

The German Ideology: A Rewriting of Phenomenology of Spirit?

—A Study of the Relationship between Marx and Hegel

Ping Ren

School of Philosophy, Heilongjiang University, Heilongjiang, China

Abstract: Since the inception of historical materialism, the relationship between Marx's and Hegel's philosophies has remained a central question of inquiry in academic circles. *The German Ideology*, a landmark in the development of historical materialism, has been the subject of extensive scholarly research from both philological and intellectual history perspectives. Yet, scholars have not yet fully elucidated the Hegelian philosophical elements. For instance, Wataru Hiromatsu, the Japanese scholar, took the self-alienation theory in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* as his point of departure, yet failed to uncover that *The German Ideology* essentially constitutes a reworking of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This paper contends that there is a profound structural and substantive correspondence between the two works: in *The German Ideology*, the historical development of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is systematically recast as the genetic history of human labor. This reworking is far more than a simple substitution of content; its significance lies in its capacity to effect a paradigm shift in practical philosophy.

Keywords: *The German Ideology*; *Phenomenology of Spirit*; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; Marx; Hegel



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1 Introduction

Since the first edited publication of *The German Ideology* saw its first publication in 1932, this text has long garnered extensive attention from academic circles. It has not only advanced the understanding of the formation process of historical materialism at the documentary level but also revealed the theoretical divide between Marx, Engels and the Young Hegelians in the 1840s from the perspective of intellectual history. However, *The German Ideology* itself entails complex editorial issues spanning version selection, textual arrangement, translation source texts and other aspects, endowing it with both historical complexity and theoretical significance. The Japanese scholar Wataru Hiromatsu systematically refined editorial methods and restored the original manuscript form in printed editions for the first time, which propelled inquiries into such issues as how Marx sublated Hegel's self-alienation theory. *Volume I/5*

Author Introduction: Ren Ping, Heilongjiang Province. He is a PhD candidate at the School of Philosophy, Heilongjiang University. His research interests include Marxist philosophy, practical philosophy, German classical philosophy, and philosophical anthropology.

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of *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe Second Edition (MEGA²)*, published in 2017, presents a new interpretive perspective, emphasizing that *The German Ideology* is primarily a theoretical achievement forged by Marx and Engels in their debates with the Young Hegelians, Max Stirner in particular (Marx, & Engels, 2017: 725).

This stance suggests that the editors of *Vol. I/5 of MEGA²* maintain a fundamental judgment: Hegelian philosophy was not effectively integrated into *The German Ideology*'s theoretical framework, resulting in what might be termed a "systematic absence". Therefore, this paper argues that to understand the philosophical relationship between Marx and Hegel, we must take the cutting-edge achievements of philological research on *The German Ideology* as the academic foundation and conduct systematic research in combination with the intellectual lineage of Marxism.

2 The Problem of the Absence of Hegelian Philosophy in *The German Ideology*

Volume I/5 of MEGA², the volume devoted to *The German Ideology*, was published in 2017. Its editors attached particular importance to the polemical role of the Young Hegelians in their debates with Marx and Engels. In this new edition, the editors specifically designated the "Saint Max" chapter—composed by Marx in his critique of Max Stirner—as the core section of this text, and centered their key interpretive analysis on this very part. They pointed out the genesis of *The German Ideology* as follows: "It was not the polemic against Feuerbach, but the critique of Bauer and Stirner that formed this starting point. In particular, in the course of their extensive debates with the latter, they formulate a clearer outline of their historical outlook." (Marx, & Engels, 2017: 731) Therefore, influenced by this theoretical viewpoint, academic research on *The German Ideology* has undergone a marked shift. From the previous focus on examining Marx and Engels' critique of Feuerbach, it has shifted to attaching equal importance to research on their critique of the Young Hegelians (Bauer and Stirner in particular). Against the backdrop of the editorial history of this text, a pivotal question has thus come to the fore: Traditional Marxist philosophy holds that Marxist philosophy has inherited the basic core of Feuerbach's philosophy and the rational core of Hegelian philosophy; yet in this context, with the retreat of Feuerbach's philosophy in research on *The German Ideology*, Hegelian philosophy has accordingly been downplayed. Furthermore, the critical orientation of *The German Ideology* toward philosophy is markedly different from that of the 1842-1844 period. In his works of this period—*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, and *The Holy Family*—Marx launched concrete and systematic critiques of Hegelian philosophy. In contrast, the focal point of *The German Ideology*'s critique has shifted to the elaboration and critique of the ideas of relevant members of the Young Hegelians.

Marx's engagement with Hegelian philosophy persisted well beyond the composition of *The German Ideology*. In 1847, he still launched a systematic critique of Hegelian philosophy in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a work penned in polemic against Proudhon. Even twenty years later, in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx explicitly stated that he had drawn on the relevant traditions of Hegelian philosophy. As he put it: "I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him. The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working comprehensively and consciously." (Marx, 1987a: 19) Evidently, Hegelian philosophy was a vital theoretical resource for Marx from start to finish: its influence endured from his early years, when he wrote his Doctoral Dissertation under the impact of Bruno Bauer, a Young Hegelian, to his tenure as an editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the subsequent launch of

his philosophical career. Yet by tracing the editorial history of *The German Ideology* and the intellectual lineage of Marxist philosophy, we can easily identify a pivotal clue: in the process of composing *The German Ideology*, Hegelian philosophy was, in fact, in a state of absence.

