



Research Article

THE METHOD OF PROGRESS FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE CONCRETE OF K. MARX

Pham Minh Hoang

Academy of Politics Region I, Vietnam

Corresponding author: Pham Minh Hoang – Email: phamminhhoang.ussh@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The method of progress from the abstract to the concrete is the primary method used by K. Marx to build his theory on the capitalist mode of production. It is also an essential method of Marxist dialectical logic that aims to understand the object in a logically coherent and comprehensive way. With that in mind, the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete is not only valuable for philosophy but also a common research method of many other sciences acting as an inventive logic. This paper analyzes the concepts of the concrete and the abstract from the point of view of Marxist dialectical logic, followed by a demonstration of their dialectical relationship as the philosophical basis of this method. The paper clarifies the content of the method through two stages, from the sensory concrete to the abstract and from the abstract to the rational concrete. This is also the typical scientific thinking in exploring the truth about the world.

Keywords: abstract; capital; concrete; dialectical logic; method

1. Introduction

Dialectical logic is the study of dialectical thinking and the dialectic of thought. This science provides methods and ways to explore the true and search for the truth. Dialectical logic has a long history of development, but it was not until Marxist-Leninist philosophy was born to gain its position. In particular, in *Capital*, Marx used the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete, which is a specific method of Marxist dialectic logic to successfully expose the nature of the capitalist mode of production and build his political-economic theory. It can be said that the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete that Marx inherited and developed from Hegelian logic has the power as a universal scientific research method. It needs to be studied systematically and widely applied in many disciplines to effectively contribute to the discovery of the nature of the world based on the stance of Marxism-Leninism.

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2. Findings

2.1. Concepts of “the concrete” and “the abstract”

2.1.1. Concept of “the concrete”

Regarding the concept of *the concrete*, Marx stated that, “the concrete is concrete because it is the combination of many determinate properties, so it is the unity of the diversity. So, it plays the role as a synthesis, a result, but not a starting point, although it is the real starting point and therefore also the starting point of the intuition and expression” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63), and “the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete is just a method by which thinking grasps the concrete and recreate it as a concrete in thought” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.64). V.I. Lenin stated that the natural world is both concrete and abstract, both phenomenon and nature, both moment and relationship. Thus, *the concrete*, according to the conception of the Marxist-Leninist classics, is interpreted in the two following meanings:

First, the concrete is the starting point of the cognitive process. In other words, this is the sensitive concrete being the starting point of cognitive process in general and emotional perception in particular. Lenin once said, “From lively intuition to abstract thinking, and from abstract thinking to reality – it is the dialectical way of the realization of truth as well as objective reality” (Lenin, 1981, p.179). On this basis, in terms of ontology, the sensory concrete is, first of all, an objective thing that is independent from human’s consciousness. As for epistemology, it is perceived by a human through feelings, perception, symbols, and “is the starting point of intuition and symbol” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63). For a more explicit analysis of the above argument of K. Marx, Ilyenkov said that, “the sensitive concrete is the whole being analyzed in a diversity in itself, given the intuition and symbol” (Ilyenkov, 2003, p.424). The perception of all phenomena must start from the sensitive concrete, through the sensory perception; otherwise, the cognitive process will not have data to develop to a higher degree that is abstract thinking.

Second, the concrete is the endpoint of the cognitive process. Accordingly, *this is the rational concrete (the concrete in thought or the mental concrete)*. The mental concrete is the sensitive concrete that has been perceived but is no longer the perception of superficial, random phenomena. It is shaped by a system of concepts, categories, and rules, which closely obeys the logic and coincides with the historical development of the sensory concrete. In other words, the sensitive concrete is now recreated in thoughts with a full range of aspects, attributes, and relationships interwoven between them in consistent and comprehensive theoretical aspects. In that sense, the mental concrete cannot be the starting point, but it must be the end or result of the cognitive process.

