

Thought is Being or Thought and Being? Feuerbach and his Criticism of Hegel's Absolute Idealism by Martin Jenkins

Although he was once an ardent follower of the Philosophy of GWF Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) became highly critical of it and sought to supersede Absolute Idealism and Idealism in general, with his own 'New Philosophy'. As Zawar Hanfi notes, Feuerbach is invariably placed as a 'chapter in the book that is called Karl Marx'; that as Frederick Engels wrote upon the upon reading *The Essence of Christianity* 'we all became Feuerbachians'.² The influence of Feuerbach upon the thought of Karl Marx is not the subject matter of my paper, the subject matter is Feuerbach's criticism's of German Idealism, most notably the Absolute Idealism of Hegel, which indeed, did influence the early thinking of Marx.³

In the following, I have concentrated on Feuerbach's main arguments against Hegel as published by him from 1839 to 1843 in numerous texts.⁴ I have not examined his 'New Philosophy' as I am concerned only with his criticisms of Absolute Idealism and by implication, Idealism in general.

Firstly, Feuerbach maintains that Hegel's exposition of Absolute Idealism is circular. It presupposes its own Truth. The *Logic* begins with abstract, indeterminate Being and ends with the Absolute Idea. Yet the latter is derived by means of dialectical mediation between a term and it's otherness which begins with Being. The Absolute Idea is only a working out and elaboration of the original first term - Being. So, on Feuerbach's view, the conclusion is already presupposed in the very beginning.

Why does Hegel not proceed from the true starting point? 'Indeed, the true can only be a result; the true to prove itself to be so, that is, it has to present itself'. But how can it do so if Being itself has to the Idea, that is, when the Idea has already in itself been presupposed as the Primary'?⁵

The *Logic* 'is like a judge who tries his own case'⁶ and Hegel himself describes his Absolute Idealism as a 'circle of circles'.⁷ This methodology is not unique to Hegel, Feuerbach sees it operating in the philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza, Fichte and Schelling.⁸ Wrongly in his view, the 'first principles' from which they begin presuppose a-priori, their conclusion in a closed, reflexive exposition. Indeed, the latter is a mere formality.

Thus understood, the question of its proof (i.e. the Absolute Idea) had an essential and at the same time an unessential meaning: it was a necessity insofar as the Absolute Idea had to prove itself because only so could it demonstrate its necessity; but it was at the same time superfluous as far as the inner certainty of the of the truth of the Absolute Idea was concerned. The expression of this superfluous necessity of this dispensible indispensability or indispensable indispensability is the Hegelian method".⁹

Whereas the Critical Idealism of Kant sought to break with Metaphysics, Hegel has arguably reintroduced it. He can be accused, as can 'the whole of modern

philosophy from Descartes to Spinoza and onwards' of an unmediated break with *sensuous perception* and of 'Philosophy taking itself for granted'.¹⁰ Of course, Hegel would argue that he hasn't broken with sensuous perception, only that it be understood through conceptual mediation, by the mediation of Thought — a central tenet of Idealism.¹¹ The issue of sensuous perception leads to the second criticism against Hegel by Feuerbach.

The second criticism is that for speculative Absolute Idealism, Thought and Being are identical. Absolute Idealism therefore, remains restricted to existing in Thought alone. For Feuerbach, Knowledge is obtained through the interaction of Thought and its other — the concrete, the empirical, the sensuous: *actual Being*. Precisely this alone is a 'dialectic' between 'thesis and antithesis'. In the case of Idealist thought that expresses an antithesis, its credibility will remain 'subjective, one-sided and doubtful' so long as it relies on itself alone — a consequence of conflating of Thought and Being.¹²

Dialectics is not a monologue that speculation carries on with itself, but a dialogue between speculation and empirical reality.¹³

Thus the *Logic* which begins and premises the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* Logic, Nature, Spirit (Geist) with and from abstract, indeterminate Being, dialectically passing into Nothing, is a monological fabrication and certainly, not capable of providing any such sound, philosophical beginning. For if you 'leave out determinateness from being, you leave being with no being at all'.¹⁴ Likewise, 'if you exclude from man that which makes him man, you can demonstrate without any difficulty that he is not a man'. Being has to have a content for it to have meaning. Being is one with the thing that is, take away Being from it and all its actuality is removed. 'It is impossible to think of Being in separation from specific determinations'.¹⁵ We cannot begin with the *idea or thought* of Being as Hegel does, we begin with *actual Being*.

Actual Being and the acquisition of real knowledge, remains therefore, beyond the grasp of Absolute Idealism. Hence in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach states that Being which is not distinct from Thought:

... that is, a being which is only a predicate or determination of reason, or only a conceived and abstract being is, in truth, no being at all. The identity of Thinking and Being expresses therefore, only the identity of Thought with itself. This means that absolute Thought is unable to cleave itself from itself, that it cannot step out of itself to be able to reach Being.¹⁶

Absolute Idealism is trapped within abstraction. This leads nicely to Feuerbach's third and devastating criticism which goes to the very heart (head?) of the methodology of Speculative Absolute Idealism — its inversion of the Subject (Being) and Object (Thought).

