

FEUERBACH AND THE RISE OF DIALECTICAL ATHEISM

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The philosophers who we have studied so far were smart men, and as the centuries progressed, the theological implications of the Cartesian cogito only became clearer to them. Yet so far, none have been willing to offer us a straightforward denial of the existence of God. They've left plenty of hints tucked away in their tomes of philosophic prose, but the religious propriety that held on until the middle of the 19th century kept them tiptoeing around the subject. Popular piety was waning, though; everyone in the German idealistic schools watched as Fichte got booted out of the University of Jena for his openly atheistic take on the concept of a personal God,¹ but this only added force to a gigantic shift that stirred beneath Germany's intellectual soil. The youth felt it, especially the members of the Young Hegelians.

This left-wing school was home to a number of revolutionary philosophers, and one of their earliest members was named Ludwig Feuerbach. One fine day, having recently made some comments that were similarly Fichtean in their career-ruining consequences, and now in the twilight of his academic aspirations, he decided to be very candid. He pointed towards the crumbling edifice of German idealist Christianity and wrote, "Hey, that's actually atheism." In 1841, he published "The Essence of Christianity," in which he boldly penned what the idealists before him had only whispered: that man is the ultimate principle and determinant of man, and that anything beyond the scope of his consciousness *cannot* exist. In his own words:

"The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective."²

¹ Ameriks, Karl. *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 259

² Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 662

Out of the woodwork came a bunch of philosophers and theologians who had been laying low up 'till then. German theologian David Strauss called the book the “truth of our time.”³ It freed an entire generation of skeptical minds from Georg Hegel’s troublesome metaphysics, and blazed the trail as atheism marched into a new era of intellectual legitimacy.

In this paper I’ll talk about Feuerbach’s notion of being and the concept of man that flows from this. That will lead into his interpretation of the Christian Gospel, in which theology becomes anthropology. Finally, we’ll look briefly at Cornelio Fabro’s critique of this system in light of the good old cogito. I will do my best to stay within these boundaries; Dr. Joseph Papa will be delving a lot deeper into some aspects of Feuerbach on Friday.

