

“In defence of Feuerbach’s Moleschott reception: Feuerbach’s open dialectic”

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Prof. John Hymers, PhD

Philosophy Dept.

La Salle University

Wister Hall

1900 W. Olney

Philadelphia, 19171 PA

Tel. 1 215 951 1321

hymers@lasalle.edu

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This paper is an attempt to re-evaluate a moment of Feuerbach’s oft-maligned late philosophy, which Sydney Hook calls Feuerbach’s “degenerate sensationalism” (Hook, 267 ff). To this end I am interested in addressing Feuerbach’s Moleschott reception, which has led to more than its fair share of resistance among Feuerbach scholars. Usually, Feuerbach’s interest in this Dutch physician and proto-dietician is derided for a crass materialism which “degenerates ... into a purely physiological one when [he] discovers Moleschott” (Wartofsky, 411). But I want to argue that Feuerbach’s position is far from materialism – that it fact preserves a certain dialectic that Hegel initiated. Feuerbach’s position is not the reduction of thought or human activity to matter, but rather an interesting discussion of the fundamental unity between the human being and the objects from which it lives. Feuerbach introduces what we will call an open dialectic, which in fact prefigures Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the chiasm.

Jacob Moleschott – Dutch physiologist, chemist, and eventually senator – was Feuerbach’s junior by eighteen years. A pioneering food chemist, he was intensely interested in the relation between diet and well-being. And as his *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel* (1850) displays, he saw a connection between diet and all aspects of human life. Offering detailed descriptions of the nutritional value of everything from beer to beans, and prescribing diets for children, women, students, and even artists, Moleschott was busy developing a field in which food was not just fuel, but part of a complicated exchange of matter that determined “the blaze of the heart, the strength of the muscle, the strength of bones, the liveliness of the brain” (Moleschott, 1).¹ In 1845 he accepted a position in Heidelberg, and although forced out by controversy by the mid 1850s, he was on hand to hear Feuerbach’s 1848-49 Heidelberg lectures that were eventually published as the *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion* (Lectures on the Essence of Religion). As a result of these lectures, Moleschott and

Feuerbach became mutual admirers – Feuerbach saw a scientific confirmation of his oldest philosophical position, and Moleschott gained an avant-garde philosophical champion.

History has not looked kindly upon this teamwork. A typical caricature of Feuerbach's position, which we find explicitly in Hook and Wartofsky, goes something like this: as Feuerbach rebelled from the Hegelian system in particular and idealism in general, he became interested in materialism. This led him to dilettantish interest in the physical sciences, but Feuerbach, not being an actual scientist, was not able to discern good science from bad science, nor able to understand the true importance of scientific discoveries. "Feuerbach's faith in the ability to arrive at all these truths by scientific inquiry and by an empirical philosophy of knowledge is testimony to the sustained, though non-professional interest he maintains in the natural sciences," writes Wartofsky (419). Indeed, Feuerbach's lack of critical distance led him to latch on to a thinker whose work seemed to do no more than support his own philosophical presuppositions. Despite the distrust of both Marx and Schopenhauer in Moleschott (Wartofsky, 413 f.; Rawidowicz 332), Feuerbach put him to dubious use. In short, Feuerbach saw in him the simple position that we become what we eat, such that we are reduced to our food, in the sense that those who eat potatoes will think like people who eat potatoes, and those who eat beans will think like those who eat beans. As Sydney Hook sees it, instead of holding food to be a negative condition for thinking in the sense that without food, we can't think, Feuerbach holds food to be epistemologically significant as a positive condition on thinking: if we eat beans, we will think thoughts that a potato diet would prevent from us (Hook, p. 268 f.). Wartofsky simply repeats Hook's critique (Wartofsky, 411 ff.). And even within his own lifetime, Feuerbach found himself the target of ridicule: "Man is what he eats," writes Feuerbach himself in the voice of his detractors, "what a crude saying of Modern sensual anal-wisdom" (GWⁱⁱ 11, 27).ⁱⁱⁱ Wartofsky sums this position up: Feuerbach's late philosophy is a "failed but suggestive epistemology" (431).

