The Paradox of Feuerbach: Luther and Religious Naturalism

Christy L. Flanagan
The members of the committee approve the dissertation of Christy L. Flanagan defended on July 15, 2009.

__________________________________
John Kelsay
Professor Directing Dissertation

__________________________________
Daniel Maier-Katkin
Outside Committee Member

__________________________________
Martin Kavka
Committee Member

__________________________________
Sumner B. Twiss
Committee Member

__________________________________
Amanda Porterfield
Committee Member

Approved:

________________________________
John Corrigan, Chair, Department of Religion

________________________________
Joseph Travis, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members.
To Mom and Dad
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many important people who have helped this project along its way. A special thank you to Professor John Kelsay, the director of the dissertation, who assumed full leadership of the project at a particularly stressful time for me and I very much appreciate his support. I hope a beverage of celebration at Finnegan’s is forthcoming. Much appreciation also goes to Professors Martin Kavka and Amanda Porterfield for not only serving on the committee but also dancing up a storm at my wedding. I also owe a great debt of appreciation and gratitude to Professors Barney Twiss and Dan Maier-Katkin for their willingness to come on board later in the game and provide helpful comments. I will always look back on my time at Florida State fondly and I appreciate the advisors and fellow students who made that experience possible. There are many friends with whom I have crossed paths in Tallahassee who have taught this girl from Chicago to be a little more Dixie and I am the better for it.

I must also thank my friends and family who have always been there when I needed them most. To Amy Gassen and Sarah Wehren Kooiker, thank you for listening and bringing me back to reality in my moments of despair. I miss you both and you must move to warmer climates so we see each other more often. I also thank my friend and brother-in-law, Dustin Feddon, who has also offered many words of encouragement and understanding. Thank you to my husband Derek, who came on to the scene later in the dissertation process but nonetheless learned very quickly of the madness and has been here to help me through. Finally, my deepest thanks go to my mother and father, Judy and Larry Flanagan, whose unwavering love and encouragement undoubtedly and also unwittingly made this project possible. Thank you for simply being who you are.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION................................................................................................. 1
Methodology and Paradigm of Naturalism......................................................... 5
Relationship to Luther and Religious Thought................................................ 6

1. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS............................................................ 13
   1.1 Feuerbach, Luther and Religious Naturalism............................................. 17
   1.2 Feuerbach and Hegelianism......................................................................... 21
      1.2.1 The Early Years.................................................................................. 21
      1.2.2 “Left” Hegelianism............................................................................ 26
   1.3 Feuerbach and Anthropomorphism............................................................. 31
      1.3.1 Guthrie............................................................................................... 33
      1.3.2 Barth.................................................................................................... 36
      1.3.3 Harvey............................................................................................... 38
   1.4 Feuerbach and the Study of Religion.......................................................... 48
      1.4.1 Phenomenology of Religious Consciousness.................................... 49
      1.4.2 Pragmatism and Religious Experience.............................................. 56
      1.4.3 Religious Experience After God....................................................... 60

2. HEGELIAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE THINKING EGO................. 64
   2.1 Kantian Rationalism and German Idealism............................................. 66
      2.1.1 Dealing with the Ego: Kant, Fichte, and Schelling........................... 68
      2.1.2 Hegel and System.............................................................................. 76
   2.2 Religion as Representation.......................................................................... 80
   2.3 Feuerbach’s Critique of Hegelian System.................................................. 87

3. FEUERBACH’S APPROACH TO RELIGION ........................................ 99
   3.1 The Significance of Feuerbach’s Method in Christianity......................... 100
      3.1.1 The Dual Nature of Human Self-consciousness............................... 104
      3.1.2 Divine Naturalism............................................................................. 109
      3.1.3 The Problem of “Supranaturalism”................................................... 112
   3.2 Feuerbach and Theology: Barth and Beyond........................................... 120
      3.2.1 A “Thorn in the Flesh of Modern Theology”.................................. 122
      3.2.2 Feuerbach on Luther....................................................................... 124
In this project I call for a reconsideration of Feuerbach’s place in philosophy and the study of religion. His name is recognizable in these fields usually as a marginal or “bridge” figure, facilitating a shift from one thinker to the next. I suggest that the automatic association of Feuerbach with Left Hegelianism and/or psychological interpretations of religion obscure the greater insights of his model of religious consciousness.

Feuerbach’s desire to revise the anti-natural and speculative tendencies of both philosophy and theology was at the cornerstone of his fundamental project. This effort was first directed towards Hegelian idealism, but grew into a larger critique of Christianity and religious consciousness in general. His criticism of religion is not due to a specific condemnation of the divine, but the extent to which it is born out of speculative presuppositions. This indicates the presence of an important theme in Feuerbach’s work outside of Hegel and I argue that naturalism filled this role. Interestingly, this also demonstrates a link between the seemingly disparate goals of Feuerbach’s humanism and Luther’s theology. Luther’s observations of religious consciousness provided a vision of naturalism and passivity in his description of the human being’s experience of existing before God. Feuerbach also saw in this a profound paradox regarding the relationship between God and human being. His reflections provide the contemporary theorist with ways to reconcile many of the problematic aspects of the rationalist-dualist model that pervades Western philosophy, particularly in the effort to reconsider the foundations of religious self-identity in the post-metaphysical age. Ultimately this places his project in dialogue more appropriately with contemporary studies in pragmatism and phenomenology rather than Hegelian or Freudian thought.
INTRODUCTION

THE PARADOX OF FEUERBACH: LUTHER AND RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

“No one among the modern philosophers has been so intensively, so exclusively and precisely occupied with the problem of theology as Feuerbach—although his love was an unhappy one.”

--Karl Barth

“[My writings] have only one aim, one will, one thought, one theme. This theme is religion and theology and whatever is connected with them.”

--Ludwig Feuerbach

“Luther’s doctrine is divine, but inhuman, indeed barbaric—a hymn to God, but a lampoon of man. But it is only inhuman at its starting point, in its presuppositions, not in its consequences; in its means, not in its end.”

--Ludwig Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach is a name familiar to most in the modern day study of religion, but almost exclusively as a point of reference to another. His most recognizable contribution, the projection theory of God from The Essence of Christianity (1841/3), is almost invariably interpreted in one of two ways. It is either cited in reference to Feuerbach’s roots in Hegelianism, or in the context of a psychological-anthropomorphic model of religion. In this project I suggest that both of these approaches take the projection model out of the context of the larger scope of Feuerbach’s project. While these interpretations have their merits in other regards, they should not be regarded as exhaustive representations of Feuerbach as a thinker. Not only are these accounts dismissive of significant components of Feuerbach’s writings, but they also discount what I believe to be the most fascinating, albeit inconsistent and paradoxical, aspect of Feuerbach’s research: his interest in religion. The most significant

problem with the Left Hegelian and psychological interpretations of Feuerbach is that they interpret Feuerbach’s account of religious consciousness as one of total rejection. While Feuerbach clearly sought to criticize and revise the modern understanding of religion, he nonetheless maintained an interest in religious consciousness throughout his career. Feuerbach saw religion as a deeply ambivalent, paradoxical concept: it was valuable because it was where human beings engaged in the most fundamental questions regarding human existence and human nature, but it was either damaging or inaccurate because of its anti-natural or speculative assumptions.

In this project I also seek to contextualize the projection theory in the larger scope of Feuerbach’s work through the consideration of Luther and religious naturalism. Most significantly, the aforementioned interpretations of Feuerbach omit two very significant features of his work. Feuerbach’s criticism of religion was one aspect of his larger criticism of the tendency towards speculation in Western thought. In his view, the mind-body distinction that is exemplified in post-Cartesian philosophy relegates the senses to a base, secondary existence. The mind and intellection are viewed as the true source of truth, whereas the senses lead one astray. Not only does he view such Western dualism as unfortunate, but ultimately untenable. In Feuerbach’s view it is only insofar as an object or experience is recognized within human consciousness that it can be viewed as actually existent. For Feuerbach, it is an inescapable fact that human beings exist in nature as natural beings, and therefore any systems we use to describe our situation must also take that into account: “for it is in nature that we live, breathe, and are; nature encompasses man on every side; take away nature and man ceases to exist.”

Feuerbach viewed theistic religion as just another form of metaphysical dualism that privileged a form of rationality outside of human consciousness. His criticism of

---

religion is as much due to epistemological grounds as it is any condemnation of the divine. As an alternative to the dualist-rationalist tendencies of Western metaphysics, he offers an alternative methodology as a self-proclaimed “natural philosopher.” To Feuerbach this means that material and concrete reality must be primary in any accounts of human experience and not a transcendent or noumenal concept: there must be “no abstract, merely conceptual being, but a real being, the true ens realissimum—man; its principle, therefore, is in the highest degree positive and real.” In Feuerbach’s view, the accuracy of any assertion about reality is its relationship to real and perceived human existence, not an ideal or other-worldly realm.

Following from this, a closer look at Feuerbach’s body of work indicates his early and sustained interest in nature and natural forms of awareness. This theme is evident in all of Feuerbach’s major works, but reaches its height in reference to a largely unacknowledged counterpart to his work: Luther. Feuerbach saw in Luther the quintessential example of the inability of speculative thought to sustain itself. Luther’s emphasis on faith and the individual’s experience of existing before God in turn highlighted the existential components of human consciousness. Feuerbach was fascinated by this fact because he believed it to be evidence that accounts of the Christian tradition that placed all value in the supranatural were ultimately untenable, at least from the perspective of human consciousness. Feuerbach indeed has many words of criticism for Luther because he was unable or unwilling to admit the seemingly logical consequences of his assertions, but this does not change the importance of both Luther and Lutheran themes in the development of Feuerbach’s own project. According to Wilhelm Bolin, the biographer of Feuerbach and editor of his Sämtliche Werke, Feuerbach even referred to himself as “Luther II.” Certainly the

---

5 Christianity, xxxiv.
6 Ibid., xxxv.
7 Wilhelm Bolin, Ludwig Feuerbach: Sein Wirken und seine Zeitgenossen, (Stuttgart, 1891), 58.
revolutionary spirit and the conceptual similarities demonstrate a clear convergence between the two thinkers. Both attribute to “God” the transcendental condition for human self-consciousness: it is only vis-à-vis one’s awareness of the ideal, radical Other that one gains self-awareness. In spite of their numerous differences, Luther and Feuerbach intersect on this very important issue and there are numerous provocative implications as a result. This also will prove to be a very significant difference between the objectives of Hegel and Feuerbach: Feuerbach viewed the sameness of Hegel’s universalism (or “ego-centricity”) as a major problem. Similarly, Feuerbach’s criticism of the ego of Western consciousness also problematizes his frequent association with the psychological models of religion.

Beyond the shared trajectory of their respective projects, the intersection between Feuerbach and Luther is an important one to consider today because they refer to a number of important methodological issues in the contemporary study of religion. In its emphasis on the subject’s consciousness of God, Feuerbach’s model of religious consciousness is a significant foreshadowing of developments in the phenomenology of religion and religious thought. Even though he does appear to personally reject the metaphysical existence of God, his philosophy is still consumed by the impact of the subject’s perception of this Being within consciousness, enacting his own phenomenological epoché. While Feuerbach’s account of religion highlights feeling and emotion as important features of religious experience, this will ultimately prove to be conversant with certain issues in the current “pragmatic turn” in the study of religion. Many theorists in this tradition regard personal experience or feeling as unacceptable media of religious experience because such acts privilege interiority over the linguistic justification of the community. However, while Feuerbach’s paradigm of religious naturalism does involve individual feeling, it also necessarily ties one with others in the

---

8 I am thinking specifically of contemporary figures associated with the current “pragmatic turn,” including Rorty, Davis, and Proudfoot.
community. Feuerbach’s rehabilitation of religious consciousness is an attempt to rid religion of its epistemologically inaccurate and ethically questionable anti-natural components for favor of a more comprehensive reflection on human nature and self-knowledge. In the present study of religion, I suggest that Feuerbach is equally at home, if not more so, in these discussions than in those in the post-Hegelian and psychological-anthropomorphic camps.

Feuerbach’s Methodology and Paradigm of Naturalism

In this project I suggest that Feuerbach’s model of naturalism formed the basis of his criticism of what he regarded as the two major pitfalls of modern Western thought: Christianity and German idealism. Under the tutelage of the speculative philosopher Karl Daub and later Hegel himself, Feuerbach’s disdain of speculative rationalism grew until he formed a more coherent critique first seen in his dissertation and then his first published works. While Feuerbach is far from a fully developed, systematic thinker (some would say to his detriment, some to his genius), his basic objectives remained consistent throughout his writings: he sought to provide an account of human experience and rationality that utilized the human being’s natural and existential reality as a frame of reference. For Feuerbach, the human subject was a complex weave of rationality and sensuality, affectivity and passivity, sociality and individualism. These traits were inevitably obscured in the accounts offered by thinkers like Descartes, Hegel, or the Christian tradition. While my exegesis of Feuerbach is more thematic than historical, I do consider broadly the trajectory of his writings beginning with his doctoral dissertation.\footnote{While this project considers Feuerbach beyond his common 9 I focus especially on his middle writings that consider the major metaphysical issues of Western philosophy and theology. I have glossed over some of Feuerbach’s writings during the period from 1831-1841 because many of them offer very specific treatments of isolated figures, such as Abélard und Heloise, Oder Der Schriftsteller und Der Mensch (1834) and Pierre Bayle (1838), the larger themes of which are enveloped in his more prominent writings. While I do not consider the work in great detail because of}
representations, we will consider *Christianity* at length in order to clarify the misconceptions of his work, specifically those which identify Feuerbach only in the context of his post-Hegelianism or as a pre-Freudian. In *Christianity* and throughout his other writings Feuerbach consistently utilized the paradigm of naturalism as an important component of his comments regarding philosophy and religion. His interest in naturalism formed the basis of his criticisms of Hegel, Hegelian idealism, and theistic religions. While this theme remained consistent throughout his work, his vocabulary is not always the same. I contend that Feuerbach’s use of the terms *Sinnlichkeit* (sensuousness or sense-perceptibility), *Gefühl* and *Empfindung* (feeling), *Natur* (nature), and *Wesen* (nature, being, or essence)\(^{10}\) connote the meaning of his paradigm he sought to establish.

The Paradox: Feuerbach’s Relation to Luther and Religious Thought

It is because of Feuerbach’s interest in the natural and existential components of philosophical and religious consciousness that Luther was of such fascination to him. In his writings before *Christianity*, Feuerbach sketched a paradigm of naturalism as a foil to the speculative tendency present in Western philosophy. This general interest became more focused in 1841 and beyond, when Feuerbach’s work considered the topic of religious consciousness as a means of self-identity. In this later phase, Luther was frequently cited as an example of the logical inconsistencies of supranatural models of consciousness. Therefore, our consideration of the relationship between Luther and Feuerbach will involve two perspectives. On one level, we will consider instances

---

\(^{10}\) As I will consider in chapter two, James A. Massey explains Feuerbach’s notion of “nature” in his understanding of *Wesen*. 

this reason, Feuerbach’s *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie von Bacon von Verulam bis Benedict Spinoza* (1833) is an important work for our purposes because it is the first time he names Luther explicitly in relationship to his consideration of naturalism in the Western intellectual tradition. I have also left out Feuerbach’s final work, *Theogonie* (1857) because he goes in a different direction, considering the concept of *Glückseligkeitstrieb* in much greater detail. Except where cited, I refer to the translated editions of his works.
where Feuerbach refers to Luther by name in his writing, a practice that commonly takes place after the second edition of Christianity, published in 1843.\(^{11}\)

However, Feuerbach’s interest in Luther can also be viewed as the culmination of his long-standing interest in naturalism that formed the conceptual basis for his doctoral dissertation and other early writings. For example in his 1833 work Geschichteder neuern Philosophie von Bacon von Verulam bis Benedict Spinoza, Feuerbach’s description of modern philosophy is characterized by what he regards as a Cartesian effort to value thought [Denken] or spirit [Geist] over nature [Natur] and materiality [Materie]. He explains how this trend in philosophy defines God as the one unified substance, from which all material beings and things derive their essence.\(^{12}\) The effort to name the supranatural as the superior metaphysical concept is present in trends in both philosophy and theology. Where Descartes locates human existence in thinking, Feuerbach suggests that Luther locates it in the human being’s belief in God.\(^{13}\) This is the first time that Feuerbach names Luther explicitly as an example of the untenability of dualistic considerations of human consciousness. While it is a fairly obvious theological assertion, Feuerbach explains Luther’s explanation of human identity as dependent upon the belief in God as representative of the larger trend within

---

\(^{11}\) In the second edition of Christianity, Feuerbach refers to Luther eighty-three times. See especially pp. 96 and 145. In his other writings beyond Luther, see also The Essence of Religion, pp. 17, 21, 36, 38, 62, 68, 73, 77; and Lectures, pp. 179, 238, 290.

\(^{12}\) Feuerbach, Geschichteder neuern Philosophie von Bacon von Verulam bis Benedict Spinoza, (Ansbach, DE: C. Brügel, 1833), 434. “Denn der Gegenstand und Inhalt der wahren Philosophie ist Gott als die eine und allgemeine Substanz, als das omne Esse extra quod nullum datur Esse, es kommt nur darauf an, wie und als was dieses omne Esse bestimmt wird.”

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 22. “Wenn es bei Cartesius-heisst: Ich denke, Ich bin, d.h. mein Denken ist mein Sein, so heisst es dagegen bei Luther: mein Glauben ist mein Sein. Wie jener die Einheit von Denken und Sein, und als diese Einheit den Geist, dessen Sein nur das Denken ist, erkennt und als Princip der Philosophie setzt; so erfasst dagegen dieser die Einheit von Glauben und Sein, und spricht diese als Religion aus.”
philosophy to deny nature. This work is important because it is the first time that Feuerbach associates his interest in naturalism with Luther specifically.

Even though the link to Luther is not widely recognized in current scholarship in the English-speaking world, it has not gone completely unrecognized. From the theological perspective, Barth argued that Feuerbach is the “thorn in the flesh of modern theology and perhaps will continue to be so” without the Calvinist correction of Luther’s theology. In terms of their conceptual and philosophical similarities, Marx Wartofsky observed that “it is in Luther that Feuerbach finds the concretization of belief into action; and in Protestantism the ‘new principle’ that expresses itself religiously.” Unlike Cartesianism, this is a methodology in which “not thinking but rather feeling and belief are its essence, and Luther is its clearest spokesman.” More recently, Van Harvey has suggested that Feuerbach’s body of work is best divided into two categories: the early, Hegelian phase which includes Christianity, and then a later phase that is more attentive to existentialist-naturalist themes, attributable to Feuerbach’s shift away from Hegel to Luther. Harvey’s is a very important work that will be the implicit interlocutor for many of my observations. His is the most prominent recent work in the English-speaking world and also rightly asserts that Luther’s thought was very influential for Feuerbach. However, there are certain features of Harvey’s work with which I take issue. For one, his division of Feuerbach’s work into two “strands” is faulty because it discounts the significance of naturalism in Feuerbach’s early work. This also overstates Feuerbach’s reliance upon Hegel and reiterates the marginalization of Feuerbach as having relevance only as a post-Hegelian thinker. Further, the

---

14 Ibid., 9. Selbst Luther hatte, als er noch unfrei war und noch nicht zur Anerkennung der Philosophie, wenigstens ihrer Unentbehrlichkeit gekommen war, eine solche Abneigung gegen das Studium der Natur, wenn er die zu seiner Zeit geltende scholastisch- aristotelische Physik ganz und gar verwirrt, und sagt: ‘die Kunst ist nichts, nur ein Wiedersatz und Christum zu vertilgen aufkommen.’
17 Ibid., 60.
discounting of Feuerbach’s naturalism in his early work also obscures his criticism of Hegel himself.  

While Harvey observes the importance of Luther to Feuerbach’s work, the purpose he attributes to Luther is very different than what we will consider in this project. Following from the two-strand hypothesis, Harvey states that Feuerbach’s position towards religion in the early idealist phase is much more charitable than the later existentialist phase. Ironically, the latter phase is also when he is more interested in Luther. However, Harvey believes that Feuerbach’s later interest is due to a development in his thought in which Feuerbach determined that “the secret of religion...is the Promethean desire to be free from all evils, from the oppression of matter, from death, and from the limitations of nature.” Harvey also calls this desire the “felicity principle” and suggests, like Barth, that it is an inheritance from Luther because it is “the desire for blessedness.” Harvey’s myopic view of the meaning of “felicity principle” results in his association of Feuerbach with contemporary anthropologists and psychologists of religion. This is of course precisely what this project seeks to call into question as the rightful inheritors of Feuerbach’s legacy.

While this project was influenced by Harvey’s insights in a number of ways, ultimately my objectives differ from his because of the roles I believe Luther and naturalism play throughout Feuerbach’s body of work. Feuerbach rejected the ontological premise of God not out of a sense of personal skepticism, but because of epistemological validity. His criticism of theistic religion goes hand in hand with his criticism of certain trends in philosophy. Like Cartesianism and Hegelianism, Feuerbach believed Christianity was a conceptual system that was flawed because of its

---

19 As I will discuss in chapter two, the naturalist paradigm Feuerbach employs in such works as his 1839 essay, “Towards a Critique of Hegelian Philosophy,” is also the same concept that draws him to Luther’s theology and therefore makes Harvey’s two-strand hypothesis inaccurate.
20 Ibid., 23.
21 Ibid.
speculative methodology. Harvey’s dual-strand hypothesis is problematic because it creates an arbitrary point of division in his work with reference to religion. Feuerbach singled out Luther because of their philosophical and conceptual similarities and the reductionist-psychological approach does not take this into account.

Echoing Barth’s observation that Feuerbach remained entrenched in an “unhappy love affair” with theology, I believe that he never fully worked out his final conclusions on the validity of religious consciousness. In his effort to unveil the true “essence of religion” and reveal its inconsistencies, I think he became entrenched in his own paradox regarding the ambivalence of religious thought. However, I see this not as a shortcoming but actually the source of his insight. Like Wartofsky, I think that Feuerbach’s work itself functions dialectically in the progression of his philosophical thought. The tension and complexity of Feuerbach’s thoughts regarding religion have been all but ignored in contemporary discussions of his work. In this project, I will consider his observations in relationship to significant issues in philosophy and religious thought.

In chapter one, I begin the study of Feuerbach by contextualizing his work in the present-day study of religion. In particular, I call into question the legitimacy of Feuerbach’s automatic association with other prominent theorists rather than a thinker in his own right. Some of Feuerbach’s more common associations obscure the complexity of his views on modern philosophy and religion, and particularly his larger interest in naturalism. For example, the consideration of Feuerbach as a post-Hegelian thinker conceals the more incisive aspects of his criticism of Hegel, particularly with regard to speculative thought and the primacy of the ego. Feuerbach has much in common with others in the Hegelian Left, but his discussion of religion also demonstrates significant points of distinction between them. Another frequent

______________________________

22Wartofsky, vii.
interpretation of Feuerbach’s model of religion is with reference to Freud. This view also obscures the deeply ambivalent nature of Feuerbach’s comments on religion, and the discussion of religion from a purely mental or cognitive perspective conflicts with his naturalist methodology. Following from this, I outline the basic characteristics of Feuerbach’s naturalist paradigm and its relationship to Luther’s theology. Considering the characteristics of this methodology in greater detail, I will also consider how Feuerbach’s model of religion relates more closely to contemporary studies in phenomenology and pragmatism.

Chapter two considers the relationship between Hegel and Feuerbach in greater detail. Feuerbach’s early work involves a detailed criticism of the speculative tendencies of Western consciousness, particularly with reference to rationalism and dualism. Feuerbach’s later discussion of religion is given much greater precision when considered alongside his larger philosophical discussions in his early work. Feuerbach saw Hegelian idealism and theistic religions like Christianity as victims of the same pitfall towards speculation that dominated Western thought. His criticism of philosophy and theology referred to the denial of nature that he thought was present in both. All of these issues establish the foundation for Christianity and provide additional context for the meaning of the projection theory in the present-day study of religion. Moving beyond the post-Hegelian or pre-Freudian interpretations of this work, Feuerbach also demonstrates an attentiveness to the natural and existential conditions of religious awareness. Also unlike Hegel or Freud, Feuerbach describes human subjectivity as a state of affectivity and passivity, and therefore indicates another important counterpart to this thought, namely Luther.

In the third chapter, I consider how these philosophical issues relate to important themes within Luther’s work. Because of the impact of sin, Luther’s description of human self-consciousness requires a denial of the ego and human rationality. This in turn emphasizes the natural and existential conditions of human self-awareness and the
human being’s existence before God. The discussion of the existence of the ideal God as the condition for self-awareness has a number of important areas of comparison to Feuerbach’s model of religion. Both figures highlight the epistemological validity of natural forms of awareness and also describe human self-consciousness as a passive and affective state. Following from this, I will also consider how the philosophical implications of this Lutheran-Feuerbachian model of religion relate to contemporary debates regarding the discussion of individual religious experience.

Chapter four describes further Feuerbach’s incorporation of Luther and the development of naturalism in his later works, which also explains how Feuerbach serves as interlocutor for many methodological and conceptual issues in the study of religion. While the later works move beyond the Christian tradition to a more general consideration of religious dependence, Feuerbach still draws from many of his previous ideas. The basic interest in how the process of self-awareness is conditioned by an awareness of one’s limitations and finitude still remains the same. While Feuerbach was certainly critical of religion, his criticism is best understood in the larger context of his disdain of the anti-natural effects of dualist metaphysics. The points of intersection between Luther and Feuerbach suggest that the simple lines between theology and humanism are not easily drawn.
CHAPTER ONE
PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In his introduction to Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Thomas E. Wartenberg says of the author that “No other figure in the history of thought has played so predominantly the role of muse, with the exception of Socrates himself.” He describes Feuerbach as a purveyor of “raw materials” to a range of thinkers in philosophy and religious thought. In spite of this, Wartenberg and many others have also noted the somewhat tragic nature of Feuerbach’s legacy. After the initial stir of *The Essence of Christianity* (First ed., 1841), Feuerbach never reclaimed that same level of success and dropped off the German intellectual horizon almost as quickly as he appeared. In the present-day study of religion, Feuerbach’s name is almost exclusively associated as the theoretical bridge from Hegel to Marx or as a precursor to Freud. In this project I seek to reclaim Feuerbach as a thinker in his own right and also uncover another of Feuerbach’s so-called raw materials in his discussion of religious naturalism. While the association to Hegel and Freud is certainly not without cause, it is also not without its problems. The facile link made between Feuerbach and these respective traditions inevitably obscures the complexity of Feuerbach’s relationship to religious thought in general, but particularly his relationship to the theology of Luther.

Embedded in the Feuerbach-Luther relationship is also Feuerbach’s link to Hegel’s work. Without a doubt, Feuerbach’s entrance into philosophy was introduced by his interest in Hegel. Yet what is often overlooked in the discussion of Feuerbach as a Hegelian thinker is Feuerbach’s intense desire to rid the philosophical world of Hegelian thinking. While it is not uncommon for figures to criticize the major preceding thinkers in their tradition, Feuerbach’s rejection of Hegel was more than a

typical effort of revision and development. He believed that the very core of Hegel’s beliefs represented the fundamental flaw of Western metaphysical thinking, and a significant portion of Feuerbach’s project was devoted to developing a conceptual model that freed one from these flaws. Further consideration of this issue also indicates the interrelationship between Feuerbach, Hegel, and Luther: while Feuerbach ultimately believed that both fell victim to the same speculative pitfalls, his interest in naturalism was also what provided him with the fuel to criticize Hegel. Feuerbach’s emphasis on the human experience of affectivity is a key point of his rejection of Hegelian thought and also points to his link with Luther’s theology.

Therefore in order to unveil the “raw material” of religious naturalism, we will have to rethink Feuerbach’s common characterizations. Feuerbach’s classification as a “left Hegelian” has historical merit but most certainly overlooks the vital role Luther and naturalism played in the development of Feuerbach’s model of religious subjectivity. Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel was an aspect of his larger criticism of the “ego-centric” nature of Western consciousness. Feuerbach believed that Western thought had erred in its emphasis on the speculative ego and sought to correct this problem with a more nuanced description of human consciousness as an experience of passivity and affectivity. This also demonstrates the problematic nature of his association with Freud. As I will consider in the pages to come, this is an often overlooked component of his work and it challenges the traditional reading of Feuerbach’s understanding of religion as primarily psychological.

Feuerbach’s model of naturalistic religious consciousness coincides with important developments in Continental philosophy and the study of religion. In spite of their differing theological commitments, both Feuerbach and Luther undertook the difficult task of how the finite human subject makes sense of matters infinite vis-à-vis natural forms of awareness. Feuerbach considered how the human subject’s natural forms of awareness could serve as philosophical ground while avoiding the speculative
pitfalls of Cartesianism, German idealism, and even Christian theology. In his discussion of *Sinnlichkeit* and religious naturalism, Feuerbach illustrates important changes in the development of Western metaphysics after Kant. Feuerbach’s emphasis on the human subject’s natural and existential understanding of religious consciousness also illustrates the deeply ambivalent nature of his views on religion: while his discussion begins and ends with the rejection of the ontological premise of Christianity and theistic traditions, Feuerbach also believed that religious consciousness was a penultimate moment in the process of human self-awareness. However, Feuerbach’s emphasis on human consciousness also meant that the ontological certainty of God’s existence or non-existence was not the primary issue, but rather the human being’s consciousness of this experience and its implications for human self-identity. While this component of Feuerbach’s thought is usually interpreted as the foundation of his psychological interpretation of religion, I suggest instead that Feuerbach offers a phenomenological reading of religious experience that emphasizes the subject’s natural forms of awareness.

Feuerbach’s reflections in this area will also offer another way to consider religious experience in light of the “pragmatic turn” in the contemporary study of religion.²⁴ G. Scott Davis has described this trend in the study of religion as the result of the influence of such authors as Jeffrey Stout and Wayne Proudfoot. In the tradition of Peirce, these authors seek to describe religious belief as a function of language and normative commitments within the community, particularly seeking to limit the discussion of religious experience in terms of individual experience or “prelinguistic reality.”²⁵ As Davis quotes from Peirce, “the absolutely incognizable does not exist.”²⁶ To a certain extent, Feuerbach’s criticism of speculative thought also condemns the

---

²⁵ Ibid., 660.
²⁶ Peirce in Davis, 660.
effort to emphasize the non-articulated, non-empirical component of religious experience. His explanation of *Sinnlichkeit* and the natural forms of religious experience are key components of this aspect of his argument. Nonetheless, those of this same “pragmatic turn” also reject the validity of accounts from such theorists as Otto or Schleiermacher insofar as they do not withstand the pragmatic-linguistic justification of truth. While Feuerbach also had his own issues with Schleiermacher’s account, he still appreciated the type of argument that Schleiermacher sought to make and certainly incorporated aspects of it into his own work. As I reconsider Feuerbach’s place in the modern-day study of religion, I also will consider how Feuerbach’s naturalism provides an alternate viewpoint for the apparent divide between the pragmatic-linguistic camp, represented by Davis *et al.*, and the phenomenological camp. Feuerbach’s interpretation of the natural-existential dimensions of religious experience considers how non-linguistic feelings of affectivity serve as conduit to the awareness of one’s human responsibility and participation in the community, adding an unarticulated viewpoint to the current discussion taking place.

In this chapter, I will offer a sketch of how Feuerbach fits into the contemporary landscape of religion and philosophy. I focus primarily on the treatment of Feuerbach in the English-speaking world, although I will mention some significant German sources along the way. As I will explain later, the important link between Luther and Feuerbach made in this project is not as unusual to those in Germany as it might be for those of us on this side of the Atlantic. That being said, my argument regarding the essential link between Luther and Feuerbach still differs significantly from these studies. I suggest that this unlikely partnership ultimately offers an alternative to the dualism that characterizes Western philosophical and theological traditions. The interconnection between Feuerbach the “humanist” and Luther the “theologian” is not easily resolved. In their shared emphasis on the existential reality of the subject as the source for real knowledge, both figures mark a turn towards naturalism that is shared
by other trends in philosophy and the study of religion. The reconsideration of Feuerbach is relevant not only to illumine the specifics of his relationship to Luther, but also to acknowledge Feuerbach’s model as conversant, if not even foreshadowing, of these developments.

1.1 Feuerbach, Luther and Religious Naturalism

Feuerbach is undoubtedly most well known for his description of God as a projection in *Christianity* where he suggests that the being known as “God” is the embodiment of idealized human traits. Because the predicates used to describe God are also human predicates, Feuerbach asserts that the subject’s perception of God is based on its perception of humanity: “but the object to which a subject essentially relates, is nothing else that this subject’s own, but objective, nature.” Feuerbach explains this process in the context of a larger discussion regarding the uniqueness of human self-consciousness compared to other sentient beings. Unlike rational animals, whose self-awareness is limited to only immediate perception, Feuerbach observes that a human being “can put himself in the place of another” and is both “I and thou.” Human beings gain awareness of their identity as a reflective process, considering both immediate perceptions and also abstract concepts and possibilities. The complexity of human nature exceeds one’s individual experience, so one learns of the full scope of possibilities for human nature when displayed in a being separate from oneself. The inherently inquisitive nature of human consciousness automatically compels us to conceive of ourselves in terms of both present reality and projected possibility, or “I” and “Thou.” For Feuerbach, this dual-reflection is a fundamental component of the human personality: “man is nothing without an object.”

---

27 *Christianity*, 4.
28 Ibid., 3.
29 Ibid., 4.
this projection scheme as indicative of Feuerbach’s close ties to Hegelian thought, particularly in terms of the language of “I-Thou” and the logic of the projection model. While this separate being is indeed a negation of oneself, the being is nonetheless conceived vis-à-vis the contemplation of one’s self-identity. The link between Hegel and Feuerbach is indeed substantial, but has also been overemphasized. Even the decidedly “Hegelian” themes of Christianity also demonstrate Feuerbach’s attention to the existential elements also illustrated in Luther’s thought.

It is imperative to take note of the context in which Feuerbach introduces the projection model. Feuerbach offers this view of the Christian God as part of a larger deliberation upon the epistemological limits of self-consciousness. Before Feuerbach explains the God-projection process explicitly, he explains the other examples of self-objectification in human consciousness, namely the experience of emotions and feeling. The process of self-objectification in the projection of God is similar to the process of self-objectification through human feeling and senses. In the same way that human beings objectify themselves in the perception that their own traits are God’s, humans are also objectified by the “power” of feeling. Feuerbach explains that “in the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself” and that this perceived external object in fact has a power “over him[self].” For instance, Feuerbach describes the experience of love as an event in which the emotion actually “possesses man,” rather than the other way around. Insofar as one is “possessed” by their emotions, the subject is actually rendered passive to itself. Feuerbach views this process of self-objectification as an opportunity for the subject to see oneself with clarity that is not possible through introspection alone. Like looking at oneself in a mirror, Feuerbach explains that the subject gains self-awareness in this inverse fashion. While this model contains elements of a Hegelian dialectical logic, it also incorporates concepts that are

30 Ibid., 5.
31 Ibid., 4.
decidedly un-Hegelian. Where Hegel’s description of absolute identity revealed through negation begins at the level of Spirit outside of human consciousness, Feuerbach suggests that true knowledge is only that which is revealed within human consciousness. Hegel describes Spirit in terms of its non-material, speculative consciousness, whereas Feuerbach suggests that human consciousness has meaning only in its reference to natural, physical phenomena.

In the opening pages of Christianity, Feuerbach provides a number of examples of the self-objectification that is part of the complexity of human consciousness. This is not part of a Hegelian scheme of absolute and/or speculative cognition that governs physical reality, but simply the self’s natural awareness of its finitude and existential limitations. Because I am only one isolated and finite human being, I have to think about the fullness of my human identity through a reflective process, I conceive of myself as both subject and object. Feuerbach, like Luther, describes the possibilities of human self-knowledge insofar as one is aware of one’s own natural limitations. This interest in the natural, empirical basis of self-awareness is an essential part of Feuerbach’s thought. It provides the basis for his criticism of Hegel and the prevailing models of Western consciousness, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and also the formation of his “new” philosophy that he hopes will supersede these traditions. To a certain extent, Feuerbach may be vulnerable to criticism that he did not offer a fully-formed systematic account of these traditions and his plan to evolve past them. His writing can be repetitive at times, his terminology often varies, and some have criticized his “aphoristic” style of writing.

Those accusations notwithstanding, it is important to consider is the specific nature of Feuerbach’s work. In his effort to expose the paradox of religious thought, he

remained somewhat entrenched in his own paradox. In spite of his numerous points of criticism of the theological tradition, Barth and others have taken note of his theological expertise, even if his love of theology is ultimately an “unhappy one.” In fact, a significant component of this project is the effort to navigate through this unhappy affection and illustrate the ambivalent nature of Feuerbach’s view of religious consciousness. Inconsistencies aside, I think it is quite possible to ascertain a basic concern that exists throughout the trajectory of Feuerbach’s writings—namely, the possibility of establishing natural, non-speculative forms of awareness as the foundation of philosophical thinking. Feuerbach believed that naturalism was not only more epistemologically sound than speculative models, but also more ethically responsible. As I will explain in the later pages, Feuerbach’s specific terminology varies somewhat throughout his writings. However, his assertion of naturalism as conceptual ground is consistently defined as a function of human feeling and sensuousness [Gefühl, Empfindung, and Sinnlichkeit]. Feuerbach utilizes these terms to describe the human subject’s experience of passivity, in relationship to the natural world at large and also to oneself. The finite human experience is defined by the subject’s awareness of its limitations. While the rationalist-dualist tendencies of Western epistemology often denigrate the value of these characteristics, Feuerbach believed that one’s finitude and naturalism should instead be embraced and is in fact the ground of possibility for the transformation of the human species.

These characteristics demonstrate the paradoxical relationship that exists between Feuerbach and Luther. Luther shares many of the observations regarding the passivity of human consciousness and also the necessity of utilizing naturalism as the

---

33 This is a general point recognized by many of Feuerbach’s commentators. Rawidowicz suggests that Feuerbach was himself divided over the final conclusions of his own thought in Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie: Ursprung und Schicksal, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Company, 1964), 307. Later in this chapter, I will also consider Wartofsky’s assertions regarding Feuerbach’s style of writing as containing its own methodology.

34 Barth, “An Introductory Essay,” in Christianity, x.
bridge to awareness of the ultimate reality. Much of this is due to Luther’s denial of human reason as an accurate tool of human self-awareness. As a result of original sin, human reason is flawed and self-serving. In Luther’s view, a more accurate gauge of self-awareness is the standard set by the supreme goodness of God. This model has two important areas of reference to Feuerbach. In both figures, the image of God establishes human self-awareness; and also like Feuerbach, Luther’s skepticism regarding the ego and rationality in turn places a primacy on human feeling and perceptions of finitude as illustrative of the human condition. While Luther differs from Feuerbach in his conclusion that the finitude and limitations of humanity indicate one’s dependence upon Christ, a comparison of the two figures illustrates a significant degree of similarity between them. In their observations regarding human consciousness, they even provide the same examples of certain experiences like love and human emotion. Both are very attentive to the existential reality of the human subject, arguing that the particular conditions of human finitude indicate the human being’s reliance upon a supreme entity, whether this is an actual theological God or a God that appears within human consciousness. A closer analysis of the relationship between these two figures will also illustrate the complexity of Feuerbach’s affiliation to religious thought and complicates the usual comparison of Feuerbach to such influences as Hegel and anthropomorphic theories of religion.

