

The Intellectual Transformation Of Trần Đức Thảo: From Phenomenology To Dialectical Materialism

A Transformação Intelectual De Trần Đức Thảo: Da Fenomenologia Ao Materialismo Dialético

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the intellectual transformation of Vietnamese philosopher Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993), tracing his philosophical journey from an initial engagement with phenomenology, particularly Husserl's methodologies, to a profound advocacy for dialectical materialism. Thảo's work represents a critical dialogue with the philosophical currents of his time, challenging the dominant paradigms of phenomenology and existentialism through a Marxist lens. His critique of Husserl's phenomenology, focusing on its internal contradictions and the transition towards a materialist conception of history and consciousness, underscores Thảo's endeavor to reconcile the phenomenological emphasis on subjective experience with the materialist analysis of societal structures and human existence. Moreover, Thảo's engagement with the origins of language and his critique of existentialism highlight his comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of human consciousness within the socio-economic conditions that shape it. By integrating dialectical materialism into his philosophical discourse, Thảo offers innovative perspectives on the development of human society, the nature of labor, and the phenomena of social division and alienation. This article explores Thảo's intellectual legacy and its implications for contemporary philosophical debates, demonstrating his significant contribution to bridging phenomenology and dialectical materialism. Through his work, Thảo not only provides a critical lens for examining the foundations of human existence and consciousness but also enriches the philosophical dialogue between Eastern and Western thought traditions.

KEYWORDS: Dialectical materialism, Husserl's methodologies, Intellectual transformation, Marxist philosophy, Phenomenology, Trần Đức Thảo.

RESUMO:

Este artigo examina a transformação intelectual do filósofo vietnamita Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993), traçando a sua jornada filosófica desde um envolvimento inicial com a fenomenologia, particularmente as metodologias de Husserl, até uma profunda defesa do materialismo dialético. O trabalho de Thao representa um diálogo crítico com as correntes filosóficas do seu tempo, desafiando os paradigmas dominantes da fenomenologia e do existencialismo através de uma lente marxista. A sua crítica da fenomenologia de Husserl, centrando-se nas suas contradições internas e na transição para uma concepção materialista da história e da consciência, sublinha o esforço de Thao para conciliar a ênfase fenomenológica na experiência subjectiva com a análise materialista das estruturas sociais e da existência humana. Além disso, o envolvimento de Thao com as origens da linguagem e a sua crítica ao existencialismo destaca a sua abordagem abrangente para a compreensão das complexidades da consciência humana dentro das condições socioeconómicas que a moldam. Ao integrar o materialismo no seu discurso filosófico, Thao oferece perspectivas inovadoras sobre o desenvolvimento da sociedade humana, a natureza do trabalho e os fenómenos de divisão social e alienação. Este artigo explora o legado intelectual de Thao e as suas implicações para os debates filosóficos contemporâneos, demonstrando a sua contribuição significativa para unir a fenomenologia e o materialismo dialético. Através do seu trabalho, Thao não só fornece uma lente crítica para examinar os fundamentos da existência e da consciência humanas, mas também enriquece o diálogo filosófico entre as tradições de pensamento orientais e ocidentais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Materialismo dialético, metodologias de Husserl, transformação intelectual, filosofia marxista, fenomenologia, Trần Đức Thảo.

Introduction

The intellectual odyssey of Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993), tracing his path from phenomenology to dialectical materialism, presents a riveting narrative that confronts and transcends the philosophical orthodoxies of his era. As a Vietnamese thinker, Thảo's profound engagement with Marxist dialectical materialism provided a critical counterpoint to the prevailing currents of phenomenology and existentialism, as outlined by Ford (2020). His pioneering approach aimed at weaving Marxist principles into the fabric of philosophical inquiry, thereby offering a transformative critique of established philosophical doctrines. Thảo's scholarly pursuits spanned an impressive array of subjects including politics, linguistics, and the critique of colonialism, reflecting a holistic endeavor to unravel the complexities of human existence through a multifaceted lens, as explored by D'Alonzo (2016). His insightful analyses of the colonial dynamics in Indochina and the psychological schism between colonizer

and colonized laid the foundational stones for an anticolonial phenomenology, influencing intellectuals like Fanon, noted by Renault (2015).

