



The Dialectical Unity between the Part and the Whole in the Conception of Marxist - Leninist Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the “part” and the “whole,” as well as the relationship between them, is a major topic in the history of philosophy in general, and the history of Western philosophy in particular, which has been discussed by many philosophers and schools of philosophy. However, for different reasons, only when the Marxist-Leninist philosophy was formed and developed, the most fundamental factor from the worldview and methodological position, the conception of “part” and “whole” as well as the dialectical unity between the “part” and the “whole” are explained most accurately and scientifically. Nevertheless, for several reasons, the above issue is rarely mentioned and studied systematically in Vietnam, despite being one of the significant contents, constituting the great values of materialist dialectics. Therefore, the study of the Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception of the dialectical unity between the “part” and the “whole” has great theoretical significance and involves many critical methodological aspects, providing effective thinking tools to help people practice effectively.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the part and the whole was studied from very early in the history of philosophy, even at the very beginning of philosophy, especially in the West. Throughout the long history of development, the conception of the part and the whole, as well as the relationship between them, have been studied comprehensively and thoroughly in different aspects associated with the philosophical characteristics of each period. In the Ancient Greco-Roman period, the part and the whole, as well as the relationship between them, were settled mainly based on the conception of the primordial that gave birth to the world. Entering the period of medieval Western Europe, the above issue was discussed from the perspective of theology, associated with the role and presence of God. The conception of the part and the whole, as well as the relationship between them, were studied systematically in modern Western European philosophy and culminated in Hegelian philosophy. However, because they have yet to approach the problem from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, the predecessors of Marx could not thoroughly and adequately resolve the relationship between the part and the whole. Only when Marxist-Leninist philosophy was formed and developed, the above problem was recognized and satisfactorily resolved. The conception of the Marxist-Leninist classics about the part and the whole as well as the dialectical unity relationship between them has great theoretical and practical values. These contents include the Marxist-Leninist conception of the part and the whole, the dialectical unity between the part and the whole, and the methodological significance in the perception and practical operation of this pair of categories. The study of the above issues will create a solid premise for identifying and resolving the problems that have been existing and will persist in the current practice of Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the paper entitled “On the relationship between the whole and the part in Hegelian philosophy”, author Nguyen Ngoc Kha (1999) presents thoroughly and comprehensively the idealistic dialectical relationship between the part and the whole. Hegel’s philosophy manifests itself in nature, society, and thoughts. It can be said that Hegel’s conception of the dialectical relationship between the part and the whole and the manifestation of this relationship in different fields is the most direct premise to form the conception of dialectical unity between the part and the whole in Marxist-Leninist philosophy. However, as an idealist viewpoint, ultimately, the origin of the part and the whole in Hegel’s conception does not come from materialistic causes, and the dialectical relationship between them is thoroughly solved only in the field of thought. Nguyen Ngoc Kha (1999) also focuses on in-depth research on Hegel’s conception but does not include a comparison with the concept of the relationship between the part and the whole in Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

In the paper “The systematicity of the materialist dialectics”, author Nguyen Ngoc Kha (2015) continues to delve deeply into the relationship between the part and the whole expressed in the system of the materialist dialectics. Accordingly, the author believes that the material dialectics is a unified whole with constant systematicity. The materialist dialectics’ principles, categories, and laws are considered to constitute parts of that whole. Thus, the paper only raises the issue of clarifying the systematicity of the materialist dialectics rather than the interpretation of the dialectical relationship between the part and the whole according to the Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception.

Thus, although there have been several papers related to the dialectical unity between the part and the whole according to the Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception, this issue still needs careful and systematic attempts to further clarify the Marxist-Leninist conception of the part and the whole as well as the relationship between these two objects.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In achieving the set research objectives, the paper has conducted a literature review and analyzed documents directly related to the research content. The materials used in the research process are classics, scientific journal papers, monographs, and reference books. In the paper, the author uses the methodology of dialectical materialism, the literary method, combining analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *The pre-Marxist philosophical conception of the relationship between the part and the whole*

The “part” and the “whole” appeared long ago in the history of philosophy before Marxism as philosophical categories. To deeply understand the dialectical unity between the part and the whole according to the Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception and see its value clearly, we need to first study the conception of part and whole in the history of pre-Marxist philosophy.