2.1.2. Concept of “the abstract”

According to the Latin root’s understanding, *abstract* is considered to be “the removed”, “the pulled out”. However, the *abstract* in Marxist philosophy has not only

similar contents but also contains many differences from the common understanding of *abstract*, which is expressed in the two following main aspects:

First, the abstract is one side, an aspect of the concrete. In this sense, the abstract is a result of thought through the process of separating (consciously) the sensitive concrete into relationships for research. In other words, the abstract is considered to be the result of a *temporary* recognition that has not fully covered the relationships of the sensory concrete such as “abstract labor”, “abstract individual”, “form of the abstract capitalist mode of production”. Thus, the abstract will inevitably be incomplete compared to the concrete. It is drawn from the concrete and appears only in thought but does not exist in reality.

Second, the abstract is the cognitive method of abstract thinking. Accordingly, when reflecting on existence, thinking will divide things into attributes and certain elements that are considered general, essential, and temporarily discarded, ignoring other attributes and factors.

Thus, although the concrete and the abstract are opposites, they have a dialectical relationship. This relationship is the philosophical basis of the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete in K. Marx’s *Capital*.

2.2. The dialectical relationship between the concrete and the abstract – the philosophical basis of the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete of K. Marx

First, the sensitive concrete determines the existence of the abstract.

The sensitive concrete plays the role as sensory objects and the concrete phenomena that is the origin and pattern of the abstract. As the abstract is the result of abstract thinking, it cannot be anything else but the reflection of reality, especially the sensitive concrete. First of all, the sensory concrete determines the content of the abstract. Accordingly, the abstract is the various, facet aspects of the sensitive concreteness as its whole characteristics. Therefore, its content cannot stem from thinking, but it must derive from the description of reality. The sensory concrete can only be comprehensively reflected through a multitude of abstracts. Besides, the sensitive concrete specifies the cause of the existence of the abstract. Because sensory objects and concrete phenomena are always in motion and constantly changing, the number of abstracts and the level of abstractions has been increasing because of the determination of the sensitive concrete, which satisfies the world awareness needs of humans.

Second, the abstract determines the existence of the rational concrete.

While the sensory concrete merely appears in objective reality, the abstract and the rational concrete exist only in human thinking. The existence of the rational concrete cannot be based only on data of feelings, perceptions, and symbols, but it must be formed from a harmonious and comprehensive combination of abstractions, which obeys a certain logic. In other words, mental concrete is the synthesis of many systematically arranged abstracts to re-describe the sensitive concrete. Suppose the richer and more diverse abstract

follows a strict sequence that fully and thoughtfully grasps the laws of dialectic thinking. In that case, the rational concrete will be asymptotic to the nature of the sensory concrete, which correctly orientates people in the process of practical action.

Third, rational concrete affects sensitive concrete through practical human activities.

It can be said that the rational concrete is the ultimate result of a cycle of perception along the path from the abstract to the concrete. It is a reflection of the sensory concrete completely and consistently theory. However, the way from abstract thinking to reality is not and cannot be limited only to establishing the rational concrete, but most importantly, it must be “mobilized” maximally in practical activities to serve the world transformation process of humans. Through practical activities, the concrete in thinking can affect the sensitive concrete, and at the same time, it reveals its function, which sharply expresses the power of abstract thinking. Besides, practice is also a criterion to evaluate the “relative similarity” of the sensory concrete and the rational concrete. It sets out the requirement to continue the process from the abstract to the concrete to realize the objective reality through infinite successive cognitive cycles.

2.3. Content of the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete of K. Marx

2.3.1. The process of progress from the sensitive concrete to the abstract

The process of progress from the sensory concrete to the abstract is, to a certain extent, the process from lively intuition to abstract thinking. To complete this process, it is necessary to fulfill the two following requirements:

First, separating the sensitive concrete into different components and attributes. This is essentially an *analytical* operation in the perception process of the object. This operation is done to clarify the object that is made up of which attributes and signs. The analysis helps the subject to grasp each part of the object. “The main method of thinking from the concrete to the abstract is the analytical method, which is to use the analytical method to divide the whole into each part, separating the essential from the nonessential” (Le, To, & Vu, 2007, p.238). The analysis is conducted first of all through observing things (in connection with the activities of other senses) to gather information. Then, describe things and make comparisons to find similarities and different parts, properties, and relationships. Rosenthal said, “Logical analysis is the division object being studied into constituent parts, and that is the method of acquiring new knowledge. Depending on the property of the object to be studied, the analysis will be in different forms. The multifaceted nature of the analysis is a condition to perceive the studied object comprehensively. The division of the whole into constituent parts helps clarify the structure of the object to be studied, i.e., its *structure*” (Rosenthal, 1986, pp.461-462). Regarding the role of analytical manipulation, K. Marx said, “Researching must grasp the materials with its all details, must analyze its different developmental forms and find out the inner relationship of those forms” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.34). “Materials” and “details” that K. Marx mentioned are the products of analysis, from which we can perceive and discover the “inner relationships” of the object.