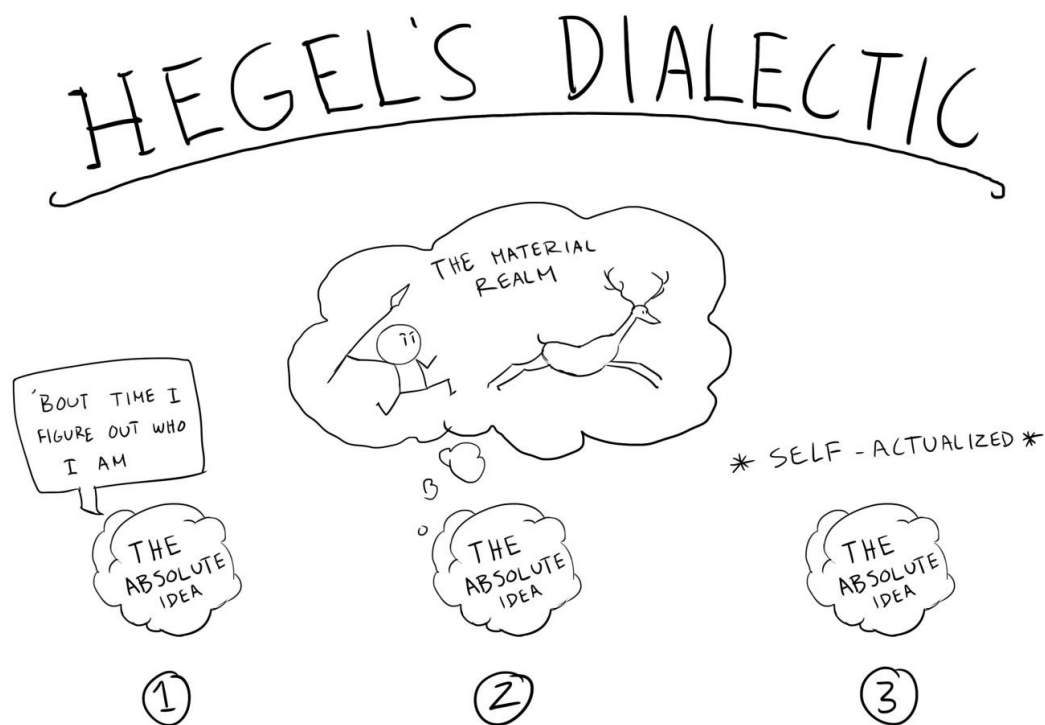
Background: Hegel

Feuerbach studied under Hegel for two years in Berlin, and he builds his philosophy upon Hegelian foundations. It was unthinkable to begin elsewhere; at the time everyone thought Hegel’s work was the best systematic philosophy out there. Simultaneously, Feuerbach’s work is also a radical criticism of the Hegelian system, and his main concern is to get out of the abstract principles of idealism and back to the solid ground of material reality. This tension between reliance upon and critique of Hegel is mirrored in the history surrounding his death. When Hegel died in 1831, German philosophy divided into two distinct schools: the old conservative Hegelians, and the Young Hegelians who we’ve already mentioned. The latter believed that a tremendous upheaval was brewing beneath Prussian Germany’s changing social and economic climate, and saw in Hegel’s philosophy a tool to help effect that social change. Hegel himself left a lot of room for the augmentation of his system, so they felt vindicated in their unorthodox shift towards materialism.⁴

³ Harvey, Van A. *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007. p. 26

⁴ Stepelevich, Lawrence S. *The young Hegelians: an anthology*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999. p. ix

Let's quickly review Hegel's three step process of the dialectic which Brother Cesar covered. In step one, we start with the Spiritual Idea, which really is a transcendent being. We proceed to step two as this Idea projects itself into the material realm and knows itself through mankind's collective thought, and we complete step three when it proceeds back into the spiritual realm with newly gleaned self-knowledge. Essentially, he goes from abstract Idea to concrete reality, back to abstract



Idea.

Feuerbach's Interpretation

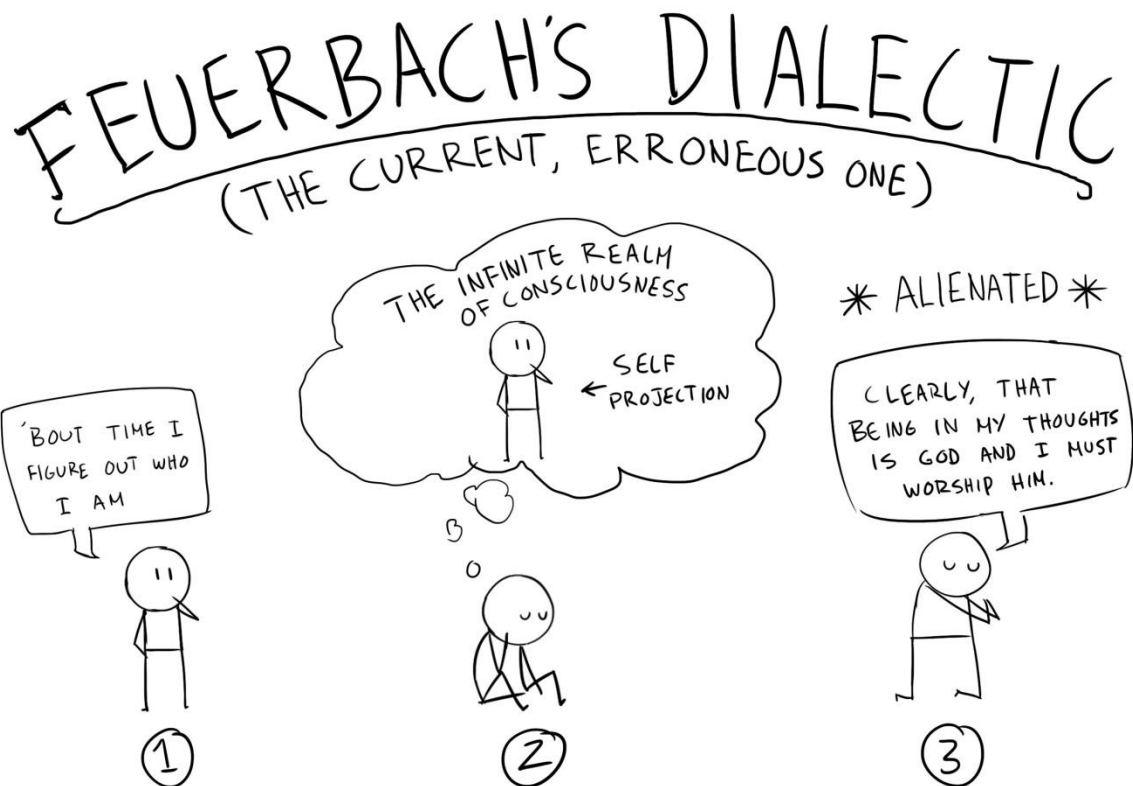
Feuerbach agrees with the triune structure of Hegel's dialectic, but he differs on one fundamental point: for Hegel, being is based in the spiritual thought of the Idea, and for Feuerbach, being is based squarely and completely in spatio-temporal reality, in matter.⁵ Thus, Feuerbach aims to derive the materialistic version of the three step dialectic, and this turns out to be simple: he just

