

LUDWIG FEUERBACH

The Essence of Religion

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804–1872) broke with the German Idealism in which he had been schooled and propounded a radical materialism that influenced, among others, Karl Marx. As part of that materialism, Feuerbach here in the twelfth lecture of *The Essence of Religion* set forth the thesis that man had created God in his own image — the precise reverse of the creation story — and that therefore religion was to be explained on the basis of psychology rather than of theology.

IN THE LAST LECTURE I elucidated by the example of man one of the first and most common proofs of the existence of God, the so-called cosmological proof, to the effect that everything in the world is finite and dependent and therefore presupposes something infinite and independent. My conclusion was that although man was originally a child, he is at the same time a father, that although he is effect he is also cause, that though dependent he is also independent. But, obvious differences aside, what is true of man is also true of other beings. For all its dependency on other beings, each being is an independent self; each being has the ground of its existence in itself — to what purpose would it otherwise exist? Every being has come into existence under conditions and through causes — regardless of their nature — which could have given rise to no other being; each being owes its existence to a set of causes which would not be operative without it. 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 on 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.

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Nature has no beginning and no end. Everything in it acts upon everything else, everything in it is relative, everything is at once effect and cause, acting and reacting on all sides. Nature does not culminate in a monarchic summit; it is a republic. Those who are accustomed to a monarchy cannot conceive of a human society without a prince, and likewise those who have grown up with the idea of a Father in Heaven find it hard to conceive of nature without a God. But it is just as possible to conceive of nature without a God, without an extranatural and supernatural being, as of a state or nation without a royal idol situated outside and above it. Indeed, 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 it grounded in nature. Nothing is more absurd than 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 cannot refrain from spinning out fantasies, from looking further and further afield, if I am unable to stop with nature and content my intellectual need for causes with the universal action and interaction of nature, what is to prevent me from going beyond God? What is to prevent me from looking for a ground and cause of God as well? Do we not in God find the same situation as in the concatenation of natural causes and effects, the very situation that I wished to remedy by positing the existence of a God?

If I conceive of 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? What becomes of His power if He does nothing; of His wisdom, if there is no world for Him to govern? Where is His goodness if there is nothing for Him to be good to — where His infinity, if there is nothing finite? For He is infinite only in contrast to finiteness. Thus if I omit the world, nothing remains of God. Why then should we not confine ourselves to the world, since in any case we cannot go above or outside it, since even the idea and hypothesis of God throws us back on the world, since if we take away nature, we deprive the world of all reality and consequently negate even the reality of God insofar as He is conceived as the cause of the world?

Thus the difficulties arising from the question of the beginning of the world are only postponed or thrust aside or glossed over by the notion of a God, a being outside the world; they are *not solved*. Is it not then more reasonable to assume that the world always was and always will be, and consequently that it has the ground of its existence within

itself. "We cannot dispel but neither can we endure the thought," says Kant in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, "that a being whom we conceive of as the highest of all possible beings says to himself as it were: I am from eternity to eternity; outside of me there is nothing except for that which is something through my will; but *whence then am I?*" In other words, where does God come from? What obliges me to stop at God? Nothing; I cannot help inquiring into His origin. And that is no secret: the cause of what for the theists, theologians, and so-called speculative philosophers is the first and universal cause of all things — is the human intellect. The intellect rises from the individual and particular to the universal, from the concrete to the abstract, from the determined to the undetermined. It also rises from real, definite, particular causes, and goes on rising until it comes to the concept of *cause as such*, the cause that produces no real, definite, particular effects.

God is not, at least not directly as the theists suppose, the cause of thunder and lightning, of rain and sunshine, of fire and water, sun and moon; all these things and phenomena have only particular, special, sensuous causes; He is merely the universal first cause, the cause of causes; He is the cause that is not a definite, sensuous real cause, the cause that is abstracted from all sensuous matter, from all special determinations. In other words, He is *cause as such*, the concept of cause personified as an independent being. Just as the intellect personifies as one being the concept of being, abstracted from all the definite properties of being, so it personifies the concept of cause abstracted from all the characteristics of real, determinate causality in a First Cause. Just as man, operating on the plane of reason disengaged from the senses, subjectively and quite logically sets the species above individuals, color above colors, mankind above men, so he sets "cause" above causes. "God is the ground of the world" means: "cause" is the ground of causes; without "cause" there can be no causes; the *first* in logic, in the intellectual order, is "cause"; the second and subordinate term is causes or *kinds* of cause; in short, the first cause reduces itself to the concept of cause and the concept of cause is a product of the intellect, which abstracts the universal from particular real things and then, in accordance with its own nature, sets this abstracted universal over them as the First.

