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Critical Social Ontology as a Foundation for Ethics: Marx, Lukács and Critical Judgment*

by Michael J. Thompson

Abstract

In this paper, I outline a theory of critical social ontology derived from the fundamental ideas of Marx and the later work on the ontology of social being by Georg Lukács. I argue that we can discern categories of social being that can aid in the project of diagnostic social critique, but also that these categories can be used to formulate an ethical theory that we can ground in this critical social ontology. I therefore defend the thesis, against postmetaphysical thinkers that have argued to the contrary, that a satisfactory and critical theory of ethics can and indeed must be rooted in a theory of ontology. I end with some reflections on how critical social ontology can help combat the problem of reification and help us think through issues of ethical or normative concern.

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For several years, I have been pursuing the construction of a theory of critical social ontology that I believe can provide a coherent and unified philosophical framework or ground for Marxian theory as well as a more critical theory of ethics based on the ontology of human social being.¹ Central to this project has been the task of understanding how, in Marx's own writings, concepts such as 'materialism', 'social reality', 'essence', and so on, are to be interpreted and understood. What I would like to do in this paper is demonstrate that there is a consistent theory of human reality that undergirds Marx's ideas about human life as well as show that they can be used to develop a critical theory of judgment, or a system of evaluative reasons that can serve as the substance of a Marxian ethics or, in a more general sense, what I am referring to as an objective ethics. To this end, I maintain that a more robust understanding of social ontology can be gleaned from the Hegelian-Marxian vantage point and that the work of Georg Lukács is one thinker that can help us make these ideas coherent. What I propose here is to sketch the basis for a critical social ontology and then show how this can be used to articulate ethical-evaluative criteria for social critique.

Indeed, the import of such a research program seems to me to be a necessary and not merely academic concern. One of the core problems faced by Marxist theory has been the cultivation and maintenance of a critical insight into the forms of domination and control that pervade capitalist society that would allow for the formation of a radical and critical form of political agency. Whatever the mantras and tired slogans about the interests of a working class may have been, and for some, may continue to be, there is little question that the twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries have demonstrated a secular decline in that kind of political agency requisite for social transformation. Neoliberalism has created new and more intense relations of exploitation and expropriation even as it has created a new form of tacit legitimacy to these new systems of production and consumption.

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As a result, the reification of consciousness and modern ethical life has rendered critical cognition inert. Georg Lukács saw this to be the case about a century ago when he articulated the problem of reification as a kind of pathology of consciousness that resulted from the increasing penetration of the commodity form and the rationalization of productive and consumptive practices. The deformation of critical consciousness hid from view what he saw as the core insight of Marxian theory: *that human praxis lay at the core of any rational and valid conception of human existence*. Critical consciousness could only emerge in the context of the realization on behalf of working people that the society around them was in fact a collective creation and, as such, exploded the legitimacy of the private control over it and the rest of society as a whole. Lukács was never able to complete his reflections on social ontology or his project for a Marxian ethics. But I believe we can, indeed should, continue where he left off and consider the ways that a critical practical reason can be developed from the essential conceptual apparatus of Marxism.

But today, we can see that the impact of reification on consciousness has only deepened its effects. Neoliberal capitalism is not only a form of political economy, it is also a form of culture and consciousness where the self and consciousness have become absorbed into the functional structures of capitalist society. Capital's sociological shifts have shredded the structures of social-relatedness that once granted some stability to the individual. At the same time, the globalization of capital has rendered the social dependencies between capital and labor abstract; and the atomized self, now searches for meaning and comfort in various forms of group narcissism and 'identity'. With the gradual collapse of welfare state capitalism has come a new kind of reification: one that is rooted not only in the commodity form itself, but the new forms of technical command and control that has reinvented capitalism. We can therefore say that the participants in capitalist society lack a fundamental rational awareness of the rootedness of social and psychological pathologies in the distorted forms of sociality that are constitutive of capitalism.

It should therefore come as little surprise that theory itself – the mere reflection of these objective sociological trends – has essentially transformed the project of social critique into a form of irrationalism. I mean by this term what Lukács himself describes as the essence of irrationalism: the departure from seeing objective social practices as the basic criterion for truth-claims and a rational comprehension of the social world. Pragmatism, poststructuralism, analytic philosophy, intersubjectivity, discourse ethics, recognition, nihilistic attacks on progress and other trends in contemporary academic theory all share this common dimension. Lukács makes it clear that fundamental to any sense of critical dialectics is the thesis 'that praxis forms the criterion of theoretical truth. The accuracy or inaccuracy of the intellectual production of objective reality existing independently of our consciousness, or rather our degree of approximation to it, is verified only in praxis and through praxis'.²

Contemporary critical theory is caught up in this kind of irrationalism. It expresses itself most clearly in one of the most central philosophical tenets of our time: that of the postmetaphysical turn and anti-foundationalism. Current critical theory embraces an explicitly post-metaphysical paradigm shift where theories of communication, discourse, justification and recognition – all products of the post-metaphysical turn in moral and political philosophy – have gained sway. They embrace what I think we can call a form of 'noumenalism', or a philosophy that views the essence of human sociality as restricted to the intersubjective and cognitive domain of consciousness. What unites these various programs is a neo-Idealist paradigm where sociality is reduced to intersubjectivity and pragmatic forms of moral-cognitive 'development'.³ A struggle for the recognition of one's identity or for a universal consensus on norms has replaced class conflict, social domination, alienation and reification as the underpinning vocabulary of this new critical theory. But even more, the criteria now used to establish valid ethical norms is no longer the objectivity

of the social world but rather the agreement among rational persons within an intersubjective context. Hence, the postmetaphysical turn, while admittedly embracing sociality as a core aspect of ethics, nevertheless reproduces the split between consciousness and the ontological structures of the social world. In this sense, the content of ethical judgments is left open to the pathologies of reason such as reification which threaten to reproduce the rationalized forms of power and legitimacy embedded in the established reality.