⁵ Copleston, Frederick C. *A History of Philosophy*. Vol. 7. New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1994. p. 295

switches Hegel's subject and object. Man and the Idea-God change places. As straightforward as this sounds, he manages to compose a wonderfully puzzling sentence about it:

“Man – this is the mystery of religion – projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an *object* to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as *the object of an object*, of *another* being than himself.”⁶

Lots of objects being objectified by other objects there. But to put it simply, let's start with a guy.



He is capable of consciously understanding himself. But how? Precisely by objectifying himself; by using his mind to create an image of himself that he can know. Then he makes this error where, as

⁶ Harvey, Van A. *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007. p. 27

he makes the mental connection of himself to that image, he accidentally attributes an independent existence to it, as if it were outside his mind. Then he starts worshipping it. Whoops.

So that flips Hegel on his head, (Feuerbach calls it “setting Hegel on his feet,”) yet stays true to the three step dialectic. We still begin with a dissatisfied self-consciousness, and it still has to overcome its own self-alienating projection in order to be satisfied. “Alienation” happens when we don’t realize our projection is actually *dependent upon us* for its existence, and the freedom obtained by realizing this is basically just “being at home with ourselves.”⁷ But hey, can’t we just not project a self image and avoid all the mess? Feuerbach and the idealists both say no, because we can only know ourselves *through another*; experiencing the other is the only way to climb out of ignorance of self, and human beings *have to do this*, they can’t help it.

Feuerbach’s Anthropology

So that’s the situation of humankind, according to Feuerbach. But it leaves us wondering about that moment where we gum everything up and invent God. The process begins; I’m pondering this projection of myself... seminarian... clerics... I like sushi... BAM! Next minute I’m building a temple to some primitive sun god. How does that happen?

Well first, we have to understand some of Feuerbach’s anthropology. What does he think man *is*? For Feuerbach, man is an animal that is unique from all other animals because he can do science. When man does science, he makes statements that apply to entire species of things, not just individuals, and this implies that man can abstract the universal essences of things. Great so far, St. Thomas is nodding his head. Wait a minute, though, doesn’t that intellectual power require a non-material, spiritual principle? That’s a problem for Feuerbach because he is a materialist, so man’s potency to know abstract universals cannot flow from a soul. Instead, Feuerbach has to differentiate

⁷ Ameriks, Karl. *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 260

essences from particular finite things by calling them *infinite*; he can't assign immaterial or spiritual properties to them. As far as I can tell, infinite for Feuerbach simply means unlimited and unending in number. So here we are: man is a material being that has a unique level of consciousness with which he can know infinite essences.

Strauss' Contribution

Next question: where does this potency come from? Feuerbach holds that man has the power to know infinite essences because his *being has as its object its own species*.⁸ This principle reads more simply that his sentence about objects being objectified, but it's a lot more difficult to translate directly; at first it looks like a non sequitur. Actually, this idea is not original to Feuerbach; he takes it from David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. This "Life of Christ" is a pretty good example of the historical critique of the scriptures that was in full swing in Germany at that time. Due to the resurgence of Spinozan pantheism as Hegel's work became more widespread, which we mentioned yesterday, the main body of German idealists had been encouraging a dismantling of orthodox understanding of scripture, and detachment from traditional and literal meaning in the Christian Gospels. This process only accelerated after Hegel's death, and Strauss had developed one of the main critical approaches of the time. In his *Leben Jesu*, he holds that Christ is a mythical image that represents the relationship of the individual to humanity as a whole. Strauss affirms that each man is capable of receiving the religious concept of the God-man, the unity of the divine nature and human nature in one being. But he says the Church's teaching that Jesus Christ is the only instance of this unity that will ever exist is false. In fact, the idea that this unity could *ever* be present in a single individual is absurd; rather, our awareness of this concept points to a reality that can only be actualized on the level of our species understood as a united whole. In Strauss's own words:

