

THE MIRROR AND THE CRITERION: FEUERBACH AS A CONSTITUTIVIST OF VALUE AND THE LIMITS OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Ludwig Feuerbach interprets religion as the objectification of the human essence, understanding the divinity as a projection of humanity's own predicates, needs, and aspirations. Two critical theses are usually drawn from this interpretation: that the anthropological explanation of religion would invalidate its content, and that the same explanation would turn against Feuerbach's humanist alternative, producing a "mirror effect" that would undermine the asymmetry of his critique. This article argues that both theses, in the form in which they are usually presented, are either false or not new. The first rests on the confusion between genetic explanation and refutation—a fallacy that the distinction between suspicion and scepticism already dispels—and ignores that the only legitimate bridge between explaining and invalidating is the truth-insensitivity premise developed by the literature on debunking arguments. The second, in its functional-equivalence version, had already been advanced by Stirner, and it reaches not the truth of the critique but only its practical function. As an alternative, a reformulation is proposed: Feuerbach constitutes a parent form of value constitutivism—the supreme is that which the species reflexively recognizes as its own essence—and, as such, inherits the shmagency objection and the question of the ground of norms. The mirror effect then receives its exact and strong formulation: the very premise that would invalidate religious valuation equally invalidates humanist valuation, unless one admits a realism about value that Feuerbach rejects. It is concluded that the asymmetry of the Feuerbachian critique falls not because humanism "also consoles", but because it cannot meet the normative demand it presses upon religion.

Keywords: Feuerbach; critique of religion; projection; constitutivism; debunking arguments; normativity.

INTRODUCTION

The critique of religion developed by Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* occupies a central position in modern philosophy. Against the understanding according to which God constitutes a transcendent reality independent of the human being, Feuerbach maintains that the predicates attributed to the divinity correspond, in truth, to the objectified human essence: religion is not primarily knowledge of a transcendent being, but the expression of human self-consciousness in alienated form. From this methodological inversion two critical claims are ordinarily drawn. The first is epistemic: once religion has been explained as the projection of human needs, its content would thereby be invalidated. The second is dialectical: the same scheme applied to religion could be reapplied to the humanist solution itself, so that the critique would lose the asymmetry on which it lives—what will here be called, taking up a label already in use, the mirror effect.

The purpose of this article is to submit both claims to examination and to show that, in the form in which they usually appear, they either do not hold or are not new—and that, at the point where something still remains to be said, what remains to be said is something else, and something stronger, than what the most widespread literature states. The argument unfolds in five steps, and it is worth announcing them at once, since the contribution lies less in each step taken in isolation than in their order. First, an exegetical correction: the target that the epistemic version usually attacks—religion as consolation and wish fulfilment—is more Freudian than Feuerbachian, and does not coincide with what Feuerbach actually maintains.

Second, an epistemological correction: the passage from explanation to rejection does not lack a bridge, as is usually claimed; the bridge exists, it has a precise name and form, and it is precisely because it exists that it exacts a price. Third, a confrontation: the mirror effect, in its functional-equivalence version, belongs to Stirner, and it does not reach the truth of the critique. Fourth, a reformulation: Feuerbach is, beneath the language of the nineteenth century, a constitutivist of value, and reading his thesis in this way opens it to the contemporary metaethical debate. Fifth, the consequence: thus reread, the Feuerbachian critique inherits a normative demand—the same one that contemporary metaethics names the question of the ground of norms—which it is no better able to meet than the religion it seeks to dissolve.

The method is reconstructive and analytic-conceptual, and its neutrality needs to be declared. No argument is made here for or against the existence of God, nor is any creed presupposed; the internal structure of a philosophical argument is examined, and what it establishes and what it does not establish is measured. The historical accuracy of Feuerbach's theses is called upon only where the argument depends on it—and it does depend on it, as will be seen, at one decisive point, that at which specialist scholarship distinguishes two mutually incompatible theories of religion. Beyond that, the analysis remains on the level of inferential

relations, and it is on that level, and not on that of the acceptance or rejection of faith, that its conclusion should be judged.

THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION AND THE CORRECT FEUERBACH

It is advisable to reconstruct the thesis before assessing it, and to reconstruct it with care not to replace Feuerbach with a neighbour who is easier to refute. The core of *The Essence of Christianity* is not the claim that religion consoles, but the claim that theology is, without knowing it, anthropology: the predicates that faith attributes to God—wisdom, love, mercy, infinity—are predicates of the human species-essence, objectified and posited as the subject of another being. Man, Feuerbach says, projects his essence into objectivity and then makes himself the object of this projected image, which has in turn become a subject. Religion is, in this sense, true knowledge about man in the form of illusory knowledge about God. The decisive operation is not an inference of the type “this has a human origin, therefore it is false”; it is a redescription of the referent: when what religious language asserts is correctly analysed, it turns out that it asserts something about humanity, mistakenly taking it for an assertion about a transcendent Other.