But for that very reason, because the First Cause is a mere intellectual concept or entity without objective existence, it also is not the cause of my life and existence. *This* cause is of no use to me; the cause of my life is the sum of *many different, definite* causes; the cause, for

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example, of my breathing is subjectively my lungs, objectively the air; the cause of my vision is objectively the light, subjectively my eyes. In short, the First Cause is an unprofitable abstraction. From this first cause that causes nothing I therefore turn back to the more profitable theme of nature, the sum of real causes, and try once again to prove that we must confine ourselves to nature as the ultimate ground of our existence; that all derivations from nature which transcend nature to arrive at a nonnatural being are mere fantasies and delusions. The proofs are both direct and indirect; the direct proofs are drawn from nature and relate to it directly; the indirect ones show the contradictions involved in the contrary assumption and the absurd consequences that follow from it.

Our world — not only our political and social world, but our learned, intellectual world as well — is a world upside down. The great achievement of our education, of our culture, our science, our erudition has been, above all, to stray as far as possible from nature, from the simple palpable truth. It is a universal principle of this upside-down world that God manifests Himself in nature, whereas we should say the opposite, namely, that originally at least nature manifests itself to man as a God, that nature makes on man an impression which he calls God, which he becomes conscious of and objectifies under the name of God. It is a universal doctrine in our upside-down world that nature sprang from God, whereas we should say the opposite, namely, that God was abstracted from nature and is merely a concept derived from it; for all the predicates, all the attributes or determinations, all the realities, as the philosophers say, that is, all the essences or perfections which are summed up in God; or whose totality is, or is called, God — in short all those divine predicates that are not borrowed from man, are derived from nature, so that they objectify, represent, illustrate nothing other than the essence of nature, or nature pure and simple. The difference is only that God is an abstraction, that is, a mere notion, while nature is concrete, that is, real; but the essence, the substance, the content are the same; God is nature in the abstract, that is, removed from physical perception, transformed into an object or concept of the intellect; nature itself is sensuous, real nature as directly revealed and communicated to us by the senses.

If we now consider the attributes of the Godhead, we shall find that they are all rooted in nature, that they are meaningful only if we relate them to nature. One attribute of God is power: He is a powerful being, the most powerful of beings; according to late conceptions, He is

all-powerful. Power is the first predicate of the Godhead or rather, it is the first god. But what is this power? What does it express? Nothing other than the power of natural phenomena. As we have seen in the first lectures, thunder and lightning, the phenomena that make the most powerful, most terrible impression on man, are the effects of the highest, most powerful god, or they are one with him. Even in the Old Testament, thunder is the voice of God, and in many passages lightning is "the face of God." But what is a God whose voice is thunder, whose face is lightning, other than the essence of nature, or of thunder and lightning? Even Christian theists identify the power of their God, for all His spirituality, purely and simply with the sensuous power of nature. The Christian poet Triller, for example, writes in his "poetic reflections":

Is it not so, confess,
That your heart trembles in your breast,
When with shattering power the thunder
Rolls and roars and crashes?
What can be the cause of your fear,
What else, if not that your mind
Tells you that with the might of His thunder
And with the sulphurous flames of His lightning
God might suddenly snatch you from the earth?
Thus there can be no doubt
That *thunder and lightning are a sign*
Of *God's being and God's omnipotence.*

And even in Christian views that do not make the power of nature so palpably evident as the divine Triller makes the thunder and lightning, it remains the underlying factor. The Christian theists, whose guiding principle is abstraction, hence remoteness from the truth of nature, who look upon nature as dead, inert matter, regard God's power or omnipotence as the cause of motion in nature. God, they say, has conferred, implanted, impressed motion upon matter, and they marvel at God's vast power, which has enabled Him to set this enormous mass or machine in motion. But this power by which God set body or matter in motion — is it not abstracted from the force or power by which one body imparts its motion to another? The diplomatic theists deny, to be sure, that God moved matter by means of a thrust, or any immediate contact; as a spirit, they claim, He did so by His will alone. But they do not really conceive God as pure spirit — at the same time they conceive of Him as a material and sensuous, or better still,

