Tran Duc Thao was born September 16, 1917 in Thai Binh, in what would later become North Vietnam. He left for France in 1963 where he pursued his philosophical studies. It was then and there that he met Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Jean Cavailles who introduced him to the philosophy of Husserl. In 1941–42, under the direction of Cavailles, Thao did his doctoral dissertation on the Husserlian method, and under the strong influence of Merleau-Ponty deviated from common interpretations which made of Husserlian phenomenology a doctrine of eternal essences to a philosophy of temporality, of historical subjectivity and universal history. For, as Husserl used to say, “inner temporality is an omnitemporality, which is itself but a mode of temporality.”

It was then that lengthy dialogues took place between Sartre and Thao. These conversations were taken down in short hand with the aim of publishing them. Thao gave his own version of them when he stated that Sartre’s invitation was for the purpose of proving that existentialism could peacefully co-exist with Marxism on the doctrinal plane. Sartre minimized the role of Marxism in so far as he recognized its value solely in terms of politics and social history. The sphere of influence would be shared by both Marxism and existentialism, the former being competent with respect to social problems, the latter being valid solely as philosophy. Thao tried to point out to Sartre that quite to the contrary Marxist philosophy was to be taken seriously since it grappled with the fundamental problem of the relation of consciousness to matter. These dialogues with Sartre, along with the destruction of German fascism, necessitated a radical choice between existentialism or Marxism, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty having already opted for the former. Thao, owing to his phenomenological orientation, broke with existentialism with the publication of *Phenomenology and Dialectical Marxism.*

Owing to this same orientation, the choice of Marxism created for Thao a need to rid the dual Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenologies of their idealistic form and metaphysical elements in order to salvage whatever else was left valid and place it at the service of dialectical materialism for a scientific solution of the problem of subjectivity.

Tran Duc Thao’s analysis of Husserlian phenomenology, especially

the later writings, the *Crisis* and the "Origin of Geometry," led him to a cavalier rejection of phenomenology altogether. The *practical* results of Husserl’s analyses are incompatible with the theoretical framework in which they originated. Meaning, which originates at the antepredicative level, cannot be the work of a transcendental ego that constitutes the meaning of the world outside of space and time, but is, rather, the work of a consciousness immersed in a historical becoming. Husserl’s transcendental ego turns out to be the actual consciousness of each man within his own actual experience. At this point, Thao points out, Husserl falls into a total relativism: "the merchant at the market has his own market truth." Husserl’s constitutions of the world with the contemplation of eternal essences turns out to be a nihilism, wherein consists the crisis of Western man, which in turn gave birth to irrational man, the existential man whose claim is that the only sense of life is the lack of any sense, or Heidegger’s "being unto death."

The solution to the crisis of Western man and others lie for Thao in dialectical materialism, thus the second part of the book: "The Dialectic of Real Movement." What Thao stresses here is Husserl’s investigation turned right side up, by ridding it of idealistic formalism and thereby construction a new rationality, a stress on the concrete contents of experience. The relationship between consciousness and its intentional object is explained by reference to the antepredicative level of conscious experience mediated by human labor. "The notion of production takes into full account the enigma of consciousness inasmuch as the object that is worked on takes its meaning for man as a *human product.*" The realizing of meaning is precisely nothing but the symbolic transposition of the material operations of production into a system of intentional operations in which the subject appropriates the object ideally, in *reproducing* it in his own consciousness. "This is true reason for man, who being in the world constitutes the world in the intensity of his lived experience." And the truth of any constitution such as this is measured only by the actual power of the mode of production from which it takes its model. The humanization of nature through labor is how Thao accounts for how matter becomes life and consequently assumes human value.

Tran Duc Thao frankly admits that an interpretation of Marxism subject to the conditions of a personality cult engulfed *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* in a hopeless metaphysical juxtaposition of phenomenological content to material content which paved the way for the return of an idealistic dualism.