

‘UNDER-LABOURING’ FOR ETHICS: LUKÁCS’ CRITICAL ONTOLOGY

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The objectivity of values is based on the fact that they are moving and moved components of the overall social development.

G. Lukács

Introduction

Over the last thirty years or so critical realism has advanced its project of elaborating an ontology that could rival at any level the empiricist ontology implicit in both positivist and idealist traditions. The ontology resulting from this collective effort should be capable of furnishing science, whether natural or social, with an explicit philosophical foundation. As early as in his first work Bhaskar (1997: 10) employed the Lockean expression ‘under-labour’ to refer to the accessory role played by philosophy (particularly ontology) in scientific development.¹ According to him, in under-labouring *for* science philosophy would function as a ‘second-order knowledge’, insofar as the knowledge produced by it would be ‘a knowledge of the necessary conditions of knowledge’. (Bhaskar, 1979: 10)

Obviously, a philosophy for science such as proposed by critical realism presupposes that truth makes a difference. Against most fashionable theoretical contemporary doctrines for which truth is nothing but a ‘fifth wheel’, critical realism seems to concentrate most of its efforts in demonstrating the relationship between knowledge and human practice as follows:

If the fundamental norm of theoretical discourse is descriptive or representative adequacy or truth, the fundamental norm of practical discourse is the fulfilment, realisation or satisfaction of human wants, needs or purposes. If there are real grounds (causes) for belief or action, then it is possible that we are mistaken about them, and if we fail in truth we may also fail in satisfaction (Bhaskar, 1986: 206).

Thus, even when stated as a philosophy for science critical realism is actually concerned with the ability of scientific discoveries in assisting the satisfaction of human ends. Accordingly, critical realism must address *from the beginning* questions about the origin of human values and their ontological status – that is to say, with ethics. In spite of this, it seems impossible to recognise a set of propositions that could characterise a critical realist ethics with the same readiness that one could identify critical realist understanding of the ontological content of the scientific discourse, just to mention one of several points of general agreement.²

A quite influential position on these issues, however, is undoubtedly that defended by Bhaskar himself in one of his early works, according to which ontology is a sort of *third-order* knowledge in relation to ethics. More specifically, ontology would serve as the basis for the scientific analysis of human nature, which, in turn, would allow the identification of those transcendently human values (i.e. values present in any social context). This division and organisation of theoretical labour was formulated accordingly:

¹ The term ‘under-labour’ was employed first by John Locke (1689) to describe the process of ‘clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge’.

² This does not mean that critical realism neglects ethics. In fact, this is a subject ever present in Critical Realist writings. See, for instance: Bhaskar (1986; 2002: chapter 5), Collier (1994: chapter 6; 1999) and the volume 3 of *Alethia*, the Journal of the International Association for Critical Realism (IACR), published in April 2000.

...some anthropology is the condition of any moral discourse at all. As ontology stands to epistemology, so anthropology stands to ethics. Indeed, one could say that anthropology is just the ontology of ethics. But just as a theory about the nature of the world is implicit in any cognitive claim, a theory about the nature of (wo)men is implicit in any moral one. (Bhaskar, 1998: 438)

In our view, a quite distinct attitude concerning the relationship between ontology and ethics can be found in Lukács' late endeavour to put forward a Marxist ethics. Its difference from the above mentioned position is due exactly to Lukács' understanding that his Marxist ethics could only be based *directly* on a Marxist ontology of social being. In other words, we would suggest that, for Lukács, it is ontology, instead of anthropology, that stands to or 'under-labours' for realist ethics. This explains why his concerns regarding ontology were delivered as an introduction to his ethics, although what many authors refer to as the 'ontological turn' of Lukács' thought can be tracked down to the early 1930s.³ (Oldrini, 2002: 54)

Tertulian was right to say, in this context, that Lukács' project of developing an ontology was, from the beginning, linked to the problem of human praxis in regard to emancipation. To go beyond the aporias of *Realpolitik* it was necessary to reject, as did Lukács,

the identification of revolutionary action with *Realpolitik* (that is, an aethical 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*] (Tertulian, 1999: 131-2).⁴

This rejection entails a conception of society in which revolutionary (transformative) action could really make sense, that is, an ontology of social being in which history and law-like processes, relations and structures are not mutually exclusive. It presupposes also an immediate appraisal of ethics, since a transformative practice can only arise based on a negative valuation of existing social structures, relations etc.

