

FEUERBACH AND ROOTS OF MATERIALISM¹

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FEUERBACH is one of those figures who appears again and again in the footnotes and introductory paragraphs of works on other philosophers, but is very rarely studied for himself. Everyone knows him as a transition figure: principally as the most important of the 'young Hegelians' of the 1840s who gave a human-centred twist to Hegel's thought, and thereby provided Marx with one of his reference points—but also of course as one of the originators of a modern tradition of debunking and re-interpreting religious myth in terms of man, and one of the inspirers of the contemporary school of the theology known by the trendy name of the 'death of God'. And in more specialized circles, it is also recognized that he provided Freud with some of his ideas on religion.

At this point, knowledge about Feuerbach on the part of even academic philosophers tends to peter out. Most share the view that they need know no more. But a book now published by Marx Wartofsky,² professor of philosophy at the University of Boston, challenges this complacent neglect. The book is a major study, the only study in English of this scope devoted to Feuerbach; and it is carried out by a highly intelligent and demanding contemporary philosopher who has been engaged for many years in an attempt to reformulate the conception of materialist humanism that comes to us from Marx and therefore also from Feuerbach. It is much less an exposition of Feuerbach than a continuing discussion with him, almost an attempt to wrest from him what insights he can offer in this enterprise of contemporary reconstruction.

In this sense, Wartofsky's book provides the perfect test for Feuerbach's reputation as a peripheral figure. We think of Feuerbach as a transitional philosopher, just because we have unconsciously written him off as a source of insights, because we have embraced the easily available in Marx, or modern theologians, or Freud. Wartofsky's strenuous questioning of Feuerbach should shatter this assumption, if it is really wrong.

Well, is it? The answer, even Wartofsky's answer, cannot be put in a straight 'yes' or 'no'. If we are looking for penetrating and consistent formulations, then Feuerbach will disappoint us. Wartofsky makes this clear. He never tried to work out in coherent and rigorous form the insights which made his name in the early 'forties', principally in his best known work, *The Essence of Christianity* of 1841, which was the rallying point of the young Hegelians. But at the same time, following the genesis of Feuerbach's mature thought, as Wartofsky does, from his early beginnings as a more or less orthodox Hegelian, turns out to be an immensely salutary experience, because it makes us aware again how questionable and genuinely puzzling are the more confident formulations of those thinkers who followed and supposedly superseded Feuerbach. It makes us ask again whether we really understand what we mean by materialism, let alone a humanist or dialectical materialism.

The puzzlement arises as soon as we go beyond the bland capsule descriptions of Feuerbach's historical significance, and look at what he was struggling to express. Let us take off from one of those cliché summations of Feuerbach: that he debunked

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² Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), xx + 460 pp., £17.50.

Hegel's pretensions to a science of some super-human, cosmic entity called 'spirit', and showed that the real, unconscious subject of both metaphysics and theology was man. In an age and culture where most people find Hegel's conception of spirit half unbelievable and half incomprehensible, this kind of debunking does not seem to have much to teach us. Our philosophers are nourished on Hume and indirectly on the French Enlightenment, more recently they have read some Freud and heard much about Marx from their graduate students. They know all about this. Of course, for those poor Germans of the 1840s, who had just been through a binge of Hegelian speculation, such a take-down was no doubt a salutary experience.

But already we have missed an interesting point. We can assume too easily that Feuerbach is just taking us back to the Enlightenment, whereas in fact he remains in important respects a Hegelian, and therefore is on to a problem the Enlightenment did not pose.

Hegel did indeed have a notion of spirit as a cosmic subject, greater than man, of which man was in a sense a vehicle. Hence a materialist humanism must attempt to refute him. But once you have read Hegel seriously, you cannot just go back to Diderot or Holbach or Hume, because he has put questions to materialism or empiricism which they did not consider and cannot answer.

We might sum up these questions in the following way: the materialist or empiricist Enlightenment—let us take our examples of Holbach and Hume—attempt a reductive explanation of religion and metaphysics, in general of human talk about God, or the Absolute, or what is spiritual and allegedly greater than man. They show this to emanate from human sensibility, or experience, or human material needs. It is a projection of this experience or these needs. This is supposed to be evident in a scientific perspective.

Now Hegel's arguments probe at the hidden dogmatism of such views: that they take for granted as quite unproblematical whatever they want to reduce religion and metaphysics to. Hume starts with immediate experience, as made of impressions, particulate data of sense; the French materialists start with a mechanistic conception of human nature and human needs. But once we examine these allegedly clear factors which are supposed to explain the cloudy and speculative fancies of the human mind, they become themselves very problematic and questionable. Is it really any clearer or surer that my experience is made up of particular data of sense than it is that my soul is indivisible and indestructible? Both these claims repose on a supposedly clear and indubitable reading of what it is to be a human agent. Both appear arbitrary and bizarre when we reflect on other dimensions of experience which they ignore or screen out.

