

LUKÁCS' CRITICAL ONTOLOGY AND CRITICAL REALISM

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ABSTRACT: This paper intends to put forward the late work of G. 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 is quite unknown even by authors and currents which have been (properly) dealing with ontological issues in the last decades it seems to be extremely fruitful to bring it into discussion. Comparing the analysis of Lukács with the ontology of Critical Realism, for instance, 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.

Introduction

By the beginning of the 1960s, after the publication of the first two volumes of his (unfinished) *Aesthetics*, Lukács set out the project of developing a Marxist ethics. For this purpose he had been collecting a huge amount of material 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 tracked down to the early 1930s. (Oldrini, 2002: 54) Since, for Lukács, there is no ethics without ontology, his Marxist ethics could only be elaborated on the basis of a Marxist ontology of social being. Thus his voluminous work, *The Ontology of Social Being*, published in German after the author's death in 1971, is the end result of the attempt to develop an ontological foundation for an ethics that unfortunately could not be accomplished.

One could say with Tertulian 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).¹ This rejection necessarily presupposes 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 would be also possible to affirm that Lukács' ontology was 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 the main complexes of social being, namely, labour, reproduction, ideas and ideology, and alienation. Such an arrangement in which the positive contribution for the ontology of the human world appears in

¹ To state 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 Marx for instance (1994).

the last part of the work is not unintentional. For it necessarily stems from the analysis carried out in the first section. In this analysis 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,² the 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 contrasted with Hegel’s and Hartmann’s explicit effort 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’ (ibid.: 559). Marx’s (implicit) ontological legacy is not only made explicit by Lukács but is also employed 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,³ but seeks to contribute to underline the obvious mutual benefits that might accrue if the insights of Critical Realism could be combined with those put forward by Lukács.

Hence, this article concentrates on some few moments of Lukács’ *Ontology* which seem to make clear the topicality of his contribution. One of these moments is certainly the critique of the main contemporary philosophical traditions (positivism, neo-Kantianism etc.) which, maintains the author, are not able to distinguish social being as a specific form of being. The first section tries to follow the argument by means of which Lukács, in his critique of neopositivism, connects this theoretical deficiency not only to the set of presuppositions it involves, but also to its serious practical implications. The way the author advances what is denoted, in the jargon of Critical Realism, an *explanatory critique* of neopositivism, is also presented. The second section summarises Lukács’s 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. Finally, a concluding section reproduces Lukács’ examination of the dialectical relationship between social practice and social consciousness. In this examination, the author discloses the ontological foundation of science in labour (practice) and defends the indispensable character of ontological critique.

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

Perhaps we should begin with Lukács’ indication that the main insufficiency of contemporary philosophical traditions is in itself ontological. 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 handle what distinguishes social being, namely, the

² Neopositivism is the term employed by Lukács to denote the late theoretical avatars of the positivist tradition.

³ 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.

dialectical unity of necessity (law) and liberty (freedom). Since the ontological distinction among these domains is not 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. On the one hand, conceiving social being as having no specific being at all and, on the other, establishing 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. (Lukács, 1984: 325)

Such a radical bipartition of the world can never be accomplished in a consequent manner, because it misses the distinctive feature of society, precisely the unity of causality and teleology. Following Marx, Lukács points out that society is the unique realm of reality in which that unity can be concretely (i.e., non-speculatively) shown. Human practice is nothing but the ideal positing of end and its consequent objectification. Now the positing of an end that reality cannot generate by itself and the manipulation of objects in order to realise this end both presuppose a correct knowledge – in any degree – of real objects, structures, relations, tendencies etc. To put it bluntly, this 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’ (Lukács, 1986: 20).

In other words, realisation of human ends means conversion of pure causalities into posited causalities. The successful realisation of ends can then be taken as the demonstration of the empirical plausibility of those descriptions, conceptions, representations, etc. 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. (Marx, 1976: 37)

Naturally, understanding the empirical plausibility of conceptions of reality is not the same as admitting the equivalence of every representation suggested by the celebrated pragmatic maxim: ‘the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief...’ (James, 1907: 30) By opposition, Marx’s own work can be held as an effort to criticise the conceptions of immediate practice, which he frequently refers to as *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 men to transcend the ‘truths’ 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, is the starting point of all theoretical attempts to explain the nature of knowledge and the criteria for its validation. The question 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. When the teleological character of human praxis is not highlighted, when it is not acknowledged that consciousness is a constitutive category of human being, when it is not realised that consciousness emerges in and through practice, consciousness and reality are completely severed. Hence the correspondence between them can only be treated, says Lukács, in a ‘purely gnosiological or purely methodological, epistemological way’.⁴ (Lukács, 1984: 326) It goes without saying that in an approach like this the criteria for attesting the validity of our conceptions can only be found in the empirical reality.

