"The Essence Of Christianity" In Relation To
"The Ego And Its Own"
by Ludwig Feuerbach

Taken from The Philosophical Forum, Volume 8, number 2-3-4, (1976)

Translated by Frederick M. Gordon

1845

"Feuerbach", says the Unique one, "provides us with only a theoretical liberation from theology and religion; he merely gets rid of God the subject, but leaves the divine essence, the predicates of God, untouched." Of course he allows them to remain, but only because he has to allow them to remain; otherwise, he could not allow anything at all in nature and nothing of humanity to remain. For God is an essence made up of the realities, i.e., the predicates, of nature and mankind: (God is light, life, power, beauty, essence, understanding, consciousness, love, in short, everything. What then would be left, if the predicates of God (295) didn't remain any longer? But why should anything at all be left? That is the very sign of religiosity, of Feuerbach's "subjugation," that he is still infatuated with an "object," that he still wishes something, loves - something- a sign that he has still not raised himself to the absolute idealism of "Egoism". "I have based my affairs on nothing," sings the Unique one. But isn't this nothing a predicate of god, and isn't the sentence: God is nothing, an expression of religious consciousness? [20] So the "Egoist" has still, despite everything, also based his affairs on God! So he also belongs to the "pious atheists".

How does Feuerbach allow the predicates to remain? Everything comes down to that. Are they the same as when they're predicates of God? Not at all. Rather they are retained as predicates of nature and humanity -- as natural, human properties. When they are transferred from God to humanity, they lose their very character of Godliness, their inflated nature, their existence only far removed from men in abstraction, in phantasy. By being transferred out of the mystical darkness of the religious spirit into the bright light of day of popular human consciousness, they would become "common," "profane." On what does the power of earthly majesty depend? Solely on the power of the opinion, the belief, that the person of majesty is an entirely different sort of being. When I therefore put the person or subject of majesty on the same footing as myself, in thought, or still better in actuality, I bring to mind that that person is just as good as any other men, and no better, and, with this, the majesty itself vanishes into nothing. Now with heavenly majesty, it's just the same. God as subject alone is the original bearer of all religious predicates. (296) Only when they are predicates of a highest, i.e. exaggerated, extravagant being, consequently only when the predicates themselves are to the highest degree exaggerated, extravagant, hyperbolic, are they predicates which are different from my own, predicates which stand over me (Uber mich), i.e. over mankind. Therefore, if one gets rid of the subject, one thereby gets rid of the predicate as well (be it understood, as a theological predicate), because the subject is nothing but the predicate is thought, represented as a subject.
"But Feuerbach himself says that what concerns him is the destruction of an illusion". Indeed, but an illusion with which all illusions, all prejudices, all unnatural constraints fall away, even though this might not happen immediately; for humanity's primary illusion, primary prejudice, primary constraint, is God as subject. If one, therefore, devotes one's time and power to the dissolution of the primary illusion, it follows that at the same time one will dissolve the illusions and constraints derived from it.

What does it mean, "Man is the God of Men?" Does that mean something like: Man is God in the sense of a being differentiated from men, standing over men, in short, in the sense in which there is a God for religion and for speculative philosophy? Feuerbach shows that religion does not understand itself, but that speculative philosophy and theology understand religion wrongly. He shows that the belief in God - a real belief, naturally, not the imagination and reflection of a belief in God - is only the belief of men in themselves. He therefore shows that the divine is not divine, that God is not God, but is only the human essence that is self-loving, self-affirming, and self-regarding to the highest degree. Man only has regard for a God who has regard for men, and indeed, who regards men (297) as they regards themselves. I do not, for example, have any regard for the body; I separate it from myself. I experience bodily needs and functions as constrictions, as being in contradiction with myself. I disavow the body with a word. I contemplate suicide and praise the lifeless body as the true, holy, noble, highest, i.e. divine being. What I am not but wish to be, and strive to become, that is my God. Feuerbach therefore says that God is nothing but the fulfilled wishes of men, the being which satisfies their needs be they of whatever sort they might. When you therefore heal the sick or also if you only cure someone "possessed by fixed ideas," when you revive a hungry person with food, you are to that person, prosaically put, a benefactor, or a beneficent man, poetically expressed - a god; for what one finds pleasing and beneficial, one declares with praise is god. Religion is affect; it is poetry. The statement: Man is the God, the highest essence of men, is therefore identical to the statement: There is no God, no highest being in the sense that theology uses those words. But that last statement is just the atheistic, i.e. negative expression of the same thing of which the earlier statement is the practical and religious, i.e. positive expression.

