

Chaput, Emmanuel

## From the death of god to the death of man. Feuerbach's humanism and post-structuralist anti-humanism

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### Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS

DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation

Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung

E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)

Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

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# From the Death of God to the Death of Man

Feuerbach's Humanism and Post-structuralist Anti-humanism

*Emmanuel Chaput*

## 1. Introduction

God and religion naturally play a key role in Ludwig Feuerbach's thought as the main obstacles to man's knowledge of his own true place in the world. If Christian religion, at least in the Western world, has been for so long a structuring agent of human actions and aspirations, its collapse or at least its fading away from the structuring social role it once played with the emergence of modernity confronts the Western world with a certain crisis. A crisis of meaning and frame of references. As it collapses with what we now call, following Nietzsche, the 'death of God', it also brings down man to a hazardous position. The anthropological question becomes a central issue of philosophy from Max Scheler<sup>1</sup> and Martin Buber<sup>2</sup> – and, to a lesser extent, Martin Heidegger<sup>3</sup> – to Helmuth Plessner<sup>4</sup> or Arnold Gehlen<sup>5</sup>. However, without a prior clarification of the religious roots of philosophical anthropology, such reflections on the 'situation of man in the cosmos' (Scheler) run the risk of resulting in a mere transfer of the conceptual categories of the divine to the realm of the human being. Feuerbach has often been considered as a prime example of such a gesture deemed incomplete: By restoring anthropology as the essence of theology, Feuerbach would have merely divinized man at the expense of God.

In this paper, I would like to go against this somewhat simplistic interpretation and show how, in the context of the 'death of God' topic, the philosophical anthropology of Ludwig Feuerbach actually represents an interesting and original contribution that is neither reducible to the mere recovery of divine categories simply transferred to the human being, nor to the anti-humanist stance of modern nihilism. While re-

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1 M. Scheler: *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (1928). Bonn 1991.

2 M. Buber: *Das Problem des Menschen* (1948). Gütersloh 2000.

3 M. Heidegger: *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1929). In: Gesamtausgabe. Vol.3. Frankfurt am Main 2010 (p. 204–46).

4 H. Plessner: *Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie* (1937). In: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 8. Frankfurt am Main 2019, p. 33–51.

5 A. Gehlen: *Der Mensch* (1940). Frankfurt am Main 2016. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783465142898>

habilitating a secular and materialist account of man's 'being-in-the-world' as a finite being, he does not give up his humanist ideal.

Accordingly, I will briefly spell out the main thrust of Feuerbach's anthropology, which I shall consider here more as a *project* or a *program* than as a completed and systematic theory. In light of this summary, I will then consider the Nietzsche-inspired poststructuralist critique commonly addressed to Feuerbach. I will show that Feuerbach is often built into a straw man by the likes of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in order to undermine a certain humanist ideal deemed obsolete and naïve. Contrary to such a view, I shall argue that a qualified reading of Feuerbach, when contrasted with the topic of the 'death of Man' understood as the logical consequence, from a Nietzschean perspective<sup>6</sup>, to the 'Death of God', shows how Feuerbach's project for a humanist philosophical anthropology remains thoroughly actual and should, in a way, be rehabilitated.

## 2. Feuerbach's Anthropology: Man, and the Mirror of Nature

*Wer sich scheut, endlich zu sein, scheut sich, zu existieren.* Alle reale Existenz, d. h. alle Existenz, die *wirklich*, re vera [wahrhaftig] Existenz ist, die ist *qualitative, bestimmte* und deswegen *endliche Existenz*.<sup>7</sup>

For Feuerbach, a proper anthropological perspective is always relational, be it between I and Thou, the self and the world, my body and mind, etc.<sup>8</sup>. On the opposite the anthropological perspective inherited from Christianity and speculative philosophy are, according to Feuerbach, essentially divisive, although in different ways. Whereas the traditional Christian anthropology is grounded on consciousness's withdrawal from nature into itself (the starting point of our projection of human capacities into an absolute and divine figure goes back to our denial of our own *dependence* on nature, our socio-historical world and others), speculative philosophy begins with the withdrawal of thought from its own empirical and material conditions<sup>9</sup>. In religion, what is disavowed is nature as it exists *outside* and *independently* from us. In philosophy, it is rather the natural dimension of our own *self* which is disavowed, our own flesh

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6 See F. Nietzsche: Also sprach Zarathustra I, Zarathustras Vorrede, §3-4 (1883); F. Nietzsche: Also Sprach Zarathustra IV, Vom höheren Menschen (1885). In: Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefwechsel (eKGWB). Eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Online <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB> (27.04.2021).

7 L. Feuerbach: Das Wesen des Christentums (1841). In: Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 5. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1984, p. 50. <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783050085456>

8 J.-F. Deranty. Feuerbach's Philosophical Psychology and its Political and Aesthetic Implications. In: Religion after Kant: God and Culture in the Idealist Era. Eds. P.D. Bubbio and P. Redding. Newcastle upon Tyne 2012 (p. 147-171), p. 150.

9 See L. Feuerbach: Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft (1843). In: Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 9. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Ed. Berlin 1970, (p. 264-341), p. 311, §29.

and blood<sup>10</sup>. Of course, the negation of nature as the world outside of us or as our own body is often not presented *as such*. Nature is obviously present in Christianity, but merely as the product of creation, i.e., as something deprived of substance<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the body and the flesh are present in speculative philosophy, not as *grounds* however, but as mere *moments* of the dialectical process of thought<sup>12</sup>.