In his *Preliminary Thesis on the Reform of Philosophy* (1842) we find this:

The method of the reformative critique of *speculative philosophy* as such does not differ from that already used in the *Philosophy of Religion*. We need only turn the *predicate* in the *subject* and thus as *subject* into *object* and *principle* — that is, only *reverse* speculative philosophy. In this way, we have the

unconcealed, pure and untarnished truth.¹⁷

Just as his *On the Essence of Christianity* had proposed that the Christian God was the transferal and projection of attributes from the human (Subject) into a transcendent God (Object) and, the inversion of this Subject-Object schema making God the primary Subject and human beings subordinate Objects/ attributes or Predicates of the Subject; so Feuerbach similarly maintains that Hegel's Absolute Idealism and Idealism generally commits the same inversion.¹⁸

Hegel posits subjective human thinking/ reason as an actual, independently existing and objective entity that is Spirit *Geist* (collective human consciousness and/ or God and/ or Reason). Spirit dialectically overcomes its own estrangement, alienation, inversion from itself until it finally becomes the Absolute Idea or total self-consciousness of itself. Spirit/ Absolute Idea is the Subject and human beings are the highest, most eminent of its predicates.

Idealism hypostasises Intellect when in Feuerbach's view, it at most co-exists with the sensuous or at least, is subordinate to it. It is not primary as Idealism maintains. The inversion perpetrated by Hegel must itself be inverted.

Fourthly, Feuerbach claims to have identified an inconsistency in Hegel, specifically in the movement of the Absolute Idea into Nature.¹⁹ This inconsistency inadvertently raises the truth of a materialist, empiricist epistemology. Feuerbach's interpretation of this movement is as follows.

The concrete concept, the Absolute Idea of the *Logic*, exists in an abstract way, as thought thinking itself. This Idea alienates itself in Nature. (It is 'the history of theology transformed into a logical process' — how God manifests himself in the creation).²⁰ The realisation of the Idea in Nature manifests in a materialism. 'If the *truth* of the Idea is that it *really* is, that it *exists* then *existence* is the *criterion of truth*. *True* is what *really exists*.' If thought alone is what exists, we remain limited, trapped in thought (see second criticism above). So something other than thought is required. Hence:

... It must, as *realised thought*, be other than what is *unrealised, pure thought* — the object not only of thought but also of non-thought. That thought realises itself means simply that it *negates* itself, ceases to be mere thought. Now what is this non-thought, this something different from thought? It is the sensuous.²¹

The realisation of the Idea is sensuousness. What is real is true. So sensuousness is the truth of the Idea.

However, this remains within the Subject-Predicate schema of Idealism where the Subject Idea is realised in the Predicate of sensuousness. If sensuousness is subordinate to, a mere attribute contingent upon the Idea, why does the Idea need it to realise its Truth? Sensuousness/ Nature is essential to the truth of the Idea, so it must have Truth value in itself, cannot be a mere contingency. This is contradictory according to Feuerbach:

But this is a contradiction; for sensuousness is an attribute and yet it lends truth to thought. That is, it is both essential and inessential, both substance and

accident. The only way out of this contradiction is to regard sensuous reality as *its own subject*; to give it absolutely independent, divine and primary significance, not one derived from the Idea.²²

Of course, this could be offset, by retaining belief in the Absolute Idealism/ Theology of Hegel — itself a matter of contingent belief.

Concluding Remarks

Feuerbach maintains that Idealism remains trapped within Thought. This will be remedied in his 'New Philosophy' with its mediation between Thought and sensuous Being, between the I and You. Due to the influence of Spinoza in Schelling and Hegel's critical development of this, Substance will become aware of itself as Subject., in the Absolute Idea. In other words, Nature (or God) becomes conscious of itself by means of collective human consciousness (*Geist*). Hence Feuerbach believes that the Idealism of Hegel is essentially revised Theology and that this is only possible by the inversion of the Subject and Predicates whereby human Thought becomes the hypostasised Subject and humanity its highest predicate. This inversion is to be reversed to finally free Thought from Theology and Idealist abstraction and to reconnect it to sensuous being again, allowing a dialogue of Thought and sensuous being to ensue.

This sensuous empiricism however reintroduces the very problems Kant identified with Hume's empiricism and hence prompted his formulation of Transcendental Idealism. Whilst Feuerbach may arguably have shown Absolute Idealism through the front door, the issues it raised re-enter through another.

References

- 1 Ludwig Feuerbach. *The Fiery Brook. Selected Writings*. Ed: Zavar Hanif. Verso. 2012. Editor's Introduction. P.1.
2. Frederick Engels. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. International Publishers. New York. 2012. P. 18.
3. See for example: *Karl Marx. Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and Philosophy in General*. Contained in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*. Ed: Lucio Colletti. Penguin. 1992.
4. The texts are contained in *The Fiery Brook* op cite. I will use the following abbreviations for purpose of page reference:
Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy. (1839) TCHP.
Preliminary Thesis on the Reform of Philosophy. (1842) PTRP
Principles of the Philosophy of the Future. (1843) PPF.

5. TCHP. P. 70.

6. *ibid.*

7. GWF Hegel. *Encyclopedia Logic*.
Hackett Publishing, 1991. #15. P.31.

8. TCHP. P. 76.

9. TCHP. P. 75.

10. TCHP. P. 76.

11. See: 1. Sense Certainty or the ‘This’ and ‘Meaning’ A. Consciousness.
GWF Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Geist*. Oxford University Press. 1977. P. 58.

GWF Hegel. *Encyclopedia Logic* op. Cite. #20. P. 49.

12. TCHP. P. 76.

13. TCHP. P. 72.

14. TCHP. P. 71.

15. *ibid.*

16. PPF. Part Three. #24. P. 211.

17. PTRP. P. 154.

18. PPF #23. P. 211 & PTRP. P. 157.

19. *Encyclopedia Logic*. Op cite. #244. P. 307.

20. PPF. #31. P. 222.

21. *ibid.*

22. PPF. #31. P. 223.

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