⁸ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 658

“Will not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures necessarily be a real idea in an infinitely more lofty sense if I comprehend the whole of humanity in its actualization rather than singling out individuals as such?... If you try to think of the properties and functions which Church teaching attributes to Christ as being present in one individual, a God-Man, then you are faced with a contradiction. But there is no such difficulty if instead you think of them as present in the Idea of the Species.”⁹

Essentially, Strauss argues that the fact that each individual man can be cognizant of a perfect, universal being, but is clearly a particular and limited being himself, is *the* clue to understanding what man really is: he is a member of a species, all of whose members are, by their very essence, oriented toward the whole species, not their individual persons. Our preoccupation with God, with his attributes of perfect simplicity and unity, points to this. Thus, the proper way to conceive of man is as a species, not as an individual, because here, together, the combined perfections of the human race actually achieve the same unity and fullness as the transcendental perfections that compose our image of God. Feuerbach calls this our “species being,” and agrees with Strauss that this being is the essentially true manifestation of man, while the individual man, in his mortality and ephemeral nature, is hardly a being at all. It is here that we can really start to touch upon the immanent bent within Feuerbach’s development of man; the primacy he puts on the mind, and his relegation of the individual to the status of a disposable sensory organ. At the same time, in light of the “species being,” we can truly say that “Man is God,” or, more correctly, “God is Man; there is no God.” Feuerbach comments on the process of arriving at this conclusion with uncharacteristic simplicity:

" 'Pantheism' is the *necessary consequence* of theology (or theism)—it is *consistent and consequential* theology; '*atheism*' is the *necessary consequence* of 'pantheism'-it is consistent and consequential '*pantheism*.'¹⁰

⁹ D. F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, Vol. II (Tübingen, 1836), pp. 734 (Cited in C. Fabro, *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 655)

¹⁰ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 657

Consciousness as an Infinite Being

Feuerbach goes to great lengths to express the implications of a consciousness that knows essences, and is essentially ordered towards its own unified species. The main consequence of this is that our individual consciousness becomes infinite in the same way that “species being” is infinite. He extrapolates this with a syllogism that basically looks like this:

-Man is conscious of his own essence. His own essence is infinite.

>Ergo, man’s consciousness is infinite.

Feuerbach holds, as Hegel does, that “consciousness in the strict and proper sense and consciousness of the Infinite are inseparable and that consciousness is essentially infinite and all-embracing in nature.”¹¹ Because of this,

“Religion arises as "consciousness of the *infinite*" (*Bewusstsein des Unendlichen*), and since this consciousness is nothing more than self-consciousness, religion is the consciousness that man has of himself.”¹²

So at this point we understand why man is conscious of the concept of an infinite being, and why he is attracted to it. It is himself, and he is his own object. But we’re still not sure why he makes the mistake of giving this infinite being existence outside of the collective mind of man, and develops religion out of it.

Feelings

Feuerbach says this happens because of our feelings. Back down on the depressing level of individual men, we experience a feeling of dependence upon the material realm, since we actually do depend on it in order to not starve and do other important corporeal things. Feuerbach traces the rise of nature religions and the deification of material phenomena throughout our human history, and says that “the divine essence which manifests itself in Nature is nothing else but Nature which reveals and manifests itself to man and imposes

¹¹ Ibid. p. 659

¹² Ibid.

itself on him as a divine being.”¹³ Once we infuse this with the infinitude which flows from our essence, we’ve got God, and we’re all set for some serious self-alienation.

The Feuerbach Code

So Feuerbach has his six-shooters in his hands. He’s got his species being, and an explanation of how man mistakenly creates God by casting his own essence on reality. Now he’s ready to put serious holes in Christianity. One of the first Christian mysteries that he “decodes” is the concept of the Divine Trinity. His rationale is a great example of how he’s able to flex the ambiguity of the species being. For Feuerbach, our concept of the “Triune God” is the result of our anthropomorphizing the three main faculties that flow from man’s essence. The members of this trio are reason, will, and love. Since they come from man’s essence, they don’t belong to the individual as a personal principle; and thus the individual cannot control their operation the way we can control our sensory faculties. For example, when we don’t want to see something, we can shut our eyes, but try not *reasoning* for a moment and you’ll realize that’s impossible. We’re always drawing conclusions and making predications, it’s inherent to our thinking. So reason, will, and love are an irresistible driving force that acts on us at all times, independent of our individual desires. Feuerbach says that throughout history these powers have exhibited one purpose: to perfect themselves for their own sake. Fabro paraphrases Feuerbach, saying:

