

A Promising Godlessness:
Recovering the Religious Atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach

Doctoral Dissertation by:
Jeremy Fisher
Department of Religious Studies
University of Virginia
Defended 15 October, 2019

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The Essentials

I. The Case Against and the Argument For

In today's political climate—whether secular, religious, or academic—the notion of “essence” seems particularly out-of-date. If the history of ideas has taught us anything, it would be that to speak as though there is some necessary quality or qualities that defines and/or establishes the “fundamental features” of human existence (or human experience) is simply invariable. While such discussions may claim to uncover the universal (or at least the universalized) elements of human *subjectivity* (i.e. similarity, commonality), they all-too-often reveal themselves as decidedly *subjective* and speculative (i.e. idiosyncratic), covertly introducing an unsupported and corrosive normativity into rational deliberation. Whether one begins with a preconceived notion of essence and works back to a description of those ideas, institutions, or individuals who/that are supposed to embody it, or begins with an idea, individual, or group and works out to the establishment of an essence that is supposed to encapsulate the whole, the very act of essentializing seems to be inherently reductive, distorting the very meanings which it purports to clarify by simultaneously oversimplifying and homogenizing *difference*. In the context of contemporary intellectual discourse, then, it would seem fair to suggest that essentialist reasoning is simply disingenuous at best and dangerous at worst. In a multicultural society where the experiences, relations, and/or commitments of individuals or groups seem to defy definitive, absolute, characterization, to speak of essence at all seems to limit one's scope of vision and thus inhibit one's sphere of potential concern and/or action.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that despite falling out of academic favor (if, that is, it was ever really in favor at all), the idea of “essence” remains (in the West) a subtle, yet ever-present feature of our everyday moral and/or political deliberations. Whether through force of habit, logical expediency, intellectual laziness, religious upbringing, commitment to empirical science, or a host of other factors, our most elemental evaluations (i.e. of personhood, of morality, of God, and so on) often seem to be the result of reductive, binary thinking. So much so, in fact, that judging another’s character (in the pejorative sense) based on the content and supposed supremacy of our *own* beliefs has become an easy, if not effortless, practice of criticism.

This practice of (mutual) condemnation has manifested itself clearly in the contemporary debate between religious believers and non-believers regarding the role of religion in the public sphere. As we will see in the first chapter of this study, proponents of the so-called New Atheism have employed the use of essentialist reasoning in order to establish the basis for what they see as the complete inviolability of reason (i.e. scientific, empirical demonstration) in all matters metaphysical and thus the complete disqualification of religion or faith in the establishment of truth and morality. Likewise, certain Christian critics of New Atheism have employed the use of essentialist reasoning in order to establish the basis for what they see as the complete inviolability of God’s in-breaking spirit in all matters material and thus the complete disqualification of reason as the sole determiner of truth and morality. But what’s more, both the New Atheists and their critics have used their respective assessments to establish the basis of judgement for those who disagree with them. In the name of a self-conceived enlightened atheism, the New Atheists have effectively reduced all believers to irrational, illogical, or ignorant dupes. Likewise, in the name of a self-conceived moderate Protestant Christianity, certain Christian apologists have effectively

reduced all proponents of New Atheism (atheism in general?) to self-important, self-righteous, blowhards.

On the face of it, then, the effect of essentialist reasoning in the sphere of religion does not appear to suggest any (obvious) worthwhile benefits in the rational exchange of ideas. Indeed, as it stands, it would seem that the crude reductionism inherent in such binary thinking has led to the very suspension of exchange or even the possibility thereof. However, as strong as the case against reductionist thinking may be, and as taboo as it may be to defend it, there are aspects of essentialism that cannot (and should not) be invalidated and/or dismissed so easily. And, since the validity of the critique of essentialism looms over the following project, dependent as it is on the notion of essence (here, the essence of religion in particular), it will serve us well to briefly discuss the merits of essentialist reasoning. While these advantages must certainly be qualified, they can provide promising avenues for analysis and critique and help to correct faulty or facile objectifications—whether derived from contemporary atheistic sources or contemporary theological ones. But moreover, such qualifications will allow us to keep our critical gaze on the sort of essentialism developed within Ludwig Feuerbach’s *religious atheism*.

II. A Critical, Corrective Reaction

In today’s culture—academic or otherwise—any discussion couched in essentialist language tends to generate suspicion. Given the societal implications and ramifications of essentialist rhetoric, anti-essentialism seems to be the trump card that gets played whenever precise boundaries are even attempted to be constructed. Regardless of the issue at hand, essentialism is thought to box in or keep out individuals or groups based on supposedly normative standards that

do not adequately reflect the variety of opinions, beliefs, and/or lifestyles that exist inside or outside of them. Better to have no walls, no boundaries at all, it seems, than to risk the possibility of misidentifying or misrepresenting someone, some group, some institution, or some idea.

The motivations behind such a position are certainly understandable, but they can also be crippling for the rational exchange of ideas. It goes without saying that rational discourse requires, at minimum, a certain degree of categorization. However, slightly more contentious, perhaps, is the claim that categorization is *not* inherently problematic simply because it categorizes. Indeed, on its face, there seems to be very good reasons to be skeptical of the foundational authority of this particular claim.

For starters, because the very act of categorizing seems predicated on seemingly pre-determined notions of what counts as categorical, complexity, nuance, and subjective experience tend to give way to an illusory simplicity that reinforces the very conviction that enabled the categorization in the first place. This is a vital contention because such oversimplification tends to carry with it a strength of conviction disassociated from the logical channels that would justify it. On this account, categorization is not simply a matter of objective distinction, but rather a matter of covertly passing off subjective determinations as impartial descriptions of a seemingly self-evident reality. As a result, analysis and argument tend to conform to pre-established conclusions which, in turn, tend to be asserted and defended regardless of rational support or despite contrary evidence. Categorization, on this account, is simply a euphemism for crude reductionism—a mode of binary thinking that fundamentally interferes with the analysis and appreciation of diversity.

Now, on the one hand, this line of critique seems undeniably true. One purpose of categorization in rational discourse *is* to establish precise boundaries or limits whereby the viewpoints and actions of individuals, groups, or institutions can be examined and analyzed. On

the other hand, however, the fear of smuggling in normative values or uncritically supporting the status quo can easily overshadow the valid rational distinctions that make clarity and precision possible. In other words, where (mis)categorization (read: essentialism) is used as a weapon of control, it is inherently corrosive of the rational exchange of ideas. But where it is used as a critical corrective to that control, it can become an authentic representation of recovery and self-description and not merely a manufactured misrepresentation of a falsified one. In this way, essentialist reasoning may actually provide protection against the systematic tidiness that absorbs everything into obscurity and then defends such absorption on the grounds of (unassailable) inclusivity. As Nietzsche reminds us, “Nothing serves as well as obscurity to make shallowness look profound.”¹ On this account, then, essentialist reasoning may in fact fortify a clarity and consistency in rational discourse that is determinate, flexible, and archetypal.

As we will see in the analysis which is to follow, the notion of essentialism as a critical corrective to speculation (here, to philosophical and religious speculation) was championed by Ludwig Feuerbach, an early 19th century scholar of religion and self-admitted atheist. In the preface to the second edition of his seminal work, *The Essence of Christianity*, he stated: “Not to invent, but to discover, “to unveil existence,” has been my sole object; to *see* correctly, my sole endeavor.”² As the discussion in chapter two will make clear, Feuerbach’s notion of essentialism was predicated upon individuals, groups, or institutions speaking for, and characterizing, themselves. Unlike the later masters of suspicion (i.e. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) or the New Atheists, who seem to rely on well-established binaries in order to settle their accounts of religion once and for all, Feuerbach never ceased to explore the meaning of religion for human

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 6.

² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), xvi.

consciousness, and it was his return to religious analysis time and again that showed most clearly that his work was more than just vulgar reduction. Indeed, according to Van Harvey, who has written substantially on Feuerbach, “Just because he was *not* concerned to construct an intellectual system in which religion had a fragmentary but well-defined place, he was constantly open to revision and correction and deepening of insight.”³ In short, Feuerbach’s goal was not to determine or to dictate (i.e. to *essentialize*, in the pejorative sense), but rather to examine and to understand (i.e. to uncover *essence*, in the objective sense). In this way, Feuerbach did not understand the religious imaginary (here, Christianity) as a mere irrational construction *in direct contrast with* the irreligious and thus seemingly rational imaginary of post-Enlightenment secularism, but rather as an “imagined” and “mystified” account of humanity’s developing self-consciousness itself.

What this indicates is that Feuerbach was not averse to using reductionist (read: binary) reasoning, but neither did he allow an anti-essentialist sentiment to be used in order to escape substantive critique. As we will see throughout our discussion, Feuerbach does indeed offer a series of binary oppositions which he sees as being emphatically opposed to each other (i.e. imagery and plain speech, delusion and truth, mystification and reality, and so on). But he goes further than mere reduction and maintains that certain terms that are (inappropriately) used as oppositions are in fact identical (i.e. transcendent and material, supernatural and natural, divine and human, God and “man”). Methodologically, he both opposes certain binary oppositions and attempts to persuade the reader to choose between them, and identifies other (seemingly apparent) oppositional terms and persuades the reader to refuse to distinguish them. For all intents and purposes, then, his critique both deconstructs injurious and destructive binaries and replaces them

³ Van Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14. Emphasis added.

with critical and constructive ones—ones that invariably display a unitary vision of human and divine nature. And, in the end, this transposition discloses the same conclusion: Christians are simply deluded in their speech about God. For Feuerbach, in truth, all that can ever be said about God is simply all that can ever be said about humanity itself. Thus he states:

As man in his utmost remoteness from himself, in God, always returns upon himself, always revolves round himself; so in his utmost remoteness from the world, he always at last comes back to it. The more extra- and supra-human God appears to be at the commencement, the more human does he show himself to be in the subsequent course of things or at the close.⁴

As presented, then, the *promise* of Feuerbach's argument lies in the fact that it neutralizes the most unsavory aspects of both the New Atheists and their critics (i.e. their crude reductionism) while providing an *atheistic* explanation of religious experience that surpasses facile accusations of mere ignorance (contra Christian apologists) or sheer unintelligibility (contra New Atheists). The *persuasiveness* of Feuerbach's argument lies in the fact that it remains, and functions, at the level of basic categories. And the *force* of Feuerbach's argument lies in the fact that once one entertains the possibility that the transcendent can only ever be a mystification of the material, the very identity of God and humanity becomes indisputable. And what's more, it becomes impossible to see what arguments *could* establish the distinction between the divine and the human, for any such argument would itself be the product of human reasoning and imagination.

As we will soon see, Feuerbach's analysis of religion requires us to examine precisely what we mean (or what we think we mean) when we say the things that we say about God. The implications of this claim will be drawn out in the discussion that spans chapters two, three, and four. Chapter two begins by briefly detailing Feuerbach's critique of speculative philosophy,

⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 183.

particularly the German Idealism of G.W.F Hegel, and the subsequent shifts in methodology and intent that his own work took as a result. This discussion will provide the groundwork for all that is to follow, insofar as it establishes the basis of Feuerbach's anthropological account of religion (here, Christianity) as well as its subsequent mystification and objectification in the form of Christian theology proper. Unlike the New Atheists who fail (or simply refuse) to distinguish between religion and theology, Feuerbach crafted his entire critique of Christianity with this distinction in mind. As such, while his reductions were inherently destructive to theological claims, they did not require him to discard the meaningfulness and significance of the Christian imaginary. What they did require, however, was the rejection of the very possibility that any supposed existence could transcend the human, and therefore a *translation* of Christianity's metaphysical claims and immaterial images (i.e. theology) into the language of materiality and sensuality (i.e. religion).

Chapter three builds on this discussion by analyzing what Feuerbach took to be the constituent elements of humanity's essential nature (i.e. thought, will, and feeling)—the self-same elements that he claimed were mystified and objectified in Christianity's account of God. To be sure, these elements were not understood as mere abstractions derived from philosophical speculation (i.e. constructs posited from reflections upon a presupposed absolute, immaterial reality), but rather as the animating features of a person's very being, the consciousness of which was coterminous with the self-objectification of consciousness itself. What this meant was that for Feuerbach, consciousness itself (i.e. self-consciousness) was the event horizon of human experience—the boundary which marked the very limit of one's understanding and imagination. On this account, the very notion of God was a synthetic image derived entirely from *within* one's consciousness—a projection of human perfections—and thus a notion which had an essentially

determinate (read: human) basis and foundation. Chapter three concludes with an illustrative example, or perhaps put better, *the* illustrative example, of God as a reification of human nature: the objectification of human understanding itself as the original, self-subsistent, unified, infinite, and necessary, criterion, determiner, and measure of all reality.

Chapter four signals the essential turn in the discussion of Feuerbach's anthropological analysis of religion. It begins with a second illustrative example of God's reification, the objectification of the will. For Feuerbach, this objectification signaled the initial transition from the concept of God as pure abstraction, to the concept of God as a personal being, that is, as the Godhead made *visible*. For Feuerbach, as the objectification of the will, God represented humanity's moral nature, or perhaps put better, the moral law itself. But as we will see, on Feuerbach's account, this objectification, while necessary, was not sufficient to establish the existence of a *sensual* God, that is, a God *for* human beings. As the objectification of the moral law, God's ethical objectivity was essentially uncompromising and hard-hearted, condemning everyone who failed to meet its absolute requirements. On the face of it, then, God's supposed benevolence appeared to be decidedly malevolent.

But according to Feuerbach, all was not as it seemed. On his account, Christianity did away with this conflicting conception of God's goodness by conceiving of God as a *human* person—that is, by conceiving of God as abnegating His independent (and thus abstract and absolute) existence in the Incarnation of Christ. For Feuerbach, a feeling, subjective person needed a feeling, personal God—and to be sure, a real, determinate, historical one at that. On this account, only that which is good for the senses is good for the entire human and moreover, only that which is good for the entire human can be said to also be, in itself, a thoroughly perfect good. In the Incarnation, then, humanity is assured that God is more than the mere instantiation of objectivity. He is, in a

word, a sensual, material being—the objectification of the third and final constituent element of human nature, feeling.

This transfigurative moment of Christian theology signified the culminating moment of Feuerbach’s anthropocentric and atheistic reduction. Indeed, he goes so far as to say, “How can the worth of man be more strongly expressed than when God, *for man’s sake*, becomes a man, when man *is* the end, the object of the divine love?”⁵ Put differently, for Feuerbach, once properly translated, the doctrine of the Incarnation simply confessed what in Christian theology proper it would not admit—namely, that in religion, the human separates him/herself from him/herself, but only to return always to the same point from which he/she set out.⁶ In short, on Feuerbach’s account, the so-called mystery of the God-man is no enigmatic amalgamation of contraries, but rather the very expression of identity in the nature of God and humanity.

Chapter five expounds upon the practical implications of the previous analysis. In emphasizing the fundamental import of sensuousness in his analysis of religion, Feuerbach demonstrated that the love exemplified in the theological conception of the Incarnation was only *human* love made objective and affirming itself *as divine*. On this account, in and through the Incarnate God, the believer had in view him or herself alone, for when one loved and worshiped the God who loved humanity, then one became aware of the divine quality of (human) love itself. But according to Feuerbach, Christianity perverted this notion of love, substituting its universal (and atheistic) foundation and orientation for an exclusive and particular conception unique to the Christian alone. Feuerbach framed this discussion as the contradiction between faith and love and maintained that the former was a corrosive idea which served only to reinforce the epistemological

⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 57. Emphasis added.

⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 181-182.

contradictions embedded within Christian theology and thereby obscure the moral significance of the Incarnation itself.

In order to recover one's essential nature, then, one must reject the Christian notion that "God is love" and replace it with the *atheistic* notion that "Love is God." This is not simply an existential requirement for Feuerbach, but a *moral* one as well. On his account, so long as faith is concerned only with what is Christian, it is, in essence, unloving—its compassion and generosity extending only to those in whom the belief in God's absolute personality is left intact. But for Feuerbach, in order to derive one's morality *from* God, one must first place morality *in* God—for without infusing God with genuine human feeling, His moral dictates are entirely incomprehensible. Doing so, however, effectively does away with God's "special" existence, once more (and inevitably) reuniting His essence with the essence of humankind. In the end, Feuerbach reveals a God who does not float above morality, but rather a God who instantiates a genuine philanthropic conscientiousness—the very unity of I and Thou.

As the following discussion will show, Feuerbach's critical analysis continually removes the blanket of protection that allows us to maintain confused or contradictory positions, and creates a space wherein those positions can be thoughtfully engaged and evaluated. In this way, Feuerbach's discussion of the essence of religion does not stifle conversation or limit our vision, but precisely the opposite. His examination of the religious consciousness requires that we do not dodge substantive critique regarding the nature of God, and perhaps more importantly, it requires that the beliefs that we adopt should not be mere assertions derived from abstract speculations, but rather rational conclusions derived from material and sensuous experience.

In objectifying our nature in the being of God, we inadvertently clarify what is essential to our own self-conscious understanding. In this way, Feuerbach's critique of Christianity is about

more than epistemology proper and his defense of religion is about more than feelings of transcendence. On his account, religion is not a speculative enterprise that uncovers a reality that exists over and against the human. Rather, for Feuerbach, religion is the coming into focus of the essence of human nature and its inherent unity with the divine. “Man,” Feuerbach states, “has his highest being, his God, in himself.”⁷ It is no wonder, then, that Feuerbach finds *atheism* to be the *secret of religion* itself.

⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 281.

Chapter One

Where the Conflict Lies

I. The Debate

Anyone vaguely familiar with the contemporary debate surrounding the role of religion in the public sphere, has heard mention of “New Atheism.” New Atheism is a philosophical and political movement of sorts, championed by the so-called New Atheists, a band of philosophers, neuroscientists, and evolutionary biologists who have spearheaded the resurgence of atheist critique of religious faith and religion in the public domain.⁸ Their ultimate aim is, simply, to demonstrate the perniciousness of religious belief, and in so doing, render its (putatively) privileged status in rational discourse obsolete. To be sure, the achievement of this end is motivated by more than mere disagreement on matters metaphysical. For the New Atheists, such a task has become both a political and a moral necessity. In our technological age, it is argued, human beings can no longer afford to ground their epistemological and/or ethical imperatives on beliefs that cannot be empirically justified (i.e. faith). And on their account, since faith-based religion is founded on such beliefs, it must be effectively disqualified as an authority in both instances.

For many, such a conclusion, surprising as it may sound, hardly raises an eyebrow. According to the New Atheists, outside the sphere of faith-based religion, one would be hard

⁸ For the purpose of the following discussion, I will be leaning rather heavily on the work of Sam Harris. Admittedly, this is a rather arbitrary decision. However, of the “Four Horseman” of New Atheism (Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett), his engagement with religious belief is the most “systematic” of the bunch. Dawkins and Dennett focus primarily on evolutionary arguments, which we will not be dealing with here, and Hitchens focuses more on the misapplication of unfounded belief rather than on the nature of belief itself. This is certainly not to say that Harris is the mouthpiece of a unified New Atheist position, but his underlying claims will certainly be conceded by the rest. Therefore, I will refer to Harris as the primary interlocutor for the New Atheists and will supplement his analysis with references to the others as needed.

pressed to find anyone who would deny the importance of authentication and validation for their beliefs or actions. Indeed, on their account, in no other area of our practical lives do we allow the relinquishment of rational justification (i.e. evidence) for our beliefs or actions, save for faith-based religion. *And for good reason.* For the New Atheists, this point seems so obvious that they find it difficult to imagine how civil society could have even developed without its acceptance. Unsurprisingly, then, the New Atheists find it both baffling and infuriating that modern society continues to be threatened by unsubstantiated beliefs in the guise of religious faith. Truly, the very fact that religion continues to provide its adherents with the impetus and justification for inequality, oppression, and violence goes only to show that religious faith is “so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness.”⁹ Plain and simple, for the New Atheists, religion is the common enemy of all reasonable people.

According to New Atheism, however, observations of this sort have given rise to a peculiar problem. On its account, criticizing someone’s religious beliefs has become taboo in every corner of modern Western culture. According to Sam Harris, who is arguably the most outspoken New Atheist, both liberals and conservatives have seemed to reach a rare consensus on this point: religious beliefs appear simply to stand beyond the scope of critique in rational discourse—even as they are regularly appealed to within it. He states, “Criticizing a person’s idea about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolitic in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not.”¹⁰ Whether for the sake of political advantage or the mere appearance of diversity and/or inclusivity, religious beliefs are simply not subjected to the same requirement of rational scrutiny as all others. And yet, while religious beliefs are certainly *treated* differently in ordinary discourse,

⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004), 131.

¹⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 13.

according to Harris and his compatriots, there is no indication that they are *or should be* deemed special in any rational sense.

Unsurprisingly, there are many contemporary Christian theologians who take exception to this description. On their account, the New Atheists suffer from—amongst other things—a bad case of explanatory monism. By resting their entire case on the assumption that there is only one explanatory slot available for the achievement of rational knowledge, Christian apologists contend that New Atheism closes off more expansive ways of thinking about the divine and thus more intuitive ways of thinking about moral relations. Based on this account, it is not religious faith which proves to be the common enemy of all reasonable human beings, but rather the crude empiricism of New Atheism which does. Insofar as the New Atheists insist upon a seemingly self-apparent logical positivism to ground their epistemological (and ethical) claims, they betray the very nuance and mystery embedded within human experience itself—two features which could go a long way in disrupting the seemingly rational basis for inequality, oppression, and violence.

So where does this leave us? Intellectually, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of faith-based religion in the public domain seems to suggest that we must choose between an overt dismissal and a covert integration: either New Atheism dismantles faith-based religions as such, rendering everyone an atheist (or at least, an irrational believer); or faith-based religion assimilates New Atheism as such, rendering everyone a theist (or at least, a crypto-theist). And, according to George Smith, unless this conflict is explored and some agreement is reached, we will inevitably reach an intellectual, dialogical, and moral impasse. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, it seems as though we are already suffering from what Smith has called a kind of “intellectual atrophy”—

a condition where rational argument has degenerated without significant progress and where participants know beforehand that neither side will be convincing to the other.¹¹

Nevertheless, for Smith and his contemporaries, such an apparent stalemate does not suggest that contrary claims are, or can be, equally rationally binding, or that contrary beliefs are, or can be, determined (let alone assessed) by different cognitive procedures (as if there are any). Indeed, according to the New Atheists, the contemporary debate is not so much grounded on a conflict between the propositions of reason and the propositions of faith, but rather on a more fundamental conflict between the epistemological requirements of reason and the nature of faith as a mode of nonrational knowledge. As the New Atheists contend, theists assert (at least tacitly) that religious faith provides an alternative epistemology from which the nature of truth can be determined. On their account, the theist, wishing to claim *as knowledge* beliefs which cannot be rationally demonstrated, merely posits faith as an alternative mode or procedure of substantiating truth claims, thereby asserting the status of truth without meeting (or even applying) the rational test of truth. But for the New Atheists, to grant such positing a valid epistemological ground in rational discourse would effectively circumvent the universally accepted channels of rational assessment and empirical verification. It would, in a word, necessitate new rules of discourse entirely. And, on their account, these new rules would be tantamount to *no* rules whatsoever. Thus, while the New Atheists acknowledge that theists never claim to be indifferent to truth, they also contend that theists readily and repeatedly found it on/in ways that render its meaning incoherent. (A point we will return to below.)

¹¹ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (New York: Prometheus, 1979), 96.

As we will soon see, the claim that faith is inherently irrational, outlandish as it may seem to some, is the cornerstone on which the debate between contemporary atheism and faith-based religion is erected. According to the New Atheists, if our beliefs—religious or otherwise—are to be considered true in the epistemological sense, then they must be evaluated by the same evidentiary standards as all other beliefs which claim the status of truth as well. In the present case, for example, if the notion of “God” is to have any real meaning, then the notion of the “truth” of His existence must also mean what truth means everywhere else. This requirement is non-negotiable and, for the New Atheists, serves as the very bedrock of a coherent, rational exchange of ideas. According to New Atheism, then, all theological faith claims (i.e. in Christian terms: that Christ is the son of God, that He died for the sins of humankind and was raised from the dead, that all human beings have souls that will be subject to judgment after death, and so on) must be taken as specific, descriptive claims about the way the world *is* for them to have any possibility of epistemic meaning. Indeed, to deny such a requirement forces one to promote the indefensible position that there are multiple, non-contradictory methods by which we can arrive at truth (in the epistemic sense).

If the truth of the previous statement is not immediately obvious, consider the following. According to the New Atheists, if one made no tacit claims of knowledge regarding the propositional truths of one’s faith—that is, if one was “agnostic” as to whether such claims accurately represented reality to some degree—then effectively, one would be just as much a *nonbeliever* as a believer. After all, as the New Atheists see it, the very distinction between the theist and the atheist is predicated on the acceptance that these seemingly sacred, redeeming, and metaphysical beliefs are, in fact, *demonstrably* true in some way. For Harris, then, “It is only the notion that a doctrine *is in accord with reality at large* that renders a person’s faith useful,

redemptive, or, indeed, logically possible,” for on his account, “faith in a doctrine *is* faith in its truth.”¹² In other words, for Harris and his compatriots, to accept a (religious) belief as true, one must also accept that there can be no (logical) space between what said doctrine attests and the reality to which said doctrine purports to represent. (A point we will return to in detail below.)

To be sure, while many theists, like John Haught, ardently reject this “narrow intellectual and propositional sense” of faith¹³, on the New Atheists’ account it is difficult to understand how defining “faith” as, for example, the “dynamic state of allowing yourself to be carried along toward a deeper understanding and truth”¹⁴ describes anything at all without its tacit acceptance. While religious faith may certainly be *described* as “the commitment of one’s whole being to God,”¹⁵ for the New Atheists, it is not logically possible to know what such a description actually means without reference to its propositional basis.

What follows in this chapter, then, is an attempt to systematize and analyze the essential features and foundational components of the contemporary debate between New Atheism and faith-based religion, here, (Protestant) Christianity. As such, it is ambitious in scope, but modest in range. For the sake of expediency and efficiency, I will focus my attention on New Atheism and introduce theological points of contention as they arise. While many disagreements take interest in New Atheist rhetoric and style, I aim instead to contribute to conversations about argument and proposition. This seems to me, a benefit and not a limitation of this project. First, there are far too many rebuttals and rejoinders to handle proficiently in a single chapter, and second, I have found that most of those rebuttals and rejoinders are a source of tangential distraction from the more

¹² Harris, *The End of Faith*, 68. First emphasis added, second in original.

¹³ John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 61.

¹⁵ Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 5.

direct points that underlie this dispute. The purpose of the following discussion is neither to provide an exhaustive analysis of New Atheistic critique or its logical components, nor a comprehensive study of its refutations and replies. Rather, it is simply to clarify the underlying motivations and methodologies of our interlocutors and to offer some key insights into how their arguments function.

My analysis will begin with a brief discussion regarding the argumentative strategies that each side sees the other employing in defense of their respective position. According to the critics of New Atheism, the New Atheists ground their arguments upon an unsupportable empirical foundationalism which insists that faith in the existence of God is nothing more than a “hypothesis” which functions for theists in the same way that a scientific hypothesis does for scientists. Contrarily, according to the New Atheists, Christian theists ground their arguments upon an epistemological skepticism which allows faith to be conceived as cognitive without being honest about its ability (or perhaps put better, its inability) to make rational propositions.

Once these strategies are in place, I will analyze their critical components and discuss their implications for rational discourse. Here, I will make explicit the functional definitions of atheism and theism, God, belief, reason, and faith, and consider how they operate within each framework. Crucial rebuttals will be offered, and counterarguments presented. Again, the purpose of this discussion is not to dissect individual lines of critique, but simply to grant the reader access to the terms and conditions of the critique itself.

After the conceptual details of these positions have been discussed, I will move on to the implications that they hold for the field of ethical and moral thought about religion. For the New Atheists, ignorance of (i.e. the “ignoring” of) their critique belies practical consequences which grow increasingly more dangerous as our global and technological society progresses. On their

account, belief without evidence is the groundwork for action without justification. And what's more, they contend that neither the religious moderation of contemporary Protestantism nor the cultural pluralism of modern liberalism can effectively curb the immoral effects of religious belief, for neither can provide any substantive grounds for their critique and/or displacement. According to the New Atheists, then, neither the religious moderate nor the secular pluralist can consistently defend the claim that the fundamentals of religious belief are not injurious to others.

What we will uncover is that for the New Atheists, critique is about more than besmirching or belittling the intelligence, feelings, and/or experiences of religious believers (despite it not always appearing that way). Rather, on their account, it is an attempt to regain some semblance of clarity in a discourse which they feel has become increasingly tolerant of obscurity—an obscurity, they argue, that would not be accepted, let alone celebrated, in any other aspect of our rational or practical lives. Granted, the New Atheists are proudly confrontational and unabashedly unapologetic. As we will see below, this leads many critics (believers and non-believers alike) to assume, incorrectly I think, that their position is as “dogmatic” as the dogmas that they are so eager to criticize. But as we all know well, force of argument does not dogma make. Therefore, if we truly desire to make headway regarding the claims of this debate, we must be willing to accept criticism where it is due, move beyond mere semantics and bombastic rhetoric, and adjust our beliefs—religious or otherwise—wherever and whenever appropriate.

II. Argumentative Strategies

Critics of New Atheism contend that its advocates seek merely to unveil religion at its ugliest. As the critique goes, in not taking interest in a balanced approach to genuine theological

scholarship, the New Atheists operate as inflexibly as the theological extremists/literalists that they are so eager to demonize. On this account, the ignorance of Christian theology and its historical development displayed by the New Atheists effectively mirrors the ignorance of their dogmatic, fundamentalist, and equally uninformed religious adversaries—each caricaturizing their opponents and assuming that they themselves are in complete and inalterable possession of the “Truth.”

According to Wade Roof, western modernism’s emphasis on empirical observation leaves no real place for discussions of the numinous at all. He states:

Rationalization substitutes mastery for mystery; it standardizes rules and procedures, thereby creating formal structures called bureaucracies; it encourages instrumental criteria and approaches to life; it favors rational and scientific-technical ways of knowing and ordering experience at the expense of the intuitive and non-empirical; it privileges mind over body, the cognitive over the imaginative and the emotional; its hold upon the human spirit is far-reaching and threatening to the human spirit.¹⁶

John Haught thinks similarly: he contends that this rationalization is made apparent in the so-called “scientism” exhibited by the New Atheists. On his account, scientism functions (in this context) by insisting upon the requirement that divinely inspired scriptures, doctrines, and/or dogmas must also serve as a reliable source of *scientific* information in order to be considered credible. Given the presupposed empirical foundation of this demand, the New Atheists show that they are either unable or unwilling to accept any alternative account of reality which so much as hints at the notion that a deeper drama might be going on beneath the surface of nature, as Christian theology

¹⁶ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 61. The epistemological troubles associated with the notion of “spirituality” is also taken up by Donnalee Dox in her book entitled *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance*. There she contends that discussions of “spirituality” need not fall either on the side of a faithful description of revealed truths or on the side of materialistic reductionism. See Donnalee Dox, *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 24-25.

maintains. Refusing to outgrow (or improperly importing) the idea that “inspiration means dictation,” New Atheism fails to realize that Biblical witness has nothing to do with the communication of scientific information, but rather with the awakening of a sense of gratitude, humility, confidence, and hope in the communities in/for which it was composed.¹⁷

According to Haught, this oversimplification leads the New Atheists to intentionally and misleadingly diminish theology’s sphere of influence in a number of telling ways: 1) by attempting to reduce the entire monotheistic religious population to scriptural literalists and/or dogmatic extremists; 2) by attempting to reduce the cultural role of Christian theology to the systematic underwriting of religious abuse; 3) by attempting to reduce the meaning of religious faith to mindless belief in whatever has no evidence; 4) by attempting to reduce the meaning of evidence to what is available/observable to science alone; 5) by attempting to reduce the whole of reality to what can be known by science; and 6) by attempting to reduce the idea of God to a hypothesis.¹⁸ Based on these terms, however, Haught contends that the New Atheists are simply waging a fruitless battle against the kind of faith that hardly any theist assents to anymore, in the vain hope of doing away with a religious tradition that, as described, most contemporary Christian theologians would have no interest in defending anyway.

The apparent spuriousness of New Atheist critique leads many theologians, like Tom Gilson, to ask whether the New Atheists have gotten sidetracked by their own question begging. On his assessment, if the truth of God’s existence requires independent, objective, and empirical evidence—as the New Atheists stipulate—then the truth of the supposedly all-encompassing cognitional scope of science ought to require it as well. If empirical verification is itself the only

¹⁷ Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 28-35.

¹⁸ Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 38-39.

way to provide an independent assessment of truth, then the New Atheists ultimately fail the requirements of their own test by assuming that naturalism/materialism/empiricism is correct without providing an independent corroboration or substantiation of its basis.¹⁹ Indeed, according to David Bentley Hart, New Atheist arguments appear to consist of little more than a persistent misapplication of quantitative and empirical terms to otherwise unquantifiable and intrinsically nonempirical realities, sustained merely by classifications which are entirely arbitrary and thus essentially unverifiable.²⁰

According to the New Atheists, however, the Christian theological critique of New Atheism belies an entirely self-contradictory epistemological skepticism. By misrepresenting what atheism is, and by suggesting that New Atheism is devoted solely to the achievement of scientific knowledge, Christian apologists erroneously assert that reason is intrinsically deficient in some respect, thereby prying open the rational door with the suggestion that religious faith can serve as a valid alternative or supplement to reason itself. For the New Atheists, however, religious faith cannot provide an epistemological supplement to the supposed inadequacies of reason because reason simply does not lack any conditions which could be considered essential for the determination of truth in the first place. And what's more, even if reason did display such "deficiencies," faith could still not provide a supplement to it primarily because faith itself cannot provide a coherent account of its own epistemological credentials. On this account, then, Christian theology's diminishing sphere of influence results merely from the proper and consistent application of the epistemological requirements of reason itself.

¹⁹ Tom Gilson, *"The Party of Reason?" True Reason: Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 19.

²⁰ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7-11.

The claim of atheism's inevitable success, then, is predicated on the fact that theological rebuttals fail to demonstrate the soundness of their own foundational claims. This can be seen in two distinct but related ways. First, while Christian apologists assert that New Atheism claims (of itself) to be in complete and inalterable possession of the "Truth," the New Atheists make no such declaration. On their account, the insistence of rational demonstration and justification for a belief is not synonymous with the insistence of a belief's absolute certainty. According to New Atheism, reason does not demand that every bit of human knowledge must be accepted as complete or closed off from further investigation in order to be considered true. Rather, it simply demands that the degree of certitude and/or truthfulness assigned to a belief or claim must be in accordance with the evidence that is available.²¹ According to the New Atheists, then, reason, so understood, simply cannot encompass non-evidential (i.e. transcendent, metaphysical) realities.

Second, despite its best efforts to disqualify reason as the sole means of establishing knowledge, New Atheism contends that Christianity itself is entirely dependent upon it to give authentication to its objects of faith in the first place. Overtly or covertly, the theist must recognize that his or her faith claims purport to be representative of some state of reality in some coherent way. With this recognition, the theist must accept (at least tacitly) that the veracity of his or her claim must be determined in the same way that veracity is determined everywhere else—for what reason could he or she give to justify the exception? Based on this account, the New Atheists are not seeking "scientific knowledge" from religious scripture (i.e. laws of physics, mathematics, evidence of climate change, and so on), they are simply insisting that if one claims scripture to be true, then its veracity must be assessed "scientifically" (i.e. by way of empirical demonstration)—for what *other way* could such a claim be substantiated or corroborated? From the vantage point

²¹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 66.

of New Atheism, then, the theist may interpret scripture to his or her heart's content, but he or she will never move any closer to refuting atheism itself on that account. Rather than dealing with this or that theory or conception of religious faith (i.e. the critics "balanced approach to genuine theological scholarship"), then, the New Atheists maintain that the defense of reason itself undercuts Christian theology entirely by denying it any degree of epistemological legitimacy at all. Indeed, on their account, the critique of theism simply *is* the defense of atheism and vice versa. As such, the New Atheists echo Smith's contention that insofar as religious faith is possible, it is simply irrational; and insofar as religious faith is rational, it is simply impossible.²²

According to New Atheism, the accusation that reason is intrinsically inadequate and thus requires its own "leap of faith" for its justification is a facile and intentionally misleading equivocation. Indeed, to accept it is to invite an insidious and erosive skepticism into rational thought—a skepticism that ultimately proves self-defeating for the supposed truth of Christian theology as well. While the theist may be able to present valid conditional arguments to support the rejection of empiricism as a necessary condition of reason, the soundness of theistic arguments would appear to depend entirely upon the very mode or method of qualification that the theist seeks to reject. For the New Atheists, then, if we are to accurately represent our reality, then the truth of the premises used to describe it must be validated by the only means available: empirical demonstration.

²² Smith, *Atheism*, 123-4.

III. Let the Debate Begin

The New Atheist position is grounded on several key presuppositions to which the above strategy only alludes. For all their contributions to the contemporary debate, as a collective the New Atheists hardly engage in a rigorous, systematic critique of the foundations of religious belief. Indeed, as a whole, the New Atheists tend not to delve all that deeply into the philosophical underpinnings which ground their own position and as a result, their arguments tend to rest on inferences which are not made readily explicit. As such, their conclusions often emerge haphazardly—the product, it seems to me, of a disconnected series of stylistic enthymemes and/or idiosyncratic illustrations. The lack of philosophical precision notwithstanding, the rudiments of their argument demonstrates a philosophic continuity with the history of atheistic thought from David Hume to Bertrand Russell as well as the universally accepted laws of rational discourse (i.e. intuitions of truth and falsity, logical necessity, non-contradiction, and so on), giving their position a logical consistency that is difficult to challenge without reference to other unsupportable claims.

Regrettably, the intent of their project, together with the force of their rhetoric, is off-putting enough to some as to suggest that it warrants no meaningful consideration whatsoever. To this criticism is added the virulently directed attacks against Christianity and Islam (admittedly, more so the latter), making their more general (and less controversial, I should think) claim about unsubstantiated beliefs more challenging to defend. Quite frankly, there is a fair amount of direct correlation, false equivalence, and theological conflation in the pages of their books—so much so, in fact, that it should make even the most sympathetic reader cringe. But cringiness aside, we must tease out the suppositions and implications that underly their critiques, for they are far more difficult to refute than the apparent xenophobia and bigotry of which they are often accused. Let

us begin, then, by discussing the foundational distinction which grounds and facilitates the debate as such: the distinction between atheism and theism itself.

To be sure, the underlying presuppositions of the New Atheist argument are hardly “new.” Indeed, for all intents and purposes, the terms and conditions of their position do not seem to have evolved much beyond George Smith’s analysis of them in the 1970’s. Based on his account, historically, both theism and atheism have been conceived as *descriptive* terms—one’s which specify the presence or absence of a belief in God. Straightforward as this categorization may seem, imprecision on this matter has been a generative cause of misunderstanding and equivocation for millennia. To put it plainly, theism is defined as the “belief in a god or gods.” Adding the prefix “a” (i.e. “without”) to theism (i.e. “a-theism”), then, literally means “without theism,” or perhaps put better, “without belief in god or gods.” On this account, in addition to being a descriptive term, atheism is also a *privative* term—a term of negation. As such, atheism is not conceived as a belief or set of beliefs, but rather as the absence of those beliefs. While atheism is sometimes described in seemingly “positive” terms (i.e. as the “belief that” there is no god of any kind, or as the “claim that” a god cannot exist), strictly speaking, an atheist is not primarily a person who *believes that* a god does not exist, but rather one who *does not believe* in the existence of god.²³ While this may seem like a fine distinction, the effects of its misapplication are consequential.

As Smith explains, positive beliefs or claims are assertive, not privative, and as such, each is subject to the burden of proof for its veracity and acceptance. (A point we will return to in detail below.) If evidence in favor of the claim is not forthcoming, or there are insufficient grounds for

²³ Smith, *Atheism*, 7. Emphasis in original.

accepting the belief, then neither should be accepted as true. On this account, the one who asserts that God exists, for example, is responsible for demonstrating the veracity of the assertion—not the other way around. If he or she fails to do so, God’s existence should not be accepted.

Note, here, that the concept of the “burden of proof” is inherently implied and involved in the very notion of truth itself. As such, the veracity of any positive claim depends entirely upon the conditions that can be provided for its authentication. By contrast, privative beliefs (i.e. non-beliefs and/or non-claims) are not subject to this same requirement of determinability. While this may seem biased or irrational, it is neither. Simply stated, the designation of “atheist” does not tell us what one believes to be true (i.e. assertion), but rather what one does *not* believe to be true (i.e. privation). Logically speaking, then, privative claims lack content and therefore, lack positive terms.²⁴ In this way, theological arguments are not rebuttals to the *claims* of atheism, because atheism is, strictly speaking, not making a (positive) case which can be rebutted in the first place. Put differently, one need not *prove* the veracity of atheism, for atheism is not asserting anything positive about God at all.

Now, this is simply a backhanded way of saying that atheism is, implicitly, the default position of our experiential reality. Theism, as a positive belief, is something that must be “added on” to non-belief in order to have any meaning at all. If it is never added, then one merely remains implicitly atheistic. The New Atheist strategy is to simply take this implication one step further and reject theism outright. As such, their atheism is no longer considered implicit, but rather *explicit*.

²⁴ Smith, *Atheism*, 7-16.

According to Smith, explicit atheism (often referred to as “critical atheism” or “anti-theism”) is often expressed thusly: “I do not believe in the existence of God”; or “God does not exist”; or “The existence of God is impossible.” On the face of it, such declarations may easily suggest that atheists are making *positive* assertions about God’s existence—one’s that now place the burden of proof equally upon their shoulders. However, assertive as they may seem, such statements remain essentially “negative” in character. In other words, according to Smith, such assertions merely give expression to the consequence of theism’s failure to provide a sufficient ground for its own positive case. And, given this (consistent and repeated) failure, the atheist need not remain implicitly atheistic, or even agnostic, but can now “assert the negative” to be definitive until proven otherwise.²⁵

It is in this sense, then, that the concept of God functions as a hypothesis for the New Atheists. (To be sure, it is in this sense that every positive belief functions as a hypothesis for the New Atheists.) Made plain, *assertive rejection* does not imply that atheism is the absence of belief *plus* certain positive beliefs. As such, New Atheism is neither a worldview, belief system, nor a crypto-religious scientific cult (whatever that might mean). If its declarations sound like positive assertions, it is only because, on its account, Christian theology’s logical deficiencies are total and all-encompassing.²⁶

Now, given this description, it should be obvious that nothing can qualify as evidence for the existence of God unless we have a clear and coherent idea of what God is. That said, the theist

²⁵ Smith, *Atheism*, 17-18.

²⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 46-54. While a bit convoluted at times, one of Dawkins’ ultimate claims is that simply because we cannot prove nor disprove the existence of something does not put existence and non-existence on an even footing. Indeed, on his account, it is a common error to leap from the premise that the question of God’s existence is in principle unanswerable to the conclusion that His existence and His non-existence are equiprobable.

must present a comprehensible description of God, for until he or she does, the notion of God itself remains a cognitively empty and/or unconceivable concept for which any attempt at proof proves logically absurd. Put differently, on New Atheist grounds, providing a clear and coherent understanding of God is not an optional initiative to be undertaken at the theist's convenience, but rather the necessary prerequisite for rational intelligibility. If such insistence appears dogmatic, then such dogmatism is simply the price of entry for rational discourse. Without an intelligible definition of God, we simply cannot know what anyone is talking about.

While any self-proclaimed theist will have to decide for him or herself what, if anything, his or her profession of belief has in common with any others, the atheist position is clear. Put succinctly, the term "God" is taken to designate any supernatural or metaphysical being which is conceived as "other than"—indeed, *wholly other than*—the natural world, and thus independent of the natural laws of the universe.²⁷ Disbelief in God, then, consists of the rejection of any claims pertaining to that which is purportedly above or beyond natural, empirical reality.²⁸

As noted above, many theists take exception to this characterization and claim that the New Atheists advocate it simply because it makes their (faulty) argument easier to defend. Indeed, according to Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, the reductionism of the New Atheists constricts both reason and reality equally, effectually closing off the very possibility of understanding an alternative demonstration of God's existence. On their account, demonstration of the sort required

²⁷ On this point, the New Atheists position themselves in direct opposition to Paul Tillich who claims that faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, but rather the existential existence of something which transcends ordinary experience. For the New Atheists, God is conceived as a being which exists, and as such, as a being which exists as a part of the whole of reality. While He is supposed to be *beyond* the ontological elements and categories which constitute empirical reality, the New Atheists contend that every theological statement subjects Him to them. While Tillich maintains that the rejection of the God of theological theism is the deepest root of atheism, New Atheism ultimately rejects Tillich's notion of God as the ground of the whole—or as Tillich puts it, the God beyond God. See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 156-190. Especially pp. 182-185.

