



Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804 – 1872)



Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach was born into a distinguished family, in Landshut, Bavaria. His father, a renowned professor of jurisprudence, was knighted by the Bavarian court and was engaged to revise the court's legal code. Ludwig, who was very religious as a child, first encountered Hegelianism while attending the Gymnasium in Ansbach where he was introduced to the Christian theology doctrine espoused by the Hegelian theologian, Karl Daub of Heidelberg University. In 1823, Feuerbach enrolled in Heidelberg University with the intention of studying rationalistic theology under H.E.G. Paulus. Young Feuerbach, however, was immediately captured by the Hegelian project, and finding Paulus' lectures irrelevant and mistaken, he soon transferred to Berlin to study with the 'master' himself. In the summer of 1824, Feuerbach listened to Hegel's lectures on 'Logic and Metaphysics', and the 'Philosophy of Religion'. Through his own pen, we know that these lectures were a turning point in his life – Hegel, Feuerbach would later write, was a second father to him.

Feuerbach's work can be divided into four categories: his early idealist period; his criticism of Hegel; his interpretation of religion; and the 'new philosophy'. Feuerbach's focus on the I-Thou relation cut through all of the phases of his development and changes in his thinking.

During his early idealist period Feuerbach was fiercely Hegelian, so much so that he pledged his allegiance to the Hegelian project on a note appended to his dissertation, which he submitted to Hegel himself. His dissertation, along with his first published work, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), are the most systematic accounts of his idealist period. In these works, Feuerbach's use of the concepts of 'Venunft', 'Aufhebung', 'Geist', nature, love, and the relationship of philosophy and religion are widely seen as indistinguishable from Hegel's. Both texts also pronounce the maxim of idealism, namely, the identity of being and thought, and echo the Hegelian claim that both nature and consciousness are grounded in Infinite Spirit, which is constitutive of the self-identical actuality of all beings. In both works, Feuerbach concentrated on establishing universality through reason. He argued that all selves are driven by an inextinguishable desire to be with others, and that this desired I-Thou relationship leads to the apprehension of a concept of the species, this concept being reason (or 'love', in *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*). Reason, for Feuerbach, is the essence of the species, and is identical in all. As such, reason also constitutes the unity of human beings. Feuerbach's famous play on Descartes summarizes his position: '*insofar as I think, I am Thou*' (or *insofar as I think, I am all men*). Following Hegel, Feuerbach made a series of important distinctions between thought and knowing, consciousness and self-consciousness, the finite and the infinite, and finally the similarity, if not synonymy, between Reason and God. The



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emphasis of both of these works is the prioritization of community, of the collective over mere egoism or individuality, which Feuerbach often refers to as 'pure naked personhood'; it is not the individual in isolation from others that is the substantial reality, but precisely the opposite, namely, the I-Thou, a concept similar to what Martin Heidegger would later refer to as *Mitsein*.

Feuerbach's divergence from Hegel, ironically, finds its roots in the same note appended to the dissertation, in which he declared his allegiance to Hegel, when he concludes with a very un-Hegelian statement: 'Christianity is the religion of the pure self'. In this single note, written for Hegel's eyes, and attached to a thoroughly Hegelian thesis, Feuerbach identifies himself as Hegelian, and simultaneously raises the issue of the incompatibility between Idealism and Christianity.

Hegel's position regarding the incompatible relationship was that his philosophy clarified, in the form of ideas and concepts, that which is expressed through imaginative symbolism by Christian theology. For Hegel, Christianity was a consummate religion. For Feuerbach, on the other hand - taking his lead from D.F. Strauss' *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) - Christianity was a religion of 'pure selfhood'. Aside from their conflict over Christianity, Feuerbach also criticized Hegel on his idea of totality as truth, which is consummated in Absolute Knowledge. Feuerbach claimed that the idea of a process in which each new stage contains all previous stages until we get to Absolute Knowledge results in a misrepresentation of religion and culture in so far as it cannot account for all the variety and particularity throughout the process. Feuerbach also claimed that Hegel's philosophy confuses the demonstration of his ideas with the substance of his philosophy, that is, Hegel's Logic is thought to describe both the structures of reality itself as well as govern the dialectical form he uses to explain them. In short, the criticism is that Hegel confuses the dialectical form of philosophy with what he is trying to explain, leading to the conclusion that history itself, and everything within it, is governed by dialectical logic. Feuerbach also criticized Hegel's overemphasis on abstractions which leads him to completely ignore the concreteness of sensuous reality. Feuerbach's argument here rings of Kantianism; he argues that simply because language employs universals, and we employ language, does not mean that what sensuous consciousness encounters is not particular. For this consciousness, language is just a collection of signs used as tools to achieve its aims. Feuerbach condenses all the problems he sees in idealism, and hence also his criticisms of Hegel, into Idealism's commitment to an Absolute Identity between subject and object. That is to say, for Feuerbach Idealism resolves the problem of the objectivity of nature by appealing to an Absolute subject in whom 'nature' and 'spirit' are two attributes of the same thing, namely, the Absolute.