“Love, will reason... are powers of the species which dominate and ought to dominate the individual, his passions and his impulses. Hence, he says, we can understand how the *object* of man is man himself, i.e., his own objective essence; and Feuerbach actually writes "consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man".¹⁴

¹³ Feuerbach, Ludwig, Friedrich Jodl, and Wilhelm Bolin. *Ludwig Feuerbachs sämtliche Werke*. Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann, 1960. p. 180

¹⁴ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 659

This answers why Feuerbach and the idealists say man doesn't have a choice in whether he projects a self image or not. Man is more or less "possessed" by reason, will, and love, so he *has* to enter the process of the three step dialectic. This is why Feuerbach, in a sense, looks on religion in a positive light; for him it is just one chapter of progress in the grand timeline of man's self-realization. Christianity, as the summit of religious development, is basically just the best series of symbols that we have to date, which "expresses the structure of the communal human consciousness of the "species" wherein is actualized the truth of the being of man."¹⁵ We could spend the rest of the day looking at more Feuerbachian interpretations of Christian symbols and "myths," but there isn't time. Let's take a look now at what Fabro says about Feuerbach's philosophy.

Immanence Taken to its Logical Conclusion

Actually, Fabro says that everything that Feuerbach claims about religion is completely true... *IF...* the consciousness he refers to from the start is the cogito of Descartes. And it is. Fabro has surprisingly little to say in critique of Feuerbach, probably because they're both essentially in agreement about Descartes's cogito resulting in atheism; they're just on completely opposite ends of the same truth. Fabro says that:

"[Feuerbach] is therefore significant, not so much for his lapse into sensualism and materialism... as rather for his elucidation of the crucial point that, in the wake of the *cogito*, the being of the world is the limiting horizon for the existent who is man."¹⁶

We can see this quite clearly in a quote where Feuerbach is talking about his own method of anthropology. He says:

"...it posits in the "here", i.e., makes *present, determined and definite, realized*, that divine essence, that divine nature which common theology, out of fear or incomprehension, had posited in the remote beyond."¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 654.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 654.

By “here,” Feuerbach refers to our consciousness, and “Present, determined, and definite, realized” have an oddly similar ring to Descartes’s criteria for knowing truth, which is that the thing be known “clearly and distinctly” in his mind. The validity of Feuerbach’s system, in his opinion, lies in the fact that it bases all speculation inside the locus where knowledge is clearly present: our mind in its act of sense-knowing. From the very start, despite his rejection of Hegel’s idealism, he has accepted the even deeper fundamental that truth is determined by the mind.

For example, in defending his atheism against the pantheistic idealist Christians of his time, who had effectively brought God down into the world and subjected his will to the laws of nature, as Michael hit on yesterday, he says that

“The negation of the subject is held to be irreligion, nay atheism; though not so the negation of the predicates. But that which has no predicates or qualities, has no effect upon me; and that which has no effect upon me has no existence for me. To deny all the qualities of a being is equivalent to denying the being himself.”¹⁸

Essentially, he has made the question of God’s existence dependent upon the mind that predicates the qualities that make God to be God. And as soon as he has posed the question this way, it becomes empirical for him, since the human mind is only concerned with the reality it can sense, just as Hobbes and Locke had done. Now we reach the same impassable contradiction of trying to prove with our senses a being that, by our very definition, “transcends” the senses. Unlike the others, who spin their wheels and find elaborate solutions to get around this problem, Feuerbach simply says “that’s nonsense.” At rock bottom, says Feuerbach, this was an error of humans in

¹⁷ Feuerbach, *Vorläufige Thesen zur Reform der Philosophie*, 1843; C. W., ed. Bolin-Jodl, Vol. II (Stuttgart, 1904) (Cited in C. Fabro, *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 654)

¹⁸ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day*. N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 663

forming the concept of “a being who had in him the essence of sensible being without any of the signs (*Zeichen*) of that sort of (sensible) being.”¹⁹

Feuerbach elucidates how there is no way *ever* that a modern philosopher who operates according to the Cartesian cogito will ever produce a convincing proof for the existence of God. For if they're trying to conclude from the *interior reality* of reason a being that is exterior to that reality, while at once holding that the interior reality is the only existent reality, they are entertaining something completely illogical from the start. He happily suggest that the only refuge from complete contradiction once immanentism is accepted is atheism.