Feuerbach's "theological perspective" consists in the fact that he "splits us into an essential and an unessential I," and he presents us with "the species, Man, an abstraction, an idea, as our true essence, instead of the actual, individual I." "Unique One"! haven't you read the Essence of Christianity with any thoroughness? Impossible; for what is the very theme, the kernel of this work? It is nothing other than the overcoming of the split into an essential and unessential I - the deification, that is, the presentation, the regarding of the whole man from head to foot. Doesn't the book have expressly as its conclusion that the divinity of the individual articulates the revealed secret of religion? Does it not even go so far as to say that (298), "To eat and to drink are divine acts?" But are eating and drinking things that are done by an idea, by an abstraction? The only piece of writing in which the slogan of the new age, viz. personality, Individuality, is something other than a meaningless flourish is precisely The Essence of Christianity, for only the negation of God (the abstract, infinite essence which is taken for the true essence) allows the presentation of the Individual, and only sensibility is the correctly grasped meaning of Individuality. In this respect, this particular writing of Feuerbach is essentially different from even his own earlier work, because in it, for the first time, he has advanced sensibility as Truth,
for the first time in it, absolute essence is grasped as sensible essence, and the sensible essence as absolute essence. And if you want to check whether this is true, just compare, for example, the significance of miracles in "Bayle" with that of The Essence of Christianity. To be sure, you will find there what is also in this work, and what moreover is self-evident, viz. the senselessness of miracles the way that theology talks about them. But while in Bayle miracles are presented as contradicting the divine essence, here they are presented as being in agreement with it. The reason is that there, God is still an abstract essence which is differentiated from men. Here, however, it is grasped as the human essence in its totality, content with itself. And the true meaning of miracles is exactly that, for they are nothing but the of course supernatural and to that degree unreasonable - satisfaction of the felt wishes and needs of human beings. Feuerbach has dedicated himself exclusively in this work to tracing back God or religion to its human origins, and to dissolving it through this reduction, theoretically and practically, into man. Religion, however, presents the essence of man himself, or the abstracted essence of man, as something which is outside of and above him. Feuerbach, therefore, has to account for this division between God and man in terms of a distinction which is made in man himself. (299) For how could religion be explained at all if no distinction whatsoever were to occur between the I or self consciousness, and essence or nature in man? He therefore had to adopt as the starting point of his investigation the psychial condition in which man, his essence, his powers, are differentiated from himself, and put over himself, the condition of enthusiasm, of passion, of submersion, of ecstasy. The perceptive critic thus observes that the introduction to The Essence of Christianity, in which the theme of powers "in man, but over man" is especially brought into prominence, is not an introduction to a philosophical treatise on the relation of human predicates to the human subject, or the human essence to the human I, but an introduction to the essence of Christianity, that is, the essence of religion. But can one on such a basis blame the overture to The Magic Flute for being only the overture to The Magic Flute, and not also to Don Juan?

For Feuerbach, the individual is the absolute, i.e. the true, the actual being. But why doesn't he say: this exclusive individual? Because if he did that, he wouldn't know what it is that he wanted to achieve - if he assumed the standpoint of the exclusive individual, which in fact he rejects, he would sink back into the standpoint of religion. For, in exactly that standpoint, consists the essence of religion, at least in this connection, viz. that it selects from a class or species a unique individual and sets him up as holy, 'unapproachable by all the others. This man, this "Unique One", "Incomparable One", this Jesus Christ, exclusively and alone is God. This oak, this place, this grove, this bull, this day, is holy, not the rest. To transcend religion therefore is not something different than to demonstrate the identity between consecrated objects or individuals and the other profane ones. (300) Hectolitre Bonaface already supplied this demonstration to our forefathers when he applied the standard of the divine to a she goat. So, with the "exclusive individual," you would assume the standpoint of Christianity whose essence is summed up in the statement: I, this exclusive, incomparable individual, even if not now, still by my divine destiny, am God. And this is true equally whether God is defined as abstract, as the perfect moral essence, or as mystical, as the fantastic sensible essence. Religion can only be transcended if you bring this incomparable individual down out of the blue haze of his supernatural egoism into the world of profane sensible appearance; and this would demonstrate to you, unmistakably and undeniably, also his identity with other
individuals, his commonness, despite his individual differences. Grant to the isolated individual not less than his due, but also not more. Only so can you free yourselves from the chains of Christianity. To be an individual is certainly, of course, to be an "Egoist," but it is also at the same time and indeed unintentionally to be a "communist." Consider things as they are, i.e. think about how you yourself are, for the way you consider things to be, that's the way you think about yourself, and vice versa. Strike down the "Unique One" in heaven, but also strike out of your head the "Unique One" of this world.

