



ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMICS

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Abstract: *This article delves into the ontological foundations of economic being, situating it within the broader philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. Two contrasting perspectives frame the analysis: being as a primordial, unchanging element and being as the totality of all that exists, capable of becoming and development. Adopting the latter view, the study explores the systemic interconnections among natural, social, and ideal being, emphasizing the pivotal role of economic being in social life. Through a materialist framework informed by Marxist principles—materialism, interdependence, development, and the existence of objective laws—the article argues that labor constitutes the social substance underpinning economic being across its historical manifestations. Addressing fundamental questions about existence, relationships, and processes of becoming, this work offers a dialectical understanding of economic being's foundational significance, engaging with critiques from Durkheim, Weber, and others to refine its conclusions.*

Key words: *Ontological Problems, Philosophy of Economics, Economic Being, Materialism, Interdependence, Development, Objective Laws, Labor, Social Substance, Dialectical Understanding, Natural Being, Social Being, Ideal Being, Base and Superstructure, Transformational Processes, Historical Materialism*

Introduction

The question of being lies at the heart of philosophical inquiry, serving as a perennial touchstone for understanding the essence, structure, and dynamics of



existence. In the philosophy of economics, this ontological exploration takes on a specific urgency, as it seeks to clarify the nature of economic being and its relationship to other dimensions of reality. Historically, philosophers have approached being through two primary lenses: one that identifies it with a foundational, eternal element—such as Democritus’s atom or Plato’s idea—and another that encompasses all that exists, embracing its capacity for transformation and development. These perspectives offer distinct starting points for examining economic phenomena, with implications for how we understand the interplay of material and ideal factors in human life.

This article adopts the broader, developmental conception of being to investigate the systemic unity of natural, social, and ideal being, with a particular focus on the economic sphere within social existence. Economic being, understood as the domain of material production and exchange, emerges as a critical nexus for addressing foundational ontological questions: what exists, how it exists, what interconnections bind the existent, and how it becomes what it is. By employing a materialist framework rooted in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this study posits that economic being, grounded in labor as a social substance, occupies a determining role in the structure and evolution of society. The analysis unfolds across three main sections: a theoretical framework that establishes the conceptual groundwork, a discussion that engages with implications and critiques, and a summary that synthesizes key insights. Through this structure, the article aims to contribute to the philosophy of economics by illuminating the ontological underpinnings of economic life and its broader significance within the tapestry of being.

Theoretical Framework

The investigation begins with an exposition of two competing ontological conceptions of being, each with profound implications for the philosophy of economics. The first perspective, traceable to ancient Greek philosophy, interprets being as the existence of a primordial, unchanging element that underpins the transient world. For Democritus, this element was the atom—an indivisible, eternal



unit whose interactions generate the observable cosmos. For Plato, it was the idea—a timeless, ideal form that conditions the imperfect, mutable reality of sensory experience. In both cases, being is contrasted with the world of becoming, with the latter's ephemerality dependent on the stability of the former. This view implies a hierarchical ontology, where an eternal foundation anchors the flux of existence, preventing its descent into absolute chaos.

The second perspective, which this article adopts, defines being as the totality of all that exists, encompassing both stability and change. Rather than positing a single, unchanging origin, this conception endows being with the capacity for becoming—transitioning into other states, evolving into complex structures, and developing across qualitatively distinct levels. This systemic approach emphasizes the interconnections among different domains of existence, framing being as a dynamic unity of diversity. Historically, this view finds resonance in dialectical traditions, notably in Hegel's philosophy and its materialist reinterpretation by Marx and Engels. For the philosophy of economics, this perspective shifts the focus from static essences to processes of transformation, foregrounding the role of economic activity in shaping and being shaped by broader existential structures.

Within this framework, being is conceptualized as a systemic unity of developing diversity, giving rise to four interrelated questions: (1) what exists, (2) how it exists, (3) what is the nature of the interconnections among what exists, and (4) what is the nature of the process of becoming? To address the first question, three primary types of being are identified: natural being (the material world of nature), social being (human societal relations), and ideal being (consciousness, thought, and cultural forms). These categories, however, remain abstract without further specification. Concretization requires an analysis of the relationships between these types—e.g., how natural being underpins social being, or how ideal being emerges from social interactions—as well as the internal dynamics within each type, such as the interplay between individuals and society or between material conditions and consciousness.



