CHAPTER 1

The Problem of Nature in Lukács

1. THE PROBLEM

Andrew Feenberg, in his Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory, writes that “Lukács’ fundamental difficulty is with nature,” and most commentators seem to agree that this is so.1 Yet as soon as they start to describe what that difficulty consists in, disagreement immediately arises. The most common criticism is that Lukács denies the existence of nature as something independent of the social: Lucio Colletti explicitly asserts this, and Alfred Schmidt too writes that Lukács in History and Class Consciousness “dissolves nature, both in form and in content, into the social forms of its appropriation.”2 Yet Schmidt himself also writes that Lukács “deserves recognition as the first to oppose Engels’s fateful attempt to extend the dialectic to cover . . . nature, by pointing out how important it is precisely for materialism to restrict the dialectical method to the socio-historical areas of reality.”3 It’s not at all clear, though, how both of Schmidt’s characterizations can be true: if nature is dissolved into the social, why would a dialectics of nature not precisely have a place reserved for it within a dialectical method “restricted” to the socio-historical?

Similar critiques accuse Lukács of rejecting natural science. Gareth Stedman Jones says that History and Class Consciousness “represents the first major irruption of the romantic anti-scientific tradition of bourgeois thought into Marxist theory,” and Colletti witheringly criticizes what he sees as the irrationalist elements in Lukács’s thought, accusing it of falling into a tradition that “mistak[es] the romantic critique of intellect and science for a socio-historical critique of capitalism.”4 But on the other hand Feenberg writes that Lukács “has a quite banal respect for the sciences of nature,” and “nowhere denies the independence of nature nor the validity of the sciences which study it”; and he produces persuasive textual evidence to show that this is so.5 Andrew Arato and Paul Breines agree, writing against Jones that “the argument
that [Lukács] meant to do away with the positive results of modern science . . . is groundless" and adding that in any case "it would be a mistake . . . to seek a fully developed critique of modern science . . . in History and Class Consciousness."

Lukács himself is not much help. In his self-critical 1967 introduction to History and Class Consciousness, he complains that the book's position implies "the disappearance of the ontological objectivity of nature." But he also agrees with Schmidt that the book is marked by a desire to restrict Marxism's applicability to the social realm and "repuatie it as a theory of nature," yet unlike Schmidt he sees this as a failing that "strike[s] at the very roots of Marxian ontology," not as something to be praised. His youthful mistake, Lukács famously writes, was to confuse objectification with alienation, resulting in a fundamental theoretical antipathy toward the objective as such. Colletti, Arato, Schmidt, and many others agree. But Feenberg denies that Lukács makes this identification, and Marković (who was a student of Lukács) concurs, adding that "it is a sad task to have to defend this extraordinary book, one of the most original philosophical works in this century, from its own author."

What's a commentator to do, when those who precede him seem unable to agree (and seem indeed to disagree so radically) not merely about whether an author's theses are true but even what precisely those theses are, and when they are even prepared to reject the author's own self-criticism (not the only one Lukács ever performed, of course . . . ) as based on a misreading? Does Lukács have a theory of nature or natural science at all? Is he a romantic critic of science or does he ignore it? Does he restrict his theory to human history and society and deny it any relevance to nature, or does his theory itself depend on "dissolving" nature into the social? Does he identify objectification with alienation or not? What is going on here?

In this chapter and the next I want not only to disentangle the various threads associated with "the problem of nature in Lukács," but also to examine why they got tangled in the first place. The truth is, I will argue, that Lukács's position is marked from the start by a series of deep ambivalences about the status of nature and natural science, and it is these that have led to such confusion among his critics as to what he really believes. Further, it is these ambivalences, as much as the particular theses he defends, that Lukács bequeaths as a difficult and ambiguous inheritance to the Western Marxist tradition he inaugurates. We will see the later career of this inheritance in the chapters that follow.

2. MARXISM AND THE DIALECTICS OF NATURE

It is of the first importance to realize that the method is limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels' account of dialectics can in the main be put down
to the fact that Engels—following Hegel’s mistaken lead—extended the method to apply also to knowledge of nature. However, the crucial determinants of dialectics—the interaction of subject and object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc.—are absent from our knowledge of nature.\textsuperscript{12}

With this apparently simple remark (deceptively placed in a footnote) Lukács founds Western Marxism. Despite the attempts at camouflage—the footnote is prefaced in the text by not one but two comforting quotations from Marx and Engels both, and appears in the middle of an essay supposedly calling for a return to “orthodox Marxism” and a rejection of revisionism—the radical theoretical implications are unmistakable. Here, in the first essay of \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, Lukács announces the defiant repudiation of what were until then central tenets of Marxist philosophical orthodoxy—Engels’s view that Marxism is a science of society on the model of the successful natural sciences and his further claim that, as such, Marx’s “dialectics of history” is grounded on a more general “dialectics of nature” identified ultimately with the most advanced discoveries of those sciences. Lukács’s critical point is not merely to demand a new ontological modesty in Marxist theory, as the reference to “limiting” might suggest, but rather radically to transform its view of method, questioning Engels’s account of what is meant by “dialectics” and in particular renouncing the latter’s identification of Marxist method with that of the natural sciences.