²⁸ Smith, *Atheism*, 32.

by New Atheism becomes impossible because demonstration itself only plays out what the demonstrator has been determined to believe. (A point we will return to below.) If empirical demonstration is (pre)determined as a necessary condition for the establishment of truth, then the New Atheists will forever find ontologically fluid accounts of God's existence wanting.²⁹

However, according to New Atheism, to divorce the idea of a supernatural being from the concept of God is to undo the basic distinction between theism and atheism in the first place. In effect, "to adopt the atheistic position in substance, while defining "god" in such a way that one remains a theist or believer in god, is to misrepresent a philosophical position of long historical standing and to evade the major issue dividing theism from atheism."³⁰ The implication here is rather plain. Any depiction of God which purports to extend beyond the scope of a human being's intellectual comprehension, is not merely unknown, but rather *unknowable*. For the New Atheists, then, to posit the existence of something which, by its very nature, cannot be known to humans *as humans know*, is simply to submerge oneself in hopeless contradictions. Intelligibility, construed in terms of empirical warrants, is simply ground zero for rational assessment. Indeed, on New Atheist grounds, if knowledge of the unknowable is a logical contradiction, then the concept of God as "wholly other" is without cognitive content: a supernatural God is simply an epistemologically vacuous concept.

By and large, this unintelligibility is why the New Atheists find very little value in engaging with or assessing theological analysis, much to the apparent chagrin of Christian apologists. On the New Atheist account, without having coherently described the reality of a supernatural/metaphysical being, Christian theology effectively does away with the possibility that

²⁹ Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2008), 83-84.

³⁰ Smith, *Atheism*, 36.

such a being could be known to exist at all. And, to put it bluntly, without knowledge *of*, knowledge *that* simply evaporates. In the end, if indeterminability and incomprehensibility are proffered as essential qualities of the nature of God—and it is impossible to see how they’re not—then for the New Atheists, the case for atheism is fully established.³¹

IV. Reason and Belief

According to New Atheism, a belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in one’s life. For Harris, beliefs both define one’s vision of the world and determine one’s behavior in the world—that is, beliefs both represent one’s reality and dictate one’s emotional and practical responses towards other beings within that reality. On the face of it, this hardly seems like a contentious claim to make. Surely, unless one is a dyed-in-the-wool philosophical pragmatist, beliefs tend not to be adopted strictly upon their usefulness to a specific end. Based on this account, then, everything we know—indeed, the entire notion of epistemology itself—can be reduced to this understanding of belief. Knowledge, as it were, is simply a matter of justified true belief. The notion that New Atheism operates (or wishes to operate) on a philosophical or logical register which deals in facts *in distinction from* beliefs, then, is simply a misguided and facile misconception.

According to the New Atheists, beliefs are meant to address a genuine sphere of empirical understanding. Every belief, true or false, contributes to our growing body of knowledge (i.e. our rational understanding of the world) and therefore, every belief must be describable in ways that are logically consistent with the rest of what we know (and how we know it). On the New Atheist

³¹ It has been my observation that, while never explicitly defined, the notion of intelligibility within New Atheism refers to the very conditions of rational thought and not to whether a claim can be made contextually coherent. In other words, if changing the context renders a claim incoherent, then the claim itself is fundamentally unintelligible.

account, a rational belief is tantamount to a coherent and intelligible representation of some state of the world. According to Harris, this explains the value that is placed on evidence by believers and non-believers alike, for as he states, “evidence is simply an account of the causal linkage between states of the world and our beliefs about them.”³² In effect, Harris contends that we can believe a proposition to be true (i.e. factual) only because something in our experience or in our reasoning about the world, actually corresponds with the content of the proposition in question. As such, the act of believing a given proposition inevitably grants a number of immediate insights into the standards by which our beliefs can be accepted (or perhaps put better, are considered acceptable).

On Daniel Dennett’s account, by recourse to “intuitions” of truth and falsity, logical necessity, and noncontradiction (i.e. the universally accepted features of rational discourse and/or language), human beings are able to knit together visions of the world that largely cohere. These visions are, in a sense, both internal and external—or perhaps better, both private and public. Internally/privately, such intuitions help us to make sense of our own personal experiences. Put differently, these intuitions serve as foils which help to filter our experiences, varied as they may be, and organize them consistently and coherently. Externally/publicly, such intuitions help us to form connections with others who, in turn, organize their experiences much in the same way as we’ve organized our own. In this way, such intuitions form the basis of a common frame of reference from which communication itself is made possible.³³

According to Harris, “every sphere of genuine discourse must, at a minimum, admit of *discourse*—and hence the possibility that those standing on the fringe can come to understand the

³² Harris, *The End of Faith*, 62.

³³ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 370-383.

truths that it strives to articulate.”³⁴ This is simply another way of saying that our need to understand what words mean in the various contexts in which we find ourselves requires that our beliefs are, at minimum, free from contradiction (at least logically). As Harris continues, “there is just no escaping the fact that there is a tight relationship between the words we use, the type of thoughts we can think, and what we can believe to be true about the world.”³⁵ Indeed, for all intents and purposes, both our personal identities as well as our social interactions and institutions appear entirely dependent on it.

That said, no one—the New Atheists included—would be foolish enough to endorse the idea that total coherence is possible. Indeed, for such perfect coherence to be had, every new belief would have to be checked over and against all others (and every combination thereof) for logical contradictions. However, simply because a flawless coherence is unattainable does not mean that one can afford to be any less stringent. Imperfection on this matter should not be taken to suggest that coherence is optional or need only be selectively applied. Indeed, if it was, we would quickly find ourselves guilty of peddling empty words or phrases.

For the New Atheists, then, justified belief requires that what we affirm, we also accept as representationally sound.³⁶ For this reason, rational belief entails that one’s representations must also be true and not merely that one desires them to be. On this account, for a belief to be

³⁴ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 45.

³⁵ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 54.

³⁶ This contention is invariably set over/against Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of a private language discussed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. According to Marie McGinn, those who are inclined to accept Wittgenstein’s private language argument as valid see it as providing a decisive refutation of the philosophy of Descartes, classical empiricism, phenomenalism and sense-data theories of perception. Those who are inclined to reject it, however, see it as representing nothing more than a verificationist theory of meaning that runs counter to our commonsense intuition that psychological concepts describe internal states that play a causal role in explaining a subject’s behavior. For a more in-depth discussion, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1953), 75e-81e. See also Marie McGinn, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 116-141.

considered true, there must be some causal connection—or at least an appearance thereof—between the proposition in question and one’s acceptance of it. If we were to apply this criterion to the existence of God, for example, we would say that, “to believe that God exists is to believe that I stand in some relation to his existence *such that his existence is itself the reason for my belief*.”³⁷ Put differently, if we are to admit that religious beliefs are attempts to represent states of the world, then we must require that they stand in the right relation *to* the world in order to be considered true. According to New Atheism, there is simply no other logical space for such descriptions to occupy.

This significance of this claim for New Atheism cannot go understated. Indeed, on its account, dissent from it is not only baseless, but outright incoherent. For the New Atheists, so long as a person maintains that his or her beliefs represent an actual state of the world, he or she must also accept that said beliefs are a *consequence* of the way the world really is. Indeed, as Harris makes clear, “if there were no conceivable change in the world that could get a person to question his (religious) beliefs, this would prove that his beliefs were not predicated upon his taking any state of the world into account. He could not claim, therefore, to be *representing* the world at all.”³⁸ On this ground, rational discourse would effectively come to an end, for here we would no longer be dealing with an account or representation of reality that was common to all (or at least had the potential to be), but rather one that was entirely idiosyncratic to the believer.

For some theists, however, the truths of theological faith are said to be of a different sphere or order than the truths of reason and, since truths never conflict, each is said to have its own mode of representing the world and thus its own method of ascertaining knowledge. On this account,

³⁷ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 63. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 63. Emphasis in original.

theological faith is proffered as a supplement to reason, not its contrary. As such, it need not be required to meet the epistemological conditions or standards of reason, for it simply has a different—but not incompatible—function. As the argument goes, we must turn to reason in order to grasp the truths of our material reality, but we must also turn to faith in order to grasp the *immaterial truths* that surpass it.³⁹ Based on this account, one need not, and in fact cannot, demand that the requirements of one must be met by the other. Made plain, reason is only one aspect of cognition and therefore empirical demonstration is simply one type of demonstration amongst others.

Alvin Plantinga discusses this notion at length in his work, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Of particular value to this discussion is his analysis of methodological naturalism (MN). Properly speaking, MN is a constraint upon science, not a statement about the nature of the universe (as is ontological naturalism). As such, MN does not restrict the study of nature, it simply lays down what sort of study qualifies as scientific in the first place. Now, for any scientific theory, there will be a data set or data model. And, as a rule, according to MN, the data model of a scientific theory will not invoke God or any supernatural agents or employ what one knows or thinks one knows by way of divine revelation. But based on Plantinga's account, the initial plausibility or probability of any proposed scientific theory is determined solely by the evidentiary base that is employed in its assessment. If the evidence base

³⁹ In the First Article of Part One of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* he states: "*Objection 1*. It seems that, besides the philosophical sciences we have no need of any further knowledge. For man should not seek to know what is above reason...*On the Contrary*...Now Scripture, inspired of God, is not a part of the philosophical sciences discovered by human reason. Therefore it is useful that besides the philosophical sciences there should be another science—i.e. inspired of God. *I answer that*, It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides the philosophical sciences investigated by human reason...Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason can investigate, it was necessary that man be taught by a divine revelation." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas: The Summa Theologica and The Summa Contra Gentiles* ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, Inc., 1948), 3-4. Emphasis in original.

precludes the various features, signs, experiences, and so on which are said to be substantiated by theistic belief, then on his account, it would be entirely unsurprising for a scientific inquiry to reach a conclusion that is incompatible with theism itself. Indeed, such a conclusion would be a simple logical consequence of the evidence base that science started and/or operated with at the outset. However, what's key for Plantinga is that coming to that conclusion would not necessarily constitute a defeater of religious belief for the simple fact that the scientific data set is only *one part of* a theist's total evidence base. As such, he contends that it is certainly possible to accept the whole range of Christian belief *and* prescind from the empirical requirement of its demonstration simultaneously—*without* contradiction.⁴⁰

Now, as promising as this analysis may seem for Christian apologists, on New Atheist grounds, it fundamentally misrepresents what reason is and thus necessarily misrepresents how reason functions. Made plain, if all that it took to support one's claims was the adjustment of one's data set, then in effect, there would be no consistent or coherent procedure with which to defeat any claim of any kind. On this ground, discourse itself would reach an end for each participant could simply present the idiosyncratic conditions of his or her own data set in his or her own defense. On the New Atheists account, then, rational justification must pertain to the justification *for belief* as well as justification for the content of that belief. Truly, for the New Atheists, there is simply no way to avoid the fact that the merit of one's belief (religious or otherwise) requires consistent, coherent, empirical justification (or at the very least, the possibility thereof). For religious faith to qualify as a justifiable source of knowledge, then, the theist must indicate precisely how it constitutes a valid epistemological procedure (i.e., it must show its

⁴⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 168-186.

epistemological credentials). Without the ability to demonstrate that religious faith is capable of distinguishing truth from falsity, theism rests its entire case upon the bald assertion that although its propositions lack the very possibility of empirical demonstration, they can be accepted as true, nonetheless.

But what's more, according to the New Atheists, reason is not simply one *aspect* of thought, but is rather the very capacity for thought itself. As such, it is not one tool of thought among many, but rather is the entire toolbox. Based on this account, empirical demonstration is not a "special kind" of demonstration, but rather the sole means by which one can assess whether a belief fulfills the epistemological requirements of human knowledge in the first place. In other words, the qualification of "empirical" does not suggest a contrast with other equally valid forms of nonempirical demonstration (whatever that means). While a believer may claim that the truths of religious faith are of a different sphere or order than the truths established by reason, he or she has yet to explain the *alternative process* by which this sphere is experienced and/or accessed or how the knowledge achieved from it can be rationally transferred and/or verified.⁴¹ While on its face MN may seem to offer a compelling case for the commensurability of reason and religious faith, in the end it can do so only by compartmentalizing the empirical requirements that render reason and religious faith incompatible in the first place. For the New Atheists, then, faith-based religion's inability to empirically demonstrate the existence of their God necessarily places their arguments and explanations entirely within the realm of faith, a realm which, on the New Atheist account, is appealed to only to justify logically unjustifiable claims.

⁴¹ Smith, *Atheism*, 108-122.

V. Belief and Religious Faith

A common misconception regarding the New Atheist critique of religion, I think, lies in the notion that somehow the deepest concerns of the faithful are taken to be trivial and therefore fundamentally misguided. But as Harris readily admits, “there is no denying that most of us have emotional and spiritual needs that are now addressed...by mainstream religion. And these are needs that a mere *understanding* of our world, scientific or otherwise, will never fulfill.”⁴² Based on this account, it seems entirely reasonable to claim that man cannot live “by reason alone.” As each of the New Atheists will readily admit, there is no doubting that a wide range of human experience can be appropriately described as spiritual, mystical, and/or sacred. (Though they do doubt that any such experience is inscrutable or beyond the scope of empirical verification.) Certainly, human beings experience instances or occasions of meaningfulness, selflessness, or heightened emotion which readily transcend our conception of atomistic individualism and, at present, surpass our current functional understanding of the brain. This is because, on Dawkins’ account, the range of possible human experience far exceeds the ordinary limits of our subjectivity (in the physicalist sense).

Recall that for the New Atheists, knowledge is a matter of justified true belief. Belief as such, then, is not a functional or systematic problem within New Atheism, nor is it a significant point of contention in their critique of religion or against religious believers. Much in the same way, when used in/as a semantical and/or colloquial expression or as a synonym for trust, the notion of faith poses no more of a logical problem or point of dispute than does the notion of belief. However, as they see it, the clash is not to be found in semantics, but rather in epistemology itself.

⁴² Harris, *The End of Faith*, 16. Emphasis in original.

According to the New Atheists, religious faith requires one to accept an idea as true even though it cannot satisfy the requirements of truth. Likewise, religious faith requires one to accept an idea as having a referent in empirical reality, while rejecting the very process by which human beings come to know that reality. According to George Smith, “since faith must entail belief in the absence of rational demonstration, all propositions of faith—regardless of their specific content—are irrational. To believe on faith is to believe in defiance of rational guidelines, and this is the essence of irrationalism.”⁴³ Based on this account, religious faith is merely unjustified belief, full stop. And for the New Atheists, this is the *only* conception of faith that is meaningful in this debate.

According to Michael Poole, however, we already have a word which encapsulates this understanding—*credulity*—and so he ponders as to why we do not use it instead of conflating it with faith. He states: “It is puzzling to see where this cluster of idiosyncratic ‘definitions’, these caricatures of faith come from. How many religious believers would recognize *any* of them as remotely describing their own position? Are we being misled by what philosophers call ‘*stipulative*’ definitions, in the hope that, if they are uttered often enough, we will believe them?”⁴⁴

Now, from the vantage point of New Atheism, even a cursory glance at this critique poses several glaring problems—common as it seems to be among theistic critics. First, the English language has multiple words which can be used to describe the same object, idea, or theme and so there doesn’t seem to be any logical problem in using the term faith as a synonym of credulity—providing, of course, that we do not falsely equivocate their meanings.

⁴³ Smith, *Atheism*, 124.

⁴⁴ Michael Poole, *The ‘New’ Atheism: 10 Arguments that Don’t Hold Water* (Oxford: Lion, 2009), 18. Emphasis in original.

Second, that Poole contends that the meaning of faith can be conflated suggests that perhaps he is the one operating with an idiosyncratic meaning of the term. Indeed, according to the New Atheists, the definitional/functional meaning of faith hardly seems stipulative at all, for as Harris contends, the meaning of the term seems to be entirely unambiguous. Granted, on his account, “It is true that certain theologians and contemplatives have attempted to recast faith as a spiritual principle that transcends mere motivated credulity...But this is not the “faith” that has animated the faithful for millennia.”⁴⁵ While the New Atheists acknowledge that anyone is free to redefine the term “faith” however he or she sees fit, thereby bringing it into conformity with some rational ideal, on their account, the notion of faith to which atheists have so ardently objected refers solely to faith in its particular, (Protestant) theistic and/or scriptural sense—that is, faith as a belief in, and an orientation toward, certain historical and (more importantly) metaphysical propositions. As such, it is a species of belief the truth of which is, in essence, indemonstrable. For Harris, then, “faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor.”⁴⁶

Now, assuredly this statement is one which is meant to express a double intent: to make a logical point about religious faith, and to make a patronizing point about those who have it. But according to the New Atheists, not all patronizing is without purpose. On their account, while it may be true that many theists, like Poole, do not operate with this depiction of religious faith in their personal lives, the epistemological underpinnings of religious faith itself do not become any less irrational on that account alone. For the New Atheists, incredible as it may seem, credulity is

⁴⁵ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 65.

⁴⁶ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 65.

the only outlet for which Christian apologists can make appeal, for the very tenets of their belief have immunized them from the ability to accept inculpatory evidence against their case.⁴⁷

According to New Atheism, then, the logical deficiencies inherent in Christian theology clearly demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling reason and religious faith. On its account, insofar as religious faith is considered non-epistemological, it has no rational referent and therefore no basis whatsoever. But to the extent that theological faith purports to be epistemological, it provides no alternative method of distinguishing beliefs which correspond to reality from beliefs which do not. According to New Atheism, then, a belief can be based on reason *or* on faith, but not on both simultaneously. Because reason and faith cannot exist in the same person, at the same time, with regard to the same object of knowledge (for otherwise they would be indistinguishable), New Atheism contends that faith can serve as an epistemological function only when reason does not. In this way, religious faith is possible only in the case of beliefs that lack empirical demonstration. And what's more, the attempt to do away with the incommensurability either by undermining the necessity of demonstrable evidence or by contending that religious faith can (somehow) remain evidential without it, is to negate the very possibility of epistemology itself. Or as Smith puts it, "to advocate that reason be discarded in some circumstances is to advocate that thinking be discarded—which leaves one in the position of attempting to do a job after throwing

⁴⁷ This line of argumentation is common within New Atheist literature and is often used to express the idea that believers are simply dim-witted and thus are incapable of understanding how logical, rational argumentation works. But this is not the sense in which I am using this notion. As I see it, certain Christian apologists see themselves as immune from inculpatory evidence against their case because any potential evidence that runs counter to their claims exists within a data set that assimilates contrary evidence as support of their position. In this way, counter arguments can simply be interpreted as "temptations" or "tests of faith" which are to be expected but do not count as defeaters. As a result, atheist arguments, rebuttals, and/or rejoinders fall on deaf ears simply because they simply reiterate the internal, operational logic of belief itself. But on this account, what "evidence" could be provided to dissuade a believer? If rational points are all that can be proposed as a rejoinder, and these rejoinders are assimilated into the structure of belief itself, what *more* is there to offer?

away the required instrument.”⁴⁸ For the New Atheists, then, anyone who calls upon religious faith in support of his or her belief has already conceded that it cannot be defended by rational channels.

Now, on the face of it, this statement may seem to violate the New Atheist’s own requirement of evidentiary verification for truth claims (or the basis thereof). Indeed, as we recall, this is precisely the logical thread that Christian apologists pulled on the hardest in their critique of New Atheism. As the critique went, New Atheism simply cannot provide any independent empirical evidence for why empirical evidence should constitute the basis and/or entirety of rational epistemology. Or perhaps put better, New Atheism cannot provide any independent empirical evidence for why empiricism should be the default position of all experiential analysis in the first place. As such, the New Atheists are guilty of that which they accuse: unsubstantiated belief—that is, faith in an unprovable, and thus unfalsifiable, claim.

But on New Atheist grounds, such an accusation, logical as it may *seem*, betrays our most common sense. Indeed, to demand an accounting of the most basic presupposition of thought itself—that feature which admits of no reduction—is a meaningless obfuscation, one that seeks to capitalize on the obscurity inherent in theological speculation by suggesting that obscurity itself is an inherent feature of reason as such. However, according to New Atheism, reason simply *is* the very lens by which we access and assess our reality and there is nothing within it or about it that would (or should, or could) lead us to assume that reality (or our knowledge of it) is somehow more/other than it appears.

According to the New Atheists, this last-ditch effort to defend manifestly irrational beliefs effectively seeks to do away with the very capability by which any claim of any kind can be

⁴⁸ Smith, *Atheism*, 110.

assessed. On their account, religious faith is no more an alternative to reason than astrology is an alternative to astronomy. Whether religious or non-religious in content, unjustified untrue beliefs are, quite simply, baseless. To accept them as otherwise suggests that we either fundamentally misunderstand the necessary foundations of rationality or, perhaps more alarmingly, that we simply do not care to apply them consistently. Regardless of our choice, however, it is (or at least should be) uncontentious to claim that even intelligent dissent has its event horizon. As Harris quips, “people who believe the earth is flat are not dissenting *geographers*.”⁴⁹

It is musings like this which led Christopher Hitchens to assert that religious faith represents a dark current of unreason in our moral, social, and political exchange of ideas. On his account, the only basis of human collaboration lies in the willingness to have one’s beliefs modified by new facts (i.e. by justified true beliefs). And as he saw it, since religious faith is necessarily hostile to the spirit of mutual inquiry, there is simply no alternative cognitive or cultural substitute for its desacralization.⁵⁰ Insofar as beliefs purport to be representations of the world, then, they also serve as founts of potential action, informing or *mis*informing our behavior. And as the discussion below will make clear, such misformations generate both logical and practical problems—simultaneously creating points of contention while undermining our ability to deal with them rationally and effectively.

VI. The Moral Ramifications of Religious Belief

According to the New Atheists, if it was truly the case that religious faith was concerned solely with the awakening of a sense of gratitude, humility, confidence, and hope in the

⁴⁹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 184. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 63-71.

communities in/for which it operated, then there would be little reason to decry it. However, on their account, because our beliefs rarely, if ever, remain exclusively personal/internal, their adoption and/or promotion necessarily requires rational scrutiny. As bombastic as the New Atheists may seem to be on this front, they are not so in indiscriminate ways. Indeed, as they see it, beliefs (religious or otherwise) are part and parcel of our moral deliberations, and as such, they invariably shape our moral landscape and determine the ways in which we move through it.

While every faith-based religious tradition has surrendered—in greater or lesser degree—to the spirit of ecumenicism, the New Atheists contend that mutual exclusivity remains the central tenet which underwrites them. On their account, each tradition (implicitly or explicitly) claims *sole* possession of the “Truth” (i.e. the singular correct representation of reality), and as a result, each tradition contends that every other is somehow either incorrect, incomplete or both. Hard as it may be to swallow, according to New Atheism, religious beliefs (and the foundations thereof) are simply incompatible cross-culturally. Put differently, religious beliefs are zero-sum and necessarily so. As a result, intolerance is wittingly and seamlessly woven into the very fabric of every faith-based religion’s moral assessments and adjudications. While this thread is pulled with differing intensity by different religious traditions, sects, congregations, and/or individuals, one simply cannot avoid the logical conclusion that if one believes that one’s own tradition is—in fact—correct, then one must also believe that all others must necessarily be incorrect.

For the New Atheists, then, as a person believes—*truly* believes—so too shall he or she act.⁵¹ On the face of it, this claim seems rather mundane. But on their account, the implications of

⁵¹ The “truly” is an important qualification here, for it is fairly easy to imagine the various ways in which one might act contrarily to what he/she believes. For example, one might believe that sugar is bad for the body but eat sweets anyway. Likewise, one might believe that eight hours of continual sleep per night is essential for sound mental health but wake up every two hours to care for a newborn baby. While potentially trivial, these illustrations simply go to

it are anything but. A case in point: according to the New Atheists, if a person truly believed that there were various conditions that must be met for, say, the redemption of human beings, then he or she must also find it acceptable—if not necessary—to bring those conditions about. Likewise, if a person truly believed that there were impediments to the realization of that end (spiritual or otherwise), then according to the New Atheists, he or she must at least find it acceptable—if not necessary—to delimit them wherever, whenever, or however possible. Take special care to note that for the New Atheists, dissimilar beliefs, intentions, and actions are not merely different, but rather *contrary* and/or *oppositional*. Invariably, then, on their account, those who sincerely believe to be in possession of religious “Truth” can only ever find conflicting religious claims to be obstacles to the satisfaction of the end in which they actively and faithfully seek.

According to the New Atheists, then, acceptance of one’s religious faith as true readily allows (indeed, readily *requires*, it would seem) one to behave dutifully to doctrine—regardless of whether the ethical commands or expectations dictated therein proved inconsistent with or contrary to our common sense of morality and decency. It is for this very reason that the New Atheists contend that religious faith and religious fundamentalism/extremism make for rather auspicious bedfellows. On their account, religious faith justifies scriptural literalism (if it does not require it altogether) which, in turn, undergirds the theological conception of morality itself.⁵² Put simply,

show that inconsistency, laziness, and/or conflicts of interest can often interfere with a perfect belief-to-action ratio. It also goes to show, however, that the effects of that ratio are not always so inconsequential.

⁵² According to a 2017 Gallup poll, 24 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the *literal* and *inerrant* word of the Creator of the universe, while another 47 percent believe that it is the “inspired” word of the same—just in need of symbolic interpretation from time to time before its truth can become accessible. The numbers are even higher within Christianity itself, with 30 percent believing that the Bible should be taken literally and 54 percent believing it to be inspired. See Lydia Saad, “Record Few Americans Believe Bible is Literal Word of God,” Social & Policy Issues, Gallup, last modified May 15, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>. At first glance, since faith-based religion offers no internal mechanism by which to rationally adjudicate the truth or falsity of its propositions, it makes one wonder precisely *how* the faithful are meant to know exactly *which* passages are in need of such interpretation and which are not. But as it stands, for the New Atheists, such is rather a moot point. While, admittedly, the New Atheists are not scriptural hermeneuts—nor do they aspire

for the New Atheists, scriptural literalism is, by logical necessity, the default position of religious believers.

According to the New Atheists, (Protestant) Christianity stipulates that God's moral commands are grounded in holy fiat, not in the rational adjudication of intentions or actions.⁵³ At the risk of oversimplifying, on their account, if God commands it, then it must be accepted as a moral good worthy of faithful obedience, full stop. As such, God's commands are (logically) immune from rational assessment and therefore beyond moral reproach. But for the New Atheists, virtue, on this account, is determined solely by divine decree and morality becomes little more than a pernicious euphemism for blind obedience. This is, by in large, why the New Atheists are so adamant in their pursuit of a world without faith-based religion. On their account, some beliefs are intrinsically dangerous and exponentially more so when infused with a divine sense of purpose and truth.

For the New Atheists, then, religious fundamentalism is a problem *precisely because* the fundamentals of religion are a problem. This statement is meant in two distinct, but related ways. First, as discussed above, the “fundamentals” of religion or theological belief merely refer to the manner in which said beliefs arise and are maintained. The fundamentals, therefore, simply denote a methodology—or in this case, a faulty one. According to New Atheism, since every theological belief is founded on unfalsifiable premises, each is necessarily—or perhaps put better,

to be—on their account, religious faith does not admit of even the *possibility* of correction, and therefore, engaging in theological exegesis and interpretation is—at best—nothing more than a waste of one's intellectual resources.

⁵³ Of course, it is easy to claim that God also operates under the auspices of (divine) adjudication. But to admit as much seems to cause more problems than it solves. First, it suggests that God also operates within the framework of reason, implying that we could reach the same moral conclusions without reference to a transcendent (read: metaphysical) standard and/or measure. Second, given the rather unsavory accounts of divine behavior in Christian scripture, it suggests that should God Himself be judged by these moral standards, He would likely be found wanting of divinity itself.

fundamentally—flawed. In this sense, it is not the propositional content of one’s belief that is problematic, but rather the foundational underpinnings of those beliefs which turn out to be.

Secondly, the flawed fundamentalism of theological belief refers to the “fundamentals” of its own internal moral structure. According to the New Atheists, the content of every faith-based religion suffers from an internal inconsistency which either directly promotes immoral prescriptions or effectually disbars the displacement of those prescriptions. Put simply, for the New Atheists, every faith-based religion requires contrary states of ethical orientation. Focusing here on Christianity, believers are commanded, for example, to punish and forgive; accept and exile; love and hate; kill and pacify. Now, since one’s obedience to these commands is not simply recommended or encouraged, but rather demanded, it would appear that one is required, logically speaking, to accept and follow contradictory moral directives. While it is undoubtedly true that every believer *prioritizes* some commands over others, for the New Atheists, such prioritization does not suggest that the contradiction itself is only apparent, or that only some of the commands are morally binding.

Additionally, on New Atheist grounds, the logical implications of scriptural literalism suggest that even if one refused, in principle, to heed divine command and/or the effects thereof, there is simply no *intrinsic* justification which would validate the appeal to *extrinsic* moral standards in order to defend one’s noncompliance. In other words, if a believer accepts the truth of his or her moral beliefs, then reference to alternative evidential avenues for the assessment of divine decree is simply not appropriate. In effect, in order to justify the dereliction of divine duty, the believer must look to find a resolution within the selfsame resource (i.e. Christian scripture) which inspired the disregard in the first place. On this account, the believer is confined to an ethical doctrine which is neither consistent nor explanatory. For the New Atheists, such a state begs the

question as to how such ambiguity and inconsistency can serve as a rationally valid foundation for morality in the first place.

According to New Atheism, the retreat from scriptural literalism, then, draws its inspiration not from scripture, but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God's supposed utterances difficult to accept as written.⁵⁴ The truth of this conclusion is often difficult to see because Christianity has had a lengthy—and wildly successful—history of seamlessly blending fundamentally extrinsic features of cultural experience into its own theological frameworks. Indeed, as Ernst Troeltsch has made clear, cultural appropriation and political pragmatism have been functional realities of faith-based religious traditions from their very emergence in the public domain.⁵⁵ The banality of this fact, however, has served as a rather effective cover for theological obscurity. In order to remain meaningful (read: relevant) to its adherents, Christianity (like all faith-based religions) has inevitably applied its interpretive strategy of scriptural justification to secular elements of human experience and subsequently presented them as intrinsic features of God's mysterious and incomprehensible *telos*. In other words, Christianity has synthesized secular and sectarian claims of truth and passed off the former as compatible (or identical) with the latter.

For the New Atheists, then, the retreat from scriptural literalism can be accounted for in two unique, but interrelated ways. The first comes by way of religious moderation. On the face of it, given the implications of the discussion above, moderation regarding scriptural literalism would seem like a rather welcome outcome of contemporary theological belief and, to be sure, for the New Atheists, it most certainly is. But such an apparent upshot is not without its drawbacks. The first and most glaring problem with the notion of moderation in religion is that it simply has

⁵⁴ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 17.

⁵⁵ See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches Vols I and II*, trans. Olive Wyon (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 1992.

nothing underwriting it other than the unacknowledged neglect of the letter of divine law.

According to Harris,

We cannot say that fundamentalists are crazy, because they are merely practicing their freedom of belief; we cannot even say that they are mistaken in *religious* terms, because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivaled. All we can say, as religious moderates, is that we don't like the personal and social costs that a full embrace of scripture imposes on us.⁵⁶

As mentioned above, for the New Atheists there is simply no internal mechanism within theological belief that can justify the outright abandonment of a literal understanding of divine decree. As a result, religious moderation simply reinforces its own inability to level a thoughtful and thorough critique regarding the adverse consequences of religious fundamentalism. Put differently, religious moderation effectively undercuts its own import, caricaturing itself as an *uncredible*, or at the very least, an unreliable, authority for the rational adjudication of its own moderately-based faith claims.

In this way, and as difficult as it may be for some to accept, Harris is correct when he asserts that the doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the inside. While nothing precludes believers from grounding their moral orientations exclusively on the set of divine commands which *they* find to align most faithfully to *their* interpretation of God's ultimate purpose, such a choice does not—on that account alone—impede or invalidate believers with alternative interpretations of God's *telos* to select a different set of divine commands from which to align *their* moral orientations. For the New Atheists, then, moderation in religion is, at best, a revolving door which offers neither a consistent nor a reliable defense for the abandonment of scriptural literalism.

⁵⁶ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 20. Emphasis in original.

For the New Atheists, religious moderation represents nothing more than an attempt to hold on to what remains serviceable within scriptural literalism, without actually displacing its destructive foundation. On their account, religious moderates simply wish to relax the standards of divine command without adulterating its meaning and/or relinquishing their own sense of obedience to it. Not wishing to abandon their sense of connection with God (whatever that might mean), believers intuitively plunder the spoils of secular moral thought and smuggle back in that which is deemed reconcilable (read: serviceable) with their traditional theological frameworks. Indeed, according to the New Atheists, this is the only way that theological faith can function—or at least appear to function—as commensurate with reason itself. On this account, then, moderate faith is not a “new form” of faith grounded in some intuitively expansive notion of scriptural interpretation, but rather the covert forfeiture of religious principle in favor of a more accessible, and therefore a less demanding, lived religious experience. In the end, religious moderation is nothing more than a concession to a variety of social, moral, and political interests that have, *in principle*, nothing to do with God or His heavenly instructions.

The second way in which the retreat from scriptural literalism can be accounted for, according to the New Atheists, comes by way of cultural pluralism. On their account, the problems which stem from religious faith will not be mitigated simply by reining in a minority of extremists—if, that is, faith can even manage to do that. But neither will the problem be mitigated simply by granting faith-based religious traditions seats at the table of public discourse in the hopes that a liberal appreciation for cultural diversity will somehow make incompatible claims compatible. As the New Atheists understand it, the fact that faith-based religious traditions have made various concessions to modern and secular life (and vice versa) in no way suggests that religious faith and reason have somehow become epistemological equals. In fact, for the New

Atheists, such apparent benignity does not suggest that cultural pluralism is any more capable than religious moderation of sustaining a thoughtful or honest acceptance of conflicting religious beliefs. Neither, for that matter, does it suggest that religious traditions are, in principle, open to new channels of learning. While New Atheism acknowledges that neither the religious moderate nor the non-religious pluralist desires to *kill* anyone in the name of God, both the moderate and the pluralist must nevertheless accept that nothing too critical can be said about those who do. In this way, cultural pluralism mirrors religious moderation by making it difficult, if not impossible, to level a credible or reliable social critique of the effects of theological faith in the public sphere.

According to New Atheism, then, the greatest problem confronting contemporary civilization is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations that have been given to religious faith and faith-based religion itself. According to Harris,

The fact that religious faith has left its mark on every aspect of our civilization is not an argument in its favor, nor can any particular faith be exonerated simply because certain of its adherents made foundational contributions to human culture.⁵⁷

On the New Atheist account, simply because we have allowed religious faith to go effectively unchallenged in the public sphere does not suggest that it is intrinsically beneficial to social cooperation. Indeed, as is plain to see, religious faith has been a regular source of social distortion and according to the New Atheists, its more destructive tendencies have, for the most part, been reined in simply by virtue of appealing to it less and less. In this way, rational, ethical sensibilities emerge from faith-based religions only when its adherents learn to *ignore* most of their own canons. For the New Atheists, then, there is no fundamentally benevolent kernel of rational belief within or behind faith-based religion. And moreover, none is (or will be) generated simply by

⁵⁷ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 109.

deferring rational assessment in favor of the supposed tolerance which is said to be manufactured by cultural and/or religious pluralism.

In short, for the New Atheists, cultural pluralism—taken to its logical conclusion—suggests that any belief is compatible with any mental state, providing that one takes cultural context into consideration. Indeed, on their account, such contextualization has become so commonplace within faith-based religion that it now seems entirely uncontentious to claim that nearly *any* set of beliefs, intentions, or actions can be justified as compatible with theological belief. But in the end, such concessions to modernity do not suggest that the synthesis of religious faith and rational thought can be consistently and/or ethically sustained.

To be sure, none of these declarations should be taken to mean that the New Atheists believe that every Christian apologist is an immoral monster. Such claims are neither meant to imply that theists are logically incapable of moral goodness (which they clearly are), nor that it is impossible to find morally virtuous individuals within faith-based religious traditions (which it clearly is). Indeed, the New Atheists will readily admit that there are countless historical examples to which one could point to in order to demonstrate the philanthropic spirit of various religious individuals and/or institutions. However, while none would deny the ability of the theist to behave morally, New Atheism adamantly denies the ability of faith-based religions to be the generative cause of such moral behavior. Made plain, for the New Atheists, morality emerges *despite* theological faith, not because of it. Wherever and whenever morality holds sway over the theist, it has been imported and implanted in his or her belief independently, and in spite of, divine decree.

VII. Moving Forward

This chapter has covered a tremendous amount of ground. It began by detailing the argumentative strategies employed by both the New Atheists and their critics in regard to the logical and moral foundations of religious belief. According to New Atheism, reason required a foundational empirical methodology from which—and *only from which*—the truth of any positive claim could be authenticated. Our theists, for their part, rejected this requirement (at least in principle) and contended instead that faith served as a supplement to reason, providing a form of knowledge that surpassed the so-conceived limitations of rational (i.e. empirical) thought. By articulating how the conceptual and functional definitions of atheism and theism, God, belief, reason, and faith functioned within each framework, I was able to highlight both the logical and philosophical points of contention between our interlocutors and emphasize the atheistic claim that a God who is conceptualized as “wholly other” defies the most basic sense of rational intelligibility. I concluded this chapter by analyzing the ethical implications of this debate for both religious and secular moral thought and succinctly framed the New Atheist appeal for the abandonment of faith-based religion in public discourse. Since neither the religious moderation of contemporary Protestantism nor the cultural pluralism of modern liberalism have been effective in consistently curtailing the demonstrably harmful effects of unsubstantiated beliefs in the guise of religious faith, it was alluded that the shelf-life of faith-based religion had effectually expired. Unfortunately, for every detail discussed, another is inevitably left out. While detailing every intricacy of the contemporary debate is beyond the scope of this project, I hope that the limitations of this chapter have not left the reader with the impression that the debate lacks dimension or depth or is superficially reductive on either side.

Metaphysical questions (i.e. Does God exist?) and ontological questions (i.e. Is God a “being”?) are difficult to answer and always done so with disputation. As this chapter has demonstrated, how one answers depends entirely on the framework he or she selects. According to Robin Le Poidevin,

If we construe the question (“Does God exist?”) as an internal question, as posed within, say, the Christian theological framework, then the answer is both obvious and trivial, since ‘God exists’ follows from other internal propositions, such as ‘Jesus was the son of God.’ If, on the other hand, we construe the question as an external question concerning the advisability of adopting the framework, then we can only give it a pragmatic answer...But this carries no ontological commitment to the reality of God.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, for Le Poidevin, there is one framework which we cannot but take as reflecting reality, and that is the framework which is about *us*. On his account, just which framework we adopt depends on how we see ourselves—as physical objects, or as minds/souls which could exist in a disembodied form, or simply as objects which exist in space and time. Adopting the framework of the *self*, then, does involve accepting that framework as reflecting reality. Or as he says, “the fact that a particular framework contains *us* gives that framework its ontological authority.”⁵⁹ As he sees it, the problem with an abstract object framework (i.e. theistic framework) is that it is not defined in terms of the relations the object (i.e. God) stands in regarding to us, but rather in the *lack* of such relations. To give this object any ontological authority, then, we must place it in relation to *us*—that is, we must strip it of its abstract transcendental metaphysicality and see it as a reflection and/or reification of humanity itself. To achieve this understanding, then, we must move beyond the strictly empirical framework of the New Atheists or the speculatively transcendental framework of their critics. Only by doing so can the impasse between contemporary

⁵⁸ Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1996), 128.

⁵⁹ Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 132. Emphasis added.

atheism and faith-based religion be overcome. And only thereby can New Atheism learn to see promise in Christianity and can Christianity learn to see truth in godlessness. For the task that lies ahead, then, I look back to the *religious atheism* (*religiösen Atheismus*)⁶⁰ of Ludwig Feuerbach.

⁶⁰ All German translations taken from Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Erstdruck: Otto Wigand, 1841), Google, <http://www.zeno.org/nid/20009166475>.

Chapter Two

Approaching Feuerbach

I. The New Religion of Humankind

In the opening chapter, we examined the extent to which the current dispute between New Atheism and Christian theism has reached an impasse, both intellectually and ethically. At the center of this impasse was a debate between two seemingly contradictory positions: an epistemological foundationalism with seemingly positivistic underpinnings, exemplified by the so-called New Atheists, and an empirical skepticism with seemingly metaphysical underpinnings, exemplified by some of the New Atheist's contemporary Christian interlocutors. Despite their differences, however, these opposing positions might suggest a commonality—one that has either gone unnoticed or unappreciated—that complicates this apparent binary. Both, it seems, appear to predicate their respective views on an ineluctable connection between religion (in general) and Christianity (in particular) and its contents. That is, each tether together the experiential (read: emotive) reality of *religion*, and the formal (read: doctrinal/theological) structure of *Christianity* so tightly, that to be rid of one is to effectively to be rid of the other.

As we saw above, on the New Atheist account, the illogical conception of God proffered by Christian theology rendered the putative experiences of His (supposed) existence utterly moot. According to the New Atheists, Christian theists focus so intently on the varied expressions of divine existence, that they utterly disregard the illogicality of their own theological descriptions. Based on New Atheist grounds, then, the foundational structure of Christianity is so weak that it can no longer uphold itself against the contradictions that it itself generates.

But is it necessary to tether form and content so tightly? Is it possible to remain committed to the atheist project *and* welcome the Christian imaginary as a valid source of rational knowledge (as the New Atheists define it)? Could a deeper engagement with Christian theology yield a *more* robust atheism than is on offer at present? Could this “new” atheism appeal to charitable Christian apologists (or even religiously minded philosophical agnostics) in ways that New Atheism has been unable (or unwilling) to do? In short, is it possible to rectify the discord between Christian theists and atheists by examining whether and/or to what extent each position effectively informs the other? Can we find a way to reengage with these respective traditions in service of overcoming the mutual insistence that humanity and divinity are somehow at odds, and moreover, that one must always supersede (if not dispel completely) the other?

It is in the spirit of these questions and in the hope of providing a suitable answer that this chapter begins. To guide our way through the rather ambitious task set before us, I turn to Ludwig Feuerbach, the nineteenth century German philosopher who, incidentally, began his professional career as a student of theology at the University of Heidelberg and later at the University of Berlin. Though a self-admitted atheist, Feuerbach was once lauded by the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth as being “more theological than that of many theologians,” suggesting (to me, at least) that Feuerbach is uniquely qualified to lead us through the difficult terrain that lies ahead.⁶¹ While not a moral philosopher *per se*, Feuerbach’s project is inherently ethical, having set its attention and concern on one’s relationship to one’s fellow human beings and to the world. And moreover, his dedication to recasting—not rejecting—the notion of religion (in general) and Christianity (in particular) make his insights all the more relevant for us today.

⁶¹ Quotation taken from John Glasse, “Barth on Feuerbach,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol 57, no. 2, (1964): 70.

What this chapter will begin to show is that Feuerbach was a vocal critic, not only of Christian (read: Protestant) theology, but also of the prevailing speculative philosophy of his day. His critique, together with his anthropological interest in human transcendence, may lead some to categorize his thought as thoroughly humanistic, which wouldn't be entirely incorrect. However, while Feuerbach insisted that the true sense of theology *is* anthropology—that is, that there is no distinction between the predicates of the divine and the predicates of human nature and thus no distinction between the divine and human subject—his humanism does not neatly transpose into the sort of atheism adopted by the New Atheists. Indeed, on Feuerbach's account, the true essence of religion both conceives of and affirms human relation *as* a divine relation. Thus, it cannot be overstated that for Feuerbach, anthropology is, in the end, exalted *into* religion and conceived as thoroughly anthropotheistic (*anthropotheistisches*)—that is, as the exclusive self-affirmation of the human nature *as God*.⁶²

What this means for us is that Feuerbach's humanism is not entirely atheistic, but neither is his conception of religion entirely theistic (in the traditional sense). To couch it in the language discussed in the previous chapter: Feuerbach is more of an atheologian than he is an atheist.⁶³ For this reason, he operates in quite a different register than our contemporary atheist and theist interlocutors. As we will soon see, Feuerbach was not merely interested in strict epistemological arguments (although they played an essential role in his form of atheism), but neither was he

⁶² Language does us a bit of a disservice here, insofar as the terms "human" and "divine" are typically viewed as contraries in Plato's wake. In a Feuerbachian sense though, to assert that the human *is* divine is redundant, as the term "divine" loses its typical meaning when the contrary is abolished. The reader must be diligent not to smuggle the contrary meaning back into the analysis when Feuerbach refers to the divine. To be clear, the divine has no independent existence from human beings. It has never, nor will it ever, transcend the human.

