

The Thought of Ludwig Feuerbach as a Limit to the Theoretical Development of Karl Marx¹

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to critique the traditional interpretation of Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy as belonging to the materialist and anti-idealist tradition. Instead, the author argues that underlying Feuerbach's anthropology is a metaphysics of 'Genus' (Gattung in German) conceived as an organic and communitarian universality. Behind Feuerbach's apparent materialism and sensualism lies a spiritualist doctrine of essence, according to which human beings participate in principle in a common life in which individuals integrate and add up their differences without conflict and opposition. According to the author, many of the limitations of Karl Marx's anthropology of communism and the identification of the working class as the bearer by definition of a universal spirit and interest are derived from this conception of the 'common' essence as universal, original and immediately present. That is to say, an idea of communism that was too extreme and dogmatic in its valorisation of the 'common' and the 'equal', with little concern for individuality and difference.

Keywords: Materialismus; Anthropocentrism; Alienation; Sensualismus; Gattungswesen.

1. The Fallacy of Willed Continuity in a Philosophy of History

This essay is based upon some results of my research on Feuerbach and Marx that I began over forty years ago and that continues to the present.² It has five goals. *First*, to refute the conception of a linear progression from Hegel to Marx, mediated by Feuerbach, that a number of studies within the old canon of dialectical materialism defended. *Second*, to demonstrate, in an interpretative perspective that differs from that of Althusser, that Feuerbach's thought constitutes a radical regression in regard to the problems and solutions that stem from the modernity of Hegel's philosophy, and not an improvement³. *Third*, to show that Feuerbach's alleged materialism is, in the end, a form of monistic and pre-dialectical *spiritualism* (*Geis-*

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¹ This essay has been translated from the Italian by Anja Hansen and Francesco Maiolo.

² See Finelli, Trincia (1982, 131-159); Finelli (2016).

³ See Finelli (2014, 341-347).

tphilosophie). *Fourth*, to show that Marx's initial adherence to Feuerbach's anthropology had not only a negative influence on the development of his conception of class and communism, but also entailed a radical theoretical *deficit* with regard to the development of a comprehensive theory on the subject. *Fifth*, to prove that this theoretical *deficit*, marked by the predominance of equality over difference, and of socialisation over individualization, has not only legitimized totalitarian excesses in the historical reality of communism, but has also weakened the hegemonic potential of the Marxist tradition as compared to other philosophical and political theories that managed to fill, by prioritizing difference over equality, the theoretical gap that Marx himself and the various Marxisms left.

The historiography of philosophy has traditionally portrayed the development from Feuerbach to Marx as the deepening and completion of a shared empirical and materialist matrix. In this perspective, Feuerbach steered German philosophy away from Idealism and directed it towards humanist materialism by reclaiming the ontological and epistemological significance and force of what he called "the finite", that is, the sensuous and determinate universe opposed to the abstract primacy of the Idea. Feuerbach dismantled Hegel's logo-centric system by conceiving of the empirical world as one in which human needs, passions and emotions are the very foundation of his philosophy. He considered every hypostatization of thought, all abstract ideas, as mere allusion to the empirical multiplicity of the world, as mere reflection of it, or, more precisely, as its alienation or inversion.

According to this line of interpretation, Marx and Engels appropriated Feuerbach's anti-Hegelianism, his concern for the materiality of the world over the metaphysical and identitarian *Logos*. In so doing they freed it from the non-historical naturalism and anthropological essentialism that had characterized the philosophy of the Bruckberg thinker. It was thanks to Feuerbach that Marx learned how to avoid the snarls of Hegelianism, and, in a distinctly original way, Marx incorporated Feuerbach's humanism into the science of history in order to solve problems of a societal and political nature.⁴

⁴ One of the major sources of this interpretation is Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, originally published in *Die Neue Zeit*, Vierter Jahrgang, Nr. 4 und 5, 1886 (*Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, ed. C.P. Dutt, International Publishers, New York 1941). According to Engels, Feuerbach was an unorthodox Hegelian who rejected idealism in order to embrace materialism. The latter regarded the premundane existence of the Idea and of the fundamental logical categories of Hegelianism as a misleading and even deceptive leftover of the belief in God as portrayed in theology. The material world, as

The interpretative perspective that I defend in this essay differs notably from the conventional one. In fact, it is antithetical to the latter. In my view, Feuerbach was never a thinker who simply moved between empiricism and materialism, nor one who definitively established 'the finite' and 'the determinate' as the founding principles of philosophy. On the contrary, throughout all his undeniable variations of thought, Feuerbach constantly adhered to an ontological and axiological position marked by an *essentialist*, *organicist*, and *fusionist* character.

The time Feuerbach spent with Hegel as his disciple in Berlin had, in fact, made him Hegelian only in appearance⁵. The encounter undoubtedly provided him with a Hegelian subject-matter and a Hegelian way of expressing himself theoretically and in terms of writing-style. At the same time, however, his exposure to Hegel's teachings produced a superficial and merely formal adherence to the work of his master. The same can be said in respect to the *Junghegelianismus* movement as a whole.

The formal rather than substantial adherence to his master's thought is explicit in Feuerbach's 1828 dissertation entitled *On Reason: Its Unity, Universality, and Infinity (De ratione, una, universali, infinita)*. In this text, reason and thought itself are the essence, or the founding principle, of man's universality. Through the thinking activity the individual subject lo-

we perceive it through our senses, is the only real world. Consciousness and thought stem from the human brain. Matter is not the product of spirit. Rather, spirit is the noblest product of matter. Engels, however, lucidly pointed out that the primacy of matter was never thoroughly developed in Feuerbach, even though he defended it. Instead, he grafted an abstract conception of man, deprived of historical and social determinations, onto a naturalistic trunk. He said nothing relevant about the vast array of relationships that man engages in. Feuerbach's man is the image of a myriad of men, and, in the end, this image does not differ much from that evoked in philosophy of religion. According to Engels, the lack of theoretical elaboration and socio-political isolation in Feuerbach explain the coexistence of materialism and spiritualism in his philosophy. However, Engels gave no exhaustive account of the contradictions inherent to Feuerbach's thought, focusing instead on extrinsic elements, which, in his view, were mainly associated with Germany's social backwardness.

⁵ In 1823, Feuerbach began his theology studies at the University of Heidelberg. He attended the lectures of Carl Daub (1765-1836), a speculative theologian who, among other things, extensively covered the topic of self-denial. Daub, one of the foremost theologians of the Hegelian school, sought to reconcile theology and philosophy. He addressed the question of worldly vanity, emphasizing the moral value of "renunciation" (*Entsagung*), the basic condition for accessing the knowledge of the true and the eternal. See Daub (1810, 2). At the end of August 1844, Feuerbach wrote a letter to Daub expressing his sincere gratitude for all he had learned at Heidelberg, and in which he commented that "the will to think the end of the world" is the first step in philosophy. In order to be able to do so, Feuerbach claimed, one must be prepared to give up "the miserable individual ego". See Ascheri (1970, 192).

ses his singularity and finitude to become truly universal. Feuerbach asserts that thought actualizes its essential unity through all human beings, and though it may appear to spread through a myriad of individuals, thought remains one, continuous, perpetual, identical to itself, indivisible⁶. If, as a sensuous being, a single human being is constrained within his own limitations, and these limitations are different from and even opposed to those of other sensuous beings, then it is by thinking that the human being becomes genus, community, through a spiritual activity that is pure, unitary and undivided. The senses set limits; reason – the knowing thinking – is an opening up that allows for socialization. As soon as one thinks, says Feuerbach, one stops being an individual. Thinking is the same as being universal⁷. Through thinking the human being overcomes personal existence, which is coincident with an exclusive *being-for-oneself*, enemy and hostile to the other, and becomes *being-one, being-in-communion* (*Gemeinsamsein*). Feuerbach affirms that because man thinks, *one* can truly be the *other*. The essence of one man is the same as the essence of another man. What one has deep inside is what intimately belongs to the self of the other.⁸ “While I think”, Feuerbach claims, “the other is in me”. “I am myself and you” at the same time, although the “you” in question is never a determinate “you” but “you” in general⁹. There is always something particular, determinate and individual about perception, the senses and sensing itself, something that cannot be shared with others. Thus, given that

⁶ Feuerbach (1981, 16-18) writes: “*Cogitare ipsum per omnes homines secum cohaeret, et quamvis diffusum quasi per singulos, continuum tamen est et perpetuum, unum, sibi compar, inseparabile a se*” (Thought coincides and is united with itself through the thoughts of all human beings. However widespread amongst individuals, it is continuous, perpetual, one, equal to itself, inseparable from itself).