Another result of this shift is that the critical thrust of Marx's ideas has been buried beneath the academic debris of this kind of postmetaphysical thinking. This is the doctrine that holds that our approach to reality and to practical reason must be restricted to intersubjective domains of reason-exchange or what the American philosopher Wilfred Sellars termed the 'space of reasons'. The features of this paradigm are too variegated to explore here with any depth, but we can point the advocates of the 'linguistic turn', from Wittgenstein to Habermas and Rorty, the neo-Idealist theory of recognition of Axel Honneth, as well as the existential-communitarian ideas of Hannah Arendt, among many others as exemplars of this structure of thought. All were intent on ejecting Marx from the political theoretical framework of the twentieth century and push for what they saw to be a kind of political imaginary without foundations or without the constraint of ontological concerns.

It is my basic position that these thinkers and the paradigm shift that they have effected has resulted in the failure of critical consciousness and critical judgment more broadly. At least it has robbed theory of its capacity to fight against the deforming pressures of modern capitalism and the culture that springs from it. Their move back to Idealism in the form of inter-subjectivism has rendered theory abstract and impotent in the face of neoliberal capitalism. A renewal of Marxian philosophy and of a more robust, radical form of social critique will therefore have to reconsider this postmetaphysical move. Indeed, it will have to turn to the critical social ontology that Marx himself implicitly laid out and which Lukács saw as forming the basis for a more systematic reformulation of Marxism.

Before I proceed, some preliminary comments may be needed. First concerns the word, the concept, of ontology itself. As I use the term, it refers to the modes of social being and the study of the objective ways that social forms either distort or enhance our freedom and development as members of a community. As I see it, the rejection of ontology by any theory is a contradiction in terms. Every social theory or theory of politics works with either an implicit or explicit ontology of what it means to be human, what society 'is', and so on. Second concerns the association of conservatism and social stagnation with the concept of social ontology. As I see it, this is another dangerous association. A critical social ontology is one that seeks to understand the ways that social forms actively possess causal powers over us. The norms and practices that we instantiate are constitutive of our social reality. Hence, as I see it, critical social ontology is a means for social transformation, to get at the root conceptual and objective mechanisms that shape our social world. To make the world *rational* it is necessary to change it; but to change it, we must abandon vague, non-conceptual forms of sociality (such as Arendt's concept of 'activity') and instead come to understand the full thickness of the ways that our sociality and our inherent capacities as a species interact to constitute different shapes of social reality.

A critical social ontology, as I am developing it, is essentially historical, fully committed to social transformation, and also fits with the democratic and contestatory impulses of a democratic society. What it brings to the table that is important, as I see it, is the anti-reificatory powers of critical reason. Whereas the postmetaphysical, intersubjective and communicative paradigms of theory have assumed that social action is sufficient to generate critical reason, I believe these theories have shown themselves to be essentially unable to withstand the strong pressures of reification that are emitted by modern technocratically-administrative societies. Hence, a critical form of reason will have to shift gears. It will have to abandon the fallacy of postmetaphysics and instead embrace the project of a critical

metaphysics that has human life and concrete human freedom at its core. This was the move of thinkers such as Hegel and Marx away from abstract forms of philosophizing. It must also, in my view, be the horizon of a new critical theory and a new form of critical reason as well for our own time.

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I would like to begin with Lukács' proposition that 'praxis forms the criterion of theoretical truth' in order to reorient the theoretical direction of the discussion. Unpacking this thesis, we find that the concept of praxis contains within it the nucleus for an ontological foundation for human consciousness and action. The Marxian and Lukácsian theory of praxis is rooted in the Greek concept where thought and being are connected forming a higher conception of reality. As Aristotle puts it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'Thought (διάνοια) by itself however moves nothing, only thought directed toward an end and concerning action (πρακτική) does.'⁴ Praxis is not simply activity, but activity that is directed toward an end and which is therefore the basis of 'productive activity', or of making and doing things in the world (τῆς ποιητικῆς). Praxis, for Aristotle, is therefore more than 'activity' it is a distinctively human form of activity that enables thought to shape reality. It encompasses the metaphysical system of causes – specifically of formal, efficient and final causes – and creates an ontological domain separate from mere nature or matter (ὕλη).

Marx makes many of these ideas explicit in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. In the first thesis, he posits a new kind of relation between subject and object: 'The chief defect of all previous materialism . . . is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object of perception (Anschauung), but not as sensuous human activity, Praxis, not subjectively.'⁵ Marx complains that 'Feuerbach wants sensuous objects actually different from thought objects: but he does not comprehend human activity itself as objective'.⁶ Further, Marx claims that: 'In practice (Praxis) man must prove the truth, that is, actuality and power, this-sidedness of his thinking.'⁷ Putting these ideas together gives us a first step in Marx's ontological conception of human sociality and the essence of human being. Thinking and being are united in the concept of praxis just as in the Aristotelian thesis that cognition cannot be complete without activity. For Marx, too, this is a critique of Idealism in that only the dialectic of subject and object can be made complete through praxis, i.e., through the externalization of thought into the world. This makes the objective world actual (Wirklich), or 'active' in that things realize their active completion via this dialectic.⁸

Marx's ideas therefore possess what we can call an ontological structure or framework. Briefly stated, we can see the framework of Marx's critical social ontology as consisting in four basic theses:

- (i) human activity as *praxis*, or a special kind of activity that has teleological force;
- (ii) human individuals are *social-relational* and form interdependent structures of relations with others;
- (iii) human beings develop within these social relational-structures of practical activities constitute and therefore possess *processual* properties;
- (iv) structures of social-relations are organized praxis and orient our practices toward certain *collective ends and purposes*.

