

Ludwig Feuerbach

The Essence of Christianity (excerpts)¹

PHIL101

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updated: 10/23/13 9:10 AM

Section III: How do I know?

Reading III.6

The German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, develops a humanist account of religion. On this view, religion is best understood not in the supernatural terms of beings distinct and removed from us, but as an expression of certain of humanity's most important features. God is an idealization of the things that we hold sacred – goodness, wisdom, love, and the very form of our own subjective being. Feuerbach's account suggests a form of religious belief that is both epistemically and pragmatically rational – provided that God is understood as Feuerbach intends.

“Quod supra nos nihil ad nos: a God who inspires us with no human emotions, who does not reflect our own emotions, in a word, who is not a man – such a God is nothing to us, has no interest for us, does not concern us.”

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) was a German philosopher important to the development of thought in the 19th Century, particularly in the area of theology. His critique of religion helped to pave the way for the materialist thinkers of the later 19th Century, notably Marx and Nietzsche, and was influential in the liberal revolutions in Europe of 1848.

***Humanism** is the doctrine asserting the primacy of the human rather than supernatural realm.*

Feuerbach is best known for his humanist interpretation of religion. Humanism is the doctrine asserting the primacy of the human rather than supernatural realm. The “supernatural” is precisely something “super”, beyond or above the natural, which is our realm. To designate something supernatural is to identify it as radically different from us and our natural world. To the extent that we tend to look beyond this, our natural world to an “other”, supernatural world, humanism seeks to return our gaze and focus to our world. In particular, where things of value or great importance are concerned, the humanist asserts that these things are to be found and understood in this world, our natural world, and not by reference to a supernatural order. Postulating the value of things beyond us, particularly gods and things divine, effectively removes them from all significance for us. A humanist interpretation of religion, then, will seek to show that where religion is important and significant it expresses not facts about a supernatural being or realm beyond us, but, rather, important facts about ourselves.

***Supernaturalism:** the view that ultimate reality lies in a realm or form of being beyond or distinct from the natural order*

¹ *The Essence of Christianity*. M. Evans, trans. London: John Chapman, 1854. (Public Domain, as per <http://archive.org/details/a581696600feneuoft>.) The translator, Marian Evans, is best known by her pen name, George Eliot.

Feuerbach thought that such a critique of religion should not be viewed as a solely negative, iconoclastic exercise. Rather, he thought, the humanist re-interpretation of religion could re-establish the value of religious thought, grounding it more firmly in the real.

We see an expression of Feuerbach's humanist re-construction of religion in the following, short passage, in which Feuerbach likens religion to a dream.

Religion is the dream of the human *mind*. But even in dreams we do not *find* ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality; we only see real things in the entrancing splendor of imagination and caprice, instead of in the simple daylight of reality and necessity. Hence I do nothing more to religion – and to speculative philosophy and theology also – than to open its eyes, or rather to turn its gaze from the internal towards the external; i.e., I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality ...

Religious objects – God, the divine, heaven and hell, saints and angels – are the products of human thought. They are in a sense our invention. But this is not to say that they are not grounded in some fact or reality, Feuerbach asserts. While dreams are themselves made up of elements of our actual experience, so, too, Feuerbach maintains, do our religious beliefs draw upon fundamental aspects of our reality. If this is so, then Feuerbach not so much rejects or refutes religion as he re-conceives its basic nature. His goal is to reveal its basis in human nature. That basis, Feuerbach believes, comprises the most valued and fundamental of human attributes.

You believe in love as a divine attribute because you yourself love; you believe that God is a wise, benevolent being because you know nothing better in yourself than benevolence and wisdom; and you believe that God exists, that therefore he is a subject – whatever exists is a subject whether it be defined as substance, person, essence, or otherwise – because you yourself exist, are yourself a subject. You know no higher human good than to love, than to be good and wise; and even so you know no higher happiness than to exist, to be a subject; for the consciousness of all reality, of all bliss, is for you bound up in the consciousness of being a subject of existing. God is an existence, a subject to you, for the same reason that he is to you a wise, a blessed, a personal being.

Feuerbach asks us to consider a striking correlation. The qualities that we attribute to God are precisely the qualities that we value most in ourselves. These include human love and wisdom as well as our consciousness of our own, subjective existence. “God is love,” a Christian doctrine asserts; “His wisdom surpasses all understanding.” And God is *awake* – he is a *conscious*, *thinking* being, like us. For Feuerbach, then, our God is an *anthropomorphized* deity.

