

**Ontology and Totality: Reconstructing
Lukács' Concept of Critical Theory**

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If critical theory is to have any lasting relevance today, it lies in its ability to contrast meaningful forms of life with the presently existing structure of social reality. The kind of critical reflection that can not only form a critical discourse, but also provide us with ethical categories to guide the construction of new institutions, to be able to confront the most profound forms of dehumanization and moral degradation, and therefore give us an insight into a qualitatively more progressive form of social life. This was the motivating impulse that drove proponents of the Western Marxist tradition from the beginning and, from this point of view, the work of Lukács' later period—in particular his researches into ontological questions—is a systematic attempt to reinvent the tradition of critical theory and bring it back to its roots as a confrontation with the structural-functional arrangements of capitalist society. Rather than a new philosophy of the subject or an attempt to construct an ethical theory grounded in Kant or Hegel, Lukács' approach takes Marx's insights seriously in deepening the project of critical theory. I want to argue here that Lukács' concepts of ontology and totality can help us achieve such a paradigm shift in critical theory, one that takes us back to a direct confrontation with the structural and material causes of the pathological consequences of modern capitalism. In this sense, the classic question of alienation, of the possibility of man's lack of control over his self-determination—in both individual and social terms—remains at the heart of Lukács' attempt to come to grips with the basic structure of human life, thought, and activity.

Lukacs' ontological theory provides us with a crucial way to find a concrete universal to which our theoretical and ethical categories can find reference, something that should be seen as an important antidote to the dilemmas of contemporary thought. In particular, the theories of modern social and political theory which seek to understand political, social, and moral categories from perspectives which exclude the distinctiveness of the ontological and material

substrates of human activity and thought. In this sense, the search for some kind of universalism which can establish objective ethical categories can be seen as the high-point of critical thought since, if such categories could exist, we would be able to make concrete ethical judgments about ethical and political affairs without any of the dangers of moral relativism. Only by overcoming the problematic relation between thought and being, between theory and practice, between *what is* and *what ought to be*, can critical theory hold its place as a unique enterprise. At the heart of this project, Lukács proposes that the impulse of “bourgeois” philosophy as manifested in an exaggerated concept of subjectivity—whether in the form of subjective idealism, or modern existentialism—needs to be overcome. The Hegelian solution to this problem was to seek a reconciliation between human thought and the rational structure of reality, to look for the dialectical unity of the subjective and objective into a new, more integrated form of life. The rationalism of the Enlightenment was seen as incomplete since it was unable to formulate a true idea of the totality for man, a home in this world which was genuine.¹ But Hegel’s was an insufficient attempt at holism since, as Marx argued, the unity of man with his world could only come about through the “actual” (actively rational, *Wirklich*) transformation of the material conditions that shape social life itself. Only then would the project of the Enlightenment, of the holistic vision of antiquity (*Griechensehnsucht*), and of Hegelian idealism, come to its proper completion. Lukács, then, stands at the end-point of this ambitious project, one that should be seen as the true core of critical theory.

Throughout his work, Lukács struggled with the basic tension that ran through the course of German Idealism: the relation between an autonomous ethics which gives primacy to subjective, practical reason on the one hand, and a non-autonomous ethics which privileges the objective nature of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit* in Hegel’s formulation) or the formulation of ethical

value as intrinsic in the objective structure of social life and practices.² In the case of the former, an ethical theory which could be used actively against the atomized world of modernity was appealing for obvious reasons: a subject could, as in the extreme case of Nietzsche, rail against the petrified iron cage of modern culture and its loss of meaning. But reflecting on the latter, the overcoming of the *absolute Zerrissenheit* required that there be some shared set of meaning in order for the tornness to be made whole again.³ Lukács expresses the chasm between these two approaches in *Theory of the Novel*:

No light radiates any longer from within into the world of events, into its vast complexity to which the soul is a stranger. And who can tell whether the fitness of the action to the essential nature of the subject—the only guide that still remains—really touches upon the essence, when the subject has become a phenomenon, an object unto itself; when his innermost and most particular essential nature appears to him only as a never-ceasing demand written upon the imaginary sky of that which “should be”; when this innermost nature must emerge from an unfathomable chasm which lies within the subject himself, when only what comes up from the furthest depths is his essential nature, and no one can ever sound or even glimpse the bottom of those depths?⁴

The opposition between the inner need of the individual and the objective world cannot be overcome through an autonomous ethics of what “should be”; the dichotomy itself has to be overcome. Although Lukács grasps this problem in *Theory of the Novel*, he is unable to come up with a satisfactory way out of this problem. I want to suggest that only in his later philosophical investigations is this problem solved in a compelling way; that the fact-value split is best seen as overcome through the formulation of an ontology of social being which is capable of providing a unification of *knowledge* of the object (socialized humanity on the one hand and the integrated moral personality on the other) and a *moral-evaluative* perspective for critical judgment.⁵ Only

by positing degrees of perfection of man can Lukács overcome the thorny problem of the fact-value split institutionalized by Weber and taken up by mainstream social science ever since.

In many ways, Frankfurt School critical theory began to disintegrate under the pressure of this very question. Marx had posited a cohesive theory of society, history, and our knowledge of them both, but by rejecting the centrality of this theory, thinkers such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer were unable to hold out against the temptations of subjectivity. The need to investigate the proper form of consciousness capable of understanding the mechanism of social change—a thesis put forth by Lukács himself in *History and Class Consciousness*—turned into a new problem for later Frankfurt School theorists: a defensive posture of the subject against the colonizing impulse of capitalist instrumental rationality in all of its forms. The turn toward the protection of subjectivity in the later work of Adorno and Horkheimer, to the linguistic turn of Jürgen Habermas, and the more recent move toward an “ethics of recognition” by Axel Honneth, all indicate an emphasis on epistemological concerns over ontological ones. This has the effect of distracting us from what Lukács posits as a more genuine approach to understanding the world and changing it: an insight into the processes of actual reality, into the concrete world which we inhabit. I want to argue that Lukács effectively brings together the insights of a particular Aristotelian-Hegelian-Marxist vantage point in order to construct a theory of society and ethical value which can bring critical theory back to its more radical, more critical point of origin.