From this we can see that the implication is that Marx's social ontology is a theory of nested or layered dimensions of social reality that are not natural or objective in any physical sense, but rather are *ontological* in the sense that they are rooted in human practices and constitute a reality that is not natural but distinctly *social* in nature.⁹ This latter point is of particular

importance since for Marx practices constitute the basic nucleus of an ontology of sociality. Marx takes after Aristotle's thesis that thought requires activity in the world for it to be an *effective reality*.¹⁰

Marx's revolt against Hegel, in this sense, pivots on a more radical understanding of how reason interacts with the world. For Marx, praxis is the very means by which humans are able to rationalize the world they live within. It is not a matter of an instrumental treatment of nature, but as a means of understanding the ways that capitalist society misshapes and distorts the ontological reality of human life that is at issue. For Marx, the great insight is that we need to grasp the essential metaphysical structure inherent within human sociality if we are to be able to achieve this kind of radical-transformative power. Freedom becomes genuinely human, it becomes concrete and not a mere idealistic principle once we are able to root it in the capacities and activities of human life – capacities that are ontological in a basic phylogenetic sense, i.e., that they are properties of us as a species. These properties, in turn, take on more complex manifestations and features as they become objectified in the world and organized into social structures, institutions and so on.

This thesis is distinctly ontological as opposed to being purely materialist or Idealist. In contrast to mechanical formulations of materialism, Marx is arguing that human praxis conceived as the externalization of human thought into the world can be understood as proper human activity. This means that the very capacity to understand and grasp what we are as human requires that we understand *our world as created by us*. But there is more. In a next step, Marx wants us to see that practice is not simply a feature of us *qua* individuals. Rather, praxis is *social* just as society itself is practical: 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice'.¹¹

Marx now begins to build out a model of social ontology that comprehends the species not as an aggregate of individuals, but rather as *essentially social*: 'the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships'.¹² Hence brute natural facts are transformed into human, social facts via praxis. Trees and grass exist as brute facts of nature; but parks possess an ontological existence that transcends the brute natural facts of trees and so on. And parks or lawns or whatever only have meaning as concepts because we have externalized the ideas of parks and lawns into a transformed physical organization of matter that corresponds with the idea of a park or lawn – it achieves an *ontological reality as a result of the synthesis of the two*. No one does this alone, but rather it is always *essentially social*. Hence Marx writes in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

Even when I carry out *scientific* work, etc. an activity which I can seldom conduct in direct association with other men, I perform a *social*, because *human*, act. It is not only the material of my activity – such as the language itself which the thinker uses – which is given to me as a social product. *My own existence* is a social activity. For this reason, what I myself produce I produce for society, and with the consciousness of acting as a social being.¹³

Marx's radical thesis here now comes more clearly into view. If we see human beings as possessing an essential structure or a *first-order* ontology we can see that as a species possess certain phylogenetic features or capacities such that we are:

- (α) *social-relational*
- (1) *First Order or Phylogenetic Level* = (β) *processual-developmental; and*
- (γ) *practical-teleological*

But we can also discern a *second-order* social ontology describing properties of the social forms that our collective praxis takes. In this sense, the social world we inhabit possesses the features of:

- (*a*) *relational structures;*
- (2) *Second Order or Socio-Ontogenetic Level* = (*b*) *social processes; and*
- (*c*) *social ends or purposes.*

These are ontological features of the objective social world we inhabit and which possess causal powers on our first-order ontological features and capacities. What we are dealing with here, then, is what I call a ‘generative social ontology’, by which I mean an account of our social being that rests on certain capacities that constitute our essential structure.¹⁴ This essential structure, this ensemble of capacities, define us as a species and yet they can be shaped and formed in different ways via the structures or ‘shapes’ of the social reality that is historically produced and instantiated at any given time. Indeed, this follows from Marx for whom first-order *phylogenetic* capacities are mediated by the second-order ontological features of our social world. Second order properties of society have causal powers over the first-order phylogenetic features and therefore mediate in a concrete way the developmental shape or *ontogenetic* features of our historical being. Here critique becomes important, for we can see that there are *defective expressions* of these ontological dimensions to social reality. Our social relations can be dependent instead of interdependent; the social processes exploitive or extractive instead of cooperative; and social ends or purposes can serve either particular interests and oligarchic wealth or they can produce common goods and social wealth, and so on (see table 1 below).

Expression Property	Defective	Good
Relational Structures	Dependent	Interdependent
Social Processes	Extractive / Expropriative	Cooperative
Ends and Purposes	Particular	Common

Table 1: Social-ontological properties and their expressions.

The different *shapes or forms that the ontology of our sociality takes* have causal powers on the development of the members of that society. Freedom is concrete to the extent that these defective relations are overcome forming what Marx refers to as the ‘fully constituted society’:

The fully constituted society produces man in all the plenitude of his being, the wealthy man endowed with all the sense, as an enduring

reality. It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity, cease to be antinomies and thus cease to exist as antinomies.¹⁵

Marx reaches back to Aristotle and his thesis about the essence of human life being social and constituted by a series of relations to others forming a coherent whole. As Marx notes in the *Grundrisse*: 'The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society'.¹⁶ The process of individuation is the process whereby the second-order socio-ontogenetic level interpenetrates with the first-order phylogenetic capacities of the subject. A Marxian ethics is therefore not an application of *a priori* categories to empirical reality; rather, it is a matter of assessing the ways that the various shapes of our social reality either promote free development of the members of the community or frustrate or pervert them. I will return to this later in the paper.