Hook's caricature, as far as it goes, is fairly accurate and is based on Feuerbach's review of Moleschott's *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*.^{iv} Hook's intentions go beyond Feuerbach, however; his interests lie in mapping the path from Hegel to Marx. Sadly, this is the typical role of Feuerbach in the literature: Feuerbach is nothing more than the catalyst for Marx's ultimately doomed philosophy. Feuerbach once again wears the mantle of philosophy's most famous two-time loser, so to speak. Hence, Hook unsurprisingly locates the genesis of his critique in Marx's patricidal *Thesen*, which first problematized Feuerbach's supposed contemplative materialism, putatively exposing it as a failure of a rigorous, or at least dialectical, materialism.^v Like all honest caricatures, Hook's is sketched from fact. Feuerbach certainly, especially in the Moleschott review, makes claims^{vi} about food that rival Brillat-Savarin^{vii} in naive scientism; in this sense, his writing provides some perhaps unintentional humour, which we see especially in his rhapsodic embrace of beans [*Erbsenstoff*] as the food of the revolution.^{viii} But however long Feuerbach may have actually sat as a model in the guise of this one review, the caricature is largely painted from memory and lacks the verve of the true colours of Feuerbach's thought.

Cherno (1963) takes issue with Hook's position. To Cherno, the review displays a kind of weariness with academic life and the failure of the 1848 revolution (Cherno, 406). Instead of attempting a scientific contribution to the store of human knowledge, the piece "is trying to get us to assent to the absurdity of the status quo and the necessity of rectifying it by rational and scientific means" (Cherno, 402). And hence, the piece's oblique rhetorical strategies and extortive final paragraph suggests satire, which Feuerbach seems to admit in a letter to Heidenreich (Cherno, 402). Nevertheless, Cherno acknowledges that Feuerbach's "philosophy remains unchanged from about 1843": a sensualism or philosophical anthropology stressing our encounter with an outer world through social contact with other people (Cherno, 405). So, although I am in sympathy with his attempt to rehabilitate the essay, I will stress the continuity of the piece with his work. Specifically, I will argue below

that the materialist view of Feuerbach's position problematically reduces Feuerbach's Moleschott reception to a crude epistemology. Instead, I claim this theme in Feuerbach's work makes a valuable contribution to dialectical philosophy. In short, I will show that Feuerbach's theory can be read as what William Desmond calls an open dialectic.^{ix}

And so if we stop at Hook's position – here where our incredulity at Feuerbach's putative stupidity blinds us and wraps us up in a false sense of superiority – then we will miss what is at stake in these writings. If we, like Hook, limit our understanding of Feuerbach's Moleschott reception to *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, and – more importantly – if we give that work a merely epistemological interpretation, then we do Feuerbach a great disservice, for this review is his *immediate* reaction to Moleschott. If Hegel has taught us anything, it is that the immediate will always prove itself false. Over time, Feuerbach's relation with food departs from the review's merely univocal position, and takes on characteristics of greater philosophical interest. Rawidowicz is surely correct in not taking *der Mensch ist was er ißt* as the last word of Feuerbachian philosophy, nor as a principle of his philosophy, nor even as a phase of his philosophy: “despite what many people dare to believe or claim, nevertheless Feuerbach was not so philosophically primitive” (Rawidowicz, 203).^x Indeed, even within the review itself, moments anticipate his later writings on food – I am speaking of the notion of appropriation (*aneigenen*),^{xi} which itself is based on the subjective and objective aspects of being.^{xii} In this sense, Feuerbach's Moleschott reception is no aberration, but rather holds a proper position in the gradual maturation of his path of thinking. And if Feuerbach is not a univocal materialist, as Rawidowicz notes,^{xiii} then the solution to Feuerbach's seeming illness is not Hook's suggested dialectical materialism, a materialism that is intended to be more rigorous than Feuerbach's putative weak or contemplative materialism.

To my mind, what characterizes Feuerbach's intellectual development – even until the end – is his ever-increasing application of the central truth of the Hegel, whose thinking he

would otherwise eschew as too abstract: i.e., that the truth of the human condition is found in its dependency on the mediation formed by the projective unity of subject and object.

