

The Evolution of Materialism from Democritus to Karl Marx¹

A Evolução do Materialismo de Demócrito até Karl Marx

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the evolution of materialism from its origins with Democritus to its development by Karl Marx. It begins with Democritus' atomism, which proposed that everything is made up of indivisible atoms, laying the groundwork for a materialist worldview. The study then explores how Epicurus expanded on these ideas, focusing on sensory experience and the pursuit of a tranquil life. Moving into the Enlightenment, the paper examines the mechanistic materialism of thinkers like Hobbes and La Mettrie, who viewed humans as complex machines governed by physical laws. Finally, it addresses Marx's dialectical and historical materialism, which combined materialist philosophy with Hegelian dialectics to explain the influence of material conditions and economic structures on society and history. This analysis highlights the enduring significance of materialist thought in understanding social and historical processes.

Keywords: Materialism, Democritus, Marx, Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism

Resumo:

Este artigo investiga a evolução do materialismo desde suas origens com Demócrito até seu desenvolvimento por Karl Marx. Começa com o atomismo de Demócrito, que propunha que tudo é feito de átomos indivisíveis, lançando as bases para uma visão de mundo materialista. O estudo explora então como Epicuro expandiu essas ideias, concentrando-se na experiência sensorial e na busca de uma vida tranquila. Passando para o Iluminismo, o artigo examina o materialismo mecanicista de pensadores como Hobbes e La Mettrie, que viam os humanos como máquinas complexas governadas por leis físicas. Por fim, aborda o materialismo dialético e histórico de Marx, que combinou a filosofia materialista com a dialética hegeliana para explicar a influência das condições materiais e das estruturas econômicas na sociedade e na história. Esta análise destaca a importância duradoura do pensamento materialista na compreensão dos processos sociais e históricos.

Palavras-chave: Materialismo, Demócrito, Marx, Materialismo Dialético, Materialismo Histórico

¹ Acknowledgements: This research paper is solely funded by VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi under project number USSH-2024

Introduction:

Materialism, as a philosophical doctrine, has undergone significant transformation since its inception. Originating with the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus, who posited that everything is composed of indivisible atoms, materialism has evolved through various interpretations and refinements over the centuries. This paper traces the journey of materialist thought from Democritus through to Karl Marx, whose dialectical and historical materialism provided a revolutionary framework for analyzing social and historical phenomena.

Democritus, often referred to as the father of materialism, introduced the concept that the universe is composed of small, indivisible particles called atoms. This idea was groundbreaking as it rejected supernatural explanations for natural phenomena, emphasizing instead the material basis of all existence. Democritus' atomism suggested that all changes in the physical world could be explained by the movement and interaction of atoms, without recourse to divine intervention. This marked a significant departure from the mythological and religious explanations prevalent in ancient Greek thought, laying the groundwork for a scientific and rational understanding of the universe.

Epicurus later expanded on Democritus' ideas, placing greater emphasis on sensory experience and the pursuit of happiness as the ultimate goals of life. Epicureanism posited that understanding the material nature of the world could liberate individuals from the fear of gods and death, leading to a tranquil and happy life. Lucretius, a Roman poet and philosopher, further articulated these ideas in his work "On the Nature of Things," which provided a comprehensive account of Epicurean physics and ethics. By advocating for a rational understanding of the world and the pursuit of personal tranquility, Epicureanism contributed significantly to the development of materialist thought.

The Enlightenment brought a renewed interest in materialism, driven by advances in science and the desire to apply reason to understand the natural world. Thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Julien Offray de La Mettrie were pivotal in this period. Hobbes, in his work "Leviathan," argued that everything, including human thought and behavior, could be explained in terms of matter and motion. His mechanistic materialism laid the foundation for a scientific approach to understanding human nature and society. La Mettrie took these ideas further in "Man a Machine," where he argued that humans are complex machines and that all mental and physiological processes could be explained through physical laws. This radical view challenged the dominant religious and metaphysical explanations of human existence, emphasizing the continuity between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Ludwig Feuerbach, a significant figure in the development of materialism, critiqued religion and idealism, arguing that religious beliefs are projections of human qualities and desires. His humanistic

materialism influenced many subsequent thinkers, including Marx, by emphasizing the importance of human sensory experience and the material conditions of life. Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's idealism paved the way for a more grounded, materialist approach to philosophy, focusing on the material and human basis of religious phenomena.