In opposition to idealism, Feuerbach's anthropological enterprise will thus aim to re-establish the unity between senses and thought, body and mind, nature and the understanding, and finally between the individual and its species-being. "Der Mensch ist aber sogut als die Pflanze, als das Tier ein Naturwesen<sup>13</sup>". This is anthropology's first truth. Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology is a naturalism, nature being the basis of any possible ontology<sup>14</sup>. This means first that human existence, both as individuals and species-beings, is the result of our constant interactions with nature. Of course, reason may apprehend nature as a universal totality, as a merely theoretical object, but this possibility always presupposes a more intimate and practical relation to nature. Nature is first the *particular* eco-system which ensure man's physiological and hence psychological and cultural reproduction. Nature is as such the world that surrounds us, the *Umwelt* inhabited by man. This is why the first determination of a natural being for Feuerbach is essentially spatial:

*Dasein* ist das erste Sein, das erste Bestimmtsein. *Hier* bin ich – das ist das erste Zeichen eines *wirklichen, lebendigen* Wesens. Der Zeigefinger ist der Wegweiser vom Nichts zum Sein. *Hier* ist die erste Grenze, die erste Scheidung. Hier bin ich, dort du; wir sind außereinander; darum können wir beide sein, ohne uns zu beeinträchtigen; es ist Platz genug.<sup>15</sup>

From this spatial determination, Feuerbach draws a certain number of consequences for his anthropology. I and Thou are not mere representations, mere thoughts or conceptual constructs, but the fact they occupy a determinate physical place implies that they are actual *bodies*. However, they are not merely extended bodies, but sensuous ones, able to perceive each other, to distinguish the *here* where I stand from the *there* where you are<sup>16</sup>. And between this I and Thou, communication flows, a mutual recognition. As Marx W. Wartofsky writes: "Individuality is not, therefore, *selbst-sein*, being

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10 See *Ibid.*, p. 319–20, §37.

11 See L. Feuerbach: *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 202.

12 See L. Feuerbach: *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, p. 311, §29.

13 L. Feuerbach: *Die Unsterblichkeitsfrage vom Standpunkt der Anthropologie* (1846). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 10. W. Schuffenhauer. Ed. Berlin 1982 (p. 192–284), p. 251; see also L. Feuerbach: *Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie* (1842). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 9. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1970 (p. 243–263), p. 259.

14 See L. Feuerbach. *Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie*, p. 258–59.

15 L. Feuerbach. *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, p. 327, §45.

16 See V. Harvey: *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge 1997, p. 141.

oneself, but *mitsein*, being with another<sup>17</sup>. We have here something like Löwith's idea of the *Mitmensch* which is largely indebted to Feuerbach<sup>18</sup>. The result of our first contact with sensuous alterity is the notion of *limit*: if I am here, I cannot be there. It thus implies that I am a finite being.

This single proposition summarizes the multiple dimensions of Feuerbach's anthropology: the human being is a natural, relational, finite, sensitive and embodied being. Against the traditional conception of man within religion and speculative philosophy, Feuerbach asserts the priority of the finite over the infinite, of the body over the soul and of sensation over the speculative reason.

### a) Finitude and Infinity

The new anthropology is indeed anchored in an acknowledgement of the primacy of finitude, but a finitude that is not thought of, negatively, in *opposition* to some divine infinity, but rather, positively, in *relation* to nature both as it constitutes our *Umwelt* and our own *self* as embodied beings. Human life deploys itself within the limits of natural existence. It is *in* and *through* this life that the human being may access something like infinity despite the fact that our life is in itself limited, circumscribed, finite.

Indeed, for Feuerbach, the human being is a peculiar finite being able to *produce*, through the means of imagination, *infinite* beings (God, Spirit, etc.). This is why Feuerbach writes that „das *Endliche*“ is „die *Wahrheit des Unendlichen*“<sup>19</sup>. Naturally, one might ask: if infinity is a product of imagination, where does this infinite power of imagination come from? The issue is naturally a tricky one, but for Feuerbach, it seems that the source of our imagination could be entirely explained from a sensuous and physical standpoint.

It is through pain and loss (and so, through the consciousness of death, not as our own, but that of a loved one) that imagination unfolds all its might. Feuerbach gives the example of poetry: „Der Schmerz ist die Quelle der Poesie. Nur wer den Verlust eines endlichen Wesens als einen unendlichen Verlust empfindet, hat die Kraft zu lyrischem Feuer“<sup>20</sup>. Imagination which always finds an infinity of words and images to express itself poetically, is rooted in the pain felt by a finite being for the loss of another one. This is how one can understand the strange paradox which makes of the finite the source of infinity, this is how we can make sense of Feuerbach's assertion that „das Unendliche *ohne Bestimmung, d. h. ohne Endlichkeit, nichts* ist“<sup>21</sup>. It is through the *intensive* magnitude of our pains and joys, which can be felt as infinitely powerful, that the greatest works of arts of mankind are created. There is, in this sense, something

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17 M. Wartofsky: Feuerbach. Cambridge 1977, p. 422.

18 See K. Löwith: Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen (1928). Darmstadt 1962.

19 L. Feuerbach: Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie, p. 249.

20 Ibid., p. 248.

21 Ibid., p. 249.

definitely positive about infinity for Feuerbach provided that we never lose sight of its finite origin.