Feuerbach never essentially deviated from his early position in his lectures on Hegel's Logic that the essence of humanity is the unity of opposites (*das Wesen des Menschen ist die Einheit von Gegensätzen*), and as such, he remained indebted to the core of the Hegelian system. This belief clearly runs throughout all of Feuerbach's writings, whether in the lectures on the Logic, his histories, the *Todesgedanken* [*Thoughts on Death and Immortality*], the *Wesen des Christentums* [*Essence of Christianity*], and so on. The main difference in his later philosophy is that the truth of this unity is not simply logical, but actual. For Feuerbach, 'actual' means essentially the empirical, external moments of the unity before becoming the object of thinking: an "object is only that which exists outside of the head [*aber Gegenstand ist nur, was außer dem Kopfe existiert*]" (GW 5, 10 n. 1; EC, xxxiv).^{xiv}

Of course, this cry to make Feuerbach a subtle thinker finds itself in the most hostile of terrains. Feuerbach is, largely, a reductionist. Take, for instance, his love for the term "nothing else but [*nichts anders als*]," which he uses *ad infinitum* (I count 143 examples in the *Das Wesen des Christentums* alone). His philosophy of religion constantly tries to reduce its objects to anthropological signifiers. But just suppose that one of these reductions, of which there are so many, contains an unexpected complexity? Perhaps the one reduction that Feuerbach cherished so much on the grounds of Luther's Occamist reduction of Christianity to just two sacraments, perhaps the cornerstone to the *Das Wesen des Christentums*, fits our theme perfectly? Let us choose the Eucharist, which provides exactly half of the true essence of Christianity. Christianity is nothing but feasting and bathing, as Feuerbach says in the forward to the second edition in the *Das Wesen des Christentums*, because, following Luther, the only two sacraments are the Eucharist and baptism (GW 5, 10 n. 1; EC, xli). Feuerbach's interest is always to strip away the mystical from the practical, and faced with the religious sensitivity for food, Feuerbach is likewise forced to anthropologize such. As he is later to

point out, nobody reads the *Iliad* and thinks that the gods eat the sacrifices of the Achaeans or the Trojans; why should the anthropologist of Christian ritual think any differently?^{xv}

Feuerbach amplifies his views through a chapter in the *Das Wesen des Christentums* on the “*Der Widerspruch in den Sakramenten* [The Contradiction in the Sacraments].” Here, he shows how he considers the Eucharist to be an imaginary feast. Why do Christians see bread as Christ? Only, says Feuerbach, what I touch see, smell, taste, and hear is real, and I do not see Christ in the Eucharist, only bread. Indeed, it is Christ only to those who believe; non-believers understand it to be only bread: “Belief is the *power of the imagination*, which makes the actual into the non-actual and the non-actual into the actual” (GW 5, 402; EC 242).^{xvi} Thus, the Eucharist is not only the truth of the Christian religion seen from within its own terms (i.e., the incarnation or *Menschenwerdung* of God), but rather also the truth of the Christian theology from within the terms of anthropology as well, for in the Eucharist, according to Feuerbach, we have the ultimate denial of truth (remember: Feuerbach thinks that forgetfulness of humanity, or *Menschenvergessenheit*, is the core task of theology): it denies that the sensible bread is bread. It denies the truth of the senses, and ultimately its theophilia is misanthropy. But, the Eucharist still points us in the direction of a simple truth upon which Feuerbach’s later writings on food will concentrate. In *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Feuerbach sees only the imagination at work: the host is only flesh in the imagination. But, Feuerbach later discovers that the imagination, *mutatis mutandis*, is correct: bread *is* flesh, which is precisely what the churches teach, only this time the doctrine is imbued with a real and not theological sense. When we eat bread, we incorporate it: for Feuerbach, we are bread become flesh, and hence rather than the *Menschenwerdung* of God, the *Menschenwerdung* of bread is at stake.^{xvii} Thus, Feuerbach suggests that the shift from human blood sacrifice to animal and vegetable sacrifice is latent knowledge of this basic truth: if human food is basically the human body, then any food sacrifice in effect is a human sacrifice, but this time the sacrifice of a cultured people.^{xviii} The Eucharist is thus nothing

more than shorthand for this central truth of food-chemistry, and, despite the change in emphasis, we certainly see in *Das Wesen des Christentums* the early seed of Feuerbach's interest in Moleschott, not to mention the seed of his famous expression as well. Christianity well saw the *Menschenwerdung*, but askew.