1.2 Feuerbach and Hegelianism

1.2.1 The Early Years

While I call into question the relationship between Hegel and Feuerbach as it is commonly understood, that does not mean that the connection between the two thinkers is not essential. My specific point of interest is the lack of attention in recent studies of Feuerbach regarding the specific nature of this connection. His interest in
Hegel is but one component of the issues he sought to clarify in Western methods of thinking. The problem with his automatic association with “left” Hegelianism is not the connection to Hegel by itself, but a failure to contextualize why Feuerbach responded to Hegel’s philosophy. Feuerbach’s interest in Hegelian philosophy does not exhaustively define his own project, as it is only one treatment in a larger host of issues that Feuerbach investigated. Instead one must recognize that Feuerbach’s interest in Hegelian thought emerged in the greater context of his inquiry into issues of religion. As a youth, Feuerbach was an avid student of theology and devout believer. Eventually this progressed to what he called a “thinking religiosity” and this inspired him to study with Karl Daub at Erlangen. However he quickly developed an interest in Hegelian idealism and went to Berlin in 1825 to study directly with Hegel. During that period of time Feuerbach rejected theology and became immersed in philosophy instead. He was fascinated with Hegel’s discussion of the dialectical Spirit and the accompanying theory of consciousness. However, in time Feuerbach’s doubts about the legitimacy of Hegel’s theory grew.

In his dissertation, *De ratione, una, universali, infinita* (1828) Feuerbach argued that Western rationalism had rendered the specific activity of human thinking into an abstraction. While Feuerbach notes similar trends in ancient philosophy, his main criticism was reserved for German idealism and its description of rationality. In the idealist’s effort to describe the “infinite self-consciousness as the basis of all truth, it had reduced the power of thinking [Denken] to a merely finite instrument.” In response, Feuerbach wanted to explain the process of thinking in relationship to real being [Sein]. Rather than describing self-consciousness as the function of an infinite entity, Feuerbach argued that human rationality is a specific activity that is the “unifying and universal

---

basis of all individuals.”  

While it is universal in the sense of being an essential trait of the human species, it is also part of each person’s unique consciousness. Rationality endows the subject with two faculties: a particular sense of self and knowledge of its larger human community. Whether conceived as the cause of grand changes in human history or the concrete actions of particular individuals, Feuerbach wanted to move beyond the rationalist’s tendency to describe reason as super-human, or as a disembodied infinite consciousness. The drive to explain philosophy as being part of a universal rationality had removed human thought from the realm of things and/or matter [die Sache oder Substanz] and suggested that it belonged instead to a disembodied Intellect (in the case of Kant) or infinite consciousness (in the case of Hegel). 

Charles Alan Wilson argues that Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel is due to the latter’s “loss of otherness.” Hegel’s overwhelming quest for system meant that all events are subsumed under a sense of unification and teleology. This prohibits a true account of lived human experience because of the emphasis on “the ideated being, not the raw being which meets us in sensation.”

Hegel, along with Fichte and the other German Idealists, are wrong in their explanation of “the story of reality [as unfolding] out of the I = I.” Human life is specific and individuated, and therefore cannot be encapsulated as part of a larger Idea.

In particular, Feuerbach feared that an emphasis on a universal, infinite consciousness devalued the importance of the human rationality. It is by virtue of the

37 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 5.
41 Ibid. Wilson’s description of the “I = I” in German Idealism is a perfect contrast to Harvey’s description of the self’s confrontation with the “not-I” in Feuerbach’s later writings.
process of thinking that human beings live, exist, and participate in the world.\textsuperscript{42} To him, the universal rationality utilized the concrete lives of human beings as its methodology: the abstract quality of reason only existed by virtue of the human actions it inspired. For this reason, Feuerbach attached universal thinking to the specific faculties of human subjectivity. It was only through the will and feeling that universal thinking could take hold as particular actions in the world. While a teleological system such as Hegel’s would suggest that all events take place as a part of rational providence, Feuerbach states that these events have to be enacted by human beings. While not recognized in the current state of philosophy, Feuerbach described the human faculties of will and feeling as themselves a priori because they are the specific causes of world-historical events. In the present state of rationalism and idealism, such traits are the “children” \textit{[Kinder]} of the master Intellect.\textsuperscript{43}

Even in this early work, Feuerbach’s naturalist-existentialist tendencies are evident. He limits the all-encompassing scope of universalism (as Spirit, rationality, God, etc.) through the example of nature. Feuerbach describes the natural world as “unstable” and “internally antagonistic” \textit{[innerliches widerstreben]} which underscores the particularity of the subject’s experience in the world.\textsuperscript{44} The confrontation with nature is a theme that Feuerbach will return to time and again. Feuerbach’s views on ethics, epistemology, and human consciousness are all tied to the multivalent qualities he attributes to realm of nature. These attributes can be specifically conceived as general


\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 212. “Man sieht, der Wille, die Empfindung, sind hier wie in aller Idealphilosophie nichts Apriorisches, Ursprüngliches, sondern erst Kinder des absoluten Hausherrn, des Intellekts.”

features of the natural world or as the specific characteristics of the individual human subject. Both senses of the term illustrate the picture of the human species that is supplied in the awareness of its limitations. For Feuerbach, everything that the human being aspires to know, or be, or act upon, should have a natural referent: in this sense, nature serves as both epistemic limit and also personal inspiration.

These observations are part of Feuerbach’s larger thesis: the universalist tendencies of Western rationality from Plato to Hegel inevitably created a dualist system in which the realm of thinking was viewed as separate from the realm of humanity. While Hegel initially served as Feuerbach’s muse, with the completion of his dissertation he believed that he had discovered a significant flaw in Hegel’s logic. Feuerbach sent a personal letter and copy of his dissertation to Hegel and suggested that he had discovered an important point of revision to the master’s work. He explained how the privileging of Absolute Spirit in effect subjugated actual human spirit and activity, thereby perpetuating a dualism that separated the “real” world from its Ideal source. Hegel described religious ideas and symbols as pictures or representations [Vorstellungen] of Spirit, but not Spirit itself. In his view, religious picture-thinking does not refer specifically to the expression of the believer, or one’s individual means of thinking about religious consciousness. Instead, it indicates the presence of the Spirit that supersedes the individual subject. Feuerbach believed that Hegel was too concerned about the grand process of Thinking, instead of focusing on the subjects who thought and the points of reference available to them. In a sense, Hegel suggested that Spirit “thinks” Christianity, rather than considering how world-historical individuals think as Christians in their particular identities. Feuerbach saw in both Hegel and Christianity a continuance of the dualism that had plagued Western

---

45 For example, consider Feuerbach’s discussion of the “moon, the sun, the stars” in comparison to the personal feeling of love in chapter one of Christianity (4-5).
47 Feuerbach in Massey, 370.
thinking. In this scheme, the true unity was found only in Spirit or the theological God, whereas human beings and the material world were lacking and incomplete.

I have considered these issues from Feuerbach’s dissertation in order to identify precisely why he distanced himself from this school of thought. Even in his earliest stages as a theologian and later a student of Hegel’s, Feuerbach was still interested in naturalism as an epistemological tool. In these first writings one can observe the beginning stages of the foundation for his more mature works. Feuerbach believed that the speculative problem of Western consciousness was exemplified by Hegelian idealism and Christianity. In the privileging of a supra-rational or spiritual ideal outside of human nature the most important feature of human identity, our naturalism, was in turn denied. It is important to recognize this as the primary feature of Feuerbach’s project because it also defines his interest in religion and philosophy. When Feuerbach is critical of religious consciousness, it is specifically because of what he regards as its speculative and anti-natural components. Feuerbach’s criticism of religion is much more nuanced than others with whom he is often associated, particularly others in the Hegelian school of thought.

1.2.2 “Left” Hegelianism

Feuerbach entered the intellectual spotlight in the late 1830’s as part of a radical group known as the “Young” or “Left” Hegelians. This term was first defined by David Strauss after his publication of The Life of Jesus (1835-6) and it became evident that there were decidedly different “schools” of Hegelian thought. The schism between what constitutes “Young/Left” and “Old/Right” has been defined in different ways, but generally speaking, the dichotomy relates to whether or not one accepts Hegel’s final view of history and corollary view of Christianity as the penultimate manifestation of

---

48 Toews, 203. Toews clearly prefers the terms “Right” and “Left” over “Old” and “Young.”
Spirit. Those on the Right are usually regarded as accepting Hegel’s view that human development culminated in the establishment of the Prussian state. This view is usually regarded as the conservative view as it was more accepting of the present social situation at that time. Those on the Left wish to appropriate aspects of Hegel’s logic, particularly his theory of dialectical consciousness, but do not ultimately agree with his teleological view of history. This side is also associated with more radical political views, as its adherents are seeking to change some aspects of the current situation. As Toews explains, this perspective is interested in how Hegel’s theory raises consciousness of human “species being” or “species consciousness,” or in other words, a social and anthropological interpretation of the dialectic.\(^{50}\)

Beyond these underlying themes, Left Hegelians are specifically associated with atheistic humanism.\(^{51}\) Sidney Hook explains the goal of this group as the effort to reveal political institutions and traditional religions as “irrational in virtue of their own historical development.”\(^{52}\) Those who were part of this Berlin political circle included such figures as Feuerbach, Marx, Bruno Bauer, and Strauss. Hook’s 1936 analysis has been very influential in the contemporary understanding of this intellectual tradition. His description focuses on the impact of Marx’s appropriation of Hegelian idealism, which in turn shapes the horizon in which he interprets Feuerbach. In comparison to others in the Hegelian Left, Feuerbach had a greater interest in issues of self-identity and religious consciousness which subsequently invites a more “psychological” interpretation of his work. In studies such as Hook’s, the starting point is the political activism and atheism identified with the Left Hegelian movement at large. By default,

---

49 For a concise view see Hegel’s Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*, tr. Leo Rauch, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988) [hereafter *Philosophy of History*].
50 Toews, 203.
51 Ibid., 357.
this marginalizes the place of Feuerbach’s work quite significantly as a response to these particular issues and most certainly obscures the more nuanced aspects of his views on religion. While Hook makes brief reference to Feuerbach’s naturalism and link to Luther, his primary assessment of Feuerbach’s view of religion is the psychological justification “which make[s] intelligible their acceptance of tradition, tendentious apologetic and edifying fairy-tales.”

Hook’s account establishes Feuerbach’s legacy only as the psychological representative of Left Hegelianism.

In the effort to reconsider the significance of Feuerbach to the present-day study of religion, we should also reconsider how Feuerbach’s automatic association with the Hegelian Left conceals some of the more complex aspects of his commentaries on religion. For example, consider the exchange between Bauer and Marx regarding Bauer’s essay, “The Jewish Question,” (1843). Bauer suggested that true human emancipation would only be possible if human beings were emancipated from religion: “as long as the state is Christian and the Jew is Jewish, they are both equally incapable of either giving or receiving emancipation.”

Bauer suggested that religious affiliation was the key obstacle to achieving true human freedom because it was socially divisive. Because a religious community would always choose their own interests over others, ultimately this would prohibit any true social unity in the state among people of different religious traditions. As a result, he argued that human beings would be most free in a secular state. Marx responded by saying that Bauer’s solution concealed the true nature of the problem, which to Marx was not the divisiveness of religion but of capitalism. Religion was not the true source of the problem; it only provided a distraction from the more pressing issue of political and social inequality. Using the United States as an example, Marx suggests that people continued to turn to religion in

53 Ibid., 245.
spite of their freedom to remain secular precisely because of the political problems at hand. Marx states that the so-called “secular” society without state religion is “the land of religiosity par excellence.” Religion is not the true villain but an accomplice, the “opium of the people.”

At the outset, it is clear that the nature of the discussion on religion between Bauer and Marx is different than Feuerbach’s. Bauer and Marx were specifically interested in religion insofar as it affected the larger goal of political freedom. To Bauer, it was the true obstacle to human freedom; to Marx it was a nuisance to be done away with in order to deal directly with the more pressing issues. Without a doubt Feuerbach was himself interested in the political issues, as he was a regular contributor to the *Deutsche Jährbcher* and other publications of the Hegelian Left. That being said, there also exist important points of difference between them. While Marx viewed Feuerbach’s materialist model as an essential pivot point for the turn away from Hegel’s abstract philosophy, he ultimately did not think Feuerbach went far enough. Marx accused Feuerbach of being inattentive to the specific socio-political realities, and he tied this specifically to Feuerbach’s continuing interest in religious consciousness:

V. Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants contemplation; but he does not conceive *sensuousness* as practical, human-sensuous activity.
VI. 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…
VII. Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses [sic] belongs to a particular form of society.

---

55 Ibid., 217.
56 Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Introduction,” in Ibid., 244.
57 As Hook explains, Feuerbach stated to Strauss that religion was “not a product of poetic fancy but of real need” and to Bauer that it was “not a need of the understanding but of the heart” (245, emphasis author’s).
58 Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Ibid., 422-423 [emphasis mine]. Also note Marx’s observation of “sensuousness” as a defining feature of Feuerbach’s model.
In the end, Marx accused Feuerbach of remaining too abstract and not addressing the most pressing issues of the day. To Marx, Feuerbach’s abstraction is the specific result of his continued interest in religious consciousness. Marx suggests in the above passage that Feuerbach’s interest in the “religious essence” as a means of human identity in turn obscures individual social identity. Interestingly, Marx and others will associate this interest in essential religious consciousness with idealism and suggest that Feuerbach did not quite go far enough in his efforts to radicalize Hegelian thought. Marx’s cohort Friedrich Engels explains this view: “the real idealism of Feuerbach becomes evident as soon as we come to his philosophy of religion and ethics. *He by no means wishes to abolish religion: he wants to perfect it.*”


This is a very significant point of distinction between Feuerbach and others in the Hegelian Left: while Feuerbach maintained a rather ambivalent view about the value of religious consciousness, Marx believed it was unequivocally negative.

This difference is particularly relevant when considering the value of a thinker like Luther. Even though Feuerbach believed Luther’s beliefs were inconsistent, he still saw an essential value in Luther’s theology; the same can certainly not be said for Marx *et al.* Engels states that the Reformation “degenerated and reduced the country to rack and ruin,” 60 furthering the idea that “religion, once formed, always contains traditional material, just as in all ideological domains tradition forms a great conservative force.”

60 Ibid., 58.

The association of religion with political subjugation meant that it was something to be eradicated. While Feuerbach also saw in religion certain detrimental aspects to human selfhood, he certainly did not issue the blanket condemnation described by Marx and Engels. It was quite the opposite: if rid of its anti-natural components, religion illuminates essential features of human self-consciousness. This is precisely where

61 Ibid., 59.
Feuerbach’s relationship to naturalism and Luther’s thought once again enters the discussion.

1.3 Feuerbach and Anthropomorphism

Feuerbach is probably most recognized for his projection theory in Christianity, and unfortunately it is chiefly responsible for many of the misconceptions of his thought. I believe the interpretation of Feuerbach’s model of religious consciousness as primarily anthropomorphic and/or psychological to be deficient. In chapter three I will clarify that while he did indeed use the language of “wish,” it is important to understand how the “wish” of religion in Feuerbach’s view relates to self-consciousness and knowledge of human nature. This concept undoubtedly has psychological implications, but nonetheless is not Feuerbach’s primary interest in religious consciousness. The insinuation that his model is primarily psychological completely discounts Feuerbach’s effort to unveil the “essential” component of religious consciousness when rid of its anti-natural formulations.

Additionally, Feuerbach’s quite painstaking effort to consider the paradox and ambiguity of religious discourse hardly lends itself to the reductionistic view of religion that is normally associated with psychological and/or anthropomorphic models. These models offer little or no consideration of Feuerbach’s fundamental interest in naturalism and sensuousness, but consider the projection model of God solely as a cognitive and mental construct. While the projection model is indeed a construction of human consciousness, more specifically it is also a mechanism that aids the self’s contemplation of nature.62 Feuerbach’s sustained effort to criticize speculative thought in itself rules out many of the meanings attributed to the projection theory. The thesis that considers

62 By nature, I mean both the functions of naturalism vis-à-vis Sinnlichkeit, Gefühl, and Empfindung, as well as Massey’s consideration of Wesen as both the indicator of finitude and condition of self-consciousness (373).
Feuerbach’s theory of religion solely as a process of the mind takes the projection model out of context and fails to consider how it relates to the other major themes of Feuerbach’s project.

While the anthropomorphic view of Feuerbach is indeed one of the more common appropriations of Feuerbach in the present-day study of religion, the relationship of this idea to the larger goals of Feuerbach’s project needs to be clarified. Without a doubt, one of the premises of Christianity is his observation that assertions of positive theology inevitably contain assertions about human nature. For example, Feuerbach explains that “if love, goodness, personality, &c. are human attributes, so also is the subject that there is a God, an anthropomorphism—a presupposition purely human.”63 This statement should not be viewed in isolation from the rest of Feuerbach’s project because it also illustrates two important facets of Feuerbach’s naturalism. First it underscores his belief that God is meaningful to the human being only with reference to human consciousness: “what he is to me is to me all that he is.”64 Following from this, Feuerbach’s observations here also demonstrate his primary interest in the predicates attributed to God in positive theology, and not the Being itself: “the necessity of the subject lies only in the necessity of the predicate...The reality of the predicate is the sole guarantee of existence.”65

Even though the perceived existence of God provides a certain degree of security and comfort for the believer, to Feuerbach the more telling aspect of this experience is not the subject of God, but the predicates themselves. Feuerbach focuses on the predicates because they describe human feeling and experience, and with reference to human consciousness, are therefore real: “only in the realm of the senses, only in space

63 Feuerbach, Christianity, 17.
64 Ibid., 16.
65 Ibid., 18-19.
and time, does there exist a being of really infinite qualities or predicates.” Feuerbach is ultimately more interested in the traits used to describe God because of his emphasis on materiality and actuality. Something is “real” insofar as it is part of the finite and observable world, and this is obviously linked to human action. For this reason he is interested in the deliberation on God because it gives the self a vision of the ideal value of human characteristics. The projection is essentially a process of self-discovery and transformation: “in religion man contemplates his own latent nature.” Through the vision of the ideal God, human beings reflect on the meaning of human virtues and characteristics and are able to conceive possibilities for human society beyond what is immediately present or the “limitations of [one’s] own individuality.” The projection is the process by which human beings can elevate the possibilities of society, or seek the “perfection” of the traits of human nature. While this process is anthropomorphic in the sense that Feuerbach asserts that God’s traits are actually human traits, the term is somewhat misleading because it suggests that God is whatever human beings posit God to be. Feuerbach’s description of nature and the “power” of the predicates suggest that the self is actually much more passive in this process of self-understanding, which is precisely the need for the projection in the first place. The inherent value of the human predicates beyond the self’s present understanding implies that they have their own identity beyond the human ego.

1.3.1 Freud and Guthrie

Feuerbach’s is a very different account of the religious experience from someone like Freud, for example. Freud attributes the belief in God solely to the human being’s

---

66 Ibid., 23.
67 Ibid., 33.
68 Ibid., 35.
69 Ibid., 34. Also see p. 3, where Feuerbach describes the “power” of such human traits as “reason, will, affection” as “absolute perfections of being.”
need to perceive the existence of a divine being as a means of security and comfort: “now that God was a single person, man’s relations to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child’s relation to his father.” To suggest that God exists only in the level of thought as a Freudian would, without reference to material and sensuous existence, is meaningless is Feuerbach’s view. One of Feuerbach’s most fundamental assertions in these early pages of Christianity is that the Christian “God” in its most essential form is not transcendent or speculative, but fundamentally tied to human nature and material existence. For this reason, Feuerbach would not explain God only as an object of thought. In spite of this fundamental difference between Freud and Feuerbach, contemporary theorists often link the two because of the seemingly similar interest in the anthropomorphic understanding of God.

For example, in Stewart Elliot Guthrie’s book Faces in the Clouds (1993), he considers religion from an anthropomorphic perspective. He suggests that religious belief is a coping mechanism for an uncertain world. In the same way that we import meaning into inanimate object when we see “faces in the clouds,” one’s perception of God reflects what one needs God to be. Reminiscent of Pascal’s wager, Guthrie explains that because we are “uncertain of what we face, we bet on the most important possibility,” which is God’s existence. Guthrie offers Freud’s work as an early example of his theory. Freud, he writes, describes religion as a “confusion typical in children and of people in simple or primitive societies,” and also acknowledges Feuerbach as one of the key “predecessors” to Freud’s line of thought. Unfortunately this characterization of Feuerbach discounts the role of nature in Feuerbach’s discussion

72 Ibid., 65. As I will discuss in a moment, Harvey also demonstrates an interest in the psychological view of religion, but offers a vast improvement from Guthrie’s view because of his acknowledgment of the role of Luther and Sinnlichkeit in Feuerbach’s model of religion.
of God. As previously discussed, when Feuerbach ties the discussion of God to the “senses,” this necessarily involves a link to the outlying material world and larger community. It is not simply about the individual’s personal relationship to God or feelings of religious interiority, but rather an expression of how the sensuously perceived attributes of God describe the universal attributes of all human beings in society. This important feature of the projection model is not considered in accounts like Guthrie’s: “Though he [Feuerbach] says people’s attitudes toward other people are part of their religious awareness, his introspection is still individualistic. In this he accepts Schleiermacher’s emphasis on inward experience.” Guthrie misses the point of the “I-Thou” in Feuerbach’s projection model. God as “Thou” is a construction that exists through the “I’s” understanding of society and the natural world. The very existence of the “Thou” demonstrates that the “I” cannot exist in solitude or pure immediacy; the process of objectification that takes place in the projection model is the consequence of the fact that the human self does not exist in isolation. Guthrie has essentially inverted Feuerbach’s model of religious experience, stating that the needs of the “I” are primary and the “Thou” is constructed accordingly. Consider how Feuerbach explains the dual nature of human self-consciousness:

Man is himself at once I and Thou; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought.\(^73\)

Guthrie suggests that Feuerbach and Schleiermacher are connected simply because they both describe human feeling as a key feature of religious consciousness. While they certainly share some similarities, their respective interests in human feeling and religious consciousness come from dramatically different perspectives. Schleiermacher’s discussion of religious consciousness as “intuition of the infinite” is a radically solitary, largely ineffable experience. He describes religious consciousness as

\(^{73}\) Feuerbach, Christianity, 2 [emphasis mine].
a “sublime unity” in which the subject “would not be able to formulate any lofty concept of the whole.” To Schleiermacher, the experiences of human emotion and feeling draw one out of the finite world and gesture towards the infinite world beyond human nature. Of course, Feuerbach would not describe human feeling in this way. While the characteristics of the human personality often assert themselves outside of the scope of the intentional human ego, this is an example of the complexity of human self-consciousness and not evidence of an infinite, supranatural world outside of human materiality. More than that, his description of the “Thou” as inherently social, along with the aforementioned criticism of subjectivism in the discussion of personal immortality, demonstrates Feuerbach’s strong aversion to formulations of religion as inherently individualistic. In fact, Feuerbach uses the examples of nature and the self’s feeling of affectivity in order to demonstrate how the “I” is dependent upon the “Thou.” It is the presence of the “Thou” that makes the “I’s” self-awareness possible in the projection model. While Feuerbach’s projection model can certainly be described as anthropomorphic insofar as he argues that the traits used to describe God are actually traits of human nature, it is also important to acknowledge that that the ideal God is not simply an extension of the needs of the human ego. As I will explain in more detail in the coming pages, Feuerbach’s description of the passivity of the self in relationship to nature and even its own predicates explains why this is not an accurate assessment of his work.

1.3.2 Barth

Karl Barth also characterizes Feuerbach’s account of religion as anthropomorphic, but his account is more attentive to some of the nuances of Feuerbach’s work. Rather than looking at Feuerbach’s vision of God only as the effect

---

of the human being’s psychological need, he suggests that anthropomorphism enters
the discussion when God is described with reference to human experience. Barth
explains this as a trend common to other thinkers of Feuerbach’s generation and is a
result of the influence of Luther’s thought. Feuerbach is an example of one of the
possible consequences of Luther’s emphasis on the believer’s relationship to God. For
example, Luther’s description of faith was “peculiar” because he described it “as an
almost independent appearance and function of the divine hypostasis.” Luther’s
description of the power of faith did not adequately convey that “faith and God belong
together” and that one’s faith was not simply personal expression, but necessarily about
the divine God. Barth suggests that Luther is to blame for a figure like Feuerbach
because he “himself urged us to seek deity not in heaven but on earth, in man, man, man,
the man Jesus.”

Barth is quite right to suggest that this is what interested Feuerbach so much in
Luther in the first place. He takes Feuerbach’s interest in “sensuous existence” and
materiality as the essential features of religious consciousness to be consequences of
Feuerbach’s interpretation of Luther. Barth describes this model of religion as
anthropomorphic because Feuerbach “sets up this God that has human form, human
feeling, and human thoughts as an object of its worship and reverence.” Barth
criticizes this because it denies the transcendent quality of God and suggests that God is
understandable only with reference to human experience. To Barth, the idea that
human consciousness can illuminate the true nature of God elevates the status of the
human being much higher than it should be. He suggests that Feuerbach’s explanation
is “shallow” in that it is ignorant of the human being’s capacity for evil and subsequent

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., xxiii.
78 Ibid., xii.
79 Ibid., xix.
dependence upon God for redemption. That being said, Barth still viewed Feuerbach as someone that theologians should take very seriously.

I will consider Barth and Feuerbach’s relationship to theology in greater detail in chapter three. However, I introduce him now in order to provide another account of Feuerbach’s anthropomorphism that does not rely only on the psychological implications. Barth’s account of Feuerbach is much closer to the mark because it acknowledges both Feuerbach’s fundamental interest in nature and the inherent tension between theology and Feuerbach’s “anti-theological” views: “the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians.”

Barth provides a good segue to consider the relation between Luther and Feuerbach in greater detail.

1.3.3 Harvey

Van Harvey’s *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (1995) is probably the most notable contemporary study of Feuerbach in the English-speaking world. With theorists like Hook in mind, Harvey asserts that Feuerbach has been underutilized in the contemporary study of religion largely due to the usual association of Feuerbach as a Hegelian thinker. His response to this view is that Feuerbach’s scholarship falls within two divisions: the Hegelian emphasis on species-differentiation illustrated in *Christianity*, and the existentialist-naturalist component demonstrated by his later works. After Feuerbach wrote *The Essence of Faith According to Luther* (1846), Harvey

---

80 Ibid., xxviii.
81 Ibid., x.
82 Along these lines, Hook describes *Christianity* as Feuerbach’s “most important” work (243). At the time of that book, Feuerbach was still closely associated with Left Hegelianism. Like Harvey, Hook also suggests that Feuerbach’s “later” writings after Christianity demonstrated less of a Hegelian influence and more of an interest in naturalism. This later era is of little interest to Hook because he views Feuerbach’s work during this time as inconsistent and repetitive (242). Harvey’s analysis begins here, suggesting that the “later” era of naturalism is Feuerbach’s more philosophically interesting period.
83 Harvey, 242.
argues that Feuerbach’s analysis of religion demonstrated a stronger emphasis on existential anxiety, and the Hegelian effort to establish self-identity becomes much less prominent. It is important to note Harvey’s apparent motivation in doing so. He explains that his work should be viewed, in the tradition of Richard Rorty, as a “rational reconstruction” and not a historical commentary. In his reconstruction of Feuerbach’s work, Harvey clearly wishes to counter the commonly accepted view that Feuerbach is a simple atheist who has little to offer contemporary theologians and theorists of religion. However, it is clear that Harvey believes this is possible only when Feuerbach is given emancipation from the “arcane” Hegelian paradigm as noted above. Once this is achieved, the meaning of the projection theory can be “reconstructed” not as an example of Hegel’s universalism but as a precursor to contemporary psychoanalytic and sociological theories of religion, which is Harvey’s interest in chapter seven of his book.

While Harvey’s apologetic attempt to distance Feuerbach from Hegel certainly endears him to a number of otherwise uninterested thinkers in the present day, it is also problematic because it does not account for the reasons behind Feuerbach’s effort to distance himself from Hegel, namely his rejection of the speculative ego. In spite of the fact that Harvey observes the existentialist-naturalist component of the second strand, his hypothesis in the end showcases the psychological reading of Feuerbach’s theory of religion. As I will continue to discuss throughout this project, this hypothesis distorts Feuerbach’s interest in the passivity of human consciousness and its relationship to naturalism.

84 Ibid, 18, 23. Harvey suggests that Feuerbach’s main influence for this shift was motivated by his interest in Glückseligkeitstrieb. This condition emerges in the context of religion’s “felicity principle,” the desire to be free from evil and the oppression of forces counter to human well-being. He translates Glückseligkeitstrieb as “rage-to-live,” which while it conveys the spirit of sustenance that I believe Feuerbach intended, does not include the important concept of happiness. Instead, I think a more accurate translation would be something along the lines of “drive-to-happiness.”

85 Ibid, 16.
As a whole, Harvey asserts that the flaws of *Christianity* are attributable to the easily discernible Hegelian theme of species-differentiation. In this aspect of the work, Harvey suggests that “Feuerbach is preoccupied only with that aspect of consciousness that is conscious of the unlimited and infinite nature of consciousness itself,” and thus “the nature of religion tends to ignore nature.”86 This observation relates to one of the common criticisms that Hegel’s emphasis on the movement of Absolute Spirit undervalues the role of the finite subject: Hegel’s paradigm obscures the particular for the sake of the universal. To explain this notion, Harvey cites the important passage from *Christianity* where Feuerbach writes that “consciousness of the infinite...is essentially infinite in nature.”87 From Harvey’s perspective, Feuerbach’s emphasis on the “infinitude” of the human species is precisely what is uninteresting and unintelligible from the modern perspective because it ignores the real existential value of the human predicates for the sake of indeterminate “consciousness.” Harvey overlooks a fundamental detail here, as it is precisely the existential value of those predicates *as they are felt* that thereby makes one aware of the need to undergo a greater reflection upon the essence of one’s species. However, in Harvey’s view this concept is not given enough attention in the work. He writes that “the basic thesis is presented but is only found in scattered pages throughout the book.”88 Harvey argues that Feuerbach only emphasizes the concept of consciousness at large, rather than the particularity of the subject’s experience. In this regard, Harvey believes that the “I-Thou” relation is too abstract for the non-Hegelian reader to grasp and as a result, readers lack the information to understand why the projection takes place or how it works.89

86 Harvey, 36-37.
87 Feuerbach, *Christianity*, 2.
88 Harvey, 36.
89 Harvey, 39.
This is the source of my main point of contention with Harvey. In the opening pages of *Christianity*, Feuerbach provides a description of the naturalist elements of religious consciousness that continue to occupy him throughout his work. Harvey’s failure to recognize this fact leads him to suggest an inconsistency in Feuerbach’s work that is not there, and it also misconstrues Feuerbach’s theory of self-consciousness. These differences notwithstanding, Harvey himself asserts that “both the early and later Feuerbach believed that religion is rooted in something more primal and elemental than consciousness itself,” the existential conflict between the “I” and the “not-I.” I contend that this is the most essential feature of Feuerbach’s work and is consistently illustrated throughout. As previously noted, Feuerbach’s early works were responding more explicitly to Hegel and German idealism, but it is a mistake to suggest that Feuerbach had a wholly different agenda at different stages of his work. Feuerbach makes the same observations about nature and human feeling at all stages of his writing.

Harvey acknowledges that much of the above comments on the Hegelian portions of *Christianity* are taken from Marx Wartofsky’s work, *Feuerbach* (1977). Wartofsky’s influence on Harvey in this regard appears to be quite significant, as Harvey’s dual-strand hypothesis is clearly informed by Wartofsky’s analysis of Feuerbach. In the Preface to his work, Wartofsky explains his intention to “set forth the development of Feuerbach’s thought as a dialectic.” This methodology presents two different schemas: one, to consider the role Hegel’s dialectic plays in the formulation of Feuerbach’s thought; and two, to consider how Feuerbach’s work functions as a dialectic in the progression of modern philosophical thought. Thus,

---

90 Ibid, 12. However, how this point is interpreted is ultimately my main point of contention with Harvey.
91 Ibid., 37, n. 23.
92 Zawar Hanfi also mentions the importance of Wartofsky’s work in his translator’s introduction to *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972) [hereafter *Fiery Brook*]. This idea is also more widely acknowledged in German-language writings.
93 Wartofsky, vii.
Wartofsky considers how Feuerbach offers a critique of the speculative philosophy of his time through an analysis of the manner in which Feuerbach to both his benefit as well as his detriment appropriates the Hegelian philosophy that he supposedly seeks to surpass. As to whether or not Feuerbach moves completely beyond this first stage (his Hegelianism), Wartofsky writes that this remains an “open question, not resolvable by neat cuts.”94 Similarly, Arve Brunvoll has argued that Feuerbach’s sometimes aphoristic style of writing should not be viewed as a philosophical shortcoming, but in fact a quite deliberate attempt to consider the paradoxical but logically necessary implications of the religious paradigm.95

This is a concept that will prove to be important for our analysis of Feuerbach as well. Rather than attempting to pin a distinct dual-phase schema to his work as Wartofsky and Harvey have attempted, I suggest that we should consider Feuerbach’s body of work as more of an organic unfolding. While such a process may certainly involve different points of emphasis from time to time, this does not mean that one phase is wholly distinct from another. This is especially true in light of the paradoxical nature of religion that Feuerbach sought to describe. His effort to naturalize religion (and at times, vice versa) is an effort that is itself riddled with tension and contradiction, but deliberately so. Wartofsky is right to acknowledge that this is not only Feuerbach’s subject matter, but also his methodology. It is unfortunate that he undermines his own insight when he attempts to apply a rigid external schema to it. In spite of the difficulty in doing so, Wartofsky does suggest that Feuerbach’s corpus offers two distinct strands.

---

94 Ibid., xi. Unlike many other treatments of Feuerbach that often criticize the “aphoristic” style of most of his books after Christianity, Wartofsky argues that this style is itself quite important, illustrating the organic unfolding of his thought process as he works through certain tensions. I voice a similar idea as I assert that Feuerbach’s view of religious consciousness is deeply ambivalent and not only critical.
He suggests that after *Christianity*, Feuerbach’s later treatment of sensuousness *[Sinnlichkeit]* as the “primary mode of conscious existence...is certainly not Hegelian.”\(^96\) This constitutes what Wartofsky describes as Feuerbach’s “radical move”: achieving a moment in which the dialectic is not “ontologized” but is rooted in the very condition of material human existence: in needs, interests, wants; in the human being’s dependency on other human beings, and on nature. Thus, because the primary reality of human beings is their sensible existence, the dialectic is a dialectic of this sensibility, of *Sinnlichkeit*.\(^97\)

Wartofsky argues that the later Feuerbach’s interest in sensuousness as the ground of self-consciousness represents a distinct shift from the abstract idealism of species-consciousness that is the main concept of *Christianity*. Harvey echoes this and attributes the shift to a period of “intellectual development” from 1842-1844 that arose as Feuerbach’s response to the criticism of *Christianity*, including those from the Hegelian Left. Their criticisms were all alike in that they did not believe that Feuerbach had gone far enough in his effort to radicalize the old Hegelian philosophy. Harvey attributes the shift in part as an effort to respond to these criticisms. He views Feuerbach’s so-called “transition” to *Sinnlichkeit* as a means of emphasizing the concreteness of the individual’s existence in a way that abstract Hegelianism could never achieve. In Harvey’s view, this radicalizes the Hegelian understanding of the “I-Thou” by emphasizing the manner in which the self relates to its Other through sense-experience. While *Christianity* only considered this relation in abstract terms, the *Principles* and subsequent works consider the specific experience of the subject as a subject who perceives himself in a world. To illustrate this, Harvey cites the following Feuerbach passage:

> To-be here [*Dasein*] is the primary being, the primary determination. *Here* I am—this is the first sign of a *real living* being...Where there is no space, there is also

---

\(^96\) Ibid., 3.

\(^97\) Ibid., 20.
no room for any system. The first determination of reason on which every subsequent determination can rest is to situate things.  

While Harvey describes this as a distinct shift in Feuerbach’s thought, I contend that Feuerbach’s attention to the naturalist-existentialist elements of religious consciousness were always present. Feuerbach’s argument is perhaps more specifically defined in the later works, but his general argument remains the same throughout.

Furthermore, Harvey suggests that Feuerbach’s discovery of Luther continues the development of his thought in a significant way. While some theorists have suggested that Feuerbach’s interest in Luther arose out of various practical needs, Harvey rightly insists that Feuerbach and Luther are connected by “intrinsic intellectual reasons.” Of course, the most important of these is Feuerbach’s observation that in Luther, “grace abolishes merit” and therefore, Luther takes the stance of “entirely and unqualifiedly for God and against man.” Insofar as the human being’s ability to achieve the good is dependent entirely on the reception of God’s grace, Feuerbach suggests that “God is by his very nature concerned with man…[and therefore] is a being existing not for himself or against us, but rather for us, a good being, good to us men.”

Feuerbach suggests that Luther’s own words present a challenge to traditional Christianity, as God does not exist as a “being-for-Himself,” but as a “being-for-us.” Harvey states that Luther’s emphasis on the “for us” interests Feuerbach because he believes that it demonstrates the “felicity principle” as the foundation of God’s

---

98. Feuerbach, *Principles*, 51, in Harvey, 141 [emphasis author’s].
99. Harvey writes that the later phase describes at human consciousness as “constituted in its mode of being as feeling [Empfindung]” (143). As I will explain in chapter three, Feuerbach presents a very similar argument that explains the need for the God-projection in *Christianity*. While he uses the term Gefühl instead of Empfindung, the basic connotation of “feeling” as constitutive of human awareness is the same.
100. Harvey, 150. In the immediately preceding pages, Harvey considers Muller’s charge to Feuerbach that *Christianity* is an accurate critique of only Catholicism and not Protestantism, and Glasse’s suggestion that Feuerbach wrote *Luther* in order to avoid censorship by the authorities.
101. Harvey, 152.
103. Harvey, 154.
existence, and thus “God is not the creator of nature for its own sake but has created it for ours.” For Feuerbach, the humanity of Christ demonstrates God’s presence for human beings: our awareness of God is made possible through the existence of a living, breathing human being who appeals to our senses as such. And furthermore, the presence of God as an appearing God illustrates that God exists in order to ensure human welfare. Harvey explains:

[quoting Feuerbach] ‘Only a sensuous being favors and satisfies man and can be a beneficent being; for only a sensuous being is an incontrovertible and a certain being. And without certainty there is no beneficence.’ The revelation of God has not been given merely to thought, not does it rest on mere belief. ‘The pledge and truth of the goodness and mercy (humanness) of God lie therefore in Christ as the sensuous essence of God.’

Harvey asserts that Luther illustrates themes in Feuerbach’s thought that were not present in Christianity. The notion of God as an appearing God who exists for-us establishes the “felicity principle” as central to religious consciousness, and not projection or species-differentiation. Therefore, Harvey suggests that Feuerbach’s consideration of Luther serves as a springboard to a completely different line of inquiry in his thought, constituting what Harvey names the “bipolar” model of religion. In this phase, Harvey writes that Feuerbach is much more attentive to the notion of the human being’s dependency upon nature, and the effort for self-identity is much less important, offering this passage from Luther: “Nature is the first, original object of religion, as is amply confirmed by the history of all religions and peoples.” Harvey argues that it is only in this later shift that the reader is able to discern Feuerbach’s emphasis on the human self’s dependency on the “not-I” (nature) as is made evident by individual

104 Harvey, 155.
105 Feuerbach, Luther, 65, in Harvey, 155.
106 Harvey, 157.
107 Ibid., 161.
108 Feuerbach, Religion, 4, in Harvey, 164.
feeling, both as the product of sense-perceptibility and of psychological awareness. In the later works, Harvey suggests human identity is characterized by its existential being-there [Dasein] and therefore relates to the world “through affect and emotion” and wishes to feel “at home” in the world by “transforming natural beings [Naturwesen] into feeling beings [Gemütswesen], which is to say subjective human beings.” Harvey asserts that Feuerbach’s later model of subjectivity is made possible by the human being’s capacity for self-definition by and through the senses. Harvey suggests that in Feuerbach’s consideration of the sensuous nature as fundamental to religious consciousness, he supersedes the Hegelian paradigm of Christianity. Thus, the dominant motifs in Christianity have now become the subordinate ones, and vice versa. Harvey believes that this is the most original element of Feuerbach’s work and could prevent him from being viewed as only a post-Hegelian or pre-Marxist figure.