This absence is, in fact, also borne out by the editorial history of *The German Ideology*. After the editorial board of *MEGA*¹ launched the compilation of *The German Ideology*—and particularly after Vladimir Adoratskij succeeded Ryazanov as its leader in 1931—he provided a specialized analysis of the editorial motivations underlying *The German Ideology* in the introduction to the then *MEGA*¹/5. He argued: “As a critique and analysis of the post-Hegelian schools and Feuerbach’s philosophy, *The German Ideology* stands as a model of theoretical struggle. Its purpose is to enable the working class to clarify theoretical questions of orientation [...]. For the same reason, this work also holds practical significance for the workers’ movement.” (Marx, & Engels, 1932) From this evaluative standpoint, it directly led them to demand a systematic examination of the various parts of *The German Ideology* in their interconnection, and an attempt to elaborate as fully as possible ideological propositions aligned with Soviet official *The German Ideology*—such as dialectical materialism—by reconstructing a new version of the work. In doing so, they incorporated the fragmentary manuscript known as the “Konvoluts zu Feuerbach” (H5) section, which directly resulted in *The German Ideology* becoming a theoretical classic of a compilatory nature. Yet this approach, to a certain extent, obscured the inherent complexity and unfinished state of the original text, and also reduced the ideological tension of *The German Ideology* to a set of fixed philosophical conclusions. While this ideological demand-oriented approach to integration certainly consolidated its canonical status, it also weakened the intrinsic connection between historical critique and the practical dimension. It even overlooked the inherent value of the intellectual exploration undertaken by Marx and Engels themselves in the course of their writing. It was precisely in response to this that the new editorial board of *Volume I/5 of MEGA*², published in 2017, explicitly critiqued the version of *The German Ideology* edited by Adoratskij. They advocated for a systematic examination of the work rooted in its historical generative context, and argued that two key factors merit close attention. The first is the multiple shifts in the intended purpose of *The German Ideology*’s composition. These shifts pertained not only to the positioning of Feuerbach’s philosophy and the ideas of Bauer and Stirner, but also to the theoretical divergences between Marx and Engels and other socialists, including Hess and Weitling. The second is the practical imperatives that shaped Marx and Engels’ plans for publishing *The German Ideology*: the two initially intended to publish it as a self-edited quarterly journal. They later revised their plan to release it as a two-volume or single-volume edition (Marx, & Engels, 2017: 731).

From the perspective of the editorial history of the relevant sections of *The German Ideology* by the editorial boards of *MEGA*¹ and *MEGA*², it is not difficult to discern that both sides—whether the *MEGA*¹ board that pursued a systematic editing of *The German Ideology* out of the need for ideological integration, or the *MEGA*² board that conducted its editorial work from the perspective of reconstructing the historical generative context of *The German Ideology*—have overlooked the important role that Hegelian philosophy played in the text. On the one hand, as Marx and Engels pointed out in *The German Ideology*, “German criticism has, until its latest attempts, never left the philosophical foundation. It by no means examines its general philosophic premises, but in fact, all its problems originate in a definite philosophical system, that of Hegel. Not only in its answers, but also in its questions, there was a mystification. This dependence on Hegel is the reason why not one of these modern critics has even attempted a comprehensive criticism of the Hegelian system, however much each professes to have advanced beyond Hegel. Their polemics against Hegel and against one another are confined to this—each takes one aspect of the Hegelian system and turns this against the whole system as

well as against the aspects chosen by the others. To begin with, they took pure, unfalsified Hegelian categories such as ‘substance’ and ‘self-consciousness’/ later, they secularised these categories by giving them more profane names such as ‘species,’ ‘the unique,’ ‘man,’ etc.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976a: 28-29)

The German Ideology itself is precisely a pivotal achievement of Marx and Engels’ response to and reflection on the intellectual debates in German thought in the wake of Hegelian philosophy, and the core issues it addresses are exactly the ideological contentions of the post-Hegelian philosophical era. Feuerbach, Bauer, Stirner, and even Hess and others all employed the relevant terms and categories of Hegelian philosophy in these contentions. On the other hand, following Hegel’s death, the Young Hegelians and the Old Hegelians waged a struggle over the right of interpretation of Hegelian philosophy, the core of which was the contest for the primacy of its system and method. Centered on Bruno Bauer, the Young Hegelians, through their aesthetic and religious critique, not only repudiated the alliance of religion and philosophy espoused by the Old Hegelians but also seized the right of interpretation of Hegelian philosophy. Marx and Engels themselves emerged from the Young Hegelian movement. They too waged a struggle with the Young Hegelians over the right of interpretation of Hegelian philosophy—its core being the question: “It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism with their own material surroundings.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976a: 30) Therefore, we should not merely regard *The German Ideology* as a theoretical achievement of Marx and Engels’ polemical struggle with the Young Hegelians, but rather define it as an academic accomplishment of the two in their contest for the right of interpretation of Hegelian philosophy. This very definition precisely reflects the progress achieved in the two contests waged over the right of interpretation of Hegelian philosophy following its disintegration.

