

**REIFIED THINKING: AN ESSAY ON
LUKÁCS' CRITIQUE OF KANT'S
PHILOSOPHY**

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Introduction: The Problematic

In his essay, *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought*, György Lukács asserts the radical claim that “modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness.”¹ This essay will explore what precisely he means in each clause of this claim: why he takes philosophical and political issue with modern critical philosophy, what causal scheme he means by “springs from,” and how this claim contributes to his larger project of understanding, diagnosing, and curing the reified structure of consciousness in modernity.

The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought is one section of one essay in a collection that was published first in 1923 as *History and Class Consciousness*. The text was political in nature. It established Lukács as the father of the cultural studies-oriented Western Marxism and an important figure in Marxist theory and advocacy. The book famously outlines his theory of reification which extends Karl Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism to argue that under capitalist conditions, all social relations are objectified.² This is all done in the service of Lukács’ broader political project to endow the proletariat with the philosophically and politically significant role of being the “subject-object of history.”³ In capitalism, social and economic conditions decouple and objectivize subject-object relations, rendering real *praxis*, real betterment of society, impossible. The subject-object of history represents Lukács’ antidote to the woes of capitalist society. It binds subject and object in a dialectical relationship in which action, *praxis*, becomes possible. By becoming conscious of its position as the subject-object of history, the proletariat can overcome the forced lethargy and passivity of capitalism to achieve the kind of social upheaval Karl Marx envisioned, that is, freeing us from reification. Lukács’ ambition to define the proletariat as the

¹ Lukács, 110-1

² Ibid., 86

³ Stahl

acting subject-object of history in *History and Class Consciousness* forms the backdrop of each essay in the collection.

The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought's role in this project is crucial. Lukács saw the decoupling of subject and object not only in the lived experience of the alienated subjects of bourgeois society, he saw it in bourgeois thought and philosophy itself. To establish the dialectical relationship between subject and object as being correct, Lukács' first step was to dismantle the prevailing philosophies which decoupled subject and object. This was the philosophy of Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—the so-called philosophy of bourgeois thought. With a nod to the antinomies in the *Critique's Transcendental Dialectic* in which Kant himself dismantles his philosophical predecessors—the Rationalists—Lukács takes aim at Kant's subject. This subject—the *Transcendental Subject* (so named for the *Transcendental Aesthetic*)—is a purely cognitive subject, one who can access the outside world only through mental appearances he creates of objects in the world. It is a subject emblematic of a sharp subject-object divide.

Lukács' argument against Kant proceeds in two steps. First, he provides a general theoretical criticism of modern critical philosophy in the tradition that followed Kant's. He argues that philosophers in this tradition have set for themselves a goal that is fundamentally impossible—that is, positing a comprehensive account of the relationship between all phenomena. All philosophical work in this tradition has been an attempt, unsuccessfully, to solve this problem. The issue, according to Lukács, is that any rational system where subject and object are decoupled inevitably chafes against limits of rationality, rendering their project of comprehensive explanation impossible. Modern philosophy, no matter how certain it is presented, cannot overcome this obstacle. Second, he draws a comparison between the *Transcendental Subject* and the subject in

capitalist bourgeois society. He argues that the capitalist subject is trapped in a similar antinomy to the transcendental subject. Both fall victim to the reified mode of thinking. We can think of Lukács as critiquing Kant's critical philosophy from the outside and the inside. From the external perspective, he argues that living in the social conditions of capitalism, Kant had no choice but to develop a philosophy that decoupled subject and object. From the internal, he argues that even ignoring external factors, Kant's critical philosophy suffers the same internal issues that plague all of modern philosophy. It is a flawed philosophy, one ripe with internal antinomies, antinomies that appear similarly in the social conditions of bourgeois society. These arguments work in tandem to develop Lukács' central argument in *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought*: "modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness."⁴ Throughout this essay, I will refer to this claim as Lukács' *Central Thesis*.

Kantian epistemology is a useful target for several reasons. Lukács sees Kantian epistemology as the bedrock for the objectionable philosophical tradition and itself a prominent example of the objectionable thought. It is in his criticism of Kant's subject that he most clearly elucidates the antinomies with which he is concerned. The *Transcendental Subject*, which Kant hopes to grant the sort of freedom that allows for an escape from strict necessity, is fundamentally incapable of accessing the so-called "thing-in-itself." This "thing-in-itself" appears in many roles for Kant. One becomes clear through an analysis of Kant's unknowable object—the noumena. Another appears in Kant's attempt to understand both the totality and basic units of the spatio-temporal intuitions. What these explanations, and many others, share, according to Lukács, is that they represent the antinomy at the center of modern critical philosophy. They are cardinal examples of the kinds of limits inevitable to rationality. Though Kant recognizes this shortcoming,

⁴ Lukács, 110-1

he is, nonetheless, according to Lukács, forced to construct the *Transcendental Subject* in such a way that this antinomy arises. Kant's critical philosophy is thus antinomial at its core.

This thesis does not hope to attack Lukács' project as a whole or even most sections of it. Most of Lukács' critique of Kantian epistemology and critical philosophy is as interesting as it is compelling. In fact, as he notes several times in the essay, the concerns he has with Rationalism are ones that Kant himself noted in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (namely that Rationalism has fundamental limits to its explanatory power). Similarly, his concept of the reified capitalist subject is compelling and has been the subject of much secondary literature. This thesis has a much more limited scope. It aims only to investigate the causal link and the directionality of the causality that Lukács draws between the social conditions of bourgeois society and modern critical philosophy, that is, the causal link at the center of the *Central Thesis*.

This investigation is divided into three sections. In the first section, I investigate why Kant's philosophy is a useful political and philosophical target for Lukács and why, according to Lukács, Kant is forced to develop transcendental idealism as is. In the second, I investigate how Lukács attempts to establish the causality in the *Central Thesis*. In particular, Lukács attempts to identify common internal errors in Rationalism, Kantian epistemology, and the social conditions and attitudes of bourgeois society. In the third, I raise two questions and offer two criticisms of his attempt at establishing causality. Along the way, I introduce a vocabulary to more precisely understand and dissect Lukács claims in *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought* (a glossary can be found at the end of this thesis).

Lukács approaches his philosophical questions with an eclectic methodology that reflects his tenures as government leader, political theorist, literary critic, and philosopher. In *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought*, his political and philosophical ambitions take center stage.

While each provides important context for the other, his navigation between the two becomes increasingly haphazard. By the end, it appears that his political ambition to establish the proletariat as the subject-object of history with actual *praxis* comes at the cost of philosophical clarity and cohesion. In particular, Lukács' claim that those philosophies—problematic philosophies for him—spring from bourgeois society seems at best unclear and at worst implausible. One can't help but notice how useful this claim would be for Lukács. If this problematic philosophy is caused by bourgeois society which itself is problematic, then there's good reason to reject the philosophy altogether. While politically useful, this claim is philosophically unsound. Even more, Lukács' effort to draw a link between the social and intellectual world appears to ensnare him in a metaphysical antinomy of his own.

Section I: Inevitability and Inconsistency

In this first section, I will reconstruct why Kant's critical philosophy becomes a useful target for Lukács, how Lukács critiques that philosophy, and why, according to Lukács, Kant is forced to accept the *Transcendental Subject* as is. It is first worth investigating what Lukács means by modern critical philosophy. He develops the idea in several steps, but for modern critical philosophy, all roads lead to Kant's transcendental idealism. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant outlines an epistemology that defined the philosophical evolution of modern philosophy. The epistemology took its subject—the *Transcendental Subject*—as one with purely mental activity. Using its intuitions of space and time in relation to objects, the *Transcendental Subject* creates the phenomenal world of experience. The subject subsumes appearances—mental representations—of those objects into *a priori* cognitive concepts to reach some understanding of the world. But that understanding is fundamentally limited because the objects which are really out there—the so-called *noumena*—are unknown and unknowable. The *Transcendental Subject* of Kant was in a specific sense, a passive subject, incapable of certainties, able only to develop ideas about possibility concerning the actual world.

Kant's epistemology in the *Critique of Pure Reason* was a radical theory. It developed the human subject in philosophy as simultaneously being the creator of his own world and entirely ignorant of the actual world and the phenomenological world of his peers. Crucial to Kant's philosophy was the phenomena-noumena distinction. The vivid world of phenomena existed in the mind of the subject, and interacted in some way with the outside world, but was wholly and unequivocally detached from it, for the *Transcendental Subject* could do no more than interact with the world of the phenomena. Transcendental idealism should be thought of in contrast to the Rationalist philosophies of Kant's predecessors, namely Gottfried Leibniz. In fact, in the

Critique's final section, Kant identifies a set of antinomies in Leibnizian Rationalism aimed at proving the inconsistencies and untenability of Rationalism.⁵ Whereas Rationalism endowed its subject with objectivity to understand the actual world, Kant understood that for the human mind, metaphysical claims had to be limited to the phenomena of our cognitive worlds. Our experience became limited to possibilities—*possible experience*—not necessities. It was this limitation of human experience that defined the “critical” aspect of critical philosophy. Kant’s solution to describe his subject as understanding only a world mediated by its own cognitive intuitions marked an important shift towards subjectivity in the intellectual history of modern philosophy.

To be precise, the phenomena-noumena distinction does not perfectly align with the subject-object distinction this paper will later discuss, but they are emblematic of the same conceptual dichotomy. Whereas the phenomena-noumena distinction indicates the things themselves that are or are not perceived by the *Transcendental Subject*, the subject-object distinction describes the ‘bodies’ of the epistemological framework (the subject being the thinking mind and the object being whatever it is out there with which the subject interacts). In other words, the subject represents the noumena through phenomena. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the subject-object and phenomena-noumena distinctions relatively interchangeably because they represent the same core tension: the *Transcendental Subject* (with access only to the phenomena) cannot understand the object as noumena.