In the remaining three chapters of the book, Harvey explains the implications of what he deems to be the new “interpretative strategy” of Feuerbach’s multi-causal theory of religion illustrated in the later works. This is the most curious aspect of Harvey’s thesis. First he highlights Feuerbach’s interest in nature and existential location, albeit only in the later works. Yet he ultimately suggests that this formulation of Feuerbach’s thought has much more bearing on contemporary scholarship in psychology of religion. He places Feuerbach in dialogue with such thinkers as Freud and Jung, and considers at great length how Feuerbach’s conceptualizations of religion when emancipated from the Hegelian framework can be applied to such thinkers as Guthrie and Peter Berger. Considering that Harvey’s work is the most prominent recent exposition of Feuerbach in English, it is especially important that we press this issue further because it furthers the psychological interpretation of Feuerbach. His view is problematic because it explains religious belief as only a mental construct or coping

---

109 Harvey, 165.
110 Ibid. 168.
mechanism, and it essentially discounts the role of nature and natural dependence as a function of religious consciousness that he just finished explaining. More than this, such a view also distorts the nature of Feuerbach’s sustained interest in Luther as the example of the paradoxical aspects of this phenomenon. Feuerbach did not need Luther to teach him about naturalism, but he did need Luther as an example of the complexity he sought to unravel.

Harvey’s work is a very important one for Feuerbach studies in spite of its problems. To date, his is the most significant study written in English in the last decade and is thus largely responsible for the modern view of Feuerbach. He rightly makes the intellectual and conceptual link between Luther and Feuerbach, even though he furthers the psychological appropriation of his work in the modern day. Harvey also offers a thorough synthesis of many current views of Feuerbach from the German-speaking world. The dual-strand hypothesis also emerges in international scholarship that dates at approximately the same time as Harvey’s work. Brunvoll offers a comprehensive synopsis of the differing views regarding Feuerbach’s relationship to Luther and Sinnlichkeit and whether or not that is discontinuous with the Hegelian influence present in Christianity. Unlike Harvey, Brunvoll suggests that there is a strong possibility that both Luther and Hegel had a significant influence on the writing of Christianity, and thus the philosophical development of his later works.111 While Brunvoll takes us one step closer in the right direction, we must still ask if they are considering Feuerbach’s project from the correct angle. Both Brunvoll and Harvey attempt to explain Feuerbach epochally, as if different moments of his project need to be attributed to the influence of another primary thinker. In this project, I argue that Feuerbach’s basic trajectory is more unified than this. Throughout his career, he sought to unveil nature and sensuousness as the key to deciphering the major intellectual

111 Brunvoll, 116: “Von dieser Begegnung Feuerbachs mit Luther können wir behaupten, dass sie entschiedend seine weitere philosophische Entwicklung beeinflusst hat.”
trends of the West. He was especially occupied by the inconsistencies of these traditions, particularly with reference to the dualism inherent in Western philosophy and theology. He utilized the same basic principles in his criticism of philosophy and religious consciousness and what he believed to be the untenability of their dualist metaphysics. Also considering Feuerbach’s love of tension and paradox, it is also important to consider the dialectical component that is present in both Luther and Hegel. Hegel’s dialectic is a component within the consciousness of Spirit, and Luther’s is a result of the fractured nature of human reason after the impact of sin. While I think the dialectical model of consciousness that is present in both of these thinkers is primarily what occupied Feuerbach, ultimately his stronger kinship is with Luther because of his description of the natural-existential state of the human being as a means to knowing God. As I will consider further in the next chapter, Hegel’s denial of nature as ground is what Feuerbach sought to overhaul from a very early stage in his writing. Feuerbach did critique Luther for positing a transcendent God over and above his incarnation in Christ, but Feuerbach’s equation of the material with the real places him in a decidedly non-Hegelian theological camp. This also works through tensions in Luther’s thought about the human subject’s sensibility to the ideal image of God.

1.4 Feuerbach and the Study of Religion

The work of such authors as Harvey and Guthrie has meant that Feuerbach is usually considered as offering a predominantly psychological interpretation of religious consciousness. I do not think this is an adequate account of his model for a number of reasons. While Feuerbach is certainly interested in the psychological dimensions of both the predisposition toward and also effect of religious reflection, it is a misnomer to suggest this is his primary source of interest in religion. The emphasis on the psychology of Feuerbach’s position implies a certain understanding of the ego and
human consciousness that is precisely what Feuerbach seeks to overhaul in Western models of subjectivity. The psychological reading of Feuerbach also quite understandably tends to place Feuerbach on a type of pre-Freudian trajectory, which in turn conceals the deeply ambivalent aspects of Feuerbach’s relationship to religious consciousness. While Feuerbach does use the language of “wish” in Christianity for example, it is part of his larger effort to reflect upon the complexity of human consciousness and is not the same vein as Freudian wish-fulfillment. The link between Feuerbach and Freud is not wholly unfounded, although I do not believe that it considers the most essential components of Feuerbach’s work. The emphasis on the psychological elements suggests that Feuerbach’s main interest in religious consciousness is from a functionalist perspective, rather than the essential link between his work and the theology of Luther. While Feuerbach was not a friend of religion per se, his stance was not completely antithetical either. Feuerbach’s primary area of interest was an effort to clarify and describe the nature of religious consciousness and finitude from the perspective of human experience.

1.4.1 Phenomenology of Religious Consciousness

Because of this, the reductionist-psychological account is an inadequate representation of Feuerbach’s comprehensive project. While psychology may play a role in the subject’s feeling of affectivity, Feuerbach’s primary interest is the realization of nature as the condition of human identity and religious consciousness. His

---

112 See for example Christianity, 32 or Lectures, 260. As I will consider in the following pages, Feuerbach uses the language of wish in conjunction with a complex picture of human feeling and imagination that exists beyond the intentionality of the conscious ego. Where Freud’s link of religion and wish results in a dismissal of the intrinsic validity of religious consciousness, Feuerbach’s is only the beginning of a discussion of the complexity of human nature and self-recognition.

113 The original title of Christianity was Gnosis Seauton [Know Thyself.] While Hook associates this type of “knowing” with psychology (243), I argue that it was instead Feuerbach’s call to human beings to recognize naturalism as a fundamental aspect of subjectivity and self-consciousness. He writes in Christianity that “even the moon, the sun, the stars, call to man to [Know Thyself]. That he sees them, and
rejection of Hegel and speculative thought further problematizes the discussion of religious consciousness as a psychological state or type of interior consciousness. Resulting in part from his fascination with Luther’s account of religious experience, Feuerbach considered religious consciousness as a function of the subject’s natural and sensuous forms of awareness. While Feuerbach is not often considered from such a perspective, this nonetheless locates his work in the area of phenomenology of religion. The consideration of Feuerbach’s project from this perspective also clarifies the significant structural differences between his objectives and those from a Hegelian or Freudian angle and ultimately it also indicates the locus of Feuerbach’s ambivalence towards religion. Even though Feuerbach did not support the notion of a transcendent God that initially prompted such experiences, he believed that the phenomenological clues of religious experience ultimately indicated important insights about the fundamental aspects of human nature: in our reflection on “God,” we necessarily reflect on the depths of human nature, all while utilizing our natural forms of awareness. To Feuerbach religious consciousness was important not because of orthodox belief, but the fact that religious experiences made human beings aware of the most fundamental aspects of self. While Feuerbach was undeniably critical of numerous aspects of religious participation, he still believed that it could be a valuable pursuit. It was in religious experience that human beings explored the depths of human consciousness and human nature.

For these reasons I suggest that Feuerbach’s theory of religion should be considered from a perspective other than the reductionist-psychological method. Feuerbach’s belief that religious consciousness revealed important components of human nature demonstrates his relationship to phenomenological thought. Twiss and

so sees them, is an evidence of his own nature. The animal is sensible only of the beam which immediately affects life; while man perceives the ray, to him physically indifferent, of the remotest star” (5). I will return to this passage again in chapter three.
Conser attribute the work of Husserl and Dilthey to be the most influential in the development of phenomenology of religion as a separate discourse. In his effort to overhaul philosophy, Husserl asked that theorists “return to the things themselves” by “free[ing] philosophy from prior dogmatic claims about the nature of knowledge, the world, and ourselves” and instead to emphasize individual descriptions of experience. Following from this, Dilthey’s description of human consciousness required one to consider the “tacit significations of a gesture” beyond its intentional structure or “physiology.” Dilthey suggests that there is an elusive nature to human consciousness whereby meaningful experiences exist beyond the “official” intention of what the conscious ego believes to be taking place. This is one moment in the larger process of understanding [Verstehen] in which the subject is actively interpreting the experience from a number of different perspectives. This indicates an interesting relationship between the individual subject and its own faculty of consciousness: while radically one’s own, one’s consciousness nonetheless possesses its own autonomy beyond the subject’s intentionality: “the expressions of human consciousness always point beyond themselves to something else.”

These ideas also comprise important aspects of Feuerbach’s theory of religious consciousness. In Christianity he explains that as the “listener and interpreter, [but] not…prompter” of religion, he only desires to “let religion itself speak.” Feuerbach believed the most essential component of the Christian tradition to not be its doctrine but the fact that religious consciousness is animated by the human being’s natural forms of awareness: “I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only

---

115 Ibid., 6.
116 Ibid.
117 Christianity, xxxvi.
through the activity of the senses.” Yet to Feuerbach’s dismay, the Christian tradition had not been considered from this perspective. Rather than allowing religious consciousness to reveal itself as a function of the human being’s process of self-awareness, it was hijacked in the form of supernatural dogma. Feuerbach argued that the true insights of religion had been misunderstood or concealed by its implicit anti-naturalist narrative. Feuerbach’s consideration of human senses and feeling as tools of religious consciousness is quite significant when evaluating his place alongside other theorists of religion, particularly concerning the issue of the psychological and/or “inner” emotive components of religious experience.

Twiss and Conser suggest that one of the problems of “essential” phenomenology of religion, characterized by someone like Otto, is the fact that it “subscribes to a theory of experience or consciousness that implicitly values mental as contrasted with corporeal phenomena.” The concern here is that a stress on mental phenomena (Otto’s noumena) privileges the subject’s inner experiences over physical or social reality. The authors note the irony in this trend in essential phenomenology considering the fact that one of Husserl’s objectives in his work was to overcome the mind-body dualism of Western philosophical thought. They suggest that another development within the tradition, “existential” phenomenology, sidesteps some of these problems in the other track. In particular, existentialist phenomenology highlights the intersubjectivity, linguisticality, and historicity as important modalities of experience. These factors explain how the subject’s individual experience is embedded in a larger world beyond itself. Where essential phenomenology underscores the solitary aspects of personal experience, existential phenomenology identifies these experiences as marks of the greater milieu in which the subject finds

---

118 Ibid., xxxiv.
119 Twiss and Conser, 22.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid., 50.
itself. This latter view is more in line with the core of the “phenomenological attitude” of “being radically ‘bound’ or situated in the world.” The existential view is more attentive to one’s embodiment and corporeality as disclosive of the larger issues of society. While the essential view might tend to emphasize the solitary aspects of experience, the existentialist view emphasizes how isolated phenomenological clues are part of a larger issue of one’s existence as a physical self in society. This point is directly related to another component of existential phenomenology, the emphasis of human freedom. The realities of sociality and embodiment result in the dual-awareness of being independent yet constricted, and a major point of reflection for existential phenomenology is how these preconditions navigate our being-in-the-world.

Feuerbach’s project is directly engaged with these issues present in both essential and existential phenomenology camps, but especially the latter. His motivation in Christianity to “let religion speak” for itself is clearly in line with the general dictates of phenomenology, but this same motivation also exists in his general project beyond that particular book. As I will consider in the pages to come, Feuerbach believed the major problem of speculative thought in the form of both theistic religion and Hegelianism was in its dismissal of the validity of the human subject’s natural and existential experience. Feuerbach believed that religious consciousness was the penultimate moment in which human beings reflected on the depths of their identity as human beings, and particularly as natural-existential beings in society. This activity illustrates the larger phenomenological concept of intentionality: for Feuerbach the true issue of religious consciousness was not the fact that subjects were conscious of God, but that they were conscious of God. It was by virtue of the effort of reflection itself, and the insights and tools contained therein, that was his true object of concern.

---

122 Ibid., 51.
123 Ibid., 52.
This is much unlike the more commonly held view of Feuerbach as an interpreter of religion from a psychological perspective. The correction of this view will prove to be a central portion of my project here, and the support for this correction exists in Feuerbach’s phenomenological method. Louis Dupré argues that “any claim of psychology to a full understanding of religious experience, therefore, assumes that the religious act can be explained entirely as a subjective experience,” meaning that it “never comes to grips with the religious consciousness as consciousness, i.e., as a subject ideally related to an object without ever coinciding with it.” Dupré articulates Feuerbach’s interest in what he believed to be the essential components of religious consciousness. While one’s consciousness of religion may be a part of a larger reflection of human wish or desire, that does not mean that religious consciousness can be subsumed under wish alone. Feuerbach believed that in the perception of the ideal God, human beings contemplated the infinite aspects of human nature itself—and his desire to clarify the misunderstandings that existed therein established the foundation for his project.

Beyond psychology of religion, Dupré also suggests that philosophy of religion should also be aware of the tendency towards “Gnostic” interpretations in which the full content of religious reflection can be fully subsumed under rational classifications: “the moment religion is treated as if its content were merely rational it ceases to be religion and becomes something else.” However, even while considering the uniqueness of religious experience Dupré underscores the importance of the phenomenological epoché: “what the transcendent object is in itself, i.e., beyond its relation to the immanent being of consciousness, is unimportant.” Even so, a tension ultimately exists between the unique nature of religious experience and the effort on the

---

125 Dupré, in Twiss and Conser, 138.
126 Ibid., 134 [emphasis author’s].
part of the phenomenologist to bracket issues of ontological certainty. Dupré suggests that an authentic interpretation of the religious act is only possible if the theorist acknowledges the “trans-phenomenological” object of the religious act. As a result, the religious experience never becomes completely immanent; its immanent being retains an essential incompleteness, due to the evasive and transcendent character of its object, which is unique in human experience.

This tension is also illustrated in the ambivalence of Feuerbach’s position regarding the validity of religious consciousness. While his eventual rejection of the transcendent God likely exceeded the parameters of the phenomenological epoché, he nonetheless was fascinated by the “evasive and transcendent” components of human nature that were illustrated by the act of religious consciousness. Feuerbach believed that the religious act conceived as a function of Sinnlichkeit and the like was valuable because it ultimately reflected the complexity of human consciousness. This vital issue is wholly ignored by the interpretations of Feuerbach as being in line with Freudian psychological models that suggest religious belief is ultimately reducible to human wish-fulfillment or illusion.

However, even with Dupré’s and Feuerbach’s emphasis on the unique and immanent, i.e., non-rational, nature of religious consciousness, this does not mean it is rightly conceived as being irrational. This matter will be further complicated when I will consider in the next chapter how the Luther-Feuerbach model of religious experience is fundamentally at odds with Hegel and German idealism precisely because of Hegel’s interpretation of universal Reason. However, the most fascinating component of Feuerbach’s naturalist model of religious experience is the fact that it maintains this elusive and transcendent character without relying upon a description of

\[127\] Ibid.
\[128\] Ibid., 135.
religion as radically subjective or interior. At best, the emphasis on mental experience or “inner” religious experience is conceptually imprecise, and at worst it can potentially provide justification for immoral acts in the name of religious consciousness. This latter concern is on the mind of pragmatic theorists of religion.

1.4.2 Pragmatism and Descriptions of Religious Experience

Davis’ assertion that the contemporary study of religion has made a shift towards pragmatic theory is specifically directed to the charges of an essential phenomenologist like Otto who suggests the reality of an interior and radically personal religious experience that cannot be expressed in language. Davis and other pragmatic theorists of religion undoubtedly have in mind Wittgenstein’s “private-language” argument, in which the latter explains that experiences have meaning through linguistic practice and the understanding of the community, not in the context of an interior and individualized consciousness before such experiences are articulated. Another prominent figure involved in this discussion is Rorty, whose assertion that religion is the ultimate “conversation-stopper” is often quoted in discussions regarding the legitimacy of religious belief as justification for arguments in the public sphere. While it is true that Rorty’s views regarding the legitimacy of language were tempered somewhat in his later writings, his utopian vision of society still involved at the very least widespread secularity at the public level. Rorty broadly defines this view as “anti-clericalism” and it stems from his assumption that when used as justification for social practice, strong religious views are divisive and prohibit a reasonable exchange of

---

ideas among people of different traditions. He has in mind such instances as a devout believer’s condemnation of homosexuality based on Leviticus 18:22. The use of the Bible is problematic because it implies that members of the Judeo-Christian tradition have special access to sources of truth and cites principles that those outside of the tradition would not accept. He echoes the pragmatic view that beliefs and desires are not meaningful in a “prelinguistic” sense. The existence of theoretical phenomena can only be conceived in either “wordplay” or “practice” and both require the process of linguistic justification with others. Even though most of this discussion is directed towards the consideration of how one should speak about religious belief in the political domain, inevitably the use of pragmatic methods of truth-verification will eliminate certain types of discussions about religious experience, particularly ones taking place from the perspective of essential phenomenology.

For example, Davis refers to the work of Proudfoot, who ultimately suggests that religion is not sui generis (à la Otto), but a cultural phenomenon. Its authority lies not in the immediate experience of the believer, but how that experience is explained. Davis explains that Proudfoot is furthering the arguments of Peirce, who is against “a romantic tradition that locates the justification of religious commitments in some prelinguistic, direct experience of an ineffable something.” Along these lines, Proudfoot explains that emotions are not themselves unique or self-referential and that the significance we assign to them is due to other factors. Referring to the Schachter-Singer experiment, Proudfoot maintains that emotions are essentially ambiguous and are assigned value by virtue of other factors in our external environments. The perception of something as “sacred” or “religious” is not in effect an assertion of an

132 Ibid., 145.
133 Rorty, PSH, xxiii.
134 Ibid., xxv.
136 Davis, 662.
irreducible religious reality but instead a manifestation of a preconceived notion: if I approach an event with the anticipation that it will be an experience of the divine, then it will be. He argues that the religious experience one describes will be synonymous with their beliefs about religious experiences in general. Ultimately Proudfoot argues that an experience is “religious” when we do not have another explanation for it: “a person identifies an experience as religious when he comes to believe that the best explanation of what has happened to him is a religious one.” Following from this, both Davis and Rorty suggest that the meaningful aspect of such experiences is not an effort to describe the essential notion of what this experience is in itself, or what it means individually for the believer, but how it affects pragmatic action: “students of mysticism, and of religious experience generally, open up a window into what really matters for the active and engaged members of this particular community.”

There are two primary reasons why the pragmatist finds the consideration of religious experience from a position of interiority to be problematic and chooses instead to consider religious belief on the basis of practicality or usefulness. One is an issue of concern about what actions could be justified from a position of “private” religious belief. Because of the pragmatist’s assertion that belief is bound to practice, interior religious belief that is perceived as one’s own and is not subject to verification by the larger community. Without the tests of truth and verification provided by the community, a private religious belief could be used as the justification for unethical actions. Rorty describes this as the problem of the “individual” or “idiosyncratic” views endemic not only to religious belief, but also in the philosophy of thinkers like

137 Proudfoot, 91. Davis also points the reader to the work of Mary Douglas, who argued that a culture’s views of the sacred were tied to other beliefs regarding contamination and purity: “it remains true that religions also sacralise [sic] the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence,” in Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo, (New York: Routledge, 1966), 160.
138 Proudfoot, 108.
139 Davis, 662. Rorty echoes the same sentiment almost verbatim in PSH, xxiv: “the right question to ask [the believer] is, ‘For what purposes would it be useful to hold that belief?’ This is like the question, ‘For what purposes would it be useful to load this program into my computer?’”
Because these perspectives emphasize the uniqueness of personal experience and self-identity, Rorty’s concern is that these ideas draw one away from the community when viewed literally. As a consequence he suggests that such ideas should be viewed either “ironically” or “metaphorically.” Following from this, pragmatists also tend to take issue with the subjective components of religious experience is because they attribute to it antiquated philosophical and epistemological assumptions.

Rorty suggests that the privileging of the interior aspects of religious belief over the exterior is a type of “inverted Platonism” or play in a “Cartesian Theatre” in which the true reality is found in a world “out there,” separate from human perception and experience. Rorty rightfully reminds us that this pursuit is based in a mindset that was all but rendered obsolete after Kant. While the pragmatist does raise legitimate concerns about certain issues in the discussion of religion, one could still question how adequately the pragmatist can give an account of religious experience given his criteria. Nicholas Wolterstorff has said that Rorty’s efforts to limit and “privatize” religion send the message that it “must shape up if it’s to be tolerated in our liberal democracy,” which conveys “an illiberal, sometimes even menacing, tone in Rorty’s position and argument.” Reading Davis and Rorty, one is left to the conclusion that it is not possible to consider religious experience from the perspective of individual consciousness without either reverting back to mindset of the Meditations or entering dangerous ethical territory.

---

141 Ibid., 96.
142 Rorty, *PSH*, xxiv.
143 Rorty, CIS, 43.
144 Rorty, *PSH*, xxiii.
1.4.3 Religious Experience After God

In the above descriptions, the phenomenologist and the pragmatist appear to be quite divided in their methodologies and assertions. This is where Feuerbach enters the discussion. While his description of religious consciousness was from a perspective of individual feeling and emotion, it was only in the context that these experiences were revealed by religious naturalism and *Sinnlichkeit*. Unlike the pragmatist’s concern that the “idiosyncratic” nature of religious experience could draw one away from the community, Feuerbach argued that it was vis-à-vis these individual experiences that the subject contemplated the essence of human nature, and thus one’s bond to the community was in fact strengthened. Like Rorty, Feuerbach too sought to move philosophical thinking away from the Cartesian Theatre and towards the realm of tangible human life and experience. In fact, he believed that this effort could be maintained, even when describing the particularities of individual religious experience, if described through the lens of naturalism.

Feuerbach’s basic methodology has much in common with several key developments in the twentieth century and beyond. In addition to the aforementioned schools of phenomenology and pragmatism, Feuerbach’s paradigm also relates to “death of God” and other trends in post-metaphysical thought. Situating Feuerbach in this context also explains his relationship to religious thought more accurately than previous treatments of his work because Feuerbach believed religion needed clarity and revision, not eradication. His normal association with the Left Hegelians and/or Freudian psychology does not convey this point clearly. Feuerbach’s discussion of religion relates to many other ideas present in contemporary religious thought. For example, Mark A. Wrathall suggests that the “absence of the foundational God opens up access to richer and more relevant ways for us to understand creation and for us to encounter the divine and the sacred... that were blocked by traditional metaphysical
theology (or onto-theology).”\textsuperscript{146} Wrathall’s explanation of Heidegger’s criticism of religion and onto-theology could have easily been about Feuerbach’s project as well: “the onto-theological structure of metaphysical inquiry has had deleterious effects on both philosophy and theology…it has misconstrued the nature of God, thereby obstructing our relationship with the divine.”\textsuperscript{147} For some, the move beyond onto-theology also allows room for additional consideration of religious consciousness within philosophy. With the “death of God” and onto-theology, religious discourse moves beyond debates regarding orthodoxy and affiliation to other types of deliberations regarding the existential religious subject.

Charles Taylor suggests that the current “world structures,” or “features of the way experiments and thoughts are shaped and cohere,” are “closed to transcendence.”\textsuperscript{148} Taylor attributes this closed view towards religion to a post-Enlightenment culture that emphasizes reason and human teleology. Present cultural and epistemological views are closed to considerations of the transcendent as a description of human selfhood or vocation, denouncing such views as superstitious or irrational. However, Taylor suggests this view is much too narrow. He refers to a figure like John Locke, who indeed emphasized such modern ideals as rationality, freedom, and sovereignty but also suggested that they were important because they were God-given.\textsuperscript{149} Locke is an example of how the transcendent can operate as a world structure without claiming metaphysical truths or lapsing to religious fanaticism. This is rarely acknowledged in the present day because structures “blank out” the transcendent and marginalize religious discourse, a trend he dismisses as “over-hasty naturalization” and should ultimately be more open to the different possibilities of

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 64.
religious consciousness.\textsuperscript{150} He acknowledges that both secularists and theologians can be equally dogmatic and dismissive of the other side, and he calls for a reopening of such world structures that could “open the issue for a more active and fruitful search” regarding the nature and existence of God.\textsuperscript{151}

Taylor urges the modern theorist to be more open to the ways in which transcendence can enter discussions of religious thought. Feuerbach’s model fits in this discussion because his description of religious consciousness highlights Luther’s theology from the natural-existential perspective. While no one will ever confuse Feuerbach for a traditional theologian, his observations consider the ways in which discussions of the transcendent have bearing on the natural aspects of human identity. This account is compatible with the pragmatic and post-onto-theological culture described here, but also leaves room for a residue of transcendence within the structure of naturalism. Feuerbach’s emphasis on empiricism and naturalism also stands up to pragmatic tests of verifiability without automatically dismissing the legitimacy of religious experiences in the matter that Proudfoot does above. While Feuerbach would be the first to deny the validity of privileging an other-worldly realm over humanity, his description of feeling and affect in religious consciousness cannot be exhaustively categorized either.

This type of dual-consideration of both transcendence and naturalism is what John Caputo had in mind in accounts of religious experience after onto-theology. With the death of God and onto-theology, human beings have the possibility of forming a more authentic relationship to the incomprehensible God that is not defined by the constraints of the ego or metaphysical assumptions.\textsuperscript{152} Taylor and Caputo suggest the post-metaphysical culture allows the secular humanist and the religionist to have a

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{152} John Caputo, “The experience of God and the axiology of the impossible,” in Religion after Metaphysics, 129.
more meaningful dialogue with one another because of the different ways in which
descriptions of God can take place. In the absence of onto-theology’s prevailing system
of meaning the lines between these categories are not as easily drawn, which again
brings us back to Feuerbach.

Feuerbach’s account of religious consciousness is much more complex and
nuanced than is often recognized. It is part of a larger meditation on the state of
Western metaphysics and rationalism of his day, and his epistemological concerns
foreshadowed important developments to follow. In this chapter, I have explained that
the common associations of Feuerbach to Left Hegelianism and Freudian thought are
problematic because they dismiss the broader issues of his project. These
representations predominantly depict Feuerbach as a purveyor of atheism without
considering the greater context for his condemnation of religion. His sustained interest
in Luther demonstrates his commitment to the revision and clarification, and not
elimination, of the goals of the theological tradition. Further, changes in discourse after
the “death of God” and onto-theology suggest other ways in which the religious
paradigm can be conceived. Discussions of religious consciousness that move beyond
old metaphysical assumptions allow many interpretations regarding the nature of the
referent in religious reflection. This is precisely the realm of ambiguity and paradox
that characterizes so much of Feuerbach’s reflections on religion. In order to explore
this idea further, we must have a greater historical and intellectual context for
Feuerbach’s early work, beginning with Hegel. Hegel and Feuerbach posit radically
different visions of human selfhood and the role of religious consciousness. A
comparison of these two models will begin to explain why Luther, and not Hegel, is the
unacknowledged muse for Feuerbach’s philosophy.
Feuerbach’s label as a Left Hegelian is not wholly without merit but it has oversimplified the deeper issues of Feuerbach’s project, particularly his relationship to religious thought. In the previous chapter I described Feuerbach’s complicated relationship to others in the Hegelian Left, and in this chapter I will consider his relationship to Hegel directly. Feuerbach’s discussions of Hegel illumine the larger revisions he hoped to make to Western theories of consciousness and religious thought. The easy link to Hegel reiterates only a simplistic understanding of Feuerbach and atheism. This in turn leaves the more pervasive questions about his relationship to religious thought unexplored, particularly with reference to Luther and naturalism. Harvey has identified this theme in the later Feuerbach writings, but this thesis overlooks the finer points of Feuerbach’s effort to overhaul Hegel in even his early work. Feuerbach’s incorporation of the Hegelian “I-Thou” in Christianity notwithstanding, in many other respects Feuerbach and Hegel had very different projects. Hegel sought to lay out a universal model of spirit and consciousness at large, and Feuerbach believed that universalist claims made sense only with reference to material existence.

For this reason, Feuerbach wanted to articulate a philosophical model that pertained to humanism and materialism, not idealism and abstraction. This basic difference is evident in a number of Feuerbach’s writings and it is at the heart of his essential project. While Feuerbach’s Left Hegelian association is accurate in a general sense, the label carries with it a great deal of baggage and promotes a rather cursory understanding of Feuerbach. For this reason, we must be much more precise—identifying not only what Feuerbach gained from Hegel, but also what he criticized and
what is present in his thought outside of Hegel’s influence. It is in this remaining residue that Feuerbach’s interest in Luther and naturalism is discernible. Of course, Hegel is a self-proclaimed “Lutheran theologian” himself so there is a certain degree of interconnectedness between the three thinkers, something not well described by Harvey’s dual-strand hypothesis. The greater issue is that previous accounts by Harvey and others fail to appreciate the implications of the exclusively Luther-Feuerbachian link, particularly with reference to religious consciousness. In Feuerbach’s effort to provide a more existentially aware interpretation of Spirit, Feuerbach is indebted to Luther in more ways than he even realized himself. Harvey is right to say that this is a moment in Feuerbach’s thought that is separate from the Hegelian component, but he is wrong to suggest that it was not always present.

With these issues in mind I will clarify Feuerbach’s role as a left Hegelian, considering the major components of Hegel’s view of religious consciousness as well as the ways in which Feuerbach seeks to differentiate himself. With reference to Hegel’s relationship to Feuerbach, I am isolating two main components in the former’s model: the ultimate meaning of history as defined by Spirit [Geist]; and his discussion of religious thinking as picture-thinking and representation [Vorstellungen]. These two concepts illustrate the centrality of absolute cognition and non-sensuously derived reason for Hegel and this is also antithetical to the aims of Feuerbach’s project.

The consideration of this idea will advance us one step further in the larger deliberation on Feuerbach’s relationship to Luther. With the demonstration of an essential relationship between the two, the simple atheist view of Feuerbach is shown to be incredibly problematic. Through Luther but also in spite of himself, Feuerbach

---

153 Of course, Hegel is a self-proclaimed “Lutheran theologian” himself so there is a certain degree of interconnectedness between the three thinkers, something not well described by Harvey’s dual-strand hypothesis. See Hegel’s declaration in a letter to Friedrich Tholuck, “I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy have been at once completely confirmed in Lutheranism” in Philip M. Merklinger, Philosophy, Theology, and Hegel’s Berlin Philosophy of Religion 1821-1827, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 99.
promotes a naturalistic religious consciousness in the use of *Sinnlichkeit* and similar terms that connote the religious subject’s feeling of affectivity. While Hegel also wrote about sense-perceptibility in religious experience, Feuerbach’s interpretation is different in its focus on the individual subject. Hegel’s emphasis on the universal guides his account of the conscious subject in terms of one’s participation in universal reason and absolute cognition. For Feuerbach, the individual human subject is paramount in the consideration of universals, whether they are broadly metaphysical or specifically theological. It is only through the human being, and the human being’s natural forms of awareness, that the meaning of religious ideas or truth may take hold, or to borrow a term from Heidegger, is given a site of disclosure. Such observations locate Feuerbach more firmly within a tradition of existentialism and not idealism. Finally, considerations of religious consciousness and human subjectivity relate not only to Hegel and Feuerbach but also to Luther, who quite notably condemned reason as the “devil’s whore.” Luther conceives the difference between descriptions of the religious subject as ultimately one who *feels* in one’s own particularity versus one who *thinks* vis-à-vis the absolute as quite significant. This distinction will prove to play an important role in the establishment of Feuerbach’s place in philosophy and religion.

### 2.1 Kantian Rationalism and German Idealism

It is important to first consider the larger historical context in which Hegel was writing. One of Hegel’s most significant contributions over the course of his career was his interpretation of the religious event within history. Hegel’s views on philosophy and religion were part of a larger system that sought to explain the events of history in a comprehensive fashion, and this view emerged out of his specific intellectual context. Born at the end of the Enlightenment, Hegel entered adulthood during the Romantic era. It is clear that he was influenced by both movements, yet satisfied by neither. He
sought to reconcile two of the major themes of both human reason and human passion into a coherent system that would explain the nature of epistemology in general, and more specifically the significance of human experience and history. Philip Merklinger suggests that after the Reformation, “the hermeneutics of the knowledge of God and the universe shifted, with Enlightenment thinkers placing the discourse of natural, purely human reason before revelatory discourse as that which is most able to disclose the truth of the universe and its Creator.”\textsuperscript{154} The natural theology and rationalism as the reigning modes of discourse during the Enlightenment era resulted in a general skepticism towards observations that were made on the basis of faith or theology.

Hegel sought to reconcile this divide, positing a teleological system in which universal Spirit is viewed as undergirding the movement of history in a determinate way. He suggested that a unity exists between rational thought and religious consciousness, despite an apparent belief to the contrary. In an early essay written as a seminary student at Tübingen, Hegel explained that while “human nature is quickened...solely by virtue of its rational ideas” it is essential to point out that by its very nature, religion is not merely a systematic investigation of God, God’s attributes, the relation of the world and ourselves to God, and the permanence of our souls; we could learn all this by reason alone, or be aware of it by other means. Nor is religious knowledge merely a matter of history or argumentation. Rather, religion engages the heart. It influences our feelings and the determination of our will; and this is so in part because our duties and our laws obtain powerful reinforcement by being represented to us as laws of God, and in part because our notion of the exaltedness and goodness of God fills our hearts with admiration as well as with feelings of humility and gratitude.\textsuperscript{155}

In the empirical climate of the post-Enlightenment era, Hegel sought to account for the way in which a “non-rational” event could still be part of this rational and teleological

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Merklinger, 2.}
\end{footnotes}

67
schema of history. In many ways, Hegel was indebted to the ideas first introduced by Kant in his consideration of the manner in which religion should be regarded alongside human reason: religious consciousness serves as the rationale upon which our other faculties act. Interestingly, the term “engage[ment] of the heart” is also used by Luther and Feuerbach, although in a fashion much different than Hegel. Hegel describes human feeling not as primary, but as a sign of something greater than itself—namely the meaning of religion as a function of Spirit. For Hegel, religious events should not be regarded as existing in a realm outside of the province of rational discourse because religious symbols are to be understood rationally.

2.1.1 Dealing with the Ego: Kant, Fichte, and Schelling

Kant’s introduction of the transcendental ego is a cornerstone of the phenomenological thought that follows because it identifies the extent to which the human subject actively interprets and assigns meanings to the objects presented in experience. This is particularly provocative with reference to religious experience because it demonstrates the inherent difficulty at hand: how does the transcendental human subject articulate experiences of the divine? Merklinger credits Kant and the publication of Critique of Pure Reason (1781) as a decisive moment in the study of philosophy of religion. In the first Critique, Kant offers a means by which philosophy and revelation, reason and faith, and the like may be mutually considered in the effort to make a decisive return to the subject. In Merklinger’s estimation, Kant’s positing of the antinomies suggests that one must “deny Knowledge [of God, immortality, and freedom] in order to make room for faith.”\textsuperscript{156} Kant refines this idea further in his later book, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793). In response to the Third Antinomy, Kant suggests that God must be viewed as a postulate of practical reason,

\textsuperscript{156} Merklinger, 3.
and not a concept that can be regarded with epistemological certainty.\(^{157}\) This is a rather pragmatic understanding of God in which one believes that the existence of God should be taken as true in an effort to reconcile the apparently bridgeless gap between duty and desire. In this fashion, statements about the nature of religious experience itself are essentially left off the table.

But for Hegel, this does not go far enough. Indeed, Kant’s transcendental ego is incredibly important in the identification of the phenomenal subject and the resulting descriptions of experience. Yet Hegel suggests that Kant still does not give a sufficient account of the perception of the human subject within experience because he perpetuates a dualistic methodology. Even with the priority of the transcendental ego, Kant still identifies the existence of noumena outside the realm of human cognition or experience. In Hegel’s view, this continues a static dualist view of the self and the external object and does not consider the extent to which these categories exist in relation to one another. Hegel’s criticism of the Kantian system was further refined upon his arrival at the University of Jena in 1801, where he found himself involved in the dialogue taking place between Fichte and Schelling and the inception of German idealism. When Kant posited the existence of the thing-in-itself, he also posited the existence of ideas that cannot be known in human experience or through the human understanding. From a standpoint of morality and practical reason, this presented problems for the moral subject. One cannot explain religion or a belief in the transcendent as this exists outside of human reason; one only knows what to do from a standpoint of practicality or prudence. On a metaphysical level, these later idealists sought to lessen the epistemological dualism found in Kant. On a practical or moral level, this resulted in the reconciliation of the divide between duty and desire through the establishment of human reason as existing within the sensible realm of objects. With

\(^{157}\) See John R. Silber’s essay, “The Ethical Significance of Kant’s Religion,” especially ci, included in the introduction of Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone.
the abolition of the epistemological dualism, idealists believed that it was possible to posit human reason as its own transcendental ground.

Hegel credited Fichte with providing the first main break with former systems of dualism and the introduction of the new movement of German idealism after Kant. In Hegel’s view, Fichte’s most significant contribution was the positing of the ego as the first principle of philosophy. In the *Science of Knowledge* (1794), Fichte named the ego as the first principle of philosophy, explaining that the totality of knowledge or experience originates only in the self and not an ideal noumenal world.\(^\text{158}\) In one sense, this provided a unified theory of consciousness that explained the human will as working in conjunction with the larger issues of the divine will. Beyond this, Fichte described human reason as having a larger sense of providence in the sensible world, existing fundamentally “in agreement of the sphere of our duty” and is ultimately “brought about by the One Eternal Infinite Will.”\(^\text{159}\) However, there is also a sensible world that exists outside of one’s immediate perception: the world is not simply what the ego thinks it is at any given time. As a second principle of philosophy, Fichte also posited the existence of a “not-self” that is “opposed absolutely to the self.”\(^\text{160}\) While Fichte explained both the “self” and “non-self” as fully knowable within consciousness—and therefore not truly opposed to one another because they are known through the same activity of the thinking ego—Hegel was concerned that Fichte’s model lacked the cohesiveness of a true system.

Hegel saw in Schelling’s philosophy of identity (*Identitätsphilosophie*) a truer inheritor of Spinoza’s concepts of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* than Fichte and it was therefore the more comprehensive system. Hegel believed that it was only Schelling who fully considered the scope of the speculative intuition of reason. Where

---


\(^\text{160}\) Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 104.
the other thinkers emphasized reason on primarily a subjective level, Schelling considered reason as a function of the universal and therefore was able to offer a more comprehensive view of the cosmos. In discussions of physical phenomena, such as the law of gravity, or such creative pursuits of human beings as art, Schelling emphasized a concept of self-contained causation:

For as soon as we step into the sphere of organic nature every mechanical connection between cause and effect ceases for us. Every organic product exists for itself, its existence is dependent upon no other existence. Now the cause is never the same as the effect....but the organization produces itself, arises from itself...Every organic product bears the ground of its existence within itself, for it is its own cause and effect.¹⁶¹

Where Fichte’s model of the “self” and “not-self” intimated that consciousness remained somewhat divided, Hegel believed that Schelling went farther in his explanation of the underlying unity of seemingly opposing forces. Schelling also sought to explain how this organic unity revealed itself in a grander scale, such as in aesthetic forms and representations (art, religion), where Fichte tended to explain his ideas more on the level of individual subjectivity (human will, vocation). Quite significantly, Schelling’s method also emphasized larger activities of process and becoming not simply amongst individual persons, but the cosmos at large.