⁷ Feuerbach (1981, 8) writes: “*Cum cogito, desii esse individuum, et cogitare idem est atque universale esse*” (While I think, I cease to be an individual, because thinking is the same as being universal).

⁸ Feuerbach (1981, 12) writes: “*Sed ego ipse esse possum ac sum revera, quoad cogito, alter ipse: mea est illius quoque essentia, pariterque, quod intus habeo, mihiq; intimum indiscretumque a me, alterius simul et esse potest et est; nihil mihi magis proprium est, quam cogitatum, et tamen nulla pars mei aut rerum mearum ita a me ipso amoveri, tradique alteri et tanquam a me alienari potest*” (In so far as I think, I can also at the same time be the other, and in truth I am; my essence is also of the other; what is in my deepest interiority can and will also be part of the other’s being. I own nothing more than the thinking. However, no part of my person or my property may be more easily taken from me and transferred to another).

⁹ Feuerbach (1981, 16) writes: “[...] *in cogitando in memet ipso ille Alter Ego est, ipse sum simul Ego et Alter, idque modo indiscreto, neque certus quidam Alter omnino (sive in specie)*” (In the act of thinking the other is inside me; I am, at the same time, myself and you; undoubtedly not a determinate you, but you in general, or insofar as a species).

sense perception distinguishes one individual from another, no one can have access to the sensitivity of the other¹⁰. By contrast, thought is a unity embracing all human beings; it turns man into the totality of all, men and women alike. “As a thinking being”, Feuerbach affirms, “I am united to”, or, rather, “I am one and the same with all human beings”¹¹.

The totalizing curve of the genus constitutes a unitary horizon not only in terms of the relationships between individual thinking beings, but also within each subject, as the relationship between self-consciousness (pure thought that has itself as its content and is thus unconditioned universality) and the concrete, determinate knowing activity, which is nothing but an actualization of that self-consciousness. Thought, as self-consciousness, is the *genus*, whereas knowing is the *species*, which is posited only through the unchangeable presence and indivisible continuity of the former. “Thought”, says Feuerbach, “is the genus”, and knowing is its specification, for knowing is nothing but the relation of consciousness – which expresses the reference, simple and permanently identical to itself – to the different objects that consciousness itself represents as separate and broken¹². Every concrete act of knowledge is a specification and emanation of self-consciousness, that is, consciousness in its primordial structure. If thought is intrinsically an activity with itself as its object, the nexus between knowing-thought and known-object is nothing but an articulation, an individualization of that original nexus constituted by the dual unity of self-conscious thought with itself. It is the penetration of its infinity into the infinity of determinate beings. In order to avoid retaining its infinity for too long, self-consciousness, which keeps its infinity separate from objects and their knowledge, assumes within itself the world of objects,

¹⁰ Feuerbach (1981, 12) writes: “*Ob hanc causam, quod in sentiendo disto ab altero, ego tantum modo ego sum et alter mihi alter est, non ego, sensuum meorum, qui quidem proprie sic sunt nuncupandi, alter particeps fieri non potest*” (For this reason, I differ from others in sense perception, as I’m just me and for me the other remains another, no one can participate in my perceptions, to the extent that perceptions are and remain perceptions).

¹¹ Feuerbach (1981, 18) writes: “*In uno ergo cogitandi actu omnes nomine, vel maxime sibi contrarii, inter se sunt pares: cogitans conjunctus, vel potius unitus sum cum omnibus, quin ipse ego omnes sum homines*” (In an act of thought all human beings, however they may differ in other ways, are equal to each other. *Qua* a thinking being, I am joined, or rather united, with all; I am all human beings).

¹² Feuerbach (1981, 54) writes: “*Conscientia est igitur genus, ejusque species cognitio, quippe quae ad diversas res ipsa diversa quaedam sit et fracta quasi conscientiae relatio, quae est simplex suisque similis relatio ad se ipsam*” (Consciousness is therefore the genus, knowing is the species of the genus and it represents the same relationship diversified into several distinct elements, which is a kind of break in the relationship of the consciousness, that is, the simple and same relationship with itself).

which is also infinite. By means of its infinity, self-consciousness pervades the determinate and its knowledge¹³. It must be noted that the nexus universal/particular, and, similarly, the nexus self-consciousness/determinate knowledge, is conceived here in accordance with the relation genus/species. To be more precise, it is conceived in accordance with a *specification* of the genus, despite its *analytic* nature and possible classical roots that are distant from the Hegelian dialectical theorization of the infinite/finite nexus conceptualized through logico-ontological tools such as negation and contradiction. “Consciousness”, says Feuerbach, “can rightly be defined as genus”. As relation to itself, consciousness is the primal relation through which knowledge is made possible. It is the relation that persists in the thought of ourselves and in the knowledge of the world. It remains perpetual, uninterrupted, and equal to itself throughout its specific knowledges and determinate thoughts. Self-knowledge is to be seen here as a species of consciousness, especially because it refers to determinate and definite objects – which are indeed part of its province – conceiving them through finite and determinate forms of knowledge. Thus, knowing oneself, concludes Feuerbach, is only a determinate and particular expression of the primal and permanent relation of consciousness with itself¹⁴. Certainly, the

¹³ Feuerbach (1981, 58) writes: “[...] *ut rem, quae per se est infinita, in se contineat et cognoscendam sibi sumat, ideoque conscientia, quam infinitatem antea habuit, prout sibi uni erat atque in se ipsa (solute, amotaque ab cognoscendo), eam non amplius sibi velut retineat, sed se ipsam et infinitatem suam in determinationem ipsam et cognitionem transfundat atque immittat*” ([...] in order for consciousness to take an infinite thing as its own object, that thing has to be recognized as infinite. The consciousness – still considered separate and apart from any concrete knowing – is infinite in itself until it ceases to keep its own infinity by transferring and instilling it in every definite and determinate knowledge).

¹⁴ Feuerbach (1981, 52) writes: “*Conscientia rite appellari potest genus propterea quia, utpote relatio ad se ipsam, primigenia est relatio, eaque, per quam solam fieri potest cognitio, quaeque servatur non minus in sui ipsius cogitatione, quam in cognitione, ac perpetua est, non interrupta, sibi que constans et aequalis per omnes suas cognitiones cogitandique formulas. At contra cognitio, praecipue quum non nisi ad res certa et definitas – quippe hae solae cognitioni sunt relictæ – pertineat, easque sub certis quibusdam finitisque cogitandi formulis concipiat, species conscientiae nuncupanda est, et quidem propter id ipsum, quod primigeniae illius et permanentis relationis ad se ipsam determinata quaedam et particularis est relatio*” (Consciousness [*conscientia*] can legitimately be called a genus [*genus*] due to the fact that, in relation to itself, it is the original relationship that can be generated solely through knowledge [*cognitio*]. Consciousness, in fact, remains, both in thought as in the knowledge of things, eternal, uninterrupted, equal and continuous with itself through all the knowledge and determinate forms of thinking. In contrast, knowledge [*cognitio*] [...] should be called a species [*species*] of [the *genus* of] consciousness because knowledge refers only to determinate and single things that it understands by means of determinate and finite forms of thought. Knowledge,

genus in a merely biological sense, the genus pertaining to the world of nature – which is, in a Hegelian sense, an immanent universal – exists in the individual of a determinate species only in an unconscious way. It is thus necessarily dispersed in the multiple production of its generation. In the realm of beasts too, affirms Feuerbach, we find a weak and embryonic image of the moment that we call universality. Clearly, this is the case when from the union of two entities – the male and the female – a new exemplar of the genus appears. Every single animal contains in its semen another or many other animals. In this sense, each animal is a unity of ‘I’ and ‘you’, a unity that does not manage to appear concretely as unity but as a unity that is fragmented, manifested in a myriad of separate individuals¹⁵. The universality of the genus as humankind is immediately at hand, differently from the troubled way in which Hegel’s *Geist* actualizes. This is the case if the former gives up its biological life, which is corporeal and particular. In other words, if it gives up its natural birth and opens to the life of universalizing thought which comes from the ability of the human being. This being differs in turn from the merely animal being by the emergence of self-consciousness, the split from itself, the distancing from itself in the configuration of a particular being to reach the level of generalization and universalization.