These supposedly well-founded scientific reductive explanations turn out to be specious. They all require that we swallow some huge initial assumption which they are powerless to establish when challenged. Certainly, we can offer some account of religious belief and experience in terms of economic structures or sexual libido (to take more contemporary examples) and this will sound convincing as long as we happily believe that economic structures can be discriminated as basic, or that libido is the drive behind all others. But when challenged we have a hard time establishing that we even know what we mean by these terms, let alone that they describe the basis of human life.

But does this just leave us in a morass of doubt? Are all explanations of human life, society, religion equally dubitable, and based on equally arbitrary assumptions? Hegel thought he had found a way out of this morass, a way beyond scepticism, a 'self-completing scepticism' as he called it which would lead to firm ground. The great statement of this is his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was extremely important for Feuerbach in the formulation of his own thought.

Now the *Phenomenology* starts with a consideration of knowledge, and it faces the dilemma that any way of posing the question of how or what we know has to presuppose some conception of the knowing subject. All epistemologies, for example Hume's or Kant's, start from some notion of the subject of knowledge, of his experience. And

insofar as these are open to challenge, their whole enterprise of founding knowledge is compromised from the start. We seem unable to escape from the morass.

Hegel's answer in the *Phenomenology* is to propose a way of what has subsequently been called 'immanent critique'. Starting from any conception of the subject of knowledge, we show its inner incoherence, and hence the necessity of discarding it for another one, about which in turn we demonstrate the internal incoherence; and so on until we have arrived at a conception which cannot be so set aside. Our thinking about knowledge as about anything else, cannot start without presuppositions, but in the *Phenomenology* we see laid out a way of challenging our presuppositions, and continuing the challenge until they resist effectively. We are, therefore, not just at the mercy of some dogmatic assumptions, as we have already seen the early materialist reductive explanations seem to be.

Now Feuerbach is a Hegelian, in the sense at least, that he has absorbed this lesson of the *Phenomenology*. Debunking Hegel's Spirit and making man the centre of his account of religion and metaphysics cannot just be a return to some generally accepted notion of man and human nature, from which we explain our beliefs about God, or the Absolute. Our conception of man has to emerge out of an immanent critique of Hegel, and other, pre-Hegelian views. It has to be a critically-grounded view of man, and not just a dogmatically-assumed one.

But the humanist materialism which emerges out of this process can never be the simple, unproblematic one of the Enlightenment. It has to incorporate a critically defensible doctrine of what it is to be a human subject.

This is Feuerbach's aspiration as a Hegelian. As Wartofsky shows, his performance often turns out to be disappointingly—and even bewilderingly—below the mark. But the problem remains alive for him, and some of his discussions are extremely fruitful and suggestive.

Feuerbach seems to recognize that an adequate account of the human subject has to recognize that men form conceptions of themselves, and that they are partly shaped by these conceptions. Part of what is essential to being a human being, as against an animal, is our relating ourselves to a certain understanding of ourselves. He also sees that the subject who so understands himself cannot simply be individual, that it is only in relation to others, in a community of speech, that we make and develop these understandings by which we live.

All this emerges in the rich and still obscure Feuerbachian concept of the 'species being', which Wartofsky expounds at length. This is one of the terms that Marx took over from Feuerbach, using it extensively in his unpublished manuscripts of 1844. Marx dropped the term later, but I do not believe that he sloughed off his debt to the Feuerbachian notion.

Now, the notion of species being can be used to define man, because man is related to his species being in a way that no other animal is. We can say of any animal, and particularly gregarious animals, that the life they lead is not just that of the individual specimen, but their life is involved in that of their group, their troop or pack, and also in a more distant sense in the life of their whole species, in that they have offspring and perpetuate their kind. Now we can think of animals as living this life with others unconsciously, unreflectingly. But in the case of man, this common life is something of which we have a notion, or at least a picture. We relate ourselves to some such notions or images of what we are as men. And it is difficult to conceive of any being as human in the full sense who did not so relate himself. At the same time, these conceptions of species being are conceptions of our life among other humans, and are conceptions held in common with other humans. So that being human is not something which a man can achieve on his own.

In the notion of species being Feuerbach has, it would seem, incorporated an understanding of man both as a self-interpreting being and an inescapably social being. Marx took over both these dimensions when he borrowed the term.

This notion of species being is one cornerstone of Feuerbach's famous critique of religion. His claim is that the real unrecognized subject of religious belief is man, in that what we love, worship, feel awe for under the titles 'God', the divine, or the numinous, are the characteristics of our own species being as we grasp them. Only that in religion, we grasp them in an alienated form, as existing in a transcendent realm, which expresses in a distorted way how far we see the capacities of the species as transcending our lives as individuals. The love of God for man is thus, for instance, the love which is an essential part of our species life, in that without love there would be no species life. In God we love a perfected image of ourselves.

