When did Marx Become a Materialist?: Irony as the Origin of Marx’s Materialism

Hideki Shibata

Introduction
Marx’s view of irony
From philosophy to materialism
Conclusion

Introduction

Marx overturned, so to speak, the superiority of form over matter and adhered tightly to the real world in order to reveal the immanent necessity hidden deep in the objective world. This is the core of his understanding of the subject. Marx’s subject is more comprehensive than that found in the customary usage of the term, and the significance of the conscious subject is limited. It proceeds from intuition and representation to understanding. Furthermore, the rational and dialectical form of consciousness arises. However, this development is not caused by the conscious subject itself; rather, it is the result of the practice of the comprehensive subject (“Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence” [The German Ideology]). The subject is understood as a real entity with its own independent existence outside of mind, objective activity, sensuous human activity, practice (Kato 2014; Shibata 2014).

We now are familiar with negative opinions about consciousness, concepts, and theories. We have learned these, for example, from Nietzsche’s argument about Dionysus, Heidegger’s critique of classical Greek philosophy, or Bakhtin’s argument about the carnival; however, I would like to raise the question of where Marx obtained his understanding of consciousness and subject. I would like to investigate this question largely by examining his dissertation and the preparatory notebooks for it.

In the history of philosophy, much value is placed on metaphysics and epistemology; some ancient philosophers are underestimated because they left fewer systematic works.1)

---

1) Today, we think of Plato as the most famous disciple of Socrates, but Diogenes lists three equally valued disciples: Plato, Xenophon, and Antisthenes (Diogenes 1938, p. 177). Xenophon and Antisthenes were, however, less valued today because of this reason.
However, in ancient Greece, philosophy meant the love of Sophia (wisdom), which would allow a man to live a better life. In this sense, the Socratic dialogue method was a typically philosophic activity. Man should study philosophy not just to live but also to live well. Even Aristotle sends an alert to those who forget this practical side of philosophy. He writes:

But the majority of people do not perform those actions, but take refuge in theory, thinking that they are studying philosophy and that thereby they will become good, and so behaving like such people who listen carefully to their doctors but do none to the things they are told to do. Now just as people who go in for that kind of regime will not have a healthy body, similarly people who study philosophy in that way will not have a healthy soul. (Aristotle 2006, p. 7)

The irony of ancient Greek philosophy, on which Marx focused, is intimately related to this original meaning of philosophy. Marx, who tackled Hegel’s system and the real world that was embodied in it (die sittliche Welt), had to be ironic, and his critique had to express its nature in the form of irony. We must understand Marx’s argument about irony to grasp the meaning of his critique.

Marx’s view of irony

Marx submitted his dissertation, The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature, and received the doctorate from Jena University in 1841. He had written preparatory notes for the dissertation; we find his argument on irony in the “Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy.” It is the critique of D.F.C. Bauer’s Das Christliche des Platonismus oder Sokrates und Christus (Tübingen, 1837). In the notebook, Marx writes:

If now a similarity, an analogy is established between grace and Socrates’ midwifery, irony, this means carrying only the contradiction, not the analogy, to the extreme. Socratic irony, as understood by Bauer and as it must be understood with Hegel, namely as the dialectic trap through which human common sense is precipitated out of its motley ossification, not into self-complacentKnowing-better, but into the truth immanent in human common sense itself, this irony is nothing but the form of philosophy in its subjective attitude to common consciousness. The fact that in Socrates it has the form of an ironical, wise man follows from the basic character of Greek philosophy and its attitude to reality. With us irony as a general immanent form, so to speak, as philosophy was taught by Fr. V. Schlegel. But objectively, so far as content is concerned, Heraclitus, who also not only despised, but hated human common sense, is just as much an ironist, so is even Thales, who taught that everything is water, though every
Greek knew that no one could live on water, so is Fichte with his world-creating ego, despite which even Nicolai realized that he could not create any world, and so is any philosopher who asserts immanence in opposition to the empirical person.

