

# MARXIST PHILOSOPHY ADDRESSES THE ISSUES RAISED IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF IMMANUEL KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

## TRIẾT HỌC MÁC XÍT GIẢI QUYẾT NHỮNG VẤN ĐỀ ĐẶT RA TRONG NHẬN THỨC LUẬN CỦA TRIẾT HỌC I.KANT

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**Abstract** - In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, there exist two worlds: the phenomenal world and the noumenal world (thing-in-itself). In the phenomenal world, the subject gradually apprehends the forms, impressions, states, concepts, and essence of objects and phenomena through the fundamental cognitive frameworks of space, time, and categories. However, this process encounters the paradoxes articulated in the four Antinomies of Pure Reason. In contrast, the noumenal world remains inaccessible to human cognition. Despite its limitations, I.Kant's epistemology raised profound questions regarding the "barriers" of human cognition and the dynamic relationship among the three stages of cognition: sensibility, understanding, and reason. From the standpoint of dialectical materialism, Marxist philosophy offers a comprehensive resolution to these issues by affirming that cognition is an active and continuous process, that practice serves as the criterion of truth, and that there exists a dialectical relationship between essence and phenomenon.

**Key words** - Cognitive faculty; Antinomy; Practice; I.Kant

### 1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant (22 April 1724 – 12 February 1804) was born into a craftsman's family as the fourth of nine in Königsberg. He is recognized as one of the most influential distinctive philosophers, remarkable for the fact that he never left Königsberg (a small city in Eastern Prussia, now Kaliningrad, Russia) and maintained limited social and political connections throughout his life. As the founder of German classical philosophy, "His reputation eclipsed all that preceded him and illuminated everything that followed" [1, p. 28]. The American scholar W. Durant asserted: "No system of thought has ever dominated an era as I.Kant's philosophy dominated the nineteenth century. After nearly 60 years of quiet, isolated activity, the peculiar and eccentric Scotsman of Königsberg awakened the entire world from its 'dogmatic slumber' in 1781 with his renowned work Critique of Pure Reason; from that year to our present age, 'critical philosophy' has dominated rationalist Europe" [2, p. 201].

I.Kant's critical trilogy - Critique of Pure Reason (1781), Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and Critique of Judgment (1790) - represents his significant contributions to German classical philosophy. At the core of his theoretical project lies a fundamental problem: the necessity of examining the faculties and stages of the human cognitive. This opened up a novel approach, a completely new interpretation compared to traditional

**Tóm tắt** - Trong quan niệm của triết học I.Kant tồn tại hai thế giới: thế giới hiện tượng và vật tự nó. Trong thế giới hiện tượng, chủ thể từng bước nắm bắt được mô thức, ấn tượng, trạng thái, các khái niệm và bản chất của sự vật, hiện tượng trên các công cụ chính là không gian, thời gian và các phạm trù. Tuy nhiên, nó gặp phải nghịch lý là bốn Antinomy. Trong thế giới vật tự nó, chủ thể không nhận thức được. Mặc dù, còn hạn chế nhưng những đóng góp của I.Kant đã đặt ra vấn đề về "rào cản" trong nhận thức và mối quan hệ của ba giai đoạn nhận thức: cảm năng, giác tính và lý tính. Trên lập trường duy vật biện chứng, triết học mácxít đã giải quyết triệt để những vấn đề trên và khẳng định: nhận thức là một quá trình; thực tiễn là tiêu chuẩn của chân lý và khẳng định quan hệ biện chứng giữa bản chất và hiện tượng.

**Từ khóa** - Năng lực nhận thức; Antinomy; Thực tiễn; I.Kant

metaphysics, namely, the establishment of a tribunal to critique pure reason. These are also I.Kant's unique contributions to epistemological theory. In modern Western philosophy, I.Kant's epistemology has exerted a profound influence on various philosophical movements, including those of Schopenhauer, Husserl, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc. From the standpoint of Marxist philosophy, I.Kant's epistemology serves as an important premise for resolving epistemological issues from the standpoint of dialectical materialism.

### 2. Main content

#### 2.1. Core epistemological content in I.Kant's Philosophy

I.Kant's epistemological inquiry centers on two fundamental questions:

- 1) What can we know? ("Was können wir wissen?");
- 2) How is knowledge possible? ("Wie ist Erkenntnis möglich?").

By answering the first question, humanity seeks to clarify the nature and limits of cognition; by answering the second, it examines the process through which knowledge is constituted in the pursuit of truth. I.Kant initiated a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy, resolving the conflict between rationalism and empiricism.