Beyond philosophy, Thảo ventured into the domain of linguistics and the evolutionary trajectory of language, enriching his philosophical discourse with nuanced understandings of language's origins and its symbolic capacities, as discussed by D'Alonzo in various works (2018, 2021). His exploration of language within the framework of Marxist anthropology unveiled new dimensions of the interplay between linguistic practices, human agency, and socio-economic structures, a perspective brought to light by Yang (2023). Thảo's intellectual journey is characterized by a relentless critique and reevaluation of dominant philosophical narratives, marking a transition from phenomenology to dialectical materialism. This shift not only navigated the intricate philosophical landscapes but also introduced groundbreaking viewpoints that resonate within contemporary philosophical debates.

Trần Đức Thảo's intellectual legacy, which straddles various philosophical currents, highlights the depth and breadth of his contributions to the field, positioning him as a seminal figure in the annals of philosophical thought. His work on the interrelation between consciousness, societal constructs, and historical materialism—merging phenomenological introspection with a materialist critique of social configurations—offers insightful perspectives on the forces sculpting human existence, as Melançon (2016) elaborates. Such integration not only enriches philosophical dialogue but also sheds light on the complexities of human consciousness and societal existence.

His seminal text, "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism," garnered acclaim from luminaries such as Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard, and Roland Barthes, illustrating its significant impact. Thảo's exploration is bifurcated into a meticulous examination of Husserl's phenomenology evolving into dialectical materialism, and a detailed portrayal of historical reality's dialectical movements, as Thao (1986) and Trần (2004) articulate. This dual-step composition, evolving from a historical analysis of phenomenology to a comprehensive dialectical materialist perspective, reflects Thảo's methodical approach in bridging disparate philosophical terrains, thereby offering a novel lens through which to view the philosophical landscape.

In the broader discourse, the contemplation of contingency by Jean-Paul Sartre, as investigated by Beltrán (2023), alongside contributions from Cotrina Cosar (2023), Lo Feudo (2023), Cruz (2023), Oliveira (2023), Savignano (2023), Basilio Cladakis (2023), and Vinolo (2023), enriches the dialogue on existential and phenomenological philosophy. Beltrán (2023) delves into the significance of contingency

in Sartrean philosophy, tracing its roots to Sartre's early work "La Nausea" and its development into "Being and Nothingness". The notion of contingency, as articulated by Sartre, underscores the absence of inherent essence or purpose in the existence of objects and the world, which reveals itself to human consciousness as a fundamental freedom but also as a source of existential nausea. This idea is not only a recurring theme in Sartre's oeuvre but also serves as a foundational concept in understanding the arbitrariness of existence and the burden of freedom it entails.

Cotrina Cosar (2023) highlights the concept of pre-reflective cogito, a non-egological and inherently self-aware consciousness that Sartre develops in contrast to the reflective cogito of Descartes. Influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre posits this form of consciousness as the basis of existentialist ontology, suggesting that our awareness of existence precedes and grounds all reflective thought. This perspective challenges traditional metaphysical assumptions about the self and consciousness, emphasizing a more fluid, dynamic understanding of being.

Lo Feudo (2023) and Cruz (2023) explore Sartre's nuanced conception of freedom. Lo Feudo interrogates the limits of Sartrean freedom, arguing against the notion of absolute freedom by illustrating how Sartre delineates certain boundaries to freedom's exercise within the context of personal projects and the overarching aim of becoming an in-itself-for-itself being. Cruz contrasts Sartre's understanding of freedom and nothingness with Heidegger's, pointing out how Sartre's overlook of the linguistic turn could be remedied to address issues in his conception of freedom, particularly in the context of bad faith.

Oliveira (2023) examines the role of Husserl's idea of intentionality in shaping Sartre's phenomenological ontology, emphasizing the movement of consciousness towards its objects as a fundamental aspect of human reality. This approach reiterates the centrality of freedom in Sartre's thought, as consciousness is not confined by the objects it apprehends but is always transcending towards new horizons, underscoring the ontological freedom inherent in Sartrean philosophy.

Basilio Cladakis (2023) and Vinolo (2023) address the implications of Sartre's theory of action and his engagement with psychoanalysis. Cladakis underscores the dialectic of action as a core element of Sartre's phenomenological ontology, where action is both a manifestation of freedom and a process of engaging with the world. Vinolo discusses Sartre's critical engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis, highlighting the existential psychoanalysis Sartre proposes, which pivots on the future-oriented, intentional nature of consciousness as opposed to Freud's emphasis on the deterministic past.