For now it is enough to argue that what is crucial here is the insight that *free individuality is a function of free sociality*.¹⁷ In turn, free sociality is one where the relations, processes, ends and purposes of our social world are oriented toward the development of such a free individuality.¹⁸ It is not simply a mastery over nature that is of concern, but a comprehension of the social-ontological structures requisite for the articulation of a free sociality. Of course, such comprehension is only concretely free if it instantiates itself *practically* in the world: only once our actual lived lives unfold within relations of practices that are oriented toward common ends and purposes that cultivate a common, social form of wealth that has its purpose and end, its *telos*, the full development of each individual. Since Marx's social ontology dialectically sublates the concepts of individual and community insofar as it sees our individuality as functionally related to the particular shape of interdependencies within which it is embedded, then the concept of freedom must become a social category, not merely an individual one.

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Lukács sees Marx's distinctive contribution to a social ontology as his conception of human labor. Taking Marx's Aristotelian conception of labor/praxis as a core concept, he proposes that we see in labor as the constitutive causal activity for all forms of social reality. Once we see labor as both *efficient* cause and *final* cause, we can begin to glimpse the ontological ground that Lukács proposes as a fundamental principle. The essential component of labor is the core concept of 'teleological positing' or 'teleological projection' (*teleologische Setzung*). Lukács defines this as:

a mental plan achieving material realization, in the projection of a desired goal bringing about a change in material reality, introducing a material change in reality that represents something qualitatively and radically new in relation to nature. Aristotle's example of the building of a house shows this very concretely. The house is just as material an existence as the stone, wood, etc., of which it is constructed. Yet the teleological projection gives rise to an objectivity that is completely different from that of its elements. . . . What is necessary for the house is the power of human thought and will, to arrange these properties materially and actually in an essentially quite new connection.¹⁹

From this Lukács derives what he calls the 'fundamental ontological ground': 'causality set in motion through teleological decisions (*teleologische Alternativenentscheidungen*) where choice enters into play'.²⁰

The key idea here is that our social being is determined not by our biological capacities but by the social mediations that are used to shape our activities. Labor is not to be narrowly construed as 'work' but rather as the central category of both our sociality and social being, one that is able to articulate new forms of objectivity rooted in our capacity for positing and externalizing an abstract concept via labor into the objective world.²¹ The reason for this is that:

Through labor a teleological positing is realized within material being as the realization of a new objectivity. The first consequence of this is that labor becomes the model for any social practice (*Praxis*), for in this – no matter how widely ramified its mediations – teleological projections become realized and in the end, realized materially.²²

As a basis for building a more complex understanding of social reality, Lukács takes pains to emphasize that the desired goal, the mental plan that exists prior to the realization of this new objectivity is followed by the means by which this new objectivity is brought into being. But add to this the fundamental ontological ground that Lukács emphasizes: namely that all human praxis has the feature of 'freedom', of the capacity of choosing between different ends and means to realize them. In this way, a distinctive social ontology opens up since we are then able to cooperate around shared plans that are not hard-wired into us as a species, but are subject to change, rational reflection, and choice. There is an irreducible humanism at play here.²³ We begin to unfold new forms of social reality – language, conceptual thought, cooperation, etc. – from this core capacity of human being. Society is therefore a series of overlapping forms of praxis that have their origin in human practical relations with nature – 'the transformation of natural objects into use value'.²⁴

Group cooperation then follows as a result of this basic capacity, and the basis of human society based not on biological drives, but a capacity that has choice at its center now becomes the distinctive space within which the human community realizes itself.²⁵ Lukács is clear that this latter point – the capacity to choose or to decide the means by which we realize our posited *ends and purposes* – is distinctive in that different means can be developed to solve problems and create new forms of social reality. The complexity of social forms therefore becomes seen as a complexity of decisions of how to realize certain ends. Lukács gives an example of this, in somewhat rudimentary fashion, when he describes the emergence in hunter societies of their cooperative activities:

The size, strength and danger of the animals hunted made group cooperation (*Kooperation einer Menschengruppe*) necessary. But if this cooperation was to function successfully, there had to be a division of functions among the individual participants (beaters and hunters). The teleological projections that follow from this have a secondary character from the standpoint of the immediate labor itself. They must be preceded by a teleological positing that defines the character, role, function, etc., of the individual concrete and real positings that are oriented to a natural object. The object of this secondary goal positing, therefore, is no longer something purely natural, but rather the consciousness of a human group; the posited goal is no longer designed directly to change a natural object, but rather to bring about a teleological positing that really is oriented to the natural objects.²⁶

This indicates how the various aspects of social reality can be seen as the nested layering of forms of *Praxis* in that each form of social reality contains webs of teleological projections. Lukács is therefore saying that for us to act together, we possess a shared form of teleological positing or, as some contemporary analytic social ontologists would argue, a sense of 'shared agency' rooted in our capacity for collective intentionality.²⁷ But as societies become more complex, the root capacity to realize teleological positing at the individual level becomes lost. 'The internal discrepancy between teleological projections and their causal consequences increases with the growth of societies and the intensification of socio-human (*gesellschaftlich-menschlichen*) participation'.²⁸ Now, the critical potency of this social ontology begins to take shape. Once we place the ends or purposes of our activities at center stage, we begin to open up the various ways that social values can be assessed as either promoting social ends or private ends; as either oriented toward particular benefits and goods or common benefits and goods; as organized for the production of surplus value or the production of social wealth. We now have an objective criterion for the evaluation of the kinds of activities, relations, institutions and norms that constitute our social reality.