The subject-object distinction is crucial also for Lukács’ project. *History and Class Consciousness* is as much a political project as a philosophical one. Lukács had in mind the goal of situating both the Marxist notions of *praxis* and *action* (man’s practical relationship to the world through which he can alter reality) as well as the proletariat as a class conscious enough of its

⁵ Kant, 458-85

social position to become the subjects of action as philosophical relevant concepts. To understand the project, it is important to briefly investigate Lukács' notion of reification. *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought* immediately succeeds Lukács' *The Phenomenon of Reification* in which he develops this notion. Reification extends Marxist fetishism of commodities by asserting that the capitalist subject increasingly objectifies not only objects with value, but also himself, his peers, and his social relations. As Lukács writes of reification:

What is important is to recognise clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this 'action' likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these – artificially abstract – processes, the attitude of the experimenter.⁶

Reification works on two levels: in regards to human relations and in regards to the individual. In the reified world, humans inappropriately apply our constructed laws of natural sciences to ourselves, others, and our social relations. These processes in tandem render the reified subject a *pure observer*, unable to treat his now objectified self or his relations as ones which he can act on and affect. Here we can begin to note the similarity to Kantian epistemology: the passive *Transcendental Subject* is to the *pure observer* subject of the reified world. It is precisely this issue of reification—that the subject is fundamentally decoupled from the objects of his world—that Lukács attempts to resolve. Later in the book, he develops the *dialectical method* between subject and object as the means of resolution, a method he will argue that only the proletariat can successfully employ.⁷ Though the dialectical method is not the subject of this paper, it is important to briefly understand two ideas related to it. First, it takes the subject and object not as rationally separated, but rather as two sides of the same reality, with their unity forming the basis of the social

⁶ Lukács, 131

⁷ Stahl

world. As one scholar described, “in the dialectical conception of the subject/object...men are not outside the world, or standing in front of reality; existence does not take place on the margins of the world, or outside of social reality where they constitute themselves as subjects.”⁸ Lukács articulates this same idea here:

Even more original is the fact that the subject is neither the unchanged observer of the objective dialectic of being and concept (as was true of the Eleatic philosophers and even of Plato), nor the practical manipulator of its purely mental possibilities (as with the Greek sophists): the dialectical process, the ending of a rigid confrontation of rigid forms, is enacted essentially *between the subject and the object*...⁹

Second, for Lukács, it is only the proletariat that has the capacity to become conscious of its social position in such a way that it can develop a dialectical relationship with the objects in its world. Without that dialectical relationship, the subject remains rationally and actually separate from the object and remains a passive actor unable to overcome the destructive social realities of reification.

We begin to see the larger contrast Lukács hopes to elucidate, and why Kantian epistemology becomes the ideal target against which he can develop his theory. An uncharitable reading of Lukács sees him as taking first the political goal of developing the importance of the proletariat, working back to find the philosophical significance of the proletariat, identifying the importance of action and praxis, then locating the most prominent philosophy within which that action is impossible. That is precisely the philosophy of Kantian epistemology, one in which the subject and object are fundamentally and inevitably decoupled such that the subject can have no effect on his social reality, one in which reification remains the defining feature of social reality. Whether or not Lukács’ train of thought followed this progression is not a topic for this paper, but he makes no effort to hide that his central problem with Kantian is that, in driving a wedge between

⁸ Lucero-Montaña

⁹ Lukács, 142

subject and object, the *Transcendental Subject*, capable only of mental activity, cannot become the subject of action who can better his world.

With this context in the backdrop, Lukács' criticism of Kant begins to take form. His criticism is double-faceted, composed of an external and internal objection that explain the socio-cultural and theoretical inevitability of Kant's flawed epistemology. In the external criticism, he argues that Kant, living in a reified capitalist world, could not have done otherwise than to develop a problematic epistemology. This I will call the *Inevitability Thesis*.¹⁰ In the internal criticism, he claims that even ignoring the social conditions in which Kant developed his ideas, logical contradictions necessary to Kantian epistemology render his theory philosophically objectionable. This I will call the *Inconsistency Thesis*. These two theses work hand-in-hand. The *Inevitability Thesis*—his socio-cultural claim about the causation of modern critical philosophy—is justified by the *Inconsistency Thesis*—his logical claim about the structural errors that appear in bourgeois social conditions and modern critical philosophy. It is important here to note a point of clarification. It would be a mistake to say that Lukács is critical only of Kant. Rather, he sees Kant as the most prominent vehicle in modern intellectual history through which a flawed mode of thought appeared. Interestingly, he sees Kant as being cognizant of the issue his theory created, and all modern philosophy after Kant as aiming to resolve the passivity of the *Transcendental Subject*. But where the reified social conditions led them all to fail—Hegel, Fichte, Schelling—Lukács promises his reader that he could prevail.

The external objection—the *Inevitability Thesis*—is less philosophically interesting, yet is intimately tethered to Lukács' *Central Thesis*. As hinted in the first sentence of the essay, he argues that the social reality in which Kant wrote—the reified bourgeois society—exerted social pressures

¹⁰ See Glossary of Terms

such that he could not have done otherwise than to develop a philosophy that decoupled subject and object. He develops this idea by noting that Kant's critical philosophy has theoretical contradictions analogous to contradictions in the social world of bourgeois capitalism. The *Inevitability Thesis* is the historical, socio-cultural aspect of the *Central Thesis*. It is here that Lukács proposes the radical causal claim that Kant's ideas, and the contradictions central to them, were an inevitable expression of his social reality:

For the contradiction does not lie in the inability of the philosophers to give a definitive analysis of the available facts. It is rather the intellectual expression of the objective situation itself.¹¹

The *Inevitability Thesis* is in many ways an argumentative bridge for Lukács. It connects his internal criticism of Kant to his notion of reification. In its attempt to establish a link between the problematic social conditions of bourgeois society and Kant's philosophy, it also works to make way for a *dialectical philosophy* as a potential solution. An important question for this paper will surround what precisely it means to be an "intellectual expression of the objective situation," and by extension, how the notion of inevitability can explain the relationship Lukács hopes to draw between Kantian epistemology and the objective reality of reified bourgeois society—whether it's causal, comparative, expressivist, or something entirely different. But for now, it is worth noting that though the external objection of Kant takes center stage in Lukács' essay (note the first sentence of the essay), it is at most an observational claim averring a relationship between Kant and his society. It does not "critique" Kant, so to speak, or provide an objection against Kant's argument or Rationalism in general.

With this in mind, we can turn to Lukács' internal objection against Kant—the *Inconsistency Thesis*. This represents *Lukács'* theoretical and logical criticism of Kant's

¹¹ Lukács, 128

philosophy, which he identifies as embodying similar structural tensions as the social conditions of bourgeois society. Though he believes that the conceptual errors central to the framework of modern critical philosophy are not the result of human error but rather expressions of contradictions in social reality, they are errors nonetheless. Lukács identifies modern critical philosophy as having begun with Kant's shift towards subjectivity, but he begins his argumentative journey one phase earlier in intellectual history with the Rationalists, where the structural tensions he will proceed to identify in Kantian epistemology and bourgeois society first appeared. Rationalism, according to Lukács, claims to have found a principle that connects all phenomena in nature. It was novel not in its attempt to develop laws explaining the relationships between objects in the world, but rather because it took on the attitude that it had discovered a principle with the power to comprehensively explain *all* of the phenomena in the world. In contrast to previous systems of thought—*partial systems*—in which it was “taken as given that the irrational world delimits what humans can understand,”¹² Rationalism claimed to be a *total system*.¹³ Partial systems are correct to accept their limitations because, according to Lukács, any rational system will “strike a frontier or barrier of irrationality.”¹⁴ This is particularly true in Rationalism. He writes:

In modern bourgeois Rationalism, the claim that Rationalism can provide the universal method by which to obtain knowledge of the whole exists leads to the necessary correlation between the rational and irrational erodes and dissolves the whole system.¹⁵

The problem with modern Rationalism is that it fails to recognize its fundamental shortcomings.

¹² Ibid., 114

¹³ Ibid., 147

¹⁴ Ibid., 114

¹⁵ Ibid.

In the *Inconsistency Thesis*, Lukács attempts to transpose the contradictions of Rationalism onto Kantian epistemology, the attitudes of bourgeois society, and the social conditions of bourgeois society themselves (which is the focus of this paper’s second section). Along the way, there appears a rhetorical motif. The motif is a two-step blueprint that leads these *total systems* to fail as they chafe against limits of irrationality. First, an effort at comprehensive systemization is made. In the case of Rationalism, that is the definition of a principle that connects all phenomena in nature and society. Second, it becomes apparent—either inherently or through an effort to become conscious of the system—that the system cannot meet its promises to be comprehensive. In the case of Rationalism, once the effort is made, the system will always come against a barrier of irrationality. It is an almost hubristic tension Lukács describes in Rationalism: “as soon as the attempt at systematisation is made, the unsolved problem of the irrational reappears in the problem of totality.”¹⁶ We will call the two-step blueprint as it is seen in Rationalism the *Rationalist Tension*. Throughout his essay, Lukács’ *Inconsistency Thesis* consists of holding the *Rationalist Tension* up against Kant and bourgeois society in an effort to establish causality.

Though the barriers of irrationality are present in any rationalist theory, Lukács identifies it as being most clear in “strange significance for Kant’s system of his concept of the ‘thing-in-itself’.”¹⁷ It is through an explanation of the irrationality of the ‘thing-in-itself’ that Lukács attempts to locate the *Rationalist Tension* in Kant’s philosophy. When Kant decided that his subject could not access the world directly but that the world did exist, the ‘thing in itself’ arose as a necessary concept. It described the objects not for us, but as they exist independently of us—the noumena, serving as the source of the phenomena from which experience is derived. The ‘thing-in-itself’ is a necessary consequence of the “dogmatic assumption that the rational and

¹⁶ Ibid., 120

¹⁷ Ibid., 114

formalistic mode of cognition is the only possible way of apprehending reality (or to put it in its most critical form: the only possible way for ‘us’), in contrast to the facts which are simply given and alien to ‘us’.”¹⁸ But for Lukács, the ‘thing-in-itself’ represents a “limit, a barrier, to the abstract, formal, rationalistic, ‘human’ faculty of cognition.”¹⁹ It was the primary example in modern critical philosophy a *total system* failing in its mission.