It would be possible to affirm, furthermore, that Lukács' ontology is based on a clear understanding that, on the one hand, the main philosophical traditions absolutely neglected ontology and, on the other, that this attitude could only be concretely grasped if referred to a social order that seemed to deny any transcendence to itself – the order posited by capital. It is this interpretation that underlies the structure of Lukács' *Ontology*, as can be readily perceived in the way the work is organised.

In the first part, Lukács deals with philosophical traditions and authors that either disavow or affirm ontology; in the second, there is an investigation of categories of what, in his view, are the main complexes of social being, namely, labour, reproduction, the ideal and ideology, and alienation. Such an arrangement in which the positive contribution to the ontology of the human world appears in the last part of the work is not unintentional. For it stems necessarily from the analysis carried out in the first section, in which Lukács provides a broad picture of the fate of ontology in philosophies of the past and of the present (Lukács, 1984: 325). The radical attack on ontology undertaken by neopositivism,⁵ its more subtle (but still radical) rejection implicit in existentialism and other idealist philosophies (neo-Kantianism) and the contradictory or insufficient character of the ontologies put forward by Hegel and Hartmann deserved special consideration and criticism.

With regard to the first two schools of thought, neopositivism and neo-Kantianism, Lukács stresses the convergence and complementarity of traditions that are usually seen as antithetical – the convergence here refers precisely to their common dismissal of ontology. This attitude is

³ Lukács set out this project of writing a Marxist ethics just by the beginning of the 1960s, after the publication of the first two volumes of his (unfinished) *Aesthetics*, though he had been collecting a huge amount of material since the late 1940s for this purpose. His voluminous work, *The Ontology of Social Being*, published in German after the author's death in 1971, was actually meant as a prolegomenon of his projected *Ethics*.

⁴ In the jargon of critical realism, one could say that Lukács is obviously dealing here with the problem of reproductive and transformative activity. In proper 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 for instance Marx (1994).

⁵ Neopositivism is the term employed by Lukács to denote the late theoretical avatars of the positivist tradition.

contrasted with Hegel's and Hartmann's explicit effort to illuminate various decisive ontological questions (such as Hegel's investigations into 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' (ibid.: 559). It is this ontological legacy that is employed by Lukács as the ground for developing a Marxist ontology of society in the second part of the work.

In presence of such an effort to reaffirm ontology *against the current*, it is certainly astonishing that Lukács' posthumous work has received almost no attention. This could be explained by the very fact that Lukács writes in the midst of a theoretical milieu which completely repudiated any ontological inquiry: it is well-known that *postist* fashion either attracted or paralysed even Marxist circles. Yet it is more difficult to explain why Lukács' *Ontology* went unperceived by one of the most serious recent attempts to reaffirm ontology: critical realism.

The present article does not try to speculate about the reasons for this particular lack of interest,⁶ but seeks to underline the obvious mutual benefits that might accrue if the insights of critical realism could be combined with those put forward by Lukács. One of these benefits relates exactly to the domain of ethics. Hence, this article concentrates on specific moments of Lukács' *Ontology* which seem to demonstrate the importance of his contribution in general and in reference to the relationship between ontology and ethics.

One of these moments is certainly 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 beings. We provide a brief account of this analysis in the first section below. A second section delineates Lukács' examination of the genesis of human consciousness in labour and its dialectical relationship with social practice. The last section attempts to indicate how Lukács defends value as a new and decisive category of social being, the genesis of which is to be found in labour.

Labour and the Emergence of Social Being

One possible way to start an account of Lukács' ontological analysis of labour is by recalling 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 the suspension of tranquillity. ... Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining 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. (Marx, 1973: 610)

Apart from being a glaring illustration of Marx's ontological critique,⁷ 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,

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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: op. cit.)

hence real freedom', is thus the key to understanding the dialectical unity of necessity (law) and liberty (freedom) that distinguishes social being from organic and inorganic beings.

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.⁸ The same perspective is adopted by Lukács when he underlines that the analysis of labour has to be the starting point 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. (Lukács, 1986: 7) This section intends to outline Lukács' demonstration of the necessity and fruitfulness of this point of departure. Since his reasoning unfolds in an entire chapter of his *Ontology (Labour)* – not to mention its nexus with questions raised and developments carried out throughout the whole work –, only a few moments of a complex and extremely articulated analysis can be focused on here.