This distinction has a consequence that compromises from the outset the most widespread version of the critique—and of the self-critique—of Feuerbachianism. If Feuerbach’s operation were the genetic inference, it would fall under the classical objection of the genetic fallacy, and the first thesis of this debate would be right to point it out. But since the operation is a redescription of the subject of the predicates, what Feuerbach offers is not a proof that religion is false, but a rival reading of what religion says. This shifts the problem: the question is no longer “does the explanation invalidate the content?”, but “is the redescription the correct reading, or only a possible reading?”—and that is a question of another kind, to which the final section will return.

There is, however, a second misconception to be undone, and this one is textual. The characterization of religion as existential fulfilment or compensation in the face of finitude—consolation, the satisfaction of the wish for a protector and for a life without end—is not the centre of Feuerbach, but of Freud. This is what the best Feuerbach scholarship establishes. Van Harvey, in the now indispensable study on the subject, shows that there are in Feuerbach not one but two theories of religion, and that they are incompatible: the first, that of projection, set out in *The Essence of Christianity* in dependence on the Hegelian dialectic of consciousness; the second, later and anchored in the feeling of dependence on nature, set out in *The Essence of Religion* (Harvey, 1995). It is to the first, and through the lens of the “happiness principle” that Harvey identifies in the consolatory reading, that the theme of compensation is best suited—and even so it belongs, strictly speaking, to the Freudian posterity of projection, not to Feuerbach himself. The distinction is not a philological detail: on it depends knowing against whom, exactly, the epistemic critique is directed.

From this follows the first delimitation of interlocutors, which will serve as a thread for the rest. Harvey provides the correction of the target: he obliges one not to confuse the theory of projection with that of dependence, nor either of them with the Freudian theory of wish. What Harvey does not provide is any assessment of the passage between explanation and rejection, or of the normative criterion at stake; his contribution is reconstructive, not evaluative. With this gain and this limit in hand, the first thesis proper can be confronted.

EXPLANATION AND TRUTH: SUSPICION, THE GENETIC FALLACY, AND THE BRIDGE THAT EXISTS

The first thesis maintains that explaining religion as projection does not invalidate it, since there is no bridge between the anthropological origin of a belief and its truth value. In its trivial form, the thesis is true and well known: explaining why someone believes something does not demonstrate that what is believed is false, on pain of the genetic fallacy. The distinction underlying it was formulated with precision by Merold Westphal, in separating suspicion from scepticism: scepticism is directed at the truth or evidential basis of a belief, whereas suspicion interrogates the motives that produce it and the function it fulfils for those who hold it (Westphal, 1998). Suspicion, by itself, does not decide on truth; it moves on a different plane. On this point, the first thesis merely reformulates Westphal—and Westphal, it should be noted, draws from the distinction a conclusion opposite to the one being combated here: for him, the suspicion of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud should be received by the believer as a stimulus to self-examination, and not refuted as error.

The problem with the first thesis lies, therefore, not in its being false, but in its being incomplete in a way that renders it vulnerable. In asserting that a bridge between explanation and invalidation is lacking, it ignores that the bridge has been built, and rigorously, by the contemporary literature on debunking arguments. The canonical scheme, as Guy Kahane formalizes it, has three steps: a causal premise—a subject's belief that *p* is explained by process *X*; an epistemic premise—*X* is an off-track process, that is, insensitive to the truth of *p*, one that would produce the belief whether *p* were true or false; and the conclusion—the belief that *p* is unjustified (Kahane, 2011). The bridge is precisely the epistemic premise. Falsity is not inferred from origin; lack of justification is inferred from the truth-insensitivity of the generating process. Applied to religion, the manoeuvre is direct: if the projection of the species-essence would produce the representation of God regardless of whether God exists, then the process is off-track, and the belief it generates cannot claim epistemic credit—even if, by chance, it were true.