Hegel’s Jena writings in particular demonstrate his preference for Schelling’s work over the other main figures in German idealism, namely Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi. He uses the examples of religious faith and eudaemonism to illustrate how these thinkers lapse into a type of subjectivism rather than considering the universal nature of speculative thought. Hegel writes:

In Kant the infinite concept is posited as that which is in and for itself and as the only thing philosophy acknowledges. In Jacobi, the infinite appears as affected

by subjectivity, that is, as instinct, impulse, individuality. In Fichte, the infinite as affected by subjectivity is itself objectified again, as obligation and striving. So these philosophers are as completely confined within eudaemonism as they are diametrically opposed to it.\textsuperscript{162}

Along these same lines, Hegel also uses the example of the above thinkers’ interpretation of religious faith. He suggests that with all three, “philosophy has made itself the handmaid of a faith once more” because they all posit religious ideas as existing in a “supersensuous” (Kant), “subjective” or “instinct[ual]” (Jacobi) or “incomprehensible and unthinkable” (Fichte).\textsuperscript{163} In both examples of faith and eudaemonism, the individual subject’s perception is the primary source of rationality: my right action will ensure my well-being, or my intuition of God leads me to have faith in that God. In both, the universal sense of the good is defined by the subjective intuition, and Hegel believed this leads one down a path of philosophical obscurity. For Hegel, the universal good is that of reason (or philosophy, as he often uses that term to describe the activity or application of reason). Even as a child of the Enlightenment, Hegel is not trying to suggest that “philosophy” is superior to “faith”, but he is frustrated with the efforts to relegate religious knowledge to a realm outside of rationality. Hegel’s aim is to explain how reason functions speculatively as part of a world-historical process. He believes that the world unfolds in a determinate way as legislated by universal reason, and thus individual interpretations of this reason (such as in religious consciousness) are individual effects of this larger Spirit. The problem with Kant and Fichte is that they begin their analysis backwards, on the subjective level, rather than considering how the subject and their cognitions are legislated by the universal. Schelling is superior in this regard because like Hegel, he also considers the universal as an epochal process.

\textsuperscript{162} Hegel, \textit{Jena Writings} (1802-1803), in Hodgson, 79.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 73.
Differences aside, two main themes emerge in Hegel’s reflections on Fichte and Schelling: a doctrine of difference ultimately governed by an underlying unity. Hegel’s desire to consider these concepts further helped to produce *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which offers a model of the process of absolute consciousness coming to know itself as Spirit [Geist]. This effort requires further engagement with the above issues of metaphysical dualism however conceived: reason and faith, as a Kantian distinction of noumena and phenomena, or spirit and body. Hegel suggests that these categories are unified in a fashion that is not present in Kantian dualist epistemology. As we will consider below, Hegel regards religion as a penultimate stage in this process, although it is not the final stage. In his own words, the *Phenomenology* can therefore be described as

>The way of the Soul which journeys through the series of its own configurations as though they were the stations appointed for it by its own nature, so that it may purify itself for the life of the Spirit, and achieve finally, through a completed experience of itself, the awareness of what it really is in itself.164

Because Spirit is legislated by universal Reason, the ways in which it manifests itself must be regarded as different permutations of the same universal origin. Hegel explains that in the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*. At the same time, it is to be observed that substantiality embraces the universal, or the *immediacy of knowledge* itself, as well as that which is *being* or immediacy for knowledge.165

He describes Spirit as a volatile force that seeks self-consciousness as both Subject and Substance, which for Hegel is not a matter of metaphysics but mediation. This inherent volatility of Spirit is described by Hegel as Desire: a desiring for self-consciousness in all forms possible to it. Inevitably, this is a consciousness not only of oneself, but also of

---

164 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49 [hereafter *Phenomenology*].
165 Ibid., 10.
what one is not. Yet for Hegel, identity is not an exclusive enterprise as it is founded in
a realization of the same universal consciousness of Spirit. Unlike the dichotomies of
noumena/phenomena in Kant’s model or spirit/body in theology, this is not a system of
dualism. Hegel’s cosmos is ultimately unified: through the concept of mediation, a
thing’s dialectical opposite is simply a different permutation of the same True. For
Hegel, the mediation of a self and its Other is the condition for the possibility of Spirit’s
complete self-awareness. Hegel explains that the more complete model of
consciousness looks not only at external objects, but identifies “what consciousness
knows in knowing itself” as part of that very process. 166 As a result, Hegel posits his
dialectical model of reasoning as a more thorough exposition of self-consciousness. He
explains that “consciousness of an ‘other’, of an object in general, is itself necessarily
self-consciousness, a reflectedness-into-self, consciousness of itself in its otherness.” 167 In
this regard, consciousness for Hegel “is Desire”, seeking to conquer the object that is
presented as its other so that it exists not as an object radically separate from its
consciousness, but is itself contained within it. Raymond Keith Williamson describes
this process as “part of the drive for self-integrity” in that it “reveals the self and makes
him conscious of himself.” 168 In consciousness, the subject renders the external object as
an object that is essentially for itself, and thus the new conceptualization of the object
has a greater sense of meaning, as it provides “the certainty of itself as a true certainty, a
certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective
manner.” 169 For Hegel, this establishes Reason as that which facilitates Spirit’s self-
awareness. In the recognition that one is self-aware in relation to its other, the self

166 Ibid., 103.
167 Ibid., 102.
105.
169 Hegel, Phenomenology, 109.
“raise[s] itself into universality” and is the process by which all self-consciousness is united.\textsuperscript{170}

The Phenomenology ultimately illustrates Hegel’s monism. His model of dialectical reasoning describes the radically Other as different manifestations of the same True Spirit. Even in the sense of identity, of saying “I am” someone and not another, puts oneself in recognition of the other to whom I am making this proclamation, thereby revealing a greater unity:

Hence otherness is for it in the form of a being, or as a distinct moment; but there is also for consciousness the unity of itself with this difference as a second distinct moment. With that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of consciousness, and the whole expanse of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time only as connected with the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself; and hence the sensuous world is for it an enduring existence which, however, is only appearance, or a difference which, in itself, is no difference.\textsuperscript{171}

The unity that is found in the recognition of the Other is best illustrated in his description of the master-slave (lord-bondsman) dialectic. For Hegel, the ontic meaning of such terms are fluid, always known only in-relation to their mediating categories. A “master” is such only with reference to a “slave,” and vice versa. With reference to Kant and other dualist systems, Hegel explains how these categories do not exist statically, but exist always already in relation to their opposite. He writes that “the lord relates himself mediately to the thing through the bondsman; the bondsman; \textit{qua} self-consciousness in general, also relates himself negatively to the thing, and takes away its independence.”\textsuperscript{172} In order for the master to truly be that, he must have a slave upon whom he can enforce his mastery; the master literally becomes dependent upon the slave. The master-slave model demonstrates for Hegel the underlying unity that

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 116.
ultimately undergirds two seemingly disparate forces. This speaks once again to Hegel’s ultimate principle of the unifying quality of absolute Spirit as the entity that governs all matters of existence.

2.1.2 Hegel and System

While the description of the master and slave can certainly be applied on the level of individual Spirit, it also illustrates Hegel’s larger cosmological view. In his Introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, (published posthumously in 1840) he explains that world history is the “theater” in which “Spirit is to be observed.”\(^\text{173}\) In the events of the world, Spirit is given a determinate form and concrete reality. Hegel suggests that all of the events that take place in the world are moving towards the realization of its final universal goal, or the “fulfillment of the concept of Spirit.”\(^\text{174}\) For Hegel, this final fulfillment is realized in the establishment of human freedom through democracy, and he believes that the “slaughter-bench” of history, although violent and bloody, is nonetheless moving towards this concrete goal. In this theory, Hegel suggests that all events, including those that appear the most disparate or irreconcilable to a greater good, are ultimately part of the universal Spirit.

This aspect of Hegel’s thought has been a point of criticism from several different perspectives. Feuerbach, for one, was concerned about the identity of individual human subjects being overtaken by the identity of the universal Spirit. In this, individuals are simply enveloped in the movement of history as mere drones. Hegel admits that his historical perspective is indeed a theodicy in which the most atrocious of acts can be viewed as ultimately fulfilling the goal of Spirit.\(^\text{175}\) For Hegel, all of the events taking place in the world can be encapsulated under the same power of Spirit’s

\(^{173}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 19.  
\(^{174}\) Ibid., 27.  
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 18
discursive action within history—and all can be explained as existing under the same provenance or “cunning”\textsuperscript{176} of Reason. He explains:

Reason rules the world, which means that it has ruled history as well. Everything else is subordinate in relation to this universal and substantial Reason, in and for itself; it serves that Reason as its means. Moreover, this Reason is immanent in historical existence, and fulfills itself in and through it. The union of the universal, existing in and for itself, with the individual subjective aspect, so that this union alone is the truth—all this is speculative, and it is handled in this general form in metaphysical logic.\textsuperscript{177}

Beyond his interpretation of the meaning of the progression of history, Hegel goes one step farther to suggest that he is channeling a larger component of the Western metaphysical view. Alfredo Ferrarin has described Hegel’s universalism as the result of his reinterpretation of Aristotle’s \textit{energia} as Spirit.\textsuperscript{178} Resulting from this, Hegel views subjectivity as not only the “cause of its being and movement, or self-actualizing form”\textsuperscript{179} but also that “its very being consists in the process of its own actualization.”\textsuperscript{180}

From a metaphysical standpoint, this is a very profound contention, pointing again to Hegel’s prevailing desire to reconcile the dualism pervasive in Western thought in general and particularly as a result of the intellectual culture after the Enlightenment. This is a system that is not characterized by ontological difference or otherness, as all components therein are described as different manifestations of the same True Substance. Ferrarin explains that Hegel seeks to reclaim Aristotle as a philosophy of unification [\textit{Vereinigungsphilosophie}] in response to the trends in metaphysical and epistemological dualism of his day. Ferrarin explains that Hegel’s interpretation demonstrates that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[176] Ibid., 35.
\item[177] Ibid., 28.
\item[179] Ibid., 10.
\item[180] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
the sensible is not opposed to reason; nature is not opposed to spirit. It is rather its immediate substance (Grundlage), the otherness of the Idea, out of which spirit emerges to attain to itself. It attains to itself in a process of actualization which is at the same time God’s, that is, the self-thinking Idea’s gradual appropriation of itself. In all this spirit does not have to reach an end outside itself, for its end is internal to it; if spirit is the movement of positing itself as its other and of negating its otherness, then, in Aristotelian terms, its activity is complete (teleia) even when it is a production, for production, like theory and practice, is for Hegel’s spirit self-production in reality.181

Ferrarin’s observations illustrate a number of points that are crucial not only for Hegel’s thought, but also for that of Luther and Feuerbach that we will consider in the later chapters. For Hegel, true ontological difference does not exist; all is contained within the movement of Spirit’s own self-actualizing subjectivity. This basic idea illustrates not only the theodical elements of Hegel’s system, but also the basic metaphysical concept of sameness. Hegel describes the subjectivity of both human beings and God or the Absolute as simply being different components within the same emerging Spirit. In one sense, this is the concept that appealed to the Hegelian left, as the notion of Spirit’s self-actualization and unfolding as the Same can be interpreted as the ground of possibility for social and political transformation: the presence of injustice in the present time, however divorced from the good that it may appear, can still be corrected.182 Of course, this same idea is also what this movement also criticized, as Hegel’s model runs the risk of devaluing the welfare of individual human beings for the sake of the universal.

Feuerbach was too a part of this “revolutionary” culture, but his description of subjectivity bore stark differences from Hegel in this regard. Feuerbach’s description of human sense-perceptibility and emotion clearly introduces the possibility of self-awareness that is not self-actualization, but made possible only in the face of

181 Ibid., 10-11.
182 As Ferrarin explains, “for Hegel the good is isomorphic to the true, and that both are true and good as defined by energia, that is as the movement by which each thing tries to adequate or realize its concept or standard, its telos,” 374.
confrontation by a radical Other. The theological differences between the two notwithstanding, both Feuerbach and Luther demonstrate a clear departure from Hegel in this capacity: both describe human self-awareness as made possible by the confrontation with the “not I,” as shown by one’s perception of God, human finitude, and/or the insurmountability of nature. For this reason, it is important not to overstate Feuerbach’s place in the literary canon solely as a Left Hegelian. Ferrarin also criticizes Hegel’s interpretation of Aristotle on the same point that Feuerbach begins his own criticism of Hegelian thought:

Because nowhere in the Lectures [on Aristotle] or elsewhere is there any mention of what Aristotle considered ‘the hardest problem,’ that of being and oneness in relation to the substance of things. There is no trace, in other words, of the Greek problem from Parmenides on…The conclusion is that the Aristotelian relation between dialectic and science is inverted by Hegel: instead of starting from the givenness of the realm of investigation and the attempt to understand its nature, for Hegel philosophy must show the different realms of being as well as the particular sciences dealing with them as negative and finite moments of a totality, as limited nodes of one absolute truth, that of thought.183

Here Ferrarin takes up an issue that will also be very important for Feuerbach. Both believe that Hegel’s speculative model does not adequately consider the basic problem of ontological difference when conceiving the multiplicity of existence in relation to a supreme unifying principle.184 Feuerbach believed that it was precisely the prioritization of “absolute truth” over the givenness of the natural and empirical world exercised in both theology and Hegelianism that was responsible for leading Western thought into obscurantism. The link between Aristotle and Hegel will continue to be relevant not only as we continue to flesh out the essential components of Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel, but again in the discussion of Luther.

183 Ibid., 377.
184 This is a similar line of thought made famous by Heidegger’s discussion of the “Being of beings” in Being and Time, tr. Joan Stambaugh, (New York, SUNY Press, 1996).
2.2 Religion as Representation

In issues of religion, the analysis of Spirit goes beyond the individual subjective level and moves into the realm of historical progress at large. Religious consciousness is a unique moment in this process because it is concerned with an absolute self-knowing Spirit viewed beyond the development of the mere human Spirit. The problem of religious dualism is again at play: how does the human self-consciousness cognize the experience of the divine, pure Spirit? Hegel offers his explanation of the metaphysical hierarchy that is present in the *Phenomenology*. He explains that religious consciousness is expressed only symbolically, in the forms of pictures:

> So far as Spirit in religion *pictures* itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its picture-thinking. But, in this picture-thinking, reality does not receive its perfect due, viz. to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence.\(^{185}\)

This passage illustrates Hegel’s view that religious ideas and symbols are *pictures* or representations [*Vorstellungen*] of Spirit, but not Spirit itself. These pictures are subject to a host of interpretations and cultural influences and as a result cannot be viewed as pure Spirit themselves. However, the very presence of religious images is quite significant: the actual religious symbol is less important than the fact that a religious symbol exists at all. *That* humans use religious symbols at all to represent higher truths—regardless of the diversity of such images and ideas—is demonstration of Spirit representing itself. Hegel describes religion, and particularly Christianity, as itself revelatory [*offenbar*] and self-disclosing of the meaning of Spirit.\(^{186}\) With reference to

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 412.

\(^{186}\) Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 453. As Hodgson notes, Miller translates *Die offenbare Religion* as the “revealed” religion instead of “revelatory” religion, which conflates the important distinction Hegel made between religion as itself “revelatory” [*offenbar*] (as a self-animating, manifesting process) and “revealed” [*geoffenbart*] religion, which is the static content of religion given in past events or symbols. See Hodgson 116, n. 1.
absolute Spirit, religion is indeed a self-revealing vehicle of Spirit as it is a place where matters ultimate are given expression and meaning within human culture.

Nonetheless, the full meaning of Spirit cannot be reduced to the parameters set by cultural influences and/or religious authorities. Hegel used the term “positive religion” to define religion as explained by rational theology, religious communities, and/or church doctrine.\textsuperscript{187} Theologians and other church authorities posit ideas about the meaning of God or religious morality, but this is not Spirit itself. These are only assertions about, or pictures of Spirit. In Hegel’s view, Spirit is found in religion through an active process of Spirit thinking or revealing itself—and conversely, in the process of human beings thinking about Spirit in the context of religious activity—not how it is posited in static church doctrine. He explains:

Human reason, human spiritual consciousness or consciousness of its own essence, is reason as such \([\text{Vernunft überhaupt}]\), is the divine within humanity. Spirit, insofar as it is called divine spirit, is not a spirit beyond the stars of beyond the world; for God is present, is omnipresent, and strictly as spirit is God present in spirit. God is a living God who is effective, active, and present in spirit. Religion is a begetting of the divine spirit, not an invention of human beings but an effect of the divine at work, of the divine productive process within humanity.\textsuperscript{188}

For Hegel, religious picture-thinking does not refer specifically to the expression of the believer, or one’s individual means of thinking about religious consciousness. Instead, it indicates the presence of the Spirit that supersedes the individual subject. The fact that human beings ask religious questions, or tend toward religious inquiry, it itself a picture of the divine productive process (of Spirit) working in humanity. It is important to recognize the propensity human beings have towards considering these matters ultimate as itself the most essential, and not necessarily the revealed or positive content


\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 181.
of the religious traditions themselves. Hegel writes “when we ask in this way what God is, what the expression ‘God’ means, we want the thought; it is the thought that is supposed to be delivered up to us—the representation we no doubt have”. In Hegel’s view, the mere fact that human beings are thinking beings with consciousness of a higher power and higher order of things is much more significant than the particular representation of who or what that God may be, or the process by which they are made aware of this God.

Religious consciousness is therefore a very important stage in the process of Spirit coming to know itself fully in the world, but it is not the final moment. In the Lectures, Hegel’s definition of religion is a “cognitive” activity insofar as it “is the activity of reason and the activity of conceptualization and thought.” The prevailing feature of religious reflection is not personal faith, identity, or feelings of affectivity, but thinking and conceptualization—insofar as one is thinking or representing absolute Spirit. This postures again to his description of religion as “revelatory” in the Phenomenology, as an individual’s religious reflection is itself engaging in a larger process of Spirit thinking itself. The teleological process of Reason ordaining the events of history as the “cunning” of reason in history is mirrored in the teleological process of Spirit thinking itself as a function of religious consciousness. Religion is the penultimate example of Spirit representing itself to human consciousness as part of this larger scheme, but it is not the only example. Hegel also discusses the arts, sciences, and philosophy as fulfilling similar roles as different moments taking place in the larger process of Spirit coming to know itself. Hegel explains that human beings “are truly human through consciousness—by virtue of the fact that they think and by virtue of the fact that they are spirit.” He explains that our basic capacities of thought and self-

---

189 Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (1824), in Hodgson, 175.
190 Ibid., 185.
191 Ibid., 173
consciousness are what give rise to religion, the arts and sciences. For Hegel, the human creative drive that gives rise to these pursuits is built from the speculative energy of Spirit; in doing these things we are participating in a source greater than ourselves. In religious consciousness, for example, we are picturing and representing Spirit—or conversely, Spirit represents itself through the picture of religion. The activity of thinking in religious consciousness is evidence of the thinking Spirit working in us.

For this reason, Hegel seeks to explain religious consciousness in conjunction with the greater speculative concept. This is another moment in the unfolding of the dialectic of Spirit within history and is explained in a paradigm of thinking and reason. As an individual, one’s personal sense of God should be regarded as a moment in this larger speculative process, and religion is therefore considered alongside categories of reason and cognition. One’s religious consciousness is not simply about an individual’s personal experience with God, but about the larger representation of Spirit that is depicted in such an experience. Hegel is explicit in his assertion that discussions of religious consciousness must be free from contamination by subjectivism. For this reason he condemns Schleiermacher’s model of religious feeling in a number of passages, stating that “if religion in man is based only on feeling, then... the dog would then be the best Christian.” ¹⁹² Hegel sees in Schleiermacher the potential for religion’s lapse back to obscurity, which is why the description religious experience in the context of rational categories or philosophy is the best way to maintain its integrity. He writes:

For the privation to which philosophy has sunk shows itself no less as a lack of objective content. Philosophy is the science of thinking reason, while religious faith is the consciousness of and the absolute taking-as-true of the reason provided for representational thinking; and the material for philosophical science has become as impoverished as for faith.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Hegel’s Forward to Hinrichs’ *Die Religion* (1822), in Hodgson, 166.
¹⁹³ Ibid. in Hodgson, 161.
Hegel suggests that philosophy and religion need each other: rational, philosophical categories provide a ground and substantiation to religious faith, whereas a religious attitude endows philosophy with a sense of the Absolute. Religion elevates philosophy to an awareness of its greater purpose, or a move beyond the subjective and particular into the universal. Schleiermacher’s “theology of feeling” is inadequate because it remains at the level of only the individual subject, emphasizing feelings of religious interiority. This immediate knowledge of God and self is significant only as a temporary stage before the more complete forms of religious consciousness in representation and eventually, reason or cognition. Hegel fears that Schleiermacher’s model moves thought away from universal consciousness and the causality behind world events at large, which is ultimately that with which absolute thinking should concern itself. In his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (1824) he explains:

> The spirit that makes itself an object gives itself essentially the shape of a representation, of something given, of something appearing to the other spirit for which it is...Similarly, the definition of religion—according to which it is cognitive, is the activity of reason or the activity of conceptualization and thought—lies within religion itself; this cognitive attitude toward God falls within religion itself, just as feeling does...[by contrast], feeling is the subjective aspect, what pertains to me as this single individual.¹⁹⁴

It is clear that Hegel values religious thought as representation and conceptualization only as they are “tangible” manifestations of universal Spirit. Religious consciousness, therefore, needs the counsel of rational modes of expression and this is precisely what Hegel argues is lacking in Schleiermacher. Beyond the level of individual religious experience, the existence of rational modes of expression is also at play in the epochal development of absolute thought. Perhaps as a function of his work’s own epochal development, Hegel describes this process slightly differently throughout his work but

¹⁹⁴ Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, in Hodgson, 185.
the basic structure exists throughout. In the *Phenomenology*, the complete attainment of Spirit within history is only attained in the final stage of the dialectic, Philosophy, and Hegel describes this moment as the realization of “Absolute Knowledge.” In the *Encyclopedia*, the successor to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes the media of art, religion, and philosophy as being different representations of the same speculative concept.\(^{195}\) And in his later work focusing explicitly on religion, the *Lectures*, Hegel considers religion’s unique characteristics as a picture of Spirit, which relates specifically to how religion and religious consciousness are informed by categories of reason and speculative thought. In one lecture, he considers how positive religion relates to philosophy and philosophy of religion by asking the question, “When we ask in this way what God is, what the expression ‘God’ means, we want the thought; it is the thought that is supposed to be delivered up to us—the representation we no doubt have.”\(^{196}\) To avoid the pitfall of Schleiermacher, he ties this individual feeling of religious awareness to the greater speculative concept, and thus the universal rationality. Religious consciousness is therefore a process that takes place in stages: the subject’s individual feeling or sense of religion will ultimately be overridden by the consciousness of the absolute, which for Hegel is explained through categories of reason. He writes:

> Religion is (1) conceived as result, but (2) as a result which at the same time annuls itself as result, and that (3) it is the content itself which passes over in itself and through itself to posit itself as result. That is objective necessity, and not a mere subjective process. It is not we who set the necessity in movement; on the contrary, it is the act of content itself, or, the object may be said to produce itself.\(^{197}\)

\(^{195}\) *Ibid.*, 137.

\(^{196}\) *Ibid.*, 175.

Hegel views the religious standpoint as a kind of mechanism that makes one aware of the absolute process of Spirit. The subject’s individual conception of religion eventually “annuls itself” as it opens up awareness of the universal process taking place, which is for Hegel a process of objective and not subjective necessity. Schleiermacher and others make a grave mistake when they relate the essential meaning of religious consciousness with human subjectivity. In its relationship to rational and objective truth, religion is literally for Hegel an opportunity of “rising above” the constraints of human identity: “religion is the consciousness of what is in and for itself true, in contrast to sensuous, finite truth, and to sense perceptions.” Hegel’s dichotomy of infinite, objective truth as defined by reason, versus finite, subjective truth as perceived through human senses, is a pivotal point for not only his criticism of Kant, Fichte, and Schleiermacher, but it will also be the main point of divergence with Feuerbach and Luther, as I will consider in a moment.

In this brief summary of Hegel’s work, a number of salient characteristics emerge: his effort to craft a universal and rational system of thought working vis-à-vis material history, his understanding of Spirit as the animus of this process, and individual perceptions of the subject as representations of this objective truth. In this capacity, the human being participates in the universal only by means of objective and not subjective truth. In his exposition of world history, Spirit broadly defined, or in his specific discussions of religion, Hegel is very clear in his emphasis of the universal over the particular. In this model, the individual is not significant as a personal, subjective being, but as a being who is a site of manifestation of universal Spirit. For this reason, the interpretation of the individual subject’s religious consciousness must be properly tempered. In Hegel’s view, authors like Schleiermacher committed a misstep in not relating the subjective religious consciousness to the universal. He argues that such

\[198\] Ibid., 106, [emphasis mine].
authors were incorrect in not relating religious consciousness to cognitive and rational
categories. Hegel believed that we could escape the problem of Schleiermacher’s
“canine piety” only if such feelings of religious awareness were automatically applied
to universal Spirit.

To a certain extent this is a rather curious move on Hegel’s part: after all of his
efforts to reconcile reason and faith, is he not still perpetuating the divide? While Hegel
indisputably holds religion in a very high regard, he nonetheless equates religion to a
kind of “picture-thinking” that must be cognized in the categories of reason, and
similarly, the initial constraints of the dualist Kantian epistemology remain essentially
intact. In spite of Hegel’s efforts to posit a new metaphysical system, the traditional
effect of prioritizing infinite over finite, or Spirit over matter, remains intact. From the
standpoint of individual human selfhood, this perspective is particularly troubling, as a
subject is not important in one’s own particularity, but as a vessel for objective truth.
These issues were at the forefront of Feuerbach’s mind when he began his critique of
Hegel’s model. Feuerbach sought to criticize the ideas central to Hegel’s model of Spirit
as the controlling force of history, namely the privileging of the rational and universal
over the individual and sensuous means of awareness. Feuerbach takes issue with this
because the former categories in particular because they effectively deny the value of
individual experience and feeling.

2.3 Feuerbach’s Criticism of the Hegelian System

With the above issues in mind I will consider Feuerbach’s relationship to Hegel
more explicitly. As noted in the introduction, Feuerbach’s early studies in philosophy
were indeed occupied by Hegelianism and speculative thought. With the completion of
his doctoral dissertation in 1828, he sent it directly to Hegel along with a personal
In this letter, however, Feuerbach did suggest that while his work “lives and has being in the speculative spirit,” he also suggested that speculative thought (such as Hegel’s) needed to incorporate the principle of “sensuousness” [Sinnlichkeit] in order to view the Idea [Begriff] as part of the material subject, to descend from “the heaven of its colorless purity” into the particular world of the sensuously perceived subject. Feuerbach made the link between these speculative philosophical concepts and the discussion of salvation and personal immortality in Christianity. He found it incredulous that Christians viewed their salvation and the life of Jesus from only a supernatural perspective. This point of view caused them to ignore the importance of the world in which they currently lived, or even how that world could actually play a role in the process of redemption. As a result, in his letter to Hegel he asserts that Spirit and/or Christianity must be conceived in relationship to the lived existence of human beings, which specifically entails a closer consideration of naturalist-existentialist concerns. In spite of its emphasis on the incarnation of God, Feuerbach believed that the Christian tradition had lost its sense of the natural world and was essentially dishonest with itself. Feuerbach believed this tie to nature is an important part of how human beings view themselves and their relationship with others in the community. As Massey explains, Feuerbach uses the concept of “Nature” [Wesen] to illustrate a “reality opposite to self.”

200 Feuerbach in Hanfi’s “Introduction,” in Fiery Brook, 9.
201 Feuerbach, Briefwechsel und Nachlass, Œ. “Ja inbegriffen, geheimnissvoll aufgenommen in die Einheit des göttlichen Wesens liegt sie da, so dass nur die Person (nicht die Natur, die Welt, der Geist,) ihre der Erlösungfeiert, welche eben ihre Erkenntnis wäre. Die Vernunft ist daher im Christenthum wohl noch nicht erlöst.
It is not difficult to discern that the issues Feuerbach raises in this letter to Hegel will continue to occupy Feuerbach as he begins his career. In his first publication, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), Feuerbach considered how in the emphasis on personal immortality, the fabric of the universal community is degraded. In what is certainly a precursor to his concerns over “anti-naturalism” described in *Christianity*, Feuerbach asserts that religious consciousness should emphasize life in the human community and not one’s personal quest for the great beyond. In *Thoughts on Death*, Feuerbach suggested that during the modern Christian era a new view on personal immortality had emerged that was unlike previous times in history. Feuerbach suggests that the defining features of the present view on immortality is the “separation of potentiality from actuality; when these are one, the modern belief disappears.” In his view, this “separation” causes an obsession with the reward of personal immortality, essentially putting one at odds with others competing for the same reward. Feuerbach believed that the pietists of his era were particularly responsible in their emphasis on the individual nature of religious experience. Instead of the church or community, Feuerbach asserts that the pietists emphasized personal experience and interiority and therefore established a type of religious subjectivism. In the

emphasis takes the posture [Stellung] of both Spirit and thoughtlessness [Gedankenlos] in its denigration of nature.

---

\(^{203}\) Massey, 370. I think one could question the translation of [Wesen] as “nature” here, as obviously this term is more often translated as “essence” with reference to Feuerbach (i.e., *Das Wesen des Christenthums*). In these immediately preceding passages I have included a number of Feuerbach’s references to *Natur*. That being said, I think Massey’s point is well taken, as *Wesen* (perhaps better understood as “being”) is clearly an antithesis to the supra-being of *Geist*. As noted, Feuerbach himself uses many separate terms to connote the same basic ideas.

\(^{204}\) Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, tr. James A. Massey, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). [Hereafter *Thoughts on Death*]. As the translator notes, Feuerbach originally published this book anonymously for fear of repercussion of denying the value of the religious afterlife. Once his identity was revealed, the backlash is perceived as largely responsible for his never receiving a full professorship in Germany (ix).


\(^{206}\) Massey, 372.
veneration of Jesus, Feuerbach believed that adherents developed a very strange understanding of their self-identity as human beings. He writes:

The focal point of the Protestant believer was Christ, the God-man, or the essence of humanity unified with the essence of God in the shape and form of Christ. Thus already the focal point of Protestantism was the person, but not yet the concept of the person as person, without which each person is included without distinction; it was the person only as the single, world-historical person of Christ. In certain sects within Protestantism, such as those of the pietists, this veneration of the person of Christ was pressed to such extremes that even the sensuous individuality of Christ became an object of veneration; in turn, the veneration of his individuality was extended to the veneration of his corpse.\textsuperscript{207}

Feuerbach suggests that the isolation of Jesus as the salvific figure in turn shaped the way the religious person perceived oneself and one’s relationship to God. Jesus was not viewed as a regular person existing within community, but a unique person who held the secret for redemption. As a result, Feuerbach argues that believers did not think of Jesus as providing example of how they should live as human beings in society, but how they could achieve immortality and redemption beyond humanity. That being said, Jesus was nonetheless the Son of God and therefore subject to his own mortality. Feuerbach believed that this created a strange fascination with the particular characteristics of his embodiment. To illustrate, Feuerbach offers a quote from an anonymous pietist: “Those who wish to be and to remain blessed must be kissed by the pale, dead, icy lips of Jesus, must smell the dead corpse of the Savior, and must be penetrated with the breath of his grave.”\textsuperscript{208}

To Feuerbach, such a statement reveals its logical inconsistency: while its ultimate point of reference is a supernatural one in the beatitude of Jesus, the means to salvation is one’s recognition of the inherently natural traits of Jesus’ mortal body. Ultimately this has two major pitfalls: it gives one a distorted view of their human

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 10. Note Feuerbach’s use of the term “sensuous” [\textit{sinnlich}].
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
identity and also creates a sense of separation in society. If my focus is only on the supernatural Jesus as savior, Feuerbach believes, then I will not think about my own identity as a human being nor will I care about yours. Massey explains why this is such an issue for Feuerbach:

Subjectivism sees nothing outside it but other single subjectivities or single realities; nature is seen as a collection of individual things, history as a collection of individual opinions...The real world becomes empty for it, because it cannot support the self’s ideals, and the self gains the experience of its own emptiness...Over the gaps between the world as it is and the world as drained of its reality by the subject, it builds an imaginary bridge to an imaginary, transcendent attainment of its ideals. The belief in immortality, then, for Feuerbach is the central result of a mistaken position concerning the relationship between individual existence and its environment.  

The most damaging aspect of the belief in personal immortality in Feuerbach’s view was not its ontological presuppositions, but the impact it had on the person’s self-consciousness. If the most important thing I can achieve in my life is to be saved from it by a supernatural figure, this undoubtedly affects my view of my human self and society. Again, this is where the significance of naturalism is crucial for Feuerbach: when self-consciousness is navigated by our natural forms of awareness, we have a broader and more accurate view of our existential situation. For Feuerbach, “to be self-conscious means to be a nature and to be at once beyond nature.” While not reducible to our immediate and sense-perceived reality, our sense of self is nonetheless animated by these natural forms of awareness. Human beings should not forget who we are—natural, sensuous beings also endowed with sense of what is possible beyond what is immediately given. Even so, in Feuerbach’s view we cannot violate the basic tenets of naturalism, or seek to transcend the core features of our identity.

---

209 Massey, 372.
210 Massey, 373.
211 See Feuerbach’s comparison between the “brutes” and human self-consciousness in Christianity, especially p. 5.
Moving forward, Feuerbach eventually formed a more comprehensive criticism of Hegel’s work in his essay, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy” (1838). It was in this essay that Feuerbach first asserted that two of the most salient features of Hegel’s work, its speculative and systematic nature, were precisely what required revision. It is also in this essay that Feuerbach began to develop the ideas that formed the foundation of Christianity three years later. Feuerbach believed that the manner in which Hegel incorporates these ideas into his work is against nature. Hegel’s tendency toward system overlooked the value of the natural being in its materiality and existential identity. Feuerbach argued that Hegel reduces the “stages of development as independent entities only to a historical meaning; although living, they continue to exist as nothing more than shadows or moments, nothing more than homeopathic drops on the level of the absolute.” Feuerbach’s contention with Hegel is not the notion of system in itself, but the fact that it is a non-sensuously perceived system that prioritizes an ephemeral Being over individual beings. Following from this, Feuerbach believes that an implicit hierarchy results with the non-material Spirit ranking higher than its material and embodied counterparts: “the form of both Hegel’s conception and method is that of exclusive time alone, not that of tolerant space: his system knows only subordination and succession; coordination and coexistence are unknown to it.” The actual existence of persons, things, animals, and the like is not itself important, but the greater meaning that is signified by their existence as such.

Feuerbach views this problem of the subordination of the material and finite as a flaw not only in Hegel’s philosophy, but in modern philosophy of the West. Feuerbach explains the drive towards system by means of a formal logic as an ultimately unintelligible task: priority is given to a supersensible realm, even though human and

---

212 Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy (1838),” in Fiery Brook, 55.
213 Ibid., 54.
sensuously-perceived subjects must ultimately make assertions about concepts that supersede their own reality. Feuerbach writes:

Logical being is only an indulgence, a condescension on the part of the Idea, and, consequently, already that which it must prove to be. This means that I enter the Logic as well as intellectual perception only through a violent act, through a transcendent act, or through an immediate break with real perception. The Hegelian philosophy is therefore open to the same accusation as the whole of modern philosophy from Descartes and Spinoza onward—the accusation of an unmediated break with sensuous perception and of philosophy’s immediate taking itself for granted.\footnote{Ibid., 76.}

The “violence” he describes is here only metaphorical as it pertains to philosophical paradigms, but this idea is certainly also present in \textit{Essence} in his discussion of religious fanaticism. Feuerbach suggests there that the desire to harm another human being in the name of God is the product of this same ontological hierarchy.\footnote{This issue is of primary concern in \textit{Christianity}, chapter twenty-six, “The Contradiction of Faith and Love.” This idea will be flushed out in greater detail in the next chapter.} From both metaphysical and ethical perspectives, Feuerbach argues that modern philosophy will only endure when it takes natural phenomena and its empirical data seriously. Modern Western philosophy’s effort to assign logical priority to an ideal or noumenal realm that exists beyond human thought and perception is not only groundless, but potentially harmful. For Feuerbach, what is real is what is perceived by human consciousness: “the reality of sensuous and particular being is the truth that carries the seal of our blood...Enough of words, come down to real things! Show me what you are talking about!”\footnote{Ibid., 77.} Feuerbach boldly suggests here that natural, non-speculative methods of investigation carry an implicit moral compass. When our assertions are based in experience and about real people perceiving real things, he contends that they inherently bring a sense of authenticity and responsibility that is not present in speculative justification about a sense of Being outside of human existence.

\footnote{Ibid., 76.}
For Feuerbach, the speculative model can be hijacked in two different ways: in *Christianity*, he looks at how the prioritization of God over man can cause human beings to devalue themselves and others. In this essay on Hegel, he also suggests that the obscurantism of the speculative model can take the other route of an extreme anthropocentrism. In this, he reserves special criticism for the period of German idealism because of the manner in which it ascribes the Ideal as ultimately serving human ends. While idealism may initially appear to place a similar priority on human consciousness as does Feuerbach, he explains that the idealist philosopher sees life and reason in nature also, but he means by them his own life and reason. What he sees in nature is what he puts into it...nature is objectified ego, or spirit looking at itself as its own internalization...The idealist said to nature [Natur]: ‘you are my alter ego,’ while he emphasized only the ego so that what he actually meant was: ‘you are an outflow, a reflected image of myself, but nothing particular just by yourself.’

Feuerbach’s mentioning of “nature” in this passage furthers the notion of the “moral compass” I mentioned a moment ago. Here he takes issue with the idealist who tries to explain the meaning of nature as simply an extension of the ego. It is clear that Feuerbach identifies “nature” as existing separately from the ego and its intentions, and not a mere “outflow” of the self. For Feuerbach, the scope of self-consciousness is limited by nature and not the other way around. Because the idealist philosopher has confused this fact, Feuerbach describes him as having a rather unfounded smugness. With some disdain, Feuerbach notes that for this type of philosopher, the meaning of “life and reason” is simply “his own life and reason.” The recognition of nature—and by extension, natural forms of awareness—demonstrates for Feuerbach the limitations of the ego.

---

218 Ibid., 80. In this section, Feuerbach imagines a dialogue between the “idealist” (certainly Kant and Fichte, but definitely Hegel) and the “philosopher of nature” (Schelling, for whom Feuerbach clearly has respect but does not think did enough to mitigate the philosophical problems of Fichte et. al); “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie,” *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 2, 188.
Similarly, when Hegel describes Spirit as a teleological force that changes the events of the world in a way that will ultimately ensure human freedom, he suggests that the cosmos itself is designed in order to produce ends that will benefit human beings. The theodicy that is implicit in Hegel’s historical model ascribes a level of human intentionality that Feuerbach does not believe is logically viable. Moreover, it establishes a relationship between man and nature that is both ethically troublesome and also contrary to experience, as if all that happens in world and exists in the world is ultimately there in order to achieve results for human want. Beyond the problematic implication that the world is simply at the disposal of human beings, countless natural disasters and examples of violence throughout history have shown that this is not the case. Following this, Feuerbach explains that it is necessary to now “release nature from the bondage to which the idealist philosopher had subjected it by chaining to it his own ego.”