In the first place, Lukács observes that Marx had for long understood that there is a set of determinations in the absence of which 'no being can have its ontological character concretely apprehended'. (Lukács, 1984: 326) These determinations make up a general ontology that simply comprise 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 the 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 on 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. (ibid.: 327)

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

Under this perspective, therefore, when the aim is to understand social being there is no alternative except to admit that its specific and decisive categories – labour, language, cooperation and division of labour, consciousness etc. – can only be properly conceived in reference to the totality they constitute. It means that 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. Consequently, when Lukács defends the necessity and fruitfulness of starting with the analysis of labour, he clearly presupposes not only the totality of social being, but also the indissoluble nexus of its specific categories.

In suggesting labour as the starting point of the analysis of social being, that is to say, of an already existing totality, Lukács admittedly relies on Marx's method deployed in *Capital*. The object of the latter is obviously the mode of production ruled by capital, which is definitively a totality with multiple categories of its own. The ideal reconstruction of this complex totality had

⁸ 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'.

to depart from one of these categories.⁹ However it is not indifferent which category is selected for this purpose. *Capital* shows exemplarily that it was the departure from the commodity that made it possible to mentally reproduce that totality ‘not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations’. (Marx, 1976: 36) Labour performs an analogous role in Lukács’ ontology of social being.

Hence the question posed by Lukács: how to justify 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 has as an intermediate character, in the sense that it is precisely labour, which is a metabolism between human being (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. (Lukács, 1986: 10) In Lukács words:

All those determinations which we shall see to 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.¹⁰ (ibid.)

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.¹¹ 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 man creates, 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 man 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.¹²

Following Marx, Lukács notes that the most distinguishable feature of labour, as an exclusively human activity, is that ‘through labour, a teleological positing is realised within material being, as the rise of a new objectivity’. (ibid.) 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 – just because it is their original ontological form –, Lukács emphasises that its prototypical character could be unduly extrapolated in two directions. First, when taken too schematically to understand other social-teleological positings, it blurs their distinctive traits. Second, when its teleological character is generalised without limit.

This generalisation can be ontologically 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, authors who were able to recognise labour’s teleological character, did not realise that teleology is restricted to labour (and other human practices) 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

⁹ For Lukács’ defense that, for Marx, society is a totality that is always already immediately given, see Lukács (1984: 579)

¹⁰ Exactly in opposition to the argument of Karlsson (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 above mentioned.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

antinomy between causality and teleology' present in the entire history of philosophy derived from the latter's improper generalisation. (ibid.: 13) When conceived as a universal category, teleology implies purpose both in natural and human history and, for this reason, prevents the identification of those realms in which it is actually operative.

The point then is not proving the teleological character of labour, but rather to subject this quite 'unlimited generalisation to a genuine critical ontological treatment'. In order to do this, argues Lukács, 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'. (ibid.: 14)

Thus such generalisations, as attempts to find a way out of the antithetical character of teleology and causality, end up by affirming the former and doing away with the latter, or vice-versa. The correct ontological 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, 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 just in labour that this real process can be ontologically proved, 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, concludes Lukács, teleology receives a 'simple, self-evident and real foundation'. (ibid.)

To circumscribe teleology to labour (and to human practice) might give the impression that its relevance is thereby being improperly deflated. On the contrary, points out Lukács, because in so proceeding it is possible to demonstrate that teleology is exactly the distinctive and specific category of the most developed form of being, namely social being. In other words, circumscribing teleology to 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'. (ibid.: 16)

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 mobility results just from the reciprocal effects of these antitheses. To create reality from the latter, the process has to transform pure causality into posited causality, without violating the inner nature of the former.

Recalling Aristotle's examination of labour, Lukács describes how this unity is realised. Aristotle analytically divides labour in two components: *thinking* and *producing*. In the first, both the positing of an end and investigation of the means of its realisation are carried out; in the second, the realisation of the previously posited end takes place. This description is made more concrete, says Lukács, by the further division of the first moment suggested by Nicolai Hartmann. Accordingly, the two moments comprised in thinking are explicitly broken up into two acts. This complement by Hartmann does 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 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'. (ibid.: 18)

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 of teleology and causality. Considering that the investigation of means is

oriented towards 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'. 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. The separation of those two moments of Aristotle's thinking shows at this point 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, posed in a new combination. (ibid.: 19)

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 render something that is in itself homogeneous: labour process and, in the end, the product'. In this sense, labour involves the overcoming of the heterogeneity of nature as regards human ends. Nevertheless, such overcoming of heterogeneities has defined limits. These limits do not refer just to the obvious fact that the homogenisation is constrained by the 'correct knowledge of the causal connections that are not homogeneous in reality'. They concern more properly 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 limitedness 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.¹³ (ibid.)