Anthropomorphism: understanding a non-human thing or phenomenon in human terms

The idea of God is a product of the human mind, modeled after us, the idealization of what we consider our best qualities, on this view.

These human qualities make God intelligible to us, familiar to us. At the same time, for Feuerbach, God is conceived by us as a separate and different being. While this *alienation* of God has significant drawbacks, which we will see below, it is also useful: it enables us to create in God an independent being of tremendous stature.

But here it is also essential to observe, and this phenomenon is an extremely remarkable one, characterizing the very core of religion, that in proportion as the divine subject is in reality human, the greater is the apparent difference between God and man; that is, the more, by reflection on religion, by

theology, is the Identity of the divine and human denied, than the human considered as such is depreciated. The reason of this is, that as what is positive in the conception of the divine being can only be human, the conception of man, as an object of consciousness, can only be negative. To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing. But he desires to be nothing in himself, because what he takes from himself is not lost to him, since it is preserved in God. Man has his being in God; why then should he have it in himself? Where is the necessity of positing the same thing twice, of having it twice? What man withdraws from himself, what he renounces in himself, he only enjoys in an incomparably higher and fuller measure in God ...

Humans exalt their greatest qualities, elevating them from their limited, imperfect realization in us to an unlimited, perfected form.² The intense and vital value of these qualities in us is expressed in the resulting concept of the “divine” or “sacred”. The very notion of “a greater than” this is inconceivable, to us.³ God is thus the very definition and embodiment of all that is valuable, for us.

But God is thus conceived by us as something *external* to us, something *other than* what we are ourselves. As such, we must view ourselves as something different from God and the divine. And if God is the very expression of goodness and reality, then we can only be something other than the real and the good. Thus we have the doctrine common to religion of *sin*, or original, fundamental error, weakness, failing, and evil. We abase ourselves in order to elevate the concept of our greatest goods.

In one sense, Feuerbach suggests, this logic is useful to us. It enables us to conceive in superlative terms our greatest goods. Where the perfection of our goodness, love, and wisdom is never found among us, we can cherish and glorify it as a real thing – *the* real thing – in another, supernatural being. But the logic of an externalized deity is also problematic and ultimately unsustainable, for Feuerbach.

Religion further denies goodness as a quality of human nature; man is wicked, corrupt, incapable of good; but, on the other hand, God is only good – the Good Being. Man's nature demands as an object goodness, personified as God; but is it not hereby declared that goodness is an essential tendency of man? If my heart is wicked, my understanding perverted, how can I perceive and feel the holy to be holy, the good to be good? ... Either goodness does not exist at all for man, or, if it does exist, therein is revealed to the individual man the holiness and goodness of human nature.

Separating God from us, placing God at a level “beyond human understanding,” creates an intellectual dilemma, Feuerbach asserts.⁴ If God is fundamentally *different* from us, how is it possible for us to understand him? If we have no part of God's love or wisdom, how otherwise could we recognize and understand any part of God's love or wisdom? On the other hand, if we can understand him, he must not be radically different from us. And if he is not radically different from us, how can we exalt him – and our best qualities – to the level that he – and they – deserve?

Feuerbach's humanism represents his response to this dilemma. The dilemma, he thinks, results from placing God in a *supernatural* realm – a realm utterly beyond and distinct from our own. The solution, then, is to recognize that God and the divine are not essentially distinct from us, but are rather, in fact, the very *expression* of our essence.

² Our term ‘perfect’ derives from the Latin, *perfectus*, meaning “completed”.

³ Compare, of course, St. Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence, which trades on this feature of the divine.

⁴ A dilemma is a logical problem in which a proposition that one wishes to hold entails two (or more) further propositions what one wishes to avoid.

Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species. No individual is an adequate representation of his species, but only the human individual is conscious of the distinction between the species and the individual; in the sense of this distinction lies the root of religion. The yearning of man after something above himself is nothing else than the longing after the perfect type of his nature, the yearning to be free from himself, i.e., from the limits and defects of his individuality. Individuality is the self-conditioning, the self-limitation of the species. Thus man has cognizance of nothing above himself, of nothing beyond the nature of humanity; but to the individual man this nature presents itself under the form of an individual man. Thus, for example, the child sees the nature of man *above itself* in the form of its parents, the pupil in the form of his tutor. But all feelings which man experiences toward a superior man, nay, in general, all moral feelings which man has towards man, are of a religious nature. Man feels nothing towards God which he does not also feel toward man. *Homo homini deus est.*⁵ ... The purely, truly human emotions are religious; but for that reason the religious emotions are purely human; the only difference is that the religious emotions are vague, indefinite; but even this is only the case when the object of them is indefinite. Where God is positively defined, is the object of positive religion, there God is also the object of positive, definite human feelings, the object of fear and love, and therefore he is a positively human being; for there is nothing more in God than what lies in feeling. If in the heart there is fear and terror, in God there is anger; if in the heart there is joy, hope, confidence, in God there is love ... Thus even in religion man bows before the nature of man under the form of a personal human being; religion itself expressly declares – and all anthropomorphisms declare this in opposition to Pantheism – *quod supra nos nihil ad nos:*⁶ that is, a God who inspires us with no human emotions, who does not reflect our own emotions, in a word, who is not a man – such a God is nothing to us, has no interest for us, does not concern us.

