Chapter IV

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGY IN
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Though Marx and Engels have not proposed an epistemology in a professional manner, their observations and comments together constitute a consistent epistemology (i) which denied all agnosticism and skepticism, (ii) that saw knowledge as a process from appearance to essence, from ignorance to knowledge, (iii) that took knowledge as a reflection of the objective world through universal forms, i.e., dialectical laws and categories, (iv) which gave practice an important role, i.e., to treat the knowability and knowledge of the world as a practical question than a theoretical one, (v) that comprehended both empiricism and rationalism on a common materialist footing, and (vi) that considered itself coinciding with logic, objective dialectics and methodology.

The observations of Marx and Engels get codified in Lenin, especially in his Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. As far as possible, by using the original works of Marx and Engels themselves, we would
consider all the above features of the Marxist epistemology under various other subheadings. We shall take up the analysis under the following sections: (1) Dialectics, (2) Role of Practice, (3) Knowledge and truth, (4) Subject-object dialectics and cognition through reflection, (5) Method, (6) Categories and the concept of freedom, and lastly an assessment of the epistemology in (7) A dialectical theory of knowledge.

1. Dialectics

In ontology, we saw that the matter is in motion and that the rhythm of this universal motion can be captured in terms of few laws of dialectic. The same laws formulated by Engels work in every field - nature, society, consciousness, history, cognition etc. The expression of this materialist dialectic in various realms may be different. The dialectics in the external world is the objective dialectics or the ontology, that reflected in the consciousness is the logic, that in the cognition process is the epistemology, and that behind the unity of all these is the methodology. In fact, dialectics is everywhere and everywhen.
Epistemology deals with the question of the relation of thinking and being. (1) With Hegel, the epistemology got the first dialectical answer in his 'identity of thinking and being'. With materialist dialectics, the answer became more specific, i.e., first, being is prime, and secondly, thinking is capable of cognition of being. Even though, Hegel's method was basically dialectical, it retained certain metaphysical traits owing to its idealist fashion. Hegel was different from and an improvement on Kant because the former identified thought with object, subject with object, logic with ontology. This identity was thought in essence for Hegel; it was matter for Marx and Engels. Hegel starts from abstract and deduces everything, takes everything as just manifestations of the general. Marx and Engels start from the concrete, and at the same time take into account the need of deductions from the historically accumulated knowledge. In Marxism, we get the dialectic of subject and object, concrete and abstract, induction and deduction, experience and reason, and the like. As we have already seen the laws of materialist dialectics in the chapter on methodology, we are not going to it again.

Apart from the fact that dialectics is all-permeating, the sameness or the identity of logic, dialectics (ontology) and the epistemology is also pointed out by Marxism. Lenin rightly points out the unity of "logic, dialectics and theory of knowledge of materialism" in his Philosophical Notebooks. (2) Lenin says that "there is no need of three words: they are all one and the same". (3) This unity or identity does not mean an absolute identity that does not allow any differentiation. Oizerman also substantiates this point when he discusses Lenin's remarks on the Hegelian concept of the coincidence of dialectics, logic and epistemology. He says that this is "not an abstract identity devoid of differences". (4) The unity of these disciplines is suggested by Lenin as the proper methodology.

In Spinoza, we saw the identity of truth, method and idea. Dialectics is the common point in Marx and Engels that unites the truth, method, thought and reality. In the following sections, we would confront


3. Ibid.

dialectics in its one or the other forms.

2. Role of Practice

In Marxism, the terms practice, human sensuous activity, praxis, practical-critical activity, revolutionary activity, human labour are all used in almost the same sense. Practice is the purposive human activity. In Theses on Feuerbach, Marx succinctly presents the significance of practice. This "active side" is taken the meeting or mediating point of subject and object. So far, in contemplative materialism, reality was conceived "not subjectively"; nor was human activity conceived as "objective activity". A reciprocation of subject and object which is a factual reality was not conceived as such in thought. Marxism was a breakthrough in this regard.

Marx took the very question of knowledge itself a practical one. Our ability to know or not is not a theoretical question but a matter to be proved by our practice.

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory that is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. (6)

Marx rightly finds the solution of mysteries and mysticism in practice.

Social science is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. (7)

Marx's characterisation of social life as essentially practical is necessitated by their (of Engels also) finding that, throughout history, human practice or labour or the purposive activity remains the crucial factor which changed and continues to change nature and man himself.

6. Ibid., p. 29.
7. Ibid., p. 31.
drastically. As Engels noted in his unfinished article(8), even the evolution of man was prompted by the role of labour. The most famous dictum of Marx that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it"(9) also hints at the significance of practice. Here lies the paradigm difference of Marxism from all the previous philosophies.

Practice in Marx and Engels is different from that in pragmatism. The practicality as the criterion of truth in the pragmatist philosophy is no way related to the practice in Marxism. In pragmatism, whether something is practical or not decides itself true or false, right or wrong. Practice in Marxism is the human activity, labour that creates and reflects the reality, and that tests the truth itself. Practice in Marxism is part of the reality, forms part of the reflection as truth, and works as the criterion of truth; it is a vehicle of transformation in every arena.