Wilkins and Griffiths developed this structure in a direction that bears closely on our problem, by asking in which domains evolutionary explanation debunks belief and in which it does not. The answer they propose is asymmetrical: commonsense and scientific beliefs are not overturned, because the process that generates them favours truth; moral and religious beliefs, by contrast, are, since there is no analogous guarantee that the process producing them is sensitive to their truth (Wilkins; Griffiths, 2013; cf. Street, 2006; Jong; Visala, 2014). The crucial point, for

what follows, is that the force of debunking depends entirely on an asymmetry of tracking: a process is disqualifying when, and only when, it proves insensitive to the truth of what it produces. Let this condition be kept in mind; it will be the key to the argument.

The lesson of this section, as regards the interlocutors, is twofold. The debunking literature—Kahane, Wilkins and Griffiths, Street—provides the bridge that the first thesis declared absent, and thereby corrects it: it is not true that the explanation of religion can never touch its validity; it touches it when, and only when, the premise of truth-insensitivity is added. What this literature does not provide is the application of the manoeuvre to the specific case of Feuerbach, and still less to the humanist alternative that Feuerbach puts in the place of religion: its target is theism in general or morality, not the Feuerbachian reconstruction of value. It is this gap—between the apparatus of debunking and the humanist Feuerbach—that the following sections occupy.

THE MIRROR EFFECT AND WHY THE KNOWN VERSION IS WEAK

The second thesis maintains that the same scheme used to explain and criticize religion can be reapplied to Feuerbach's humanist solution, which also produces meaning, reconciliation, and existential stabilization—whence the asymmetry of the critique would dissolve. In the functional-equivalence version, however, this thesis is not new: it belongs to Max Stirner, who formulated it in 1844 with a radicalism that the contemporary version rarely equals. For Stirner, Feuerbach did not abolish religion; he merely effected a change of masters. The religious core—the positing of an “essence above me”—remains intact when “Man” or “Humanity” takes the place of God; and the new divinity is even more domineering, because it can possess believers and unbelievers alike, and because the scrutiny of one's own conscience is harder to evade than that of a transcendent subject (STIRNER, 2004). Stirner's exact target is the Feuerbachian motto *homo homini deus est*—man is to man the supreme being—and the structure of his book parodies that of Feuerbach the better to invert it. It is worth recording that the same reapplication had already been made, on Freudian terrain, by Paul Vitz, who turns the theory of projection against Freud himself and concludes that it has limited logical value as an argument for or against theism, being, at bottom, an *ad hominem* (Vitz, 1999).

There is, however, a more serious reason not to be content with this version of the mirror: it is weak, because Feuerbach has a reply that disarms it. The asymmetry Feuerbach claims was never “religion consoles and humanism does not”; it was alienated misrecognition against lucid self-recognition. Consider two ways of finding meaning before the same world: one attributes meaning to a transcendent Other that does not exist; the other recognizes it as belonging to the human being's own relation to itself and to nature. Both, by hypothesis, “console”—they are functionally similar. But Feuerbach's point is that only the second is truthful as to the subject of the predicates: the one exiles into fiction what the other restores to its real bearer. If the axis that matters is the truth of the attribution, then functional similarity is irrelevant, and the mirror reflects where there is nothing to reflect. The functional-equivalence thesis, in order to reach

Feuerbach, would need to show that function, and not the truth of the referent, is the relevant criterion—and this is precisely what it presupposes without argument.

As regards the interlocutors, therefore: Stirner provides the mirror effect in its original and sharpest form, and for that reason any claim of novelty for functional equivalence is untenable; but what Stirner does not provide is a version of the mirror that operates on the plane of truth rather than on that of practical domination. His mirror is political-existential, not epistemic: it shows that humanism re-deifies the human, not that humanist valuation is as epistemically fragile as religious valuation. Vitz, for his part, provides the *tu quoque* and the lesson that projection is dialectically reversible, but does not provide the diagnosis of what a valid reversal would require. To obtain it, Feuerbach must be reread in a vocabulary that he did not have at his disposal, but whose structure he anticipates.

FEUERBACH AS VALUE CONSTITUTIVISM

The reformulation proposed here starts from a structural observation. When Feuerbach concludes that the supreme is the human essence recognized by itself—*homo homini deus est*—he is not merely making a claim about the origin of religious ideas; he is making a claim about the ground of value. Value does not come from outside, from a transcendent being that would institute it; it emerges from the species' reflexive relation to itself, from the recognition by which humanity takes its own essence as supreme. Now, this is, beneath the language of the nineteenth century, the exact structure of a family of contemporary metaethical theories: value constitutivism, whose most influential formulation is that of Christine Korsgaard. For Korsgaard, the source of normativity lies in the human project of self-constitution and in the valuing of one's own humanity; and the mark of constitutivism is to reject, in one and the same gesture, moral realism—which would make value depend on mind-independent facts—and scepticism—which would deny normativity its authority over the agent (Korsgaard, 1996; 2009). Replace “self-constitution” with “recognized species-essence”, and one has Feuerbach: value grounded in humanity's relation to itself, without appeal to an outside and without relapse into scepticism.