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, argues Lukács, induces the autonomy of the investigation of means. In contrast to what happens in the 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 gained 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 how we could call the regional category of the social appears in labour... 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 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. (ibid.: 21)

The emphasis here is that, on the one hand, the investigation of means can never dispense with the repertoire acquired in real causalities previously posed. On the other, it continuously accumulates the acquisitions derived from the ongoing positings. In brief, Lukács describes thereby the constitution, conservation, transmission and expansion of past, materialised, dead

¹³ This is the foundation of Lukács' ontological critique of neopositivism and other philosophical traditions that, after reducing practice to immediate practice, cannot but identify truth with empirical adequacy.

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 from the immanent tendency of the investigation of means to become autonomous in 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, there does not follow any duality between social existence and social consciousness, between necessity (law) and liberty (freedom).

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’ –, was said to be the key to understanding the 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 fulfilment of a teleological positing. The central character of labour as an intermediary category is shown then by the fact that ‘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’. (ibid.: 26)

Human Consciousness as the Condition of Possibility of Labour

This second section focuses on some aspects of Lukács’ account of human consciousness in connection to 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. He notes that before dealing with human consciousness it is necessary to distinguish it from the consciousness of other animals, especially the higher ones. The consciousness of the latter, despite the fact that it already expresses their more complex and developed relation to the environment, has still 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 this role of being instrumental to mere adaptive interaction to the environment.

Having established that teleology is a category exclusive to social being and that it implies a subject who posits ends, it seems easy to understand that we are dealing here with a kind of activity of the singulars that has no parallel with the ‘activities’ of the 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, instead of a passive reaction (adaptation) to changes of the environment. Thus, from the concrete existence of labour it can be assured that consciousness is one of its necessary presuppositions, and that this consciousness cannot be anymore epiphenomenal.¹⁴

Now, this new consciousness that emerges in labour as its necessary condition transcends the epiphenomenal character only when it posits an end and the means of its realisation, i.e., with the

¹⁴ Lukács’ procedure here illustrates once again the type of inference called ‘retroduction’ by critical realism.

teleological positing as a self-guided act. So its distinction 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.¹⁵ (ibid.: 27)

After examining this 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 exactest possible reflection [Widerspiegelung]¹⁶ of the realm of reality relevant to the end at 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. Modes that 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.

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, it is necessary 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 reflection, its inspection immediately reveals the unequivocal separation between objects that exist independently of the subject and subjects that, 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 those two heterogeneous considerations of reality just mentioned. (ibid.: 29)

For the sake of emphasis, it is worth reiterating that given the presence of ends and means in labour, it follows that it presupposes the reflection of reality. Neither the end could be conceived nor could the means to its realisation be prepared without knowledge of reality, viz. without a reflection. Now this reflection produces (and presupposes) a separation and detachment of human being from its environment which is manifested in the confrontation of object and subject. Clearly, Lukács’ contention here is that the subject of the reflection has in this very act not only to reproduce reality as her/his spiritual possession, but also that she/he can only do this by conceiving her/himself as distinct from the reality that is being reproduced. That is to say, a subject that turns both the external reality as well as her/himself into her/his spiritual possession. The ontologically necessary character of this separation is expressed by Lukács as follows:

Turned conscious, this separation of subject and object 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. (ibid.)