The passage from a form of existence based upon the senses, which excludes the other, to a form of existence based upon reason, which includes it instead, is reminiscent of *topoi* and a form of expression that is typically Hegelian. Yet it would suffice to re-examine the complexity and the development of mediation – which, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), is connected to the difficult and troubled overcoming of itself by the sensuous consciousness which strives to become reason

thus, is of that primary and permanent relationship with itself that is consciousness, a determinate and particular relationship).

¹⁵ Feuerbach (1981, 18-20) writes: “*Sic, ut hoc utar, etiam in ipsis brutis animalibus ejus momenti, quod universitatis vocant, adumbratam quandam ac tenuem habemus imaginem, siquidem unum cum altero commixtum (mas cum femina) tertium ejusdem speciei gignit, vel (ut ea ratione potius exprimat, quae ad nostram rem explicandam et illustrandam est accommodatior) siquidem unumquodque singulum animal alterum sive multa alia (non enim interest quidquam) potentia certe, seu semine suo involuta, in se comprehendit, et sic unum ipsum individuum quodammodo est alterum sive multa alia individua*”. (In animals, without consciousness and reason, you can find an example, certainly tenuous and weak, of this feature, which we call universality, when from the mixing of one with another (male and female) a third of the same species is born. That is, to say it clearly and concretely, every living individual being implies by a power in itself, content in its seed, another or many living individuals, so that every individual is always one, another or many other individuals).

– to realize that, by contrast, Feuerbach’s argumentation is characterized by the immediacy of opposition and the moving from one world to the other. It is one that turns around an exclusive paradigm in which *identity* is predominant and whereby only the total abandonment of individual and sensuous living can lead to the plenitude and totality of the life of the genus. “By nature”, Feuerbach asserts, “man is not a thinking being, but a being deprived of reason and totally separated from the Other”. “Reason is neither innate nor does it belong to man like the attractive force belongs to a magnet”. Reason does not stem from man “like a fruit from a tree”. As a single individual, “man is deprived of reason”¹⁶.

Eventually, the thesis of the identity of subject and object that characterizes human desire is a confirmation of the analytic perspective of identity that finds expression in the Dissertation. The life of the genus, given the nature of its infinity, can only produce an object which is identical to itself, namely one that has the same universal nature. But, in this way, given such absolute continuity, and rid of all differences and heterogeneity amongst the two poles, desiring itself is a *fullness* rather than a *vacuum*. It is not lack but saturation, because the subject of desire contains and implicates the desired object and, being the perfect mirror-image of itself, anticipates its presence. Regarding desire, we must consider the difference between “the needs that aim at the extrinsic and accidental objects, which do not belong to our nature and are alien to us”, and “the needs that aim at that which belongs to our very essence and stem from the latter”. Inclination, Feuerbach argues, is the activity of desire bearing the object towards that which desire itself is oriented. Thus, desiring bears the very condition, the pre-supposition, of the attainment of the object towards which it strives. It is proper of desiring that in it the lack of something is its possession, and the absence is presence. “My true, deep, nature”, writes Feuerbach, “is in itself the medium that connects myself as desiring being to the desired object”.¹⁷

¹⁶ “*A natura enim non cogitat, a natura irrationalis est, totusque sejunctus ab Altero. Homini non, ut v.c. magneti virtus magnetica, ratio est innata et insita, neque provenit ex ipso, ut fructus ex arbore, quin imo homo ut singularis omni destitutus est ratione*” (Feuerbach 1981, 162).

¹⁷ Feuerbach (1981, 150-2) writes: “*Qui hanc rem probe intelligere velit, monendus est, ut secum reputet discrimen, quale sit inter desideria rerum fortuita rerum et extraneorum, quae non pertinent ad nostram naturam ipsam, et per se alienae sunt a nobis ipsis, et desideria earum rerum, quae intime cohaereant cum interiori nostra veraque natura, atque ex ipsa proficiscantur. In illis enim desideris, quae ipsa sunt fortuita, quia sunt, rerum fortuitarum, disjunctum est Posse ab Appetere, Habere a Non-habere, appetitus et a re appetita, et a conditione causaque, rem appetitam assequendi, ita ut penuria nihil sit nisi penuria, appetentia nihil nisi appetentia [...] Studium enim talis est cupiditas, quae per se ipsa sit actus, remque, ad quam fertur, et conditionem causamque, hujus rei consequendae,*

2. From Self-Reflexive Negation to Extrinsic Negation

The merely extrinsic reception of Hegel's teachings within a system of thought, in which the individual is either immediately part of the whole or has no true existence, is to be found in Feuerbach's first published work as well, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker* (*Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit aus den Papieren eines Denkers*). By means of a vocabulary profoundly influenced by Hegel, Feuerbach theorizes that, in posing itself, the finite denies itself. The determinateness of the finite can only derive from the negation of a totality that, in as much as it is negated, constitutes the truth and the foundation of the finite itself. Limitation, which marks the peculiarity of the finite and, at the same time, its connection with the totality, constitutes the most important element of every particular being. Feuerbach asks: "Is not the end of something always its true beginning? Do you not obtain the concept of something only at its end? Do you not perceive its essence only when it ceases?" He then argues that if we "separate the passing away of the finite from its arising [...] the end from the beginning [...] the not-being of a reality from its being", we will "grant the finite an insuperable, a pure and absolute existence like that of the infinite itself"¹⁸. In conceiving of the finite as abstract and apart from the infinite and the universal, which in turn embody and sustain the determinate existence of the former, Feuerbach destined the finite to complete annihilation. "The finite", he asserts, "is being with limitations, with negation, therefore, with not-being"¹⁹. In my view, this passage reveals the lack of a properly dialectical theorization of the concept of limitation, a theorization of the kind expounded by Hegel in the *Logic* from the Jena period and, subsequently, in the *Science of Logic* from the Nuremberg pe-

in se ipsa contineat. Nam quod ad studium attinet, est ipsa penuria possessio, ipsa absentia praesentia; mea enim universalis i.e. vera et interio natura est medium quiddam conjungens mei ipsius, appetentis, et rei appetitae (Who wants to understand well what is led to reflect on the difference that exists between the desires of accidental and extrinsic things, which do not belong to our nature, that are alien to us and contrary to the wishes of those things that spring from and coincide with our true inner nature. In those desires that are incidental, because they turn to accidental things, power is separated from the desired, having from the have-nots, the desire from the thing desired and from the conditions for realizing it, so that here the lack is nothing but failure, the desire is nothing but desire. [...] The drive is one such that wish in itself is already an action, it already contains within itself the thing that you want and the conditions for achieving it. Characteristic of the drive is that the shortage is already possessed, the absence is already present. In fact my universal nature, that is my true and interior nature, is the medium that unites me as wanting to the thing that I want).

¹⁸ Feuerbach (1980, 42-43).

¹⁹ Feuerbach (1980, 45).

riod. What we do not find in Feuerbach is a reflection similar to that provided by Hegel on the possible ways in which the negation, which in turn belongs to the very notion of limitation and excludes the *external*, may become a negation referring to the *internal*, namely *self*-contradiction or *self*-negation. In other words, a contradiction that operates intrinsically and that therefore removes the finite and determinate immanently, not coactively or moralistically²⁰.

According to Feuerbach the genus is so consubstantial with the individual that, as soon as the individual looks beyond his own body and natural needs, the integrational and associative force of the universal immediately – and without obstacles – animates the life of the particular. The genus, in fact, derives not from the inward negation of the particular, but from the association of one individual life with other individual lives. It is not a sum of a series of *negations*, but *positivity* consisting in the integration of what one does not find in his own individuality with what one finds in other individualities. “If you add all single existences together”, argues Feuerbach, “and if you integrate and compensate for that which is absent in one by that which is present in another, you will discover that all phenomena taken together constitute the adequate, pure, complete existence of the essence itself; that, therefore, the organic body itself, which, in relation to your single body, is species, is essence, is not an abstraction, but is actual substance, has reality”. He adds: “the existence of the single being is single existence, while the existence of essence is actuality itself, because actuality itself is not single existence for itself, but is all existence together, is everything as it is one, is the unity of all mutually compensating and integrating phenomena”²¹.

