

How Did Marx and Engels Critically Transcend Feuerbach's Sensible Intuition?

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How to cite this paper: Yan, M. Y. (2025). How Did Marx and Engels Critically Transcend Feuerbach's Sensible Intuition? *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 541-550. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2025.153032>

Received: June 13, 2025

Accepted: July 28, 2025

Published: July 31, 2025

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Abstract

In Section 41 of Feuerbach's *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, three forms of sensible intuition are discussed, which attracted the attention of Marx and Engels and is centrally reflected in their co-authored work *The German Ideology*. Among these, the references to "higher philosophical intuition" and "the highest intuition" in *The German Ideology* have sparked lively debate among Chinese scholars. Through a comparative analysis of the texts of Marx, Engels, and Feuerbach, we find that "higher philosophical intuition" is Marx and Engels' generalization of the highest form of sensible intuition in Feuerbach, specifically referring to the intuition of art, religion, and thought as pointed out by Feuerbach himself in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. Marx and Engels' method of observing the external world did not discard intuition; rather, their transcendence over Feuerbach's sensible intuition lies in their establishment of: an empirical intuition rooted in historical materialism, an active intuition grounded in practical materialism, and a dialectical intuition imbued with materialist dialectics.

Keywords

Marx and Engels, Feuerbach, "Higher Philosophical Intuition", Sensible Intuition

1. Introduction

Since the ancient Greek philosopher Plato elevated the power of reason while diminishing that of sensibility, intellectual intuition has long been regarded as the sole means of pursuing truth and discerning the essence of things. Sensible intuition, due to its perceived superficiality and unreliability, was largely dismissed by Western philosophers. The modern philosophical tradition, initiated by Des-

cartes, further entrenched the binary opposition between sensibility and reason. It was not until Feuerbach that sensible intuition regained its rightful place. Feuerbach's concept of sensible intuition, grounded in the principle of sensibility-certainty, not only critiqued Hegel's abstract speculative philosophy and idealist dialectics but also unified sensibility and reason within an intuitive framework of thought. He affirmed that the objects of intuition are real, sensible entities while asserting that sensible intuition encompasses reason and thought. However, because Feuerbach's sensible intuition failed to grasp the social-historical role of the sensuous activity of real human beings, he reverted to a metaphysical stance akin to Hegel's in his conception of materialist history.

Marx and Engels' critique of Feuerbach's sensible intuition is prominently articulated in *The German Ideology*:

“In his contemplation of the sensuous world, Feuerbach inevitably encounters things that contradict his consciousness and his senses, things that disrupt the harmony he assumes exists among all parts of the sensuous world, especially between humanity and nature. To resolve these contradictions, he resorts to a dual form of intuition—one that lies between the ordinary intuition, which merely perceives what is ‘immediately present’, and the higher philosophical intuition, which discerns the ‘true essence’ of things.” (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 528).

Here, a critical question arises: Is “higher philosophical intuition” Marx and Engels' own intuitive method, or does it refer to Feuerbach's? Chinese academia is divided on this issue:

1) One view asserts that “higher philosophical intuition is the intuitive method of Marx and Engels” (Zou, 2003; Zheng, 2015; Bao & Tian, 2023).

2) The opposing view holds that “higher philosophical intuition is Feuerbach's philosophical method” (Shu & Geng, 2018).

Against this backdrop, this paper anchors its analysis in the concept of sensible intuition. By examining Feuerbach's texts on sensible intuition and parsing Marx and Engels' original critiques of Feuerbach's approach, it seeks to elucidate how Marx and Engels critically transcended Feuerbach's sensible intuition.

2. Feuerbach's Sensible Intuition

Feuerbach, in Section 41 of *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, identifies three distinct levels of sensible cognition:

“All objects can be cognized through sensation—even if not directly, then indirectly; even if not through ordinary, crude sensible cognition, then through trained sensible cognition; even if not through the eyes of an anatomist or chemist, then through the eyes of a philosopher.” (Feuerbach, 1995)

Here, Feuerbach posits that:

1) The lowest level of sensible cognition refers to the “ordinary, crude sensible cognition” intuited by laypeople. (**die bloße Anschauung**)

2) The second tier denotes the “trained sensible cognition” intuited by anatomists or chemists. (**der Anschauung der Naturwissenschaft**)

3) The highest level constitutes cognition “through the eyes of a philosopher”. (**den Augen des Philosophen**) (Feuerbach, 1843)

The syntactic structure—“even if not A, then at least B”—reveals a logically progressive hierarchy where B surpasses A in sophistication. The most basic sensory cognition operates through direct apprehension, whereas the observations of anatomists/chemists and philosophers entail indirect cognition. Crucially: Natural scientists employ empirical sensible intuition, Philosophers utilize abstract philosophical thinking, both of which transcend purely experiential sensible intuition.