As Engels pointed out in the Preface to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in 1888: “In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in Berlin, 1859, Karl Marx relates how the two of us in Brussels in the year 1845 set about: ‘to work out in common the opposition of our view’—the materialist conception of history which was elaborated mainly by Marx...Since then, more than forty years have elapsed, and Marx died without either of us having had an opportunity of returning to the subject. We have expressed ourselves in various places regarding our relation to Hegel, but nowhere in a comprehensive, coherent account. To Feuerbach, who, after all, in some respects forms an intermediate link between Hegelian philosophy and our conception, we never returned.”(Engels, 1990: 519) Therefore, both Marx and Engels were aware of the intimate connection between Hegelian philosophy and their materialist conception of history—especially *The German Ideology*, written in 1845—yet they never offered a systematic elaboration of this connection. More thought-provokingly, Marx accounted for the composition of *The German Ideology* in 1845. He stated: “Frederick Engels, with whom I maintained a constant exchange of ideas by correspondence since the publication of his brilliant essay on the critique of economic categories (printed in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*), arrived by another road (compare his *Condition of the Working-Class in England*) at the same result as I, and when in the spring of 1845 he too came to live in Brussels, we decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy.”(Marx, 1987b: 264) Marx proposed that he and Engels jointly settle accounts with their former philosophical convictions, a conviction that consisted in their shared theoretical endorsement of Hegelian philosophy. On the one hand, the two had both belonged to the Young Hegelians, not only adhering to Hegelian philosophy but also acknowledging its explanatory power with regard to the world. On the other hand, they recognized both the significance

of Hegelian philosophy and its inherent limitations—namely, the construction of a holistic worldview through abstract concepts and logical deduction. Against the backdrop of this philosophical reckoning, a pivotal theoretical question has come to the fore: the absence of adequate research on Hegelian philosophy in *The German Ideology* in previous scholarship. In essence, this problem of absence pertains to how Marx and Engels exercised a leading role in the interpretation of Hegelian philosophy and thereby critiqued the Young Hegelians and their adopted version of Hegelian philosophy; it can also be understood as the question of how Marx and Engels realized the transformation of their own philosophical paradigm by appropriating, assimilating and critiquing Hegelian philosophy. Therefore, to address this question, we must return to the contextual framework of the generative history of Marxism.

It was against this line of thinking that the Japanese scholar Wataru Hiromatsu embarked on the revised collation and compilation of *The German Ideology*. He argued that the previously edited versions did not reflect the authentic original of the work, and advocated a return to the original form of the *Manuscripts*. He distinguished the *Manuscripts* of the “Feuerbach Chapter” into the large manuscript bundle and the small manuscript bundle. He pointed out that the chapter was not only left in an unfinished state, but also contained theoretical conflicts and contradictions in the course of its composition (Hiromatsu, 1997: 426). To this end, he attempted to present the form of the *Manuscripts* in double-column and facing-page layouts: he used odd and even page numbers to mark variant drafts, addenda and supplements respectively, and distinguished between the written notes of Marx and Engels with different typefaces and symbols. By this means, he reconstructed the traces of their additions and revisions, ultimately presenting the original appearance of the *Manuscripts* directly in printed editions. Hiromatsu’s recompilation of *The German Ideology* is closely intertwined with his attention to Hegelian philosophy within the text.

3 Hiromatsu’s Research on *The German Ideology* and the Sublation of the Theory of Alienation

After Marx completed the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* between April and August 1844, the work remained unpublished in its entirety for various reasons. It was not until 1927 that the Marx-Engels Institute of the Soviet Union published the Third Manuscript section of the *Manuscripts* in *Volume 3 of the Marx-Engels Archives*, which was printed in Moscow. This section covered themes such as “Communism” and “The Critique of Hegel’s Dialectics”, yet omitted the chapter on the theory of alienated labor. It was not until 1932 that J. R. Mayer and S. Landshut, theorists of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, compiled and published the three sections of the *Manuscripts* in Berlin under the title *Marx: Early Writings on Historical Materialism*—namely, “Wages, Profit of Capital, Rent,” “Alienated Labor,” and “Communism and the Critique of Hegel”. They also included in the volume supplementary notes dating from the same creative period as the *Manuscripts*. It was only then that the pivotal questions addressed in the *Manuscripts*, such as the theory of alienated labor and the essence of man, finally came to light (Marx, 1932). This development sparked a series of pertinent debates, including the dispute over the Young Marx versus the Mature Marx, and the debate between humanism and scientism within the Marxist camp, with the core of these controversies centering particularly on how to interpret the theory of alienation in the *Manuscripts*. On this issue, Western Marxists articulated a clear stance: they argued that humanist Marxism, represented by the Young Marx, constituted the true essence of Marxism.