⁴ Gnosiological, in Lukács usage, refers to theory of knowledge in general, while epistemological refers to scientific knowledge.

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 to neopositivism and neo-Kantianism respectively. In both cases the 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 partake a fundamental belief: ‘that ontological questions are not relevant to the philosophy of science’. And precisely because consciousness has no access to things in themselves. (ibid.)

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. For our purposes it suffices to mention his interpretation of the roll 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 and science would deal with secular issues.

The eviction of ontology from the modern scientific endeavour, argues Lukács, is already in germ 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 cannot aspire anymore to rival science at the ontological level. On the other, as put forward by Lukács, science – under the influence of chief contemporary philosophical traditions – voluntarily relinquished any ontological aspiration. The most unequivocal evidence of this orientation is provided by neopositivism, 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 expose in detail the critique of neopositivism made by Lukács in his *Ontology*. But it is worth mentioning that this critique, though situating neopositivist ideas in the history of philosophy, is mainly concerned with the relationship between its genesis and development and the imperatives posited by the society ruled by capital. These imperatives express capital’s continuous and increasing necessity of regulating all spheres of social life. It is only when society appears to the 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 the society of capital), it is not hard to understand why social science can be informed by philosophical doctrines, such as neopositivism, that reduces science to mere assistant of immediate praxis.

This critical inspection of neopositivism 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. (Bhaskar, 1979: 67)

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 among these two descriptions of the same critical procedure, which were developed in complete ignorance of each other, can be easily explained by the fact that they admittedly rely on Marx. Lukács shows that this critical stance of Marx's thought can be recognised as early as in 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, proceeds Marx, 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 from 'the actual historical efficacy of certain representations of god should result to these a kind of social existence'. There is here, argues Lukács, 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'. (Lukács, 1986: 561)

Moreover, Marx contends that Kant's attacks on that 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]. (ibid.) In other words, Lukács is defending here that Marx apprehends clearly the reflexive relation between social consciousness and social being. It is this indissoluble relation that explains why the genuine critique must in the end be able to give an account of the social reality of those forms of consciousness that are demonstrably false or superficial by logical and epistemological argument.

Thus neopositivism, 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.⁵ Since science, philosophy and religion do not constitute autonomous complexes – each one with its own law-like movement –, such unconstrained reliance upon science had to imply some repercussion on 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 the bourgeois society, the dismantling effects of scientific discoveries on ordinary and religious ontologies – and its contribution for a comprehensive and rational knowledge of reality – contradict the irrational character of class society itself. In accordance with Lukács, it is this contradiction that explains the specific role played by positivism, and specially neopositivism, in the development of philosophy within the bourgeois society. In fact, this contradiction seems to disappear to philosophies that

come up reclaiming a perfect neutrality regarding all questions relative to the world conception, a simply 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. (Lukács, 1984: 351)

As a philosophy that suppresses any ontological concern, neopositivism presents itself as an adequate philosophy for science precisely because its presumed neutrality would be a warranty

⁵ 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 result 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'. (Lukács, 1984: 331)

for pure scientific knowledge. However, this endeavour of setting 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 with the increasing mathematization of natural sciences, since the homogenisation of reality involved in the mathematical reflection appeared to provide the uniform device needed by a theoretical conception willing to describe reality in exclusively empirical terms. From this perspective, neopositivism, 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 neopositivism 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 neopositivism.

Though the reliance on the mathematical logic lent an objective appearance to neopositivism, it naturally brought with it the subjective-idealist point of departure of the old empiricism, namely the sensorial experience. Thus, in Lukács' opinion, when referred to scientific practice neopositivism does not differ substantially from subjective idealism, no matter their subtle particularities in other aspects. Their fundamental agreement is contained in the belief that reality in itself is something uninteresting and in its corollary that truth should be set aside: all that matters is the 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 something evident for a Marxist. The point is the narrowing of the scope of practice that is so operated. To understand the problem at stake here it is necessary, according to Lukács, to analyse other aspects of practice. Firstly, it is a truism that practice is always immediately directed towards a determined concrete objective. For this reason it presupposes knowledge of the true constitution of objects, relations, structures etc. that are means to the posited objective. It follows from this that practice is intimately related to knowledge. Hence practice, particularly labour, can be conceived as the original source of the theoretical activity of men. (ibid.: 353-4)