⁶³ For Feuerbach, the human *is* God, and thus to speak in terms of "traditional" atheism can be a bit misleading. As we will see, a true atheist, on Feuerbach's account, would have to deny the reality of the *subject* of whom the predicates (of the divine) simply describe. Because human beings cannot do so—as it would be tantamount to denying one's own being—Feuerbach's position takes aim at Christian theology which seeks to establish God's existence as independent of the human being.

merely interested in (Christian) theological speculations (although they played an essential role in his form of religion). More concretely, while his sole aim was dismantling Christianity's *form*, Feuerbach was adamant about preserving its *content*. In this way, Feuerbach guides the atheist back to theism without insisting upon the adoption of its (metaphysical, i.e. theological) illogicality. Indeed, according to Eugene Kamenka, Feuerbach emphasized that his seminal work, the *Essence of Christianity*, was not primarily an atheistic assault against religion, but rather, "a real attempt to preserve the moral and cultural content of religion, to help religion break out of what had become a confining chrysalis."⁶⁴ And because Feuerbach saw this content as essential to human being's true self-understanding, he was compelled to bring the discussion "down to Earth," that is, to an intellectual level at which it had a greater chance of influencing the lives of everyday people. As Feuerbach saw it, his critique of Christianity was in the service of the same human values that Christianity itself recognized and fostered (note, *not* generated or created)—albeit imaginatively and/or abstractly. Indeed, on Kamenka's account, Feuerbach was the scholar who,

had put materialist anthropology in the place of religious idealism, who had shown that God was made in the image of man, that thought was a function of being, that man had feelings and strivings as well as consciousness and that nature confronted man as an independent force, as an objective challenge.⁶⁵

Simply stated: Feuerbach had a foot in both worlds (i.e. in speculative philosophy and Christian theology), and a critical eye toward their mutual transcendence in concrete, sensuous materiality.

In its most general sense, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* is a detailed analysis of the distinction that he insisted existed between "religion" and "theology"—a distinction that is often ignored in the contemporary debate between New Atheism and faith-based religion. On his

⁶⁴ Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 28.

⁶⁵ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 16.

account, “religion” was not merely some generic category marker, but rather the essential designation of the active process of human self-discovery. As such, religion had no inherent dogmatic principles or doctrines *per se*. It did not contain any explicit ethical precepts or moral instructions. Rather, on Feuerbach’s account, religion was simply the process by which a human being became self-conscious of the various arrangements of his or her nature and thus fully self-conscious of him or herself. Feuerbach states: “Religion has the conviction that its conceptions, its predicates of God, are such as every man ought to have, and must have, if he would have the true ones—that they are the conceptions necessary to human nature; nay, further, that there are objectively true, representing God as he is.”⁶⁶

But pay special attention to the arc of this religious trajectory. According to Feuerbach, as the religious understanding developed, its object (i.e. God) seemed to move further and further *away* from the materiality that initially gave rise to it. Indeed, on his account, the further away its object got, the more “real” it appeared to be. Following this observation to its logical conclusion, the religious consciousness concluded that the “most real” object must be *entirely* immaterial—after all, how can that which is conceived as the highest originate from that which is lower? As reflection on this observation deepened, the involuntary and (seemingly) harmless speculation that gave rise to the notion of “immaterial existence” became an intentional and sustained separation. Immateriality was no longer considered as an abstraction of the material, but rather its very ground. Authenticating this position, according to Feuerbach, signaled the transition from religion to *theology*.

⁶⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 16.

Based on this account, “theology” (Christian or otherwise), was simply the formalized structure constructed from the self-reflective process of analyzing the nature of religion itself. In short, theology was the process by which one took the very conceptions, features, and constituent elements of human nature and converted them into the functions and/or activities of a supposedly independently existing God.⁶⁷ Understanding this distinction is crucial for interpreting Feuerbach’s project, for as he made abundantly clear, he was *not* attempting to discard the *reality* of the divine. Rather, he was attempting to displace the divine from its (supposedly) metaphysical heights and return it from whence it came—from human nature itself.

Now, much like our New Atheist contemporaries, the epistemological conditions of reason (*Vernunft*) were foundational for Feuerbach’s method. As I will consider in detail below, Feuerbach rejected the notion of any reality which claimed to exist above, beyond, or outside empirical reality or in (total) abstraction from it. Non-sensory knowledge or non-empirical experiences (in Christian theological terms: *revelations*) were, for Feuerbach, merely projections (*vergegenständlicht*) of the real components of material or sensual existence into an otherwise illusory or mystified world. However, unlike our contemporary atheist interlocutors, whose

⁶⁷ According to Feuerbach, the *ontological proof* most clearly expresses the inmost nature of the object of religious development. It goes something like this: The most perfect being is that which none higher can be conceived; that from which man can make no further abstraction. (Note already that subjectivity (i.e. God being *a being* and not God being “*being itself*”) is essential to this proof.) Put differently, the most perfect being is the positive limit of man’s intellect, feeling, and/or sentiment. That being is, theologically speaking, God. *But*, God would not be the highest being if He did not actually *exist*, as we could easily conceive of a being superior to Him by virtue of material *existence* alone. After all, the highest being which man can conceive must *at least* possess the same quality as the lowliest creature of nature. Not to exist materially, then, is a limitation or an imperfection. And as no such limited or imperfect being could properly be conceived as the highest, no such limited or imperfect being could properly be conceived as God. The result of this proof, of course, is the requirement that God’s existence must be more than a mere ideal one—that is, more than a mere conception in the mind of man. (Or to use the terminology from above: God’s existence must be more than a logical conclusion induced from materiality.) God, *qua* God, must have an existence apart from human thought, and thus apart from the mind who thinks Him. In short, God must have a real, independent, self-existence.

particular brand of atheism seeks to dismantle and consign Christianity (in particular) and by extension religion (in general) to the past, Feuerbach insisted that his new “philosophy” emerged only by *evolving out of* the very core of religion itself. He states, “the new philosophy can no longer, like the old Catholic and modern Protestant scholasticism, fall into the temptation to prove its agreement with religion by its agreement with Christian dogmas.”⁶⁸ Feuerbach’s atheism, then, sought to re-envision religion, not merely to reject or remove it, and so he returned to the Christian imaginary time and again for conceptual and experiential fodder for his positive a-theistic claims. Thus, while Feuerbach certainly looked to sever religion from its supposed theological bindings, the essential purpose of his work was to usher *in* the new religion of humankind.⁶⁹

To get a clear sense of Feuerbach’s ultimate objective, it is necessary to understand what he saw himself doing, for whom he saw himself doing it, and how he was hoping to achieve it. Investigation of his work begins, then, by briefly positioning his motive for analysis against the backdrop of German Idealism, especially as it was exemplified by G.W.F. Hegel, and then situating his overall project against the backdrop of contemporary atheism, especially as it is exemplified by the New Atheists. Here, I will make note of the commonalities between the two atheistic perspectives, but more importantly, I will highlight key differences in both methodology and intent. Using these differences as a foil, I will unpack Feuerbach’s conception of religion, showing not only how he differentiated it from Christian theology proper, but also how he conceived of it as an experiential reality which was intrinsically connected to the very essence of the human being.

⁶⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xxiii-xxiv.

⁶⁹ According to Feuerbach, “This philosophy has for its principle, not the Substance of Spinoza, not the *ego* of Kant and Fichte, not the Absolute Identity of Schelling, not the Absolute Mind of Hegel, in short, no abstract, merely conceptual being, but a real being, the true *Ens realissimum*—man; its principle, therefore, is the highest degree positive and real.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xv. Emphasis in original.

Throughout the remaining chapters, we will come to see more fully that for Feuerbach, materiality and sensuousness (the latter term being *Sinnlichkeit*, *Sensualismus*) alone constituted a real, determinate existence—one that could be both understood and felt as divine. And what's more, we will come to see that it was in monotheism (and especially Protestant Christianity exemplified by Martin Luther) where Feuerbach found the unification of these elements (i.e. understanding and feeling) presented, or perhaps put better, *revealed as* the one absolute and perfect being (*Gott als Wesen des Verstandes* and *Gott als Herzenswesen*). Indeed, on Feuerbach's account, it was in the theological workings of Luther where Christianity most clearly exemplified its propensity to turn the objectified mystifications of the imagination into an actual being, and undeniably, the most real, absolute, and highest being. It was in, or better still, *through* Christianity, then, that Feuerbach thought that he had found the key to discerning the true meaning of religion, and by extension, the true meaning of humankind.

To be clear, while Feuerbach found it necessary to reject what he saw as logical contradictions rooted in Christian theology, he also insisted that such rejection must be done without losing the anthropological meaning and/or the material significance that those contradictions were meant to express. Based on his account, there was no need to be “militantly” opposed to religion (in general), or even to Christianity (in particular), for both Christianity and religion exposed and exhibited the self-same reality. As we will see in the chapters which are to follow, according to Feuerbach, the essential elements of the Christian God *are* the very constituent elements (*begründenden Elemente*) of the human being's essential nature, externalized, projected outward (and upward), and given independent, objective reality. As such, it was Feuerbach's ultimate task “to show that the antithesis of divine and human [was] altogether illusory, that it is nothing else than the antithesis between the human nature in general and the

human individual; that, consequently, the object and contents of the Christian religion [were] altogether human.”⁷⁰

II. The Key to the Cipher of the Christian Religion

In the preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach offered insight into the motives, methodology, and spirit of his project. By his own admission, his work had no pretension to be anything more than an empirical or historico-philosophical analysis of what he referred to as the “enigma” of the Christian religion.⁷¹ His writings—including his studies in the history of philosophy and his criticism of German Idealism—had but one aim, intention, thought, and theme: religion and all of its accompanying complications. On Feuerbach’s account, religion was the fundamental cultural phenomenon in the history of human development and thus to understand it was to understand humankind itself.⁷² According to Eugene Kamenka, Feuerbach’s aim was merely to parcel out the empirical grounds of (Christian) theological belief in terms of which it could be rationally appraised and understood. In other words, Feuerbach’s genetic-critical method consisted simply in tracing theological speculations, conceptions, and beliefs back to their origin in the experiences and attitudes of the human subject.⁷³

⁷⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 13-14. “Und unsre Aufgabe ist es eben nachzuweisen, daß der Gegensatz des Göttlichen und Menschlichen ein illusorischer daß er nichts andres ist als der Gegensatz zwischen dem menschlichen Wesen und dem menschlichen Individuum, daß folglich auch der Gegenstand und Inhalt der christlichen Religion ein durchaus menschlicher ist.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

⁷¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xiii.

⁷² This claim undergirds a lasting continuity with later theorists of religion such as Clifford Geertz. For more in-depth analysis, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Especially 87-125.

⁷³ For Feuerbach, “A genetico-critical philosophy is one that does not dogmatically demonstrate or apprehend an object given through perception—for what Hegel says applies unconditionally to objects given immediately, i.e., those that are absolutely real and given through nature—but examines its origin; which questions whether an object is a real object, only an idea, or just a psychological phenomenon; which, finally, distinguishes with utmost rigor between what is subjective and what is objective.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2013), 39.

As alluded to above, Feuerbach understood this process as *historical*—it varied from person to person, was concretely differentiated in material reality, developed in time, and continually built upon itself. Nevertheless, on Feuerbach’s account, it had a universal ground in those aspects of human nature that he considered infinite in essence, and as such, it displayed fundamental patterns and imaginative expressions which he found common to all human beings. (A point we will return to in detail below.) The motivation for his analysis, then, was the desire to reveal and examine the psychological and epistemological process of concept formation, particularly as it pertained to self-consciousness (i.e. of the species, *Gattung*), and especially as it appeared in theological imagery.

On this point, Feuerbach was adamant that his examination allowed Christianity to speak for itself. He insisted that he was merely a listener and an interpreter, not a prompter or a creator. “Not to invent, but to discover, ‘to unveil existence,’ has been my sole object; to *see* correctly, my sole endeavor.”⁷⁴ Feuerbach’s entire critique proceeded on the supposition that the objects of his analysis were merely those which had been given significance *by Christianity itself*. Feuerbach did not, for example, inquire into who the historical Christ was or may have been in distinction from what he (Christ) had been made or had become in (Protestant) Christianity’s account of him. Accordingly, Feuerbach did not see the components of his analysis as *a priori* propositions, or as mere products of speculation, but rather as *a posteriori* generalizations gleaned from the expressed manifestations of the religious consciousness. As such, the positive ideas that Feuerbach laid out in his analysis were understood (by him) as *conclusions*—deductions and inferences drawn directly from premises which were not mere ideas of the mind, but rather objective facts (as he saw them). Put differently, Feuerbach’s project was not an attempt to counter speculation with

⁷⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xvi. Emphasis in original.

more speculation, but was rather an attempt to put an end to speculation *by actually explaining it*—by asking exactly what we mean (or perhaps put better, by asking what meaning is possible) when we say the things that we say. *From* the analysis of Christian theology, then, Feuerbach delivered what he found to be a faithful and correct *translation* of a decidedly atheist anthropology, out of the language of mystification and obscurity and into plain speech.⁷⁵ In short,

To it [theology] God is the first, man the second. Thus it inverts the natural order of things. In reality, the first is man, the second the nature of man made objective, namely God. Only in later times, in which religion is already become flesh and blood, can it be said—As God is, so is man; although, indeed, this proposition never amounts to anything more than tautology. But in the origin of religion it is otherwise; and it is only in the origin of a thing that we can discern its true nature. Man first unconsciously and involuntarily creates God in his own image, and after this God consciously and voluntarily creates man in his own image.⁷⁶

Feuerbach's key to the cipher of the Christian religion (*das Geheimnis der christlichen Religion*) was the cumulative result of several remarkable methodological shifts, and it will serve us well to familiarize ourselves with them, albeit briefly. Arguably the most significant was Feuerbach's rejection of the German Idealism of his day and his subsequent inversion of Hegelian philosophy. While it may be fair to say that the entire structure of Feuerbach's work (i.e. the dialectical process of self-differentiation that involved objectification, alienation, and synthesis), was essentially derived from Hegel (whose structure was partially derived from Fichte before him and Kant before him),⁷⁷ Feuerbach positioned his project in direct opposition to Hegel's idealism

⁷⁵ For Feuerbach, anthropology requires a clear and decisive *refusal* of God's metaphysicality and independent existence—it cannot simply ground itself in a vague humanism that remains agnostic about the question of divine origin or essence.

⁷⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 118.

⁷⁷ In *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, Eugene Kamenka ushers the reader through a concise philosophical history beginning with the work of Immanuel Kant and culminating with the work of Ludwig Feuerbach. He contends that despite Kant's description of the autonomy of man as a free, self-determined being, viewed as a systematic whole, his Critical philosophy had left itself with an insupportable dualism of the noumenal and phenomenal, and moreover, with a radical discontinuity between its concept of man as a free moral agent and its concept as man as an *ego cogitans*. According to Kamenka, the existence of Kant's "thing-in-itself" is assumed but never fully demonstrated. In the end, the special conditions under which we know are not deduced by Kant from the nature of consciousness

(at least theoretically). Indeed, Feuerbach's *Critique of Hegelian Philosophy* began with an initial assessment of the Hegelian claim to an Absolute philosophy—and more specifically, to the claim that such a philosophy was absolute simply *because* it was (supposedly) presuppositionless—and concluded with a proposal for a philosophy based on human species knowledge wherein experience was conceived of as embodied and sensuous and not merely as theoretical.⁷⁸ On Feuerbach's account, any attempt to transcend our sensuous, material experience resulted in either blind anthropomorphisms or in hypostatizations of human qualities as though they were objective or transhuman qualities.⁷⁹

Now, according to Feuerbach, Hegel understood human consciousness (and each of its various expressions) as nothing more than a vehicle or moment through which the Absolute Spirit (i.e. Being, Mind, *Geist*) gradually came to self-consciousness (i.e. its *own* consciousness of itself) in the course of human history. Based on Hegel's dialectical account, the Absolute Spirit “alienated” (in theological terms, “self-differentiated”) itself from itself in the form of material

itself. This, then, is precisely what the work of Fichte set out to achieve, showing that all the necessary conditions of cognition recognized by Kant can be demonstrated from a single fundamental principle—the existence of consciousness itself. On Kamenka's account, Fichte's position is as follows: “The mind is first unconsciously active; it then finds that in this unconscious spontaneous activity it is limited by the laws of its being; it thus comes to objectify and project these limitations and call them an external world... Only after the mind has posited such an external world could it come to the consciousness of itself as a mind, since it could only recognize its own qualities by first contrasting itself with something it takes to be non-mind... Thereafter, but only slowly, the mind comes to recognize that the experiences it has must be read as its, that the mind alone is the sphere of its operations, that it is at once subject and object, the sole and absolute starting point and the ultimate content of all knowledge which can claim to be scientific (i.e., of all knowledge not based on postulates of faith, on mere belief, as opposed to certain and immediate knowledge).” Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 8. Hegel, for his part, took this one step further and insisted that the self-determined substance must actually be the only substance of which all things are merely modes and/or attributes, subordinating the human will and human consciousness to the laws of thought.

⁷⁸ According to Feuerbach, every philosophy originates as a manifestation of its time and thus only *appears* to itself as not resting on any presuppositions. He states: “Hegel starts from Being; i.e., the notion of Being or abstract Being. Why should I not be able to start from Being itself; i.e., real Being? Or, again, why should I not be able to start from reason, since Being, in so far as it is thought of and in so far as it is an object of logic, immediately refers me back to reason? Do I still start from a presupposition when I start from reason? No! I cannot doubt reason and abstract from it without declaring at the same time that both doubting and abstracting do not partake of reason.” Feuerbach, *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, 12-13.

⁷⁹ Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 172-3.

existence, and then “reunited” (in theological terms, “reconciled”) itself with itself by “negating” these material forms, using them to aid its own awareness of itself as Spirit.⁸⁰ Now, according to Marx Wartofsky, Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel was not that he (Hegel) had failed to see that nature was dynamic, or that process was historical, but rather that he (Hegel) had failed to see that both nature and process were constituted by independently (though not atomistically) existing individuals who were *different than* mere “moments” in the overarching process of unfolding Spirit.⁸¹ Feuerbach states:

To be sure, the last stage of development is always the totality that includes in itself the other stages, but since it itself is a definite temporal existence and hence bears the character of particularity, it cannot incorporate into itself other existences without sucking out the very marrow of their independent lives and without robbing them of the meaning which they can have only in complete freedom.⁸²

As such, Feuerbach insisted that the self-differentiation of Spirit (i.e. the “I” from the “Thou”) was mediated through a bodily (i.e. embodied) encounter and not merely through consciousness.⁸³ The fundamental error of Hegel’s view, on his account, was that it did not critically raise the question of how *species* could be actualized in an individual—or perhaps put better, how infinite nature

⁸⁰ As Hegel explains in his seminal work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure *simple negativity*, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis [the immediate simplicity]. Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself—not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such—is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10. Emphasis in original.

⁸¹ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 175.

⁸² Feuerbach, *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy*, 8.

⁸³ Returning to Hegel, “The self-knowing Spirit is, in religion, immediately its own pure self-consciousness. Those forms of it which have been considered, viz. the true Spirit, the self-alienated Spirit, and the Spirit that is certain of itself, together constitute Spirit in its *consciousness* which, confronting its *world*, does not recognize itself therein. But in conscience it brings itself, as well as its objective world in general, into subjection, as also its picture-thinking and its specific Notions, and its not a self-consciousness that communes with its own self. In this, Spirit conceived as object, has for itself the significance of being the universal Spirit that contains within itself all essence and all actuality.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 411. Emphasis in original.

could be made manifest in a finite subject.⁸⁴ Thus it was for Hegelian philosophy (as well as the modern Protestant Christian theology which it has informed) that the notion of “immaterial being” presupposed a pure object of the mind as the only true and absolute being—that is, as God.⁸⁵

According to Wartofsky, Feuerbach’s primary issue with Hegel’s concept of Being stemmed from this very notion of absolute or immediate beginning. He admits that while Feuerbach was not averse to making assumptions and/or presuppositions, Feuerbach loathed the tendency of speculative philosophy (and Christian theology alike) to absolutize those presuppositions (read: speculations)—that is, to assert them as ultimate, unconditional, or immediate—and therefore as necessary.⁸⁶ The key mistake, on Feuerbach’s account, was not simply the fact that a person could not coherently conceptualize *pure Being*, but rather that a presumably rational philosophy such as Hegel’s objectified or hypostatized this concept, thereby making it the absolute from which all other concepts derived.⁸⁷ In other words, for Feuerbach, Hegelian idealism (as well as its Christian theological derivatives) *started* by presupposing its own

⁸⁴ Feuerbach states: “But however sagacious the author [i.e. Hegel] is otherwise, he proceeds from the very outset uncritically in so far as he does not pose the question: Is it at all possible that a species realizes itself in one individual, art as such in one artist, and philosophy as such in one philosopher?...Reason, however, knows nothing...of a real and absolute incarnation of the species in a particular individuality...Incarnation and history are absolutely incompatible; when deity itself enters into history, history ceases to exist.” Feuerbach, *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy*, 10-11.

⁸⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred Vogel (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 32. Emphasis added. On this account, the Absolute Spirit “alienates itself from itself” in the form of material existence, and then “reconciles itself with itself” by negating these material forms (i.e. using these material forms to further aid its own awareness of itself as Spirit). The doctrine of Creation, for example, symbolized the “going forth” of the Infinite into the finite, whereas the doctrine of the Incarnation, for example, symbolized the reconciliation of the Infinite with this self-estranged “otherness.”

⁸⁶ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 180.

⁸⁷ In Hegel’s 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he states: “God is the absolute substance. If we cling to this declaration in its abstract form, then it is certainly Spinozism or pantheism. But the fact that God is *substance* does not exclude *subjectivity*, for substance as such is part of the presupposition we have made that God is *spirit*, *absolute spirit*, eternally simply spirit, being essentially present to itself. Then this ideality or subjectivity of spirit, which is the perspicuity or ideality of every particular, is likewise this very universality, this pure relation to itself, the absolute being-with-self and abiding-with-self; it is absolute substance.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118-119. Emphasis in original.

truth.⁸⁸ And this presupposition, aside from being philosophically problematic and rationally indefensible, led Feuerbach to conclude that Absolute Being never fully “disengaged” itself from itself to become *actual* material being. In effect, “Being remains in another world.”⁸⁹

Now, since Feuerbach recognized that the key to understanding Hegel’s logic was his objectification-alienation-synthesis schema, Feuerbach also realized that he could appropriate Hegel’s insights by simply reversing the directionality between the subject and the predicate, thereby restoring them to their proper relationship. For instance, instead of saying that the Absolute Spirit achieved self-knowledge by objectifying itself in the material world, Feuerbach maintained the inverse: the finite being achieved self-knowledge by externalizing or objectivizing its own essential nature in the idea of God. As Van Harvey states: “If, for example, Hegel had argued that the world is the objectification and unfolding of the divine mind, then this should be transformed to mean that the divine is the abstraction and reification of human thought.”⁹⁰ In Hegel, religion served as a façade for the Absolute Idea. But for Feuerbach, religion (here, Christianity) was

⁸⁸ According to Feuerbach, speculation (or perhaps better, speculative philosophy) makes religion say only what it has itself thought. In this way, Hegel took the truth of the Absolute for granted. On his account, Hegel had no issue with the existence or the objective reality of Absolute Identity, he simply maintained that it lacked form. But for Feuerbach, it is precisely for that reason that the proof of the Absolute, in Hegel, has in principle and essence only a formal significance. He states: “Right at its starting point, the philosophy of Hegel presents us with a contradiction, the contradiction between truth and science, between essence and form, between thinking and writing. The Absolute Idea is assumed, not formally, to be sure, but essentially. What Hegel premises as states and constituent parts of mediation, he thinks are determined by the Absolute Idea. Hegel does not step outside the Idea, nor does he forget it. Rather, he already thinks the antithesis out of which the Idea should produce itself on the basis of its having been taken for granted. It is already proved substantially before it is proved formally. Hence, it must always remain unprovable, always subjective for someone who recognizes in the antithesis of the Idea a premise which the Idea has established in advance...The starting point could just as well be the Absolute Idea because it was already a certainty, an immediate truth for Hegel before he wrote the Logic...The Absolute Idea—the Idea of the Absolute—is its own indubitable certainty as the Absolute Truth. It posits itself in advance as true.” Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy*, 27.

⁸⁹ Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 38.

⁹⁰ Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, 26.

simply a façade for human nature. On this account, there simply was no Absolute beyond or above the human.⁹¹

With this key in hand, the task that Feuerbach set for himself was to demonstrate how the entire history of religious (and philosophical) thought was really a history of the development of alienated forms of human self-consciousness. On this account, “God [was] the form [read: image] in which the human spirit first [discovered] its own essential nature.”⁹² Quite simply, for Feuerbach, religion was *not* the revelation *by* the Infinite in the finite, but rather the self-recognition, self-discovery, and self-consciousness of the finite creature’s infinite nature. And as such, every advance in religion was a step toward a deeper self-knowledge.

This brief sketch of Feuerbach’s critique of Hegelian philosophy highlights a second methodological shift in his work: the transition from idealism to materialism. Given his critique of Hegelian dialectics and the subsequent inversion of Hegel’s theory, Feuerbach’s analysis of religion is fundamentally bottom-up, rather than top-down. Rather matter-of-factly he asserts:

I unconditionally repudiate *absolute*, immaterial, self-sufficing speculation,—that speculation which draws its materials from within...I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only through the activity of the senses. I do not generate the object from the thought, but the thought from the object; and I hold *that* alone to be an object which has an existence beyond one’s own brain.⁹³

In contrast with the speculative philosophical or theological approach which began with the immaterial concept of Absolute Spirit (i.e. Being or God) and then attempted to deduce how the human was related to or distinguished from it, Feuerbach’s transposition began with the material

⁹¹ It is for this reason that Feuerbach stated, “I am nothing but a *natural philosopher in the domain of mind*.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xiv. Italics in original.

⁹² Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, 27.

⁹³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xiv. Italics in original.

existence of humankind and then extrapolated how the concept of God was merely a *reification* of it.⁹⁴ He states:

Dialectics is not a monologue that speculation carries on with itself, but a dialogue between speculation and empirical reality...Hence, if philosophy or, in our context, the Logic wishes to prove itself true, it must refute rational empiricism or the intellect which denies it and which alone contradicts it. Otherwise all its proofs will be nothing more than subjective assurances, so far as the intellect is concerned.⁹⁵

What this meant is that for Feuerbach, a person could not simply deduce, create, or describe reality from “out of his or her head.” Indeed, on his account, belief in the supposed immaterial existence of God was only possible by mystifying the various components or features of sensuous, material being itself and projecting them outward. Because the very mode of knowing objective reality (even if immaterially conceived) required the materiality of the subject, Feuerbach contended that all perceived objects of the mind, whatever they might be, were contingent upon the material existence of the one who perceived. Put differently, Feuerbach contended that “mental objects” could not exist independently of the mind that objectified them. (In this sense, neither could “material objects” exist independently of the mind that perceived them.) Because “mental objects” were not grounded in materiality—that is, because they could not be accessed via the senses—there would be no way to know that they existed independently of the mind even if they did. And, obviously, without the understanding, the same could be said for material objects.

⁹⁴ Kamenka contends that Fichtean idealism correctly recognizes that self-consciousness is absolute for man, but then reverses the true relation of subject and predicate—a reversal Hegel commits as well. For example, for Fichte, the absolute is self-consciousness rather than self-consciousness being absolute. Likewise, for Hegel, instead of saying that man knows himself in God, he says that God knows himself in man. Instead of saying that reason is absolute, it says, the Absolute is Reason. And so on. See Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 101, 36.

⁹⁵ Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, 25.

However, according to Feuerbach, while sense perceptions cannot be distinguished from the faculties that perceive them⁹⁶, their objects certainly can be—not by the senses themselves (for that is not their function), but by the understanding. In other words, the senses relay data from material reality which the understanding translates into conceptions of objectively existing objects. But in thinking, one cannot represent what is thought (or *thought itself* for that matter) as a sensible object, external to itself. Put differently, the understanding cannot perceive its objects as sensible, for its function is not to perceive, but to conceive. But for Feuerbach, if objects of the understanding are not sensible, then they are necessarily contained entirely within the understanding itself. And since God's existence is one utterly void of determinability and, as we will see, determinability is the sole condition of real, external, objective existence—God's "existence" can never truly exceed the limits of reason, for He is "fully contained" therein.

For Feuerbach, then, it was not possible for an idea or concept to precede the mind that thought or conceived it, and the idea of God was no exception. On his account, non-empirical views were merely speculative forms of self-mystification. As Kamenka explains,

we [can] never pass from concepts or thoughts also to an objective reality...idealism [can] only create an illusory world, and consciousness [can] not be divorced logically from the carrier of consciousness, from man as a physical and emotional animal.⁹⁷

For Feuerbach, to say, for example, that God existed independently of and prior to, material or sensational existence was simply a non-starter. One cannot *know* what (if anything) existed prior to, or independently of, material or sensational existence because on Feuerbach's account, materiality and sensation were the only measures by which humans could know anything to exist

⁹⁶ In other words, sight cannot distinguish itself from seeing, smell from smelling, touch, from touching, etc. Likewise, but differently, conceptions of the mind are indistinguishable from the "faculty" that conceives them—thought cannot distinguish itself from thinking. The vital difference, however, lies in the respective *objects* of these faculties.

⁹⁷ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 105-106.

at all. Indeed, to claim that God “pre-existed” this very measure was to place a divine cart before the material horse.⁹⁸

According to Kamenka, this was the essential meaning of Feuerbach’s self-classification as a materialist. Feuerbach insisted that there was nothing outside or above the ordinary world of our senses; nothing that did not exist in space and time.⁹⁹ On Feuerbach’s account, it was simply not possible to arrive at a material content—that is, at the notion of a qualitative distinction or an external world—by starting from or beginning with speculation, logic, or concepts (or in Hegel’s words, Ideas and/or Notions). Indeed, to claim that such abstractions could “materialize” or give rise to an objective, sensual, reality (on their own) was pure, unadulterated speculation and therefore, according to Feuerbach, logically indefensible.

To be clear, however, none of this is meant to render Feuerbach’s work “crudely” materialistic. Kamenka is keen to notice that in Feuerbach’s analysis there is no suggestion that only matter is real—that reason, conscience, consciousness, hope, and faith are in some way unreal or fictitious. Indeed, the very notion of *Sinnlichkeit* or *Sensualismus* was crucial for Feuerbach’s analysis, for it implied that the human being was a *sensual* creature rather than a mere reasoning or thinking machine or passive receptacle. Indeed, on Feuerbach’s account, matter was given its character to the extent that it was needed, acted upon, or otherwise transformed by human activity as a means of satisfying life’s needs—both natural and social. So much so, in fact, that Feuerbach ground his analysis of consciousness *in* the very conditions of material human existence itself—

⁹⁸ According to Feuerbach, “This unity [of the subjective and the objective, i.e. God] is both a fruitless and a harmful principle because it eliminates the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” even in the case of particulars, and renders futile the genetico-critical thought, indeed, negates the very question about truth.” Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy*, 40.

⁹⁹ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 36. Returning once again to Hegel, “The course traversed by these moments [i.e. the unfolding of Spirit] is, moreover, in relation to religion, not to be represented as occurring in Time. Only the totality of Spirit is in Time, and the ‘shapes,’ which are ‘shapes’ of the totality of *Spirit*, display themselves in a temporal succession; for only the whole has true actuality and therefore the form of pure freedom in face of an ‘other’, a form which expresses itself as Time.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 413. Italics in original.

that is, in the needs, interests, and wants of humankind, as well as in one's dependency on other human beings and nature.¹⁰⁰ Kamenka illustrates this point beautifully when he states that, for Feuerbach, "the confusion of sights, sounds, pressures and tastes that beat in upon man produce and interact with feelings, fears, hopes and passions, without which man cannot be understood and without which his beliefs cannot be explained."¹⁰¹ In other words, Feuerbach's materialism took seriously the various physical and existential components of human embodiment—especially, but not exclusively, relationality. Therefore, while the notion of "man" was certainly used as a generalized category marker for Feuerbach, it marked much more than a mere *brutum factum* in his analysis. Indeed, based on his account, to separate the human being from his or her lived experiences (i.e. to reductively conceptualize "man" as Marx would later accuse him of doing)¹⁰² would be tantamount to committing the same speculative error that Feuerbach accused Hegel of committing.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 20. This claim is, undoubtedly, influenced by Feuerbach's familiarity with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher who contended that religion was primarily rooted in an immediate pre-reflexive feeling or intuition, and, contra Kant, only secondarily at the level of intellectual cognition. For Schleiermacher, this fundamental self-awareness (what he referred to as an "intuition of the universe") was prior to all knowledge claims, and thus his approach to religious truth was based on a personal encounter in the form of feeling. We will return to this idea in chapter four. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially pp.18-54.

¹⁰¹ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 99.

¹⁰² According to Marx: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively...Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity." Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 143.

¹⁰³ Consequently, what Feuerbach refers to as "real things" are always objects *as known to/by human beings*. To be sure, these objects are not necessarily created by the human or totally subsumed to his or her interests (as Feuerbach took Idealism to treat things). On Kamenka's account, these real things can impede one's interests, frustrate his or her desires, and/or limit his or her actions. Nevertheless, human beings cannot speak or think of things *except as* they are encountered by themselves, directly or indirectly. Kamenka states, "If we speak of the *objectivity* of things, it is because *man* experiences this objectivity, this intractability, because *man* finds that he is not only an active but also a passive, a suffering creature." Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 109-110. For Feuerbach, then, the attempt to go *beyond* this, to ask what things are *really* like *in themselves*, is simply an unnecessary mystification. Indeed, in a certain sense, Feuerbach suggests that nature is intractable to human knowledge, for on his account, a human can only know what comes under the laws of his or her being, his or her thinking. Put simply, then, there simply cannot be anything knowable *beyond* human nature itself. As will be mentioned at numerous points, this is a

Given the aforementioned discussion, one can easily surmise why Feuerbach found the epistemological conditions of the understanding essential for his methodology. (A point we will return to in detail below.) On his account, because the very essence of the understanding was to distinguish (i.e. establish the distinction) between the abstract (i.e. the non-sensual) and the actual (i.e. the material or sensual), the understanding was taken by Feuerbach as *the* self-evident condition of reality—a contention that is held in common with our New Atheist interlocutors. It should also come as no surprise, then, that Feuerbach contended that when this distinction was overlooked or ignored, epistemological mystifications readily compounded into tangible self-deceptions. Indeed, in the *Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach states:

for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality (*die Vorstellung der Wirklichkeit*), the appearance to the essence...*illusion* only is *sacred*, *truth profane* (*den heilig ist ihr nur die Illusion, profan aber die Wahrheit*). Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.¹⁰⁴

In this context, epistemological error replaces clarity with confusion and buries what is really sacred (i.e. humankind) under an illusionary concept of metaphysical and transcendent divinity. What's more, according to Feuerbach, such error effectively encourages humankind to find truth in this illusion and falsehood in the *actual* reality that it obscures and denigrates.

methodological and philosophical claim that gets Feuerbach into a bit of trouble. As many critics are correct to point out, there is a sizeable gap in Feuerbach's own conception of the relation between humankind and nature. On the one hand, nature must exist independently of (and, it would seem, prior to) human beings—as the human is simply a part of that material nature. On the other, human beings (or perhaps better, human consciousness) seems necessary (and it would also seem, prior to) nature for the recognition of materiality in the first place. Wartofsky explains as follows: "Man's existence, as a natural or material being, his *actual* relation to physical nature, to the world outside his conscious nature is dealt with only under its phenomenological aspect—that is, as it appears to man in *terms* of his own nature, as it mirrors his nature for him...Feuerbach's justification for this restriction of human essence to consciousness is that his subject matter, [in the *Essence of Christianity*], is religious consciousness, and that the very content of *this* consciousness is limited to and properly concerns itself only with man. Therefore, whatever religion or speculative philosophy say about nature is *only* a symbolic or esoteric statement about man. Anthropomorphism is therefore the essence of religion." Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 262. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xix.

Now, given the rhetorical import of this observation, one might easily conclude that it was drawn directly from the pages of one of our New Atheist interlocutors. Indeed, according to New Atheism, it was precisely the seemingly illusory nature of theological significations that warranted the outright dismissal of Christianity (and thus religion in general) in the first place. However, as mentioned above, Feuerbach's methodology did not require the outright rejection or dismissal of Christianity's theological claims. It required, rather, the accurate and correct translation of them. That Christianity is a common receptacle for fancy, appearance, or illusion is regrettable—insofar as it mystifies, and by extension, obscures the real object of the religious consciousness. But for Feuerbach, that did not indicate that it was an absurdity, or a nothing, *full stop*. He stated,

But I by no means say (that were an easy task!): God is nothing, the Trinity is nothing, the Word of God is nothing, &c. I only show that they are not *that* which the illusions of theology make them,—not foreign, but native mysteries, the mysteries of human nature; I show that religion takes the apparent, the superficial in Nature and humanity for the essential, and hence conceives their true essence as a separate, special existence...¹⁰⁵

When it came to Christianity, in other words, Feuerbach's aim (at least initially) was analytical and, in a non-vicious sense, reductive: to understand the significance of the Christian imaginary, one must explain its origin and development in terms of something non-supernatural/non-metaphysical. In this way—and *only in this way*—the metaphysical pretensions of Christianity could be genuinely and seriously accounted for while simultaneously being undone.¹⁰⁶ Admittedly, Feuerbach understood Christianity as a “fantasy” (*Phantasie*). (A point we will return to below.) But this did not mean that his analysis was strictly interested in exposing the irrationality of biblical

¹⁰⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xviii. Emphasis in original. “Allein ich sage keineswegs—wie leicht hätte ich es mir dann machen können!—Gott ist *Nichts*, die Trinität ist *Nichts*, das Wort Gottes ist Nichts usw., ich zeige nur, daß sie *nicht* das sind, was sie in der Illusion der Theologie sind—nich ausländische, sondern einheimische Mysterien, die Mysterien der menschlichen Natur; ich zeige, daß die Religion das scheinbare oberflächliche Wesen der Natur und Menschheit für ihr wahres, inneres Wesen nimmt und daher das wahre, esoterische Wesen derselben als ein andres, als ein besonderes Wesen vorstellt...” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹⁰⁶ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 37.

theology or in the dogmatics of Protestant Christianity. Feuerbach did not confront Christianity merely as an external critic concerned with showing that there was no God. Rather, in viewing God as the product of an imaginative *human* projection, Feuerbach was also interested in the passions, desires, and needs that said God supposedly gave attention and expression to. In the end, then, his goal was not simply to criticize Christianity's coherence, but also to understand and communicate the significance of its mystifications.

Now this is certainly not to suggest that Feuerbach and the New Atheists disagree in terms of the intention of their respective critiques. Both maintain that speculation is inadequate for true knowledge. Both emphasize the necessity of the material and the sensual for the determination of truth. Both identify and reject what they see as contradictions in Christian thought when objects of the imagination are conflated with objects of reason, or when material or sensual reality is characterized as indeterminate.¹⁰⁷ And both maintain that the acceptance and continuation of such contradiction is not only philosophically problematic, but morally problematic as well. (A point we will return to in chapter five.) However, while the New Atheists use these appeals to ground their contention that Christianity provides a mere safe haven for a *false* consciousness,¹⁰⁸ Feuerbach uses these appeals to ground his contention that Christianity provided an authentic atheistic framework for a *developing* (*Entwicklungsgänge*) consciousness.

¹⁰⁷ To reiterate a point made above, for both the New Atheists and Feuerbach, the law of non-contradiction reigns supreme. According to Harris, "logical and semantic constraints appear to be two sides of the same coin, because our need to understand what words mean in each new context requires that our beliefs be free from contradiction (at least logically). Harris, *The End of Faith*, 53. While Feuerbach does not explicitly discuss the law of non-contradiction, the second half of his *Essence of Christianity* is devoted to its explication. Regarding the idea of the Trinity, for example, he states: "The idea of the Trinity contains in itself the contradiction of polytheism and monotheism, of imagination and reason, of fiction and reality. Imagination gives the Trinity, reason the Unity of the persons. According to reason, the things distinguished are only distinctions; according to imagination, the distinctions are things distinguished, which therefore do away with the unity of being. To the reason, the divine persons are phantoms, to the imagination realities. The idea of the Trinity demands that man should think the opposite of what he imagines, and imagine the opposite of what he thinks,—that he should think phantoms realities." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 232.

¹⁰⁸ This is perhaps why Richard Dawkins entitled his book, *The God Delusion*, instead of the *God Illusion*.

This countervailing vision makes the juxtaposition between Feuerbach's religious atheism and New Atheism even more apparent. Instead of maintaining, as his contemporaries do, that the illusions of Christianity render its supposed meaning entirely baseless, Feuerbach insisted that Christianity's illusions were indicative of humanity's essential nature and value.¹⁰⁹ Yes, Feuerbach concedes that the *form* of Christian theology is "imaginary" insofar as it is a product of the imagination and not the product of the understanding, but *only* insofar as it is that. However, on his account, the *content* of Christian theology is in fact objectively real insofar as it depicts human nature in its universality (however indirectly, imaginatively, or abstractly). Indeed, far from being a rejection of reality (as if that was even possible), Feuerbach contended that the imaginative projections of Christianity actually signaled an expansion of it—a deepening of one's own sense of what one has yet to come to know about oneself.

According to Feuerbach, so long as a person continues to view the mystifications of Christianity as indicative of a reality that exists beyond his or her sensual experience, he or she will fail to recognize the divinity of his or her own nature.¹¹⁰ For this reason he emphasized that

¹⁰⁹ According to John Glasse, Karl Barth identified this very notion as the crux of Feuerbach's theory of religion. On his account, "As Barth read Feuerbach, the root of his whole position is a vision of man as "not only the measure of all things, but also the epitome, the origin and end of all *values*." Glasse, "Barth on Feuerbach," 76. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁰ Now, one of the many strengths of Feuerbach's analysis was his recognition that religious imagery (and the formal theological structures constructed therefrom) combined components and contents from different areas of human experience and/or from various levels of human understanding. (A position which is not so different from our contemporary theological interlocutors.) According to Kamenka, then, Feuerbach is perhaps best understood as a scholar analyzing a complex social phenomenon—one who finds that a great deal can be said about it at multiple levels. Nevertheless, for Feuerbach, religious conceptions reflected the *universality* of the human condition as well as the *ubiquity* (note, *not* identity) of human experiences. For example, at times in his analysis, religion is presented as the "product of man's self-knowledge;" at others, it is presented as the "expression of man's dependence," or the "gratification of a wish," or the "poetic evaluation of the thing man admires," and so on. For Kamenka, Feuerbach's grammar and style should not be taken too literal on this point. While his "is" often seems to allude to identity (i.e. the essence of religion *is* man, *is* love, *is* dependence, *is* nature, and so on), it is simply oratorical and a habit of style which should not seriously affect the readers assessment of his critical evaluation of religion in its most general implications. Put differently, while Feuerbach presents each of these reductions with such force as to appear to regard each of them (alone) as the true essence in terms of which the whole of religion should be explained, each is

we should not, as is the case in theology and speculative philosophy, make real beings and things into arbitrary signs, vehicles, symbols, or predicates of a distinct, transcendent [sic], *i.e.* abstract being; but we should accept and understand them in the significance which they have in themselves, which is identical with their qualities, with those conditions which make them what they are:—thus only do we obtain the key to a *real theory and practice*.¹¹¹

Based on this account, it is easy to see how Feuerbach understood religion as an essentially human-centered view of the world. Indeed, according to Kamenka, Feuerbach's final assessment of religion was one which most obviously and openly took a human being's powers, qualities, and essential characteristics and treated them *as godly*.¹¹² On these grounds, the object of Christianity's illusion (*i.e.* God) can finally be uncovered for what it *really* is—an objectification of definite being (*i.e.* humankind), complete with all the qualities that render immateriality material, and turn an indeterminate existence (whatever that might mean) into a determinate (*i.e.* real) one. Put even more simply, for Feuerbach, God is nothing more than the human being (or perhaps put better, human nature, humanity in species) objectified, freed from the limits of determinability, and projected as another—indeed, the *highest*—being.¹¹³

III. Looking Back to Move Forward

This chapter began with a seemingly counterintuitive question. There I asked if it was possible that a deeper engagement with Christian theology could yield a more robust atheism than

simply one component which, either analyzed together or apart, represents an essential element of a necessary relation in a rather complex social phenomenon. And ultimately, Feuerbach looks to pull each of these essences together by showing that they are simply expressions of the essence of the human being.

¹¹¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xx. "Wir sollen also, die Bestimmungen und Kräfte der Wirklichkeit, überhaupt die wirklichen Wesen und dinge nicht wie die Theologie und spekulative Philosophie zu willkürlichen Zeichen, zu Vehikeln, Symbolen oder Prädikaten eines von ihnen unterschiednen, transzendenten, absoluten, d.i. abstrakten Wesens machen, sondern *in* der Bedeutung nehmen und erfassen, welche sie *für sich selbst* haben, welche identisch ist mit ihrer Qualität, mit *der* Bestimmtheit, die sie zu dem macht, was sie sind—so erst haben wir die Schlüssel zu einer *reellen Theorie und Praxis*." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹¹² Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 46.

¹¹³ We will return to the ethical implications of this claim in chapter five.

that which was currently on offer by the New Atheists. I answered that question in the affirmative and suggested that looking back to the religious atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach would help us move the contemporary debate toward more constructive and productive grounds. Unlike our contemporary New Atheist interlocutors who see little, if any, value in faith-based religion generally or Christian theism in particular, Feuerbach's philosophical orientation was decidedly religious. While his analysis was certainly intended to dismantle the formal structure of Christian theology, he was adamant about preserving the meaningfulness and significance of its content. Indeed, on his account, the true essence of religion conceived and affirmed human relation *as* godly and therefore, in Feuerbach's analysis of Christianity, we find an account of religious experience that legitimately exceeds the subjective (i.e. idiosyncratic), as well as a religious object that has an *actual* referent in empirical reality. His intention, then, was not to discard the Christian imaginary, but rather to engage it in order to translate (read: demystify) its underlying presuppositions and show that its supposedly divine (i.e. metaphysical) object was merely the objectified projection of humanity's material and sensuous nature.

