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LUKÁCS' CRITICAL ONTOLOGY AND CRITICAL REALISM¹

BY

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Abstract. This paper proposes that we read a late work of Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, as an indispensable contribution to ontological investigation in general and particularly to the understanding of social reality. As the ontology of Lukács tends not to be familiar even to those who have (properly) foregrounded ontological issues in recent decades, it seems to be extremely fruitful to bring it into discussion. Comparing the analysis of Lukács with the ontology of critical realism, we argue that it is not only possible to identify obvious convergences but also to shed light on many questions that still demand a proper treatment from an ontological perspective.

Keywords: Lukács; critical ontology; critical realism; labour; social practice and consciousness

Introduction

Early in the 1960s, after the publication of the first two volumes of his (unfinished) *Aesthetics*, Lukács set out the project of developing a Marxist ethics. He had been collecting a huge amount of material for this purpose since the late 1940s. It is in connection with this work that his concerns regarding ontology were most openly stated, though what many authors refer to as the 'ontological turn' of Lukács' thought could be traced back to the early 1930s.² Since for Lukács there is no ethics without ontology,

¹ The authors would like to thank *JCR*'s anonymous referees for their helpful comments. We wish to register our gratitude to Branwen Gruffydd Jones for her help with expressing the finer points in English. This final version of the paper benefited greatly from the thorough reading of Gideon Calder and Mervyn Hartwig, to whom we are very grateful.

² G. Oldrini, 'Em Busca das Raízes da Ontologia (Marxista) de Lukács', in M. O. Pinassi and Sérgio Lessa, eds., *Lukács e a Atualidade do Marxismo*, São Paulo: Boitempo, 2002, p. 54.

his Marxist ethics could be elaborated only on the basis of a Marxist ontology of social being.³ In the end, he was to take the latter step but not the former. His voluminous work, *The Ontology of Social Being*, published in German after the author's death in 1971, can be seen as the end result of an attempt to develop an ontological foundation for an ethics which itself, regrettably, could not be accomplished.

One might say, with Tertulian, that Lukács' project of developing an ontology was linked from the beginning to the problem of human praxis with regard to emancipation. To go beyond the aporias of *Realpolitik* it was necessary to reject 'the identification of revolutionary action with *Realpolitik* (that is, ethical pragmatism) because, for its own objectives (human liberty and disalienation), it transcends vulgar pragmatism and utilitarianism, being directed on the contrary to the realisation of "humankind for itself" [*Gattungsmäßigkeit für sich*].'⁴ This rejection necessarily presupposes a conception of society in which revolutionary (transformative) action could make full sense: that is, an ontology of social being in which history and law-like processes, relations and structures are not mutually exclusive.

Lukács' ontology is founded on a clear understanding that, on the one hand, the main philosophical traditions have fundamentally neglected ontology and, on the other, that this attitude may be grasped concretely only if related to a social order that seems to deny any transcendence of itself—the order posited by capital. It is this understanding that underlies the structure of Lukács' *Ontology*, as can readily be perceived in the way the work is organised. In the first part, Lukács deals with philosophical traditions and figures that either disavow or affirm ontology. In the second,

³ As will be shown below, the analysis of labour allows demonstrating in a concrete, non-speculative way that social being emerges and constitutes itself as a specific being by means of practice based on alternatives. Although this question is not pursued any further in this paper, it is important to stress that the alternative character of human practice is Lukács' point of departure in seeking to establish the connection between ontology and ethics. For the choice between alternatives presupposes valuation—and therefore, values—as a proper and exclusive category of social being.

⁴ N. Tertulian, 'O Grande Projeto da *Ética*', *Ad Hominem*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1999, pp. 131-2. In the idiom of critical realism, one might say that Lukács is dealing here with the problem of reproductive and transformative activity. In strictly Marxian terms, the question here is to understand political praxis and politics not as an *end* in itself (praxis designed to accommodate irreconcilable interests of *civil society*) but as a *means* to change society. For an illustration of Marx's thought on this question, see e.g. Marx, 'Critical marginal notes on the article: "The King of Prussia and social reform. By a Prussian"', in *Early Political Writings*, ed. J. O'Malley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

there is an investigation of categories pertaining to the main complexes of social being: namely, labour, reproduction, ideas and ideology, and alienation. Such an arrangement—in which the positive contribution to an ontology of the human world appears in the last part of the work—is not unintentional. For it necessarily stems from the analysis carried out in the first section. Here Lukács provides a broad picture of the fate of ontology in 'philosophies of the past and of the present'.⁵ Special critical attention is given to the radical attack on ontology undertaken by neo-positivism,⁶ the more subtle (but still radical) rejection implicit in existentialism and other (more or less neo-Kantian) idealist philosophies, and the contradictory or insufficient character of the ontologies put forward by Hegel and Hartmann.

With regard to neo-positivism and neo-Kantianism, Lukács stresses the convergence and complementarity of traditions often seen as antithetical—the prime convergence consisting precisely in their common dismissal of ontology. This attitude is contrasted with the explicit efforts of Hegel and Hartmann to illuminate various decisive ontological questions (such as Hegel's investigations on the teleological character of labour, for example) and, not surprisingly, with Marx. In this last case, Lukács emphasises the fact that all Marx's statements 'are in the last instance intended as direct statements about being, i.e. they are specifically ontological', though paradoxically 'we find in Marx no independent treatment of ontological problems'.⁷ So Lukács' initial task is both to make explicit this ontological legacy, and also to secure it as the ground on which to develop a Marxist ontology of society in the second part of the work.

Given such an effort to reaffirm ontology *against the current*, it is in many ways astonishing that Lukács' posthumous work has received such scant attention. This could be explained by the very fact that Lukács writes in a theoretical milieu that has renounced ontological inquiry: it is well enough

⁵ G. Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, erster Halbband, Luchterhand: Darmstadt, 1984, p. 325. Hereafter: *Ontologie I*.

⁶ Neo-positivism is the term employed by Lukács to denote the late theoretical avatars of the positivist tradition. A similar qualification is found in Kolakowski: 'Considered solely in terms of its contents, logical empiricism, logical positivism or neo-positivism belongs to the framework of a more general tendency usually called analytical philosophy' (*La Filosofía Positivista*, Madrid: Catedra, 1966, p. 208). In this sense, the usage is the same as that employed within critical realism for positivism.

⁷ *Ontologie I*, p. 559.

known that 'postist' fashion has either attracted, distracted or paralysed many in Marxist circles. Yet it is more difficult to explain why Lukács' ontology has gone largely unnoticed by one of the most serious recent attempts to reaffirm ontology: critical realism. Rather than speculating about the reasons for this particular lack of interest,⁸ this article seeks to highlight the obvious mutual benefits that might accrue if the insights of critical realism could be combined with those of Lukács.

In so doing, the main concern of this article is to draw attention to Lukács' relatively unknown late ideas. Convinced of the relevance of these ideas to a critical realist readership, we concentrate on specific moments of Lukács' *Ontology* which make clearest the topicality of his contribution. In so doing, more general connections between Lukács' ontology and the ontology proposed by critical realism will also be identified. The decisive connection is, of course, the restatement of the priority of ontology. One might contend that while Lukács' work seeks an ontology of social being, on the basis of which is instituted a critique of forms of consciousness, critical realism infers an ontology from the critique of forms of consciousness.