These scholars, through their varied analytical lenses, delve into Sartre's ontological phenomenology, his nuanced views on freedom, the intricate dynamics of action within his philosophical ontology, and his engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis, offering a comprehensive view of the existentialist framework. This collection of perspectives not only contextualizes Thảo's intellectual odyssey within a broader philosophical milieu but also highlights the enduring relevance and complexity of existential and phenomenological inquiries in understanding the nuances of human existence.

1. From Husserl's Phenomenology to Dialectical Materialism

Like many phenomenological researchers, Trần Đức Thảo was passionate about Husserl's thought for its phenomenological reduction method and the capability of philosophy to return to concrete experiential existence. As Trần Đức Thảo recounted through comparison with Descartes and Kant in *The Origin of Husserl's Phenomenological Method*, the reduction achieved the "reality of human experiential lives" as the foundation of meaning production.¹ In the introduction to the 1949 edition (the work was written in 1944), Trần Đức Thảo foretold his departure from phenomenological interpretation in the soon-to-be-published work *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* and the overcoming of Husserl's phenomenology by dialectical materialism. However, phenomenology was "the first, definitely subconscious step" toward the truth of Marxism. Trần Đức Thảo personally shared this in the work *Marxism and Phenomenology* (Tran, 1946). Overcoming Husserl was the primary purpose of the work *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*.

Trần Đức Thảo's profound writings remain a typical example of clarity. At its publication, the work had established a standard for the best phenomenological works in France (such as Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*). The first part of the work is an internal critique of the development of phenomenology from Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and *The Crisis of European Sciences* and may include unpublished documents that Trần Đức Thảo had access to at the Husserl Archives in Leuven; at the same time identifying "the internal contradictions" within Husserl's phenomenology. Trần Đức Thảo realized that phenomenology had developed through three stages: the description of essences in *Logical Investigations*, which opposed idealistic theory and the "technical," "logical" conceptions of thought; the return to lived experience in the static phenomenology of *Ideen* (Ideas); the expansion and deepening of original phenomenology to its limits in *The Crisis of European Sciences*. When investigating

¹ According to Prof. Nicolas de Warren (Husserl Archives - Center for Phenomenology and Continental Philosophy KU Leuven, Belgium), he is the person who translated some of Tran Duc Thao's works into English.

the approaches to the internal contradictions in phenomenology, continuously reflecting on the inconsistency between the theory and practice of phenomenology, between Husserl's published and unpublished works, Trần Đức Thảo ultimately concluded that it was impossible to "reconcile the concept of phenomenology with its actual results" (Trần, 2004, p.15).

According to Trần Đức Thảo, the significance of phenomenology lies in a method of analysis and description within science that is guided by the directive to return to the concrete and actual forms of human existence. The characteristic of phenomenological philosophy, not in the narrow sense of epistemology in the "critical" tradition of Kant's neo-criticism, but driven by a steadfast commitment to the core truth of meaningfulness and the capability of knowledge, becomes profoundly deep when combined with dialectical materialism as Trần Đức Thảo did. According to the early views of Husserl in "Logical Investigations," the transition of phenomenology to reality occurs in the direction of knowledge to truth. Knowledge aims at the "self-showing" of what is meaningful and the dual standard of truth and science that Trần Đức Thảo retains from Husserl's phenomenological thought to critique its limits. From Trần Đức Thảo's perspective, the phenomenological examination of knowledge in demonstration yields a dual outcome. On the affirmative side (affirmation), it is the structure of knowledge as intentionality placed within the realm of "the given" in reality, thereby opening a domain of descriptive analysis about reality. On the negative side (negation), the connection to "the given" provides phenomenological thought with a critical weapon against the specters of idealism, sophistry, or speculative reasoning. However, as Trần Đức Thảo emphasizes, the phenomenological shift to concrete existence must go through a "subjective" variable that is decisive, certainly not the vague subjectivity of idealist philosophy but the subjectivity (in Husserl, the authentic meaning of subjectivity) in the form of a transcendental subject.