Conceived of as a sum of individuals, the *Genus* is *One* that does not allow for discontinuities and otherness within itself. It is an identity that posits difference and otherness outside of itself and thus it lives the life of the essence in timelessness and multiplicity. In Feuerbach’s discourse, difference and otherness are given *outside* of the essence. This demonstrates, once again, that identity and difference, *essence* and *negation*, are related to one another only in an extrinsic way. According to Feuerbach all that in time exists sequentially, in the essence exists simultaneously. He writes: “In as much as time is distinct from essence, all that is sequential in time is at one and the same time in essence”. Everything, therefore, “the multiple, particular, finite, is one and at once in essence; thus, essence is negating

²⁰ On the difficulties inherent to the Hegelian view of negation as *self*-negation see Finelli (2013).

²¹ Feuerbach (1980, 94-95).

unity". He specifies that "conceived of solely as being-at-one, essence is essence", but "conceived of as *negating* being-at-one [...] precisely as negating, it is time". Essence is "the being-at-one of being that is sequential, which arises and passes away at once for the very reason that essence is the being-at-one of being that is sequential". For "although arising and passing away within temporality are separated from the senses, in time itself they are inseparable". Time "is distinguished from essence as negating is distinguished from negation". The essence, "as it negates, is time". Of negation Feuerbach says: "as negation negates, it posits and creates", that is, "it posits the particular, the finite, the multiple, which is one in essence and infinite in this unity" and "it posits everything that is one in essence as many, as externally divided". *Negating negation* "posits the particular as particular, the finite as finite". Eventually, action "is negation only when that which is identical in essence is posited out of unity and into distinction, only when the finite is posited as finite and the single is posited as single". This "passage into external relation is simultaneously passing away, this positing is simultaneously canceling, this beginning is simultaneously ending". Therefore, "time is only the *active* essence, the essence in action"²².

Conceiving of negation as negation of the other than itself, together with the inability to conceive of negation as negation of negation, of negation as self-negating activity, mark the distance that separates Feuerbach from Hegel. The possibility of a deductive mediation is not given in the former's thought, nor is that of an immanent dialectical relationship between the atemporal essence and the temporality of negation/existence. The relation between *One* and the *many ones* is a mere *petitio principii*, and the only way of explaining such nexus, which constitutes the unsolved problem of Western philosophy as a whole, relies on the extrinsic argumentation of the *positing-one-outside-of-the other*.

Feuerbach's metaphysics of the genus is a philosophy whereby life is seen as an inexhaustible power of generation that brings all individual human beings, as well as the infinite multiplicity of determinate beings, into existence, differentiating them from itself. Yet it is a philosophy of life that, in line with the weak type of sub-Hegelianism that inspired Feuerbach, inevitably took the form of a philosophy of spiritual life. Within it the human species, in its uniqueness as a species, becomes the object of consciousness, namely it gets endlessly produced and reproduced by the means of every individual consciousness. From a purely biological perspective, the universal manifests itself through the infinite succession of the genera-

²² Feuerbach (1980, 44-45).

tions that is the inexhaustible sequence of births and deaths, given that the life-principle coincides with the death-principle. Our birth establishes our individualization within the species. Being born means being destined to death from the very beginning. “The ground of your life that is consciousness and division”, Feuerbach argues, “is also the true ground and origin of your death”. In fact, “plants and animals only die because Spirit breaks out in them, because freedom takes root in them”. “Oh death! I cannot wrench myself free from the sweet consideration of your soft essence, so inwardly fused with my own!”²³. Within the human species, though, the death of the individual is the very life of reason, which destroys every individual and particular human being. The “*true limitation* of the individual, which transcends the sensible limit that is sensible death, is *reason*, Spirit, consciousness”. Reason “is the spiritual limit, the supersensible end, and the true death of the individual”²⁴. Certainly, in *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, love too is a life-dimension that leads to the overcoming of abstract individuality, and Feuerbach emphasized this idea in other works of the 1840s. In fact, love erases the person’s individuality and realizes the *being-one* condition, the condition of *being-in-communion*. “The being of the single and the particular, of the diverse and various, which otherwise has existence and reality for you”, claims Feuerbach, “is consumed and destroyed by love”. All multiplicity and variety in us are destroyed as love arises. The arising of love is “the disappearing of all particular existence”²⁵. Properly it is only the life of knowledge, the life of reason, that realizes and reproduces the fullness of the genus par excellence, leading all expectations connected to natural life toward their completion and exhaustion.

In *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* Feuerbach’s *naturalism* implies, and turns into, a *humanism*. Human life presupposes that of genus as well as that of essence. Every living being, everything that is, has one and the same essence. The multiplicity of forms that life assumes finds its unity in the earth as organic whole²⁶. Yet, beyond the purely biologic-geographical

²³ Feuerbach (1980, 112).

²⁴ Feuerbach (1980, 47).

²⁵ Feuerbach (1980, 37).

²⁶ “Life is possible and actual only within the determinate kind and form of the elements, only within the general measure that nature on earth assumes. It is the essence of life itself to exist on earth alone”. On the earth, “there are determinate, distinct measures of life, there are stages, levels, and kinds of life that diverge from one another. Thus each species of animal and plants is its own kind and measure of life. But nature itself is [...] infinite, meaningful measure; it is a measure that imparts, engenders, and maintains within itself the most manifold kinds, distinctions, and opposites; the

dimension, it is the human kind, as *the genus of all genera*, which constitutes the truly unifying principle and which charges nature and the objective world with significance, making them exist as objects only in terms of their human significance. Thus, the human body gains significance on the basis of its soul and the activity of the latter, namely on the basis of the nourishing material constitution of the soul. The soul, according to Feuerbach, relates to the body the same way in which fire relates to flammable material. The souls, he affirms, “disappears with its body”. That is why the body is the very nourishment of the soul, which is “no stable, fixed essence that sits in its body like an oyster in its shell”. The soul is “pure life” and “pure activity”. It is a “sacred supersensible fire”. But, “just as the fire goes out when it has consumed all the flammable material, so too the determinate soul, in as much and in so far as it is the determinate, particular, soul of [a] determinate, particular body”, ceases to be along with the latter. The body is “the opposite and object of the soul”. The body is animated, and spiritedness is the interior determination of the soul²⁷. It can be argued that if man alone, as human genus, is the essential being, no objective world exists outside of man. The object is always subaltern and subordinate to the subject. It is either merely the reference-point for overcoming and consuming, and thus the occasion and means for free affirmation of the spiritual activity, or it constitutes a mirror-image of the subject as actualization and testimony of its essential forces.

This elevation of the genus to the rank of unique and absolute principle, this metaphysics of *Gattung*, implies, given its inclusion of the totality of reality, the foundation and the explanation of the fallacious world. To Feuerbach, as well as to the other members of the *Junghegelianismus*, this world of error and ideological falsity is maximally expressed in religion. The nature of religion, in so far as it is belief in a personal God, in the *Todesgedanken*, is linked to the inversion of the ontological status of the nexus genus-individual. In modern times, and specifically due to Protestantism, religiosity, unlike antique and medieval religiosity, is born from the separation/abstraction of the single individual from all communitarian ties and from any type of participation in a universal dimension. Modern religiosity developed out of the valorization of each individual person and was pulled from the (genera) will to establish the individual as the unique and absolute principle. “The trademark of the entire modern age”, Feuerbach argues, “is that the human as human, the person as person, and

earth is an organic and organizing measure, a system [...] then the earth itself is the only measure, the insuperable limit of all life” (Feuerbach 1980, 75-77).

²⁷ Feuerbach (1980, 101-102).

therefore the single human individual in his own individuality, has been perceived as divine and infinite”²⁸.

