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Stahl, Titus

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Normativity and Totality: Lukács' Contribution to a Critical Social Ontology

Titus Stahl

1 Introduction¹

In the last twenty years, there has been a resurgence in interest in the ontology of the social, especially on the part of philosophers working in the analytic tradition. In particular, theorists have focused on providing accounts of collective intentionality and collective action.²

The debate thus far has remained largely unconnected to prior attempts to develop an ontology of society in traditions ranging from phenomenology to Marxism. It is therefore hardly surprising that Lukács' *Ontology of Social Being* has not attracted the attention of those working in this field. Lukács' book had limited influence even on Marxist scholarship, and it is famous for its occasional inconsistency, not to mention its wordiness, all of which partly explain its contemporary irrelevance. In addition to the more or less accidental circumstances that explain this disregard for Lukács' work on social ontology, there are systematic reasons for why it cannot easily be treated as just another position in the contemporary debate.

One of these reasons consists in the fact that the dominant approaches in the current analytic debate focus on two questions. First, how can we account for social facts from within a broadly naturalist perspective? Second, how can we account for social facts in a way that makes causal explanations possible?³ Both of these questions frame the debate in such a way that theories that account for social facts in terms of underlying intentional or mental states, which

1 This article is a substantially revised version of a paper that first appeared as Titus Stahl, "Praxis und Totalität: Lukács' Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins im Lichte aktueller sozialontologischer Debatten." *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, 14/15 (2015): 123–150.

2 Cf. David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Collective Intentionality." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/collective-intentionality/>; Deborah Tollefsen, "Collective Intentionality." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2004, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/coll-int/>.

3 Cf. John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*. (New York: Penguin, 1995), 5–7.

are then usually treated as ontologically and explanatorily primary, become attractive.⁴

Lukács' approach to social ontology is clearly animated by different questions and consequently frames the issue in a different way. Even though Lukács is also concerned with presenting a naturalist picture, his framing of the question is focused on how social institutions and social activity fit into a broader picture of exchange between humans and their environment. The theory which Lukács begins to develop in the *Ontology* is in this regard much more ambitious than most social ontological works in the analytic debate: Lukács wants to examine not only the metaphysics of groups and the features of distinctive sorts of collective intentional action but also the way in which almost all activity in a developed society is integrated into a network, or a "totality," that is rooted in the intentional engagement of human beings with their natural environment.

Even if not in the precise way in which Lukács develops it, such a comprehensive theory is of central interest to a critical social ontology, and this for two reasons. First, critical theories famously distinguish themselves from "traditional" theories by adopting a reflexive stance – that is, by including themselves in their object domain. Critical social theories must therefore not only engage in social ontological theorizing in virtue of aiming at social practices in their critiques but also understand their very own activity as one of the social practices they are about, thus adopting a social ontology that includes itself in its object domain. In the history of Western Marxism, such a comprehensive approach was often motivated by the idea that modern capitalist societies form a "totality" – that is, a whole in which no part can be understood in isolation and which thus requires social theory to account for its own place within that totality.

Second, critical theories traditionally distinguish themselves from forms of moral critique by assuming that, rather than approaching their object – society – with norms that have been developed and justified independently of it, they engage in immanent critique. This means that they take up norms and standards which in some sense already exist in social reality. This raises social ontological issues regarding the normative nature of social phenomena for which critical theories must account.

4 Authors such as Philip Pettit (cf. Philip Pettit, *The Common Mind. An Essay on Psychology, Society and Politics*. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 129ff.) and Michael Bratman (cf. Michael E. Bratman, *Faces of Intention*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999).) make this assumption explicit.

Both issues, normativity and totality, play a major role in Lukács' discussion. The following considerations should be understood as a first attempt to think through the implications of his approach for the possible development of a critical social ontology. Given the many well-known problems associated with his explicit social ontology, the following will not take his pronouncements at face-value or merely attempt to interpret them in the most consistent way possible; rather it will take them as points of departure that allow for insights which can be used in the service of the project of a critical social ontology. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 examines the theoretical problems faced by critical social ontologies in general. The issues of normativity and totality are then examined. Section 3 discusses the central role that Lukács assigns to work in the emergence of social normativity, and Section 4 does the same for the concept of totality. In both cases, it can be shown that Lukács endorses some intuitions that point beyond contemporary accounts in social ontology but that he does not reject the individualist and objectivist presuppositions of that debate radically enough. The article therefore concludes (Section 5) by discussing the extent to which and the respects in which a convincing critical social ontology must go beyond Lukács.

2 Problems of a Critical Social Ontology

The question at the heart of all theories of social ontology is the question of the *existence of social facts*. Social ontological arguments are grounded in the observation that the most plausible social theories are committed to the existence of institutions, groups, social systems, social rules, collective action, and finally, societies. This raises the question of what it means to claim that such entities exist and in what sense and under what conditions they can exist.

In the contemporary debate, leading theorists defend a number of distinct claims that concern both the question of totality (even if not by that name) and the question of normativity. Regarding the totality issue, most authors in contemporary social ontology assume that it is plausible to assume some form of supervenience of social facts on facts about individuals:⁵ At least globally speaking, social phenomena can be taken to supervene not only on the material world but also on the behavior and thoughts of, and the relations between,

5 Cf. Brian McLaughlin and Karen Bennett, "Supervenience." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, n.d., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/supervenience/>; Frank Hindriks, "The Location Problem in Social Ontology." *Synthese*, vol. 190, no. 3 (February 1, 2013): 414, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-0036-0>.

individual people. If two worlds are the same in all of these respects, they will also be the same with respect to the social entities that exist in them, as social phenomena can only be realized through configurations of material objects and individual human action and thought. As Brian Epstein has noted, this assumption of supervenience motivates the almost universally accepted idea of ontological individualism.⁶ While ontological individualism is almost universally accepted, however, it can be spelled out in quite different ways. For example, the "Standard Model" in contemporary social ontology, as defended by John Searle, Raimo Tuomela and many others, takes social facts to depend on the acceptance of constitutive rules that confer a certain status on them. Epstein has recently proposed a more complex theory that combines these views. According to his model, (particular) social facts are ultimately *grounded* in (particular) non-social facts. But this grounding relation (or several relations, in complex cases) depends on there being grounding conditions in place that define the conditions under which non-social facts count as having certain social roles. These grounding conditions are in turn *anchored* in people's collective acceptance of certain frames.⁷