There are two noteworthy aspects to Lukács’s rejection of the “dialectics of nature,” one having to do with nature, the other having to do with dialectics. On the one hand, Engels’s claim that Marxist method—the method of materialist dialectics—is applicable universally, and that indeed Marx’s accounts of history and society are merely part of a broader dialectical view of the world as a whole that includes the world of nature, is here peremptorily denied.\textsuperscript{13} Marxism is a social theory. Lukács is asserting, and as such is methodologically sui generis; it neither offers a method for the investigation of nature nor does it borrow one from that investigation.

On the other hand, Lukács here at the same time is rejecting Engels’s account of what the dialectical method is. For the “crucial determinants” he mentions are not the ones emphasized by Engels in the latter’s accounts of dialectics (e.g., in \textit{Anti-Dühring} and the \textit{Dialectics of Nature}). Lukács makes this clearer elsewhere in the essay. Although Engels emphasizes the role of “interaction” instead of one-way causality as pivotal to dialectics, Lukács writes, “he does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely the \textit{dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process}.”\textsuperscript{14} We might say that Engels’s conception of dialectics is essentially \textit{dynamic}, emphasizing motion,
the fluidity and interconnection of objects, and the dissolution of the world of static things into one of processes. But all this takes place, so to speak, on the side of the object; the subject investigating the world—the scientist or social theorist—is concerned simply with describing it as it is, "ohne fremde Zutat," as Engels says. Indeed, for Engels, just such a pure, objective description of nature leads to the discovery of its dialectical character; natural science in this sense is for him the proof of dialectics, but is not itself understood dialectically. Against this Lukács is calling for a return to the root Hegelian sense of dialectics as epistemological, emphasizing the interconnection between subject and object in the process of knowledge. On this view, knowledge is fundamentally active, which means that knowledge and that which is known are correlative from the very start. The "fluidity" and "interrelation" between objects Engels speaks of are only consequences of this, the primary dialectical relationship. Such a view clearly puts into question the very idea that knowledge ought to, or could, aim at the kind of pure description of an external state of affairs that Engels's view of natural science seems to take for granted.

Thus although both Engels and Lukács distinguish "dialectical" from "metaphysical" modes of thought, they differ on how to draw the distinction. For Lukács the "bourgeois worldview" involves the taking up of a "contemplative attitude" by the subject toward the world with which it is confronted, an attitude whereby that world is viewed as separate from the subject and knowledge is seen as a passive reflection in the subject's mind of what is "out there" independent of it. But this, Lukács believes, is just the attitude taken up by natural science. Thus the sign conferred upon natural science is reversed: whereas Engels saw it as providing a methodological model to be emulated by Marxist social theory, Lukács now sees it as methodologically associated at its core with bourgeois ideology and hence as subject to critique. Here nineteenth-century Marxism's essentially Enlightenment view of natural science as offering a paradigm for a liberating knowledge that might help overcome oppression is replaced by a new suspicion of natural science as in itself oppressive, a suspicion that will henceforth characterize Western Marxist discussions of science.

"There is something highly problematic in the fact that capitalist society is predisposed to harmonise with scientific method," Lukács writes in History and Class Consciousness, and the distrust this predisposition generates is a central theme of the work. He sees a set of philosophical consequences in Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities whose implications Engels had missed. Under capitalism, Marx had claimed, human relations and human activities congeal into the form of things; the model, of course, is the way in which the exercise of human labor power to produce a commodity takes the form of an apparently objective property of the commodity produced, its
exchange value. For Lukács this process of reification (Verdinglichung) suggested more generally a basic propensity for the institutions and policies of the capitalist social order to appear as eternal and unalterable givens, in which their source in human interaction is systematically hidden: they appear thinglike. But to say this is to say that they appear like nature—like a kind of “second nature,” in the famous phrase, not in the Hegelian sense of a sittliche realm of Objective Spirit in which humans can feel at home but rather in the sense of a false consciousness in which the human origin of the human world has been forgotten.\textsuperscript{19}

If this is so, it begins to become clear what is “problematic” about natural science. For the appearance of society as “second nature,” Lukács argues, encourages the illusion that the way we achieve knowledge of society is the same as the way we achieve knowledge of things. This is why Engels’s dream of Marxism as part of a more universal dialectical science based on a unity of method with the sciences of nature is, in Lukács’s view, an ideological mistake. Contra Engels, Lukács wants to insist on the essential difference between radical social theory and natural science: they are different sorts of projects, employing different methodologies and concerned with different kinds of objects. And the failure to recognize this difference is not merely an epistemological error, but one with an ideological import, reflecting (and helping to perpetuate) the reification that forms the dominant fact of contemporary society.