According to Feuerbach, an anthropomorphic religion based upon the cult of God’s personality derives from the mystifying turn of the particular into the universal. In other words, from the pretension of opposing the absoluteness and self-sufficiency of an individual subject to the ontological primacy of the genus, which, instead, lives exclusively off the unity of all individuals. This individual subject, even though he remains an individual capable of thinking, judging, and demanding, is infinitely expanded and perfected through the idealized figure of God. There exists a mere formal difference between man and God. This difference is a matter of quantity, a matter of degree, for “the same determinations that are in God are in humans”. But “they are in him infinitely, in humans finitely”. In other words, “they are realized in God in an infinitely greater degree”. The personality of God as portrayed within anthropomorphic religiosity is nothing but the transformation of a single and determinate individual into a universal and infinite genus. The individual, unable to attain a qualitative radical transformation of its own particular nature, enjoys, at the level of imagination, a change and development that is merely quantitative. At the end of this process the individual being finds nothing but its own particularity made absolute. For the human being “recognizes only himself in God” and “finds in God only his own self-assurance, recovers only himself in and from God”. “God”, concludes Feuerbach, “is to the individual only the inviolable sanctuary, the holy authority, the sacred certificate and guarantee of himself” and of his own existence²⁹. The content of a religion based upon the personality of God, far from being the transcendence of the divine, is rather the dogma of the individual, the arrogance of the person who does not want to die by the de-individualizing and supersensitive death of the spiritual life. The content of this kind of religion is the man as an abstraction: namely, the individual as an *absolute* which is recovered within the image of God and reconnected with the genus, but only to make it the means and instrument of his selfish absolute self-sufficiency.

If one goes through some classic passages by Hegel on this theme, the conceptual and theoretical distance between master and disciple is evident. This points at the sub-Hegelianism that both Feuerbach and the *Junghegelianismus* produced and even celebrated while deforming the lesson of the master.

²⁸ Feuerbach (1980, 10).

²⁹ Feuerbach (1980, 23-24).

When, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel treats the transition from the Roman *res publica* to the *Imperium*, he argues that the history of this transition is the history of how the unity of the State became the property of the eminent citizens who decided all public affairs by their factual power and private wealth. The multitude of citizens projected the lost unity of the Republic onto the single will of an autocrat. The will of one man became the symbol of universality. The emperor became the bearer of a symbolic *plus-value* by means of which he provided himself with authority. Corresponding to this was the *minus-value* of all citizens, namely the impoverishment that they themselves experienced, confined as they were to a private sphere unrelated to the otherness represented by the old sense of community.³⁰ Hegel explains how the *One* becomes a symbol of the universal, and how the autocrat contains a symbolic surplus that gives indisputable authority to his actions, simply due to the negative value that the others assign to themselves. They identify themselves as private individuals who are incompetent in relating and dealing with otherness.

In the Hegelian perspective, we find the disintegration of the ancient community into the multiplicity of the many, the removal of the fundamental bond and its projective recovery thanks to the universalized image of the *One*. This occurs by way of the dialectics of *minus-* and *plus-value* which characterizes the *cives/imperator* nexus; that is, the dialectics of public and private life established by collective and super-personal mechanisms of historical transformation. According to Feuerbach, it is only in imagined and symbolic terms that we find the quantitative-analytic growth of the individual who tries to make himself permanent; it is not through a dialectical movement of opposites, but rather through the mere increase and multiplication of his own identity. Here again the distance between the two apparently similar theoretical positions is confirmed. The Hegelian conceptualization of the false infinity of the finite is achieved through the removal of a universal and its outwards projection, while Feuerbach's version of the same topic is achieved through the exclusion of the universal by the acting of the particular that grows to replace the former entirely.

³⁰ See Hegel (1956, 306-313).

3. The Analytic of Subject and Predicate

The analytic and non-dialectical conceptualization of identity and of the ontological continuity between man and God is characteristic of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (*Das Wesen des Christentums*). In this work the divine is *positively* conceived as the first naïve form of awareness in respect to the genus, as the human universal freed from the limitations of individuality and the bodily element³¹. In other words, it is the apprehension of the infinity of the human species and of humanity's identity between particular and universal being, prior to the transformation of religion into theology. For it is then, according to Feuerbach, that continuity is broken, and the identity of essence becomes alienation of essence, which breaks away and embodies something other than itself.

Feuerbach's way of arguing must be analytic and, in fact, throughout his entire work it never changes. This makes sense if we consider that the fundamental presupposition of Feuerbach's thought is the fullness of life belonging to the genus, which, in turn, sustains the life of the individual within itself, but only as life deprived from its unique individuality and singularity.

Based as it is upon the ontological principle of the *Genus* (*Gattung*), his argumentation cannot be other than *analytic*, expressed through the formula of the nexus between subject and predicate. The predicate makes explicit and actualizes that which is implicit and embodied in the subject. This occurs in a uniform and linear way of proceeding whereby, without the intervention of other elements of mediation, the predicate is immediate individualization of the generic and universal subject. In this perspective, every breaking and pathological deformation of such physiologic continuity is given, in the absence of other elements of mediation, according to the mode of inversion of that predicative linearity by means of which the predicate becomes the subject of the subject.

It is as if Hegel, from *Phenomenology* onwards – differently from Kant but not less radically – had never denounced the inadequacy of the judgment, as nexus of subject and predicate, to express the truth of the dialectical relations of opposition and contradiction. As Hegel put it, “the general nature of the judgment or proposition, which involves the distinction of Subject and Predicate, is destroyed by the speculative proposition”³². As it is known, the form of truth according to Hegel is circular rather than

³¹ See Feuerbach (1957).

³² Hegel (1977, 38).

linear. Hence, “what is essential for Science is not so much that a pure immediate is the beginning, but that itself in its totality forms a cycle returning upon itself, wherein the first is also last, and the last first”³³. Here too the distance between Feuerbach and Hegel can be noted. Here we see the difference between an analytic and linear epistemology of the relationship subject/predicate and a circular epistemology of the *posed-presupposed* whereby the immediacy of the beginning does not count as fullness, as it does in Feuerbach’s philosophy. It appears instead to be a deficient and abstract reality in the need of further conceptualization and foundation through a long series of mediations. The circularity inherent to the beginning means it is only it whole once the process is completed.

On the basis of his physiologic conception of the nexus subject/predicate, and of its pathological inversion through the prevailing force of the predicate over the subject, that is, of the part over the whole, Feuerbach eventually relates and reduces the entire Hegelian philosophy to such pathology. The critical approach towards his master that appears in *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy (Zur Kritik des hegelschen Philosophie)*, published in the *Annales of Halle* in 1839, is the same as that employed elsewhere. In Feuerbach’s view, after turning it into the absolute, Hegel makes abstract individuality –the dimension of the particular and of the partial – triumph against the notion of true absoluteness that, Feuerbach argued, is a multiplicity of parts. So, given the peculiar way in which the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy appears in Hegelian idealism, the Hegelian system according to Feuerbach “knows only *subordination* and *succession*; coordination and coexistence are unknown to it”. In the philosophy of Hegel, Feuerbach adds, “only time, not space, belongs to the form of intuition”³⁴. At the end of the history of philosophy, Hegel’s philosophy is placed as the only true one, as the absolute reality of the idea of philosophy, so that all preceding moments survive as mere shadows, deprived of any autonomy. The philosophy of Hegel, which is “a philosophy that is, after all, a particular and definite philosophy with an empirical existence”, is “defined and proclaimed as absolute philosophy; i.e., as nothing less than philosophy itself, if not by the master himself, then certainly by his disciples – at least by his orthodox disciples”³⁵. In this way, Hegel’s philosophy detached itself from the history of philosophy, seen as the coexistence of different philosophies, and, as an abstraction, turned itself into the rational completion of such history. “Reason”, Feu-

³³ Hegel (1966, 83).

³⁴ Feuerbach (2012c, 54-55).

³⁵ Feuerbach (2012c, 56).

erbach concludes, “knows nothing [...] of a real and absolute incarnation of the species in a particular individuality”, and “whatever becomes real, becomes so only as something determined. The incarnation of the species with all its plenitude into one individuality would be an absolute miracle, a violent suspension of all the laws and principles of reality; it would, indeed, be the *end of the world*”³⁶.