Karl Marx synthesized earlier materialist ideas with Hegelian dialectics to develop dialectical and historical materialism. Marx's dialectical materialism posits that all phenomena are interconnected and in constant change due to inherent contradictions. Historical materialism, on the other hand, focuses on the material conditions of society, particularly the mode of production, as the foundation for understanding historical development. Marx argued that the economic base of society influences the superstructure, which includes culture, politics, and ideology. This relationship between base and superstructure explains how material conditions shape human consciousness and social relations. By applying this framework, Marx analyzed the dynamics of capitalism, identifying class struggle as the driving force of historical change.

In summary, the evolution of materialism from Democritus to Marx demonstrates its enduring significance as a philosophical doctrine. By continually adapting to new scientific discoveries and social realities, materialism has provided a robust framework for understanding the physical world and human society. This paper aims to elucidate the transformations in materialist philosophy and their implications for contemporary thought, highlighting the importance of materialist philosophy in addressing contemporary challenges and advancing human knowledge.

Literature Review:

The literature on materialism spans over two millennia, reflecting the extensive and varied history of this philosophical doctrine. Early materialism, as articulated by Democritus, laid the foundation by focusing on the physical composition of the universe. Democritus posited that everything is composed of indivisible atoms moving through a void, which provided a naturalistic explanation for the formation and changes of all things. His atomistic theory represented a significant shift from the mythological and supernatural explanations prevalent in ancient Greek thought (Aristotle, 1984).

Epicurus built upon Democritus' ideas, introducing the notion that the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain are central to human life. Epicurus emphasized sensory experience as the basis for knowledge and argued that understanding the material nature of the world could free individuals from the fear of gods and death. His work, particularly the "Letter to Herodotus," laid out a systematic account of his physical theories, which were further elaborated by his follower Lucretius in "On the Nature of Things." Lucretius provided a detailed exposition of Epicurean physics and ethics, underscoring the role of materialism in achieving a tranquil life (Epicurus, 1994; Lucretius, 2007).

During the Enlightenment, materialism was profoundly influenced by the scientific revolution. Thomas Hobbes, in his seminal work "Leviathan," argued that all phenomena, including human thought and behavior, could be explained in terms of matter and motion. Hobbes' mechanistic materialism laid the groundwork for a scientific approach to understanding human nature and society, positing that human beings are akin to machines governed by physical laws (Hobbes, 1996). Julien Offray de La Mettrie extended this analogy in "Man a Machine," where he argued that all mental and physiological processes could be explained through physical laws, challenging the dominant religious and metaphysical explanations of human existence (La Mettrie, 1996).

Ludwig Feuerbach played a crucial role in the development of materialism by critiquing religion and idealism. In "The Essence of Christianity," Feuerbach argued that religious beliefs are projections of human qualities and desires, and that understanding these projections could uncover the material and human basis of religious phenomena. Feuerbach's humanistic materialism emphasized the importance of human sensory experience and the material conditions of life, influencing many subsequent thinkers, including Karl Marx (Feuerbach, 1989).

Karl Marx synthesized earlier materialist ideas with Hegelian dialectics to develop dialectical and historical materialism. Marx's dialectical materialism posits that all phenomena are interconnected and in constant change due to inherent contradictions. Historical materialism focuses on the material conditions of society, particularly the mode of production, as the foundation for understanding historical development. Marx argued that the economic base of society influences the superstructure, which includes culture, politics, and ideology. This relationship between base and superstructure explains how material conditions shape human consciousness and social relations (Marx, 1992; Marx & Engels, 1848).

In recent scholarship, contemporary materialist thought continues to evolve. Foster and Burkett (2000) in "Marx and the Earth" emphasize the ecological dimensions of Marx's materialism, while Eagleton (2011) in "Why Marx Was Right" reasserts the relevance of Marx's ideas in the modern context. These works highlight the adaptability and enduring significance of materialism in addressing contemporary social and ecological challenges (Foster & Burkett, 2000; Eagleton, 2011).

This review demonstrates that materialist philosophy has continuously adapted to new scientific discoveries and social realities, providing a robust framework for understanding the physical world and human society. The evolution from Democritus' atomism to Marx's dialectical and historical materialism underscores the enduring importance of materialist thought in philosophical discourse.

Method:

This study employs dialectical and historical materialism as its methodological framework. Dialectical materialism, developed by Marx and Engels, emphasizes the importance of contradictions and

change in understanding reality. Historical materialism, on the other hand, focuses on the material conditions of society as the basis for historical development. By applying these methodologies, the paper examines the evolution of materialist thought and its impact on the interpretation of social and historical phenomena.