One of our key points of focus in the *Ontology* is its critique of the main contemporary philosophical traditions (positivism, neo-Kantianism, etc.) which, for Lukács, are not able to distinguish social being as a specific form of being. The first section tracks the argument through which Lukács, in his critique of neo-positivism, connects this theoretical deficiency not only to the set of presuppositions it involves, but also to its problematic practical implications. In the process, we explicate Lukács' own version of what for critical realism would be termed an *explanatory critique* of neo-positivism. The second section summarises Lukács' ontological analysis of the prototypical form of human practice (labour), which is employed, among other things, to establish the particularity of social being in comparison to organic and inorganic being respectively. Finally, a concluding section reviews Lukács' examination of the dialectical relationship between social practice and social consciousness. Here he discloses the ontological foundation of science in labour (practice) and argues for the indispensability of ontological critique.

⁸ It could be argued, for instance, that the fragmentary English edition of Lukács' *Ontology* represents a considerable obstacle to its worldwide diffusion. Actually, just three chapters out of ten were published in English. In addition to that, it should be mentioned that the translation has various shortcomings.

The Specificity of Social Being and the Critique of the Ontology of Immediate Practice

Perhaps we should begin with Lukács' indication that the main insufficiency of contemporary philosophical traditions (whether neo-positivist or neo-Kantian) is in itself ontological.⁹ According to him, these traditions do not differentiate between the distinct ontological domains of reality: inorganic, organic and social. For this reason, they are not able to grasp what distinguishes social being, namely, the dialectical unity of necessity (law) and liberty (freedom). Since no such ontological distinction is made, when the time comes to explain human activity within a world full of law-like processes and structures, there remain only two alternatives, equally mistaken. One is the conception of social being as having no specificity at all. The other is the establishment of a crude and external relation between the world of material being (the domain of necessity) and the pure kingdom of spiritual freedom (the domain of liberty). In brief, social being is partitioned into apparently autonomous spheres: objectivity and subjectivity.¹⁰

Such a radical bipartition of the world can never be sustainable, precisely because it misses the distinctive feature of society: the unity of causality and teleology.¹¹ Following Marx, Lukács points out that society is the unique realm of reality in which this unity can be concretely (i.e., non-speculatively) demonstrated. Human practice is nothing but the ideal positing of an end and its consequent objectification. Both the positing of an

⁹ For further details see *ibid.*, 'Einleitung'. The traditions referred to here are basically the same as those confronted by critical realism: classical empiricism and transcendental idealism. That such ontological insufficiency is also highlighted by critical realism is clear, for instance, in the following passage from Bhaskar: 'Neither classical empiricism nor transcendental idealism can sustain the idea of the independent existence and action of the causal structures and things investigated and discovered by science. It is in their shared ontology that the source of this common incapacity lies. For although transcendental idealism rejects the empiricist account of science, it tacitly takes over the empiricist account of being. This ontological legacy is expressed most succinctly in its commitment to empirical realism, and thus to the concept of the "empirical world".' (R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London: Verso, 1997, pp. 27-8; cf. Bhaskar, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, New Delhi: Sage, 2002, ch. 1).

¹⁰ Lukács, *Ontologie I*, p. 325.

¹¹ Later it will be argued that what is specifically social results from posited causalities, that is to say, from the interaction of intentional (teleological) human practice and the pure causalities controlled by it. By converting pure into posited causalities human practice produces that unity of causality and teleology which characterises social reality.

end that reality cannot generate by itself, and the manipulation of objects in order to realise this end, presuppose a correct knowledge of real objects, structures, relations, tendencies, etc. This, then, is the way human practice connects subjectivity and objectivity. Given the insurmountable ontological character of laws of nature, for instance, the realisation of human ends consists just of the process by means of which these laws become posited in an arrangement determined by the end itself; 'their positedness is the mediation of their subordination to the determining teleological positing, which is also what makes the posited interweaving of causality and teleology into a unitary and homogeneous object, process, etc.'¹²

In other words, the realisation of human ends entails the conversion of pure causalities into posited causalities. The successful realisation of ends can then be taken as the demonstration of the empirical plausibility of the descriptions, conceptions, representations (and so on) of reality that are a necessary moment of practice. Marx explains this empirical plausibility as follows:

The concrete is concrete because it is the synthesis of multiple determinations, hence unity of diversity. For this reason, it appears in thought as a process of synthesis, as result, not as point of departure, even though it is the actual point of departure and hence also the point of departure for intuition and representation.¹³

Naturally, understanding the empirical plausibility of conceptions of reality is not the same as admitting the equivalence of every representation suggested by the celebrated pragmatist maxim: 'the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief'.¹⁴ By contrast, Marx's work can be seen as an effort to criticise those conceptions of immediate practice which he frequently refers to as the *religion of everyday life*. These conceptions are in principle operative within the same practice of which they are conceptions. But Marx tries to show, in the same context, that being operative in practice is not the same as being true. To do so, he examines the methods employed by people to transcend the 'truths'

¹² Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, zweiter Halbband, Luchterhand: Darmstadt, 1986, p. 20. Hereafter: *Ontologie II*.

¹³ Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857-58 (Grundrisse)*, MEGA, Band 1, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, p. 37.

¹⁴ W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York: Longman Green & Co., 1907, p. 30.

of immediate practice and, consequently, grasp reality in an increasingly deep and extensive manner.

The empirical plausibility of our conceptions is thus a truism and, as such, the starting point of all theoretical attempts to explain the nature of knowledge and the criteria for its validation. The proposal raised by Lukács is that the main philosophical traditions are unable to go beyond the empirical domain due to their very inability to take into account the specificity of social being mentioned above.¹⁵ When the teleological character of human praxis is not highlighted; when it is not acknowledged that consciousness is a constitutive category of human being, or that consciousness emerges in and through practice, consciousness and reality are radically severed. Hence the correspondence between them can only be treated, says Lukács, in a 'purely gnosiological or purely methodological, epistemological way'.¹⁶ It goes without saying that in an approach like this the criteria for attesting the validity of our conceptions can only be found in empirical reality.

Underlying this total separation of consciousness and reality is the notion that reality itself cannot be known objectively. From this perspective, the contents of consciousness are either an immediate expression of experience or a subjective construct based upon experience. Lukács finds no problem in associating these two attitudes concerning the nature of knowledge with neo-positivism and neo-Kantianism respectively. In both cases empirical (immediate) reality is the only instance which can be used as a standard to evaluate the conformity between conceptions and the world 'out there' of which they are conceptions. Even taking for granted their 'subtle differences', these theoretical positions invoke a fundamental belief: 'that ontological questions are not relevant to the philosophy of science'—precisely because consciousness has no access to things in themselves.¹⁷

Lukács is aware that this contraposition of truth and empirical adequacy is not new in the history of philosophy, and provides an extensive analysis of past debates about it and of its concrete historical roots in social life.

¹⁵ Lukács distinguishes between 'old' and 'new' empiricisms. The former departed from 'the irreducible being-character of the given facts', but 'left out of account the further mediations, which were frequently the decisive ontological relationships'. As a result, says Lukács, it arrived at a naive ontology. In the new empiricism, developed on a positivist or neo-positivist basis, 'this naive, uncritical, ontology disappeared, but only to be replaced by abstractly constructed categories of manipulation'. (*Ontologie I*, p. 568)

¹⁶ *Ontologie I*, p. 326. 'Gnosiological', in Lukács usage, refers to theory of knowledge in general, while 'epistemological' refers to scientific knowledge.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

For our purposes it suffices to mention his interpretation of the role played by Cardinal Bellarmine in the ‘Galileo case’. The main line of Bellarmine’s argument, says Lukács, was underpinned by the notion of double-truth. According to this notion, scientific truths are elaborated on the basis of our experiences and should not challenge the truth of faith. The double-truth theory can be seen therefore as a compromise solution which would establish a sort of division of labour between religion and science: the Church would be in charge of ontological questions, with science left to deal with secular issues.