Second, after having analyzed things and objects into parts for perception, it is necessary to draw out the essential properties of the sensitive concrete through temporarily leaving aspects, relationships, and other nonessential properties: “from the available concrete in the symbol, one goes to increasingly poorer abstractions, until to the simplest prescriptive properties” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.62). Regarding the process from the concrete to the abstract, K. Marx stated that, “On the first way, all of the symbols turn subtly into an abstract normative nature” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63). In addition, in *Capital*, he also affirms the role of abstraction in scientific research that. “When analyzing economic forms, one cannot use a microscope or chemical reactants. The abstraction has to replace both” (Marx & Engels, 1993, p.16). It can be said that abstraction is the manipulation of *temporarily ignoring nonessential* attributes, properties, relationships of things and phenomena, to derive the *essential nature* of objects. Thus, after conducting observations (combining with other senses) to obtain information, it is necessary to describe the object and compare it to identify similarities and differences between them, from which derive the most common properties. This is the condition to create *abstract concepts* based on provided symbols from the sensory perception process. Abstraction is seen as the process of going further from the sensitive concrete to get closer to the sensory concrete, “Thought, when moving from the concrete to the abstract, is not far – if it is *true* (and Kant, like all philosophers, speaks of right-thinking) – *leaving* the truth, and moving closer to the truth. The abstractions of *material*, the *laws* of nature, the abstractions of *values*, etc., in short, all the scientific abstractions (true, serious, non-arbitrary) reflect nature deeper, more precise, *more complete*” (Lenin, 1981, p.179).

K. Marx argued that the process of progress from the concrete to the abstract “is the historical path that the faculty of political economy went through in its first appearance” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63). Accordingly, 17th century economists would begin this process with the sensitive concrete such as population, ethnicity, country to draw some abstractions such as value, money: “when the individual elements were more or less fixed and abstracted, economic (theory) systems began to arise, going from the simplest – such as labor, division of labor, demand, exchange value... to go to countries, exchange between people and the world market” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63).

In *Capital*, Marx started his research process of capitalist production from the *commodity*. It can be said that this is an abstraction drawn from the process of progress from the concrete to the abstract. However, the discovery of commodities has been made by economics for a long time, so he did not go back this way. From commodity, K. Marx performed the analysis to find the final abstract of progress from the concrete to the abstract, but *the starting point* of the process of progress from the abstract to the concrete supported him to build the rational concrete successfully.

2.3.2. *The process of progress from the abstract to the rational concrete*

The process of progress from the abstract to the rational concrete has the opposite nature to the first process and is also the most important stage in the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete. Marx said this was the way which thought reproduces (grasps) the sensitive concrete, through the abstract to form the rational concrete, that is, the sensory concrete has been recognized completely and consistently in a theoretical way. "On the second path, the abstract prescribes lead to the re-description of the concrete by way of thought" (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.63). If the process of progress from the concrete to the abstract is seen as going further from the concrete, then the process of progress from the abstract to the concrete is the process of going back and closer to the concrete. "From the available concrete in the symbol, one goes to increasingly poorer abstractions, until to the simplest prescriptive properties. From there, it will have to go back and forth until, finally, one comes back to population, but this time the population will not be a messy symbol of a rich whole with so many attributes and relationships" (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.62).

The process of progress from the abstract to the rational concrete is done through the two following basic steps:

First, defining the starting abstract to progress from the abstract to the concrete.