I take it that Epstein's analysis is the most advanced and most plausible interpretation of commitments in contemporary social ontology. However, it is relatively clear that a critical social ontology of the type envisaged by Lukács will not accept this interpretation of the supervenience claim for several reasons, the most important of which has to do with its own reflexive character. Social ontological theorizing, in the philosophical sense, is an extension and part of the way in which we conceptualize social facts in ordinary life. This means that the claims of a social ontological theory are to some extent part of the anchoring of social facts in our societies insofar as social ontological theorizing forms a part of our collectively shared self-understanding. In most cases, however, it will be impossible to neatly divide social phenomena into lower-level phenomena which anchor higher-level phenomena without introducing circularity at some point. This is not only because collective beliefs, such as those we share about the social ontological constitution of our lifeworld, are often rooted in institutions which are anchored by such beliefs and in turn provide anchoring conditions for them. There is also always the possibility that social entities can be ontologically shaped in ways that are independent of our understanding of them. This means that parts of the empirical function of social entities will be determined not by the (anchoring) beliefs we have about

6 Brian Epstein, *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*, Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Science. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34.

7 Epstein, 84.

them but by the entire complex of social practices that make up social life. An admittedly not very useful way to describe this issue is to say that social facts must be seen as anchored not only in particular beliefs (of which social ontological theory forms one part) but also in the entirety of the social life of a community. More formally, we can say that it is possible to have a situation in which a particular social fact that anchors a set of social facts S_1 is itself anchored in another set of social facts S_2 , where S_1 and S_2 are not distinct sets but share elements with each other. In such a case, both ontological individualism and the standard picture of social reality cease to be useful models of analysis (as does the anchoring model, which combines elements of both), although we can still hold on to a global version of the supervenience claim.

In the Marxist tradition and the tradition of critical theory, this interpretation of the interdependence of social facts has often been referred to by the term “totality,”⁸ although there has so far been no attempt to account for the meaning of this term in the vocabulary of social ontology. We should thus expect a critical social ontology to give us insight into this idea.

The normativity issue is a second problem that clearly animates Lukács’ social ontology and that sharply separates his analysis from contemporary social ontology. Some contemporary theorists in social ontology – such as Margaret Gilbert – acknowledge that a defining feature of social phenomena such as collective intentions, collective beliefs and institutional rules is their normative character. Gilbert argues, for example, that a genuinely *collective* intention to perform an action A differs from merely *summatively shared* individual intentions to perform A insofar as a collective intention can only exist once the relevant group has “jointly committed itself” to performing A, which generates a “derived” individual commitment on the part of every member of the group to do their part and a corresponding entitlement on the part of other members to demand performance. Such an entitlement is, however, absent in the case of merely accidentally shared individual intentions.⁹ Similarly, John Searle argues that social institutions are partly defined by the collective recognition of rules by their members, who thereby impose normatively relevant statuses on actions or objects, which then make certain forms of behavior permissible or impermissible (collectively imposing the status of money on certain objects, for example, means that those objects then fall under rules that regulate how

8 See Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

9 Margaret Gilbert, “Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon.” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. xv (1990): 3–14.

they can be treated).¹⁰ Both accounts remain deeply problematic, however. In both cases, it never becomes clear how the adoption of individual attitudes (which, as the relevant theorists admit, do not entail normative obligations) can connect up to collective attitudes (which then mysteriously do).¹¹

The totality challenge and the normativity challenge are thus two aspects in terms of which current accounts in social ontology are insufficient for the purposes of a critical project. It is these challenges with which Lukács' ontology is also concerned and which justify returning to it, in spite of its difficulties. I will reconstruct Lukács' view on normativity in the next section, before tackling the issue of totality in Section 4.

3 Work, "Teleological Positing," and Normativity

The problem of normativity lies at the center of Lukács' account of a Marxist social ontology, as he argues that "teleological" phenomena are the defining characteristic of the social (which differentiates the latter from both inorganic and organic nature). Lukács explains teleological phenomena in the context of a materialist account by referring to the role played by "teleological positing" – or, put more simply, the anticipation of results of intentional action – in organizing the interchange process between humans and non-human nature through work. In referring to "teleology," Lukács does not thereby want to suggest that society strives towards a goal in its entirety, independently of individual thought and action. Rather, he argues that individuals engage in "teleological positing" in their work, that these individual phenomena can form structures, and that a particular form of structure is a defining characteristic of social entities.¹² It is important to understand that, at its foundation in individual acts of positing, this is a normative phenomenon, which Lukács then takes to explain all normative aspects of social structures (including "objectively existing" social values). All normative social phenomena, in other words, can be traced back to the commitments that individuals undertake in their labor processes.

10 John R. Searle, "What Is an Institution?" *Journal of Institutional Economics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137405000020>.

11 Titus Stahl, "The Conditions of Collectivity, Joint Commitments and the Shared Norms of Membership." In *Perspectives on Social Ontology*, ed. Hans-Bernhard Schmid, Anita Konzelmann Ziv, and Ulla Schmid. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

12 György Lukács, *Prolegomena zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, ed. Frank Benseler. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1984). (hereafter cited as OGS), I, 189; II, 52, 464.

To give just a brief overview over some of Lukács' main claims in the *Ontology*, he assigns this central function to labor in his general social ontology on the following grounds: (1) labor, according to him, is the point of transition between nature and society;¹³ (2) the positing act in the process of labor has a normative dimension that grounds all normative phenomena in society;¹⁴ (3) the only way to properly understand social institutions and the very idea of history is to view them as being based on such fundamental normativity;¹⁵ and (4) teleological positing and the choice between alternatives are the conditions of existence of human freedom.¹⁶

In the first instance, the somewhat artificial term "positing" does not refer to much more than the anticipation of a desired result by the worker – in other words, a component of their having an intention.¹⁷ This act of anticipation, Lukács argues, establishes a normative standard for the subsequent work process, or an "ought."¹⁸ Such an "ought," in turn, involves both a dimension of necessity – the regularities described by natural laws, which make choosing one element of a set containing different combinations of means necessary for achieving one's goal – and a dimension of freedom in terms of choosing one's goal.¹⁹ To put it simply: If one wants to achieve X, and if Y is a necessary means to X, then one ought to perform Y. Building on this quite mundane thought, Lukács argues, we can also understand the idea of "unconditioned" normative standards, such as those involved in forms of the moral ought.