Feuerbach established the principle of sensibility-certainty by grounding it in anthropological self-consciousness. Unlike Hegel, who praised the power of thought while neglecting the power of sensation, Feuerbach elevated sensation to a position of third importance—surpassed only by sight and hearing. This is most evident in his critique of Hegel’s dialectic of soul and body. For Feuerbach, the form of sensible cognition is an intuition defined by sensibility, one that infuses content into thought. This implies his incorporation of reflection on human co-existence (*Mitmenschlichkeit*) itself—a form of cognition that belongs to dialectical thought. Thus, Feuerbach’s highest perceptual intuition includes the intuition of reason, which treats not only the finite, phenomenal things as the objects of sensation, but also the true, divine essence (Feuerbach, 1995), intuiting not only the apparent phenomena of things, but also their inner essence”.

Firstly, Feuerbach’s supreme sensuous intuition can recognize the “true nature” of art as the “truth of sensuous things”, not as the divine essence that expresses mystical entities, but as visible, audible, and sensible objects, and that art is the expression of the truth of sensuous things. (Feuerbach, 1995)

Secondly, it is possible to recognize the “true essence” of Christianity as the “sensible entity-God”. Feuerbach points out that Hegel’s philosophy abstracts sensibility into a formal category of sensibility in accordance with the principle of abstraction of sensation. The essence of Christianity, i.e., the supreme, divine entity-functionality, is not an idea, but a sensuous intuition. Christ and God are not an object of conception, an object of thought, and a spiritual entity, but an entity that we can intuit, feel, touch, and see in the world of sensibility (Feuerbach, 1995).

Thirdly, the “true essence” of thought can be recognized as “reason and spirit”. Feuerbach not only points out that “only the objects of sensation, intuition, and perception are unquestionably and directly real,” but also mentions that “only the thinking that is enlarged and inspired by intuition is the thinking of the true reality” (Feuerbach, 1995). Thinking is also the thinking of the sensuous subject person, not the thinking of the absolute spirit. Intuition and thinking are two cognitive abilities possessed by the sensible person, who can not only intuitively perceive sensible things in order to obtain broad cognition, but also rationally think things in order to achieve a more profound and essential understanding.

3. Marx and Engels' Critique of Feuerbach's "Higher Philosophical Intuition"

3.1. Engels' Critique of Feuerbach's "Higher Philosophical Intuition"

Engels' marginal note (*The German Ideology*) states that "Feuerbach's error lies not in his subordinating what is before him, i.e., the sensible appearance, to the sensible reality which is confirmed by a more precise study of the sensible facts, but in the fact that he would end up being at a loss for sensibility if he were to observe it without using the philosopher's 'eye', that is to say, if he were to observe it without the philosopher's 'spectacles'. philosopher's 'spectacles' to observe the sensible, he would end up being at his wits' end with the sensible." (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 528). From this small and unobtrusive marginal note, it can be seen that Engels criticized Feuerbach for observing the world of sensibility and sensible reality by way of sensible intuition; more than that, even though Feuerbach used the eyes of a philosopher and wore the spectacles of a philosopher to observe the sensible, he was at a loss to do anything about the sensible due to the fact that he did not unveil the activity of the sensible, the practicality of the sensible. Engels adds to the text with this marginal note, "Observation with philosophers 'eyes, with philosophers' glasses" (den "Augen", d. h. durch die "Brille"), "des Philosophen zu Brille" (d. h. durch die "Brille").

At the same time, it corresponds exactly to the text "**den Augen des Philosophen**" (the recognition of the philosopher's eye) in Feuerbach's Principles of the Philosophy of the Future. It can be seen that Engels directly refers to the "higher philosophical intuition" as the highest form of Feuerbach's perceptual intuition.