We can find numerous examples of this all over Feuerbach's writings. In his *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* for instance:

Nur wenn der Mensch wieder erkennt, daß es nicht bloß einen *Scheintod*, sondern einen wirklichen und wahrhaften Tod gibt [...] und einkehrt in das Bewußtsein seine Endlichkeit, wird er den Mut fassen, ein neues Leben wieder zu beginnen und das dringende Bedürfnis empfinden, absolut Wahrhaftes und Wesenhaftes, wirklich Unendliches zum Vorwurf und Inhalt seiner gesamten Geistestätigkeit zu machen.<sup>22</sup>

And even when Feuerbach forsake idealism, the idea remained central to his thought<sup>23</sup>. It is through his historical existence and in *humanity as a project* that the human individual accesses infinity, by making such a project *his own*. This Feuerbachian answer to the Hegelian puzzle of the Unhappy Consciousness (*unglückliche Bewußtsein*) does not necessarily imply however, in my view, a transition from the individual's standpoint to the level of the infinite or, to put it in 'Feuerbachian' terms, the necessity to transcend the individual from the standpoint of its *Gattungswesen*. On the contrary, our relation to our *Gattungswesen* is mediated by our interactions with other individuals. The infinite or the *Gattungswesen* of the human being come as the result of an encounter between a finite I and a finite Thou. It is through the acknowledgement that I was always already in a relation of reciprocity with another – and through him or her, with my *Gattungswesen* in general – that the I understand the infinite potential of this shared humanity. Feuerbach even goes as far as to say “daß der Gedanke der menschlich-geschichtlichen Fortdauer und Unsterblichkeit unendlich mehr geeignet ist, den Menschen zu großen Gesinnungen und Taten zu begeistern, als der Traum der theologischen himmlischen Unsterblichkeit”<sup>24</sup>. As we see then, Feuerbach's assertion of the primacy of finitude (*from which infinity ensues*) is fundamentally practical. It seeks to redirect the human hopes and efforts toward our natural existence on earth and toward a real humanism that still needs to be fulfilled: “das Jenseits der Gegenwart schon in das Diesseits fällt”<sup>25</sup>.

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22 L. Feuerbach: *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* (1830). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 1. W. Schuffenhauer. Ed. Berlin 2000, (p. 175–515), p. 199. <https://doi.org/10.0000/9783050065717>

23 L. Feuerbach: *Die Unsterblichkeitsfrage vom Standpunkt der Anthropologie*, p. 218.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

**b) The Body and the Flesh**

As Jean Greisch remarks, this critique of an infinity *beyond* the bounds of nature and human existence is anchored in an “analysis of corporeity<sup>26</sup>” as the symbol of human finitude. Again, in Feuerbach’s philosophy of the body and flesh, the dualism between the finite and infinity emerges. The body thru the space it occupies and the time of its existence belongs from the outset to the realm of finitude. Spirit and thought, on the opposite, at least from an idealist standpoint, are limitless and as such infinite. Criticizing this conception of an infinite and disembodied thought, Feuerbach asserts that thought and philosophy essentially arise from need, lack and desire.

The fact that Feuerbach anchors thought into affects allows us to understand better the relation he draws between finitude and embodiment. As a sensitive body, the human being feels his own finitude, and it is the desire and the need for understanding his own worldly experience which brings him to speculation. What speculation conveys is a need for interpretation, understanding, explanation, etc. But, as with Friedrich Nietzsche, the reflexive and interpretative unit is not, as modern philosophy contended since René Descartes, consciousness, but the body. The body constitutes the actual unity of consciousness. This aspect of Nietzsche’s thought has been rightfully underlined by Didier Franck for instance<sup>27</sup>. But the fact that the idea is already present in Feuerbach’s anthropology<sup>28</sup> has been far more neglected by Nietzsche’s readership. One can certainly differentiate the psychological from the physiological standpoint, but as Feuerbach underlines in *Wider den Dualismus von Leib und Seele, Fleisch und Geist* (1846), it remains nothing but an abstract distinction<sup>29</sup>. The physiological standpoint conceives the body merely as an object, whereas psychology stands firm on a strictly subjective standpoint. On the contrary, from an anthropological standpoint, the body is the unity of the inner and the outer, of subject and object. In the superior unity of the human flesh, Feuerbach seeks to reconcile the philosophical dualisms:

Wahrheit ist weder der Materialismus noch der Idealismus, weder die Physiologie noch die Psychologie; Wahrheit ist nur die *Anthropologie*, Wahrheit nur der Standpunkt der Sinnlichkeit, der Anschauung, denn nur dieser Standpunkt gibt mir *Totalität* und *Individualität*. Weder die Seele denkt und empfindet – denn die Seele ist nur die personifizierte und hypostasierte, in ein Wesen verwandelte Funktion oder

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26 J. Greisch. *Le Buisson ardent et les Lumières de la raison*. Vol. 1. Paris 2002, p. 487 [my translation].

27 See D. Franck: *Nietzsche and the Shadow of God* (1998). Trans. B. Bergho and P. Farah. Evanston 2012; F. Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884*, 27[27]; F. Nietzsche: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887), §11. In: eKGWB. Eds G. Colli and M. Montinari. Online: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB> (27.04.2021).

28 See L. Feuerbach: *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 176–77; L. Feuerbach: *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, p. 320, §37.

29 See L. Feuerbach: *Wider den Dualismus von Leib und Seele, Fleisch und Geist* (1846). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 10. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1982, (p. 122–150), p. 124.

