

Thomas E. Wartenberg

FEUERBACH'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL MATERIALISM

The title of this conference, *Man – Nature – Universe*, demands that one think about the human being and its relation to its natural environment in the most general and abstract manner possible. It asks us to address a most basic form of metaphysical reflection in which we seek to locate the human being in relation to nature and to the cosmos. In so doing, we enter into a dialogue with the great thinkers of the past, many of whom were concerned to articulate a particular vision of this relationship.

During the Nineteenth Century, various different thinkers addressed this general topic both explicitly and implicitly. In my contribution to this Conference, I shall consider the contribution of one such thinker to this general dialogue. That thinker is Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. Although Feuerbach is not thought of today as one of the central thinkers of the Nineteenth Century, he did address the question of the nature of the human being and its relation to nature and the cosmos in a straight-forward and significant manner. Indeed, his naturalistic philosophy has been an inspiration to many contemporary thinkers.

The particular topic to which I shall address myself is Feuerbach's attempt to justify his metaphysical claim that there are no transcendent beings. I will show that Feuerbach develops this view by means of a reinterpretation of the claims of both theology and speculative metaphysics. According to this reinterpretation, when these two disciplines talked about the transcendent beings – be it God or Spirit – they were really articulating truths about the human community. By means of a two-pronged methodological attack, Feuerbach believes himself able to decode these mystified forms of discourse and thereby prepare the way for the „philosophy of the future“, a philosophy that would be based upon his materialist and empiricist ontology. It was Feuerbach's belief that, without the presence of religious and philosophic abstractions, human beings could come to realize their own divinity, thus creating a world in which the human race could fully realize its potential as a species.

Feuerbach begins his argument for this point of view in *The Essence of Christianity*. There, Feuerbach attempted to show that Christianity could be viewed as a form of truth. Feuerbach argued that the claims that Christianity made about God were really truths about the human species, only made in a manner that obscured this fact. Feuerbach saw Christian doctrine as essentially a code, one that he set out to decipher. The essence of the code was the positing of a being that existed apart from human beings, i.e. God, and the attribution of divinity to this being. In Feuerbach's eyes, talk of such a being was a serious mistake, one that not only mystified the nature of human existence, but also degraded the human being in as much as it glorified a non-human being.

Man – this is the mystery of religion – projects his being [*Wesen*] into objectivity and then again makes himself an object of this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject, a person; he thinks of himself, is an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself¹.

In this quotation, Feuerbach explains the two-stage process that he sees as constituting the essence of religion. First, the human being takes its self-concept and objectifies this into another being, i.e. God; second, the human being sees itself as dependent on this Other, even though this Other is its own creation. Thus, religion is not simply a form of consciousness in which the human being relates to another being, but it is one in which it conceives of itself as inferior to this Other.

There are really two important implications that can be drawn from this claim. The first is that the human being thinks of itself in terms that are derived from its understanding of how another being thinks about the human being. In this sense, the human being's understanding of itself is mediated by its understanding of both a being other than the human being and also that being's understanding of the human being. Nonetheless, Feuerbach goes on to argue that the human being's understanding of God is really nothing more than a „mystified” form of self-understanding. By using the term „mystification”, Feuerbach highlights the idea that the human being is the real object of religious discourse even though its statements are formulated in terms of God.

Such an understanding of the nature of religion explains the aim of Feuerbach's philosophizing in *The Essence of Christianity*: to expose religious language for what it is, nothing but mystified claims about the human being which, properly understood, would enhance rather than demean the lives of human beings. Much of the interest of *The Essence of Christianity* lies in the

¹ L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. G. Eliot, Harper and Row, New York, Evanston and London 1957, p. 29–30 (translation slightly modified).

demonstrations that particular religious claims about God's nature are simply obscure versions of truths about human beings. Here is one example:

What in religion is a *predicate* we must make into a *subject*, what is a subject, into a predicate... that is, *invert* the oracles of religion while at the same time seizing them as a counter-truths – thus do we arrive at the truth. God suffers – Suffering is the predicate – however for human beings, for others, not for himself. What does this mean in English? Nothing other than: *Suffering for others is divine*. Whoever suffers for others, who dies for them, acts divinely, is a god to human beings².