A materialist approach, drawing on Engels's developmental schema and Marx's historical materialism, provides the theoretical scaffolding for this analysis. Engels outlines a trajectory from natural being to social and ideal being, rooted in the evolution of material existence. Natural being, initially inanimate, progresses to biological life and eventually to the preconditions for human society, marked by the emergence of labor and thought. Labor, as socio-labor activity, facilitates the transition from nature to society, enabling humans to shape their environment and develop consciousness. This process is governed by four interrelated principles:

1. **Materialism:** Social being is objective, existing independently of subjective will, and is fundamentally shaped by material conditions. Economic activity, as the production of material life, forms the bedrock of this objectivity.
2. **Interdependence:** The relationships between individuals and society are dialectically intertwined, emerging from and shaping the process of material production. Society is neither a mere aggregate of individuals nor an external imposition but a system of relations conditioned by economic necessity.
3. **Development:** Social being evolves through internal contradictions, notably between productive forces (tools, skills, and technologies) and production relations (forms of ownership and distribution). These contradictions drive historical change, from primitive communism to capitalism and beyond.
4. **Objective Laws:** Societal laws arise spontaneously from human activity, reflecting the necessity of material production rather than conscious design. These laws govern the dynamics of economic being, manifesting as stable, essential relationships.

Economic being, as a subset of social being, is defined by the production of material life, with labor as its foundational substance. Marx's assertion that "the first historical act is the production of the means necessary to satisfy these needs" (Marx, 34, p. 26) highlights the primacy of economic activity in human existence. This primacy is further elaborated through the dialectic of base and superstructure: the base, comprising material relations of production, determines the superstructure of legal, political, and ideological forms, though the latter exerts reciprocal influence.



The interplay of productive forces and production relations—e.g., technological advances prompting shifts in ownership patterns—underpins the developmental trajectory of economic being, positioning it as the linchpin of social life.

Discussion

The theoretical framework outlined above establishes economic being as a central pillar of social existence, a claim that warrants detailed exploration and critical engagement. The principle of materialism anchors this analysis, asserting that social being, including its economic dimension, is grounded in objective material conditions rather than subjective consciousness or ideal forms. Marx's reversal of idealist ontology—"it is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness"¹—challenges traditional philosophy by prioritizing material production over mental constructs. This inversion is concretized in the necessity of labor, which Marx describes as "an eternal natural necessity" enabling the metabolism between humanity and nature². Labor, as the substance of economic being, transcends its concrete historical forms—whether the communal labor of hunter-gatherers, the coerced labor of slaves, or the wage labor of industrial workers—unifying them as manifestations of a single, immanent process of self-development.

The principle of interdependence illuminates the dialectical relationship between individuals and society, a dynamic Hegel first articulated and Marx later grounded in material production. Hegel observes that "neither the universal has significance nor can it be realized without particular interest, knowledge, and volition; nor do individuals live solely for their particular interest as private persons, but they also will the universal and act for it"³. Marx extends this insight by rooting the dialectic in economic activity: society emerges as a system of relations shaped by the production of material life, which, in turn, shapes individuals. For example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism involved not just individual innovations but a

¹ Маркс, К. Сочинения. Т. 13. К критике политической экономии / К. Маркс, Ф. Энгельс. – 2-е изд. – М.: Политиздат, 1959. – С. 1 – 167

² Маркс, К. Сочинения. Т. 23: Капитал. Критика политической экономии. Том первый / К. Маркс, Ф. Энгельс. – 2-е изд. – М.: Политиздат, 1960. – 907 с

³ Гегель, Г.В.Ф. Философия права / Г.Ф.В. Гегель. – М.: Мысль, 1990. – 524 с.



reconfiguration of production relations—from serfdom to wage labor—that redefined societal structures and individual identities. This interdependence underscores the qualitative specificity of society as a whole, possessing characteristics (e.g., class structures) absent in isolated individuals.

The principle of development highlights the dynamic, contradictory nature of economic being, driven by the tension between productive forces and production relations. Marx identifies this contradiction as the root of "all historical conflicts"⁴, a process observable in historical shifts such as the Industrial Revolution, where mechanization (productive forces) outpaced feudal ownership (production relations), precipitating capitalist transformation. The base-superstructure dialectic further enriches this analysis: changes in the base—e.g., the invention of the steam engine—initiate new developmental cycles, while the superstructure—e.g., liberal ideologies—reinforces and reshapes these changes. Revolutionary movements, such as the French Revolution, exemplify this interplay, where economic shifts (e.g., enclosures) fueled ideological critiques that, in turn, catalyzed further material transformations.