When Feuerbach addresses Moleschott and food in his later writings, his framework is a critique of idealism. And in this, it is consonant with his earlier treatment of the Eucharist. For, according to Feuerbach, both treatments resist the radical subjectification of objectivity. *Das Wesen des Christentums* denies a suprasensible, subjective meaning for bread. The real, empirical object plays an important role in the subject's relation to it, and, although the object is a project of the subject, the subject cannot constitute the object however it wants, for the subject is also a project of the object; the two form an economy or system of mutual influence. Whether through idealism or religion, the reduction of the object to mere appearance, instead of the recognition of it as a *proper* phenomenon of a specific economy, is wrong, and it is this that Feuerbach's writings on food address most clearly.

In his *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus, besonders in Beziehung auf die Willensfreiheit*, Feuerbach rehearses his version of idealism, which he vaguely attributes to Fichte (GW 11, 170 ff.). Idealism sees the world as the product of spirit, just as does Christianity. Yet, Feuerbach finds that Christianity has a richer understanding of the world than does Idealism because of its concept of creation. Christianity does not see the world as emerging from the spirit through reason (GW 11, 174), as does idealism, but rather as emerging from the will and love of God. Idealism, says Feuerbach, sees the world only through the principle of sufficient reason, which means that it reduces the world to reason. The real becomes the real. Thus we have here a simple picture of idealism, wherein the sensations that a subject experiences are merely affectations of consciousness having no objective connection with the putative real world. Our sensible knowledge of objects is laid out by a critique of our knowing faculties, and not by the objects in themselves, which escape

our faculties. This epistemological shift from *what* we know to *how* we know implies that the subject only experiences itself, not the external world. The external world is merely tacked on to the experience of sensation through the principle of sufficient reason: the affectations of consciousness, since they are effects and hence need a cause, are posited as being in the external world. But we do not experience the cause, only the effect, and so the effect is the only real thing for the subject. Thus, says idealism, materialism is wrong, for it starts with the external world as if it were the principle of knowledge and experience. Instead, the self is the proper starting point, for the self is the limit of knowledge.

And indeed Feuerbach thinks that idealism is right to start with the subject, for I can only know the world through my own body, as we read in *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 171). In this sense, the world is my object; the world is an objectification, an outward projection, of myself. But Feuerbach holds that idealism itself starts with the wrong idea of the subject, for idealism does not start with this here empirical subject located within a certain time and specific space and situated in a community with others, but rather with the transcendental subject removed from all spatio-temporal, and, importantly, generative-sexual distinctions. The “real situation,”^{xix} if we can call it that, is that there can only be a self with an other — only an I with a You.^{xx} The real situation dictates that philosophy recognize that we have desires and passions, that we are willing and loving beings, before we are thinking beings – or worse, thinking things (*res cogitans*).^{xxi}

Hegel certainly overcomes this deficiency of critical idealism by showing the generation of consciousness in the mutual implication of all opposition, but his success comes at a steep price, for his system, which would overcome abstraction, starts with the ultimate abstraction: pure being that can be thought without presupposition. Feuerbach disagrees: pure being itself contains a presupposition – the very being from which it was purified (or abstracted). Thus, all thinking is founded, and may never be presuppositionless as Hegel wrongly believed. Feuerbach, of course, clearly laid out his understanding of this Hegelian

strategy in his 1839 *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie*, which, despite its temporal proximity to his pro-Hegelian Bachman critique, nevertheless functioned as Feuerbach's public break with orthodox Hegelianism.^{xxii} This story is well known, and its fame ought to help us to see more clearly that Feuerbach's Moleschott reception is not a mere appendage to the Feuerbachian corpus that deserves to atrophy, but in fact springs from its very soul. For Feuerbach, Hegel shares the chief failing of the idealism he would overcome: both only understand the question of the world's subjectivity and objectivity from within a theoretical perspective, whereas the world — which they would delimit within their own theoretical constructs — is originally an object of desire, or practical activity, before it is an object of thought. Religious people already know this, says Feuerbach: for the religious the world is created by the will of God, and sustained through this love.^{xxiii}