There are two senses according to Lukács in which Kant’s ‘thing-in-itself’ represents the antinomy of critical philosophy. First, the ‘thing-in-itself’ serves as ‘ultimate’ objects of knowledge.²⁰ The wedge Kantian epistemology drives between subject and object—between phenomena and noumena—creates a gap that needs to be filled to successfully establish a *total system*.²¹ After all, if phenomena are derived from the world, we must have some means of making sense of the world if we want to explain the relations between phenomena. The ‘thing-in-itself’ fills that gap. Lukács calls this the “problem of the whole and of the ultimate substance of knowledge.”²² As he writes, “the transcendental dialectic with its sharp distinction between phenomena and noumena repudiates all attempts by ‘our’ reason to obtain knowledge of the second group of objects. They are regarded as things-in-themselves as opposed to the phenomena that can be known.”²³ This is the sense in which the ‘thing-in-itself’ is an analytical consequence of Kantian epistemology. Since the thinking subject is separated from the objects of the world, then, in order to develop a comprehensive theory of the world, there must be some way to describe the object which exists independently of the subject. The thing-in-itself represents the object in the form that the Kantian subject cannot understand or act upon—an object that it cannot possibly *rationalize*.

¹⁸ Ibid., 121

¹⁹ Ibid., 114

²⁰ Ibid., 115

²¹ Ibid., 147

²² Ibid., 115

²³ Ibid.

It is thus emblematic of a barrier of irrationality necessary to Kantian epistemology, a barrier that Kant, once he set out to establish transcendental idealism, could not avoid.

In the second sense, the ‘thing-in-itself’ fills a “logical and technical” gap in Kant’s framework of understanding. This, which Lukács describes as the ‘methodological problem of the thing-in-itself,” is a necessary corollary of incorporating the ‘thing-in-itself’ into a theory. Here is the argument. Per the *Transcendental Aesthetic* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we take as given that the *Transcendental Subject* uses the forms of intuition to furnish the forms of understanding with content. The faculty of intuition, according to Kant, “is a receptive quality for being affected in a certain way by ideas.”²⁴ Simply put, though we access only a constructed phenomenological experience of the world, we assume that there is something out there from which that experience arises. However, because of the fundamental lacuna between subject and object, we cannot know anything about what it is that is out there: “the non-sensuous cause of these ideas is wholly unknown to us and we are therefore unable to intuit it as an object.”²⁵ But we must explain our experience somehow; we must explain from what our forms of intuition are receiving. We call the purely theoretical (in Kant’s words, ‘intelligible’) cause “the ‘transcendental object’ so that ‘we’ have something which corresponds to sensuousness as receptivity.”²⁶ This is a reiteration of the first sense described above. In other words, we define the ‘thing-in-itself’ to explain the unknowable object from which we are deriving phenomena, appearances, and experience. But in attempting to break down the total system into its rational elements, if we cannot use our rational tools to understand those objects and therefore the contents of our understanding, we must conclude that the objects of our understanding are inherently irrational. This implies that it is

²⁴ Ibid., 115, Kant

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

impossible to reduce the content of our understanding to its rational elements. We are left scratching our heads at whether or not we can say that any empirical fact or phenomenological element of our experience is a product of our reason or whether it is given. After all, if we cannot reduce the contents of our understanding to rational elements, it seems impossible to determine if any piece of content is a derivative of our rational concepts. In this second sense, the ‘thing-in-itself’ reveals the irrationality inherent to Kantian epistemology that becomes apparent when we attempt to understand its constituent parts. Lukács wants to suggest that the irrationality of the “thing-in-itself” reveals that even after rejecting Rationalism, Kant cannot escape its structural tensions. Even with its radical pivot to subjectivity, transcendental idealism cannot claim to be a rational system any more than Leibnizian Rationalism was.

The two “delimiting functions” highlight both why the ‘thing-in-itself’ became a logical and methodological necessity for Kantian epistemology and the contradictions of any rationalist theory which incorporates the ‘thing-in-itself’. They do so in reciprocal ways: the first bottom-up—in its attempt to construct a whole conceptual system from its rational parts—and the second top-down—in its attempt to reduce a totality to its rational elements. In their reciprocity, these delimiting functions highlight two sides of the same problem, precisely that a rational system of the whole designed from the individual parts will always come against a barrier of irrationality.

As Lukács writes:

The two quite distinct delimiting functions of the thing-in-itself (viz. the impossibility of apprehending the whole with the aid of the conceptual framework of the rational partial systems and the irrationality of the contents of the individual concepts) are but two sides of the one problem.²⁷

It is in the delimiting functions of the ‘thing-in-itself’ that the *Rationalist Tension* presents itself in Kant’s philosophy. First, the *Transcendental Subject*, in his newfound subjectivity, takes

²⁷ Ibid., 116

on the ‘grandiose assumption’ that it is ‘master’ of the world it has created; through the process outlined in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, it has created its own world of phenomena over which its mind has control. But second, it cannot use its rational powers to make sense of the “insuperable obstacle of the given, of the thing-in-itself.”²⁸ Furthermore, as soon as ‘the question of the system is consciously posed,’ it becomes clear that it will fail. From the vantage point of the subject’s experience, the system dissolves with the realization that the ‘thing-in-itself’ is irrational and the world is thus un-masterable, swiftly rebutting any notion that the subject is master of his world. The subject becomes instead pure observer, unable to act on the world, subject instead to the very laws of our creation.

We have now developed Lukács’ criticism of Kant along two lines. First, Kant inevitably developed a flawed epistemology because something about the social conditions of reality forced him to do so (the *Inevitability Thesis*). Specifically, these contradictions are the intellectual expression of contradictions in his objective reality—i.e., in the reified bourgeois social world. Second, Kant’s system is flawed because, no matter how you view it, it hits barriers of irrationality (the *Inconsistency Thesis*). The ‘thing-in-itself’ is central to fill out Kant’s effort to systematize the world, yet it is a concept that necessarily leads to internal structural contradictions. Kantian epistemology aimed to remedy the errors of Rationalist objectivity, but in doing so, in decoupling subject and object, it was forced to incorporate the ‘thing-in-itself.’ In solving one problem—the implausibility of human access the actual world—Kant reraised another, one which necessarily refutes the initial conviction that it could construct a comprehensive rational explanation of its own world.

²⁸ Ibid., 121

Here we can understand why, according to Lukács, Kant was forced to develop the *Transcendental Subject* as is. Interestingly, while he, for the most part, suggests that Kant decouples subject and object primarily because he recognized the flaws in Rationalism, he also suggests in some places that Kant decoupled subject and object precisely because he recognized the necessary irrationality in any rational total system. For Lukács, there is a “necessary correlation between the rational and irrational.”²⁹ Kant, in his endeavor to establish a rational system, chose to cope with this necessary irrationality by incorporating the ‘thing-in-itself.’ This itself highlights the irrationality of the system, but in needing to find a place for the ‘thing-in-itself,’ Kant was forced to decouple his subject and object. He seems to say that the gap between rational and irrational forced the gap between subject and object, between phenomena and noumena. Either way, according to Lukács, Kant’s philosophy repeats the errors of Rationalism, namely that it fails in its mission to develop a comprehensive and consistent epistemological framework.

It is worth noting that even though Kant’s system ends up hitting a barrier of irrationality similar to the *Rationalist Tension*, transcendental idealism is markedly different from Rationalism because it does recognize its shortcomings. Kant recognizes the problem between sensuous experience and rational concepts. He recognizes that pure reason is fundamentally incapable of concluding with any degree of certainty that empirical facts are created by ‘us’ as opposed to being given. It is for this reason that Kant develops an epistemological framework of *possible experience*. The very essence of a principle, in its ability to operate universally, is that the connection between forms is *necessary*,³⁰ but since the introduction of the ‘thing-in-itself’, i.e., the acceptance of a boundary of irrationality, introduces a fundamental ambiguity in any effort to discern whether empirical facts are given or produced by our reason, the most we can do is deduce principles about

²⁹ Ibid., 114

³⁰ Ibid., 117

possible experience. Lukács recognizes this when he writes that pure reason cannot deduce principles “directly from concepts but only indirectly by relating these concepts to something wholly contingent, namely *possible experience*.”³¹ This is the crux of Kantian epistemology: the *possibility*, not necessity, of human experience. This is what makes critical philosophy critical. In this way, Kant’s development of a theory with possible experience is a tacit acknowledgment of the inability of his epistemology to effectively develop a principle that explains all phenomena.

Nonetheless, Lukács argues that what is a problem for Kantian epistemology—internally and externally—is a problem for modern critical philosophy in general. Lukács writes that, in the wake of Kant, modern critical philosophy “puts more and more energy into its efforts to weed out ruthlessly from its own outlook every subjective and irrational element and every anthropomorphic tendency.”³² But even with all of its efforts to construct a subject-independent, i.e., objective, principle to connect all phenomena, it can never succeed in its goal because of the social reality in which modern critical philosophy takes place, from which it “springs.” Here we can begin to see Lukács’ argument take form. Kantian epistemology is an ideal target because the problems in Kantian epistemology are problems he thinks are identifiable in the social conditions of bourgeois society, for in bourgeois thought, there is a necessary ‘double tendency’ too:

On the one hand, it acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other hand, it loses – likewise progressively – the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualifications for leadership.³³

In this ‘double tendency’, there is a familiar reciprocity. From the bottom up, bourgeois society attempts to construct laws that control social existence. Yet the more it does, the more powerful its reciprocal bottom-down process becomes, because the more it aims to systematize, the more its

³¹ Ibid., 116

³² Ibid., 128

³³ Ibid., 121

autonomy as the creator of laws becomes dictated and determined by the very laws it creates. The reminiscence to Lukács' description of the tension in Kantian epistemology and Rationalism is imperfect, an imperfection this paper will explore in-depth. But for now, we can understand where Lukács hopes to go. There are fundamental contradictions in Kantian epistemology and Rationalism highlighting the implausibility of any rational system that claims to transcend a *partial system* and develop a system that wholly explains the phenomena in the world. Another tension exists in the reified social world, one about constructing a set of laws to control 'the details of social existence.' As that system develops, the very autonomy that allowed for its creation is diminished as the creating subjects increasingly fall victim to the very laws they created. In the next section, we will investigate how Lukács attempts to draw a parallel between the contradictions in Rationalism, modern critical philosophy, and in the social conditions of bourgeois society.