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The notion of power as a divine predicate or god springs chiefly from a comparison of the works of nature with the works of man. Man cannot produce plants and trees, he cannot make storms, thunder, and lightning. Vergil therefore calls Jupiter's thunderbolt "inimitable," and in Greek mythology Salmoeneus is struck by Zeus' lightning for his presumption in trying to make thunder and lightning. Such works of nature are beyond man's strength, they are not in his power. That is why the being who produces such effects and phenomena is *superhuman* and therefore divine. But all these effects and phenomena express nothing other than the *power of nature*. Christian theists, to be sure, attribute these effects *indirectly*, or in their ultimate source, to God, to a being distinct from nature and endowed with will, reason, and consciousness; but this is only an explanation, and what concerns us here is not whether a spirit is or is not, can or cannot be, the source of these phenomena, but solely the fact that the natural phenomena, the natural forces which even a Christian, at least a rational enlightened Christian, does not look upon as immediate actions of God, but, in accordance with the real facts, as effects of nature, are the model from which man originally derived the notion and concept of a superhuman divine power.

An example: If a man is struck down by lightning, a Christian says or thinks that this has not happened by chance or simply in the course of nature; he attributes it to a divine decision; for "God's eye is on the sparrow." God wanted the man to die, and to die in just this way. His will is the cause, the last or first cause of the man's death; the immediate cause is the lightning, or as the ancients believed, the lightning is the instrument with which God Himself killed the man, or according to modern faith, the instrumental cause which by God's will, at least with His permission or consent, brought about the man's death. But this shattering, killing, searing power is the power of lightning itself, just as the power or effect of the arsenic with which I poison somebody is not an effect of my will, of my power, but the power and effect inherent in the arsenic itself. Thus from the theist or Christian standpoint we distinguish the power of *things* from the power or rather the will of God. We do not regard the effects and hence

the properties — for we know the properties of things only by their effects — of electricity, of magnetism, of air; water, and fire as the properties and effects of God; we do not say: God burns and gives warmth, we do not say or think that God makes something wet; we say that water makes it wet; we do not say that God is thundering and lightning, no, we say: it is thundering and lightning, etc. But it is precisely from these phenomena, properties, and effects of nature, incompatible with the spiritual God conceived by Christians, that man derives his conception of divine, superhuman power, and because of which, so long as he remains faithful to his original, ingenuous view and does not split nature into God and the world, he worships nature itself as God.

Apropos of the word superhuman, I cannot refrain from a digression. One of the most frequent laments heard from the religious and learned bewailers of atheism is that it destroys or ignores an essential need of man, the need to revere something higher than himself, and therefore turns man into a presumptuous egoist. But in annulling what is Above Man theologically, atheism does not annul what is ethically and naturally Higher. The ethically Higher is the ideal that every man must pursue if he is to make anything worthwhile of himself; but this ideal is and must be a human ideal and aim. The naturally Higher is nature itself, and in particular, the celestial powers on which our existence, our earth depend; for the earth itself is only a part of the "celestial powers" and is what it is only by virtue of the position it occupies in our solar system. Even the supraterrrestrial and superhuman God owes His origin only to the physical, optical being-above-us of the sky and the heavenly bodies. According to Cyril, Julian proved the divinity of the stars by pointing out that everyone raises his hands to heaven when he prays or swears or in any way invokes the name of the Godhead. Even Christians put their "spiritual, omnipresent" God in the sky; and they put Him there for the same reasons which originally caused the sky itself to be regarded as God. Aristotle of Chios, a pupil of Zeno, founder of Stoicism, said expressly: "Over us is [or goes] the Physical [nature], for it is impossible to know, and brings us no benefit." But this Physical is mainly the celestial. More than anything else it was the objects of astronomy and meteorology that aroused the interest of the first scientists and natural philosophers. Socrates rejected physics as something beyond the powers of man and directed men's minds from physics to ethics; but by physics he meant chiefly astronomy and meteorology, hence the well-known saying that he brought philosophy down from heaven to earth; and this is also

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why he spoke of all philosophizing that exceeded the powers and vocation of man as *meteorologein* (i.e., concern with celestial, supra-terrestrial things).