But here an ambiguity starts to emerge. The argument about reification just outlined entails that the attempt to employ the methods of natural science to investigate “second nature”—that is, the realm of the social—is illicit and ideological. But what about the employment of these methods in the investigation of first nature? The quotation with which this section began asserted that “crucial determinants” of dialectics were missing from knowledge of nature; this seems to suggest that the critique of science and its epistemological presuppositions simply does not apply there. The methods of natural science extolled by Engels are inapplicable to “second nature” because those methods ignore the dialectical interplay between subject and object central to an understanding of historical and social processes, and hence they perpetuate the reified misunderstanding of such processes as things. But the things of first nature are things (aren’t they?), and so for the examination of such a realm a natural science ignorant of dialectics is apparently unproblematic. Lukács’s position combines something like a neo-Kantian dualism distinguishing Natur- from Geisteswissenschaften with a distinctively Marxist critique of reification and its ideology. “When natural science’s ideal of knowledge is applied to nature,” he writes, “it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie.”\textsuperscript{20}
Yet there is something disingenuous about this. It seems to assert a kind of ideological neutrality to the methods of natural science when applied to their own proper realm—that of nature—while reserving its criticism for the misapplication of these methods to the realm of the social; we might call it the misapplication thesis. But that those methods are so easily misapplied and that they are “predisposed to harmonize” so well with the requirements of a reified society suggests that their “problematic” character might arise at a different level. We have already seen Lukács associate the methods of natural science with a nondialectical “metaphysical” standpoint, presupposing as they do a set of epistemological assumptions where knowledge (“science”) appears as the pure and disinterested apprehension of external objects taken as independent of the knowing subject. It is these very assumptions and not simply their “misapplication” that Lukács criticizes as “problematic”: might the methods of natural science themselves reflect the structures of a capitalist society in which the contribution of knowing and acting subjects to producing the objects they confront is systematically obscured?

Lukács, that is, wants to reverse the sign that traditional Marxism gave to natural science, now turning it into an object of critique, but his strategy for doing so takes the paradoxical form of splitting natural science off from the social and banishing it from any role in Marxist theory at all. Whether one emphasizes the desire to criticize natural science or the attempt to split it off determines which view of Lukács one takes—Lukács as radical “neo-romantic” critic of science or Lukács as modest limiter of Marxism’s ontological pretensions. But this indicates the problem: Lukács’s paradoxical strategy does not really resolve the question of the status of natural science so much as it drives it underground. The tensions and contradictions in the position are built in from the very beginning—indeed, in the very footnote I began by quoting.

For the methodological dualism Lukács asserts in History and Class Consciousness is highly questionable given his own assumptions. It seems to require for its own plausibility something like a fundamental ontological dualism as well, between the realm of nature and the realm of society.21 This seems to run directly counter to Marxist “materialist” assertions about the continuity between nature and the human, and to reinstitute the very centrality of the category of Geist in social theory that Marx and Engels had so decisively rejected (a rejection Lukács shows no sign of finding questionable). But the dualism fits uneasily with Marxist “materialism” in quite another sense as well. For if “ideas” reflect “material conditions,” and if “in every society the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class,” then it is not clear how natural science could in any case escape the charge of being part of the ideological superstructure even as an account of nature. In a book so centrally dedicated to criticizing the worldview of contemporary society, how could natural science, so closely tied to that worldview, be immune from critique?
Lukács recognizes this set of problems, although perhaps only obscurely, and they account for a strong underground countertendency in History and Class Consciousness, in which the misapplication thesis is de-emphasized and the suggestion arises that contemporary natural science, too, even in its “own” sphere, must be seen as part of the ideological superstructure of a society based on reification. Knowledge of nature itself is a social phenomenon, after all: why then should the “crucial determinants of dialectics” be missing there, as the footnote I began this section by quoting claims? Andrew Feenberg has remarked on a passage at the very end of the essay on reification that indeed seems to offer a significant modification of that claim, where Lukács writes that

the dialectics of nature can never become anything more exalted than a dialectics of movement witnessed by the detached observer, as the subject cannot be integrated into the dialectical process, at least not at the stage reached hitherto. . . . From this we deduce the necessity of separating the merely objective dialectics of nature from those of society. For in the dialectics of society the subject is included in the reciprocal relation in which theory and practice become dialectical with reference to one another. (It goes without saying that the growth of knowledge about nature is a social phenomenon and therefore to be included in the second dialectical type.)

This differs from the footnote in “What Is Orthodox Marxism?” first in the concession that there might be a dialectics of nature after all (albeit of a different form than that studied by Marxist social theory), but second and more important in the explicit appropriation of natural science (as knowledge about nature) to the dialectics of the social, and hence presumably also to the theory of reification. These two points are in some tension, however: if our knowledge of nature involves the second or social dialectic, it is not clear how the “merely objective” dialectics in nature could themselves ever come to be known. At least Engels had grounded his dialectics of nature on the results of empirical research; by drawing the dualist line in this new way—so that instead of separating social theory from natural science it now separates the latter from objective nature itself—Lukács leaves the assertion that nature is dialectical, and in a different way from the social, entirely without any foundation at all. Indeed, it is not evident how this new dualism could possibly be tenable—and in this context the obscure (and unexplained) hint that a “social” dialectics of nature is impossible only “at the stage reached hitherto” perhaps represents an interesting irruption of some other possibility into the text.

Lukács is drawn, I am arguing, more or less despite his explicit intention, to the claim that natural science’s methods, even as applied in their “own” realm, have to be seen as social and ideological, and hence as subject to a
critique that goes beyond the misapplication thesis. It is this secret telos to his position that accounts for the view of him as romantic critic of science (although Feenberg is nonetheless quite right to point out that Lukács never makes any such explicit claim). It also helps account for the widespread view of him as offering an idealist account of nature. “Nature is a social category,” Lukács famously writes (forgetting his own stricture against offering a Marxist account of this “nondialectical” sphere); “whatever is held to be natural [als Natur gilt] at any given stage of social development, however this nature is related to man and whatever form his involvement with it takes, i.e., nature’s form, its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned.”