Even though this relatively simple thought raises more questions than it answers, it is clear that Lukács attributes a central role to the requirement to choose between goals given available means, together with the emergence of rational planning that is also constitutive of labor – understood here as action in relation to a scope of objects which are governed by natural laws. The concept of "law" that is involved here is located "between" nature and society, Lukács argues, because the relevant ought – i.e., the normative dimension – results from the combination of two non-social components, anticipation of the results of one's action by a desire-driven subject and the relations of natural necessity which govern the rational choice of means, although the resulting normative standard is socially significant insofar as it allows for the intersubjective interpretation of action. One can speculate that other forms of

13 OGS II, 9.

14 OGS I, 620.

15 OGS II, 78ff.

16 OGS II, 39ff.

17 OGS II, 18.

18 OGS II, 61.

19 OGS II, 306.

“social-teleological positing” from which Lukács distinguishes his own work,²⁰ such as institutional and social norms, are not in the same sense “in between” nature and society, because the necessity which has to be incorporated in the choice of means is in these cases no longer natural necessity (i.e., a form of necessity which results from the fact that certain goals, in virtue of the natural features of the relevant context, can only be reached using certain means) but rather socially determined necessity. Similarly, one may say that while in the case of labor the setting of goals is a result of choices between options that are natural kinds (because they can be described as results of non-social action), in the social case the options themselves are socially constituted.

Lukács sometimes also describes the transition between nature and society by claiming that labor leads to a “new form of objectivity.”²¹ He thereby seems to refer primarily not to the character of the products of work but to the role that objects play in enabling the work process – that is, to tools.²² Tools can be characterized by their function, which is only intelligible in relation to goals that can be pursued through their use. Hammers are not only suitable for hammering. The fact that it is their function to enable hammering is only intelligible if there are at least possible situations in which hammering is a means to pursuing a goal that someone desires and anticipates before selecting the necessary means. Furthermore, it is a characteristic feature of tools that we can assign essential functions to them which are not fully determined by their natural properties (one could also assign another function to a hammer). Any function that is assigned to them, however, will directly involve their physical properties. This distinguishes them from institutional entities (like advocates or contracts) the functions of which are not such that they are selected from a range that is directly determined by their physical properties. Compared to such entities, the social imposition of a tool's function is more closely bound to its possible roles in causal processes.

Taken together, these elements can help us to grasp a claim that is central to Lukács' (wide-ranging and not always consistent) remarks to the effect that the origin of normativity in society must be located in the attribution of functions to tools, which is only intelligible in a context in which both normative-intentional positing through the (individual) anticipation of the result of an action and the determination of possible routes to achieving that goal by natural laws play a role – in other words, in the context of labor. Lukács seems to assume that it is only labor that can provide a non-mysterious basis (anticipatory

20 OGS II, 12.

21 OGS II, 30.

22 OGS II, 35.

imagination of a possible result of one's action and *knowledge* of natural laws) for normative criteria as emerging from broadly natural processes. If we accept this, then we can understand how, through the imposition of functions, tools emerge as the first social entities the internal teleological structure of which also becomes a part of intersubjective reality, as cooperative labor processes require achieving a shared understanding of that structure and thereby form the basis of all other kinds of social normativity.

To put it kindly, this story leaves certain questions open. First, it is unclear why only tools can play this role, and why for, example, communication about goals does not also introduce language as an independent source of normative commitments. Equally unclear, however, is whether Lukács does not merely adopt, after all, a relatively standard Humean idea about normative commitment as the result of a combination of desire and knowledge. Above all, what remains unclear is why labor gives rise to a form of normativity that is, in some non-trivial sense, essentially social. After all, Lukács' conception of labor – at least the way he himself introduces that conception – refers to an activity that can be performed by individuals. If the anticipatory imagination forms the normative standard for labor, it seems entirely possible to explain the resulting normativity even independently of cooperative contexts and as something which can equally apply to a solitary worker. In other words, labor-based normativity does not have social preconditions and does not necessarily lead to socially shared norms. Compared, for example, with the analysis of being-at-hand in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Lukács' analysis seems to be thoroughly individualistic. Where Heidegger assumes that other people must be included in one's orientation towards the work process, at least as potential consumers of the product,²³ Lukács seems to follow an individualistic path that is quite surprising for one of the most famous Marxist theorists of totality. Society and labor are necessarily linked merely insofar as people create causal connections between each other's activities through the non-intended consequences of their activities, which then gradually form a systemic structure.²⁴ The *individualist reduction* of labor-based normativity is thus combined by Lukács with a *quasi-system-theoretic analysis* of social integration of individual goals into one overarching structure of production by anonymous laws.²⁵

23 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 100.

24 Cf. OGS II, 458, 459, 464, 504, but also OGS I, 191–192, 592, 662 and OGS II, 302ff.

25 It is remarkable that a thought that had been prominent in Lukács' reification essay is almost absent in the *Ontology*. This is the idea that the totality can be appropriated by a revolutionary subject and that a merely causally integrated whole can thereby be transformed into one that can itself be understood as the result of intentional positing. It is not

Second, it remains unclear why the structure of work – even if we accept that the interplay of desire and necessity that is characteristic of interaction with nature is the foundation of normativity – should be key to understanding society rather than merely one element within a broader theory of social norms. Even if the normative ought of social rules is always a result, directly or indirectly, of the interaction of human anticipation with natural-law necessity (which is itself not exactly an intuitive thought), it remains possible that social normative structures have a logic of their own which is such that we learn very little about them by examining the structure of the labor process.