This quotation provides an excellent example of Feuerbach's „method of inversion“. Since claims about the nature of God generally involve the attribution of properties like suffering to Him, Feuerbach is able to simply invert the structure of the sentences in which they are made. The resulting sentences, instead of speaking about the nature of God as having the particular character or predicate – of suffering in this case – will reveal the predicate itself – here suffering – to be a divine, i.e. valuable, characteristic of human beings³. This simple and elegant „inversion“ reveals the human truth that is concealed in the religious talk about the divinity of God.

Feuerbach's argument that religious discourse is really a mystified form of human self-understanding can be seen to be a development of Hegel's claims about the „Unhappy Consciousness“ in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There, Hegel argues that any form of religious consciousness which posits a divine being which exists apart from human beings is an incoherent form of consciousness, one that cannot give a coherent account of its relation to the posited being.

The Unhappy Consciousness itself *is* the gazing of one self-consciousness into another, and itself *is* both, and the unity of both is also its essential nature. But it is not as yet explicitly aware that this is its essential nature, or that it is the unity of both⁴.

Because such a form of consciousness cannot account for the relation between itself and this other being, or see that this other being is actually itself, it is doomed to an unhappy vacillation as it seeks to resolve the contradiction in its self-understanding.

By identifying religious consciousness in general with the structure Hegel attributes to the Unhappy Consciousness, Feuerbach is able to move beyond Hegel on two scores. First, he is able to interpret religious discourse itself on

² *Ibid.*, p. 60 (translation slightly modified).

³ It is worth noting that the full reinterpretation of this sentence involves not just the inversion of the sentence structure, but also the reinterpretation of the predicate divine in human terms.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 126.

the basis of this model. Feuerbach uses Hegel's general claim about religious consciousness as a means for understanding religious discourse. What Hegel sees as a specific form of religious consciousness, Feuerbach identifies with religious consciousness itself. As a result, Feuerbach is able to develop this claim into a concrete strategy of textual interpretation, one according to which religious discourse becomes decoded on the basis of this understanding of its origin.

But even more significantly, Feuerbach is able to turn this view upon Hegel himself, whose speculative philosophy he sees as simply another form of mystified discourse. Before exploring this latter idea, however, I would like to discuss a seemingly obvious problem with Feuerbach's claims in regard to religious discourse. We have seen Feuerbach claim that talk about God is really a mystified form of human self-reflection. God is, however, an infinite being, whereas the human being is only a finite creature. If this is so, what sense it makes to assert that claims made about an infinite being are really about a finite one? Doesn't the difference in the natures of these two entities entail that the Feuerbachian translations miss their mark?

The reason that such objections are not telling is that Feuerbach does not attempt to decode religious discourse by seeing it as discourse about individual human beings. Instead, he posits the human „species character” or „species being” as the true object of religious and theological discourse. The reason that this solves the problem for Feuerbach is that he holds that the human species as a whole is infinite⁵.

Feuerbach is not always consistent in his attempt to explain what this claim means. At times, he seems to literally mean that there are no limits to what the human species can accomplish. While this is certainly hyperbole – something that, unfortunately, Feuerbach is prone to – in his more careful statements Feuerbach is clear to specify different senses in which the human species is infinite. At one level, he says that the human species is infinite because there is no *a priori* limit that can be set either to the number of members of the species nor to the range of their abilities. However, the more interesting claim that Feuerbach makes is that the human species is infinite because of its communal character, for as a species human beings are able to transcend many of the limitations that face individual finite human beings. Thus, for example, when considering the infinitude of the divine understanding, Feuerbach points out that natural science, because of its communal character, is infinite in that it allows the human species to transcend the inherent limitations on an individual's knowledge. He even argues that science, because it unites a multiplicity of finite understandings, is the realization of the very idea of an

⁵ See for example Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 7 ff.

infinite understanding⁶. In this communal and anthropological decoding of religious claims about God into claims about the significance of communal human activities, Feuerbach anticipates claims made by American pragmatism about the significance of the scientific community.

Thus, by introducing the idea of the human species Feuerbach is able to get his program of inversion off the ground. By seeing the idea of the human species as the true subject behind the mystified claims made about the divine being, Feuerbach is able to provide a critique of religious and theological discourse that sees it as more than simply meaningless metaphysical language.