Erscheinung des Denkens, Empfindens und Wollens –, noch das Hirn denkt und empfindet, denn das Hirn ist eine *physiologische Abstraktion*, ein aus der Totalität herausgerissenes, vom Schädel, vom Gesicht, vom Leibe überhaupt abgesondertes, für sich selbst fixiertes Organ. Das Hirn ist aber nur so lange Denkorgan, als es mit einem menschlichen Kopf und Leibe verbunden ist. Das Äußere setzt das Innere voraus, aber nur in seiner Äußerung verwirklicht sich das Innere. Das Wesen des Lebens ist die *Lebensäußerung*. Die Lebensäußerung des Gehirns ist aber der Kopf.<sup>30</sup>

The *Sinnliche* and the spiritual arise only out of the *organic unity* of the body as a whole. As such, Greisch is right when he writes that for Feuerbach, “[the] idea of a spiritual body [in Christ, E. C.] is an illusion since the organic body is already a spiritual body”<sup>31</sup>. But contrary to the spiritual body of the Church, the organic body remains entirely within the bounds of nature and does not wander off in the realm of infinite fantasy. If imagination still retains a certain positive role, both theoretical and practical, within Feuerbach’s anthropology, it is to the condition that it plays *with* and *within* the limits imposed by nature rather than it being as a phantasy that *denies* the very existence of such limitations. This is why Feuerbach asserts for instance:

[I]st etwa, wie der Platonismus und Christianismus behauptet, der Körper eine „lästige Fessel des Geistes“? Wie abgeschmackt! Der Körper ist das *Fundament der Vernunft*, das *Band der logischen Notwendigkeit*, welches allein den Menschen zur Raison bringt und verhindert, daß seine Gedanken sich ins Gebiet phantastischen Unsinn verlieren; er ist insofern allerdings eine Fessel, aber eine Fessel, welche die Sanitätspolizei der Natur dem Wahnsinn des Menschen angelegt hat.<sup>32</sup>

Feuerbach’s *somatism* thus anticipates an idea later found in Nietzsche and Freud which cripples the Promethean conception of man as a sovereign and autonomous being. With the reintroduction of the body at the center-stage of his anthropology, Feuerbach lays out the first elements of a critique of modern subjectivism, a critique that would find perhaps a more definite expression in the works of Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud or Heidegger which, ironically, had such an impact on the post-structuralist tradition. Of course, this filiation is more often than not clouded by the fact that with Feuerbach, this critique does not serve any anti-humanist (or conservative, anti-democratic) agenda. On the contrary, in opposition to post-structuralism’s anti-humanist trope, Feuerbach’s anthropology is thoroughly humanistic. But in order to shed some light on the human being’s full potential and true capabilities, one must first clarify his limits.

By doing so, Feuerbach tips the subject off of its center. Indeed, if the body becomes the center of human existence, the human being does not necessarily remain the mas-

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30 Ibid., p. 135–36.

31 J. Greisch. *Le Buisson ardent et les Lumières de la raison*. Vol. 1. p. 488 [my translation].

32 L. Feuerbach: *Nachträgliche Bemerkungen* (1846). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 10. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1982 (p. 309–323), p. 317.

ter of his own home. Picking up Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's "Es denkt" which will have a similar importance for Nietzsche<sup>33</sup>, Feuerbach underlines the existence of an *Unbewußtsein* able to act beyond the intentionality of subjective consciousness<sup>34</sup>: "Der Mensch steht mit Bewusstsein auf einem unbewussten Grunde; er ist unwillkürlich da, er ist ein notwendiges Wesen der Natur. Die Natur wirkt in ihm ohne sein Wollen und Wissen. Er nennt seinen Leib sein und ist ihm doch absolut fremd"<sup>35</sup>. As we see then, although the body constitutes the unity of exteriority and internality, of thought and sensation, of nature and spirit, etc., it nevertheless remains a *problematic unity* in a Kantian sense, one to which no definitive solution can be given.

But instead of falling into a pessimistic or a nihilist perspective simply because the human being would be "a stranger in his own house"<sup>36</sup>, Feuerbach sees this revelation as a salutary step toward a healthy and authentic relation toward our natural existence. Such a '*gesunde Sinnlichkeit*'<sup>37</sup> is the primary aim of Feuerbach's new philosophy. But such a rearticulation of the human relation to nature and reality cannot be achieved in isolation. It is through the relation to *another* that the human being *can* not only acknowledge his/her finitude, but seek liberation. The infinite that arises from the finite can only emerge in and through the relation between *Ich* and *Du*.

### c) Intersubjectivity, the Individual and the *Gattungswesen*

If Feuerbach, despite what many critics pretend, considers the individual as a primary reality<sup>38</sup>, nevertheless, the individual's self-consciousness remains inseparable from his relation to another<sup>39</sup>. This other is not (yet) the *Gattungswesen*, but at first merely the fellowman or woman, the *Mitmensch*, the *Du* which not only mediates the I's first experience of the external world – as with the influence of a parent in the construction

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33 See F. Nietzsche: Menschliches Allzumenschliches II, Der Wanderer und sein Schatten (1886), §109. In: eKGWB. Eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Online: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB> (27.04.2021).

34 See L. Feuerbach: Wider den Dualismus von Leib und Seele, Fleisch und Geist, p. 127.

35 L. Feuerbach: Nachgelassenen Aphorismen. In: Sämtliche Werke. Vol. 10. Eds. W. Bolin and F. Jodl. Eds. Stuttgart 1911 (p. 295–346), p. 306.