3. Knowledge and Truth

Whether the world is knowable or not is also a highly debated issue in philosophy. Hume believed that when we know the external world through perceptions, actually we never advance beyond ourselves. Kant assumed the existence of things-in-themselves as unknown and unknowables. In his view things-in-themselves exist as the ground of appearances; they are something which affect our senses and are the cause of appearances. But they can never be given in a manifold of sensible situations, and the categories of understanding cannot be applied to them. Therefore, they remain unknown and unknowable. The dissolution of the gap between the appearances and the essence of things is the task of epistemology. To know the reality, it is necessary to penetrate and go behind the appearances; then only is possible the unravelling of the "concealed essential forms" of the social and natural reality.(10) Marx follows this method in grasping the real essence of economic realities. Marx ridicules limiting the pursuit unto appearances only. While

criticising the Ricardo school of thought, Marx said:

Vulgar economy, which, indeed, "has really learnt nothing" here as everywhere sticks to appearances in opposition to the law which regulates and explains them. In opposition to Spinoza, it believes that "ignorance is a sufficient reason."(11)

Knowledge consists in going beyond the ignorance and appearances to arrive at the essences. If there is no contradiction between what appears and what really is, epistemology, and for that matter, even science would have been impossible and unnecessary. Marx says:

All science would be superfluous, if the appearance, the form, and the nature of things were wholly identical.(12)

The process of making the 'thing in itself' of Kant into 'things for us', the process of going beyond empirical sense data, is the knowledge process. Engels answers the agnostics in Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy:


... there is yet a set of different philosophers — those who question the possibility of any cognition, or at least of an exhaustive cognition, of the world. To them, among the more modern ones, belong Hume and Kant,... The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotchet's is practice, namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable "thing-in-itself". The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such "things-in-themselves" until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the "thing-in-itself" become a thing for us,...(13)

Both Marx and Engels believe in the knowability of the world and they think that it is

practice which solves the dispute of the reality or the non-reality of thinking. But they do not claim that man can achieve knowledge in its completeness because, as Lenin remarked, knowledge is a movement from incompleteness to completeness. In other words, they have discussed also the limitations of human knowledge.

They explain the historical development of human knowledge where we move towards the absolute truth, towards the unlimited, sovereign and highest sphere of knowledge. In Anti-Duhring, Engels has discussed the sovereignty and limitations of knowledge:

... human thought is just as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign and unlimited in its disposition, its vocation, its possibilities and its historical ultimate goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual realisation and in reality at any particular moment."(14)

Knowledge is historically relative in the sense that it can always be improved upon. "In other

words", as Engels says, "the sovereignty of thought is realised in a series of extremely unsovereignly-thinking human beings; the knowledge which has an unconditional claim to truth, is realised in a series of relative errors; neither the one nor the other can be fully realised except through an unending duration of human existence."(15) Engels has time and again reiterated that knowledge is historical and relative.

... there is absolutely no need to be alarmed at the fact that the stage of knowledge which we have now reached is as little final as all that have preceded it. It already embraces a vast mass of judgements and requires very great specialisation of study on the part of anyone who wants to become conversant with any particular science. But a man who applies the measure of genuine, immutable, final and ultimate truth to knowledge which, by its very nature, must either remain relative for many generations and be completed only step by step, or which, as in cosmogony, geology and the history of man must always contain gaps and be

15. Ibid., pp. 71-72.
incomplete because of the inadequacy of the historical material - such a man only proves thereby his own ignorance and perversity, even if the real thing behind it all is not, as in this case, the claim to personal infallibility.(16)

This relativity of knowledge is not reducible to relativism. Dialectics itself contains, as Lenin noted in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, an element of relativism.(17) Dialectical materialist theory of knowledge does not deny objective truth, but recognises the relativity of our knowledge in the sense that "the limits of approximation of our knowledge to this truth are historically conditioned".(18) An approximation towards absolute truth is accepted in Marxism; every truth is absolute within its narrow limits, but they are relative truths in the broader sense of time and space. The dialectic of truth and error can be witnessed in the relation between absolute and relative truths. In Anti-Duhring, Engels:

16. Ibid., p. 76.
17. Ibid., p. 273.
18. Ibid. p. 272.
Truth and error, like all thought-concepts which move in polar opposites, have absolute validity only in an extremely limited field, as we have just seen, and as even Herr Duhring would realise if he had an acquaintance with the first elements of dialectics, which deal precisely with the inadequacy of all polar opposites. As soon as we apply the anti-thesis between truth and error outside of that narrow field which has been referred to above it becomes relative and therefore unserviceable for exact scientific modes of expression; and if we attempt to apply it as absolutely valid outside that field we really find ourselves altogether beaten: both poles of the antithesis become transformed into their opposite, truth becomes error and error truth.(19)

Now, the dialectic of truth and error or of relative and absolute truths is obvious. As Lenin rightly points out, "for dialectical materialism there is no impassable boundary between relative and absolute truth".(20) Engels uses phrases like "grain of truth"