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Now we can glimpse a richer way of conceiving reification. Once we connect our powers of cognition with the idea of social practice, we can see what the social totality means as an ontological category. The totality is not an entity external to us, but one that is constituted through us – through us as practical beings. It is an ontological category because it embraces the total world of social facts that we as members of any community create and endow with meaning and significance. As Lukács sees it, what is special about capitalism is its ability to constitute the entirety of the totality; a capacity to reshape and reorient all social practices toward those ends that it posits as valid. *Once we see praxis as consciously directed activity, reification now presents itself as a corruption of praxis; it is the supplanting of heteronomous ideas about what the ends of our activities should be that re-orient our world-creating powers toward heteronomous ends and purposes.*

These ideas are normative ideas, for they express ways that we should orient our activities, our practical lives, as well as the ways that we rationalize and legitimate those regimes of practice. Capitalism as a total process, indeed, as an 'inverted world', as Hegel would have called it, is not only an economic, but a total social system once it is able to absorb and direct not only our time and labor, but our *practices as a whole*.²⁹ It has stunted our capacity to see that the ends toward which our activities are oriented possess class character – that capital is a material force insofar as it has the capacity to colonize our practices by supplanting *its* ends as *our* ends. The key idea here is that reification is not epistemic in nature, but rather *social-ontological: it re-organizes the very reality of the social world via this shaping of our consciousness and the norms that underwrite it and our practices*.³⁰ It not only hides aspects of our social reality from view, it also steers our practical-relational lives toward the realization of a social reality that is essentially defective and perverted: capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and so on, are forms of consciousness that prevent a genuinely interdependent, common world from emerging.

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As I see it, this is what Lukács rightly saw as the essential purpose of a critical social ontology, its capacity to structure a critical theory of judgment, a Marxian ethics. Even so, the relation between the categorial scheme of critical social ontology and the normative assessment of one's social reality is not a deductive procedure. Rather, it is only through a synthetic operation of consciousness where we are able to assess our phenomenological state, itself shaped by the rationalizing categories of the prevailing reality, that a critical consciousness can be established. *Our critical assessment of the world can only become concrete,*

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in this sense, when we theorize about the ways that the structures of relations that constitute our world also constitute the social processes that we inhabit and which shape our lives. This in turn has to be assessed via the social purposes and ends toward which those relations, structures and processes are oriented in order for us to thematize the structure of the totality. What we come to grasp is the ontological shape of our social reality. The concept of an *ontological shape of reality* is important here for it forms a comprehensive picture of the ontological form of the world we inhabit and allows us to assess it critically.

In this sense, the role of ontology in constructing a Marxian ethics is to serve as the categorial structure of a new space of reasons within which *synthetic-critical judgments* can be constructed. Synthetic-critical judgments are those that are able dialectically to grasp the ontological categories that constitute any given object of social reality. To think in this way is to have one's cognition imbued by the metaphysical structure of reasons by which is meant the ability to connect any given social fact that is presented to consciousness to the socio-practical structures and processes (i.e., social-ontological) that generate it. By this I mean a kind of ethical or practical reasoning that evaluates the phenomena of social reality based on the ways that social reality and the relations, structures processes and ends that constitute its ontological reality serve the development of the social totality itself – a social totality that can be understood as having a specific “shape” or form in terms of the structures of its social relations, its processes and designated ends and purposes.

This is why Lukács argues that ‘categories do not predicate something about a being or that which is becoming; nor are they the (ideal) principles that shape matter. They are rather the moving and moved forms of matter itself’.³¹ Ontological categories are therefore to be understood as the constitutive features that produce any object, that shape matter and move it into the forms that we comprehend via the processes of human praxis. But we have seen, this need not be restricted to matter alone, but can also be applied to the norms and values that are used to shape and structure social relations as well. But Lukács’ point here seems to be that the forms of social relations and other objective ontological modes are in service of the practical shaping of brute nature into social reality.

Now, any *telos* should be judged not by some abstract, arbitrary set of standards of evaluation, but by the purpose that such a *telos* is supposed to serve. Normative concepts are not, in this sense, sealed off in some neo-Kantian sphere of values but are internal to the very structures of praxis that constitute social being. In this sense, it seems to me that Lukács’ contention that there can be ‘no ethics without ontology’ (*keine Ethik ohne Ontologie*), is an expression of the thesis that the evaluative categories that can bring our social reality to critical consciousness. The concept of social value now becomes a crucial category. To judge the products of our social world critically means, on this view, to be able to judge them according to their capacity to fulfill some kind of valid social purpose or end. Lukács states that:

Generally speaking, in our way of knowing, we make a clear distinction between the existence of objects in themselves and their being-for-us (*Fürunssein*), which is merely thought in the process of knowing. But in labor, the being-for-us of the product of labor realizes in itself its objective ontological character and becomes exactly that being through which, when properly thematized, the product can fulfill its social functions. It is in this way that the product becomes valuable (in case of failure, valueless).³²

What Lukács seems to be suggesting here is that the *telos* of the production of any object is part of the criterion that can be used to evaluate it. But when we think in non-ontological terms, we separate out the object from its use for us. The essence of social objects are the objective ontological modes elaborated above: that is, we come to see that our evaluation of

social fact must be tied to the way we cognize it. In other words, the thesis here is that true knowledge of social facts provides us with the requisite criteria for their evaluation.

