

# ON PRACTICE

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On the Relation Between Knowledge and Practice

—Between Knowing and Doing

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## EDITORS' NOTE

For a long time there was in the Communist Party of China a group of devotees of doctrinairism who refused to accept what the experience of the Chinese revolution taught us. They denied the truth that "Marxism is not a dogma but a guide to action" and bluffed people with isolated words and phrases savagely torn out of the text of Marxist books. There was yet another group of followers of empiricism who stuck to their own fragmentary experience and did not understand the importance of theory to revolutionary practice. They failed to see the situation of the revolution as a whole and, hard working as they were, they laboured blindly. Great damage was done to the Chinese revolution during 1931-1934 by the incorrect ideas of these two groups of comrades, particularly those of the doctrinaires who, wearing the cloak of Marxism, captivated large numbers of comrades.

This essay, written in July, 1937, was to expose from the epistemological viewpoint of Marxism the subjectivist mistakes of doctrinairism and empiricism, especially doctrinairism. As the main thesis lies in exposing the kind of doctrinaire subjectivism that belittles practice, the essay is entitled "On Practice." Comrade Mao Tse-tung once presented the views contained in this essay in a lecture at the Anti-Japanese University of Yen-an.

The following is a tentative English translation of the essay.

**I**N THE STUDY of the problem of knowledge pre-Marxist materialism leaves man's social nature and historical development out of account. Hence it cannot explain the dependence of cognition upon social practice—its dependence upon production and class struggle.

First of all, a Marxist regards human productive activity as the most fundamental practice determining all other human activities. Cognitively man depends mainly upon his activity in material production for a gradual understanding of nature's phenomena, its characteristics, its laws, and its relation to himself; at the same time, through productive activity, man comes to understand gradually and in varying degrees certain human interrelations. None of such knowledge can be obtained apart from productive activity. In a classless society everyone in his capacity as one of its members works together with other members of society, comes into certain relations of production with them, and engages in production to solve the problem of man's material life. In various kinds of class societies members of society from all classes come in different ways into certain relations of production with each other and engage in production to solve the same problem. This is the funda-

mental source of the development of human knowledge.

Productive activity is not the only form of man's social practice. There are various other forms—class struggle, political life, scientific and artistic activities. In short, man participates as a social being in every sphere of the actual life of society. Thus besides his cognition of things of material life, man comes to know in varying degrees the different kinds of human relations through his political and cultural life closely connected with his material life. Among these, class struggle in its various forms especially exerts a profound influence on the development of man's knowledge. In a class society everyone lives with a certain class status and all his thoughts are stamped with the seal of his class.

According to the Marxist, man's activity in social production develops step by step from a low stage to a high stage, and consequently man's knowledge, whether of nature or of society, also develops step by step from a low stage to a high stage, viz., from the elementary to the advanced, and from the one-sided to the many-sided. For a very long period in human history, people were, as they could only be, limited to a phasic understanding of the history of society. This was due on the one hand to the constant distortion of it by the exploiting classes with their biased views, and on the other to the small scale of production which limited the breadth of view of the people. Not until the modern proletariat appeared along with greatly increased productive forces or big industry did man begin to have a comprehensive and historical under-

standing of the development of society and turn his knowledge of society into a science. This is none other than the science of Marxism.

According to the Marxist, man's social practice alone is the criterion of truth in his cognition of the external world, for in actuality human cognition becomes verified only when man arrives at the results predicted, through the process of social practice, viz., through the processes of material production, of class struggle, and of scientific experiments. If anyone wants to be successful in his work or to achieve the anticipated results, he must make his ideas correspond to the laws of the external world; otherwise he will fail in practice. It is from failure that one derives lessons and corrects one's ideas so as to make them correspond to the laws of the external world. This is how one turns failure into success. This is exactly what is meant by failure being the mother of success, and by "a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit."

