



# Feuerbach

Philosophy 151  
Winter, 2004  
G. J. Mattey

# The Young Hegelians

- A number of early followers of Hegel are known as the “young Hegelians”
- The leaders of the group included Bruno Bauer and David Strauss
- In their youth, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels were associates
- The young Hegelians were radical opponents of despotic governments upheld by religious institutions

# Left and Right Hegelians

- A counter-movement was that of the conservative “right” Hegelians
- Thus the young Hegelians came to be known as “left” Hegelians
- The right Hegelians held the power in the universities and kept the left Hegelians out
- They considered Hegel’s work to be the culmination of philosophy and existing institutions the culmination of society

# Christology

- An essential component of Christian theology is an account of Jesus Christ
- Various doctrines had been advanced and had fallen under criticism
- The central problem was to give an intelligible account of unity of the divine and the human
- A key issue was how the single temporal death of Christ could atone for the sins of all humans

# Rationalist Christology

- A number of theologians held that the Biblical doctrine of Christ cannot be literally true because it is incoherent
- The only role of Jesus is as a divine messenger who was the greatest human
- The life of Jesus is an inspiration for people to live a spiritual life
- But then Christ loses his central role

# Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher

- 1768-1834
- An opponent of rationalism and romanticism in religion
- Made major concessions to religious skepticism



# Schleiermacher's Early Theology

- In his early writings, Schleiermacher emphasized religious feeling over dogma
- It is a feeling of absolute dependence
- Jesus had the greatest God-consciousness of all humans and was perfectly free of the influence of sensual consciousness
- The mission of Jesus was to impart this consciousness to his fellow humans
- As we attain this consciousness, we are freed from sin, i.e., sensual consciousness

# David Friedrich Strauss

- 1808-1874
- Studied theology
- Arrived in Berlin to study with Hegel just before his death
- Lectured at Tübingen
- Ostracized from lecturing



# *Life of Jesus*

- In 1835, Strauss published a controversial theological work
- Called by one critic “the most pestilential book ever vomited out of the jaws of hell”
- *Life of Jesus* was a summary of “critical” historical investigation of the facts surrounding Jesus’s life
- The historical evidence is only consistent with understanding the “miraculous” events in Jesus’s life as myth

# Hegelian Christology

- For Hegel, God and finite human beings are infinite and finite “moments,” respectively, of a single entity, “spirit”
- The unity of God and humans is not abstract, but must become concrete in the person of a divine human
- Strauss allowed that the divine and the human are fundamentally one
- But he thought that this unity is manifest in the spiritual development of humanity

# Strauss's Christology

- The role of Christ as an individual is replaced by that of an idea of divine/human unity: the life of the species
- The human species is essentially spiritual, but its spirituality is negated by nature
- Spiritual development is the negation of nature (the negation of the negation of spirit)
- Humanity takes on the properties that are assigned to Christ: it “dies, rises, and ascends to heaven”

# Dangerous Writings

- Feuerbach's early writings were mostly on the history of modern philosophy
- One of them, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, was published anonymously
- This book wrecked his promising career as a scholar when he refused to disavow its authorship
- Later he became co-editor of a radical journal

# *The Essence of Christianity*

- In 1841, Feuerbach published his most famous book, *The Essence of Christianity*
- It was criticized by some, e.g. Max Stirner, as being too religious
- Mostly it was considered dangerous to the Christian religion
- But it also struck a blow against Hegelianism
- As Feuerbach aged, his writings came closer to orthodoxy

# Human Nature

- The topic of our text is the essential nature of the human being
- Understanding human nature is the prerequisite for understanding religion
- There are three powers making up the totality of human nature
  - Reason (“the light of the intellect”)
  - Will (“the energy of character”)
  - Affection (“love”)

# Brutes

- What distinguishes humans from non-human animals is their consciousness of their own nature
- The other animals are conscious in many other ways
- They even have a feeling of “self as the common center of successive sensations”
- What they lack is consciousness of natures or species, which makes them unscientific

# Inner and Outer Lives

- Unlike the other animals, human beings have both an inner and an outer life
- Thought and speech imply a relation to the species as something apart from any relation to another individual
- Humans can thus put themselves in the place of another by thinking both under the species of humanity

# The Infinite

- Humans are conscious of their nature as being infinite
- Thus human consciousness really is infinite
- The non-human animal's finite "consciousness" is really only instinct
- Religion is consciousness of the infinite
- So, human self-consciousness is at the same time religious consciousness