Ethical-evaluative categories for judgment should be seen as rooted in social-ontological categories since then we are able to understand the category of the good in a very different way: as concrete expressions of practice, but also as the concrete ways that the ontological structures, processes and ends of the ontic structures of our given social reality operate. The moment of immanent critique now emerges when we are able to explode this ontic, given existence with those forms of relations, processes and ends that would express and fulfill full associative membership of each with one another. Since society is a nested structure of relations of interdependence for the achievement of ends, the evaluative criterion emerges from the ontology itself: what are good versus defective forms of relations and what are good versus defective ends? Any group activity that displays structures of dependence, exploitation or subordination become defective once it is seen that they are shaped and formed for the benefit not of the whole association but for a sub-group of that association. This basic idea is fundamental to the political tradition of republicanism in western thought, a structure of thought that informed Marx's own ideas about socialism and communism and his critique of capitalist society.³³

As I see it, we can derive a system of normative or evaluative criteria from the ontological structures of our sociality once we see that these structures themselves can be evaluated according to the rational purposes of any association itself. Since our cooperation with others is meant to enhance or magnify our collective powers to accomplish tasks, the validity of any structure of relations must be judged according to the purpose or end toward which they are oriented. Even in a simple dyadic relation, say between lovers or friends, once this relation is not for the mutual good of the members of that association, it becomes defective. Its purpose may be for the extraction of benefit from one agent to another, but it does not realize the ontological potentiality of that relation: i.e., the common benefit of both members of the association. No different with more complex forms of association: our social being can be warped and shaped according to unequal, extractive modes of being; but the robustness of social critique must be able to point to the good or free forms of social being in order for rational immanent critique to be in force.

Lacking this, we descend into irrational forms of protest – there is an emptiness to the kinds of alternatives that non-metaphysical forms of critique offer us; little more, I would say, than either a nihilistic form of emancipatory critique, or, at best, a formalistic proceduralism without any sense of vision or grasp of the concrete ways that human freedom can be expressed and how it is stunted and mutilated under forms of domination and control. Since every social fact has an ontological structure, social facts can be called into question based not only on their structure or the properties of relations, processes and purposes or ends that it exhibits, but also according to the norms, roles and value-orientations it imposes on us or makes ambient within the community.

Capitalism is therefore a unique form of social organization because it is a logic that colonizes and transforms existing social institutions. The ontological structure of society begins to transform: economic life shifts toward large-scale manufacturing, personal life becomes organized according to a new set of norms and values, the practices that constitute our activities are also transformed according to its logic. Capital is, as Harry Dahms has suggested, a kind of social 'artificial intelligence' that re-shapes the social reality according to its own auto-poietic logic.³⁴ But this is also another way to understand capital's capacity to radiate reification, or the particular patterning of all social forms and logics according to the structure of the commodity form. To say this means that the structure of social relations, their processes and ends are all re-made according to private interest – the interest to accumulate and expand surplus value.

Domination is therefore a crucial variable in grasping a critical social ontology

since it is the efficient cause giving new shape to the ontological forms of our sociality. Consider one of the basic critiques issued by Marx of capitalist society: the capacity of private individuals to organize the social-relational structures and activities of society as a whole according to their interests, i.e., the maximization of surplus value as opposed to valid social ends and purposes. As he puts it in volume one of *Capital*:

[T]he co-operation of wage laborers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. Their unification into one single productive body, and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside their competence. These things are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation. Hence, the interconnection between their various labors confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose.³⁵

This passage is imbued by the kind of critical social-ontological reasoning that I have been exploring here. The last line of the passage quoted tells us much when he argues that the capitalist ‘subjects their activity to his purpose’. The power of capital enables its owner to shape the ontology of our social reality – the relations, practices and processes – according to his designs and ends.

We now have a theory of immanent critique as well as the foundation for a theory of ethics. But once reification is shattered in the consciousness of the agents that reproduce the system, the immediacy of it dissolves and we begin to move in a critical space of reasons: one where we begin to inquire to the validity of the ends and purposes of the social forms that shape our lives. This is why Lukács’ emphasis on practice, on labor as teleological positing is so crucial: it entails seeing that the structure of social reality as ontological means seeing that the ends toward which our individual and social-relational activities are put are determinative of our broader social reality. If we do not think in these *praxiological* terms, we will not be able to think in *ontological* terms, and this implies that our consciousness and cognition will be collapsed into the prevailing structure of the objective world. Critical reflection will remain inert and impotent.³⁶

An objective theory of ethics is therefore one that can conceive of our normative-evaluative premises as rooted in the ends and purposes of our collective activities, in the processes put in motion to realize them, and the structures of relations patterned by those processes. One of the central pathologies of modern, technologically advanced societies is the loss of the knowledge of ends and the centrality of the means as the organizing criteria of our evaluative concepts. A materialist ethics is therefore concerned with the concrete ends and purposes that our material social relations are organized to attain. Once we make a turn toward *praxis* (or labour as Lukács expresses it) as the nucleus of an evaluative scheme we are moving in a structure of thought that takes us away from a detached noumenalism characteristic of pragmatism, discourse ethics, recognition, or whatever, and we are placed firmly back into a realm of thinking about the *concrete ways that social reality is organized and the ways that these forms of organization can shape consciousness and individual development as well*. Indeed, once social agents begin to absorb the norms and rule-following necessary for technological and administrative institutions to function, their capacity to generate rational critical consciousness withers. The category of a common good, in this sense, can be conceived not as a predicate of some object or social fact, but rather as constitutive of its capacity to fulfill ends that are appropriate to a common structure of relations that enhances the developmental capacities of its members.