Follow the senses! Where the senses take over, religion and philosophy come to an end. And you have as a consequence the plain, shining truth. Here stands before your eyes a feminine beauty. You exclaim in delight: She is incomparably beautiful. But see! There also stands before your eyes a masculine beauty. Wouldn't you now want to compare the two? And if you would refuse to do this so that you could stubbornly maintain your notion of "incomparability," wouldn't the two beauties themselves wonder over their similarity despite their difference, and their difference despite their similarity? (301) Wouldn't they spontaneously cry out to one another: You are "what" I am. And finally, in the name of mankind, wouldn't they refute their exclusiveness through mutual embrace? "I love only this Unique One," says the Unique One. I do too, although I am just an entirely ordinary man. But is this unique woman that you love an ape, a she-ass, a bitch? Is she not a human woman? "I am more than man," says the Unique One. But are you also more than a male? Is your essence, or rather - for the word, 'essence', the egoist disdains, though he uses it all the same - your I not that of a male? Can you sever masculinity from what is called spirit? Isn't your brain, the most holy and most elevated visera of the body, masculine in its determination? Are your feelings, your thoughts, unmasculine? Are you, moreover, a beastly man, a dog, an ape, a jackass? What else is your "unique, incomparable," your consequently sexless I, than an undigested residue of the old Christian supernaturalism?

Follow the senses! You are masculine through and through - the I, which you separate in thought from your sensible, masculine being, is the product of abstraction which has just as much or as little reality as does the Platonic table-ness in distinction from the actual table. But as masculine, you relate yourself essentially, necessarily, to another 'I' or being - to a woman. Therefore, when I want to know you as an individual, I must not limit myself to knowing you alone, but must extend my knowledge beyond you, to your wife as well. To know an individual is necessarily to know at least two individuals. Two, however, has no finality and no meaning: On two, follows three; after the woman, the child. But only a unique, incomparable child? No, love drives me forward without stopping beyond this one. Already, the very sight is so loveable, (302) so powerful, that it engenders in you the irresistible longing for more of the same kind. Egoism wishes only one, but love, many. Through a multiplicity of children, love eliminates the monotheistic status and the title of uniqueness and incomparability given to the first born. And wouldn't love which wanted to restrict itself only to this individual be stingy and loveless to other possible children? Wouldn't it, moreover, manifest lovelessness to this single child who would himself soon become sated with his uniqueness and would long for a sister or a brother? Therefore, how can you blame a writer for not doing justice to the individual when he knows him in the same way that love knows him? How can you blame him for abstractness if he knows the individual according to the model of love, which while it expresses both the most elevated and most profound knowledge of the
individual, nonetheless; does not remain with this single individual in exclusion from all others, and is not limited to this unique and incomparable individual, but extends its, thoughts and feelings to the species, i.e. to other individuals. The species, that is to say, signifies in Feuerbach not an abstraction, but only the You opposite the single, self-positing I, the other, in general terms, the human individual existing outside me. If it is therefore said by Feuerbach: The individual is limited, the species, infinite, it is nothing other than to say: The limits of this individual are not the limits of another; the limits contemporary man are not for that not reason the limits of future humanity.[30]

The thought of the species in this sense is a necessary, indespensible thing for the particular individual, and everyone is particular. (303) "We are altogether perfect," says the Unique One, truly and beautifully. Nonetheless, we feel that we are limited and imperfect because we necessarily compare ourselves - necessarily, since we are reflecting beings not only with others, but also with ourselves, when we compare what we have become with what we could become and what under other circumstances we perhaps would have become. We feel that we are limited not only morally, moreover, but also sensibly, spacially, and temporally. We, these individuals, live in this particular place, in this limited span of time. Now, how can we free ourselves from this feeling of limitedness if not in the thought of the infinite species, i.e. in the thought of other men, other places, and other happier times? Whoever, therefore, does not put the species in the place of the Divine, leaves a gap in the individual which will be filled again by the idea of God, i.e. the personified essence of the species. Only the species is in a position to both transcend religion and to replace it. To have no religion is: To think only of oneself. To have religion is to think of another. And this religion is the one that alone remains, at least as long as there is not only a "unique" man left on earth. For so long as we have just two, as man and wife, we still have religion. Two, difference, is the origin of religion - the Thou, the God of the I, for the I is not without the Thou. I am dependent on Thou. No Thou - no I.