It can be said that finding the starting abstract of the object is not simple, especially for relatively complicated things. However, based on the position of Marxist philosophy, we can point out some following main criteria to define the abstract upon studying the object thing:

Firstly, the starting abstract must be historically pre-existing and relatively homogeneous with the first thing historically.

Determining the starting abstract is inseparable from understanding the principle of unity between logic and history in the study of the object. This "ultimate abstraction" must be fundamentally consistent with what took place first in history. That is to say, it is not the abstracts that come from only logic or history, but which abstract stems from the unity between logic and history. In *Capital*, the sequence of development of the categories of K. Marx, starting from commodity and values to other categories at the same time, is also a summary of the historical development of capitalism.

Secondly, the starting abstract must contain the dialectical contradiction of two opposites in the object as the germ, the embryo, whose development is the inner motivation that promotes the development of the subject to the current degree.

In *Capital*, Marx begins with *value* as the starting abstract for the study of the capitalist production: "Once done 'master the document', and after discovering the fundamental, inner relationships of capitalist production, Marx began his studies in *Capital* from value. The analysis of the exchange relations of commodity, the analysis of the exchange value led him to the value, the value shown, in the form of the relationship of things, the relationship of production between people to people" (Rosenthal, 1962, pp.431-432). Thus, Marx realized that there is a dialectic contradiction in value between the *used-*

value and the *exchange-value*, of which struggle between them is the “impetus” for the development of the capitalist mode of production. From this starting abstract, we can understand the other components that make up the “portrait” of capitalism: “Of course, value is not that basis of the capitalist mode of production. It is the surplus-value that is created by the capital exploitation of workers, which is the main basis and the law. But that will explain to us why Marx started from the common abstraction of that value. Value is labor in commodities and in things. Marx studied that very meticulously because it is crucial in understanding the laws of capitalist production. It is impossible to discover the secret of surplus value without such research” (Rosenthal, 1962, p.433). At the same time, also from the value, Marx proceeded to interpret other objects according to a particular system and sequence which is relatively close between categories, and this is what capitalist economists have not been able to do. “One can only understand the true source of surplus-value if it is recognized that the commodities, including the special commodity, the labor power, exchanging with each other according to value, that is, according to the labor in those commodities, yet, even in that condition, there appeared surplus labor, surplus-value for the capitalist to acquire. The law of value already exists and can exist without the law of surplus-value. But the law of surplus-value cannot exist without the law of value. It is impossible to understand even the categories at the level of development of capitalist production, such as profits, prices of production, and so on, without the law of value. The inability of bourgeois economists is also that they cannot reconcile specific developing categories with the foundation, which is, with the definition of value by labor” (Rosenthal, 1962, pp.433-434). This is precisely the reason why Marx defined value as the starting abstract because the wealth of the bourgeoisie was essential “the later development of value” (Rosenthal, 1962, p.435).

Second, defining ways of progress from the abstract to the concrete.

After defining the starting abstract, then the way of progress from abstract to concrete also plays a vital role in recreating the concrete in thought. Rosenthal affirms this by highlighting the meaning of the “intermediaries”: “Starting from value, Smit and Ricardo skip suddenly to profit, which is to a complicated and concrete relationship, without going through the inevitable intermediate stages when moving from the abstract to the concrete. We can now understand more deeply Marx’s instruction on the need to analyze “intermediaries” while studying economic categories. Analyzing intermediaries is not anything other than gradual progress from the abstract to the concrete, from the simple to the complex. There is no *direct relation* between the abstract and the concrete” (Rosenthal, 1962, p.437). Thus, the determination of the “intermediate stages” and their order is the way of progress from the abstract to the concrete to build the concrete in terms of rationality in thinking. This absolutely cannot be arbitrarily determined, at the same time, if only based on the historical development of the object to arrange categories according to that order will be a mistake. This is according to what Marx asserted, “The

arrangement of economic categories in the order in which they played a decisive role in history is impossible and false. On the contrary, the sequence of categories is determined by their dialectic relationship in modern capitalist society, moreover, that relationship is the opposite of their seemingly natural sequence, or it seems to fist the sequence of historical development. It is not a matter of the order where economic relations dominate in different and successive socio-economic forms. It is not even in their serial sequence... The problem is dividing those categories within modern bourgeois society” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.75).