As an alternative to both of these pitfalls, Feuerbach proposes his own “philosophy of nature” that utilizes a “genetico-critical method.” He suggests that this method utilizes the best feature of idealism, namely the “unity of the subjective and objective,” but does so by first looking at the particular reality of the sensuously-perceived subject. Rather than suggesting that an organic objective unity exists outside of the particular subject, Feuerbach suggests that it is only through the natural characteristics of the individual being, i.e., what is sensuously perceived through the senses and feeling, that can give human beings any sense of the universal. This is different than Fichte, who posited the autonomous ego as controlling the will of nature, as well as Hegel, who believed that the universal Spirit controlled the workings of the individual ego. Feuerbach suggested that through the senses, human beings learn the features of their own particular identity and uniqueness, but they also gain a greater

---

219 As does the existence of the Chicago Cubs.
220 Ibid.
awareness of what supersedes them in the natural world. It is vital in Feuerbach’s view that logical assertions are made not only the basis of thought (as this is defined only by the individual ego) or speculation (as this refers to a supersensory, non-human realm), but as a result of what the human being can observe as a human being and then explain with reference to material existence. He explains:

The communicating of thoughts is not material or real communication. For example, a push, a sound that shocks my ears, or light is real communication. I am only passively receptive to that which is material; but I become aware of that which is mental only through myself, through self-activity. For this very reason, what the person demonstrating communicates is not the subject matter itself, but only the medium.221

In this example, Feuerbach describes the instance of hearing a loud and unexpected noise. It is startling and clearly much more “real” than if I just imagine an action like that taking place in my mind: in the thought, I am ultimately in control—a noise that I imagine in my mind is obviously not going to surprise me. But if I hear a loud noise in reality, it hurts my ears and I jump in that moment of surprise; I do this because the source of the noise is an external source to which I am rendered passive. Feuerbach identifies this moment of passivity as something that is both radically personal (I hear the noise, it is happening to me) but also indicative of the way in which my own senses perceive something that is out of my control. When something occurs in the material world and is not simply imagined in my head, it demonstrates its own autonomy, which for Feuerbach is its “real” existence. He finds an implicit danger in all speculative models of thought because they claim their knowledge through methods other than the sensuous and therefore run the inherent risk of being defined by human intentionality. Feuerbach believed that his method, although based in the human faculty of sense perception, was ultimately more reliable because the sensuous could not be controlled in the same manner that the cognitive could. Where speculative

221 Ibid., 66.
reason had the potential to run wild because it could be anything the human mind could fathom to be possible or hope to be true, the sense-perceived only pertained to phenomena given in nature to the human senses. As Feuerbach will continue to point out, the senses have the interesting capacity to keep any delusions of grandeur on the part of the ego in check.

Insofar as Hegel’s discussion of Spirit is determined by the cognitive powers of speculative reason, Feuerbach ultimately denounces Hegelianism as a kind of “rational mysticism” that lacks determinate ground.\(^{222}\) Hegel’s emphasis on cognition and not sensuousness as primary ground is precisely what renders his project untenable in the end. Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel in this essay also illustrates an important component of his thought that is often overlooked. In *Christianity*, Feuerbach criticizes the speculative project with reference to ethical concerns, arguing that the view of God as a transcendent being denigrates the worth of the human self and puts one at odds with other human beings in the world. In the above essay on Hegel (clearly a prolegomenon to the later work) Feuerbach demonstrates his criticism of speculative thought on more epistemological grounds by suggesting that Hegel’s Spirit ultimately renders itself unintelligible. That being said, both of these works highlight the same basic idea: deliberations about the nature of human selfhood must take the human being’s existential reality seriously if they are to maintain both ethical and epistemological cohesion. His assertion that knowledge is based in natural and material methods of investigation, and not speculation, is something that made him very popular with thinkers like Marx. However, this essay on Hegel demonstrates that unlike Marx, Feuerbach’s criticism of religion and the Christian tradition in particular is not the product of a general mistrust of religious consciousness, but a component of his

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 86.
greater philosophical project and continued effort to consider the importance of religious consciousness to human self-identity.

Feuerbach’s concerns with both Hegelianism and Christianity indicate his criticism of Western thought in general as one that seeks to reconcile the problem of ontological difference through a narrative of teleological purpose or ultimate unity. As Ferrarin suggested, the problem that has plagued the West since ancient Greece of how beings are part of ultimate Being is usually reconciled in theological or metaphysical thought through a doctrine of unified system. Feuerbach looked at the cunning of Hegel’s Reason and the providence of the Christian God in particular and believed that both were flawed in their suggestions that the work and life of the human being is less important than the interests of a larger omnipotent source. Feuerbach did not believe that this account was true to human experience in empirical or epistemological senses of the word, nor did he find it helpful from a humanistic perspective.

As I will consider in the pages to come, Feuerbach believed human self-consciousness was not one’s awareness of a larger system into which one assimilates, but the awareness of a confrontation with a radical Other, or the “not-I,” to borrow a phrase from Harvey. Human beings learn of the “not-I” through numerous experiences—some of which are based in the external world and some are part of personal experience. Feuerbach describes self-consciousness as a very subtle but complex process made possible by the human being’s natural forms of awareness. In spite of the fact that along with German idealism, Feuerbach’s system also emphasizes consciousness as primary, the type of “system” which follows from this is very unlike the “ego-centric” system of Hegel and German idealism. For this reason, I suggest that there was another figure in Feuerbach’s library who was not only foundational to his project, but also calls into question the traditional view of Feuerbach as being synonymous with atheism. We will now turn to Feuerbach’s early work in order to begin to excavate this relationship to Luther directly.
Building from Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel in the previous chapter, in this section I will consider the model of religious subjectivity illustrated by his most famous work, *The Essence of Christianity*. While this is indeed a well recognized work in the study of religion, its most fundamental insights have been overlooked. The common interpretation of the projection theory in Christianity emphasizes only the psychological elements of the projection theory, thereby considering Feuerbach only as part of a trajectory in religious criticism that leads to Freud. This interpretation has a number of fallacies: it suggests that Feuerbach’s view of religion is one of total condemnation, it misinterprets Feuerbach’s view of human selfhood, and it also ignores the place of this work in the context of Feuerbach’s larger project. Feuerbach’s rejection of Hegelianism and Christianity is not due to a rejection of their ontological presuppositions *per se*, but their methodologies. The “psychological” reading of *Christianity* does not begin to engage with the larger scope of Feuerbach’s work not only in this book, but the other works in his corpus. Most importantly, this narrow reading of Feuerbach obscures the fact that Feuerbach was deeply engaged with theological texts, in spite of his issues with them.

Feuerbach’s approach to religion is deeply ambivalent: even though his posture is ultimately one of criticism, he also believes that religion is an undeniable aspect of the human condition. His criticism of Hegel and the Christian tradition results specifically from his condemnation of speculative thought, and his criticism of speculation is due to his view that both subjugate the natural and particular for favor of an ideal universal reality. He believes that this is both philosophically irresponsible and damaging to human selfhood. Feuerbach’s primary concern is not with the existence of the transcendent itself—in fact, his philosophical method prevents him from even
considering religion from that perspective—but rather with the manner in which a
certain type of religious belief has the potential to denigrate the value of human beings
and the natural world. Feuerbach states quite explicitly in Christianity that he is not
interested in an ontological discussion about God’s existence or even the rightness or
wrongness of such a belief. It is only if such a belief undermines the value of the human
species and its natural categories that Feuerbach takes issue. In this section I will
consider the implications of this subtle but essential distinction.

3.1 The Significance of Feuerbach’s Method in Christianity

Feuerbach’s primary objective in Christianity is clear: he wishes to reject the
certainty of a speculative ideal that exists outside of human nature, and he believes
Hegelianism and Christianity are the two quintessential examples of this error. On the
second and third pages of the preface, he explains that, “I attach myself, in direct
opposition to the Hegelian philosophy, only to realism, to materialism in the sense
above indicated” and that this is in direct opposition to the “ego of Kant and Fichte,”
the “Absolute Identity of Schelling” and the “Absolute Mind of Hegel” in the latter’s
emphasis on what is the “highest degree positive and real.” Feuerbach explains that
the problem with all of these authors is that they begin with thought and speculation
rather than what is given to thought through material means:

It [Feuerbach’s preferred method] generates thought from the opposite of thought,
from Matter, from existence, from the senses; it has relation to its object first
through the senses, i.e., passively, before defining it in thought.

As discussed in his criticism of Hegel, Feuerbach believes that data that is posited by
speculative thought and theory, and not empirical and material observation, lacks

---

223 Preface to Christianity, xxxiv-xxxv. This preface was written for the second edition in 1843, and in
response to some critics who believed that Feuerbach did not do enough to surpass Hegelian thinking.
224 Ibid., xxxv.
determinate ground. In my mind, I can posit the existence of almost anything; therefore from my perspective as a human being and in order to keep my speculative mind in check I must rely on my natural and sense-derived forms of awareness. Feuerbach contends that only data that is observed in the physical world and by virtue of the human senses can be determined from the human being’s perspective as being “real.” Because of this, Feuerbach explains that he is a “natural philosopher” who is not interested in conceptual or abstract theories of meaning, but in what is objectively determined through the senses and existing in matter. Feuerbach believes the Christian tradition posits the existence of an other-worldly God. Feuerbach believes that this is an epistemological leap that is not valid and he seeks to clarify the meaning of this tradition on its own terms. He explains that he will let the true meaning of religion speak for itself by considering the effect of religion from the method of natural, sense-derived observation. The emphasis on the transcendent, or “superhuman” elements of the Christian tradition has unfortunate “anti-human” and “anti-natural” consequences. Feuerbach indeed acknowledges that his is a “negative and destructive” project—but it is only so in terms of these “unnatural” and supernatural ideas. By privileging supernatural spirit, the natural human existence is necessarily lower and depraved: “To enrich God, man must become poor; so that God may be all, man must be nothing.” In this emphasis on the transcendent God and the pervasiveness of human sin, Feuerbach believes that Christianity has become entrenched in a web of contradiction, relying only on speculative assertions and undermining natural forms of human consciousness—and he finds this as particularly tragic when one considers the very real existence of Jesus of

---

225 Ibid., xxxv.
226 Ibid., xxxvi.
227 Ibid., xxxv.
228 Ibid., 26.
Nazareth. He asserts that Christianity has somehow forgotten its own true nature. In spite of the fact that Christianity is a tradition founded on the human incarnation of the Son of God, its traditional understanding diminishes the value of human existence and human consciousness for favor of an other-worldly realm.

It is in this area where the truly ambivalent aspect of Feuerbach’s perspective emerges. On one hand, Feuerbach admits that if indeed his work is “irreligious, atheistic” then “let it also be remembered that atheism—at least in the sense of this work—is the secret of religion.” He then continues on to say that the nature of this secret is that religion in its “heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature.”{229} There is an undeniable tension here: even in his rejection of the metaphysical God, he still employs such terms as “divinity” in his description of human beings. What is at stake when, for instance, Feuerbach offers the clever quip that while he is indeed “reducing theology to anthropology”, he is also exalting “theology into anthropology”?{230} While there is certainly a tone of shock value and sacrilege here, that is only part of the message: in Feuerbach’s view, the truly real and what should be exalted is the natural, empirical reality. He even implies that his method of religious awareness is more reverent than the speculative consciousness of traditional Christianity because of its adoration of Creation—particularly the natural world and human beings—instead of a transcendent and non-natural realm.

Feuerbach is without a doubt undermining the true possibility of existence of important components of the Christian tradition. But the perspective that is rarely considered in exegeses of this work is why Feuerbach does this. For this reason, it is especially important to consider this book in relationship to his other works. Feuerbach’s primary issue in this book is not with the actual Christian God, but the speculative method used by the tradition’s epistemology to discuss the meaning of this

---

{229} Ibid., xxxvi.
{230} Ibid., xxxviii.
God. For Feuerbach, the Anselmian discussions about proving the existence of God from an ontological perspective are dead; instead he wants to shift the nature of the discussion to the perspective of the human being. It is only in doing this that the discussion of God as a projection of human predicates comes into play. He writes:

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

Here Feuerbach describes an awareness of God that is purely perspectival, based in one’s individual and natural forms of awareness. Feuerbach does not reject outright the possibility of God’s existence as a transcendent being, but only the human being’s certainty of knowing such a fact and the speculative, anti-natural means that must be employed when making such assertions. What I know about God is only that which can be deduced through human experience, which is why Feuerbach’s dictum of “the reality of a subject lies in its predicates” is so significant. God is only a real being if the predicates used to describe God are themselves real — that is, also displayed in human beings. Feuerbach suggests that not only is this form of awareness more philosophically precise, but even more pious:

To the truly religious man, God is not a being without qualities, because to him he is a positive, real being. The theory that God cannot be defined, and consequently cannot be known by man, is therefore the product of recent times, a product of modern unbelief.

In addition to Feuerbach’s philosophical concerns, this passage also conjures some of the social issues of his day. Zawar Hanfi describes Feuerbach’s experience living in 1840’s Germany as “a prolonged victimization by a politically reinforced religious

\[231\] Ibid., 16. These passages also illustrate Feuerbach’s foreshadowing of the phenomenological epoché described in chapter one.

\[232\] Ibid., 18-19ff.

\[233\] Ibid., 14.
orthodoxy and a religiously reinforced political regime bent on crushing all criticism and free speech.” The political reality of the day only reinforces Feuerbach’s view that religious identity is and must be grounded in human experience. As the book’s title suggests, Feuerbach argues throughout the book that he is simply uncovering the true “essence” of Christianity. The provocative nature of his assertions aside, he believes to be positing a more authentic and socially expedient description of religious experience. Even in his criticism of Christianity, he seeks to maintain a distinct notion of divinity as such, even if what is regarded as divine deviates from the tradition. His play on the meanings of “human” and “divine,” and the extent to which these dichotomies necessarily relate to one another, is an essential part of his discussion. This is much unlike a figure like Freud, who is unequivocal in his description of religion as wholly illusory—but more on that in the later pages of this section. Feuerbach’s effort to maintain the language of divinity is an essential component of his overall argument in Christianity and is central to his description of the uniqueness of human self-consciousness in particular.

3.1.1 The Dual Nature of Human Self-Consciousness

For Feuerbach, human self-consciousness is a unique phenomenon: we are aware of things immediately present before us, such as the immediate perception of hunger or fear; and also abstract states of affairs that do not currently exist, such as when we think about something that we might do next week. To Feuerbach, this is what separates us as human beings from rational animals, who think only in pure immediacy. He explains:

Hence the brute only has a simple, man a twofold life: in the brute, the inner life is one with the outer; man has an inner and outer life. The inner life of man is the life which has relation to the species, to his general, as distinguished from his

234 Hanfi, “Introduction,” in Fiery Brook, 26-27.
individual, nature. Man thinks—that is, he converses with himself...he is himself at once and I and thou; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought.\textsuperscript{235}

As Feuerbach explains, it is a function of the abstract or inner form of consciousness that allows us to think about the nature of our identity as human beings and also reflect upon both our shortcomings and possibilities. Feuerbach describes the phenomenological clues we have that make us aware of these unique capacities of human consciousness. These clues demonstrate the unusual ways in which our most intimate and personal experiences also distance the “outer” life from the “inner” life, and literally objectify ourselves to ourselves. These aspects of human nature exceed our abilities of control and mastery, but nonetheless comprise the very source of our possibility for growth and self-transformation. Feuerbach suggests that the divide between the inner and outer lives is defined by the interesting connection human beings have to their most essential traits. In his view, human beings are defined by such traits as their ability to love, to reason, or to will a certain intention to take place. Yet when these characteristics are in effect, they actually demonstrate an independence from our individual consciousness. Feuerbach writes that these “constituent elements of his nature” are also those “to which he can oppose no resistance.”\textsuperscript{236} This is an often overlooked but essential aspect of Feuerbach’s projection theory. \textit{Before} Feuerbach goes into great detail about how we project the existence of a God who embodies our ideal traits in the effort to seek self-knowledge, he describes the dual nature of human self-consciousness: our ability to think of ourselves as both subject and object, or our ability to become conscious of ourselves through both self-projection and self-reception. Consider the following passage:

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 3.
Who has not experienced the power of love, or at least heard of it? Which is the stronger—love or the individual man? Is it man that possesses love, or is it not much rather love that possesses man?...When thou sinkest into deep reflection, forgetting thyself and what is around thee, dost thou govern reason, or is it not reason which governs and absorbs thee?\textsuperscript{237}

In addition to the experience of love, Feuerbach also offers the examples of when one succumbs to a passion or bad habit as examples of when the self can be subordinate to itself.\textsuperscript{238} Furthermore, the fact that we are fundamentally vulnerable and capable of being affected by our own predicates in this fashion illustrates our sensuous nature. It is only through the capacity of sense-perceptibility that we have the ability to become aware of how we are affected by our otherness (as explained by the dual nature of our species-being, both subjectivity and objectivity). Feuerbach explains:

\begin{quote}
In the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man...Even the moon, the sun, the stars, call to man [Know Thyself]. That he sees them, and so sees them, is an evidence of his own nature.\textsuperscript{239}
\end{quote}

Feuerbach asserts here that our sensuousness is evidence of our existence as subjects. We are made aware of our capacity to \textit{become} subjects through the process of projection only by virtue of the fact that we are affected by the “power” of feeling: “The power of the object over him [that \textit{affects} him] is therefore the power of his own nature. Thus the power of the object of feeling is the power of feeling itself” [die Macht des Gefühls].\textsuperscript{240} That is, we learn of such traits as love or reason when they \textit{affect}, or perhaps even \textit{afflict}, us. Feuerbach describes the unique nature of human feeling as an “inward power” that is at the same time “independent and above” oneself.\textsuperscript{241} The truly profound aspect of the characteristics of human nature, according to Feuerbach, is that they exist

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 5. As noted in chapter one, “Know Thyself” was Feuerbach’s original title of \textit{Christianity}.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid; 	extit{Das Wesen des Christenthums} in \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, Vol. 6, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 11.
independently from our intentionality. Our own feelings and senses have the ability to at times render us into objects.\textsuperscript{242}

On an individual level, these experiences illustrate the ways in which our self-consciousness operates as a process of self-objectification. For Feuerbach, this is the precondition for his assertion in \textit{Christianity} that God is a projection of our idealized traits. Both of these instances utilize the same capacity of human self-consciousness to think of itself in terms of both subject and object, active and passive. The experience of passivity that is described in the experience of love, for example, is a crucial step that makes our subjectivity vis-à-vis the projection of the ideal God possible. It is in the experience of limitation that we have the ability to become conscious of our nature in fragmented moments. In order to think about the ways we can evolve beyond the present reality, we project the existence of the external God who encompasses these ideal traits in a more complete, perfected form. In my individuality, I think of the isolated and imperfect instances of wisdom; but in God, I think of a being who is wise at all times and about all things, and this gives me a sense of transformation beyond my own limited state. Feuerbach explains:

\begin{quote}
It is impossible to love, will, or think, without perceiving these activities to be perfections...Consciousness consists in a being becoming objective to itself; hence it is nothing apart, nothing distinct from the being which is conscious of itself.\textsuperscript{243}
\end{quote}

In Feuerbach’s view, we can only begin to ponder the scope of our human species when we consider the implications of the dual nature of self-consciousness, characterized by both passivity as described by the autonomy of the human predicates, and activity as indicated by his projection theory of God. While the former is rarely mentioned alongside the latter, it is an indisputable part of the puzzle. Feuerbach explains the

\textsuperscript{242} As Feuerbach explains on page 4, “But the object to which a subject necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject’s own, but objective, nature.”

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 6.
projection theory as the mechanism by which we are able to reflect upon our nature through a Hegelian concept of absolute thinking or contemplation only after we receive the predicates of our nature in momentary, fragmented form through the senses. The effort for self-recognition vis-à-vis the projection paradigm is secondary to the initial moment of the self’s being affected through its embodiment. Thus, even in Christianity, Feuerbach explains that our subjectivity is made possible by our consciousness of being affected by the power of our own predicates. In its projection of the ideal God, Christianity is therefore the penultimate example of the subject-object interplay that takes places within human consciousness. Contrary to a thinker like Freud, Feuerbach does not take issue with the projection of God itself. In fact, he believes that projection (or the subject’s rendering of itself as object) is a natural and even necessary effect of the dual nature of human self-consciousness. He explains:

Religion is man’s earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge. Hence, religion precedes philosophy, as in the history of the race, so also in that of the individual. Man first of all sees his nature as if out of himself, before he finds it in himself. His own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being.244

Projection is therefore a necessary function of human self-consciousness. We are unlike animals in our ability to think beyond what is immediately and objectively present, but we can only do this by rendering ourselves as objects to a projected external subject. We do this in many different instances: the commonly used thought experiments of “taking a step in someone else’s shoes” or “looking at the situation from their eyes” are examples we employ to describe the process of considering another’s perspective on an issue that is different from our own. Feuerbach utilizes a very similar process here in his description of the relationship between God and human self-knowledge. In our religious traditions, the traits we use to describe God reflect our values and ultimate

244 Ibid., 13 [emphasis mine].
hopes for the possibilities inherent within human culture. With God, we can think about the human trait of wisdom at large, freed from the constraints of the wisdom displayed in a particular individual. Feuerbach’s point of criticism is therefore not with projection itself as it is a necessary corollary to our self-consciousness, but when this God is attributed to supernatural or anti-human origins. When God is viewed as a being fundamentally separate from human beings, Feuerbach contends that it denigrates the value of humanity and our natural identity.

3.1.2 Divine Naturalism

In the description of God and religious consciousness in Christianity, Feuerbach first explains the positive ways in which these symbols relate to the human quest for self-knowledge. The projection of God is a significant effort in contemplating opportunities for growth within the human species. Interestingly, Feuerbach’s reading of God also illuminates the value of human sense-perceptibility and naturalism as the mechanisms that make this contemplation possible. It is vital for Feuerbach that the terms used to describe God are ultimately recognized as being decidedly human traits observed through natural and empirical methods of observation, and not speculation. That being said, human beings can still posit a reality that is material and natural, although not objectively present. This is what is achieved through the belief in the projected God, and this object (albeit rendered to our consciousness as a subject) is what gives us a standard by which we can transform our behavior. Feuerbach does not believe this projected possibility to be supernatural, but simply a hope for the possibility of an improved human nature. We have the ability to actually be objectified by our own self-consciousness, and we experience this sense of otherness literally through our own bodies: our senses, emotions, and feelings all indicate experiences in which the intentions of the ego are fractured. It is because of this particular structure of self-consciousness that Feuerbach believes our opportunities for reflection and growth
exist. While the dual structure of human consciousness is indeed more advanced than the pure immediate consciousness of the “brute,” it is precisely in its complexity that we can very easily lead ourselves astray. Indeed, animals lack the ability for self-transformation because they only perceive what is immediately in front of them. If one’s consciousness consists primarily of hunger, fear, excitement, pain, and the like, then the ability to conceive of a reality beyond the status quo is not possible. By contrast, our ability to project a reality that is not objectively present is precisely what gives us the opportunity to change the current state of affairs.

This is where the true ambiguity of Feuerbach’s projection model of God exists: in one sense, he describes the true essence of religion as anthropological, as it is in the projection of the ideal God that we reflect upon the potential of the human species: “in religion man contemplates his own latent nature.”245 The commonly understood connotation of this idea is that the God-projection is an intentional psychological or cognitive mechanism we employ as human beings in order to fulfill some kind of need. The perceived presence of God can help us to set moral standards and/or ease existential concerns. This is the general view put forth by such thinkers as Freud, Barth, and also Harvey to a certain extent, as I will consider in a moment. However, I suggest that Feuerbach is saying something much different in this book.

While it may admittedly be somewhat obscure in the later pages of Christianity, his opening pages clearly describe the unique characteristics of our human nature, and this is precisely what makes the God projection not only possible, but necessary. Feuerbach describes a very complex relationship between the categories of humanity and divinity that is negotiated by the unique power of human “feeling” [Gefühl]. This has profound meaning for the central objective of Christianity, as it unites the distinctly natural characteristics of human selfhood with this notion of autonomy beyond the

245 Ibid., 33.
individual. He suggests that this “divine organ” of feeling can be observed by the power of the love emotion over the objective self, or the joy one feels by the sound of a powerful melody.246 The autonomy of human predicates illustrates to Feuerbach the infusion of divine nature with human existence: “the nature of God [as defined by the idealized human traits] is nothing else than an expression of the nature of feeling…feeling is the noblest, most excellent, i.e., the divine, in man.”247 Even though Feuerbach decries the “anti-natural” or “anti-human” connotation of God, he still maintains the language of “divinity” in order to identify components of the human species that elude the control of the intentional subject—and it is precisely because of this elusive quality within human consciousness that the possibility for human growth and transformation exists.

This is particularly significant when one recalls the criticism of Hegel and German idealism that Feuerbach levies in Christianity and his earlier writings. The description of God and religious consciousness is indeed drawing from natural means of awareness and even self-consciousness, but this is absolutely not an extension of the ego: God is not whatever I intentionally think or will Him to be. Instead, God is an embodiment of perfected human nature which is indicated by the same form of awareness that renders me passive in experiences of love or the other predicates. It is in these experiences of passivity that I learn on a small scale the depths of human nature beyond my individual identity. This is in contrast to the pure immediate consciousness of the dog, who does not think about his foibles and triumphs compared to other dogs. For Feuerbach, the predicates are natural human characteristics that also exhibit an authoritative power over the individual finite self, and this illustrates their divine and infinite character. He writes:

246 Ibid.
247 Ibid., 9.
Thus the human nature presents an infinite abundance of different predicates, and for that very reason it presents an infinite abundance of different individuals...The mystery of the inexhaustible fullness of the divine predicates is therefore nothing else than the mystery of human nature considered as an infinitely varied, infinitely modifiable, but consequently, phenomenal being. Only in the realm of the senses, only in space and time, does there exist a being of really infinite qualities or predicates.\(^{248}\)

Feuerbach believes that both Hegel and the Christian tradition got it wrong in their respective attempts to locate infinitude in a realm outside of the natural world. He argues that it is the multiplicity of the human species itself and the complexity of individual forms of consciousness of the species that is truly infinite in nature. The effort for the human being to be self-aware is a lifelong and inexhaustible task; there is always additional room for growth as well as setback, and is further compounded by the fact that self-consciousness is always subject to the control of the autonomous predicates.

3.1.3 The Problem of “Supranaturalism”

Feuerbach claims that the attribution of God to “superhuman” origins in spite of the fact that God is an extension of human nature has resulted in a number of complicated distortions. In many ways, Feuerbach seeks to maintain the language of divinity and religious symbolism while eliminating what he perceives as its “anti-natural” or “anti-human” elements. Again, much of his reasoning for doing this is reminiscent of the same logic he employs in the Hegel essay. According to Feuerbach, the natural philosophical methodology not only has more epistemological accuracy over a speculative one, but it also carries with it an implicit moral compass from a humanistic perspective. In the middle chapters of Christianity, Feuerbach looks at such hallmarks of the Christian tradition as baptism, prayer, the incarnation, and the

\(^{248}\) Ibid., 23.
resurrection and suggests that the true value of these symbols is in their materiality. In discussing the value of the sacraments, for example, he highlights their natural characteristics: the water of baptism is literally cleansing, wine and bread are literally nourishing. The perception of these things in the literal or “anthropological” sense of how they affect the real lives of human beings is “infinitely more productive and real, both in theory and in practice, than when accepted in the sense of theology.” 249 In his discussion of prayer, Feuerbach associates the practice with the omnipotence of the love predicate rather than an appeal to a supernatural being. Because “God is love,” he argues, prayer is the opportunity of the individual man to discuss his thoughts and wishes with his projected alter ego, God. Feuerbach states that, “prayer is the absolute relation of the human heart to itself, to its own nature; in prayer, man forgets that there is a limit to his wishes and is happy in this forgetfulness.” 250

Along these lines, Feuerbach associates the doctrine of the resurrection with the widespread human hope for immortality and/or fear of death. The fact that Jesus’ body was ultimately raised from the dead symbolizes “the highest triumph of Christianity over the sublime but certainly abstract spirituality and objectivity over the ancients.” 251 Feuerbach finds the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian tradition incredibly provocative. He suggests that the reason that immortality is at the cornerstone of the tradition is because human beings have become preoccupied with their fear of death—a development that he believes is a direct correlation to its “anti-human” elements. In the denigration of the natural world, we become more fearful of its processes. Yet because these processes are an inescapable fact of being human, we cannot truly divorce ourselves from them, and as a result we become even more fixated. Feuerbach writes:

The more man alienates himself from Nature, the more subjective, i.e., supranatural or antinatural, is his view of things, the greater the horror he has of

249 Preface to Christianity, xl.
250 Ibid., 123.
251 Ibid., 136.
Nature, or at least of those natural objects and processes which displease his imagination, which affect him disagreeably. The free, objective man doubtless finds things repugnant and distasteful in Nature, but he regards them as natural, inevitable results, and under this conviction he subdues his feeling as a merely subjective and untrue one.\(^{252}\)

In Christian eschatology, one gains the hope that one’s body will too be resurrected one day and the greatest of existential anxieties is quelled. Feuerbach is quick to note the irony of this belief: while a supernatural, “unhuman” being must be posited in order to restore life from death, and hence the order of the natural world, the precise order that is restored is in fact a human body. The Christian’s ultimate hope for redemption is literally embodied in the restoration of Jesus’ body. Feuerbach coins this simultaneous repulsion/adoration of materiality “supranaturalism” and asserts that it plays a significant role in Christian theology. In addition to the resurrection, the examples of monastic celibacy, the Virgin Mary, and asceticism in general demonstrate this paradoxical phenomenon of how the denial of the natural processes of the human body actually results in an extreme fixation on flesh and embodiment:

Virginity in itself is to him the highest moral idea, the *cornu copiae* of his supranaturalistic feelings and ideas, his personified sense of honour and shame before common nature. Nevertheless, there stirs in his bosom a natural feeling also, the compassionate feeling which makes the Mother beloved. What then is to be done in this difficulty of the heart, in this conflict between a natural and a supranatural feeling? The supranaturalist must unite the two, must comprise in one and the same subject two predicates which exclude each other.\(^{253}\)

And for Feuerbach, this effort at unification is what leads to the paradoxical nature of most Christian symbols: the figure of Jesus, holy water, and the like, are given credence within the tradition as supranatural entities, but truly have meaning for believers vis-à-vis their materiality and praxis.

---

\(^{252}\) Ibid., 136-137.

\(^{253}\) Ibid., 137-138.
The ultimate offense of supranaturalism in Feuerbach’s view is that it robs human beings of their ultimate tools of awareness: feeling and sensuality. The denial of our natural forms of awareness ultimately makes us dependent on speculative notions about the world and as previously mentioned, this move lacks epistemological accuracy as well as humanistic responsibility. In *Christianity*, Feuerbach resumes his criticism of the ego of German idealism in his denial of individuality and human feeling. In idealism, nature is simply an extension of the ego and “the accusative is the same as the nominative”, because it does not require the same paradigm of passivity that is part of his naturalist method. In Feuerbach’s method, nature is uncovered through human feeling and sense-perceptibility as a force to which the ego is rendered passive, and this experience is precisely what illustrates the complexity of human consciousness to the subject. The ego-centricity of idealism and the supranaturalism of Christianity ultimately are responsible for the same pitfall: they deny the value of naturalism and human feeling for favor of a speculative concept or being.

In the case of religion, Feuerbach believes that this move is particularly problematic because it can lead to religious fanaticism. With the exaltation of a supreme transcendent being and the subsequent denial of the value of human beings, Feuerbach argues that believers become overly reliant on the other-worldly God as their sole source of redemption. Not only does this cause a negative view of oneself and one’s ability to do good deeds, but it also results in a negative view of other human beings as well. The human species at large is devalued to the point where human beings may be viewed as dispensable for a larger, supranatural cause. The denial of the value of human beings brings with it the denial of the most important human predicate, love, as the ground for human action and ethical awareness. As a result, Feuerbach argues that this places the human being’s only hope for salvation not on human love,

---

254 Ibid., 140.
but faith in the supernatural being. He argues that “love identifies man with God and
God with man; faith separates God from man” which leads to “the separation of man
from man, the unloosening of the social bond.”255 Because the believer no longer sees
his bond with God alone, he does not feel a sense of commonality with other human
beings. Feuerbach asserts that faith in this sense “gives man a peculiar sense of his own
dignity and importance,” finding himself “distinguished above other men” in an
aristocratic sense.256 Feuerbach believes that this belief taken to the extreme is at the
heart of religious intolerance. He writes:

    Faith left to itself necessarily exalts itself above the laws of natural morality. The
doctrine of faith is the doctrine of duty towards God—the highest duty of faith.
By how much God is higher than man, by so much higher are duties to God than
duties towards man; and duties toward God necessarily come into collision with
common human duties.257

Again recollecting the logic of his Hegel critique, Feuerbach argues that the speculative
ground of supranaturalism in religion is detrimental to human beings in two seemingly
opposite but nonetheless interrelated ways. As previously mentioned, the exalted view
of the transcendent God can lead to a degenerate view of human beings: God can only
be viewed as good at the expense of humankind. However, as the above passage
illustrates, Feuerbach also believes that supranaturalism runs the risk of affecting
human beings in the opposite extreme. If one’s worth as a human being is associated
only with one’s affiliation to an “unhuman” God, Feuerbach suggests that this creates
an unhealthy reliance on this God for the sole source of goodness in the world. He
believes that if different senses of God or religion come into conflict, the human will
choose their image of God over their fellow human being. This scheme degrades the

255 Ibid., 247.
256 Ibid., 249.
257 Ibid., 260.
natural sense of community and social responsibility we feel as collective members of
the human species and can result in apathy and intolerance, if not even violence.

The model of religion Feuerbach posits in Christianity is indeed a complicated
one. While he perhaps did not fully articulate all of its implications, the work
nonetheless presents a number of “raw materials” that will influence movements in
philosophy and the study of religion.\textsuperscript{258} The first of these raw materials is his
description of human self-consciousness. Feuerbach describes self-awareness as a
multivalent process in which human beings learn of the depths of their selfhood
through being confronted by their limitations. The unique nature of human
consciousness is its ability to think of itself as both subject and object, through both
active and passive faculties. Such human emotions as love demonstrate autonomy
outside of the intentional actions of the ego. Because these human predicates have
demonstrated sovereignty over the individual subject, it is only in God where one can
envision the full meaning of these human characteristics. The perception of God as an
ideal figure who embodies such human traits in their perfection gives one the
opportunity to ponder the depth of the meaning of these autonomous traits.

Feuerbach’s description of human self-consciousness in this fashion indicates
another of his other important contributions in Christianity. In an effort to distinguish
himself from Hegel and the ego-centricity of German idealism, Feuerbach emphasizes
sense-perceptibility and natural forms of awareness in the human being’s description of
God. This highlights the empirical observation of the subject and not abstract
speculative ideas as the prevailing methodology in descriptions of religious
consciousness. In his inclusion of human feeling and sense-perceptibility as the
primary tools of religious awareness, Feuerbach calls for a shift in the nature of the
discussion about God. Rather than attempting an ontological discussion about the

\textsuperscript{258} As mentioned in chapter one, Wartenberg uses this term in his Introduction to Feuerbach’s Principles, ix.
existence and nature of God as a transcendent being, Feuerbach points the discussion to
the perspective of the individual religious subject. This is less a consideration of who
God is, in God’s totality, but what God represents and illuminates for the subject. The
issue of who God is in Himself is not the primary issue of concern, but what God means
in his appearance to human consciousness. While this concept may be more precise
in his later works, in Christianity Feuerbach still seeks to identify the existential identity
of the religious subject. Furthermore, this identity is made possible through the human
being’s natural and material self-awareness, as well as one’s awareness of existing
before an ideal image of God. While Feuerbach maintains some of Hegel’s language,
such as the “I-Thou” in the discussion of the God projection, he distances himself from
Hegel in the most essential areas of their respective projects.

The third raw material found within Christianity, the nature of Feuerbach’s
atheism, is undoubtedly the most complex. In his assertion that God is a postulate of
human consciousness and rejection of the “anti-human” elements of theology,
Feuerbach goes on to become somewhat of a hero for secular humanism. Indeed,
Feuerbach presents atheism as the “secret of religion” and argues that the “truth” of
religion is in fact a “profoundly human relation.” However, in this chapter I have
suggested that Feuerbach’s intended meaning of these terms is more complex than
traditional understandings of the terms may connote, and perhaps even more than
Feuerbach himself understood. By shifting the empirical burden of the God discussion
away from the actual being of God to the God who appears within human consciousness,
Feuerbach introduces a new method of inquiry in the consideration of religion. In this
methodology, religious consciousness involves a discussion about the existential reality
of the human subject and that subject’s experience of affectivity. This is a

---

259 This gestures again to Feuerbach’s statement on page 16: “I cannot know whether God is something
else in himself or for himself than he is to me; what he is to me is all that he is.”
260 Preface to Christianity, xxxvi.
261 Ibid., xxxvii.
phenomenological viewpoint that identifies human experience and observation as the
tools of religious awareness, and it furthers Feuerbach’s view that knowledge of the
divine and/or infinite is a task that is embedded in naturalism. Hanfi explains the
interrelatedness of the perception of the individual subject and the larger world of
which that subject is a part. He states that

the very core of Feuerbach’s theoretical revolution [is] that it destroys the basis of
speculative epistemology which proceeds from a world-less subject-as-thought
confronting a thought-less world. The subject of Feuerbach, insofar as
sensuousness belongs to its essential ontological constitution, is from the very
outset filled with the world, just as the world in its turn is the world of and for
the subject. Thus, nature in Feuerbach’s philosophy is the object of man; he is
ontologically dependent upon her; that is, he needs her in order to exist and
realize himself.\(^{262}\)

Even in Feuerbach’s denial of the transcendent God, he still acknowledges that human
beings are fully dependent on an entity outside of the intentional ego. In this model,
the ontological determination of oneself is not a product of the non-human God, but in
the sense-awareness of my limitations of existing in and before the natural world. In
this formulation, Feuerbach still maintains the basic structure of a finite self existing
before the infinite—even if this is simply a sense of the infinitude that exists within the
material world and human consciousness. Along these lines, Hanfi points out that
Feuerbach’s “atheism” is best clarified as the “denial of the negation of human
beings.”\(^{263}\) Feuerbach’s rejection of God is contingent upon what a given definition of
God means for the understanding of human beings and the natural world. While
Feuerbach will never be confused for a traditional theologian, his discussion of the
interrelatedness of the so-called dichotomies of naturalism and theology is quite
significant. In fact, Feuerbach has identified a number of features of human subjectivity

\(^{262}\) Hanfi, “Introduction,” in *Fiery Brook*, 36.
\(^{263}\) Ibid., 27.
and religious identity that are also crucial to another important figure to his thought: Luther.

### 3.2 Feuerbach and Theology: Barth and Beyond

In *Christianity*, Feuerbach distances himself from Hegelian idealism through his description of human feeling and sensuousness as the means by which one gains self-consciousness as well as consciousness of the depths of human nature. The capacity of human feeling is particularly important because it underscores the value of natural and empirical means of awareness, and not speculation. For Feuerbach, the truly real is what is observable through natural and/or human means of deduction and not simply abstract or speculative musings. Feuerbach believes that this method is more legitimate from both epistemological and humanistic perspectives. When supranatural ideas or entities are prioritized over natural ones, Feuerbach argues that unfortunate consequences occur. These consequences can take the form of religious intolerance or a degraded view of human selfhood. While these concerns place a number of limitations on religious identity, he still maintains a certain kind of religious vocabulary in his model. In fact, the most provocative aspects of *Christianity* include the manner in which Feuerbach suggests the categories of humanity and divinity are intertwined. In terms of both the projected ideal God, as well as the “divinity” that is displayed by the autonomy of the human predicates, Feuerbach argues that the meaning of God is accessible only through human experience and feeling. From the human perspective—which is all that Feuerbach believes we can assert—God is the being who embodies our traits in their most perfect form. While Feuerbach rejects the notion of God as a supranatural being, he still goes to great lengths to maintain a certain understanding of transcendence that occurs within the human species. Human consciousness exhibits a
“power” over the individual self, yet this experience is discerned through only our natural capacity of feeling.

Feuerbach’s ultimate goal in *Christianity* is the restoration of theology with its true essence, human feeling, which is further illuminated when considered in its social context. The particular characteristics of human feeling certainly have the interesting consequence of isolating the individual experiences of the human being, but they also compel him to consider his relationship to others in the community. In one sense, the individual’s feelings of love, fear, and the like emphasize the particular conditions of one’s embodied nature in a very personal and intimate manner. However, as Feuerbach described above, the dual-awareness of selfhood that is illustrated in these moments of identity is also the pre-condition for our ability to contemplate about the depths of human traits and feeling. Therefore, it is the result of our individual experiences of feeling that we consider the unique aspects of the human species, which is of course illustrated by our fellow human beings. These individual feelings of affectivity in turn allow one to embrace one’s natural human identity, strengthening the bond between human beings and encouraging social concern and responsibility, rather than reliance solely upon an abstract and supernatural God.