In grace, on the other hand, in consciousness of sin, not only the subject which receives grace, which is brought to consciousness of sin, but even that which bestows grace and that which arises out of the consciousness of sin are empirical persons. (Marx 1975a, pp. 493-494)

Marx touches here on Hegel and Schlegel, but he also briefly summarizes his own argument about irony. First, he defines irony as “the form of philosophy in its subjective attitude to common consciousness”; second, he sees Socrates as “an ironical, wise man” and argues that this fact is founded on “the basic character of Greek philosophy and its attitude to reality”; third, he distinguishes between “the empirical person” and “any philosopher who asserts immanence,” the latter being an “ironist”; and forth, he sees religious men as “empirical persons.” I will examine the uniqueness of Marx’s argument about irony in more depth below.

Socratic irony “must be understood with Hegel,” but this remark is very ironical, since closer investigation allows us to recognize the difference in Marx and Hegel’s interpretations of Socratic irony. In speaking of Socrates in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel, in contrast to Marx, clearly distinguishes between Socratic irony and the art of midwifery, and he regards both as two moments of the Socratic method. Hegel states that Socratic irony is “a particular mode of carrying on intercourse between one person and another” (Hegel 1955, p. 398) and “a manner of speech, a pleasant rallying” (Hegel 1955, p. 402). He recognizes that Socratic irony is dialectic in its nature, as long as it is a manner of speech, that is, the method of dialogue, but he underestimates it as “only a subjective form of dialectic” (Hegel 1955, p. 398). However, he properly evaluates the art of midwifery and says, “it is the assisting in the world of the thought which is already contained in the consciousness of the individual” (Hegel 1955, p. 402), but he also characterizes it as “tiresome and tedious” (Hegel 1955, p. 404). Hegel seems to distinguish unnecessarily between the art of midwifery as dialogue and irony as a manner of speech, and undervalues both of them. This is far from Marx’s interpretation of Socratic irony.

However, Hegel does not entirely lack respect for Socratic irony. The following remark is an example of his thought on this matter.

For if I say I know what reason, what belief is, these are only quite abstract ideas; it is necessary, in order to become concrete, that they should be explained, and that it should be understood that what they really are, is unknown. The irony of Socrates is this great quality of showing how to make abstract ideas concrete and effect their development, for on that alone depends the bringing of the notion into consciousness.
This could be the origin of Marx's remark about "the dialectic trap through which human common sense is precipitated out of its motley ossification, not into self-complacent knowing-better, but into the truth immanent in human common sense itself." Hegel's argument about Socrates contains both positive and negative evaluations. He says positively that "the principle of his [Socrates'] philosophy falls in with the method itself" (Hegel 1955, p. 397) and recognizes the contents of Socratic irony (i.e., "to make abstract ideas concrete"), but he denies the "method itself" as "a manner of speech, a pleasant rallying."

One of the reasons for this dualistic evaluation is Hegel's speculative system, which reveals its weakness in his interpretation of Socrates. Hegel asserts, "The philosophy of Socrates is no withdrawal from existence now and here into the free, pure regions of thought, but is in a piece with his life, it does not proceed to a system" (Hegel 1955, p. 396) and "It may actually be said that Socrates knew nothing, for he did not reach the systematic construction of a philosophy" (Hegel 1955, p. 399). Seen from an opposite standpoint, a Socratic standpoint, the speculative philosophical system of Hegel reaches "the systematic construction of a philosophy"; therefore, it knows everything (absolute knowledge) but is only an abstract construction in the "free and pure realm of thought," which is disconnected from the real life.

Hegel's critique was also directed against critical philosophy, as in his critical remarks about Friedrich von Schlegel.² He denounces the irony of Schlegel and states:

It [Schlegel's view of irony] is when subjective consciousness maintains its independence of everything. . . . This irony is thus only a trifling with everything, and it can transform all things into show: to this subjectivity nothing is any longer serious, for any seriousness which it has, immediately becomes dissipated again in jokes, and all noble or divine truth vanishes away or becomes mere triviality "(Hegel 1955, p. 400-401).

What is Schlegel's view of irony that was severely criticized by Hegel? I cannot treat the Schlegel's argument about irony comprehensively here, but Schlegel refers to it in a fragment on Socratic irony:

The Socratic irony is the only disguise that is entirely instinctive, and yet quite prudent. It is equally impossible assume and evince them. Those who do, find it a mystery

² Each review should be at the same time a philosophy of reviews [Jede philosophische Rezension sollte zugleich Philosophie der Rezensionen sein] (Schlegel 2005, p. 81 [Athenäums-Fragmente, No. 44]); Cf. Allemann 1956.