Feuerbach first looks at animals – to a cat and a mouse, in fact – to prove his point, and I find it rather instructive that this example preserves some truth of a famous Hegelian passage, all the while controverting its original use. In the *Phänemologie des Geistes*' rightfully famous chapter on sense-certainty (*sinnliche Gewißheit*), Hegel explains how animals are already initiated into the mysteries of the finitude, or rather, of the nothingness of the objects of sense: rather than searching for their enduring substance, they eat them up, and thus manifest their nothingness by immanentizing their finitude, their own *Eschaton*. In a word, animals show the negative structure of sensuous reality. Feuerbach agrees in part. Animals do destroy their objects. But, Hegel's explanation only goes so far, because the relationship between a cat and a mouse is not merely negative, but also positive. The cat needs to eat the mouse; the cat lives from the mouse. The mouse, then, helps to constitute the essence of the cat, and not just in the negative sense as a moment of the *omnitudo realitatis* of thorough definition. The cat is not just a cat because he is not a mouse (a merely negative and logical), but in fact is a cat *because* he eats mice.^{xxiv} In English, we can even say that a cat is a mouser. The negative moment of eating is in fact predicated on a more primal positive

moment: the mouse is fitting for the cat, or perhaps I should say that the mouse is *conveniens* for the cat, to preserve an older language that I believe to be helpful for Feuerbach. This is a positive, convenient relationship because the cat can only eat what he can eat: what he eats (or appropriates - *aneigenen*) must have a physical fittingness for it. What is not fitting for the cat is poison to the cat. Thus, concludes Feuerbach, the subject is really a subject-object; the cat is a mouse-cat.

Surely, though, this is evidence that Feuerbach reduces the object to the subject? To the contrary: no, it is not. For Feuerbach is quick to point out that although *this* cat eats *this* mouse, ‘cat-ness’ does not sublate ‘mouse-ness’: a mouse becomes a cat, but mouse-ness does not become cat-ness. Were it to, Feuerbach says, then cat-ness would disappear too – not due to any logical machinations, but simply because cats would no longer have anything to eat, and would die off.^{xxv} Feuerbach’s point is obvious: beings eat what is fitting for them and thus form a proper economy with them. And thus the subject does not swallow its proper object into itself á la Hegel, but instead becomes a kind of double being: a mouse-cat, just as the object becomes a kind of double being: a cat-mouse. In Hegel, the object enters the definition of the subject through determinate negation. We can say, on the contrary, the proper Feuerbachian object enters the subject as a kind of determinate position.^{xxvi} This dialectic is thus open: both terms are preserved.

The idealism that Feuerbach caricatures certainly knows that there is no subject without an object, but it sees this as merely empirically true. However, since the empirical is the realm of variable sensuousness and hence of the false, idealism does not see this as transcendentally true. Feuerbach retorts: the object is not simply the object of sensation, but also the presupposition for sensation. In other words, that there is anything like sensation depends on there being an objective world, a world outside of our bodies that corresponds to our ability to know it. The objective world, then, is transcendentally true, in so far as it is the ground of possibility for sensation.