Feuerbach's most important work, widely considered to be *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), became a bible for an entire generation of intellectuals especially those who considered themselves to be revolutionaries, including Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Wagner and Strauss, who later wrote that *The Essence of Christianity* was the 'truth of our times'. The essential thesis of the book is that a



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self achieves self-consciousness on the basis of a confrontation with another self, and that the process of self-differentiation leads to the realization that the self is a member of a species, or in the famous words of his second father, 'the I that is a we'. Individualization from the universal of a species is the result of the imagination, which under the pressures and urges of wish and feeling converts the self into an individual being. The book also puts forth the thesis that self-consciousness is religion because man is nothing without an object and because the object to which man relates is nothing more than a projection or externalization of the subject's own nature. For Feuerbach, there exists a mirroring relationship between the subject and its object, or the object and its subject. In *The Essence of Christianity*, and in the above thesis in particular, Feuerbach appropriates many important Hegelian concepts, such as alienation, reconciliation, objectification and inter-determination. It is this continuity with Hegel, together with a criticism of Hegel, that allowed the work to be considered both revolutionary and the 'truth of the times'. In short, we can summarize Feuerbach's relationship to Hegel, and thereby his criticism of Christianity as a consummate religion, by saying that Feuerbach considered Hegel's philosophy guilty of reifying abstract predicates such a 'thought' into agents. Consequently, to preserve the truth of Hegel, all that is needed is an inversion of this relationship, namely, Feuerbach claimed that instead of the Hegelian thesis that thought itself is the agent, we must assert that thinking is the activity of individuals so that it is thought which comes forth from being, and not being from thought. On this paradigm, and on Feuerbach's ontological and normative claims on it, depends his entire criticism and analysis of Hegel and Christianity. For example, Feuerbach's assertion that a predicate is not divine because God possesses it, but that he possesses it because it is divine; or, that the attribution of human predicates to a non-human being necessarily withdraws them from the human being itself. In these examples, Feuerbach both accounts for particular phenomena by his projective and alienating paradigm, and also predicts their consequences.

What is termed the 'new philosophy' of Feuerbach finds its initial systematization in *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy* (1842) and in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843). Both works are aphoristic, leaving out no less than they put forth. The 'new philosophy' can be categorized as a material realism by virtue of the emphasis and dignity it places on 'perception' and 'feeling', namely on their priority and their claim to certainty and immediacy. As a rather crude distinction, we can say that Feuerbach's 'new philosophy' assigns essence to the body, while the old philosophy assigns it to the abstract. In this opposition of the 'new' with the 'old', i.e. idealist philosophy, we can draw out some of Feuerbach's basic theses: the new philosophy concerns the concrete particularities while the old claimed that knowledge comes only in the form of universals; the new argues that to realize an idea means to make it an object for the senses while the old limited the realization of the idea to abstract thought, or subjective spirit; lastly, while the old can be said to think 'Being as such', the new thinks 'being as such'; in short, the emphasis shifts from abstract universals to concrete particularity. This interpretation, under the guidelines of a firm demarcation between the universal and the particular, and the abstract and the concrete, is obviously folly to a



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particular reading of German Idealism, especially Hegel himself. Consequently, we ought to read these distinctions as changes in emphasis rather than as changes in object. It can be said that the movement of emphasis from Hegel to Feuerbach is a precursor of the movement from metaphysics into phenomenology.

In the 'new philosophy' Feuerbach attempts to shatter two common dualities, that between mind and body, and that between inside and outside, or man and world. More precisely, Feuerbach claims that the oppositions are not oppositions in themselves, but the result of the human creation of multiple spheres of discourse and that this this collapsing of mind into body has social and political implications. The essence of this can be reduced to the statement that men must come to understand that the mind develops together with and from within the body, which itself is the product not only of a primordial nature but also its passage through history.

Source: Adapted from <http://www.egs.edu/library/ludwig-andreas-feuerbach/biography/>



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