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Consciousness and Reality: A Comparative Study of the Philosophical Foundations of Marx and Hegel

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Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of the philosophical foundations of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx with a focus on their respective conceptions of consciousness and reality. Drawing from classical texts and contemporary scholarship, it reconstructs Hegel's dialectical idealism, which views reality as the unfolding of Absolute Spirit, and contrasts it with Marx's materialist dialectics, which locates consciousness in socio-historical praxis. The analysis highlights Marx's critique of Feuerbach's abstract humanism and Stirner's radical egoism, culminating in the notion of the "real individual" as historically situated and socially

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embedded. Through a layered examination of method, history, subjectivity, and community, the paper demonstrates how Marx inherits and subverts Hegel's philosophical system, transforming it into a critical theory of liberation. This dialogue between idealism and materialism, abstract freedom and practical emancipation, remains vital for understanding contemporary structures of power, ideology, and agency.

Keywords: Marx, Hegel, materialism, dialectics, emancipation

1. Introduction

The philosophical relationship between consciousness and reality stands at the core of modern thought. Among the most influential formulations of this relationship are those found in the works of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx—two thinkers whose dialectical frameworks have defined the contours of idealism and materialism in the Western philosophical tradition. While Hegel positions consciousness as the self-developing process of Spirit that ultimately reconciles with reality through Absolute Knowledge, Marx fundamentally inverts this relationship, insisting that material conditions and human practice determine consciousness.

This study aims to offer a comparative analysis of the philosophical foundations underlying Hegel's and Marx's theories of consciousness and reality. Through this investigation, it will become evident how Marx's materialist conception is both a continuation and a radical transformation of Hegelian dialectics. As Norman Levine (2006) notes, Marx's divergence from Hegel rests not merely on methodological shifts but on the philosophical rupture that reorients the dialectic from the movement of Spirit to the laboring subject in history.

In engaging this comparison, the paper draws upon both classical and contemporary scholarship. Raya Dunayevskaya (2003) foregrounds the revolutionary continuity between Hegel's dialectic and Marx's praxis, while thinkers like Karen Ng (2015) extend this lineage into modern ideology critique. Carl Schmitt (2014) and Andrew Chitty (2011) further probe the political stakes of aligning or distinguishing the two systems. Meanwhile, Than Thi Hanh and Phan Thi Thanh (2025) explore the reception and reinterpretation of Hegelian themes within Marxist philosophical traditions.

The core questions this paper addresses are:

1. How does each thinker conceive the relation between consciousness and reality?
2. In what ways does Marx adopt, adapt, or reject

Hegelian premises?

3. What are the implications of these philosophical foundations for understanding history, ideology, and human agency?

By examining these questions, this study contributes to the broader discourse on dialectical thought, offering insights into the philosophical transition from German Idealism to historical materialism. The analysis also seeks to clarify the enduring relevance of this transition for contemporary critical theory and socio-political praxis.

2. The Philosophical Foundations of Hegel: From Consciousness to Absolute Spirit

2.1 Self-Consciousness and Dialectical Movement

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* marks a pivotal moment in the development of modern philosophy, especially in articulating the generative structure of self-consciousness. For Hegel, consciousness is not a static entity but a historical process that unfolds through contradiction, negation, and reconciliation—a movement he terms dialectic (Maybee, 2016). Its classic expression is found in the *Master-Slave dialectic*, where *recognition* (*Anerkennung*) operates as the mediating force between self and other in the formation of self-consciousness (O'Neill, 1996, *n.p.*).

As McKenna (2011) notes, Hegel's dialectic does not aim to eliminate contradiction but to sublate it (*Aufhebung*), preserving, overcoming, and elevating oppositions into higher forms of unity. This movement is both epistemological and ontological: it explains how knowledge is generated and reveals how reality itself unfolds. Berto (2007) further argues that Hegel's dialectic can be understood semantically as a self-adjusting system of meaning, offering a response to analytic criticisms of Hegel's supposed illogicality**.**

2.2 Absolute Spirit and the Unity of Thought and Reality

The culmination of Hegel's dialectical system lies in the realization of Absolute Spirit (der absolute Geist), where subjective consciousness, objective spirit (law, morality, social institutions), and absolute spirit (art, religion, and philosophy) are finally unified. Within this framework, "what is rational is real, and what is real is rational" becomes the core axiom of Hegel's philosophical idealism (Rosen, 1984, *n.p.*), asserting that reality is the historical unfolding of reason itself.

Gadamer (1976) reinterprets this not as a rigid metaphysical system but as a hermeneutic process of self-understanding that is historically situated yet open to universality. The Absolute, in this view, is not a static endpoint but a living

totality in motion (Gadamer, 1976, *n.p.*).