The analysis of the 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

¹⁵ 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.: 28)

¹⁶ Though Lukács employs here the term ‘reflection’ it is obvious from the whole conception of the author 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.

reality. As a reproduction in consciousness it cannot have the same ontological nature as what 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 and its reflection in consciousness.¹⁷ From the point of view of being, emphasises Lukács, they confront each other as things that are not only heterogeneous, but absolutely antithetical. (ibid.: 30)

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 said, 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 what Lukács meant when he observed that, with the referred duality, human being elevates itself from the animal world. (ibid.: 30)

The duality represented by this heterogeneity is not suppressed by the permanent relationship of being and reflection. It is not eliminated even considering that the reflection has already in labour an effect upon being and, conversely, 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, the reflection of reality demands systems of mediation more and more complicated (such as mathematics, geometry, logic etc.) in order to reproduce as accurately as possible reality 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 the 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 more deep and extensive knowledge of reality does not naturally exclude the possibility of mistakes. The more you know, the greater your chances of being mistaken – taken 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’. (ibid.: 31)

Secondly, the reproductions are always determined by the end-positings, 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 operating here are two opposing tendencies: the concrete teleological orientation of reflection and the tendency of objectification (i.e. of reality as spiritual possession), working as a corrective. The 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. (ibid.)

This possibilistic character of human practice is, according to Lukács, decisive to understanding the ontological relationship between reflection and reality. What is decisive in this case, of course, is not the fact that the reflection is not reality, but *that it might be*. Being different from reality, reflection expresses a possibility exactly because it might or might not be concretely realised. Since human practice is always teleologically oriented this potential nature of reflection endows it with an insuppressible alternative character. Furthermore, this alternative character 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 on the structure of reality itself. Besides, as reality does not produce the end in question by itself, its capacity of being other – i.e. its plasticity – is

¹⁷ Needless to say that 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.

realised in labour (human practice). The possibility entailed by the posited end in reflection is, thus, always referred to a concrete possibility.

Lukács points out that Aristotle's *dynamis* and Hartmann's *lability* are categories intended to denote precisely the possibilistic character of human praxis. (ibid.: 31-2) Both categories capture the idea that labour is endowed with the power of transforming what is a non-being into a concrete realisation. Now, as the concrete alternatives of labour characterise both the determination of ends and all phases of the working process itself, the complex of labour entails countless acts of judgement. The 'locus' and 'organ' of such judgements, decisions, selections, valuations is human consciousness. Since the results of such judgements become a new reality – a humanly produced reality – values are ontologically constitutive of social being. It is not a surprise, therefore, that, already in the chapter on labour in his *Ontology*, Lukács fruitfully explores several aspects related to ethics. The next section will bring into discussion some of Lukács' arguments in this regard.

Under-labouring for ethics

Prior to examining this issue we should recall the main aspects raised in our discussion of Lukács' ontological account of labour. Firstly, it was shown that social consciousness has its genesis and development in practice. Secondly, the ontological interaction between social consciousness and social being was established. Particular emphasis was given to the fact that social consciousness constitutes a new type of objectivity. Thirdly, having explained the heterogeneity between reflection and reality it was possible to argue that the dynamics of social being derives precisely from their relationship. Fourthly, it was defended that reflection, though determined by reality, can give rise to new forms of reality by virtue of its relative autonomy. Finally and consequently, the alternative character of human practice could be demonstrated.

We are now in position to discuss some aspects of Lukács' attempt to ground ethics on an ontological basis. Although emphasising repeatedly that the complex of problems regarding values could only be properly dealt with in the framework of his projected *Ethics*, Lukács suggests that the ontological genesis of values is to be looked for in labour. Such an account of values is relevant chiefly because it is able to demonstrate the origin of values in the production and reproduction of social life itself – i.e., their ontological status –, instead of construing them in a reified manner. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, Lukács' *Ethics* remained an unaccomplished project. Therefore, the intention here is just to explore some of the connections he establishes between human praxis and values in his analysis of labour examined above. In this regard, it should be recalled that Lukács' analysis, though focusing mainly on labour, in no way presupposes the homogenisation of the various human practices or their reduction to labour, as the author expressly emphasises.

Actually, when analysing the particular kind of value – use-value – that emerges in labour, viz. in the metabolism between human being (society) and nature, Lukács is not presuming its identity with values that are characteristic of other spheres of social being, as might be thought at first glance. On the contrary, his intention is precisely to shed light on the emergence of a form of being in which value is an ontologically constitutive category distinct from others in which there is no value at all. That is to say, as a model, use-value is to other values exactly as labour is to other socio-teleological practices.