# Absolute Perfections of Being

- The three powers of the human being are its perfections
- Insofar as the human is the perfection of being, these powers are absolute perfections of being
- They take themselves as their own ultimate aims
- So, thinking, willing, and loving are divine, existing for their own sakes

# The Priority of the Powers

- Love possesses the human, as is seen when one is willing to sacrifice one's life for the sake of love
- Sinking into deep contemplation or enthusiastically pursuing science show the power of reason over our actions
- Achieving a victory over ourselves by correcting our bad habits is the result of the power of will

# Subject and Object

- Like the idealists, Feuerbach emphasized the relation between subject and object
- Objects are objects only for the subject to which they are related
  - Even the sun is a different physical object for each of the planets
  - It is the same object only theoretically
- Because of this relativity to the subject, the subject finds its own nature in its objects

# The Absolute

- The nature of humanity is the absolute for the human being
- The power of the object of any of the powers making up human nature is to be found on the side of the subject
- Whenever we affirm something, we affirm the perfection of our powers
- It is impossible to think these powers as limited: our attitude is infinite

# Existence is Good

- Self-consciousness is joy in one's own existence
- This is confirmed by the satisfaction one gets upon viewing his own image
- One affirms one's own humanity
- This must be distinguished from vanity, satisfaction with one's individual form
- Existence is a good thing, and consciousness is its highest form

# Egoism

- Those who impose limitations on the human species do so out of laziness and egoism
- It is an attempt to generalize the feeling of dissatisfaction at one's own inadequacies
- But this is an error
- It is impossible for beings with any degree of power to think that their power is not the highest
- Only a lower-level being is deemed limited

# Adaptation

- The powers that make a thing the kind that it is also dictate its self-image
- If flowers could think, they would regard the beauty of their own kind to be the highest
- Any limitation on a thing's power is automatically a limitation what it can understand as being great
- The nature of a thing and what it values are perfectly adapted to each other

# God

- Human intellectual vision reaches to unlimited self-consciousness
- Hence, in becoming conscious of itself as unlimited, it finds God in itself
- It does not find God in itself insofar as its ability to produce falls short of its ability to conceive
- But this is a higher level of awareness than not recognizing individual limitations

# Monologue

- The object of a power is only the power itself
- To feel the infinite is to feel the infinite in the power of feeling
- One would feel nothing but rushing wind on hearing music if one's feelings did not infuse the music itself
- Music is a monologue of emotion
- Philosophy is the monologue of reason, as is seen in our intellectual interest in things

# Feeling and the Divine

- The subjective, which is generally regarded as inferior to the objective, is really what is primary in consciousness
- Our feeling toward (love of) the divine is thus an expression of the nature of feeling
- Since this is self-knowledge, feeling is the nature of the divine itself
- In religious feeling, God is in an ecstatic relation to divine nature

# Doctrine

- The priority of religious feeling renders religious doctrine of secondary importance
- If it has any value, it is in relation to feeling
- If another doctrine inspired the same feelings, it would be equally valuable
- It is said that feeling is the organ of the divine being
- This could only be the case if feeling in itself is the hallmark of the religious

# Objective Being

- The only “objective” aspect of feeling is its universality, its transcendence of the feeling of the individual
- Setting God up as an objective being invites doubt about whether God exists
- “Feeling is atheistic in the sense of orthodox belief”
- People fear this atheism because they are constrained by outward considerations

# Projection

- The present description of feeling applies to the other powers of a being
- Generally, we are confined by our nature in thinking anything beyond these powers
- In attempting to conceive of less-limited beings, we only imagine and project ourselves
- If we imagine people on other planets, they are just an extension of humanity

# Reclamation

- Religion has a definite course of development in time
- “Man progressively appropriates to himself what he had attributed to God” (Intro, Sec. 2)
- This can be seen in the movement from Judaism to Christianity
- “What yesterday still passed for religion, has ceased to be so today; and what is regarded as atheism today will be religion tomorrow.”

# Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach"

- Engels appended to one of his work a series of eleven theses on Feuerbach written by Marx
- He credited Feuerbach for placing religion on a materialist basis
- But he regarded Feuerbach's materialism as merely "contemplative"
- Its focus is on essence, rather than activity
- Hence, he misses the all-important practical dimension of the human being