Badiou, Bellassen, and Mossot (2011) extract what they call the "rational kernel" of Hegelian dialectics (Badiou et al., 2011, *n.p.*), emphasizing the immanent logic of contradiction as a philosophical tool that remains relevant in contemporary thought. This impulse resonates with Marx's own inversion of Hegel's dialectic, which sought to ground the dialectical movement not in Spirit but in material social conditions.

Significantly, Hanh and Thanh (2025) argue that Hegel's conception of the unity between consciousness and history served as a foundational influence on Marxist philosophy. Though Marx reoriented this unity toward praxis and materialism, he retained Hegel's dialectical logic and totalizing view of historical development, transforming them into the analytic structures of class struggle and revolutionary change.

2.3 Contemporary Interpretations and Critiques

Contemporary scholarship continues to engage Hegelian dialectics across both analytic and post-structural traditions. Berto (2007), for instance, reframes Hegel's logic as a semantic structure with pragmatic implications, challenging the assumption that Hegel lacks conceptual rigor. Meanwhile, Priest (1989) explores the relationship between Hegelian dialectics and dialetheism—the view that some contradictions may be true—arguing that Hegel anticipates this form of logical paradox.

In historical and ethical contexts, Soufiani and Aldawoodi (2024) analyze the dialectic of evil in Hegel's moral philosophy, highlighting the internal tension between ethical law and negation. Vandevert (2024) interprets Hegelian dialectics as a foundation for *metamodern* thought, which seeks to oscillate between modernist and postmodernist commitments.

From a cross-cultural perspective, Yang (2024) underscores the continuity between Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, particularly in the emphasis on contradiction, unity of opposites, and historical movement. This continuity, Yang argues, provides a valuable framework for interpreting the evolution of Marxist philosophy in non-Western contexts.

This chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for the next section, which turns to Marx's philosophical foundations and his transformation of dialectics into a materialist theory of social practice.

3. The Philosophical Foundations of Marx: From Consciousness to Praxis

3.1 From Species-Being to Real Individuals: A Critique of Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy, especially his theory of *species-being* (*Gattungswesen*), played a formative role in shaping the early intellectual development of Karl Marx. Feuerbach criticized Hegel's speculative idealism by rooting human nature in the sensual, emotional, and communal dimensions of existence. His project aimed to humanize theology by demonstrating that God is merely a projection of the human essence, and that true human freedom is found in love and communal unity (Jiacheng, 2024).

Marx, however, would eventually critique this conception as abstract and insufficiently material. Feuerbach, Marx argued, "resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx & Engels, 1970). While Feuerbach claimed to restore human agency, Marx saw him as merely inverting idealism, remaining bound to contemplative materialism rather than revolutionary praxis (Marx, 1844; Antonio, 1981).

Marx proposed a new foundation for philosophy: the analysis of real individuals engaged in productive activity. Human beings, he insisted, are not defined by abstract essence but by the material conditions under which they live, labor, and reproduce life. Thus, essence becomes historically situated and socially produced through *praxis*, a key category in Marx's thought (Yang, 2024).

Chinese scholars have offered valuable insights on this shift. Liu and Xiao (2016) argue that Marx's departure from Feuerbach's "species-being" marks a critical advance from moral abstraction to dialectical historicity. Han (2009) emphasizes that Marx's engagement with alienation is shaped by both Feuerbach's anthropological critique and Hegel's self-externalizing subject, but ultimately transcends both through a practice-centered transformation of the individual.

3.2 Confronting the “Unique One”: Marx’s Engagement with Stirner

Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* presented a radical challenge to both Feuerbach’s humanism and Hegelian idealism. Stirner critiqued any universal category—be it God, man, or species-being—as ideological constructs that enslave the individual. He advocated for the *Unique One*, a radically autonomous ego that resists all external definitions and social bonds (Stirner, 1844/1995, *n.p.*).

While Stirner's critique exposed the authoritarian residues within Feuerbach's thought, Marx and Engels rejected his extreme individualism as ahistorical and idealist. They argued that Stirner merely replaced theological abstraction with a solipsistic one (Marx & Engels, 1970). Marx acknowledged Stirner’s insight that ideologies often mask

domination but emphasized that Stirner overlooked the material roots of alienation and social structure (Jeko & Ndidi, 2024).

Marx grounded his own critique in the notion of the *real individual*—a being embedded in historical processes and social relations. Where Stirner imagined freedom as detachment from society, Marx saw it as achievable only through the transformation of society via collective praxis (Stirner, 1844/1995; Ng, 2015).

Zhang (2021) provides an insightful analysis of Marx's engagement with Hegel in *Notes on the Phenomenology*, emphasizing how Marx's focus on objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*) and alienation redefines individual identity as historically mediated. Zhu (2007) further argues that Marx's critique of Stirner represents a shift from political critique to a broader social and materialist one, enabling a more transformative vision of subjectivity.