36 V. Harvey: Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion, p. 188.

37 See L. Feuerbach: Der Eudämonismus (1867–69). In: Sämtliche Werke. Vol. 10. W. Bolin and F. Jodl. Eds. Stuttgart 1911 (p. 230–293), p. 286; A. Schmidt: Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit – Ludwig Feuerbachs anthropologischer Materialismus. München 1973; M. Xhaufflaire\_ L'Évangile de la *Sinnlichkeit* et la théologie politique. In: Atheismus in der Diskussion – Kontroversen um Ludwig Feuerbach. Eds. H. Lübke & H.-M. Sass. München 1975 (p. 36–56).

38 See L. Feuerbach: Über des „Wesen des Christentums“ in Beziehung auf Stirners „Der Einzige und sein Eigentum“ (1845). In: Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 9. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1970 (p. 427–441), p. 430, 432, 434; L. Feuerbach: Die Unsterblichkeitsfrage vom Standpunkt der Anthropologie, p. 274.

39 See L. Feuerbach: Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft, p. 339.

of a child's relation to the world for instance –, but also constitutes an essential aspect of the formation of the I's self-consciousness of itself as an I. Here again the example of a child's cognitive development is enlightening: I become an I as I become progressively conscious of my distinction and opposition to a not-I (i.e., the parent which by not responding immediately to the child's various needs, shows that it exists on its own and not merely as a part of the child's existence or being-in-the-world) that constitutes me as an I through this very opposition. The other is thus both my connection with the world and what allows me to constitute myself as a self: "Der *andere* Mensch ist das Band zwischen mir und der Welt"<sup>40</sup>. The question then becomes: How does this relation which is so central to Feuerbach's anthropology presents itself concretely?

Essentially through the dual concept of love. From a genetical standpoint, the relation to another is first affective and sexual. The other is first an object of reciprocal love and desire, and from this relation emerges the *Gattung*, the genus, as children are born out of the union between men and woman<sup>41</sup>. But the love expressed through a healthy sexuality takes on a more universal figure in its ethical dimension. If love, in its sexual dimension, remains at the level of an *intimate* relation between I and Thou, in its ethical dimension, love rather presents itself as a *social* relation that is wider in scope. Love as a social relation take the form of respect and assistance, i.e., of *care*: „*Wohltun heißt Gott sein*“, writes Feuerbach. "Aber was ist dem Menschen das tröstlichste, lieblichste, wohlthuedenste Wesen? *Der Mensch*. Warum suchst du also, törichter Christ, noch nach einem Gotte *außer* und *über* dem Menschen?"<sup>42</sup>

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40 L. Feuerbach: *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 165, 167.

41 See L. Feuerbach: *Über des „Wesen des Christentums“ in Beziehung auf Stirners „Der Einzige und sein Eigentum“*, p. 433–34. In this regard, Feuerbach remains faithful to the teachings of Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* (G. W. F. Hegel: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Zweiter Teil. Die Naturphilosophie* (1830). In: *Werke*. Vol. 9. Frankfurt 1970, p. 516, 519, §369-70). Naturally, one could be tempted to see in Feuerbach's position a crude manifestation of heteronormativity, since the physiological reproduction of humanity and its *Gattungswesen* rests on the sexual reproduction between a man and a woman. It would nevertheless be anachronistic to criticize such a perspective since Feuerbach, at the time, could not even fathom the possibility of assisted reproduction and thus the possibility of another model for sexual reproduction. Moreover, the fact that the *physiological* reproduction of humankind rested on the primacy heterosexuality did not necessarily imply for Feuerbach the dismissal of homosexuality *per se*. If the homosexual couple played no role in the *biological* reproduction of the *Gattung*, it could nevertheless play an essential role in the *cultural* and *spiritual* reproduction of humanity. Thus, the fact that heterosexual love was seen, for Feuerbach, as the only possible source for the biological and sexual reproduction of humankind does not necessarily imply a disqualification of homosexual love. But this is an issue that would request further developments.

42 L. Feuerbach: *Merkwürdige Äußerungen Luthers nebst Glossen* (1844). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 9. Ed. W. Schuffenhauer. Berlin 1970 (p. 420–426), p. 424.

Love is thus for Feuerbach the source and the leaven of biological reproduction, what guarantees and hardens the social bonds, the ethical, cultural, and historical condition of social reproduction. Of course, Feuerbach did not necessarily study, as an historian, a sociologist or an ethnologist would have, the concrete historical forms those relations took among different cultures and which we could subsume rather loosely, following Feuerbach, under the universal concept of love. Neither did he take seriously into account the inequalities and conflicts which could emerge not only from these social structures, but also, more basically, from the relation between I and Thou. Feuerbach sought to understand what binds the human beings together rather than to seek what divides them. And as far as no one can live outside the society of his or her fellowmen or women, the urge to foster these relations appears to Feuerbach as more fundamental than the urge for struggle and conflicts. Those would rather be manifestations of the inadequacy of a given social structure which fosters conflicts rather than love. Thus, regarding Immanuel Kant's famous thesis on the "ungesellige Geselligkeit der Menschen"<sup>43</sup>, Feuerbach clearly insists on the 'sociable' dimension rather than on the 'unsociable' aspect of man.