Section II: Establishing Causality

I have now developed two theses through which Lukács reads and criticizes Kant and, by extension, modern critical philosophy. What I call the *Inevitability Thesis* and *Inconsistency Thesis* work in tandem to open the door for Lukács to offer the dialectic method as the political and philosophical solution to bourgeois society and critical philosophy. The import of these two theses is not merely to criticize Kant and modern critical philosophy; they are offered as the foundation for Lukács' *Central Thesis*: that modern critical philosophy is related in some specific way to the social conditions of bourgeois society. He develops this argument in two ways. First, he uses the *Inevitability Thesis* to establish a direction of causality by arguing that the *Rationalist Tension*, as seen in Kant and many other places, must have arisen from the social conditions of bourgeois society. Second, he identifies analogous tensions in the social conditions of bourgeois society as he identified in the *Inconsistency Thesis*, that is, similar tensions as exist in the theoretical framework of modern critical philosophy.³⁴ He attempts to use these two theses to establish a causality from bourgeois society to critical philosophy. In this section, I will offer an explanation and several interpretations of that argument.

The *Central Thesis* is stated most prominently in two places. He writes in the first sentence of *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought*:

Modern critical philosophy *springs* from the reified structure of consciousness.³⁵
(My italics)

He writes ten pages later:

For the contradiction [in Kant] does not lie in the inability of the philosophers to give a definitive analysis of the available facts. It is rather the *intellectual expression* of the objective situation itself.³⁶ (My italics)

³⁴ See Appendix

³⁵ Ibid., 110

³⁶ Ibid., 128

It is clear that Lukács wants to elucidate some relationship between the critical philosophy of Kant and the social conditions of bourgeois society: the ‘reified structure of consciousness or the ‘objective situation itself,’ but it is unclear how he wants his reader to understand that relationship. From a *prima facie* reading, ‘springs from’ and ‘is... the intellectual expression of’ describe fundamentally different relationships: one of causality and one of expression. A political reading of this text indicates that Lukács prefers a causal relationship. It is evident that Lukács saw bourgeois society as flawed, and if it *caused* the ideas of critical philosophy, then critical philosophy is flawed too, and if critical philosophy is flawed, then perhaps dialectic philosophy can prevail, and then perhaps the proletariat can be endowed with philosophical significance. Furthermore, causality is a stronger claim, so a more worthwhile target for philosophical exploration. For this reason, I will read Lukács’ thesis as being one about causality. But even if it is a claim about expression, Lukács means to establish a directionality from the social world to the intellectual. Whether it is causal or expressivist, it is unclear how he hopes to establish this directionality. His primary strategy is to identify the *Rationalist Tension* in Kantian epistemology, the attitude of subjects in bourgeois society, and the lived experience of subjects in bourgeois society to assert that these similarities imply causality in one direction. In this section, I propose we understand Lukács’ argument of this causality along two avenues: following first the *Inevitability Thesis* then the *Inconsistency Thesis*.

The Inevitability Thesis

First, we will investigate the Central Thesis through the lens of the Inevitability Thesis. The Inevitability Thesis holds that because of the social conditions of bourgeois society, Kant could not have done otherwise than to develop a flawed epistemology. More generally, because of

the way all subjects exist in reified society, the prevailing epistemology would inevitably develop the outlook that the subject and object are decoupled entities. The fundamentals of his argument can be formalized as:

1. Every thinker in reified society is impacted by his social reality, so Kant must have been too
2. Kant's argument is flawed internally (*Inconsistency Thesis*)
3. Those flaws are also in society and we can see them in society
4. Therefore, those flaws were caused by society

The leap between 3 and 4 appears problematic. It is unclear what precisely about the social conditions of bourgeois society deterministically dictate that the prevailing epistemology would decouple subject and object. Lukács only offers a something close to an explanation of this causality once, so one might be tempted to point to this passage as an answer:

What is important is to recognise clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this 'action' likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these – artificially abstract – processes, the attitude of the experimenter.³⁷

But this passage actually implies causality in the other direction: that the intellectual informs the social. It holds that humans increasingly apply principles of the natural sciences, which begin on the intellectual plane, to human relations to the point of objectification. If this is the case, then the construction and application of those principles begin with the intellectual, not the social. This passage cannot adequately explain how the existing social conditions cause the distinct subject-object epistemology.

There is another hint of what Lukács might mean early in this section during his discussion of modern critical philosophy as straying from the *partial system*-philosophies of its predecessors.

He writes:

³⁷ Ibid., 131

The horizon that delimits the totality that has been and can be created here is, at best, culture (i.e. the culture of bourgeois society). This culture cannot be derived from anything else and has simply to be accepted on its own terms as ‘facticity’ in the sense given to it by the classical philosophers.³⁸

Here, he wants to say that, in the development of a rational system in modern life, when attempting to leap from the partial system to the total system—the defining unique feature of modern Rationalism—Rationalism was forced to take certain views as facts because the gap between partial and total could not be filled on principle alone. Those facts were decided as a matter of bourgeois culture. It is suggested here that the social conditions of bourgeois society may cause philosophical thought in the sense that they fill the gap of the unknown, irrational elements of Rationalism. This is an intuitive enough idea: when the system of rationality hit the barrier of irrationality, it was forced to make less justified assumptions to explain the unknowable, and those assumptions, if they did not follow the basic axioms of Rationalism, must have come from culture. Interestingly, this is the same gap—between the partial and total system—where Lukács situates the ‘thing-in-itself.’ One could then read the ‘thing-in-itself’ as itself a product of bourgeois social conditions.

But this explanation, though interesting, is not entirely satisfying. Lukács’ claim is not that the social conditions informed a *part* of critical philosophy; he claims that critical philosophy in its entirety is caused by bourgeois social conditions. How can it be the case that the contradictions of Rationalism arose out of bourgeois society if those contradictions were possible only with the incorporation of bourgeois society into its theory?

Aside from this passage, it is difficult to locate an explanation of what precisely it means that Kant, and modern critical philosophy, were inevitable byproducts of bourgeois society. I propose that there are three potential ways of understanding the *Inevitability Thesis* and the

³⁸ Ibid., 120

relationship it establishes between critical philosophy and bourgeois society: a *psychoanalytical reading*, a *sociological reading*, and an *analytic reading*.

A *psychoanalytical reading* holds that Lukács wants to establish the subjective consciousness of the bourgeois subject as developing ideas about reality and its world through bourgeois socialization. This idea is given credence by the fact that we know Lukács read Freud. Marxist historian Victor Serge described Lukács in *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* as “a philosopher steeped in the works of Hegel, Marx, and Freud.”³⁹ Perhaps Lukács meant to say something about the environmental forces exerted on the psyche of the reified subject, that the capitalist conditions of labor and social relations influenced the psyche in such a way that the subject could view himself only narcissistically, detached from the objects of his relations. Or perhaps he meant something more like the social conditions of bourgeois society informing a Jungian collective unconscious to which every subject belonged and which Kant indirectly articulated in his theory of human epistemology. And these views, though undoubtedly variable by subject, made it inevitable that the greatest thinkers at the time—like Kant—would understand the subject as passive in the world, trapped in his narcissistic understanding of the world.

The *sociological reading* understands bourgeois society as instead informing certain social institutions which pushed consciousness to conclude that subject and object were distinct. Here we can think about Durkheim’s writings on the division of labor.⁴⁰ Modern, industrial society, he argues, is defined by *organic solidarity*. This view holds that in a society dominated by people’s need for goods and services and a high degree of labor division, people see one another as differentiated organs. Perhaps Lukács means to describe something in this vein, where labor conditions have the sociological effect of inculcating the subject to believe that he is separate from

³⁹ Serge, 220

⁴⁰ Durkheim, 111

his peers, and by extension, from the world outside his mind. This is not to say that Lukács meant to employ the theories of Freud or Durkheim, or that these readings are mutually exclusive. I use these examples only to offer a possible explanation of the kind of relationship Lukács means to describe. Where Lukács stops at describing the similarities between the tensions in critical philosophy and bourgeois society, these readings offer potential explanations of causality.

Finally, the *analytic reading* offers a meta-reading of how we can make sense of Lukács' *Inevitability Thesis* as a logical argument. Here it is useful to think of this equation: Critical philosophy = *partial system* of its predecessors + gap of the irrational/unknowable = *total system*. One complication, as noted above, is how it can both be the case that the contradictions of critical philosophy arose out of bourgeois society and that those contradictions were possible only because critical philosophy incorporated bourgeois culture to fill its argumentative gap. These two ideas, at face value, seem challenging to reconcile with one another. The issue is that if the tensions in critical philosophy arose from bourgeois society, but bourgeois society was only incorporated into the "gap of the irrational" portion of the equation, it seems that there are elements of critical philosophy (i.e., everything in the merely partial system) that are not informed by bourgeois culture. I propose there are four ways to make sense of this. First, perhaps Lukács means to say that this gap between the partial and total system—where bourgeois culture is injected—is so defining of Rationalism and critical philosophy that it does not matter that the other elements of the partial system can exist independently of bourgeois culture. When viewed on the whole, the filling of the gap between partial and total system *is what defines* critical philosophy, and since it is bourgeois culture that fills that gap, it is justified to say that bourgeois society caused critical philosophy. Second, perhaps he means to say that the relevant contradictions exist entirely in the elements of bourgeois culture injected to fill the gap, so the elements of the partial system that exist

independently of bourgeois culture are irrelevant in the claim that critical philosophy shares contradictions with bourgeois society. Third, perhaps he means to say that the introduction of the elements of bourgeois culture to fill the gap *is what* creates the tension by contradicting elements of the partial system. Fourth, perhaps he is saying that the elements of bourgeois culture that are injected to fill the gap between partial and total system are not the only elements of bourgeois culture which inform critical philosophy, and in fact, other cultural elements inform the partial system, so critical philosophy in its entirety is informed by bourgeois society. None of this is to say that these four possibilities are substantively compelling, I bring them up only to show that there exist possible logical paths for causality to be established between the social conditions of bourgeois society and critical philosophy.

The thesis that “modern critical philosophy *springs* from the reified structure of consciousness” through the lens of the *Inevitability Thesis* is a causal claim about the cultural and social factors which influence intellectual development. Though it is not entirely clear how Lukács sees the relationship between the environment and the subject, we can understand the *Inevitability Thesis* as contributing to the *Central Thesis* by explaining the external forces which led the humans behind modern critical philosophy, like Kant, to develop an epistemology that decoupled subject and object, and how that development was necessary. With this in the backdrop, Lukács uses the *Inconsistency Thesis* to identify analogous logical errors in Kant’s philosophy and bourgeois society.