However, in spite of Feuerbach’s effort to prioritize naturalism and human feeling, he still asserts the existence of an essential link between religious consciousness and human self-identity. While he indeed states that “atheism is the secret of religion,” he still finds it necessary to identify religion as a worthwhile category, often maintaining the use of religious symbols and vocabulary. There is a significant difference between Feuerbach’s efforts here to simply “clarify” the essence of

---

264 Preface to *Christianity*, xxxvi.
Christianity and those of someone like Freud, who ultimately suggests that religious consciousness is completely illusory and a type of neurosis.²⁶⁵

3.2.1 A “Thorn in the Flesh of Modern Theology”²⁶⁶

Karl Barth had this curious nature of Feuerbach’s thought in mind when he wrote in the introductory essay to Christianity that “no one among the modern philosophers has been so intensively, so exclusively and precisely preoccupied with the problem of theology as Feuerbach—although his love was an unhappy one.”²⁶⁷ In spite of Feuerbach’s constant criticism of the tradition, Barth argued that Feuerbach’s knowledge of theology in general was impressive, setting him apart from other philosophers of his day.²⁶⁸ While Barth ultimately did not agree with Feuerbach’s naturalist interpretation of theology, he nonetheless affirmed Feuerbach as a significant figure to the study of theology. In one sense, a figure like Feuerbach demonstrates certain issues within Protestant theology that call for additional reflection and clarification, such as the relationship between God and human being when mediated by faith. However, it is also important to underscore that Barth does not view the worth of Feuerbach as being only an interpretive foil. Although flawed, he sees value in Feuerbach’s theory as reason to reflect on the current state of theology. For example, Feuerbach’s effort to reconsider the role of the social and existential identity of the human subject demonstrates to Barth that “the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians” and that Feuerbach’s argument against the supernatural tenets of theology is nonetheless an “antithesis to be

²⁶⁵ The contrast between Feuerbach and Freud underscores the inherent problem with analyses such as Harvey’s. To characterize Feuerbach’s criticism of religion as primarily psychological overlooks the most complex and also profound aspects of his commentary, namely the ways in which the human being’s natural forms of religious awareness are also those responsible for his awareness of self-identity. ²⁶⁶ Karl Barth, “An Introductory Essay,” in Feuerbach, Christianity, xxiv. ²⁶⁷ Ibid., x. ²⁶⁸ Ibid.
established theologically.”269 In particular, Barth appreciated the value of Feuerbach’s efforts to emphasize the social reality of human beings that is established through theological discourse. Barth suggested that Feuerbach’s emphasis on human sensuousness [Sinnlichkeit] in not only Christianity, but throughout his body of work underscores the existential value of faith. In Barth’s view, Feuerbach’s reflection on the “thatness and suchness” [Dasein und Sosein] of the human subject’s awareness of existence before God, rather than abstract theological concepts, is a significant component of religious identity.270 For one, this concept is the source of Feuerbach’s interest in social justice and responsibility, stating that he demonstrates an “unconscious but evident affinity to the ideology of the socialist workers’ movement.”271

Beyond the social and humanistic elements, however, Barth is also interested in how Feuerbach’s work is an essential response to the positive theology of the West. Barth rightly criticizes treatments of Feuerbach that suggest his primary goal is the denigration of the theological tradition, explaining instead that “it is the essence of man that he emphatically and enthusiastically affirms, against theology and idealistic philosophy.”272 Feuerbach’s assertion in the “I-Thou” paradigm that the adoration of God demonstrated by the human predicates is actually the adoration of the ideal essence of human beings is an unfortunate but logical implication of positive theology. Barth acknowledges that the effort to speak of the essential nature of God as defined by the human being’s perspective is inherently problematic: either the essence of God remains undefined, or God’s essence is given a limiting and/or inadequate description. Because of this, a thinker like Feuerbach who “collapses the distinction between the original, immediate knowledge of God and the reflected, mediate knowledge of man,” has a

269 Ibid., x-xi.
270 Ibid., xxiv.
271 Ibid., xxv.
272 Ibid., xv.
The door to such discussions in Protestant theology in particular has only been opened further by a thinker like Luther, who in Barth’s view “emphatically shifted the interest from what God is in himself to what God is for man.”

3.2.2 Feuerbach on Luther

Feuerbach responds directly to Luther in *The Essence of Faith According to Luther* (1844), a short aphoristic work that is regarded as a supplement to the *Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach’s basic argument is that in spite of his theological commitments, Luther himself reveals that God is inaccessible to consciousness of human beings. While Luther professes a belief in the existence of the transcendent God, he nonetheless describes the human awareness of this God vis-à-vis human consciousness, and therefore furthers the basic projection idea that is central to *Christianity*. While the basic argument is still the same, in this second work Feuerbach emphasizes the philosophical significance of Jesus as evidence that the speculative concept within Christianity is ultimately untenable and he does this through the consideration of what he regards to be key passages in Luther’s work. In the Christian tradition, God has a literal face and existence in Jesus, which is significant to Feuerbach because the “real” is only what has tangible presence in the world. Similarly, the humanity of Christ demonstrates for Feuerbach that God can be known as a natural being and through our natural means of awareness. Our understanding of anything stems from the fact that we are human, and in Jesus, God is demonstrated to Himself be human; therefore, the only things we know to be good—and to be real—must also

---

273 Ibid., xvii.
274 Ibid., xix.
appeal to human sensibility and sense-perceptibility. Feuerbach contends that the Christian legacy is the necessary correlation of existence to essence:

In Christ God has revealed himself; that is, he has shown and proved himself to be a human being. In the humanity of Christ the humanness of God is placed beyond all doubt. The chief sign that God is good is that he is a man...How can I have access to a person who has no senses? Who can be my representative and mediator without an eye and an ear? The pledge and truth of the goodness and mercy (humanness) of God lie therefore in Christ as the sensual essence of God: [quoting Luther] ‘God without flesh is worth nothing.’

Feuerbach explains that in spite of its speculative basis, Christianity is nonetheless a tradition of naturalism. God is a being with flesh, certainty, sensuality and even humanity, and these traits are the very marks of existence. The God who is beyond being has “revealed himself” in the being of Jesus; God as potential must become a God who is actual in the human being. Feuerbach contends that this is the natural progression of Luther’s own arguments. Because we are tainted by original sin, we lack the ability to accurately assess our own goodness and appropriately direct our actions, thereby relying on God’s direction. We learn of the quality of beneficence, for example, through the concept that God is a beneficent being. For Christians, the incarnation of Jesus is what brings such qualities as beneficence into the world. In the sense that God represents all qualities in their ideal essence, Jesus makes them actual through his distinctively human personality. In Feuerbach’s words, “what you think God is, you see in Christ; what God is in the form of thought, Christ is in actuality.” For Feuerbach, the value of Christ’s humanity within the tradition was compromised by what he regarded as the untenability of Christian faith. As Barth suggested, Luther’s doctrine of faith effectively establishes the existence of God “for man.” Feuerbach believes that Luther’s description of the salvific power of faith leads to logical contradictions

---

276 Feuerbach, *Luther*, 63-64.
277 Ibid., 65.
278 Ibid., 73.
regarding the existence of God as a transcendent being. In one sense, Feuerbach argues, we are to believe that God is a

   God-in-himself, an incomprehensible and inhuman being, who only ‘clothes’ and ‘furnishes’ himself as a man in order—a good notion!—to insinuate his inhumanity to man under the guise of humanness? He can do this only by contradicting his true meaning and belief.\(^\text{279}\)

While this contradiction is to be resolved through Luther’s understanding of faith, Feuerbach argues that Luther’s model illustrates the problem of supranaturalism. Believers are confronted with the idea that even though Christ was indeed knowable as a physical human being, they must still accept the fullest sense of Christ’s identity as a supranatural Savior. Feuerbach explains that a skepticism or “unbelief” about the supernatural identity of Christ creates “doubt” or “discord” while faith allows for “unity” and “certainty” in the person’s world view.\(^\text{280}\) Described in isolation, the notion of a transcendent God who sent His Son to not only live as a fully human being but also have the power to redeem to world is illogical. It is only vis-à-vis the presence of human faith in such a being that this belief can be given credence.

For Feuerbach, this is a pivotal moment in the understanding of the legacy of Luther’s theology. Feuerbach offers his own Kantian critique in his rejection of the meaningfulness of a “God-in-Himself;” from the perspective of human consciousness this God only gains certainty when described as a matter of faith. Luther’s emphasis on the redemptive nature of Christ has the logical consequence of underscoring the meaning of Christ’s existence as being essentially for [the redemption of] human beings. Carter Lindberg describes Feuerbach’s interest in this issue as his “aware[ness] of Luther’s transcendental perspective.”\(^\text{281}\) Lindberg’s observation focuses on the same

\(^{279}\) Ibid., 88.
\(^{280}\) Ibid.
\(^{281}\) Lindberg, “Luther and Feuerbach,” 110, n. 22. Lindberg also notes Feuerbach’s similar point in Christianity, 127.
point made by Barth: while Luther intends his point that God is only accessible through human faith and not reason to be a limiting factor of human consciousness, for Feuerbach it achieves the opposite. The only perspective human beings can claim is their own, and from this perspective God exists as a being who appears in one’s consciousness and achieves human benefit. However, in Lindberg’s identification of Feuerbach’s point as transcendental, and not simply psychological or anthropocentric, his analysis of Feuerbach’s relationship to Luther is much more precise than Barth’s.

Feuerbach suggests here that Luther’s emphasis on faith and human experience of God in turn indicates the epistemological problems of supranatural and/or speculative assertions. If God is described as a being who exists “for man,” His recognition as God is also contingent upon his recognition within human consciousness. From the perspective of the human being, this is an occurrence that creates the condition for the possibility of self-recognition: it is only in one’s recognition of the God who exists for human beings that one may learn of the conditions of one’s own humanity. The essential link Feuerbach makes between God as a being and this God’s appearing within human consciousness is not a reflection of human psychology or want: i.e., I posit a God who means what I think He means; instead, Feuerbach’s bondage of God to human consciousness is simply a reflection of his belief in the epistemological validity of human consciousness and naturalism.

Feuerbach’s logic in this idea is similar to the ideas that drove his criticism of Hegel: in sum, both Christianity and idealism lack empirical accuracy and certainty because they attempt to supersede these natural forms of deduction. Feuerbach believes that Luther himself understood this point, continually dancing around the issue but never admitting to the logical inconsistency of the orthodox view of Christianity. On this point, Feuerbach notes the impossibility of a “God-in-himself” who is not also simultaneously a “God for you,” as “it is precisely God himself who
removes the validity and possibility of this distinction.”

Because of this, Feuerbach observes that Luther himself writes that “we learn to recognize God’s omnipotent force and strength” through what “God has said and commanded in His words.” Insofar as the human subject must rely on God in order to make goodness possible, Feuerbach asserts that human reality, in and of itself, is a necessary corollary to God in order to actualize God’s presence in the world. Without the human being, God is simply an abstract idea without bearing on existence. Therefore, the inherent paradox of Christianity is that both God and human being embody potentiality and actuality—and they each need the other in order to make themselves (and the reality they effect) present. With some frustration, Feuerbach notes that Luther himself has uncovered this concept but ignores it:

It should be noticed in passing, by the way, that God-in-himself is strictly speaking only God as a metaphysical being; that is, as a pure and dispassionate being of thought. L. was an enemy of metaphysics, abstraction, and dispassionateness. ‘God hates and despises,’ says L., ‘hard apathy.’ But what men abhor and reject outside of religion they put up with in religion. The true God, the true object of Lutheran (and in general of Christian) faith, is only God…

Because Luther emphasizes the role of the individual religious subject and his experience of God in an existential sense, Feuerbach praises him for being an enemy of metaphysics and abstraction. However, Feuerbach also expresses his frustration in the fact that Luther cancels out many of his insights by virtue of the fact that he ultimately privileges the belief in the transcendent God over the natural and lived reality of the human being. In spite of all the ways in which Luther’s work blurs the lines of the flesh-spirit dualism, in the end he furthers the traditional metaphysical scheme.

---

282 Ibid., 91.
283 Ibid., 58. And as Feuerbach would note, God’s words have meaning in the sense of what is actualized in the world through human action.
284 Ibid., 92.
Feuerbach argues that Luther’s writing ultimately reaches a different logical conclusion than the one he himself reaches, particularly in terms of his discussions of justification. Reflecting on Luther’s discussion in Lectures on Romans, he writes that God’s justification of the human being is likewise a justification of Himself because it is the fulfillment of what it is to be God. For Feuerbach, the fruit of the Christian tradition is that God wished to become incarnate; He sought to actualize his being by the sending of his Son into the world. Thus, the truest religious reflection is the expression of human consciousness—as desire, as actuality, as presence. Feuerbach contends that not only does this respond to the important issues raised by Luther, but this is also the most accurate rendition of the Christian tradition. If indeed the ultimate goal of Christianity is to be like Christ, Feuerbach argues that this is best achieved simply by being human, which is illustrated in none other than Luther’s own theological writings.
CHAPTER FOUR
LUTHER’S RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS AS NON-COGNITIVE KNOWING

Previously, I questioned the accuracy of the facile link that is made between Feuerbach and Hegel because of the significant differences in their basic projects. Feuerbach’s discussion of self-consciousness requires sensuousness and feeling rather than reason, it is an awareness of both oneself and the limitations of oneself, and it is not a smaller component of a grand meta-narrative of consciousness. By contrast, Hegel sought to provide a model of objective truth as defined through the universal consciousness of absolute Spirit. Feuerbach condemned Hegel’s preference of the speculative consciousness over the material because it required him to describe history in a manner that failed to recognize not only the inherent multiplicity of the natural and finite world, but also its fundamental inability to be assimilated by the intentions of the ego. Feuerbach’s view of self-consciousness is not only a reflection of oneself, but also of one’s limitations as determined by the presence of the material world. I closed the last chapter with the suggestion that this fundamental component of Feuerbach’s project is not the result of his Hegelian heritage, but his interest in naturalism. This is also what made Luther such an important fixture in Feuerbach’s writings.

In his book on Luther, Feuerbach identifies what he regards as inconsistencies within the Christian tradition. While Luther the theologian and Feuerbach the materialist are certainly on different sides of the metaphysical pond in many regards, they have an essential link in their effort to articulate the model of human self-consciousness. Both Luther and Feuerbach describe consciousness of self as an effort that is made possible through one’s awareness of the radical Other. In this chapter I will turn to Luther himself in order to consider these issues more explicitly. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the method employed here will be more systematic than historical, considering important themes that emerge in Luther’s project. While the intention is
not to provide an exhaustive account of Luther’s work, it is important to locate these themes in the context of their larger place in Luther’s project. Further, this method will identify the themes in Luther that paved the way for a thinker like Feuerbach: what changes does Luther achieve in theological discourse that provides Feuerbach with the opportunity to speak? What characteristics of Luther’s project affect the manner in which Feuerbach tackles his? As I will argue below, this will include the dialectical themes present in Feuerbach’s work that are often attributed to Hegel’s influence, but it also demonstrates aspects of the existential dilemma—integral to both Feuerbach and Luther—that is posed by one’s consciousness of the infinite. In terms of the implications of the theological dualism in place, Feuerbach was concerned with the denigrating image of the self that emerges as a result of theology, and Luther was concerned with the exalted image of self that emerges as a result of sin. More specifically, this will involve a consideration of the philosophical implications of certain issues emerging out of the Reformation, particularly theologia crucis (theology of the cross) and Deus absconditus (the hiddenness of God). Both of these are important concepts that exist throughout Luther’s body of work, and they are directly related to his view on the significance of sin and the influence it has on the existential reality of the human subject. The power of sin renders one unable to have adequate knowledge of oneself and thereby demonstrates one’s complete reliance on faith and the grace of God. The presence of human sin introduces an estrangement between God and human being and a rupture in the unified consciousness of prelapsarian reality. After the Fall, human beings are no longer part of God’s unity and humans must seek other realms of self-knowledge beyond their own cognitive and rational capabilities.

In Luther’s view, grace and faith are these means of human self-recognition that are not based in intellect or human reason, but in awareness of the ontological difference that exists between human being and God. Because such a notion of difference undermines the human ability to “know” through his/her own powers of
deductive reasoning, the power of God will have to be made apparent to the human being though other means. Along these lines, both Luther and Feuerbach are interested in uncovering the unique nature of the human identity through an identification of the means available for doing so. Their differences notwithstanding, both figures are concerned with human being’s understanding of self in relation to its ideal vision of self in the “Thou” or God. Both Feuerbach and Luther describe human identity as an experience of confrontation between the limitations of one’s own physicality and the perception of an ideal selfhood that exists beyond these limitations. For Feuerbach, this is the role of the projected vision of God in Christianity, and for Luther this is achieved by God Himself.

4.1 Sin and the Problem of Human Self-consciousness

Luther’s Lectures on Romans (1515-1516) is a very significant work because it illustrates many of the issues important to his lasting legacy, most notably the consequences of the sinful nature of the human condition. Luther argues that even with the best of intentions, human beings are entrenched in sin and the will is affected accordingly. He writes that one of the more tragic aspects of the human condition is that when the human being is left only to his own devices, he lacks the ability to make accurate self-judgments. Free will, without the intervention of God’s righteousness through grace and the example set by Scripture, will always turn to sin and self-interest.\(^{285}\) Luther describes the onset of original sin as an event so profound that it can be described as only an affliction of the human race. He explains:

The apostle uses this particular expression [sin came into the world] to indicate that original sin does not come from men but rather that it comes to them. For it is the nature of original sin that it comes out of us, as the Lord says in Matt. 15:19: ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts’. But this sin enters into men, and they

Luther makes the very provocative suggestion here that human beings do not commit sin, but suffer it. To “commit” implies a sending or engagement that assumes the self has the basic control or autonomy over its actions; an actual choice between “sin” and “goodness.” Instead, Luther suggests that Paul’s epistle describes the coming of sin to the human race as a moment in which the self is afflicted by a presence that is alien to itself, but whose very character is altered as a result. Luther is careful not to suggest that sin is a matter of choice, or a “lack of righteousness in the will.” Luther views sin in a matter similar to the affliction of an illness: I do not have the flu because I chose it to happen; rather, I was afflicted by the influenza virus and became ill. Similarly, I do not have a fever and muscle aches as an extension of my intention or will, but because they are natural consequences of the affliction. For Luther, sin “comes out of the human heart” as an intrinsic result of the transforming presence of original sin, but ultimately the human being is still “suffering” the sin or being affected by it. This is a significant observation for a number of reasons: first, it identifies the human being’s faculty for the awareness of sin as a condition of feeling and not decidedly rational capabilities. Following from this, a certain sense of self emerges as a result of this experience: while sin is now a necessary part of my condition, it is not so as an act of my choosing. I am aware of it as a (now) natural part of my selfhood, but it is not the result of a deliberate act of will or human choice. This is a very significant moment for Luther because it begins to articulate a moment in which the human self is aware of a condition of its selfhood that is indeed a necessary part of oneself, but to which the self is rendered passive: this is a feeling of one’s being affected and not a deliberate assertion of will.

286 Ibid., 301 [emphasis mine].
287 Ibid., 300.
Following from this, Luther describes human subjectivity as essentially fractured, tragic in its inability to have accurate self-knowledge. The very idea of “human reason” as an accurate measure of self is for Luther a deeply erred, if not self-indulgent, conception of reality. Because of this, we are reliant on God’s grace rather than our own ability to reason in order to adequately determine the good. Luther writes that “philosophy stinks in our nostrils, as if our reason always spoke of the best things, and we make up many stories about the law of nature,” a view that is echoed throughout his canon of works. He explains that we must resist a natural law view of human reason as something that is naturally inclined towards the good. The affliction of original sin not only eliminates our natural tendency toward the good, but demonstrates a propensity towards evil when left to its own devices. Considering Romans 7:7, Luther writes that “sin itself is the passion, the tinder, and the concupiscence, or the inclination, toward evil and the difficulty of doing good.”

The lesson from this is that human beings ought to be skeptical of their own pursuits. Reason, self-consciousness, philosophy and even theology to a certain extent, has the capacity to lead the sinner astray. In Romans, Luther also considers the problem of good works and the Law in light of these observations. He explains that the “power of men” is a power that is radically different than the power of God; in fact it is “completely canceled by the cross of Christ.” Luther describes the effort of human beings to seek their own ends as not only “vain,” but ultimately of the “gravest dangers” because “he who finds pleasure and enjoyment in the things that are of the flesh and of the world cannot have a taste or pleasure for the things that are of the Spirit of God.”

---

288 Ibid., 344.
289 Ibid., 259.
290 Ibid., 149.
291 Ibid., 150-151.
292 Ibid., 150.
He is very clear in his assertion that “in human teachings the righteousness of man is revealed and taught;” whereas “only in the Gospel is the righteousness of God revealed by faith alone.” These observations are at the cornerstone of Luther’s rejection of Scholastic theology as well as his rejection of human works as salvific. In works, the human subject is essentially trying to apprehend one’s own being, or will a good event to occur. As Luther notes, this is not possible because humans do not produce the good through their own actions; they can only relate to the good through God. The act of evil should not be rightly regarded as a weak or perverted will; its genesis is of the ontology of the flesh that is completely different than that of Spirit.

Nonetheless, Spirit can still be revealed to human beings. While this is not the product of human effort or intention, humans learn of the power of God as a power that is completely separate than the world of the flesh. Because of the ontological difference that exists between the flesh and the goodness of God, humans cannot begin to apprehend the latter in its totality. For both Luther and Feuerbach, humans come to know the potentiality for their own goodness as a reflective process, considering the shortcomings of their present identities and comparing that with the perceived reality of God. In this capacity, God is known not simply by virtue of what God is, statically, but what God does or actualizes. He writes:

> And power of God is understood not as the power by which according to His essence He is powerful but the power by virtue of which He makes powerful and strong. As one says, ‘the gift of God,’ ‘the creature of God,’ or ‘the things of God,’ so one also says the power of God.294

As Luther describes, the “power” of God is God’s ability to appear in the world and make His presence known by the acts of goodness that take place in the world. For Luther, it is through the “invisible things of God” that “one can see how one man helps

---

293 Ibid., 151.
294 Ibid., 149.
another, one animal another,” and so on.\textsuperscript{295} In this sense, we bring goodness into the world not by what we do (through our own acts or works), but by what we allow God to bring forth in us. This provides a very complex picture of the religious experience: in one sense, the human being cannot produce a perception or judgment about the goodness of God, as such things are only of the realm of Spirit. Nonetheless, this still places the human being in the important role of witness. While human consciousness is forever tainted by sin, it is nonetheless the only faculty the human being has for participating in religious experience. A central concern of Luther’s overall theological project is clarifying the role human perception plays in facilitating this process. For Luther, this is precisely where previous schools of philosophy and theology have missed the mark. During his time at the University of Wittenberg, where he gave his Lectures on Romans in addition to many other significant projects, Luther sought to establish a theology that was separate from the “Aristotelian causation” that was a major component of Scholasticism in general, but especially that of Aquinas.\textsuperscript{296} Luther took issue with the notion that nature and the natural reason of the human being could provide knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{297} This is an idea that he will continue to develop in the years to come and will eventually become established as his “theology of the cross” that

\textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 158. Furthermore, it is important to consider how this same basic concept—that is, how the perception of God’s goodness animates the goodness in human behavior—is also present in the social ethic that is purported by Feuerbach in Christianity. While this is a theme that is evident throughout the work, see especially his discussion of the necessity of love being exalted into substance (that is, through actual behavior in society) on 52, or the discussion of the faith/love dichotomy in chapters 26-27. Feuerbach suggests that the false or theological aspect of religion values faith (as only passivity or latency, a waiting) over love (an actualized social ethic of responsibility).


\textsuperscript{297} Ibid., 26. Kusukawa considers also how Philip Melanchthon, in the tradition of Lutheran orthodoxy, sought to transform this notion of Scholastic “natural philosophy.” At times, Kusukawa seems to be conflating the distinction between “natural theology” (such as in the style of William Paley in the 1700’s) and “natural law” of Thomistic theology. For her purposes, however—and for the most part I agree—both of these discourses are significant in spite of their differences because they regard human reason and judgment as worthy indicators of the majesty of God insofar as both of these describe the human ability to know these matters through deductive or empirical means.
is the foundation of his Reformation theology. This is a particularly significant point in relation to Hegel and his appropriation of Aristotle’s *energia*. The Aristotelian element in Hegel suggests that the events of existence are teleologically inclined towards the Good. Luther says something quite different here: goodness does not take place as the result of a natural progression but a total rupture—namely, the presence of God over and against the natural workings of the world.

4.1.1 Luther’s Theology of the Cross

Alister E. McGrath suggests that the issues that emerged in Luther’s theology in years 1509-1519 lead to the “breakthrough” of his establishment of the “theology of the cross” [*theologica crucis*], illustrated especially in such works as the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518).

This question is particularly relevant because it speaks to the aforementioned issues of the inadequate human self-consciousness due to sin. He suggests that we look to Theses 19 and 20 in the *Heidelberg Disputation* in order to gain a clear picture of the theology of the cross:

19. The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian.
20. The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God [*posteriora Dei*] as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian.

In these two theses, Luther explains that we ought to be wary of the person who regards human wisdom as a sufficient tool for discerning the things of God. The problems of sin indicate that the human self cannot rightly utilize its own devices in theological observations. Because of the negative influence of sin, we can only view the good in this reflective, dialectical capacity. Whatever we observe of God, we only know

---

299 Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* in McGrath, 148. McGrath notes problems with other translations of these two theses in particular so I have cited his translation.
it as good with reference to our inadequacies and not as a spontaneous and self-originating judgment in our own right. As McGrath explains, “for Luther, the sole authentic locus of man’s knowledge of God is the cross of Christ.” He explains how Luther’s mention of the *posteriora Dei* refers to Exodus 33:23, where like Moses, we “can only see God from the rear: we are denied a direct knowledge of God, or a vision of his face.” This notion of “indirect” knowledge is an important clarification in terms of how human beings participate in theological matters: we can neither look directly into the sun, nor can we gain a direct knowledge of God. We cannot uncover religious knowledge through our own deductive reasoning or powers of speculation, as this type of knowledge is available through revelation alone. Luther states that the good is not before us to grasp or uncover, and we must look to God in order to reveal it to us. In this way, God carries the hermeneutical burden, so to speak: while the sinner believes that knowledge originates (or can be uncovered) in the human mind, the righteous person understands that God can only be revealed to us indirectly, as God reveals Himself through the crucifixion. McGrath explains:

This revelation is to be recognized in the sufferings and the cross of Christ, rather than in human moral activity or the created order. Both the moralist and the rationalist expect to find God through intelligent reflection upon the nature of man’s moral sense or the pattern of the created order: for Luther, ‘true theology and knowledge of God are found in Christ crucified.’ The cross shatters human illusions concerning the capacity of human reason to discern God in this manner.

This idea also relates to the earlier passage from *Lectures on Romans* in which Luther explains that human beings learn of the “power of God” by the changes that he effects in the world. Insofar as human reason cannot understand or grasp the ways of the cross, Luther explains that God is known by what God effects/signifies: in this case, God

---

300 McGrath, 149.
301 Ibid.
302 Ibid., 150.
is known through suffering. Luther is very clear to point out that human reason is not performing the interpretive task in such a moment. The majesty of God appears and is made known through Christ’s suffering on the cross. Luther explains that this is rightly thought of as what God allows to be seen, rather than a product of human effort or uncovering. The “theologian of glory” looks to the visible world and human intellect as sources of the good, but the “theologian of the cross” seeks God as a revelation that is wholly separate from the created world that is now tainted after the Fall. This idea also illustrates another concept that is central to Luther’s theology of the cross: the hiddenness of God [Deus absconditus]. Where the theologian of the cross understands that God is hidden from the world and therefore must be revealed, or uncovered by the grace of God alone, the theologian of glory seeks to uncover this knowledge himself. In Theses 14-16, Luther explains how human beings need to make the distinction between their active capacities of free will and reason and their passive capacities of receiving God’s grace:

14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could free will endure in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.
16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.303

Luther separates human consciousness into two distinct parts: the active and the passive. The active is associated with what is generated by the human will, speculative knowledge and originates in Creation; the passive is what is generated by God and is associated with theology and revelatory knowledge. This also illustrates why Luther regards suffering as such an important aspect of the theology of the cross. In the experience of suffering, the human being realizes meaning through a source other than

his own speculative will or reason. The act of suffering is not *produced* in a manner that a rational thought would take place, but rather *happens* to the self: in such experiences the human being is rendered passive to himself. This is not a point of theodicy, but rather an indication to Luther of the limitations of physical embodiment. He explains the pain one feels, as well as one’s inability to stop it, as indicative of the presence of God. In such moments, the will and the corresponding theology of glory are annihilated, opening a place within human consciousness for the power of God to appear in a manner that renders the self completely passive. This is a unique type of awareness that it is clearly not under the guise of human intentionality, cognition, or will. In Luther’s view these forms of awareness are not possible in the postlapsarian state; the human being no longer has mastery over his selfhood and capacities of consciousness.

These issues are also at the heart of Luther’s debate with Erasmus in *Bondage of the Will*. Luther is forceful in his criticism of Erasmus’ humanism. Where Erasmus argues that human reason and human will can be regarded as efficacious in the effort for salvation, Luther retorts that knowledge regarding eternal life “is something that passes human comprehension.”304 Again, we can only learn of the power of God in this relational fashion, and not through direct human understanding. God is hidden from human knowledge, and therefore we are reliant upon the ways God chooses to reveal Himself to us. In this model laid out by the Pauline Epistles, the human being becomes self-aware (as sinner) in a dialectical fashion: I relate to my true nature as a fallen creature in comparison to the power of God, and I relate to the power of God in relationship to my own inadequacies. For Luther and Paul, the human being’s inability to truly fulfill the demands of the Law is a prime example of this. Through the Law and the Gospel, God interacts with human beings and reveals the true nature of their

condition. In his tongue-in-cheek diatribe (against the personified Diatribe, Erasmus), Luther comments:

If then, Moses so distinctly announces that there is in us not only a faculty, but also a facility for keeping all the commandments, why are we sweating so much? Why did we not promptly produce this passage and assert free choice on a free field? What need is there now of Christ and the Spirit?\(^{305}\)

If salvation were simply a project, he asks here, then why are we not more comfortable about the possible outcome? It should be a simple issue of completing the tasks laid out by the Law. But because we always fall short of these Commandments, Luther reminds us of the need for Christ as Redeemer. Luther continues Paul’s assertion that salvation will be attained by grace alone, and not the effort of the human being, as “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”\(^{306}\) In Luther’s view, human consciousness is conditioned by the effort to become aware of the fallen condition of humanity as demonstrated by such instances as human suffering or the will’s inability to choose its proper ends. He explains self-awareness as awareness of the lack that exists in relation to the almighty God. This is not an act of rational contemplation but a moment in which the self is affected by its greater power, God. Once again, this locates suffering as a very unique and powerful theological experience. McGrath explains how the theologian of the cross actually welcomes the experience of suffering because it is a moment in which God reveals His glory:

The significance of suffering, whether this is understood as *passiones Christi* or human *Anfechtung* [suffering], is that it represents the *opus alienum* [alien to God’s nature] through which God works out his *opus proprium* [belongs to God’s nature]...God assaults man in order to break him down and thus to justify him...Far from regarding suffering as evil or a nonsensical intrusion into the world...the theologian of the cross regards such suffering as his most precious

\(^{305}\) Ibid., 203.

\(^{306}\) Ibid., 308.
treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves.\textsuperscript{307}

This passage does not suggest that Luther’s view is a theodicy, but rather illuminates the complexities at hand due to the impact of original sin. Because human beings are embodied, we must also be cognizant of the ways in which the calamities of our flesh nonetheless indicate the presence of God. As the Fall has caused a discontinuity between God and human being and the means of understanding available between them, it is now necessary for God to reveal himself in other forms (such as human suffering), and strangely enough, incorporate aspects of His Being that are in fact alien to Him as a means of God’s self-expression. This is not a commentary on the limitations of God because God is by definition all that there is, but instead is an effort for God to incorporate additional spheres of existence into His being or assume different ways of appearing to human consciousness. Again, this is all necessary because of the disconnect that now exists between God and human being: knowledge about God and religious experiences cannot be regarded as products of human effort, nor can they rightly be understood as originating in the limited realm of human understanding.

This passage also suggests that embedded in the very nature of God’s being and by extension human being, is a receptivity to its dialectical other. This apparent paradox is nonetheless necessary as the result of human sin and the resulting change that takes place in the Created world. God’s creation is now fallen—and as a result, the method by which God is revealed to the world must take on new dimensions. This is where Luther’s theology takes its most definitive shape. His problem with the “Aristotelian causation” of Thomistic theology is that it still ascribes human ends and God’s ends as being part of the same telos. In this paradigm, the human conscience is still inclined towards the good, even after the Fall. Instead, Luther suggests that the identity of

\textsuperscript{307} McGrath, 151.
human beings is simultaneously sinful and just \( \textit{simul peccator et iustus} \) and can therefore be redeemed only in Christ, and not autonomous human effort.\textsuperscript{308} Luther must achieve the difficult task of describing how this is not the case \textit{without} simultaneously undermining the ontology of God’s own creation; he must explain that decidedly human ends are no longer inclined towards the good, but to evil, but also that the good can still reach humanity—insofar as it is acknowledged that this is a good that is wholly caused by God. Human beings display the goodness of God not as their own doing, but as an effect. Because human beings are not the authors of good actions, but simply exist in a space in which the good can appear, the manner in which we think about ourselves in relationship to goodness becomes two-fold. Not only does this demonstrate the decidedly “existential” component of Luther’s theology, but it also illustrates a profound parallel to Feuerbach’s description of the human self in \textit{Christianity}. Furthermore, both authors explain that human beings are aware of this dual aspect to their identity as conditions of their \textit{natural} existence.

This is also an important concept when considering the place of Luther’s ideas in relationship to other characteristics of Western thought, particularly the \textit{teleology} of Hegel and Aristotle. While Luther’s Christian doctrine is indeed ultimately synthetic through one’s salvation by Christ, the physical and existential reality of the subject (as flesh, sinner, and the limitations contained therein) is necessary in the self’s recognition of the majesty of God. This once again illustrates Luther’s affinity towards Plato rather than Aristotle in his differentiation between the two spheres of God and human/Created world, but it also underscores the importance of considering how these two spheres are in relation to one another. The world and human experience relate to God—and therefore are good—insofar as they are the places where God reveals His

\textsuperscript{308} Along these lines, James McCue suggests that an important difference between Aquinas and Luther is the latter’s rejection of Aristotelian ontology in “‘Simul iustus et peccator’ in Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther: Toward Putting the Debate into Context,” \textit{Journal of the American Academy of Religion} Vol. 48, No. 1, (March 1980): 81-96.
goodness. Walther von Loewenich explains the philosophical heritage of this aspect of Luther’s model:

The basic insight where Luther takes over from Augustine’s Neoplatonism is the separation of the two worlds. On the one side is the world of things invisible, spiritual, understandable, interior, and on the other side the world of things visible, physical, subject to the senses, external...Man—and this leads us to our theme—stands between these two worlds. He belongs fully to neither of the two, but he participates in both.\textsuperscript{309}

Interestingly, the elements of Luther’s model that seek to draw a clear line between human and divine have the interesting consequence of actually placing more emphasis on the finite realm. In this Platonic and dualist scheme, Luther has to account for how these two realms can still have interaction with one another, which is where the emphasis on the human being’s experience of God originates. If the human being were simply a privation of the good in the Thomistic-Aristotelian sense, its identity and purpose would be enveloped into that of God. Yet with Luther’s theology of the cross, human beings and their faculties must be regarded as completely separate from God.

It is ironically at this point where Luther and Feuerbach intersect. From a metaphysical standpoint, Luther’s theological dualism bears affinity towards Platonism. However, his effort to describe the religious subject’s experience of God from a natural and existential standpoint is precisely what occupied Feuerbach so significantly. Both Luther and Feuerbach name the self’s perception of affectivity by the Other as the precondition of human identity. While Feuerbach indeed criticizes the anti-natural assumptions of dualist metaphysics, he does so on the grounds that such models claim a dichotomy between the two worlds that does not actually exist. Luther’s theology heralds the supreme goodness of God over the depraved human race, yet because of

\textsuperscript{309} Walther von Loewenich, \textit{Luther’s Theology of the Cross}, tr. Herbert J.A. Bouman, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 59. Von Loewenich also notes the important distinctions between Luther and the Platonic model, including the role of grace and that fact that as God’s creation, the material world is not altogether evil. That being said, the important differences between Luther and Thomistic theology are highlighted by this passage.
this disparity he must also explain how the former can be knowable by the latter. Feuerbach’s thought contains a similar doctrine of difference, albeit from the opposite starting point. In Christianity, the projection model describes self-objectification as a means of recognition of its nature. Feuerbach views this fracturing of the self as a necessary aspect of the dual nature of human self-consciousness in its own right, but also by virtue of the fact that the human self exists within nature and as a natural being. Feuerbach’s bone of contention with Luther is with not his doctrine of otherness, but the fact that it denigrates nature. Feuerbach argued that the recognition of our nature and finitude provides a more accurate view of existence and also contains an implicit moral compass. We are made aware of our nature through the feeling of passivity, and this demonstrates a need for humility and sense of solidarity with the larger community. Feuerbach argues that our naturalism is our most accurate tool of awareness and this is eliminated if our sense of self is subsumed by a supranatural concept. This is precisely the problem with Hegelian idealism and the Aristotelian concept of teleology as described in chapter two.

4.2 Sin, Existential Faith, and Justification

Luther’s above description of the fallen nature of the human condition leaves a rather bleak picture: humans are completely isolated from the good, unable to reach it by their own accord and suffering is regarded as the quintessential religious experience insofar as it demonstrates this divide and the supreme power of God. Following in Paul’s footsteps, Luther views the unobtainable standards of the Law as a continued sign of our fractured condition and fallen will, and total reliance upon the grace of God for justification. In his theological writings, Luther sought to isolate the relationship of God and human being: before the sacraments, rituals, and church authority, the most profound fact of this is that the human being exists—as a fallen being, in total
solitude—before God. The condition for the possibility of human identity is awareness of the contrast that exists between God’s perfection and our fallenness: we are self-aware as impotent, depraved, isolated, suffering beings existing before the awesome power of God. This is not a teleological scheme in which human beings are naturally inclined towards the good, or can effect the good in their own right, as there is nothing we can do to ensure our salvation save being affected by grace and alien righteousness. These observations about the despairing nature of the human condition underline the simple fact that human beings rightly have faith only in the righteousness of Christ as Redeemer and not themselves, and it also points to an interesting aspect of Luther’s theology. For Luther, the effort to underscore the fallenness of humanity also underscores the significance of Christ as He who justifies, and it draws special attention to the manner in which God affects the faithful in a decidedly existential and anthropological manner.310

4.2.1 Christ: The Human Being in Isolation

Luther’s awareness of the isolated nature of the human being forms a major foundation of his theological assertions. The necessary consequence of his emphasis on salvation by Christ alone has the interesting consequence of emphasizing the existential element of faith. Luther describes the fallen human identity as a kind of terminal illness; each day is one day closer to the sorrowful end of the human life, at least. To borrow a phrase from Heidegger, one’s human existence is truly one’s being-toward-death, saved only by the influence of Christ: “so against my death which bindeth me, I have another death, that is to say, life, which quickeneth me in Christ; and this death

310 This idea relates to many of the observations in the first chapter, including Harvey’s discussion of the “felicity principle” and Barth’s suggestion that after Luther, the view that God exists “for man” inspires the anthropological turn of such thinkers as Schleiermacher and Feuerbach.
looseth and freeth me from the bonds of my death [sic].”311 The complete and total isolation of the human being is explained further in Luther’s description of “alien righteousness.” Righteousness is fully external to the human being, made possible by Christ alone. When the human being is affected by this grace alien to it, two things take place: first, his existence as a fallen creature is made evident, and second, he takes on a new character as living in Christ. Luther writes:

This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: ‘Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.’312

This alien righteousness transforms our very existence and serves as a foundation for our identity. The newly transformed takes on a new existence not as living in oneself, but as living in Christ. Luther explains this as literally a kind of rebirth: we had one existence as sinner, and a second as sanctified: “he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he.”313 The act of trusting in Christ inaugurates a new selfhood that is not composed of one’s material embodiment alone, but an awareness of something greater, namely one’s ultimate vocation as having an eternal life in Christ.