And just as Feuerbach's neglect of the unsociability of man will be criticized by Max Stirner for instance, his neglect of conflict and struggle in human societies and the idea to make of love the ground principle of social relations will be heavily criticized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who will conceive it as the expression of a bourgeois ideology eager to deny the existence of class struggle and social tensions<sup>44</sup>. Such a critique is not, in my view, completely fair to Feuerbach's social philosophy, but the fact that one focuses on social *bonds* while the others are interested in social *divisions* and struggles is in itself significant, and helps us see the fundamental difference between Feuerbach and the Marxian tradition.

Furthermore, Engels will point out what many critiques of Feuerbach will later underline, namely that the notion of love which is so central in Feuerbach's philosophy appears as a mere rework of the core concept of Christianity: "es bleibt nur die alte Leier: Liebet euch untereinander"<sup>45</sup>. As if Feuerbach's anthropology was merely a secularization of Christian morals, a simple retrieval of its content uncoupled from its Christian form. Feuerbach's humanism would thus consist in a secularization of Christianity in which the death of God leads to His resurrection in the figure of Man.

### 3. Feuerbach and the Critique of a Post-Structuralist Critique

This is how the poststructuralists will understand the issue, and in the transition from the claim that 'God is dead' (Nietzsche) to the claim that 'Man is dead' (Foucault),

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43 I. Kant: Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (1784). In: Akademieausgabe. Vol. 8. Berlin 1971 (p. 15–32), p. 20.

44 See F. Engels: Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie (1888). In: K. Marx & F. Engels. Werke. Vol. 21. Berlin 1975 (p. 259–307), p. 289.

45 Ibid.

Feuerbach will be relegated to the dustbins of history whereas Nietzsche will be seen as the great forerunner. For Foucault, Nietzsche “has shown that the death of God did not mean the apparition, but the disappearance of man”<sup>46</sup> and that “the death of God is accomplished through the death of man”<sup>47</sup>.

As such, if for both Foucault and Deleuze, Feuerbach should indeed be part of the ‘death of God’ narrative which goes roughly speaking from Hegel to Nietzsche via Heinrich Heine and Jean Paul, nonetheless, Nietzsche’s contribution to the question should be set apart from the rest of the bunch. He would be the only one who would have brought the notion of the death of God to a whole new level, distinct from the old tradition of those who thematized the death of God before him. In fact, for Deleuze, “We distort Nietzsche when we make him into the thinker who wrote about the death of God. It is Feuerbach who is the last thinker of the death of God [...] But for Nietzsche this is an old story [...] what interests him is the death of man”<sup>48</sup>.

Whereas from Hegel to Feuerbach, we would merely replace God by something else<sup>49</sup>, with Nietzsche the death of God would find a radically new meaning: “Gott ist todt! Gott bleibt todt!”<sup>50</sup>. No new avatars, no new idols: the place God occupied remains empty. This is the original contribution of Nietzsche according to Foucault:

The ‘death of God’ does not have the same meaning whether you find it in Hegel, Feuerbach or Nietzsche. For Hegel, Reason takes God’s place, it is the human spirit which slowly comes to fruition. For Feuerbach, God was the illusion that alienated Man; once this illusion is swept away, Man becomes conscious of his own freedom. Finally, for Nietzsche, the death of God entails the end of metaphysics, but the place remains empty, it is absolutely not Man who takes the place of God.<sup>51</sup>

For both Foucault and Deleuze then, Feuerbach is a central figure of this ‘Death of God’ narrative, but his importance is merely put forward to accentuate the sharp break with Nietzsche<sup>52</sup>. They both cast Feuerbach in a role that accentuates Nietzsche’s distinctiveness, namely the role of Man’s apologue, and incidentally of his reactive

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46 M. Foucault: *L’homme est-il mort?* (1966). In : M. Foucault. *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 1. Paris 2012 (p. 568–572), p. 570 [my translation]; see also M. Foucault: *Order of Things* (1966). Trans. A. Sheridan. London 2005, p. 334. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203996645>

47 Quoted in D. Eribon: *Michel Foucault* (1989). Trans. B. Wing. Cambridge 1991, p. 157.

48 G. Deleuze: *Foucault* (1986). Trans. S. Hand. Minneapolis 2006, p. 129–30. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350252004>

49 See G. Deleuze: *Nietzsche*. Paris 1965, p. 17–18; M. Foucault : *Order of Things*, p. 419–20.

50 F. Nietzsche: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887), §125.

51 M. Foucault : *Qu’est-ce qu’un philosophe?* (1966). In : M. Foucault. *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 1. Paris 2012 (p. 580–581), p. 581 [my translation].

52 See M. Foucault: *Michel Foucault et Gilles Deleuze veulent rendre à Nietzsche son vrai visage* (1966). In: M. Foucault. *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 1. Paris 2012, (p. 577–580), p. 579: “Nietzsche’s apparition constitutes a caesura in the history of Western thought” [my translation].

moral<sup>53</sup>. It is indeed easy to emphasize Nietzsche's radicality which makes of the human being "ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Thier und Übermensch"<sup>54</sup> and makes of the transvaluation of all values the task of the philosophy of the future, when one contrasts it with a more or less abstract understanding of Feuerbach. Foucault writes for instance in a discussion with Jean-Pierre Elkabbach:

The human being as a subject, as the subject of his own consciousness and freedom is in fact an image corresponding to God. The nineteenth century man is merely God embodied in humanity. There is a kind of 'theologization' of the human being [...] When Feuerbach says: "We must bring back to earth the treasures that have been spent in the heaven", he places in the heart of man the treasure that man granted to God. And Nietzsche is the one that, while criticizing the death of God, criticized this divinized man that the nineteenth century constantly dreamt of.<sup>55</sup>

The contrast is clear: Feuerbach is reduced to the state of a naïve apologue of Man which would attempt to deprive man of his own theological illusion, but who would in fact end up divinizing the human being. A move that Nietzsche would have obviously rejected<sup>56</sup>. Feuerbach is thus turned into a straw man, a good foil to underline Nietzsche's singularity and originality.