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19. Ibid., p.76.
20. Ibid., p. 272.
and "particle of error", showing his adherence to the dialectical law of interpenetration of opposites.(21)

Let us sum up our discussion on truth and knowledge by using Lenin's words which are very apt here:

Human thought... by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a 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.(22)

4. Subject-Object Dialectics and the Cognition through Reflection

Engels shows the process and the way of the emergence of real knowledge as a reflection of the real world. He criticises idealist philosophers who explain it otherwise. In ontology, we have discussed that Marx and Engels believe that dialectics exist in objectivity,

21. Ibid., p. 77.
22. Ibid., p. 271.
and so the reflection of dialectics in thought is considered knowledge. Engels considers dialectics as objective dialectics as well as subjective dialectics.

Dialectics, so called objective dialectics, prevails throughout nature, and so called subjective dialectics, dialectical thought, is only the reflection of the motion through opposites which asserts itself everywhere in nature, and which by the continual conflict of the opposites and their final passage into one another, or into higher forms, determines the life of nature. (23)

Marx and Engels have considered knowledge as a conscious reflection, a reflection of objective dialectics. This conscious reflection is the cognition process which involves the study of subject, object and the source of human knowledge. Marx and Engels consider man as a subject of knowledge. However, Spinoza also

considers man as a subject of knowledge; but Spinoza's man is only a natural and biological being. This becomes a historico-social, biological being in the philosophy of Marx and Engels. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx shows the socio-historical development of human senses; man is the subject of knowledge, a socio-historical subject.

Only through objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility..., in a word, human sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of humanised nature. The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. (24)

When man cognises the world his being and thinking live in unity. Marx considers the whole human subjective activity as one activity. He writes:

Thinking and being are... certainly distinct, but at the same time they are in unity with each other. (25)

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25. Ibid., p. 100.
Here, he shows a dialectical unity, in man, of thinking and being. The cognition process shows the internal dynamism and unity of man when he takes part in cognition as a subject of knowledge. It is a specific contribution of Marx and Engels that they consider human sensation in a new way, as practice. This is different from the vulgar materialist analysis which takes sensation only as a contemplation. So, for Marx and Engels, the socio-historico man takes part in cognition as a subject of knowledge who interacts with the outside reality, the object of knowledge. In Marx and Engels, object of knowledge is taken for granted. Whether perceived or not, an independent objective world exists which is not mind-dependent. For example, Marx analysed light as an object of knowledge. In *Capital*, he says:

... the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself.\(^{(26)}\)

Marx and Engels consider the whole objective reality as the object of knowledge. When they analyse

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world as a subject and object of knowledge, they consider man as a subject of knowledge and the whole external reality of subject is taken as the object of knowledge for the subject. Of course, subject is also an object for the subjects.

Engels also expressed the same views on the question of the independence of the object of knowledge. In his *Dialectics of Nature*. According to him, the influence of the external world upon man expresses itself in his brain, and gets reflected there as feelings, thoughts, impulses, volitions, etc.

The question of source of knowledge is also an important one in the make-up of the epistemological position of any philosopher. The epistemological debate in the modern era of philosophy came up on the basis of the source of knowledge. Reason is the source of knowledge for the rationalists; experience or human sensation for the empiricists. Marx and Engels consider practice as the source of knowledge which includes the acts of both subject and object in the process of interaction or cognition. We have seen earlier that how practice was taken by Marx to refute both the idealist and vulgar materialist deviations of knowledge.

Marx and Engels consider cognition as an endless process of interaction between subject and object where both have their own historical limitations.
Subject-object dialectics is the basis of Marxist epistemology. Every instance of cognition, every stage of knowledge process, and the whole history of knowledge and theory of knowledge would not have been possible without this dialectic of subject and object, of thinking and being. Practice, as we have seen earlier, is the mediating link in this dialectic. Practice, hence, is both a subjective as well as an objective activity. The dialectic or the contradiction is the main lever of all intellectual advance. The continuous conflict and solution give rise to the endless progressive, ever changing image of the world system. This reflected image is and remains limited objectively by the historical conditions and subjectively by the physical and mental constitution of the subject of knowledge.

In the beginning, cognition was only a simple reflection of the concrete. Later, man formed notions, concepts and categories, and entered into the second stage of cognition where the mankind started with abstract and cognised the concrete or thinking reproduced the concrete. First, we cognise the concrete in various ways and then form the notions of them. In the second stage of cognition, we start from the inducted notions to deduced particular instances. In the Introduction to Grundrisse,
Marx:

The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination. The first procedure attenuates meaningful images to abstract definitions, the second leads from abstract definitions by way of reasoning to the reproduction of the concrete situation. (27)

In the first stage, knowledge of the concrete originates through an empirical process and later, the reflection of both concrete and abstract takes part in the making of knowledge. The development of knowledge starts with the reflection of the concrete and arrive at the level of categories from which the concrete can be reproduced. Actually, these two basic modes of cognition

in their innumerable shades of combinations participate in the epistemological process. Cognition in Marxism is the active process of reflecting the objective world, the subject included, into a system of thought represented by sensations, concepts and categories of relations and things in motion. This reflected thought should correspond to its object. This reflection of reality into a system of knowledge and its correspondence to reality are not a passive case of one to one parallelism, but of a dialectical case of active interaction between subject and object, concrete and abstract, truth and error, knowledge and ignorance. We would see more about the reflection theory in the end of this chapter.