The eviction of ontology from the modern scientific endeavour, argues Lukács, is nascent in this compromise solution. However, the dispute between a scientifically founded ontology and religious ontology, of which the above mentioned episode is a paradigmatic instance, is today quite different. On the one hand, religion does not, and can no longer aspire to, rival science at the ontological level. On the other, science—under the influence of recently dominant philosophical traditions—has voluntarily relinquished any ontological remit. The most unequivocal evidence of this orientation is provided by neo-positivism, a conception of the nature of scientific knowledge that elevates to supreme wisdom the refusal of ontology implied in the Bellarminian compromise solution.

This is not the place to set out in detail the critique of neo-positivism made by Lukács in his *Ontology*. But it is worth mentioning that this critique, though situating its core ideas in the history of philosophy, is mainly concerned with the relationship between neo-positivism’s genesis and development and the imperatives posited by capital. These imperatives express capital’s continuous and increasing drive to regulate all spheres of social life. It is only when society appears to individuals as something external, as a thing ‘out there’, when social production appears to producers as an external and *post-festum* aggregation of purely individual decisions, when social wealth seems to possess an autonomous movement in relation to individuals, that society presents itself to individuals as something to be controlled, manipulated, etc. Since this is exactly what happens when social production is mediated by the exchange of commodities (i.e. in capitalist society), it is not hard to understand why social science can be informed by philosophical doctrines, such as neo-positivism, that reduce science to a mere assistant of immediate praxis.

This critical inspection of neo-positivism carried out by Lukács, which seeks to explain the social necessity of this kind of philosophy of science, fits squarely into the framework of critical realism as a typical case of

explanatory critique. The following description of explanatory critique put forward by Bhaskar captures the procedure adopted by Lukács:

Now the appellation 'ideology' to the set of ideas *P* is only justified if their *necessity* can be demonstrated: that is, if they can be explained as well as criticised. This involves something more than just being able to say that the beliefs concerned are false or superficial, which normally entails having a better explanation for the phenomena in question. It involves, in addition, being able to give an account of the *reasons* why the false or superficial beliefs are *held*—a mode of explanation without parallel in the natural sciences.¹⁸

In Lukács' terminology, this kind of criticism that not only demonstrates the falseness or incompleteness of a determined belief but also acknowledges its social assent—i.e., its social reality—is referred to as *ontological critique*. The striking convergence between these two, quite separately developed descriptions of the same critical procedure, can easily be explained by their shared reliance on Marx. Lukács shows that this element of Marx's thought can be found as early as his doctoral dissertation. In that context, when dealing with Kant's logical and epistemological criticism of the ontological proof for the existence of God, Marx objects that these proofs are mere 'hollow tautologies'. For him, Kant's 'ontological proofs mean nothing but the following: "that which I really (*realiter*) represent for myself, is a real representation for me, it acts upon me"'. It could be concluded from this, Marx continues, that '*all gods*, the pagan as well as the Christian ones, possessed a real existence'. Lukács highlights at this point that, already for the young Marx, 'social reality is the ultimate criterion for the social being or non-being of a phenomenon'. Considering that Marx did not, of course, admit the existence of any god, what the passage shows is that 'the actual historical efficacy of certain representations of God should impart to these a kind of social existence'. Here, argues Lukács, we find an insight that would play a major role in the development of Marx's thought: 'the practical social function of determined forms of consciousness, irrespective of whether they are true or false in a general ontological sense'.¹⁹

Moreover, Marx contends that Kant's attacks on the ontological proof, accomplished from an exclusively logical-epistemological point of view, 'suppressed any necessary connection between representation and reality, denying any ontologically relevant character of the content [of representation]'.²⁰

¹⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Brighton: Harvester, 1979, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ontologie II*, p. 561.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Lukács' point here is that Marx apprehends clearly the reflexive relation between social consciousness and social being. It is this indissoluble relation that explains why genuine critique must ultimately be able to give an account of the social reality of those forms of consciousness that are demonstrably false or superficial by means of logical/epistemological argument.

Thus neo-positivism, like God, has a social being. This social existence, thinks Lukács, cannot be grasped unless one recalls that the development of the bourgeoisie entails the positive valuation and unlimited employment of all scientific achievements. At the same time, it needs to keep alive among the masses a kind of religious necessity.²¹ Because science, philosophy and religion do not constitute autonomous complexes, each with its own law-like movement, such unconstrained reliance upon science must carry repercussions for philosophy and religion. Furthermore, under the conditions set by class society, the aspirations of the ruling class condition the social task of philosophy, science and religion, influencing their positing of ends and mode of actualisation. In the particular case of bourgeois society, the dismantling effects of scientific discoveries on ordinary and religious ontologies—and their contribution to a comprehensive and rational knowledge of reality—contradict the irrational character of class society itself. According to Lukács, it is this contradiction that explains the specific role played by positivism, and specially neo-positivism, in the development of philosophy within bourgeois society. In fact, this contradiction will seem invisible to philosophies that

arise proclaiming a perfect neutrality regarding all questions relative to the world conception, a simple suspension of ontology as a whole and a realisation of philosophy that completely removes from its realm the complex of problems referent to things in themselves—which is taken as a pseudo-problem, unanswerable in principle.²²

²¹ Religious needs for Lukács are related to 'the problems of everyday life that emerge in given historical circumstances, in the existing conditions of class and in the corresponding attitudes of humanity in the face of a social reality immediately given to itself—including nature mediated by social reality—, problems to which men are not in position to offer a satisfactory answer by themselves, above all within the framework of their respective mundane life. From the religious needs so formed results the power of living religions in depicting an ontology which provides an adequate framework for the satisfaction of such desires: an image of the world in which those desires that transcend the everyday existence of men, not fulfilled in everyday life, acquire a perspective of realisation in a hereafter presented with ontological pretension'. (*Ontologie I*, p. 331).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

As a philosophy that suppresses any ontological concern, neo-positivism presents itself as an adequate philosophy for science precisely because its presumed neutrality serves as a warranty for pure scientific knowledge. However, this endeavour to set out a philosophy deprived of any ontology had, of course, to rely on a 'neutral' and 'objective' language. This language, says Lukács, was readily at hand given the increasing mathematization of the natural sciences. The homogenisation of reality involved in mathematical reflection appeared to provide the uniform device required to describe reality in exclusively empirical terms. From this perspective, neo-positivism, as a scientific philosophy, consists essentially of a 'linguistic regulation' of the homogenous material dispensed by immediate experience. It is quite clear that Lukács was discerning in neo-positivism the theoretical attitude that later came to be known as the 'linguistic turn'. And this indication is very significant because the 'linguistic turn' has been widely interpreted as a radical critique of neo-positivism.

Though reliance on mathematical logic lent an 'objective' appearance to neo-positivism, it naturally brought with it the subjective-idealist point of departure of the old empiricism, namely sense experience. Thus, in Lukács' opinion, when applied to scientific practice, neo-positivism does not differ substantially from subjective idealism, notwithstanding their subtle particularities in other aspects. Their fundamental agreement is contained in the belief that reality in itself is something uninteresting, and its corollary that truth should be set aside: ultimately, all that matters is utility for practice.