Feuerbach is then in polite disagreement with Kant, whose transcendental philosophy also contests the radical divorce of subject and object, but whose terminology and system denies our access to the things as they are in themselves. Kant argues that we cannot know the things in themselves because that knowledge would be without perspective, and perspective is precisely what knowledge demands (i.e., the understanding gains knowledge by making judgements through the aesthetic application of its concepts in experience). While Feuerbach certainly contests the existence of perspectiveless knowledge (this is precisely the task of the *Das Wesen des Christentums*, which is in fact a thinly disguised homage to the transcendental dialectic),^{xxvii} likewise, he certainly does not limit the things in themselves to this epistemological dead end. Thus, Feuerbach thinks that he can simplify Kant's language: we have access to the things as they are because they become us, and this in both senses of this equivocal term: they become us, are fitting for us, and become us, turn into us. This bipolar, dialectical becoming is precisely Feuerbach's great difference from Hegel, who, according to the language of William Desmond, only speaks in the language of absorption or swallowing. In *Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, Feuerbach says that life itself is a system not of reduction, but of exchange: "life is material exchange," as he quotes Moleschott (GW 11, 360).^{xxviii} For Feuerbach, we mirror the objective world within our own bodies: it is as if an objective world inside of us forms the ground of our sensation. Although we have bodies and are thus discrete from other bodies, nevertheless, our bodies are completely porous, and even leaky.^{xxix} The holes in our bodies take the external world inside, and in turn issue counter-charges. Thus, a century before Merleau-Ponty, Feuerbach had already grasped the chiasm: We exist as an opening to the world. This open dialectic of mutual influence thoroughly permeates our being. Breathing, eating, and drinking best illustrate this porous promiscuity: breathing is the mixing of the air with our bodies; eating is the mixing of solids with our bodies; drinking is the mixture of fluids with our bodies. But what we breath, eat, and drink also flows from out bodies and re-enters the objective world,

the source perhaps of the self-levelled charge of anal-wisdom [*Afterweisheit*]. Since we live from the so-called external world, since without air, food, and drink we could not sense anything or have anything like an internal world, the external world is truly transcendental to our perception, and not merely an object of sensation.^{xxx}

Indeed, before we talk of an objective relationship with the world, we must talk about a chemical bond with the world. We breathe before we think — we have physical needs that must exist before thinking, as Aristotle and other Greek thinkers already knew. Plato orients his *Republic* around the thinker, whose bodily integrity must be ensured through political order and food. Plato's perhaps most beautiful dialogue is set at a feast — itself the subject of a stirring painting by none other than Feuerbach's famed nephew Anselm Feuerbach — and thus says poetically that food and philosophy are intertwined. Aristotle has the same basic principle at work. “*Primum vivere, deinde philosophari* — first live, then philosophize,” Feuerbach quotes in his *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus, besonders in Beziehung auf die Willensfreiheit*. How does he gloss this?

Thus, due to a preceding abstention or privation from food, hunger has me in its power, and forces me to think only about my stomach. However, once hunger is satisfied and consequently surpassed, I have the time and freedom to think of the mind instead of the stomach (GW 11, 65).

In short, it would be unhealthy to doubt the existence of the very conditions that we need in order to doubt. Sydney Hook thinks that this trivial position should be the terminus to Feuerbach's line of inquiry. But, Feuerbach is not providing an epistemology, so the positive moment of his argument is actually quite important. I mean: were Feuerbach simply telling us how we know something, then his position would be a naive realism, of which the less said the better, and the critiques of Wartofsky and Hook would be fatal. But Feuerbach, I maintain, is thinking ontologically: his interest is in what we are, not how we can know. Feuerbach explicitly sees himself as a philosophical anthropologist, “a spiritual natural

scientist [*ein geistiger Naturforscher*]” (GW 5, 10 n. 1). This approach wins him some points that would not attain importance until the following century, as I have hinted in pointing out Feuerbach’s anticipation of Merleau-Ponty.

Above, I have shown that Feuerbach escapes the negative through his unacknowledged borrowing of the scholastic term *conveniens*, i.e., fittingness. In *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus*, Feuerbach calls this “*Wohlsein*” — well-being — and defines it, with a typical absolute and reductive negation, as “nothing else than the identity or unity of the subject and object” (GW 11, 178).^{xxx} Hunger is not just the absence of food through some sort of abstinence or withholding from [*Enthaltung*], but is rather the *Entbehrung*, the privation [*privatio*] of food. *Privatio*, as the negative moment proper to *conveniens*, always refers to something proper to the subject, something due to the subject, some moment of the subject’s own economy. Feuerbach asks if this relationship, which he names desire here, is not

An expression of the fact that it is not more indispensable and essential for me that I merely live and exist from it, but that I am in an obligatory relationship to it as an object of my self-love not only negatively, but also positively; not only as a lord, but also as a subject (GW 11, 175).