Before going into the system of knowledge, i.e., mainly the categories, we shall see the method in Marxism.

5. Method

The question of method is most relevant for philosophical inquiries. We see in the beginning of modern age that many philosophers try to make a basis for method so that correct conclusions are arrived at. Spinoza also formulated his own method which he called geometrical. He explained it as a tool of intellect. In
the writings of Marx and Engels, we find the discussion on method; they named their method as dialectical method. This method is inherited from Hegel and developed according to the materialist philosophical foundations of Marx and Engels. Engels pointed out this in his appreciation of Marx's Critique of 1859.(28)

Marx was and is the only one who could undertake the work of extracting from the Hegelian logic the nucleus containing Hegel's real discoveries in this field, and of establishing the dialectical method, divested of its idealist wrappings in the simple form in which it becomes the only correct mode of conceptual evolution.(29)

Marx also agrees with this in a way when he says in Capital that his "dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite".(30) By this he means the distinction of his materialist dialectic from the idealist one of Hegel. Marx thought that dialectic

can be freed from its Hegelian "mystical shell"; with Hegel, dialectic is "standing on its head"; it must be "turned rightside up" to get "the rational kernel" out of it.(31)

Marx's elaborate notes of 1857-'58 on the political economy, known as Grundrisse, the Introduction of 1857 to Grundrisse(1857-'58), the critique that preceded Capital in 1859 (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) including its Preface, and Capital itself are generally considered mature explications or employments of his method. Engels' review (1859) of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy by Marx in 1859 also directly deals with Marx's method approvingly. In his review, Engels says:

With this method we begin with the first and simplest relation which is historically, actually available, thus in this context with the first economic relation to be found. We analyse this relation. The fact that it is a relation already implies that it has two aspects which are related to each other. Each of these aspects is examined separately; this reveals the nature of their mutual behaviour, their reciprocal action. Contradictions will emerge demanding a solution. But since we are

31. Ibid., p. 29.
not examining an abstract mental process that takes place solely in our mind, but an actual event which really took place at some time or other, or which is still taking place, these contradictions will have arisen in practice and have probably been solved. We shall trace the mode of this solution and find that it has been effected by establishing a new relation, whose two contradictory aspects we shall then have to set forth, and so on.(32)

Here, Engels depicts the analysis of starting from simple relations to complex, and says that the development of history is also one with this method. Engels finds that logical exposition is also one with the historical analysis.

Even after the determination of the method, the critique of economics could still be arranged in two ways - historically or logically. Since in the course of history, as in its literary reflection, the evolution proceeds by and large from the simplest to the more complex relations, the historical development of political economy

constituted a natural clue, which the critique could take as a point of departure, and then the economic categories would appear on the whole in the same order as in the logical exposition.(33)

The identity of the logical and the historical methods is shown again when he says:

The logical method of approach was therefore the only suitable one. This, however, is indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences. The point where this history begins must also be the starting point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the historical course.(34)

The first step in Marx's method is that it does not start from concrete categories of appearances, but real concrete factors are deduced and established

33. Ibid., p. 225 (emphasis added)
34. Ibid.
through analysis. Marx gives examples of population and rent. (35) Population seems, at the outset, to be concrete. But it is an abstraction unless we know classes, wage labour, capital etc. (36) To arrive at concrete elements, we have to go beyond appearance. How is it done, for instance, in the case of population? Marx says:

If one were to take population as the point of departure, it would be a very vague notion of a complete whole and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from imaginary concrete terms one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one reached the most simple definition. (37)

Marx says that it appears that these concrete, simple concepts are not starting points but results. (38) The next step is to start from the starting points - concrete concepts (separate factors, or in other words,

35. Karl Marx, 'Introduction' (to Grudriss) in Karl Marx, op. cit. (N.27), (pp.188-217), p.205; p.212.
36. Ibid., p. 205.
37. Ibid., p. 205-6.
38. Ibid., p.206. "It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination".
abstract definitions with meaningful images), and to reach higher categories. (39)

When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange value, advanced to categories like state, international exchange and world market. (40)

This dialectical method of combining the two stages, as pointed out by Marx, is different from the method followed by the seventeenth century economists where they started from the concrete appearances and arrived at few decisive abstract, general relations. (41)

In a way, the movement from concrete to abstract and from abstract to concrete is the total process. But, Marx took the ascent from abstract to concrete as the essential aspect of the method, because the other aspect is taken as the essential precondition. For Marx, "the correct scientific method" is that which "leads from abstract

39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
definitions by way of reasoning to the reproduction of the concrete situation".  (42) It is a move from appearance to concrete reality in general. Marx's concept of concrete is not the old, but the new Hegelian one. "The concrete concept is concrete because it is the synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects".  (43) From the apparently concrete we come to the abstract (abstract again in the Hegelian and Marxist perspective), separate factors as a precondition. From these, the 'ascent from abstract to concrete' starts.  (44) But these are not two completely separate stages. The opposite stage, i.e., the descent from concrete to abstract is implied in the method of ascent from abstract to concrete. This dialectical unity is present "in each separate link as well as in the whole" of the method, as Ilyenkov has rightly put.  (45) In the method, we find the dialectics of ascent and descent, concrete and abstract, induction and deduction, synthesis and analysis, etc.