The fact that practice appears in this approach as the criterion of theory is not a problem for Lukács—the close relation of theory and practice is evident enough for a Marxist. Rather, the concern is the narrowing of the *scope* of practice. To understand the problem at stake here it is necessary, according to Lukács, to analyse other aspects of practice. Firstly, practice is always immediately directed towards a determined concrete objective. For this reason it presupposes knowledge of the true constitution of those objects, relations, structures, etc., that are means to the posited objective. Hence practice, particularly labour, can be conceived as the original source of the theoretical activity of people.²³

Admitting this relationship between theory and practice, one can agree with Lukács that, in the course of human development, the knowledge

²³ Ibid., pp. 353-4.

acquired within practice has followed two distinct but frequently interconnected ontological paths. On the one hand, knowledge emerging within immediate practice, when correctly generalised, is integrated into the totality of existing knowledge, giving rise to a correction and veridical enlargement of the human conception of the world. On this first path practice is decisive in scientific progress. On the other hand, knowledge obtained in practice remains confined to direct usability in immediate practice. On this path, alternatively, practical knowledge has the exclusive function of assisting the manipulation of certain complexes of objects. From this ontological analysis of practice, Lukács suggests that the less developed science is at a given conjuncture, the more frequent will be the integration of immediately correct knowledge into false general theories.²⁴

The peculiarity of neo-positivism consists in raising this second tendency to a universal principle of science. Its refusal of ontology ‘means, at the same time, the proclamation of the superiority in principle of manipulation over any attempt to understand reality as reality’. In so doing, neo-positivism served to give the tendency of the times—operative also in political, social and economic life—a ‘maximum conceptual perfection’. Thus, what is a secondary trend of knowledge is converted into a general doctrine of science. Something qualitatively new arises at this point: ‘it is no longer a case of asking if, in each singular moment, the linguistic regulation of neo-positivism leads to immediate practical results, but rather that the entire system of knowledge is heightened to the condition of instrument of a general manipulability of all relevant facts’. Therefore, it is exactly from this standpoint that it becomes possible to deny the claim that our system of knowledge constitutes a synthesis of what is known about reality. Summing up his examination of the nature of neo-positivism and of its hegemonic role in modern thought, Lukács observes that

up to the present it is the most pure form of epistemology [gnosiology] founded on itself. For a long time epistemology [gnosiology] used to be a complement and accessory to ontology: its aim was knowledge of reality in itself and, consequently, concordance with the object was the criterion of any correct statement. It is just when things in themselves are taken as theoretically inaccessible that epistemology [gnosiology] is changed into something autonomous, so that statements should be classified as correct or false independently of correspondence to the object: epistemology [gnosiology] founds itself unilaterally on the form of the statement, on the productive role that the subject plays

²⁴ Ibid. p. 354.

in it to find autonomous criteria—immanent in consciousness—of the true and the false. This development reaches its highest point in neo-positivism. Epistemology [gnosiology] turns itself thoroughly into a technique for language's regulation, for transformation of semantic and mathematical signs, for translation of one 'language' into another.²⁵

The parallel between Lukács' analysis and critical realism's diagnosis of the 'epistemic fallacy' seems evident enough. Nevertheless, it might be relevant to glance at the self-delusion that, affirms Lukács, neo-positivism and other schools of thought that adopt a purely epistemological [gnosiological] orientation fall prey to. This is a self-delusion that can be traced back to their obliviousness towards being's ontological neutrality as regards the categories of the universal, the particular and the singular.²⁶ In other words, Lukács is emphasising that objects, relations, etc., 'are in themselves or appear in thought [*Widerspiegelung*] irrespective of whether they are singular, particular or universal'. Neo-positivism is exposed to this self-delusion not only because, among other things, it focuses on polishing the 'language' of manipulation and debases the 'categorical structure of reality' to a metaphysical pseudo-problem, but mainly because it 'partly overestimates and partly deforms the role of the knowing subject in the working out of the correct reflection [*Widerspiegelung*]'. Nobody disputes, of course, that the knowing subject performs a decisive part in the reflection in thought of the universal. This has to be so simply because, argues Lukács, the universal does not appear in reality itself in an immediate or isolated manner, that is, independently of singular objects and relations. Thus the former can only be obtained by means of analysis of the latter carried out by the subject. But this activity of the knowing subject does not suppress the ontological character of the universal.²⁷ For Lukács, these are the circumstances which give rise to the illusion that 'the universal is nothing but a product

²⁵ Ibid., p. 355.

²⁶ In Bhaskarian terminology, 'the concrete singular'. See Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, London and New York: Verso, 1993.

²⁷ Taking issue with Quine, John Searle provides a witty criticism of such ideas: 'Quine famously argued that his acceptance of the existence of the particles of atomic physics was a posit on a par, as a posit, with the acceptance of the existence of Homer's gods. Quite so, but it does not follow that it is up to us whether electrons or Zeus and Athena exist. What is up to us is whether we accept or reject the theory that says that they exist. The theory is true or false depending on whether they exist or not, independently of our acceptance or rejection of the theory.' (J. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, New York: Basic Books, 1998, p. 26).

of the knowing consciousness, and not an objective category of reality in itself'.²⁸

A reverse and complementary illusion happens in the analysis of the singular: the illusion of its immediate givenness. Neo-positivism does not recognise, in this case, that the singular is as much in itself as the universal. The idea of the immediate givenness of the singular presupposes that we are able to identify (to know) the singular without the mediation of the particular and of the universal.²⁹ Perhaps the most plastic illustration of the misunderstanding implicit in this kind of fantasy is provided by Borges in his short essay entitled 'The analytical language of John Wilkins'. Wilkins entertained the project of developing a universal language in which every singular could be immediately identified, or in which 'each word defines itself'. Borges satirises this project by calling attention to the fact that Wilkins just forgot that his language, like any other, presupposes a taxonomy of classes and species—i.e., of universals and particulars.³⁰ In other words, languages have to recur to particulars and universals to identify singulars, for the trivial reason that these cannot exist without determinations of particulars and universals.

Having identified the linguistic turn already in neo-positivism, and hence anticipating the subsequent linguistification of the world in theory, Lukács was almost alone in discerning that reaffirming ontology was an urgent task for theories standing against the social order of capital. Recalling that for him all Marx's statements are specifically ontological, his attempt to disclose Marx's ontology is readily understandable. In contradistinction to those conceptions that nominally dismiss ontology under the argument that the world in itself cannot be known, ontology permeates Marx's work. And quite differently from those theories that attribute to subjects the passive role of adjusting themselves to an unfathomable world 'out there', in Marx's ontology subjects are subjects because social reality, though existing independently of them, is always a product of their activity. Consequently, an

²⁸ *Ontologie I*, p. 357. Although it is not our intention to establish at each time a parallel between Lukács' formulations and those of critical realism, it is worth calling attention to the fact that the dialectical relation between singular, particular and universal in its connection with the process of knowledge, as worked out by Lukács, bears a similarity with the dialectical relation between the empirical, the actual and the real domains in its connection to science, as described in the ontology of critical realism.

²⁹ *Ontologie I*, p. 357.

³⁰ J. L. Borges, *Selected Non-Fiction*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 229.

ever more adequate and comprehensive knowledge of reality in itself is a presupposition of genuinely free activity of the subject. This connection between knowledge and the activity of the subject appears paradigmatically in labour. Labour, for this reason, is the complex of social being from which Lukács departs for developing a Marxist ontology. Needless to say, in a paper on so massive and complex a work as Lukács' *Ontology*, one may pick up only on a few of its moments. This is what we aim to do in the following sections.

Elements of Lukács' Ontology of Labour

One starting-point for an account of Lukács' ontological analysis of labour is to recall Marx's critique of the ontological conception of human being implicit in Adam Smith's idea of labour as curse:

'Tranquillity' appears as the adequate state, as identical with 'freedom' and 'happiness'. It seems quite far from Smith's mind that the individual, 'in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility', also needs a normal portion of work, and of suspension of tranquillity. [...] Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to achieve its goal and the obstacles to be overcome in achieving it. But Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity—and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits—hence as self-realisation, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour.³¹

Apart from being a striking illustration of Marx's ontological critique,³² this particular formulation is relevant to us to the extent that, in sharp contrast to bourgeois scientific conceptions, it shows that human activity, especially labour, is a constitutive determination of social being. Labour, understood by Marx as 'self-realisation, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom', is thus the key to understanding the dialectical unity of necessity (law) and liberty (freedom) that, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, distinguishes social being from organic and inorganic beings.