Having explored Feuerbach's method of inversion, we are now in a position to return to the question of how Feuerbach was able to turn Hegel's analysis of the Unhappy Consciousness back upon Hegel himself. In this context, Feuerbach sought to show that Hegel's own attempt to provide a form of discourse that was adequate to the task of articulating a systematic comprehension of reality was subject to the same sort of inversion as were the claims of theology. We have already seen how Feuerbach argued that the mystified religious claims about God's nature were, in reality, true claims about the nature of the human being. Using this same „method of inversion“, Feuerbach now sought to show that even the obscure and immensely abstract claims of the Hegelian *Logic* could be viewed as true so long as they are understood on the basis of the appropriate linguistic transformation and anthropological reinterpretation.

For example, Feuerbach asks us to consider the unity of opposite determinations, one of the basic principles of Hegel's philosophy. By that principle, Hegel had demanded that anyone who wanted to ascend to the heights of philosophical speculation be willing to challenge the rigid opposition between truth and falsity that is taken to characterize ordinary common sense. The challenge of Hegel's philosophy was that the security of common sense would have to be rejected by anyone interested in comprehending the rational structure of reality.

Feuerbach shares with many of Hegel's critics the idea that such a shift of standpoint cannot successfully be made by the human being. However, rather than simply rejecting the Hegelian philosophy as demanding the acceptance of a humanly impossible point of view, Feuerbach asks us to look more deeply into the Hegelian philosophy and to recognize that there is a veiled truth in Hegel's assertion. In order to see this truth, we need to see how it represents a feature of human experience albeit in an obscure manner. Feuerbach's position here, as elsewhere in his writing, is remarkable for its simplicity and insight. He states:

⁶ L. Feuerbach discusses this idea at some length in the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, tr. M. Vogel, Hackett Publications, Indianapolis 1986, p. 15 ff.

The only means by which opposing and contradicting determinations are united in the same being in a way corresponding to reality is time... The pain of contradiction consists precisely in that I am and passionately wish to be now that which in the next instant I, just as vigorously, am not and wish not to be, in that affirmation and negation follow each other, each excluding the other and each affecting me in its full determinateness and sharpness⁷.

In this passage, Feuerbach decodes the mysteries of the Hegelian system by showing that there is an easily understood interpretation of Hegel's abstract claims. Whereas Hegel had demanded that we depart from our ordinary understanding of things in order to comprehend the contradictory nature of reality, Feuerbach reinserts this „speculative proposition” into the human context of our awareness of time, showing that there is a truth about the changeable nature of human desires concealed in Hegel's abstract philosophic truths.

Whether Feuerbach's anthropological reinterpretation of the unity of opposite determinations is adequate as a critique of Hegel is open to question⁸. Nonetheless, the central element of Feuerbach's critique of Hegel is the claim that Hegel's attempt to „overcome the contradiction of thought and being” is inadequate⁹. Feuerbach argues that the idealistic attempt to comprehend all of reality in thought is a sham form of comprehension that only succeeds by presupposing the outcome. Relying on Kant's distinction between 100 thalers in thought and in reality¹⁰. Feuerbach argues that the distinction between thought and being is primitive, something that thought must accept and not seek to transcend. Idealism is therefore an inadequate philosophical standpoint, he argues, one that can succeed only by denying the reality of the real.

This distinction is the beginning of Feuerbach's own materialist point of view, the theory which he puts forward as an adequate means of thinking about the human being in its relation to the cosmos. For Feuerbach, a materialist is one who accepts the „reality of the real” as a fundamental fact that thought must come to terms with. A materialist form of philosophy must accept the derivative nature of thought, seeing it as dependent upon the nature of reality itself. Such a materialism would resist the impulse Feuerbach sees behind idealism: the attempt to go beyond the limitations of human thought and posit thought as the whole of reality.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63–64.

⁸ In the *Preface to The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel himself uses an example very much like Feuerbach's in order to show the need to develop a logic of contradiction. Indeed, it could be argued that any account of the historical genesis of the human species, including Feuerbach's own, must take some account of the logic of such development; and it precisely this logic that Hegel's account of contradictions gives under the title of the unity of opposite determinations.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰ See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. Kemp Smith, St. Martin Press, New York 1929, A599/B627, p. 505.

In order to put forward and defend this basic metaphysical position, Feuerbach argues for the need for a „new philosophy“:

The new philosophy is the philosophy that thinks of the concrete not in an abstract, but in a concrete manner. It is the philosophy that recognizes the real in its reality as true... and raises it into the principle and object of philosophy¹¹.