The arguments by means of which Lukács maintains labour as the central category of social being have already been presented. This centrality has to do, among other things, with the fact that labour, for its teleological nature, cannot be merely taken as an activity towards the satisfaction of needs. Satisfaction of needs as such is a common trait to both human and other animals. What distinguishes labour is rather that it is a mediating category, which, in its development, establishes an ever increasing distance between needs and their satisfaction. This distance is due to the increasing chain of alternatives entailed in labour from the positing of ends to the continuous monitoring of the whole process up to their actual realisation. Along this

process the working subject is faced with the necessity to judge whether instruments and materials are suitable for the realisation of the ends in view. The same applies even to the ends and to the attitudes of the working subject her/himself.

Since what is at stake in labour is the metabolism between human being and nature, the ends in question are use-values. Relying again on Aristotle's notion of *dynamis*, Lukács argues, radically against the conventional wisdom, for the objectivity of use-values: to become something adequate for the satisfaction of a particular human need, an object must have inscribed in its inner constitution the possibility of being (or not) transformed in a determined way. Hence, alternatives refer to values objectively given in things themselves, viz. to the objective possibilities things are endowed with of being converted from potential into realised values. Under this perspective, use-value is nothing but the human recognition of the utility (value) of things themselves.

If observed from the point of view of the working subject the same process shows that this distancing between needs and satisfaction also presuppose a lability of human beings, i.e. the possibility of being other. The concrete realisation of a posited end by means of labour requires considerable transformations of the working subject, whose affects, emotions, instincts etc. must be put on hold for two reasons: first, satisfaction is no longer immediate; second, the working process involves self-controlled behaviours and attitudes. It is quite clear that such conditions of possibility of labour, as described by Lukács, are exactly those highlighted by Marx when he says that men, by transforming external nature, transform themselves.

For our argument, however, what is important to stress is that Lukács devises in the possibilistic character of that double transformation (of things and of human beings) the objective foundation of both ethics and moral. Ethics are founded on the objective character of values (the possibility of becoming other of things); moral is founded on the objective possibility of becoming other of human behaviour, hence of becoming other of human being.

In order to deal with these problems raised by Lukács one should depart from the alternative character of labour. The concrete alternatives of labour always involve in the last instance the choice between trueness and falseness, just because the realisation of the posited end rests on this ability of discerning the true constitution of things, relations etc. This implies that the alternatives of labour have an insuppressible cognitive character. Now that which, in the process of labour, is recognised as correct or incorrect, true or false, useful or useless etc. by an act of consciousness is naturally related to the end of the process. It is related, thus, to a use-value. This means that, for Lukács, human consciousness emerges as an 'organ' of judgement that, stretching out the metaphor, secretes valuations. Lukács synthesises these ideas as follows:

The alternative thus gives rise to a bifurcation of the objective world effected by the subject on the basis of the known properties of the object related to the reactions which the interactions with the world induce. This series runs from the opposition of the useful and non-useful, beneficial and harmful, by way of many social mediations, up to the 'highest values' such as good and evil. (Lukács, 1984: 502)

Yet to understand the role performed by consciousness in human practice and its relation to values, it is necessary to notice that the direction of the determination of action is inverted by it. Taking for granted that the decisive act of the subject is the teleological positing and its actualisation, it becomes clear that 'the categorically determining moment of this act comprises the emergence of a praxis determined by the "ought".' (Lukács, 1986: 61) Hence, whenever intention intervenes, the envisaged future governs the present in the form of an 'ought' that simultaneously impels and constrains action. The radical inversion involved here can be clearly grasped if we consider that in biology

the normal causal determinability, in men as well as in animals, emerges as a causal process in which the past inevitably determines the present. Even the adaptation of the living being to a changed environment takes place with causal necessity, as far as the organism, on the basis of its properties produced by the past, reacts on such a change in assimilative or destructive way. The end-positing... reverses this relationship: the end exists (in consciousness) prior to its actualisation,

and in the process that leads to this actualisation each step and each movement is governed by the posited end (by the future). (ibid.)