Feuerbach's engagement began by railing against both the speculative philosophy of his day, exemplified in the German Idealism of G.W.F. Hegel, as well as the (Protestant) Christian theological history that Hegel's idealism inspired and engendered. As we recall, Hegel viewed material existence as an overarching process of unfolding "moments" within Absolute Spirit. Based on his (Hegel's) dialectical account, Absolute Spirit "alienated" itself from itself in the form of material existence, and then "reunited" itself with itself by "negating" these material forms, using them to aid its own awareness of itself as Spirit. The problem, as Feuerbach saw it, was that Hegel made this process (and the object thereof) the absolute concept from which all others derived, effectively disbaring Spirit from real materiality. According to Feuerbach, Christianity

adopted this framework and mirrored its logic within its own theological imaginary, ultimately conferring upon itself the self-same problem that Hegel faced within his—namely, that *Being* (i.e. Absolute Spirit, God) remained in another world.

Feuerbach's ultimate task, then, was to demonstrate how the entire history of religious and speculative philosophical thought was really a history of the development of alienated forms of self-consciousness. He did this by inverting Hegel's logic and contending that instead of conceiving of the world as the objectification and unfolding of the divine mind, the finite being achieved self-knowledge by externalizing or objectivizing its own essential nature in the idea of God. On this account, then, religion was not the revelation (i.e. self-differentiation and reconciliation) by the Infinite in the finite, but rather the self-recognition, self-discovery, and self-consciousness of the finite creature's infinite nature.

At the very heart of Feuerbach's analysis is a materiality and sensuousness that unequivocally rejects the possibility of any supposed existence that transcends the human. In this way, his anthropology is metaphysically atheistic insofar as it refuses to remain agnostic about the possibility of an independent, transcendent reality. But in this way also, his anthropology is decidedly religious insofar as it seeks to counter theological speculation with explanation, thereby displacing the divine from its (supposed) metaphysical heights and facilitating the self-discovery of humanity's own objective self-disclosure. According to Feuerbach, it is only when God's predicates are thought of abstractly, that is, when His predicates are conceived as the result of philosophic speculation, that the fiction arises wherein His existence (subjecthood, personhood) is somehow distinct and/or independent from the very predicates of said existence. As we will see in the following chapter, where it is shown that the predicate of being is the true subject, then so too will it be shown that where the divine predicates are indistinguishable from human predicates, the

divine subject is indistinguishable from the human as well. It is to the features of that disclosure that we now turn.

Chapter Three

The God of Limitation

I. Material Motivations

The previous chapter introduced both how and the extent to which Feuerbach found the supposed antithesis between the divine nature and human nature illusory. In critiquing Hegelian idealism, Feuerbach rejected what he took to be hidden and self-deceiving modes of human understanding. Where speculative philosophy and Christian theology each laid claim to the Absolute or to God, Feuerbach saw nothing in those claims but the mystified self-conceptions of human nature and human consciousness itself.¹¹⁴ However, instead of rejecting this mystification outright as blind superstition, mere illusion, or some kind of folk mythology, Feuerbach sought to establish an epistemological and existential explanation of its form and to offer a material and sensuous interpretation of its content.

As previously mentioned, Feuerbach contended that religion was indistinguishable from the consciousness which a human being had of his or her own universal nature. Now, while this description may seem a bit convoluted, Feuerbach insisted that the simplicity of its meaning would emerge clearly if we took the time to critically examine the imaginative expressions of Christian theology, as well as the material motivations that had inspired them. If Feuerbach was correct to have rejected the purely abstract and speculative nature of Hegelian metaphysics (and its

¹¹⁴ To be explicit, for Feuerbach, the Absolute of Hegel and/or the God of Christianity are not “*nothings*.” Each has authentic reality, just not independently of the human being’s species nature. In other words, a person’s essential nature is not contained within the Absolute or God, but rather vice versa—one’s essential nature contains within itself the Absolute or God.

theological off-shoots), and I believe that he was, then on his account, the metaphysical mystifications imbedded in Christianity begin to lose their seemingly inherent magnetism.¹¹⁵

To be sure, this is certainly not to say that with this loosening, theological mystifications simply vanish from the hearts and minds of believers. Indeed, on Feuerbach's account, it was the conceptual (read: experiential) basis of these theological mystifications which established the framework and narrative through which many (if not all) of our experiences—theological or otherwise were filtered in the first place. However, for Feuerbach, instead of being drawn into the obscurity of mystification and resting comfortably in the (selective) incomprehensibility that it afforded, he contended that one must dispel such obscurity and replace its comfort with a deeper and clearer sense of self-understanding. It was with this realization in mind that Feuerbach stated, "All therefore which, in the point of view of metaphysical, transcendental speculation and religion, has the significance only of the secondary, the subjective, the medium, the organ—has in truth the significance of the primary, of the essence, of the object itself."¹¹⁶ Put differently, for Feuerbach, the metaphysical and transcendental mystifications of Christian theology had for their content, only the positive qualities, determinations, and predications which could be drawn directly from the human being's own essential (read: universal) nature. And as we will see in detail below, on Feuerbach's account, this amounts to nothing less than the realization that the consciousness of

¹¹⁵ As Feuerbach states, "The more empty it [i.e. theological doctrine] is, however, for natural philosophy, the more profound is its "speculative" significance; for just because it has no theoretic fulcrum, it allows to the speculatist [sic] infinite room for the play of arbitrary, groundless interpretation." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 117. On his account, "The reason why Hegel conceived those ideas which express only subjective needs to be objective truth is because he did not go back to the source of and the need for these ideas. What he took for real reveals itself on closer examination to be of a highly dubious nature. He made what is secondary primary, thus either ignoring that which is really primary or dismissing it as something subordinate. And he demonstrated what is only particular, what is only relatively rational, to be the rational in and for itself." Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, 40.

¹¹⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 9. "Alles daher, was im Sinne der übermenschlichen Spekulation und Religion nur die Bedeutung des Abgeleiteten, des Subjektiven oder Menschlichen, des Mittels, des Organs hat, das hat im Sinne der Wahrheit die Bedeutung des Ursprünglichen, des Göttlichen, des Wesens, des Gegenstandes selbst." Zeno, *Des Wesen des Christentums*.

God (note, *not* God's consciousness as in Hegel) *is* self-consciousness and therefore knowledge of God *is* self-knowledge.¹¹⁷

This claim is central to Feuerbach's overall critique of Christianity. On his account, if the divine nature was really (essentially) different from the nature of humankind, then its existence would be both inconceivable and unimaginable. Indeed, for Feuerbach, the notion of a God "apart from" or "above" human nature surpassed the very limits of consciousness itself, and therefore, an independently existing, metaphysical God simply could not be an object *for thought*. On Feuerbach's account, then, neither God's being, nor His action made any sense outside of an anthropocentric framework, and consequently, he maintained that behind every religious image and/or theological mystification regarding the divine nature, there was an underlying human explication.¹¹⁸

As we will come to see, while Feuerbach found it necessary to point out the absurdity in the attempt to distinguish God's independent reality from the very predicates that would ground His supposed existence to begin with, he did not assume, like the New Atheists, that negative critique alone was enough to supplant theological speculation with authentic a-religious truth. For Feuerbach, one must also offer an alternative account that specified what this antithetical

¹¹⁷ "Das Bewußtsein Gottes ist das Selbstbewußtsein des Menschen, die Erkenntnis Gottes die Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen. Aus seinem Gotte erkennst du den Menschen und wiederum aus dem Menschen seinen Gott; beides ist eins." Zeno, *Des Wesen des Christentums*.

¹¹⁸ For Feuerbach, the ontological proof exposes a God whose existence must necessarily be *sensational*—that is, an existence conceived according to the form of our senses. He states: "The idea of sensational existence is indeed already involved in the characteristic expression "external to us." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 200. Externality, in other words, is a property qualified by the senses, and by the senses alone. Real, sensational existence, Feuerbach explains, is not dependent on my own mental spontaneity or activity, but rather is that by which I am involuntarily affected. In other words, what is external to me stands over and against me in time and space. If, then, God is to be more than the sum of my thoughts, feelings, or beliefs, His existence must be independent and external to them. Put differently, His existence must also be in time and space, for if His externality is only figurative, then so too must be His existence.

conception of God actually referred to and why Christian theology found it meaningful to frame the notion of God in this antithetical manner in the first place.¹¹⁹ The time has come, then, to examine precisely what Feuerbach meant when he said that God *is* the objectification of the constituent elements of human nature.

In this chapter, I aim to make explicit Feuerbach's conception of humanity's essential nature and its foundational relation to (religious) consciousness itself. Once analyzed, it should be clear exactly how Feuerbach's notion of determinate existence grounded his understanding of the divine, and moreover, how the constituent elements of human nature were objectified in Christian theology *as* the being of God. In short, for Feuerbach, God (as the object of religion) could be nothing other than the externalized expression of the human being's inward nature. For this reason, religion could not give God any content *except* a material and sensual one. And on this account, the apparent supernatural status of God was nothing more than the mystified projection of the features of human self-consciousness. In other words, at the very heart of religion lies the realization that one's consciousness *of* God (again, *not* God's self-consciousness as in Hegel) *is* one's consciousness of oneself.

¹¹⁹ To be sure, Feuerbach is not contending that theology has not done this—as the history of theological exegesis would certainly demonstrate otherwise. Rather, Feuerbach is contending, rather simply, that theology has only done this *theologically*, in which case it has only supplemented speculation with more “precise,” but no less speculative, speculations. Theology, on his account, is happy to rest in absurdity which it not only folds into itself, but also elevates the acceptance thereof into a fundamental measure of one's commitment to God. (John 20:29 comes to mind here: “Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”) This seems a rather full-proof safeguard against the charge of inconsistency and/or contradiction.

II. Consciousness and the Essential Nature of Humankind

According to Feuerbach, religion had its very basis in human consciousness (*das Bewußtsein*).¹²⁰ On his account, consciousness (in the strictest sense) was present only in a being to whom its species (i.e. its essential nature) was, or at least could be, an object of/for thought.¹²¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that the concept of “species-being” (*Gattung*) was one of the central themes in Feuerbach’s analysis on religion. But what exactly constituted this species-being? What was it that, on Feuerbach’s account, made a person unique and yet universal? What were the qualities of one’s nature that were integral to the materiality of personhood and yet transcended the human being as an individual subject? What were the characteristic elements of human nature that a person seemingly identified clearly only after glimpsing them in the divine? Put simply: reason (*Die Vernunft*), will (*der Wille*), and affection (*Das Herz*). For Feuerbach, thought, will, and feeling were “absolute perfections”—the highest powers of humankind; the very basis of human existence.¹²² They were, in short, what a human *is*.¹²³

¹²⁰ Regrettably, this is not the time to engage in tangential debates pertaining to the exclusivity of human consciousness. It will be readily admitted, by biologists and neuroscientists alike, that the origin or emergence of the consciousness is still not fully understood. For now, it will be taken as given that consciousness, as we know it, is exclusively human. For a nuanced account of the development of cognition and religious systems, see Todd Tremlin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹²¹ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 209. On Kamenka’s account, as important as this Feuerbachian conception of species-being seemed to many subsequent thinkers, especially religious thinkers, it had no particularly interesting connotation in Feuerbach’s overall analysis. He states: “He uses a striking phrase, the phrase that ‘man is both I and Thou,’ to bring together a number of different notions about man: the fact that man can see himself both subjectively and objectively, the fact that the human individual is somehow incomplete without both sexual and intellectual love, which requires recognition of and striving towards another, and the fact that thought, reason and speech use a language common to the species and are thus dependent on the existence of others.” Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 47-48.

¹²² “Vernunft, Liebe, Willenskraft sind *Vollkommenheiten*, sind die *höchsten Kräfte*, sind das *absolute Wesen* des Menschen als Menschen und der Zweck seines Daseins.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹²³ When it comes to Feuerbach’s analysis of theological mystification as an expression of what is essentially human, his tripartite characterization is quite traditional and conventional. The constituent elements of human nature are the qualities that are essential to a human being and yet transcend him or her as an individual. As such, they are characteristics of the species and therefore turn one’s attention beyond him or herself.

To be sure, Feuerbach contended that these “powers” were not synonymous with the particular objects (for lack of a better term) to which they generated and/or coincided with. The “power of thought,” for example, was distinguishable from a particular thought, much in the same way that the “powers of will or feeling” were distinguishable from particular intentions or emotions. (Though, the power of thought itself, for example, like the powers of will or feeling, could become an “object *of* thought *for* thought” for a thinking subject.) The essential nature of a human being did not, on Feuerbach’s account, *comprise* thoughts, goals, or sensitivities, but rather *was* the very capacity to think, will, and feel.

But even here, Feuerbach insisted that we must be careful not to conflate the notion of “capacity” with the notion of “ability”—as though each element should be taken merely as a “feature” of human nature that a person simply possessed. Thought, will, and feeling were not “powers” that one “had.” One did not apply them as one would some internal or external force. On the contrary, for Feuerbach, thought, will, and feeling were taken as the “animating, determining, governing powers—divine absolute powers—to which he can oppose no resistance.”¹²⁴ As such, he contended that these elements were the essentially infinite characteristics of human nature insofar as they were boundless in principle and insofar as they “possessed the human being” instead of being merely possessed *by* him or her.

Now, according to Feuerbach, the constituent elements of human nature could not be understood or accounted for in terms of a single individual—they required a minimum of two: an I and a Thou (*Ich und Du*). The fundamental distinction in his analysis of species-being, then, was

¹²⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 3. “Vernunft (Einbildungskraft, Phantasie, Vorstellung, Meinung), Wille, Liebe oder Herz sind keine Kräfte, welche der Mensch hat—denn er ist nicht ohne sie, er is, was er ist, nur durch sie—, sie sind als die sein Wesen, welches er weder *hat* noch *macht*, begründenden Elemente, die ihn *beseelended*, *bestimmended*, *beherrschenden Mächte*—*göttliche, absolute Mächte*, denen er keinen Widerstand entgegensetzen kann.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

between the existing individual as the finite and incomplete instance of the species, and human nature as such, which was the infinite character of the species—its essence. On Feuerbach's account, historically speaking, the expression of this infinite capacity had always been articulated in a person's highest ideals—that is, in his or her highest expression of reason, of love, of respect, of morality, and so on. As such, while the *content* of this expression had always been strictly “material,” for Feuerbach, the *form* of this expression had always taken on a religious significance: one's highest ideals had always been conceived as God.

For Feuerbach, then, self-consciousness was coterminous with the self-objectification of consciousness itself. As Wartofsky explains:

Just as the “object in itself” is an abstraction (i.e., empty of content), so too the “subject in itself” is an abstraction. The *process* of consciousness, therefore, is one that takes place as an appropriation by the subject of its “other,” of the object. In the process, the abstract “object in itself” becomes an “object for me” or for the subject. The crucial move, however, is that the “other” that the subject grasps *is consciousness itself* in its aspect as *other*, so that *self*-consciousness is a relation in which consciousness as subject is aware of *itself* as object.¹²⁵

Put differently, for Feuerbach, it was through the self-differentiation of consciousness that a person first “confronted” him or herself as both an I and a Thou—that is, as both a subject and an object *to oneself*, as well as a subject and object *of another*. And it was from this expanded sense of self that the foundation was laid to see oneself as the unity of the finite and the infinite together.

On Feuerbach's account, consciousness was more than mere sense perception or instinctual determinations or judgments (i.e. acts of the brain). Consciousness involved a certain self-awareness—not simply in the sense that a person was aware of his or her own surroundings, but

¹²⁵ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 207. Emphasis in original.

also in the sense that a person was aware of his or her self *as a self* in those surroundings.¹²⁶ Put differently, consciousness implied that not only could one separate what one did (i.e. instinctual existence) from what one was (i.e. intentional existence), but also that one could recognize that separation (and thus, that relation) and subsequently, make oneself *and* the object of that separation/relation, *and* the very act of that differentiation itself, objects of thought. Put differently, for Feuerbach, the very condition of self-consciousness was a separation or differentiation within consciousness itself.¹²⁷ (A point we will return to in detail below.)

Thus it was that Feuerbach stated, “Such as are a man’s thoughts and dispositions, such is his God; so much worth as a man has, so much *and no more* has his God.”¹²⁸ On his account, the being of God was simply a composite of human predicates and attributes, and therefore, what was worshipped as divine was really a projection of the synthesis of human perfections. While never explicitly discussed or defined by Feuerbach, a model of projection functioned within his analysis as the operational necessity of the religious consciousness insofar as it was the means by which the human being “transferred” his or her essential qualities to the divine. Projection, in this sense, was both the stimulus to self-objectification as well as the foundation of its theological mystification.

For Feuerbach, a person could not “get beyond” his or her essential nature. On the face of it, this statement seems rather innocuous, but its implications are far-reaching. For starters, if the limit of one’s nature is the limit of one’s consciousness, and if reason, will, and feeling are taken

¹²⁶ While Feuerbach’s conception of the self transcends that of atomistic individualism, his insistence on grounding his analysis in actual, material, *being* certainly establishes a very sovereign view of the self. Extrapolating backwards from material being will never lead us to immaterial being, only ever projected mystifications of being itself.

¹²⁷ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 207.

¹²⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 12. Emphasis added. “Wie der Mensch denkt, wie er gesinnt ist, so ist sein Gott: soviel Wert der Mensch hat, soviel Wert *und nicht mehr* hat sein Gott.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Emphasis added.

as the absolute perfections of human nature, then the limit of one's consciousness is also the limit of the absolute perfections of one's nature. Since reason, will, and feeling were understood by Feuerbach as the highest powers of humankind (and the notion of a "limited absolute perfection" is a contradiction in terms), logically speaking, it was impossible that one should perceive one's essential nature (i.e. one's species-being) as limited. In other words, according to Feuerbach, it was simply impossible to be conscious of a perfection as an imperfection—that is, it was impossible to think *thought*, will *willing*, or feel *feeling*, as limited. For Feuerbach, then, the constituent elements of human nature were the immediate (self)verification and (self)affirmation of the human being (as a species-being) as a universal, or perhaps put better, as an infinite being (*unendliche Geist*). On this account, if religion was indistinguishable from the consciousness which one had of one's own nature, and self-consciousness was necessarily the consciousness of the ultimate (i.e. unlimited), then for Feuerbach, religion was nothing else than the consciousness which one had of one's own infinite nature. Or as he put it: "The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature."¹²⁹

What this meant for Feuerbach's analysis was that religion's experiential pull (and Christian theology's mystification thereof) was merely indicative of the human being's initial grasp of his or her own self-consciousness and the extended level of awareness that came with it. This was because, for Feuerbach, every limit of a being is cognizable only by another being "out of" and/or "above" it. (After all, how would one even recognize a limit if he or she had no access to what surpassed it?) For Feuerbach, then, to be aware of one's limitations *as* limitations, or

¹²⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2-3. "Das Bewußtsein des Unendlichen ist nichts andres als das Bewußtsein von der *Unendlichkeit des Bewußtsein*. Oder: Im Bewußtsein des Unendlichen ist dem Bewußtsein die *Unendlichkeit des eignen Wesens Gegenstand*." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

perhaps put better, to be aware of one's finitude *as* finite, one must be confronted by an external measure of what is greater. But since the measure of one's nature is the sphere of one's vision (which is true of all natures, human or otherwise), and since one's vision cannot "get beyond" one's nature, and since one must see one's own nature as the ultimate, then for one to be aware of one's limitations *as* limitations, Feuerbach contended that one must conceive of *oneself* as the being that is "out of and above" one's own nature.

According to Feuerbach, it was in this initial and indirect form of self-knowledge that the mystification of human nature and the foundational falsehood of Christian theology were generated and sustained. Since human beings initially fail to find this measure in themselves, *and are conscious of it*, Feuerbach contended that the very measure which stood "above" them was inevitably taken as standing "outside of" them as well. In short, the consciousness of human nature—which was essentially grounded in the relation of the human being (as individual) to the human being (as species)—now emerged in relation to the new highest measure, God, conceived as an independently existing being.

This is a vital contention for Feuerbach, for as Kamenka explains, "as long as we do not make man the highest principle of all his activities, we necessarily make man dependent on some other principle, and fail to achieve inner unity and universality."¹³⁰ Indeed, according to William Chamberlain, the characteristic fault of Christian theology, as Feuerbach saw it, was that it deprived a person of his or her own nature in exteriorizing in God what really belonged to the essence of humankind. In so doing, the individual was disconnected from the essential indwelling communal spirit of his or her species-being.¹³¹ Feuerbach states: "The more subjective God is, the

¹³⁰ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 119.

¹³¹ William B. Chamberlain, *Heaven Wasn't His Destination: The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (London: Routledge, 1941), 41.

more completely does man divest himself of his subjectivity, because God is, per se, his relinquished self, the possession of which he however again vindicates to himself.”¹³² On Feuerbach’s account, then, in order for a human being to recover a true (species) being, the content of his or her projection must be re-appropriated: that which a person had unwittingly taken from him or herself and assigned to God must be reintegrated back into his or her present reality. Indeed, for Feuerbach, it was only after one became aware of the fact that the Christian imaginary was merely a mystified and projected anthropology, that one could begin the process of reclaiming the attributes and features of one’s own nature *as divine*.¹³³

III. Determinative Existence as Divine Existence

Recall above and note that according to Feuerbach, the notion of consciousness was meaningless without an object. Indeed, on his account, the notion of “sheer consciousness” was an utterly empty conception.¹³⁴ This is simply to say that the object of consciousness and

¹³² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 31.

¹³³ Feuerbach states: “As the action of the arteries drives the blood into the extremities, and the action of the veins brings it back again, as life in general consists in a perpetual systole and diastole; so it is with religion. In the religious systole man propels his own nature from himself, he throws himself outward; in the religious diastole he receives the rejected nature into his heart again. God alone is the being who acts of himself,—this is the force of repulsion in religion; God is the being who acts in me, with me, through me, upon me, for me, is the principle of my salvation, of my good dispositions and actions, consequently my own good principle and nature,—this is the force of attraction in religion.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 31. “Wie die arterielle Tätigkeit das Blut bis in die äußersten Extremitäten treibt, die Venentätigkeit es wieder zurückführt, wie das Leben überhaupt in einer fortwährenden Systole und Diastole besteht, so auch die Religion. In der religiösen Systole stößt der Mensch sein eignes Wesen von sich aus, er verstößt, verwirft sich selbst; in der religiösen Diastole nimmt er das verstoßne Wesen wieder in sein Herz auf. Gott nur ist das *aus sich* handelnde, *aus sich* tätige Wesen — dies ist der Akt der religiösen Repulsionskraft; Gott ist das *in mir, mit mir, durch mich, auf mich, für mich* handelnde Wesen, das Prinzip *meines* Heils, meiner guten Gesinnungen und Handlungen, folglich mein eignes gutes Prinzip und Wesen — dies ist der Akt der religiösen Attraktionskraft.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹³⁴ This is a bit problematic for Feuerbach’s methodology. On the one hand, his emphasis on thought being derivative of an object implies that material objects exist independently of humanity’s ability to be conscious of them. On the other hand, without consciousness, material objects cannot be properly understood as objects at all—they are essentially “non-things.” The problem here, is that external, material objects only become so as they become objects “for humanity.” This is partly why Feuerbach asserts: “Whatever kind of object, therefore, we are at any time conscious of, we are always at the same time conscious of our own nature; we can affirm nothing without affirming

consciousness itself are inherently interconnected—the very concept of consciousness implies the consciousness *of* something.¹³⁵ Now, in sense perception, consciousness of an object (i.e. object-awareness) is ordinarily explained as distinguishable from the consciousness of the self (i.e. self-awareness). In sense perception, that is, the conscious self is aware that the data collected is distinct from his or her consciousness thereof—sense perceptions (and the objects to which they refer) are not mere ideas of the mind. But for Feuerbach, in religion, consciousness of the object (i.e. the highest, the ultimate, God) and self-consciousness *coincide*: the religious object “resides” entirely within a person’s consciousness because the religious object *is* a person’s consciousness—objectified.

In the *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach stated this position succinctly:

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (*i.e.*, his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—*i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.¹³⁶

Because these two claims are central to Feuerbach’s analysis, it will be of great benefit to unpack them. I will do so in reverse order—discussing first the claim that the attributes of the divine nature are synonymous with/identical to the attributes of human nature, and next discussing the claim that religion is a human being’s relation to him or herself, though viewed as apart.

ourselves.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 6. But this would seem to undermine the external material reality that Feuerbach relies on for his very analysis. Does the material precede the consciousness, or does the consciousness precede the material? In general, Feuerbach seems to need both options to hold. (Though it might just as easily be said that consciousness and materiality are concurrent within his system.) His analysis of religion, however, allows consciousness to precede the object, simply because the object of religious consciousness is entirely “within” humanity’s consciousness.

¹³⁵ This statement is to be taken in its most general sense. This project does not set out to examine Feuerbach’s methodology in the context of the field of phenomenology.

¹³⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.

According to Feuerbach, whatever enters space and time must subordinate itself to the laws of space and time. “The god of limitation,” he states, “stands guard at the entrance to the world. Self-limitation is the condition of entry.”¹³⁷ While this may sound a bit cryptic, it simply meant that whatever was considered *real*, for Feuerbach, was considered such only as something *determinate (bestimmte)*—that is, as something definitive or discernable to consciousness itself. Because reason consists only in positing (this or that) being, the “genesis of being” or the “ground thereof” simply could not be thought (or imagined). On this account, then, the attributes and predicates of God could be nothing more than the reifications of human qualities or characteristics—for what “other” qualities could they possibly reference?

Now, according to Feuerbach, this claim generated a significant problem for Christian theology. On his account, Christianity envisioned a God who was within the world and yet independent of it; a God who was material and yet immaterial; a God who was specific and yet intangible; a God who capable of understanding weakness, suffering, and sin, and yet immovable, impassible, and unaffected and so on.¹³⁸ The descriptions of the Christian God, then, seemed to rest entirely upon the projection of human predicates, while simultaneously being independent of the source/model of said projections.¹³⁹ In other words, on theology’s account, we seem to have a God whose existence is both real (i.e. external and sensational) and yet not real (i.e. indistinguishable from human thought, feeling, and belief). According to Feuerbach, theology calls this a state of *spiritual existence*, but on his account, it is nothing more than bald sophistry. “Spiritual existence,” for Feuerbach, is an existence exclusively in thought, feeling, or belief. And

¹³⁷ Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy*, 10.

¹³⁸ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 57.

¹³⁹ Thanks go out to my colleague, Dr. Charles Gillespie, for pointing out that this point holds if and only if theology works as a dogmatic expression of reality and not as a kind of interpretive (or performative) act.

yet, on his account, theology contends that it stands midway between conceptual existence and sensational existence. But as a sensational existence, it lacks all the necessary conditions of sensuality, contradicting the very idea it is supposed to embody (no pun intended). Put differently, what theology requires of God's physicality, it denies with the requirement of His metaphysicality, and vice versa. Likewise, as a merely conceptual notion, "spiritual existence" is invariably reduced to a vague, *general* existence (i.e. *being* in general) divested of all the predicates of real, sensational existence. God's existence, so conceived, is essentially an empirical existence without any of its distinctive characteristics—a non-empirical empirical reality—or perhaps better, an immaterial material reality. But this is mere non-sense. Existence "in general" and "unsensual sensuality" are contradictions, not spiritual existences. Quite simply for Feuerbach, "To existence belongs full, *definite* reality."¹⁴⁰

This is a vital realization, for as Feuerbach stated, "That which is absolutely opposed to my nature, [i.e. God-in-Godself] to which I am united by no bond of sympathy, is not even conceivable or perceptible by me."¹⁴¹ Therefore, on his account, if all that was (or could be) perceptible by human beings were the qualities that were analogous (*analogen, ähnlichen*) to their own, then it was simply not possible to conceive of God as "distinct from" or "more than" those self-same qualities without falling into open contradiction of thought.

In order to mitigate this contradiction, Feuerbach contended that Christian theology had either compartmentalized God's supposedly supernatural existence from His natural predicates, unified His supposedly supernatural existence with His natural predicates, or simply denied that the predicates attributed to Him were anything more than the products of humanity's imperfect

¹⁴⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 200.

¹⁴¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 28.

understanding.¹⁴² But for Feuerbach, one can make the distinction between an object as it is “in itself” and an object as it is “for humans” only where that object can really appear otherwise—that is, only where said object it is not merely an object of the mind.¹⁴³ Consequently, on his account, if God is to exist for human beings, then He *cannot* appear otherwise than as He does (i.e. as analogous to the human)—precisely because the limit of His being is determined solely by the limit of human consciousness itself.

For Feuerbach, God (as an object of consciousness) was not generated from without (that is, from external material existence) but rather entirely from within. Or perhaps put better, perception of God’s material existence did not generate the idea of God (as all *real* objects of thought must, for Feuerbach), but rather His supposed “material existence” (his “personality”) was generated (i.e. abstracted) solely from the idea of existence/being itself. On Feuerbach’s account, then,

I cannot know whether God is something else in himself or for himself than he is for me; what he is to me is to me all that he is. For me, there lies in these predicates under which

¹⁴² For all intents and purposes, these tactics seem to play themselves out perfectly in the Christian conception of the Trinity. Feuerbach states: “The three persons are thus only phantoms in the eyes of reason, for the conditions or modes under which alone their personality could be realized, are done away with by the command of monotheism. The unity gives the lie to the personality; the self-subsistence of the persons is annihilated in the self-subsistence of the unity—they are mere relations. The Son is not without the Father, the Father not without the Son: the Holy Spirit, who indeed spoils the symmetry, expresses nothing but the relation of the two to each other...But at the same time these relations, as has been said, are maintained to be not mere relations, but real persons, beings, substances. Thus the truth of the plural, the truth of polytheism is again affirmed, and the truth of monotheism is denied. To require the reality of the persons is to require the unreality of the unity, and conversely, to require the reality of the unity is to require the unreality of the persons. Thus in the holy mystery of the Trinity,—that is to say, so far as it is supposed to represent a truth distinct from human nature,—all resolves itself into delusions, phantasms, contradictions, and sophisms.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 234-235.

¹⁴³ Feuerbach gives a wonderful illustration of this position early in *The Essence of Christianity*. He explains: “That which is to man the self-existent, the highest being, to which he can conceive nothing higher—that is to him the Divine Being. How then should he inquire concerning this being, what he is in himself? If God were an object to the bird, he would be a winged being: the bird knows nothing higher, nothing more blissful, than the winged condition. How ludicrous would it be if this bird pronounced: To me God appears as a bird, but what he is in himself I know not. To the bird the highest nature is the bird-nature; take from him the conception of this, and you take from him the conception of the highest being.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 17.

he exists for me, what he is in himself, his very nature; he is for me what he can alone ever be for me.¹⁴⁴

Consequently, for Feuerbach, even to phrase the matter as whether God was something else “in Himself” or “for Himself” was to invite confusion and incite controversy where it was unneeded. Indeed, as Kamenka makes clear, by making God supernatural it makes him indescribable and uninteresting (i.e., irrelevant to any human concern or human experience); and by making God describable and interesting it turns him into a *natural* being, but into one that is logically impossible.¹⁴⁵

Expanding upon this idea, Feuerbach contended that an object with no predicates or qualities (or at least an object which had no *knowable* predicates or qualities—which is to say the same thing), was, in essence, equivalent to the non-existence (i.e. nothingness) of that object. “Fantasy (*Phantasie*) alone,” he states, “is responsible for making a substance out of nothingness, but only by way of metamorphosing nothingness into a ghost-like, being-less being.”¹⁴⁶ Indeed, on his account, if it was really possible to conceive of nothingness (i.e. God-in-Godself), then the distinction between reason and unreason and/or thought and thoughtlessness would disappear completely.¹⁴⁷ Simply stated, for Feuerbach, if a person is to have any coherent conception of God, then he or she must insist upon the impossibility of Him having any predicates that differ completely from (or exceed) his or her own.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 16. “Ich kann gar nicht wissen, ob Gott etwas *andres* an sich oder für sich ist, als er *für mich* ist; wie er für mich ist, so ist er *alles* für mich.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹⁴⁵ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 57.

¹⁴⁶ Feuerbach, *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, 45.

¹⁴⁷ On this point, see Paul Ricoeur's discussion of sin as “nothingness” in his work *The Symbolism of Evil*. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), especially pp. 70-81.

¹⁴⁸ According to Feuerbach, the force of necessity generated by the ontological proof supplants the mind with sensational predication and qualities of God and demands that man find them in empirical reality. But to find them at all merely begs the question—for the existence of God must be accepted *prior to* the determinability that is meant to serve as the very support for the acceptance of God's existence. *Of course*, one can see God in determinate nature

Note, here, that as forceful as this requirement sounds, Feuerbach does not view it as a matter of dogmatic assertion. On his account, “to be” simply *is* to have predicates. Thus, to say that God either has no predicates or has “wholly other” ones (or perhaps put better, that He is the “source” of all predications) is effectively to say that there is no God that we, as human beings, can conceive (or imagine). As Kamenka explains,

A being is no more than all those things that might be predicated of it. We cannot say, ‘everything about God is natural, but he himself is supernatural’, because there is no ‘he himself’ over and above the properties that make him up. There is, in other words, no colourless, propertyless, unspeakable and unknowable ‘essence’ or ‘being’ or ‘substance’ behind all properties in which these properties inhere: an ‘essence’ or ‘being’ is nothing more than a collection of properties bound together in space and time. Properties are related to each other, not to some propertyless ‘substance’ behind them which would have to be both something and nothing.¹⁴⁹

For Feuerbach, existence “in general”—that is, existence without (or beyond) determinative qualities—was simply an absurdity. Qualities, on his account, “[were] the fire, the vital breath, the oxygen, the salt” of existence.”¹⁵⁰ As such, all *real* existence was necessarily qualitative and moreover, to doubt the determinative reality of the predicates of being was also to doubt the objective reality of the *subject* whose predicates they described. In other words, if the determinative reality of the predicate was the sole guarantee of real existence (and it’s inconceivable to Feuerbach how it couldn’t be), then the negation (or abstraction) of the

if one already accepts that He can be found there. The problem, however, is that determinate nature itself precludes such prior acceptance. And we recall that for Feuerbach, determinate nature is the only appropriate starting point. Thus, when such sensational conceptions and pretensions are supplanted, but cannot be found—that is, when man’s (rational) experiences come into direct contradiction with these conceptions—it is only intellectual honesty that leads man to deny that existence altogether. *Atheism*—and not theism—then, is the real consequence of the ontological proof.

¹⁴⁹ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 58.

¹⁵⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 15.

predication was subsequently the negation (or abstraction) of the reality as well.¹⁵¹ For Feuerbach, then, any being that appeared to be injured by knowable, definable, or comprehensible qualities, “[had] not the courage and the strength to exist.”¹⁵²

The implication of this claim is easy to see. For Feuerbach, if the notion of God’s incomprehensibility or indeterminability is rejected (which it must be if God’s existence is to have any *real* meaning *for* human beings), then the determining qualities of God’s existence must be seen for what they really are—reifications and projections of human characteristics and evaluations *and nothing more*.¹⁵³ On Feuerbach’s account, then, a divine quality is not divine because God is said to have it, but rather the contrary: God is said to have the qualities He has

¹⁵¹ It may be argued here that the insistence on predication is false because predicates do not exist independently (i.e. materially). But this makes little sense. For Feuerbach, subject and predicate are distinguished only as existence and essence. However, in reality, the two are identical. For Feuerbach, all being is “simple:” remove existence, and the notion of essence is empty. Remove essence (i.e. take away all necessary predicates of being) and the notion of existence is empty.

¹⁵² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 15. This claim speaks to the very heart of Feuerbach’s analysis and so to clarify it, he asks us to imagine what would remain of the *human* subject if he or she were to “lose” all of his or her predicates (as though this is even conceivable). How would one form a conception of an entirely quality-less being? What would an existence void of any determining (or determinable) features even look like? Could such a being even be conceived? (Of course not.) Likewise, but contrarily, what would it mean to say that a person was “more than” the sum of his or her known or knowable predicates? Whether referring to human nature or to God’s (which again, for Feuerbach is to refer to the same thing), “infinity” (the theological “more than” *par excellence*) is not a property which can be distinguished from the finite, but rather is merely an *extension* of the finite in numerical terms. Or as Kamenka explains, infinity is an “endless addition” of more finite properties or events—it does not rise above finitude but merely keeps extending it in space and time. Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 58. In short, a person as presented by Feuerbach, and/or God as presented by the theologian, can have no *supernatural* qualities, only *more* natural ones.

¹⁵³ According to Feuerbach, claiming that God is incomprehensible does not rescue theology from the contradiction it espouses. Instead, it solidifies the contradiction. On his account, in theology, inconceivability is used as a *defense* of conceivability: our conceptions are validated to the exact same extent to which they prove invalid. We can conceive of God *precisely because* He is inconceivable. To be sure, this is not some disguised attempt at negative predication—for, presumably, following this method to its logical end would undoubtedly lead to some positive predicate, whatever it might be. For Feuerbach, this “defense” seems more pernicious than that. Indeed, on his account, it appears to intentionally undermine the understanding, while reinforcing the subjective need of doing so—giving incomprehensibility the air of absolute necessity. In other words, God *must be* incomprehensible because man *needs him to be*; because without the quality of incomprehensibility (at least at carefully selected times), the defense of His existence becomes a “contradiction which can be concealed only by sophisms.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 213.

precisely because those qualities are considered in themselves to be divine (i.e. universal).¹⁵⁴ In other words, because God is measured by (i.e. exists solely within) the limits of a human being's consciousness, the predicates and/or qualities attributed to Him are merely those which have been previously judged to be worthy (or not) of a divine nature. For Feuerbach, then, if God (as a subject) is the determined while the predicate is the determining, then in truth, the rank of the Godhead is due *not* to the subject, but to the predicate.¹⁵⁵

This observation highlights the nuance of Feuerbach's religious atheism and its dissimilarity from the version of the New Atheists. As he contends, "he alone is the true atheist to whom the *predicates* of the Divine Being,—for example, love, wisdom, justice,—are nothing; not he to whom merely the *subject* of these predicates is nothing."¹⁵⁶ But the contrast is made even more apparent with the second half of his claim (which contended that religion is humanity's relation to itself, though viewed as apart). Feuerbach insisted that the only distinction between the divine predicates and the divine subject was that—to the human being—the subject (i.e. God's existence) did not *appear* as an anthropomorphism. However, he explains that this is so only because the conception of "being" is necessarily involved in a person's own existence as a subject. Put differently, since a person's own being is self-evident to him or her, in religion, the initial and necessary subconscious objectification and projection is of *being itself*. This is why Feuerbach

¹⁵⁴ In other words, that God is said to be (absolute) goodness, or justice, for example, indicates that goodness and justice are taken as supreme *human* values—they are qualities of humanity which are deserving of the highest dignity. Put differently, they are *transcendent* qualities: those which elevate humanity above his/her individuality and into the realm of the universal (i.e. the *divine*). Conversely, that God lacks certain qualities indicates that they are considered unbecoming of the human, and consequently, unworthy and/or ungodlike. That God is not capricious, or arbitrary, or vain, or selfish, (despite otherwise appearing so in countless texts) is an indication that these qualities, in humanity, are denigrated and vilified (at least in others).

¹⁵⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 21.

¹⁵⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 21. Emphasis added. "Ein wahrer Atheist, d.h. ein Atheist im gewöhnlichen Sinne, ist daher auch nur der, welchem die Prädikate des göttlichen Wesens, wie z.B. die Liebe, die Weisheit, die Gerechtigkeit nichts sind, aber nicht der, welchem nur das Subjekt dieser Prädikate nichts ist." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

asserts that *to exist* is, for the human being, the first datum—that which constitutes the very idea of the subject and presupposes the reality of its predicates.¹⁵⁷ On his account, then,

Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects (*vergegenständlicht*) his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but *as* the object of an object, of another being than himself.¹⁵⁸

Now, as discussed above, the identity of the human and divine predicates (and the consequent identity of the human and divine nature) is obscured by the mystified notion that God's nature is somehow “more than” the human's—a notion, we recall, which was reinforced by a person's recognition of his or her own subjective (i.e. idiosyncratic) limitations. But for Feuerbach, distinguished and detached from the species-nature of humankind and combined with the notion of God as an independent being, the notion of the “infinite fulness” of divine predicates devolves into a mystification without reality—a conception (necessarily) drawn from the sensible world, but without any of its essential conditions. He states:

Each new man is a new predicate, a new phasis of humanity (*ein neues Talent der Menschheit*). As many as are the men, so many are the powers, the properties of humanity. It is true that there are the same elements in every individual, but under such various conditions and modifications that they appear new and peculiar. The mystery of the inexhaustible fulness of the divine predicates (*Das Geheimnis der unerschöpflichen Fülle der göttlichen Bestimmungen*) is therefore nothing else than the mystery of human nature considered as an infinitely varied, infinitely modifiable, but, consequently, *phenomenal being* (*sinnlichen Wesens*).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 18. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 29-30. “Der Mensch—dies ist das Geheimnis der Religion—vergegenständlicht sein Wesen und macht dann wieder sich zum *Gegenstand* dieses vergegenständlichten, in ein Subjekt, eine Person verwandelten Wesens; er denkt sich, ist sich Gegenstand, aber als *Gegenstand eines Gegenstands*, eines *andern* Wesens.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹⁵⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 23.

For Feuerbach, then, it was not until several (and those contradictory) attributes were united in one being—and this being was conceived as *personal*—that the origin of religion was lost sight of, and moreover, that what one’s reflective power converted into a predicate distinguishable from oneself was originally the true subject.¹⁶⁰ This is most clearly evidenced by the fact that, on Feuerbach’s account, what a person declares concerning the nature of God is always only (and can only be) an abstraction and/or extrapolation of what he or she declares concerning him or herself. He states,

Man denies as to himself only what he attributes to God. Religion abstracts from man, from the world; *but it can only abstract from the limitations*, from the phenomena; in short, from the negative, not from the essence, the positive, of the world and humanity: hence, in the very abstraction and negation it must recover that from which it abstracts, or believes itself to abstract. And thus, in reality, whatever religion consciously denies—always supposing that what is denied by it is something essential, true, and consequently incapable of being ultimately denied—it *unconsciously restores in God*.¹⁶¹

This is a key insight, especially when combined with Feuerbach’s claim that the “personality” of God constitutes the true essence of religion. For God to be God, according to Feuerbach, He must *at least* have in full measure all the attributes that the human has (or can have). The “more” of God, then, can only ever be abstracted from the limitations of the human as *individual*. But when we recall that the human is also a species-being and therefore contains within him or herself the infinite, the “more” of God returns from whence it came—to humanity itself. In short, for Feuerbach, the reality of God is nothing other than the objectification of the human being in species.

What’s more, that Christian theology insists that God should not be taken as a purely abstract being (that is, as some strictly metaphysical placeholder) effectively makes God’s

¹⁶⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 22. Emphasis added.

¹⁶¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 27.

action—indeed, His very purpose for being (i.e. His essence and existence)—entirely anthropocentric. It is not said, for example, that God reserves *a part of* His time, energy, and action for the benefit of humankind (and the rest towards who knows what), but rather that His total and perfect purpose, will, and action are directed solely at the lives of humanity.¹⁶² On Feuerbach’s account, then, the person (or more importantly here, the *religion*) who/that makes God act humanly—that is, the person/religion who/that makes God interested in the affairs, well-being, and goodness of humanity *and nothing else*—in truth, declares human activity to be divine, for a higher form (or end) of action is impossible for a person to conceive (or imagine). And so, it is only because the human projects his or her own essential activity (i.e. thought, will, and feeling) outward and then objectifies it, that he or she feels as though he or she *receives* the impulse or motive (for action) not from him or herself, but from an independent, divine being.¹⁶³ Thus, Feuerbach concludes, “It is true that man places the aim of his action in God, but God has *no other aim of action* than the moral and eternal salvation of man: thus man has in fact no other aim than himself.”¹⁶⁴ In short, according to Feuerbach, as the human begins to contemplate the nature of

¹⁶² According to Luther, “These words of Paul should be pondered carefully, as follows. Is it true or is it not that Christ died? Again, did He die to no purpose? Unless we are obviously insane, we are forced to answer here that He did die, that He did not die to no purpose, and that *He died for us, not for Himself.*” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 181. Emphasis added. It should be noted, here, that some earlier Christian theologians, like St. Thomas Aquinas, would not make the claim that God is entirely *pro nobis*. While Feuerbach does not concern himself with Catholic patristics, he does seem to operate on the assumption that Luther speaks for the entirety of the Christian theological tradition.

¹⁶³ Returning once again to Luther’s 1535 Lectures on Galatians. He states: “When I have this righteousness within me, *I descend from heaven* like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the sad, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command. If I am a servant, I faithfully tend to my master’s affairs. In short, those who know for sure that Christ is their righteousness not only cheerfully and gladly work in their calling. They also submit themselves for the sake of love to magistrates—even to wicked laws and everything else in this present life. If need, be, even to burden and danger. For they know that God wants this and is pleased by this service.” Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings: Third Edition*, ed. William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 92. Emphasis added.