It is with this affirmation of the „reality of the real“, i.e. of the indispensibility of the assumption of a „real“ that is distinct from „thought“, that Feuerbach begins the articulation of his new philosophy.

One of the central problems in Feuerbach's own philosophic position is his inability to find adequate grounds for this materialistic point of view. In the *Principles*, he makes a number of interesting attempts to ground his materialism. For example, in the discussion of Kant's example of the 100 thalers Feuerbach claims that the distinguishing mark of reality is the agreement of others. In this passage and many others like it, Feuerbach seems to anticipate Wittgenstein, the pragmatists, and Habermas in arguing that the truth is what a community agrees upon. Feuerbach develops this idea more fully by means of his notion of the community as a fundamental relationship of an „I“ with a „Thou“, a form that he argues is necessary to the constitution of the human being as a person¹². But despite the originality of this idea, one that is intended as a this-worldly decoding of Hegel's notion of Spirit, Feuerbach fails to develop it as the basis of an epistemology that could stand as a critical alternative to the Hegelian system.

Instead of such a social epistemology, we find Feuerbach giving another account of the nature of reality, one according to which the real is that which is given through sensation: „The real in its reality or taken as real is the real as an object of the senses; it is the sensuous“¹³. Aligning himself with the traditional empiricist claim that sensation is the mark of the real, Feuerbach argues that this entails that space and time are forms of reality itself, „laws of existence as well as of thought“¹⁴. His point that human access to reality is conditioned by the structure of reality itself, that we cannot form the concept of an object that is not conditioned by a sensible nature. It is the nature of reality which determines the structure of our thought.

Feuerbach uses this particular idea to argue against the meaningfulness of Hegel's speculative propositions in a manner foreshadowing the claims of twentieth century logical positivism¹⁵. But Feuerbach's account of how

¹¹ Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, p. 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 71 ff. The importance of this idea for religious existentialism is obvious.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51 f., p. 60 f.

sensation reflects the reality of the real is, at best, suggestive. For, once again, we find Feuerbach shifting ground rather than developing his insights more fully. Relying on the ambiguity of the notion of the sensuous, Feuerbach presents yet a third version of materialism: that feeling (*Empfindung*) is the key to reality.

The role of feelings in structuring our understanding of reality is a characteristic Feuerbachian theme. Feuerbach believed that the conception of the human being articulated by modern thought was an abstract and disembodied one, one that privileged reason over other human capacities such as action and emotion¹⁶. This was an important aspect of his critique of modern philosophy, for he claimed that the reason that modern philosophy saw present in the world was nothing but the objectified form of the philosophers actual life. The philosophers who led lives in which reason was itself dominant over feelings and actions simply projected the structure of their own lives onto the world.

In the present context, Feuerbach extends this claim by arguing that the new philosophy needs to accord a greater importance to feelings in general and to love in particular.

Hence, human feelings... have ontological and metaphysical significance... there is no other proof of being but love and feeling in general. That object whose being affords you pleasure and whose nonbeing affords you pain – that alone exists¹⁷.

The attempt to incorporate other aspects of the human being into our conception both of our natures and of the world itself is certainly an important philosophic innovation. It enables us to see the failure of modern thought to treat emotions as cognitively significant. This idea is one that was taken up by the existentialists and is again being heard today in the claims of the deconstructivists; it shows Feuerbach as an innovative critic of traditional thought.

Feuerbach's various attempts to ground the new philosophy in a form of materialism are both innovative and suggestive. A central weakness of Feuerbach's thought is that it elides their differences rather than providing an account of their interrelations. Feuerbach slips comfortably from one to the next, relying on the verbal identity which his multiple uses of the term „materialism” permits.

My discussion of the ambiguities in Feuerbach's materialism can help us see why Feuerbach's positive thought has not been as influential as his criticisms of religion and philosophy. Feuerbach's critiques of traditional

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 30-31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

thought give the reader a sense of a new possibility for human life, one in which the power of such mystified forms of thought to structure and limit the lives of human beings has been undercut. Feuerbach's critique of traditional forms of thought is like a breath of fresh air, giving us a glimpse of the possibility of throwing off our intellectual chains. Feuerbach's own positive philosophy, however, seems unable to handle the difficult task of providing a successor to the tradition whose weaknesses Feuerbach himself was pivotal in exposing: it does not provide an adequate ground for a way of life lived beyond religion and philosophy. The themes of his own theory call for such a development; but it was left to philosophers other than Feuerbach to continue along those paths Feuerbach had been the first to tread.