4.1.1. *On the pair of categories “part” and “whole”*

Before the Marxist-Leninist philosophers gave their conception of the part and the whole, the pre-Marxist philosophers argued about the part and the whole from *materialistic* and *idealistic* standpoints.

Firstly, from the materialist standpoint, the part and the whole are interpreted from material causes. In ancient Greco-Roman philosophy, part and whole are considered to be of natural origin, related to the existence of one or several things or phenomena in nature. This conception was popular and most concentrated in the philosophical thoughts of the schools of naive and rustic materialist philosophers. For example, Heraclitus asserts: “everything changes into fire and fire into everything like exchanging gold for goods and goods for gold” (Nguyen, 2012, p. 181). Thus, according to Heraclitus, fire is the absolute, the supreme whole of the world. Things and phenomena in the world are just parts of another form of fire, originating from fire. This is similar to the view of the philosophers of the School of Miles. Thus, the naive and simple materialism of this period explained the whole and the part in association with natural origins having substances from nature, and at the same time attributed the supreme whole of the universe in its original form which first gave birth to the world, and the part is the derivative of that whole, just like F. Engels asserts: “Spontaneous and primitive materialism has come into full clarity, this materialism in its first stage of development considers unity in the infinite variety of phenomena, natural images are a natural thing, and find that unity in some tangible things, in some special things, like Thales, in water” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 662). However, even though they stood on a materialist position and were aware of the dynamic nature of the world, because the materialist

philosophers of this period attributed the first original to concrete forms of matter, the interpretation the nature of the part and the whole is limited, just like F. Engels asserts: “A picture of an endless interlacing of relationships and interactions in which nothing is static, unchanged, but all move, change, arise and pass away, etc. but that view, even if it captures the general character of the whole picture of phenomena, is not enough to explain the details that make up the whole picture and as long as we do not know those details, we do not understand the whole picture well” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 35). Until the early modern period, the materialist philosophers of this period did not reduce matter to a specific form of matter but still explained the part and the whole from the material cause. Spinoza believes that “God is everything, everything is God” (Nguyen, 2012, p. 331) and identifies God with the world. Although a single entity is identical to God, this entity manifests itself through a multitude of attributes, of which two are fundamental: thinking and properties. At the same time, Spinoza also asserts that individual things are seen as different variations of the entity. Thus, according to Spinoza’s conception, particular things are the parts that form the world and form a supreme whole that is an “entity” and also the world, God: “I understand God as an absolutely infinite entity, an entity constituted of innumerable characteristics, each of which denotes the eternal and infinite nature” (Do et al., 2006, p. 373). Unlike Spinoza, Leibniz thinks that the monad makes up the whole. Entities in the world, however complex they may be, are but products of monads, for monads are the smallest, indivisible: “each monad is a living mirror of the world, reflecting the entire universe in its particular form” (Nguyen, 1992, p. 102). Thus, Leibniz considered the monad the smallest part that constitutes the whole - the entities that exist in the world.

Secondly, from the idealist position, the part and the whole are interpreted in association with the origin of consciousness, derived from the conscious cause, and shown in the following two approaches:

First, the part and the whole are explained in association with the existence of supernatural forces, super earthly forces, which are essentially the products of human thinking. This conception was very popular in medieval Western European philosophy, reflected in the philosophical notion of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Accordingly, things and phenomena as parts in the world are created by God as the supreme whole in the world, building the part and existing in part: “God is all that he created” (Augustine, 2007, p. 188).