But although this ethics is *objective* in nature, it does not mean that it eschews the features of discourse and communication that thinkers such as Habermas make central. Indeed, the common charge against an ontologically-based ethics is that it reproduces the status quo or is immune to change and creativity. But there is no need to give these criticisms credence in the version I am constructing here. For one thing, the key thesis is not a substantive ethics – i.e., one that would promote ethical content or some menu of practices and norms – but rather to say that valid norms, practices, relations, institutions and social purposes are to be judged based on the criteria of how they shape the actual community itself. It asks how the structures of our sociality and the ends toward which they are put concretize a form of human development where common and individual goods are seen as mutually dependent features. It is open to new ways of organizing our social world based on democratic decision making and ethical discourse. But it move beyond mere formalism insofar as it considers *value as an ontological category*: i.e., that our values, our ethics, must be seen as instantiating concrete forms of practices and relations; that these are real in the world, and that we, as a species, also possess certain developmental capacities that can either be stunted or enhanced based on the social reality in which we are situated. Ethics becomes ‘ethical life’ once we see that any value that is put into practice is one that has constitutive effects on others. Hence, critical social ontology can give us a richer and, I believe, more critically oriented theory of ethics.

The concept of freedom now can be seen to move beyond any narrow liberal confines. Freedom is an *ontological state* both of the individual and the community. It is a condition that is so structured by self-conscious agents directing their activities toward the kinds of common goods that are requisite for the development of themselves as individuals – but as individuals embedded in a social-relational and socio-praxiological contexts that must be oriented toward those ends and purposes that have their common good as developing selves at their core. Any struggle for emancipation, any struggle to realize social freedom or Marx’s idea of the ‘fully constituted society’, must elaborate new ontological social forms that can achieve the fullest development of the capacities and ends and purposes of the community. Any struggle for emancipation, to qualify as radical and rational, must consequently examine the ways that social organization is structured and struggle for more humane forms of social relations.

This project cannot be undertaken unless we comprehend the ways that social power maintains not only the prevailing orders of institutional logics and the normative webs that underwrite them, but also the ends and purposes of the social order as well. A shadow of Plato’s thesis about the nature of justice in the *Republic* therefore informs the Marxian thesis about what a good, free, or just society would look like: a structure of associational life where both personal good and common good are maximized through the organization of social structures and processes according to common needs of the community – common needs that fulfill the modern requirements of self-development and the expansion of the realm of concrete, realized freedom.³⁷ Freedom is therefore not to be seen as an abstract principle, but a property of the social-ontological structure of society as a whole. For only once there exist the preconditions for the free development of each can we speak in any meaningful way about the free development of all.

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Endnotes

1 In particular, see my papers: 'Marxism, Ethics, and the Task of Critical Theory', in M. Thompson (ed.) *Rational Radicalism and Political Theory: Essays in Honor of Stephen Eric Bronner*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011): 159-186; 'Ontology and Totality: Reconstructing Lukács' Concept of Critical Theory', in M. Thompson (ed.) *George Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays on Philosophy, Politics, and Aesthetics*. (New York: Continuum Press, 2011): 229-250; 'Toward an Objective Ethics: Lukács' Ontology and Contemporary Moral Philosophy', *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, vol. 12/13 (2012): 81-104; 'Philosophical Foundations for a Marxian Ethics', in M. Thompson (ed.) *Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis*. (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 235-265; 'Social Ontology and Social Critique: Toward a New Paradigm for Critical Theory', in Daniel Krier and Mark P. Worrell (eds.) *The Social Ontology of Capitalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 15-45; 'The Metaphysical Infrastructure of Hegel's Practical Philosophy', In M. Thompson (ed.) *Hegel's Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 101-141; 'Marx, Lukács and the Groundwork of Critical Social Ontology', In M. Thompson (ed.) *Georg Lukács and the Possibilities of Critical Social Ontology* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming, 2019); and 'Erich Fromm and the Ontology of Social Relations', in Joan Braun and Kieran Durkin (eds.) *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future* (New York: Bloomsbury, in press).

2 Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*. (London: Merlin Press, 1980), 22.

3 Elsewhere I have critiqued this neo-Idealist paradigm. See my *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, ii. 5.

5 Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' in Lloyd Easton and Kurt Guddat (eds.) *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*. (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 400.

6 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 400.

7 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 401.

8 For a more textured discussion of the Aristotelian concept of "activity," upon which Marx draws, see Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), specifically 87ff.

9 Cf. Vardaman R. Smith, 'Marx's Social Ontology, His Critical Method and Contemporary Social Economics', *Review of Social Economy*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1984): 143-169.

10 Norman D. Livergood argues on this point that: 'Reality, according to Marx, must be viewed as the result of the redirective activity of human beings in relation to changing conditions in external reality. Both the object and the subject are continually active; human history may be seen as a process in which changes in material reality create new needs which in turn bring about human transformations of material reality'. *Activity in Marx's Philosophy*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 20.

11 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 402.