¹⁶⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 30. Emphasis added. “So wird der Mensch, indem er scheinbar aufs tiefste erniedrigt wird, in Wahrheit aufs höchste erhoben. So bezweckt der Mensch nur sich selbst in und durch Gott.

this independent, divine being, he or she inevitably finds that the impulse that he or she seemingly received from it originated precisely from where he or she initially placed it.

IV. God as the Element of Human Understanding

As we now know, Feuerbach conceived of theology as the formalized disuniting of the human from his or her own essential nature. This should come as no surprise given the fact that, on his account, (Protestant) Christianity presented God as—amongst other things—the foundational antithesis of man.¹⁶⁵ But if, as Feuerbach contends, this theological representation of God is false—that is, if God is *not* the antithesis of the human *per se*, but rather the very objectification of his or her inward nature—then the qualities of God’s being must instead be seen as reflections of human nature itself.¹⁶⁶ Now, while it is certainly necessary to *say* that God is the abstract reification of the human’s essential nature, assertion alone is not sufficient to demonstrate its logical necessity. One must also detail the specific human attributes that would be considered worthy of divine objectification. Let us first focus our attention, then, on the element which grounds the very notion of God as *beginning* or *being*: the understanding.¹⁶⁷

Allerdings bezweck der Mensch Gott, aber Gott bezweckt nichts als das moralische und ewige Heil des Menschen, also bezweckt der Mensch nur sich selbst.“ Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

¹⁶⁵ The “anti” in antithesis, here, should not be taken in the antagonistic sense of “against,” or even in the substitutive sense of “instead of,” but rather simply in the oppositional sense of “different than” or “other than.” Credit and thanks are given to Mr. Matt Farley who helped to clarify these differing modes of interpretation for me.

¹⁶⁶ In this regard, Feuerbach follows a classic theological sequence in engaging the issues surrounding the *attributes* of God prior to engaging the issues surrounding Christology.

¹⁶⁷ While it is certainly strange to personify the understanding (or any of the other elements we will be discussing), language is rather limited when discussing consciousness. Mr. Matt Farley explains to me that this is so because we are writing *about* consciousness and are not *writing consciousness*. Writing consciousness would be impossible as its phenomenality is non-verbal, pre-verbal, and verbal together. Writing *about* consciousness, however, means that one is participating in a historical discourse about it, with words already made, and so there is no way to get it perfectly right.

According to Feuerbach, if religion is identical with the process by which the human becomes aware of his or her own essential nature, then the theological account of God's antitheticity and contradistinction must be understood as an objectified representation of a fundamental distinction *within* the human itself. This claim is to be taken in two distinct, but related, ways: 1) the source of the supposed distinction must be understood to originate *in* human nature—since what is objectified in God must first have its essence in the being which does the objectifying; and 2) God, as “object,” must be understood as an instantiation of the objectified projection of the fundamental “process” of distinguishing itself. On this account, the conception of God's essential distinction from the human is nothing more than an image of the externalized, objectified, and projected “element” of objective discernment itself (i.e. reason/intelligence), and the subsequent establishment of God as a perfect “embodiment” of that very element. Let's take a closer look.

As discussed above, for Feuerbach, consciousness was the characteristic mark of a perfect nature.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, on his account, it was the very ability to make distinctions and discernments that signaled the essential shift from unconsciousness (i.e. non-existence) to consciousness (i.e. existence) in the first place. While represented theologically as God (or perhaps better, God-in-Godself, the Godhead), Feuerbach found in this image nothing more than the objective nature of the understanding affirming itself as the highest, most perfect being. On this account, God was conceived as the perfect instantiation of the understanding itself, externalized and given independent existence (i.e. independent subjecthood).¹⁶⁹ The understanding, for Feuerbach, was

¹⁶⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ On this point, Feuerbach lacks a degree of specification that would prove helpful to his overall analysis. At times, consciousness is a term that is used interchangeably with reason and intellect—as a notion of discernment and/or the ability to make distinctions. At other times, it is used as a term which seems to encapsulate the total essence of man's species-being.

thus the very source, the absolute ground of logical identity (i.e. the consciousness of existence/being), for it was conceived *as* the foundational processor of material existence itself—that which determined objective truth in the first place. Or as Feuerbach put it, it was the “consciousness of law, necessity, rule, measure, because *it is itself* the activity of law, the necessity of the nature of things under the form of spontaneous activity, the rule of rules, the absolute measure, the measure of measures.”¹⁷⁰ On this account, the notion of God as an independent and metaphysical being was nothing more than a theological mystification of the notion of *objectified* conscious objectivity.¹⁷¹

According to Feuerbach, as an instantiation of the understanding, God was not conceived as a thought personified, but rather as thought itself (or perhaps better, intelligence itself) objectified (i.e. an “objectivity-being,” “*Wesen des Verstandes*”). This is a rather fine distinction insofar as the notion of objectification often accompanies the notion of personalization.¹⁷² But according to Feuerbach,

Only by and in the understanding has man the power of abstraction from himself, from his subjective being,—of exalting himself to general ideas and relations, of distinguishing

¹⁷⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 34. Emphasis added.

¹⁷¹ This is an admittedly odd way of phrasing this idea, but it seems unavoidable, nonetheless. The point is not simply that God’s being is objective (in the sense of being an object to humanity) but rather that His own subjectivity (i.e. His personhood) is given objectivity *as* objectivity objectified.

¹⁷² For Feuerbach, God (as a theological object) tended to be conceived (by the common man) as an objectified image of one’s own subjectivity (i.e. individuality). In this case, however, God’s “objectivity” was nothing more than a person’s subjectivity (i.e. idiosyncrasy) made objective, and as such there was nothing truly objective about it at all. For Feuerbach, subjectivity (i.e. inclination), divine or otherwise, is simply incongruent with the nature of the understanding. To be clear, the notion of subjectivity as “subjecthood” is not synonymous with the notion of subjectivity as “inclination.” The understanding is integral to the former notion insofar as it is that very element which marks the initial transition from unconsciousness to consciousness, thereby establishing the very existence of a “subject” in the first place. The latter notion is diametrically opposed to the understanding insofar as it takes personal predispositions (i.e. idiosyncrasies, biases, prejudices, limitations, etc.) and attempts to pass them off as features of the intellect (i.e. universal). But here, we are no longer dealing with fact as fact (i.e. impartial consciousness), but rather with “fact” as conviction—and indeed, one which makes no appeal to reason or to understanding at all. Likewise, anthropomorphism is also incongruent with the nature of the understanding—as each personification merely represents a “localized” (for lack of a better term) quality or set of qualities self-adjudicated as worthy of the divine (i.e. universal).

the object from the impressions which it produces on his feelings, of regarding it in and by itself without reference to human personality.¹⁷³

What is important to note here is that God, so conceived, is not phenomenal at all. As a projected instantiation of objectivity itself, this conception of God is purely abstract, incorporeal, and metaphysical. Therefore, according to Feuerbach, in characterizing God as absolute beginning, Christian theology accurately represented the understanding as it really existed in human nature. As the objectification of objective self-discernment itself, God is essentially the original, self-subsistent, unified, infinite, and necessary, criterion, determiner, and measure of all reality.¹⁷⁴ Let's take a moment to unpack these manifestly "transcendent" features.

According to Feuerbach:

The understanding is that which conditionates [sic] and co-ordinates all things, that which places all things in reciprocal dependence and connection, because it is itself immediate and unconditioned; it inquires for the cause of all things, because it has its own ground and end in itself.¹⁷⁵

From this description it is easy to see how one could identify God *as* a representation of the understanding. For Feuerbach, only that which is itself unreducible can regard everything besides itself as such. On his account, then, the understanding cannot be deduced, because it itself is the

¹⁷³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 35.

¹⁷⁴ According to Feuerbach: "It is God, therefore, who can save me from all moral as well as physical evil, whom I can unqualifiedly rely upon in all times of need. But in order to be an object of unqualified faith and trust, and hence in order to be God or, rather, to be able to be God, a being must be without needs; for a being with needs has enough to do for itself. It must be veracious and unchangeable (in being good); otherwise it is not dependable. It must be omnipresent; otherwise it can help me where it is but not in distant places. It must be knowing—indeed, omniscient—for if it has no eyes and ears, like the pagan statues of gods, it cannot perceive my sorrows. It must be omnipotent and unlimited, for a limitation on its power or its nature in general is also a limitation on my trust. It must be autonomous and independent of all things—indeed, with power over all things—for if it is not Lord of all things, it is not Lord over all evils." Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, trans. Melvin Chernoff (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 52-53.

¹⁷⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 37. "Der Verstand leitet alle Dinge von Gott als der ersten Ursache ab, er findet ohne eine *verständige* Ursache die Welt dem sinn—und zwecklosen Zufall preisgegeben; d.h.: er findet nur *in sich*, nur in seinem Wesen, den *Grund* und *Zweck* der Welt, ihr Dasein nur klar und begreiflich, wenn er es aus der Quelle aller klaren und deutlichen Begriffe, d.h. aus sich selbst erklärt." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

very source of all deductions (i.e. the source of all qualitative distinction). As the ground of all determination, the understanding is the original, primordial element of true (human) existence. Without it, there is absolutely nothing that could be known to exist at all.¹⁷⁶ Hence Feuerbach states, “And thus the understanding posits its own nature as the causal, first, premundane existence—*i.e.*, being in rank the first but in time the last, it makes itself the first in time also.”¹⁷⁷ Based on this account, in Christian theological terms, God is the *Alpha*.

As the original, primitive element of consciousness, the understanding is also self-subsistent and independent. On Feuerbach’s account, if the understanding is the foundation of the determination of objective reality, then it itself could not be dependent on anything else for its own determination—for if it was, then that (whatever *that* might be) would necessarily become the foundation of the determination of objective reality and the understanding would simply be another determination of *it*. (This is, of course, the exact account which is proffered by Christian theology.) Indeed, this is precisely what Feuerbach meant when he contended that the understanding alone enjoys all things without being itself enjoyed. He states:

The understanding is...the subject which cannot be reduced to the object of another being, because it makes all things objects, predicates of itself,—which comprehends all things in itself, because it is itself not a thing, because it is free from all things.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ While this may seem like a rather audacious assertion to make, its truth is rather banal. How, for example, would it be possible to recognize perceptions *as perceptions* without the understanding? How would it be possible to differentiate between instinctual behavior and intentional behavior without the understanding? How would it be possible to make abstractions, physical or metaphysical, without the understanding? How would it be possible to recognize, differentiate, and/or abstract the qualities or predicates of reality *at all* without the element of recognition, differentiation, and abstraction? What would it mean to say that the qualities or predicates of material reality “existed” prior to our ability to identify them? What would it mean to say that there even was a “prior to,” *prior to* our discernment of what *is*?

¹⁷⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 37.

¹⁷⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 40.

According to Feuerbach, then, it was simply inconceivable to think of the understanding as both original and independent (and thus the highest) and yet nevertheless as either derived from, or equivalent with, another “highest.” In other words, the immediacy (i.e. originality) of the understanding made it impossible for it to conceive of two supreme beings (or, epistemologically speaking, two contrary foundational modes of knowing). For Feuerbach, this represented the logical law of non-contradiction. On this account, then, unity was essential to the very conception of reason itself, for as Feuerbach contended, it was simply inconceivable that the understanding should think that what was self-contradictory, false, or irrational could anywhere be true; or conversely, that what was true, rational, or logical, could anywhere be false.

This observation had especially important ramifications for Christian theology. For Feuerbach, the unity of the understanding effectively did away with the notion of a “special existence.” Whether in terms of God’s being, action, or the manner or degree to which they could be known, Feuerbach argued that it was simply impossible for one to rationally conceive of an *essentially different* kind of existence, and thus an essentially different way of knowing, than that which affirmed itself in his or her own essential nature. Indeed, according to Feuerbach, “every understanding which I posit as different from my own, is only a position of my own understanding, i.e., an idea of my own, a conception which falls *within* my power of thought, and thus expresses my understanding.”¹⁷⁹ For Feuerbach, then, if the understanding was the very means by which

¹⁷⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 41. Emphasis added. “Vielmehr ist jeder vermeintlich andere Verstand, den ich setze, nur eine Bejahung meines eignen Verstandes, d.h. eine Idee von mir, eine Vorstellung, die innerhalb mein Denkvermögen fällt, also meinen Verstand ausdrückt.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. While this conception may raise the specter of monism and thereby complicate Feuerbach’s empiricism, it seems rather unavoidable. For Feuerbach, to conceive of God as “wholly other” would require an independent existence—one which would inevitably exceed the limits of human understanding. Thus, any conception of God must be understood as an abstract mystification of one’s own understanding. There is simply no “more than” that can be provided. Even the notion of revelation is no help here, for on Feuerbach’s account, revelation’s “mode of transfer” must still fit within the paradigm of human understanding in order for it to be recognized as such. But in so doing, revelation itself becomes indistinguishable from one’s own conception of it.

distinctions were made, then God conceived as “other” (i.e. distinguished from man’s own being) was *still* a conception formed within/by/through the understanding itself. He states:

But whatever may be the conditions of the understanding which a given human individual may suppose as distinguished from his own, this other understanding is only the understanding which exists in man in general—the understanding conceived apart from the limits of this particular individual.¹⁸⁰

Simply stated, on Feuerbach’s account, knowledge and truth were possible only if the object of knowledge was in fact *knowable*—that is, only if what was to be known was of the nature consciousness itself.¹⁸¹ For Feuerbach, then, the understanding simply could not get “outside” of itself and thus whatever “else” was suggested to be “out there” would necessarily be unknowable—as it would necessarily exist beyond the very paradigm that allowed humankind to know anything at all. Returning once more to theological terms, based on this account, God, as the instantiation of the understanding, is also the *Omega*.

For Feuerbach, immediately involved in the notion of unity, is the notion of infinitude (in Christian terms, the Alpha *and* the Omega). On his account, finitude rested on the distinction between the individual and the species, or as he would say, the distinction between existence and essence. Infinitude, on the other hand, rested on the unity of existence and essence. He states:

that is finite which can be compared with other beings of the same species; that is infinite which has nothing like itself, which consequently does not stand as an individual under a

¹⁸⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 41-2.

¹⁸¹ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 16-17. Put differently, for Feuerbach, the understanding signifies the absolute *indifference* and *identity* of all things and beings. Now, this should not be taken in the sense that it is *indifferent* as to the existence of things and beings—as the understanding is precisely that which is concerned with establishing determinate existence. Nor should it be taken to mean that it makes all things and beings *identical*. Indeed, this would be to negate the understanding as the very faculty of distinction and discernment in the first place. Rather it is meant in the sense that it establishes the determinate existence of all things and beings *through the self-same “process.”* Regardless of *what* object is determined (be it physical or metaphysical), *how* it is determined is (and must always be) the same.

species, but is species and individual in one, essence and existence in one.¹⁸²

Now, recall above and note that for Feuerbach, as the original criterion of all reality, the understanding was deemed incapable of comparison (i.e. incapable of being compared), precisely because it was itself considered to be the very source of all combinations and comparisons. It could not be measured, because it was itself considered to be the measure of all measures. In other words, for Feuerbach, nothing could exceed the understanding because the understanding itself was that which established the very range of what was (and wasn't) knowable. As such, its existence and its essence were one—what it is *is* what it does.¹⁸³ And, on Feuerbach's account, since the set of what is knowable was boundless—since (by way of species knowledge) it was always possible to know something *else*—the understanding was considered to be essentially infinite.

Pay special attention to the theological implication here. If God's being (i.e. His essence) is said to transcend the infinite range of knowable things, then: 1) the notion of infinity no longer has any meaning—for as we recall, infinity is not a property which is distinguished from the finite, but rather simply an extension of it in numerical terms; and (more importantly) 2) God's existence would necessarily limit the understanding—as there would now exist something that the understanding could not know (although exactly *how* it could know that in the first place remains a mystery.) But, then, since a limited (i.e. finite) understanding could not discern the unlimited (i.e. infinite), the very knowledge of God's infinite existence would necessarily be out of reach yet again. For this reason, according to Feuerbach, the understanding was also deemed to be absolutely

¹⁸² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 42.

¹⁸³ This is another instance where Feuerbach's lack of precise methodological thought complicates his explication. On the one hand, the constituent elements of human nature, while distinct, cannot be derivatives of any other. Each "exists" independently and has its own object as its end. (i.e. thought *thinks*, will *wills*, and feeling *feels*.) However, Feuerbach also speaks as though thought/understanding must "precede" the others, for how would one identify thinking, willing, and/or feeling *as such* without it? Will and feeling are not dependent on the understanding for their "existence," but seem to be dependent on it in order to distinguish their own elemental essences.

necessary, or perhaps put better, “absolute necessity” itself. For Feuerbach, reason existed because if it didn’t, if there was no consciousness, all would be, in effect, *nothing*—existence (if it could even be called that) would be equivalent to non-existence as such. But as mentioned above, Feuerbach contended that consciousness first founds the difference, not between materiality and immateriality, but rather between existence and non-existence. Without the recognition of said distinction, the very notion of existence becomes nonsensical and irrational. Existence (i.e. absolute necessity, objectified) alone, then, is deemed absolutely necessary.¹⁸⁴ Feuerbach states:

In the absurdity of its non-existence is found the true reason of its existence, in the groundlessness of the supposition that it were not the reason that it is. Nothing, non-existence, is aimless, nonsensical, irrational. Existence alone has an aim, a foundation, rationality; existence is, because only existence is reason and truth; existence is the absolute necessity.¹⁸⁵

In the end, then, Feuerbach contended that not only was the understanding itself projected and objectified as the being of God, but the very “features” and/or operational “functions” of the understanding were projected and objectified as “personal” predicates of God’s being and/or existence as well.

¹⁸⁴ While this may read as overly cryptic, language is unfortunately rather limited in its ability to describe indeterminacy determinately. More to the point, it is simply impossible. The notion of non-existence is simply a non-starter for Feuerbach. To make sense of it at all, non-existence must “exist” as some kind of (determinate) materiality that can be conceptualized. Put differently, “non-being” itself must be conceived as some kind of being (i.e. some kind of object) if a human being is to make reference to it in the first place. Without consciousness, this “nothing” that “existed without existing” could never be known to “not exist” at all. (For Feuerbach, this is precisely why Eastern philosophies/religions fail to reach the level of “consummate religion,” for they have yet to accept the conclusion that non-being is simply inconceivable.) He states, “It is true that thus, negativity, as the speculative philosophers express themselves—*nothing* is the cause of the world;—but a nothing which abolishes itself, i.e., a nothing which could not have existed if there had been no world.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 43. Emphasis in original. In other words, Feuerbach contends that, according to the speculative philosophers and Christian theologians, the “nothing” from which the world comes is only conceivable if it itself can be understood as some “thing” that exists as a non-thing—that is, it is only conceivable as an abstraction of the understanding. It is true, Feuerbach contends, that the world springs out of a want, out of privation. However, “it is false speculation to make this privation an ontological being.” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 43.

¹⁸⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 43.

That said, while the metaphysical Godhead may have been primary in the Christian imaginary (given Christian theology's insistence on God as the creator *ex nihilo*), according to Feuerbach, such a conception was, nevertheless, not the *real* God of religion (here, of Christianity). He states,

God as God—the infinite, universal, non-anthropomorphic being of the understanding, has no more significance for religion than a fundamental general principle has for a special science; it is merely the ultimate point of support,—as it were, the mathematical point of religion.¹⁸⁶

Put differently, Feuerbach contended that while the understanding laid the groundwork for God's objectification as *other*, such a representation related only to His *existence*. As an instantiation of the understanding, God was merely a necessary concept which served as the scaffold on which the true reality of His "person-ality" could be constructed. In order to grasp the true nature of God's supposed *essence*, then, we must "turn away" from the understanding and turn towards the other two constituent elements of human nature, for on Feuerbach's account, it was only in these representations that God's otherness gave way (or perhaps put better, *returned*) to the very (embodied) nature which established it in the first place.

V. Moving Forward

This chapter laid the structural foundation for Feuerbach's understanding of God as the instantiation of humanity's projected and objectified (i.e. reified) nature. It began by analyzing Feuerbach's conception of consciousness and its essential relation to his conception of humanity

¹⁸⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 44. "Gott als God—das unendliche, allgemeine, anthropomorphismenlose Wesen des Verstandes hat für die Religion nicht mehr Bedeutung als für eine besondere Wissenschaft ein allgemeiner Grundsatz, womit sie anfängt; es ist nur der oberste, letzte Anhalts—und Anknüpfungspunkt, gleichsam der mathematische Punkt der Religion." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

as species-being. As our discussion made clear, the fundamental distinction in the analysis of religious consciousness was, for Feuerbach, that between the existing individual as the finite and incomplete instance of the species, and human nature as such, which was understood by Feuerbach as the infinite character of the species—its essence. On this account, Feuerbach contended that religion was indistinguishable from the consciousness which a human being had of his or her own universal nature. For Feuerbach, then, the metaphysical or transcendental mystifications of Christian theology had for their content, only the positive qualities, determinations, and predications which could be drawn directly from the human being's own essential (read: universal) nature. In the end, behind every religious image and/or theological mystification regarding the divine nature, there was an underlying material foundation.

Based on this account, whatever was considered *real*, for Feuerbach, was so only as something *determinate*. But this qualification posed a serious problem for Christian theology, for as Feuerbach saw it, Christianity's manifest concession to it required Christianity to vacillate between two contradictory notions of God: a supernatural (but ultimately indescribable) conception, and a natural/material (but ultimately logically impossible) conception. Nevertheless, Feuerbach still did not call for the dissolution of Christianity on that account. As we recall, Feuerbach was not simply interested in the accuracy and/or veracity of Christian theology, but also in the experiential reality of what the various theological contradictions were said to represent.

Accordingly, if the notion of God's incomprehensibility or indeterminability is ultimately rejected (which it must be if God's existence is to have any real meaning), then, on Feuerbach's account, the determining qualities of God's existence (if they are to be spoken of at all) must be seen for what they really are: reifications and projections of human characteristics and evaluations. The foundational basis of these projections came in the objectified form of the understanding. As

the ground of all determination, Feuerbach conceived of the understanding as the original, primordial element of true existence—without which nothing could be said to be consciously known to exist at all. But as the instantiation of objectivity itself, the theological representation of God remained purely abstract, incorporeal, and metaphysical—suggesting to Feuerbach that, as conceived, such a God could not be the *true* God of religion (here, Christianity). To put it bluntly, for Feuerbach, an abstract essence entailed an abstract existence, and neither was sufficient to satisfy the material longings and/or needs of an embodied human being. For God to be God *for humanity*, then, He must exist as human beings exist—not as an abstract mystification of actual being, but rather as a determinate (human) subject.

In the following chapter, we will turn to the remaining two constituent elements of human nature and examine the extent to which they contribute to an authentically religious consciousness, at least as far as Feuerbach was concerned. What we will come to see is that the “abstract” elements of human nature (i.e. the understanding and will) must give way to the sensuous element (i.e. feeling), for it is only in/through feeling that God’s mystified essence is given true existence. And it is only in/through feeling that, for Feuerbach, the truth of the Christian imaginary can be made plain and the theological conceptions which underpin it can be given (*back*) their true anthropological significance.

Chapter Four

The Incarnate Face to Face

I. God is an altogether Human Being

In the opening chapter of this project, I attempted to lay bare the essential structural definitions and argumentative strategies that fueled the contemporary debate between New Atheism and Christian theism. During that explication, I made it a point of concern to unpack the central claims, assertions, and arguments of each position, hoping that in doing so, it might be possible to undo (or at least, loosen) the intellectual and moral knots that have bound our thoughts and commitments as a result of allowing a cycle of cynicism to replace the conventions of hermeneutical and philosophical charity. The goal of that discussion was not simply to rehash an otherwise ineffectual debate regarding epistemology and/or metaphysics, but rather to enliven and (re)establish a more meaningful line of communication between two traditions, each of which should be commended for their seriousness and sincerity of thought.

In the second chapter, I proposed that Ludwig Feuerbach was uniquely qualified to aid in this endeavor by elucidating how his inversion of Hegelian idealism complicated the stale binaries of the contemporary dispute. There I argued that the epistemological requirements of Feuerbach's religious atheism allowed him to translate and demystify Christianity's theological understanding of God without completely discarding its existential significance. Using this translation as a foil, I accentuated Feuerbach's contention that while a sensuous materialism was the only proper starting point for reflection—philosophical, religious, or otherwise—it did not require the disqualification of religion (in general) or Christianity (in particular) from rational discourse. Rather it was argued

that, for Feuerbach, working through Christian theology (as well as the imaginary that it has inspired) helped to uncover a more complete understanding of human nature itself. Indeed, on Feuerbach's account, even to suggest that God could (or should) be expelled from human experience was as misleading and vacuous an idea as the suggestion that consciousness itself could (or should) be. Contrary to the notion that to take the claims of Christian theology seriously contradicted one's rational nature, then, Feuerbach contended that a sustained and thoughtful engagement with the Christian imaginary (and especially, the humanity of Christ) generated authentic and meaningful *atheistic* insights.

Chapter three expanded upon this contention, elucidating further both how, and the extent to which, Christian theology attempted to make evident the supposed distinctions between the divine personality and the human, only to make manifest their actual identity. Given Feuerbach's account of religious consciousness, such apparent differentiation ultimately revealed itself as a mere mystification—an objectified projection of the self-same elemental conditions of human nature which seemed to press upon the human being the consciousness of a supernatural and divine existence. With this mystification, or perhaps put better, in the act of mystification, the human being invariably separated his or her essential nature from his or her fellows, thereby separating his or her moral commitments to him or her as well. (A point we will return to in detail in the following chapter.)

What we have uncovered thus far, then, is that for Feuerbach, a human being can only truly believe in that which is immediately involved in his or her own sensuous nature and existence.

Based on his account, then, religion (in general) and Christianity (in particular) portray nothing more than the truth and divinity of human nature itself.¹⁸⁷ He states:

It is not I, but religion that worships man, although religion, or rather theology, denies this; it is not I, an insignificant individual, but religion itself that says: God is man, man is God; it is not I, but religion that denies the God who is *not* man, but only an *ens rationis*,—since it makes God become man, and then constitutes this God, not distinguished from man, having a human form, human feelings, and human thoughts, the object of its worship and veneration.¹⁸⁸

Put differently, according to Feuerbach, since religion can only draw its inspiration from the material and sensual nature of human beings, it can only truly depict the reality of a material and sensual God. As the discussion in the previous chapter made clear, a God whose being is unmoored from the qualities or predicates of material existence is necessarily a God of pure abstraction—if not a God of pure speculation. And because such a conception of God has no referent in relation to an actual embodied being, Feuerbach contended that an abstract and speculative God simply could not be a God for humankind. The “for” is essential here, for as we will see in detail below, according to Feuerbach, if God is to be God *for* humanity, then He must *cease to be* a God for Himself—that is, He must cease to be a God of abstract necessity alone (i.e. God-in-Godself, the Godhead).¹⁸⁹ Keep in mind that for Feuerbach, this does not suggest that Christian theology can simply “add” determinative qualities to the supposedly indeterminate ones that God must somehow retain in Godself. Rather, it means that the very notion of “Godself” is an abstraction that must be entirely re-conceived, or perhaps put better, entirely re-imagined.

Now, as Van Harvey reminds us, from the time that Feuerbach had first begun to think about religion, he (Feuerbach) had correctly observed that it did not have its roots solely in the

¹⁸⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xvi. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xvi. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁹ For Feuerbach, God’s aseity is more of a problem than it is a divine attribute.

intellect, but also in will and feeling. “Religion,” Harvey states of Feuerbach, “is rooted in affect, in those feelings and desires that arise out of the structure of consciousness itself.”¹⁹⁰ As a consequence, Feuerbach thought it was a mistake to treat Christian theology primarily and/or exclusively as a species of intellectual abstraction—a mistake which the New Atheists often capitalize upon to undermine the supposed legitimacy of faith-based religions. As we recall, the truth of Feuerbach’s religious atheism was not predicated on merely epistemological grounds, but rather on the analysis and translation of images and themes which were considered central to Christianity, by Christianity itself. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Feuerbach contended that his observations were simply translations of conclusions that had been generated, promoted, supported, and drawn from *within* Christianity’s own theological history. As such, Feuerbach saw his analysis as a mere continuation of the process of epistemological development and critique that took shape within Christian theology (and ran concurrently within speculative philosophy), but which ultimately refused to accept (at least consistently) the conclusions that each necessitated.

For Feuerbach, nowhere was the spirit of this contention seen more clearly than in its representation in the Christian imaginary through the theological conception of the Incarnation. As we now know, Feuerbach rejected the attempt to combine in one notion of God two incompatible kinds of predicates—metaphysical and moral—as well as the subsequent attempt to rationalize the resulting contradictions with the assertion that the divine being was simply incomprehensible to human intellect. For Feuerbach, then, the true significance of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation must be found solely in its representation of sensual, embodied

¹⁹⁰ Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, 221.

experience. Once this significance is laid bare, the true meaning of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation can be properly translated and revealed.

In what follows, I aim to make clear precisely how Feuerbach found Christianity's conception of the Incarnation to reflect the mystified objectification and projection of humanity's sensuous nature. As discussed above, on Feuerbach's account, a God who does not share in the essential nature of humanity would be, by sheer necessity, complete in itself—neither interested in, nor affected by, the affairs of humanity. But for Feuerbach, such a God is simply inconceivable within human consciousness. For God *to be God*, then, He must concern Himself with humankind. Indeed, as we will see below, Feuerbach contended that Christianity ceded this very point by representing God as—amongst other things—a perfect moral being.

According to Feuerbach's account, Christianity depicted God's moral concern as decidedly human. What this indicated, for Feuerbach, was that the very directionality and/or relationality of God's intent and action rendered His supposed self-subsistence (i.e. His own Godhood) impossible. In other words, Feuerbach contended that in Christianity, God's moral nature was indistinguishable from humanity's. And it was this fundamentally anthropocentric orientation which led Feuerbach to conclude that God was nothing more than the objectified representation of humanity's externalized, objectified, and projected moral nature.

Now, while this conception is certainly consistent with Feuerbach's overall analysis of religious consciousness, its truth poses a rather serious problem for Christian theology (and especially, Christian moral thought). Conceived as the instantiation of the moral law, God's (moral) perfection (i.e. will) necessitated an objectivity of morality that appeared to be directly opposed to the sensuous nature of the human being. On Feuerbach's account, if God was conceived as the objectified instantiation of the moral law, then His existence was, once again, relegated

entirely to the realm of the abstract or the speculative. Unable to conceive of moral perfection without perfect will, Feuerbach contended that Christian theology was forced to portray moral perfection in purely objective terms which, when internalized, threw the human subject into internal strife and disunion yet again.¹⁹¹

Now, if the understanding and the will were the only constituent elements of human nature that were objectified and projected as divine, then the reality of the human's relation to God (theologically speaking) and thus to him or herself (religiously speaking) would certainly appear rather grim. Indeed, as Feuerbach readily admits, "No man is sufficient for the law which moral perfection sets before us."¹⁹² However, Feuerbach also contended that for that very reason, "neither is the law sufficient for man, for the heart."¹⁹³ On his account, then, the human delivers him or herself from the state of his or her own disunion by conceiving God not only as the being of the understanding, or as the being of moral law, but also as a feeling, subjective being. In this way, one's self-negation (i.e. self-externalization, objectification, and projection) becomes a covert affirmation insofar as that which one denies in oneself is immediately returned (and in greater measure) by God's benevolent action towards humankind.¹⁹⁴ On this account, then, God, so conceived, is *more than* a being of moral perfection (i.e. a being of abstract moral law). He *is*, in a word, a *human being*.

¹⁹¹ Returning once more to Luther's 1535 Lectures, he states: "Therefore, *we are nothing*, even with all our great gifts, unless God is present. When He deserts us and leaves us to our own resources, our wisdom and knowledge are *nothing*. Unless He sustains us continually, the highest learning and even theology are *useless*." (114) Still more: "For the Law says: 'You are an evil tree. Therefore *everything* you think, speak, or do is *opposed* to God.'" (126) And finally: "Whatever is in our will is evil; whatever is in our intellect is error. In divine matters, therefore, *man has nothing but* darkness, error, malice, and perversity of will and of intellect." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 174-175. Emphasis added.

¹⁹² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 47.

¹⁹³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 47.

¹⁹⁴ Luther states: "Through the Law, therefore, we are condemned and killed; but through Christ we are justified and made alive. The Law terrifies us and drives us away from God. But Christ reconciles us to God and makes it possible for us to have access to Him." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 151.

As we will soon see, the constituent element of feeling is, according to Feuerbach, the middle term between the universal and the subjective, that which tethers together a person in his or her individual subjecthood and a person as a member of his or her species. As such, Feuerbach contends that it is the true unity of “God” and humanity. On his account, since God can only exist for humanity *sensually* (i.e. in accordance with humanity’s sensual existence), divine love can only ever be a mystification of human love—for “if this love is a real love, it is not essentially different from our love.”¹⁹⁵ (A point we will return to in detail in the following chapter.) Thus, for Feuerbach, the Incarnation is conceived as nothing more than the mystification of individual self-sacrifice for the benefit and well-being of his or her fellow human beings (i.e. the substitution of egocentric moral concern for universal moral concern). And what’s more, on Feuerbach’s account, it is only by way of the *imagination* (*Phantasie*) that said sacrifice appears as other-worldly or transcendent in the first place. Only the imagination, then, solves the contradiction in an existence that is at once purported to be both sensational and not sensational. And only in the imagination can an existence that is absent to the senses nevertheless be sensational in essence. Hence, for Feuerbach, the imagination alone is the only preservative from atheism. He states:

Where the existence of God is a living truth, an object on which the imagination exercises itself, there also appearances of God are believed in. Where, on the contrary, the fire of the religious imagination is extinct, where the sensational effects or appearances necessarily connected with an essentially sensational existence cease, there the existence becomes a dead, self-contradictory existence, which falls irrecoverable into the negation of atheism.¹⁹⁶

On Feuerbach’s account, then, once properly translated, the doctrine of the Incarnation articulates nothing less than the *atheist* insight that God’s being is, in essence, altogether human, and moreover, that humanity’s devotion toward Him (in the person of Christ) is merely a mystification

¹⁹⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 56.

¹⁹⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 203.

of the re-appropriation of the latent truth from which the human has been alienated by having projected his or her own predicates onto an external divine being.¹⁹⁷ Simply stated, for Feuerbach, one need look no further than Christianity's own representation of its Christ to see that it is little more than a mystified, objectified, and projected anthropology. Let's take a closer look.

II. The Limitation of Divine Will and the Limitlessness of Human Feeling

According to Feuerbach, of all the attributes which the human being assigned to God, that which religion—especially Christianity—gave preeminent status to was moral perfection (*moralischen Vollkommenheit*, i.e. perfect Good). On his account, as a morally perfect being, God was conceived as nothing else than the realized idea, or perhaps better, the instantiation of the fulfilled law of morality itself (i.e. the moral law). Functionally, this representation was, for Feuerbach, Christianity's attempt at bridging the gap between God's apparent self-subsistence and God's supposed benevolence toward human beings. Logically speaking, God's nature (in Godself) would neither be moral nor immoral, for the very notion of moral law implies a relationality and directionality of intent and/or action that a God of pure unity would necessarily lack. As such, Feuerbach contended that it was essential for Christianity to conceive of God's moral nature as compatible with the moral nature of human beings. The problem, as Feuerbach saw it, was that Christian theology wished to place God's "wholly otherness" in intrinsic relation to humanity's essential nature while simultaneously insisting that He retain His pure, independent, objectivity

¹⁹⁷ This is a subtle, yet consequential conclusion for Feuerbach. As we now know, on his account, the notion of God is merely the objectified and mystified projection of the human being's essential nature. As our self-consciousness of this projection deepens, we realize that God, in Christ, is simply the mystified nature of the species being *and yet* we continue to mystify the person of Christ (i.e. our own re-appropriation) as somehow distinct from the nature of the human being. It is only when we see Christ as human, full stop, that our self-consciousness is complete.

(i.e. His Godself).¹⁹⁸ But for Feuerbach, since such natures were, as conceived, logically incommensurate, he found that Christianity inevitably vacillated between contrary conceptions of God's moral nature.

According to Feuerbach, it was not possible to conceive of moral perfection in unison with the understanding without at the same time conceiving of it (moral perfection) as an object of *objective obligation*—that is, a matter of perfect will.¹⁹⁹ As the instantiation of the moral law, then, the being of God effectively mirrored the objectification of the understanding—that is, as pure (moral) objectivity, objectified. As Feuerbach contended, “I cannot have the idea of moral perfection without at the same time being conscious of it as a law for me. Moral perfection depends, at least for the moral consciousness, not on the nature, but on the will—it is a perfection of will, perfect will.”²⁰⁰ However, based on Feuerbach's account, consciousness of a perfect moral

¹⁹⁸ This conception is undoubtedly influenced by the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his Second Speech (On the Essence of Religion) in his work *On Religion*, Schleiermacher states: “You take the idea of the good and carry it into metaphysics as the natural law of an unlimited and plenteous being, and you take the idea of a primal being from metaphysics and carry it into morality so that this great work should not remain anonymous, but so that the picture of the lawgiver might be engraved at the front of so splendid a code. But mix and stir as you will, these never go together; you play an empty game with materials that are not suited to each other.” Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 20. Here, for Schleiermacher, like Feuerbach, religion maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from the sphere and character of speculation. We will return to Schleiermacher below.

¹⁹⁹ We should note, here, that Feuerbach's conception of obligation resembles Kant's notion of the Christian religion as a natural religion developed in his work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. There Kant states, “Natural religion, as morality (in its relation to the freedom of the agent) united with the concept of that which can make actual its final end (with the concept of *God* as moral Creator of the world), and referred to a continuance of man which is suited to this end in its completeness (to immortality), is a pure practical idea of reason, which, despite its inexhaustible fruitfulness, presupposes so very little capacity for theoretical reason that one can convince every man of it sufficiently for practical purposes and can at least require of all men as a duty that which is its effect. This religion possesses the prime essential of the true church, namely, the qualification for universality, so far as one understands by that a validity for everyone (*universitas vel omnitude distributiva*), i.e. universal unanimity.” Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1934), 145. For a more in-depth discussion, see pp. 139-190.

²⁰⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 47. “Aber der moralischen Vollkommenheit kann ich mir mich bewußt werden, ohne derselben zugleich als eines *Gesetzes für mich* bewußt zu werden. Die moralische Vollkommenheit hängt, wenigstens fürs das moralische Bewußtsein, nicht von der Natur, sondern allein vom Willen ab, sie ist eine Willensvollkommenheit, der vollkommene Wille. Den vollkommenen Willen, den Willen, der eins mit dem Gesetze, der selbst Gesetz ist, kann ich nicht denken, ohne ihn zugleich als Willensobjekt, d.h. also Sollen für mich zu denken.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

nature—especially one conceived as being wholly other from oneself—leaves a person cold and empty, insofar as he or she feels the distance, the chasm between his or her own (limited) moral ability and this *other* being's apparent perfection.²⁰¹ But what was worse, on Feuerbach's account, was that the distance a person felt between his or her moral nature and God's, so conceived, was intensified by Christian theology itself, insofar as it set a person's own nature before him or herself, not merely as separate, but now as *personal*: one which measured and judged humankind. As Kamenka puts it,

God, in calling on me to become what I might be, tells me what I am not. As the personification of the understanding and of the moral will, God therefore depresses man instead of building him up. This depression is the more agonizing because the idea of God sets up against man what are the essential characters of man's own being.²⁰²

For Feuerbach, just as the projected and objectified nature of the understanding represented a God whose being was merely a distilled or abstract conception (and thus one that ultimately failed to qualify as having a determinate, and therefore a real, *existence*), so too does the projected and objectified nature of the will represent a God whose nature is uncompromising and hard-hearted (and thus one that ultimately fails to qualify as having a real benevolent *essence*.)

Now, while this conclusion may seem a bit heavy-handed, Feuerbach argued that so long as Christianity insisted upon maintaining God's wholly otherness, *real* humanness was necessarily excluded from His divine (here, moral) nature. On this account,

A being which excludes humanness from itself is an inhuman being, and necessarily also condemns the sins of men. To the inhuman legislator, the man who transgresses his commandments stands before his eyes not as a man, but only as a transgressor or a sinner. He therefore mercilessly sentences the man to death with the sinner, without

²⁰¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 46.

²⁰² Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 49.

distinguishing the two.²⁰³

Put differently, based on Feuerbach's account, as the instantiation of the moral law, God cannot forgive what is contrary to His nature—His will is unflinching and as such, one's obligation to His decrees and/or declarations must be total. If one denies the law (i.e. fails to fulfil it perfectly), then one is necessarily denied by it as well. But such a state is, for Feuerbach, utter denunciation, condemnation and self-negation (i.e. in Christian terms, *sin*). By objectifying God in this way, then, one places the object of one's own self-alienation over/against one's own material reality (i.e. one's sensuous existence and experience) and subsequently finds oneself wanting.²⁰⁴ Here, God's proposed benevolence appears to take the form of total denunciation: in Christian theology's conception of God as the objectification of the moral law, God's righteousness appeared to Feuerbach as entirely malevolent.

To be clear, Feuerbach's notion of "malevolence," here, does not suggest a malicious intent (on God's part). On his account, God's apparent malevolence is not the result of divine vindictiveness or pettiness—as the New Atheists often accuse—but rather the inevitable result of Christianity's attempt at making incompatible natures compatible. For Feuerbach, the wholly otherness of God (i.e. God conceived as objectivity objectified) which Christianity proposes as being commensurate with *real* human subjecthood (via the Trinity) is simply a mystified

²⁰³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, 82.

²⁰⁴ In an autobiographical fragment from the Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings (1545) Luther states: "I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1 [:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner." (5) He continues: "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath! Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience." (5)

abstraction, one which, on his account, necessarily entailed the untethering of God's intrinsic connection with humanity's determinate nature.

As we now know well, according to Feuerbach, God cannot be conceived as wholly other than humankind and identical in nature simultaneously. On his account, then,

To be merciful to the sinner, I must respect the man; I must set up the man as intercessor or mediator between the judge and the sinner. I must warm my cold, preemptory understating in the blood of man. But how can I do this if I myself am only a bloodless phantom? I, myself, therefore, must above all else be an *actual, full, complete man* in order to be able to recognize the man in the sinner and to purify and pardon the sinner through the man.²⁰⁵

Put differently, for Feuerbach, only one who shares an essential nature with humanity can aid in the recovery of another's self-alienation (in Christian terms, forgive one's sins). Feeling (*Empfindung*), then, must be conceived as the middle term, the substantial bond and/or principle of reconciliation between the perfect and the imperfect—or perhaps put better, between the abstract and the real, the limitless and the limited, or the species and the individual.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, 82.

²⁰⁶ Feuerbach's conception of feeling brings us back to the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his Second Speech (On the Essence of Religion) in his work *On Religion*, Schleiermacher contends (seemingly contra Feuerbach) that "You cannot say that your horizon, even the broadest, comprehends everything and that nothing more is to be intuited beyond it." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 27. Indeed, in his Third Speech (On the Self-Formation for Religion) he contends that the "first stirring of religion" is a secret, uncomprehended intimation which drives the human *beyond* the riches of this world. He states, "Already along with the finite and determined, they seek something different that they can oppose to it; they grasp in all directions after something that reaches beyond the sensible phenomena and their laws; and however much even their senses are full of earthly objects, it is always as if they had besides these yet other objects that would have to waste away without sustenance." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 59. On his account, "The immeasurability of sensible intuition is, after all, also at least a hint at a different and higher infinity." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 63. And what's more: "Everything, therefore, must begin by putting an end to the bondage in which human sense is held for the purpose of those lessons of the understanding through which nothing is learned, those explanations that make nothing clear, and those analyses that resolve nothing." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 66. In short, for Schleiermacher, feeling/intuition was the intimation that there was "more" to sensual existence than what the understanding proper could attest (i.e. a God-consciousness). Nevertheless, Schleiermacher goes on to say that it is an illusion to seek the infinite precisely outside the finite or to seek the opposite outside that to which it is opposed. For Feuerbach, then, this "more" was simply the unification of the individual with the species, a unification which transcended an individual's conception of the universe he or she alone could understand.

Recall above and note that the opposition of the noumenal or immaterial divine nature and the phenomenal or material nature of the world was, for Feuerbach, nothing more than the opposition between the nature of abstraction and the nature of perception (i.e. sensuality). Regrettably, while Feuerbach insisted that abstraction and perception were both fundamental elements of human nature (or at least the “products” of the “conditions” of the fundamental elements of human nature), his analysis was less insistent on detailing the inter-relational workings that linked them together operationally. In this, Feuerbach failed to learn from the mistakes that he found in Hegel.²⁰⁷ As Wartofsky is keen to point out, while Feuerbach’s examination of the process of anthropological reduction (and its imaginative projection) comprised the bulk of *The Essence of Christianity*, his analysis of the process itself (despite being treated in a wide range of concrete examples) was never made explicit by Feuerbach in the work. To be sure, the *materialist* character of Feuerbach’s treatment of image projection and objectification is presented clearly in his analysis of the various ways in which speculative philosophy and theology substitute abstract images for the actual objects to which they are but mystifications. Likewise, the *sensual* character of Feuerbach’s treatment of image projection and objectification is presented clearly in his analysis of the various ways in which said mystifications are merely determinations of human nature itself.