3.3 Praxis and the "Real Individual": Marx's Philosophical Breakthrough

Marx's turn toward historical materialism marks a decisive shift from both Feuerbach's abstract humanism and Stirner's radical egoism. The foundation of this transformation is his concept of *praxis*—the idea that human beings create themselves and their world through purposeful activity, especially labor (Flohr, 2024).

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels emphasize that the starting point for all social analysis must be "real, active men" involved in "the production of their material life" (Marx & Engels, 1970). These individuals do not exist in isolation but are formed within networks of production, distribution, and reproduction. Consciousness itself is not primary but arises from social life: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."

In this context, alienation is not merely spiritual or psychological, but social and economic—stemming from the separation of individuals from the products of their labor, from nature, from others, and from themselves. Praxis, therefore, becomes the means of both critique and liberation.

3.4 Beyond Humanism: The Dialectic of Individual and Community

Marx's philosophy is not anti-individual but anti-abstract individualism. He envisions a *real community* where individual freedom is realized not against the collective, but through it. This dialectical unity contrasts sharply with the formulations of both Feuerbach and Stirner. Feuerbach subsumes the individual into the species; Stirner isolates the ego from social life. Marx, however, identifies the individual as a "social being" whose development is bound up with

material and historical conditions (Duquette, 1989; Buchwalter, 1991; Wilén, 2025).

In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx argues that the modern state represents an alienation of society from itself. True emancipation, he asserts, cannot come from political reform alone, but from social revolution grounded in the needs and activity of real individuals (Marx, 1843/1970,n.p.; Ng, 2015).

Liu and Chen (2013) emphasize that Marx's Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* represents a radical departure from classical German idealism by repositioning the state not as the embodiment of ethical life, but as an alienated form that must be overturned by the proletariat. This insight supports Marx's vision of a community where individuals are no longer abstracted into legal subjects but are participants in the reproduction and transformation of social life.

4. Comparative Analysis of Hegel and Marx on Consciousness and Reality

4.1 Dialectical Method: Idealism versus Materialism

At the heart of the philosophical divergence between Hegel and Marx lies their respective uses of dialectics. Hegel's dialectic is fundamentally idealist: it unfolds within the domain of Spirit (*Geist*), where contradictions are internal to thought and resolved through the synthesis of opposites in the progression toward Absolute Knowledge (Maybee, 2016; McKenna, 2011). Reality, in this view, is the expression of the rational and self-developing Idea.

Marx, by contrast, materializes the dialectic. He does not abandon Hegel's structure of negation and sublation (*Aufhebung*), but he reorients it toward concrete human activity and socio-economic conditions. Marx "turned Hegel on his head"—or rather, on his feet—by insisting that it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1970; Yang, 2024). For Marx, contradictions emerge in labor, in the forces and relations of production, and dialectical movement occurs through historical class struggle.

This transformation has been widely noted in both Western and Chinese scholarship. Wu (2018) argues that Marx's reconfiguration of dialectics establishes a new ontological ground in production and social relations. Deng (2008) similarly emphasizes that what Marx inherits from Hegel is not just logical form, but the capacity of contradiction to drive historical development within material reality.

4.2 The Relationship Between Consciousness and Reality

Hegel views consciousness as both the site and agent of reality's unfolding. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, self-consciousness advances through a dialectical process that culminates in the unity of subject and object, of thought and being, within Absolute Spirit (Gadamer, 1976). Reality is rational to the extent that it is grasped by and within consciousness.

Marx reverses this directionality. He asserts that consciousness arises from material life—specifically, from individuals engaged in social and productive relations. Rather than an absolute subject, Marx posits the "real individual" as both conditioned by and conditioning the material world through praxis (Marx, 1844; Ng, 2015). In this schema, ideas are not autonomous forces but reflections of historically situated practices.

Chinese theorists have noted that Marx's concept of the "real individual" was forged through his critical engagement with both Feuerbach's abstract anthropology and Hegel's logic of alienation (Liu & Xiao, 2016; Han, 2009). The "externalization" of consciousness becomes, in Marx, a critique of objectification under capitalism and a call to reappropriate the social totality.

4.3 History, Subjectivity, and the Role of Practice

In Hegel's account, history is the progressive realization of freedom through the dialectical development of Spirit. The historical subject is Reason actualizing itself in the world—often through states, laws, and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) (Rosen, 1984). History is meaningful because it is the movement of the Idea.

Marx reconfigures the historical subject as the collective of living individuals whose activity produces the material conditions of existence. History is not the realization of Spirit, but the struggle of classes embedded in concrete economic relations. Subjectivity arises not from philosophical insight but from labor, production, and social conflict (Flohr, 2024; Wilén, 2025).

Zhang (2021) emphasizes that in Marx's *Notes on Hegel's Phenomenology*, the subject is no longer understood as a mere vehicle for universal reason, but as a historically alienated actor whose objectification must be dialectically negated through praxis. In this light, alienation becomes the central pivot around which Marx's theory of history and emancipation revolves.