For Lukács, the persistent problem of any critical theory of society is to understand, from a rational standpoint, the *ontological nature of social being* and oppose this rational knowledge to the irrational, distorted understandings that compete with that rationalist standpoint. What makes this a particularly relevant theme for critical theory, I will argue, is that it forces us back to Marx in order to retrieve a more radical position on the nature of social life than that espoused

by later Frankfurt School critical theorists who advocated a turn toward a concept of resistance embedded in forms of subjectivity. Instead, I will argue that Lukács provides for us a crucial framework for rebuilding a more critical, more Marxian conception of critical theory. This return to Marx does not mean a return to outmoded concepts of social theory, but a return to the question of the extent to which social praxis can be guided by forms of thought which do not take into consideration the structure and process of capitalist social forms and institutions as an essential element in human self-understanding. What Lukács' later work forces us to consider is the way a critical theory of society can be produced anew from the construction of a specific form of ethical content, one grounded in the ontological structure of human sociality.

This ethical perspective—one based on a specific structure of thought rooted in Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx—provides us with a deeper critique of modern subjectivist forms of ethics by building an ontology of social being which serves as a ground to formulate ethical claims about the nature of social life. In this way, the Marxian project of overcoming alienation is saved from an over-emphasis on romantic forms of transcending the social world of the present, but it also frees us from the rigid and dogmatic teleological forms of thinking that dominated the lion's share of Marxist thought in collapsing the subject into a fatalist structural-functionalism.⁶ In short, it is capable of forging a path out of the dual problem of determination and voluntarism without falling into the familiar traps of idealism and materialism. Far from being reductionist in character, Lukács provides us with a paradigm for a radical form of ethics that can both call into question the problems of capitalist modernity while also providing a framework for constructing a politics that escapes romantic flight from reality and a resignation to necessity. In short, it serves as a ground for an ethical theory tied to the problem of the realization of human freedom through the realist structure of social life. It is in this sense that Lukács' comment *keine Ethik*

ohne Ontologie should be understood: any ethical theory which is not grounded in the actual, real, ontological structure of human social existence will be ill-equipped to realize a more genuine progress toward human liberation; it will be plagued by some form of irrationalism, unable to shape genuine human personalities.

Lukács' particular ontological vantage point helps solve the crucial problem of constructing an objective ethics which, as Vittorio Hösle has argued "requires an ontology which transcends the factual and the empirical."⁷ This means that any objective ethics that simply reduces the *ought* to the *is* simply reproduces the Humean insight that we would not be providing an ethics at all, since nature cannot provide for us ethical content. Instead, I propose to read Lukács' ontological analysis back through the concerns of Hegel and Marx and, to a broader extent, of Aristotle as well in that they persist in seeing man as a dynamic, processual being. This lineage constitutes not only a distinct tradition but also, and more crucially, a distinct *structure of thought*.⁸ They hold this view of the individual and the social world itself especially in the face of subjectivist and liberal forms of ethics which they ultimately see as resting on problematic and abstract categories. Lukács is insistent that the domain of ethics be grounded in an objective, ontological sphere of social being in order to construct an ethical conception of human value which is in line with our nature as human beings. Lukács' basic insight to get out of the problem of the naturalistic fallacy is to recast the question of nature itself, to see human beings not as collapsed into the structure of external nature, but, rather, to tease out the unique categories of social existence itself: the determinative categories of social being which avoids reducing us to a materialist natural mechanism (a la Hobbes) but instead seeks to reveal the categories which can be used to engage the material structures of the social totality in order to enhance human freedom and reduce alienation and fragmentation. To do this, Lukács sees that it

is imperative to overcome the problem of subjectivist epistemology and ethics which, as his theory of reification had initially made evident, was the very source of modern alienation and false attempts at human self-understanding and freedom as genuine, unalienated self-determination.

The Domestication of Critical Theory

Although critical theory was always grounded in the Marxian premise that capitalism produced certain distortions in human rationality as well as a complex of social and cultural pathologies, its later phase became more concerned with the problems of subjectivity than on the structural-functional nature of late capitalism. Whereas Marx's critique centered on the constitution of subjects within the empirical contexts of social formations, contemporary critical theory has turned its attention to the problems of communicative rationality on the one hand and, stemming from the later work of Adorno, on a negative dialectic of subjectivity resisting all forms of domination. In the process, the centrality of capitalism and its specific social forms has been eclipsed by this renewed interest in articulating an alternative which is freed from the constraints of the structure and function of social forms. This has led to a shift in critical theory to construct forms of rationality accessible to subjects detached from the material basis that determines the context within which the subject is formed.

Deeply impacted by Lukács' theory of reification, Adorno was able to develop the critical application of the category introduced by Lukács, but without what he and other late Frankfurt School thinkers saw as the failed thesis of the "expressive totality." From a methodological perspective, Adorno's ideas can essentially be seen as a prolonged reading of the first part of Lukács' "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" essay in *History and Class*

Consciousness in terms of the second part, seeing the third part of the essay as essentially vestigial and passé. As a consequence, Adorno was centrally concerned with reification as a problem of knowledge and, therefore, a problem of subjectivity itself. Since a correct view of subjectivity had to be seen in dialectical terms, the crucial move for Adorno was to refuse any form of reconciliation of the categories of thought with the objective world. This was not a resignation, as in existentialism, but rather a condition wherein—because of the disruptive effect of capitalism on consciousness—one’s conceptual thinking about the world cannot identify the true object of its thinking. By seeing advanced capitalism as beyond our capacity to grasp in its totality (the whole was false, after all) critical theory needed to focus on the problems of consciousness, on the inability for our conceptual thinking to be able to grasp adequately the concrete totality. As Gillian Rose once pointed out, Adorno sacrifices “the unique advantage of a Marxian approach: the derivation of political relations and the state from an analysis of the productive and social relations of a specific kind of society.” In short, “he makes it impossible to reinsert the ‘individual’ into a socio-political context.”⁹

Because of this crisis of relating the individual to processes of social integration, Habermas seeks to transcend the materialist nature of the Marxist framework in order to derive a theory of society which is capable of escaping the pathologies of modernity without the rejection of rationalist forms of critical thought.¹⁰ To achieve this, Habermas moves beyond what he sees as the exhausted paradigm of subject-centered reason in favor of communicative rationality: “the paradigm of the knowledge of objects has to be replaced by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action. Hegel and Marx did not achieve this paradigm-change.”¹¹ Instead, Habermas argues, we need to move away from the dualism “between the productivity of a self-generating species and a primordial element prior to all

production” which he claims is “a symptom of exhaustion.”¹² The real problem is to move the emphasis of the task of critical theory toward those aspects of human reason that are capable of overcoming both the problems of social atomism as well as the problem of reification. In this sense, a communicative rationality serves as the basis for a new kind of ethics based upon discourse. We are concerned now, Habermas argues, not with the concrete analysis of the socio-political totality within which man is produced, nor are we concerned with the Aristotelian question of objective values grounded in a philosophico-anthropological understanding of man. Rather, we are concerned with ethical postulates that are universalizable through rational discursive practices. The substantive content of ethics drops out since there is no longer an anthropocentric referent and we are left with a mechanism of universalizing ethical claims through justificatory discourse.