³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 610.

³² The ontological critique is accomplished to the extent that Marx, in what follows, gives an account of the social objectivity of such ideas, despite their falseness: 'He is right, of course, that, in its historic forms as slave-labour, serf-labour, and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as *external forced labour*; and not-labour, by contrast, as "freedom, and happiness".' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 610).

Two things are quite clear in this critique: 1) that it illustrates Lukács' suggestion that all Marx's statements 'are in the last instance intended as direct statements about being, i.e. they are specifically ontological'; 2) that in this particular statement, Marx asserts the centrality of labour for social being.³³ The same perspective is adopted by Lukács when he emphasises that the analysis of labour has to be the starting point from which to expound, in ontological terms, the specific categories of social being. Precisely because this exposition seeks to apprehend the peculiarity of social being, it has to clarify how these categories have their genesis in the precedent *forms of being* (inorganic, organic), how they are based upon them and connected to them, and how they differentiate themselves from them.³⁴ This last section outlines Lukács' demonstration of the necessity and fruitfulness of this point of departure. Since his reasoning unfolds in an entire chapter of *Ontology* ('Labour')—not to mention its nexus with questions and developments throughout the whole work—only a few moments of a complex and tightly articulated analysis can be focused on here.

In the first place, Lukács observes that Marx had long understood that there is a set of determinations in the absence of which 'no being can have its ontological character concretely apprehended'.³⁵ These determinations make up a general ontology that simply comprises the general ontological foundations of every being. The categories of this general ontology remain as superseded moments in the more complex forms of being that emerge in reality (life, society). As an ontology of inorganic nature, this ontology is general by the 'simple' fact that there can be no being that is not ontologically based on inorganic nature. In life the categories that account for the peculiarity of its form of being can only operate with 'ontological efficacy' on the basis of those general categories and in connection with them. Similarly, in social being the categories that determine its particularity interact with organic and inorganic categories. For this reason,

[the] Marxian inquiry into the essence and the constitution of social being can only be rationally formulated on the basis of a foundation structured in that manner. The investigation around the specificity of social being implies the confirmation of the general unity of all being and, simultaneously, the evidencing of its own specific categories.³⁶

³³ It should be noted that the word 'labour' is taken here from the English edition of Lukács' *Ontology* as the translation of the German word 'Arbeit'.

³⁴ *Ontologie II*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ontologie I*, p. 326.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

All forms of being thus emerge from inorganic nature, and have in it their insuppressible foundation. This process of genesis and development in the case of the organic world and, even more, of society, means the emergence and increasing dominance of those categories that are specific to the form of being that comes into reality in any particular case. These specific categories constitute a particular totality, precisely because they account for the peculiar character of a new form of being. Moreover, they can only be comprehended with reference to the web of relations in which they appear as part of a totality, together with categories deriving from other forms of being.

From this perspective, therefore, in seeking to understand social being, there is no alternative to admitting that its specific and decisive categories—labour, language, cooperation and division of labour, consciousness, etc.—can properly be conceived only with reference to the totality they constitute. They cannot be conceived in isolation. Otherwise, one would have to suppose that social being has emerged by means of a sequential incorporation of singular categories. So in defending the necessity and fruitfulness of starting with the analysis of labour, Lukács clearly presupposes not only the totality of social being, but also the indissoluble nexus of its specific categories.

In proposing labour as the starting point of the analysis of social being, that is to say, of an already existing totality, Lukács explicitly relies on Marx's method as deployed in *Capital*. The object of the latter is obviously the mode of production ruled by capital, which is definitively a totality with many categories of its own. The ideal reconstruction of this complex totality must depart from one of these categories.³⁷ However it is not immaterial which category is selected for this purpose. In *Capital*, it is the departure from the commodity that makes it possible mentally to reproduce the totality 'not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations'.³⁸ Labour performs an analogous role in Lukács' ontology of social being.

Hence the question posed by Lukács is the following: how to justify taking labour as the central category of social being? He starts by observing that all other categories (language, cooperation and division of labour, consciousness, etc.) already essentially presuppose a social character. Only labour

³⁷ For Lukács' case that, for Marx, society is a totality that is always already immediately given, see *Ontologie I*, p. 579.

³⁸ Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte*, p. 36.

has as an intermediate character, in the sense that it is precisely labour, which is a metabolism between people (society) and nature, that ‘characterises [. . .] the transition in the working man himself from a purely biological being to social being’ and, therefore, that eventually impels corresponding changes in other categories.³⁹ In Lukács words:

All those determinations which, as we shall see, make up the essence of what is new in social being are contained *in nuce* in labour. Thus labour can be viewed as the original phenomenon, as the model for social being, and the elucidation of these determinations gives so clear a picture of the essential features of social being that it seems methodologically advantageous to begin by analysing labour.⁴⁰

As with the emergence of every new form of being, man’s coming to be human also entails what Lukács calls an ‘ontological leap’: a set of qualitative and structural changes in being.⁴¹ In social being, this ontological leap is noticeable in labour. Whereas in the other ‘animal societies’ the organisation of the species’ material relation with nature is biologically fixed, i.e. has no immanent possibility of further development, in society people create, by means of labour, its own conditions of reproduction. This property of labour makes expanded reproduction the typical situation in social being—as testified by the formal plasticity it shows in history. Hence, grasping the specificity of social being means grasping the way the human being creates social life itself out of nature. This requires understanding the activity by means of which this process operates, or, in other words, understanding the distinctive character of human labour (activity) in comparison to its merely biological counterpart.⁴²

Following Marx, Lukács notes that the most distinguishable feature of labour, as an exclusively human activity, is that ‘through labour, a teleo-

³⁹ *Ontologie II*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Exactly in opposition to the argument offered by Karlsson (see J. Karlsson ‘The ontology of work: social relations and doing in the sphere of necessity’, 5th Annual IACR Conference, Roskilde University, Denmark 2001), Lukács calls attention to the fact that, though being analysed in isolation, labour does not actually exist isolated. So the analysis consists of an abstraction *sui generis*, methodologically similar to that made by Marx in *Capital* as mentioned above.

⁴¹ ‘Ontological leap’ refers to a process of emergence of a new form of being out of precedent conditions that, nevertheless, cannot be deduced from them.

⁴² In the examination of the specific nature of labour, it could be said that Lukács comes close to what is named retroductive analysis in the terminology of critical realism.

logical positing is realised within material being as the rise of a new objectivity'. This makes labour the model of any social practice to the extent that social practice is synonymous with teleological positings that, no matter how mediated, have in the end to be materially realised. Yet, although labour as the model of social practice can be used to illuminate other kinds of social positing—precisely because it is their original ontological form—Lukács emphasises that its prototypical character might potentially be over-extended in two directions. First, when taken too schematically to understand other social-teleological positings, thereby blurring their distinctive traits; and second, when its teleological character is generalised without limit.

Ontologically, this generalisation can be explained by the fact that labour is experienced in everyday life as the realisation of a teleological positing, being present in myth, religion and philosophy. Even Aristotle and Hegel, both of whom recognised labour's teleological character, did not realise that teleology is restricted to labour and raised it up to the status of 'universal cosmological category' and 'motor of history' respectively. These conceptions illustrate, says Lukács, a 'lasting relationship of competition, an insoluble antinomy between causality and teleology' present in the entire history of philosophy and deriving from the latter's improper generalisation.⁴³ When conceived as a universal category, teleology implies purpose both in natural and in human history and, for this reason, prevents the identification of those realms in which it is actually operative.