4.4 Individual and Community: From Absolute Spirit to Real Society

For Hegel, the individual finds self-realization through ethical life, culminating in unity with the state(Gadamer, 1976, *n.p.*), which he views as the actualization of universal

reason. The community, in this view, is a spiritual and rational whole that integrates individuals through their duties and roles (Gadamer, 1976).

Marx, while initially influenced by this holistic vision, grew critical of its idealism and abstraction. Instead of viewing the state as the rational realization of freedom, he saw it as the alienation of society from itself. True community, for Marx, must emerge from the free association of real individuals engaged in common social production (Marx, 1843/1970; Hanh & Thanh, 2025).

Zhang Shuangli (2016) notes that Marx's critique of Hegel's philosophy of right does not simply reject state theory, but exposes its ideological function in maintaining alienated political forms. Guo (2025) extends this critique to Marx's engagement with Hegel's philosophy of nature, arguing that Marx restructured the dialectic to articulate a historically grounded ecological totality.

4.5 Conclusion: Inheritance and Transcendence

The relationship between Marx and Hegel's philosophies has been a subject of extensive scholarly debate. Fraser (1997) argues that their dialectics are fundamentally the same, emphasizing the analysis of societal forms. Cesarale (2011) discusses how Marx's interpretation of Hegel evolved over time, from viewing him as theorizing self-consciousness to recognizing him as a rigorous theoretician of conceptual development. Duquette (1989) contends that Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of state focuses on its material presuppositions rather than its idealism. Blunden (2021) emphasizes that the main difference between Marx and Hegel lies in the historical contexts they lived in, with Marx recognizing the transformative power of the industrial working class. Despite their differences, both philosophers shared a focus on societal analysis and conceptual development, with Marx adapting Hegel's ideas to address the economic and social realities of his time.

Marx inherits from Hegel a powerful dialectical logic and a commitment to historical development. Yet he departs from Hegel in his insistence that history begins not in thought but in material life. His transformation of dialectics into a tool for critiquing political economy marks a decisive break from speculative philosophy and a move toward emancipatory theory.

Where Hegel's consciousness discovers itself in the Absolute, Marx's consciousness is born in labor. Where Hegel's state is the end of freedom, Marx's freedom lies in the withering of the state. The two thinkers thus stand at the pivot point between idealism and materialism, metaphysics and history, abstraction and actuality.

Chinese scholars such as Yuyujin (2011) and Sun (2008)

have also emphasized the methodological rupture Marx introduced, repositioning dialectical thought from a metaphysical system to a historical-materialist mode of critique. In bridging and breaking from Hegel, Marx lays the groundwork for a philosophy rooted in the real lives of individuals and their collective capacity to transform the world.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study has provided a comparative philosophical inquiry into the foundational concepts of consciousness and reality in the works of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx. By systematically analyzing their dialectical methods, historical perspectives, and understandings of individual and community, the research demonstrates how Marx appropriated and transformed Hegelian idealism into a materialist theory of praxis. The evolution from Hegel's Absolute Spirit to Marx's real individual marks a decisive shift in the conceptualization of human agency, freedom, and history.

While this transformation has been widely noted, the present study has contributed by mapping out how alienation, labor, and subjectivity operate differently within their respective systems. Marx's critique of Feuerbach and Stirner further clarifies this trajectory, enabling a deeper understanding of how philosophical humanism gives way to a dialectics of concrete social relations. Importantly, the incorporation of both Western and Chinese philosophical scholarship has allowed for a pluralized reflection on this transition, showing how the philosophical reconfiguration from idealism to materialism reverberates across cultural and historical contexts.

The implications of this study extend beyond intellectual history. At a time when the alienation of labor, ecological degradation, and ideological fragmentation define much of global capitalist society, the philosophical issues addressed by Hegel and Marx remain acutely relevant. Hegel's conception of freedom as self-realization through ethical life challenges us to think beyond atomized liberal subjectivity. Marx, in turn, insists that freedom cannot be achieved within alienated social structures, but must be realized through their transformation.

This calls for a renewed appreciation of philosophy not merely as abstract reflection, but as a critical practice. Marx's transformation of dialectics reminds us that concepts are not inert—they intervene in reality. In this sense, philosophy regains its critical function when it reorients itself toward the world, exposing the contradictions embedded in its forms, and envisioning pathways of emancipation.

Ultimately, the dialogue between Hegel and Marx invites us

to rethink the relationship between thought and being, between consciousness and the world. Their philosophies, despite profound differences, converge in one crucial respect: they both affirm that the human subject is not passive, but constitutive. To reflect is to act; to know is to intervene. In this regard, the study of Hegel and Marx remains not only philosophically significant but politically and ethically imperative.

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