Second, the part and the whole are interpreted in association with the existence of thinking, spirit, and subjective consciousness. This conception originates from the ancient age with the birth of Plato’s ideal theory and culminated in Hegel’s philosophy when he introduced the concept of the “absolute idea”. Accordingly, Hegel believes that the natural world and man are only products of the absolute idea created by corrupting the absolute idea. According to Hegel’s view, the natural world is only seen as a stage of development that the absolute idea goes through as a whole, including the parts that are *mechanical form*, *chemical form*, and *organic form*. Thus, the part and the whole are not categories derived from reality, reflecting reality but reflecting the absolute idea, reflecting thinking.

4.1.2. *On the relationship between the part and the whole*

Besides the conception of the pair of categories, the part and the whole, the relationship between the part and the whole has also been discussed in the history of pre-Marxist philosophy based on the metaphysical and dialectical methodology. Accordingly, because the two methodologies mentioned above are opposite, the conception of the relationship between the part and the whole built from the two types of methodologies above will undoubtedly have many different contents. According to F. Engels, the characteristics of metaphysical methodology is that: “the affirmation and the negation are absolutely mutually exclusive; cause and effect are also diametrically opposed” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 37); “considering things as still and lifeless, one for that, one beside the other and one after the other, finds no contradiction in things at all” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 172). Therefore, with the metaphysical approach, the relationship between the part and the whole cannot be properly resolved, even from a materialist standpoint.

Contrary to the metaphysical methodology, dialectical methodology always recognizes the existence of things and phenomena in relationships, motion, and constant development, so it becomes the critical foundation to interpret the relationship between the part and the whole correctly. Prior to the birth of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, many philosophers in history interpreted the relationship between the part and the whole from a dialectical approach. As early as the ancient age, Anaxagore asserted: “all things are mixed in all things” (Nguyen, 1991, p. 199). To the early modern period, Bruno asserted: “everything is in the universe and the universe is in everything. We are in the universe and the universe is in us” (Nguyen, 1992, p. 21). Francis Bacon took it a step further when he did not stop at just recognizing the dialectical relationship between the part and the whole in the world of objective reality but also saw it present in human thoughts through the classification of the sciences: “In dividing the sciences, I studied not only those that were invented and known, but also that which ought to be, but which is ignored. For, we find wasteland

and reclaimed land in both the intellectual realm and on the earth. Therefore, it is not surprising that sometimes I am forced to depart from the usual divisions because by adding to the whole, you will inevitably transform the part and the subdivisions; but the accepted division of the sciences is consistent with only a few that are recognized as we have" (Bacon, 1939, p. 6). Unlike previous philosophers, Descartes realizes the intimate relationship between the part and the whole by breaking down the whole into certain parts for study, which is also the manipulation of the analysis on human thinking: "dividing each complex thing, as far as it is possible, into its constituent parts so that it is most convenient to study them" (Nguyen, 1992, p.72). Finally, Hegel mentions the close relationship between the part and the whole in philosophy, embodying the spirit of dialectical thinking: "Each part of philosophy is a whole philosophy, a closed circle within itself, but in each of these parts, the philosophical idea is present in a specificity or element. The reason that the individual circle also breaks due to the limitation of its elements, is precisely because it is the whole within it and it lays the basis for the next range. Therefore, the whole presents itself as a circle of circles; each of its circles is an essential link [necessity and necessary] by which its system of separate elements constitutes the whole idea - and this idea also appears in each individual circles" (Hegel, 2008, p. 53).

Thus, before Marxist-Leninist philosophy was born, the conception of the part and the whole and the relationship between them were explained based on different positions and approaches, even opposites. However, due to the lack of connection between the materialist worldview and the dialectical methodology, the pre-Marxist views still seek to adequately solve the problem of the unity between the parts and the whole. Inheriting the ideas of their predecessors and simultaneously developing them to a higher level in terms of quality, the classics of Marxism-Leninism have built and developed the Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception of the dialectical unity between the part and the whole, thoroughly, correctly and scientifically solving the above problems.