²⁰⁷ Indeed, as Marx was to note: “Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is consequently compelled: (1) To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract—*isolated*—human individual. (2) The human essence, therefore, can with him be comprehended only as “genus,” as an internal, dumb generality which merely *naturally* unites the many individuals.” Marx, “Theses,” 145. Marx admits that Feuerbach is aware of social relations but refuses to accept that human essence (read: Feuerbach’s constituent elements of human nature) is itself free from social construction. The implication here, is that while Feuerbach has indeed inverted Hegelian categories, he gives those same categories an objectivity which he does not adequately explain.

But as Wartofsky correctly observes, what it is that exactly distinguishes image from thought (as opposed to what distinguishes one sort of image from another) is never made plain.²⁰⁸ He states:

Feuerbach echoes the traditional rationalist view that images, as copies or representations of things, are obscure, and that the clear light of truth is best apprehended directly by thought or by the intellect. But the distinction remains epistemologically unclear.²⁰⁹

But, while Feuerbach's work has received its fair share of criticism for this ostensible lack of systematic tidiness, and perhaps rightly so, it was the very fluidity of his analysis that made it possible to

conceive of the relation of philosophical theory to human practice, to human weal and woe, to human history, society, political economy, culture itself; and thereby turn philosophy first into a critique of philosophy itself, insofar as such a "speculative philosophy" conceived of its object as other than human, or transcendental; and thereby, into a critique of culture, of society, of the "forms of life" that speculative philosophy [and, by extension, Christian theology] expresses in its abstract, "rational," and esoteric forms.²¹⁰

Put differently, it was Feuerbach's *lack* of formalized systematics (for lack of a better term) which allowed both the content of, and the motivation for, his analysis to remain focused solely on the self-alienation and/or mystification of the conditions of material (read: human) existence. Based

²⁰⁸ On Wartofsky's account, the closest Feuerbach comes to differentiating between "images of sense" and "images of feeling" is by contending that the former are attributable to the action of outward stimuli on the brain, whereas the latter are attributable to the internal stimulus of the heart—that is, of inner feeling activity. But in both cases, for Feuerbach, these would be construed as "brain acts" and not acts of thought. They are the stimulus for thought (as there can be no thought without images for Feuerbach), but they are only the matter, not the essence of thinking activity itself. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 218.

²⁰⁹ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 219-220. On Wartofsky's account, Feuerbach had still not fully resolved the question of the status of the species concept itself. In other words, Feuerbach had not decided (or at least, explicitly articulated) what status universals had, or what the ontological or epistemological status of "species being" actually was. Thus, "he has only interpreted it as a human concept, whose reference is not a transcendently existing God, but a this-worldly humanity. But what the denotation of "humanity" is, is not yet resolved." (221) In both instances, then, as natural and tangible as Feuerbach's conception of "man" seemed to be, it lacked (to a certain degree) the specific historical, social, and/or developmental classifications that would have concretized his understanding of the concept as well as its usage in his analysis. It is in this sense (but only in this sense), I believe, that Marx's claim that Feuerbach took philosophy as far as it could go while remaining a philosopher, has teeth. See Marx, "Theses," 143-145.

²¹⁰ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 18.

on this account, the dialectical process that held the material and the abstract in tension within Feuerbach's analysis made less sense when thought of as a formal theory, and more sense when thought of as a general methodology or practice of criticism.²¹¹ Indeed, instead of ontologizing this dialectical process (as Hegel had done), Feuerbach rooted it in the very condition of material human existence itself (i.e. feeling). And because the primary reality for the human being is his or her sensible existence, Feuerbach's dialectic is best understood as a dialectic of this sensibility, this sensuousness.²¹²

²¹¹ Special thanks go to Mr. William Boyce for helping to clarify this distinction.

²¹² Returning once more to the work of Schleiermacher. On his account, religion's essence was neither thinking nor acting, but rather intuition and feeling. On this point, he and Feuerbach are in agreement. But as his (Schleiermacher's) analysis unfolds, he comes to conclusions that Feuerbach must alter in order to accept. To put it crudely, for Feuerbach, the "unfolding process" of religion is *active* whereas in Schleiermacher it is *passive*. In other words, for Feuerbach, religion (as the process of (self)alienation, objectification, and synthesis) is a process that the human subject undertakes on his or her own account. In effect, it is the self-active recovery of one's own mystified projections. For Schleiermacher, however, religion lies in the intuition of the universe, an intuition which "proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits, from an original and independent action of the former, which is then grasped, apprehended, and conceived by the latter according to one's own nature." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 24-25. Emphasis added. In other words, Schleiermacher contends that religious intuition consists of one's devout wish to be grasped by and filled by the universe's immediate influences. (What he will later call the "feeling of utter dependence.") It is in this passive sense of intuition that Schleiermacher grounds his notion of feeling. I quote him here at length: "Your senses mediate the connection between the object and yourselves; the same influence of the object, which reveals its existence to you, must stimulate them in various ways and produce a change in your inner consciousness. This feeling, of which you are frequently scarcely aware, can in other cases grow to such intensity that you forget both the object and yourselves because of it; your whole nervous system can be so permeated by it that for a long time that sensation alone dominates and resounds and resists the effect of other impressions. But that an action is brought forth in you, that the internally generated activity of your spirit is set in motion, surely you will not ascribe this the influence of external objects? You will, of course, admit that this lies far beyond the power of even the strongest feelings and must have a completely different source in you. The same is true for religion. The same actions of the universe through which it reveals itself to you in the finite also bring it into a new relationship to your mind and your condition; in the act of intuiting it, you must necessarily be seized by various feelings. In religion, however, a different and stronger relationship between intuition and feeling takes place, and intuition never predominates so much that feeling is almost extinguished." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 29. It is in this sense that Schleiermacher contends that the universe is portrayed in the inner life and only through the internal life is the external comprehensible—or perhaps put better, that undivided humanity itself is actually the universe. (A point of emphasis for Feuerbach.) However, Schleiermacher also seems to suffer from the idealistic pangs of Hegel insofar as he contends that one must intuit humanity not only in its being but also in its becoming, and what's more, to observe and perceive this progress as one of the great actions of the universe. Thus, he concludes, "To join the different moments of humanity to one another and, from its succession, to divine the spirit in which the whole is directed, that is religion's highest concern." Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 42. In the end, Schleiermacher grounds religion in the intuitive "pull" of the universe itself—a pull which later theologians (like Barth) (re)identify with the God of Christianity. We will return to Barth below.

Feuerbach's critique of Christianity's conception of God as the instantiation of the moral law, then, offers numerous insights into the significance of feeling for the religious consciousness. As alluded to above, feeling (i.e. sensuality or sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*)) was that which predicated the distinctive capacity for human self-recognition (i.e. non-abstraction).²¹³ As such, it constituted the "other side" of Feuerbach's anthropological framework.²¹⁴ Understood as the element of being which qualified and/or constituted an authentically *human* existence, it was both part and parcel of Feuerbach's inversion of Hegelian idealism as well as his (Feuerbach's) adoption and promotion of a materialist framework. On Feuerbach's account, materiality did not simply connote the physical (i.e. empirical) conditions for human existence, but also the complex social and/or communal relations that established the very possibility for the consciousness of another and thus ultimately the consciousness of oneself (i.e. self-consciousness). As such, feeling not only represented the "condition of" the "elemental existence of" the understanding and will (i.e. material embodiment), but also the affective moods, intentions, desires, needs, and/or relations that fleshed out human existence.

According to Feuerbach, then, it was the relation between the human and the world that ultimately determined reality and therefore, to compartmentalize the material and/or sensuous longings (i.e. determinative predications) that were given in and through feeling in favor of a wanted precision that excised these longings from the human's experiential reality entirely, was to miss (or perhaps put better, misunderstand) the essential purpose of his religious anthropology in

²¹³ Here again, Feuerbach's claim resembles that of Kant. For Kant, whereas speculative reason aims solely at knowledge for its own sake, practical reason competes with the inclinations in determining one's will and guiding one's conduct. On this account, it is thus the rational expression of one's moral consciousness—that is, the moral law becoming articulate in oneself. See Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 1934.

²¹⁴ According to Wartofsky, the "lawfulness" or "purposefulness" of feeling is not conceptual, but *existential*. On his account, it fulfills itself not in thought, but in the life of the species. Or perhaps better, its fulfillment is humanity itself, and the process of its fulfillment is the humanizing of the species, its attainment of the full capacities of the species. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 219.

the first place. Put differently, for Feuerbach, the end (i.e. purpose) of religion was knowledge of *ourselves*, that is, genuine *self*-consciousness, not simply knowledge of the theory of knowledge and its methods, validity, and/or scope (i.e. epistemology proper).²¹⁵ Feuerbach was not simply investigating what distinguished justified true belief from mere opinion (or faith), but he was also inquiring into the motivations that gave said investigation its material content.²¹⁶

As we now know, for Feuerbach, the assumed distinction between God and the human advocated by Christian theology betrayed the notion that the professed objects of human faith and worship were simply false fronts for real objects close to the hearts of believers. On his account, a human being simply could not be an object to a God who had not (in Himself) the ground, the principle, *of* sensuous materiality (i.e. feeling), for as he contends, such a God would also lack the essential understanding, sympathy and sense *for* sensuousness and all that it entailed. Indeed, this is why Feuerbach went to such great lengths (in *The Essence of Christianity*) to attempt to decipher precisely what believers were actually saying when they expressed a belief, and/or what that saying could actually mean when they proffered a description of God. On his account, it was the desire for the satisfaction of sensuous, material desires (together with the apparent limitation of one's own subjective nature) that inspired the objectification of God in the first place, for without a

²¹⁵ On this account, it seems to follow quite naturally that someone like Marx, reading Feuerbach, would proceed to say that religion is not simply a useful projection but rather a hallucinogenic opiate. Marx states, "*Religious* suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the *opium* of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a *call to abandon a condition which requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *the embryonic criticism of this vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not in order that man shall bear the chain without caprice or consolation but so that he shall cast off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason; so that he will revolve around himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself." Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1978), 54. Emphasis in original.

²¹⁶ In this way also, Feuerbach's epistemology differs from the theological sort for, on his account, "religious epistemology" concerns knowledge of humankind, whereas "theological epistemology" concerns knowledge of God.

limitless divine being, one could not be assured that the satisfaction one sought was actually attainable.²¹⁷ Indeed, on Feuerbach's account,

God, as an object of thought only, i.e., God as God, is always a remote being...However his works, the proofs of love which he gives us, may make his nature present to us, there always remains an unfilled void,—the heart is unsatisfied, we *long* to see him. So long as we have not met a being face to face, we are always in doubt whether he be really such as we imagine him; *actual presence alone* gives final confidence, perfect repose.²¹⁸

To be clear, for Feuerbach, the desire for such satisfaction (i.e. “wish fulfillment”) was not taken as a mere frivolity or a vain attempt at securing some sort of superficial self-gratification. Indeed, for Feuerbach, this was not the “close your eyes, *make a wish*, and blow out the candles” kind of desire. To the contrary, the notion of wish, (i.e. longing, *Sehnsucht*, *Verlangen*) here, carried the existential weight of necessity itself, that is, *what must be the case* in order to satisfy the very needs of the human condition. For Feuerbach, then, feeling necessarily longs for a human (i.e. personal) God. He states, “Longing says: There must be a personal God, i.e. it cannot be that there is not; satisfied feeling says: He is.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ This notion of the satisfaction of desires (i.e. “wish fulfillment”) was later expanded by Sigmund Freud. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud states: “Man’s seriously menaced self-esteem craves for consolation, life and the universe must be rid of their terrors, and incidentally man’s curiosity, reinforced, it is true, by the strongest practical motives, demands and answer...In the course of time the first observations of law and order in natural phenomena are made, and therewith the forces of nature lose their human traits. But men’s helplessness remains, and with it their father-longing and the gods. The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile one to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death, and they must make amends for the sufferings and privations that the communal life of culture has imposed on man.” Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W.D. Robson-Scott (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2010), 28-30. For a more complete discussion, see pp. 25-35.

²¹⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 144. Emphasis added. “Gott, nur gedacht, nur als Denkwesen, d.i. Gott als Gott ist immer nur ein *entferntes* Wesen...So sehr auch seine Werke, die Beweise von Liebe, die er uns gibt, uns sein Wesen vergegenwärtigen, es bleibt doch stets eine unausgefüllte Lücke, das Herz unbefriedigt; wir sehnen uns darnach, ihn zu sehen. Solange uns ein Wesen nicht von Angesicht zu Angesicht bekannt ist, sind wir doch immer noch im Zweifel, ob es wohl ist und so ist, wie wir es vorstellen; erst im Sehen liegt die letzte Zuversicht, die vollständige Beruhigung.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. See also, 1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

²¹⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 146. “Die Sehnsucht sagt: *Es muß ein persönlicher Gott sein*, d.h. *er kann nicht nicht sein*. Das befriedigte Gemüt: *Er ist*.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

According to Feuerbach, then, it was the appearance of God as a human (in Christ) which gave human beings the certainty that God was actually a being *for* humankind. In the humanity of Christ, in other words, the anthropocentric nature of God, and thus His actual benevolence, was placed beyond all doubt. He states:

How can the worth of man be more strongly expressed than when God, *for man's sake*, becomes a man, when man *is* the end, the object of the divine love? The love of God to man is an *essential condition* of the Divine being: God *is* a God who loves *me*.²²⁰

In short, on Feuerbach's account, the Incarnation was the culmination of a theological process of image formation that unveiled unity in differentiation, not merely through abstraction, but through an actual embodied encounter (i.e. the material relations) between sensuous beings.

III. In the Shadow of Luther

According to Feuerbach, it was the theological explications of the reformer Martin Luther, and particularly his Christology, which most definitively suggested that it was anthropology, and thus *atheism*, that was the secret of religion itself. Indeed, as Feuerbach contended, the essence of faith according to Luther (upon which so much of his own analysis and translation relied) rested on the belief that God was a being who existed not for Himself (as was Luther's contention regarding the Catholic depictions of God's being) but rather entirely for us.²²¹ As such, it was Luther who made the requirement that God is *ours* an essential attribute of His very Godhood and

²²⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 57. Emphasis added. "Wie kann den der Wert des Menschen höher ausgedrückt werden, als wenn Gott um des Menschen willen Mensch wird, der Mensch der Endzweck, der Gegenstand der göttlichen Liebe ist? Die Liebe Gottes zum Menschen ist eine *wesentlich Bestimmung* des göttlichen Wesens: Gott is ein *mich*, den *Menschen überhaupt liebender* Gott Darauf ruht der Akzent, darin liegt der Grundaffekt der Religion." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²²¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, 51.

therefore, on Feuerbach's account, it was Luther who let out the true secret of the Christian faith—namely, that “God” was a word the *sole* meaning of which was “*man*.”

To be sure, on the surface, one might be hard pressed to glean this insight from Luther's theological writings. Indeed, by Feuerbach's own account, Luther's theological works seemed to directly contradict his (Feuerbach's) conceptions of human understanding, will, and feeling. So much so, in fact, that the nullity of the human appeared to serve as the very presupposition of the reality of God Himself. Feuerbach observes of Luther:

If you want to have God, therefore, give up man; if you want to have man, reject God—or else you have neither of the two. The nullity of man is the presupposition of the reality of God. To affirm God is to negate man; to honor God is to scorn man; to praise God is to revile man. The glory of God rests only on the lowliness of man, divine blessedness only on human misery, divine wisdom only on human folly, divine power only on human weakness.²²²

Moreover, according to Feuerbach, Luther went so far as to insist that it was only by maintaining this sharp distinction, or perhaps put better, this foundational dissimilarity, between the human and God, that Christianity could avoid being indifferent to the question of whether God even *existed* in the first place. Quoting Luther:

If we men describe correctly our position in regard to God, we will discover that between God and us men there is a great difference, and a greater one than between heaven and earth; indeed, there can be no comparison made. God is eternal, just, holy, veracious, and *in summa* God is everything Good. Man, on the other hand, is mortal, unjust, deceitful, full of vice, sin and depravity. Everything in connection with God is good; in connection with man there is death, devil, and hellish fire. God is from eternity and remains in eternity. Man is rooted in sins and lives amid death every moment. God is full of Grace; man is full of disgrace and under the wrath of God, this is the result of comparing man to God. (34 II; 497-498)²²³

²²² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 33.

²²³ Quotation appears in Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 32. (The editor's note regarding this quotation states that Feuerbach identified the source of this quotation as the 23-volume Leipzig edition of Luther's *Works* (1792-1740). This translation has been changed to reflect the more recent Weimar edition, Luther, *Werke*:

On the face of it, then, it would seem that Luther's theological account of God offered a direct *refutation* of the fundamental premises and/or arguments laid out in *The Essence of Christianity*. However, Feuerbach contended that beneath the surface of Luther's exegetical analysis, there was a God who was entirely anthropocentric, and therefore the "necessity of opposition" that Luther manifestly insisted upon served only to *reinforce* Feuerbach's central claim—namely, that even the most staunchly transcendent theology could not avoid drawing the conclusion that the divine personality and the human personality were, in essence, indistinguishable (within human consciousness).

According to Feuerbach, despite Luther's insistence upon the metaphysical existence of the transcendent God, his (Luther's) theological claims betrayed the covert admonition that the satisfaction of human needs and desires, and thus the very condition of that satisfaction (i.e. feeling, sensuous materiality), was first and foremost in the divine order of things.²²⁴ On Feuerbach's account, Luther's representation of the otherness of God was simply a product of logical necessity, one that sought to both establish and ground the very presuppositions that were

kritische Gesamtausgabe, 1883.) According to Feuerbach, Luther insisted that the bond between God and the human rested entirely on a need, or a lack. (Indeed, what else could it rest on if, as Luther maintained, God's nature and human nature are antithetical?) He states: "God's existence is an intellectual necessity, an emotional need, *only when* those qualities which are in God and make him God would not exist if God himself did not exist. *But this is only the case when* the essential qualities (i.e., those which make God God), such as wisdom, goodness, justice, truth, freedom, are not also in us; for if they are also in us, they remain in us whether God is or not, and there is nothing essentially interesting connected with the acceptance of a God." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 35. In other words, if the human had the qualities and/or predicates that God had, then nothing would be lacking (in him or her) if God did not exist. Therefore, it is only when something is lacking in humanity *when God is lacking* (i.e. when God's existence is questioned) that the very notion of God's existence becomes a necessity for the human at all. "So," Feuerbach contends of Luther, "you must be concerned either with God or with man; either believe in God and doubt man, or believe in man and doubt God...Either entirely for God and against man, or else entirely for man and against God." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, 41.

²²⁴ Luther states: "For the issue before us is grave and vital; it involves the death of the Son of God, who, by the will and commandment of the Father, became flesh, was crucified, and died *for the sins of the world*. If faith yields on this point, the death of the Son of God will be in vain. Then it is only a fable that Christ is the Savior of the world...If we lose this, we lose God, Christ, all the promises, faith, righteousness, and eternal life." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 90-91. Emphasis added.

needed to make the concept of God's existence intelligible (and/or meaningful) in the first place. In other words, before Luther could speak of God's intentionality and/or purposeful action, he had to first establish (or at least solidify) the formal basis of God's existence. But for Feuerbach, such conventionalism was merely the scaffolding on which Luther stood to construct his Christology—a Christology which ultimately dismantled the logical foundation on which it was predicated and rendered the (abstract) object thereof unnecessary.²²⁵

For Feuerbach, then, Luther's doctrine was only inhuman at its starting point, but not as it developed and certainly not as it concluded.²²⁶ While it may have begun with metaphysical presuppositions, it culminated with material consequences.²²⁷ Feuerbach states:

Luther is inhuman toward man only because he has a humane God and because the humanity of God [read: God's (total) self-(re)orientation towards the needs of humanity] takes away man's own humanity from him.²²⁸

For Luther, goodness (i.e. being good to humanity) was an essential predication of God. But for Feuerbach, in order for something to be good, there must be something *else* to which its goodness is directed, for a being considered exclusively in terms of itself is neither good nor evil.²²⁹ On his account, then,

²²⁵ Luther states: "This I say in opposition to the monstrous flattery and praise with which the foolish scholastics and monks have adorned the saints...Our inherent holiness is not enough. Therefore *Christ is our entire holiness.*" Quotation taken from Luther, *Luther's Works*, 109. Emphasis added. More still: "Therefore when your conscience is terrified by the Law and is wrestling with the judgment of God, do not consult either reason or the Law, but rely *only* on grace and the Word of comfort. Here take your stand as though you had never heard of the Law. Ascend into the darkness, where neither the Law nor reason shines, but only the dimness of faith. (I Cor. 13:12), which assures us that we are saved *by Christ alone*, without any Law." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 113.

²²⁶ According to Luther: "For by His Word God has revealed to us that He wants to be a merciful Father to us. Without our merit—since, after all, we cannot merit anything—He wants to give us forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life for the sake of Christ. For God is He who dispenses His gifts freely to all, and this is the praise of His deity." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 126-127.

²²⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 41.

²²⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 43.

²²⁹ Quoting Luther: "It is therefore not enough that a man believe that there is a God, that Christ suffered, etc. but he must firmly believe that God is a God for *his* blessedness, that Christ suffered for *him*, etc." (11: 472) Still more:

Where there is no need in general, there is also no need for God; and where there is no need for God, there is no God. The “basis” of God lies *outside* God—in man. God presupposes man. God is the “necessary being”; necessary not himself or in himself, *but for others*—for those who feel or think him necessary. A God without man is a God without need; but to be without need is to be without a basis; it is trifling, an extravagance, vanity.²³⁰

As far as Feuerbach was concerned, this contention was not a matter of philosophical speculation, but rather the inevitable conclusion that had to be drawn given the very premises on which Luther’s theology was constructed. Quite simply, if Luther was correct, and God was, in essence, good to humankind, then on Feuerbach’s account, both His (anthropocentric) intentions and His (anthropocentric) actions rendered His very nature utterly indeterminable from humanity’s.

Now, as has been made clear, for Feuerbach, the notion of God-in-Godself is, strictly speaking, only an abstract representation—the image of a dispassionate being of pure thought and/or will. But on his account, if God was a being which existed only in thought, then “I must make myself dumb and rob myself of my senses in order to reach this pure being.”²³¹ In other words, according to Feuerbach, if God was truly for humankind, then He must also be for the *senses* of humankind, for that which is against the senses is, in essence, against human nature itself. As such, Feuerbach contended that the fundamental proposition of Christianity (i.e. that God had revealed Himself to man, or that God became man) had no other meaning than that God had become a sensual being *instead of* a being existing in thought alone.

According to Feuerbach, if one does not raise oneself above the life of the senses (as though this is even possible), then God will have no place in his/her consciousness. Why? Because God

“Christ is God and Man and He is God and Man so that He may be Christ *not for Himself, but for us*.” (10 III: 364) Quotations taken from Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 49. First emphasis in original; second emphasis added.

²³⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 94. Emphasis added.

²³¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 42.

is not seen, nor heard, nor even perceived sensationally. His existence relies *solely* on being felt, imagined, or believed in. But on Feuerbach's account, this kind of existence is inseparable from the one who is feeling, imagining, or believing, and therefore, God's (independent) existence cannot be contradistinguished therefrom. Without the aid of the senses, "God" is forever locked away *inside* the human—His separate, independent, external existence is simply indeterminable. In other words, without the aid of the senses, God's materiality is entirely immaterial. And as the discussion in the previous chapter made clear, such a God cannot properly be said to "exist" at all—as true existence requires genuine, determinate materiality. God's independent and external existence, then, cannot break *into* human consciousness, rather, it must break *out of it*.

To be explicitly clear, according to both Luther and Feuerbach, re-imagining the abstract Godhead as a sensuous being was not only necessary to speak coherently about His *existence*, but it was also necessary to speak coherently about His *essence*. Feuerbach explains that,

A being which operates for the senses is also a being which operates for the understanding, but the reverse is not necessarily true—namely, that what is conceived of as a being by the understanding must also be perceptible by the senses.²³²

On this account, only that which is good for the senses is good for the entire human and moreover, only that which is good for the entire human can be said to also be, in itself, a thoroughly perfect good. Put differently, a universally good being (*for* a human being) is necessarily one which operates under and/or within the very conditions of humanity's essential nature. For Feuerbach, then, Luther's theology, once translated, showed that the certainty of God's existence, and thus the certainty of His benevolence, rested solely in His human-focused nature. Put simply, that God

²³² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 42.

became human, for the sake of humanity, was theological proof-positive that, for Feuerbach, the only important aspect of divinity was His materiality, His sensuality.

For Feuerbach, then, it was Luther's insistence upon a God that was not merely an abstract, supernatural being, but rather a being of flesh and blood that shone the brightest in his theology. So much so, in fact, that Feuerbach claimed that,

The reduction of the extrahuman, supernatural, and antirational nature of God to the natural, immanent, inborn nature of man, is therefore the liberation of Protestantism, of Christianity in general, from its fundamental contradiction, the reduction of it to its truth,—the result, the necessary, irrepressible, irrefragable result of Christianity.²³³

As such, and rather tellingly, Feuerbach contended that we must look solely to the embodied Christ as the *real* God of Christianity, for on his account, the theological “making-material” of Christ was not merely the central point of history, Christian or otherwise, but rather the *terminal* point—the point at which humanity's objectified and mystified nature was fully disclosed in its essence.²³⁴

For Feuerbach, then, the existence of a personal God had its foundation in the condition that an embodied human could only truly meet with and/or find him or herself in another human

²³³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 339.

²³⁴ For many readers, such a statement may smack of a religious imperialism unbefitting an analysis as rich as Feuerbach's. Despite his best efforts to do away with the binaries that plague contemporary religion, Feuerbach readily admitted that Christianity ought to be understood as the consummate religion. However, this should not be taken to mean that Feuerbach had some ulterior “conversional” motive that animated his thought. Or to put it differently, Feuerbach did not assume that all non-believers and/or religious adherents (of other traditions) must convert to, or pass through, Christianity to achieve true and complete self-consciousness. His intention is simply to explain both how, and the extent to which, Christianity—and Christianity *alone*—has deciphered (albeit imaginatively) the truth regarding the real nature of religious consciousness. It is without contention that a Feuerbachian would be hard pressed to justify these ideas to a Buddhist or Daoist, for example, whose foundational belief in non-being or no-self effectively grounds his/her thoughts and analysis. However, Feuerbach himself would be rather unapologetic on this account, understanding the very concept of non-being to be nothing more than a mystification of being itself—a concept which must “act” as being in some way to be understood at all. On this account, I think Feuerbach's insistence upon a material, anthropological starting point is correct. While there are certainly hermeneutical, political, and/or ontological problems regarding the nature or essence of the “self,” the task of self-realization (if that is indeed the task one is out to pursue) requires that one operates within that assumption—or as Feuerbach would say, within that self-evident reality.

being. Abstract qualities, we recall, confirmed abstract existences, and neither was suitable to satisfy the needs of a feeling being. “Speculate as much as you will,” Feuerbach contends, “you will never derive your personality from God, if you have not beforehand introduced it, if God himself be not already the idea of your personality, your own subjective nature.”²³⁵ Simply stated, for Feuerbach, the (prior) humanization of God was the very ground for the possibility of His Incarnation at all, and it was only the denial of this human nature to God which made the Incarnation appear as a transcendent mystery, that is, as an incompatibility of the finite with the infinite, in the first place.

Now, on one hand, Feuerbach contended that this conclusion merely expressed the essential religious impulse to regain, in the form of concrete, individual human existence, that which was given up in the projection and objectification of human nature as other or divine. He states: “Man completes and satisfies himself in God; man’s defective nature is a perfect nature in God. Seek and ye shall find. What you miss in Luther’s conception of man you will find in God.”²³⁶ But on the other hand, it reinforced Feuerbach’s contention that feeling was an essential element of humanity’s *species* being and thus that true sensuality was confirmed only in relation, that is, with another who shares in (i.e. is species-identical with) one’s essential nature. For Feuerbach, then, it is only as an embodiment of one’s species nature that Christ can truly represent universality and individuality together. And thus, when properly translated, we can see that it is only by transcending one’s own sense of (atomistic) individualism that one can identify and/or recognize the divine.

²³⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 111. “Spekuliert soviel als ihr wollt: ihr werdet nie eure Persönlichketi aus Gott herausbringen, wenn ihr sie nicht schon vorher hineingebracht habt, wenn nicht Gott selbst schon euer subjektives oder persönliches Wesen ist.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²³⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 46.

IV. The Imaginative Conception

According to Feuerbach, the religious consciousness overcomes the opposition between God's nature and human nature by/through the process of image production "directed by" the "faculty of" the feeling-directed *imagination*. On his account, the imagination serves as the very foundation of every psychological truth and/or necessity contained in any theogony or cosmogony, for it is only through/by the imagination, that is, only through/by the production of sensible images, that reality is "given."²³⁷ As Wartofsky explains, it is not human need *in itself*, then, that constitutes a theogony, but it is rather the satisfaction that this need finds in the imagination which creates and appropriates the objects to which these wishes and/or desires correspond (i.e. "reality procurement").²³⁸

While it has been made clear that, on Feuerbach's account, the essence of theology is the absolutization of human nature *as other*, he insisted that neither the imagination (as the faculty of image production) nor its images were "imaginary" in the pejorative sense of the word.²³⁹ Indeed, based on Feuerbach's account, to casually dismiss the operational necessity of the imagination and/or its images would be to effectively downplay the psychological significance of feeling as a

²³⁷ This is just a reminder to the reader that for Feuerbach, there is no such thing as an object "as such." For Feuerbach, matter has no independent being, it is only matter insofar as it stands to thought in the relation of object to subject—that is, it is matter only to the extent to which it has the capacity to be taken up in thought activity as an object. Put differently, perception of an object in Feuerbach's system is tantamount to perception of "my image of" an object, and thus perception of an object is always filtered through one's projected self-consciousness as other. Unfortunately, the working mechanics (and the necessity thereof) of this relationality remains a point of contention within his work.

²³⁸ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 215-216.

²³⁹ While rational reflection certainly effects the realization that objects of imagination are *in fact* objects of the *imagination*—that is, images produced by feeling, desire, and/or wish and *not* objects of reason or thought—for Feuerbach, the very tendency to take imaginary objects as *sensibly* real, concrete, and/or perceptual is characteristic of the religious consciousness itself. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 230-232.

foundational relational marker when determining what did and what didn't count as "real" or as "factual" in the first place. He states:

The Son is the satisfaction of the need for mental images, the nature of the imaginative activity in man made objective as an absolute, divine activity. Man makes to himself an image of God, *i.e.*, he converts the abstract being of the reason, the being of the thinking power, into an object of sense or imagination. But he places this image in God himself, because his want would not be satisfied if he did not regard this image as an objective reality, if it were nothing more for him than a subjective image separate from God,—a mere figment devised by man. And it is in fact no devised, no arbitrary image; for it expresses the necessity of the imagination, the necessity of affirming the imagination as a divine power. The Son is the reflected splendour [sic] of the imagination, the image dearest to the heart; but for the very reason that he is only an object of the imagination, he is only the nature of the imagination made objective.²⁴⁰

Put differently, once Feuerbach gives to feeling the status of a concrete mode of human existence, the very "unreality" of the objects of consciousness that the imagination produces are effectually transformed into the material/content of the subject-object relation of consciousness, through which, *and only through which*, self-consciousness is made attainable at all. And, as we have seen, since this required the projection and objectification *of* this species character *as* an object of consciousness, Feuerbach contended that the imagination provided the very stimulus to the process of rational (self) knowledge itself.

Now, according to Wartofsky, inner satisfaction is possible only to a being who can know what he or she wants well enough to be able to form an image of it as an object of consciousness.

²⁴⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 75. "Der Sohn ist das befriedigte Bedürfnis der Bilderanschauung; das vergegenständlichte Wesen der Bildertätigkeit als einer absoluten, göttlichen Tätigkeit. Der Mensch macht sich ein Bild von Gott, d.h. er verwandelt *das abstrakte Vernunftwesen*, das *Wesen der Denkkraft* in ein *Sinnenobjekt* oder *Phantasiewesen*. Er setzt aber dieses Bild in Gott selbst, weil es natürlich nicht seinem Bedürfnis entsprechen würde, wenn er dieses Bild nicht als gegenständliche Wahrheit wüßte, wenn dieses Bild für ihn nur ein subjektives, von Gott unterschiedenes, vom Menschen *gemachtes* wäre. In der Tat ist es auch kein gemachtes, kein willkürliches Bild; denn es drückt die Notwendigkeit der Phantasie aus, die Notwendigkeit, die Phantasie als eine göttliche Macht zu bejahen. Der Sohn ist der Abglanz der Phantasie, das Lieblingsbild des Herzens; aber eben deswegen, weil er, im Gegensatz zu Gott als dem personifizierten Wesen der Abstraktion, nur der Phantasie Gegenstand, ist er nur das gegenständliche Wesen der Phantasie." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

But moreover, *real* satisfaction is possible only to a being who can turn *from* the image of the object, once objectified and held before him or her, *to* the actual object of which the image is made, thereby distinguishing the “illusory” satisfaction *within* the imagination from the actual satisfaction generated by the relation to the object itself.²⁴¹ For Feuerbach, this rational realization of the relation of image to the real object (i.e. seeing the representation as nothing more than a representation) was at the same time the self-realization of the function of the imagination itself. Or as Wartofsky put it, “It is the process of coming to know the object of feeling, and not just the immediate fulfillment of feeling in itself.”²⁴² For Feuerbach, then, rational activity was not the discarding (or at the very least, the disregarding) of the objects of consciousness that the imagination produced, but rather the self-conscious process of the mediation of (i.e. the dialectical tension between) feeling and empirical reality itself.

Couched in terms of the religious consciousness, then, the theological conception of the Incarnation was, for Feuerbach, no mere product of make-belief or fantasy. Rather, it was a mystic paraphrase of a psychological process—the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness made objective.²⁴³ He states:

That which is mysterious and incomprehensible, *i.e.*, contradictory, in the proposition, “God is or becomes man,” arises only from the mingling or confusion of the idea or definitions of the universal, unlimited, metaphysical being with the idea of the religious God, *i.e.*, the conditions of the understanding with the conditions of the heart, the emotive nature; a confusion which is the greatest hindrance to the correct knowledge of religion. But, in fact, the idea of the Incarnation is nothing more than the human *form* of a God, who already in his nature, in the profoundest depths of his soul, is a merciful and therefore a human god.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 233.

²⁴² Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, 233.

²⁴³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 81.

²⁴⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 51. Emphasis in original. “Das Tiefe und Unbegreifliche, d.h. *das Widersprechende*, welches man in dem Satze: “Gott is oder wird Mensch“ findet, hommt nur daher, daß man den

In other words, Feuerbach contended that if the culminating revelation of Christian theology consisted of an immaterial abstraction “abandoning itself” in favor of perception (i.e. God becoming human), then in effect, the inhuman being was essentially negated and in its place emerged a new being, the *human* God. And what’s more,

Out of the heart, out of the divine instinct of benevolence which desires to make all happy, and excludes none, not even the most abandoned and abject, out of the moral duty of benevolence in the highest sense, as having become an inward necessity, *i.e.* a movement of the heart,—*out of the human nature*, therefore, as it reveals itself through the heart, has sprung what is best, what is true in Christianity—its essence purified from

Begriff oder die Bestimmungen des allgemeinen, uneingeschränkten, metaphysischen Wesens mit dem Begriffe oder den Bestimmungen des *religiösen* Gottes, d.h. die Bestimmungen des Verstandes mit den Bestimmungen des Herzens vermischt oder verwechselt—eine Verwechslung, die das größte Hindernis der richtigen Erkenntnis der Religion ist. Aber es handelt sich ja in der Tat nur um die menschliche *Gestalt* eines Gottes, der schon *im Wesen* im tiefsten Grunde seiner Seele ein barmherziger, d.i. menschlicher Gott ist.“ Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Here we recall that for Feuerbach, the disparate elements that “make up” the human being’s essential nature have objects unique to each operational function (for lack of a better description). In other words, the specific operations of the constituent elements of human nature have only themselves as referents: the understanding *comprehends*; the feeling *feels*; and the will *intends*. This is key because on Feuerbach’s account, intellect and affect are distinct elements of human nature, and each has for its object only that which corresponds to its essence. If, then, God is the externalized objectification of one’s inward nature, intellect and affect must be distinct elements of His nature as well. The emotional and psychological trouble that that one experiences, on Feuerbach’s account, is a result of misapplying the object of one element (say, the object of feeling, i.e. imagination) with the operation of another (say, the operation of reason, i.e. understanding). Here, one experiences a self-conscious dissonance, whereby the otherwise neutral (i.e. objective), impassible, and passionless intellect, *is felt to* elicit a subjective, affective, and/or emotional response. It is this misapplication that solidifies the contradiction in the theological concept of God. But as mistaken as one is on this account, he or she is only derivatively so—despite the possibility of not yet being aware of this fact. Yes, the notion of the intellect (directly) manifesting an emotion is a contradiction. So too is the notion of feeling (directly) manifesting a conceptual thought. But on Feuerbach’s account, these contradictions can be accounted for and corrected by redirecting one’s attention back to the source of the contradiction itself—humanity’s essential nature. While each constituent element of one’s essential nature is its own immediate verification and affirmation of itself, their unity (note: NOT *unification*) in a human often leads him or her to confuse the effect of one with the cause of another. (This is because, we recall, self-consciousness is a process, not an immediate given.) But because one can abstract from him or herself as an individual, to him or herself as a member of a species, he or she can avoid the problems inherent in the theological conception of God. In other words, one can alleviate the feeling of limitation, for example, by making appeal to humankind (as species). Limitation cannot be overcome individually, but only in the limitlessness of species. But theology’s account of God requires Him to be both finite and infinite *simultaneously*—requiring theology to develop more nuanced speculations to give these contradictions a semblance of rationality.

theological dogmas and contradictions.²⁴⁵

We recall that the ontological proof resulted in self-contradiction: the certainty it claimed to offer in regard to God's independent existence, was nullified by His total lack of sensuality. The proof, as a proof, was found wanting because it inevitably folded the (supposed) material existence of God back into a mere thought or conception. In other words, as a formal proof, it left God's actual existence up in the air (pun intended). To move beyond the proof, then, in the spirit *of* the proof, Feuerbach contended that Christianity had to find a way to convert the conceptional existence of God into a *real*, determinate existence. To achieve this, God's existence was said to be inextricably linked to that which would make it impossible to deny: His self-disclosure, or perhaps better, his Incarnation.

According to Feuerbach, "A God who only exists without revealing himself, who exists for me only through my own mental act, such a God is a merely abstract, imaginary, subjective God."²⁴⁶ This, of course, is the very description of God as an object of the understanding and moral law discussed above. But, "a God who gives me a knowledge of himself through his own act is alone a God who truly exists, who proves himself to exist—an objective God."²⁴⁷ For Feuerbach, the certainty of God's existence, then, hinges completely on the certainty of His revelation. But just how certain is it?

²⁴⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 60. Emphasis added. "Unde eben aus dem Herzen, aus dem innern Drange, Gutes zu tun, für die Menschen zu leben und sterben, aus dem göttlichen Triebe der *Wohltätigkeit*, die all beglücken will, die keinen, auch nicht den Verworfensten, den Niedrigsten von sich ausschließt, aus der sittlichen Pflicht der Wohltätigkeit im höchsten Sinne, wie sie zu einer *innern Notwendigkeit*, d.i. zum Herzen geworden, aus dem menschlichen Wesen also, wie es sich als Herz und durch das Herz offenbart, ist das bessere, das wahre, d.h. das von seinen theologischen Elementen und Widersprüchen gereinigte Wesen des Christentums entsprungen." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁴⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 204.

²⁴⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 204.

According to Feuerbach, in order for God to act on His own accord, He must exist independently of the object which is acted upon. Likewise, if God is to really exist, He must do so sensually, otherwise His existence will be merely figurative (i.e. a *special* existence) and thus so too will be His action. His Incarnation, then, must be conceived as an act of self-disclosure emanating from a sensuous being, and therefore it must operate in a manner that is consistent with our ability to perceive it sensually. But it has already been stipulated that God does not exist sensually, but rather *spiritually*. Spiritual existence, we recall, was purported to be a midway point between sensual existence and conceptual existence. But for Feuerbach, if conceptual activity (i.e. “spiritual activity,” aka revelation) cannot be distinguished from the subjective experience of man, then neither, it would seem, can the content of revelation be distinguished from man’s externalized subjective desires.

For Feuerbach, in the Incarnation, the subjective conviction of God’s existence is transposed into the culminating point of theological objectivism. Put differently, the Incarnation reveals that the immediate certainty of the religious mind—what it believes, wishes, and/or conceives—becomes what *actually is*, by fiat alone. With this revelation, subjective belief is transformed into external, necessary, and historical fact. What was in theory the necessity of the object (i.e. God’s essence), becomes in practice the necessity of the subjective (i.e. God’s determinate existence). Here, the religious mind can have no doubt that the object of his/her conception exists as an independent, sensuous being. To the theologically inclined mind, the imagination grants the immediate certainty that all of its involuntary and spontaneous affections and impressions are manifestations of a distinct, external being. God’s reality (i.e. His abstract existence), then, no longer appears as mere wish, but rather as a practical matter of conscience—a *fact*.

Fact, in this sense, is not an object of the intellect per se, but rather an object of the intellect which has become a matter of *conscience*. Taken in this way, fact operates in much the same way as does assertion or conviction: it makes no appeal to reason—it is merely the *force of feeling* which desires that what it wishes, and what it believes, should undoubtedly be true. Facts, on his account, do not express what *is*, but rather what we desire the world *to be*. In this way, the imagination “solves” the contradiction of “subjective objectivity” by simply ignoring it.²⁴⁸ In the Incarnation, God’s existence becomes actual because it *has to*, and revelation becomes real because it *needs to*.²⁴⁹

According to Feuerbach, the theological doctrine of the Incarnation exhibits in the clearest manner what he refers to as, the characteristic illusion of the religious consciousness.²⁵⁰ In this revelation, God is conceived as the active being, while the human is conceived as the passive. But that which determines God *to action* is not Godself (for God as a perfect being needs nothing), but rather humanity. But on this account, in the Incarnation, “man determines himself as that which determines God.”²⁵¹ In other words, because God in Himself has no need for self-disclosure, His revelation, here the Incarnation, can only ever be originated by mankind.²⁵² For Feuerbach, then, if mankind is to receive anything via this disclosure, it must inevitably be that which *he/she* needs

²⁴⁸ “Subjective,” here, meaning personal inclination, whim, or desire, not subjective as in “from the standpoint of a subject.” A *subject* can be objective about his/her subjectivity. His/her subjectivity cannot be *objective*—as in, speaking for all *subjects*.

²⁴⁹ I can’t help but notice that this description of fact is oddly congruent with the “alternative facts” of the Trump administration. Even a cursory glance at any news media shows that Trump’s “facts” operate strictly as solidified forces of feeling.

²⁵⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 206.

²⁵¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 206.

²⁵² Theology contends that God’s self-disclosure is not a matter of need, but rather a matter of overflowing benevolence. But even this notion of benevolence implies an “intentional” state of being. To act benevolently implies has a purpose in action. But if God is perfect, He can have no such intentionality. Likewise, to say that God simply *is* benevolence will not do, for as we have seen, such a general condition cannot be conceived as being intentionally directed, and to understand God’s action, we must conceive it as intentional.

and/or desires to receive. What he/she *receives*, then, is simply what he/she *has already given*, but in reverse. The only difference is that between the human as the determined, and the human as the determining, he/she interjects God as a distinct being acting independently. Let's take a closer look.

For Feuerbach, the general premise of this "illusion" is as follows:

[M]an can of himself know nothing of God; all his knowledge is merely vain, earthly, human. But God is a superhuman being; God is known only by himself. Thus we know nothing of God *beyond* what he reveals to us. The knowledge imparted by God is alone divine, superhuman, supernatural knowledge. By means of revelation, therefore, we know God through himself; for revelation is the word of God—God declaring himself. Hence in the belief in revelation man makes himself a negation, he goes out of and above himself; he places revelation in opposition to human knowledge and opinion; in it is contained a hidden knowledge, the fullness of all supersensuous [sic] mysteries; here reason must hold its place.²⁵³

Put differently, the necessity of God's independent existence requires the independent existence of His knowledge—especially His self-knowledge. Moreover, as God's being is conceived (theologically) as incomprehensible, His knowledge is also conceived as incomprehensible, and thus must be communicated *differently*. It would be foolish, theologically speaking, to assume that God can be known in the same way as we know other things, for God is *beyond* such things. But as the discussion above made clear, if God can be known at all, then it must be in the same way that humans know anything else. If God is to be known, then, His self-revelation must be commensurate with human nature. Or perhaps better, his apparent super-sensuous existence must be translated into a sensuous experience if it is to be received. Even if one is to concede that one is an object to God *before* He imparts Himself to mankind, His action (if it is to be effective) must

²⁵³ Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. George Elliot. New York: Prometheus, 1989, 206. Emphasis added.

still be in direct accordance with the nature of humanity and its needs. According to Feuerbach, then, while God may be free in will (whatever that might mean), He is not, and cannot be free as to human understanding. That is, He cannot reveal to mankind whatever He desires, but *only* that which is adapted to, and commensurate with, humanity's essential nature. In other words, if the Incarnation is to reveal anything, it must have reference *not* to God-in-Godself, but rather only to humanity's power of comprehension. That being the case, *what* is revealed can only be determined by the limits of human consciousness. For Feuerbach, God can only reveal what humanity can understand, in the way he/she can understand it. But here then, as before, God's revelatory action cannot be contradistinguished from the one who is doing the distinguishing. In the end, God's revelatory action is shown to be *identical* with man's so-called passive comprehensibility.