The point then is not to prove the teleological character of labour, but rather to subject this quite 'unlimited generalisation to a genuine critical ontological treatment'. In order to do this, Lukács argues, it is necessary to acknowledge, on the one hand, that causality is a principle of motion that relies on itself; and this is so even when it might have had its origin in an act of consciousness. Teleology, by contrast, is by its own nature a posited category, in the precise sense that teleological processes presuppose an end and, consequently, a positing consciousness. Therefore, assuming teleology either in nature or in history necessitates not only that both move towards an end, but also that their 'existence and motion [. . .] must have a conscious author'.⁴⁴

Thus such generalisations, as attempts to find a way out of the anti-theoretical character of teleology and causality, end up by affirming the former, thereby doing away with the latter, or vice-versa. The correct ontological

⁴³ *Ontologie II*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

answer to this question, says Lukács, is provided by the Marxian teleology of labour. The explanatory power of Marx's solution is due, above all, to a clear comprehension of teleology as a real process, and hence endowed with an ineliminable ontological character. To posit an end means in this context that consciousness gives rise to a process—the teleological process itself—through which the end becomes real. It is solely in labour that this real process can be ontologically proven. That is to say, 'labour is not one of the many phenomenal forms of teleology in general, but rather the only point at which a teleological positing can be ontologically established as a real moment of material actuality'. With this explanation, Lukács concludes, teleology receives a 'simple, self-evident and real foundation'.⁴⁵

To confine teleology to labour (and to human practice) might give the impression that its relevance is thereby being unduly deflated. On the contrary, argues Lukács: in so proceeding it is possible to demonstrate that teleology is precisely the distinctive and specific category of the most developed form of being, namely social being. In other words, circumscribing teleology within the realm of labour (human practice) is the only way to emphasise that it is by the 'ongoing realisation of teleological positings', presupposed in labour, that social being can be understood in 'its genesis, its elevation from its basis and its becoming autonomous'.⁴⁶ From this perspective, in social being teleology and causality constitute the categorical basis of reality and of its movement. Naturally, these categories remain antithetical in social being, but do so within a real and unitary process (labour, social practice) whose dynamism results just from the reciprocal effects of these antitheses. To produce a genuinely human reality from those antitheses, the process has to transform pure causality into posited causality, without violating the inner nature of the former.⁴⁷

Drawing on Aristotle's account of labour, Lukács describes how this unity is realised. Aristotle analytically divides labour into two components: *thinking* and *producing*. With the first comes both the positing of an end and investigation of the means for its realisation; with the second comes the realisation of the previously posited end. This description is made more concrete, says Lukács, by the further division of the first moment suggested by Hartmann. Accordingly, the two moments comprised in thinking are explicitly broken up into two acts. This supplementation by Hartmann does

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

not change the ontological insight of Aristotle, the essence of which consists of conceiving labour as that complex of social being in which an ideal project realises itself materially; in which an imagined positing of an end modifies material reality; in which something radically and qualitatively new is brought to reality. That is to say, reality becomes something that it could never be by itself, something that could not be logically derived from the 'immanent development of its properties, of its powers and law-like processes'.⁴⁸

The analytical distinction between end-positing and investigation of means is, however, of enormous relevance for the ontology of social being. This is precisely the distinction that reveals the inseparable link between teleology and causality. Considering that the investigation of means is related to the realisation of ends, it cannot but imply an objective knowledge of the 'causality of those objectivities and processes that have to be set in motion to materialise the posited end'.⁴⁹ Since natural reality—a system of law-like complexes—is in itself indifferent to human projects and endeavour, the end-positing and investigation of means are not able to produce anything new unless natural causal systems are rearranged. At this point, the separation of these two moments of Aristotle's thinking shows its fecundity, to the extent that it allows the recognition of the two functions performed by the investigation of means. On the one hand, it discovers the causalities—that exist independently of consciousness—governing the objects related to the production of the end in question. On the other, it devises new arrangements of these causalities that constitute the end itself and that might, when set in motion, materially realise the end. Hence, this last function is crucial for transforming pure into posited causalities. Lukács illustrates this point with a rather trivial example: since a stone in itself is not even potentially a cutting-tool, its realisation as such can only happen if its immanent properties are firstly correctly apprehended and, secondly, posited in a new combination.⁵⁰

Therefore, conceived in this manner, the essence of the labour process reduces itself to the transformation of natural causalities into posited causalities. In this process, then, 'nature and labour, means and ends, produce something that is in itself homogeneous: the labour process and, in the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

end, the product'. In this sense, labour involves overcoming of the heterogeneity of nature as regards human ends. Nevertheless, Lukács calls attention to the fact that such overcoming has definite limits. These limits are not confined to the obvious fact that such a homogenisation will be constrained by 'correct knowledge of the causal connections that are not homogeneous in reality'. They concern more properly what he calls the dialectical delimiting of the correctness of knowledge. In the first place, given that any object has infinite determinations (properties and relations with other objects), correct knowledge can only mean in this context the adequate knowledge of those determinations indispensable to realise the posited end, being consequently always limited. It is the limited nature of 'correct' knowledge connected to a particular labour process that explains that a successful practice may be based on false notions or lead to false generalisations.⁵¹

Secondly, the limits have to do with the fact that the subordination of means to ends is not as trivial as it appears at first sight. The positing of ends emerges from a social need and is oriented towards its satisfaction. Means, however, have a natural substratum extrinsic to those ends. This extrinsic character of means, i.e. their heterogeneity, Lukács argues, grounds the autonomy of the investigation of means. In contrast to what happens in concrete singular labour processes, in which the end regulates and governs the means and sets the criterion of correctness of their investigation, in this autonomisation the process is reversed: the investigation of means becomes an end in itself. The way this autonomy acquired by the investigation of means results from the enlargement of human practice is formulated as follows:

We have already indicated the principle of the new, which even the most primitive labour teleology contains. Now we can add that the continuous production of the new, which is what we could call the regional category of the social, appears in labour; its first clear elevation from any close nature-boundness, is contained in this mode of labour's rise and development. This has the result that the end commands and governs the means in every concrete individual labour process. Yet in speaking of labour processes in their historical continuity and development within the real complexes of social being, we see the rise of a certain reversal of this hierarchical relationship—certainly not an absolute and total reversal, but one that is for all that of the utmost

⁵¹ This is the foundation of Lukács' ontological critique of neo-positivism and other philosophical traditions that, after reducing practice to immediate practice, cannot but identify truth with empirical adequacy.

importance for the development of society and human kind. For since the investigation of nature that is indispensable for labour is concentrated above all on the elaboration of means, these means are the principal vehicle of social guarantee that the results of the labour processes are established, the experience of labour continued and particularly further developed.⁵²

It could be said that Lukács is emphasising here that, on the one hand, the investigation of means can never dispense with the repertoire acquired in real causalities previously posited. On the other hand, it continuously accumulates the acquisitions derived from ongoing positings. In brief, he seems to be describing the constitution, conservation, transmission and expansion of past, materialised, dead labour as the ever increasing condition of living labour. The identification of this relative autonomy of the investigation of means in labour, in which the correct apprehension of concrete causalities becomes for social being more important than the realisation of any singular end, illuminates the ontological foundation of science. In other words, the genesis and development of scientifically oriented thought derives, according to Lukács, from the immanent tendency of the investigation of means to become autonomous in the labour process. This is a tendency that, in science, finally converts truth (the comprehension of the ontological constitution of things) into an end in itself.