The Marxist proposition that the starting point for building a theory of society begins with the notion of labor is seen by Habermas as superseded by the thesis of communicative action. Habermas reads the Marxian thesis of *homo laborans* materialistically via the first thesis on Feuerbach in order to show that social labor is a “form of reproduction of human life.” In this sense, he seeks to re-read the conception of social labor as “strategic forms of cooperation and rules of distribution,”¹³ taking the Marxian thesis in the direction of intersubjectivity and communication in order to establish a new paradigm for critical theory. Social labor becomes co-determinate along with language by preceding man and society, making it possible in the first place: “We can assume that it is through the structures of labor and language that a specifically human form of reproduction of life and also the initial state of social evolution occurred. *Labor and language are older than man and society.*”¹⁴ As a result, Habermas contends we need to move the paradigm of critical theory toward questions about deliberation, pushing critical theory

toward a Kantian paradigm mixed with pragmatism in order to analyze “the conditions for making impartial judgments of practical questions, judgments based solely on reasons.”¹⁵

This view is elaborated and built upon by Axel Honneth who sees that the basis of critical theory ought to manifest a distinct concern with a normative theory of “recognition” a thesis which argues that “the integrity of human subjects, vulnerable as they are to injury through insult and disrespect, depends on their receiving approval and respect from others.”¹⁶ Moving back to the idealism of Hegel and the methodological framework of pragmatism via G. H. Mead, Honneth’s move away from the material foundations of social life and consciousness makes the domestication of critical theory essentially complete. Now, moral theory is to concern itself with a sphere of social life which is detached from the logic of capitalist institutions and society more broadly. It may seek to reflect back on it, but it looks for the normative source of human liberation and the overcoming of the fragmentation of the human personality through means which bypass the structural-functional pulse that shapes the social totality within which individuals are shaped and formed. We are concerned with a moral philosophy which is epistemological and intersubjective, but removed from the concern with the ways in which social power is constituted by institutional logics grounded in capitalist economic life. The initial starting point of critical theory has now been eclipsed.

The domestication of critical theory means, in this context, a surrendering to abstract forms of thought which are unable to grasp the actual structure of the material forms of social life that shape forms of consciousness and praxis. Although Habermas seeks to secure a move to discourse ethics and an emphasis on the intersubjective nature of rationality, we are still not out of the problem of addressing the dialectical relation between subject and object in the sense of its relational structure to the processes and institutions economic life. The domestication of critical

theory is therefore the state of moving away from this fundamental ontological precept: that social life is grounded in pre-determined institutional forms which themselves shape the relations we have with others prior to the linguistification of consciousness and modes of expression. Adorno, Habermas, and Honneth pave a way for critical theory to abandon the ontological question and move once again, as with German Idealism, toward the separation of consciousness from objective structures and determinants of consciousness. More to the point, they are taken away from the real conditions of modernity: the capitalist matrix of social organization which possesses certain structural-functional conditions for the development of pathological forms of rationality and moral degradation.

Indeed, Habermas' basic critique of subject-centered reason retains its salience, but it takes us far afield from the initial problems critical theory sought to confront. The central reason for this is that the problem of the social and material constitution of human beings and society as a whole cannot be overcome through epistemological or discursive means alone. The content of the critical impulse against the structures of modernity are not an exclusively epistemological concern, but rather penetrate the deeper, ontological domain of social life itself. For this reason, both Hegel and Marx knew that the core problem was the means by which the social totality was structured: for Hegel around the question of the fabric of ethical habits and norms (*Sittlichkeit*) as well as the forms of subjectivity and institutional forms (*objektiver Geist*) to which that fabric gives rise, whereas for Marx it was a question of the ways in which the metabolism of society and nature was structured and organized that determined the nature of human freedom and development.

From Moral Epistemology to Social Ontology

Both Hegel and Marx represent for Lukács a fundamental critical wedge for contesting the pathological shape of capitalist modernity, despite their crucial differences. But this requires a move from *epistemological* questions and concerns to *ontological* ones. Epistemology, which inquires into the structure of consciousness, is unable to grasp the *process of realization*, or the ways in which consciousness is shaped, determined by external objective forces. It is “not only unable to detect the elementary form in a higher realization or to show the way from an initial intellectual attitude to a later one, but the elementary and the higher ontological forms appear from the epistemological standpoint as contradictions.”¹⁷ When directed at society, ontological questions therefore concern the need to overcome the deductive logic of Hegelian thought as well as the subjective nature of bourgeois thinking. The only way to disclose the actual reality of social being is to move beyond the deductive-logical thinking as well as subjective, epistemology. At its core, Lukács’ project becomes the construction of a theory of social reality which is truly dialectical in that it seeks to theorize the objective determinants of man’s “social being” while at the same time perceiving the ways in which that being can and must be shaped and changed by man. In place of being passive moments within an abstract totality, we become active members of it; shaping those factors which in turn shape us: “The categories that are the most important from the point of view of principles, namely, the categories of the more complicated forms of being as opposed to the lower forms of being, have already been discovered by science: the reproduction of life, as opposed to mere change of becoming something else; conscious adaptation to the environment by transforming it, as opposed to the merely passive adaptation.”¹⁸