There are, however, resources in Lukács' discussion for dealing with these two objections. As to the first problem, concerning the underlying individualism in the description of labor, one might say with some interpretive charity that Lukács not only views work as the realization of individuals' subjective intentions but also views these intentions as in turn subject to social evaluation based on how they contribute (or fail to contribute) to the satisfaction of *needs*.²⁶ Admittedly, Lukács often seems to endorse a relatively simplistic subjectivist-utilitarian analysis of how work can be evaluated with regard to its effects.²⁷ That this is not the whole story can be shown, however, if one takes into account his emphasis on the idea that the needs that are relevant to such an evaluation and to judging whether the intention guiding a given labor process has been actualized are needs with a "social character."²⁸ What does this mean? A first idea is that it could mean that some needs are themselves products of social practices, processes and institutions. Such needs either constitutively depend on social contexts (for example, the need to experience certain forms of recognition or status) or are causally related to social practices (for example, the need to satisfy desires that are the result of a certain kind of socialization).²⁹ But this cannot be all that Lukács means. Even though such needs are social in some sense, they are not *social* needs in an ontological sense. They are needs of individuals – needs that relate to what individuals require and to what is in some sense essential to their existence or self-realization.

entirely clear that this is merely the result of a politically motivated renunciation of the Hegelianism of Lukács' middle period. It could equally well be viewed as the resolution of a tension between the sociological theory of reification and the subject theoretical theory of revolution in that earlier model.

26 OGS II, 39, 42.

27 OGS II, 70.

28 OGS II, 341.

29 OGS II, 242.

There are two passages which are informative for an understanding of the concept of need employed by Lukács and its relation to social normativity. First, he distinguishes between work as a *mere* satisfaction of need and “work as social practice”:

The original intention of the teleological positing is directed, in the first instance, to a mere satisfaction of need. Only within an objectively social context do the work process and the product of work acquire a more general nature which goes beyond the individual person, but is still tied to social practice and thereby to human being.³⁰

The distinction between an “original intention” and an “objectively social context” probably refers to the distinction – familiar from Marx³¹ – between production that does not involve a division of labor and production that does. While “in the first instance” – that is, in the historically prior form of non-divided labor – individuals work for the satisfaction of their own needs, the norms that govern their labor change in stages where the social environment makes an objective difference to what they do (their actions only being intelligible as part of a larger practice of cooperation), and what they do is different in a social ontological sense.

Earlier in the text, Lukács makes the following argument concerning the “sociality of the determination of purpose” (“Gesellschaftlichkeit der Zielsetzung”) within the labor process, which helps to make sense of this idea:

The homogenization of end and means as set out above, must also be dialectically qualified from another standpoint, and thereby made more concrete. The doubly social character of the positing of the goal – arising as it does from a social need and being called on to satisfy such a need, whereas the naturalness of the substratum of means of realization leads practice directly into a different kind of environment and activity – sets up a fundamental heterogeneity between end and means.³²

³⁰ OGS II, 245, Translation T.S.

³¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology.” In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 158.

³² OGS II, 21. Translation according to György Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*. (London: Merlin Press, 1978), vol. 3: 14.

This somewhat opaque passage can be read as follows. Processes of labor are characterized by heterogeneity on an ontological level. On the one hand, they are guided by needs which are socially determined (in a way that still has to be explored). On the other hand, the way in which these needs (as standards for labor) find application is through guiding a choice of appropriate means, whereby the question of which means are appropriate for a given purpose is determined by natural properties and ultimately natural laws, and thus not socially defined. Labor thus requires matching up a standard that is not exhausted by the individual's representation of it with natural facts that are also not exhausted by it, and thus the anticipation which is characteristic of labor has to bring together elements from two ontological spheres which systematically transcend the reach of the individual. If that process succeeds, what the individual's anticipation then establishes is a "homogeneous" (that is, consistent) standard governing their activities. The heterogeneity is homogenized through the labor process, in particular once socially defined and created needs indirectly form the standard for the choice of means.

To fully understand this interpretation, more must be said about the social normative nature of needs. When Lukács talks about social needs that must be satisfied, the social aspect should be taken to refer not only to the *source of the normative significance* of individual needs (for example the way in which the norm of trying to anticipate the widely shared needs of potential customers is established as a rational requirement by the market mechanism) but also to *determining the content* of needs. In other words, what counts as fulfilling a need should also be viewed as something that is socially established.

To use a simple example: The cooperative work of building an apartment complex can be motivated by anticipation of unspecified people's need to have a place to live. We can think of this need as both causally arising from society (for example, if it is assumed that having a place to live is a need that people at least partly acquire through socialization) and as socially determined in terms of its content. For example, there will never be a mere need for a place to live; such a need will always be for an adequate, dignified space. What that means is not determined by the subject of the need alone – as if believing that an apartment is adequate could make it so. Rather, we can assume that people can be mistaken about whether their needs have actually been fulfilled. This entails that those who are trying to fulfill a need – in this example, the builders – can be mistaken about whether they have succeeded in doing so. Not every product that they take to be adequate to satisfy the need involved in the construction of the anticipated result is indeed adequate, and this even holds when there is a consumer who concurs in the judgment that it is. Apparent

and actual need satisfaction can be distinguished in the case of socially defined needs.³³ This distinction is socially instituted and can be intersubjectively evaluated.

To be sure, Lukács never explicitly endorses this claim. However, the supposition that the social constitution of needs must extend to their content and the way this content is reflected in the labor-guiding intentions of workers is necessary for making sense of further claims in the ontology. Consider, for example, the following passage, which refers to the character of “positing” (that is, intentionality):

Epistemologically, a positing that misses its object is still a positing, even if it must be judged to be false. The ontological positing of causality in the complex of a teleological positing, however, must correctly come to grips with its object, or else it is no positing at all, in this sense.³⁴

The intentions that guide labor are thus not to be understood as being independent of what they objectively aim at – that is, the product that satisfies anticipated needs and that is produced using specific means. This further entails that, if products and means acquire a specifically historical character through the process of “homogenization,” that is, through the imposition of a standard referring to socially determined needs, then (it seems at least reasonable to conclude that) the way in which intentions relate to their satisfactory conditions will be determined by categories that are instituted in a social practice, independently of whether the individual worker adequately represents these conditions to herself.