As Trần Đức Thảo elaborates in "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism" and "The Origins of Husserl's Phenomenological Method," the historical significance of Husserl's subjectivity is univocal. As the embodiment of the concreteness of the world it constitutes, subjectivity breaks free from the molds of Descartes and Kant's philosophy. However, despite what Husserl intended and achieved – the reality of "the given" – the transcendental subjectivity still relies on the latent form of idealism because Husserl overlooks the material conditions of subjectivity and historical movement. Here, the implications of Trần Đức Thảo's interpretations, as he later commented in 1974, are "competing with the positive critique of Marxism-Leninism against Hegel."

In the first part of "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism," Trần Đức Thảo persistently pursues another assumption, according to which the contradiction between the movement towards reality and outdated idealism about the constitution of subjectivity, shapes and drives Husserl's development of thought. Among many reasons he opposes Husserl, Trần Đức Thảo particularly notes the "theoretical object" that dominates the phenomenological analysis of structure, with the consequence of losing a solid description of the structure of the Other, as well as the materiality of the lifeworld. This critique of Husserl's voluntarism results from his early admiration for Husserl in France and his reception of profound interpretations in the works of Levinas, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. However, for Trần Đức Thảo, the initially dominant intellectual synthesis in Husserl does not accompany the forgetting of origin and "the synthesis of perception" embodied (Merleau-Ponty), an abstraction from the mundane sphere of activity of *Zuhandenheit* (Heidegger), nor is it a failure in realizing the existential plan in its materialized direction with *being-for-itself* (Sartre). Instead, Husserl's thought reflects the bourgeois psychological attitude of his class. When Husserl picks up a piece of paper or an ink bottle on the desk to concretely apply the reduction method and pose a descriptive question about the object's structure in his hand, he implicitly assumes that this object has been created through the laboring hands of humans. This critique of Husserl's bourgeois standpoint with *Vorhandenheit* is a more thorough critique than Heidegger's famous concern with the origin of *Zuhandenheit* and the practical context of expression in which the "meaning" of labor is embedded. From Trần Đức Thảo's viewpoint, Heidegger's analysis of *Zuhandenheit* remains idealistic for having overlooked the material origins of society where tools and the economic organization of labor are crucial and historically manifested. The bourgeois philosopher constructs (with a sickle) his straw hut merely by presuming the meaning-making activity of labor. Separated from his study, the philosopher believes that knowing how to use the sickle equates to experiencing the world's origin.

The critique of Heidegger's "existential temptation" and Sartre's existentialism is a significant feature in Trần Đức Thảo's thought. This critique is developed in his works "Marxism and Phenomenology," "Existentialism and Dialectical Materialism," particularly in the latter's introduction. Heidegger's shift from intentionality to "being-in-the-world" does not free him from the shadow of idealism, as "being-in-the-world" remains closely tied to absolute humanism - as Heidegger himself was forced to admit in the "Letter on Humanism." The "deception" of existentialism, whether in the style of Heidegger or Sartre, is disguised like alchemy in the transition from "unjustifiable" to "supremely justified." This critique of existential freedom as a baseless project is presented by Trần Đức Thảo in

"Existentialism and Dialectical Materialism," where he argues that existentialism is merely a continuation of transcendental (a priori) philosophy. The mystery of the internal contradictions in phenomenology under Heidegger and Sartre reveals the ultimate connection between irrationalism and the collapse of philosophical thought before "the magic of language." Henri Lefebvre's critique of existentialism in "L'Existentialisme" is essentially a diagnosis of existentialism as the collapse of "higher layers" succumbing to mental irrationalism. When Trần Đức Thảo writes in the introduction to "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism" about the deception in the "magic" of existential temptation's language, he is repeating Lefebvre's critique of the "magic" nature of Sartre's scientifically imprecise concepts. More importantly, we can easily recognize Husserl's legacy in Trần Đức Thảo's emphasis on the precision (rigor) of philosophy. Marx's message that "Humanity only poses itself problems that it is capable of solving" could have been similarly articulated by Husserl (Trần, 2004, p.13). However, instead of applying the phenomenological reduction method, Trần Đức Thảo turns to the dialectical materialist method to address the problems Husserl posed but could not solve himself.