The ontological foundation of human sociality is important for Lukács because it constitutes the totality within which man is constituted and constitutes himself. Man’s self-

evolution is circumscribed by this totality; it is the very foundation of thinking and of action, preceding our reflection of the world, rational or otherwise. By grasping the ontological structure of society, Lukács believes we will have an objective referent to build ethical values about the world which will be best suited to genuine human freedom, overcoming the moral and intellectual problem of atomism and diremption that oriented his thought from the beginning. Not unlike his theory of art, Lukács seeks to make this argument explicit within the realm of social theory in order to ground a normative vision of socialized man.¹⁹ This means that the essence of the critical project is rooted in the construction of a kind of ethical content which can orient thought and action to overcome the distorting, de-humanizing structures that constitute capitalist society: the structures and patterns of life that have a pathological effect on man's self-evolution, retarding his growth and progress as a social being. But these can only be known, only be judged from the perspective of a social ontology which can ground the concept of a true form or state of being in the sense that it takes into consideration the insights of man as a socialized, laboring being—one fully realized and functional in a socio-human sense. From a Lukácsian perspective, Habermas' move toward communicative rationality is insufficient for such a task because it does nothing to deal with the problem of *constitution*. The constitution problem arises from the basic ontological viewpoint that Lukács develops and it can be defined as the ways in which the subject is shaped and formed through its interaction with the object domain. Now, Lukács sees this as a central concern in structuring a Marxian philosophy of ethics, and the reason for this is obvious since the very nature of ontology, on his view, is derived not from metaphysical sources but from the point of view that sees the human subject as the result of processes of self-development, of *constitution*. This has its obvious roots in Aristotle's concept of ontology in his *Metaphysics*, but also in the ideas of Hegel and, finally,

Marx. Lukács' social ontology is a means of investigating the crucial category of the social totality within which individuals are constituted, shaped, and formed.²⁰ Lukács therefore recasts the problem of alienation (*Entfremdung*) as a means by which we can understand the general sense of the human subject's ontological and moral degradation from what he can most fully achieve. This degradation is not caused by distortions in intersubjective reason (as with Honneth) but by the structural arrangements in capitalist society which constrain the development of a more genuine, more integrated personality. Ontology, rather than epistemology, therefore becomes the most important form of investigation because it is the "science of the qualitative, that is the science which measures the degree of perfection or realization of a being."²¹ But this still requires that a crucial problem be solved, namely the problem of defining humanity in some ontological sense.

For Lukács, the ontological starting point is the concept of man as capable of positing a goal in thought which is to be realized through actual praxis within the objective, material world. It is a special kind of praxis which plays an authentic role in changing reality. He sees this as a seed for all other forms of human thinking and acting—from the simple act of fashioning an ax to higher forms of sociality such as intersubjectivity—since the real conception of social being he wants to isolate possesses the character of the subject's ability to have power over his ability to progress into higher stages of being; a genuine (i.e., self-conscious) state of being as a process of becoming free (*Befreiungsprozess*) can only be obtained through this creative praxis which, according to Lukács, is man's fundamental ontological ground.²² He does not make a neo-Fichtean move of seeing the world as constituted by the subject but rather sees it, as does Hegel, as a mediating process "that links human praxis with the idea of social progress."²³ It is not Lukács' claim that man can be reduced to the concept of labor, as some recent critics of Lukács

have suggested.²⁴ Nor is it his claim that the teleology of the labor process is a static dichotomy, which would place him into a neo-Fichtean position. Rather, the core element in his ontological investigation is to search for and isolate that kernel within human existence wherein he is able to be most “at home”; to be most able to overcome the problematic split between abstract subjectivity and static objectivity and then to build higher forms and categories of social being from that point.²⁵ Now, this means that we see the essential nature of man as a laboring being in a more complex way. Specifically, human praxis is understood as a series of conflicting decisions (*Alternativentscheidung*) where “every social act . . . arises from choices directed toward future teleological positings.”²⁶ This means that human praxis is grounded in the dialectical relation between thought and the object created. The value of any object, for any human being’s self-understanding (*Fürunssein*) as opposed to its economic exchange value, is determined by the extent to which it “can fulfill its social functions.”²⁷ Human beings are thus ontologically defined simultaneously by their sociality and their labor as seeking to realize goals (*Zielen*) in the concrete world. This Lukács refers to as the category of the “socio-human” (*gesellschaftlich-menschlich*).

Lukács claims that the root of social being is contained in labor which he defines as “the positing of a goal (*Setzen des Zieles*) and its means” wherein “consciousness rises with a self-governed act, the teleological positing (*Setzung*), above mere adaptation to the environment.”²⁸ The act of positing means that the individual’s labor is an act of realization (*Verwirklich*) in the sense that man humanizes the sphere of nature, endowing it with value but also, and more importantly, structuring the nature of consciousness as well. What is typically seen as *praxis*, in the Greek sense, the actions of individuals in the world, becomes more akin to the Greek idea of *poiesis*, the act of doing-as-making, of shaping, transforming the realm of nature, endowing it

with value. Making a distinction between “being-as-it-is” (*Sosein*) and the end product of labor which dialectically relates subject and object through the ontology of labor, Lukács sees a leap from the realm of pure nature to that of social being. The importance of this is that he wants to see labor not as the central category of all human action but, rather, to see in the nature of labor, of the “positing of the labor process” (*Setzungen des Arbeitsprozesses*) the kernel of what is most distinctly human in all human forms of action believing “that it is correct to see labor as the model for all social practice, all social behavior.”²⁹

The importance of this insight can be better grasped when we see that Lukács wants to connect this thesis of *homo laborans* with the kernel of the ontological essence of man. But as I have suggested above, this does not mean a reduction of man to labor, it means seeing that the only means to breach subject and object is through a process which is actually found in that process. The labor process is central because it is the seed for ontological transformation: man reworks himself through labor as well as the environment; he develops the potentialities within him thereby forcing a qualitative change in his being.³⁰ The real key here is not to come up with a comprehensive theory of social integration, but to found a grounding for ethical claims which can guide the ontological development of man and, therefore, to grant us an understanding of what is distinctly human in an ontological sense. Once we are able to do this, Lukács hopes we will be able to possess a framework within which we can articulate ethical claims which are not abstract, but radical in the more traditional sense the term in that they take man as the basic root of their concern. Lukács argues in his study of the young Hegel that this is a turning point in Hegel’ development and the more general move toward Marx’s conception of man. The basic idea is that by seeing the teleological nature of labor as a central idea, the activities of man could be linked with the objective structure of reality in a truly dialectical way.