Hiromatsu's position represents a fundamental departure from that of Western Marxists. He rejected their stance of upholding the theory of alienation and instead explicitly argued that this theory should be subjected to critical examination. Accordingly, in his works including *The Formative Process of Marxism*, *The Horizon of Marxism*, *The Rationale of Marxism*, *A New Restored Edition of the Manuscripts of The German Ideology*, and *The Structure of the Reification Theory*, Hiromatsu, on the one hand, offered dedicated expositions on the questions of alienation addressed by Marx, and on the other, traced the theoretical lineage of Marxism and analyzed the pivotal role of the theory of alienation within this lineage. In *The Structure of the Reification Theory* in particular, he clearly pointed out that the evolution of Marx's thought from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to *The German Ideology* can be conceived as a process of transition from the "theory of alienation" to the "reification theory". Hiromatsu laid special emphasis on the ideological status of the "reification theory" in *The German Ideology*, arguing that this theory was established on the basis of the critical sublation of the "theory of alienation", and that *The German Ideology* itself marked the official formulation of the materialist conception of history. From this, he posited that there exists a close systematic connection between *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, the core of which lies in Marx's critique of capitalist fetishism through his consistent employment of the "critical reification theory"; this entire series of theoretical developments collectively constituted a transcendence of the "theory of alienation" of the young Marx in his early period (Hiromatsu, 2002: 48-76).

Hiromatsu arrived at this view in close connection with his engagement with Hegelian philosophy, in particular the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In his opinion, Marx's propositions on the theory of alienation derived directly from the self-alienation theory in Hegelian philosophy, and were a further critical deepening of it, built on the foundation of Feuerbach's critique of Hegelian philosophy. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx further expanded the connotation of "self-alienation" into the "four forms of alienation", which specifically include the alienation of the product of labor, the alienation of labor itself, the alienation of man's species-being, and the alienation of man from man (from others). These four forms of alienation constitute a further deepening and development of Hegel's self-alienation theory (Marx, 1975: 229-347).

As inheritors of Hegelian philosophy, particularly *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the Young Hegelians inherited and developed the theory of self-consciousness and put forward three distinct solutions to the problem of self-alienation, centering on the theory itself.

The first was Bruno Bauer's theory of self-consciousness. Bauer rejected the proposition of the "self-alienation of the absolute spirit" in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and divided alienation in the Hegelian context into two forms: first, the alienation of substance, which he argued lacks subjectivity and is merely a product of theory, and thus need not undergo alienation; second, the alienation of self-consciousness, which he claimed possesses subjectivity and the capacity for creative activity. From this, he advanced the tenet that "Self-consciousness is all there is"—meaning only self-consciousness has a free essence, and only self-consciousness is capable of alienation. In this way, Bauer strictly confined alienation to the spiritual dimension, maintaining that the alienation of self-consciousness is in essence spiritual self-alienation. By reinterpreting the theory of alienation in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, he further restricted it to the spiritual sphere and put forward his core argument: as long as human beings possess self-consciousness, they can undergo alienation and, in turn, bring about the emancipation of the world.

The second was Feuerbach's self-alienation theory, which is materialist in nature. He argued that the subject of alienation is not the absolute spirit in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, but nature or the human body, and that

God is in essence the self-alienation of the human species-being. In his view, the essence of religion—Christianity in particular—is the human being’s self-alienation of their own species-being: the interpretations of God’s attributes by human beings stem in fact from their projecting their own species-being outward. When human beings regard this projected “species-being” as a foreign force independent of themselves and instead bow down in worship to God, they forfeit their own power. This is the very essence of alienation. The key to overcoming alienation, he held, lies in human beings recognizing that God is merely a fictitious concept of their own creation, which allows them to break free from religious bondage and reclaim the power of their species-being.

The third was Moses Hess’s theory of the alienation of money. Unlike Feuerbach, who attributed the human species-being to individual human beings, Hess argued that human essence is forged in social interaction and joint activity. He pointed out that in a state where human beings are alienated from one another, people must establish connections with money as a medium to ensure the smooth progress of interaction; at this point, money is no longer merely a tool for circulation and exchange, but has become a measure of all values. Correspondingly, human beings abandon species-life as their goal and instead enshrine individual interests as their purpose, with money ultimately evolving into a force that rules and dominates humanity. On this basis, Hess argued that the elimination of such alienation must take the path of the establishment of a communist society, the core of which lies in achieving the unification of labor and enjoyment.