Regarding the first question, "What can we know?", I.Kant posits a distinction between the phenomenal world

and the noumenal world (thing-in-itself). In the phenomenal world, the subject strives to apprehend, yet encounters contradictions (paradoxes), the *Antinomies*, which I.Kant divides into thesis and antitheses:

**Table 1.** *The Four Antinomies in Immanuel Kant's Philosophy*

Thesis	Antithesis
1. "The world has a beginning in time and is also enclosed within boundaries in space" [1, p. 760]	"The world has no beginning and no boundaries in space; it is infinite in both time and space" [1, p. 762]
2. "Every composite substance in the world consists of simple parts, and nothing exists anywhere except the simple or what is composed of it" [1, p. 769]	"No composite thing in the world is made up of simple parts, nor does any simple thing exist anywhere in the world" [1, p. 771]
3. "Causality according to laws of nature is not the only causality from which the phenomena of the world can be derived. It is necessary to assume a causality through freedom to explain these phenomena" [1, p. 778]	"There is no freedom; everything in the world occurs solely in accordance with laws of nature" [1, p. 780]
4. "There exists an absolutely necessary being, either as part of the world or as its cause" [1, p. 786]	"There is no absolutely necessary being, whether in or outside the world, as its cause" [1, p. 788]

In resolving these paradoxes, I.Kant argues that the first two Antinomies are both incorrect. This is because: *First*, the world has never manifested itself completely and fully; *second*, human experience is subjective and individual, incapable of simultaneously encompassing both necessary and sufficient conditions to conclude the essence of the world; *third*, human sensuous cognition is inherently finite and cannot comprehensively grasp the phenomenal world as a whole. However, in the noumenal world, which lies beyond space and time and is transcendental, all determinations and characteristics such as "beginning" and "infinity" become meaningless.

In classical metaphysics, metaphysics resolves contradictions by analyzing right and wrong and eliminating one of the opposing sides. That is, contradictions are analyzed as A and not-A; if A is true, not-A is false, and vice versa. I.Kant, however, rejects this approach. He contends that the Antinomies are dialectical oppositions - not between being and non-being, but between "this way" and "that way." Therefore, it is necessary to consider each specific case to determine the truth value of each Antinomy. It is also possible that both sides may be correct or incorrect. With the Antinomies, I.Kant elucidates the complexity and paradoxical nature of the process of truth cognition. The key to resolving these contradictions, according to I.Kant, lies in transcendental idealism.

In response to "How is knowledge possible?", I.Kant asserts that we require the senses, which he collectively refers to as Sensibility, through which we receive intuitions of phenomena. The forms of these intuitions are space and time. However, sensibility alone is insufficient to constitute cognition. If the cognitive process were limited to isolated,

contingent, and direct impressions, human being would merely sense the existence of external objects without distinguishing their forms, structures, or properties, and thus would fail to acquire genuine knowledge of them. For this reason, I.Kant posits that innate a priori form of sensibility - space and time - are essential in consciousness. The a priori form of space (the faculty to perceive objects in a position, shape, boundary, or definite outline) and the a priori form of time (the faculty to perceive processes occurring within and outside oneself in a definite order and sequence) are indispensable. If we discard these a priori forms of sensibility - space and time - all our data about the surrounding world would become chaotic, disorderly, and formless. Outside human senses, space and time do not exist. "Through external sense (an attribute of the mind), we imagine objects as outside ourselves and all in **SPACE**. Only in space are shape, magnitude, and relations among objects determined. Internal sense - by which the mind intuits itself or its internal states - though it does not provide any intuition of the soul as an object, is also a definite form, through which intuition of internal states becomes possible; thus, all that pertains to internal determinations is conceived in relations of **TIME**" [1, p. 143].

The second stage of cognition, understanding, is the faculty of thinking. In the process of thinking, understanding operates through concepts and judgments. At this stage, I.Kant distinguishes between two types of knowledge: empirical knowledge and scientific knowledge, and two types of judgments: analytic and synthetic judgments. Empirical knowledge is characterized by "Experience does not provide us with any genuine universality, and reason - which craves such knowledge - is stimulated by experience rather than satisfied by it" [1, p. 79]. In contrast, scientific knowledge attains universality and necessity, meaning it is valid for all possible cases. Such knowledge cannot arise from experience; it is a priori knowledge. "Knowledge that is universal and necessarily valid must be clear and firm in itself, independent of experience, and is therefore called a priori knowledge" [1, p. 79].

Since concepts and judgments are used, the number of forms of activity of understanding matches the number of concepts:

In terms of quantity: universal, particular, and singular judgments;

In terms of quality: affirmative, negative, and indefinite judgments;

In terms of relation: categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive judgments;

In terms of modality: problematic, assertoric, and apodictic judgments.