4.2. Marxist-Leninist philosophical conception of the dialectical unity between the part and the whole

4.2.1. On the pair of categories the "part" and the "whole" according to the conception of Marxist-Leninist philosophy

Based on inheriting and developing the conceptions of their predecessors, the classics of Marxism-Leninism have formed and developed the dialectical materialistic conception of the "part" and the "whole" as well as the dialectical relationship between them.

Firstly, the "part" is a philosophical category that refers to an object that exists as a constitutive unit in relation to other things. On the contrary, the "whole" is a philosophical category that refers to a complete set of parts: "All nature that we can study is a system, a set of close things, but here we understand matter as all of the physical realities, from stars to atoms, to even ethers, if we admit the existence of particles ether" (Marx & Engels, 1993, p. 520). Thus, the part and the whole are defined only in relation to each other. To be more specific about the intension of these two categories, Rodentan asserts: "PART and WHOLE - two philosophical categories express the relationship between the whole of things (or the constituting elements of each object) and the unifying relationship between this thing and leading to the appearance, in the whole mentioned, new properties and new regularities which were not present in things when they were separate. That relationship plays the role of the whole, and for it, things are part" (Rosental, 1986, p. 48).

Secondly, based on the relationship between the part, the whole is formed and divided into two basic types:

First, the non-systematic whole: this is the kind of whole in which the combination of the parts contained in it does not follow any conceivable laws. In other words, the essence of this kind of wholeness is unsystematic. This stems from the fact that the relationships between the parts in the above sort of the whole are only superficial and mechanically assembled together. Thus, the properties of the non-systemic whole are determined through the sum of the properties of its constituent parts: "What foolish people! They have forgotten that before, our party was not a formally organized bloc, but only a collection of separate groups, and therefore, between these groups there could be no other relationship, other than the influence of the ideological side. Now, we have become an organized party, which means that we have created a power, turning ideological prestige into power prestige, making subordinates submit to their party's superiors" (Lenin, 2005e, pp. 428-429).

Second, the systematic whole: this is a more complex whole than the non-systemic one because the parts of this whole have an intrinsic relationship, which can be identified through laws. Unlike the non-systemic whole, the characteristic of the systemic whole is not the metaphysical addition to the sum of the part's features. Still, its characteristics have quantitative and qualitative variations compared with the characteristics of the parts it contains: "Just as the offensive power of one cavalry or the resistance of one infantry regiment is essentially different from the sum of the attacks or resistances of individual cavalymen or individual infantrymen, the total mechanical strength

of individual workers is also fundamentally different from the collective strength they develop, when there are many arms engaged at the same time in the same indivisible work” (Marx & Engels, 1995a, p. 473). Depending on the relationship and the combination of parts, the organizational structure of this whole is hierarchical into corresponding levels of complexity. The systemic whole is not only characterized by a high level of organization but also by the self-development and self-manufacturing of parts: “This organic system itself, as a whole, has its own premises, and its development process in the direction of the whole is reflected in the domination of all elements in society or the creation of organs which the system lacks. In this way, in the course of historical development, the system transforms into a whole. The fact that the system becomes such a whole constitutes its constituent element, the system, its process, its development factor” (Marx & Engels, 1998b, pp. 379-380). For this type of whole, when its parts are separated, these parts either lose all of their inherent properties or cannot continue to exist; at the same time, the original systemic whole no longer exists intact in the true sense after it has lost one or several parts. Accordingly, the most complex system as a whole is the social whole because its systematicity is made up of interlaced social relationships, in which the relationship between people and people in material production activities is considered the fundamental relationship that determines all the remaining relationships between people: “... production also has a certain social body, a social subject is operating in a large totality of production industries... Production in general. Specific industries. Production as a whole” (Marx & Engels, 1993, p. 858).