Precisely against the backdrop of the intellectual lineage of the theory of self-consciousness after Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hiromatsu explored the value of Marx’s theory of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Louis Althusser, the French scholar, proposed the theory of the epistemological break in response to the ideological divergences in Marx’s thought from the *Manuscripts* to *The German Ideology*. He categorizes Marx’s theory of alienation within the framework of anthropology, and argues that this framework aligns with the theoretical trajectory of the Young Hegelians. In Althusser’s view, although Marx used concepts such as “alienated labor” in the *Manuscripts* to critically lay bare the political economic fact of “the poverty of the worker and the wealth of the non-worker”, Marx at this time defined alienation as “the alienation of human essence”, confining his critique within a humanist framework. He contends that there exists a pivotal epistemological break between the *Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*. In *The German Ideology*, Marx made a complete break with the previous philosophical tradition and officially entered the scientific phase of his ideological development. Hiromatsu acknowledged that there was a rupture in Marx’s thought between the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*. Yet, he rejected Althusser’s view that framed the relationship between the two works as that of “radically opposed achievements”. Instead, he put forward the theory of the transcendence of alienation. He argued that Marx’s theory of alienation in the *Manuscripts* was in fact a synthetic inheritance of the self-alienation theory in Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as the alienation theories of Young Hegelian thinkers, including Bruno Bauer, Feuerbach and Hess. This theory not only transcended the binary logical structure of “subject-object” upheld by its predecessors, but also propelled Marx’s thought toward the reification theory—a perspective that conceives of human essence as a material social relation (Hiromatsu, 2002: 77-82). Hiromatsu’s view stemmed in fact from his evaluation of Hegelian philosophy and the Young Hegelians’ self-alienation theory; it is important to note, however, that his interpretation of the reification theory still took Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as its foundation. In the “Chapter on Reason” of this work, Hegel put forward the concept of *Die Sache selbst* (the thing-in-itself), which he used to denote a product that is separate from human beings yet collectively created by innumerable individuals—namely, it does not belong to any single individual, and individuals can only establish connections through it. This is clearly analogous to

the reification posited by Hiromatsu, which describes a state where social relations between people are manifested as relations between things, and things thus acquire the power to dominate and override human beings. Furthermore, in his interpretation of Marx's reification theory, Hiromatsu distinguished two standpoints: the *Für es* standpoint (the "for them" standpoint, i.e., the relations concealed by the outward form of things that remain unperceived), and the *Für uns* standpoint (the "for us" standpoint, i.e., the relations concealed by the outward form of things that have been perceived). (Hiromatsu, 2013: 103)

This distinction still falls under the categories of "for consciousness" (*Für es*) and "for us" (*Für uns*) in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. From the perspective of "for consciousness", the object presents itself directly to consciousness, and the subject can only grasp the object from its own standpoint. By contrast, from the perspective of "for us", the object itself and its activities are conceived as an interconnected whole with a processual nature. Therefore, only from the perspective of "for us" can the object itself be cognized and the processes underlying it be grasped. Furthermore, the fundamental principles of Marx's reification theory, as elaborated by Hiromatsu, bear relevance and consistency with those of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel no longer accounted for the external world in terms of the individual's spiritual world; instead, he subsumed the external objective world within the scope of human conscious activity, emphasizing the direct connection between humans and the external world. Marx's reification theory, for its part, also moves beyond the individual perspective, grounding the organizational relations of humans and human society in the relations between things and among things themselves. This logic also underscores the relational significance of the external world for human beings.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the reification theory advocated by Hiromatsu bears a profound connection with Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its significance extends far beyond merely transcending the theory of alienation. This view of his confirms that Marx maintained a close intellectual connection with *The Phenomenology of Spirit* even in *The German Ideology*. Yet this connection has neither been fundamentally recognized nor given due attention for a long time, in both the editorial history of *The German Ideology* and the intellectual history of Marx and Engels' critique of the Young Hegelians. It is therefore imperative for us to re-examine and elaborate on the relationship between *The German Ideology* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

4 *The German Ideology as a Rewriting of The Phenomenology of Spirit: The Generative History of Labor and the historical development of self-consciousness*

Franco Volpi, the Italian Neo-Aristotelian philosopher, points out in his book *Heidegger and Aristotle* that "Being and Time is a modern rewritten version of the Nicomachean Ethics" (Volpi, 1984: 220). Volpi's view is profoundly insightful, and his thesis has, in fact, provided an important paradigm for the inheritance and transformation of ideas in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, almost all the core terms in *Being and Time* can be traced back to antecedents in Aristotle's thought; on the other hand, Heidegger and Aristotle also share a hidden discursive structure between them. Volpi's thesis of rewriting comprises two core principles. The first is the "traceability of core terms", namely that the key terms in the works of later scholars can find their ideological origins in those of their predecessors, and the concepts of the latter represent a deepening and expansion of those of the former. The second is the "sharing of a hidden discursive structure", meaning that the two address the same category of questions and form a similar

argumentative framework and analytical context around them. This set of principles is fully applicable to interpreting the relationship between *The German Ideology* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. When this paradigm is extended to the philosophical relationship between Hegel and Marx, it can be clearly seen that *The German Ideology* is precisely a pivotal rewriting of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. On the one hand, the core terms and their associated logic in Marxist philosophy—*The German Ideology* in particular—can all be further traced back to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, such as the concepts of labor, alienation, consciousness, self-consciousness, spirit, history and others. On the other hand, there exists a shared discursive category and ideological structure between the Young Hegelians and Marx and Engels. Both parties received a classical education in Hegelian philosophy, and it was precisely through their polemics with the Young Hegelians that Marx and Engels gradually broke away from the school.