As that which is “set opposite original sin,” Luther describes alien righteousness as the wellspring out of which the human subject is inspired to act as a new person in Christ. While an immediate change takes place in one’s being affected by alien righteousness, the effort to truly live as Christ is a lifelong effort. He writes that this is a continuous striving, not “instilled at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.”314 Nonetheless, the moment one receives the grace

---

312 Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness (Sermon, 1519),” Ibid., 86.
313 Ibid., 88 [emphasis mine].
314 Ibid.
of God, one’s very being is completely changed. No longer is the person a sinner who is radically disconnected from the source of the good; through the grace of God, and as a result of the impact of alien righteousness, the person takes on a new awareness of a person who exists in Christ, and thus can effect the good as such. In the simultaneous recognition of one’s limited fallen state, and similarly, transformation through Christ’s goodness, a person takes on a new identity. While this transformation does not make us just like Christ, we live in the hope of Christ’s redemption and view our new life as an opportunity to exist in Christ and live as Christ to the best of our abilities. Luther explains how this changes our behavior, as well as our self-identity, in a very profound fashion:

Now, when I have thus apprehended Christ by faith, and through him am dead to the law, justified from sin, delivered from death, the devil and hell, then I do good works. I love God, I give thanks to him, I exercise charity towards my neighbor...This is our divinity; which seemeth strange and marvelous, or rather foolish, to carnal reason...[sic]

The transformative element of the human being’s sanctification cannot be overemphasized. Luther describes here how human beings actually become divine through the actions of good works. He writes that God’s presence is made known in the world through the acts of charity that individuals put into action, literally enacting divinity within human beings.

4.2.2 Humanity: God’s Presence in the World

Luther regarded the Gospel of John as the most precious of Scripture, or part of his “inner canon.” John’s exposition of the significance of the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) was of significant interest to Luther for many of the reasons considered above.

---

315 Luther, “Commentary on Galatians,” 122.
Luther looks to this Gospel in an effort to further illuminate the problem we have been considering throughout this chapter. He describes human beings after the Fall as radically disconnected from God and as a result have only a very dim vision of the good that is made possible only by God’s presence in the world. This places a strong emphasis on John’s interest in the Word made flesh, because in Jesus human beings have a visible and tangible example of the presence of God. The physicality of Jesus, as well as individual instances of human pain and suffering, are for Luther the moments where human beings can learn of the contrast between the calamity of the fallen world and the hope that is given by God alone. To illustrate, Ronald F. Marshall suggests that the crucifixion in particular serves as the primary “scandal” of the Fourth Gospel, as nothing is more shocking than God Himself dying in such a graphic manner.\textsuperscript{317} The brutality and violence associated with Jesus’ death on the Cross nonetheless emphasizes both his own humanity \textit{and} his divine redemptive grace for the rest of the world.

Luther’s interpretation of John explains how the Christian has the choice between living either in the world or “set[ting] out for eternal life in heaven,” but underscores that our knowledge of this choice is only possible vis-à-vis tangible signs, namely baptismal water and the sacrifice of Christ’s body: “By means of Baptism and the Word of God He places you and your Christianity into the lap of our dear mother, the Christian Church. This He accomplished through His suffering and death that \textit{by virtue} of His death and blood we might live eternally.”\textsuperscript{318}

Marshall explains that a long-standing debate has existed in Johannine scholarship regarding whether or not Jesus is compared positively to a serpent.\textsuperscript{319} Not only does this appear as a somewhat unseemly comparison towards the Son of God, but this is of course especially provocative because of the key role a serpent played in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[318] Luther, \textit{Sermons on the Gospel of St. John}, Vol. 22, 291 [emphasis mine].
\item[319] Marshall, 387, n. 9.
\end{footnotes}
Garden of Eden to tempt Adam and Eve to consume from the Tree of Knowledge. Is Jesus being compared to Satan in some way? Luther explains that Christ is indeed “the Serpent of our salvation,” and that Christ becomes this serpent as he was nailed to the Cross atoning for our sins.\textsuperscript{320} Using this same imagery, he recounts the story of Christ being condemned to death, “regarded not as a godly person but as a venomous worm unworthy of having the sun shine on Him.”\textsuperscript{321} For Luther, it is crucial that we understand the despair and contempt associated with the redemptive event of Christ’s crucifixion. This was not a happy moment where the heavens opened and the angels ushered Jesus into heaven, as Jesus was literally “numbered with the transgressors” (Is 53:12). His punishment was that of a common criminal: bloody, painful, and shameful. In one sense, this description highlights the humility we should feel as sinners for what Christ had to endure, but it also describes the human condition \textit{itself} as the condition for the possibility of its own redemption. The wretched state of Jesus’ body on the cross and literally hanging like a serpent becomes the site of God’s entrance into the world and the possibility for human salvation.

The Feuerbachian analysis to these observations, of course, is the fact that God’s supernatural goodness is essentially reliant upon natural and physical signs of expression. In spite of the implicit dualistic structure of flesh/spirit that these descriptions emphasize, they also have the interesting effect of emphasizing aspects of the human condition as the means by which humans learn of theological truth. In the Fourth Gospel, the Word is not regarded as an ephemeral reality; it is made \textit{flesh}. The human identity left alone is indeed a lesser, depraved reality, but it is nonetheless an inseparable part of the picture Luther describes. As a consequence of the aforementioned dualist scheme and the total separation of the human being from the good, Luther must explain how the sinner still has the ability to be affected by God.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 341.
While this may ultimately be regarded as an event facilitated by God’s grace, it would be a significant oversight to not consider the nuances of this relationship—or more specifically, the moments in which each party is called to be active and passive at various moments. For example, the existential despair felt by the sinner places a strong emphasis on the role of Christ as Redeemer—as the one who conquers despair—yet ironically also demonstrates the role of incarnation and materiality, signifiers of despair for the sinner, as what allows Christ to redeem. In his discussion of Romans 3:7, Luther considers the role the existential self plays in the fulfillment of Christ’s identity. He writes:

Thus God is justified in His words, that is, when we believe Him in the Gospel concerning the fulfillment of the promise, so that He is regarded as truthful and righteous. For these words of His in which He is justified are the word of the Gospel, when people believe Him, that He speaks the truth in them and that what is prophesied in this Word will come to pass.\footnote{Luther, Romans, 210.}

For God to truly \textit{be} justified as a God \textit{who} justifies, He must be regarded as such in existence. This is not a move that changes the ontology of what God \textit{is} in Himself: God is still God whether or not we recognize it. But in order for the covenantal promise to truly be fulfilled, God must be recognized as the being who justifies the human sinner. In this way, God is truly God insofar as the human being is conscious of God’s justification. This furthers the notion of the “power of God” from the previous section: God’s truth is revealed in the world by means of phenomenological effect. God is seen in the world through the events and effects that are caused by God. Because of the mark of original sin, we cannot see the good directly or cause it to happen; we only see the effects of God’s goodness. In earlier pages, I considered the various forms this could take, both pleasant and unpleasant: when Christ exists in us, we are compelled towards acts of charity for our fellow neighbors on one hand, but on the other, acts of
pain and suffering are also regarded as paramount theological experiences. In particular, suffering is such an important experience because of its identification with Christ’s death on the cross for the sins of humanity. The presence of Christ in the world has far-reaching implications not only for human beings, but also God Himself.\textsuperscript{323}

In \textit{Sermons on the Gospel of John}, for example, Luther begins with what he regards as a “crude illustration” to explain the significance of the Son of God. Through faith, it is understood that “the Father bestows His entire divine nature on the Son.”\textsuperscript{324} However, in the same way that a “painting of wine may possess the semblance and likeness of wine, but wine it is not,” we cannot participate fully in the divinity of Jesus.\textsuperscript{325} This means that we will never truly understand the depth of our ultimate identity as existing in Christ, or truly be able to fulfill it as mere human beings. Nonetheless, even if we will always be inadequate in our attempts to masterfully know Jesus as the Son of God and all that entails, we still have these natural means of recognition available to us. For Luther, the most significant of these is certainly faith, but he also describes other experiences in which human beings have a perception of the divinity of God. The significance of the Word becoming flesh in Jesus’ human form means that as human beings, we also experience manifestations of the Word. The difference is that we cannot fully grasp or understand the depth of what is transpiring. Luther provides an account of such experiences:

This analogy of our word is very inadequate and vague. But although our Word cannot be compared to His Word, it affords us a faint idea. Indeed, it impels us to ponder that matter and to obtain a better insight into its meaning, comparing the thoughts and speculations of the human heart with those of God and thus perceiving how God’s Son is a Word. For as I hold secret and inaudible converse with myself, decide on future actions, debate about this or that within myself as I

\textsuperscript{323} Much of the philosophical literature to be considered in a moment will hinge on this point. In particular, Feuerbach’s project considers the extent to which Lutheran theology backs itself into a corner and thus theology becomes anthropology.

\textsuperscript{324} Luther, \textit{Sermons on the Gospel of St. John}, Vol. 22, 6.

\textsuperscript{325} Ibid.
walk about, these secret and silent words of my heart, if freely and frankly released, would, I suppose, contain power sufficient for the ears of several thousand people...If love is genuine, then the heart of the person is so full of thoughts of love that he sees, hears, and feels nothing else...if anger is genuine, it occupies the heart so fully as to make a man insensible of himself.\(^{326}\)

Luther describes experiences of love and anger as “occupations of the heart” that are illuminative of the religious experience. In one sense, moments of extreme love and anger are times in which fully rational accounts are unable to explain the depth of the emotions taking place, and thus demonstrate the limitations of human reason after the Fall. To the human being, such conversations are “invisible and incomprehensible,” but Luther suggests that in our acknowledgment that God’s consciousness is without limit, these kinds of experiences simply demonstrate to us the scope of God’s omnipotence and omnipresence.\(^{327}\) He suggests that such moments of limitation and weakness also demonstrate the power of God’s perfection and presence. These moments show to us that even after the Fall we still have the capacity to be made aware of God’s power and to be affected by it. The fact that anger and love occupy our hearts and not our reason indicates a structure within human consciousness that is based on receptivity or affectivity, and not autonomy. It is true that we feel anger and love and they are indeed our emotions, but we cannot accurately say that we cause such emotions to occur. In fact, it is quite the opposite: love is gripping us, causing us to feel a certain way. These emotions identify a location that is contained within human self-consciousness but is nonetheless fully unknown to us. Luther continues this point by citing a passage from First Corinthians:

> ‘No person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him’ [1 Cor 2:11]...Thus God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a speech, a thought, or

\(^{326}\) Ibid, 9-10. As discussed in chapter one and will be considered more fully in the next chapter, the resemblance between Luther’s comments here and Feuerbach’s in the Preface and first chapter of Christianity is striking, especially p. 4. It is a reasonable hypothesis that Luther is Feuerbach’s unattributed source in such passages.

\(^{327}\) Ibid., 10.
a conversation with Himself in his divine heart, unknown to angels and men...No one has given Him His speech, His Word, or His conversation. What He is, He is of Himself from eternity. But whatever we are, we have received from Him and not from ourselves. He alone has everything from himself.328

Not only do these occupations of heart demonstrate our limitations and inability to truly understand ourselves and our emotions, they also provide us with great truth, because their presence opens our awareness of the power of God. When our hearts are occupied and we have these mysterious conversations with ourselves in an effort to understand, we are also making an effort to understand the relationship between finitude and infinite understanding, or where our limited consciousness ends and God’s must take over.

It is on this point that Feuerbach and many others from Nietzsche to Barth have much to say about Luther’s theology in spite of their individual differences. They will all agree that there are many points in which Luther blurs the lines that exist between humanity and divinity, or at least describes the relationship in such a way that lends itself to a number of interpretations. Consider the following passage from his Sermons on the Fourth Gospel:

He [John] unites wonderfully the two natures in the one Person of Christ. Although it is not the work of the Son of man to save, to deliver from death, and to confer eternal life—a work that is not appropriate to man at all but to God alone—John declares that the Son of man was lifted up that all who believe in Him might have eternal life. Thus he does not separate the two natures here. He does not say: ‘Whoever believes in the Son of God has eternal life;’ but ‘Whoever believes in the Son of man.’ The two natures are united in the single Person of Christ, and this Person is both God and man. The two natures, deity and humanity, are found in one Person; and the attributes of each nature are imputed

328 Ibid., 9. Pelikan suggests that here Luther is speaking of the medieval doctrine of aseity, or that only God has his own origins in Himself, and other beings have their true source in a being outside of themselves. This is also a point of considerable philosophical significance for Feuerbach, especially with reference to the notion of God as a projection in the Christianity.
to the other, so that whoever believes in the Son of man believes not only in a human being but also in God.\textsuperscript{329}

This is one of numerous passages from Luther’s writing that illustrate where a person like Feuerbach finds his entrance into the discussion. While Luther clearly wants to emphasize that the work of redemption is a task performed by God alone, the actual toil of redemption—the miracles performed, interactions with human beings, persecution, and crucifixion—were experienced by Jesus, the \textit{human} being. Jesus is a unique figure therefore because he unites deity and humanity in his flesh. In his commentaries on not only the Fourth Gospel but also the Pauline epistles at large, Luther introduces a number of important concepts that serve as fodder for a number of philosophical and theological figures to follow. His denial of human reason as the means of salvation nonetheless has the unusual effect of placing human selfhood as an important factor in the overall redemptive model. Unlike a model that would be influenced by Aristotle’s account of causation, where human reason can be regarded as an active faculty towards the good, Luther describes reason as completely fallen and thus the human self is completely reliant on the grace of God for salvation. That being said, the human being still must become conscious of how he is to be saved, and from a Feuerbachian perspective this is where the interesting philosophical implications emerge. Because human consciousness and reason have been negatively affected by sin, we can only observe God through phenomenological effect. The presence of God is given a site of disclosure within the human domain: God is known by what He causes: miracles, acts of charity, the crucifixion of Christ, and even human suffering at times. Luther explains these physical manifestations of Christ’s redemptive power as absolutely necessary events that make it possible for the human being to understand the power of God. For thinkers like Feuerbach and others, this offers a ground that is fertile for additional

\textsuperscript{329} Ibid., 346.
interpretation because God’s presence as the divine, omnipotent, transcendent being is now described in the context of such events as one’s awareness of self as sinner, or the sanctifying blood of Jesus. These moments do not affect the actual being of God in Himself, but they are nonetheless integral mechanisms in terms of what can be truly known or apprehended within human consciousness. Indeed, Luther does not intend for these events to suggest that the lines between humanity and divinity are now conflated, but the razor-thin distinction of these lines is precisely what Feuerbach wants to press. Whether or not he is completely fair to Luther is less important than the fact that Luther raises important issues that inspire a number of philosophical schools to follow, and for that reason their interpretations are a necessary consideration in a complete exposition of Luther’s legacy.

4.3 The Philosophical Implications of Luther’s Model

4.3.1 Religious Consciousness as Passivity and Feeling

Both intentionally and unintentionally, Luther raises a number of issues that serve as a foundation for philosophical thought to follow, and particularly the issues that were of central concern for Feuerbach. Because knowledge of the good does not originate in human effort or reason, the nature of religious experience must be clarified and this clarification illustrates distinct features of religious consciousness. In one sense, human beings must take a posture of passivity or awe in their awareness of God; they do not cause or will such knowledge, but instead experience and feel it and are made aware of God’s infinity in relationship to human finitude. The phenomenology of human suffering and/or human emotions as love and anger serve as examples of these
experiences. These events illustrate how God is revealed in human consciousness, albeit as the Being who is wholly Other.

Many scholars have written about how these observations by Luther inspired changes in religious discourse. John Dillenberger suggests that Luther introduces a “new source” of religious interpretation that is characterized by such thinkers as Schleiermacher, Otto and Feuerbach, as I will explain in the next chapter. These works are significant because they “carved a new area for religion—namely experience—or more precisely still, feeling, in the sense of a directly different order of cognition than had been previously possible in either philosophy or theology.” As Dillenberger points out, Otto himself attributes his own observations regarding the numinous to Luther’s theology: “even when he is speaking solely in rational terms of judgement [sic], punishment, and the wrath of God, we must, if we are to recapture the real Luther in these expressions, hear sounding in them the profoundly non-rational strain of ‘religious awe’.” While a profoundly important aspect of Luther’s legacy, it is also the area that is ripe with possibility for misinterpretation. The denial of reason, or the so-called “irrationality” of Lutheran-era thought, has been given responsibility for all kinds of atrocities, both intellectual and political, in the modern age.
This discussion has merit but it responds to different issues than the ones at stake for us. Rather than an emphasis on the so-called “irrational” aspects of Luther’s thought and its possible implications, another of our primary interests relates to Luther’s introduction of a “non-rational” or even perhaps precognitive awareness as part of a modality of human consciousness. After the Fall, our means of self-recognition is now severely impaired, but we have the basic capacity to think of our limitations in relation to the ideal reality of God. Luther’s emphasis on the impact of sin and the human being’s complete inability to know oneself means that self-consciousness is the result of a reflective effort, and awareness of one’s limitations conceived in relationship to the power and limitlessness of God. The human being cannot think of oneself, nor can he think of God, without thinking of what those entities mean in relationship to the other. Clearly, Luther and Feuerbach differ significantly about which side of the ontological divide they stand, but they nonetheless are fully committed to engaging in the same conversation. With reference to these later thinkers, the most provocative aspect of Luther’s thought pertains to the fact that human self-consciousness in all of its implications and permutations is made possible by an initial awareness of its limitations. This awareness occurs by virtue of our capacity to be affected, humbled, awestruck, and rendered passive by the power of God, and it is also the only condition that allows the human being to fully and accurately ponder the various dimensions of human nature. To borrow a phrase from Reiner Schürrmann, Luther suggests that when the human self-identity is understood religiously, the foundation of self-identity is not the purely autonomous act of saying “I”; it is saying “I obey” to God. Luther writes:

of German consciousness [“l’homme allemande par excellence”] that is highly individualistic, anthropocentric, and the source of the problems of modernity: “et de claimeurs discordantes, regardant, avant Nietzsche, la vie comme essentiellement tragique, Luther est bien le type de l’individualisme moderne, (le prototype des ages modernes, dira Fichte).” Many of the debates concerning the ethical impact of Kierkegaard’s discussion of the binding of Isaac in Fear and Trembling can also be linked to a Pauline-Lutheran model of justification. See Ronald Green, “Enough is Enough! Fear and Trembling is Not about Ethics,” Journal of Religious Ethics 21.2, (Fall 1993).
In going outside of himself, God directs us to enter into ourselves, and by the knowledge he has of himself, he brings about in us the knowledge that we have of ourselves.\textsuperscript{335}

Luther explains that we gain our consciousness not as self-contained, autonomous beings, but through the self-consciousness that is put forth in us by God. Our self-consciousness must be disclosed to us by God; in ourselves, we cannot simply cause a clear self-understanding to emerge through willed self-reflection. In this regard, Schürmann has suggested that before Kant, the Lutheran model of subjectivity inaugurated the notion of a transcendental subject as a self who is phenomenologically called to being itself.\textsuperscript{336} Along these lines, Schürmann writes that “the consciousness I have of myself is the consciousness of a causality”.\textsuperscript{337} This point relates to my criticism what I described earlier as the “psychological” interpretations of Feuerbach’s model of religion like those found in Harvey and Guthrie. Prior to the self’s ability to consider its own interests or psychological needs for existential security, it must, quite simply, be itself. While Barth’s analysis of Feuerbach embraces the value of Sinnlichkeit to Feuerbach’s thought, he still situates this in the midst of his critique of the post-Lutheran consciousness of God existing “for man.” Barth’s criticism is like the psychological models in this regard because it assumes that human self-consciousness already exists as a spontaneous and self-aware activity of the ego, much like the ego-consciousness of idealism. While Barth criticizes the anthropocentrism of thinkers like Feuerbach and suggests that it is an unfortunate interpretation of Luther’s thought, the notion of the self-aware, spontaneous, intentional ego is precisely what Luther condemns and Feuerbach believes is not possible. Instead, both Luther and Feuerbach describe human consciousness in a more passive sense, as self-awareness is only

\textsuperscript{335} This quote from Luther is found in Reiner Schürmann, \textit{Broken Hegemonies}, tr. Reginald Lilly, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 394. Schürmann also considers the transcendental significance of the “I obey” on page 442.
\textsuperscript{336} This is outlined in all of chapter one, but see especially Schürmann, 377.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 394.
possible in relation to the awareness of one’s limitations. In the case of Luther, Schürmann explains how this takes place during the formation of self-identity that results after God’s appearing in the world. We acknowledge our human self-identity insofar as we exist before the majesty of God. Moreover, Feuerbach continues an extension of this idea in his discussion of religious subjectivity. As described in the second chapter, the self’s species-awareness through the projection paradigm is subsequent to the first moment of the appearing sovereign “power,” as it is this moment that makes me aware of the possibility of my subjectivity at all.

The contrast between Luther’s description of the passive, reflective religious subject and the self-aware, self-causing ego of German idealism is striking. For Hegel and others, self-consciousness is simply an extension of absolute subjectivity: the dialectical logic of Spirit indicates that the subject’s Other is really another manifestation of the same substance. This formation of subjectivity does not allow for the same process of reflective self-awareness as is indicated by Luther’s “occupations of heart,” for example. Where Hegel would describe the experience of contemplation as a creative event, and ultimately as an extension of the spontaneous ego, Luther explains the experience of contemplation as indicative of the very limitations of the ego: I contemplate an issue only because I understand the limits of my immediate knowledge and the need to think about the reality beyond it.

4.3.2 Transitioning to Feuerbach: Religious Consciousness and Naturalism

In this chapter we have also considered the somewhat curious consequence of Luther’s description of the passive and affected religious subject. While this is a model of metaphysical dualism, in this chapter we have also explored how the two categories are linked to one another through his explanation of the phenomenological effects of God’s grace in the world. At the cornerstone of Luther’s project is his need to identify the ways in which God as a transcendent being appears to the human being vis-à-vis the
materiality of human consciousness. Luther describes the means of recognition available to the religious subject as a natural and existential being. It is for this reason that Schürmann suggests that the paradox that results from Lutheran theology goes much deeper than Barth’s concern over the emphasis on an anthropological or humanist perspective. Luther’s description of God always includes the manner in which God affects the human being. Along these lines, Schürmann observes how Luther’s description of God’s participation in the world (and necessary correlation with human self-consciousness) introduces the “transcendental turn” of establishing God as a phenomenon.\footnote{Ibid., 380.} Humans know God not as an unchanging ultimate Being radically separate from themselves, but the being that God puts forth in them in the process of God’s justification. From the perspective of the human subject, God’s identity is observable only in the effects that God causes. While it is not entirely accurate to say that Luther’s God needs the human subject (in order to be God), it is clear in the above passages that, as an aspect of His omnipotence, God needs to express Himself in human existence. Moreover, humans observe the effects of God phenomenologically in the appearances of goodness in self and world. This scheme suggests interdependence between human self-consciousness and God-consciousness that is precisely the main object of inquiry for Feuerbach.

In consideration of the model of passivity that is described here and not the autonomous ego of German idealism, this also places Luther and not only Hegel at the foundation of the dialectical component of Feuerbach’s model of religious consciousness. While Hegel is certainly a significant influence for Feuerbach, the differences in the structure and motivation of their respective projects are significant. As previously mentioned, these differences also indicate the problematic nature of Feuerbach’s traditional historical label of atheism. Because of the concerns Luther holds
regarding the merit of so-called “absolute” cognition and human reason, there is even more reason to consider the relationship between Feuerbach and Luther directly, and not simply one that is mediated by Hegel. Furthermore, Luther’s discussion of the fallen nature of human subjectivity results in his need to highlight natural forms of awareness of God’s existence. The impact of sin means that human beings cannot know God as an extension of the ego or their own cognitive processes. The human subject is a depraved and fleshly being, and consequently can only experience the goodness of God through these imperfect and indirect means. The self does not experience this goodness in its full majesty, but instead experiences feelings of being affected by something greater than itself. While these feelings of affectivity certainly do not demonstrate the full scope of God’s goodness, Luther explains that these experiences are the only means human beings have available to them. For Luther, this only underscores the significance of describing the relationship between God and human being from the perspective of the human being’s natural embodied identity.

Luther’s reflections on the dialectical nature of self-consciousness also opened a line of thought that was influential for not only Feuerbach, but many others in the area of religious subjectivity. Michel Henry has suggested that, “it is the entire Lutheran problematic which can appear in many respects as a prefiguration and at times an explicit preformation of dialectical thought [characterized in his terms by German metaphysics].”339 Both thinkers describe human identity as a process of relating between the actual self (the present I) and the ideal self (the absent Thou). In this regard, human self-identity is possible only as a project, namely the continued effort to become conscious of the ideal Thou-object. Along these lines, Henry suggests that “the dialectic has an ontological meaning” insofar as “the structure of the dialectic appears at one and the same time to be the structure of consciousness itself.”340 However, this is an

---

340 Ibid., 72.
understanding of dialectical consciousness that is much different than Hegel’s. While he might describe the dialectic as a logical move of Spirit realizing itself, remaining as a cognitive construct in the “sphere of consciousness,” Henry suggests that the Lutheran dialectic has a very literal meaning, as it is the process by which “nature reaches being.” Where Hegel’s concept of the dialectic remains primarily on the level of abstract thought, Luther and Feuerbach emphasize how this method defines the existential identity of the material subject: it is literally through the method of dialectical thought that the human subject comes to be. This provides additional response to theorists who describe Feuerbach’s model of religion as primarily psychological or anthropomorphic: Henry’s exposition of Feuerbachian subjectivity suggests that the self’s interests in the humanistic or naturalistic dimensions are ontologically established, arising at a moment that is logically after its constitution through the modality of consciousness. The self is called to self-recognition through a process of sensuously mediated perception. The “felicity principle” described by Harvey and related psychological benefits achieved by religious reflection can only take place after this crucial process of self-recognition through naturalism. Henry explains:

[quoting Feuerbach] ’My fellow-man is the bond between me and the world.’ The thesis of the identity of naturalism and humanism thus finds its explicit ontological ground in the affirmation—borrowed from Hegel by Feuerbach but which here attests to an earlier origin [Luther]—that objectivity rests on intersubjectivity...It is because self-consciousness objectifies itself...that that of which it is conscious is at one and the same time an object and a self.

Henry argues that Feuerbach’s religious subjectivity is not reducible to its psychological or anthropological applications, because the Feuerbachian subject is ontologically established as a subject that objectifies itself through its sensuous parameters. And unlike Hegel, Luther and Feuerbach describe this process through a paradigm of

341 Ibid., 70-71.
342 Ibid., 56.
difference that nonetheless leaves the material and the ideal bound to one another in a paradoxical fashion. Not only does Henry identify Luther’s influence on German philosophy especially during the nineteenth century, but he also foreshadows other important developments to follow. The effort to consider being not as an expression of metaphysical identity, intentionality, and/or interiority, but a reflective awareness of one’s existential location, is certainly a signature moment of later movements in twentieth century philosophy and the study of religion.

4.3.3 Different Paradigms of Religious Experience

Luther and Feuerbach articulate a tension that exists between theology and naturalism that is not accounted for in most descriptions of religious experience. In one sense, both figures emphasize the natural and sensory perceptions of the subject’s experience, which changes the ontological structure of discussions about religion. In these accounts, the epistemological burden does not rest with the effort to prove the existence or nature of the transcendent itself, but rather the physical and natural manifestations of the ideal being as experienced by the human subject. However, this shift to the subject (and hence, Barth’s concern over post-Schleiermacherian religious thought) is also not adequately described as merely psychological or even anthropological. Both Feuerbach and Luther take great measures to limit the role of the ego and its intentions in descriptions of religion and human consciousness. They are unequivocal in their emphasis on the human being’s feeling of affectivity over concepts of control and the like.

This refers again to the different descriptions of religious experience considered in chapter one. Within the present “pragmatic turn” in the study of religion, theorists like Rorty and Davis only accept descriptions of religious experience on the basis of pragmatic verification, limiting the claims of individual experience and feeling. As Davis considered, Proudfoot does not accept the concept of religious experience as a
unique phenomenon, suggesting instead that the believer imports his own interpretation of otherwise ambiguous phenomena. However, the Luther-Feuerbach model describes the subject’s experience of affectivity as transcendental, existing as a precondition to its self-awareness. This model describes religious consciousness in conjunction with the self’s confrontation with nature, which locates religious consciousness in the horizon of affectivity. This renders accounts of religious experience that depict the ego as self-sufficient and primary incredibly problematic. In addition to the pragmatic accounts of Davis et al. this also challenges the assertions of psychological accounts like Guthrie’s, who suggests that the subject’s expectations assign meaning to an otherwise ambiguous experience. From the perspective of Feuerbach and Luther, the intentions of the ego do not precede religious experience. It is quite the opposite: the feeling of religious affect is what constitutes the condition for self-identity.

At the same time, Feuerbach’s description of naturalism as also providing a link to the human community responds to other concerns in the pragmatic camp. Rorty’s aversion to religion relates to his view that appeals to personal religious experience potentially compromise democratic solidarity. Claims of inner experience or personal access to the divine can be divisive if others do not have the same beliefs. While Feuerbach’s description of religious consciousness utilized the phenomenological method, he also shared Rorty’s concern over religious intolerance as described in the previous chapter. In the sense that religious consciousness opened the door for self-consciousness and consciousness of the human species, he saw greater hope for the benefits of religion if rid of its anti-natural elements. To a certain extent, Rorty and Feuerbach sound somewhat similar in this regard. The former’s paraphrasing of his hero Whitman in the following passage from Achieving Our Country could have also been taken from Christianity:
We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future. Other nations thought of themselves as hymns to the glory of God. We redefine God as our future selves.\footnote{Rorty, \textit{Achieving Our Country}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 22. While beyond the scope of this project, the points of comparison between Feuerbach and Rorty could very well prove to be a worthwhile future pursuit. Judith Sieverding has already made this connection in her \textit{Sensibilität und Solidarität: Skizze einer dialogischen Ethik im Anschluss an Ludwig Feuerbach und Richard Rorty}, (Münster, DE: Waxmann Verlag GmbH), 2007.}

While the Feuerbach-Luther association may be unorthodox from the perspective of either the ardent theologian or secular humanist, the strong conceptual similarities described above require its exploration. Not only does it relate to a number of existing areas within the present study of religion from phenomenology to pragmatism, but also gestures to the paradigm that both Taylor and Caputo had in mind in their visions of the post-metaphysical study of religion described in chapter one.\footnote{In chapter one, I referenced both of their essays from the volume \textit{Religion after Metaphysics}.} Taylor’s description of Locke’s philosophy illustrated how personal understanding of God can help one contribute to the larger goals of the democratic community. Caputo suggested that in the post-onto-theological age, we have opened up the possibility of having different ways of relating to the incomprehensible God. Both theorists appear to be calling for a bit more creativity in how we conceive and account for the religious experience. The shattering of metaphysical dualism calls one to reconsider how two seemingly opposite figures like Feuerbach and Luther are fundamentally intertwined.
CHAPTER FIVE
FEUERBACH AND RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

In the previous chapters, I have called for the recasting of Feuerbach’s role in contemporary religious thought. Through the reconsideration of his relationship to both Hegel and Luther, we have also reconsidered the consistency of his putative “atheism.” While Feuerbach is probably the most well known as a Left Hegelian and his critique of Hegelian idealism is indeed an important cornerstone of his project, I have argued that the automatic link usually made between these figures obscures the more complex theological issues raised by his work. Feuerbach sought to distance himself from Hegel in very significant ways. Hegel’s privileging of intellection and the ego as the primary modes of religious awareness are antithetical to Feuerbach’s epistemology and his subsequent model of religious subjectivity. Rather than these modes of discourse, Feuerbach underscores the human being’s perception of affectivity as illustrated by sense-perceptibility [Sinnlichkeit] and human feeling [Gefühl]. In this regard, Feuerbach’s discussion of religion and self-consciousness represents a type of awareness that is not based in the absolute subjectivity of Hegel or the transcendental ego of German idealism, but in naturalism. Interestingly, this reflects the significance of another figure in Feuerbach’s library, Luther. In spite of their differing theological commitments, both figures seek to identify human selfhood in terms of the possibilities and limitations inherent to its natural condition. While Feuerbach and Luther ultimately draw very different conclusions regarding the legitimacy of the belief in a transcendent God, the parallel between their discussions of religious self-consciousness is very significant: Feuerbach’s naturalism, while undeniably critical of theology, is nonetheless responding to certain issues that emerge in the context of Luther’s theology. Feuerbach believes that Luther’s effort to emphasize the existential condition of the human being unwittingly highlights the true essence of theological reflection as one of
naturalism. However in his reflection on this issue, Feuerbach remains entrenched in the paradox of this intersection between naturalism and theology. He denies the validity of the certain existence of the transcendent being, but nonetheless maintains a certain concept of divinity in his description of human consciousness.

While this link between Feuerbach and Luther is less recognized, in chapter one I reviewed some of the authors who have observed their relationship. Two of the more significant claims have been made by Barth and Harvey. In the end, I consider these arguments to be inadequate because they explain Feuerbach’s model of religious consciousness on the basis of the intentional needs of the ego. Ultimately, both of these views emphasize different aspects of the “felicity principle,” relating Feuerbach’s final conclusions regarding religion directly to a psychological need to perceive the existence of an omnipotent God. While this move may not be intentional in the sense of “I think I need comfort, therefore I posit the existence of God,” it nonetheless assumes a certain level of intentionality on the part of the subject—namely, the individual’s consciousness of God is directly fashioned out of the desire for comfort and stability. From a phenomenological perspective, this suggests that the presence of the self in terms of both its ontological constitution and its existential self-awareness precedes the belief in God. However, in previous chapters we observed how this account does not consider the model of passivity that is championed by both Luther and Feuerbach.

Luther argues that the human being’s sinful nature results in an inability to perceive the good. This means that human beings also have an inaccurate view of self and overvalue the productivity and beneficence of the will. For Luther, we can only gain an accurate view of humanity and all its shortcomings by comparing ourselves to the splendor of God. Human self-consciousness is a necessarily reflective process that is made possible only when we perceive ourselves in relationship to God. Feuerbach believed that this aspect of Luther’s thought revealed a fundamental paradox. Luther argued that the limitations of humanity indicate the majesty of the divine God, but this
is nonetheless revealed through the natural and existential reality of the human subject. This questions the previously conceived boundaries established by metaphysical dualism. However, Feuerbach’s own ideas only deepened the paradox in question. His contention that theology is in fact anthropology is certainly well known, but his description of the passive and reflective human subject as determined by the realities of his natural identity is not emphasized in contemporary discussions. Feuerbach describes this aspect of the human identity as being completely separate from the ego, but is nonetheless a component of the human being’s natural condition. But even in his denial of the legitimacy of theology as an ontological category separate from humanity, he describes this proclivity as a type of divinity or transcendence. The paradox of the boundaries between “theology” and “naturalism” as established by this discussion between Feuerbach and Luther open the door for certain trends in philosophy and religious thought to follow, particularly with reference to the epistemological limits of religious knowledge and the existential implications of religious subjectivity. In their shared emphasis on the perspective of the human subject, the issues raised by the two figures also question the tenability of theological dualism. In his response to Luther, Feuerbach challenges the transcendence of God as a separate theological being, but nonetheless identifies a type of transcendence contained within the natural condition of the human being.

In this section I will consider these issues further, paying particular attention to Feuerbach’s later writings. However, this task is not without its difficulties. Feuerbach’s general body of work beyond Christianity provides a complex picture of human subjectivity and religion that remains embedded in the fundamental quest to uncover the true nature of human self-consciousness. As I mentioned in the first chapter, Wartofsky argues that the tensions and inconsistencies in this aspect of his work are part of his method of dialectical reasoning. I tend to agree more with the latter, although I would add that the tension that exists among different writings
indicates the paradoxical nature of the issue itself. Given some of the tensions illustrated in his writing, I am not convinced that Feuerbach himself ever definitively determined his own opinion. Feuerbach remains in good company on this issue, as the dichotomy between flesh and spirit in religion and the issue of ontological difference in metaphysics is a dilemma for not only his work but most of Western philosophy. In these later writings, the reader also observes how Feuerbach continues to consider theology alongside his philosophical interpretations. Feuerbach’s criticism of religious consciousness is a corollary to his criticism of speculative philosophy.

In the later works, Feuerbach continues to develop the ideas that he introduced in the previous writings. Here his scope expands beyond the explicit context of the Judeo-Christian tradition to consider religious consciousness more generally. Even so, Feuerbach continues to focus on the primary ideas from the earlier period, namely self-awareness as a condition of passivity and the natural phenomenological clues that demonstrate this in religious consciousness. Feuerbach’s specific efforts to identify these trends in religious consciousness also relate to his broader methodological goals. For example, his effort to clarify the implications of the natural identity of the human subject and the subject’s awareness as an existential being is directly related to his epistemological critique of speculative thought. Following from this, Feuerbach suggests that hidden within the human subject’s natural identity is a type of latent divinity. Feuerbach describes this phenomenon as a consequence of religious naturalism, and not transcendent or dogmatic claims to truth. This latter point is related to his effort to demonstrate the decidedly immanentist and humanistic elements of Luther’s theological model. Feuerbach’s relationship to philosophy and theology is best informed not by his religious commitments or lack thereof, but as a result of his

---

345 I am following Harvey’s example in naming the works after Christianity as the “later” works, although it is somewhat of a misnomer. Luther (1844) was written after Principles of the Philosophy of the Future (1843) but before The Essence of Religion (1845) and Lectures on the Essence of Religion (1851).
effort to reform Western epistemology. Nonetheless, even in his effort to consider the scope of religious consciousness beyond Luther’s theological horizon, Feuerbach remains embedded in a certain religiously-bound awareness. In this section, we will consider how these themes characterize his later writings and the implications of this.

5.1 Nature as Self-Identity and Epistemological Horizon

While he outlined many of these issues in the essay on Hegel, Feuerbach made his naturalist critique of the Western metaphysical tradition more refined in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843). This book explains in greater detail his model of human consciousness and also illustrates the nuances of his naturalist methodology. Feuerbach continues the notion that Western philosophy and theology have largely both succumbed to epistemological obscurity due to their prioritization of speculation over naturalism. Feuerbach continues to develop here his most notable and unique contribution: the identification of sensuousness [*Sinnlichkeit*] as an epistemological resource. Throughout his body of work, it is evident that *Sinnlichkeit* and human feeling [*Gefühl* and *Empfindung*] endured as the most important components throughout his project at large. Feuerbach’s description of Western consciousness as manifest in either philosophy or theology, is based on a particular model’s implementation of *Sinnlichkeit* and its corollaries. Feuerbach’s criticism of any system

---

346 In his description of human feeling, Feuerbach uses the term *Gefühl* more prominently in *Christianity* than the term *Empfindung*, which is more prevalent in the later works. This is a distinction worth noting, even though it ultimately connotes very similar concepts. The former term seems most appropriate in its emphasis on the immediacy of the individual subject’s relationship to the personal Judeo-Christian God. The latter term (in its relationship to the verb *empfinden*) emphasizes a more reflective awareness or perception, which is helpful in Feuerbach’s description of religious awareness beyond the Christian tradition. While I agree with Harvey that there is a distinction in these two moments of Feuerbach’s thought, I do not think it is because he has two separate projects. Building off of his criticism of Hegel and then the Christian tradition, Feuerbach expands his basic model to simply include religious consciousness in a more general sense in the later writings.
within this trajectory of thought is contingent upon its epistemological consideration of naturalism and the existential reality of the human subject. He explains:

By the same token that abstraction from all that is sensuous and material was once the necessary condition of theology, so was it also the necessary condition of speculative philosophy, except for the difference that the theological abstraction was, as it were, a sensuous abstraction, because its object, although reached by abstraction, was at the same time imagined as a sensuous being, whereas the abstraction of speculative philosophy is an intellectual and ideated abstraction that has only scientific or theoretical, but not practical, meaning. The beginning of Descartes’ philosophy, namely the abstraction from sensation and matter, is the beginning of modern speculative philosophy. 347

Feuerbach identifies the Cartesian effort of prioritizing thought over the extended, natural world as the first moment in which Western thought began its journey into abstraction: “according to Descartes, the essence of corporeal things, the body as substance, is not an object of the senses, but only of the mind.” 348 Feuerbach views this trend as unfortunate because of how it affected the epistemological landscape. Priority is given to a non-material, noumenal realm in spite of the fact that this realm only makes sense, or is given substance, when viewed in the context of its physical referent and manifestation. However, the crux of Feuerbach’s argument goes beyond his preference for empirical thought. His emphasis on the material is a large component in the discussion of human self-consciousness itself. In his view, one’s sensuously perceived awareness of the natural world is the same proclivity that demonstrates an awareness of self.