The same argumentative approach is to be found in Feuerbach’s critique of the logico-theoretical core of Hegel’s philosophy. The process of actualization and mediation of the Idea, which is the subject-matter of the Hegelian system of logic, is to the thinker of Bruckberg nothing but a communicative and expositive process that, from the beginning, presupposes the Idea and the possibility for it to be fully apprehended. *Science of Logic (Wissenschaft der Logik)* gives an account of the extent to which all that pertains to the intrinsic and immediate activity of thinking is actualized in the unitary immediacy of each thinking act and of each individual thought. In Feuerbach’s view, Hegel identified the ways of communication, demonstration and inference with the ways of truly rational thought. The philosopher of Bruckberg emphasizes that “the forms of demonstration and inference cannot be the forms of reasons as such; i.e., forms of an inner act of thought and cognition”. Rather, they are “only forms of communication, modes of expression, representations, conceptions”. In short, they are “forms in which thought manifests itself”³⁷. In this way, that which is the prime and immediate foundation (the active and original thought) is substituted by that which is derivative and dependent (demonstrative thought). This means that Hegel “made form into essence, the being of thought for others into being in itself, the *relative goal* into the *final goal*”³⁸. Thus, in the Hegelian system, thought, which is the *subject* and the primary condition of its own demonstrative force, becomes the *object* of the extrinsic structure as codified by the former’s expositive power. “The Hegelian system is the absolute self-externalization of reason”. Hegel “compresses everything into his presentation, that he proceeds abstractly from the pre-existence of the intellect, and that he does not appeal to the intellect within us”. Finally, everything “is required either to present (prove) itself or to flow into, and be dissolved in, the presentation. The presentation ignores that which was known before the presentation”³⁹. Hegelian philosophy is rooted in Schelling’s notion of the Absolute, namely

³⁶ Feuerbach (2012c, 56-57).

³⁷ Feuerbach (2012c, 65).

³⁸ Feuerbach (2012c, 68).

³⁹ Feuerbach (2012c, 68-69).

in the identity of being and thought, of nature and mind. This is its true foundational principle. All that pertains to the development and manifestation of the differences, of the becoming itself, of the dialectical unfolding of reason, is *dialogic*, it all amounts to an expositive and argumentative form which does not add anything to the Idea. “What Hegel premises as stages and constituent parts of mediation, he thinks are determined by the Absolute Idea”, writes Feuerbach. “Hegel does not step outside the Idea, nor does he forget it”. Rather, “he already thinks the antithesis out of which the Idea should produce itself *on the basis of its having been taken for granted*. It is already proved substantially before it is proved formally. Hence, it must always remain unprovable, always subjective for someone who recognizes in the antithesis of the Idea a premise which the Idea has itself established in advance”. “The externalization of the Idea is”, he concludes, “only a dissembling”, namely, “it is only a pretense and nothing serious – the Idea is just playing a game”⁴⁰.

To follow this summary of Feuerbach’s radical criticism of Hegel I wish to make a point that is psychoanalytic in nature. Unable to see how his own philosophy was, from the beginning, shaped and marked by an immediacy that erases diversity and negation (understood as counter-values) from the organic constitution of the genus, Feuerbach projected onto Hegel what he had unconsciously developed in his own philosophy: an immediacy made absolute.

4. The Legendary Appearance of a Sensuous Materialism

Feuerbach’s cultural and theoretical proclivity towards attributing value to the ontological principle of immediate plenitude, towards giving priority to the dimension of immediacy over that of mediation and diversity, marks, in my opinion, what has been called the second phase of his thought. It was in this phase of the early 1840s that Feuerbach produced a number of radically critical texts. Other than *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy* he wrote *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* (*Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie*), *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (*Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*), and *The Essence of Christianity* (*Das Wesen des Christentums*).

This period in Feuerbach’s theoretical production has been considered by most scholars as a turn away from the primacy of reason towards the

⁴⁰ Feuerbach (2012c, 73-74).

primacy of the sensuous, from an initial adhesion to idealism, rationalism, and principles of being and thinking based upon universality and infinity towards a naturalistic and materialistic philosophy based upon a view of the world animated by finite and concrete beings and bodies – each provided with lives made of needs and affectivity – that was against the abstract world of speculative logic and theological religion deprived of matter and substantiality. Feuerbach undoubtedly exalted the world of the determinate and of the finite in the works of this period. “The beginning of philosophy”, he writes, “is neither God nor the Absolute, nor is it as being the *predicate* of the Absolute or of the Idea; rather, the beginning of philosophy is the finite, the determinate, and the *real*”⁴¹. The criteria for understanding being, for what distinguishes the true from the false, the real from the unreal, are now passion, love, and the intuition of the senses. Now reality is truly so in so far as it is the object of the senses, given that the sensuous constitutes the primary function of the human being whose essence coincides with its corporeal nature rather than with thought. Speculative philosophy considered consciousness and thought to be the very essence of the human being. Thereby it propounded thought as a self-referential activity that, in its purity, was not connected to empirical experience. The new philosophy, set out in the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, made thought an attribute instead, a predicate, a function of the human being seen as a sensuous entity. “It is man who thinks, not the ego, not reason”. Thus, “the new philosophy does not depend on the divinity; i.e. the truth of reason for itself alone”. Rather, “it depends on the *divinity*; i.e., *the truth of the whole man*”.⁴² The primary, original and immediate activity of the human being is the sensuous, which is the basis of the real as a whole, of the natural as well as the spiritual. So, “the new philosophy *joyfully* and *consciously* recognizes the truth of sensuousness”. It is “a *sensuous* philosophy with an *open hearth*”. “*True and divine* is only that which *requires no proof*”, adds Feuerbach, “that which is *certain immediately through itself*, that which *speaks immediately for itself* and carries the affirmation of its being within itself; in short, that which is *purely and simply unquestionable, indubitable, and as clear as the sun*”⁴³.

The critique of abstract thought and the promotion of sensuousness as the fundamental faculty for the apprehension of reality are only apparent-

⁴¹ Feuerbach (2012b, 160).

⁴² Feuerbach (2012a, 239).

⁴³ “But only the sensuous is as clear as the sun. When sensuousness begins all doubts
ly, and rather, only partially, the consequence of a philosophical choice of an
2012a, 227-228).

empirical type. This is not only because the universal continues to operate in the atheist humanism found in *The Essence of Christianity*, a conception of human intelligence and consciousness as the faculty to abstract from empirical determinations, and as the capacity to think the general. “Where there is this higher consciousness”, writes Feuerbach, “there is a capability of science. Science is the cognizance of species. In practical life we have to do with individuals; in science, with species [...] only a being to whom his own species [...] is an object of thought can make the essential nature of other things or beings an object of thought”. “Consciousness in the strict or proper sense is identical with consciousness of the infinite; a limited consciousness is no consciousness: consciousness is essentially infinite in its nature. The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature”⁴⁴. The most authentic function of sensuousness, as argued in *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, is that of finding the subject in the object, that of objectifying the essence of the subject, that of humanizing the world as well as nature by turning the object into the mirror and into the means of expression of the subject’s essential powers.

Michel Henry rightly distinguished the *ontic* from the *ontological* meaning of sensuousness when focusing on Feuerbach’s allegedly empiricist turn. In the *ontic* perspective, the sensuous denotes the sphere of limit in which every being is situated, dependent as they are on others for the satisfaction of their basic needs. It also denotes the being which is independent and external in respect to one’s own thought and representation. In the *ontological* perspective, instead, the sensuous denotes the power and activity of the essence which constitute the subject, allowing it to open up to the world. The subject becomes receptive; it reveals and manifests all the powers of its own subjectivity to the world⁴⁵. Most of Feuerbach’s interpreters suffer from numerous and severe misinterpretations of his work because they ignored or underestimated how, and the extent to which, such a fundamental distinction operated within the second period of his

⁴⁴ Feuerbach (1957, 1-2).