The core terms in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*—such as “self-consciousness,” “labor,” “alienation,” and “history”—were not simply rejected by Marx; in particular, the concepts of “self-consciousness” and “labor” were critically reworked by him to become pivotal concepts in *The German Ideology*. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, self-consciousness unfolds its own movement through the dialectic of the master-slave relationship, thereby affirming its own position in the stage of self-consciousness and realizing the development from particularity to universality. In this process, the external world is constructed and affirmed through the objectification of self-consciousness. In *The German Ideology*, by contrast, Marx reworked Hegel's “self-consciousness” into the real and dynamic consciousness of human beings. This form of self-consciousness refers to the self-consciousness of real, active human beings. At this point, the series of conscious activities is no longer regarded as the product of the self-movement of the absolute spirit, but is empirically defined as a reflection of “the practical activities of men, their actual life-processes”. It is from this that Marx further states: “It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 37)

This thesis, in fact, reverses the relationship between self-consciousness and the external world as defined by Hegel. Yet, *The German Ideology* does not sever its connection with *The Phenomenology of Spirit* entirely. It still retains the historical principle of self-consciousness from the latter. It reinterprets the “development of self-consciousness” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as the development of human self-consciousness.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel's attitude toward labor diverges from that of traditional practical philosophy. Traditional practical philosophy regards labor as a compulsory activity undertaken by humans for survival and renders a derogatory assessment of it; by contrast, Hegel views labor as a means for self-consciousness to affirm its own existence, and an intermediary means for the return of spirit from alienation. Labor is thus incorporated into the historical narrative of the development of self-consciousness by virtue of its being a moment of the externalization of spirit.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx clearly grounds labor in the dimension of material productive life, affirming the starting point of human history as material productive labor; thus, it is no longer a moment of the externalization of spirit, but an essential distinguishing feature that sets human beings apart from other animals, and also the driving force behind the development of relations of intercourse and their forms of production.

The Phenomenology of Spirit and *The German Ideology* also share a similar discursive structure and field of inquiry, a commonality reflected not only in the polemical questions each addresses with their contemporaries, but also in their attention to the core questions of their age. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel takes the developmental process of the human spirit as its central thread, exploring how human consciousness actualizes itself in history and

thus attains freedom. In *The German Ideology*, by contrast, Marx focuses on the development of real, dynamic human beings, examining how human essence is generated and constructed in the history of material productive labor. He investigates the historical process in which human essence is continuously enriched and developed, from the stage of dependence on human beings to that of dependence on things as the foundational form of relation. While the two differ in their understanding of human beings and history, both link human development to the essence of history, forming vertical structures of “history-consciousness” and “history-labor” respectively. By virtue of such analytical structures, they further examine the relationships between relevant concepts within their respective theoretical systems. At the time Hegel wrote *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the German philosophical circle was rife with various philosophical schools, including Kant’s transcendental philosophy, Fichte’s philosophy of the ego, Schelling’s philosophy of identity, and Jacobi’s philosophy of immediacy. Through a systematic reorganization of these ideas, Hegel criticized their one-sidedness, regarded them as stage-specific achievements of historical development, and integrated them into a systematic whole, ultimately establishing his own systematic philosophy. The immediate motivation for Marx and Engels to write *The German Ideology* was precisely their critique of the Young Hegelians—initially targeting thinkers such as Bauer and Stirner, and later extending their criticism to include Feuerbach and Hess. Each of these thinkers represented a distinct philosophical system in the German philosophical circle of the time, such as Bauer’s *Die Philosophie des Selbstbewusstseins* (the philosophy of self-consciousness), Feuerbach’s *Anthropologismus* (anthropological materialism), and Stirner’s *Die Philosophie des Einzigen* (the philosophy of the Unique One). The Young Hegelians inherited the doctrines of self-consciousness from Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, yet rendered an extreme interpretation of them. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels launched a targeted critique of each of these thinkers, ultimately establishing the fundamental tenets of historical materialism. It is thus evident that *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The German Ideology* follow an identical polemical logic: critiquing the one-sidedness of the philosophies of their predecessors, synthesizing their ideological achievements, and thereby putting forward their own philosophical systems.

Hayden White, the American historical philosopher, points out that when historians write history, they will inevitably choose narrative modes (such as the romantic mode, the tragic mode, the comic mode) and rhetorical strategies (such as metaphor and metonymy) to organize historical materials, just as literary writers create novels (White, 2004). In fact, this is virtually identical to the relationship between the historical development of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the genetic history of human labor in *The German Ideology*. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel takes self-consciousness as the core and regards the development of self-consciousness as the development of the human spirit. In his view, history in its entirety is essentially the history of the movement of self-consciousness, with the master-slave dialectic as its core moment. The unfolding of this dialectic commences with the opposition between enslaver and enslaved person: the master affirms his own self-consciousness by dominating the enslaved person, while the enslaved person loses his own self-consciousness as a result of being dominated by the master. Next, in the labor performed to satisfy the master’s needs, the enslaved person gradually comes to recognize his capacity to transform nature, and realizes that labor is an activity of the externalization of his own essence, thus achieving the awakening of his self-consciousness. Ultimately, through labor, the enslaved person affirms his own independence, breaks free from dependence on the master, and attains personal independence; in contrast, the master, having become alienated from labor, gradually loses his own subjective power. Within this historical narrative, labor is a means serving the development of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the progress of world history is nothing but

“the progress of the consciousness of freedom in world history”.

