C. Marx and Ph. Engels, full volume, Truth - National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, vol. 21, p. 394

demonstrates the limited nature of the pre-Marxist materialist conception of matter. But even in ancient Greek materialistic philosophy, it was also understood that matter is the creator of all things, from which firstly all things arise and finally dissolve into it. Moreover, it is what the underlying entity is kept, and the attribute is changed. This is the objective and absolute element of the pre-Marxist conception of matter. This factor has been inherited, included in the dialectical materialistic conception of matter.

The development of practice and on that basis, the development of scientific awareness will constantly discover the mistakes that temporary cognition still commits; at the same time, expanding and developing the relative truth in the direction of progressing forever to the absolute truth. For example, until the Middle Ages, it was still thought that the sun and other planets revolved around the earth. In this misconception, there is still a “part” of objective truth - that the celestial bodies of the solar system are in motion. In the Copernican “Sun-centered” theory, the sun is the center of the universe, and the earth and planets move around the sun, following concentric circular orbits. Compared with the theory of “Earth is the center”, Copernicus' theory is more consistent with reality. Later, Kepler proved that the planets move around the sun not in circular orbits but in elliptical paths, the subsequent development of science also corrected Copernican's theory one more step: *“The Sun is the center of the solar system, and this system also moves in the infinite vast universe”*.

Thus, relative truth is true knowledge that is incomplete, developing and becoming deeper, more complete, more correct. The process of developing the scientific knowledge is also the process of forming absolute truth from the sum of relative truths, which are growing and becoming more and more complete and objective.

In objective truth, the absolute and relative elements are dialectically related and inseparable: relative truth always contains an element of absolute truth and thus, relative truths are the steps in the process of human cognition to absolute truth. Absolute truth can come into being and exist through relative truth.

Applied to cognition, the materialist dialectic admits the relativity of human knowledge in the sense of cognising the limits of approximate cognition, but does not refer to epistemological relativism, does not deny objective truth of the acquired knowledge, not denying objective truth. V.I. Lenin wrote: *“the difference between subjectivism (skepticism and sophism) and dialectics, among other things, is that, in (objective) dialectics; the difference between the relative and the absolute is also relative. As for the objective dialectics, in the relative there is the absolute. For subjectivism and sophistry, the relative is relative and excludes the absolute.”*<sup>v</sup>.

In fact, the difference between relative truth and absolute truth does not belong to the origin, the nature, but only to the degree of conformity with the object. Both absolute truth and relative truth are objective truth—they are just different manifestations of objective truth. Along with the development of scientific knowledge, absolute truth, while “containing an element of absolute truth”, also grows, (becomes more and more accurate and complete) to become the absolute truth. And *“absolute truth is composed of the*

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<sup>v</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1981, volume 29, p.380.

*sum of the developing relative truths; relative truths are relatively true reflections of an object that exists independently of humanity; those reflections are becoming more and more accurate; every scientific truth, despite being relative, contains an element of absolute truth.”<sup>vi</sup>.*

Mastering the dialectical relationship between relative truth and absolute truth will help us to overcome erroneous tendencies in epistemology. Not seeing the relativistic factor in the development of truth will fall into dogmatism, turning the acquired scientific knowledge into “ultimate” and “final” truths. In contrast, epistemological relativism sees and exaggerates only the relative side of knowledge to the point of denying the absolute truth, and thus, in essence, denying even the objective truth, this tendency inevitably leads to revisionism, subjectivism, relativism.

Objective truth is also concrete. The objectivity of truth is intimately connected with its concreteness. The concreteness of truth is determined by the concreteness of the object. Things and phenomena that people perceive always exist objectively, in its concreteness: in definite relationships, in specific conditions and circumstances of space and time, in its movement, development, in its vivid life. Therefore, knowledge as the objective truth always has the content reflected as things in specific conditions of existence, in its definite relationships. Get rid of the objective-specific conditions of the object or expand its scope too wide, then knowledge will no longer be the objective truth. V.I. Lenin himself also affirmed that: *“Any truth can be pushed to the absurdity, if one makes it “excessive”, if exaggerated, if it goes beyond its practical application; and under those conditions that truth would even turn into an absurdity of course.”<sup>vii</sup>.*

The laws of classical mechanics are scientific truths but only in a very definite field; they accurately reflect the motion of macroscopic objects and are no longer valid (no longer the truth) for the motion of macroscopic particles. The assertion that “water boils at 100C” is objective truth, only provided that the standard air pressure is 760 mm of mercury. Without this, the proposition is no longer true.