Hence, the *privatio* of the *Identität* is sickness [*Unwohlsein*]: “therefore Hunger and thirst are painful experiences, experiences of sickness, because here this unity is rent asunder, because lacking food and drink, I am only half a man, or at least not a whole man” (GW 11, 178 f.).

When hungry, I am split from myself, my proper being. I am half a person. This language is familiar to anyone who has read the *Todesgedanken*, wherein Feuerbach describes pain as the privation of wholeness,^{xxxii} and death as the privation of the species from the individual.

Feuerbach, in that book, even suggests that pain is an ontological argument proving the infinity of the human species essence [*Gattungswesen*] as the sum total of all realities

[*Inbegriff aller Realitäten*],^{xxxiii} an argument he also uses in the *Vorlesungen über Logik und*

Metaphysik and anticipated in the *Einleitung in die Logik und Metaphysik*.^{xxxiv} This language of proper object and of privation comes rather close to Thomas Aquinas:

Hence it is obvious that every being acts for the end, because any agent whatsoever tends to something definite. However, that to which the agent tends definitely ought to be fitting for it: for it would not tend to it unless it were fitting for it. But that which is fitting to something is good for it (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, 3, 2).^{xxxv}

Indeed, this passage perfectly compliments Feuerbach's understanding of the proper relationship the subject has with its food object, which he at least once discusses in terms recognisable under the Thomistic conception of *Natura*: "We cannot enjoy, let alone chew, what simply contradicts our nature; we cannot take any poison without being poisoned, and thus destroyed, by it," he says in *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 175).^{xxxvi} In the Moleschott review, he says: "Being is one with eating; being is eating; what is, eats and is eaten. Eating is the subjective, active form of being; being eaten is the objective, suffering form of Being – however, both are inseparable" (GW 11, 358).^{xxxvii} Wartofsky, seeing in this real and convenient unity of subject and object nothing more than a "half truth" (Wartofsky, 415), dismisses it. But I see some value herein, for it overcomes abstract idealism, while at the same time correcting an important failing in Hegel.

How does it do this? To eat is to do nothing more than to appropriate objective reality into our subjective bodies: "we chew and grind it with our non-aesthetic teeth ... in order to incorporate it in ourselves, to change it into flesh and blood, to make its essence into our essence," as we read in *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 178).^{xxxviii} But since we know that Feuerbach does not believe that mouse-ness disappears into cat-ness, we know that this talk of *Wesen* is not sublation, but rather the consummation of convenience in an open dialectic. Thus, unlike Hegel's wild animals, this eating does not show the finitude of the world, nor even the reduction of one being to another. Rather, in Feuerbach's estimation, it illustrates the Leibnizian *vinculum substantiale* (GW 11, 178) between the sensation of

human lack and the being that fulfils it. In a sense, then, Feuerbach is offering a naturalized version of the transcendental deduction: Feuerbach suggests that we experience the world the way we do because the categories of the understanding are neither objective nor subjective, but rather they participate in a fundamental porosity, almost a promiscuity, in which the border between subject and object is so far from being absolute that it would be better to say, in answer to idealism, that these two terms can only be seen as distinct when they are taken in abstraction from one another. When modern philosophy carries out this abstraction, it is nothing more than a logical trick obscuring a deeper ontological truth: when abstracted from its proper (*eigen, conveniens*) object (here, food), the subject dies.

Thus, better than grasping the subjective and objective as inner and outer poles whose connection is maddeningly obscure, it would be better to grasp them both in an open dialectic at play in what Desmond calls the middle,^{xxxix} the different spheres of community that give meaning to their intercourse. For, outer and inner depend on one another, and between them lies their meaning giving ground. Hegel saw this, but his mediations extend the province of idealism by swallowing up the mediated into larger and larger mediations, whose ultimate terminus has the conceit of allowing for no alterity, and hence of swallowing every middle. We can say that Feuerbach rebels against this because such swallowing is not the real swallowing of actual beings needing to eat, but a logical swallowing possible only in the realm the pure dialectical self-mediation of his former mentor. Certainly, Feuerbach's language is still too indebted to Hegel, and he still discusses the distinction of subject and object in terms that can be read to emphasize their unity – perhaps this is because Feuerbach lacks the explicit language of the middle. Nevertheless, unlike Hegel, Feuerbach wants to preserve the distinction between subject and object by seeing them not as concrescences of logic, but first as real beings in an actual and open dialectical exchange with each other, best exemplified (or better yet, given a transcendental ground) in the need to eat.