This notion of alienation shows how deeply rooted Feuerbach's humanism is in Hegel's thought, even when he has turned against his teacher. For it reflects his view that men can only come to a true, and, as we shall see, liberating understanding of their species nature, by overcoming the distorted projections of their earlier history. In this way the Hegelian way of the *Phenomenology*, where we hope to arrive at an adequate understanding of the subject through the critique of inadequate ones, that is, the proper way of philosophical thought, is matched by the mode of development of man in history, where we come to a true understanding of ourselves—or anyway approach this indefinitely—through the critical transformation of the distorted images we project of ourselves. In neither life nor philosophy is there a direct, immediate road to self-clarity and truth, but only one that advances through the destruction of illusions. Hegel calls this way 'dialectic' in the *Phenomenology*, and we can say that, in this sense, for Feuerbach, human self-understanding and therefore human development is inescapably dialectical.

All this should sufficiently illustrate my claim that Feuerbach's humanist criticism of Hegelianism is very far from being a simple return to earlier materialism; that in short, he did not just debunk Hegel, but tried to build a humanism through a dialectical transformation of Hegel's thought. This humanism allows for self-transformation in a sense undreamt of in the earlier forms, and in this provides some of the groundwork for Marx's theory. All this becomes evident as one penetrates beyond the stock formulae defining Feuerbach's role and examine the actual development of his thought, as Wartofsky does in a masterful way.

But what also comes to light is how immensely difficult and problematic the exercise is. Feuerbach could not deliver on the promise which this critical-dialectical path holds out. It is often thought, rather too quickly and schematically, that Marx did so deliver; that he picked up the ball of materialist humanism from Feuerbach and successfully ran it over the touch line. But a closer examination of what Feuerbach attempted is a very sobering experience. Feuerbach did not find the adequate formulation, but, when one examines the difficulties he tried to master, one becomes less and less convinced that Marx did either.

Wartofsky documents well the basic Marxist critique of Feuerbach, that in his conception of human self-transformation he gave virtually no place to the way men change themselves in history, through their productive activity. His humanism in this sense remains 'abstract', 'ahistorical', very much focused on men's consciousness of themselves. Human development in history is Marx's strong suit, and it is thought, quite naturally, that he overcame *the* inadequacies of Feuerbach's theory.

But in fact Marx's materialist humanism still bristles with difficulties and questions, great unexplored areas, where the master rushed through without stopping, including some important ones, like the nature of religious consciousness and epistemology, where Feuerbach has something to say. As Wartofsky succinctly puts it: 'It may be said that where Marx and Engels were concrete (for example, in historical political-economic terms), Feuerbach was abstract; but that where Feuerbach was concrete (that is, in the psychology and phenomenology of conscious experience), Marx and Engels remained abstract'.

This seems to indicate that those who want to continue or to reconstruct a humanist

materialism in our day would find great advantage in returning *also* to Feuerbach and not just to Marx. This is in fact what Wartofsky has done and why he has done it; and the example in this interesting book is very instructive. Both to take the measure of the problems, and to glean interesting hints towards their solution, Feuerbach is a rich source.

But what of those who do not share this goal, to whom the all-embracing ambitions of Marxist–Feuerbachian materialism seem unfounded? Have they nothing to learn from Feuerbach? I do not share this goal myself, I am in that sense an ‘outsider’ to the enterprise; but I still think that we all have a lot to learn from it.

This is because the conception of man as a self-transforming being, moving through criticism and/or revolution from distorting to more adequate forms of life and thought, is at the heart of a very deeply rooted and widespread contemporary notion of freedom, which is evident in the proliferation of ‘liberation’ movements in the last half of the twentieth century, through just about every conceivable human context, from class and colonial struggles to the relations between the sexes. Liberation in this late twentieth-century sense is the achievement of a condition where one can determine one’s life out of oneself through the destruction of a restricting and oppressive structure, which is at once a structure of the victim’s thought and feeling—false consciousness—and a structure of power.

Now, more has fed into this contemporary obsession than the legacy of Marx. Frantz Fanon, for instance, who is an immensely influential figure in contemporary liberation ideologies, was also affected by Nietzsche and contemporary existentialism. But the line from Hegel to Marx remains in many ways the most clear and intellectually-structured theory of liberation of the modern world. I believe it is difficult properly to understand the modern world—that is, not just the events which we read about in the newspapers, but even some of our own emotional reactions, to personal ‘liberation’ of ourselves or others, for instance—without some grasp of what this liberation talk is all about; and almost impossible to gain an intellectually coherent grasp of this without referring to the tradition of dialectical thought which Hegel launched and Marx so influentially transformed.

And an important figure in this tradition, not just a ‘transition’ thinker, but an explorer in his own right, is Feuerbach. Wartofsky’s fascinating study convinces us of this.