If this analysis of the social nature of intentions (and underlying needs) is correct, then we can at least make some progress in understanding how the normativity of (in the first instance individual) labor is also a form of social normativity. What remains unclear, however, is the respect in which this normativity can be said to be fundamental to all normative social phenomena – in particular, how it can help us to understand the normativity of social institutions. To put the same question a different way: Why should we assume that labor as a productive practice is special with regard to the social determination of the content of intentional states? There are, after all, many theories of intentional content that assume that all intentional phenomena, mediated through the sociality of concepts, are in fact determined in their content by social practices. For most of these theories, it is discourse, not labor, which is the relevant social practice in which meaning is created.

33 OGS II, 70.

34 OGS II, 20. Translation according to Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, vol. 3: 13.

In my opinion, the only way to rescue Lukács' insistence on this primacy is to adopt a relatively risky strategy that again refers to needs and the specific position of labor in the exchange between nature and society. Social practice theories of meaning – such as Brandom's inferentialism – assume that our intentional commitments and explicit linguistic utterances acquire meaningful significance only when we accept the authority of other members of our linguistic community concerning their conditions of satisfaction, which involves relations of recognition between us and them.³⁵ In Brandom's theory, for example, these others are often imagined in the role of referees or scorekeepers concerning our discursive moves. That picture suggests that they reach their judgment from the perspective of an uninvolved observer or interpreter³⁶ who imagines counterfactually what moves would be available and correct had they undertaken the commitments of the observed person. From the perspective of such a model, those who engage in "discursive score-keeping" need not be practically involved in the activities of those they interpret.

This "observer" model of the exercise of recognitive authority is intuitively plausible for discursive practices in which descriptive assertions (as in the natural sciences) or the interpretation of norms (as in law or morality) are central to the relevant discourse. It is therefore unsurprising that the examples that Brandom chooses consistently refer to these spheres.³⁷ The model of a merely observing scorekeeper is less plausible, however, once we focus on the best way to understand the social determination of the intentional states of people engaged in *material labor*. In fact, one can make an argument against the Brandomian conception of social practices which runs parallel to Marx's critique of Feuerbach.³⁸ According to Marx's critique, an attempt to understand distinctive human capacities on the basis of a conception of social practices will be misleading as long as it describes those practices in terms of interactions that are exclusively guided by epistemic criteria and as long as it understands the relevant actions as epistemic activities. A more appropriate, materialist conception of practice must take into account the fact that much normative human interaction is motivated by the basic fact that humans have needs that can only be satisfied cooperatively and that they therefore cooperatively intervene in their natural surroundings guided by rules that are appropriate for

35 Cf. Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy. Animating Ideas*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 81ff.

36 Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*. (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 3.

37 Brandom, 184; Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 84ff.

38 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 143–145.

social attempts to satisfy such needs. As some of the interpreters of the young Marx have realized,³⁹ this insight enables us to formulate a different theory of recognition, where the central practice is not the score-keeping in which those who are recognized as authorities engage with regard to the individual, nonsocial behavior of others. Rather, there are also forms of recognition of needs that confer social significance onto those needs and that thereby establish them as standards for essentially other-directed intentional performances. If A not only recognizes B as a competent authority with regard to the disinterested evaluation of whether what A does is compatible with A's stated intentions but also recognizes B's needs as significant, then actions performed by A which are justified and characterized with regard to the goal of fulfilling B's needs are socially determined in a way that is not captured by the score-keeping model. In such a case, it is not B's disinterested evaluation of A's behavior's consistency with A's intentional commitments that is the basic element of the social practice that determines the content of these commitments, but rather the satisfaction of B's needs. It is thus not only the needs referred to by intentions in the labor process that are socially determined; the normative recognition of those needs by those who try to satisfy them is also the basic building block of a social practice of determining the meaning of intentional commitments that can (but need not) be expressed in language. It is this rather speculative suggestion to the effect that we can extend the Brandomian social pragmatist program in the theory of meaning to include a "material" component connected to the structure of labor on which I will draw to make sense of Lukács' claim that *all* social normativity rests on labor.

There is, however, a qualification that must be made here. It is more than obvious that the Lukácsian model presupposes a picture of labor that is focused on the production of consumer goods, as do Marx's early considerations. From both perspectives, it is one of the pathologies of the capitalist market that, while it is driven by normative recognition of the relevance of consumer needs, this recognition appears in the shape of seemingly impersonal laws of supply and demand, blocking workers from understanding their constitutive sociality. That Lukács and Marx do not consider other types of work that are typically not, or only incompletely, subsumed under the market relation in capitalist economies, such as housework, care work, bringing up children and

39 Karl Marx, "Auszüge aus James Mills Buch 'Elémens d'économie politique.'" In *Werke / Ergänzungsband, Schriften, Manuskripte, Briefe bis 1844*. (Berlin: Dietz, 1968), 443–463; Daniel Brudney, "Marx' neuer Mensch." In *Anerkennung*, ed. Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch and Christopher F. Zurn (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), 145–180, <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783050061566>.

informal work in the domestic sector, is a severe deficiency of their account.⁴⁰ Including these forms in their analysis would both strengthen their underlying intuitions about how recognition of needs is involved and allow them to analyze pathologies of misrecognition that, even if structurally similar, cannot be ascribed to market dominance.

That being said, there is some plausibility to the idea that a social pragmatist model of linguistic meaning can be extended using the materialist insight. One advantage is that the idea of the social determination of meaning through practices of mutual recognition of needs can much more easily be integrated into a naturalist account. If we assume that human beings can only satisfy their needs through cooperation, and if we also assume that, from a certain point of cultural development onward, the relevant cooperative processes require individuals to engage in complex planning activities, then it becomes completely non-mysterious, first, that the standards of correctness for such planning are socially "administered," and second, that it is useful for humans to be able to make their commitments and entitlements explicit, using language, which also makes it possible for the inferential relations that are constitutive of the meaning of the concepts used to do so to themselves be subject to social standards of correctness. Finally, once we embrace this speculative model of the role of language in the history of the species, Lukács' seemingly reductive claim that we can explain all normativity as being derived from the labor process becomes somewhat less counterintuitive. The conceptual resources that we can use to engage in forms of social cooperation which are not immediately directed towards the satisfaction of needs will then (at the ground level) be those that have already been made available in the social coordination of labor and needs.