Trần Đức Thảo identifies the main challenge as the developmental orientation of phenomenology, which Heidegger and Sartre also centralize in their "existential temptations," the contradiction of transcendental subjectivity. Whether in the form of Husserl, Heidegger, or Sartre, "according to classical argument, Dasein can only explain itself concerning the constituted object that it encompasses." As Trần Đức Thảo presents his critique of intentionality: "Yet, consciousness [as] consciousness of an object seems to imply a 'transcendence' that elevates it above natural reality and absorbs it in the pure internality of the Self, directly given in consciousness of oneself." (Trần, 2004, p.255) The difference between the internality of consciousness and the transcendence of the object and between the constituted object and the constituting subject is based on the initial disregard of the origin of subjectivity and the world - that is, the materiality of the world. For Trần Đức Thảo, "The internality of consciousness and its conceptual relationship [on the level of thought – the authors] with the object leads to the structure of the actual subject, meaning the living body is the center of movements." (Trần, 2004, p.255) The living body must be considered in terms of "the dialectics of behavior" emerging from the material transformation into established life. The formation of the origins of the perceptual and kinesthetic fields, which Husserl meticulously described from the perspective of constitutive consciousness in "Analyses of Passive Synthesis" and Merleau-Ponty expressed from the perspective of embodied subjectivity, implies in Trần Đức Thảo's view, a more profound sedimentation process of the evolutionary process of animals from matter. At each stage of development, different degrees of living

meaning ("impression," "sensation," and "concept") are formed on the structures of behavior: impression based on attraction or repulsion; sensation based on reflex modification; concept based on tool use and language (as Trần Đức Thảo presents in his later work, *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness*.)

Like Merleau-Ponty, Trần Đức Thảo focuses on the analysis of the structure (composition) of materiality, the living body, and "things" in Husserl's unpublished *Ideen II*, hoping this would be the advancement of phenomenology through dialectical materialism. However, the relationship between the living body and the world, between nature and subjectivity, and between materiality and meaning does not follow the form of "dialogue" as in Merleau-Ponty but instead takes the form of dialectical movement spread out historically. While Merleau-Ponty's direction through Husserlian phenomenology leads to a new ontology of nature while still retaining Husserl's rejection of naturalism, Trần Đức Thảo's direction of natural ontology denies this foundational view of phenomenology in rediscovering "a new type of naturalism."

Opening up a "new naturalism" in Marxist thought becomes urgent for Husserl's concept of the lifeworld. Trần Đức Thảo understands the lifeworld as the origin of clarity but criticizes Husserl because he did not pursue this exploration to its ultimate conclusion. This is because the remaining form of idealism obscures the authentic source of meaning: not consciousness but labor. As Trần Đức Thảo argues, the origin of the world in absolute consciousness has become confused with the "becoming" of the actual history of reality, and the principle of the transcendental ego appears only as a verbal expression hiding in philosophical terminology the creative value of human labor. In this aspect, Trần Đức Thảo assimilates the idea of the lifeworld towards dialectical materialism and the surpassing of phenomenology by emphasizing Husserl's view that natural reality is the foundation of all reality and, therefore, "the phenomenology of material nature... holds a privileged position." (Trần, 2004, p.22) However, materiality in phenomenological thought still retains traces of idealism. Therefore, the issue of nature (essence) and structure (component) of materiality becomes central: the scenario of transcendental structure is a double abstraction while abstracting further the essential transformation from matter to life and from there to spirit or social existence.

2. The Dialectical Development of Matter to Life and Rationality

In the second part of "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism," Trần Đức Thảo takes a second step in theorizing the dialectical development of spirit from matter, based on the unfinished work

"Dialectics of Nature" and "Anti-Dühring" by Friedrich Engels. While criticizing idealist philosophical traditions, he also returns to the work "The German Ideology" by Karl Marx and Engels, and based on it in this second part, he conducts two studies: 1/ on the dialectical development of matter to life (human), and 2/ from human life to rationality. Trần Đức Thảo presents an ambitious view on the dialectical formation of animal life from inorganic matter and its further progression to higher animal forms, leading up to the emergence of human life and society. This genealogy emphasizes the materiality of spirit advancing to social structures and various economic organizations, where each structural component corresponds to a specific historical stage of humanity. The focus of Trần Đức Thảo's analyses is animal behavior and human labor, examining the dialectical interaction between organisms and their environment. This dialectical analysis aims to clarify the development of social division, private ownership, and alienation. Trần Đức Thảo's call to "return to the self" and "new humanism" does not create a form as Husserl envisioned as "creating a new transcendental form" but recognizes the transcendental origin of creative labor and the material reality of productive activity. In this way, the appropriation of products as the exclusive property of individuals, the power of abstract concepts of money (exchange value), and the commercialization process - typical features of capitalism - are placed in historical contexts, and the critical analysis also shows their relationship to the development of Western philosophy. The circle of analysis is completed: the "bourgeois" assumptions of Husserlian phenomenology are placed within a dialectical description of the historical formation of capitalism. As Trần Đức Thảo emphasizes: "the pure internality of thought, with the exclusivity of possessive negation, protects the subjectivity of the wealthy against the very objectivity they wish to promote among the producers of reality." (Trần, 2004, p.368)