The ultimate goal of this theory of man's social ontology is to provide a means for overcoming the great crisis that Lukács perceived throughout his work: the violent separation of the individual subject from the totality of his social relations, his social being, and the revolutionary potential that such knowledge can unlock.³¹ Labor is therefore a starting point since it is in true labor that subjectivity and objectivity are dialectically sublated. The objects of nature, of the world, do not simply face the subject as an obstacle or act upon the passive subject. Rather, there is a crucial back and forth movement of change: "the element of self-creation not only alters the environment itself, and this not only in a directly material way, but also in its material reactions on man."³² Labor is therefore not a category toward which all forms of social action are reduced;³³ it is, rather, the model for all higher forms of social behavior because it *mediates*, and thereby *connects* the consciousness of the subject with the external world in an active rather than passive way—labor becomes the "generative cell of social life."³⁴ This is not a simple connection between subject and object, of course, but a dialectical one which preserves the activity of subjectivity as well as a consciousness of the objective world's own intrinsic categories. Lukács wants to avoid the act of the subject merely "reflecting" (*Widerspiegelung*) reality instead seeing man, as did Marx, as an "active and passive component of a concrete totality."³⁵ This is done through mediations which have their beginning in the act of labor: "consciously executed teleological positing brings about a distancing in the reflection (*Distanzierung in der Widerspiegelung*) of reality, and with this distancing the subject-object relation first arises in, in the true meaning of the term."³⁶

The ontological reality of human social life is therefore to see that what is most essential to man is his ability not to change reality in some simplistic, poetic fashion but to see that the ability to rise to the condition of sublating subjective and objective reality can be glimpsed in

conscious labor. Labor therefore becomes something constitutive of man's environment and of himself; it is the "activity which provides meaning to sense and values . . . the key to anthropogenesis."³⁷ This results in a situation where "the total connection of the respective complex is primary to its elements. These elements can only be comprehended in terms of their concrete collaboration within the particular complex of being in question."³⁸ This is because Lukács adopts a view—one shared by Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx—that there is an intrinsic, categorical distinction between the empirical existence of any thing (*Dasein*) and the potential (???) reality (???, *Wirklichkeit*) that thing can achieve under proper conditions.³⁹ It is therefore crucial to tease out the ways in which ontology reveals to us not a static reality simply lying there as a datum of experience, but a seed for the genesis for potential development and unfolding into a higher form of being. This is a point of view which goes back to Aristotle who makes a distinction between mere matter (??) and actual substance which is the product of a series of causes (??). Therefore, when referring to the act of teleological positing, Lukács argues that "we should never lose sight of the fact that all that this positing can attain is a possibility, in the sense of the Aristotelian *dynamis*, while the transformation of potential into realization is a special act. . . . This act is precisely the decision arising from the alternative."⁴⁰

Now, in this sense, we can see that Lukács is trying to construct a moment wherein the subject and object division is overcome in a dynamic sense through the process of realization (*Verwirklichung*). But this process of realization through the activity of labor is reflexive and dialectical—our labor discloses to us the true nature of the world and ourselves. It is understood as that moment when we discover the rational structure of the world through praxis, through labor as opposed to contemplative thought: "I believe that that is rational (*rationell*) which corresponds with our experience in labor and our mastery of reality (*Wirklichkeit*), i.e., when I

find a relationship that actually functions.”⁴¹ The structure of reality is rational in nature, but not static—it is worked and re-worked by us, by our conscious positing of certain plans, desires, needs, goals which direct our activity upon the outside world. We are able to shape the very structures of reality which in turn affect us; we are “responding beings” who, if we are to overcome the sterile confrontation of the subjectivity and objectivity, must actively intervene in the objective structures which in turn play a role in constituting social being itself.

This ontological insight implicitly leads to an ethical one, for it means that the true expression of human social life ought to be found in the realization of this capacity found in labor; in the means by which we are able consciously to overcome narrow, rigid forms of subjectivity and objectivity. This ethical idea was the project of Lukács from the very beginning: it was the need to provide a means by which we could become able, in real terms, to overcome the atomized, reified form of culture and consciousness dominant in capitalist modernity.⁴² The ethical substance of the individual (*Persönlichkeit*) is a function of the extent to which this capacity of man is developed and permitted to develop: “The development of the process of labor and the broadening of the fields of activity have still other indirect consequences: the emergence and unfolding of human personality. This requires the growth of capacities as its indispensable ground.”⁴³ At its base lies the ethical proposition that to live a truly developed human life requires the proper knowledge of human needs: “seeking the satisfaction of unreal needs—private property, graft—renders one inhuman. On the contrary, the satisfaction of real needs makes one progressively more human. Man’s most essential need is to be a man as much as possible, and to develop his own and his fellows’ humanity. This is the way towards the development of human needs and this is how we realize in ourselves the totality of our essence.”⁴⁴ But how can a social ontology help us come to grips with these ethical demands?

First, it needs to isolate the “essence” of what it means to be human; and second, it needs to disclose the means of achieving such an ethical status. What is crucial for Lukács is that the “concrete process of development” of society (*Entwicklung*) not be confused with man’s development as a person (*Persönlichkeitwerden*); that we see a distinction between the developmental logic of modern societies and the realization (*Seiendwerdens*) of human beings that are its products. Forms of social organization which are not constructed around the total development of the species, which alienate us, split us off from our capacity for teleological positing, will therefore produce deformed selves—human beings who are constrained from reaching their fullest potentiality in terms of self-purpose and self-fulfillment as members of the social totality.

Returning to the Aristotelian root of this thesis, we come to see man as a species who achieves his optimum self-realization through labor because that creative practice is most formative in the act of developing the ethical totality of one’s personality. Aristotle’s idea was that there is an ontological distinction between, say, a brick as a piece of mere matter (as a collection of clay dried in a certain way), and a house, which is not simply the sum total of these pieces of clay, but an ontologically superior, more highly developed substance than an accumulated mass of clay. So with Lukács: the development of the human species has as its very driving force the engine of labor as teleological positing, the existence of man as a highly developed species (*höhere Gattungsmässigkeit*) is an ontological development, one that is premised on man as a social being constantly expanding his realm of freedom seen as human forces as ends in themselves (*Selbstzweck*). The human species becomes more free, erodes the state of alienation, unfolds into the realm of genuine freedom, each individual becoming more integrated as an ethical personality through this evolution—through the ontological movement

from inferior levels of social being to higher, more superior ones. Knowledge of this ontological capacity within the species is at once an *ethical claim* and a *knowledge claim* since we are able to evaluate, to judge the social organization of society and its products by the ways it produces us, by using the ontological understanding as a metric for understanding the extent of our alienation.⁴⁵