This autonomisation, though giving rise to social practices and corresponding forms of consciousness whose connections with labour are complexly mediated, can never be absolute—that is, completely severed from the material production and reproduction of life. Thus, for Lukács, no matter how subtle and far removed from labour and immediate practice forms of consciousness might be, this does not entail any duality between social existence and social consciousness, between necessity (law) and liberty (freedom). Just the opposite, since the description of labour above shows emphatically that Marx's theory of labour—the sole existing form of a teleologically produced existence—provides for the first time a basis for the specificity of social being. In sharp contrast to idealist conceptions, in which there is an unbridgeable abyss between 'the (apparently) purely spiritual functions of human consciousness [...] and the world of mere material being', Marx's theory is able to clarify their 'genetic linkage as well as their essential difference and antithesis'. That is why labour—understood by him, as already indicated, as 'self-realisation, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom'—is said to be the key to understanding the

⁵² Ibid., p. 21.

dialectical unity of necessity (law) and liberty (freedom) that distinguishes social being from organic and inorganic beings. In short, Marx's analysis of labour demonstrates that there is a qualitatively new category in the ontology of social being: realisation as the effective fulfillment of a teleological positing. Lukács characterizes the centrality of labour as an intermediary category as follows: 'the activity of man as a natural being gives rise, on the basis of inorganic and organic being, and proceeding from them, to a specifically new, more complicated and complex level of being, i.e., social being'.⁵³

Human Consciousness and Social Being

This last section focuses on aspects of Lukács' account of human consciousness in connection with the complex of labour and its ontological relationship to reality. In analysing human consciousness he emphasises, once again, the mediating character of labour and the relevance of the category of realisation just mentioned. Lukács notes that before dealing with human consciousness it is necessary to distinguish it from the consciousness of other animals, especially among the 'higher' species. The consciousness of the latter, despite the fact that it already expresses their more complex and developed relation to the environment, retains an epiphenomenal character. It is true that consciousness in this case is essential to the reproduction of the singular, but its role is confined to a reproduction of the species that is ultimately biologically regulated. By contrast, human consciousness goes far beyond the merely instrumental role of facilitating adaptive interaction with the environment.

Having established that teleology is a category exclusive to social being, on the one hand, and that it implies a subject who posits ends, on the other, it seems easy to understand that we are dealing here with a kind of activity of singulars that has no parallel with the 'activities' of singulars of other species. The radically different character of human reproduction is due precisely to the purposeful activities of the singulars on which it is based. For this reason, the ontological analysis of the complex of labour makes it possible to show that human reproduction is a reproduction which posits its own conditions, rather being in a state of passive reaction (adaptation) to changes in the environment. Thus, from the concrete existence

⁵³ Ibid., p. 26.

of labour it can be ascertained that consciousness is one of its necessary presuppositions, and that this consciousness cannot simply be epiphenomenal.⁵⁴

Now, this new consciousness that emerges in labour as its necessary condition transcends its epiphenomenal character only when it posits an end and the means of its realisation, i.e., with the teleological positing as a self-guided act. So its distinctness lies exactly in its deliberative or intentional nature, which is missing in the 'activities,' and consequently in the consciousness, of other animals. In other words: 'from the moment that a realisation of an end becomes a transmuting and new-forming principle of nature, consciousness that gave the impulse and direction to the process can no longer be ontologically an epiphenomenon'.⁵⁵

After examining the specificity of human consciousness, particularly its role in the emergence of a new form of reality, Lukács seeks to investigate its concrete modes of manifestation and its concrete mode of existence. With this purpose in mind, he recalls initially the two acts that constitute the 'true existing complex of labour': the most exact reflection [*Widerspiegelung*]⁵⁶ possible of the realm of reality relevant to the end in hand and the associated positing of the causal series necessary to its realisation. Even an abstract description indicates that these two acts, indissociable in labour, are reciprocally heterogeneous and, in consequence, represent two modes of considering reality. These modes are heterogeneous because, as already pointed out, they involve both the apprehension of the world as it is in itself and the world viewed from the particular standpoint of the end. It is just this new ontological connection of acts that are heterogeneous in themselves that, besides building the 'existing true complex of labour', can be shown to constitute the ontological foundation of social practice.

⁵⁴ Lukács' procedure here illustrates once again the type of inference called 'retroduction' by critical realism.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27. It is right at this point, notes Lukács, that dialectical materialism differentiates itself from mechanical materialism. While the latter admits only nature and its law-like processes as objective reality, the former is able to demonstrate that the realised ends resulting from human practice, from labour, become part of the world of reality, constitute new forms of objectivity that, though not 'derived' from nature, are no less real. (*Ibid.*, p. 28).

⁵⁶ Though Lukács employs here the term 'reflection' it is obvious from his whole conception that it has absolutely nothing to do with the idea of a mechanical mental reproduction of reality. Actually, it will be seen below that for him mental reproductions can never be a photographic and mechanically true copy of reality.

Furthermore, the two heterogeneous modes of considering reality entailed by those acts form the basis of the ontological specificity of social being. The distinction of the two acts, to repeat, is merely analytical, since in reality they are internally related, which means that their heterogeneity can be shown by the analysis of any of them. Taking the first, the moment of reflection, its inspection immediately reveals the unequivocal separation between objects that exist independently of the subject and subjects who, by acts of consciousness, are able to reproduce objects more or less accurately—hence subjects that turn the objects into their *spiritual possession*. This separation is the presupposition and the result of the teleological positing itself, in that it simultaneously requires the two heterogeneous considerations of reality just mentioned.⁵⁷

It is worth emphasising that, given the presence of ends and means in labour, it follows that it presupposes the reflection of reality. The end could neither be conceived, nor the means to its realisation prepared, without knowledge of reality, viz. without reflection. Now this reflection produces (and presupposes) a separation and detachment of human being from its environment, which in turn is manifested in the ‘confrontation of object and subject’. Clearly, Lukács’ point here is not only that the subject of reflection has, in this very act, to reproduce reality as her spiritual possession, but also that she can do this only by conceiving herself as distinct from the reality that is being reproduced; that is, as a subject who turns both the external reality as well as herself into her spiritual possession. The ontologically necessary character of this separation is expressed by Lukács as follows:

This separation of subject and object that has become conscious is a necessary product of the labour process, and at the same time the basis of the specifically human mode of existence. If the subject, separated from the object world as it is in consciousness, were unable to consider this object world and reproduce it in its inherent being, the positing of ends that underlies even the most primitive labour could not come about at all.⁵⁸

The analysis of reflection also discloses that a new form of objectivity comes into being. Actually, in reflection consciousness converts the reproduced reality into a ‘reality’ of its own. Despite being an objectivity, the reproduced ‘reality’, as a content of consciousness, is not a reality. As a repro-

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

duction in consciousness it cannot have the same ontological status as that which it reproduces, let alone be identical with it. Hence from the ontological distinction between reality and 'reality'—resulting from those two diverse modes of considering reality in reflection—stem the two heterogeneous moments into which social being divides itself: being itself, and its reflection in consciousness.⁵⁹ From the point of view of being, emphasises Lukács, they confront each other as things that are not only heterogeneous, but absolutely antithetical.⁶⁰

This heterogeneity between reflection ('reality') and reality, according to Lukács, constitutes the fundamental fact of social being—fundamental, because it represents the circumstance that the subject is in position to figure reality from the angle of the end in view, which, as indicated, is heterogeneous to reality as it is in itself. In other words, the heterogeneity between reflection ('reality') and reality expresses a distancing of human being from reality. And the continuing interaction of these two heterogeneous moments—being and its reflection—is presupposed in the *creation* of a reality that is specifically human. This is exactly what Lukács meant when he observed that, with this duality, human being elevates itself from the animal world.⁶¹