Judgments are the basis for I.Kant's table of categories: for each form of judgment, there is a corresponding pure concept of understanding, which I.Kant calls Categories, intended to bridge the gap between sensibility and understanding. I.Kant established 12 categories, divided into four groups:

1) Categories of quantity: unity, plurality, totality;

2) Categories of quality: reality, negation, limitation;

3) Categories of relation: substance and accident, causality and dependence, community;

4) Categories of modality: possibility–impossibility, existence–nonexistence, necessity–contingency.

Within the phenomenal world, the categories cannot cognize the absolute or the thing-in-itself.

The third stage of cognition, reason, like understanding, uses logic to abstract the content of cognition, employs reality, and utilizes concepts generated by reason itself. Reason does not create new concepts; rather, it liberates the concepts of understanding from the limitations imposed by the scope of the phenomenal world and extends this world beyond the bounds of experience, although still related to it. However, when reason embarks on its own independent course, it encounters paradoxes, aporias, and conceptual traps. As a result, transcendental ideas arise: the idea of the soul, the idea of the world, and the idea of God as the necessary cause of all phenomena. At this stage, reason seeks to penetrate the realm of the thing-in-itself but it proves powerless - agnostic in the strict philosophical sense. The thing-in-itself remains the ultimate ground, the true reality, the genuine essence; it is what human reason yearns to grasp but cannot.

Each stage of cognition contributes to resolving an important aspect of the cognitive process. The stage of sensibility, through the forms of space and time, provides initial understanding of objects and phenomena; based on these initial understandings, through concepts, judgments, and categories, human beings develop knowledge of objects. In the third stage, reason continues to deepen cognition but encounters the barrier of the thing-in-itself. I.Kant's answer to the second question demonstrates his reconciliation of idealism and rationalism, and his affirmation of his standpoint on empiricism.

## 2.2. Issues raised in I.Kant's epistemology

*First, the "barrier" in human cognitive capacity.*

I.Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself is marked dualism and internal contradictions, which constitute epistemic barriers on the path of human cognition. His solution to these contradictions remains limited to an either-or choice, without allowing for a dialectical third alternative. Through this approach, I.Kant merely discovers contradictions in human thought and reason, without recognizing dialectical contradictions characterized by the unity and opposition of opposing sides. Additionally, I.Kant limits the number of Antinomies to four, symbolizing the immortal soul, the universe, God, and freedom, which humans have yet to comprehend. These elements obstruct reason's path to cognition. I.Kant's viewpoint both acknowledges the limitations of human cognition regarding objects and phenomena in the phenomenal world and the impotence of humans in the noumenal world; simultaneously, it reflects I.Kant's compromise: he must restrict knowledge to make room for faith. This impotence in cognition is the "barrier" that humans must overcome to conquer infinite understanding.

*Second, the relationship between the stages of cognition.*

In I.Kant's epistemology, the cognitive process unfolds

in three interrelated stages: sensibility, understanding, and reason. The limitations inherent in each preceding stage are, in principle, addressed at the subsequent stage. During cognition, the knowledge obtained about objects remains chaotic, unorganized, and formless; this raw material of cognition is then organized and systematized through understanding. Only by linking these stages does knowledge emerge: "Without sensibility, no object would be given to us; without understanding, no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" [1, p. 200]. Thus, sensibility belongs to the realm of transcendental aesthetics, while understanding is an integral part of transcendental logic. Human beings require universal and necessary knowledge of objects and phenomena. Therefore, cognition continues its journey. This time, the obstacle that reason encounters is ideas. I.Kant divides them into three different types based on the relationship between the subject and the external world.

I.Kant's conception of the cognitive represents a significant contribution to the history of philosophy and reveals a profoundly dialectical mode of thought. In explaining and proving the interconnection between sensibility and understanding, I.Kant defends the principle of empiricism, asserting that all human knowledge originates from sensation and experience. However, even at the highest stage of cognition - reason - paradoxes, the Antinomies, still arise. These contradictions cannot be resolved through 'pure' theoretical reasoning alone. Thus, the issues posed by I.Kant's epistemology are fundamental and have been addressed by previous philosophers in various ways, though not satisfactorily.

Commenting on I.Kant's epistemology, V.I.Lenin affirmed: "The chief characteristic of I.Kant's philosophy is its reconciliation of materialism and idealism, establishing a compromise between these two doctrines, combining two different and opposed philosophical tendencies in a single system. When I.Kant admits that there is something outside us, a thing-in-itself corresponding to our representations, he is a materialist. When he declares that the thing-in-itself is unknowable, transcendental, and belongs to the other world, he is an idealist. When I.Kant admits that experience and sensation are the sole sources of our knowledge, he directs his philosophy toward sensationalism and, under certain conditions, toward materialism. When he admits the a priori nature of space, time, causality, etc., he directs his philosophy toward idealism. This duality led to I.Kant being fiercely criticized by both consistent materialists and consistent idealists" [3, pp. 238–239].