What is governed by the future, then, is a series of causal chains that, when selected, rearranged, put into movement and continuously monitored in an adequate way, brings about the posited end. The regulation of the whole process by the future takes the form of a new category of social being – the ‘ought’ – which is the determining factor of the subjective praxis. This new category is indissolubly bounded to value, but it is not identical to it. On the one hand, the ‘ought’ can only perform that specific function in practice because what is intended is a value to human beings. On the other, the value cannot be realised unless it imprints on the working subject the ‘ought’ of its realisation as a criterion of practice. (ibid: 68)

From this perspective the ‘ought’ is understood as the social objectivity of values reacting back on subjects as the internal criterion of adequacy of practices. The fact that this criterion of adequacy, which operates along a complex chain of alternatives, is always predicated on a desired end (on a value) demonstrates both the unity and the difference of the ‘ought’ and value. By acknowledging this difference in unity Lukács could illuminate the process by which the crystallisations of human practice (realised values) appear to human beings in practice as reasons to act (the ‘ought’). Reasons to act do not emerge out of nothing, but are grounded on those crystallisations, which are conserved, developed or transformed in and by practice. Therefore, the values implicit in those reasons to act, no matter how contradictory they might appear to individuals, are always antecedently given to them. Similarly to social production, relations, structures etc. that are outcomes of individual acts, but not their external and *post festum* aggregation – as pretended in the fairytales about the superlative isolated individual –, values are alternative outcomes of individual acts, but not synthesis of individual teleological positings.¹⁸

For this reason, says Lukács, it is possible to affirm that: ‘Every genuine value is then an important moment in every fundamental complex of social being that we denote as practice’. Actually, production and reproduction of social life is a complex process carried through by innumerable and distinct teleological acts that in practice are concretely linked to the acceptance or rejection of a value. Such process is just the condition of realisation of values and should not be confused with their ontological genesis. (ibid.: 83) On the contrary:

The genuine source of the genesis is rather the uninterrupted structural change in social being itself, from which the value-realising positings directly arise. It is a basic truth of the Marxian conception ... that men make their own history, but not under circumstances they can choose. Men rather respond – more or less consciously, more or less correctly – to those concrete alternatives that the possibilities of social development place before them at the time. But value is already implicitly involved in it. ... [Value] is a moment of social being, and is therefore really existent and effective even if it is not conscious, or only incompletely so. (ibid.: 83-4)

With this Lukács is able to vindicate, in his analysis of labour, the social objectivity of both values (ethics) and the ‘ought’ (moral). Nevertheless, it should not be inferred from this that Lukács is reducing all the complexity of the question of values to those that were treated when examining the complex of labour. The purpose of the latter, as already mentioned, was ‘simply’ to establish that the specificity of social being is based, among other things, on the fact that the activity by means of which human beings elevate themselves out of nature – labour – already presupposes values.

In our opinion, the fecundity of Lukács’ analysis rests precisely on the fact that the role of subjectivity is objectively connected already in labour to the recognition that this new form of being creates the conditions of its own reproduction. The peculiarity of the development of social being, therefore, consists in its being an open, non-teleological process that comes about by means of socio-teleological positings. Such a development amounts to a process of structural differentiation in which new spheres, categories, relations etc. emerge, conforming social being as a totality of relatively autonomous complexes. This complexification involves obviously the

¹⁸ Though obvious, it is worth emphasizing the parallel between this formulation and Bhaskar’s conceptions as presented in his critique of methodological individualism and in the chapter entitled Societies (Bhaskar: 1979).

multiplication and diversification of the alternatives ever facing human beings, together with the specific values of each complex. The development of social being then brings about a differentiation within the complex of values that do not prevent the opposition or even the antagonism among values of different spheres.

Despite the differentiation of spheres and the possibly contradictory character of their values, Lukács emphasises the ultimate unity of the totality of social being. All values, no matter their mutual contradiction, are connected in a more or less mediated way to the reproduction of social being, in the last analysis, to its material reproduction. In opposition to Max Weber who, according to Lukács, wants to derive a relativist conception of values from those contradictions or from the fact that it is impossible to abstractly rank the different values, he asserts the contradictory nature of the constitution and development of social being. (ibid.: 85) For him, the fact that, for instance, economic values might be in contradiction to other values, say, aesthetical, legal, everyday life values, just expresses the semi-autonomy of the complexes of social being with their corresponding values, and their complex interactions.

In class societies this contradictory character of values within and between distinct complexes is self-evident. Admitting that the first truly universal society is that posed by capital in a movement that tends to abolish and/or turn irrelevant all but social differences,¹⁹ it is understandable that this very objective development of social being may give rise to conflicting values. Values such as solidarity, identity (in difference), equality etc. emerge as a result of the same process of universalization that prevents their realisation. This is exactly the case in which, according to Lukács, economic values are in direct contradiction to the values that might be objectively held in other domains.