The Inconsistency Thesis

We can now turn to understand the *Central Thesis* through the lens of the *Inconsistency Thesis*. After identifying the central tensions in Kantian epistemology, Lukács attempts to identify

similar inconsistencies in the social world to develop the argument that critical philosophy is the intellectual expression of reified bourgeois society. That is, the tensions identified in the *Inconsistency Thesis* are the same tensions central to the social conditions of bourgeois society. If this is the case, Lukács suggests, the *Central Thesis*'s claim about causality must ring true. Here we can remind ourselves of the core tension Lukács identified in Rationalism and critical philosophy. We have called this the *Rationalist Tension*: Rationalism claims to have discovered a principle by which all phenomena can be connected, but “as soon as the attempt at systematisation is made, the unsolved problem of the irrational reappears in the problem of totality.”⁴¹ We can also remind ourselves of the two-step blueprint for a tension that appears and reappears throughout the essay: First, an effort at comprehensive systemization is made. Second, it becomes apparent—either inherently or through an effort to become conscious of the system—that the system cannot meet its promises to be comprehensive. Lukács wants to say that the bourgeois subject in his capitalist social relations is comparable to the theoretical subject of Rationalism and Kantian epistemology, and more broadly, that bourgeois society is analogous to the theoretical framework of modern critical philosophy.

Lukács develops this claim by transposing the *Rationalist Tension* first onto Kant's subject—the *Transcendental Subject*, then onto the conditions of bourgeois society. I will separate the analysis of bourgeois society into two components: the theoretical and the actual. He argues that, in theory, reification in bourgeois society leads the subject to take on a *contemplative* attitude. That is, as Titus Stahl has written, an attitude “where one passively adapts to a law-like system of social ‘second nature’ and to an objectifying stance towards one's own mental states and capacities.”⁴² To be clear, Lukács means to say that these two components are embodied in the

⁴¹ Lukács, 120

⁴² Stahl

same subject: the acting living subject takes on the contemplative attitude. But because Lukács does identify the *Rationalist Tension* differently in the theoretical attitude of the reified subject and the actions of the reified subject, I will investigate each on its own. I will call the theoretical subject of bourgeois society the *Contemplative Subject* and the actual living subject the *Actual Subject*. We will trace Lukács' train of thought, following the *Rationalist Tension* as Lukács sees it appearing in each subject. Then, in the final section of this paper, we will investigate whether the tensions between the subjects are sufficiently similar, and even if they are, whether or not that implies the causality Lukács needs: that bourgeois society *caused* modern critical philosophy.

The Transcendental Subject

Lukács transposes the *Rationalist Tension* onto the *Transcendental Subject* along three lines. We can think of the *Transcendental Subject's* central tension as a tension between the theoretical laws of Kantian epistemology (i.e., the transcendental idealist framework) and the fundamental limits of those laws. First, as explained in the first section of this essay, he argues that the *Transcendental Subject's* need for the 'thing-in-itself' embodies the *Rationalist Tension*. Transcendental idealism hits boundaries of irrationality like any total rational system. The *Transcendental Subject* mirrors the contradictions of Rationalism because there are elements of the so-called rational system which are necessarily irrational—namely the 'thing-in-itself.'

Second, Lukács transposes the blueprint of the *Rationalist Tension* onto universal mathematics which he identifies as the "ideal of knowledge" for Kant's subject.⁴³ Mathematics was "an attempt to establish a rational system of relations which comprehends the totality of the formal possibilities, proportions and relations of a rationalised existence with the aid of which

⁴³ Lukács, 129

every phenomenon-independently of its real and material distinctiveness – could be subjected to an exact calculus.”⁴⁴ But the same contradiction as appears in the *Rationalist Tension* appears here too:

On the one hand, the basis of this universal calculus can be nothing other than the certainty that only a reality cocooned by such concepts can truly be controlled by us. On the other hand, it appears that even if we may suppose this universal mathematics to be entirely and consistently realised, ‘control’ of reality can be nothing more than the objectively correct contemplation of what is yielded – necessarily and without our intervention – by the abstract combinations of these relations and proportions.

By now the rhetoric should feel familiar: “on the one hand..., on the other...” For mathematics, in the first step, the modern ideal of knowledge, like the *Transcendental Subject*’s transcendental idealist worldview, claims to construct a total reality of which it can serve as master. In the second, it becomes apparent that what we initially assume to control is nothing more than an illusion because all that we have “control” over are the necessary consequences of mathematical principles which result independently of us. To say we have “control” is at most tautological; it is not real control. The claim that we have control over our system of knowledge, like the *Rationalist Tension*, appears to fail.

Third, he identifies the *Rationalist Tension* in the *Transcendental Subject*’s practical life, that is, the tension between the freedom and necessity of the *Transcendental Subject*. Here we can think back to the tension between subject and object in the *Rationalist Tension*. Much like the decoupling of the two led to error, the *Transcendental Subject* is unable to comprehend and create “the union of form and content,” of the properties of the mind and the sensuous material that furnishes them.⁴⁵ They are, like the Rationalist subject who cannot determine if any empirical fact is given or constructed, trapped in the “insoluble dilemma of freedom and necessity, of voluntarism

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 115

and fatalism.”⁴⁶ He writes, “the freedom (of the subject) is neither able to overcome the sensuous necessity of the system of knowledge and the soullessness of the fatalistically conceived laws of nature, nor is it able to give them any meaning. And likewise, the contents produced by reason, and the world acknowledged by reason are just as little able to fill the purely formal determinants of freedom with a truly living life.”⁴⁷ In the first step, the *Transcendental Subject* constructs laws of nature to gain control of his world, but in the second, these laws trap the subject in an inescapable determinism. The *Transcendental Subject*’s quest for self-actualized action reveals itself to be futile as the very epistemological system it constructs renders it a passive actor in the world.

The Contemplative Subject

We have now established the first step in Lukács’ comparison between modern critical philosophy and bourgeois society: the *Rationalist Tension* appears in the *Transcendental Subject* in his fundamental cognitive framework (transcendental idealism), in the ideal of knowledge he constructs (mathematics), and in his practical life. We now turn to the second step: Lukács’ attempt to transpose the *Rationalist Tension* onto the subject of bourgeois society.

For the *Contemplative Subject*, the *Rationalist Tension* appears most clearly in the theoretical framework of the *contemplative* attitude itself which the *Contemplative Subject* embodies. Frederic Engels wrote, in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, that the *Contemplative Subject* hopes that he can “prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes.”⁴⁸ Here we can see the blueprint of the *Rationalist Tension*.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124

⁴⁷ Ibid., 134

⁴⁸ Engels, 16

In the first step, the subject attempts to eradicate the problem of the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ by mobilizing the sciences to create ‘things-for-us’ which we have control over. In the second step, the attempt to take control of the natural processes inevitably leads to reified subjects, objects, and social relations because it is precisely the misapplication of the principles of the natural sciences to the social world that Lukács reification. The contemplative attitude attempts to control the world, but this effort inevitably falls victim to reification. The *Contemplative Subject* increasingly objectifies himself and his peers, and increasingly loses actual control of the social world. Ultimately, the *contemplative* attitude at its peak has no basis of praxis, and in fact, leads the *Contemplative Subject* further into an ‘idealistic contemplation’ decoupled from control and praxis. In Lukács’ own words, “my account of the contradictions of capitalism...is unintentionally coloured by an overriding subjectivism.”⁴⁹ The *Rationalist Tension* thus appears in the *Contemplative Subject*’s loss of praxis at the hands of reified thinking in his effort to scientivize the social world.

The Actual Subject

For the *Actual Subject*, the *Rationalist Tension* appears as his actions and interests increasingly become dictated and exploited by social laws. Lukács writes,

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lukács, xviii

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 135

The *Rationalist Tension* appears for the *Actual Subject* in two ways. First, it appears on the level of action. The *Actual Subject*'s actions and interests are forced into conforming to laws that he sees himself as 'making' yet he increasingly loses control over his actions. Lukács writes:

On the one hand, men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the 'natural', irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and 'made', a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form). "To them, their own social action", says Marx, "takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them."⁵¹

In the second related sense, the *Rationalist Tension* appears on the level of consciousness. The more cognizant of the system of laws the *Actual Subject* becomes, the more powerfully they exert their control over him and the more control he loses. Lukács writes: "the field of his activity thus becomes wholly internalised: it consists on the one hand of the awareness of the laws which he uses and, on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events."⁵² We can make sense of these two senses as working together to develop the *contemplative* attitude itself:

On the one hand, the more the whole of reality is rationalised and the more its manifestations can be integrated into the system of laws, the more such prediction becomes feasible. On the other hand, it is no less evident that the more reality and the attitude of the subject 'in action' approximate to this type, the more the subject will be transformed into a receptive organ ready to pounce on opportunities created by the system of laws and his 'activity' will narrow itself down to the adoption of a vantage point from which these laws function in his best interests (and this without any intervention on his part). The attitude of the subject then becomes purely contemplative in the philosophical sense.⁵³

Lukács wants to say that on the one hand, the *Actual Subject* wants to destroy the natural world and create a world of his own—the man-made world. This is the analog to the Kantian tendency to view himself as the creator of his cognitive world. On the other hand, in modernity, as men

⁵¹ Ibid., 128

⁵² Ibid., 135

⁵³ Ibid., 130

engage in this effort, their interests inform their action to “pounce on opportunities” that conform with the system of social laws. It is intimately connected to the *contemplative* attitude because the more the *Actual Subject* continues down this path, the more he views his social action as taking the form of objects (i.e., that they view themselves as objects). In the end, having become so affected by the reified conditions of his reality, the *Actual Subject* adopts the *contemplative* attitude.