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ilyenkov and Derek Sayer calls Marx's method as the "ascent from the abstract to concrete". See E.V. Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's 'Capital',* (Moscow: Progress, 1982); Derek Sayer, *Marx's Method: Ideology, Science and Critique in 'Capital',* (Sussex: Harvester, 1979)
What is this method? Is it a creation or something else? Actually, method is a reflection of the actual processes in reality. So, the role of method is also to reflect and reproduce the reality in its concreteness in thought. This is against the Hegel's understanding that this reproduction is because of the thought itself. On this, Ilyenkov:

The method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete is merely a method of reflection of concrete reality in thought rather than a method of creation of it by the power of thought, as it was presented by Hegel. That is precisely why it does not depend on thought at all... As Marx showed, it depends only on the relation in which the various aspects of the concrete whole stand to each other. The method of logical development must therefore correspond to the method of internal division of this whole,...(46)

The reflection of reality in thought and its correspondence to the objectivity are guaranteed in this

46. Ibid., p. 169.
method. So also, as we have seen in the beginning of this section, the identity of the logical and the historical is also another important feature of this method.

The method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete is founded... on the real circumstance that the actually necessary and universal conditions of the origin and development of the object are retained at each given moment as forms of its existence. That is why thought can discern, in the analysis of a developed object, its sublated history. A historical approach to the study of an object cannot be realised other than by the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete.(47)

As we have pointed out in the section(1) of dialectics, method is also coinciding with truth, knowledge, and theory and history of knowledge. Knowledge, method of knowledge and forms of knowledge cannot be different and separate. For instance, categories represent history, form and content of knowledge. Let us see the categories now.

47. Ibid., p. 287.
6. Categories and the Concept of Freedom

Categories represent the reality in thought; they are carriers of history also. Kant's shortcoming in his treatment of categories is that he did not see their historical evolution. He was from the rationalist tradition. Kant considered categories as concepts which are innate. The greatness of Kant lies in his understanding that categories are 'empty' unless they are joined by percepts. The unresolved question of the objectivity of categories in Kant is answered in Marxism. Categories reflect the objective reality in thought-frame.

In Marxism, categories are taken to have formed in the process of the historical development of cognition. Matter and motion, time and space, quality and quantity, particular and universal, essence and appearance, content and form, necessity and chance, possibility and reality, so on and so forth, for part of the innumerable categories of which Marxism has a specific perspective.

Marx and Engels treat categories as historical universals. In the beginning, in the less developed societies, categories developed were of lower and simpler nature. In the course of the emergence of higher
categories,' the simple categories, being the historically acquired knowledge, are made use of. This historical development of categories by a process of continuous induction and deduction is the result of our practice.

As the laws of dialectics, the categories also reflect the reality. As the laws of dialectics are at the same time laws of logic and laws of cognition, the categories also take the role of knowledge, that of representing the reality and that of our interaction with nature and society. Though the categories reflect and represent reality in thought, they are evolved only because of human interaction with the nature. So categories are not independent of objective human knowledge, as the reality is. They emerge because of 'our intercourse' with the world. Marx said:

But what would old Hegel say if he heard in the next world that the general... in German and Norse means nothing but the common land, and the particular... nothing but the separate property divided off from the common land? The logical
categories are in that case damn well arising out of 'our intercourse'.

(48)

This dependence of categories does not make categories subjectivistic; they are subjective in their existence, but objective in their validity. In this sense, Marxist understanding of categories is an improvement on Kant and Hegel.

The interconnection of categories is another point that received importance in Marxism. The interconnections in Hegel come fully out of the creative activity of thought itself; but in Marx and Engels, they are universal forms of reflection of reality representing the actual stages in the development of social cognition whereby the developing reality is appropriated in thought structure. And the development of categories represents the necessary movement of knowledge from lower to higher stages.

Besides the application of categories by Marx and Engels, Engels specifically deals directly with categories as such. In *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels talks on the fluidity of categories:

... the proofs that these fixed opposites of basis and consequence, cause and effect, identity and difference, appearance and essence are untenable, that analysis shows one pole already present in the other..., that at a definite point the one pole becomes transformed into the other, and that all logic develops only from these progressing contradictions.(49)

Engels talks of quality, quantity, and their transformation, mutual opposites, positive and negative. Determinations of 'essence' as relative, part and whole, simple, compound and complex, identity and difference, equal and unequal, polarity, polarisation, necessity and chance, abstract and concrete, individuality, particularity and universality, induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, matter and motion, cause and

effect, causality, reciprocal action, finite and infinite, and appearance and things-in-itself in the chapter on 'Dialectics' in Dialectics of Nature.(50) Here, Engels shows that categories are not isolated, but are interdependent; they develop; and they represent reality. Engels uses the treatment to defeat the mechanical understandings as well as the onesided materialism and idealism.