But just as The Power, the superhuman, the highest or higher being above us — among the Romans the gods were called *Superi* — was originally a predicate of nature, so were eternity and infinity also predicates of nature. In Homer, for example, "infinite" is an epithet for the sea and the earth, in the philosopher Anaximenes for the air; in the Zend Avesta eternity and immortality are predicates of the sun and stars. Even Aristotle, the greatest philosopher of antiquity, imputes immutability and eternity to the heavens and the heavenly bodies in contrast to the transience and mutability of earthly things. And even a Christian infers (that is, derives) the greatness and infinity of God from the greatness and infinity of the world or nature, though he immediately proceeds (for a reason that is readily understood but need not be discussed here) to make nature disappear behind God. In agreement with innumerable other Christians, Scheuchzer, for example, writes: "Not only the unfathomable greatness of the world and of the heavenly bodies but even the tiniest grain of dust, is a sign of His infinite greatness." And elsewhere the same scholar and pious naturalist writes: "The Creator's *infinite* wisdom and power shine forth not only from the *infinite magna*, from the mass of the universe and from the great bodies that float free in the heavens . . . but also from the *infinite parva*, from the grains of dust and tiny organisms. . . . Each grain of dust contains an infinite number of infinitesimal worlds." The concept of infinity coincides with the concept of all-embracing universality.

God is no particular and hence finite being, He is not confined to this or that nation or locality, but neither is nature. Sun, moon, sky, earth, and sea, said a Greek philosopher, are common to all, and a Roman poet (Ovid) said that nature gave no one exclusive possession of sun, air, or water. God is "no respecter of persons," but neither is nature. The earth brings forth its fruits not for this or that chosen person or nation; the sun shines not only on Christian or Jew, but illumines all men without distinction. Precisely because of this infinity and universality of nature the ancient Jews, who regarded themselves as the chosen people and believed that the world had been created for their sake, could not understand why the good things of life had not been made available to them alone, but to idolaters as well. When asked why God did not destroy idolatry, Jewish scholars therefore answered that He would destroy the idolaters if they did not

worship things that were necessary to the world; but that since they worshiped the sun, the moon, the stars, water, and fire, why should He destroy the world for the sake of a few fools? In other words: God must spare the causes and objects of idolatry, because without them the Jews could not endure.

Here we have an interesting illustration of certain essential features of religion. First of all, an illustration of the contradiction between theory and practice, faith and life, implicit in every religion. This natural sharing of earth, light, and water with idolaters was diametrically opposed to the theory and faith of the Jews; since they wished to have nothing in common with the heathen and their religion forbade it, they should not have shared the blessings of life with them. If they had been consistent, they should have excluded either the heathen or themselves from the enjoyment of these blessings. Secondly, we have here an illustration of the fact that nature is far more liberal than the God of the religions, that man's natural view is far more universal than his religious view which separates man from man, Christian from Jew, Jew from heathen, and that consequently the unity of the human race, the love that embraces all men, is by no means grounded on the concept of the heavenly father or, as modern philosophers say, on the concept of Spirit, but far more on nature, which originally was indeed its sole foundation. The universal love of man is by no means of Christian origin. It was already taught by the pagan philosophers; but the God of the pagan philosophers was nothing other than the world, or nature.

Christians, on the contrary, held the same belief as the Jews; they too believed and said that the world was created and preserved *for their sake alone*. They were as consistently incapable as the Jews of finding an explanation for the existence of infidels and of heathen in general. For if the world exists only for the sake of Christians, why and to what end are there other people who are not Christians and do not believe in the Christian God? The Christian God accounts for the existence only of Christians, and not of pagans and infidels. The God whose sun shines on the just and the unjust, believers and unbelievers, Christians and pagans alike is indifferent to such religious distinctions, He knows nothing of them; this God, in truth, is nothing other than nature. Thus the Biblical words that God makes His sun shine on good and evil alike, contain a vestige or evidence of a nature religion, or else the good and the evil are taken as men who may differ from one another morally but not dogmatically, for the dogmatic, Biblical God strictly distinguishes the sheep from the goats, Christians from Jews and heathen,

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believers from unbelievers; to the goats He promises hell, to the sheep heaven. He condemns the sheep to bliss and eternal life, and the goats to eternal misery and death. But this is precisely why the existence of such men condemned to nothingness cannot be derived from Him; there is no way of explaining the thousands and thousands of contradictions, perplexities, difficulties, and inconsistencies in which religious belief involves us, unless we acknowledge that the original God was a being abstracted from nature and accordingly replace the mystical, ambiguous name and being of God with the name and being of nature.