Now, the issue of labor as a model of social praxis becomes more important to solve a weighty problem. In the actual process of labor we witness a connection between subject and object, between individual and context, between man and nature, and most importantly, of man with man. Lukács sees it as crucial to tease out of the category of labor a capacity of man as a producer and a product; a free subject who is at once constrained by his environment and who has the capacity to alter it; as one who is capable in a creative way (i.e., through teleological positing) to enhance his humanity through that dialectical process. When one is alienated from this capacity, the ability to overcome the duality between the two realms is rendered impossible and the dialectical transformation of subject and object cannot occur.⁴⁶ We remain trapped in irrational forms of knowledge: subjectivism, rigid materialism, and so on. At a less abstract level of understanding, we begin to lose touch with the basic human capacity to reach out of our subjectivity, we begin to see the objective world around us as static, alien, unchangeable. The sociological implication of this thesis is that what Lukács, in his earlier, more famous work, called “reification” now becomes a concrete social-psychological condition rendered existent by the taking away of this capacity for “teleological positing.” In this sense, the ontological project is seen as essential for Lukács because of the need to transcend those false forms of knowing which misstate the nature of man: as a linguistic being, as an atomistic individual, a pure subject, as an emotive being, and so on. It is therefore crucial to grasp the nature of praxis adequately, as

our interaction with the sphere of nature, of necessity itself.⁴⁷ Our socio-human nature is optimally realized once we are able to see that our humanness (*Menschsein*) develops through socio-cooperative praxis oriented toward solving concrete problems of human development. This praxis is not blindly guided, but grounded in what Lukács sees as the “fundamental ontological ground: Causality set into motion through teleological decisions where choice comes into play.”⁴⁸ The dimension of choice is crucial since Lukács wants to direct his ontological investigation toward the social rather than toward nature. Man’s life becomes more meaningful once his self-understanding encompasses himself a “producer and at the same time as a product of society achieves something greater in his humanness (*Menschsein*) than being a mere sample of an abstract species.”⁴⁹

This begins with an interpretation of Hegel’s “genuine ontology” (*echte Ontologie*) which he defines as an ontology which grounds knowledge about the world in the very categories and structure of the world. “This represents,” writes Lukács, “a great step forward in the direction of a completely new ontology. True reality appears here as a concrete becoming, and genesis is the ontological derivation of any objectivity, without which living precondition this would inevitably remain incomprehensible as a deformed rigidity.”⁵⁰ This discovery by Hegel is crucial, on Lukács’ view, because of its centrality in building an objective form of knowledge, but also because it recognizes the dynamic conception of reality that Lukács sees as crucial. Even more, we see contained in this insight the unique nature of an ethical theory which can be called properly Marxian. For Marx, the problem with the bourgeois conception of ethics is that it posits ethical value as separate from the material conditions of society. In this sense, a sterile is-ought distinction was developed which made most forms of modern philosophy merely contemplative rather than active. Normative concepts were no longer properly grounded in

actual social life and conditions, but autonomous from them. Even more, the separation of the *is* from the *ought* rendered an illusion in modern thought: that ethical content can be determined separate from the concrete totality of real existence. Lukács grounds this insight in Hegel's overcoming of subjective idealism.⁵¹ This leads us to an understanding of the world which is objective: there are certain ontological properties to things, categories that determine their being. In this sense, we see a crucial move in understanding the ontological program of Lukács: to formulate a concept of the human, of the social, which is itself ontological in that it possesses certain categories which determine the essential, true being of man and society. If we are able to access these categories of determination, we would be a long way toward constructing a critical vantage point for understanding ethical value which is not subjective, abstract, contingent, but grounded in the objective nature of human potentiality. Ethics would therefore serve as a guide for breaking through reification and evolving new, more humane forms of life. This was crucial for Lukács in his struggle against what he saw as rival tendencies in bourgeois thought that were intrinsically irrational in that they were unable to grasp the true, objective nature of the world as a totality. They were plagued by abstracting their ideas away from the material conditions of life, but also, by extension, from knowledge of the determining categories of their own existence.⁵²

Now, this also impacts the nature of rationality in an important way. If, as Lukács suggests, the core aim of ontology is the disclosure of the onto-genetic nature of human self-realization, then it becomes important to note the ways in which this impacts our ability to know what true reality actually is. In place of an epistemological vantage point, he sees it necessary to begin with an ontological one in order to be able to avoid the problem of subjective idealism: the act of simply reflecting the objective world in subjective thought without proper mediations.

Instead, as with Hegel and Marx, Lukács argues that the crucial move is to try to grasp the totality of the concrete nature of the social world, to ground a methodological way of knowing that escapes subjectivist, idealist, and other false forms of knowledge.⁵³ Without this, we are unable to orient ethical claims toward more integrative forms of social organization, toward forms of ethical value which can illuminate the more rational, more complete conception of the human personality and of society. Ethical concepts are therefore fused with correct knowledge of the rational structure of reality only once we are able to illuminate this social ontology—without this the fact-value split cannot be overcome. The ontological argument therefore provides an anchor to ground the activity of critical thought and action overcoming relativism, irrationalism, as well as providing us with a way out of the problem of reification and alienation.

Toward a Renewed Paradigm for Critical Theory

The basic thesis I have explored in this essay is that Lukács saw it as a central concern to elaborate an ontological understanding of social being in order to construct an ethical theory would be able to grasp the total nature of human social life. In this sense, the ontological grounding of human social life is seen in the act of overcoming the division between subject and object in the dialectical transformation of active labor. The fundamental aim of this hypothesis is to construct a concept of human ontological existence which can be used as a kind of metric for self-realization. The ethical element of this argument therefore retains the crucial humanistic doctrine of dignity, respect, and actual freedom through the process of man's self-realization. The development of one's individuality becomes dialectically constituted by the totality of social relations which either impede or promote this self-realization. This constitutes an ethical ideal which can be read through the major institutions of capitalist modernity. Indeed, what Lukács

was after from the beginning was a conception of value which would be able to direct forms of human consciousness toward the elaboration of ethical, cultural, social, and political forms of life which would promote the true, proper development of human personality.