Here “nature” and “knowledge of nature” both are entirely relativized to the social, in complete disregard of the dualism supposedly instituted both by the misapplication thesis and by the rejection of Engels’s dialectics of nature. A very different thesis is now hinted at—and it too will shadow Western Marxism over the decades to come: that contemporary natural science is only one possible approach to nature, an ideological one corresponding to a reified society, and that a “new society” in which reification is abolished will possess a “new science” whose methods will differ radically from those of the science we know today.

Lukács’s position, I am claiming, is thus shot through with contradictory impulses, symbolized (but also heightened) by the paradoxical attempt to criticize natural science by expelling it from Marxism. They take clearest shape in the tension I have begun to trace between the methodological dualism Lukács explicitly asserts and the argument’s secret telos in the claim that natural science is social, ideological, and subject to critique even in its “own” realm. It is this tension that is responsible for the “problem of nature in Lukács.” But to see how this is so, we need to look further into the details of Lukács’s account.

3. REIFICATION AND SELF-RECOGNITION

*History and Class Consciousness* is above all a work of epistemology. Lukács’s audacious claim is that the social phenomenon of reification has an epistemological meaning: that Marx’s account of commodities holds the key to the solution not only of practical and social problems, but of philosophical ones as well. Part of Lukács’s importance as a Marxist theorist is the way he radicalizes Marx’s thesis about the connections between modes of thought and material life, going far beyond the crude functionalism that has typically characterized Marxist discussions of the relations between “base” and “superstructure.” His concern is not to show the ideological function of particular (e.g.) religious or political beliefs, but rather to examine the connections between the deepest
categories of contemporary thought and the social practices (and social contradictions) within which that thought arises.

The argument has several steps. The first we have already seen: it is the identification of commodity fetishism, or in its broader form reification, as the central structural fact of contemporary society.\(^{27}\) The next step, in accordance both with the Marxist conception of "superstructure" and with Lukács's own methodological insistence on the category of totality, is to examine a number of contemporary social institutions and phenomena to show the ways in which reification works itself out all across the social field. Lukács, with much debt to Weber, here uncovers a set of striking structural homologies among a remarkably diverse group of areas—including the capitalist state, the legal system, journalism, economics, management techniques, factory organization, bureaucracy, and so forth. His claim is that these all share a deep structure, that this deep structure is simply that of the "bourgeois worldview" (and the bourgeois world) itself, and that ultimately its roots lie in the phenomenon of reification.

He names this worldview the contemplative attitude and subjects it to a detailed analysis and critique. For the contemplative attitude, the world that surrounds us is something independent of us, given, and immutable; we observe it but cannot change it. The investigator of this world and the actor in it alike relate to it as to something separate from them; knowledge is conceived of as the essentially passive receiving of information from a world external to the observer. The world is viewed as objective, as subject to formal laws, as reducible by analysis, and as unchanging. Objective means separate from the subject; we come to know the world by observing it "just as it presents itself" and taking care not to impose upon it our own "subjective" hopes and expectations (which are called "biases"). Subject to formal laws means (among other things) regular, general, predictable; individuals (the "content" that the formal laws are "about") appear as bearers of abstract properties that allow us to determine which laws apply and to predict, algorithmically, future effects. Reducible by analysis means subject to reductionistic explanation; complex wholes are to be understood by breaking them into the smaller parts of which they are made. Unchanging means essentially ahistorical: because the world external to us is separate from us and subject to universal formal laws, the only changes it can undergo are predictable and law-governed ones. The objects themselves may change, and thus have a "history" in a minimal sense (like the history of the solar system, say), but the laws they follow are eternal, and so no fundamental change is possible.

All this produces a deep division between the subject and the object of knowledge, recapitulated at the level of both theory and practice. To know the world is to be able to describe its laws through analysis without the imposition of the subjective; to act in it successfully is to manipulate those laws and the
objects they govern in order to achieve one’s goals. Such manipulation—which Weber had called *purposive-rational action*—treats the laws and objects as given and unchangeable, and as independent of the subjective (the “goals”); the ought and the is, what one wants and how one gets it, are kept entirely distinct.

The contemplative attitude is to be met with, Lukács believes, in a wide set of phenomena in the contemporary world—from the cult of “objectivity” in journalism to the bureaucracy of the modern social welfare state to electoral systems in which voters dutifully choose from among indistinguishable candidates without ever asking why these are the only alternatives they are offered. Formalism, passivity, a taking for granted of what is as what must be: they are endemic at all levels of our social world and our social discourse, and according to Lukács are ultimately the consequences of a contemporary social structure founded on a mode of production characterized by reification.

In each realm, he furthermore argues, the contemplative attitude finds itself faced by basic *antinomies*, problems of both a theoretical and practical nature that it cannot resolve. Objectivism finds itself unable to excise all traces of the “subjective” from its knowledge; formalism is stymied by an inability to grasp the real objects of the system in their specificity and concreteness; analysis cannot cope with holistic and emergent properties of systems; the search for eternal laws and predictable procedures is incapable of comprehending historical change as such. Is/ought, form/content, whole/parts, historical change/ eternal verities—“bourgeois thought” is characterized throughout by a set of antithetical oppositions it does not know how to integrate. The society whose guiding presuppositions derive from the contemplative worldview constantly confronts a set of problems it is incapable of resolving, including (to name just a few) bureaucratization, a conflict between formalism and compassion in the law, a populace increasingly cynical about electoral politics and politicians, and so on.