The rapprochement is not a scholarly ornament; it is what makes it possible to formulate exactly what Feuerbach's critique of religion leaves open. Feuerbach does not confine himself to saying that the divine predicates are human—that is the descriptive layer of his thesis, the mere reattribution of the subject, and the mirror does not touch it, since it is, at most, true. He also says, and above all, that these human predicates are supreme, redemptive, bestowers of meaning—that is the evaluative layer, and it is in it, and not in the descriptive one, that the promise of reconciliation resides which makes humanism an alternative to religion, and not merely its diagnosis. The two layers must therefore be separated. The first reattributes; the second transfigures. And the whole emancipatory force of the project—everything in it that is more than a statement of fact—lies in the second.

Placed within this framework, Feuerbach turns out to be the parent case of a problem that metaethics rediscovered on its own, without noticing its ancestor. Korsgaard provides the mature and technically articulated form of the grounding of value in reflexive self-recognition; what she does not provide—and here the silence is significant—is any connection with Feuerbach, so that the two fields, Feuerbach scholarship and the constitutivist debate, remain in silos that do not communicate. Crossing this silence is the contribution this article claims: not that of refuting Feuerbach, but that of showing that his critique, once read as value constitutivism, inherits precisely the difficulties that contemporary constitutivism faces—and that these difficulties give the old demand for a “normative criterion” a precise content and a literature of its own.

THE MISSING CRITERION: SHMAGENCY, THE QUESTION OF THE GROUND, AND STRONG REVERSIBILITY

Feuerbach’s evaluative layer—that the recognized human essence is supreme—faces the same question that David Enoch addressed to Korsgaard’s constitutivism under the name of the shmagency objection. If normativity is grounded in what is constitutive of agency, it remains to ask why one should be an agent: whoever does not conform to the constitutive principles is not, in Korsgaard’s vocabulary, an agent, but a “shmagent”—and, if so, so much the worse for the concept of agent, for it remains to be explained why agency, or its self-recognition, should have authority over me (Enoch, 2006). Transposed to Feuerbach, the question is immediate and devastating: why should the species’ self-recognition be taken as truth-telling, and not as mere projected self-flattery? The recognition by which humanity declares itself supreme is itself an act of the species upon itself; what guarantees that this act tracks a real value, rather than merely consoling those who perform it? Here reappears, now with a technical name, the demand for a criterion capable of distinguishing self-recognition that tracks from self-recognition that merely basks in its own image. The counterexample that makes the demand inescapable is that of the reflexively impeccable and nonetheless mistaken agent—the lucid fanatic, coherent with himself to the end, who satisfies all the internal conditions of reflective endorsement without thereby being right. No merely immanent criterion distinguishes him from one who is right, because immanent criteria measure internal properties, whereas correctness is an external relation—and no amount of internal coherence determines, by itself, that external relation.

This is also the exact and strong form of the mirror effect, which Stirner’s version merely foreshadowed. Recall the condition isolated in the second section: debunking disqualifies only a process that is insensitive to the truth of what it produces. Let this condition be applied honestly. Religious valuation—“the infinite is supreme, and the supreme is God”—is overturned by the argument because projection would generate it with or without God. But humanist valuation—“these human predicates are supreme, redemptive”—is generated by the very same process: the species objectifying and exalting its own needs and ideals. If the first process is off-track, so is the second, for nothing in the structure of the species’ self-valuation makes it more sensitive to the truth of value than religious hetero-attribution was. Reversibility, therefore, does not follow from

humanism “also consoling” (Stirner), but from the fact that the epistemic bridge that overturns religious valuation, once built, is symmetrical, and overturns humanist valuation for the same reason. Feuerbach could escape this symmetry by only one route: by admitting that value is real and independent of recognition—that “the supreme” is not supreme because the species recognizes it, but recognized because it is supreme. But this is the realist way out, and it reopens the door that Feuerbach had wanted to close: if there is a real value to which human recognition responds, then not every projected predicate is mere projection, and the anthropological redescription ceases to be exhaustive.