By "divinizing" the human being, as so many claimed, from Stirner to Deleuze, by means of a reduction of theology to anthropology, Feuerbach would remain stuck in a historically out-dated *episteme* which would merely hide behind a new concept (Man) the old figure of religious oppression (God). The Feuerbachian 'Man' would as such be

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53 See G. Deleuze: Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962). Trans. H. Tomlinson. London 2002, p. 158.

54 F. Nietzsche: Also sprach Zarathustra I (1883). Zarathustras Vorrede, §4.

55 M. Foucault : Foucault répond à Sartre (1968). In: M. Foucault. Dits et écrits. Vol. 1. Paris 2012 (p. 690–696), p. 692 [my translation]. Interestingly, Foucault mistakes a passage of Hegel's *Die Positivität der christlichen Religion* (G. W. F. Hegel: *Die Positivität der christlichen Religion* (1800). In: *Werke*. Vol. 1. Frankfurt 1970 (p. 104–229), p. 209) for a quote of Feuerbach. This goes to show just how much, in his attempt to set Nietzsche apart, Foucault unconsciously tends to confuse Hegel and Feuerbach, as if they both belong to the same catch-all category of a so-called nineteenth century humanism. But one could argue that Feuerbach's point is precisely not to bring back to earth the treasure of the heaven, but to show that these treasures are nothing but the projections of the human aspirations and desires when they refuse to acknowledge the bounds of reality. Such treasures can never be brought back, and humanity may want to grieve the lost hope that it meant, but it nevertheless needs to pull itself together and acknowledge the true possibility within the limits of a finite and natural existence.

56 See G. Deleuze: Nietzsche and Philosophy, p. 156.

both an oppressive category<sup>57</sup> and a figure historically determined to disappear rather sooner than later<sup>58</sup>.

But such a reading of Feuerbach remains in many aspects questionable. The central critique consists in making of Feuerbach a simple 'Avatar of the Dialectic'<sup>59</sup> that not only rehashes Hegel's problematic of the unhappy consciousness but also supposedly recovers Hegel's solution to the problem by simply transferring the Hegelian *Geist* into an anthropological setting.

But Hegel's solution to the problem is, in fact, what Feuerbach refuses. There is no definitive and absolute reconciliation for Feuerbach, since we merely reconcile ourselves with the fundamental meaning of our human condition, i.e., our finitude, our facticity, in relation to an autonomous natural world: "In a very important sense, then, Feuerbach's critique of idealism has ended with an anti-Promethean, naturalistic view of man. Ontologically, man is not Lord of Creation or its First Cause. On the contrary, he is a part of nature and a natural product"<sup>60</sup>.

For Foucault, one of the fundamental problems of the modern *episteme* is its tendency to turn the human being into some kind of master: a master of nature, of knowledge, etc.<sup>61</sup> But this is also what Feuerbach precisely rejects. And while Foucault criticizes the logic of *identity* of the modern *episteme*, Feuerbach rather emphasizes on the notion of *alterity*. Each time, Foucault's attempt to fit Feuerbach into his notion of a modern *episteme* implies a certain exegetical violence.

And this is true of the critique which states that Feuerbach ends up divinising man by attempting to "bring back to earth the treasures that have been spent in the heaven"<sup>62</sup> as well. For Feuerbach, the issue is not to transfer God's unlimited divine powers back to the human being, but on the contrary, to see them for what they are, to explain the genesis of those unlimited powers as constructions, metaphors and fantasies bred by the human mind: "Feuerbach's 'reduction' claims to reveal the 'real' object which always was present underneath the 'image' produced by religious delusion. As such, it is not so much a *transfer* from the spiritual to the secular level, as a *deciphering*, unveiling the real object under the fantasy"<sup>63</sup>.

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57 See M. Stirner: *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845). Erfstadt 2005, p. 359; F. Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente* 1884, 26[8], 26[412].

58 See M. Foucault: *Order of Things*, p. xxv, 281, 336, 421–22, G. Deleuze: *Foucault*, p. 89, 124.

59 See G. Deleuze: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

60 E. Kamenka: *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*. New York 1970, p. 86; see also Harvey: *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, p. 227.

61 See M. Foucault: *Order of Things*, p. 340.

62 M. Foucault: *Foucault répond à Sartre*, p. 692 [my translation].

63 J.-C. Monod: *Infinité, immortalité, sécularisation: constitution et retraduction du contenu de la religion chrétienne chez Feuerbach*. In: *Héritages de Feuerbach*. Ed. P. Sabot. Villeneuve d'Ascq 2008 (p. 145–160), p. 151 [my translation].

*The (re)naturalization of man* presupposes, for Feuerbach, a prior critique of the forces at play in the human mind which produces various imaginary *Weltanschauungen* at a religious, philosophical and political level. Only after this *deciphering* of the human mind becomes obvious to the human mind itself, i.e., for the vast majority of individuals that constitutes humanity in general, does a new gaze at the world becomes possible, a gaze cleaned out by cold water which constitutes for our *fiery* thinker the very *source* of philosophy<sup>64</sup>.