Lukács’s important claim is that these difficulties at the level of real institutions are connected to a set of *theoretical* difficulties that can be demonstrated within the worldview itself. It is in this context that he launches, in the second section of the essay on reification, into his remarkable rereading of the history of modern philosophy. This is the next step in his argument: to show that the tradition of epistemological thought from Descartes through Hegel represents the working out, on a highly abstract level, of the contemplative attitude and its predicaments. The central problem for this tradition, Lukács argues, has been to understand how the subject comes to know the object. The tradition thus begins with the assumption of a division between the two (announced explicitly in Descartes), and then sets itself the task of explaining how this division can be overcome. Knowledge is understood as requiring the possession of a correct model of the objective world in thought, one that
"reflects" or "corresponds" to what is out there and from which all traces of the "merely subjective" have been eliminated. Assumed from the start, Lukács asserts, is thus precisely the standpoint of contemplation: the world is separate from the knower, and knowledge is a process by which information from the world is passively received by the subject. (If the subject did anything to it, the result could no longer be called a "reflection," but rather would be "distortion" or "bias."

Yet a model of the world in thought, of course, is inevitably already "subjective"; the great problem for the modern epistemological position is to discover how to guarantee that the model the knower develops is the correct one—which would require, in turn, having some other prior knowledge of what the world is "really like." Struggling with this dilemma, which Lukács thinks is in fact insoluble as posed, forms the central drama of modern philosophy. Its consequence is a set of antinomies of exactly the sort the contemplative attitude always confronts, Lukács argues. The most fundamental form these antinomies take—the one to which he claims they can all be reduced—is the one that finds its sharpest expression in Kant: the problem of the thing in itself. That which knowledge was supposed to achieve—a grasp of the objective world as it is independent of the knowing subject—is exactly that which "critical" epistemology discovers it to be absolutely incapable of attaining.

Now this account of modern philosophy is not particularly original, having roots in Hegel and elsewhere. What makes Lukács’s version of it interesting is his attempt to relate the history he recounts back to the phenomenon of reification, which is to say to what Marx called the fetishism of commodities, and thus to trace the source of the epistemological antinomies confronted by modern philosophy in the "practical" contradictions of bourgeois life. Lukács speaks of "the antinomies of bourgeois thought," a phrase designed to indicate the (shocking) conjunction of post-Kantian epistemology and Marxist social theory that marks the location of his work. Both at the level of theory and of practical life, he argues, contemplation finds itself setting up abstract systems that attempt to capture concrete reality but that fail entirely; modern epistemology’s inability to grasp the thing in itself is thus structurally related to, say, modern bureaucracy’s callousness toward the real individuals whom it is supposed to be assisting or the modern economy’s inability to comprehend the phenomenon of the periodic crisis. And all of these, he suggests, find their ultimate origin in "the commodity form"—in the processes of reification that underlie capitalism whereby human social relations appear as independent and immutable Things.

But if the real contradictions of capitalist society are what underlie the ideal problems of the philosophers, then perhaps the solutions to the latter problems might arise in the practical political sphere as well—which means
for Lukács in the revolutionary processes of a proletarian seizure of power. To suggest this is the next and perhaps the most original step in Lukács’s argument, whereby he rereads the post-Kantian history of classical German philosophy in a Marxist light, using the crucial idea of knowledge as active as his guiding thread.

Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” of course introduced the idea that the problem of knowledge can be solved only if the subject is seen not as passively receiving information from an external and independent source but as actively involved in the constitution of the world of experience. Contemplative epistemology cannot explain how we could know the world to be structured and causally coherent; Kant sees that the answer is to show that we ourselves constitute it as such (although he is none too clear on how this constitution takes place). But Kant’s view remains antinomical, due to his insistence on distinguishing the world of experience from the noumenal one—we don’t constitute the “real” world, it turns out, only the world “as it appears”; the result is a doctrine of things in themselves that Lukács takes as paradigmatic of the bourgeois antinomies.

Hegel radicalizes the view of knowledge as activity and as world-creating, first by rejecting the notion of noumena as incoherent: the world we know is the only one there is. But he radicalizes it in a more significant respect as well, for he sees that the assertion that the world of objects is not external to and separate from the subject has to be supplemented by an account of why it nonetheless seems to be separate—which is to say, in Lukács’s terms, by an account of the origin of reification. Hegel confronts this question (which earlier idealist philosophers had hardly noticed) by offering an historical account, a “phenomenology of spirit.” The “objective” world is indeed actively constituted or produced by the spirit that comes to know it, but that spirit does not at first recognize it as such; both phylogenetic and ontogenetic maturation must be understood as a process in which the subject comes to recognize itself in the world it confronts—comes to see, that is, that that world is and always was its own product. In coming to this recognition, though, the subject changes, and so too does its activity: which means so does the world as well. This complicates the epistemology, requiring now a distinction between “in itself” and “for itself.” At first the world is the product of spirit but only implicitly so—and in this sense, because “unconscious spirit” is a contradiction, is also not (yet) really its product. To this kind of “immature” spirit the world appears as an alien and incomprehensible power, an independent Thing which the subject seems incapable of ever comprehending. It must learn, through a complex process of self-reflection, that the world is indeed its own product. But the process whereby it comes to this self-recognition has itself to be understood as an active one: it recognizes itself in the world because it puts itself
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there, thereby making explicitly and self-consciously true what was in fact the case, but only implicitly, all the time.