The duality represented by this heterogeneity is not suppressed by the permanent relationship of being and reflection. It is not eliminated even given that reflection, on the one hand, already has, in labour, an effect upon being and, on the other, is determined by its object. As a matter of fact, Lukács gives an account of the way this duality is reproduced in the interaction of two tendencies. Firstly, reflection of reality demands systems of mediation more and more complicated (such as mathematics, geometry, logic, etc.) in order to reproduce reality, as accurately as possible, as an independent objectivity. As mentioned above, this reproduction represents an objectification of reality in thought and, as such, a further distancing. Lukács is referring here to the obvious fact that ever more detailed knowledge of reality presupposes an increasing distancing between subject and object that enlarges (extensively and intensively) the 'range of vision'. This ever deeper and more extensive knowledge of reality does not exclude

⁵⁹ Needless to say that, at this point, Lukács' *retroductive* analysis of labour makes clear the ontological genesis of those two domains of social reality correctly put forward in the ontology of critical realism: the intransitive and the transitive.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the possibility of mistakes. The more you know, the greater your chances of being mistaken, and we may take it for granted that the mistakes grow in complexity. Consequently, even if this process involves a deepening of reflection, the distancing rules out any idea of 'a quasi-photographic and mechanically true copy of reality'.⁶²

Secondly, the reproductions are always determined by the positing of ends, i.e. they are genetically linked to the social reproduction of life. It is the concrete teleological orientation of this reflection (determined by the end) that is responsible for its fruitfulness, since it is the source of the new in social being. Hence there are two opposing tendencies in operation here: on the one side, the concrete teleological orientation of reflection and, on the other, the tendency of objectification (i.e. of reality as spiritual possession) working as a corrective. Reflection, thereby, has a 'peculiar contradictory position':

On the one hand, it is the strict antithesis of any being, it is not being exactly because it is a reflection; on the other and simultaneously it is the vehicle for the rise of new objectivity in social being, for its reproduction at the same or higher level. In this way the consciousness that reflects reality acquires a certain possibilistic character.⁶³

This possibilistic character of human practice is, according to Lukács, decisive in understanding the ontological relationship between reflection and reality. What is decisive in this case, of course, is not the fact that reflection is not reality, but that it *might* be. Being different from reality, reflection expresses a possibility exactly because, concretely, it may be realised or not. Since human practice is always teleologically oriented, this potential nature of reflection endows it with an insuppressible alternative character. This alternative character, on the one hand, must be based on concrete and correct apprehension of causal structures of reality as a necessary condition for the transformation of causal structures into posited structures. In this sense, the alternative is ontologically founded in the structure of reality itself. On the other, as reality does not produce the end in question by itself, its capacity for being other—i.e. its plasticity—is realised in labour (human practice). The possibility entailed by the posited end in reflection is thus always related to a concrete possibility.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., p. 31.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The possibilistic character of human praxis is related by Lukács to the Aristotelian category of '*dynamis*' and to Hartmann's 'lability'. (*Ontologie II*, pp. 31-2).

Concluding remarks

To sum up our outline of Lukács' ontological account of labour, we might see it in terms of a series of claims. Firstly, that social consciousness has its genesis and development in practice. Secondly, that the ontological interaction between social consciousness and social being is central—not least because social consciousness constitutes a new type of objectivity. Thirdly, that given the antinomy of reflection and reality, the dynamics of social being derive precisely from the relationship between the two. Fourthly, that reflection, though determined by reality, is relatively autonomous of it. Finally, that on the basis of the foregoing, the alternative character of human practice can be demonstrated.

We should stress here that most of these conclusions are derived by Lukács directly from his consideration of labour. Therefore, when the problem of correctness of reflection is raised and discussed, it refers mainly to natural reality. Nothing is said as regards the objectivity of reflection when what is at stake is society itself. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that one of the chief outcomes of the analysis of labour is that teleology, being restricted to the domain of human practice, cannot be extended to a *general* teleology, either in nature or society. By demonstrating that society as a whole, like nature, does not have a teleological character, Lukács establishes the same kind of naturalism as defended by critical realism: as social structures and processes are not the *intended* result of human activity, they constitute an object of knowledge analogous to natural structures and processes. Now, while there is not the space here to pursue Lukács' reasoning any further, it follows from this recognition that society is objective and structured like nature. Hence, as far as reflection is concerned, there is no need for any substantial change in the analysis provided by Lukács when its objects are the causal structures of society, except in so far as these structures are posited, that is to say, result from the interaction of a myriad of individual (and social) teleological positings.

Society, like nature, has to be reproduced in thought, has to become the spiritual possession of individuals. In the objectification of reflection both nature and society are means to, and objects of, the positing of ends: both have to be apprehended as they really are and have to be thought differently from how they actually are. That is the way human beings, through practice, mould the world to satisfy their needs, aspirations and desires. But the 'desirable' in society is quite different from the 'desirable' in nature. Desiring vis-à-vis nature involves inscribing in nature something that it would never have by itself. Desiring vis-à-vis society involves inscrib-

ing in society some possibility that it has in itself. In both cases, the decision about what is to be inscribed is determined by social reality itself. But in society the desirable has an ulterior determination, since the concrete alternatives are opened up by social evolution itself. In Lukács' words: 'Human social and economic action releases forces, tendencies, objectivities, structures, etc., that arise exclusively as a result of human practice, even though their nature may remain completely or in large part incomprehensible to those who engage in it.'⁶⁵

If therefore society is conceived as a 'complex of complexes'⁶⁶ and if from the interaction of these complexes result tendencies that govern its evolution, it follows that in Lukács' conception society, like nature, is intransitive (to employ a critical realist category). As a consequence, the two heterogeneous acts involved in reflection also apply to society. In the first, the point is to reproduce as exactly as possible its concrete tendencies. In the second, the point is to posit social ends (values) that, though emerging in the midst of existing social structures, might or might not be compatible with them. Now the possibility of realising these ends, as we have seen, depends ultimately on the first act. Thus if emancipation is an actual possibility opened up by the evolution of social being itself, its accomplishment presupposes a true knowledge of tendencies and of the possibilities they concretely offer to human action. It presupposes therefore an ontological critique that dissolves the apparent 'naturalness' of the existing social order.

In this regard, what is most significant in Lukács' analysis is not his claim that everything that pertains to so called human nature is a product of the development of social being in practice and by practice, since this is common ground within the Marxist tradition. Within this tradition, the conception of human praxis in regard to emancipation can be traced back to Marx himself as the realisation of 'free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their

⁶⁵ *Ontologie I*, p. 591.

⁶⁶ Society as a totality of interacting structures is conceived by Lukács as follows: 'a complex constituted of complexes, the reproduction of which interacts in a multiple and manifold manner with the process of reproduction of the relatively autonomous partial complexes, though the totality presents itself as the predominant influence of these interactions'. (*Ontology II*, p. 227).

communal, social productivity as their social wealth'.⁶⁷ More concretely, it is conceived as the realisation of

the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., [...] the absolute working-out of [man's] creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined yardstick*, [...] [a development in which] he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality; [...] strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming.⁶⁸

Thus, if emancipation can ultimately be synthesised in Marx's aphorism that 'the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all', as often stressed by Bhaskar, then it can be understood as the process by means of which the development of social being is carried out by socio-teleological practices that cannot do without a critical ontology. It was for similar reasons that Lukács—conscious of this relation between ontology and emancipation, on the one hand, and of the necessity of going beyond the aporias of *Realpolitik*, on the other—dedicated much of his final energies to the elaboration of an ontology of social being.

⁶⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 488.