Thus Feuerbach's „new philosophy”, while conceived of as an overcoming of traditional philosophy, fails to achieve the break with traditional theorizing that he had himself demanded. While Feuerbach was one of the first to attempt to overcome philosophy itself, he was not able to divorce himself from the tradition of philosophy fully enough to put forward a theory that truly was „in a new key”. Though he was an inspiration to theorists from Marx to Habermas, unlike them, his „new” philosophy was unable to fill the space he had created for it.

At this point, I have presented an account both of Feuerbach's critique of religious and theological discourse and of his own philosophy of the future in which he sought to provide a positive foundation for future philosophic speculation. I have also shown that, in the latter, Feuerbach presents an account of the human being and its relation to nature that is, in many respects, a model for future naturalistic accounts of human life and experience.

I would now like to return to Feuerbach's critique of traditional speculative discourse, for his account of the mystification involved in both religion and philosophy does not end with his „inversion” of the claims made in those two fields of thought. Feuerbach also presents another account of the origin of those ideas by means of a the genetical-critical method.

It is worth exploring this aspect of Feuerbach's argument in some detail, for it marks a break with a good deal of traditional philosophic thinking. For many modern philosophers, philosophical statements were conceptualized primarily as assertions, that is, propositions that make a claim to truth. The appropriate mode for challenging such claims was to prove that they were incoherent or false. Thus, to choose one outstanding example of this method, Berkeley shows, over and over again, that Locke's claim that material substance exists is riddled with contradictions and, hence, needs to be rejected¹⁸. As a result, Berkeley establishes his own theory of spiritual substances by this method of indirect proof.

¹⁸ See, for example, G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. Robert M. Adams, Hackett, Indianapolis 1979.

Although Feuerbach does use this form of argument to show that certain claims made by theology are contradictory¹⁹, it is more characteristic of him to use a different, more radical means of refuting a theory with which he disagrees, one that he characterizes as the genetical-critical method.

The use of a genetic method in philosophy can be traced back to John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*²⁰. In that work, Locke argued that no idea present in the human mind could be used with justification as a description of reality unless it was possible to demonstrate the origin of that idea in human experience. Locke sought to demonstrate that ideas like that of an apple had a legitimate employment because they could be resolved into component ideas – in this case red, round, and sweet – all of which were presented together in sensory experience. On the other hand, since an idea like that of a centaur, although itself perhaps composed of sensible ideas, did not itself get presented in experience, its use could not be justified²¹.

One aspect of the genetic method that Locke did not fully develop was its use as a powerful tool for the criticism of traditional philosophic doctrines. In the hands of a skillful dialectician it could be used to criticize not simply the truth of a philosophic theory, but the meaningfulness of the terms in which it was articulated. David Hume's philosophy contains an attempt to use this method to show that all the central ideas of traditional metaphysics – from causality to personal identity – do not have a legitimate employment since they are not derivable from sense experience²².

This method had fallen into disuse in Germany for a number of reasons. Primary among them was Kant's dismissal of the Lockean genetic method in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Distinguishing between a question of fact – *quid facti* – and a question of justification – *quid juris* – Kant²³ argued that the Lockean genetic method was not valid; just because an idea was not derived from experience did not mean that it could not be shown to have a legitimate use in the realm of experience. Indeed, Kant's own revolutionary transcendental method is aimed at showing the necessity of using metaphysical concepts that are not capable of a Lockean abstraction from experience as a means of constituting experience in the first place.

When we turn to Feuerbach's own methodology, we find him using a method that seems very much related to Locke's. Feuerbach's genetic-critical method is not, however, a simple reversion to the standpoint of pre-Kantian

¹⁹ See, for example, the second part of *The Essence of Christianity*.

²⁰ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Dover Publications, New York 1959. See especially Book II.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Book II, chap. 30, p. 15.

²² See, for example, D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1888.

²³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A84/B116, p. 120.

empiricism. In common with Locke, Feuerbach is not concerned to criticize his opponents' view in regard to the truth or falsity of their claims, but rather to question the terms in which the claims are made. In Feuerbach's case, however, this involves asking a question somewhat different than Locke's: what need of the human heart does the philosophic doctrine in question satisfy?