Here, we are not going into details of each and every category. But the categories related with the concept of freedom has to be dealt with, as we are going to discuss it now. Causality, necessity, contingency, accident, chance, freedom, determinism and indeterminism are the concepts very much interrelated to each other. The question of free will is also linked with the concept of freedom. Causality is about the necessary relations, connections between things or events. Marx and Engels, unlike Hume, accept the objectivity of cause-effect relations. Some thinkers accept causality in nature, but not in history. Hegel, for instance, was criticised for his delineation of logical connections in history. In the new physics also, the question of

50. Ibid., pp. 211-242.
uncertainty principle or the absence of causality in micro-process are issues hotly debated. This conflict of determinism and indeterminism in physics and that of free will and determinism in ethics do have a long history and are still contested questions. Spinoza denied free will and argued that those who nurse the illusion of free volition are ignorant of the causal chain, and they do not know that they themselves are not the cause. But Spinoza accepted the attainment of freedom through the achievement of the realisation that we are only part of the necessary causal chain that ends in God. Spinoza was the first to expound freedom as the recognition of necessity.

To many people, freedom means essentially the doctrine of free will or that their will are free to choose one thing or another indifferently, independent of all previous experience, surrounding circumstance or of their physical and mental make up as it is constituted at any given time. To the more sophisticated, it often means freedom from the coercion of anything material, the pure determination of action and events by reason alone, the autonomy or freedom of ideas. There is still another notion of freedom which considers it as existing only in the realm of spirit, with its conclusion that we are free only in our thought and feeling, and that all actions
are unfree or determined by other events in the material world.

The concept of free will is generally divorced from the subjective and objective reality. Spinoza, Marx and Engels were exceptions.

Before Marx and Engels, the slogan of equality, freedom and fraternity emerged as a symbol of people's fight against the regime of feudal lords. We can easily see the reflection of this class struggle in the field of philosophy of that time. In this period, every assertion of freedom was a kind of declaration of independence, an assertion of right. Freedom became an expression of a desire for what is believed to be better state of affairs.

Marx and Engels explain freedom as a historical process which can be achieved through the fulfilment of natural necessity of human society. They correctly show the connection between necessity and freedom and show the path of achieving real freedom for human
society. In *The German Ideology*, they criticise the philosophers who explain freedom as only a mental activity. They say:

We shall, of course, not take the trouble to explain to our wise philosophers that the "liberation" of "man" is not advanced a single step by reducing philosophy, theology, substance and all the rubbish to "self-consciousness" and by liberating "man" from the domination of these phrases, which have never held him in thrall. Nor shall we explain to them that it is possible to achieve real liberation only in the real world and by real means, that slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and that, in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. "Liberation" is a historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the (level) of industry, commerce, agriculture, intercourse... then subsequently, in accordance with the different stages of their development, (they make-up) the nonsense of substance,
subject, self consciousness and pure criticism, as well as religious; and theological nonsense, and later they get rid of it again when their development is sufficiently advanced. (51)

Here, Marx and Engels clearly show that freedom is a historical process which can be achieved through the development of the productive forces and satisfying the natural needs of the people. In their view, knowledge of natural necessity can produce a base for man's freedom because man cannot achieve freedom without the fulfilment of his own natural necessity. In Anti-Duhring, Engels explains the relation between necessity and freedom.

Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him, freedom is the appreciation of necessity. "Necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood." Freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the

51. The German Ideology, (Moscow: Progress, 1976), pp. 43-44.
possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves - two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought but not in reality. Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. Therefore, the freer a man's judgement is in relation to a definite question, the greater is the necessity with which the content of this judgement will be determined; while the uncertainty, founded on ignorance, which seems to make an arbitrary choice among many different and conflicting possible decisions, shows precisely by this that it is not free, that it is controlled by the very object it should itself control. Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development. The first men who separated themselves from animal kingdom were in all
essentials as unfree as the animals themselves, but each step forward in the field of culture was a step towards freedom. (52)

Here, Engels shows not only the relation between necessity and freedom but also the relation between culture, knowledge and freedom. We can rightly summarise that Marx and Engels mean by freedom—the capacity of people to make decisions founded on cognised necessity, i.e., to act with knowledge, and also man's control over nature, social relationships and over himself; human freedom does not exclude historical necessity, but might be said to represent its complement and the forms of its manifestation, i.e., the knowledge of the objective laws of nature and society makes us capable to systematically (in this sense, freely) utilise these laws to attain our aims. The conscious utilisation of the laws of social development, and the attainment of progressive social results bring genuine freedom.