- 12 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 402.
- 13 Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1964), 130.
- 14 I develop this idea of a 'generative social ontology' in my forthcoming book, *The Specter of Babel: A Reconstruction of Political Judgment*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020).
- 15 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 135.
- 16 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. (New York: Penguin, 1973), 84.
- 17 For important discussions of Marx's theory of individuality, see Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970); Lucien Sève, *Marxism and the Theory of Personality*. (London: Harvester Press, 1975); as well as Ian Forbes, *Marx and the New Individual*. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 165ff.
- 18 Carol Gould insightfully remarks that: 'for Marx freedom arises through interaction with these empirical conditions, that is, by a transformative process in which a subject who is originally heteronomous becomes autonomous by achieving mastery over nature, and freedom from social domination.' *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 107.
- 19 Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins, vol. 2*. (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland, 1986), 51.
- 20 Georg Lukács, 'The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action'. In Ernst Joos, *Lukács' Last Autocriticism: The Ontology*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 144.
- 21 I think there are rich and fruitful connections to be made here between Lukács' social ontology based in labor and the idea of 'overcoming' or 'moving beyond a given situation' (*dépassement*) and 'objectivation' in Jean-Paul Sartre's Marxian ontology, this in spite of their relative differences. For Sartre, this act of 'overcoming' (*dépassement*) is a basic feature of the human condition and of labor. As the exteriorization of what is internal, or as he puts it: 'Praxis, in effect, is a passage from the objective to the objective through interiorization; the project as subjective overcoming (*dépassement*) of objectivity toward objectivity. . . . Hence, the subjective retains in itself the objective which it denies and which goes beyond (*dépassement*) toward the new objectivity; and this new objectivity expressed in the term objectivation exteriorizes the interiority of a project as objectivated subjectivity'. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique, vol. 1*. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960), 66-67. Space here does not allow me a more in-depth comparison of Lukács' and Sartre's ideas on building a Marxian social ontology, but suffice it to say both see as essential to any Marxian theory about human reality the specific nature of praxis as the objectivation of subjective intentions, plans, or concepts more generally.
- 22 Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins, vol. 2*, 12.
- 23 Again, I would be remiss if I did not point to the strong parallel here with Sartre and his conception of the 'project' and the 'field of possibilities'. As Sartre argues, 'every person is defined negatively by the ensemble of possibilities which are impossible for him,

that is to say by a path more or less blocked. For the less-favored classes, each cultural, technical or material enrichment of society represents a diminution, an impoverishment, the path is almost entirely barred. Thus, positively and negatively, social possibilities are empty as schematic determinations of individual becoming. And the most individualized possibility is only the internalization and enrichment of a social possibility (*le possible le plus individuel n'est que l'intériorisation et l'enrichissement d'un possible social*). *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 65.

²⁴ Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 46. Sartre, too, see in his conception of the 'project' the nucleus of human creativity as a concrete ground for human freedom: 'Only the project as a mediation between two moments of objectivity can account for history, that is to say, account for human creativity. It is necessary to choose. In effect, we either reduce everything to identity (which amounts to substituting mechanistic materialism for dialectical materialism) – or we make of the dialectic a celestial law which is imposed on the universe, a metaphysical force which engenders by itself historical processes (and this is to fall back on to Hegelian Idealism) – or we restore to the individual his power to go beyond his situation (*dépassement*) via labor and activity'. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 67-68. It should be evident by now that between Lukács and Sartre and their ontological accounts of human social being there is fertile ground for a critical Marxian humanism to emerge.

²⁵ Cf. this thesis with that of the discussion by Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 381ff.

²⁶ Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 47.

²⁷ The parallel ideas between Lukács' argument here and the theory of shared agency and planning in group activities, as articulated in analytic social ontology, is striking. Cf. Michael E. Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) with Lukács' thesis here. Bratman's approach remains purely descriptive, however, in that it is unable to generate critical categories about the normative 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of the forms that any given shared agency take. Lukács, however, is able to provide a framework for us to articulate categories for the critical assessment of the structures our praxis takes.

²⁸ Lukács, 'The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action', 143.

²⁹ As Michael E. Brown notes: "the fact that capitalist political economy defines and therefore can be said to operate hegemonically across the entire terrain of economically relevant and economically dependent social life makes it difficult to speak sensibly in ways that are inconsistent with it. . . . The comprehensiveness of capitalist production, and the inevitable moral vacuum in the local settings it inevitably leaves behind, are findings of the Marxian critique of ideology." *The Production of Society: A Marxian Foundation for Social Theory*. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 101, 103. This is one reason to accept the implications of Lukács' thesis that the totality is re-patterned around the imperatives of capital once it penetrates the domain of culture. Andrew Feenberg notes that: "'Culture' now refers to the unifying pattern of an entire society, including its typical artifacts, rituals, customs, and beliefs. The concept of culture points toward the common structures of social life. It assigns the researcher the problem of discovering the overarching paradigms of meaning and value that shape all the various spheres of society." *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School*. (London: Verso, 2014), 65.

³⁰ Cf. the important discussion by Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács' Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); as well as Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School*. (London: Verso, 2014).

³¹ Lukács, 'The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action', 136.

³² Lukács, 'The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action', 140.

³³ See Norman Arthur Fischer, *Marxist Ethics within Western Political Theory*. (New York: Palgrave, 2015); as well as Michael J. Thompson, 'The Radical Republican Structure of Marx's Critique of Capitalist Society', *Critique*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2019).

³⁴ See the forthcoming work by Harry Dahms, *Modern Society as Artifice: Critical Theory and the Logic of Capital*. (London: Routledge, 2020).

³⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1. (New York: Vintage, 1977), 450.

³⁶ Lukács seems to indicate precisely this thesis when he writes: 'From the fact of this rigid confrontation it follows (1) that thought and (empirical) existence cannot reflect each other, but also (2) that the criterion of correct thought can only be found in the realm of reflection. As long as man adopts a stance of intuition and contemplation he can only relate to his own thought and to the objects of the empirical world in an immediate way. He accepts both as ready-made – produced by historical reality. As he wishes only to know the world and not to change it he is forced to accept both the empirical, material rigidity of existence and the logical rigidity of concepts as unchangeable'. *History and Class Consciousness*, 202. For more on the relation of this thesis to overcoming reification, see my paper: 'Reification and the Web of Norms: Toward a Critical Theory of Consciousness', *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2019).

³⁷ I explore this thesis in more detail in my essay 'Erich Fromm and the Ontology of Social Relations', in Joan Braun and Kieran Durkin (eds.) *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism and the Future*. (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

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