The resulting dialectic of reification and self-recognition is crucial to Lukács (as it was to the early Marx). What Lukács rejects is the mystification it undergoes in Hegel, whereby the subject of this process is identified as a Weltgeist acting behind the backs of human agents and ultimately finding its self-recognition somewhere other than in mundane secular history. Lukács insists rather that human beings themselves are the subjects of this process; they make the world through their concrete practices, and the story of their coming to self-recognition is simply human history. To say that the problems of epistemology can be solved only by seeing the subject's relation to the world as an active one means not that humans magically create the world out of their own heads, but rather that they literally produce the world they inhabit with their hands and muscles, through a set of socially organized practices, and must come to recognize this fact about themselves. Their failure to do so is the phenomenon of reification, of a world that they think is other than them but in fact is really their own doing.

Hegel's mystification is itself to be explained by the same dialectic, Lukács believes; Hegel goes as far as bourgeois (reified) thought is capable, which is to say as far as pure thought can go without itself becoming practical. His thought points toward practice as the solution to the epistemological antinomies, now identified as the "antinomies of bourgeois thought," but insofar as it is itself merely "thought" it can do no more than point. Thus Hegel is ensnared in a paradox: for him it is not practice but the thought of practice that appears as the solution, with the result being that it is only the thought of a solution that is presented. No real subject, only the abstract idea of one, appears as the creator of history.

This is "the greatness, the paradox and the tragedy of classical German philosophy"^29: that it brings philosophy right up to its very end, and then points beyond it. For if the solution to the problems of philosophy lies in human practice and not in a thought independent of the world, this means that it lies outside of philosophy itself. The "antinomies of bourgeois thought," that is, cannot be resolved by yet another thought, in fact cannot be resolved theoretically at all: they can be resolved only by an act in which the self-recognition Hegel imagined only in theory actually takes place. And this act, for Lukács, is of course nothing other than the proletarian revolution, which now turns out astonishingly to have an epistemological significance.\(^30\)

Thus Lukács's attempt to take seriously the consequences of classical German philosophy's move toward practice leads him to a reinterpretation of the history of that philosophy in which the concept of reification now plays a central role. Several times Lukács quotes a famous early letter of Marx to Ruge: "the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has
only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality."\textsuperscript{31} The world we inhabit, the social order we believe to be natural and eternal, and the institutions we never think to question are in fact the product of our own social actions: reification is when we fail to recognize this—most crucially in the commodity fetishism where our own products appear as independent objects imbued with objective exchange values—and revolution is the act of self-recognition in which it is overcome.

Thus Marxist social theory is Hegelian philosophy gone practical; but that means too that the "recognition" and the "we" just mentioned have themselves to be understood in a practical way, not theoretically. There must be a real subject (not some Weltgeist) that discovers itself to be the author through its real practices of the actual social world we inhabit. This subject, Lukács believes, Marx had shown to be the proletariat, whose surplus labor was the foundation, both physical and institutional, of the capitalist social order. And this subject's self-recognition must be an act, not just a piece of abstract knowledge—an act in which what had heretofore been only implicitly true, taking place behind the backs of and despite the needs of the real subjects, now becomes an explicit truth that they themselves consciously posit.

Thus there must be a real revolutionary transformation of society, in which proletarians take control for the first time of the conditions of their existence and engage in the activity of constituting the social world for the first time in a consciously planned and communal manner: this is the sense in which communism appears as the abolition of reification. And the implications of this act include epistemological ones, for only in such an act will the world cease to appear as something alien, as external and thinglike. Only then, Lukács thinks, will the "contemplative attitude" cease to seem a piece of common sense—and only then will the "antinomies of bourgeois thought" find, not their resolution, but their dissolution.\textsuperscript{32}

4. THE PROBLEM RESTATED

What can we say, in the light of the epistemological position just outlined, about Lukács's attempt to distinguish on methodological grounds between natural science and social theory, and especially about what I have called the misapplication thesis? It should be clear, first of all, that in the context of this position natural science as Lukács understands it has to count as a case of "contemplation" and that indeed in a way it is the paradigm case. It construes the world as objective and distinct from the subject; it understands knowledge as a description of objective reality from which all "subjective elements" have been expelled; it sees its goal as the discovery of formal laws that remain constant over time and model the world by breaking it into basic
analytical elements. Even scientific experimentation, which Engels had extolled as the “proof” of the correctness of our views of the world and thus as the decisive response to Kantian scepticism, is explicitly described by Lukács as contemplative: “Scientific experiment is contemplation at its purest. The experimenter creates an artificial, abstract milieu in order to be able to observe undisturbed the untrammeled workings of the laws under examination, eliminating all irrational factors both of the subject and the object. He strives as far as possible to reduce the material substratum of his observation to the purely rational ‘product,’ the ‘intelligible matter’ of mathematics.”