Departing from this relationship between theory and practice, one can agree with Lukács that, in the course of human development, the knowledge acquired within practice ontologically followed two distinct but frequently interconnected paths. On the one hand, knowledge emerging within immediate practice, when correctly generalised, is integrated to the totality of existing knowledge, giving rise to a correction and veridical enlargement of the human conception of the world. In this first path practice works decisively to scientific progress. On the other hand, knowledge obtained in practice remained confined to direct usability in immediate practice. In this path, alternatively, practical knowledge has the exclusive function of assisting the manipulation of certain objectual complexes. From this ontological analysis of practice, Lukács suggests that the less developed was science, the more frequent should the immediately correct knowledge be integrated into false general theories. (ibid.: 354)

The peculiarity of neopositivism consists in raising this second tendency to the 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, neopositivism rendered the tendency of the times – which worked also in the 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 then: 'it is no longer the case of asking if, in each singular moment, the linguistic regulation of neopositivism 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 neopositivism and of its overwhelming role in the 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 the knowledge of reality in itself and, consequently, the 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 the correspondence to the object: epistemology [gnosiology] founds itself unilaterally on the form of the statement, on the productive role that the subject plays in it to find the autonomous criteria – immanent to consciousness – of the true and the false. This development reaches its highest point in neopositivism. Epistemology [gnosiology] turns itself thoroughly in a technique of language's regulation, of transformation of semantic and mathematical signs, of translation of one 'language' into another. (ibid.: 355)

The parallel of Lukács analysis with Critical Realism's epistemic fallacy seems to dispense with any comment. Nevertheless, it might be relevant to glance at the self-delusion that, affirms Lukács, neopositivism and other schools of thought that adopt a purely epistemological [gnosiological] orientation fall prey to. Self-delusion that can be traced back to their oblivion of being's ontological neutrality as regards the categories of the universal, the particular and the singular. 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'. Neopositivism 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' as 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 the 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.⁶ For Lukács these are the circumstances which give rise to the illusion that 'the universal is nothing but a product of the knowing consciousness, and not an objective category of reality in itself'.⁷ (ibid.: 357)

A reverse and complementary illusion happens in the analysis of the singular: the illusion of its immediate givenness. Neopositivism does not apprehend, 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. (ibid.: 357-8) 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, as any other, presupposes a taxonomy of classes and species, which are nothing less than universals and particulars. (Borges, 1999: 229) In other words, languages have to recur to particulars and universals to identify singulars by the trivial fact that these cannot exist without particulars and universals determinations.

Once having identified the linguistic turn already in neopositivism and hence anticipating the linguistification of the world that would happen later in theory, Lukács was almost alone in

⁶ Taking issue with Quine, 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.' (Searle, 1998: 26)

⁷ Although it is not the 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.

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. Quite differently from the conceptions that nominally dismiss ontology under the argument that the world in itself cannot be known, ontology permeates Marx's work. 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 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 active 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 a massive and complex work like Lukács' *Ontology* one is compelled to pick up only a few of its moments. This is what will be done in the next sections.

Elements of Lukács' Ontology of Labour

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 A. 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,⁸ 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.

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.⁹ 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 last 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

⁸ 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.)

⁹ 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'.

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 and have equally in it 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 question 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 many categories of its own. The ideal reconstruction of this complex totality had to depart from one of these categories.¹⁰ 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 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 has as an intermediate character, in the sense that it is precisely labour, which is a metabolism between man (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:

¹⁰ For Lukács’ defense that, for Marx, society is a totality that is always already immediately given, see Lukács (1984: 579)

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.¹¹ (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.¹² 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.¹³

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'. 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 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 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)

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.

Thus such generalisations, as attempts to find a way out of the antithetical character of teleology and causality, end up by affirming the former 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'.

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 those antitheses, the process has to transform pure causality into posited causality, without violating the inner nature of the former. (ibid.: 18)

Recalling Aristotle's examination of labour, Lukács describes how this unity is realised. Aristotle analytically divides labour in two components: *thinking* and *producing*. At the first, both the positing of an end and the investigation of means of its realisation are carried out; at the second, the realisation of the previously posited end takes place. This description is made more concrete, says to Lukács, by the further division of the first moment suggested by N. 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.)

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 referred 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'. 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, realise materially 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, Lukács calls the attention to the fact that such overcoming of heterogeneities has defined limits. These limits do not refer 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 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 and, consequently, is 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.¹⁴

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, its first clear elevation from any near 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 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)

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 posed. On the other, it continuously accumulates the acquisitions derived from the 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 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,

¹⁴ 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.

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). 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' –, 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. Lukács stresses this central character 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. (ibid.: 26)

Concluding Remarks

This last section focus 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 certainly essential to the reproduction of the singular, but its role is confined to a reproduction of the species that is ultimately biologically regulated. Human consciousness, on the other hand, goes beyond this role of being instrumental to mere adaptive interaction to the environment.