Despite certain limitations, I.Kant's epistemology constitutes an essential contributions to the development of human thought. On one hand, it affirms the existence of the objective world outside the thing-in-itself, which affects human senses; on the other hand, it asserts the complex and paradoxical nature of the process of cognition and the general relationship between humans and the world. Notably, I.Kant's insights into the instruments and means of cognition were far ahead of the epistemological conceptions of his contemporaries.

### 2.3. How Marxist philosophy resolves the issues raised in I.Kant's epistemology?

Marxist philosophy introduces a new and revolutionary framework for addressing epistemological problems. It enables a comprehensive resolution of the limitations identified in I.Kant's epistemology while simultaneously recognizing its theoretical value and contributions to human cognition and practice.

I.Kant asserted that human cognition is essentially separated from nature, that sensation and concepts do not directly reflect the external world, and that the external world is the unknowable thing-in-itself. He also maintained that cognition and existence are distinct.

In his work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, F. Engels affirmed that humans cannot immediately comprehend the essence of objects and phenomena. Cognition is a process progressing from the simple to the complex, from incomplete to complete. From generation to generation, human cognitive capacity is infinite, but within the scope of each individual and each era, cognition is always limited by specific historical conditions. Therefore, our cognition is relative, incomplete; there are aspects and properties we do not recognize at the outset. Cognition is a gradual process of penetrating nature from one generation to another: "Man cannot grasp = reflect = describe the whole of nature directly in its entirety; he can only approach it ever more closely by creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc" [4, p. 193].

In *Philosophical Notebooks*, V.I. Lenin affirmed: "In reality, cognition combines two elements (man and nature). Cognition is a reflection of the external world; if that reflection is truthful, cognition unites nature with man," and this process is "from living perception to abstract thought, and from abstract thought to practice - this is the dialectical path of cognition of truth, of cognition of objective reality" [4, p. 179]. In cognition, humans initially collect sensory data and experiences, then proceed to analyze, compare, synthesize, generalize, and abstract to construct theories reflecting the essence and laws of movement of objects in the world. All knowledge, whether direct or indirect, for one person or another, from one generation to another, at the sensory or rational level, at the empirical or theoretical stage, ultimately originates from practice. Therefore, if divorced from practice, if not based on practice, cognition will lose its practical foundation, and the cognitive subject will be unable to attain accurate and profound knowledge of the world. Marxism affirms practice as the foundation, driving force, purpose, and criterion of truth. By making practice the criterion of truth, Marxism-Leninism revolutionized epistemology.

Because I.Kant misconceived the relationship between essence and phenomena, he widened the gap between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world. V.I. Lenin sharply criticized this position: "Decisively, there is and

can be no difference in principle between phenomenon and 'thing-in-itself.' There is only a difference between what has been cognized and what has not yet been cognized. Philosophical fabrications about special boundaries between the two, about a 'thing-in-itself' lying 'beyond' phenomena, are nothing but pure nonsense, fantastical inventions and fabrications" [4, p. 117].

Marxist philosophy starts from external phenomena and uncovers the hidden, profound essence within: "Non-essential, superficial, surface phenomena often disappear, do not 'stand firm,' do not 'sit securely' like 'essence.' Generally: the movement of a river - the foam on top and the deep current below. But the foam is also an expression of essence!" [4, p. 137]. Phenomena are diverse and abundant; essence is profound. To comprehend essence, we must consider phenomena in relation to other surrounding phenomena. This is also the requirement of the comprehensive and concrete-historical viewpoint in Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Essence and phenomena should not be separated; we should not stop at the superficial aspect of phenomena, but must recognize that essence and phenomena are two aspects of a unified process. Views that separate or superficially combine essence and phenomena are erroneous.

Resolving the issues raised in I.Kant's epistemology demonstrates humanity's infinite capacity to penetrate the essence and laws of the world. I.Kant's philosophy is not only a premise for the development of German classical philosophy, but has also "resolved the difficulties and contradictions that previous philosophers struggled with" [5], paving the way for reason in the pursuit of knowledge.

### 3. Conclusion

The enduring legacy of I.Kant's philosophy lies in his "critique of reason", published when he was fifty-seven years old. In contrast to his simple life, never venturing far from home, his critical ideas spread and resonated across the globe. By inheriting the rational core of I.Kant's epistemology and, from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, Marxist philosophy has resolved the problem of human cognitive capacity, continuing to open up infinite possibilities for research into cognition - not only of humans but also of artificial intelligence in the contemporary world.

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