Concluding remarks

In these concluding remarks we wish to recall that most of the arguments presented here were directly derived by Lukács' inspection of labour. Therefore, when the problem of correctness of reflection was first raised and discussed, it referred mainly to natural reality. Nothing was 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 main tenets of Lukács' conceptions is that there is no such thing as a general teleology, either in nature or society. Now, even if it is impossible here to pursue any further the reasoning of Lukács, it follows from this recognition that society is, like nature, an objective and structured totality in process. Hence, as far as reflection is concerned, there is no need of any substantial change in the analysis provided by Lukács when its objects are the causal structures of society, except by the fact that these structures are posited, that is to say, they are at the same time the conditions and results of the interaction of a myriad of individual (and social) teleological positings.

Society as nature has to be reproduced in thought, has to become spiritual possession of individuals. In the objectification of the reflection both nature and society are means and objects to the positing of ends: both have to be apprehended as they really are and have to be thought differently from what they actually are. That is the way human beings, in and through practice, mould the world to satisfy their needs, aspirations and desires. But what desirable about society is quite different from what is desirable about nature. Desirable about nature involves inscribing in nature something that it would never have by itself. Desirable about society involves inscribing in society some possibility that it can only have by itself. In both cases, the decision about what is to be inscribed is determined by social reality itself. But in society such objectifications have an ulterior determination, since the concrete alternatives are opened up by social evolution itself. In Lukács' words:

¹⁹ In this sense, it is perhaps justifiable to say of capital what Marx says about money: '[...] money ... like the radical leveller that it is, does away with all distinctions.' (Marx, 1992: Sec. 3. A)

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 make it. (Lukács, 1984: 592)

If therefore society is conceived as a ‘complex of complexes’²⁰ and if from the interaction of these complexes result tendencies that govern its evolution, then the two heterogeneous acts involved in the reflection also apply to society. In the first, the point is to reproduce as exactly as possible these existing tendencies. In the second, the point is to posit social ends (values) that, despite their objectivity, might or might not be compatible with existing social structures. Now the possibility of realising these ends, as we have seen, depends ultimately on the first act. Considering emancipation as the realisation of such values generated 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.

In this regards, what is relevant 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 a common ground within the Marxist tradition. What is most fundamental is the connection he establishes between the values that emerge of this very progress of social being and the ‘ought’ as socially posited-values that regulate social practice – both the most elevated values cherished by humanity, even when expressed in an idealised form, and the most humanly repulsive values belong to social being. Their antagonism expresses the contradictory nature of the social structures, relations, tendencies etc. that foster or hinder the realisation of social values.

Within the Marxist 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 communal, social productivity as their social wealth’ (Marx, 1973: 158). More concretely, it is conceived as the realisation of

the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., [...] the absolute working-out of his 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. (ibid.: 488).

Thus, if emancipation can be ultimately synthesised in Marx’s aphorism that ‘the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all’, as repeatedly 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 governed by the future. A future that, in straight analogy to the ‘ought’ operating in labour, represents the objective possible developments discernible from today’s conditions.

From this perspective, it is reasonable to claim that ‘human nature’ lies in the future rather than in a past that could be either presupposed or discovered by anthropology. Human nature is rather a future that human consciousness has to figure out from the present circumstances. But it has always to be figured out in the midst of socially determined ontological representations that often crystallise themselves into a social power. These ontological representations, nevertheless, might be in contradiction with the very cognitive act of conceiving a possible future. Under certain social conditions such ontological representations might in fact disallow the future. Or, what amounts to the same thing, render it the perennial reproduction of the same, consequently reducing social-teleological positings to mere practical manipulation of present conditions (institutions, knowledge, productive forces etc.) in order to accomplish their corresponding goals. For Lukács, these are conditions presently facing humanity. The manipulation of all spheres of social life as the ever increasing condition of the reproduction of capitalism can

²⁰ 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’. (Lukács, 1986: 227)

proceed indefinitely and uninterruptedly, exempt as it is from a scientific consciousness that voluntarily gave up or nominally refuses to talk about a scientifically founded ontology. It is against this false ontological consciousness, based on dominant social necessities, that Lukács emphasises the need for an ontological critique that could not only show that a rational ontological conception of the world is possible, but that in a social world so conceived there are alternatives – concrete alternatives.

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