Only the consciousness of seeing is the reality of seeing or real seeing. But why do you believe that something exists apart from you? Because you see, hear, and feel something. Thus, this something is a real something, a real object, only as an object of consciousness; and consciousness is the absolute reality, the measure of all existence. All

347 Feuerbach, Principles, 13.
348 Ibid., 26.
that exists, exists only as being for consciousness, as comprehended in consciousness; for consciousness is first and foremost being.349

Such a passage illustrates Feuerbach’s easily overlooked but essential concept: the individual subject’s self-awareness is the function of its awareness of being affected by an external presence. The dual-nature of human consciousness means that even one’s own feelings maintain a kind of sovereignty over the individual in which they feel “affected” by their own feelings. This experience of perceiving that “something exists apart from you” demonstrates the reality of the thing in question, but also the constitution of oneself. It is in one’s experience of the external object that one is in turn aware of oneself as a seeing, thinking, perceiving subject. Feuerbach maintains that this perception of reality is only possible as a function of human consciousness, or more precisely, consciousness of materiality and extension. Furthermore, this illustrates Feuerbach’s belief in the ontological nature of consciousness itself. The description of the manner in which the self is affected by the senses connotes a type of transcendence or existence beyond the ego. However, this experience is also fully natural in its affirmation of the physical manifestations of human consciousness. Feuerbach describes this unique characteristic as the following:

In feelings—indeed, in the feelings of daily occurrence—the deepest and highest truths are concealed. Thus, love is true ontological proof of the existence of an object apart from our mind; there is no other proof of being but love and feeling in general.350

These ideas are the cornerstone of Feuerbach’s essential philosophical model, and it is also important to note that they were all present in Christianity. The notion of the self’s feeling of affectivity is the precursor to both immediate self-awareness and the reflective process of the “I-Thou” or the “I” and “not-I.” Beginning with his phenomenology of human feeling, he explains how the passivity that is demonstrated in moments of love,

349 Ibid., 27, [emphasis mine].
350 Ibid., 53.
anger, hunger, and the like are clues that indicate the complexity of human consciousness. He explains how human feeling maintains a type of sovereignty over the subject that cannot be assimilated with its will or intention. In Feuerbach’s view, the experience of human feeling demonstrates a unique component of human consciousness that connotes a type of natural, non-theological transcendence. The above passage describes how the “deepest truths are concealed” in these feelings while they are also of a mundane and “daily occurrence.” This demonstrates how Feuerbach provides a third option from others in the Hegelian tradition. While his philosophy is based in a materialist view, à la Marx—it still maintains a structure of human consciousness that exists beyond the subject’s intentionality, à la Hegel. In his description of human self-consciousness through Sinnlichkeit, Feuerbach removes the description of self from supranaturalism, but nonetheless identifies a givenness that is not determined by the ego. Hanfi explains the import of Feuerbach’s views from a humanist standpoint:

Feuerbach’s insistence on the anthropological substratum of theology and speculative philosophy contains a categorical imperative for man to take back into himself all the richness of content—infinity and universality—he has put into God or into his speculative metamorphoses. The practical-emancipatory value of this supersession of man’s self-alienation would be his elevation from a morally and socio-politically degraded, impoverished, unfree being into a free and dignified being. The principle in terms of which Feuerbach seeks to restore the independence of the real is none other than sensuousness [Sinnlichkeit].

As Hanfi explains, the term Sinnlichkeit is a philosophically significant concept for Feuerbach for a number of reasons. As a natural and material concept it avoids the obscurity of speculative thought, but it also identifies the complex characteristics of human consciousness. Feuerbach associates the experience of passivity with the

---

351 Hanfi, “Introduction,” in Fiery Brook, 35.
inherently reflective capacity of the human being that he believes is the ground for ethical transformation and social responsibility within the community.

Feuerbach wishes to maintain two seemingly opposing concepts here: he wants to emphasize the real, and not the speculative or supranatural, as ground for philosophical discussions while still maintaining a sense of human subjectivity that exists outside of what is immediately present. Feuerbach believes that the articulation of this elusive component within human consciousness is the impetus behind a reflective and contemplative society. This is a very narrow tightrope, as he wants to describe this elusive quality without lapsing back into speculative obscurity or entering the ethical problems of ego-centric models of consciousness as described in his discussions of religious intolerance in Christianity. Feuerbach believes that this balancing act is achieved through the multivalent applications of Sinnlichkeit. Not only is the sensuously perceived truly “real” insofar as it is empirically given, it also demonstrates an identity above and beyond the individual subject who experiences the feeling: “the real has the ontological determination of being sensuous, and hence it is given through the senses.”352 From the perspective of the human subject, it is in and through the senses that reality is disclosed. In Feuerbach’s view, it is only qua one’s sensuous nature that one is aware of the complexities of existence. While this awareness is an explicitly natural and existential awareness, Feuerbach still explains the role of the senses as if they act as intermediary between noumena and phenomena. He describes nature as having the “expression of sensuous power—[which] is above all the creation or the bringing forth of the real and material world.”353

Following this, Feuerbach believes one of the downfalls of Western thought in general and rationalist views in particular is the resulting mistrust of the senses. He views the act of privileging thought over sensuous perception as the attempt of modern

352 Ibid.
353 Ibid., 16 [emphasis mine].
philosophy to continue a certain kind of discussion about God without having to work within an explicitly theological framework. The mind-body distinction that is exemplified in not only Descartes but also modern theology relegates the senses to a base, secondary existence. The mind and intellection are viewed as the true source of truth, whereas the senses lead one astray. Not only does he view such Western dualism as unfortunate, but ultimately untenable. He writes that

the differences between essence and appearance, ground and consequence, substance and accident, necessity and chance, speculative and empirical, do not constitute two realms of worlds of which one is a supersensuous world to which essence belongs and the other is a sensuous world to which appearance belongs; rather these distinctions all fall within the realm of sensation itself.

It is only insofar as an object or experience is recognized within human consciousness that it can be viewed as actually existent. For Feuerbach, it is an inescapable fact that human beings exist in nature as natural beings, and therefore any systems we use to describe our situation must also take that into account: “for it is in nature that we live, breathe, and are; nature encompasses man on every side; take away nature and man ceases to exist.” Feuerbach maintains that sensuousness is an enduring feature of both philosophy and religion in its ability to determine the real. He goes so far as to suggest that an account of consciousness is epistemologically valid to the extent that it involves Sinnlichkeit in its methodology. This trend in Feuerbach’s thinking becomes decidedly more pronounced in his later writings, although to a certain extent it complicates the issue a bit further. In The Essence of Religion (1845) and Lectures on the Essence of Religion (1851), Feuerbach appears to consider Nature itself, or the human being’s awareness of his dependence upon nature, as a unique phenomenon of “nature religion.” Even so, he still believes his description of “nature religion” to be an

354 Ibid., 30-31.
355 Ibid., 59.
applicable criticism of a very notable Christian theologian, Schleiermacher. He states that

[his] feeling of dependency is not a theological, Schleiermacherian, nebulous, indeterminate, abstract feeling. My feeling of dependency has eyes and ears, hands and feet...And what man is dependent on, what he feels himself and knows himself to be dependent on is nature, an object of the senses.\(^{357}\)

This passage demonstrates the extent to which Feuerbach regards speculative philosophy and theology as essentially two sides of the same coin. Even in a seemingly general account of the human subject’s awareness of nature, the validity of Sinnlichkeit as a discourse is applicable to Schleiermacher’s specific discussion of the Christian tradition. In the case of Schleiermacher, the notion of dependency described as only the “Whence” is vague and indeterminate. Feuerbach believes that Schleiermacher is attempting to describe a valid component of religious consciousness, but the methodology he employs is only speculative. Sinnlichkeit offers a reasonable criticism of Schleiermacher’s account because it considers the individual’s experience of dependence with greater specificity and realism. Feuerbach describes the senses as “an enduring foundation” of philosophy that is more incisive than abstract reason because “man’s first belief is in the truth of the senses.”\(^{358}\) This point also illustrates the variety of ways in which Feuerbach employs the term: in a philosophical sense, Sinnlichkeit is valid as a consideration of epistemological horizon; from a humanist perspective, in terms of considering the ground for ethical responsibility; and also as a function of religious consciousness, both in terms of a general feeling of dependency or with reference to a specific tradition like Christianity. To Feuerbach this undoubtedly conveys the depth of meaning for the term, but to the reader it is sometimes difficult to determine precisely to which category he is referring. Whether this is an indication of his genius or confusion is up to us to decide.

\(^{357}\) Ibid., ŚŚ ǽemphasis author’sǾ.  
\(^{358}\) Ibid., 87.
5.2 Nature as “Natural” and “Divine”

We have already established Feuerbach’s criticism of dualist metaphysics as both an epistemological issue and with reference to the Christian tradition. Feuerbach contends that such conceptual systems must adequately account for nature [Natur] and the human being’s existential reality. This trend is also continued in his discussion of nature in the later writings. This certainly demonstrates a general coherency to the main ideas of Feuerbach’s project, even though it does appear riddled with paradox at times. As discussed above, the most provocative aspect of Sinnlichkeit is that in its imminent critique of speculative models of consciousness via naturalism, it nonetheless gestures towards an elusive, if not even transcendent, component of human existence. What this means for Feuerbach’s opinion on the future of religious consciousness is a complicated question. In the discussion of Christianity, we already considered the ambivalent character of Feuerbach’s religious belief. To a large extent, this is continued in the later writings. Early on in the Lectures Feuerbach does state that he is an “atheist” but only with reference to the “idealism that wrenches man out of nature.” Feuerbach adds a distinct qualifier here: he rejects the existence of the God who is specifically equated with supranaturalism. In spite of its rather explosive claim, Feuerbach describes the terms of his distinction very plainly:

The difference between atheism or naturalism, the doctrine which interprets nature on the basis of nature or a natural principle, and theism, the doctrine which derives nature from a heterogeneous, alien being distinct from nature, is merely that the theist takes man as his starting point and proceeds to draw inferences about nature, whereas the atheist or naturalist takes nature as his starting point and goes on to the study of man.\(^\text{360}\)

---
\(^{359}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{360}\) Ibid., 150 [emphasis mine].
Here Feuerbach describes the primary distinction between atheism and theism not on a level of ontological commitment, but in terms of how each system considers human beings and their role in nature. He essentially explains the difference as a logical point of clarification: theism regards nature as derivative from the supranatural being, and atheism uses nature as ground. This passage also echoes Feuerbach’s previous points regarding the ego-centricity of speculative thought, as it “takes man as its starting point.” This furthers the basic Feuerbachian idea that the aspect of religious consciousness that requires rejection and/or revision is that which denigrates the value of human beings and natural identity. Hanfi also adds to this point, stating specifically that “Feuerbach’s atheism, his denial of God, is the denial of the negation of man.”

Feuerbach does note that he has a certain religious belief, however. He explains that he “openly profess[es]…nature religion” and its consideration of the human being’s dependence upon nature and the “feeling that he is an inseparable part of nature or the world.” Precisely what Feuerbach regards as “nature religion” requires further consideration. Generally speaking, this term illustrates the “simple fundamental truth” of all religious traditions that human beings are dependent upon nature and therefore must live in harmony with it. Feuerbach again denies the legitimacy of speculative thought because of its subjugation of the natural world. In his discussion of the nature religion, he considers especially non-theistic traditions and their emphasis on the human being’s dependency upon nature. The most significant problem with the Christian tradition, for example, is its presupposition that this feeling of dependency is “contrary to my true being” which results in the “hope to be delivered from it.” For Feuerbach, the consideration of the feeling of dependency achieves an awareness of the complexity of human consciousness without the unfortunate effort to

361 Hanfi, “Introduction,” in Fiery Brook, 27.
362 Lectures, 35.
363 Ibid.
364 Ibid., 36.
“deify” man (as the critics of Christianity suggest), nature (as is the effect of pantheism), or spirit (as in theism). Deification is regarded as negative, even in the case of nature, because of the implication that it is only good if it is infused with a supranatural entity. Feuerbach rejects this not only because of the negative effect it has on the perceived value of nature and human beings, but also because such a view discounts the intrinsic role nature actually fulfills.

In the precursor to the Lectures, his book The Essence of Religion (1845), Feuerbach writes that the “Divine Being” of theism is in fact “revealed in Nature” and is “Nature herself, revealing and representing herself with irresistible power as a Divine Being.” One of his examples of “nature religion” is the indigenous Mexican people’s worship of a Goddess of rock salt. Feuerbach explains that this practice was a reflection on the extent to which the community depended upon the refining of the salt for their livelihood. He writes that the “God of the salt is only the impression and expression of the deity or divinity of the salt, so is also the God of the world or of Nature in general, only the impression and expression of Nature’s divinity.” Feuerbach explains this effort on the part of the human being to consider its own finitude and dependence in the context of deity-worship is ultimately an indication of Nature as “the lasting source, the continuous, although hidden background of religion.” To a certain extent, this appears to be a description of religious belief as an effort to relieve existential anxiety—and in that light, Feuerbach’s views are simply one of many others. However, he still makes a point to note that this worship of Nature is the product of the extended components of human consciousness, namely “spirit” and “imagination,” to make

365 Ibid., 37.
367 Ibid.
368 Ibid, 8.
Nature a “symbol and mirror of his being.” Why does he explain this phenomenon in this fashion? The notion that religious belief can achieve the quite functional purpose of providing both comfort and explanation is an idea that certainly did not begin nor end with Feuerbach. While he does appear to be interested in these passages in the relationship between human need and religious belief, he does not assert that a culture’s understanding of God is explained by the need alone. Consider this passage for example:

But just what my body, my power in general, is unable to do, is within the power of my wish...While under the influence of an effect—and religion roots only in effect, in feeling—man places his essence without himself; he treats as living what is without life, as arbitrary what has no will; he animates the object with his sighs, for he cannot possibly in a state of affect address himself to an insensible being. Feeling does not confine itself within the limits prescribed by intellect; it gushes over man...it must communicate itself to the outer world and by so doing make the insensible essence of Nature a sympathetic one.

In this passage, as in Feuerbach’s previous reference to human “spirit” and “imagination” as the vehicles that regard Nature as a separate deity, Feuerbach identifies the human capacity of feeling as the transcendental condition that makes the other components of religious experience possible. This subtle point is nonetheless intrinsic to his general account of religion in all of its twists and turns. Unfortunately it is also the most easily overlooked, particularly in the case of those who suggest that Feuerbach’s reading of religion is primarily psychological. Feuerbach’s description of the capacity of human feeling and sense perception results in a type of dual-effect: while the projected deity may be an embodiment of human need or reflection of idealized human essence, it also indicates the basic receptivity human beings have to such a feeling in the first place. For Feuerbach, this basic receptivity is the condition for the possibility of religious awareness at all. Similarly, this capacity is also the silent

---

369 Ibid.
370 Ibid., 32.
corollary to theistic religions as well, as I will consider below. As the inherently natural and existential component of all human beings’ religious awareness, this capacity bridges the gap between nature religion and supranaturalism and also illustrates the complexity of Feuerbach’s model of religious consciousness.

Feuerbach also believes that Sinnlichkeit and an awareness of nature are at the heart of theistic traditions. In his view, the affront of theistic traditions occurs when they describe God and the ultimate reality by means of speculation. This is particularly detrimental because it undermines the human ability to consider oneself and one’s nature as part of the theological scheme. Feuerbach believes that this leads to a kind of apathy in the human condition. Only if the bridge is made between the ideal good of the speculative God and the actual good of the immediate, natural world does Feuerbach believe that human beings will truly be whole. He writes that

Only in feeling and in love does “this” — as in “this person” or “this object,” that is — the particular — have absolute value and is the finite the infinite; in this alone, and only in this, is the infinite depth, divinity, and truth of love constituted. Only in love is God — who counts the hair on one’s head — constituted. The Christian God is himself only an abstraction of human love and an image of it. But precisely because “this” has absolute value only in love, the secret of being discloses itself only in it and not in abstract thought.

Feuerbach echoes some of his similar observations regarding Hegel and the Christian tradition here. In Christianity, he argues for the necessity of love being “exalted into substance,” meaning that the predicate of love must be reclaimed from the transcendent other-worldly God and used as a model for actual words and deeds in the present finite world. Feuerbach believes that the primary problem with theistic, supranatural religious traditions is that they extract the essential characteristics of human being and nature and imply that they originate only in the transcendent realm. He criticizes this from a humanistic perspective because it denigrates the value of humanity. However

---

371 Feuerbach, Christianity, 52.
Feuerbach also tries to turn the tradition on its head with the suggestion that religion requires nature as a source of its expression, even if it is not recognized as such. This is where he relies once again on the multiple applications of *Sinnlichkeit*.

When referring to deism and the Christian tradition in particular, Feuerbach’s strategy usually employs two distinct characteristics: one, he seeks to uncover the “true” essence of the tradition as being natural, and two, he does this by reconsidering the accepted interpretations of its own symbols and doctrine. This is a strategy that he consistently employs throughout his body of work, and whether deism is his explicit focus in a certain work or not. For example, in *Religion* he cites a passage from Psalms 94:9 as support of *Sinnlichkeit*: “How should he who made the ear not hear? How should he who made the eye not see?” 372 This is a particularly interesting choice especially when considered in the larger context of this chapter in Psalms. In this passage, the power of God is considered through the ways it is made manifest: God’s omniscience is evident insofar as He is the one who has created human senses, thoughts, wisdom, and laws. Feuerbach believes this is a very revealing point, as even the biblical tradition refers to the existence of physical phenomena and human senses when discussing the existence of God. The fact that even the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition utilize naturalism as a point of reference demonstrates to Feuerbach that “man’s dependence on nature is therefore the ground and beginning of religion.” 373 In his interpretation this points to a hidden meaning within theological discourse: “the divinity of nature is indeed the foundation of religion, but the divinity of man is its ultimate end.” 374 To Feuerbach, this identifies *Sinnlichkeit* as a cornerstone of religious consciousness in addition to the untenability of both metaphysical and theological

---

373 Feuerbach, *Lectures*, 207. He also suggests this idea is the main thesis of *Religion*.
374 Ibid.
dualism: even in its own writings, theology uses naturalism as a source of self-expression.

5.3 Naturalism as a Critique of Dualism

Feuerbach has many references to the Christian tradition in his works, but Luther is certainly his theologian of choice. Feuerbach believes that Luther’s writings demonstrate the value of the senses and the natural world more than any other theologian even though this remains unacknowledged by Luther himself. Luther is featured in nearly all of Feuerbach’s most well-known pieces during the period of 1841-1851, including Christianity, Religion, Lectures, and of course Luther. In Feuerbach’s interpretation, Luther is the paradigmatic example of the untenability of metaphysical dualism and its corollary, speculative thought. Feuerbach believes that Luther’s inclusion of the existential reality of the human being with his theological assertions demonstrates, in spite of Luther’s belief in the contrary, the intrinsic role of Sinnlichkeit and human feeling as tools for self-reflection. To some, this may identify Feuerbach simply as a humanist with no reference to an existence beyond material understandings, but this view overlooks the nuances of Feuerbach’s observations. Feuerbach’s emphasis on naturalism goes alongside his critique of the egocentrism of rationalism and idealism. His narrative regarding both rationalism and theology takes the same road: in their articulation of an ideal and noumenal realm, these methods of discourse not only devalue the human subject’s natural identity and forms of awareness, but because of that fact also present the unusual consequence of producing a damaging egocentrism. By contrast, Feuerbach asserts that a methodology which takes human feeling and Sinnlichkeit seriously will have greater epistemological certainty and a sense of human responsibility. That being said, Feuerbach’s naturalism is not completely self-contained; his accounts of human experience in this capacity connote a process of relationality and reflection with a sense of self beyond the intentional ego.
This is one of the more insightful aspects of Feuerbach’s work, but it is also makes the task of pinning down an enduring view of Feuerbach’s religious description a bit more elusive.

In Feuerbach’s criticism of the transcendent or supranatural religious consciousness, he underscores the necessity of the natural world as the place where God is revealed. Without the world or the human subject as a being in that world, God would remain only an abstract concept. To a certain extent, this demonstrates Feuerbach’s attempt to describe an organic view of self and world: no aspect of natural or divine existence should be conceived as a completely isolated entity. This general concept is certainly at the heart of his reflections on Luther and the Christian tradition. He appreciates Luther’s inclination to emphasize the body and naturalism in his theological reflections, but condemns the anti-natural conclusions that are ultimately drawn:

The God, the religious ideal, of the Christians, is the spirit of mind. The Christian sets aside his sensuous nature; he wants to hear nothing of the common, “bestial” urge to eat and drink...he regards the body as a congenital taint on his nobility, a blemish on his spiritual pride, a temporarily necessary degradation and denial of his true essence... “I wish to live not only by the soul, but also by the body,” says Luther. “I want the body too.” But this Christian body is in reality a heavenly, spiritual body, that is, an imaginary body which like all other religious objects is a mere reflection of human wishes and imagination.

To Feuerbach’s chagrin, Luther claims to uphold the value of naturalism in one minute and then restores the anti-natural components of speculative theology the next. If Luther’s desire to “live by the body” were truly consistent, then his tradition would not also condemn the specific conditions of embodiment. This also highlights the implicit ego-centricity of speculative thought. With a denial of the realism that is supported by

---

375 Feuerbach, Religion, 17.
376 Feuerbach, Lectures, 260.
natural forms of awareness, Feuerbach believes that one of the dangers of speculative thought is the fact that it can be interpreted according to the needs and desires of the ego. In this, theology has the unusual effect of both denigrating the natural condition of the human condition but also ultimately existing as fulfillment of the ego’s desires. God is interpreted as superior to the human being but nonetheless exists for the benefit of humanity. Feuerbach finds the idea untenable but he believes that is precisely the effect of the supranatural and speculative effects of the theological tradition.

Feuerbach acknowledges that human beings seek to make sense of their existential predicaments and concerns in religious consciousness. Furthering a concept that he first identified in *Christianity*, he also considers the ability of human consciousness to objectify itself as a significant aspect of the human being’s consideration of a God outside of oneself. Feuerbach’s primary concern is not that human beings engage in this activity, but that theology seeks to remove it from its transcendental formulation in naturalism. He asserts that, “I do not deny religion, I do not deny the subjective, human foundation of religion, namely feeling and imagination and man’s impulse to objectify and personify his inner life, an impulse which lies in the very nature of speech and emotion.”

That being said, Feuerbach does not reduce religion to being only a psychological concept or projection. His effort to consider the human being and its religious consciousness not as self-standing entities, but inherently relational categories, can be explained as both a product of his epistemological logic and also his reflections on the organic qualities of nature.

Feuerbach’s work in the *Lectures* emphasizes naturalism from the perspective of unity and balance. While supranatural theology describes God and world in terms of hierarchy and subordination, Feuerbach believes that it is a relationship more accurately described through balance and symbiosis. Rather than abstracting an image

---

377 Ibid., 181.
of God as the ultimate cause of all being, Feuerbach urges the reader to consider how the natural world itself relates to the perception of God. Feuerbach suggests that neither God, nor even the natural world, can be perceived in total isolation. He explains:

Every being is both effect and cause. Without water there would be no fish, but without fish or some other animals capable of living in water, there would also be no water. The fish are dependent upon the water; they cannot exist without it; they presuppose it; but the ground of their dependence is in themselves, in their individual nature, which precisely makes water their need, their element.\(^{378}\)

In Feuerbach’s desired epistemological method, he seeks to limit discussion to what is referenced through material observation and experience, rather than what is posited metaphysically. In the above passage he describes the existence of the superior being (whether God to human being or water to fish) as something that is logically necessarily, even if it is not empirically knowable. Feuerbach explains that in the same way that neither fish nor the water can be perceived as existing in total isolation, neither can God nor the human being. That being said, the effort to think of one entity’s Other is interestingly a reflection of self. As a human self, the awareness of my finitude and natural existence does not lead me down a path of inner contemplation; instead it compels me to think about the existence of the all-powerful God beyond such limitations. However for Feuerbach, the consideration of such a God is established through the parameters of my existential situation and therefore the horizon in which I contemplate God is established by naturalism. Because of this, Feuerbach can say that the “ground of one’s dependence” is in oneself: the ability to think of the ideal Other is first constituted through my natural means of world and self-recognition. Along these lines, Feuerbach explains that religious consciousness should be viewed as a republic rather than a monarchy:

\(^{378}\) Ibid., 100.
Just as the republic is the historical task, the practical goal of man, so his theoretical goal is to recognize the republican constitution of nature, not to situate the governing principle of nature outside it, but to find in grounded in nature. Nothing is more absurd that to regard nature as a single effect and to give it a *single cause* in an extra-natural being who is the effect of no other being...If I conceive God as the cause of the world, is He not dependent on the world? Is there any cause without an effect? What is left of God if I omit or think away the world?\footnote{Ibid., 101 [emphasis author’s].}

The *Lectures* fill out the narrative Feuerbach begins in *Christianity*: where the earlier work considered the individual’s natural means of religious consciousness, the later work considers the necessity of the natural world for God and religion to exist. In both of these projects, Feuerbach describes the relationship of God and human being as one not of subordination, but logical dependence. This understanding of dependence is illustrated through *Sinnlichkeit* and the ground of nature.

For Feuerbach, using nature as ground is an effective philosophical and ethical resource. It embraces the value of the human being and its natural processes, but not to excess. The epistemological horizon set by nature limits the scope of the ego and speculative thought and cultivates a posture of passivity and human relation.

Feuerbach’s previous deliberations on the ego-centricity of idealism and the problems of religious intolerance highlight the importance of this. Feuerbach illustrates this point once more in the *Lectures*, explaining that the “theists, theologians, and so-called speculative philosophers” require the human intellect to be the “first and universal cause of all things.”\footnote{Ibid., 102.} To Feuerbach, the rationalist-dualist metaphysical model of the West is the source of many of its problems, particularly with reference to its denigration of *Sinnlichkeit* and the natural world. Furthermore, Feuerbach believed that the establishment of nature as philosophical ground would change the nature of Western thought. It is important to note that he did not want nature to be the new metaphysics,
or the new “first cause” in the aforementioned passage. The unique capacity of nature is the fact that it compels the subject to consider its world through feelings of dependence and reciprocity, not hierarchy. As illustrated in the above fish-water analogy, Feuerbach believes that the natural awareness of one’s dependence requires one to perceive God and/or the feeling of finitude that the concept of “God” demonstrates. It is out of this notion that Feuerbach’s ambivalent religious commitments exist: while he rejects the existence of a transcendent God on metaphysical grounds, he still views the perception of this God as logically necessary in light of the subject’s awareness of finitude and dependence in the natural world.

Additionally, the uniqueness of Sinnlichkeit and how it reveals the complexity of human nature further lends itself to a distinctly religious consciousness. Rather than rejecting the validity of religious consciousness altogether, Feuerbach’s primary objective is to establish the manner in which religious consciousness is necessarily determined by naturalism. For this reason, the consideration of religion and naturalism through the dualist lens of Western metaphysics does not work in Feuerbach’s mind. As he states in the Principles, “the true dialectic is not a monologue of a solitary thinker with himself; it is a dialogue between I and thou.” Feuerbach believes that the “new philosophy” is one that radicalizes dualist metaphysics in light of the multivalent applications of nature. Through the consideration of naturalism in general and Sinnlichkeit in particular, Feuerbach believes that the complexity of human existence can be better described without the pitfalls of speculative thought. Feuerbach’s model maintains a dual level of awareness without the anti-natural elements of dualism. As described above, this points to a type of naturally derived divinity or transcendence insofar as it eludes the intentionality of the ego, but in Feuerbach’s view it does not carry the same metaphysical baggage as does theology. Feuerbach believes that such a description of

---

381 Feuerbach, Principles, 72.
passivity is crucial in the consideration of the human being’s social and ethical responsibility: the awareness of a component of human identity that remains fully elusive, but is nonetheless fully natural, compels human beings to be more reflective regarding their self-identity and the identity of humanity at large.

It is for this reason that Luther is such an important figure for Feuerbach’s project. His interpretation of the logical implications of Luther’s work even though Luther might not himself have agreed, require one to consider the natural manifestations of theology. While Luther ultimately maintains his commitments to the metaphysical tradition Feuerbach seeks to override, he still emphasizes the inherently natural elements of theology. For Feuerbach, Luther is the perfect example of the untenability of theological and metaphysical dualism. Luther’s emphasis on the natural existential condition of the human being underscores the value of Sinnlichkeit as a resource for not only philosophy but also theological and religious discourse.
CONCLUSION

RECONSIDERING FEUERBACH’S LEGACY

In this project I have called for a reconsideration of Feuerbach’s place in philosophy and the study of religion. While his name is certainly recognizable in these fields, it is usually only as a marginal or “bridge” figure. He is commonly known as facilitating an intellectual link between the thought of Hegel and Marx or as a precursor to Freud. I have suggested here that this assessment obscures the greater insights of his work, namely the value of naturalism. He believed that the prevailing intellectual trends of modernity had undervalued nature and the human subject’s feeling of affectivity in their models of existence, which resulted in epistemological failings or ethical dangers. The proper recognition of naturalism would benefit Western thought because it ensures that philosophical assertions about the world match the real aspects of human experience, and it also fosters a greater sense of commonality amongst members of the human community. In the case of theology, Feuerbach was particularly interested in the paradoxical aspects that automatically called into question its anti-natural tendencies. Feuerbach’s reflections provide the contemporary theorist with ways to reconcile many of the problematic aspects of the rationalist-dualist model that pervades Western philosophy.

I have revisited Feuerbach’s project from two different perspectives: his debt to both Hegel and Luther and also his future progeny in the twentieth century and following. From the first perspective, I considered how his project was historically influenced by Hegel. While there is a clear connection between Feuerbach and Hegel, the nature of this relationship is rarely fully acknowledged in modern understandings of Feuerbach’s legacy. As he made the transition from theology to philosophy as a student, Feuerbach was indeed fascinated by Hegel. However, this fascination eventually grew to criticism and desire for revision. Beginning with his doctoral
dissertation, Feuerbach was critical of the speculative components of Western thought in general, but especially that of Hegelian idealism. Feuerbach condemned Hegel for not adequately incorporating naturalism and empiricism into his model of Spirit. He believed that Hegel’s metaphysics undermined the natural and existential reality of the subject by subsuming its existence under a supranatural, speculative concept. This point was what linked him to the Hegelian Left. His criticism of Hegelian speculation initially endeared him to Marx and others, but in the end they were divided on their positions regarding the validity of religion. Marx and Engels praised Feuerbach for his emphasis on materialism and human subjectivity, but found his identification of religious consciousness with essential aspects of human nature to be unacceptable. Feuerbach believed that religion was beneficial as a means of reflection upon human nature and thereby facilitated self-awareness and knowledge. He did not reject the validity of religious consciousness itself, just the anti-natural tendencies of the theological tradition. This goes hand in hand with his rejection of the anti-natural tendencies of speculative philosophy and rationalism.

Feuerbach’s desire to revise the anti-natural and speculative tendencies of both philosophy and theology was at the cornerstone of his fundamental project. This effort was first directed towards Hegelian idealism, but grew into a larger critique of Christianity and religious consciousness in general. His criticism of religion is not due to a specific condemnation of the divine, but the extent to which it is born out of speculative presuppositions. Much of Feuerbach’s criticism of speculative thought is because of its anti-naturalism and privileging of the ego. By contrast, his preferred model of consciousness favors a paradigm of passivity and affectivity. This indicates the presence of important themes that cannot be attributed to Hegel, and I have argued that this illustrates the fundamental importance of naturalism to Feuerbach’s writings regarding both philosophy and religious consciousness. Beyond his criticism of certain anti-natural trends in Western philosophy, this also forms the foundation for his
discussion of religious consciousness. It was also this emphasis on naturalism that introduced Luther as a significant interlocutor to Feuerbach’s project. Feuerbach’s fascination with Luther is discernible in both obvious and subtle ways within his work. Once describing himself as “Luther II,” Feuerbach refers to Luther by name throughout his writings after 1843 and also has one work, *Luther*, devoted solely to his theology.\(^{382}\)

In addition to these moments where Feuerbach names Luther specifically, this theme of Feuerbach’s work can also be discerned conceptually. A Lutheran awareness of finitude and naturalism provides the horizon for many of Feuerbach’s comments regarding religious subjectivity. Luther’s description of the human being’s experience of existing before God complemented Feuerbach’s interest in religious naturalism and affect. Feuerbach also saw in Luther’s theology a profound paradox regarding the relationship between God and human being. Because of the impact of sin, Luther believed that human rationality and intellect were not adequate means of self-recognition or recognition of God. Instead, Luther described human self-consciousness as made possible by one’s consciousness of God. He argues that one’s feeling of limitation and affectivity demonstrated the existence of a greater being without such limitations.

This highlighted not only the self’s natural and existential means of awareness, but it also linked one’s knowledge of God to the knowledge of the natural world. While God remains the supreme being in Luther’s model, human finitude is nonetheless the condition of the self’s awareness of this God. From the perspective of the human being, the recognition of God’s existence is in fact dependent upon the human being’s acknowledgment as such. Feuerbach was fascinated by this link between the human being and its perception of the divine Other, and a very similar structure of self-consciousness is present in *Christianity* and also such later works as the *Lectures*. In his

\(^{382}\) See p. 7, n. 11.
description of the “I-Thou” in the projection model and also the “I” and “not-I” in other formulations, Feuerbach describes the process of self-awareness in relationship to religious consciousness. The subject is self-aware insofar as it is aware of the divine Other and the conditions of its own finitude. Both Hegel and Luther describe human subjectivity as a doctrine of difference, which invokes a very different methodology than Hegel. Feuerbach and Luther demonstrate a paradigm of religious experience that is best understood from a phenomenological perspective. Because both figures desire to bracket the intentionality of the ego, this paradigm considers the structure of selfhood as is immediately given and revealed through the self’s feelings of passivity and affect.

This further calls into question several common contemporary appropriations of Feuerbach’s work. The second perspective of my project considers the validity of later interpretations of Feuerbach from psychological and/or anthropomorphic perspectives. The effort to place Feuerbach within a post-Freudian trajectory is a common one, but I argue that it is an incredibly problematic interpretation of his legacy. The main problem with these types of arguments is their assumption that religious consciousness is ego-driven, considering religion only as a means of security or explanation. This perspective completely ignores the transcendental component of religion as described by both Feuerbach and Luther: while the presence of religion may indeed provide benefit in these areas, they described religious consciousness as the condition for the possibility of self-awareness. The psychological view also locates religious consciousness within cognitive and speculative forms of awareness, which is what both Luther and Feuerbach sought to limit. Also unlike Feuerbach, the Freudian perspective offers a complete rejection of the validity of religious consciousness, likening it to an illusion.  

This view does not portray the tension and paradox that Feuerbach believed characterized religious consciousness.

---

383 This is present of course in Freud’s *Future of an Illusion*, but also in Guthrie’s suggestion that the meaning of religion is based on what the individual imports into it, much like someone’s perception that
Beyond the understanding of Feuerbach as a post-Freudian thinker, I explore the possibility of considering his thought in dialogue with the current “pragmatic turn” in the study of religion. Through his use of naturalism, Feuerbach’s paradigm provides a way to conceive individual religious consciousness through feeling and affect while also maintaining pragmatic standards of language. In general, discussions of religion in contemporary pragmatic circles consider primarily how personal religious belief can be cited as justification for political and social policy. By contrast, discussions of religion that emphasize personal experience or privilege an interior religious consciousness have been highly criticized by pragmatic theorists due to both epistemological and ethical concerns. For example, Rorty suggested that the notion of an interior religious consciousness sounds too much like a “Cartesian Theatre” in which the individual’s knowledge of the divine is separate from the common knowledge of the community. Not only does this deny the legitimacy of pragmatic and empirical methods of investigation, but it also implies that the religious believer has special access to truth that non-believers do not. Rorty finds this aspect to be even more troubling because of the potential for religious intolerance.

Feuerbach in fact shares these same concerns, although his description of religious consciousness also considers the legitimacy of individual experience. While Feuerbach referred to personal feeling and affect in his explanations of religious consciousness, he described these concepts as part of the larger structure of naturalism and sensuousness. The individual’s perception of love or anger offered an intimate view of one’s limitations, and moreover an indication of one’s natural identity as a human subject. Feuerbach believed that such experiences demonstrated the solidarity that exists amongst all human beings. Where the anti-natural tendencies of the theological tradition encouraged one to mistrust their human nature, his emphasis on there are in fact “faces in the clouds.” To a large extent, this model is also similar to Proudfoot’s account of religion in the pragmatic tradition.
the innate naturalism of religious consciousness encouraged one to embrace one’s own human identity and the collective humanity of the community at large. While Feuerbach would agree with Rorty that an anti-natural theological identity could cause divisiveness or the potential for violence, he believed that the acknowledgment of naturalism within the tradition would foster a greater sense of ethical concern. Feuerbach’s model therefore provides a means of considering personal experience without fear of causing divisiveness in the community or invoking notions of religious privilege.

Feuerbach’s interest in religious consciousness was largely motivated by his love of paradox. He took it upon himself to clarify the essential nature of religious consciousness and to unveil its inconsistencies and inner sources of tension. He suggested that there is a type of latent divinity within human consciousness and also proclaimed his atheism, or denial of God, only in the sense of a God who denies the validity of human nature. Feuerbach’s effort to renounce the legitimacy of the transcendent God while also maintaining certain aspects of religious language and symbols indicates an alternative way to consider religious consciousness. His description of religious feeling and affect locates an elusive structure to human consciousness that also exists beyond the intentionality of the ego. This effectively identifies a transcendent quality contained within the structure of the human being’s naturalism. This is a complex and nuanced assessment of religious consciousness that is rarely explored in interpretations of Feuerbach’s work. It is also appropriate in light of shifts taking place in contemporary philosophy and the study of religion. Caputo urges us to consider additional conceptualizations of religion in light of the “death” of God and metaphysics. Feuerbach’s discussion of religious consciousness and his radicalization of philosophical and theological dualism certainly responds to this call. Rather than forcing one to choose between body or thought, secularity or theology,
human or divine, Feuerbach urges us to embrace the inherent reciprocity that is contained within such categories.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Thoughts on Death and Immortality, translated by James A. Massey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).


The Vocation of Man, translated by Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987).


Luther’s Works Vols. 1-30, edited by Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972).


Die Anschauung vom heiligen Geiste bei Luther (BiblioBazaar, 2008).


Rawidowicz, S. Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie: Ursprung und Schicksal, Second edition


von Loewenich, Walther. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J.A.

202


Christy L. Flanagan was born in St. Charles, Illinois. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication and Religious Studies from DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois and her Master of Arts degree in Religion from Florida State University. After a brief hiatus in the corporate world, she returned to academia and completed her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religion from Florida State University in 2009. Her research interests include Christian Thought, Ethics, German idealism, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Methods and Theory in the Study of Religion. In addition to academic pursuits, her interests include spending time with her family and dogs, running outdoors, and all things Florida and Chicago—particularly Key West and the tragicomedy of the Chicago Cubs.