In other words, if we assume that the relevant practice of recognition is a recognition of needs as relevant (in the sense that they are accepted as standards for activities which aim at satisfying them), then labor is the basic activity in which such recognition is expressed and which is socially taken to be subject to those standards. This form of recognition then serves as a foundation for other forms of social coordination through an ascription of authority that becomes necessary, at some point, to enable further complexity. It is not necessary to deny that analyses such as Brandom's correctly capture the social practices that underlie discursive practices; rather, the argument is that they make the emergence of relations of recognition mysterious (or attribute it to an unexplained interest in conceptual capacities), which also makes it unclear

40 Titus Stahl, "Sharing the Background." In *The Background of Social Reality*, ed. Michael Schmitz, Beatrice Kobow and Hans Bernhard Schmid. (Springer, 2013), 127–146.

whether there are normative standards for determining the rationality of accepting specific forms of social authority. By contrast, if we accept the Lukács-inspired needs-based social pragmatism sketched above, social recognition will be driven, at the most basic level, by an anthropologically rooted interest in living in a society that is structured around the cooperative satisfaction of needs. At a second level, the interest in living in a discursive community in which people recognize each other as equals when it comes to their semantic capacities will then be a cultural development that, even if it ultimately acquires considerable autonomy, can be seen as motivated by and to some extent subject to evaluation with regard to this underlying interest.

This also helps us to answer the second question regarding the link between labor and institutional reality. In the current debate in social ontology, it is often assumed that what lies at the foundation of institutional reality is some kind of collective acceptance of rules. Lukács' theory of "teleological positing" (which, as I have argued, need not be interpreted in an individualistic manner) seems to be an alternative to this view. Again, we have no choice but to engage in speculation given the lack of a clear answer in Lukács' text.

If institutions rest on the collective acceptance of rules, it is plausible to assume that in most cases the answer to the question of what *counts* as a sufficient form of collective acceptance will be determined by institutional rules (which, one might say, "anchor" the fact of collective acceptance). On pain of infinite regress, however, there must be ground-level institutions the rules of which are collectively accepted in a way that is explicable without reference to any further rules. In other words, there must be non-institutional instances of collective acceptance. One example of such a claim is H.L.A. Hart's famous thoughts on the "rule of recognition," a rule which serves to identify valid legal rules but which is not identified as valid by another rule insofar as its force is a pure matter of non-legal social practice.⁴¹ As I have argued elsewhere, the most plausible way to account for such basic forms of shared rule acceptance is to adopt a theory according to which a rule is collectively accepted in a community if the members of that community recognize each other as entitled to criticize each other's behavior with reference to that rule.⁴²

I propose that we understand Lukács as advancing the claim that the idea of intersubjective recognition of needs provides the link between such general structures of social reality and processes of labor. Not only does the dependence of human beings on others for the satisfaction of their needs

41 Cf. H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

42 Cf. Titus Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente Einer Theorie Sozialer Praktiken*. (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2013), 242.

genealogically explain the emergence of historically normative practices that regulate cooperation, but there is also a social ontological point to be made in support of the necessity of including needs in this model. The basic idea is that rules or norms establish a difference between correct and incorrect action. As Wittgenstein famously argued, this distinction cannot be identified with an individual's self-assessment, as there is a difference between applying a rule correctly and merely thinking that one is applying it correctly. This motivates the idea that the distinction between correct and incorrect performance, as a necessary component of any rule-guided practice, can only be rooted in an intersubjective social assessment in which no individual reaction ever settles the matter. This does not entail, however, that there needs to be an infinite regress of rules and rule-applications. Rather, it is plausible to say that there is a standard of correctness embodied in a practice once people accept each other's reactions as having default authority that settles the matter unless there is a challenge to that authority. While the meaning of rules cannot be reduced to whatever community members are disposed to accept as their meaning, their dispositions to accept each other's interpretations as authoritative by default still enables us to think of the whole of assessments in a community as a finite set that determines what is correct or incorrect.⁴³

This model entails that, even if the content of institutional rules is not determined by any individual's dispositions, institutional practices are made possible by people's reliable dispositions to apply rules, to assess other people's applications of rules, and so on. Hegelian accounts such as Brandom's typically assume that such dispositions are there and that people are in some way motivated to serve as score-keepers in the social practice game. As sketched above, we may also adopt a more materialist version of this model, in which the basic level of evaluative dispositions is given by needs: When the standard we are asked to apply to other people's performances is whether these performances lead to the satisfaction of our needs, it is easy to see not only why we might be motivated to play that game but also what normative force the game has in its entirety. If we assume that the intersubjective recognition of needs in a cooperative practice is the bottom level of social evaluative practices, we can make more sense of Lukács' claim that all institutional practices are based on labor, as labor is simply the name of a performance that is subject to the standard of whether it satisfies other people's needs (at least this is so once we drop the problematic requirement that all kinds of labor must engage external nature).

Unlike intersubjectivist theories that privilege *discursive* interaction as the main space of recognition – such as those developed by Brandom and, with

43 For a longer version of this argument, see Stahl, 325.

some qualifications, Habermas – the materialist theory sketched above does not share the idealist assumption, first expressed by Hegel, that the development of normative orders emerges solely from the internal dialectic between forms and justification and their reflexive self-application.⁴⁴ Rather, it will assume that there is also a dialectical relation between individual needs and social institutions, where both elements do not shape each other merely causally but are instead subject to challenges based on the normative meaning of the other element.

What such a theory of labor-based normativity cannot explain, however, is the emergence of types of intentionality by which people create new institutional rules and, concomitantly, new needs emerge. If one assumes that all norms ultimately emerge from needs-directed interaction between people, then there is room to explain how the resulting practices become increasingly complex in their quest to satisfy the relevant needs, and perhaps even how derived needs that relate to the requirements of participation in such practices emerge. The resulting model will still be instrumentalist to a certain extent, however – as Lukács argues, language and institutions are mere means of the “generalization” of more particular forms of action. It will not be able to explain the emergence of new social action types that have goals which are completely divorced from need satisfaction.

Of course, this model has only been briefly sketched here and involves much speculation, although I think that it is ultimately consistent with what Lukács says and provides a foundation for his claims that is missing in his own work. With this said, we must admit that we find no systematic answer to the question of how we can understand labor itself as a social practice and how the structure of this practice fits into the larger framework of a theory of society. His analysis of the individual positing of goals is complemented only by a quasi-system-theoretic model of the emergence of social order through unintentional consequences of action. This does not explain the contribution of labor to the normative structure of society.