It can be said that the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete was solved by Marx in the *Capital* adopting the cycle from existence to essence, then from essence to phenomenon and reality: “progress from the abstract to the concrete is nothing else, but moving from categories to different categories which follow the sequence that they appear in the process of deepening awareness – from the being to the essence, from the essence to the phenomenon and reality” (Faculty of Philosophy, 2007, p.102). This process is similar to that in Hegel’s logic, only that Marx maintained the position of dialectical materialism: “The result of progress from the abstract to the concrete in the logic of *Capital*, and in the logic of the Hegel is concrete in thought, unity, rich system of properties. But in Marx, the concrete in thought in all cases is the reflection of a definite object that exists outside and does not depend on the human’s head. However, in Hegel, unifying the rich properties identified with the object itself, the movement to the concrete in thought is the thought-deepening process of thinking into itself” (Faculty of Philosophy, 2007, p.96).

Thus, the way of progress from the abstract to the concrete comes from existence to essence, to phenomena and reality. This is a common way to think and reproduce all of the objects in the objective world in thought, thereby orienting the world improvement activities, which is done through four “small vortices” to form a complete “big swirl”.

Firstly, perceptions of the object’s existence. This is the first stage of the process of progress from the abstract to the concrete. In *Capital*, Marx studied “commodity and money” as the existence of capital through the triad of quality – quantity – measure, manifested by the use-value – exchange-value – value. Accordingly, *use-value* is considered to be utility; at the same time, it is also the determination or uses of an object and satisfying specific human needs. It is the use-value – utility or defining attribute – that distinguishes commodities. However, as a social use-value, it is only helpful to serve humans if it is exchanged. Therefore, in addition to use-value, commodities also have *exchange-value*. This value refers to the *exchange rate* of the commodity, which is considered the quantity relationship on which different use-values can be exchanged with each other. However, the exchange of two or more commodities together at an available ratio shows us that a certain rationale exists to form this ratio. Such a basis as the third factor must be a common denominator among commodities, and this is the *value*: “If the

use-value of the commodity object is put aside, the commodity is left with one attribute, namely: they are the product of labor” (Marx & Engels, 1993, p.65). The value of a commodity is the dialectical consistency between the use-value and the exchange value. Obeying the law of negation of negation, at the second negation, things seem to return to the original, but at a higher degree, or in other words, the measure appears to return to quality but at another ladder, because in measure, it not only contains quality, but it also includes quantity.

Secondly, perceiving the object's nature. If the perception of *existence* is just the superficial perception of the thing and the phenomenon, the perception of *nature* is the perception of things at the inner level. Hence, this is the level of perception that is qualitatively different from awareness of existence. The capture of the essence is done through *identical – distinct – opposing – contradictory* links to identify what the object is. Identity comes from existence and associates with existence. Essence is considered to be the identity of all attributes within things, distinguishing one thing from another. However, the essence always contains its negation; that is, the essence includes the difference. This difference will lead to differences between parts of the same object or between one object and another. Superficial differences will lead to inner differences, which are the origin of the opposites and then transformed into contradictions. This process has been described very well by Marx in *Capital* through a “process of production of capital” with the chain of *absolute surplus-value – relative surplus-value – simple cooperation – manual construction – machinery and, great industry*. As analyzed above, value is born in human labor. However, in capitalism, human labor is productive labor. That is, the capitalist hires the worker to produce for the capitalist, and the worker's labor creates a surplus-value. Along with lines of history, the *method of producing absolute surplus value* appeared prevalently in the early period of capitalism, when production conditions were assumed to be given and remained constant. With this method, the essence of capital still appears as identity with itself, yet there is still the germ of difference. Because of their desires, the capitalist always aims to produce a lot of surplus-value, and in the early days, this is reflected in the fact that the capitalist owner tried to prolong the labor-day. However, due to the biological and physical limitations of the workers, it cannot be extended by the natural day, and workers always struggle to demand to shorten working hours. Therefore, the capitalist has found another way to solve the above problem: the *method of producing relative surplus-value*. Relative surplus-value is a form of higher development of surplus-value, which is the increase of surplus-value through shortening the required working time based on lowering the value of the labor force. This is done on the basis of increasing labor productivity. This is a particular method that distinguishes exploitative capitalist relations from other exploitative relations: increasing labor productivity to exploit the relative surplus-value. The process of producing relative surplus-value in its simplest form is embodied in *simple cooperation*. “It is not just about enhancing individual productivity