Consciousness transcends this epiphenomenal character only when, as an internal moment of labour, it posits an end and the means of its realisation, i.e., with the 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. (ibid.: 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.: 28)

Having established the specificity of human consciousness, particularly its role in the emergence of a new form of reality, Lukács seeks to investigate the concrete modes it manifests and expresses itself and its concrete mode of existence. With this purpose in mind, he examines initially the two acts that constitute for him the 'true existing complex of labour': the exactest possible reflection [Widerspiegelung]¹⁵ of the realm of reality relevant to the end at hand and the

¹⁵ 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.

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 heterogeneous modes of considering reality. It is precisely this new ontological connection of acts heterogeneous in themselves that, besides building the ‘existing true complex of labour’, can be shown to constitute the ontological foundation of social practice. In addition, the two heterogeneous modes of considering reality entailed by them form also 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. For this reason, 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 of and the result from the teleological positing itself, in that it simultaneously requires two heterogeneous considerations of reality: reality as it is in itself and reality as related to the posited end. (ibid.: 29)

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 man from its environment which is manifested in the ‘confrontation of object and subject’. Clearly, Lukács’ point 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 conceiving her/himself as distinct from the reality that is being reproduced. The subject, thus, becomes conscious of her/himself as subject, as something different and separate from the world.

On the other hand, 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 objective the reproduced ‘reality’, as a content of consciousness, is not a reality. As a reproduction in consciousness it cannot have the same ontological nature of 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: the being and its reflection in consciousness.¹⁶ 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 and reality, according to Lukács, constitutes the fundamental fact of social being. And it is fundamental because the continuing interaction of these two heterogeneous moments – being and its reflection – immediately expresses that distancing of man from nature that is the presupposition of the fact that human reality is created.¹⁷ The duality represented by this heterogeneity is not suppressed by the permanent relationship of being and reflection. Actually, this duality is not eliminated even considering that the reflection, on the one hand, has already in labour an effect upon being and, on the other, is determined by its object. In the sequence 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. Consequently, even if this process involves a deepening of reflection, the distancing impedes the generation of ‘a quasi-photographic and mechanically true copy of reality’.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ It is with this duality, observes Lukács, that man elevates itself from the animal world. (Lukács, 1986: 30)

Secondly, the reproductions are always determined by the end-positings, i.e. they are genetically linked to the social reproduction of life. Hence operating here are two opposing tendencies: on the one side, there is the concrete teleological orientation of reflection and, on the other, there is the tendency of objectification working as a corrective. The reflection, thereby, has a 'peculiar contradictory position':

One 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.: 31)

This is, according to Lukács, the decisive aspect to understand the ontological relationship between reflection and reality. What is decisive, 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 by the fact that it might be concretely realised or not. Since human practice is always teleologically oriented this potential nature of reflection endows it with an insuppressible alternative character. And this alternative character is ever based on concrete and correct apprehension of causal structures of reality as a necessary to transform those causal into posited structures.

At this point it is worth summing up our outline of Lukács' ontological examination of labour. Firstly, it was shown that social consciousness has its genesis and development in practice. Secondly, the 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, the antinomy of reflection and reality was explained and it was argued that the dynamics of social being derives from their relationship. Fourthly, it was defended that reflection is determined by reality but relatively autonomous of it. Finally and consequently, the alternative character of human practice could be demonstrated.

We should stress here that most of these conclusions were derived by Lukács straight from the inspection of labour. Therefore, when the problem of correctness of reflection was 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 points emphasised in the analysis of labour was that there is no 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 similarly objective and structured as nature. 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 result from 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 really are. That is the way human beings, through practice, mould the world to satisfy their needs, aspirations and desires. But desirable about society is quite different from desirable about nature. Desirable about nature involves inscribing in nature something that it does not have. Desirable about society involves inscribing in society some possibility that it may or may not have. In both cases, the decision about what is to be inscribed is determined by social reality itself. But in society they have an ulterior determination, since the alternatives themselves are opened up by social evolution. 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 make it. (Lukács, 1984: 592)

If therefore society is conceived as a complex of complexes and if from the interaction of these complexes result tendencies that govern its evolution, then the two heterogeneous acts above discussed 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 that might or not be

compatible with existing social structures. 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 existing comosocial order. Lukács, conscious of this relation between ontology and emancipation, on the one hand, and conscious of the necessity of going beyond the aporias of *Realpolitik*, on the other, literally dedicated his last energies to the elaboration of an ontology of social being.

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