As such, I would argue that the dual process of a *naturalization of man* and a *dehumanization of nature* is central not only for Nietzsche<sup>65</sup>, but also for Feuerbach (and to a certain extent for the young Marx as well<sup>66</sup>). It allows the human being to acknowledge its own place in a world that is deaf to its hopes and fears, a nature in which the human being is nothing but a being among others (this is the ‘dehumanization of nature’ part) and accordingly, it allows the human being to acknowledge the existence of those natural and sensual forces which are essential to the activity of human consciousness (this is the ‘naturalization of man’ part).

These issues opened by the *topos* of a *naturalization of man* seem indeed to bring us away from Hegel. In this sense, Foucault and Deleuze are right: the path from Hegel to Nietzsche is crooked. The transition should be thought of in terms of *mutations* rather than in terms of linear development. The study of *mutations* (between various figures of knowledge) is in fact how Foucault conceptualizes his own archeological/genealogical approach of history as the study of the successive mutations between different figures of knowledge<sup>67</sup>. As Philippe Sabot writes:

[T]he issue [...] is to know how to think change without leaning on a preestablished continuity, but on the contrary by taking into account its value as a breach and a mutation so radical that it erases what came before, instead of preserving and overtaking it (following the two aspects of an *Aufhebung*).<sup>68</sup>

But while he tried to avoid the reefs of a preestablished continuity, Foucault seems to have fallen in the opposite pitfall by postulating a rupture that is no less preestablished. By doing so, Foucault fails to meet the expectations that he himself considered to be those of a proper genealogical approach:

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64 See L. Feuerbach: *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 8–9.

65 See F. Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1881*, 11[211]; C. Cox: *Nietzsche – Naturalism and Interpretation*. Berkeley 1999, p. 91. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520921603>

66 See K. Marx: *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*. In: K. Marx & F. Engels. *Werke*. Supp. Vol. 1. Berlin 1974 (p. 465–588), p. 516.

67 See M. Foucault: *Order of Things*, p. xxv, 422; M. Foucault: *The Order of Discourse* (1971). Trans. I. McLeod. In: *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. R. Young. London 1981 (p. 48–78), p. 67; G. Deleuze: *Foucault*, p. 126; P. Sabot: *Lire Les mots et les choses de Michel Foucault*. Paris 2006, p. 48.

68 P. Sabot: *Lire Les mots et les choses de Michel Foucault*, p. 45 [my translation].

Genealogy [...] requires patience and a knowledge of details, and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. Its “cyclopean monuments” are constructed from “discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method”; they cannot be the product of “large and well-meaning errors”. In short, genealogy demands relentless erudition.<sup>69</sup>

When it comes to doing an archeology of the death of God, it seems that both Deleuze and Foucault make use of argumentative shortcuts to emphasize the rupture between Hegel and Nietzsche. The mutation(s) between the two remains unexplainable since they seem so distant from one another. However, as I argued, when we take Feuerbach into account and consider seriously his thought with its own complexity, we can see him as a central element in this mutation where the issue of reconciliation between finite consciousness and the absolute (Hegel) morphs into the issue of a reconciliation with a disenchanting, ‘*entgötterte*’ nature (Nietzsche).

Feuerbach attempts to solve the old Hegelian riddle of the unhappy consciousness in a unhegelian fashion which implies a return to the realm of the “*gesunde und frische Sinnlichkeit*”<sup>70</sup> that Nietzsche positively associated to Feuerbach’s philosophy. Accordingly, the mutation that allows the transition from a Hegelian to a Nietzschean perspective on the death of God could, in my view, be located in the shift Feuerbach operates from the Hegelian notion of unhappy consciousness to the issue of a *naturalization of man* that is central for both Nietzsche and Feuerbach. This is what both Foucault and Deleuze failed to understand.

Naturally, we should understand Feuerbach’s project as relevant in its own right. There is no denying that. But in the historical development of the idea of a ‘death of God’ in which we often tend to see Hegel and Nietzsche as two extreme opposite and irreconcilable poles, Feuerbach appears as a possible mediation capable of explaining how we got from Hegel to Nietzsche.

This is naturally interesting from an historical point of view. And of course, it is not the end of that story, but the starting point of a renewed reflection on the historical development of the notion of a ‘death of God’. Indeed, we may have seen how Feuerbach plays a crucial role in the shift between Hegel and Nietzsche, but we have yet to see how from Feuerbach to Nietzsche various mutations may still occur.

But I would argue that considering Feuerbach as a middle term between Hegel and Nietzsche is also interesting from a more practical/ethical point of view. Indeed, Feuerbach opens the possibility of a third way ‘between transcendence and nihilism’<sup>71</sup>: a deflationary, anti-Promethean perspective in which the ‘death of Man’ does not nec-

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69 M. Foucault: *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (1970). Trans. R. Hurley. In: *Essential Works of Michel Foucault (1954–1984)*. Vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. J.D. Faubion. New York 1998 (p. 369–391), p. 370.

70 F. Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887*, 7[4].

71 See L. Johnston: *Between Transcendence and Nihilism: Species-Ontology in the Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*. New York 1995, p. 285 ff.

essarily ensue from the 'death of God'. A perspective in which there is still hope for humanity on the condition that it acknowledges its own finitude and its (proper) place in the world. This is in the end the true meaning of Feuerbach's 'real' humanism.