Trần Đức Thảo embraces dialectical materialism in Ricoeur and Derrida primarily for his absolute endorsement of naturalism. However, it is a "new" kind of naturalism, as a clear return to the natural viewpoint that Husserl constantly strived to overcome. In Ideen II, the reduction to constitutive consciousness encompasses overcoming the natural viewpoint and replacing philosophical reflections from the framework of naturalism with phenomenology. The analysis in Ideen II aims to demonstrate how the material essence must be considered as a constituted phenomenon, with different structural layers related to the interactive actions of the transcendental subject. Here, it could be argued that contrary to Husserl's phenomenological answer, in his implication of "a new kind of naturalism," Trần Đức Thảo does not entirely revert to the naivety that Husserl continuously rejected. For him, Husserl's crucial discovery of the "lifeworld" must be pushed to its ultimate conclusion: the lifeworld is not only a

social world but also a world historically constituted through human creative production, economic exchange, and the transition of nature into subjectivity. This fundamental thesis on the dialectical movement (becoming) of humanity from nature will be a theme in another primary philosophical debate.

The fact is that Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre were not the only prominent figures in the Parisian philosophical forums after World War II. In 1947, there was also Jean Hyppolite, who published "Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit" and Alexandre Kojève with his "Introduction to the Reading of Hegel," both of which were taught at the *École des Hautes Études* from 1933 to 1939, thereby establishing Hegel's supreme position on the Parisian intellectual stage. In 1948, Trần Đức Thảo published a critique in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* on Kojève's "Introduction," in which he juxtaposed the critique of Husserlian phenomenology with Hegelian phenomenology (Thao, 1948) and another article in 1965 (Thao, 1965). Trần Đức Thảo examines three more detailed aspects of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, arguing that Hegel's analysis of the development of consciousness overlooked the historical conditions of reality. The objective process of dialectical movement was inverted in Hegel's thought. For instance, Trần Đức Thảo argues that Hegel failed to appropriately describe the alignment between the historical reality and the origins of the slave ownership system. Notably, Sartre also made a similar observation in his "Notebooks for an Ethics," "Hegel's doctrine of the Lordship and Bondage is appealing as a phenomenology of human relationships but cannot be historically accurate" (Sartre, 1992, p.73). However, the boldness in Trần Đức Thảo's article and his letter to Kojève did not receive sufficient attention from the editors of *Les Temps Modernes*. In the note attached to Trần Đức Thảo's article, they expressed their support for Trần Đức Thảo's Marxist critique but were very cautious to fully endorse it (Jarczyk; Labarrière, 1996).

Trần Đức Thảo's article and the two letters exchanged with Kojève opened a new door for the development of his thought on the path to "Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism." The similarity in his critique of Hegel and Husserl is apparent; on this basis, it can tentatively be asserted that the shift to dialectical materialism was indeed made by 1948. More interestingly, because Trần Đức Thảo recognized that nothing compares to the dialectical constitution of Nature and Subject ("human") that could be found in Husserl, Hegel's *Phenomenology* must hold a theoretical position between Husserl and Marx: on the one hand, Hegel is closer to Marx's dialectical materialism (as noted by Lenin), and on the other hand, he is farther from Husserl; this led Trần Đức Thảo to view Husserl as the final and highest completion of bourgeois idealism, seeing Husserl as the only one capable of exposing the internal contradictions of that idealist tradition; thus, leading him to an "unconscious step," the first step towards

dialectical materialism. So, for Trần Đức Thảo, how many steps are there to Marx? It seems there are at least two, and both seem to depend on the invisible resolution between Trần Đức Thảo's works on the two types of phenomenology.