Results and Discussion:

1. Early Materialism: Democritus and Atomism

Democritus, often regarded as the father of materialism, proposed that everything in the universe is composed of small, indivisible particles called atoms (Aristotle, 1984). This idea was revolutionary as it rejected supernatural explanations for natural phenomena and laid the groundwork for a materialist understanding of the world. Democritus' atomism suggested that all changes in the physical world could be explained by the movement and interaction of atoms, without recourse to divine intervention.

Democritus' view was that the universe was infinite, both in extent and in the number of atoms it contained. Atoms, he argued, moved through the void, combining to form all macroscopic objects and phenomena. This view represented a significant departure from the mythological and supernatural explanations prevalent in ancient Greek thought. Instead of gods or mystical forces, Democritus posited a universe governed by natural laws and processes, where everything from the formation of stars to the growth of plants could be understood through the behavior of atoms.

2. Epicurean Materialism

Epicurus expanded on Democritus' ideas, emphasizing the importance of sensory experience and the pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate goal of life (Epicurus, 1994). Epicureanism suggested that understanding the material nature of the world could liberate individuals from the fear of gods and death, leading to a tranquil and happy life. Lucretius, a follower of Epicurus, further articulated these ideas in his poem "On the Nature of Things" (Lucretius, 2007), which provided a comprehensive account of Epicurean physics and ethics.

Epicurus argued that the soul, like the body, was composed of atoms and was therefore subject to decay and dissolution. This led to his conclusion that death was nothing to be feared, as it simply represented the cessation of sensation. By freeing individuals from the fear of death and divine retribution, Epicurean philosophy aimed to achieve a state of ataraxia, or untroubledness. This was not a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in the modern sense but rather a rational and moderate approach to life, seeking to minimize pain and achieve a lasting state of tranquility.

Lucretius' work extended Epicurus' ideas, offering detailed explanations of natural phenomena and arguing against superstitious beliefs. By showing how natural processes could be explained through the interactions of atoms, Lucretius sought to dispel the fear of the unknown and encourage a rational

understanding of the world. His work stands as one of the most comprehensive statements of ancient materialism, blending philosophical argument with poetic expression.

3. Mechanistic Materialism of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment brought a renewed interest in materialism, driven by advances in science and the desire to apply reason to understand the natural world. Thomas Hobbes, one of the key figures of this period, argued that everything, including human thought and behavior, could be explained in terms of matter and motion (Hobbes, 1996). Hobbes' mechanistic materialism laid the foundation for a scientific approach to understanding human nature and society.

Hobbes' major work, *Leviathan*, posited that human beings were essentially complex machines, whose actions and thoughts could be understood through the principles of motion and physical interaction. He argued that all phenomena, including mental processes, could be explained by the movement of particles in accordance with physical laws. This mechanistic view of human beings as material entities subject to the same laws as other natural objects represented a significant shift from earlier, more mystical understandings of human nature.

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, another prominent Enlightenment thinker, took Hobbes' ideas further in his work "Man a Machine" (La Mettrie, 1996), where he argued that humans are complex machines and that all mental and physiological processes could be explained through physical laws. This radical view challenged the dominant religious and metaphysical explanations of human existence and emphasized the continuity between humans and the rest of the natural world. La Mettrie's work extended the mechanistic materialism of Hobbes, arguing that not only were human actions determined by physical processes, but so were human thoughts and feelings. He viewed the mind as an epiphenomenon of the brain, subject to the same laws of physics as any other material object. This reductionist view was controversial, but it laid the groundwork for later scientific approaches to understanding the mind and behavior.

4. Feuerbach's Critique of Religion and Materialism

Ludwig Feuerbach played a crucial role in the development of materialism by critiquing religion and idealism. In his work "The Essence of Christianity" (Feuerbach, 1989), Feuerbach argued that religious beliefs are projections of human qualities and desires. He proposed that by understanding these projections, one could uncover the material and human basis of religious phenomena. Feuerbach's humanistic materialism influenced many subsequent thinkers, including Marx, by emphasizing the importance of human sensory experience and the material conditions of life.

Feuerbach's approach was more anthropocentric, focusing on human beings and their inherent qualities as the foundation for understanding religion and consciousness. His critique of Hegel's idealism

paved the way for a more grounded, materialist approach to philosophy, although it remained somewhat limited by its metaphysical aspects.