The word "perceive" in the phrase "see the 'true nature' of things" is the same word "perceive" as the word "see" in the phrase "see what is in front of you", i.e., to perceive, to intuit. The word "see" in the English version of "see the 'true nature' of things" and the word "see" in "see what is 'in front of me'" are the same word "perceive", i.e., to perceive, to intuit. In the German version, the German word for "see" here, "erschaut," is the same word as in §7 of the Syllabus, where Marx criticizes "Feuerbach's failure to see that 'religious feeling' is one of the social forms of society. The German word for "see" in "Feuerbach did not see that 'religious feelings' are in the form of society" in Marx's critique of "Feuerbach did not see that 'religious feelings' are in the form of society" in §7 of the Syllabus does not coincide with the German word for "see" in "Sieht" (Marx & Engels, 1981: p. 44). In *The German Ideology*, for example, it is stated that Feuerbach "sees only factories and machines" and "does not look at people in terms of their existing social connections, in terms of the surrounding conditions of life which have made them what they are, and never yet sees the real, active human being, but dwells on the abstract 'man'". The words "see" and "seeing" in "see" are the German words "sieht", "einsieht" (Marx & Engels, 1981: p. 44). As can be seen, Marx Engels uses two different verbs in each of these two different contexts, one in the context of talking about sensuous intuition, "to see", and the other in the context of talking

about sensuous activity, “to see” or The other is “seeing” or “seeing” in the context of sensuous activity, and there is a subtle difference between the two. It is not appropriate to identify the higher philosophical intuition of “seeing the ‘true nature’ of things” with the philosophical intuition of Marx and Engels, which is “seeing”. It is not appropriate to identify the higher philosophical intuition of “seeing the ‘true nature’ of things” with the transformation of the sensible world by human sensible practical activities as Marx and Engels “saw” (Shu & Geng, 2018). It can be seen that the “advanced philosophical intuition” is not that of Marx and Engels, but the perceptual intuition of Feuerbach who “knows with the eyes of the philosopher”.

3.2. Marx and Engels’ Critique of Feuerbach’s “Supreme Intuition”

Marx and Engels criticized Feuerbach’s “supreme intuition”: “He never understood the sensible world as the whole living sensible activity of the individuals who constitute it, and thus, for example, when he saw the masses of scrofulous, overworked, and consumptive paupers instead of healthy people, he had to resort to ‘supreme intuition’ and conceptual ‘equalization of classes’, he is obliged to have recourse to ‘supreme intuition’ and to the conceptual ‘equalization of classes’.” (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 530) It can be seen here that the “highest intuition” is a generalization by Marx and Engels of the highest form of Feuerbach’s perceptual intuition. It has already been shown that “higher philosophical intuition” is the highest form of Feuerbach’s perceptual intuition identified by Marx and Engels, which means that the contents of “highest intuition” and “higher philosophical intuition” refer to the same thing. This means that the content of “highest intuition” and “higher philosophical intuition” refer to the same thing, i.e., the perceptual intuition that Feuerbach refers to as “knowing with the eyes of the philosopher”.

It is worth noting that “supreme intuition” is a mistranslation. Our examination of the German version reveals that “supreme intuition” is originally rendered as “höheren Anschauung” in the German edition of *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1981: p. 45).

1) German original: Er kommt also nie dazu, die sinnliche Welt als die gesamte lebendige sinnliche Tätigkeit der sie ausmachenden Individuen aufzufassen, und ist daher gezwungen, wenn er z. B. statt gesunder Menschen einen Haufen skrofulöser, überarbeiteter und schwindsüchtiger Hungerleider sieht, da zu der “höheren Anschauung” und zur ideellen “Ausgleichung in der Gattung”.

The “higher” in “higher philosophical intuition” is “höheren” in the German edition of *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1981: p. 43).

2) German original: Um diese zu beseitigen, muß er dann zu einer doppelten Anschauung seine Zuflucht nehmen, zwischen einer profanen, die nur das “auf platter Hand Liegende”, und einer höheren, philosophischen, die das “wahre Wesen” der Dinge erschaut.

The same word “höheren” is used in both cases. According to German gram-

mar, there is a distinction between the formal expression of the primary, comparative and superlative, and the use of the comparative in the German sentence in which “höheren” is found is based on the comparative of its German root “höch”. The word “höcher” is an anagram of the German root “höch”. In addition, the word “höheren” connotes “superior” “higher”, but not “highest”.