It might seem that there is no use in distinguishing between the *Contemplative* and *Actual Subjects*, but the way the *Rationalist Tension* appears in the *Actual Subject* is different in important ways. In some sense, the tension as it appears for the *Actual Subject* is socially contingent in a way that the *Rationalist Tension* as it appears in the *Transcendental Subject* and the *Contemplative Subject* is not. This is the crucial difference between the *Contemplative Subject* and the *Actual Subject*. Since the *Contemplative Subject* exists in the realm of theory, and can thus exist as the attitude in its most extreme, pure, and perfect form, the tension arises as a logical necessity from the basic principles of the *contemplative attitude*. It is in this realm that the *Rationalist Tension* appears for the *Contemplative Subject*. In contrast, the tension arises for the *Actual Subject* in the realm of action, in his decisions and interests that respond to the *contemplative attitude*. They appear on the level of ‘activity,’ ‘action,’ ‘egoistic’ interests, as he navigates the social conditions of bourgeois society.

We now have all the argumentative context to understand Lukács’ *Central Thesis*. To complement and justify the *Inevitability Thesis*, he argues in the *Inconsistency Thesis* that since the *Rationalist Tension* appears in sufficiently similar forms in the *Transcendental Subject* of Kantian epistemology, the *Contemplative Subject* of Marxist theory, and the *Actual Subject* of bourgeois society, there must be a causality to explain the development of critical philosophy.

Specifically, he asserts that the *Rationalist Tension* is the “intellectual expression of the objective situation itself.”⁵⁴ That is,

The contradiction that appears here between subjectivity and objectivity in modern rationalist formal systems, the entanglements and equivocations hidden in their concepts of subject and object, the conflict between their nature as systems created by ‘us’ and their fatalistic necessity distant from and alien to man is nothing but the logical and systematic formulation of the modern state of society.⁵⁵

In the next section of this paper, we will investigate the soundness of this claim.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 128

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Section III: Questions and Concerns

Lukács' *Central Thesis* avers that the similarity in structural tension between Rationalism, Kantian epistemology, and the social conditions of bourgeois society implies that modern critical philosophy was caused by bourgeois society and bourgeois consciousness. In this section, I will raise two questions and offer two potential criticisms against this claim. In the first criticism, I will raise questions about the soundness of the comparisons Lukács draws between the tensions in the theoretical realm—for Rationalism, transcendental idealism, and the contemplative attitude—and the actual social subject of bourgeois society. Even if these comparisons are compelling, in the second criticism, I will raise questions about whether or not that is enough to establish causality.

Who and How is the Rationalist?

Reading this essay, one begins to wonder, who and how is the Rationalist about which Lukács writes so extensively? Even more, how can the relationship between the Rationalist and Kant's critical philosophy service Lukács' *Central Thesis*? The Rationalist is certainly important for this section of the essay. He embodies the core philosophy which Lukács criticizes and links to modern critical philosophy. Those criticisms are crucial for Lukács because they identify flaws in modern critical philosophy and draw comparisons to the structural tensions in the social conditions of bourgeois society. We can understand Rationalism to be an extremely principled philosophy. Since it claims to have discovered a principle through which the relationship between *all* phenomena can be explained, there is no room for skepticism or hesitation. The instant that one phenomenon becomes unexplainable by this principle, the system gives up its status as a total system and instead becomes a partial system, which Lukács finds significantly less objectionable.

The obvious answer is the Rationalism that Kant defines, implicitly and explicitly, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is the Rationalism of Kant's immediate predecessors—most notably Leibniz. A clear notion of this philosophy comes in the *Critique's* First Antinomy.⁵⁶ There, Kant doesn't explicitly define Rationalism, but a definition becomes clear because Kant's aim in this antinomy is to reveal, as Lukács does in this essay for Kant, the internal contradictions central to Leibnizian Rationalism by identifying antinomial conflicts. For Kant, this Rationalism holds that (1) we can understand the world in its totality, and (2) the world conforms to our cognition, such that it is intelligible to us. This is the obvious choice for Lukács because it follows his general reference to Kant's writing and because these two tenets align closely with Lukács' notion of Rationalism's "principle" to explain the relationship between all phenomena and with his notion of Rationalism as a *total system*.

But, as Lukács notes and as Kant makes explicitly in the First Antinomy of the *Critique*, Kant is critical of this philosophy. This philosophy, according to Kant, in its Enlightenment hubris, does not recognize its own shortcomings. By endowing its subject with the ability to access the objective world, Leibnizian Rationalism, according to Kant, makes a metaphysical claim where it can only justifiably make an epistemological one. Kant's solution is to make clear that our access to the world is never direct. It is instead always mediated by epistemology intuitions—space and time. Precisely what makes critical philosophy *critical* is that it attempts to overcome Rationalist hubris by recognizing its shortcomings. By turning its back on objectivism and empiricism and embracing subjectivity and a qualified idealism. It does this by acknowledging the unknown noumena.

⁵⁶ Kant, 458-60

Lukács does recognize this move and admires Kant's discovery. He writes that "Kant's greatness as a philosopher lies in the fact that...he made no attempt to conceal the intractability of the problem by means of an arbitrary dogmatic resolution of any sort, but that he bluntly elaborated the contradiction and presented it in an undiluted form."⁵⁷ But he wants to say that even in rejecting the metaphysical claims of Rationalism, Kant's subjectivity repeats Rationalism's structural tensions, namely that the noumena represents the barrier of irrationality present in any Rationalist philosophy.

Here we begin to become confused about how Lukács' argument in this essay can function. Lukács wants to say that Rationalism and Kant's critical philosophy are both intellectual expressions of bourgeois society, and this is evidenced by the fact that they share structural tensions that are also present in the social conditions of bourgeois society. But Kant's rejection of Rationalism makes one wonder how it could be possible that both Rationalism and modern critical philosophy could be intellectual expressions of the same social conditions of bourgeois society.

There are two questions to be asked here. First, is it enough to say that both Kantian epistemology and Rationalism hit barriers of irrationality? Do they not hit different barriers of irrationality? Notably, the barrier of irrationality that Kantian epistemology is the 'thing-in-itself', the noumena, an element that is markedly absent from Leibnizian Rationalism. In general, the differences between Rationalism and Kantian epistemology are significant. Where Kant's critical philosophy drives an epistemological wedge between subject and object, Rationalism does not. Kant's rejection of Rationalism isn't superficial; it is fundamental. It is important here to emphasize that the defining difference between the two philosophies is the subject-object relationship. This is the relationship at the center of Lukács' theory of reification in bourgeois

⁵⁷ Lukács, 134

society. In the very relationship—between subject and object—about which Lukács is concerned in *History and Class Consciousness*, Rationalism and Kant's critical philosophy differ. This gives way to the second question: how, then, could it be the case that both are intellectual expressions of the same conditions of bourgeois society? Is it enough to say that they embody structural tensions that appear, from some angles, to be similar? The fact that it is unclear how Lukács means to attribute the same causality from the social world to both of these philosophies which differ so fundamentally raises questions about establishing causality at all.

There is a larger historical and meta-philosophical problem for Lukács about the difference between the two philosophies. Lukács wants to say that Kant's modern critical philosophy was caused by the social conditions of bourgeois society. But if Kant's philosophy, by his and Lukács' admission, was a direct response to Leibnizian Rationalism, it seems that the simplest explanation of the formation of modern critical philosophy is not that it arose as an expression of bourgeois society, but rather it arose after a logical error—one which Lukács forms with this essay around—was identified in Rationalism. It is not necessarily the case, then, that the social conditions of bourgeois society force an epistemological stance that subject and object ought to be decoupled, but rather that decoupling subject and object resolves core tensions of Rationalism.

I frame these points as questions because there seem to be plausible ways out for Lukács. Perhaps he needs only modern critical philosophy and not Rationalism to have been caused by bourgeois society. Perhaps there is a sense, which he doesn't explain in this essay, in which Rationalism and critical philosophy hit sufficiently similar barriers of irrationality. Perhaps it is both the case that Kant developed is philosophy in response to Rationalism and that it was caused by the social conditions of bourgeois society. But the questions remain because they don't change the fact that there is an equally plausible explanation of how modern critical philosophy "sprung"

into being that occurs independently of the social conditions of bourgeois society, namely that it was a response in intellectual history to the logical shortcomings of Rationalism. These questions are given weight because both Kant's motivation and Lukács' explanation of Kant's motivation for developing critical philosophy describe this response, making this alternate causality all the more compelling.

Lukács as an Actual Subject?

The *Inevitability Thesis* is radical because of its assertion that the thoughts of anyone living in bourgeois society are influenced by the social conditions of bourgeois society to such an extent that their intellectual production is deterministic and necessary. It is partially on this basis that Lukács explains Kant's development of the transcendental idealist epistemology and the development of modern critical philosophy in general. Underlying this argument is an implicit assertion that the inevitability of an epistemology that decouples subject and object renders the epistemology less sound. After all, it seems to assert, if the thinker behind the theory had no other choice, how can we consider this theory to be rational or useful? One begins to wonder, how do we, given this thesis, treat Lukács who himself lived, thought, and wrote in bourgeois society? How are the conditions in which Lukács developed his theory any different from the ones in which Kant developed his?

There seem to be only three options here. First, we can reject the *Inevitability Thesis*. This allows Lukács to develop original ideas with philosophical significance and soundness even while living in bourgeois society. But the cost is the loss of a primary component of his *Central Thesis*, namely that the thinkers behind modern critical philosophy were influenced by something or some things other than the social conditions of bourgeois society, whether it be other environmental

factors or their own cognitive spontaneity. Second, we can read Lukács as saying that only certain aspects of Kantian epistemology were inevitable consequences of bourgeois society—namely the thing-in-itself—and since Lukács’ theory does not include such a concept, there is no issue in saying that modern critical philosophy was an inevitable consequence of the social conditions of bourgeois society while Lukács’ theories were not. The cost, again, is that this allows for Kant and the thinkers of modern critical philosophy to have been influenced by other factors, which is a blow to his *Central Thesis* that modern critical philosophy as a whole sprung from bourgeois society. Third, we can read Lukács as granting himself an exception.

Historical evidence suggests that Lukács’ hopes hinge on the third. When, later in life, he described his decision to join the Communist Party, he often used the phrase *klassenverrat*, or *class treason*.⁵⁸ He explained that in joining the Party, he left, *betrayed*, his well-to-do bourgeois upbringing. We can read Lukács as making an existential claim about identity. His justification is lengthy and philosophical but reveals that he saw himself as no longer existing as a bourgeois person with bourgeois attitudes in bourgeois society. He came to see himself as external from bourgeois society, taking on the attitudes and gaining access to the insights of the proletariat. He came to see himself as being exempt. This is, for many reasons, convenient and unconvincing. Most blatantly, Lukács’ argument in this essay makes clear that one can’t escape the grasp of bourgeois society as a matter of choice. There is not a group Kant or his predecessors could have joined to free themselves from the causality which shaped their philosophies. Lukács, even if he comes to see himself and his identity as evolving, cannot escape his own *Inevitability Thesis*.