Feuerbach's view may be expressed in the form of an argument, one that involves a dilemma for what Feuerbach thinks of as the traditional understanding of God. The argument begins with a simple disjunction:

1. Either God is fundamentally like us or he is fundamentally unlike us.

The second step in the argument constructs the dilemma for the traditionalist:

2. If God is fundamentally unlike us, then either God is good, loving, exists, has a mind, etc. and we lack these qualities (are sinful, corrupt, unreal, etc.) or God lacks these qualities and is of no significance to us.

As we have seen, the problem with a supernatural God, for Feuerbach, is that he is either of no significance for us or else he places our own best qualities beyond our reach. If God is good but unlike us, then we ourselves must not be good. The only option, then would seem to be to accept God's fundamental likeness to ourselves:

3. If God is fundamentally like us, then God is not fundamentally distinct from us and is an expression of our own divine nature.

This is the view of God that Feuerbach recommends to us. He is like us because he is our own creation, an idealization of our best qualities, one well worthy of our worship.

⁵ The Latin sentence means, "Man is a god to man." Feuerbach perhaps alludes here to Thomas Hobbes, who expresses the same sentiment in the preface to his *De Cive*, the first of his great works in political theory, or to Seneca, who wrote, "*Homo sacra res homini*," "Man is sacred to man." (*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*. XCV.33)

⁶ The Latin phrase means, "What which is above us is nothing to us." The expression is sometimes attributed to Socrates and was embraced by Martin Luther and by the humanist, Erasmus.

It remains to consider Feuerbach's view of the rationality of religious belief. In order to do so, it is helpful to distinguish two conceptions of God. On what Feuerbach conceives as a *traditional* conception of God, God is a supernatural being of perfect love, wisdom, goodness, power, etc. Belief in God so understood, Feuerbach thinks, is both epistemically and pragmatically irrational. For as we have seen, the very concept of such a God seems incoherent to Feuerbach. A supernatural being is beyond all natural phenomena. But the qualities of love, wisdom, goodness, and so on are all natural, of or pertaining to *our* world, to the extent that they mean anything to us, he thinks. So to the extent that God is supernatural, he would seem to be foreign to us, having nothing to do with these cherished qualities; or if he does embody these qualities, his otherness would seem to place them beyond our reach. If an idea or concept is ultimately confused or contradictory, then we have good reason to think it false. On Feuerbach's account, the traditional concept of God is thus epistemically irrational.

Feuerbach would also judge belief in the traditional God pragmatically irrational. An incoherent conception of God is potentially crippling to our spirits. For on this account, Feuerbach argues, God is either unknowable to us – has no qualities that we can understand – or else he is knowable, but only at the expense of placing our best qualities beyond us. So either God is “nothing” to us, or his goodness entails our own essential wickedness. Neither notion is a benefit to our lives; the latter would seem positively harmful.

Feuerbach offers his humanist, anthropomorphized conception of God as an alternative, one that he thinks is both epistemically and pragmatically rational. Feuerbach's conception of God is epistemically rational, he might say, insofar as it presents a plausible account of God. God is no longer a foreign, incomprehensible being, but one that we can understand in terms of our own psychology. Such a God remains significant to us, Feuerbach argues, because it preserves the goodness and divinity that are crucial elements of the idea of God. It benefits us, Feuerbach thinks, to understand our own being in these terms. We participate in the sacred, on his account, while holding out the possibility of perpetual improvement.

Ask yourself:

1. What is *humanism*, and what is a humanist concept of religion?
2. What is the relationship, for Feuerbach, between human love and wisdom, on the one hand, and God, on the other?
3. In what respect, for Feuerbach, is the notion of a supernatural deity useful for us? In what respect is such a notion problematic?
4. In what sense, if any, is belief in God rational, for Feuerbach? (Consider both epistemic and pragmatic rationality.)