1) English original: “therefore when, for example, he sees instead of healthy men a crowd of scrofulous, overworked and consumptive starvelings, he is compelled to take refuge in the ‘higher perception’ and ‘higher perception’. refuge in the ‘higher perception’ and in the ideal “compensation in the species.” (Marx & Engels, 2010: p. 39).

From the English translation, “highest intuition” in the English version of *The German Ideology* is originally “higher perception”.

2) English original: “To remove this disturbance, he must take refuge in a double perception, a profane one which perceives ‘only the flatly obvious’ and a higher, philosophical, one which perceives philosophical, one which perceives the ‘true essence’ of things.” (Marx & Engels, 2010: p. 39).

Here, the original English version of “a higher, philosophical, one which perceives the ‘true essence’ of things” is “a higher, philosophical, one which perceives the ‘true essence’ of things”. the ‘true essence’ of things” In both cases, the comparative “higher” is used instead of the highest, which is exactly the same as in the original sentence.

Both cases use the comparative “higher” rather than the highest, which corresponds exactly to “höheren”.

It can be seen that “highest intuition” should be translated as “higher intuition” (Shu & Geng, 2018). Or “higher intuition”, which corresponds to the “higher philosophical intuition” in the previous quotation and refers to the same content, is Marx and Engels’ interpretation of Feuerbach’s sensuous intuition of “recognizing with the eyes of the philosopher”, which is the same as the “higher philosophical intuition” in the previous quotation. It is Marx and Engels’ generalization of Feuerbach’s “perceptual intuition with the eyes of the philosopher”, i.e., it belongs to one of Feuerbach’s perceptual intuitions. Marx and Engels, on the other hand, put double quotation marks around the qualifier “true nature” when they spoke of “higher philosophical intuition”, which is an ironic tone. We find in the German version that this term is related to that of Feuerbach: Marx Engels’ original use of “true essence” is “das wahre wesen” (Marx & Engels, 1981: p. 43). Feuerbach, in §39 of the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, speaks of the Hegelian Absolute Philosophy as “the true, divine entity” (das wahre, göttliche Wesen) (Marx & Engels, 2009b: p. 89). In this context, the German word wesen means “essence” and should be translated as “true, divine essence” rather than “true, divine entity” in §39 (Feuerbach, 1995: p. 62). Art is in fact an object of the senses, expressing the truth of sensual things. It can be seen that the German words in these two places are the same, except that Marx and Engels did not add “sacred” (göttliche) (Shu & Geng, 2018).

4. Marx and Engels' Transcendence of Feuerbach's Sensuous Intuition

Did Marx Engels have intuitive thoughts? We believe that although Marx Engels criticized the sensuous intuition of the old philosophy, including Feuerbach, they did not completely reject sensuous intuition, and still recognized the role of sensuous intuition in the observation of things. What Marx and Engels surpassed Feuerbach's perceptual intuition is that they not only observed or examined the perceptual world on the basis of the new vision of historical materialism and practical materialism, but also their way of observation was characterized by material dialectics.

First, Marx and Engels' way of seeing is an empirical observation grounded in historical materialism. Marx and Engels used empirical intuition to discern the precariousness of bourgeois rule and the future prospects of the dictatorship of the working class through the class struggle in France from 1848 to 1850. The objects of Feuerbach's perceptual intuition are directed at the divine ineffable in Hegel's discursive philosophy. Based on the fact that Hegel spoke the essence of divine things through art, mystified and abstracted Christianity, God, and other divine entities, and abstracted human reason and spirit, it is only when Feuerbach restores these objects of intuition to their perceptual certainty, reality, and positivity that Feuerbach ensures that the materialist stance is always maintained in Feuerbach's intuition of the natural world. materialist position is always maintained in Feuerbach's intuition of nature. However, "Feuerbach preaches sensuality on every page, preaches preoccupation with the study of the concrete, the study of reality, but this same Feuerbach, as soon as he speaks of some relation other than the purely sexual relation between men, becomes completely abstract" (Marx & Engels, 2009b: p. 290; Marx & Engels, 1962: p. 290), where Marx and Engels go beyond Feuerbach is that their way of observation or examination presupposes real, living, empirically observable human beings in the process of continuous development, that they see the existing social connections of real people, that materially productive life is the first historical activity of human societies, and that the real connection between the social and political structure and production and the existing social relations with the productive forces.