In a meta-philosophical way, it appears that Lukacs has encountered some version of the blueprint of the *Rationalist Tension* in his own writing. In the first step, he develops a principle

⁵⁸ Honneth

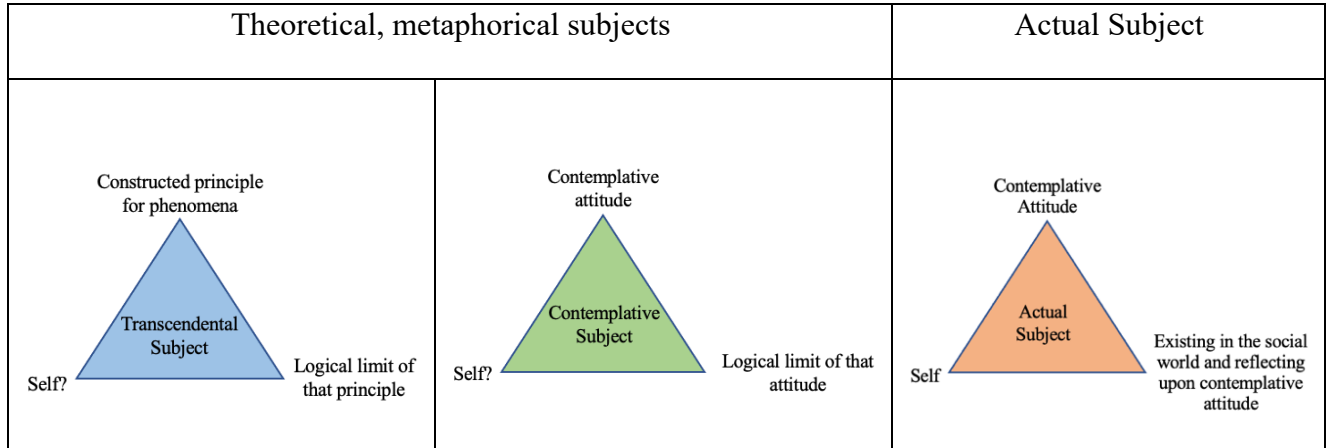
that *any* philosopher living in bourgeois society cannot escape the social conditions and laws in the development of his ideas. Second, Lukacs himself seems, inevitably, to fall victim to the very *Inevitability Thesis* he develops. It does seem he wants to make an exception for himself on the basis that the substance of his ideas challenges the subject-object wedge which is the cause of the inevitability. But that seems unconvincing. An even more troubling consequence is that in both asserting the *Inevitability Thesis* and making claims in this section and throughout his lifetime to which he gives credence, he suggests that it *is* possible to develop original and useful ideas even while living under the conditions of bourgeois society. This, in itself, is a challenge to the *Inevitability Thesis*. Lukács appears to have ensnared himself in an antinomy of his own making.

Logical Versus Social Antinomy: Theoretical Necessity Versus Social Contingency

It is clear from the beginning (see the title of this section) that Lukács wants to assert that logical and social “antinomies” are similar. But perhaps this is misleading. I argue that the theoretical “antinomies” of Rationalism, the *Transcendental Subject*, and the *Contemplative Subject* represent necessary logical contradictions whereas the social “antinomies” of bourgeois conditions—of the *Actual Subject*—represent social contingencies.

An initial observation is about the use of “subject.” Lukács wants to say that the *Transcendental “Subject”*, the *Contemplative “Subject”*, and the *Actual “Subject”* are comparable. To be clear, Lukács does not use these exact phrases, but he does use “subject” in all three contexts. Upon a closer examination, it becomes evident that their “subjecthood” is fundamentally different. To understand the distinction, I propose we think about the tensions three subjects encounter as three distinct triangles⁵⁹:

⁵⁹ See Appendix for more detailed chart



For the *Transcendental Subject*, the tension arises between the thinking subject, his epistemological laws, and the inevitability of those laws leading to antinomy. In other words, the antinomy for the *Transcendental Subject* is necessary and logical because in the realm of theory, once the theoretical framework—transcendental idealism—is proposed, it necessary results in an antimomial conflict because the theory is forced to incorporate the thing-in-itself (see Section I). In this sense, the antinomy can exist without the ‘self’ or subjecthood, so to speak, because the antinomy arises independently of a subject’s effort to become cognizant of the system. They arise as a matter of logical necessity immediately after the initial axioms are proposed.

Similarly, for the *Contemplative Subject* (the contemplative attitude), the tension rises between the self, the contemplative attitude, and the necessary contradictions that follow from the contemplative attitude. That is, the contemplative attitudes’ misapplication of the natural principles of the sciences to the social world necessarily sinks the *Contemplative Subject* into a reified state of consciousness, rendering real action in the world impossible. Once the axioms of the contemplative attitude are proposed, the it is lead necessarily to antimomial conflict because, much like the *Transcendental Subject*, its goal of spontaneous action is made impossible by the reification’s strict laws of necessity. There is a salient similarity between the *Contemplative Subject* and the *Transcendental Subject*. Both present logical, necessary tensions that result

inevitably in the realm of theory from the basic axioms of their framework, for the *Transcendental Subject*, transcendental idealism, and for the *Contemplative Subject*, the contemplative attitude. They are both theoretical, necessary tensions. In this sense, the “subjecthood” of the *transcendental* and *Contemplative Subjects* is metaphorical. When Lukács uses “subject” in these contexts, he is not describing an actual acting, living subject or an actual subject body. The “subject” is not needed to understand the antimonial conflict because these tensions arise in the realm of theory and logic as immediate and necessary consequences upon their proposal.

There is a marked difference in the “subjecthood” of the *Actual Subject*. It is not metaphorical. For the *Actual Subject*, the subject body is necessary because the *Rationalist Tension* appears only when the body attempts to act in the world, when its interests, behaviors, and activities respond to social laws, and when it attempts to reflect on its contemplative attitude. These efforts represent an extra step for the *Contemplative Subject*. The tension does not arise inevitably and necessarily; it arises contingently in the social world, upon some action or effort taken by the subject. There is a tension only if the *Actual Subject* takes on an attitude in a particular way in which contemplation occurs or when it makes an effort to become conscious of its social existence. We see the social contingency in Lukács’ language: the “action” and “activity,” the “fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests.”⁶⁰

In the theoretical realm, there is no variation between subjects, each will arrive at precisely the same antimonial conflict in precisely the same way. For the *Actual Subject*, in contrast, each acting and thinking in his own way will be affected by social laws in unique subjective ways. His forced submission to the social laws—which is the basis of the antimonial conflict for the *Actual Subject*—will invariably differ from his peers. This is evidenced by the very fact that Lukács

⁶⁰ Lukács, 135

himself asserts that there are means of finding exceptions to this conflict. If, for example, you, as he did, commit class betrayal, you might very well find yourself exempt from the deterministic conditions of bourgeois society. The marked difference between the theoretical, metaphorical subjects and the Actual Subject in that the *Rationalist Tension* occurs in fundamentally different ways calls into question the *Inconsistency Thesis*'s assertion that similarities between social and theoretical antinomies occur in sufficiently similar ways for the *Inevitability Thesis* to hold.

What arises is an important and inherent distinction between the theoretical and social world: the distinction between theoretical necessity and social contingency. In the realm of theory—the realm of the *Rationalist Tension*, transcendental idealism, and the contemplative attitude—contradictions can arise as a necessary consequence of basic axioms. In the social world—the world of the *Actual Subject*—however, any tension arises as a result of human consciousness, behavior, interests, responding to social laws and conditions. Even if the *Actual Subject* to some extent adopts a certain attitude that is defined in the theoretical realm, its social behavior will never manifest as a matter of necessity. Any tension that arises in the actual world is therefore socially contingent. If this is taken seriously, it becomes a strange move to say that Rationalism and Kantian epistemology are caused by the social conditions of bourgeois society given that for that direction of causality to hold, there would need to be a leap from contingency to necessity. It would seem that there must be some additional element in this causal chain, one which explains how the diverse interests of an entire class of people can be united into one comprehensive and necessary theory of subject-object relations. What that element might look like is unclear.

There is a much more intuitive understanding of this argument. It's hard to imagine that any actual subject living during Kant's or Lukács' writing was purely contemplative. What would

that even look like? This is not a pedantic claim. The point is that where the contemplative attitude is strict in its claims whereas the lived experiences of subjects who take on that attitude are diverse. Lukács cannot skirt this issue by claiming that there need not be a perfect transposition of the contemplative attitude onto the *Actual Subject* because the very necessity and contradictions at the core of both Rationalism and the contemplative attitude cease to exist if there is room for contingency. This is an issue for any claim that intellectual history inevitably arises from social conditions. Theory will never be a perfect expression of social conditions unless it is a theory of contingency. Perhaps Lukács means only to say that in living in bourgeois society, human consciousness and attitudes took approximations of social conditions to develop a unified theory of social existence and epistemology. But even if this were the case, how can he, looking back on intellectual history, comfortably make claims about causality and directionality, especially regarding subject-object relations, between the social and theoretical worlds?

The Issue of Causality: the Chicken or the Egg

Even if one were to accept that Lukács successfully transposes the *Rationalist Tension* onto the *Transcendental*, *Contemplative*, and *Actual Subjects*, it remains unclear how he justifies the direction of causality or expression in the *Central Thesis*, that is, from the social world to the intellectual. Even if there are sufficiently similar tensions in each subject, why is it any more likely that the social conditions caused the ideas than it is that the ideas caused the social conditions? As an initial observation, it is worth noting that Lukács himself makes note of the difficulty in establishing causality between the social conditions of capitalism and the theoretical realm. He writes,

It cannot be our task to investigate the question of priority or the historical and causal order of succession between the ‘laws of nature’ and capitalism. (The author

of these lines has, however, no wish to conceal his view that the development of capitalist economics takes precedence.)⁶¹

Though this is not the same causality Lukács writes about in his *Central Thesis*, it is similar enough to raise questions about how he feels justified in asserting a direction of causality at all. After all, if it “cannot be our task” to determine historical and causal order between certain social conditions and certain theoretical frameworks in the case of the ‘laws of nature’ and capitalism, why would it be any different for the social conditions of bourgeois society and modern critical philosophy? How does he justify asserting this precedence? This is made all the more confusing by the contextual reality that Lukács was a champion of the dialectic understanding of subjective consciousness and objective reality which calls into question any ability to assert uni-directional causality. Here we are reminded that Lukács’ essay is politically motivated. It is more useful, politically, for modern critical philosophy to arise from the social conditions of reality than the other way around. It comes as no surprise, then, that he has “no wish to conceal his view.”