The real thrust of this radical move is that it shows even the most abstract form of philosophic and religious thought as unwittingly betraying its origins in the concrete emotional life of the human being. It is this stance that rationalizes Feuerbach's critical account of religion and philosophy. We have already seen that Feuerbach claims that there is a veiled attempt to understand the nature of human beings contained beneath the explicit content of theology and philosophy. The objectifying language of religious and philosophic discourse, however, obscures this fact by talking of God and Being. These putative objects are, however, nothing but false projections of the nature of the human species, which Feuerbach refers to by means of the term „man”²⁴. The genetical-critical method which Feuerbach uses is one that seeks to show the needs which such belief fulfills for people, rather than to argue about their truth. For example, when Feuerbach asks, „for where else than in the pains and needs of man does this being who is without pain and without needs [i.e. God] have its ground and origin?”²⁵ Feuerbach is showing the origins of the idea of God in a particular desire that human beings have, i.e. the desire to live a life free from the painful nature of their needy existence; he does not demonstrate the logical inadequacies of a particular attempt to prove God's existence. The significance of this type of critical argument is that it does not simply concentrate on a particular formulation of a claim about God or Being, but allows us to understand the reasons that a theologian or philosopher actually would have for advancing such a view in the first place.

This genetical-critical method is one of Feuerbach's true philosophic innovations. It asks us to realize that the claims that certain ideas and concepts make about the world are but a superficial level of the meaning of these ideas and concepts, one that conceals a deeper level where these ideas serve a function within the experience of human beings. It also posits the human beings as living in a deep emotional relationship to its world, one that colors the nature of its thought. In different ways, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud all understood this aspect of Feuerbach's philosophy and used it to advantage in their own theories.

²⁴ Feuerbach's use of the term „man” is not as sexist as it might seem. The German term is *Mensch*. In *The Essence of Christianity* (chap. 10), he goes on to stress the importance of genders: „The human being (*Mensch*), however, exists only as man (*Mann*) and woman (*Weib*)”. Eliot's translation obscures this point. Feuerbach's use of the term „man” is thus often specifically and self-consciously generic.

²⁵ Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, p. 48.

This aspect of Feuerbach's thought has been one of its most controversial ones. Although it has been criticized as a form of the „genetic fallacy”, i.e. the assumption that exposing the origin of an idea has any relevance to the ultimate validity of it, such a criticism ultimately is wide of the mark. The importance of Feuerbach's innovation is that it lets us see that ideas are more than attempts to mirror the structure of the world, that they function within the life-context of the human being in a way that is important to the assessment of their validity.

In conclusion, let me make a few general comments about the nature of Feuerbach's philosophy. Feuerbach's anthropological standpoint is both the great strength and the fatal flaw of his materialism and humanism: important because it enabled him to assess the whole tradition of modern European philosophy in a fundamentally new way and to attempt to overturn it; but also problematic in that the basis of that perspective in the concept of „man” or of the „human community” is itself an objectification. While Feuerbach criticized previous philosophic theories for the objectified forms of being that they posit, Feuerbach never turned his own critical glance upon himself. He lacked a critical perspective from which to see that neither „man” nor „community” are terms that are sufficiently concrete to explain the varied and specific ways in which human life is shaped by differing social environments²⁶.

Thus, Feuerbach's conception of human sociality remains an abstract one. Although he speaks, for example, of heterosexual love as the true form of community, he does not seem to recognize that the form in which such love is embodied will vary depending upon historical and social circumstances. The irony here is that the very standpoint that allows Feuerbach to see the limitations of Hegel's philosophy blind him to one of Hegel's great insights, namely that the human being assumes a specific character as a result of the specific structure of social relations it has with other human beings²⁷. For all the abstraction of his idealist metaphysics, Hegel's attempt to explicate the nature of human life does more justice to our sociality and its historically varied character than does Feuerbach's avowedly communitarian and materialist perspective. The task that Marx set for himself – synthesizing the insights of these two philosophers – begins from this insight.

One of the problems here may be a certain self-satisfaction in Feuerbach's thought. In his attempt to demonstrate that religion and philosophy are forms of human self-alienation, Feuerbach fails to fully answer one very significant

²⁶ In his later work, such as the *Lectures of the Essence of Religion* (tr. R. Manheim, Harper and Row, New York 1967) Feuerbach does criticize his anthropologism. But the naturalism he advocates there does not solve the problems discussed in this essay.