7. A Dialectical Theory of Knowledge

Like ontology, epistemology of Marx and Engels is seldom set forth and must be discerned from within the general context of his writings. Theory of knowledge is implicit in their works. Though indirect and implicit, Marx's influence in epistemology is nonetheless profound. Marx's significant contribution here is in the dialectic of subject and object. However, this dialectic is perceived by different interpreters differently. Many try to capture one side of their views without grasping the very important dialectical nature of the theory of knowledge in Marx and Engels. For example, Colletti takes them as giving priority to concept in acquiring knowledge and compares them with Kant. Of course, he wants to prove Marx as an idealist and rationalist for whom ideas and reason are prior to empirical observation. Colletti argues:

From Kant... Marx clearly derives - whether he was aware of it or not, and whatever may have been the process of mediation - the principle of real existence as something 'more' with respect to everything contained in the concept; a principle which, while it makes the process of
reality irreducible to the logical process, also prevents us from forgetting that, if the concept is logically first, from another angle it is itself a resultant - the result, precisely, of the 'elaboration of perception and representation into concepts', i.e., the point of arrival of the passage from empirical reality to knowledge (the process of the formation of knowledge) which has been, of course, the critical problem par excellence. (53)

Colletti uses The Grudrisse of Marx as a basis for his conclusions. Colletti's contention is that the passage from abstract to concrete, from 'empirical reality to knowledge', i.e., the 'elaboration of perception and representation into concepts' is only an explication of an already implicit conclusion; the concept is a beginning as well as a result. But this does not allow Colletti to assume that concept is logically first. In Marx, we have seen that the concept is a reflection of reality. It seems that Colletti is confusing Marx’s identification of

logical with the historical in method with epistemology.

In method, Marx talks of an initial logical analysis of concrete appearances to arrive at abstract determinations in order to start with. From the abstract, Marx comes to the concrete which this time is the real concrete different from the initial concrete appearances. But, with this preliminary logical analyses and syntheses, Marx says, we get the whole story in a historical way. This identity of the logical and the historical does not actually give any priority to the logical except that it is taken up first in the method. The real and historical priority of the logical is wrongly attributed to Marx by Colletti. Colletti assumes that "the concept is logically first"(54) in Marx. In fact it is the opposite way. As far as Kant is concerned, Colletti is right. But the comparison of Kant with Marx in giving a logical priority to concepts (or categories) as it is in Kant is completely misplaced.

Involvement of Marx and Engels in logical deduction is also in no way hinting at any priority for logic and deduction. The historical unravelling of the truth, or the undoing of the ideological inversions in

54. Ibid.
another sense, is itself a logical, historical and practical process.

In Marx and Engels, the categories are also historical in origin and development. In Kant, they are apriori receptacles for the blind percepts. We cannot say that they are in Kant the logical essence of reality. The categories in Marx are the logical essences, rich in concreteness, representing the real objective world. The reality is reflected in the categories; the categories correspond to the reality. A reflection theory of knowledge and a correspondence theory of truth form the backbone of Marxist epistemology. One thing can be stated with conviction that Marx is not a rationalist, nor an idealist as Colletti thinks.

Ruben understands Colletti as making an unsuccessful attempt to wed a materialist ontology with an idealist epistemology in Marx.(55) Colletti’s Kantian interpretation of Marx is refuted by Ruben.

On the assumption that he is projecting onto Marx a Kantian interpretive thought claim, what Colletti has attempted to do is to combine an idealist epistemology (ratio cognoscendi) with a materialist ontology (ratio essendi). It simply won't work. In his claim for the logical process, 'that we can only arrive at a recognition of that reality' through the logical process, he has incapacitated his theory from being able to say anything about, or justify belief in, the real process, independently of its determination by and relation to the logical process. Once again the logical has managed to swallow the real. The only way a theory of knowledge can prevent this from happening is to insist that there are things that we can recognise about the real process, about reality, which are not just the product of our a priori 'recognition of the reality'.(56)

What we saw in the chapter on ontology in Marx and Engels, i.e., that the reality is independent of our mind and

56. Ibid.
ability to cognise it is the issue here. Ruben rightly points out that a consistent materialism needs a reflection theory of knowledge. He said that "only a reflection theory of knowledge can be a materialist theory of knowledge". (57)

As Colletti tries to take Marx to the rationalist fold, there are equal attempts to take him to the empiricist camp. Contrary to Colletti, Jendrich analyses Marx's epistemology and considers it to belong to a new empiricist tradition. He writes:

... Marx broke through transcendental philosophy, gave up consciousness as a standard, and turned back to empiricism. This from the high point of classical German philosophy was a return to something which was essentially unphilosophical and unscientific. It was, however, a new empiricism conceived as the non-identity of theory and praxis on the basis of a newly understood (and lived) unification of theory and praxis. This is an empiricism which

57. Ibid., p. 145.
conceives experience as praxis, which means that the pre-Kantian contraposition of a posteriori and a priori now loses its original meaning."(58)