In the real world, enslavers and enslaved people are merely the vehicles through which the spirit actualizes itself. This conception of history regards self-consciousness—i.e., abstract spirit—as the subject of history. In *The German Ideology*, by contrast, Marx completely reversed Hegel’s logic: it is not self-consciousness that drives labor, but labor that engenders human self-consciousness and the development of history; it is not spirit that constitutes the subject of history, but “human beings engaged in material production who are the subject of history”. This reversal is, in fact, a fundamental rewriting of the “historical development of self-consciousness” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, within which labor is first established as the real foundation of human history. As is pointed out in *The German Ideology*: “In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 36) The “real life-processes” in *The German Ideology* are essentially material productive labor. To sustain their existence, human beings must first engage in labor that “is the material production activity itself”, and only thereafter carry out all other activities. This definition stands in stark contrast to Hegel’s framing of labor as a moment of the externalization of spirit in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Labor in Marx’s framework is the original driving force of human history. At the origin of the historical narrative, the “generative history of labor” in *The German Ideology* has already supplanted the “historical development of self-consciousness” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel held that “Spirit—the essence that makes human beings human—is free.” Marx had already pointed out long before in his *Theses on Feuerbach* that “But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in a single individual, and in its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 4) The social relations referred to here are, in essence, the production relations formed in the process of labor. This definition also indicates that the developmental process of labor is identical with the generative process of human essence.

Marx defined labor as having an equally foundational status to self-consciousness, for it constitutes the premise of human history. This labor first serves to produce material life; second, “the first need that has been satisfied, the activity of satisfying it, and the instruments of satisfaction acquired, give rise to new needs”—thus driving the activity of reproducing material means of subsistence; and finally, it manifests itself in the fact that “human beings, who reproduce their own life every day, begin to produce other human beings, i.e., procreation—the activity of producing human life”. Following the moment of procreation, the human individual achieves the transition from nature to society. As Marx pointed out: “The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation—social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end.”(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 43)

This resonates with Hegel’s elaboration of *Begierde* (desire) as the three moments of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: first, the “desire” of self-consciousness corresponds to human needs for material productive activity; second, the “duplication” characteristic exhibited by self-consciousness is precisely linked to the differentiation between natural and social relations in the activity of *Fortpflanzung* (procreation). Moreover, in the logic of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, once the aforementioned acts are completed, self-consciousness immediately transitions to the stage of Geist (Spirit). Marx, however, advances a distinct theoretical account here, stating: “It follows from this that a

certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'. Further, that the aggregate of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, hence, the 'history of humanity' must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange."(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 43)

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, self-consciousness at the stage of Spirit must realize its own objectification and integrate itself into the developmental process of human social history. This is embodied above all in its integration into objective Spirit—i.e., institutionalized forms of Spirit such as social ethics, law, and the state. In this regard, there is an inherent consistency with Marx's understanding of the formation of human history and social stages.

Marx added that: "But it is also clear that in Germany it is impossible to write this sort of history, because the Germans lack not only the necessary power of comprehension and the material but also the 'sensuous certainty'."(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 43) The "sensuous certainty" (Sinnliche Gewissheit) referred to here is precisely the starting point of the development of consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. As the most immediate and abstract form of cognition, it seeks to grasp the "being" of an object at the level of thought through the direct designation of "this one"(Dieses). Marx appropriated this concept from Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* to criticize the Young Hegelians for their lack of attention to social reality and objective material productive life. Furthermore, the self-consciousness at the "Spirit stage" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* accomplishes its objectification in society and thus gives rise to distinct historical stages. In Marx's theoretical perspective, the root of such "stages" lies precisely in the division of labor, for the essence of self-consciousness is labor, and the division of labor is the product of human beings realizing their own objectification in material productive life. Marx elaborated further on this: "The division of labour inside a nation leads at first to the separation of industrial and commercial from agricultural labour, and hence to the separation of town and country and to the conflict of their interests. Its further development leads to the separation of commercial from industrial labour. At the same time, through the division of labour inside these various branches, there develop various divisions among the individuals co-operating in definite kinds of labour. The relative position of these individual groups is determined by the way work is organised in agriculture, industry and commerce (patriarchalism, slavery, estates, classes). These same conditions are to be seen (given a more developed intercourse) in the relations of different nations to one another."(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 32) The specific differentiation of human social labor by the stages of the division of labor as described here corresponds precisely to the various forms and relationships of the objectification of self-consciousness at the "Spirit stage" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In terms of their theoretical culmination, Marx's line of thought echoes the developmental logic of "self-consciousness" in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: self-consciousness sublates the "ethical stage" and ultimately attains the Absolute Spirit, coming to recognize its identity with the Absolute Spirit, thereby realizing the Absolute Spirit as a unity of the subjective and the objective. This logic aligns with Marx's elaborations on the "abolition of the division of labor" and the relationship between the community and the individual. Marx stated: "Only within the community has each individual the means of developing his abilities in an all-round way; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community... and since it was the combination of one class over against another, it was at the same time for the oppressed class not only a completely illusory community, but a new fetter as well. In the genuine community, the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association."(Marx, & Engels, 1976b: 78) It can be said that Marx provided a realistic theoretical answer to the stage of the ultimate realization of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: human labor, much like the historical development of self-consciousness, will, through a

protracted process, ultimately realize human beings' own essential nature and attain the telos and ideal form of human historical development. It can be said that Marx provided a realistic theoretical answer to the stage of the ultimate realization of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: human labor, much like the historical development of self-consciousness, will ultimately realize human beings' own essential nature and attain the telos and ideal form of human historical development through a protracted process.