Conclusion

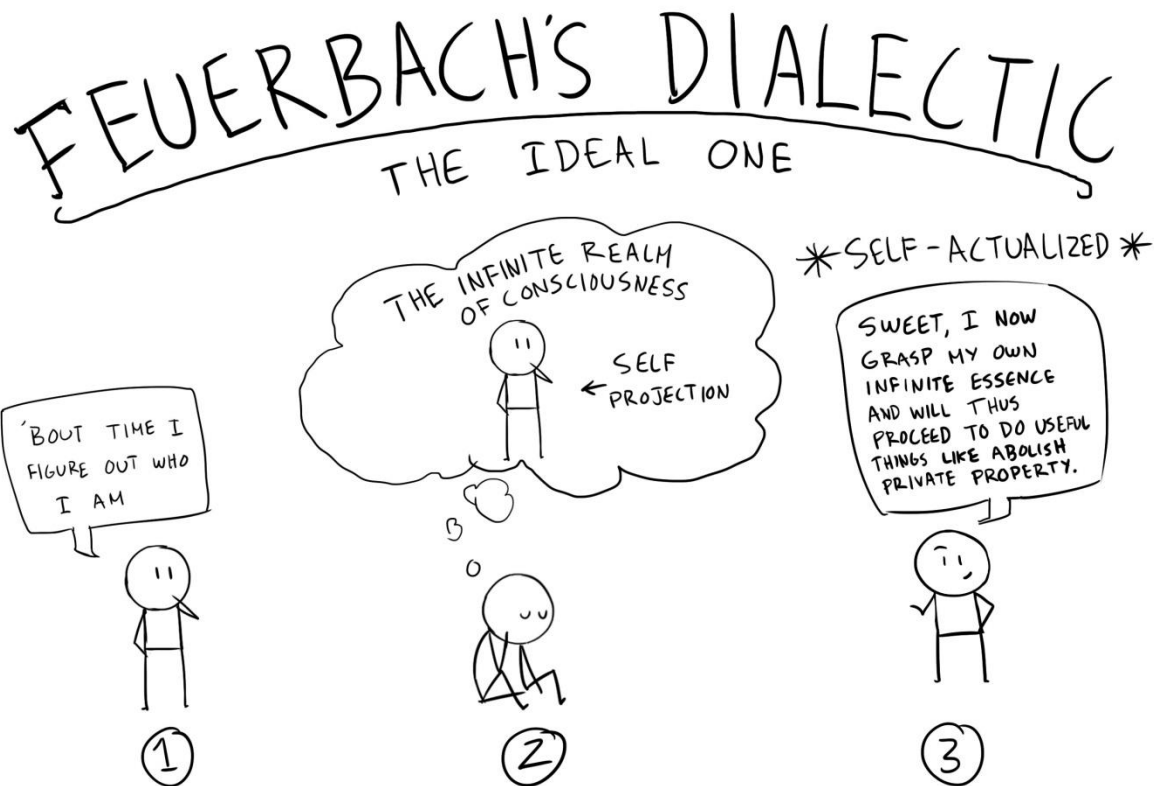
In summary, Ludwig Feuerbach was a materialist atheist who took the dialectic that Hegel had developed, and inverted it into a system that denied all transcendental realities. He used this to develop Strauss's concept of man as a species, not as an individual, and for a large section of the younger German philosophers, closed the debate about God's existence completely. Talking about atheism only makes sense if theism makes sense, but if God and theism turn out to be nonsense syllables, atheism is also devoid of meaning. What is left is man, and Feuerbach put it nicely when he said “Man is what he eats.” Fabro finishes his analysis of him by saying that

“Feuerbach claims—with good reason, it seems to us—that this dissolution or "precipitation" he has effected of the *cogito* into the sheer presence in act of reality thanks to sensible consciousness... that this constitutes the final assignment of modern thought.”²⁰

¹⁹ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in exile ; modern atheism. A study of the internal dynamic of modern atheism, from its roots in the Cartesian cogito to the present day.* N.Y.: Newman, 1968. Part 5, p. 671

²⁰ Ibid. p. 669.

Despite the fact that his primary works are all themed on Christianity, and focus mainly on the interpretation of religious themes, very little of this work is more than a development of what Hegel had already laid down in his “Phenomenology of Spirit.” Feuerbach’s real contribution is that atheism is now a completely legitimate point of departure for philosophers of the future; he has re-framed the whole philosophical question to focus on material reality and the various social and political difficulties man finds therein. Freedom is, as we mentioned, that “being at home with ourselves,” which is to say that it’s now up to man to reconcile his own moral difficulties and determine his own ends.



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