Critics of this materialist framework offer substantial challenges that merit consideration. Émile Durkheim rejects the primacy of economic factors, arguing that "the economic factor is secondary and derivative" to religious life, which he sees as "abundant and all-encompassing" in primitive societies⁵. He questions how religion could derive from a "rudimentary" economic base, suggesting instead that economic activity depends on prior social cohesion fostered by religion. This critique, however, overlooks the material preconditions for religious thought: humans must first secure their survival through labor, a necessity that precedes and enables cultural elaboration. Moreover, Engels counters that early religious notions, while not directly reducible to economic causes, reflect "the low economic development of the prehistoric

⁴ Маркс, К. Сочинения. Т. 3. Немецкая идеология / К. Маркс, Ф. Энгельс. – 2-е изд. – М.: Политиздат, 1955. – С. 7 – 544.

⁵ Дюркгейм, Э. Метод социологии 1895. Работы разных лет. 1887-1911 / Э. Дюркгейм // Цифровая библиотека по философии. – <http://filosof.historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000689/index.shtml>



period"⁶, as seen in animistic beliefs tied to natural resource dependence. The materialist response thus posits a mediated relationship, where economic conditions shape political and cultural forms indirectly, as in the link between surplus production, slavery, and the rise of monotheistic ideologies.

Max Weber, in contrast, argues that the "spirit of capitalism"—a cultural ethos of thrift and profit—preceded capitalist economic development⁷. Citing Benjamin Franklin's New England, where this spirit emerged by 1632, Weber suggests that ideas drove material change. Yet this overlooks the historical context: New England's settlers imported ideas from England, where capitalist production had been advancing since the 16th century, driven by enclosures and mercantile expansion. Earlier examples, such as the 12th-century Albigensian heresy in southern France, further illustrate economic influence: urban growth and artisan labor fostered demands for religious reform (e.g., abolishing tithes), prefiguring Protestantism's economic critiques. These cases suggest that cultural shifts often follow, rather than precede, material developments.

The principle of objective laws reinforces the materialist thesis by framing societal dynamics as spontaneous outcomes of human activity. Unlike natural laws, social laws depend on human existence—emerging through labor and interaction—yet operate independently of conscious intent. For instance, the rise of class divisions from surplus production was not planned but resulted from practical responses to material needs. This spontaneity underscores labor's role as the immanent force of economic being, linking humanity with nature ("man–nature") and each other ("man–man") in a historically contingent yet necessary process. The law of correspondence between productive forces and production relations exemplifies this objectivity: technological advances (e.g., the printing press) necessitate new social forms (e.g., mass literacy and markets), driving history forward beyond individual volition.

Summary

⁶ Энгельс, Ф. Письма об историческом материализме 1890-1894 / Ф. Энгельс // Цифровая библиотека по философии. – <http://filosof.historic.ru/books/item/f00/s01/z0001014/index.shtml>.

⁷ Вебер, М. Избранные произведения / М. Вебер. – М.: Прогресс, 1990. – 808 с



This article has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of the ontological problems of the philosophy of economics, situating economic being within the systemic unity of natural, social, and ideal being. Adopting a materialist framework informed by Marxist principles—materialism, interdependence, development, and objective laws—the analysis establishes economic being as the foundational dimension of social life. Labor emerges as the social substance, unifying diverse historical forms (e.g., feudal serfdom, industrial wage labor) and propelling their evolution through contradictions between productive forces and production relations. The dialectic of base and superstructure elucidates this process, with economic conditions serving as the determining, though not sole, cause of social change.

Engagement with critiques from Durkheim and Weber enriches the discussion, revealing the complexity of economic being's role. While Durkheim's emphasis on religion highlights cultural factors, it underestimates the material preconditions of human existence; Weber's focus on the "spirit of capitalism" misattributes primacy to ideas over economic shifts, as historical evidence suggests otherwise. The principle of objective laws reconciles these tensions, affirming that economic being operates through spontaneous, necessary processes rooted in labor's metabolism with nature and society.

In conclusion, this study underscores the determining significance of economic being within the broader ontology of existence, offering a dialectical understanding of its interplay with natural and ideal dimensions. Labor, as the eternal necessity of human life, links the "man–nature" and "man–man" relationships, driving the self-development of social forms. This analysis not only clarifies the qualitative specificity of economic being but also provides a philosophical foundation for further research into specific economic phenomena, from historical modes of production to contemporary global systems.

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