⁴⁵ Henry focused on the paradigm that is at the heart of the sensuous ontology of Feuerbach, that is, the idea that the sensuous being, by which Feuerbach himself defines the real, has two meanings referring to two different things. Feuerbach continuously moves from the ontic meaning to the ontological meaning of the sensuousness without distinguishing one from the other. See Henry (1983).

philosophical activity. More specifically, an empiricist and sensuous outlook was simplistically attributed to the philosopher of Bruckberg. Yet, in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, exalting elements such as need, passion, and even the dependency that define all sensuous beings, Feuerbach argued that “human feelings have, therefore, no empirical or anthropological significance in the sense of the old transcendental philosophy; they have, rather, an ontological and metaphysical significance: feelings, everyday feelings, contain the deepest and highest truths”⁴⁶. The immediate and intuitive function of sensuousness is not confined to the sphere of perception and affection, but opens up and connects to an infinite series of objects and essences. “The old absolute philosophy drove away the senses into the region of appearance and finitude”. “Not only is the finite and phenomenal being an object of the senses, but also the divine, the true being – *the senses are the organs of the absolute*”⁴⁷. After all, sensuousness can be infinite *a parte objecti* because it is intrinsically so *a parte subjecti*. It is a faculty of the universal because it is a faculty of the human, of the human essence, and, as such, it is part of a nature that is constitutively infinite, universal, and free. “Man is not a particular being like the animal; rather, he is a *universal* being”. Therefore, he is not limited and lacking freedom. He is “an unlimited and free being, for universality, being without limit, and freedom are inseparable”. This freedom “is not the property of just one *special* faculty, say, the will, nor does this universality reside in a special faculty of thinking called reason; this freedom, this universality applies to the *whole* being of man”⁴⁸. Freedom is the liberation from limitation, from the determinate, and, in this sense, it is sensuousness that plays the role of its eminent actualization. In this perspective, the sensuous constitutes the most eminent actualization of the human essence. Now, contrary to what Feuerbach suggested in his early works, sensuousness is the complex compound of the corporeal nature of man, which manifests itself and connects, without impediments and in all possible directions, to the totality of the real. It is through the unfolding/expression of the powers of his senses that the human being becomes infinite.

The liberation performed on the side of the perceiving subject parallels the liberation performed on the side of the perceived object. This is because the most authentic object to the human being is the human being himself, as a condition for recognition, in which the subject objectifies itself,

⁴⁶ Feuerbach (2012a, 226).

⁴⁷ Feuerbach (2012a, 229).

⁴⁸ Feuerbach (2012a, 242).

and in which reality as such, deprived from its own autonomous ontology and irreducible, actualizes its subjectivity. “It is not only ‘external’ things that are objects of the senses. *Man*, too, is *given to himself only through the senses*; only as a sensuous object is he an object for himself. The *identity of subject and object* [...] has the character of *truth* and reality only in *man’s sensuous perception of man*”. The fundamental destination, the highest and most valuable content of sensuous intuition is thus nothing but man: “The most essential sensuous object for man is *man himself*” and “only in man’s glimpse of man does the spark of consciousness and intellect spring”⁴⁹. Only here does the sensuous become the absolute in action, that is, only here does it bring any limit, any opposition, and any diversity into the unconditioned unity of the human world.

To the Feuerbach of the second period, sensuousness is fully the truth. It is so even independently from thought, but only on the condition that its immediacy is mediated and charged with the universal dimension, namely on the condition that sensuousness may assume within itself the same modern unification and universalization of reality which, in Feuerbach’s early writings, belonged to the activity of reason.

The Feuerbach of the *Principles* intends to oppose the real being to the wholeness of Hegel’s logic, turning the problem of being into a practical problem. Here too his thought remains on an objective reality that has validity and significance in itself, because the theory of the new *Sinnlichkeit* establishes the foundation of an external world that, in fact, always lives as transparency of the human. The human essence, universal and as a genus, remains the first principle, the supreme signifier, and the sensuous gains value only because it is expression and realization of the faculties of the genus up to the most advanced stage of the immediate and mirror-like fusion of subject and object. At the heart of the spiritualization of the sensuousness in Feuerbach’s production of the 1840s we find a metaphysics of the genus whose structural core is still constituted by the reduction of ontology to anthropology, of reality as a whole to the totality of the human essence.

The exposure to Feuerbach’s anthropology was a crucial element in Marx’s early rejection of Hegel and of philosophy as such. It is, in my view, the origin of the *deficit* of subjectivism – a theory of emancipation capable

⁴⁹ Feuerbach (2012a, 231).

not only of equality but also of individualization – that negatively connotes Marx's work, as well as various Marxisms.

The anti-individualistic character of Feuerbach's comprehension of the *Gattung* is something that, in my opinion, continues to operate beyond Marx's 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* (*Thesen über Feuerbach*), as well as beyond the abandonment, denounced by Engels and Marx, of any naturalistic anthropology of the human species. The entire Marxian theorization on the notion of praxis and on the revolutionary and collective power of the proletariat prior to *Capital* (*Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*) was influenced by the collectivist and organicist instances of Feuerbach's *Gattung*.

It is important to add, on the other hand, that it is precisely the *deficit* in regards to a theory of the subject that allowed Marx, in his mature criticism of political economy, to see and conceptualize capital as the subject of the modern age, being as it is an impersonal subject, a pure monetary quantity in an inexhaustible process of accumulation. This result was achieved through an internal, personal conflict and through a struggle against Feuerbach's notion of the human species, a phantom of identity that in certain respects made the possibility for an original development in Marx's thought more difficult throughout his life⁵⁰.

5. The “Genus-effekt” in Karl Marx's Early Writings.

In this last part of my essay I intend to show how deeply Feuerbach's thought influenced Marx's early writings, including those other than his *Theses on Feuerbach*, such as some celebrated passages in the German Ideology. Feuerbach's anthropocentrism and his view on the history of religions – the contraposition between, on one hand, atomism of the private and individual selfishnesses (a lot of single “one”), and, on the other, the alienated unity of their species (the big “One”) – endured through Marx's first interpretation of social and historical reality. At least until 1846 Marx saw modern society – his new theory based on class relations apart – as characterized by the multiplication of the individual egoisms on one hand, and, on the other, by the unity alienated of the State, of money, and of the global market. An example of this is Marx's description of the *civil society*

⁵⁰ For a reading of Feuerbach's work that differs from the one presented in this essay, see, among others, Schuffenhauer (1965); Braun (1971); Tomasoni (2001); Andolfi (2011).

that he developed in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* (1843).

In this manuscript, as is well known, Marx praises the French Revolution as a fundamental key for understanding modernity. As a matter of fact, he sees the substance of modern history as consisting as much in the formation and construction of the state as in the contemporaneous creation of civil society and its autonomisation from the state. Medieval society and pre-modern estate-based societies were characterised by a polycentricism of powers: that is, by the existence of orders and corporations equipped with an autonomous jurisdictional capacity that hindered the formation of a sovereign unified state power on the one hand, and, on the other, the emergence of economic individualism and free private initiative due to their communitarian structure⁵¹. Only in modern society is there the contemporaneous generation of civil society and political state, that is, the reduction, without jurisdictional power, of the economic, work and contemporary institutions to the private sphere from the public one, which ceases to be a place of universal legislation that promulgates laws and rights that are valid, without exception, for all. For Marx, this separation of the modern into two fundamental areas – one regulated only by private rights and the other regulated only by public rights – accompanied by the elimination of all privileged and corporative legislation, is an event eponymous with modern history, and represented above all by the French Revolution. “The real transformation of the political estates into civil estates took place in the absolute monarchy. The bureaucracy maintained the notion of unity against the various states within the state. Nevertheless, the social difference of the estates, even alongside the bureaucracy of the absolute executive power, remained a political difference, political within and alongside the bureaucracy of the absolute executive power. Only the French Revolution completed the transformation of the political estates into social ones, changing the differences in civil society estates into mere social ones devoid of any political significance. With that the separation of political life from civil society was completed”⁵².

Beyond the 1843 *Critique* itself, the historical and political works that Marx read and summarised in the Kreuznacher Hefte are sufficient evidence for the centrality of his view that the French Revolution, due to its establishment of fundamentally different meaning of that which is properly

⁵¹ See Schiera (1992).

⁵² Marx, Engels (1975-2004, 3, 79-80).