Likewise, for things that are in the process of change, objective truth is not immutable. Truth is concrete, there is no abstract truth. This important thesis of dialectical materialist philosophy has become the foremost important principle of the materialist dialectic method. Applied to historical cognition, it requires first of all *“considering the objective content of the historical process in a certain specific time, in a certain specific situation.”<sup>viii</sup>.*

### **3. Practice is the criterion of truth**

For the first time in the history of human thought, Marxist-Leninist philosophy considers reality as the objective criterion of truth. C. Mac wrote: *“The question of whether human thought can reach objective truth is not a theoretical problem at all, but a practical one. It is in practice that people have to prove the truth, that is, to prove the reality and power, the mundanity*

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<sup>vi</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1980, volume 18, p.383.

<sup>vii</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1977, volume 41, p.58.

<sup>viii</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1981, volume 26, p.171.

*of their thinking. The controversy over the realism or unreality of thinking which separates from practice, is a purely scholastic issue.”<sup>ix</sup>*

The reason that practice can become a standard, a measure of the truthfulness of cognitive results is because practice, just like the concept of dialectical materialist philosophy, is a material activity of historical - social nature, *“practice is superior to cognition (theory)...It has the advantage not only of popularity, but also of direct realism).”<sup>x</sup>* It is only through practice that the objectivity of popular knowledge (including scientific laws and theories) takes the form of direct reality, of affective-material authenticity.

Since practice exists in many different forms, the forms of empirical testing of knowledge as truth are also different. It can be conducting experiments, applying (successfully) inventions into production, into practical socio-political activities. The success of man in making long space flights has confirmed the correctness of the knowledge that man has accumulated about the objective laws governing the outer space. The achievements of our people in more than 30 years of implementing the reform policy initiated and directly led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, thus proving that our Party's revolutionary line is correct.

When it comes to practice as the standard - a measure of the true objectivity of the acquired knowledge, it must not be forgotten that practice itself evolves. Therefore, practice in any form and at any level even while exercising absolute power in testing the truth, *“can never completely confirm or delete a certain human symbol, whatever that symbol is. That criterion is also quite “undefined” to not allow human knowledge to become an “absolute”; at the same time, it is quite determined to be able to wage a fierce struggle against all kinds of idealism and agnosticism. If what our practice affirms is the only, ultimate, objective truth, then the only way to that truth is that way of science based on the materialist point of view.”<sup>xi</sup>* This means that truth testing must also be a process, which needs to be repeated many times, and what is more important is that the results of practical activities are the objective criteria for testing the truth. Only then will human understanding become more and more accurate, profound, and complete. Thanks to the reality of the reform by the Party over the past 30 years, our cognition today of the path to socialism has become deeper, richer, more complete, clearer, much more specific.

However, the world and society are always moving and changing, so our cognition must always change to suit that movement and change. In order to have the right cognition (cognising the truth), it is necessary to pay attention to the object, the cognised object, and the way the subject reflects. Cognitive subjects, due to many reasons (level, cognitive ability, stance, interests, etc.), will naturally have different cognitions of the same thing or phenomenon. And, therefore, it is not possible to have an absolute unity of all cognitive subjects on a certain issue in social life. Unified cognition can only be achieved in a social group with relatively unified cognition due to enlightenment, education, popularizing, and especially having the same interests (material and spirit). In society, cognitions are very different, even opposing each other, of course. The point

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<sup>ix</sup> Marx and Engels: Full volume, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, volume 3, p.9-10.

<sup>x</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1981, volume 29, p.230.

<sup>xi</sup> V.I. Lenin: Full Volume, Progress Publishing House, Moscow, 1981, volume 18, p.168.

is, in order to have a consensus in cognition, there needs to be an open exchange and dialogue with an objective, scientific spirit, a friendly attitude, a constructive spirit. Currently, in society, the issue of critical thinking with its important role is properly appreciated, thus contributing to the democratization of social life. Moreover, it helps us to more fully realize many aspects of social life, which is extremely complex.

### 3. Conclusion

In the light of the innovation path, we are actively reforming our theoretical work on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought, including the issue of the dialectical relationship between the relative truth and absolute truth. Our Party recognizes socialism and the transition to socialism in Vietnam, affirms that the path to socialism in Vietnam is correct, there is no better and more appropriate choice than the reality of Vietnamese society, thus realizing the goal of "*rich people, strong country, fair, democratic and civilized society*". However, each stage of awareness of socialism has only relative truth value, which is suitable to the current social situation. The world and modern society are extremely diverse, rich and complex. Therefore, in order not to lose direction in actions to achieve the goal of moving up to socialism, it is necessary to return to the principles of Marxist cognitive theory, including the issue of truth.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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