4.2.2. *Basic aspects of the dialectical unity between the part and the whole according to the conception of Marxist-Leninist philosophy*

Firstly, the whole is composed of parts, which exist through certain relationships between the parts; the part, in turn, is always within a particular whole, living in association with the whole: “Historically, each particular system is conditioned by other systems, which establish the basis of development that each element of the system depends on the others, on the established whole, on the whole system, and the interrelationships between the elements are considered as the inner motivation of the development of the whole system” (Marx & Engels, 1998b, pp. 332-333). The more complicated and intertwined the relationships between parts in a whole, the higher the level of organization of that whole and vice versa. Therefore, in essence, parts and the relationship between parts are decisive factors for the formation of the whole, as well as determining the nature and characteristics of the whole. Therefore, the movement and change of the part will inevitably lead to the movement and change of the whole and vice versa. For example, if capitalism is considered as a part of the whole world, the development of capitalism, especially the achievements that the capitalist countries today have been and will achieve, have a significant impact on the development of the whole world. The same thing was affirmed by V.I. Lenin when talking about the negative effects that the whole world has to suffer from as a result of the development of capitalism: “Capitalism has developed into a worldwide system of a small handful of “advanced” countries that oppress colonies and financially strangle the vast majority of the world’s people” (Lenin, 2005a, p. 389).

Secondly, in the process of objective development of things, under certain conditions, and specific circumstances, the part and the whole can transform positions for each other. In other words, a given thing can play the role of a part to form a larger whole, containing it, but at the same time, it can also be seen as a whole, made up of smaller parts.

Thirdly, the whole is made up of different parts based on the relationships between those parts. However, these parts have unequal positions and roles in forming the whole. For example, according to historical materialism, the productive force is a unified whole formed from two main parts: workers and means of production. However, the above two parts have different statuses in the structure of the productive force because workers always play a decisive role. The classics of Marxism-Leninism often emphasize this in their works: “A machine that is not used in the process of labor is only a useless machine. In addition, it is damaged by the destructive power of nature’s metabolism. Iron rusts, wood rots. Yarn that is not used for weaving or knitting is just some broken cotton.” (Marx & Engels, 1995a, p. 271); “Of all the tools of production, the most powerful production force is the revolutionary class itself.” (Marx & Engels, 1995c, p. 257); “While matter can be completely destroyed, human skills such as technology, organizational know-how, and work ethic will remain forever.” (Lenin, 2005c, p. 30).

Fourthly, because the whole is made up of parts, the characteristics of the whole (especially the whole system formed from social relationships) are qualitatively different from those of the parts that make it up. This difference can lead to conflicts between the part and the whole in the same system. F. Engels once said: “The contradiction between social production and capitalist appropriation re-emerges as the *opposition between the organized nature of production in each individual factory and the anarchy of production in the whole of society*” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 380).

4.3. Methodological significance derived from the dialectical unity between the part and the whole according to the conception of Marxist-Leninist philosophy

4.3.1. Methodological significance for cognitive activities

Firstly, the whole is made up of parts, and each part is always in a particular whole, so:

First, to fully and accurately perceive a whole, thinking needs to divide (relatively) the whole into parts to perceive all the parts that make up that whole with the internal and external relationships between these parts. In other words, the subject needs to usually use *analytical manipulation* in perceiving the objective world: “Research must grasp the material with all its details, must analyze the forms its different development and must find out the internal relationship of those forms” (Marx & Engels, 1998b, p. 34). This has been further concretized by Rodetan: “Logical analysis is the division in the mind of the object being studied into its components and it is a method of acquiring new knowledge. Depending on the nature of the object being studied, the analysis takes different forms. The multifacetedness of the analysis is a condition for a comprehensive understanding of the object being studied. The division of the whole into its constituent parts allows to clarify the structure of the object under study, i.e. its *structure*” (Rosental, 1986, pp. 461-462).