‘political’ and that which is properly ‘civil’, marks a historical watershed. However, if modern civil society is then deprived of the differentiation and liberation of the political state – by which any form of universalisation or structure that goes beyond private interests is created – it follows that its sole principles will be that of egoism and individualism. “Present-day civil society is the principle of individualism fulfilled; the individual existence is the final goal; activity, work, content, etc., are mere means”⁵³. Once the private individual has established itself as the foundation of modern civil society, the society must not contain any stable organisational method. Its articulations must be fluid, variable and arbitrary because they depend on the constantly varying inclinations and interests of the individual. Nor is there any ordered structure as in pre-modern society, whose divisions were created by a precise distinction between needs, work and social roles. Modern differences arise only on the basis of ‘money’ and ‘culture’, that is, according to criteria that, while they may possess a reality beyond the individual, are by definition mobile and lacking in any stable objectivity. “The estates of civil society were likewise transformed in the process: civil society was changed by its separation from political society. Estate [Stand] in the medieval sense continued only within the bureaucracy itself, where civil and political position are identical. Against this stands civil society as civil estate. Difference of estate here is no longer a difference of needs and of work as independent bodies. The only general, superficial and formal difference remaining is that of town and country. Within society itself, however, the difference was developed in mobile rather than fixed circles in which free choice is the principle. Money and education are the main criteria [...]. The estate of civil society has for its principle neither need, that is, a natural element, nor politics. It consists of separate masses which form fleetingly and whose very formation is arbitrary and does not amount to an organization”⁵⁴. Thus, for this early Marx it is neither need, nor labour, nor politics that constitutes the organisational criteria of modern civil society, whereas it was precisely according to these principles that the differences between orders and professions were well-articulated in estate-based society. The very performance of labour ceased to be characteristic of certain orders because it had become a general horizon and incapable, therefore, of creating and destroying differences between individuals. Nor did the performance of labour link the subject in question to a communi-

⁵³ Marx, Engels (1975-2004, 3, 81).

⁵⁴ Marx, Engels (1975-2004, 3, 80).

ty of men organically, as it still existed within the system of corporations and orders. This because in modern society, Marx noted, using a play on words between Stand as meaning order (or estate) and Stand as meaning condition, the performance of any profession or work can be indifferently connected to widely differing levels on the social scale. The foundation of modern civil society is, therefore, entirely extra-social and, in this sense, returns to being merely naturalistic: it is simply the individualist principle of pleasure alone. This occurs to such an extent that the members of civil society become men – that is, subjects capable of a relationships and social participation – only as citizens, namely, when they abandon their position in civil society and think of themselves as members of the political state. “Only one thing is characteristic, namely, that lack of property and the estate of direct labour, of concrete labour, form not so much an estate of civil society as the ground upon which its circles rest and move. [...] The present-day estate of society already makes its difference from the earlier estate of civil society clear, in that it does not hold the individual as it formerly did, as something communal, as a community [Gemeinwesen], but that it is partly accident, partly the work and so on of the individual which does, or does not, keep him in his estate, an estate which is itself only an external quality of the individual, being neither inherent in his labour nor standing to him in fixed relationships as an objective community organised according to rigid laws. It stands, rather, in no sort of real relation to his material actions, to his real standing. The physician does not form a special estate within civil society. One merchant belongs to a different estate than another, to a different social position. For just as civil society is separated from political society, so civil society has within itself become divided into estate and social position, however many relations may occur between them. The principle of the civil estate or of civil society is enjoyment and the capacity to enjoy. In his political significance the member of civil society frees himself from his estate, his true civil position; it is only here that he acquires importance as a human being, that his quality as member of the state, as social being, appears as his human quality. For all his other qualities in civil society appear inessential to the human being, the individual; they appear as external qualities which are indeed necessary for his existence as a whole, i.e., as a link with the whole, but this link is something that he can just as well throw away again”⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ Marx, Engels (1975-2004, 3, 80-81).

For this early Marx, therefore, who based himself on a theoretical approach quite different from what would become his future thought, the individual is the principle of modern civil society to such an extreme and radical degree that all social links, rather than constituting the essence of the individual (as he will theorise a few years later in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach), are instead only his most external and incidental aspects. They can be forgotten and picked up again according to the individual's needs and choices. On the other hand, it is the modern State that becomes the container of the universal, of that relationship between human beings that is excluded from civil society: an environment dominated by individualism. The image of the modern state created by Marx at this time is one of an institution whose universality is entirely abstract, just as Feuerbach's God. It is created by the atomistic fragmentation of a community of species which, having lost consciousness of its unity, cannot help but project and deposit this same unity in a power that is both foreign and in contrast to itself. Civil society and the political state as well as the individual and the universal are divided and opposed in the same way that real life and the life of the Idea are in Hegelian philosophy⁵⁶.

Even *On the Jewish Question* testifies, in my mind, to the influence of Feuerbach's humanism on Marx. In it modernity is conceived according to the scheme of many separate and abstract individuals on the one hand and the establishment of mutual and social ties as abstract and alienated universalities on the other: that is, as I've already said, according to the scheme of many single abstract "one" in opposition to the big, similarly abstract, "One". "The political revolution [in modernity] thereby *abolished* the *political character of civil society*. It broke up civil society into its simple component parts; on the one hand, the *individuals*; on the other hand, the *material* and *spiritual* elements constituting the content of the life and social position of these individuals"⁵⁷. For this Marx, still far from a class perspective, the fundamental characterization of modern civil society consists in many single individuals, closed in their selfishness, for whom social connections are only external and casual bonds. "None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society – that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the

⁵⁶ For more on the concept of civil society in the 1843 *Critique*, see Finelli (2016, 200-222).

⁵⁷ Marx, Engels, *On The Jewish Question*, in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>

community. In the rights of man, he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself, society, appears as an external framework to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence. The sole bond holding them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves”.

In *The Holy Family*, and specifically in the section entitled *Critical Battle Against French Materialism*, it is also easy to note how much Marx’s exaltation of the sensible world expresses the persistence of Feuerbach’s thought in his own. In those pages it is only sensitivity, along with finite and concrete things, to give form to the world. The function of abstraction is only epistemological-logical. This is different, in my opinion, from Marx’s mature critique of political economy. So much so that here, Feuerbach is still undoubtedly presented as the champion of materialism against the idealism of Hegel’s philosophy and metaphysics. “After *Hegel* linked it in a masterly fashion with all subsequent metaphysics and with German idealism, and founded a universal metaphysical kingdom, the attack on theology again corresponded, as in the eighteenth century, to an attack on *speculative metaphysics* and *metaphysics in general*. It will be forever defeated by *materialism*, which coincides with *humanism* and has now been perfected by the work of *speculation* itself. But just as *Feuerbach* is the representative of *materialism* coinciding with *humanism* in the *theoretical* domain, French and English *socialism* and *communism* represent materialism coinciding with *humanism* in the *practical* domain”⁵⁸.

Yet in *German Ideology* one can say that there are traces of Feuerbach’s humanism in Marx’s thought. At first glance, such a statement can appear as nothing but untrue and untenable, because Marx would eventually surpass Feuerbach’s humanism permanently. In fact, Marx says that Feuerbach’s concept of “genus” must be translated and passed on to “social relations”, and that the new knowledge, opened by historical materialism, has to start from here: i.e. that the essence of the human being cannot be defined by philosophy, as was still the case in Feuerbach, but only by history and by science of social relations.

Yet in these writings there is still, in my opinion, too easy a passage from the individual socialized through the bourgeois society, and through the world market, to the social individual of the future communist society. The dependence of each individual on the world market creates, in fact, ac-

⁵⁸ Marx, Engels, *The Holy Family*, chapter 6/3/d, in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/index.htm>.

ording to the argument of Marx, *universal individuals* who have exceeded all localism, all limited and partial ways of life. A subject is thereby produced who is already capable of leading the communist society⁵⁹: “[...] only with this universal development of productive forces is a universal intercourse between men established, which [...] makes each nation dependent on the revolution of the others, and which has finally put world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones”⁶⁰. It seems to me that there is still a trace of Feuerbach’s overly simple unification and integration of all human beings into the “universal species”) in this historical transition, committed as it is to a development of productive forces that are valorized as unceasing and positive.

Only by overcoming such residues of Feuerbach’s organicism was Karl Marx able to develop the originality of his thought in all its force.

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⁵⁹ “[...] weil ferner nur mit dieser universellen Entwicklung der productivkräfte ein *universeller* Verkehr der Menschen gesetzt ist [...] jedes derselben von den Umwälzungen der andern abhängig macht, u. endlich *weltgeschichtliche*, empirisch universelle Individuen an die Stelle del lokalen gesetzt hat” (because only with this universal development of the productive forces are placed universal relations between human beings placed [...] made everyone linked up with the transformations of others, and placed at last *cosmopolitan*, empirically universal individuals, in place of local individuals) (Marx, Engels 2004, 22).

⁶⁰ Marx, Engels, *The German Ideology*, in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>

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