Praised for his "profoundly rare creative talent," the anthropological understanding of the Phenomenology of Spirit by Kojève was not necessarily outstanding, while Trần Đức Thảo recognized a latent dialectical materialism within the Phenomenology of Spirit. In the letters exchanged between him and Kojève, this assertion of a dialectical materialism of nature (as developed in the second part of Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism) became the focus of discussion. Kojève viewed Nature and Man within the dialectical movement of formation, yet the moment of anguish introduced through Man was interpreted as freedom (strongly influenced by Sartre's Being and Nothingness). The development from Nature to Man is not unidirectional but is characterized by contradiction because anguish is a test as an act of creative freedom. Kojève opposed Trần Đức Thảo's apparent "inference" of Man from Nature. In other words, through Trần Đức Thảo's existentialism and dialectical materialism, one can discern the significance of the entire debate between Trần Đức Thảo and Kojève in the critique of Sartre. While Trần Đức Thảo acknowledges freedom as self-endowment (choice or creation), his Husserlian attention, reinterpreted in Marxist terms to the sedimentation of the past, in its material and historical characteristic, led him to seek objectivity in the form of production relations. As Trần Đức Thảo writes, "History is not just the movement of economic relations, but the movement (becoming) of existence recognized in these relations: a broad class struggle." We receive an image of the dialectical intermediary of existence as a project and its material organizations, through which "being in the world" is defined and, in turn, defines economic and class relations. The intention to overcome the incompatibility between freedom and the Marxist determinism of history in Thảo's thought, and as a focal point in his exchange with Kojève, would also become the story of Sartre's capture in the Critique of Dialectical Reason against Marxism, leading to "historical materialism" - as opposed to dialectical materialism (Nguyen, 2005).

Conclusion

The intellectual voyage of Trần Đức Thảo, from an initial embrace of Husserl's phenomenology to a robust advocacy for dialectical materialism, delineates a significant philosophical evolution that has enduring implications for contemporary thought. Thảo's critical engagement with phenomenology, notably through his intricate analysis of Husserl's methodologies and the subsequent transition towards a Marxist dialectical materialist perspective, underscores a profound quest for a more

grounded and comprehensive understanding of human existence, consciousness, and societal structures. This journey is emblematic of Thảo's commitment to not only interrogating but also transcending the limitations inherent in phenomenological approaches by incorporating the insights of dialectical materialism to address the complexities of human life and its socio-economic conditions.

Trần Đức Thảo's methodical critique of phenomenology, especially his exploration of the "internal contradictions" within Husserl's phenomenology, reveals a deep-seated drive to reconcile the concept of phenomenology with its actual results. This intellectual endeavor was not merely an academic exercise but a reflection of Thảo's broader philosophical project to integrate the concrete and actual forms of human existence with a dialectical materialist analysis. His critique of existentialism, particularly of Heidegger and Sartre, further illustrates Thảo's commitment to unveiling the material bases of subjectivity and consciousness, thereby challenging the prevailing idealist tendencies within phenomenology and existentialist thought.

Moreover, Thảo's exploration of the dialectical development from matter to life and rationality, drawing upon the works of Engels and Marx, signifies a pivotal shift towards a materialist conception of history and consciousness. This shift not only provided a critique of idealist philosophical traditions but also offered a novel framework for understanding the evolution of human society, the nature of labor, and the development of social divisions and alienation. Thảo's work thus stands as a monumental effort to bridge the gap between phenomenological inquiry and dialectical materialism, offering insights that resonate with ongoing debates in philosophy, linguistics, and social theory.

In conclusion, Trần Đức Thảo's intellectual legacy is a testament to the power of philosophical inquiry to challenge, transform, and transcend established paradigms. His journey from phenomenology to dialectical materialism is not only a narrative of personal intellectual development but also a reflection of the broader dialectical movements within philosophical thought. Thảo's contributions remain a crucial reference point for those seeking to understand the intersections of consciousness, society, and historical material conditions. As contemporary philosophy continues to grapple with the legacy of phenomenology and the challenges of materialist analysis, Trần Đức Thảo's work serves as a beacon, guiding ongoing efforts to synthesize diverse philosophical traditions in the pursuit of a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the human condition.

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