Feuerbach argued that God was a projection of human ideals and aspirations, a way for people to externalize and objectify their own qualities and desires. By turning these projections into an object of worship, religion alienated people from their true nature and potential. Feuerbach's materialism was thus deeply humanistic, emphasizing the need to reclaim these projections and recognize the human basis of religious and metaphysical ideas.

5. Marx's Dialectical and Historical Materialism

Karl Marx synthesized earlier materialist ideas with Hegelian dialectics to develop dialectical and historical materialism. Marx's dialectical materialism posits that all phenomena are interconnected and in constant change due to inherent contradictions (Marx, 1992). Historical materialism, on the other hand, focuses on the material conditions of society, particularly the mode of production, as the foundation for understanding historical development (Marx & Engels, 1848).

Marx argued that the economic base of society influences the superstructure, which includes culture, politics, and ideology. This relationship between base and superstructure explains how material conditions shape human consciousness and social relations (Marx, 1977). By applying this framework, Marx analyzed the dynamics of capitalism, identifying class struggle as the driving force of historical change.

Marx and Engels developed dialectical materialism by integrating the dialectical method of Hegel with the materialist view of history. They emphasized that societal change occurs through the resolution of contradictions within the economic base, leading to changes in the superstructure. This dynamic process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis underpins their understanding of historical progression and social transformation.

Dialectical materialism provided a method for analyzing the complexities of social and economic life, emphasizing the importance of contradictions and the dynamic interplay of forces within society. Marx's analysis of capitalism, for example, focused on the contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production, which he argued would eventually lead to the overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of a communist society.

6. Comparison of Different Phases of Materialism

The evolution of materialism can be divided into three key phases: ancient materialism (Democritus and Epicurus), mechanistic materialism (Hobbes and La Mettrie), and dialectical materialism (Marx and Engels).

Ancient Materialism:

Democritus and Epicurus focused on the physical and sensory aspects of reality. They sought to explain natural phenomena without recourse to supernatural explanations, emphasizing the material basis of existence and the pursuit of happiness through understanding nature. Democritus' atomism laid the groundwork for a materialist understanding of the universe, emphasizing the role of natural laws and processes. Epicurus built on this foundation, emphasizing the importance of sensory experience and the pursuit of a tranquil life free from the fear of gods and death.

Mechanistic Materialism:

In the Enlightenment, thinkers like Hobbes and La Mettrie adopted a more scientific and mechanical approach. They viewed the universe as a vast machine governed by physical laws, extending this analogy to human beings and their behaviors. This phase marked a significant shift towards a more empirical and scientific perspective on materialism. Hobbes' mechanistic materialism provided a framework for understanding human behavior in terms of matter and motion, while La Mettrie's radical reductionism extended this view to encompass all mental and physiological processes. This period saw the application of scientific principles to the study of human nature, challenging traditional religious and metaphysical explanations.

Dialectical Materialism:

Marx and Engels further developed materialism by incorporating Hegelian dialectics. They emphasized the dynamic and contradictory nature of reality, focusing on the material conditions of society and the role of economic structures in shaping human consciousness. Their approach provided a comprehensive framework for understanding social change and historical development. Marx's dialectical materialism emphasized the importance of contradictions and change, viewing societal development as a dynamic process driven by the resolution of conflicts within the economic base. Historical materialism, on the other hand, focused on the material conditions of society, particularly the mode of production, as the foundation for understanding historical development.

While ancient materialism laid the foundational principles, mechanistic materialism expanded these ideas through the lens of scientific rationalism. Dialectical materialism synthesized these developments, adding a dynamic and historical dimension that emphasized the interconnectedness and constant transformation of social and economic structures.

Conclusion:

The evolution of materialism from Democritus to Marx demonstrates its enduring significance as a philosophical doctrine. By continually adapting to new scientific discoveries and social realities, materialism has provided a robust framework for understanding the physical world and human society. Marx's contributions, in particular, have ensured that materialism remains a vital tool for critiquing and

transforming the world. This paper underscores the importance of materialist philosophy in addressing contemporary challenges and advancing human knowledge.

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CUONG, Nguyen Duy; The Evolution of Materialism from Democritus to Karl Marx. *Kalagatos*, Fortaleza, vol.21, n.3, 2024, eK24077, p. 01-09.

Received: 06/2024

Approved: 09/2024