According to Feuerbach, then, the distinction between divine revelation and human understanding is entirely illusory. The *contents* of divine revelation are of human origin because they have proceeded not from God qua God, but from God *as determined by* human reason and desire. Or as Feuerbach states, "And so in revelation man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself!"²⁵⁴ For Feuerbach, then, what is "received" in God's revelation is simply a mirrored version of one's own desires and needs, projected into the heavens. The human can find all he needs in God, because God *is* the satisfaction of those needs—and nothing else. Thus, to claim, as theology does, that God is beyond us *and yet* acts amongst us (strictly *for us*) is, on Feuerbach's account, sheer non-sense. Even if it were true, there would be no way to determine it that did not prove identical with human determination.

²⁵⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 207.

For Feuerbach, then, the Incarnation was Christianity's attempt to show that all of humanity's perfections and/or needs could be found and met only in humanity itself. In this relation, one's universal nature is uncovered, and one is able to see that all one seeks can be found in human relation itself. In the person of Christ, then, humanity is granted the blessed assurance that God *is* exactly what one desires and needs Him to be—a being whose very nature is sympathetic to one's own; a being whose very nature is indistinguishable from oneself. According to Feuerbach, then, once properly translated, the Incarnation simply confessed what in Christian theology proper it would not admit, namely, that the so-called mystery of the God-man was no enigmatic composition of contraries or synthetic facts, but rather the very expression of identity in the nature of God and humanity (i.e. species-being)—this time, in the flesh. Feuerbach states:

The true God, the true object of Lutheran (and in general of Christian) faith, is *only Christ*; this is only because in him there is no further distinction between Christ-in-himself and Christ for us, and therefore in him all the conditions of God are fulfilled, all mysteries of the divine nature are resolved, all objections and doubts are taken away, and all bases of mistrust and suspicion are put aside.²⁵⁵

On Feuerbach's account, the Incarnation revealed that the satisfaction of humanity's desires could only be truly realized when the existence of God as an objective, abstract, and distinct being was *abolished* (*aufheben*), that is, only when the distinction between the divine and the human was essentially negated and transcended. According to Feuerbach, then, God's self-renunciation of His metaphysical/transcendental majesty, power, and affinity (i.e. His self-existence) should be taken to mean that a person's projected and objectified "other" loses its metaphysicality, and as a result, he or she finds that the Incarnate God *is* merely the full self-disclosure of his or her self-awareness, that is, the recognition of him or herself *as* a species-being in the guise of the divine. And it is in

²⁵⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, 92-93.

and with this awareness, *and only in and with this awareness*, that the satisfaction of unrequited feelings, needs, and/or desires is made real (i.e. determinative). According to Feuerbach, then, the real elevating influence of the Incarnation came with the realization that if humanity was taken to be the object *of God by God*, then the human, *in God*, is finally seen as an object *to* him or herself.

According to Feuerbach, then, sensuousness had both therapeutic and restorative powers. On his account, sensuousness was that feature of being which demonstrated to humanity that the notion of “*superhuman*” was merely a subterfuge for *inhuman*, just as the notion of “*superrationality*” was a subterfuge for *irrationality* and “*supernaturalness*” was a subterfuge for *unnaturalness*.²⁵⁶ Indeed, on his account, if Christ (as human) did not take the place of God-in-Godself, then the very reconciliation between these two beings (and thus the very satisfaction of the need that Christ was meant to provide) became superficial at best, and deceitful at worst. But moreover, for Feuerbach, if said reconciliation was merely a pretense, that is, if the distinction between God’s nature and human nature *somehow, some way* remained, then not only was God’s benevolence undone, but so too was the very basis of His existence. In short, if Christ was really to be the mediator between the universal and the subjective, then it was essential that His *sensuousness* was understood as the true (and only) source from which all love emanated, as well as the very condition of its return. Once this is realized, the human is able to complete his or her process toward genuine self-consciousness. Here, for the first (and final) time, all that is ever found in God, is unveiled as all that God is ever found to be, namely, the human being.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 92.

²⁵⁷ On this point, Barth seems to part ways with Feuerbach’s interpretation for good. According to John Glasse, Barth rests his view of man solely on a gracious act of God Himself in exalting the humanity of Jesus Christ to fellowship with Himself. According to Glasse, even when exalted to the right hand of God, the humanity of the true man is not deified in Barth; it remains creaturely. In this way, Barth retains the sovereignty of God and understands the exaltation of man toward God (i.e. the hypostatic union) as derivative, following a prior act of divine condescension to man. On this account, the “humanity” of Barth’s God is not the “human God” of Feuerbach, for in Barth’s work,

V. Moving Forward: For Humanity's Sake

This chapter began by detailing Feuerbach's conception of the will and its mystified instantiation as the being of God. We recall that, for Feuerbach, conceiving God as the objectification of the moral law was Christianity's attempt at tethering together the apparent self-subsistence of God and His supposed benevolence toward humankind. On his account, the theological Godhead was represented as an entirely abstract being and therefore, one which—by sheer logical necessity—was neither interested in, nor affected by, the concerns of humanity. As the objectified projection of the moral law, then, Christianity attempted to superimpose an anthropocentric relationality and directionality of intent and action on to God's purely "objective" existence. According to Feuerbach, however, this divine overlay failed to convey authentic (read: human) goodwill, for as so conceived, God (as the objectification of the moral law) appeared to necessitate an objectivity of morality that directly opposed the sensuous nature (i.e.

the exaltation of man to fellowship with God is not synonymous with the deification of humanity itself. Glasse states: "Nor could the way that Barth lets God affirm man be confused with Feuerbach's proposal that we ourselves affirm an inherent identity between our humanity and deity. It is not an inherent possession of our own, nor is it to be achieved by our act. It is rather an event, *the event of our being rescued from sin and death*. As such, it consists solely in *grateful reception* of what another has done for us at a juncture so critical that we could not help ourselves." Glasse, "Barth on Feuerbach," 87. Emphasis added. In seemingly Hegelian fashion, Barth claims that the exaltation of humanity to deity is itself a triumph of the grace of God alone (i.e. God working in humanity so that humanity can come to see God's own self-image, revealed). Instead of addressing the Feuerbachian question about whether Jesus reveals anything other than our own projecting, Glasse contends that Barth simply displaces the question entirely by asserting that we are simply unfit to ask such questions. In this way, Glasse contends that Barth changes the conditions of Feuerbach's question by asserting that the real question is not asked *by us*, but rather propounded *to us* (i.e. we do not ask if God is a projection of human nature, we ask instead if we live our lives in a manner which is reflective of the revealed nature of God in the person of Christ). As such, Barth contends that the issue of projection pertains to our legitimation, not Gods. Of course, on Feuerbach's account, this is all mere question begging. But according to Glasse, Barth remains unfazed by the self-admitted circularity of his own position. Glasse states: "If Feuerbach should deny that Barth's rejoinder eludes vicious circularity by virtue of some virtuous kind of circularity, what, then, would Barth have left to say? That Feuerbach is a fool, when Barth is echoing Anselm's use of Psalms 14 and 53. However, when his utterance is controlled, instead, by his own sense of the liberating gift of divine radiance, his *ad hominem* argument acquires a different quality. It suffuses a charge of evasion with pity...From derision in the name of human evil and death, then, Barth has turned pity in the name of the divine liberation of man to eternal life." Glasse, "Barth on Feuerbach," 91.

individuality/subjectivity) of the human being. As such, Feuerbach contended, following Luther, that God's supposed benevolence toward mankind actually took the form of total condemnation.

For Feuerbach, notions of love and/or benevolence (divine or otherwise) were meaningless—nay, incoherent—without the shared condition of their very possibility. Both, then, on his account, presupposed a commonality of nature (i.e. essence) for without it, such meaning reduced to little more than a mere pretense. For this reason, Feuerbach contended that a human being simply could not be an object to a God who had not (in Himself) the ground *of* sensuous materiality, for such a God would also lack the essential understanding, sympathy and sense *for* sensuality and all that it entailed.

Feuerbach conceived the ground of this sensuous materiality as “feeling,” the third constituent element of human nature. On his account, feeling not only represented the “condition of” the “elemental existence of” the understanding and the will (i.e. materiality), but also the affective moods, intentions, desires, needs, and/or relations that “fleshed out” human existence. As such, feeling brought sensuousness into what would have otherwise been an entirely “objective” existence. It was feeling, then, that enlivened the understanding, truly bridging the gap between the human in his or her reality, and the human in his or her abstracted projection thereof.

All of this points to the fact that, on Feuerbach's account, it was the appearance of God *as a human* (in Christianity's notion of the Incarnation) which gave a person the certainty that God was actually a being *for* humankind. For Feuerbach, if the culminating revelation of Christian theology consisted of an immaterial abstraction (i.e. the instantiation of the Godhead and/or the moral law) abandoning itself in favor of perception (i.e. God becoming human), then in effect, Christianity portrayed nothing more than the truth and divinity of human nature itself. Indeed, it was for this reason that Feuerbach claimed that the Reformer Martin Luther had essentially

removed the existence of a God separate from Christ (or at the very least, made it utterly superfluous) thereby making the humanization of God synonymous with the deification of the human.

According to Feuerbach, despite its preoccupation with abstract speculation and its inability (or perhaps better, unwillingness) to follow its own suppositions to their inevitable conclusions, Christian theology—particularly the Lutheran variety—had depicted a God whose very essence was indistinguishable from humanity's. And herein lies the emphasis, the fundamental import of feeling for Feuerbach's religious atheism: in the theological conception of the Incarnation, the love (toward mankind) which the religious mind places in God is only ever real, true, human love made objective and affirming itself. In and through the Incarnate God, then, one has in view oneself alone, for when a person loves and worships the God who loves humanity, then he or she necessarily loves and worships his or her own love *as divine*.

Now, there is a certain irony here that is rather hard to escape. Theologically speaking, the Incarnation was meant to convey God's essential benevolence toward humankind. Indeed, the blessedness that accompanied this benevolence was said to be the very means by which the human was elevated above his or her limitations in the first place. But for Feuerbach, even the Incarnation, the very basis of humanity's elevation *over* self-abasement, could (and all too often did) provide the context in which a person willfully separated him or herself from his or her fellow humans. On his account, the blessedness that one felt in the inviolability of *being loved* by God obscured the realization that it was the essence of His nature (i.e. the love of God *to* humankind) that ultimately qualified His Godhood in the first place. To miss (or ignore) this distinction, then, inspired one to value one's own importance (i.e. being loved) over the importance of loving others. And in so doing, the image of Christ is transformed into a symbol of vanity and conceit rather than a symbol

of generosity and benevolence, thereby effectively removing the very qualification of one's blessedness in the first place.

Once again, however, this unethical transposition does not mean we must throw away the (divine) baby with the (holy) bathwater. While Christianity certainly made Christ the *central* point of human history, thus (potentially) animating the hypocritical literalisms which sprang from the nature of an unchecked faith, Feuerbach's religious atheism made Christ the *culminating* point of human history. This transposition served to reinforce the fact that Christianity's animations could never truly transcend the nature of humanity itself and moreover, that Christianity's morality could never grant to the human the universal acceptance and love that its Christ was meant to embody.

Thus, according to Feuerbach, it was neither to Christian faith nor to Christian love, but rather to the *rejection* of both, that insured that love conquered all—including, and especially, the independent, transcendent Godhead. Such love was, for Feuerbach, essentially *Godless*, and it was only as such that the Incarnation could have any meaningful significance for material beings. For Feuerbach, then, "As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God."²⁵⁸ It is to that sacrifice that we now turn.

²⁵⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 53. "Wie Gott sich selbst aufgegeben aus Liebe, so sollen wir auch aus Liebe Gott aufgeben; denn opfern wir nicht Gott der Liebe auf, so opfern wir die Liebe Gott auf, (und wir haben trotz des Prädikats der Liebe den Gott, das böse Wesen des religiösen Fanatismus.") Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

Chapter Five

Love is God(less)

I. The Moral Road that Lies Ahead

This project began by discussing several impasses that had been generated from the debate between contemporary atheism and Christian theism. As we now know well, the New Atheists placed the blame on faith-based religion, citing foundational epistemological errors and active attempts to undermine the intelligibility of logical claims. In turn, our theologians placed the blame on New Atheism, citing a cramped epistemology and an unsubstantiated advancement of logical foundationalism/positivism. The goal of the previous three chapters, therefore, was to complicate this apparent binary by analyzing how the images and themes depicted in the Christian imaginary could be conceived atheistically, that is, as mystified reflections of humanity's material and sensual nature.

Using Ludwig Feuerbach's religious atheism as a foil, I argued that (Christian) theological concepts were not merely the products of false consciousness (i.e. figments of imagination), but rather the projected objectifications of a human being's developing self-consciousness. By working *through* theological concepts and (re)interpreting them anthropologically, then, space was created wherein a differing account of religious life (i.e. Christianity) could (and should) be taken seriously by the atheist—not necessarily because it proved to be epistemologically sound, but because it increased the range of feeling and thus the depth of consciousness of one's sensuous materiality and relationality. Based on this account, Feuerbach's religious atheism satisfied the

epistemological requirements demanded by the New Atheists, while avoiding the crude empirical reductionism that threatened to discard Christian theology outright.

Recall that for Feuerbach, the only way to ensure that the import of Christianity was not lost was to make manifest the very mystifications that it objectified and projected. In other words, in order to *safeguard* the significance of the Christian imaginary, Feuerbach contended that its metaphysical basis must be rejected. On his account, failure to do so simply reintroduced the very mystifications that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation was meant to undo in the first place. The lengths that Feuerbach went to translate the abstract theological conception of the Godhead, then, was not simply for epistemic purposes, but also for *ethical* ones. Based on his account, without the proper understanding of Christian imagery, Christian theology vacillated between human and inhuman conceptions of divine essence, ultimately leaving human beings with conflicting accounts of what amounted to truly ethical embodied relations. Indeed, without an entirely anthropological account of theological conceptions (especially the doctrine of the Incarnation), Feuerbach contended that Christianity's meaning became obscure (if not entirely incomprehensible) and its moral value became distant (if not entirely inaccessible).

For Feuerbach, such vacillation necessarily manifested itself in the ethical practices of Christianity. While he stipulated that the theist who bound together all things in one (i.e. in the unified conception of the Godhead) did not lose him or herself in sensuality, he also insisted that for that very reason he or she was exposed to illiberality, spiritual selfishness, and greed.²⁵⁹ He states:

Therefore, to the religious man at least, the irreligious or un-religious man appears lawless, arbitrary, haughty, frivolous; not because that which is sacred to the former is not also in itself sacred to the latter, but only because that which the un-religious man

²⁵⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 64.

holds in his head merely, the religious man places out of and above himself as an object, and hence recognizes in himself the relation of formal subordination.²⁶⁰

This is a rather telling observation, though one that should hardly seem surprising by now. On Feuerbach's account, both the theist (i.e. the Christian) and the atheist held the *same* "object of consciousness" sacred. The only difference, for Feuerbach, was that the theist objectified this object and projected it outward as an independent being worthy of his or her subservience, whereas the atheist simply recognizes this object ("in his head," so to speak) as being sacred in itself. Thus far, then, Feuerbach merely appears to be reinforcing the previous points of his analysis.

However, upon closer examination we can see that this observation is also accompanied by a series of *moral* judgments. The initial judgment is internal: the theist recognizes the projected image of the object of his or her sacredness (as God) and subsequently deems it worthy of his or her subjugation and/or praise. The second judgement is external: the theist finds in his or her own judgment the basis for judging others, especially those who do not share in his or her sentiment. On this account, those with differing conceptions of the same object of sacrality are now seemingly without morality and/or respect for the divine at all (i.e. they are lawless, arbitrary, haughty, frivolous, and so on). Put differently, the original object of consciousness which both the theist and the atheist respectively shared as sacred has now been differentiated. For Feuerbach, such differentiation represented Christianity's manifest *distinction* between love and faith and moreover, its subsequent elevation of the latter over the former.

²⁶⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 64. "Der Religiöse, der alles in eins zusammenbindet, verliert sich nicht im sinnlichen Leben; aber dafür ist er der Gefahr der Illiberalität, der geistlichen Selbst—und Gewinnsucht ausgesetzt. Der Ir—oder wenigstens Nichtreligiöse erscheint daher auch, wenigstens dem Religiösen, als ein subjektiver, eigenmächtiger, hochmütiger, frivoler Mensch, aber nicht deswegen weil diesem nicht auch *an sich* heilig wäre, was jenem heilig ist, sondern nur deswegen, weil das, was der Nichtreligiöse nur *in seinem Kopfe* behält, der Religiöse außer sich als Gegenstand und zuleich über sich setzt, daher das Verhältnis einer förmlichen Subordination in sich aufnimmt." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

Admittedly, Feuerbach begins to walk a very fine line here, but it is ultimately one which makes relevant the moral thrust of his entire project. As we saw in detail in the previous chapter, on Feuerbach's account, faith is synonymous with the belief in God. In turn, the belief in God is synonymous with the certainty that God is essentially a being that loves humankind (i.e. exists solely for the sake of human beings). Or to put it differently, for Feuerbach, the certainty that the love for human beings is the highest good, and thus the very essence of God, is the foundational basis of Christian faith itself. Now, on its face, this conclusion may appear to suggest that, within Christianity, the meaning of love is synonymous with the meaning of faith. But for Feuerbach, this is not the case. He states, "Let it *not* be replied that faith in God is faith in love, in goodness itself; and that thus faith is itself an expression of a morally good disposition."²⁶¹ On Feuerbach's account, to love is to make *another* the object of one's attention. By contrast, to have faith is to make *oneself* the object of one's *own* attention. Or perhaps put better, for Feuerbach, to love is to direct one's being *away* from oneself—it is, in effect, to "become a God" (i.e. a benefactor, helper, savior, etc.) for others. To have faith, on the other hand, is to direct one's attention *toward* oneself as the being who is loved—it is, in effect, to "be a God" in oneself. For Feuerbach, then, faith necessarily transposes the true conception of love into the false conception of "*Christian love*" ("*Die christliche Liebe*"), a destructive notion which helps only to reinforce the epistemological contradictions embedded within Christian theology and thereby obscure the moral significance of the Incarnation itself.

As we will see, Feuerbach viewed Christian faith as a *perversion* of love, that is, as an element of exclusivity (for lack of a better term) which essentially untethered the believer from his

²⁶¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 260. Emphasis added. "Erwidere man nicht, daß der Glaube an Gott der Glaube an die Liebe, das Gute selbst, der Glaube also schon ein Ausdruck des guten Gemüts ist." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

or her fellows. Unlike authentic love, whose subjective (i.e. material, embodied) elemental disposition was “rooted in” and/or “directed toward” humankind, Feuerbach contended that the elemental disposition of Christian love was “rooted in” and/or “directed toward” the *Christian* alone. On Feuerbach’s account, in faith, the love bestowed upon humankind (through the person of Christ) is decidedly particular, extending only to those who recognize, accept, and/or subordinate themselves to this divine particularity.²⁶² For Feuerbach, then, the very concept of Christian love invalidated itself as an universal measure and/or representation of the absolute by substituting its own supposed uniqueness and/or distinctiveness for the universality of love itself.

But what’s more, according to Feuerbach, with this notion of Christian love, the subjective/personal nature of the Christian God (and thus the meaning of His action) could be made manifest only as an object or mode of “special understanding” (i.e. miracle). On his account, since that which stood open to all was common to all; and since that which was common to all could not form a special object of faith, it followed that Christianity must essentially conceive of its God (*even in the person of Christ*) as a peculiar being (i.e. non-human), that is, one which is distinct from (and superior to) the common nature of embodied beings.²⁶³ For Feuerbach, then, Christianity necessarily conceived of love as a predicate *of* God instead of conceiving love as the predicate which *is* God. Or perhaps put better, Christianity necessarily conceived of Christ as an instantiation of *God*, instead of conceiving Christ as an instantiation of *love*. In this sense, Christian

²⁶² Admittedly, this statement may seem a bit heavy-handed to many believers. However, according to Feuerbach, if the Christian God’s love was truly universal—that is, if it was granted to all human beings regardless of their recognition and/or acceptance thereof (i.e. universal salvation), then, in effect, the distinction between theists and atheists would be nullified. This in turn would beg the question as to why Christianity found (and continues to find) it necessary to separate and/or punish those who claimed not to believe.

²⁶³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 248.

“love” was conceived merely as an abstract quality of the divine being, and as such, the being of God necessarily remained independent of and, more importantly, *above* love itself.

According to Feuerbach, in conceiving of him or herself as the recipient of divine love (i.e. grace), the theist inevitably bestows upon him or herself a heightened sense of his or her own dignity and/or importance. (After all, what can inspire the feeling of blessedness more than the notion that the Christian is exclusively worthy of God’s love?) Instead of affixing one’s attention on that humanizing element of one’s species nature, Feuerbach contends that Christianity “extracts” it and objectifies it as a mere quality of God’s superhuman nature (a quality that is nevertheless (re)directed solely toward the (initial) source of its projection). With this transposition, Christian love shows itself to be, by its very nature, arrogant and malignant: arrogant insofar as it shadows its feeling of superiority behind the being of a divine person for whom the believer is an object of peculiar favor; and malignant insofar as it directs its attention and devotion away from the in-dwelling spirit of community and species nature and towards a supposedly transcendent, independent, and divine being.²⁶⁴

To be clear, on Feuerbach’s account, the perniciousness of Christian faith does not rest solely on a penchant for self-aggrandizement. As problematic as that may be, Feuerbach contended that its true threat lies in its readiness to buttress the independent existence of God, that is, to

²⁶⁴ This conclusion may also strike the believer as too heavy-handed. Indeed, it could easily be argued that for many, the bestowal of divine grace leaves one with a heightened sense of humility rather than a heightened sense of arrogance. But for Feuerbach, the point of contention here is not about the various emotional responses to grace, *per se*, but rather about the supposed sense of superiority that accompanies it. On Feuerbach’s account, the (Lutheran) Christian, in faith, purports to have something “extra,” something that exceeds the base nature of human beings, something that is particular, and/or exclusive to believers alone. As such, Feuerbach contends that faith becomes inviolable and what’s more, the object thereof is conceived as a privileged being deserving of the highest honor. On this account, the human owes more to God for His supposed bestowal of love, than he or she owes to his or her fellow by virtue of his or her humanity and relationality alone. It is in this sense that Feuerbach finds Christian faith arrogant and malignant.

(re)establish the being of God-in-Himself, the very being who is supposedly capable of elevating the (Christian) believer precisely because He supposedly transcends him or her. Thus, on Feuerbach's account, despite claiming that Christ was, in reality, fully human, Christian theology could not help but to reintroduce the disunion between the divine and human natures, thereby disguising the *inhuman* love bestowed by the object of faith (i.e. God) as divine benevolence itself.

For Feuerbach, the practical effect of this reintroduction amounted to nothing less than the vanishing of virtue, for "so far as God is regarded as separate from man, as an individual being, so far are duties to God separated from duties to man:—faith is, in the religious sentiment, separated from morality, from love."²⁶⁵ Put simply, according to Feuerbach, Christian faith abolished the natural ties of humanity (i.e. love), substituting the mystified supernatural unity of the Godhead (or, perhaps better, the Trinity) for the natural unity of the species-being, defusing and stifling, not developing, moral dispositions. To put it bluntly, for Feuerbach, in the notion of God's transcendent personality (and devotion there unto), *real* ethical determinations fade away.²⁶⁶

In this final chapter, then, I aim to make clear Feuerbach's conception of Christian faith and discuss how its implications effect the possibility of a truly embodied areligious/atheistic ethic. I will begin by analyzing Feuerbach's notion of faith as the inverse negation of the notion of love. From there it will become clear both how and the extent to which faith stimulates a moral distinction between believers and nonbelievers and substitutes a particular conception of love for

²⁶⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 260. "So gut sich daher Gott als ein Wesen für sich vom Wesen des Menschen absondert, so gut sondern sich auch die Pflichten gegen Gott ab von den Pflichten gegen den Menschen—sondert sich im Gemüte der Glaube von der Moral, der Liebe." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁶⁶ On this account, if Christianity is to say, for example, that God "acts *out of* love," then "God" and "love" must be distinguished. In effect, love must become merely a predicate of God's being—that is, love must be a feature that God simply *has*. In this sense, love is merely a quality capable of being directed by a being capable of directing it. Here, then, God remains *above* love, and thus one's devotion must be directed toward the being of God and not the predicate of love itself.

a universal one, thereby falsifying the essential nature of the human being. On Feuerbach's account, faith exalts itself above the laws of natural morality, insisting that that which is not beloved by God must not be loved by humankind.

Once Feuerbach's conception of Christian faith has been analyzed, I will contrast it with his understanding of *love as God* (*Die Liebe ist Gott, die Liebe das absolute Wesen*). Building upon the discussion in the previous chapter, I will show that for Feuerbach, love is an independent idea which cannot be deduced exclusively from the life of Christ. On his account, to found love on a particular person (even a supposedly divine one) disrupts the unity of the species wherein love as a constituent element of human nature is already manifest. Thus, on Feuerbach's account, where the consciousness of the species as species arises, the idea of humanity as a whole replaces the particularity of the person of Christ *without* replacing the nature He is said to embody. In effect, Feuerbach changes the directionality of blessedness, contending that complete satisfaction comes not from being loved (i.e. from faith) but rather from loving others.

Finally, I aim to make clear Feuerbach's contention that in so far as love denies the existence of an independent God whose nature is fundamentally opposed to human beings, it is essentially *atheistic*. On this account, not only is atheism understood as the secret of religion itself, but it is also understood as the secret to religion's success. To be clear, this is not meant in the sense that atheism provides the kind of oppositional fodder that motivates and/or invigorates individual faith. Rather, it is meant in the sense that atheism itself is the primary driving force *within* religion—the essential element which serves as the catalyst for religion's (especially Christianity's) continued relevance and significance. Thus, on Feuerbach's account, what appears to drive the spirit of Christianity (i.e. faith) is ultimately revealed as the very feature that

undermines and/or negates its true relevance—not because it opposes *reason* per se, as the New Atheists claim, but rather because it opposes *love*.

In short, based on Feuerbach's account, if the moral thrust of Christianity is to persist, it will be championed *solely* by religious atheists. Left in the service of faith alone, Christianity will continue to imprison itself behind the walls of its own credulity, its freedom requiring merely that it accepts what it considers to be decidedly unchristian. But inasmuch as Feuerbach's atheism is tethered to the notion of religion, its direct attack on Christianity is also an indirect attack on New Atheism. Similarly then, left in the service of reason alone, New Atheism will continue to imprison itself behind the walls of its own supposed acumen, its freedom requiring merely that it accepts what it considers to be merely irrational. For Feuerbach, then, it will neither be by faith nor by reason *alone* that the tear in the moral fabric of this debate will be mended. Rather it will be by love—*atheistic love*—that morality will truly live in the hearts and in the minds of human beings.

II. God is (not) Love

According to Feuerbach, as the objective essence of Christianity dissolves into contradiction, so too does its subjective essence. As we now know, Feuerbach contended that the essence of religion depicted the *identity* of the divine nature with the human. Conversely, he contended that religion's form (i.e. here, Christian theology) mistakenly depicted the *dissimilarity* between them. While this may seem like an inconsequential distinction, especially since the claim that "God is love" ("*Gott ist die Liebe*") is generally accepted by Christians as representative of the very belief by which everything inherently Christian is encapsulated (i.e. creation, revelation,

the Incarnation, the Passion, prayer, heaven, and so on),²⁶⁷ for Feuerbach, it poses rather significant problems for Christian moral thought.

On Feuerbach's account, the notion of the "identity of being" is represented within the religious consciousness as "love" (*Liebe*). "Love," he states, "is the universal law of intelligence and Nature;—it is nothing else than the realization of the unity of the species through the medium of moral sentiment."²⁶⁸ Put differently, for Feuerbach, love is the condition of actual human existence coalesced by virtue of a shared essential nature, that is, a common sense of sympathy, empathy, and/or philanthropy. In this sense, love functions as a universalizing element (i.e. an element of species-being). As such, Feuerbach conceives of the "God of love" as the mystified objectification of the human being's common (i.e. species) nature. Or perhaps put better, God, so conceived, is the external projection of the (sensual, material) human being in species, imagined as the absolute being. For Feuerbach, then, "He therefore who loves man for the sake of man, who rises to the love of the species, to universal love, adequate to the nature of the species, he is a Christian, is Christ himself."²⁶⁹ Put simply, for Feuerbach, love *is* God. (A point we will return to below.)

Now, based on Feuerbach's account, if love is the element of being which *identifies* human nature with God, then it cannot also *differentiate* human nature from God and continue to call itself love. In effect, the ground of this differentiation must be something other than love. For Feuerbach, then, the notion of the "dissimilarity of being" is represented within the religious consciousness

²⁶⁷ "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." 1 John 4:8 NRSV

²⁶⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 266. "Die Liebe ist das universale Gesetz der Intelligenz und Natur—sie ist nichts andres als die Verwirklichung der Einheit der Gattung auf dem Wege der Gesinnung." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁶⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 269. "Wer also den Menschen um des Menschen willen liebt, wer sich zur Liebe der Gattung erhebt, zur universalen, dem Wesen der Gattung entsprechenden Liebe, der ist Christ, der ist Christus selbst." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

(read: Christian theology) as “faith” (*Glaube*). That said, the entire notion of faith is, for Feuerbach, simply the inverse negation of the notion of love itself.²⁷⁰ On this account, then, the claim that “God is love” is neither synonymous nor reversible with the claim that “love is God.”

According to Feuerbach, since that which is common to all cannot form a special object of faith, it follows that that which forms a special object of faith cannot be common to all. In other words, insofar as faith, thus conceived, is the element of being which distinguishes between the nature of the divine and the nature of the human, Feuerbach contends that the object of faith (i.e. God) must also be conceived as one which *opposes* the object of love (i.e. humankind as such) and not simply one which expresses another form thereof.²⁷¹ As such, faith necessarily functions as a “particularizing element” (i.e. an element of human individuality, *etwas Besonderes*). On this account, Feuerbach conceives of the “God of faith” (“*Der Gott des Glaubens*”) as the mystified objectification of the human being’s subjective (i.e. independent) nature. Or perhaps put better, God, so conceived, is the external projection of the human being as individual, imagined as the absolute being.

The initial effect of this transposition, as Feuerbach saw it, was that in making it, Christianity had not made love free, that is, Christianity had not raised itself to the height of accepting love as absolute.²⁷² In failing to do so, the independent reality of God’s absolute nature (i.e. His particularity/personality/subjectivity) was thereby established and reinforced. In this

²⁷⁰ Put simply, for Feuerbach, in that love identifies common nature, its essence is universal (i.e. universality). Conversely, in that faith differentiates between natures, its essence is particular (i.e. particularity).

²⁷¹ This claim has important ramifications for Feuerbach’s understanding of the Incarnation. On his account, the Incarnation is meaningful if and only if it represents Christ as the objectification of love—that is, of universal human nature. If, however, the incarnate Christ is represented as still having an independent nature (i.e. not fully human), then He is reduced to a mere rhetorical figure—a poetical fiction of faith that serves only to remystify the essential nature of humankind.

²⁷² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 263. “Das Christentum hat die Liebe *nicht frei* gegeben, sich nicht zu der Höhe erhoben, die *Liebe absolut zu fassen*.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

sense, Christianity reduced a general unity to a particular one by substituting the essential inclusivity of human nature for the arbitrary exclusivity of the divine nature. On Feuerbach's account, then, *partiality* is both the nature and the expression of Christian love or faith. He states, "Faith has for its object a definite, specific truth, which is necessarily united with negation...One thing alone is truth, one alone is God, one alone has the monopoly of being the Son of God."²⁷³ In conceiving God as a unique, independent being, faith transforms love (as the objectification of the nature of the human being) into a mere predicate of the absolute being (as subject). With this move, Feuerbach contends that Christianity makes love an arbitrary quality of God's personality (thereby distorting its true essence) and subsequently places itself in necessary contradiction with universal love (thereby falsifying the elemental nature of human beings).²⁷⁴ In effect, Christianity makes love collateral to faith itself.

What cannot be overstated, here, is that for Feuerbach, the exclusionary nature of faith necessarily precludes it from serving as a basis for genuine (read: universal) ethical reflection and/or action. Whereas the "God of love" ("*Der Gott der Liebe*," i.e. love itself) operates entirely from necessity (read: from the commonality of universal nature), Feuerbach contends that the "love of God" (*Liebe Gottes*) operates entirely from will (read: from divine favor). Therefore, since Christian faith does not hold love itself as the absolute measure, the very unity of the moral sentiment becomes necessarily subordinated to an independent and supernatural particularity. As a mere predicate of the absolute being, then, God's love (i.e. grace, *Gnade*) becomes a "groundless (*die grundlose*), unessential (*die unwesentliche*), arbitrary (*die willkürliche*), absolutely subjective (*die absolut subjektive*), merely personal love (*die nur persönliche Liebe*)"—one which does not

²⁷³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 248.

²⁷⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 267-267.

act from an inward necessity of nature, but rather one which is equally capable of not doing what it does.²⁷⁵ If the theist contends otherwise, that is, if the theist contends that his or her God is the essential, nonarbitrary, absolutely objective ground of love, it is only because he or she takes his or her own exclusive conception as universally representative—a mistake which is as illogical as it is baseless.

On Feuerbach's account, then, as contrary as it sounds, the insistence that "God is love" effectively *does away with* Christianity's conception of God as divinely benevolent. While it may seem that a God who is not obligated to act benevolently toward humankind but does so regardless has a decidedly humane concern, for Feuerbach, such is not as it seems. We recall from our discussion in the previous chapter that if God is to be truly benevolent toward humankind, then His nature must be identical to the human, otherwise His goodness would simply be a pretense. But to this observation Feuerbach now adds another. Insofar as love is based on an independent being, it is necessarily a particular and/or exclusive love, one which extends only so far as the acknowledgement of said being extends. Based on Feuerbach's account, then, God's benevolent action, so conceived, is not decidedly *human*, but rather decidedly *Christian*.

For Feuerbach, while faith first appears to be only an unprejudiced separation of believers from unbelievers, upon closer inspection he finds that this separation quickly becomes the basis for (and justification of) a highly critical distinction. On his account, Christianity does *not* portray God as one who loves all human beings without condition (for then there would be nothing unique and/or particular about His love, and thus no basis for one's self-designation of "Christian" in the first place), but rather portrays God as one who loves all human beings *only in so far as they are*

²⁷⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 320.

Christian—or at least, only in so far as they desire to be. In other words, according to Feuerbach, in order to be beloved by God, one must accept His absolute particularity full stop. Feuerbach therefore contends that faith is essentially a spirit of partisanship (*wesentliche parteiisch*), a partisanship which knows only friends or enemies; a partisanship which understands no neutrality; a partisanship which is preoccupied only with itself.²⁷⁶

The effects of this condition on the moral sentiment are easy to see. Initially, if God is understood as the absolute moral measure, and His love extends only to those who believe in His absolute particularity (*Dogmatische, ausschließliche, skrupulöse Bestimmtheit*), then it follows naturally that one who is not beloved (*geliebt*) by God must also not be loved by the Christian. In this sense, Feuerbach contends that faith is by nature arrogant, hostile, and malignant. Indeed, on his account, even the apparent humility of the believer is taken as inverted arrogance in so far as he or she conceives of his or her own pre-eminence as a matter of grace—that is, as a matter of divine favor. Thus, according to Van Harvey,

It is because this dignity is borrowed that we can account for one of the revealing psychological paradoxes of religious faith; namely, that what the believer experiences as humility appears to others as arrogance.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 255. The notion of partisanship is taken up in detail by the political theorist Carl Schmitt. In his work, *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt contends that the specific distinction to which actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy. He states: “Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence...The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping...Every religious, moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy...A religious community which wages wars against members of other religious communities or engages in other wars is already more than a religious community; it is a political entity.” Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26-37. For a fuller discussion, see pp. 19-79.

²⁷⁷ Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, 131.

On this account, faith gives the believer a peculiar sense of his or her own dignity and importance, thereby encouraging him or her to distinguish him or herself *above* his or her fellows.

Even more troubling, perhaps, is that as the believer's sense of superiority inflates, faith narrows and restricts his or her sphere of concern. Feuerbach states:

Faith is blind to what there is of goodness and truth lying at the foundation of heathen worship; it sees in everything which does not do homage to its God, *i.e.*, to itself, a worship of idols, and in the worship of idols only the work of the devil. Faith must therefore, even in feeling, be only negative towards this negation of God: it is by inherent necessity intolerant towards its opposite, and in general towards whatever does not thoroughly accord with itself. Tolerance on its part would be intolerance towards God, who has the right to unconditional, undivided sovereignty.²⁷⁸

For Feuerbach, then, faith is well-disposed only to itself but ill-disposed towards others. On this account, Christian love “does not regard even the uncharitable actions which faith suggests as in contradiction with itself; it interprets the deeds of hatred (*die Handlungen des Hasses*) which are committed for the sake of faith as deeds of love.”²⁷⁹ While Feuerbach may be a bit heavy-handed here (*i.e.* “deeds of hatred”), his point is worthy of its gravity: so long as faith is rooted in the absolute particularity of a divine being, it reveals itself as a falsification of the universality of love and thus as a repudiation of the essential nature of human beings. And what's more, despite the fact that faith may bring with it a sense of dignity and self-worth, this dignity is, in the end, only transferred indirectly: believers do not possess such dignity in themselves, but only acquire it mediately through a deity that is distinct from them. In effect, Feuerbach contends that faith renders

²⁷⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 256. “So ist der Glaube blind gegen das Gute und Wahre, welches auch dem Götzendienste zugrunde liegt; so erblickt er in allem, was nicht seinem Gotte, d.i. *ihm selbst* huldigt, Götzdienst, und im Götzdienste nur *Teufelswerk*. Der Glaube muß daher auch der *Gesinnung* nach nur *erneinend sein* gegen diese *Verneinung Gottes*: er ist also wesentlich *Intolerant* gegen sein Gegenteil, überhaupt gegen das, was nicht mit ihm stimmt. Seiner Toleranz wäre Intoleranz gegen Gott, der das Recht zu unbedingter Alleinherrschaft hat.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁷⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 265.

a person an object of love not for his or her own sake, but only insofar as he or she appears in relation to this particularity.

This is a devastating moral assessment and it speaks directly to what Feuerbach sees as the nature of Christianity itself. On his account,

If faith does not contradict Christianity, neither do those dispositions which result from faith, neither do the actions which result from those dispositions...all the actions, all the dispositions, which contradict love, humanity, reason, accord with faith.²⁸⁰

To be sure, this is not a mere matter of moral finger-pointing. For Feuerbach, to claim that faith generates (or is even capable of generating) the philanthropic and/or charitable feeling in human beings is fundamentally to misunderstand its essential nature. On his account, all that faith is capable of generating is a theological solipsism that masquerades as tolerance and a fundamental exclusivity that masquerades as inclusivity. As such, Feuerbach contends that there is simply no natural and/or inherent connection between faith and the moral disposition, and as such, it infuses into the believer no real sense of (universal) moral necessity.

Admittedly, Feuerbach paints with fairly broad strokes here and the picture which results is especially ugly for Christianity. On his account, in faith, good works do not proceed from an essentially virtuous disposition, that is, from a believer's essential relational nature, but rather from a pale sense of gratitude to a God "who has done all for him, and for whom therefore he must on his side do all that lies in his power."²⁸¹ Put differently, for Feuerbach, in faith, the believer does not (and *cannot*) do good for the sake of goodness itself, but rather only for the sake of God, his or her savior or benefactor, and only insofar as God bestows the ability to do so. In effect,

²⁸⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 257.

²⁸¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 262.

Faith makes that a virtue which intrinsically, substantially, is no virtue; it has therefore no sense of virtue; it must necessarily depreciate true virtue because it so exalts a merely apparent virtue, because it is guided by no idea but that of the negation, the contradiction of human nature.²⁸²

On his account, then, Christian faith trades only in the appearance of virtue, for its decidedly self-centered, self-referential, self-directed, and self-congratulatory concern is grounded in nothing other than the repudiation of commonality.

On the face of it, this account of Christian faith may seem distorted or at the very least, disingenuous to many believers. But for Feuerbach, the essential nature of faith leaves little (if any) room for redemptive rhetoric. He states, “So far as God is regarded as separate from man, as an individual being, so far are duties to God separated from duties to man:—faith is, in the religious sentiment, separated from morality, from love.”²⁸³ Put differently, on Feuerbach’s account, faith left to itself exalts itself *above* the laws of natural morality, that is, above the natural ties and/or moral sentiments of human beings. As a result, in faith, the believer finds justification for intentions and/or actions that run counter to the common good (i.e. love, *love of neighbor?*) on sheer account of the fact that, in Christianity, the common good is *not* taken as the ultimate measure of morality.²⁸⁴ Indeed, for Feuerbach,

The doctrine of faith [according to Luther] is the doctrine of duty towards God,—the highest duty of faith. But how much God is higher than man, by so much higher are duties

²⁸² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 263. “Der Glaube macht demnach zur Tugend, was an sich, seinem Inhalt nach, keine Tugend ist; er hat also keinen Tugendsinn; er muß not wendig die *wahre* Tugend herabsetzen, weil er eine bloße *Scheintugend* so erhöht, weil ihn kein anderer Begriff als der der Verneinung, des Widerspruchs mit der Natu des Menschen leitet.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁸³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 260.

²⁸⁴ Admittedly, Feuerbach’s universalizing (read: generalization) gets a bit complicated on points such as these. For some strands of Christianity—say, Liberation theology, for example—the common good is all that matters. However, on Feuerbach’s account, such a move effectively makes God synonymous with “The Good,” a move Feuerbach is unwilling to accept. As such, Feuerbach’s analysis focuses on a particular theological position (i.e. Lutheran) which rails against a kind of Christian triumphalism indexed directly to God’s sovereignty. Special thanks to Dr. Charles Gillespie for making this distinction clear to me.

to God than duties toward man; and duties towards God necessarily come into collision with common human duties.²⁸⁵

It should come as no surprise, then, that for Feuerbach, Christianity effects actions in which faith exhibits itself in distinction from, or perhaps put better, in contradiction with, morality itself. Simply stated, on Feuerbach's account, not only does faith require that believers subjugate non-believers for the sake of God's glory, but it also requires that believers imprison themselves within their own prejudices for the (apparent) sake of love itself.

Now, according to Feuerbach, Christian faith necessarily passes into hatred, and hatred into persecution, where its power meets no opposition, that is, where it does not find itself in collision with an universal sense of justice.²⁸⁶ For Feuerbach, "faith is true, unfeigned, only where the specific difference of faith operates in all its severity. If the edge of this difference is blunted, faith itself naturally becomes indifferent, effete (*charkterlos*)."²⁸⁷ In other words, an inclusive faith, one which extends (its version of) love to non-Christians, is a dishonor to an exclusive God. On this account, it is not faith, but only the "believing unbelief" ("*der gläubige Unglaube*") of modern times which "finds it necessary to hide itself behind holy scripture and oppose the biblical dicta to dogmatic definitions in order that it may set itself free from the limits of dogma by arbitrary exegesis."²⁸⁸ Indeed, it is only the contemporary spirit of ecumenicism that requires tolerance on

²⁸⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 260. "Die Glaubenslehre ist *die Lehre der Pflichten gegen Gott—die höchste Pflicht der Glaube*. Soviel höher Gott als der Mensch, soviel höher stehen die Pflichten gegen Gott also gegen den Menschen. Und notwendig treten die Pflichten gegen Gott in Killision mit *den gemeinmenschlichen Pflichten*." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

²⁸⁶ With this claim, Feuerbach's analysis anticipates the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, particularly Nietzsche's discussion of *ressentiment*. See, Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals*. In particular, see his First Essay: "Good and Evil," "Good and Bad." pp. 24-56.

²⁸⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 254.

²⁸⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 251.

the part of faith. But as Feuerbach sees it, faith has already disappeared once the determinate tenets of faith are felt as limitations.