Jendrich is right compared to Colletti when he writes that Marx's point of departure is experience or practice. But he is equally wrong when he concludes Marx as an empiricist. It seems that the position of radical empiricists and logical positivists might have influenced Jendrich to conclude Marx as an empiricist. The question of verification of knowledge has become the crucial issue in the later empiricist-rationalist polemic. Charles Landesman points out this when he writes that,

In early modern philosophy, the main issue was that of the origin of ideas. Rationalists claimed that many of our most important ideas are innate, whereas empiricists asserted that all ideas come from experience. After Kant, the issue became one of showing how our

beliefs and theories can be justified. Empiricists claimed that the justification of all statements about matters of fact is founded upon experience, whereas rationalists asserted that some knowledge of matters of fact is a priori and based upon reason. The logical positivists were radical empiricists who developed a verifiability theory of cognitive significance according to which statements that can not be verified through observation are meaningless.(59)

Thus, the empiricist rationalist conflict continued even after Marx. The kind of empiricism vis-a-vis rationalism as we witness in the new empiricist theories is not seen in Marx. So Jendrich's attempt to group Marx along with the new empiricists is not justified.

Oizerman does not agree with the conclusions of either Colletti or Jendrich. In his view, Marxist

epistemology cannot be analysed as to be empiricist or rationalist. He rightly sees a new point of departure in Marx. He says that:

The rationalist and empiricist philosophical doctrines were the same one-sided antithesis. We are now well aware what the rationalists were right in, and what their opponents. The one-sided antithesis between epistemological rationalism and empiricist epistemology was not removed, however, by reconciling them, but by a new understanding of the relation of the theoretical and empirical. The point of departure for overcoming this one-sided antithesis was a dialectical development of materialist sensualism.(60)

The dialectical development of materialist sensualism was an improvement over both contemplative materialism and idealism as noted by Marx in his theses on Feuerbach. Further, Oizerman pointed out that epistemology of materialism can be properly understood only in the context

of reflection of reality. To Oizerman, materialism, rightly, is a "system of views whose epistemological basis posits the possibility of an infinite increase of knowledge through ever fuller and deeper reflection of reality."(61) Thus, Oizerman also considers the epistemology of Marx and Engels as a reflection theory.

Ilyenkov does have agreement with Oizerman and Ruben. He identifies the question of epistemology with the concept of dialectics. In his book, *Dialectical Logic*, he writes:

> Dialectics has no subject matter distinct from that of the theory of knowledge (logic), just as logic (the theory of knowledge) had no object of a study that would differ in any way from the subject matter of dialectics. In the one and in the other it was a matter of universal forms and laws of development in general that were reflected in consciousness precisely in the shape of logical forms and laws of thought through the determination of categories:(62)

61. Ibid., p. 258.
Ilyenkov has correctly shown the coincidence of dialectic and epistemology. But, in the same way as whole is not part, the identity of logic, epistemology, ontology and dialectics is not an undifferentiated one. Dialectics is common in all these areas - reality, logic and cognition. Ilyenkov is very right in stressing the dialectical nature of the Marxist theory of knowledge. So, epistemology in Marx and Engels is not onesidedly empiricist or rationalist. As we saw in the previous sections of this chapter, practice has a great role in mediating the dichotomies which would have otherwise expressed onesidedly.

Another aspect is the historical growth of knowledge, knowledge of reality, a growing reality. First, epistemology is a movement from ignorance to knowledge, from less to more knowledge. Secondly, it is a question of catching up with the reality which itself is developing. That is why the categories are also historical and dialectical.

Then, the categories are a reflection of the reality, and the truth of the categories corresponds to the reality of it. It is Lenin who has dealt in detail the reflection theory of knowledge and the correspondence theory of truth. In Lenin, we get many
passages that talk of reflection and correspondence. Most of these references come in the context of his polemic with Mensheviks. Lenin explains these concepts usually after quoting Marx, Engels, Dietzgen and Hegel while attacking back the Menshevik attempts to debase Marxist materialism. For instance, in Materialism and Empirio-criticism, Lenin says:

In a word, every ideology is historically conditional, but it is unconditionally true that to every scientific ideology (as distinct, for instance, from religious ideology) there corresponds an objective truth, absolute nature. (63)

Again,

The point at issue is not the immutable essence of things, or an immutable consciousness, but the correspondence between the consciousness which reflects nature and nature which is reflected by consciousness. (64)


64. Ibid., pp.273-4 (Last two emphases added)
In Philosophical Notebooks, while reading Hegel,

Knowledge is the reflection of nature by man. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation and development of concepts, laws etc., and these concepts, laws, etc... Here, there are actually, objectively three members: 1) nature; 2) human cognition = the human brain (as the highest product of this same nature), and 3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories, etc. Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature as a whole, in its completeness, its "immediate totality", he can only eternally come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc. etc.(65)

By attacking Lenin, there were continuous attempts to oppose the reflection and the

correspondence theories. (66) The root of many of these criticisms lies in their idealist understanding of the process of knowing. Some idealists think that only ideas, not matter, can be knowledge. They do not understand the dialectical relation between thinking and being; the point, the Marxist point, is that thinking is of being, thinking reflects being and corresponds to it, and being can very well be matter.