The man is the providence of the woman, the woman the providence of the man, the beneficent the providence of the needy, (304), the doctor, the providence of the sick, the father, the providence of the child. The helper must be more and have more - at least in the respect that he gives help - than the person who needs help. If someone himself suffers want, how can he help another? No! Who has the will and the ability to drag me out of the morass must stand over the morass himself, must stand "over me" (Uber mich). But what then is this being which stands over me? Is it some other, alien being? On the contrary, isn't it as near to me as my own heart, my own eyes, my own arm? Isn't it in the strongest sense my "other I"? Indeed, it does only what I myself wish to do, and what I myself would do under conditions of freedom, health, independence, but what only now I cannot do. I am lame, so another's arms and legs are my organs of motion; I am blind, so his eyes are my guide; I am a child, so the will and the understanding of the father are my will and my understanding, my being for-myself, for as a child I am in a thousand instances in opposition to them, and without either knowledge or will I am against myself. So is man the God unto man! And now through this human god can you make the un and extra-human god superfluous.

What is it "to realize the species?" To actualize a predisposition, an ability, a vocation of human nature in general. The caterpillar is an insect, but still not the whole insect.
In relation to itself it is indeed perfect; it is what it would and can be. Nonetheless, despite its self-satisfied egoism, there is still "in it over it" something which it would and can become - the butterfly. Only the butterfly is the realized, completed insect. Similar metamorphoses take place in the life of humanity and in the life of individual men. Therefore, when a man emerges from boyhood to young manhood, from school to life, from a condition of slavery to freedom, from sexual indifference to (305) love, in all these and in similar transitions he involuntarily cries out; Only now have I become a man, because only now has he become a fully developed man, only now has an essential, formerly unknown or powerfully suppressed drive of his nature been freed.

As necessary as the distinction between the I and the Thou, between the individual and the species, is the distinction within one and the same individual between the essential and the superficial, between what is closer and what is more distant, between the higher and the lower. Follow the senses! What is spacially placed highest is also what is qualitatively highest in man, what is nearest to him, what is not any longer distinguishable from him - this is the head. When I see the head of a man, I see the man himself. But if I see only his rump, I see nothing more than his rump. If I lose my hand or my foot, I am certainly an incomplete, mangled, unhappy man, but I can nonetheless exist as a man without them. If, however, I lose my head, I myself am gone. There is thus an essential difference between My and Me: One is what is mine which can be gone without myself being gone; the other is what is mine which cannot be gone without at the same time me myself disappearing. This is a difference which cannot be transcended except by losing one's head. If, therefore, the "Unique One," despite this, blames Feuerbach for not getting rid of the organically grounded over and under man along with the theological, supernatural "over", he blames him only for this: that he has not like the "Unique One" and others, out of desperation arising from a suppressed desire for theology, lost his head.

(306) If I today limit myself in my expenditures and my enjoyment so that I will still have something to enjoy and to have tomorrow, am I not the providence, am I not what is "over me", what keeps watch and rules authoritatively over the egoist of today who might not so willingly out of his lust for Pleasure, allow anything left over for the other, for the man of tomorrow? And if I am stretched motionless on a sick bed, do I not bring to mind, be it in the memory of lost health or in the hope of enjoying myself again, the idea of health, which stands as high over me, the sick one, as did only immortal God over mortal humanity. And if I am stricken with sorrow and anger over a grievous, harmful act, do I not stand as critic, as judge, over myself, the wrongdoer, the "poor sinner?" And if I am engaged in the creation of a work, do I not utilize all the powers that I can command on it, do I not therefore believe that this work is my testament, that in it, I bequeath all my abilities to the world, that I stand at the limit of my development, of my power of creation? If, however, I am now finished with this work, haven't I now already put myself, the creator of this work, put what was only recently my highest and most advanced, behind me and under me? Do I not perhaps now look even disdainfully on the work and its creator? So, within on and the same individual, human life is in constant change which makes the highest the bottommost! I am hungry and thirsty, so for me there's nothing higher than the enjoyment of food and drink, after a meal, though, there's nothing above resting, after resting, nothing above motion and activity, after this, nothing above conversation with friends, after a fully expended day's work, I would make sleep, the brother of death, the highest, most
worthwhile activity. In this way, then, every moment of this life has something, but
mark you well, only something human, over it. Only when one ceases to be, or, what
is the same thing, (307) when one's consciousness disappears, does one also cease to
put something over oneself. What is before me, I put over me, what is behind me,
under me. However, before me is, and indeed at every moment, the still unexhausted,
unspent, behind me, the already used up, externalized power of thought and life. What
I am and call do, however, remains for me something still unreached, something
necessarily over what I already am and do - therefore, men are always more and
always wish to have more than they are and have. The emerging thought itself, which
is necessarily brought forth in a work, hovers over me as long as the clouds in heaven
until they have fallen like raindrops before my eyes.