4 Social Holism and Totality

In a second step, I wish to discuss Lukács' claims regard the irreducibility of social facts. Lukács develops these claims by connecting his discussion of normativity to a number of other ideas. First, there is the idea that modern

44 Cf. Terry P. Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology. The Sociality of Reason*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 1.

societies must be understood as totalities – that all specific social phenomena can only be adequately understood if one considers their role and function within society as an overarching structure.⁴⁵ Second, there is the idea that individual intentions and beliefs are merely intelligible from within the context of social practices.⁴⁶ This leads him to the holistic conclusion that understanding individual beliefs and intentions requires understanding society as a totality.⁴⁷

The development of the concept of totality in Lukács' work involves ontological, epistemological and political aspects. In his earlier work, in particular in the *Theory of the Novel* and in *History and Class Consciousness*, he departs from a specific diagnosis of society. In the former book, he analyzes the modern situation by contrasting it with an earlier historical phase in which individual action could be meaningfully related to a whole, a possibility that disappeared with the emergence of modern individualism.⁴⁸ Following his move towards Marxism, he drops this historical narrative and claims that the revolutionary perspective is superior to bourgeois consciousness as it is only from within the revolutionary process that the totality of society, and even the very forms of objectivity of all social phenomena, can be adequately understood, whereas bourgeois thought necessarily regresses into irrationalism.⁴⁹ Marxism's capacity to understand totality is linked to its function of expressing the standpoint of the proletariat, which is itself the producer of that totality. Only the link to the possible revolutionary self-constitution of the proletariat accounts for the epistemic possibilities of that form of theory.

All of these aspects return in the *Ontology*, even if in a thoroughly different form. "Genuine" ontologies refer to the totality of everything that exists (as a totality of processes and partial totalities),⁵⁰ and this is also the guiding principle for an appropriate epistemology and for the possibility of political action. Political action in particular is understood as a form of acting in which the

45 Cf. Georg Lukács, "What Is Orthodox Marxism?" In *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (1923; repr., MIT Press, 1971), 8; but also OGS II, 252.

46 OGS I, 578–584.

47 Cf. Philip Pettit, "Defining and Defending Social Holism." In *Rules, Reasons and Norms*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116–135.

48 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock. (1915; repr., London: Merlin Press, 1971).

49 Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." In *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (1923; repr., MIT Press, 1971), 110–149.

50 OGS I, 240, 523; OGS II, 155ff.

society's character as a totality, which emerges out of interlocking individual acts of positing, is adequately reflected upon.⁵¹

Even though this raises all kinds of issues, I wish only to remark that the idea of totality – which, in *History and Class Consciousness*, was still closely linked to the neo-Kantian idea of “forms of objectivity” (*Gegenständlichkeitsformen*) – becomes less plausible once it is integrated into a more traditional theory of ontology. In Lukács' earlier writings, the reference to totality explains not only how certain properties of objects are socially constituted but how the very form under which these objects become accessible to us as objects in the first place is determined by social practices which form a totality and thus rule out other forms of objectivity which might lead to more appropriate forms of engagement with the respective objects. In particular, Lukács there claims that a form of objectivity that “reifies” objects insofar as the constitutive role of social practices for their respective nature becomes inaccessible due to that form also leads to social pathologies.

Compared to this critical employment of the notion of totality, the concept seems to play a less ambitious role later on, that is, in the *Ontology*. When Lukács argues, for example, that we can understand non-organic nature as a totality, this merely seems to mean that we cannot account for material properties except in relation to possible roles in causal explanations.⁵² Of course, this notion of totality, which amounts to a quasi-Quinean form of holism, is no longer either controversial or particularly critical; it has lost its connection to the way in which particular kinds of social totality can either allow or block our understanding of the very form of objects.

It might be possible, however, to distinguish remarks where Lukács seemingly accepts this watered-down conception of totality from those passages where totality still has the original meaning of a whole that is constitutive not only of the meaning of experiences but of the very form under which objects can be experienced. In fact, only if we can make such a distinction will it again be possible to examine what role the concept of totality might play in a critical social ontology.

We can begin this reconstructive work by noting that Lukács primarily uses the concept of totality in the *Ontology* in its social sense to describe the interplay of particular acts of teleological positing which relate to each other in virtue of their reference to objects.⁵³ Lukács sometimes expresses the issue in an unfortunate way, suggesting that individual acts of positing acquire a social

51 OGS II, 432–434.

52 OGS I, 182, 302.

53 Cf. OGS II, 74.

essence when they involve a reference to desired changes in the behavior of other people.⁵⁴ The possibility of such “positing” (i.e., intentionality) does not entail any form of social holism, however. At most, it leads to a description of social interaction in terms of the strategic pursuit of goals. That this cannot be Lukács’ intended meaning becomes clear when we consider his central examples of the emergence of essentially social forms of positing: the constitution of exchange value and money.⁵⁵ In these cases, individuals’ intentional acts of positing amount to a totality in a stronger sense, as we can no longer understand the meaning of what is intended without referring to the intentions of others (as would still be possible in the case of strategic interaction). That people form an intention to trade some good they possess in anticipation of the willingness of specified others to match that intention by giving up some specific object desired by them is a plausible reconstruction of the intentionality involved in the most primitive forms of commodity exchange. In any developed form of market exchange, participants’ intentions can only be interpreted rationally (at least if we follow Marx this far) if we assume that they share a conception of equal exchange which is independent of their particular desires and which refers to a standard that is only comprehensible as emerging from the social practice in which these intentions play a particular role.⁵⁶

Of course, this particular example might be vulnerable to the standard objections to the Marxist theory of value. What it purports to show is independent of them, however. One can argue that, once individuals’ intentions refer to *social* facts such as exchange values, those intentions are social not merely in the sense that their conditions of satisfaction are dependent on the intentions or actions of others (as in the case of strategic interaction) but also in the sense that their *meaning* is determined by larger social practices. In particular, as is obvious in the case of exchange value, people can be capable of reliably applying concepts correctly without being capable of giving a correct or exhaustive analysis of what they mean. In such cases, people’s mental states are insufficient to determine the content of their beliefs and intentions, leading to an externalist claim about meaning (the meaning of these terms is not “in their heads”).