The epistemology of dialectical materialism raises practice to a position of primary importance. It regards human knowledge as being at no point separable from practice, refuting all the incorrect theories which deny the importance of practice or which separate knowledge from it. Thus Lenin said, "Practice is more important than (theoretical) knowledge because it not only has the virtue of universality but also the virtue of direct reality."<sup>1</sup>

Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, has two most outstanding characteristics. One is its class nature: it openly declares itself to be in the service



of the proletariat. The other is its practicality: it emphasises the dependence of theory on practice, practice being the foundation of theory which in turn serves practice. One's theory or cognition is judged to be true or untrue not by how it is subjectively felt to be, but by what objectively the result is in social practice. The criterion of truth can only be social practice. The viewpoint which emphasises practice is primary and basic in the epistemology of dialectical materialism.<sup>2</sup>

But how after all does human knowledge arise from practice and serve practice in turn? This will be clear after an examination of the developing process of cognition.

At first man sees in the process of practice only the phenomena of things, their individual aspects, and their external relations to each other. For instance, a number of outside people came to Yen-an on an observation tour. On the first day or two, they saw the topography, the streets, and the houses of Yen-an; met people; went to feasts, evening parties, and mass meetings; heard what was talked about; read what was written: these are the phenomena of things, their individual aspects, and their external relations. This is called the perceptual stage of knowledge, namely, the stage of sensation and imagery. It is also the first stage of knowledge, the stage in which these different things in Yen-an affected the sense organs of the gentlemen of the observation commission, gave rise to sensations, and left many images in their brain together with a crude outline of their external rela-

tions. In this stage one cannot as yet form profound concepts or draw logical conclusions.

With the continuation of man's social practice, the sensations and images of a thing are repeated innumerable times in his practice and then a sudden change in the cognitive process takes place in his brain resulting in the formation of concepts. Concepts as such represent no longer the phenomena of things, their individual aspects, or their external relations. Through concepts man comes to grasp a thing in its entirety, its essence, and its internal relations. Conception is not only quantitatively but also qualitatively different from perception. Proceeding from concepts, we can employ the method of judgement and inference and arrive at logical conclusions. What is known as "knit your brows, and the idea comes to your mind" in the *Tale of the Three Kingdoms* or "let me think" in our workaday language refers to the employment of concepts in our brain to form judgements and draw inferences. This is the second stage of knowledge.

The gentlemen of the observation commission after having gathered various kinds of data and in addition reflected on them may come to the judgement: The policy of the National Anti-Japanese United Front pursued by the Communist Party is thorough, sincere, and honest. If these gentlemen themselves were sincerely in favour of unity for national salvation, then after having made the above judgement they could go a step further and conclude that "the National Anti-Japanese United Front can succeed." In the



complete process of knowing a thing this stage of conception, judgement, and inference is more important than the first stage. It is the stage of rational knowledge.

The real task of cognition is to arrive at thought through perception, at a gradual understanding of the internal contradictions of objective things, their laws, the internal relations between this and that process, that is, at rational knowledge. To repeat, the reason why rational knowledge is different from perceptual knowledge is that perceptual knowledge is knowledge of a thing in its individual aspects, its appearance, and its external relations, whereas rational knowledge, marking a great step in advance, is knowledge of a thing in its entirety, its essence, and its internal relations. When one arrives at rational knowledge, one is able to reveal the internal contradictions of the surrounding world and thus grasp the development of that world by considering it in its entirety—the internal relations of and between all its aspects.

Before the advent of Marxism none had proposed a theory of knowledge that takes account of the developing process of cognition that is based on practice, that proceeds from the elementary to the advanced, and that is dialectically materialistic. Marxist materialism for the first time correctly solved this problem, pointing out both materialistically and dialectically the ever-deepening process of cognition, a process that turns perceptual knowledge into rational knowledge through the complex and regularly recur-

ring practices of man as a social being in his production and class struggle. Lenin said: "The abstract concept of matter, of a law of nature, of economic value or any other scientific (i.e., correct and basic, not false or superficial) abstraction reflects nature more deeply, truly, and fully."<sup>3</sup> What characterizes respectively the two stages of the process of cognition, according to Marxism-Leninism, is that in the lower stage knowledge appears in perceptual form and in the higher stage in rational form; each of these two stages, however, constitutes a stage in one united process of cognition. Perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge are different in nature, but not separate from each other, being united on the basis of practice.