This developed personality (*Persönlichkeit*) requires a social context which can promote its development; a set of relations which allow for the dialectical moral development of consciousness and action. Unlike thinkers such as Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch who also sought to defend the concept of an authentic, integrated personality in the face of the petrification of modernity, Lukács sees the individual's personality as grounded in the ontological dimensions of social being, in his capacity to realize "the realm of freedom as the 'unfolding of human forces that are ends in themselves; then, due to their worthy content, they can be valid ends both for an individual and society.'"⁵⁴ But what I have sought to show here is that Lukács' ontological investigations can bring us closer to an approach to ethics which grounds a conception of value in the objective category of man's self-determining onto-genesis. This position differs sharply from the current program of critical theory which has witnessed a return to Kantian and abstract Hegelian themes and, most importantly, away from the basic structural-functional critique that Marx put forward of capitalist society. Lukács' ontological project does not aim to produce a formalist ethics, but rather a foundation to orient our ethical categories and self-understanding toward the most genuine realm of human praxis (labor) in order to reverse the moral degradation brought on by capitalism's skewing of man's potentiality to emerge as an all-sided and self-fulfilled being. Confronting the concrete, institutional arrangements of society therefore takes on a renewed emphasis: the rising living standards of capitalist society cannot activate the greater promise that comes from the realization of higher forms of being through labor.

Critical theory was always concerned, at one level, with the problem of consciousness in the process of social change. What Lukács was also able to see was that this emphasis on consciousness was only part of a larger problematic: the poverty of moral values which define the capitalist epoch are not simply an issue of consciousness, they are the result of the particular ways that our self-understanding has been shifted away from our socio-human nature as an end in itself, toward our social being, a “species in-itself” (*Gattungsmässigkeit an sich*). Our at-homeness in the world—something sought after by Hegel and Hölderlin alike—the overcoming of the fragmented self under capitalism, of alienation, of a return to a more genuine sense of sociality, of individual agency, of more human forms of work, action, and thought were all the aim of Lukács’ ontological investigations. The basic thesis that man becomes more human, develops more of himself within a society organized around developing the potentiality inherent in human individuals and in society as a whole retains its radical character without devolving into Romantic fantasy. This serves as a ground for making critical theory come back to its initial project of investigating the fields of society, culture, and consciousness. A critical theory which is able to find the locus point for the pathological nature of modern life, which is able to make clear those dormant elements of consciousness for social transformation, a critical theory which is able to unite scientific knowledge of society with the act of moral evaluation—all of this is crucial for a renewed conception of critical theory. Far from seeing all of this through the lens of “reification,” we should extend this notion toward an understanding of ethical value. In this sense, the philosophical project moves from constructing a method of philosophical justification grounded in mutual recognition or discourse ethics toward the questions of moral value which are able (i) to address the content of moral concepts and (ii) become concrete, *actualized* in the world through transforming the conditions that precede and shape social life and social practices.

Put another way, the crucial move is to posit ethical claims which can resist the structural organization of capitalism on the basis that it has a deformative impact on social relations and personality development alike. This objectivist ethics is grounded in a sphere of values which is *capable of being realized through the transformation of social life and institutions*.⁵⁵ The ontological understanding of man's sociality therefore enables us to ground an objective moment wherein the conditions of human freedom and development—at the individual and social levels—are able to become markers for calling the present conditions into question. In opposition to the more abstract project of thinkers such as Ernst Bloch who attempted to integrate natural law and utopia into the structure of Marxist thinking,⁵⁶ Lukács was able to see that the key element of critical consciousness was a confrontation with the material organization of society, toward those structures which misshape our human potentialities and, most crucially, distort our self-understanding of ourselves as social beings.

The outlines of this problem are not purely philosophical. It points toward a critical path back toward the real, concrete conditions of human existence and the potentials that exist within that sphere of socio-ontological reality. In this sense, the ethical moment is brought back into critical theory without sacrificing the contribution of Marx's "materialist correction" to Hegelian idealism. If critical theory has been hampered by its inability to provide a unique, coherent ethical vantage point which does not recede back into the "abstraction" of the fact-value dichotomy, then we can see Lukács' thought as a fertile basis for a new ethical foundation for critical theory, one that is more radical, more complete than its competitors. Freedom seen as the ability to make conscious choice with respect to action, with respect to the enhancement of human freedom means the establishment of concepts which are able to grasp the ontological nature of man's relation to himself and society as a whole, as a totality. It means a return to the

formulation of concepts which can orient social and individual action and provide a more cohesive sense of critical reflection on the real origins of the various pathologies and potentialities of human social life. It means, in the end, the construction of a kind of ethical content which brings us back to unity with ourselves as social beings. In this sense, critical theory can once again find fertile ground for positive political and ethical claims. We are therefore left with a central insight of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, one which needs once again to be taken seriously and brought back into critical theory: “The reason of the people is as clever as its arrangements.”⁵⁷

Notes

¹ See Lukács’ discussion of this theme in Hegel, *Der junge Hegel und die Probleme der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft*. (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1986), 73-88.

² In Lukács’ earlier work, this takes the form of an attempt to reclaim some form of “authentic” community with a corresponding integration of cultural life. See the discussion by Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 159-196.

³ This was a problematic Lukács inherits most strongly from Simmel. For an excellent formulation of the problem see his 1918 book *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur*. (Baden: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1994).

⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 36-37.

⁵ For an interesting critique of Lukács’ attempt to overcome the fact-value split, see Norman Fischer, “Hegelian Marxism and Ethics.” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*. Vol. 8, nos. 1-2 (1984): 112-138.

⁶ For a discussion, see Guido Oldrini, “Die Ethische Perspektive von Lukács’ Ontologie.” *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*.

⁷ Vittorio Hösle, *Objective Idealism, Ethics, and Politics*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 45.

⁸ For a discussion of this Aristotelian-Hegelian structure of thought and its relation to Marxism and ethics, see Michael J. Thompson, “Marxism, Ethics, and the Task of Critical Theory,” in Michael J. Thompson (ed.) *Rational Radicalism and Political Theory: Essays in Honor of Stephen Eric Bronner*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

⁹ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 141.

¹⁰ See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 91-213.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick G. Lawrence. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 295.

¹² *Ibid.*, 296.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 148-149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 43. Also see the important discussion in *Truth and Justification*. Trans. Barbara Fultner, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 237-275.

¹⁶ Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on a Theory of Recognition,” in *The Fragmented World of the Social*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 248.

¹⁷ Ernest Joós, *Lukács’s Last Autocriticism: The Ontology*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 140.