Ironically, perhaps, these felt limitations are, on Feuerbach's account, the result of the true in-breaking limitlessness found in the power of love—a power both independent and subversive of Christian faith itself. While it is unarguable that Christianity sanctions both the actions that spring out of love and the actions that spring from faith without love, Feuerbach argues that,

Love can only be founded on the unity of the species, the unity of intelligence—on the nature of mankind; then only is it a well-grounded love, safe in its principle, guaranteed, free, for it is fed by the original source of love, out of which the love of Christ himself arose.²⁸⁹

In other words, for Feuerbach, it is the power of love, not faith, which grounds the moral character of the human being. And so long as faith rests on the particularity of Christ (as God), His love ultimately rings hollow, distinguished as it is from the universal essence that it purports to represent. Indeed, for Feuerbach, the life of Christ can only ever be truly revered insofar as it is found in accordance with the idea of love itself. On this account, love is not holy because it is a predicate of God made manifest in Christ, but rather the opposite: love is a predicate of God because it is itself understood to be divine. And so, Feuerbach asks, “Can we truly love each other *only if* we love Christ?”²⁹⁰ Yes, but only if we love what he *is*: an image of the love of humankind to itself. This love *is* God, made real and true solely by virtue of our common species nature.

²⁸⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 266.

²⁹⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 266. Emphasis added.

III. Love is God

According to Feuerbach faith produces an inward disunion, and with it, an outward disunion also. As we saw above, Feuerbach contended that faith made belief in its God into a law, leaving a place open for uncharitable thought and action by conceiving of God as a subject in distinction from its predicate. He states,

In Christianity the moral laws are regarded as the commandments of God; morality is even made the criterion of piety (*Kriterium der Religiosität*); but ethics have nevertheless a subordinate rank, they have not in themselves a religious significance. This belongs only to faith.²⁹¹

On this account, Christianity had a God who hovered over morality (*Über der Moral schwebt Gott als ein vom Menschen unterschiedenes Wesen*), indeed, over humanity itself. It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that Feuerbach argued that within Christianity, there was no natural and/or inherent connection between faith and the moral disposition.

For Feuerbach, wherever morality is based on theology, that is, wherever the right is made dependent on divine authority (i.e. faith, grace), the most immoral and unjust things can be justified and established. This is because, on Feuerbach's account, Christianity (and thus Christian faith) is liberal (read: inclusive) only in things that are intrinsically indifferent to its nature. But for Feuerbach, faith destitute of love contradicts the natural sense of right in one's nature, upon which—and only upon which—the necessity of law emerges. Indeed, on his account,

So long as Christian love does not renounce its qualification of Christian, does not make love, simply, its highest law...so long is it a love which by its particularity is in contradiction with the nature of love, which has therefore long been justly an object of sarcasm (*Gegenstand der Ironie*).²⁹²

²⁹¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 271.

²⁹² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 265-266.

Put differently, for Feuerbach, so long as faith loves only what is Christian, it is, in essence, *unloving*—its benevolence extending only so long as the belief in an external God is left intact. True love, however, is a power independent of Christian faith which rightfully does away with the self-subsistence of the Christian God. In this sense, then, love to humankind and between human beings can only ever be *natural* (i.e. material, sensuous) love, universal in nature and free from the limitations and/or contradictions placed upon it by Christian faith. In a word, such love *is* God—the highest, absolute measure of morality.

According to Feuerbach, as a constituent element of human nature, love inevitably subverts Christian faith. On his account, even as faith champions the spirit of particularity and exclusivity, the necessity of love ushers the spirit of universality and inclusivity to the fore. While it is true that the moral sentiment is diluted by appeals to Christian faith, the assimilating power of love is, for Feuerbach, nevertheless essentially intermixed with it. On this account, Christian love is only ever a derived love, and it is only as such that it contains any meaning and/or truth. For Feuerbach, then, God (represented theologically in the person of Christ) is not some revelatory (and thus incomprehensible) instantiation of “the word made flesh”²⁹³ (whatever that means), but rather “a blank tablet on which there is nothing written but what you yourself have written.”²⁹⁴

According to Feuerbach, morality can be founded on Christian theology only where Christian theology has already defined the divine being in moral terms. Or perhaps put better, for Christianity to found morality *on* God, it must first place morality *in* God, for without infusing God with *relationality*, Christian morality would entail nothing more than the codification of arbitrary and unmoral (or at the very least, an amoral) dictates. In other words, without a God who

²⁹³ “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14 NRSV

²⁹⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith according to Luther*, 107.

is intrinsically connected to the moral nature of humanity, the very concept of morality itself becomes meaningless. According to Feuerbach, then, Christ loved humanity, not out of himself or by virtue of his own authority, but rather by virtue of (read: by necessity of) our common human nature. Thus, while it is partiality that constitutes the essential nature of faith, it is reciprocity which constitutes the essential nature of love.

For Feuerbach, this observation goes a long way to explain Christian theology's vacillation between contrary conceptions of the divine nature. On Feuerbach's account, all those dispositions which ought to be attributed to the essential nature of humankind are accredited to a being who stands in distinction from it. The real cause of morality, then, is converted into an impersonal means wherein a merely conceptual, imaginary cause appropriates the place of the true one. Thus it is that at one moment Christianity loses the thought of love and at another the thought of God; that at one moment it sacrifices the personality of God to the divinity of love and at another, the divinity of love to the personality of God.²⁹⁵ He states,

If I interpose between my fellow-man and myself the idea of an individuality, in whom the idea of the species is supposed to be already realized, I annihilate the very soul of love, I disturb the unity by the idea of a third external to us; for in that case my fellow-man is an object of love to me only on account of his resemblance or relation to this model, not for his own sake. Here all the contradictions reappear which we have in the personality of God, where the idea of the personality by itself, without regard to the qualities which render it worthy of love and reverence, fixes itself in the consciousness and feelings.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 264.

²⁹⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 268. "Schiebe ich aber zwischen den Andern und mich, der ich eben in der Liebe die Gattung verwirklicht, die Vorstellung einer Individualität ein, in welcher die Gattung schon verwirklicht sein soll, so hebe ich das Wesen der Liebe auf, störe die Einheit durch die Vorstellung eines Dritten außer uns; denn der Andere ist mir dann nur um der Ähnlichkeit oder Gemeinschaft willen, die er mit diesem Urbild hat, *nicht um seines Willens willen*, d.h. um seines Wesens willen Gegenstand der Liebe. Es kommen hier alle Widersprüche wieder zum Vorschein, die wir in der Persönlichkeit Gottes haben, wo der Begriffe der Persönlichkeit notwendig *für sich selbst*, ohne die Qualität, welche sie zu einer liebens- und verehrungswürdigen Persönlichkeit macht, im Bewußtsein und Gemüt sich befestigt." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

In other words, if Christ (through the Incarnation) is conceived as a special being, that is, as the manifestation of a predicate of an independent God, then His true significance remains mystified behind the veil of a dual (and self-contradictory) nature. For Christ to have a true significance, then, his love of humanity must be derived not out of himself or by virtue of his own authority, but rather by virtue of our common human nature, that is, he must be conceived as the mediator which stands between humanity in his or her own individual subjecthood and humanity as species-being without reference to a supernatural projection of a metaphysical absolute.

According to Feuerbach, then, in love, the need for an (independent, transcendent, metaphysical, and so on) intermediate person disappears. On his account, it is the species nature of humankind which infuses love into the believer, not the mystified notion of Christ as the incarnation of some special historical phenomenon. As the consciousness *of* love, Feuerbach conceives of Christ *as* the consciousness *of* the species itself. He states: “He therefore who loves man for the sake of man, who rises to the love of the species, to universal love, adequate to the nature of the species, he is a Christian, is Christ himself. He does what Christ did what made Christ Christ.”²⁹⁷ In other words, for Feuerbach, where the consciousness of one’s species nature (i.e. the idea of humanity as a whole) arises, the independent reality of Christ’s (special) existence disappears without the true (read: human) sense of his nature disappearing.

On Feuerbach’s account, the incarnation of Christ was nothing more than the image under which humanity’s self-consciousness was made present to humankind. He states,

²⁹⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 269. Returning once more to the work of Luther: “Although we Christians are free from all works, we ought to use this liberty to empty ourselves, take on the form of servants, take on human form, and become human in order to serve and help our neighbors in every possible way...Each of us should become a Christ to the other. And as we are Christs to one another, the result is that Christ fills us all and we become a truly Christian community.” Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 82-84. For a more detailed discussion of Luther’s explication of service to the neighbor, see pp. 79-89.

He alone [i.e. Christ] meets the longing for a personal God; he alone is an existence identical with the nature of feeling; on him alone are heaped all the joys of the imagination, and all the sufferings of the heart; in him alone are feeling and imagination exhausted. Christ is the blending in one of feeling and imagination.²⁹⁸

Consequently, for Feuerbach, it is only on account of what is *Godless* in Christianity that holds true promise for its continuation. Indeed, on his account, the distinct person of Christ (and the love portrayed thereby) is simply the mystified image of the believer's own hidden self (and nature), that is, his or her personified and/or contented desire for happiness, for on his account, in Christ, the believer finds no other qualities except those in which he or she has reference only to him or herself—to his or her own eternal deliverance (i.e. beneficence, redemption, and/or salvation).²⁹⁹ According to Feuerbach, then, insofar as love knows only itself as absolute truth, it is essentially unbelieving (i.e. atheistic). And only insofar as love is atheistic, is it absolute, universal, and sacred—that is, *divine*.³⁰⁰

IV. A Promising Godlessness

Recall for a moment the ethical implications of the conflict between faith and reason offered by the New Atheists in chapter one. There it was argued that the epistemological method of faith (i.e. belief without evidence) generated a sense of universal skepticism which effectively undermined the ability of reason to generate authentic (read: empirically verified, scientific, etc.) knowledge. The moral significance of this claim was magnified when it was suggested that such faith (for believers) underlies the very description and/or vision of their world, influencing (some

²⁹⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 148.

²⁹⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 250.

³⁰⁰ "Die Liebe ist Freiheit, sie verdammt selbst den Atheisten nicht, weil sie selbst atheistisch ist, selbst, wenn auch nicht immer theoretisch, doch praktisch die Existenz eines besondern, dem Menschen entgegengesetzten Gottes leugnet." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

might even say, determining) their responses to others (believers and non-believers alike). On this account, it was contended that if faith can float free from a material reality that is epistemologically justified by reason alone, then ethical inclinations can effectively float free from it as well. For the New Atheists, then, epistemological rigidity had just as much to do with staving off a disembodied ethos as it did with establishing and/or validating the rules of rational, scientific discourse. Indeed, according to Harris,

What one believes happens after death dictates much of what one believes about life, and this is why faith-based religion, in presuming to fill in the blanks in our knowledge of the hereafter, does such heavy lifting for those who fall under its power. A single proposition—you *will not die*—once believed, determines a response to a life that would be otherwise unthinkable.³⁰¹

For the New Atheists, then, it is all but self-evident that otherwise reasonable people could not be moved to such extreme lengths of discrimination and/or violence unless they have faith in some highly questionable grounds for their beliefs.

On the one hand, Feuerbach's system aligns rather well with these (New Atheist) concerns. Indeed, Feuerbach goes so far as to say that,

The work of the self-consciousness reason in relation to religion is simply to destroy an illusion:—an illusion however, which is by no means indifferent, but which, on the contrary, is profoundly injurious in its effect of mankind; which deprives man as well of the power of real life as the genuine sense of truth and virtue.³⁰²

In the analysis of the contradiction between faith and love, Feuerbach demonstrated how Christian theology offered both validation and justification for illogical beliefs and/or immoral behaviors.

³⁰¹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 38. Emphasis in original.

³⁰² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 274. "Es handelt sich also im Verhältnis der selbstewußten Vernunft zur Religion nur um die Vernichtung einer *Illusion*—einer Illusion aber, die keineswegs gleichgültig ist, sondern vielmehr *grundverderblich* auf die Menschheit wirkt, den Menschen, wie um die Kraft des wirklichen Lebens, so um den Wahrheits—unt Tugendsinn bringt." Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

The ultimate purpose of his analysis, then, was not simply to expel logical contradiction from rational discourse but rather to expel an erroneous and unethical exclusivity from moral deliberation. By analyzing Christianity's attempt to combine in one notion of God two incompatible kinds of predicates (i.e. metaphysical and moral), Feuerbach demonstrated that however universal Christianity claimed to be, it was nonetheless decidedly *Christian* (i.e. particular) and therefore, it was in fundamental conflict with the authentic sense (read: common, collective sense) of truth and virtue. Based on this account, if human nature is the only one that a person can truly conceive of, then the first and highest moral law must be the love of the human to his or her fellows. Indeed, for Feuerbach, moral dispositions are not (and cannot be) a consequence of faith, but rather are (and must be) a consequence of the inward conviction of the irreversible reality of humanity's moral nature.

On the other hand, Feuerbach was insistent that a philosophy of religion (or perhaps better, a philosophy of the human spirit) that merely accounted for intellect but not for feeling was incomplete—thereby effectively rendering the account of humanity's essential nature incomplete. In this, Feuerbach seems to align rather nicely with the theologians discussed in chapter one. On his account, epistemological supremacy without regard for sentiment and/or empathy does indeed appear one-dimensional, that is, overly fixated on cognitional and intellectual purity or unity at the expense of subjective nuance and complexity. Thus, to see only epistemological contradiction (and thus only moral pollution) in Christianity is also to miss *its* thoroughly embodied sensibility.

Feuerbach's emphasis on human nature's essential relationality, then, was about more than mere critique, and as it turns out, about more than the mere knowledge of the self-consciousness of one's own nature. Put differently, on Feuerbach's account, any person in whom morality was not held as holy for its own sake—that is, *holy for the sake of species-being*—apart from religious

faith, could never be compelled to be moral by either theological or philosophical argument.³⁰³ Indeed, without reference to the empirical nature of man-in-relation (i.e. love), such arguments would lack all content to begin with. For Feuerbach, then, love is unique to morality (and foreign to faith) because in it, one's happiness/desire (i.e. blessedness) *coincides* with that of the other. And to be sure, true happiness, on Feuerbach's account, can only be found in the universality of atheistic love, not in the particularity of Christian faith.

According to Feuerbach, the notion of love is not merely descriptive of human nature, but also prescriptive. Descriptively, the notion of love entails a determinate conception of humanity and a corresponding conception of essential human behavior. Prescriptively, the notion of love entails the recognition of elements of human nature that enable a person to distinguish acts of love from acts of faith—that is, mores (i.e. values, customs, patterns, etc.) that indicate which motivations, dispositions, and/or behaviors are essentially inclusive, and which are fundamentally exclusive. While not transcendent in the metaphysical sense, such conditions exceed the human as individual insofar as they arise out of empirically-based conceptions of humanity's essential nature.

What Feuerbach ultimately uncovers, then, is not a God who hovers above morality, but a genuinely philanthropic *conscientiousness* (*Gewissenhaftigkeit*) which seeks to cultivate the qualities accredited to the divine, but which ought to be ascribed to the life and *divinity* of humanity itself. "Where man is in earnest about ethics," Feuerbach states, "they have in themselves the

³⁰³ This is one significant difference between Feuerbach's notion of moral law and Kant's. For Kant, the categorical imperative is "disinterested"—that is, operational "for its own sake." But this assessment is precisely what generated such push-back to Kant's theory, insofar as this imperative was considered universal (i.e. innate) without an argument as to why. For Feuerbach, however, the moral sense is not disinterested, but rather grounded in the relationality of species-being—that is, grounded in the *real* universal.

validity of a divine power.”³⁰⁴ Put differently, for Feuerbach, one needs no transcendent measure to discern the features of genuine moral relations. (Though he/she assuredly needs more than mere intellect.) As we’ve come to know, humanity does not mirror the divinity of God; it is God who reflects the divinity of humanity—humanity, not in abstraction (i.e. not in reason alone) but in genuine sensuous materiality (i.e. loving embodied relationality). The truly moral being, then, is conscientious of (not simply conscious of) the fact that he or she can and should raise him or herself only above the limits of *individuality*—indeed, above the peculiar stand-point of all (theological) religion—but not above the essential conditions of his or her species.³⁰⁵

Here we are reminded that Feuerbach’s work focuses primarily on religion as a mystified objectification of the process of the unfolding/developing self-consciousness and so is more concerned with the anthropological significance of religion than with the specific religious practices or the various religious communities that those practices inform and influence. In this way, Marx’s accusation of Feuerbach remaining a theorist of religious anthropology as opposed to a political theologian, economic critic, or scholar of religious history more generally is applicable.³⁰⁶ While Feuerbach did not apply his insights to create a *systematic* lens through which religion, as a cultural phenomenon, could be assessed, his critique insisted that every new insight uncovered in the analysis of religion (i.e. in its various textual interpretations and/or images) led to a *deeper insight* into the nature of the human condition.

Throughout this project, I have found that one of the most intriguing intersections between the New Atheists and our theologians is the shared belief that the practical emancipation of humanity would simply be the natural outcome of the theoretical/ethical emancipation that each

³⁰⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 274.

³⁰⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 270.

³⁰⁶ Marx, “Thesis,” 145.

believed its own position to embody. Each to its own degree believes that its position has curative effects and as such, each believes that its own methodology and/or practice of criticism will ultimately enable humanity to coexist on one universal level of existence. In other words, each contends that if humanity could simply do away with or move past abstract, speculative, or scientific understandings of the world, then it would be freed from its self-alienation and thus free to exercise its natural capabilities in effective and realistic ways.

Now, it has been my contention that the religious atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach is the means by which we can indeed overcome both the epistemological and moral impasses that have plagued the contemporary debate. As this chapter set out to show, it is only by rejecting what Christianity considers uniquely Christian that the believer can come to embody the universal love which he or she claims to find in Christ. Likewise, it is only by accepting what New Atheism considers uniquely irrational that the atheist can come to see the Christian imaginary as a benefit and not as a detriment to his or her sensuous materiality. My analysis (like Feuerbach's) may indeed suffer from a touch of philosophical optimism that is, perhaps, unrepresentative of the contemporary climate. In this way, perhaps I too am an idealist. But, like Feuerbach, an idealist only in the region of practical philosophy insofar as I also

do not regard the limits of the past and present as the limits of humanity, of the future; on the contrary, I firmly believe that many things—yes, many things—which with the short-sighted, pusillanimous practical men of to-day [sic], pass for flights of imagination, for ideas never to be realized, for mere chimeras, will to-morrow [sic], i.e., in the next century,—centuries in individual lie are days in the life of humanity—,exist in full reality.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xiv.

Based on this account, it seems clear to me that Feuerbach's project allows one to embrace the unresolved tension between New Atheism and Christian theism and to suggest a middle ground that promises to place, *not displace*, Christianity within a framework that is (or at least, should be) agreeable (or at least, understandable) to contemporary atheists. And as a result, New Atheism can level and land its critique of the supposedly wholly other *and* Christianity can retain its significance as an imaginative resource from which to develop new possibilities for rational thought.

While Feuerbach is often criticized for failing to provide a successive systematic (for lack of a better term) to the traditions whose limitations he was key in exposing, his analysis and critique never demanded a complete break with traditional theorizing, only traditional speculation. Admittedly, Feuerbach's investigation into religious consciousness tended to lack a sufficiently critical paradigm from which to explain the interrelations between the human's individual nature and his or her social/collective (i.e. species) nature. On the whole, this lack gave his own analysis a bit of a mystified hue, especially when it came to explaining the *specific* ways that a person was shaped by his or her social environment.³⁰⁸ But as Thomas Wartenberg says,

Even the limitations of Feuerbach's thought make it an exciting object for a critical encounter...being the stimulus to original philosophical reflection is, after all, one of the most important roles that a philosopher can play, and it is a role for which Ludwig Feuerbach is still eminently suited.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ To this point, I direct the reader to Thomas Tweed's theory of religion entitled *Crossing and Dwelling. A Theory of Religion*. His is a wonderfully illustrative approach to the interdisciplinary study of religion, or perhaps more specifically, to the interrelational dynamics of specific practices of specific adherents in specific groups. His trope of "crossing over and coming back" is especially informative, but unlike Feuerbach's, Tweed's analysis does not aim at explanation and/or prediction. In other words, his theory has more to do with the cultural representations of religious traditions and/or communities and practices than the nature of religion (and the history of Christianity) as mystified and objectified self-consciousness as such. While the notions of "relation" and "self-consciousness" are front and center for Tweed, they seem to operate more as lenses of impartiality through which religious scholars can (and should) assess their own engagements and interactions with various religious traditions, rather than as "essential" features of human nature—the reality of which Tweed, like Marx, tends to question. Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling. A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁰⁹ Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, xxix.

In a public discourse that is, at present, as politically charged as ours, being right, that is, being in possession of the Truth, seems to outweigh the generative and/or corrective possibilities of a “critical encounter.” But for Feuerbach, when it comes to the religious consciousness, and thus the truth about our essential nature, *all there is* is critical encounter. Without it, without the relationality (of species being) it both implies and engenders, humanity is not really human at all.

As we now know well, for Feuerbach, supernaturalism in theory quickly turns to anti-naturalism in practice. It is because of this, then, that we need only invert the relations inherent in Christian theology to make manifest the true significance of human nature within the Christian imaginary. He states,

The necessary turning-point of history is therefore the open confession, that the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species; that man can and should raise himself only above the limits of his individuality, and not above the laws, the positive essential conditions of his species; that there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the *absolute*, than the essence of human nature itself.³¹⁰

For Feuerbach, life as a whole, that is, life in its essential, substantial relations, is of an essentially divine nature. On his account, God is worshiped in the person of Christ only because humanity itself is worthy of worship. God “becomes” flesh, in other words, because in truth, the human is and has always already been God. He states,

God chose man as his organ, his body, because only in man did he find an organ worthy of him, suitable, pleasing to him... Thus God comes *into* man only *out of* man. The manifestation (*die Erscheinung*) of God in man is only a manifestation of the divinity

³¹⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 270. Emphasis in original. “Der notwendige Wendepunkt der Geschichte ist daher dieses *offne Bekenntnis und Eingeständnis*, daß das Bewußtsein Gottes nichts andres ist als das Bewußtsein der Gattung daß der Mensch sich nur über die Schranken seiner Individualität oder Persönlichkeit erheben kann und soll, aber nicht über die Gesetze, die *Wesensbestimmungen seiner Gattung*, daß der Mensch kein andres Wesen als *absolutes*, als *göttliches Wesen* denken, ahnden, vorstellen, fühlen, glauben, wollen, lieben und verehren kann als *das menschliche Wesen*.” Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

(*Göttlichkeit*) and glory (*Herrlichkeit*) of man.³¹¹

In short, for Feuerbach, if the predicate of humanity is taken from God, then so too is taken the predicate of deity itself; if His essential relation (i.e. unity) with humanity is done away with, then so too is His very existence.

This observation embodies the spirit of this chapter, indeed, the spirit of this entire project. To objectify God as a being distinct from the nature of the human is, on Feuerbach's account, a falsification of both. By doing so, Christianity abolishes the natural ties of humanity and introduces a special, supernatural particularity in its place, thereby inverting the meaning of love and undermining the significance of the Incarnation itself. And yet, according to Feuerbach, the history of Christianity has had for its grand result nothing more than the unveiling of this very fact, that is, the realization and recognition of Christian theology as anthropology (*Theologie als Anthropologie*)—an anthropology which is itself exalted into religion.

Near the end of his analysis on the contradiction between faith and love, Feuerbach poses a series of seemingly hypothetical questions. He asks,

Are we to love each other because Christ loved us? Such love would be an affected, imitative love. Can we truly love each other only if we love Christ? Is Christ the cause of love? Is he not rather the apostle of love? Is not the ground of his love the unity of human nature? Shall I love Christ more than mankind? Is not such love a chimerical love? Can I step beyond the idea of the species? (*Kann ich über das Wesen der Gattung hinaus?*) Can I love anything higher than humanity?³¹²

For Feuerbach, these questions are not meant to undermine the significance of the Christian tradition or poke fun at the image of Christ. Rather, they are meant to focus our attention on, and realign our consciousness toward, the reality that both underlies and buttresses each. The love of

³¹¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 336. Emphasis in original.

³¹² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 266.

Christ to humankind, represented theologically in the doctrine of the Incarnation, is nothing more than a visual representation of human nature placed outside of itself, set apart and venerated as holy. Based on this account, even the sharpest atheistic critique thereof cannot negate its true significance and meaningfulness.

Feuerbach concludes *The Essence of Christianity* with the following words:

The reduction of the extrahuman, supernatural, and antirational nature of God to the natural, immanent, inborn nature of man, is therefore the liberation of Protestantism, of Christianity in general, from its fundamental contradiction, the reduction of it to its truth,—the result, the necessary, irrepressible, irrefragable result of Christianity.³¹³

On his account, it was Christianity itself that both articulated and substantiated the truth of religious atheism. While on the surface they may appear at odds, each point to the self-same reality, namely, that if God is really for us, then so too must we be for others. And in the end, if we are truly for others then we have no need for God, *for He is us, and we are Him already*.

³¹³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 339.

Concluding Remarks

Water, Bread, and Wine

As we near the end of this project, it will perhaps serve us well to retrace some of the key steps that have led us to this point. The work itself was motivated by a series of seemingly counterintuitive questions. Given the present stalemate (and the seemingly increasing intellectual hostilities) between contemporary atheists and a large number of their (Protestant) Christian critics, I set out to examine whether it was possible to remain committed to the epistemological tenets which underwrote the New Atheist movement *and* welcome the Christian imaginary as a valid source of rational knowledge simultaneously. I wondered if it might be possible that a *deeper* engagement with Christian theology could yield a *more* robust atheism than was on offer at present.

On the face of it, these queries seemed more like contradictions than counterintuitions. As the discussion in chapter one indicated, according to the New Atheists, reason stood diametrically opposed to religious faith, and, on their account, since the supposed truths contained within the Christian imaginary were grounded solely in faith, Christianity was, by logical necessity, excluded from the discussion of rational knowledge (justified true belief) altogether. Indeed, for the New Atheists, because Christianity's supposed truth claims were foundationally indeterminable (empirically speaking), to assert their truth at all was as unjustified as it was offensive to rational minds everywhere. But what's more, to this intellectual offense was added the basis and support of moral offense as well, indicating that not only was Christianity an impediment to reason itself, but it was also an outright detriment to human flourishing. And, since there was nothing unique to the logic of Christianity *per se*, all faith-based religions were necessarily subject to the same

critique. In short, given the inherent inviolability of reason itself, religion ought to be resigned to the historical garbage heap of worn-out ideas.

According to a number of Christian apologists and critics of New Atheism, however, while opposition was certainly an undeniable feature of the current dispute, it was not essentially grounded in the supposed clash between reason and religious faith. On their account, faith did not supersede or supplant reason, but rather supplemented it. Faith granted the Christian access to a reality that transcended the mundane, empirical world. Indeed, it was contended that through faith, one was able to give an account of reality that gave meaning to bald determinative facts and moreover, was able to place them into a larger context in which reason played out on a much grander scale. The opposition came, then, when a crude empiricism was taken as an absolute representative of reality. Based on this account, the very basis of New Atheism's supposed truth claims was itself foundationally indeterminable (empirically speaking), and thus to assert *its* logical unassailability was as unjustified as it was offensive to material, feeling hearts everywhere. And in like fashion, to this subjective offense was added the basis and support of moral offense as well, indicating that not only was New Atheism an impediment to human experientiality itself, but it was also an outright detriment to human flourishing in its own right.

In the attempt to move past this intellectual and moral deadlock, I looked back to Ludwig Feuerbach, the 19th century scholar of religion and self-admitted *religious atheist*. A promising aspect of Feuerbach's work was his decidedly religious (some might even say, theological) intellectual orientation. Despite his critique and subsequent rejection of speculative philosophy (particularly that of G.W.F. Hegel) and the theological traditions that it had inspired and engendered, chapter two detailed the ways in which Feuerbach was dedicated to recasting, not rejecting, the notion of religion (in general) and Christianity (in particular). More concretely, while

Feuerbach's critique focused entirely on dismantling Christianity's *form* (i.e. theology proper), he was adamant about persevering its *content*. Feuerbach's atheism, then, sought to re-envision religion, not merely to reject or remove it from rational discourse, and so to this end he returned to the Christian imaginary time and again for conceptual and experiential grist for his positive atheistic mill. Contrary to the New Atheist claim that to take the theological components of Christianity seriously contradicted one's rational nature, then, Feuerbach contended that a sustained and thoughtful engagement with the Christian imaginary (and especially the humanity of Christ) generated authentic and meaningful *atheistic* insights.

While Feuerbach found it necessary to reject what he saw as logical contradictions embedded in Christian theology, he thought it was a mistake to treat Christian theology primarily and/or exclusively as a species of intellectual abstraction. Indeed, Feuerbach went so far as to say that the rejection of Christian theology did *not* invalidate the existential significance and/or the anthropological meaning that those contradictions were intended to express. When it came to Christianity, in other words, Feuerbach's aim was analytical and, in a non-vicious sense, reductive. He did not confront Christianity merely as an external critic concerned with showing that there was no God. Rather, he insisted that the only way that the metaphysical pretensions of Christianity could be undone was to proffer a genuine and serious account of the origin and development of the Christian imaginary in terms of something non-supernatural/non-metaphysical. In the end, his goal was not simply to criticize Christianity's coherence, but also to understand and clearly communicate the significance of its mystifications.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ According to Manfred Vogel, "If Feuerbach has something distinctive and unique of his own to contribute in the area of religion, then it must be in some role other than that of the philosophic critic of religion. This is indeed the case. And, strange as it may seem at first sight, this other role in which Feuerbach presents himself and in which he makes his distinct and unique contribution is none other than the role of the *theologian*...Thus, the confrontation with Feuerbach is no longer just confrontation with one specific theological formulation, no matter how important

In this way, Feuerbach was interested in more than just fallacies and contradictions. Indeed, on his account, it was the conceptual (read: experiential) basis of these theological mystifications which established the framework and narrative through which many (if not all) of our experiences, theological or otherwise, were filtered in the first place. In viewing God as the product of an imaginative human projection, then, he was also interested in the passions, desires, and needs that said God supposedly gave attention and expression to. By his own account, his critique of Christianity was in the service of the same human values that Christianity itself recognized and fostered, and therefore, unlike the New Atheists who contended that there was no benevolent kernel of rational belief within or behind Christianity, Feuerbach insisted that his new philosophy emerged only by *evolving out of* the very core of religion itself. It was in, or perhaps put better, *through* Christianity, then, that Feuerbach thought that he had found the key to discerning the true meaning of religion, and by extension, the true meaning of humankind. In short, while Feuerbach worked tirelessly to sever religion from its supposed theological bindings, the very purpose of his work was to usher *in* the new religion of humankind.

On Feuerbach's account, religion was simply the process by which the human subject became self-conscious of the various (infinite) arrangements of his or her nature and thus fully self-conscious of him or herself. Whereas theology proper conceived of those arrangements as indicative of an independent, metaphysical being (i.e. God), Feuerbach saw only the objectification

it may be, but with the whole rend of the theology of the modern era. Indeed, the significance of the confrontation goes even deeper, for modern theology pursued one of the two basic alternatives open to theology, i.e., basing religion in man's consciousness, while Barth offers the other alternative, i.e., basing religion in the grace of divine revelation. Thus, the confrontation between Barth and Feuerbach is in essence the confrontation between the two basic alternatives open to theology—either start with man and end up with Feuerbach or turn to Barth and stay with God. A great deal, therefore, depends on the outcome of this confrontation, for, clearly, in the last analysis only one alternative can be tenable—either Barth or Feuerbach. Thus, before one can turn to Barth, Feuerbach must be overcome; and if Feuerbach is not overcome, this is tantamount to blocking the way to Barth." Vogel, "The Barth-Feuerbach Confrontation," 27-30. Emphasis added.

and projection of human elements and relations. The distinction between religion and theology was crucial for understanding Feuerbach's analysis, for as he made abundantly clear, he was not attempting to discard the reality of the divine. Instead, he was attempting to displace the divine from its (supposedly) transcendent heights and return it from whence it came—from human nature itself.

At the very center of Feuerbach's analysis and critique, then, was a foundational materiality and sensuousness that unequivocally rejected the possibility of any supposed existence that transcended the human. Chapters three and four showed clearly that by inverting Hegel's dialectical process of self-differentiation that involved objectification, alienation, and synthesis, Feuerbach demonstrated that there was no distinction between the predicates of the divine nature and the predicates of human nature (nor could there be), and therefore, that there was no distinction between the divine and human subject. He stated,

We should not, as is the case in theology and speculative philosophy, make real beings and things into arbitrary signs, vehicles, symbols, or predicates of a distinct, transcendent [sic], *i.e.* abstract being; but we should accept and understand them in the significance which they have in themselves, which is identical with their qualities, with those conditions which make them what they are:—thus only do we obtain the key to a *real theory and practice*.³¹⁵

With this claim, Feuerbach rejected Christian theology's penchant for speculation without concluding, as the New Atheists do, that Christianity provided nothing more (epistemologically speaking) than a mere safe haven for false consciousness, full stop. Instead of maintaining, as his contemporaries do, that the illusions of Christianity render its supposed meaning entirely baseless, Feuerbach insisted that Christianity's illusions were indicative of humanity's essential nature and value. Indeed, on Feuerbach's account to casually dismiss the operational necessity of the

³¹⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xiv. Emphasis in original.

imagination or its images was to effectively downplay the psychological significance of feeling as a foundational marker when determining what did and what did not count as “real” or as “factual” in the first place. Based on this account, far from being a rejection of reality, Feuerbach contended that the imaginative projections of Christianity actually signaled an *expansion* of it—a deepening of one’s own sense of what one has yet to come to know about oneself. As such, rational activity was not understood as the discarding or disregarding of the objects of consciousness that the imagination produced, but rather the self-conscious process of the mediation of feeling and empirical reality itself.

Based on this account, insofar as it sought to counter theological speculation with explanation, Feuerbach’s anthropological assessment of Christianity was decidedly religious. But in the same way also, insofar as it refused to remain agnostic about the possibility of an independent, transcendent reality, Feuerbach’s anthropological assessment was decidedly atheistic. According to Feuerbach, so long as a person continued to view the mystifications of Christianity as indicative of a reality that existed beyond his or her sensual experience, he or she would fail to recognize the divinity of his or her own nature. And because such an error effectively encouraged humankind to find truth in illusion and falsehood in the very reality that it obscured and denigrated, by exteriorizing in God what really belonged to the essence of humankind, a person deprived him or herself of the infinite possibilities of his or her own nature insofar as he or she disconnected him or herself from the essential indwelling spirit of his or her species-being.

According to Feuerbach, then, the real elevating influence of the Christian imaginary came with the realization that if humanity was taken to be the object *of* God *by* God, then *in* God, the human was finally seen as an object *to* him or herself. Without rejecting the metaphysical basis of Christianity and replacing it with an entirely anthropological foundation, the significance of the

Christian imaginary (especially in terms of the Incarnation of Christ) is lost. But take care to note that unlike his contemporary atheists, Feuerbach viewed this potential forfeiture *as a loss*. Recall above that for Feuerbach,

The Son is the satisfaction of the need for mental images, the nature of the imaginative activity in man made objective as an absolute, divine activity. Man makes to himself an image of God, *i.e.*, he converts the abstract being of the reason, the being of the thinking power, into an object of sense or imagination. But he places this image in God himself because his want would not be satisfied if he did not regard this image as an objective reality, if it were nothing more for him than a subjective image separate from God,—a mere figment devised by man. And it is in fact no devised, no arbitrary image; for it expresses the necessity of the imagination, the necessity of affirming the imagination as a divine power. The Son is the reflected splendour [sic] of the imagination, *the image dearest to the heart*; but for the very reason that he is only an object of the imagination, he is only the nature of the imagination made objective.³¹⁶

According to Feuerbach, couched in terms of the religious consciousness, the theological doctrine of the Incarnation (like every Christian theological doctrine) was no mere product of fantasy or make-belief, but rather a mystic paraphrase of a real, material, psychological process—the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness made objective. To abandon it entirely, like the New Atheists are want to do, then, is merely to surrender both a ready-made image and a ready-made narrative that is, nevertheless, entirely and decidedly *human*. Put differently, to haphazardly throw away the Christian imaginary in favor of some self-perceived rational purity is to miss an opportunity, perhaps *the* opportunity, to demonstrate that the driving force behind Christianity’s continued relevance and significance is *atheism* itself. And moreover, to denigrate and affront those who wish to participate in said imaginary—the so-called “dims” of New Atheist disdain—is to miss an opportunity, again, perhaps *the* opportunity, to demonstrate that the true moral significance of the Christian Christ is found only in the realization that his love of humanity must

³¹⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 75. Emphasis added.

be derived entirely from our common human nature, and not derived from some supposed metaphysical authority.

According to Feuerbach, the correct relation to theology should not merely be negative, but also critical. In separating the true from the false, we reveal an entirely new truth, one that must be developed and preserved with the same conscientiousness that was once reserved for the God “above.” On Feuerbach’s account, the pretension of Christian theology was that it could hallow an object simply by its essentially external cooperation with the divine. The new truth, disclosed in full only after we outgrow the notion of a metaphysical God, is that life as a whole, in its essential, substantial relations, is *per se* religious—that is, of a thoroughly divine nature.³¹⁷

While this new truth may seem a bit trite coming from the scholar who, in my opinion, has so thoroughly and eloquently dismantled Christian theistic belief, Feuerbach contended that the most profound secrets lie in the most common, everyday things. To demonstrate this point, he concludes *The Essence of Christianity* with two illustrative examples, translated from two of Christianity’s most hallowed sacraments: baptism and communion.

According to Feuerbach, the water of baptism is, theologically speaking, the conduit through which the Holy Spirit imparts itself to humanity. Once baptized, it is said that one enters into fellowship with God, becoming a member of the kingdom that He has established by virtue of all those who have been baptized before. As we now know well, for Feuerbach, such a depiction requires translation in order for its true significance to emerge clearly. In order to decipher the true meaning of the sacrament of baptism, then, we must start where all theological critique must start—with the rejection of divine grace and omnipotence.

³¹⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 271.

For many, this is a rather hard pill to swallow. But recall above and note that, on Feuerbach's account, the critique of Christian theology was understood to be *in the service of* the self-same human values that Christianity itself recognized, fostered, and encouraged. His analysis, then, was just as much in the spirit of *protection* as it was in the spirit of destruction. Indeed, as we saw in chapter two, Feuerbach stated:

But I by no means say (that were an easy task!): God is nothing, the Trinity is nothing, the Word of God is nothing, &c. I only show that they are not that which the illusions of theology make them,—*not foreign, but native mysteries, the mysteries of human nature*; I show that religion takes the apparent, the superficial in Nature and humanity for the essential, and hence conceives their true essence as a separate, special existence.³¹⁸

In order to safeguard the significance of this sacrament, then, Feuerbach contended that we must again do what we did in order to safeguard the significance of the Incarnation, namely, we must reject the metaphysical underpinnings which purport to infuse it with its divine (read: transcendent) value. Only then will we be able to transform the water of baptism from an arbitrary medium of divine grace to a universal symbol of (human) moral, intellectual, and bodily purity.

According to Feuerbach, baptism is given a true meaningfulness only by regarding it as a symbol of the value of water itself. If this sounds like a mere trivialization, one should note that water is the universal medium chosen for this most holy of Christian sacraments, and so to casually dismiss its import would be to casually dismiss its theological significance as well. Theologically speaking, then, water is a conduit of conversion, the means by which one's nature (moral or otherwise) is essentially purified of sin by the in-dwelling power of God. Materially speaking, the baptized is actually *washed*, establishing a "clean slate" so to speak—a necessary preparation for any significant life event which one is about to participate in. Immaterially speaking, the baptized

³¹⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xviii. Emphasis added.

is *cleansed*, the stain of original sin wiped away so that the word of God can take root in the heart and in the mind.

If we translate this “foreign mystery” into the language of a “native” one, then on Feuerbach’s account, we can say simply that water is “divine” because it *itself* has both material and immaterial effects on real, sensuous, human beings. As was the case in baptism, materially speaking, water is taken as an agent of cleanliness, the medium through which impurities are washed away—a necessary preparation for a life without sickness and disease. But moreover, water empowers and regulates the body and its internal functions, facilitating both physical and intellectual healing. Immaterially speaking, then, water is a symbol for the overall therapeutic and/or curative effects of our reliance—or to put it in Feuerbachian terms, our *relationality*—with nature itself. It is the *relation* which sustains humanity, the unification of an “external force” and the material through which it “works.”

For Feuerbach, however, human beings are distinguished from Nature (after all, neither plants nor animals are baptized) and as such, they long to celebrate their specific difference. On his account, this celebration of “otherness” is exemplified in Christianity by the sacrament of holy communion, the very activity in which particularity and exclusiveness is symbolically embodied (and consumed). Theologically speaking, the bread and wine of communion represents, for Feuerbach, the feast of the faithful, the means by which the believer’s faith in God’s salvation is reassured and sustained. Materially speaking, the communicant is actually *fed*, provided with the elemental staples of a meal which physically sustains the body. Immaterially speaking, the communicant is *nourished*, participating in the same meal that Christ shared with his chosen, thereby being reminded of God’s sacrifice as well as the promise of redemption that sacrifice has guaranteed to those who follow Him.

If we translate this “foreign mystery” into the language of a “native” one, then on Feuerbach’s account, we can say simply that bread and wine are “divine” because they represent the power and effect of human consciousness. For Feuerbach, “Bread and wine are, as to their materials, products of Nature; as to their form, products of man.”³¹⁹ In other words, for Feuerbach, wheat and grapes (i.e. elements of nature) must be *effected*, must be *transformed*, in order to become bread and wine. While “composed” of the same “ingredients,” they are differentiated, altered from their natural, universal state and *made* something apart—something sacred, something divine. For Feuerbach, then, it is the human which gives form to nature, the human which converts the elements of life to the meal which nourishes and sustains. In other words, it is through the participatory action of the human being (and the human being alone) creating the means to his or her own satisfaction, that humanity is *redeemed*. Or as Feuerbach puts it, “Bread and wine typify to us the truth that Man is the true God and Saviour [sic] of man.”³²⁰

As I argued above, the promise of Feuerbach’s argument lies in the fact that it can provide an explanation of both religious experience and Christian imagery without resorting to mockery, mystification, or claims of incomprehensibility. Now, this is certainly not to say that his critique of Christian theology is not negative in the critical sense. Rather, it is to say that his critique is not *merely* negative, full stop. His analysis and assessment is persuasive because he does not get caught in the quagmire of debating the soundness of irreducible claims. As such, he appears to use the same *modus operandi* as the apologists he is critiquing, save for the fact that he can demonstrate that the notion of God is reducible in ways that reason itself is not. In this way, he can present counter claims (not always counter arguments) that remain and function at the level of basic

³¹⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 276.

³²⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 277.

categories, but which necessarily exclude (for us) an existence and/or consciousness beyond our own. And herein lies the true force of Feuerbach's analysis: once one entertains the reality that God's supposed transcendence can only ever be an objectification of humanity's manifest immanence, the very identity of God and humanity becomes irrefutable, and what's more, it becomes inconceivable to see what arguments could establish the distinction between the divine and the human, for any such argument would itself be the product of human reasoning and imagination. As tautological as this may appear to the Christian apologist, on Feuerbach's account, solipsism is an accusation that rings utterly hollow coming from a theological point of view.

According to Feuerbach,

In Christianity, man was concentrated only on himself, he unlinked himself from the chain of sequences in the system of the universe, he made himself a self-sufficing whole, an absolute, extra- and supra-mundane being. Because he no longer regarded himself as a being immanent in the world, because he severed himself from connection with it, he felt himself an unlimited being—(for the sole limit of subjectivity is the world, is objectivity),—he had no longer any reason to doubt the truth and validity of his subjective wishes and feelings.³²¹

As we now know well, on his account, what appeared to drive the spirit of Christianity (i.e. faith) was ultimately revealed as the very feature that undermined and negated its true relevance, not because it opposed reason *per se*, as the New Atheists have claimed, but rather because it opposed *love*. But for Feuerbach, moral feeling can effect nothing without nature, for as he contends, hunger and thirst destroy not only the physical powers of humanity, but also the powers of understanding and consciousness. Feuerbach's anthropological critique of religion brings God back down to

³²¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 150. Im Christentum konzentrierte sich der Mensch nur auf sich selbst, löste er sich vom *Zusammenhang des Weltganzen* los, machte er sich zu einem selbstgenügsamen Ganzen, zu einem *absoluten, außer- und überweltlichen Wesen*. Eben dadurch, daß er sich nicht mehr als ein der Welt angehörendes Wesen ansah, den Zusammenhang mit ihr unterbrach, fühlte er sich als *unbeschränktes Wesen* – denn die Schranke der Subjektivität ist eben die Welt, die Objektivität –, hatte er keinen Grund mehr, die Wahrheit und Gültigkeit seiner subjektiven Wünsche und Gefühle zu bezweifeln. Zeno, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.

earth, and requires that when we reflect on the one who confers our blessedness, we think only of ourselves—not as atomistic, individual beings inherently separate and superior to materiality, but rather as beings in fundamental relationality with it and with ourselves. And in the end, “It needs only that the ordinary course of things be interrupted in order to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance, *to life as such, a religious import*. Therefore let bread be sacred for us, let wine be sacred, and also let water be sacred.”³²²

Amen.

³²² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 278.

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