It is our practice that proves that things perceived are not readily understood, and that only things understood are more profoundly perceived. It proves that perception only solves the problem of how things appear, and that understanding answers the question as to what their essence is. Thus these problems cannot be solved at all apart from practice. If anybody wants to know something, he cannot do otherwise than to come into contact with that thing, that is, to live (practise) in its setting.

In a feudal society one cannot know beforehand the laws of capitalist society, because, capitalist society not yet having appeared, there cannot be any practice appropriate to it. Marxism can only be the product of capitalist society. In the age of the capitalism of free competition, Marx could not know concretely before-

hand some of the special laws of the age of imperialism, because this age, the last stage of capitalism, had not yet arrived and there was no practice appropriate to it. Only Lenin and Stalin could shoulder this task.

Aside from their genius, what enabled Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin to formulate their theories was mainly their personal participation in the practice of the class struggle and scientific experiments of their time. Without the latter condition no genius could succeed in such a task. "A scholar knows all that is happening in the world without going out of his door" was only an empty phrase in the technologically undeveloped times of old. Although this dictum could be true in the present age of technological development, yet real knowledge through direct acquaintance is only for all those in the world who are engaged in actual practice. Through practice these people obtain knowledge which, when put into the hands of the scholar through the communication of language and technical devices, enables him indirectly to know about "all that is happening in the world."

If one wants to know directly some things or some kinds of things one can do so only through personal participation in the practical struggle to change existing conditions, to change those things or those kinds of things. Only thus can one come into contact with the phenomena of those things or those kinds of things; and only thus can the essence of those things or those kinds of things be revealed and understood.

This is actually the path to knowledge along which everyone travels. Only some people deliberately argue to the contrary to confuse and confound.

The most ridiculous persons in the world are those "know-alls" who pick up crumbs of knowledge piecemeal and proclaim themselves, each of them, "the number one of the world." This serves merely to show that they have not taken proper measure of themselves.

Knowledge is a matter of science, and there is no room for the slightest insincerity or conceit. What is required is decidedly the opposite, sincerity and modesty. If one wants to have knowledge one has to participate in the practice of changing existing conditions. If one wants to know the taste of a pear one has to transform the pear by eating it oneself. If one wants to know the composition and properties of atoms one has to perform physical and chemical experiments to change their original state. If one wants to know the theory and method of revolution, one has to participate in revolution.

All knowledge originates from direct experience. But no one can directly experience everything. As a matter of fact, most of our knowledge is of things indirectly experienced. All our knowledge of ancient times and foreign lands belongs to this category, but for the ancients and foreigners it is knowledge of things directly experienced. If this kind of knowledge of the ancients and foreigners from their direct experience conforms to the requirements of "scientific abstraction" mentioned by Lenin and reflects objec-

tive things scientifically, then it is reliable knowledge, otherwise it is not. Hence one's knowledge consists of two parts: knowledge of things directly experienced and knowledge of things indirectly experienced. And what is indirectly experienced by one is nevertheless directly experienced by others. Hence taken as a whole, any kind of knowledge is inseparable from direct experience.

All knowledge originates in man's perception of the external world through his sense organs. If one denies perception, denies direct experience, and denies personal participation in the practice of changing existing conditions, one is not a materialist. This is exactly where the "know-alls" are ridiculous. The Chinese have an old saying: "If one doesn't enter the tiger's den, one cannot obtain tiger cubs." This statement is as true of epistemology as of man's practice. Knowledge is impossible if separated from practice.

In order to understand the dialectical materialist conception of the process of cognition based upon and issuing from the practice of changing existing conditions—the process of cognition in its gradually deepening movement—let us take a few examples.

The knowledge of capitalist society the proletariat had in the first period of its practice, the period of machine-smashing and spontaneous struggle, was only perceptual knowledge. It was only a knowledge of the individual aspects and the external relations of the various phenomena of capitalism. At that time the

proletariat was what is called a *class in itself*. But when this class reached the second period of its practice, the period of conscious, organised economic and political struggle, there emerged the ideology of Marxism as a result of the practice of this class, its experience of constant and continuous struggle and the scientific summary and integration of all these experiences by Marx and Engels. When this ideology was used to educate the proletariat and enabled it to understand the essence of capitalist society, the relation of exploitation between classes, and its own historic task, it transformed itself into a *class for itself*.