Second, Marx and Engels' way of observation is a dynamic observation grounded in practical materialism. They criticized Feuerbach's perceptual intuition as "understanding from the form of the object or intuition," "the object, the reality, the sensibility" (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 499), and criticized Feuerbach for seeing only the abstract individual, from which "at best one can only reach the understanding of the single human being", criticizes Feuerbach for seeing only the abstract individual, and thus "at best, only reaching the intuition of the single man and of civil society" (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 502). That is why "to pass from Feuerbach's abstract men to real, living men, it is necessary to examine these men as men acting in history (betrachtet-quote)" (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 290), where Marx Engels' way of examining is higher than Feuerbach's perceptual intuition is

that in their examination of perceptual objects, perceptual appearances, and perceptual realities, they understand them as object, perceptual, real activities, see the reality, initiative, and agency of the perceptual subject, and see “practical, human perceptual activity” (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 501), saw that “in practice it is made to revolutionize”, saw that the mission of the new philosophy was to change the world, and also saw that the sensuous world in which real people live is by no means directly existent, that it is in constant motion and development, “the product of the industrial and social situation, the product of history, and the result of the activities of the generations the result of the activities of generations” (Marx & Engels, 2009c: p. 528). For example, Marx pointed out that natural science and industry drive the progress and development of social history, and that industry is “the direct mode of production of life itself”.

Third, the Marxian-Engelsian way of observation is a scientific one imbued with material dialectics. Marx and Engels used dialectical intuition to analyze the economic system of capitalist society, to analyze the essential operation of commodities and money, and to unveil the secret of capital multiplication in the market economy of capitalist society. “On the first path, complete representations evaporate into abstract prescriptions; on the second path, abstract prescriptions lead to concrete reproductions in the itinerary of thought.” (Marx & Engels, 2009d: p. 25) Here, Marx still recognizes the role of perceptual intuition, but is not limited to perceptual intuition, but also emphasizes the rise to thinking abstraction, and then from thinking abstraction to thinking concrete, both of which are crucial in the two paths of perceptual and thinking intuition, which fully demonstrates the concrete embodiment of materialistic dialectic as a scientific method in the field of political economy. However, Marx points out that the reason why Hegel’s discursive philosophy falls into illusion and understands the real as self-synthesizing, self-deepening, and self-moving thinking is because he equates the process of theoretical elaboration, in which abstraction rises to the concrete, i.e., thinking grasps the concrete, with the process of the production of the concrete itself, and describes discursive narration as the narration of the real, and here Marx returns to Chapter 5 of the Sacred Family Here Marx returns to the position of criticizing Hegel in Chapter 5 of The Holy Family, “The Secret of Discursive Structure”. Then again, Engels also refers to the intuition of thought based on the materiality of sensibility in Anti-Dühring, where he states that “purely logical arithmetic is based on material intuition, even though this intuition is abstract.” (Marx & Engels, 2009a: p. 346). Perceptual intuition first recognizes the perceptual and material nature of the object of intuition, and the intuition of thought built on it is a kind of abstract intuition, which is consistent with what Marx said about the method of observation that rises from the abstract to the concrete.

5. Conclusion

In general, this paper has sought to show that “the higher philosophical intuition which discerns the ‘true nature’ of things” is the highest form of Feuerbach’s per-

ceptual intuition, and that although Marx and Engels were influenced by Feuerbach in the formative maturity of their thought, and had also Although Marx and Engels were influenced by Feuerbach during the maturing period of their thought, and admitted that they were more influenced by Feuerbach than by any other philosophers after Hegel, Marx and Engels criticized Feuerbach's direct perceptual intuition and higher philosophical intuition through rational thought, and based on this, they founded dialectical materialism and historical materialism with the core category of practice, which not only scientifically explained the perceptual world and its historical development, but also scientifically explained the world and its development in history, as well as the world's history. This not only scientifically explains the perceptual world and its historical development, but more importantly, provides a powerful theoretical weapon for the transformation of the world.

Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by Shenzhen Polytechnic University Quality Engineering Program Undergraduate Basic Principles of Marxism Course Joint Teaching and Research Room Construction Project (2025), Shenzhen Polytechnic University General Project of Teaching Quality Project "Research on the Teaching Path of Basic Principles of Marxism in Vocational Undergraduate Programs with Special Characteristics in the Bay Area by Integrating Shenzhen Red Culture" (2025).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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