More troubling is the fact that Lukács suggests, in several places, that the direction of causality is not from the social to the intellectual, as the *Central Thesis* asserts, but rather from the intellectual to the social. Most prominently, he writes:

What is important is to recognise clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature.⁶²

Here, Lukács suggests that human relations and activity in the social world become reified and objectified because we incorrectly apply the laws of nature to social relations. The laws of nature—the intellectual Enlightenment effort to categorize the world and its relations and find a principle to explain the relationship between all phenomena—is the driving force in the objectification of

⁶¹ 131

⁶² 131

human relations. In other words, Rationalism informs human relations and social conditions in the world, not the other way around. How, then, can it be the case that critical philosophy is the inevitable expression of the conditions of bourgeois society? Why not the other way around? A more charitable reading holds that Lukács only means to say, as he does in the first sentence, that modern critical philosophy “springs” from reified consciousness—causality—and it is merely the expression—not causal consequence—of social conditions themselves. But even if this were the case, there is still reason to assert a direction of causality from reified consciousness to critical philosophy and not the other way around.

This is not to make the positive assertion that the causality is in the other direction—from the intellectual to the social—but it is to say that Lukács does not offer a compelling explanation of why it should go in the direction he prefers. His justification is essentially the *Inconsistency Thesis*: that because the tensions at the heart of modern critical philosophy also appear in reified consciousness—the contemplative attitude—and the human activity of the subject in bourgeois society—the *Actual Subject*—then modern critical philosophy must have been caused by the social conditions and consciousness of reified thinking. But to identify similarities between two theories is far from establishing causality. What seems much more likely given Lukács’ interest in the dialectical understanding of human consciousness is that each informs the other. This theory implies that a project of determining which came first is both futile and unimportant. Lukács seems to recognize that when he says definitively that such a project is “not our task,” but he nonetheless embarks on the journey because its political implications are crucial for his project. If critical philosophy is caused by the problematic conditions of bourgeois society, then it is problematic too. If critical philosophy is problematic, then perhaps it should be replaced by another philosophical framework. Perhaps that framework should be a dialectical understanding of subject-object

relations. The causality and directionality in the *Central Thesis*, though politically useful, is philosophically unconvincing.

Conclusion: Implications for Lukács and Beyond

While there is philosophy in politics and politics in philosophy, it is worthwhile to understand them as separate pursuits. Lukács' project in *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought* is ultimately political, but since he approaches his problematic with a philosophical toolkit, it is worthwhile to investigate the philosophical clarity of his argument. The goal of this thesis has not been to discount Lukács' project as a whole. There is no doubt the theory of reification and its implications as well as his insightful analysis of intellectual and cultural history are important contributions to Marxist theory and the philosophical canon in general. The goal of this thesis was rather to understand how successful Lukács' arguments in this particular section of his essay. What has become impossible to ignore is that Lukács seems comfortable overlooking missing argumentative and logical elements in this section of his essay because of his political convictions. Analyzing his two attacks on Kantian epistemology and modern critical philosophy—what I have called the *Inevitability* and *Inconsistency Theses*—as well as his effort to locate similar antimonial conflicts across the intellectual and social realms of bourgeois society has revealed shortcomings in his *Central Thesis*. This is not to say that it's not the case that modern critical philosophy was caused by the social conditions of bourgeois society and consciousness or that it isn't an intellectual expression of objective bourgeois reality, but rather that *The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought* does not clearly and convincingly articulate why that claim is justified.

If my questions and concerns are taken seriously, the impact on Lukács' larger project is relevant but not devastating. Lukács begins from a critical stance of bourgeois society and consciousness. If there is a causal link to modern critical philosophy, the critique of it follows from that initial critical stance. And with this critique, he is able to reject the subject-object distinction at the heart of modern critical philosophy and proceed to develop the dialectical relationship

between subject and object, and developing the significance that relationship holds for the proletariat. Without the causal link from the social conditions of bourgeois society to modern critical philosophy, he must find another justification for the rejection of Kantian epistemology and its subject-object relationship. This is not an impossible task. After all, in identifying similarities between critical philosophy and bourgeois society, he identifies antinomial conflicts in critical philosophy (this is the *Inconsistency Thesis*). But he nonetheless loses his *Central Thesis* about the impact of sociocultural elements on the development of intellectual history. This, for the father of Western Marxism, is significant.

There are two further lessons to be learned from this investigation. First, there is a special relationship between the social world and its contradictions and the theoretical world and its contradictions. For Lukács, they are sufficiently similar. But, as I've argued, there are important differences. I suggest we think about it as the difference between the perfection of theory and the imperfection of social existence. While theory can be an expression of social realities or an effort to make sense of social realities, it has the privilege of ignoring the variability and contingency of the social world. It is able to develop true principles, ones that work universally and necessarily. For theories with principles regarding other abstract entities, like mathematics, this poses no problems, but for theories that propose principles regarding the actions, interests, and behaviors of actual living subjects, who themselves are constructors of abstract entities and theories, the necessity that a principle requires has difficulty explaining the contingency that living subjects embody. Kant was right to qualify his epistemology with the contingency of *possible* experience. Likewise, theories about human attitudes and behaviors in response to social laws ought too to operate on frameworks of contingency. This poses a particular threat to a claim like Lukács' about

the social causing the theoretical. Claims like this must either forfeit their claim to necessity or include an element to explain the leap from social contingency to theoretical necessity.

Second, there is a curious meta-tension that arises when those who are a part of intellectual history write about intellectual history. For Lukács this tension appeared in his effort to excuse himself from the implications of his *Inevitability Thesis*, to assert spontaneous, original ideas while asserting that such spontaneity was not possible in the society in which he wrote and thought. He cannot, any more than any producing member of intellectual history, excuse himself from that history. A lack of self-awareness in this regard leads to its own form of antinomy. For Lukács, the assertion that socio-cultural elements are deterministic of thought in bourgeois society means we must either accept that his thoughts are not, in fact, any more spontaneous than Kant's, or deny the antecedent and accept his thoughts being original as proof that social conditions in bourgeois society are not deterministic. Either way, this suggests that in much the same antimomial fashion that Lukács describes for Kant throughout this essay, he has become ensnared in the consequences of his own axioms.

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Glossary of My Terms

- **Central Thesis:** Lukács' claim that "modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness" and that the contradiction of modern critical philosophy is the "intellectual expression of the objective situation itself."
- **Inevitability Thesis:** Lukács' external criticism of Kant, that living in a reified capitalist world, he could not have done otherwise than to develop a problematic epistemology.
- **Inconsistency Thesis:** Lukács' internal criticism of Kant, even ignoring the social conditions in which Kant developed his ideas, logical contradictions necessary to Kantian epistemology render his theory philosophically objectionable.
- **Two-step blueprint:** The format of the internal structural tensions Lukács identifies first in Rationalism, then Kantian epistemology, the contemplative attitude, and the social conditions of bourgeois society.
 1. An effort at comprehensive systemization is made.
 2. It becomes apparent—either inherently or through an effort to become conscious of the system—that the system cannot meet its promises to be comprehensive.
- **Rationalist Tension:** The iteration of the two-step blueprint Lukács identifies first in Rationalism. To prove the *Inconsistency Thesis*, Lukács attempts to identify the *Rationalist Tension* in Kantian epistemology, the contemplative attitude, and the social conditions of bourgeois society.
- **Transcendental Subject:** The subject of Kant's *Transcendental Aesthetic* whose mediated access to the world, via the institutions of space and time's construction of a phenomenological world, epitomizes transcendental idealism.
- **Contemplative Subject:** The metaphorical and theoretical embodiment of the contemplative attitude wherein one passively conforms to social laws. Lukács argues that through reification, subjects in bourgeois society tend towards the *Contemplative Subject*.
- **Actual Subject:** The living subject in bourgeois society who, according to Lukács, is forced by reified social conditions to adopt a contemplative attitude.

Appendix

A Diagram of the *Inconsistency Thesis*

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Rationalist Tension (the ‘blueprint’)</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Claim to have discovered a principle for the relationship between all phenomena 2. Come against barriers of irrationality <p><i>Source of tension:</i> necessary limits of rationality (logical) <i>Type of tension:</i> a theoretical tension about theoretical subjects</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Transcendental Subject</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a framework of transcendental idealism wherein the subject “creates” his own world 2. The subject and object are decoupled and must incorporate the ‘thing-in-itself,’ so there is a necessary ambiguity about whether empirical facts are given or produced, which means we cannot know if we are creating our world <p><i>Source of tension:</i> necessary limits of ‘thing-in-itself’ (logical) <i>Type of tension:</i> a theoretical tension about a theoretical subject, epistemological</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Contemplative Subject</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attempts to control social conditions by making natural processes ourselves (to eradicate the problem of the ‘thing-in-itself’) and by mobilizing the sciences to “construct” a social world with ‘things-for-us’ which we have control over 2. Reification rears itself and the Contemplative Subject becomes an object without any real means of praxis, and increasingly loses control <p><i>Source of tension:</i> necessary inevitability of reification (logical) <i>Type of tension:</i> a theoretical tension about a social subject</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Actual Subject</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Man in capitalist society thinks that lives in a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) 2. The more man attempts to ‘rationalize’ society in an effort to control its social conditions, the more he is at the ‘mercy of its laws’: his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests and his interests will lead him to take opportunities that conform with social laws. “Even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events.”

Source of tension: **contingent** conformity with social laws from attempting to rationalize, become conscious of, and control social conditions

Type of tension: an actual tension in the social world about a social subject