As we have already seen, this is why Lukács resolutely rejects Engels’s attempts to take natural science as the exemplary method for social theory. If the socialist revolution represents the overcoming of reification, and hence also the overcoming of the contemplative worldview, then it cannot take its theoretical lead from a method in which this worldview is assumed from the start. But this explains only why Lukács asserts that when natural science’s method “is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie”; what about the other side of the misapplication thesis—that when applied to nature it is not such a weapon but rather “simply furthers the progress of science”? Is this distinction tenable?

I think it is not, for reasons that by now should be clear: the broad epistemological character of the critique of contemplative thought that Lukács offers prevents it from being limited to the social realm, for it takes place at such a high level of generality as to be logically prior to any distinction between the natural and the social. It is important not to read Lukács through spectacles of the second half of the century: his argument for the inapplicability of natural science’s method to social material is not the sort of argument one finds in Winch or Gadamer or Taylor or other Wittgenstinian or neo-Diltheyan thinkers. Those arguments depend on showing there to be specific characteristics of the object field confronted by the Geisteswissenschaften—their meaningful character, perhaps, or their connection to rule following, or the curious fact that the very scientific theorizing that takes social action as its object is itself a case of social action—that render natural science’s method inappropriate in that field. But Lukács’s argument is Hegelian, not hermeneutic, which is to say it does not begin with the (phenomenologically grounded) assertion of an ineradicable distinction between two domains, but rather with a fundamental meditation on epistemology, deriving whatever distinctions it finds in the world only out of that meditation. This is why Colletti and Jones are wrong to identify Lukács’s position simply with romantic or neo-Kantian ones that depend on assertions about the “organic” or the “irrational” or “life” as characteristics of the world which “analytic” techniques of natural science will inevitably fail to capture.
For Lukács it is not some particular characteristic of the sphere of the social that explains why the methods of natural science cannot be used to come to know it—after all, that particular characteristic would have first itself to be known beforehand (and by what method?) for the argument to be successful. Indeed, it follows from his view that whatever is taken as constitutive of the specifically human realm will always be historically variable and that any account of this realm that fails to recognize the historical processes underlying that variation would itself be a case of reified thought. Instead any discussion of the limits of natural science’s methods would have to derive from an epistemological examination of those methods themselves, in something like an immanent critique, without (that is) any presuppositions about the kinds of objects they might be used to investigate.

Lukács’s Hegelian strategy is thus to engage in an examination not of the various realms to which knowledge will be “applied” but rather of knowledge itself—an examination, that is, of the conditions for the possibility of there being a realm of objects to investigate at all. Only this can provide an answer to fundamental questions of method. This examination, as we have seen, claims to discover a deep incoherence within contemplative epistemology, one that leads to the “antinomies of bourgeois thought.” These antinomies derive from the mistaken way in which contemplation understands knowledge—from its failure, that is, to see its own knowing as active and as changing the object. But they then derive from the contemplative epistemological standpoint itself, not from some particular characteristic of the objects to which it is applied, which means in turn that natural science even in its “own” realm must be subject to the same critique. And by the same token, if a “dialectical” method that recognizes the contribution of the subject to the object known is appropriate for knowledge of the social realm, it must be equally appropriate to the realm of the “natural.”

Here then is the deep tension in Lukács’s position I am indicating: that the specifically epistemological argument he offers simply contradicts the methodological dualism he explicitly asserts. Indeed any such dualism seems itself to betray symptoms of just the sort of “reified thought” Lukács wants to oppose. For one thing, it gives up the intention to totality that Lukács believes to be crucial. It is characteristic of contemplative theory, Lukács claims, to break up into “partial systems” or Teilsysteme—into formalisms that deal only with particular limited fields, analyses that stop only at a certain level, predictions that make liberal use of ceteris paribus clauses. Although these are always presented as provisional and temporary limitations to be overcome when the system is complete, in fact this is a necessary characteristic of contemplative thought, Lukács argues, which is constantly running up against a barrier of irrationality: the impossibility of entirely banning the subjective from knowledge, of developing a formal system to deal with every eventuality, of deducing

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every aspect of a whole from an exhaustive account of its parts, of explaining the real unpredictabilities of historical change.

Despite their totalizing intentions, therefore, contemplative systems of knowledge are always more modest in practice, demurely claiming validity only in some limited sphere or other and unable to answer questions about items external to this sphere or about their own connection with other “neighboring” systems dealing with different ones. But this critique would seem to make us suspicious about Lukács’s own “modesty” in limiting his theory to the sphere of the social, not to speak of his failure to offer any mediating account of how a method like that of natural science, so useful to “the progress of science” in one sphere, could come to be such a dangerous “ideological weapon” in the sphere next door.

Second, it would be astonishing for natural science to be excluded from Lukács’s critique given the dominant role played in that critique by the problem of the thing in itself—a problem raised in Kant’s work (as Lukács obviously knew) precisely in the context of a discussion of the epistemological foundations of natural science. The obstacle thus produced for Lukács’s dualism is so glaring as to suggest that we are dealing here less with a mere “difficulty” or oversight than with a conscious or unconscious occlusion of the real tendency of the argument. Indeed, if Lukács’s entire critique of bourgeois thought as inevitably founndering on the problem of the thing in itself and his apotheosis of proletarian revolution as offering the resolution of this problem turn out to be relevant only to social theory and have nothing to say about nature, the argument begins to take on a kind of comic aspect: he has labored long and hard and brought forth a mouse. It is not the noumenal character of social reality that worries Kant, after all; and so if despite all the bluster about practice solving the dilemmas of bourgeois philosophy it turns out that this practice has no relevance to the objects of nature, then Lukács leaves the classical problem of the thing in itself just where he found it—unsolved.