with cooperation, but also creating a producing itself is a collective force” (Marx & Engels, 1993, p.473). Simple cooperation that develops up to a certain point will move into a more qualitative form, which is *manual construction*, reflected by the division of labor. Accordingly, handicraft and manual construction now become in opposition when in the process of division of labor, the comprehensive proficient craftsmen in a certain profession have become partial workers, in charge of each different function, and there are professional differences based on the specialized functions they undertake. Thus, manual construction is born out of handicraft, but manual construction also excludes handicraft. A contradiction arose when machines appeared, and machines that made engines developed because they destroyed the base that created it, manual construction, and handicraft.

Thirdly, perceiving the object's phenomenon. After realizing the thing's nature, the perceived subject needs to return to existence based on the realized nature. In *Capital*, the perception of the phenomenon of capital is reflected in the “process of circulation of capital”. Accordingly, the existence of capital is now illuminated by its nature – the process of capitalist production.

Fourthly, perceiving the object's reality. The perception of reality of the research object is considered the endpoint of progress from the abstract to the concrete. Reality is now seen in the organic unity of nature and phenomenon. In *Capital*, it is the dialectical unity between the process of production and the process of circulation, or in other words, it is the whole process of production of capital.

3. Conclusion

In summary, Marx has interpreted the capitalist mode of production by using the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete in *Capital*. Its successful application of this method to expose the nature of the capitalist regime proves the inheritance and profound transformation of Marx towards Hegelian logic and eloquent evidence demonstrating the power of Marxist dialectic logic. The method of progress from the abstract to the concrete used by Marx in *Capital* is an excellent model of drafting and applying materialist dialectics to studying the most complicated objects in reality. Therefore, it is of great value to the fields of research in philosophy and provides the most common research method for many other sciences on the way to discover the living laws of the world. Especially in the context that our country is strongly carrying out the renewal process and the process of international integration, studying comprehensively and systematically the method of Marxist dialectic logic in general and the method of progress from the abstract to the concrete in particular will provide sharp thinking tools, effectively contributing to future success.

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PHƯƠNG PHÁP ĐI TỪ TRỪU TƯỢNG ĐẾN CỤ THỂ CỦA K. MARX

Phạm Minh Hoàng

Học viện Chính trị Khu vực I, Việt Nam

Tác giả liên hệ: Phạm Minh Hoàng – Email: phamminhhoang.uss@gmail.com

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TÓM TẮT

Phương pháp đi từ trừu tượng đến cụ thể là phương pháp chủ đạo được K. Marx sử dụng để xây dựng lý thuyết của mình về phương thức sản xuất tư bản chủ nghĩa. Đồng thời, nó cũng là phương pháp quan trọng của logic học biện chứng Marxist hướng đến việc nắm bắt đối tượng một cách nhất quán và toàn vẹn về mặt lý luận. Với ý nghĩa đó, phương pháp đi từ trừu tượng đến cụ thể không chỉ có giá trị đối với triết học, mà còn là phương pháp nghiên cứu phổ quát của nhiều ngành khoa học khác với tính cách là logic phát minh. Bài viết phân tích khái niệm cái cụ thể, cái trừu tượng theo quan điểm của logic học biện chứng Marxist, từ đó chỉ ra mối quan hệ biện chứng giữa chúng với tính cách là cơ sở triết học của phương pháp này. Nội dung của phương pháp được làm rõ thông qua hai giai đoạn, đó là giai đoạn đi từ cái cụ thể cảm tính đến cái trừu tượng và giai đoạn đi từ cái trừu tượng đến cái cụ thể lý tính, đồng thời đây cũng chính là con đường chung mà nhận thức khoa học phải đi qua trong quá trình kiếm tìm chân lý về thế giới.

Từ khóa: trừu tượng; tư bản; cụ thể; logic học biện chứng; phương pháp