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” in Ernest Joós, *Lukács’s Last Autocriticism*, 137.

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of totality in Lukács’ aesthetic theory, see Roy Pascal, “Georg Lukács: The Concept of Totality,” in G.H.R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas*. (New York: Random House, 1970), 147-171. For a discussion of the relation between aesthetics and ethics, see his *Ästhetik*, vol 2. (Berlin: Hermann Luchterland, 1963), 576-606.

²⁰ For a background discussion of Lukács’ concept of totality, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 81-127. Also see István Mészáros, “Lukács’ Concept of Dialectic,” in G.H.R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas*, 34-85.

²¹ Ernest Joós, “Alienation in Georg Lukács’ Ontology,” in Ernest Joós (ed.) *Georg Lukács and His World: A Reassessment*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 105.

²² Lukács claims that this process of becoming free can be completely achieved only in art. See his *Ästhetik*, vol 2., 830-872.

²³ Georg Lukács, *Der junge Hegel*,

²⁴ As Axel Honneth has recently argued, “it seems as if he intends to criticize the reifying practices that have become second nature by judging them against the ideal of a comprehensive form of praxis, in which all of reality is ultimately engendered by the productive activity of the species.” *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28-29.

²⁵ As Nicholas Tertullian has suggested, “the structure of [the *Ontology*] shows us, in effect, that Lukács begins from the analysis of the most elementary forms of social activity (beginning with work) and tries progressively to reconstruct the genesis of the principal social complexes (economics, politics, law, mores, etc.), by climbing the ladder towards superior forms of conscious activity (art, philosophy, the great moral acts).” “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” in Tom Rockmore (ed.) *Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy*. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1988), 252.

²⁶ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 139. Also see *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2. (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland Verlag, 1986), 12-13.

²⁷ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 140.

²⁸ Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰ Lukács makes this clear in his analysis of Marx: “Durch die Arbeit entsteht eine doppelte Transformation. Einerseits wird der arbeitende Mensch selbst durch seine Arbeit verwandelt, er wirkt auf die äußere Natur und verändert zugleich seine eigene, entwickelt ‘die in ihr schlummernden Potenzen’ und unterwirft ihre Kräfte ‘seiner eigenen Botmäßigkeit.’ Andererseits werden die Naturgegenstände, Naturkräfte in Arbeitsmittel, Arbeitsgegenstände, Rohstoffe, etc.” *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol 1, 563.

³¹ As Fariborz Shafai has noted, “ontology as the field of examining the real is the effective key with which to unlock and disclose the being of sociality and consciousness.” *The Ontology of Georg Lukács: Studies in Materialist Dialectics*. (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 123.

³² Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 50.

³³ Lukács is clear that he means to explore labor as a *model of social praxis*, not as the *essence of social praxis*: “we believe therefore that it is right to see labor as the model for all social praxis, all active social behavior.” Labor in the Marxian sense, of transforming objects into use-value, is seen as a narrow starting point: “Labor in this original and narrow sense involves a process between human activity and nature: its acts are directed toward the transformation of natural objects into use-values.” *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 46.

³⁴ Nicholas Tertullian, “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” 256.

³⁵ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 136.

³⁶ Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 47.

³⁷ Nicholas Tertullian, “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” 256.

³⁸ Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 47-48.

³⁹ See my discussion of this theme in “Marxism, Ethics, and the Task of Critical Theory.”

⁴⁰ Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 50.

⁴¹ Georg Lukács, in Theo Pinkus (ed.) *Gespräche mit Georg Lukács*. (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1967), 36.

⁴² I therefore see Honneth’s critique of Lukács as deeply misguided. It is not that Lukács wants to reduce the activity of man to the reproduction of the species, but rather to glimpse an ontological moment where the subject-object distinction can be overcome—not by a trans-individual subject such as the “proletariat” but that it is a potential moment in all human social praxis. As Shafai insightfully notes, “If theory-praxis, according to him, is not focused upon the present contradictions in the socio-historical present time in its presentedness, then two equally false alternatives open up: on the one hand, a romantic yearning for a past golden age (which forms the matrix of *Theory of the Novel*) or a utopian Ought-postulate whose very utopianism renders it ineffective.” *The Ontology of Georg Lukács*, 104.

⁴³ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 146.

⁴⁴ “An Interview with Georg Lukács,” in Ernest Joós, *Lukács’s Last Autocriticism: The Ontology*, 128-129.

⁴⁵ See the important discussion of alienation in *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 656-730.

⁴⁶ See the interesting discussion by Louis Dupre, “Objectivism and the Rise of Cultural Alienation,” in Ernest Joós (ed.) *Georg Lukács and His World: A Reassessment*, 77-98.

⁴⁷ See the interesting discussion by Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism: Lukács and the Marxist View of Reason*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 103-127.

⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 144.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁰ Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 1. (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland Verlag, 1986), 472.

⁵¹ See his discussion in *Der junge Hegel*, 332-349.

⁵² Lukács saw this as the result of tendency in modern thought toward subjective experience and away from the objective, material realities that condition human life: “It is a general tendency of the imperialist period to regard social relationships as secondary circumstances which do not concern the essence of man. The intuition of essence takes the immediate givenness of inner experience as its starting point, which it regards as unconditioned and primary, never looking into its character and preconditions, and proceeds thence to its final abstract ‘vision,’ divorced from reality.” “Existentialism,” in *Marxism and Human Liberation*. (New York: Delta Publishing, 1973), 247. The search for human essence is therefore not invalid, but requires an ontological method to disclose its content.

⁵³ For a discussion, see Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism*, 243-251; as well as H.A. Hodges, “Lukács on Irrationalism,” in G.H.R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas*, 86-108.

⁵⁴ Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 147.

⁵⁵ I develop a more coherent conception of “objective ethics” derived from Lukács’ ontological views in my forthcoming paper “Toward an Objective Ethics: Lukács’ Ontology and Contemporary Moral Philosophy.” *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, vol. 13, 2010.

⁵⁶ It was one of Bloch’s contentions that Marx himself possessed an implicit sense of natural law in his ethical vision of overthrowing capitalism for its degradation of workers and human beings in general and this was a fruitful starting point for integrating an ethical vantage point into the project of Marxism. See his important study, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. Trans. Dennis Schmidt. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 181-208.

⁵⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie II: Die Vorlesungen von 1805/6*. J. Hoffmeister (ed.). (Hamburg, 1967), 252.