"Feuerbach flees from religious belief and lakes refuge in love." Oh how false!
Feuerbach proceeds with firm, sure steps out of the realm of the speculative and
religious dreams into the land of actuality, away from the abstract essence of love and
toward the actual entire essence itself, but love alone does not exhaust the whole
essence of man. The understanding the "laws of intelligence," also belongs to love.
Love without understanding isn't different in its effects and activity than hate, for it
does not know what is beneficial or harmful, according to its purpose or in
contradiction to it. But why does Feuerbach elevate love to such a degree? Because
there is no other practical and organic way available to get through the opposition of
the divine and the human; for love is practical atheism, the negation of God by the
heart, by the feelings, in fact. Christianity calls itself the religion of love, but it is the
religion of supernatural, spiritual egoism, just as Judaism is the religion of worldly,
prosaic egoism. Feuerbach therefore has to take Christianity at its word, i.e. make the
word into substance, the appearance into essence.

(308) Does Feuerbach understand love in a fantastic, supernatural sense which is in
contradiction with actual love - in a sense that it is free from all self-love? No! "No
being", he says for example, "can negate his very self." "To be is to love oneself." "When I lighten the misery of another, I lighten my own at the same time; to feel the
misery of another is itself a misery," etc. Every love is egoistical to a degree for I
cannot love what contradicts me. I can only love what delights me, what makes me
happy. I cannot, that is, love another without, through doing so, loving myself at the
same time. But, despite this, there is a basic difference between the kind of love that is
called selfish, self-seeking, and what is called unselfish love. What is it? In short, this:
In self-interested love, the object is your mistress, in unselfish love, your beloved. I
enjoy myself both in one case and the other, but in the former, I subordinate the
essence to the part, but in the latter, the part, the means, the organ, to the whole, to the
essence. In the former, for that very reason I enjoy only a part of myself, but in the
latter, I enjoy my self, my whole, entire essence. In short: In selfish love, I sacrifice
the higher to the lower, a higher pleasure, consequently, to a lower, in unselfish love,
however, a lower to a higher.

"Feuerbach both makes religion into ethics and ethics into religion." Certainly he does
this in opposition to Christianity,[40] in which ethics, as the relation of man to man,
has only a subordinate place in comparison to the relationship of man to God. But
Feuerbach puts man above morality: "When God is portrayed as a being who forgives
sins, he is presented not in an immoral way, but rather as a more than moral, i.e. a
human being." These words constitute (309) the transition from the essence of moral
law to the proper essence of Christianity, i.e. the essence of man which is in and for itself as little immoral as it is moral. So Feuerbach does not make morality into a measuring stick for man, but rather man the measure of morality: good is what is fit for man, suitable; bad, objectionable, what contradicts him. Holy is thus for him the ethical relation which is by no means "for its own sake" - except as opposed to Christianity where it is "for the sake of God" - thus the relation which is the self-affirmation, the self-enjoyment of the human essence. Certainly in this sense Feuerbach makes ethics into religion, but not for itself, in abstraction, not as an aim, but only as a consequence, not because for him as the "enlightened Protestant," as the rationalist, Kantian, the moral being, morality is the religious, i.e. the highest being, but because for him this status belongs to the actual sensible individual being. Feuerbach, "Unique One," is neither an idealist nor a materialist. For Feuerbach, God, spirit, soul, I, are mere abstractions, and so are love, matter, the body. Truth, being, actuality are only what exists for the senses. But have you ever felt, seen a body, matter? You have only seen and felt indeed this water, this fire, this star, this rock, this tree, this animal, these men: in each case it's the fully determinate, sensible, individual thing and essence, but never either bodies nor souls, neither spirits nor material substances. But Feuerbach is still less an identity philosopher in the sense of the absolute identity which unites two abstractions in a third abstraction. Thus Feuerbach is neither a materialist, (310) nor an idealist, nor an identity philosopher. So what is he? He is in thought what he is in his actions, in spirit what he is in flesh, in essence what he is according to the senses - a Man; or rather he is more, for Feuerbach only treats the essence of man in society - he is a social man, a communist.

Translated by Frederick M. Gordon

Bentley College