The result has the form of a dilemma, and it is in this dilemma that the asymmetry of the Feuerbachian critique truly falls. Either the humanist valuation of the human essence is constitutive—it holds because the species recognizes it—and then it is as insensitive to truth as the religious valuation the argument debunks, so that the critique applies to itself; or it responds to a real value, independent of recognition—and then Feuerbach is, as regards value, a closet realist, and the thesis that “the secret of theology is anthropology” loses its exhaustiveness, since there is now a referent that the predicates may be tracking, and not merely projecting.

In neither branch does the humanist alternative retain the asymmetry it needed: in the first, it is overturned together with religion; in the second, it can no longer overturn religion. The demand for a “differential normative criterion”, with which critique of Feuerbachianism usually concludes in vague terms, here acquires its exact content: it is the question of the ground of norms—the Arché question, in the expression of recent metaethics—and it is now recognized that it arises for everyone, not only for the constitutivist. Feuerbach does not answer it; and his immanence gives him no more resources to answer it than the theistic foundation he sought to dissolve possessed.

The scope of this conclusion must be delimited rigorously, so as not to claim more than has been established. Nothing here demonstrates that God exists, that religion is true, or that the theistic foundation of value is available or successful; the dilemma is symmetrical in this sense too, and by itself favours neither side. What is established is more modest and more precise: that the Feuerbachian critique of religion does not possess the asymmetry that would make it a victory, because the normative demand it presses upon religion—to show that the valuation of the supreme tracks a real value, and does not merely produce it—falls upon the humanist alternative with equal weight and without a better answer. Feuerbach’s critique is not thereby refuted; it is repositioned: it ceases to be the verdict that closes the question and becomes once again a move within a question that remains open—the question of whether, and how, the valuation of whatever is taken as supreme can be more than the lengthened shadow of the one who values.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

An attempt has been made to show that the two critical claims usually drawn from Feuerbach do not hold in their received form, and that the point at which a contribution still

remains to be made is another, and a narrower one, than is usually supposed. The first claim—that explaining religion invalidates it—is, in its trivial version, a reformulation of Westphal’s distinction between suspicion and scepticism and, in the version that would acknowledge the insufficiency of that reformulation, a thesis that ignores the epistemic bridge actually built by the debunking literature. The second—the mirror effect—is, in its functional-equivalence version, Stirner’s, and it is weak, because Feuerbach disarms it through the distinction between alienated attribution and lucid attribution. What remains, and what has been proposed here, is a third thing: to read Feuerbach as a constitutivist of value and, in that light, to give the mirror effect its strong form and the demand for a criterion its exact content.

It is worth gathering, at the end, what each interlocutor provides and what it does not provide, since it is from this accounting that the position of the article emerges. Van Harvey corrects the target, by distinguishing Feuerbach’s two theories and by returning the theme of consolation to Freud; he does not assess the critical passage. Westphal provides the distinction between suspicion and truth; he does not maintain that the passage can be crossed, and indeed draws from it an opposite use. Stirner provides the mirror in its original form; he does not provide it on the plane of truth, but only on that of domination. Vitz provides the *tu quoque*; he does not provide the criterion of a valid reversal. Kahane, Wilkins and Griffiths, and Street provide the strong bridge—the premise of truth-insensitivity—and the asymmetry of tracking on which it depends; they do not apply it to Feuerbach or to humanist valuation. Korsgaard provides the mature form of the grounding of value in self-recognition; she does not connect it to Feuerbach, nor defend it against shmagency. Enoch provides shmagency—the question of the authority of self-recognition; he does not apply it to the critique of religion. It is in the conjunction of these partial contributions, and in the filling of the gaps each one leaves, that the thesis is constituted: the gap between Feuerbach scholarship and constitutivist metaethics, once crossed, shows that Feuerbach’s critique inherits the Arché question and does not settle it.

It remains to indicate where this points, even though its development exceeds the limits of this essay. If the demand that overturns the Feuerbachian asymmetry is the question of the ground of norms, and if that question arises for every foundation of value—immanent or transcendent—then the debate on the critique of religion does not end in the opposition between projection and reality, but migrates to the terrain, very much alive today, on which it is discussed whether valuation can track a real value or is condemned merely to constitute it. On that terrain, the theistic foundation and the humanist foundation appear as rival answers to the same problem, and not as victor and vanquished in a dispute already decided. The contribution of repositioning Feuerbach in this way is not to resolve that problem—it would be vain to promise as much—but to return the discussion to the place where the problem arises, and to show that the argument once believed decisive is, when examined, one more move in a game that goes on. It is a conclusion modest in its pretension and broad in its reach: modest, because it decides nothing about the truth of religion; broad, because, once worked through, it reorders the way in which the anthropological critique of religion ought to be assessed.

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