Therefore, the inquiry into the generative history of labor in *The German Ideology* is in essence a rewriting of the historical development of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This rewriting is neither a conceptual replacement at the literary level nor a formal logical adjustment, but a fundamental paradigm shift. As Professor Michael Quante, Chairman of the International Marx and Engels Foundation, has pointed out in his work *Philosophical Studies on Karl Marx—“Man’s Root Is Man Himself”* (Die Wurzel für den Menschen ist aber der Mensch selbst), published in 2025: “In the period when Marx turned to Hegelian philosophy, there existed multiple controversies and tensions in the intellectual circle over the interpretation of Hegel’s philosophical system. First, Marx’s reception of Hegelian philosophy was consistently situated within the tension between the doctrinal stances of the Old Hegelians and the Young Hegelians; influenced by Eduard Gans and Bruno Bauer, he explicitly aligned himself with the camp of the Young Hegelians. Second, Marx never regarded his understanding of Hegelian philosophy as a mere ‘interpretation’—he was soon influenced by Feuerbach’s critique of Hegelian philosophy and its associated religious thought. He thus developed a more critical perspective on it. Third, Marx was also part of a broader paradigm shift in the intellectual milieu of his era; to adopt the terminology of Richard Rorty, this shift constituted a process whereby philosophy was displaced from the cultural center by the natural sciences.” (Quante, 2025: 186-187) This view is highly consistent with the research of Professor Ding Liqun, a Chinese scholar, who explicitly holds that Marx’s practical philosophy is a paradigmatic reconstruction and reworking of the preceding traditions of practical philosophy. Professor Ding Liqun further points out that Marx’s practical philosophy integrates the “ethical-political tradition of practical philosophy” and the “scientific-technical tradition of practical philosophy”; with the three core categories of “labor”, “society” and “human emancipation”, he accomplished the transformation of the basic paradigm of traditional practical philosophy. He ultimately constructed his own “labor-society” practical theory (Ding, 2012, 2020).

Obviously, *The German Ideology* is precisely the pivotal text for this paradigm shift in practical philosophy. The core of its value lies in reconstructing Hegel’s historical narrative centered on “self-consciousness” into one centered on “labor”, and recasting the “historical development of self-consciousness” as the “generative history of labor”. This reconstruction implies a fundamental transformation of the paradigm of practical philosophy: namely, a shift from the framework of traditional practical philosophy that centers on practice and takes ethical-political life as its domain to one that centers on labor and takes social life as its domain. Thus, Marx accomplished a revolutionary transformation of the theoretical paradigm of practical philosophy. Among these outcomes, Marx’s recasting of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in *The German Ideology* constitutes an important ideological achievement of this paradigm shift. At the same time, the formulation of historical materialism represents the core accomplishment of the paradigm transformation in Marx’s practical philosophy.

5 Conclusion

In summary, starting from the philological research on *The German Ideology* in contemporary academic circles,

this paper first reviews the issue of “the absence of Hegelian philosophy” focused on by the editorial boards of *MEGA*¹ and *MEGA*² from the perspective of the compilation history of *The German Ideology*. Then, starting from this issue, it clarifies the underlying motivation for the Japanese scholar Hiromatsu Wataru’s advocacy of a revised compilation of *The German Ideology*, namely the implicit intellectual-historical logic of the “theory of self-consciousness” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* behind it. On this basis, the paper further connects the thesis elaborated by the Italian neo-Aristotelian philosopher Franco Volpi concerning “the scholarly relationship between Aristotle and Heidegger”(i.e., the “Volpi Thesis”), and applies this thesis by analogy to the study of the scholarly relationship between Hegel and Marx. It ultimately points out that *The German Ideology* is essentially a recasting of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which “the genetic history of human labor” corresponds to and replaces “the historical development of self-consciousness” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Through this recasting, Marx accomplished a revolutionary paradigm shift in practical philosophy in *The German Ideology*: he reconstructed Hegel’s historical narrative centered on “self-consciousness”. He established “labor” as the new core category, while transforming the paradigm of traditional practical philosophy—one that centered on practice and took ethical-political life as its domain—into a new paradigm centered on labor and taking social life as its domain. The core connotation of historical materialism is thus clearly manifested in this paradigm shift. Therefore, only by combining the philological research on *The German Ideology* with the intellectual history of Marxism can we accurately grasp the essential nature of Marx’s recasting of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in *The German Ideology* and understand the relationship of inheritance and transcendence between Marx’s and Hegel’s philosophies.

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