²⁷ For an example of this, consider the different theoretical concepts – person, subject, etc. – that G. W. F. Hegel uses to refer to concrete individuals in *The Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1952.

question, namely, why such a self-alienation is necessary. The story he tells, for all its persuasiveness, remains strange and troubling. That human beings should invent a fantastic world in order to reflect upon the one they themselves inhabit, and that this object should take the form of a Divine Being or even of Being itself, is something that Feuerbach seeks to reveal. But he fails to provide a systematic answer to the question of why such a peculiar process of self-knowledge is necessary for the human being. In other words, the question of what it is about the human being that compels it to deny its own nature via the abstractions of a god-head or metaphysics is an issue that Feuerbach not only fails to adequately resolve, but even evades by entitling it a mystery²⁸. And though he does say that such forms of objectivity arise from the needs of the subject, he never pushes himself to account for the peculiar nature of this process of alienation and objectification. Confronted with an historical theory in the form of Hegel's idealist metaphysics, Feuerbach took refuge in an ahistorical materialism that is ultimately unsatisfactory.

In this sense, Feuerbach's own romantic optimism about the human species may be the cause of the failure. His need to affirm the nature of the human being in the face of the huge self-deprecations of the ontotheological tradition blinds him to the possibility that human nature is of a darker sort than he imagined. Both Nietzsche and Freud take up from where Feuerbach left off, developing views about the human being that recognize the importance of a darker side²⁹.

As a consequence of these inadequacies, Feuerbach's conception of human emancipation is just as abstract as his notion of community. Although he claims that he is interested in the practical emancipation of human beings, he remains wedded to the idea that such emancipation will be the natural outcome of the theoretical emancipation he believed his own philosophy to have embodied. His emancipatory discourse of a practical liberation of humanity is thus highly problematic, a fact that Marx was quick to recognize and criticize³⁰.

²⁸ See p. 62–63 above. Freud's theory of religion marks a distinct advance upon Feuerbach in that (1) Freud seeks to show how the idea of a god is derived from specific features of childhood experience, and (2) the theory of the unconscious explains why certain ideas cannot be thought about directly, and therefore do require a sort of code. See, for example, S. Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, tr. J. Strachey, W. W. Norton and Co, New York 1928. It should be noted that Feuerbach's sympathy for religion allows him to do more justice to its positive functions that Freud is able to.

²⁹ In particular, it is interesting to contrast their views on the nature of religion with Feuerbach's. As well as Freud (*ibid.*); see F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, [in:] W. Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth 1968.

³⁰ See his well-known *Theses on Feuerbach*, reprinted, for example, in: R. C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., New York 1978, p. 143–145. But see also M. Wartowsky's claim that Marx's critique of Feuerbach ignores Feuerbach's psychological insights so that the solution to conflict between them is still unresolved (*ibid.*, p. 225).

Despite these limitations, Feuerbach's thought is fertile ground for serious philosophical reflection. His critique of religious and philosophic abstractions provide a stimulating and enriching vision of human life freed from the limitations of inherited forms of thought and feeling. In many ways, even the limitations of Feuerbach's thought make it an exciting object for a critical encounter. In his work, there are deep and stimulating reflections on the nature of human existence, but reflections that one feels impelled to push further, to develop in different directions.

Feuerbach's anthropological materialism provides a specific means, then, for thinking about the relation of the human being to the world that surrounds it. It is a philosophical position that stresses the deep emotional issues at stake in the question of the relation of the human being to its natural environment. Although Feuerbach's philosophy of the future is not fully adequate to its own name, it does allow us to reflect upon our own place in the cosmos by means of its insightful criticisms of less successful modes available for such reflection within the philosophic tradition.

Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley

Thomas E. Wartenberg

MATERIALIZM ANTROPOLOGICZNY FEUERBACHA

Autor przywołuje poglądy Feuerbacha dotyczące stosunku człowieka do przyrody w związku z toczonymi obecnie dyskusjami na ten temat. Jego zdaniem, Feuerbach przez swoją krytykę teologii i filozofii spekulatywnej uutorował drogę wielu myślicielom ku realistycznemu, materialistyczno-naturalistycznemu ujęciu bytu ludzkiego i stosunku człowieka do otaczającego go środowiska naturalnego. Jakkolwiek myśl Feuerbacha odznacza się pewną abstrakcyjnością i brakiem precyzji, to jednak może ona być źródłem inspiracji do przemyślenia w dzisiejszej perspektywie zasygnalizowanych wyżej problemów.