Furthermore, the social facts that determine the meaning of economic intentions (for example the structures of collective acceptance that fix the meaning of intentions regarding economic value) are typically characterized by

54 Cf. OGS II, 47.

55 OGS 78, 123, 206.

56 OGS II, 75.

their dependence on constitutive (or anchoring) relationships to further social facts (for example, the institutional nature of money and value cannot be analyzed without also including the institutional rules determining property, which in turn refer to norms regarding permissible and impermissible forms of exchange), leading to the conclusion that the content of economic intuition depends on a wide set of social practices and is thus social in a more fundamental sense than simple cases of purely strategic intentions.

If it is true that, given progress in the integration of interactions in networks of social practices, people's "positing" intentions – and, once we accept that they are also the source of normativity, the normative standards underlying social interaction – can only be understood if we assume that their content is determined by social institutions or practices, and if it is true that the social institutions involved in this process not only interact causally with other institutions but actually constitute and/or anchor each other, then we can make sense of Lukács' claim that it is indeed the intentional "positings" of individuals which, even if initially isolated from each other, both produce a social totality and, by becoming part of that totality, also become dependent on it for their very content.

This suggests that Lukács' theory can only be made plausible if we accept two assumptions that he himself – lacking the necessary theoretical tools – never makes explicit. The one is a form of social ontological holism that argues that there are no basic social institutions that can be understood without reference to further institutions. The other is an externalist thesis regarding (some) individual intentions that argues that the meaning of such intentions is determined not by the introspective self-understanding of the agent but by the objective social institutions to which those intentions refer, even if the very same intentions are what reproduce and account for the existence of these institutions. Both claims can be understood as forming the basis for a countercurrent to much work in contemporary social ontology.

To raise a last point, one can also relate these suggestions to what Lukács says about language in the *Ontology*. Even though Lukács generally discusses language only very rarely philosophically (apart from his aesthetic considerations), the *Ontology* is extreme in this respect as Lukács mentions the role of language only in passing. Admittedly, there is something like an implicit theory of language to be found, according to which linguistic meaning can be spelled out in terms of reference to objective kinds,⁵⁷ and Lukács also emphasizes how

57 OGS I, 147.

language can extend social reality by allowing people to refer to new phenomena. In both cases, however, he treats language as an instrument that only allows us to anticipate a relationship with the world that can ultimately only genuinely be realized through work.⁵⁸ In other words, for Lukács, language merely has the function of making explicit a world-relation that is always already there in work. The role of language in intersubjective communication (rather than the relation of a individual subject to the world) is only treated superficially. Lukács' theory of language treats communication either as a strategic attempt to influence others' behavior or as a means of transmitting representational content between speakers.⁵⁹ He never seriously considers the possibility that language can also enable communication that proceeds via the exchange of reasons and thus transcends strategic interaction insofar as through such exchanges a form of agreement that grounds many forms of social normativity and social institutions can be achieved. Similarly, he also does not consider the many forms of institutional reality the content of which is not explicable without referring to linguistically mediated agreement. One need only think of political action as aiming at generating legitimate power, where legitimacy can hardly be understood other than in terms of potential justifications. Politics and other institutions create spaces of interaction where language has a coordinating function and where, even further, specific forms of intersubjective, linguistically mediated reasoning are indeed constitutive. Even though Lukács stresses that the generalizing capacity of language allows us to think new thoughts,⁶⁰ he only considers this in relation to the representation of facts created in other domains of human action,⁶¹ but never as the creation of new forms of interaction.

In relation to the concept of totality which is at issue here, this neglect of the linguistic dimension of the social entails that Lukács can understand the mutual interdependence of institutional contexts (and the action and object types determined by them) merely in the sense that he assumes that institutions are interconnected when agents acting in one institutional context implicitly refer (in some unspecified sense) to the action-guiding intentions of others in other contexts. This prevents him from considering not only the possibility that it is not merely individual intentions that connect different parts of the social whole but also the possibility that such connections already exist

58 OGS II, 171.

59 OGS II, 172.

60 OGS II, 165ff.

61 OGS II, 344f.

on the level of meaning. The very notion of a totality of meaning remains unexamined in the *Ontology*.

5 Perspectives for a Critical Social Ontology

This discussion of different fragments of Lukács' social ontology was not so much guided by the intention to make this complex theoretical construction entirely transparent as by the intention to highlight those ideas with which Lukács goes beyond the assumptions of dominant theories in contemporary social ontology and to examine them for their potential contribution to a critical social ontology.

In the introduction, a critical social ontology was defined as a social ontological theory that examines its own historical and social conditions of existence. Such a theory cannot understand itself as being independent of its own object – that is, of social institutions and practices. It must rather analyze all elements of social reality (itself among them) as constitutively interrelated and mutually determined.

Lukács' social ontology contains inspiration for such a theory. If one takes seriously the idea that individual and social forms of teleology are mutually interdependent, there is an argument for also including social ontological theorizing as a norm-guided process in the analysis of this totality. Even if one accepts the ambitious claim that all social normativity is rooted in the labor process, however, it is clear that Lukács' analysis must be extended by an analysis of other forms of social practice that takes their relative autonomy much more seriously.

Even if only in fragments, we can find points of departure for a materialist social ontology in Lukács. I have attempted to sketch how his claims regarding a materialist conception of normativity, a non-reductive conception of the bases of social action and a holistic theory of mutual dependence between social institutions and individual intentions can be developed further and framed in contemporary language. Even if much of that work still has to be done, such a project could be a stepping stone towards a social ontology which would be useful for the purposes of critical theory. In particular, such arguments could prove useful for a theory of society which takes itself to be part of a historical social form of life and thus of a collective project which, at least in theory, can include self-reflection and conscious critical engagement with the basic assumptions that determine its self-understanding. By pursuing this thought, such a critical social ontology could make room for self-reflection and critique in a way that is unavailable to current theorizing.

Even if the way in which Lukács spells out his conception of totality is too objectivist, just as his conception of work remains too individualistic to lead such a project towards the successful challenging of contemporary assumptions, his *Ontology of Social Being* at least illustrates the challenges and unanswered issues faced by a critical social ontology.