Indeed, if nature is excluded from the account, Lukács seems to fall prey to just the criticisms he offers of Kant’s own dualistic move to “practice” in the second Critique. By positing real practice only in the inward realm of morality, so that the “activity” in which subject and object coincide is identified with the ethical act, Kant explicitly leaves nature outside the practical realm and treats it as subject only to the workings of objective and determinate laws. “Activity” is thereby limited to some mysterious inner noumenal sphere, Lukács argues, and the world of nature appears as even more alien to the moral subject than to the theoretical one. The effect, though, is that now every aspect of the real “phenomenal” subject (as itself a natural being), including its own psychology, its moral sensibility, and even its motives for acting ethically, appear as external facts given independently of the moral domain and hence under the sway of the “inexorable necessity” of the laws of nature. The consequence, he writes,
is that “freedom and the autonomy that is supposed to result from the discovery of the ethical world are reduced to a mere point of view from which to judge internal events.” Hence “the hiatus between appearance and essence . . . is not bridged”; instead (and worse) the dualism that was supposed to be overcome by the appeal to practice is now rather introduced directly into the subject itself, divided now between its own empirical psychology and some mysterious moral soul. No real ethics can be derived from such an account except one that is “purely formal and lacking in content,” Lukács concludes (following Hegel); the result is the kind of impotent assertion of an abstract and formal Sollen against an implacable and unyielding Sein characteristic of all utopianism.30

Yet this seems exactly the fate that befalls Lukács’s own appeal to practice if it is banned from nature. For the proletarian subject he calls to action is after all fundamentally tied to nature, precisely by being tied to work. Lukács seems crucially vague on the connection between the “practice” he posits as central to the proletariat’s revolutionary overcoming of contemplation and the ordinary work—which is to say, the physical labor on nature—proletarians actually perform. His materialist critique of Hegel, demanding a conception of real practice instead of the mysterious activity of a disembodied Geist, would seem to demand a role for nature and natural processes within the dialectical epistemology, and yet it is just that role that appears to be missing. The danger is clear: by leaving the realm of nature untouched by the critique, Lukács threatens to leave real life, and real practice, untouched as well.41 The result here as in Kant is to introduce the dualism into the subject itself, now split between noumenal and empirical self—a split that I would argue reappears in History and Class Consciousness in a more sinister form, precisely as the famous distinction between empirical and “imputed” class consciousness, and so between the proletariat and the Party.42

I began by quoting Schmidt’s two remarks about Lukács—criticizing him on the one hand for dissolving nature into the social but praising him on the other for limiting his theory’s applicability to the “socio-historical”—and asking how Lukács could consistently do both things at once. I have now argued in more detail that he could not, because his epistemological argument and in particular his critique of contemplation take place prior to the drawing of a distinction between the social and the natural, in such a way as to vitiate the possibility of the kind of methodological dualism required by the misapplication thesis. In this sense Colletti and Jones are surely warranted in seeing Lukács’s argument as tending toward a critique of natural science as such. Feenberg and Arato’s defense that the misapplication thesis is explicitly asserted in order to block such a critique, although doubtless textually justified, remains disingenuous, depending as it does on what Feenberg calls a “saving inconsistency”43 in the position; and indeed each admits that the misapplication-
tion thesis is inconsistent with certain elements of the epistemology. This wins the textual battle but loses the philosophical war: one defends against the charge of idealism by copping a plea to a charge of inconsistency. It's not clear, though, that that's a lesser charge.

What Colletti and Jones and Feenberg and Arato all seem to agree on (and Lukács the self-critic of 1967 does, too) is that the dissolution of the boundary between the natural and the social, which is seen to follow if the critique of contemplation is applied to natural science, would represent a reductio ad absurdum fatal to Lukács's epistemology. I want rather to argue quite the contrary, that what would be fatal would be to try to graft a dualism onto the epistemology that the latter rather simply contradicts, and that Lukács's interest as a thinker lies in just the position denying the independence of nature from the social that Feenberg calls "rigorously consistent and obviously absurd." I want, that is, to accept that the most coherent reading of Lukács's epistemology indeed entails a critique of natural science, and that this does indeed render problematic the attempt to draw a boundary between natural science and social theory or for that matter between nature and the social. But I want to deny that this commits him to a romanticism or even an "idealism" of the sort that would render his position unacceptable. The distinction I have drawn above between the Hegelian and the neo-Kantian versions of the argument against natural science is crucial here. Lukács's critique of science (a critique that I think is justified) is not that it fails to grasp some aspect of the external world, but rather some aspect of itself—namely, the fact that it is itself a human practice. This is not, I think, idealism, at least in any ordinary sense; and it is certainly not romanticism or vitalism. But to understand this further we need to examine in more detail the role of "nature" in the critique of reification.