The Chinese people came to know imperialism in the same way. The first stage was one of perceptual knowledge of the appearance of things. It was marked with the indiscriminately anti-foreign struggle of the T'ai-p'ing (1850-1864) and the Boxer (1900) revolutionary movements. It was only in the second stage that the Chinese people arrived at rational knowledge. They saw the internal and external contradictions of imperialism. They also saw the essence of the exploitation of China's broad masses by imperialism in alliance with the comprador and feudal classes. This kind of knowledge came to light only about the time of the May Fourth Movement of 1919.

Let us look at war. If those who are to direct a war have no experience of it, they would not understand at first the deep underlying laws for conducting a particular war such as that of our Agrarian Revolu-



tion of the past ten years.\* In the beginning they merely go through the experience of much fighting and many defeats, but subsequently from such experience (of victories and especially of defeats) they are able to understand the inner thread that runs through the whole of the fighting, namely, the laws of that particular war. They thus understand strategy and tactics and are able to direct the fighting with confidence. At such a time if an inexperienced man is appointed to take over the command, he still will not be able to understand the correct laws of war until he has also suffered defeats and gathered experiences from them.

Comrades who are not brave enough to accept an assignment are often heard to say: "I have no confidence." Why have they no confidence? Because they have no systematic understanding of the nature of the work nor the conditions under which it will be undertaken. Probably they have had little or even no contact with this kind of work and hence cannot know the underlying laws. After a close analysis of the nature and conditions of the work, they feel more confident and are willing to undertake it. If those people have gained experiences in this work after a period of time, and if they are not given to approaching things subjectively, one-sidedly, or superficially, but endeavour to understand them with an open mind, they are able to draw their own conclusions as to how they should proceed and their courage to undertake the task will be greatly enhanced.

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\* 1927-1937—Ed.

Those are bound to stumble who approach problems only subjectively, one-sidedly, superficially, who, upon reaching any place, start to issue orders or directives self-assuredly without considering their environment, without viewing things in their totality (their history and their present state as a whole), without coming into contact with the essence of things (their qualities and the internal relations between one thing and another).

It is thus seen that the first step in the process of cognition is to come into contact with the things of the external world; this belongs to the stage of perception. The second step is to synthesise the data of perception, to rearrange and reconstruct them; this belongs to the stage of conception, judgement, and inference. It is only when the perceptual data are abundant, not fragmentary or incomplete, and are in correspondence with reality, instead of being illusory, that they can serve as the basis for valid concepts, judgements, and inferences.

Here, two important points are to be emphasised. To repeat what has already been mentioned before, the first one is the dependence of rational knowledge upon perceptual knowledge. If one thinks that rational knowledge need not be derived from perceptual knowledge, one is an idealist. In the history of philosophy there were the so-called rationalists who admitted only the reality of reason, but not the reality of experience, regarding reason alone as reliable and perceptual experience as unreliable. The mistake of this school consisted in turning things upside down. What is rational is reliable precisely because it

originates from the senses, otherwise it would be like water without source or trees without roots and become something unreliable and self-engendered.

As to the sequence in the process of cognition, perceptual experience comes first. We point out with special emphasis the significance of social practice in the process of cognition precisely because it is only through social practice that human cognition comes to pass, that people begin to obtain perceptual experience from the external world. There could be no such thing as knowledge for a person who shuts his eyes, stops his ears, and totally cuts himself off from the external world. Knowledge starts from experience—this is epistemological materialism.

The second point is that knowledge depends upon a deepening process, upon developing from the perceptual into the rational. This is epistemological dialectics. If anyone thinks that knowledge may stop at the low stage of perception and that perceptual knowledge alone is reliable, but not rational knowledge, then one repeats the historical mistake of empiricism. The mistake of such a theory is that it fails to take into account the fact that although the data of perception are the reflection of certain realities of the external world—I am not speaking of the idealist empiricism which limits experience to the so-called introspection—yet these data concern merely the aspects and appearances of things. This kind of reflection is incomplete and it is not one of the essence of things. To reflect a thing in its entirety, its essence, and its underlying laws, it is necessary to ponder over the