Second, the perception of things and phenomena is not only carried out through *analytical manipulation* to perceive the role and position of a particular part in relation to the whole, but it is also necessary to place that part in relation to other parts forming the whole. Thus, in addition to analysis, the subject must use synthetic manipulation in cognitive activities. The more complex and sophisticated the whole (especially the whole system formed from social relationships), the more the perceiver must identify and define the intricate relationships between the parts forming that whole, especially the most fundamental relationship.

Third, the dialectical relationship between the part and the whole is the ontological foundation for the dialectical unity between analysis and synthesis in the perception of the objective world. F. Engels asserts: “Thinking consists of dividing the objects of perception into elements, as well as bringing together the elements that are related to each other into a certain unity. Without analysis, there is no synthesis” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 64). Next, to emphasize the dialectical unity between analysis and synthesis in cognitive activity, V.I. Lenin states that: “The combination of analysis and synthesis, the analysis of separate parts and the synthesis, sum of those parts” (Lenin, 2005b, p. 239).

Secondly, because the part and the whole can change positions for each other, in the perception and practical activities, determining an object as a part or a whole is only relative and must be based on certain relationships based on specific conditions and circumstances. Consequently, the subject will realize in which relation the thing under consideration plays the role of a part and in which relation it plays the role of a whole, just as V.I. Lenin emphasizes: “the nature and the living soul of Marxism is: concrete analysis of a particular situation” (Lenin, 2005d, p. 164).

Thirdly, because the whole is made up of parts, to perceive the characteristics and properties of the whole, it is necessary to deeply understand the features and properties of the parts that make it up. Specifically, the whole is divided into the non-systemic whole and the systemic whole. Therefore, determining the right sort of whole present in front of the perceiver can only be based on correctly identifying the properties of the parts that make up the whole and the relationships that govern them. Moreover, the perception of the contradiction between the part and the whole also needs to start from the perception of the contradiction between the nature of the part and the nature of the whole.

Fourthly, because parts have unequal roles in forming the whole, in cognitive activities, people must clearly define the difference in the roles of each part in a whole to identify which part has the most crucial role in creating the whole being perceived.

4.3.2. Methodological significance for practical activities

Firstly, because a part will lose its characteristics or cannot exist if separated from the whole, at the same time, a whole is not intact, not considered the “original” whole if one or several parts are missing (especially for organic wholes), so in practical activities, to eliminate the part and the whole (initially), it is necessary to “break” the dialectical unity between the part and the whole, that is, the absolute separation between the part and the whole. On the contrary, if we want to maintain the stable existence of the part and the whole, we must keep the aforementioned dialectical unity.

Secondly, because the movement and change of the part will lead to the movement and change of the whole and vice versa, in practical activities, the transformation of the part needs to be carried out simultaneously with the transformation of the whole and vice versa.

Thirdly, because the whole is classified into two different types with different levels of the organization, in practical activities, the subject needs to identify and implement different modes of impact for each other kind of whole.

Fourthly, because a thing may be a whole in this condition, situation, and relationship, but it plays the role of a part in other conditions, circumstances, and relationships, so in practical activities, the subject can choose, and perform different methods of impact on the same thing or object based on its role in specific conditions, circumstances, and relationships.

Fifthly, because the parts have unequal roles in forming the whole, in practical activities, people need to rely on and influence the parts that have the most critical role in the existing whole.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the conception of the part and the whole and the relationship between them have been discussed a lot in the history of philosophy in general and Western philosophy in particular. However, only when the Marxist-Leninist philosophy was formed and developed the conception of the part and the whole and the relationship between them were resolved scientifically and satisfactorily based on the dialectical materialist school of philosophy. Accordingly, the part and the whole have a dialectical unity in many aspects. Recognizing the above relationship is very important because it clarifies the issues that are still little researched in Vietnam today related to Marxist-Leninist philosophy. On the other hand, it indicates methodological problems in cognitive and practical activities, further illustrating the values of materialist dialectics as a scientific methodology for understanding and improving reality.

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