Hence, we can only understand Feuerbach's Moleschott reception within the context

of this dialectic. But, this dialectic is no longer Hegelian, for the Feuerbachian dialectic strives to recognize its terms as irreducible; it strives to embrace both the subject and the object, to embrace the subject's logical dependency on objectivity and vice versa, yet also to recognize the subject not as the abstract ideal *Ich* but rather as this actual I – me – here and now, and hence, to flesh out my Hegelian logical dependency on objectivity into what he sees as my real or anthropological dependency. Of course, countless citations from Feuerbach himself could show that a certain essentialism often perverts his existentialist drive, but perhaps this is only because he remains chronologically too close to the founding fathers of both transcendental and absolute idealism. This is not a limitation peculiar to Feuerbach; even his critics, for instance the firm of Marx and Engels – the very corporation that would eschew essence for the living dialectic - famously and tragically still saw individuals in abstraction, as merely moments or larger historical processes. Nevertheless, Feuerbach is expressly committed to what he considers as real dependency. As real and not simply logical, it is not a negative and rational dependency in which alterity is recouped as negative moments of the self, but rather as a positive and irreducible alterity in community with the self. In short, he suggests a system wherein alterity is real and yet not absolute, a system in which difference actually exists and is not overcome by thinking, and thus a system in which subjectivity does not sublimate the other, but also within which the other does not sublimate the subject. Feuerbach thus allows for an open dialectic of true intermediation, as opposed to a closed dialectic that only results in the mere return to self of the absolute, whether that be Hegel's *Idee*, Schopenhauer's *Wille*, or Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*, to name the related and competing absolutes swirling around during and just after Feuerbach's career. Let us give the last word to Feuerbach: the subject and the object are "distinguished and yet inseparably connected" (GW 11, 178),^{x1} and this is seen most clearly in what one eats: for, *der Mensch ist, was er isst*.

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- i “... *Gluth des Herzens, die Kraft des Muskels, die Festigkeit der Knochen, die Regsamkeit des Hirns.*”
- ii References to Feuerbach’s *Gesammelte Werke* are indicated by GW, then volume and page number. All translations are mine.
- iii “‘*Der Mensch ist, was er ißt.*’ *Welch ein skurriler Ausspruch der modernen sensualistischen Afterweisheit.*” This particularly piquant reproof (*Afterweisheit*) denies easy or polite translation. But I can say this much about it: Schopenhauer uses it against Hegel in his “Über die Universitätsphilosophie” (in *Parerga und Paralipomena*), so its vehemence cannot be underestimated. Chernov perhaps too politely translates this as a “pseudo-wisdom” (Chernov, 397).
- iv Feuerbach, Ludwig, *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution [Über: Lehre der Nahrungsmittel. Für das Volk. Von J. Moleschott]*.
- v Influential indeed. Its influence travels far beyond its reception in Feuerbach studies. This sketch, Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” a series of damning reflections on Feuerbach’s philosophical positions, reverberated in Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism*, to which Heidegger himself responded in “The Letter on Humanism,” which in turn found a recent respondent in Peter Sloterdijk, whose work then itself stoked a heated controversy. The subterranean influence of Feuerbach via Marx up to the present day is hard to deny.
- vi Feuerbach, *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, (GW 10, 368). Wolfgang Harich, in the Introduction to GW 10, calls this work a “*politisch-satirisch nuancierte Abhandlung*” (GW 10, 6). Perhaps, but if any of this humor is intentional, it strikes me more as facetious than satirical.
- vii Rawidowicz was the first to draw a parallel between Feuerbach and Brillat-Savarin. Brillat-Savarin, for instance, claims that digestion, “of all the bodily operations ... has the greatest influence on the moral state of the individual [*la digestion est de toutes les operations corporelles celle qui influe les plus sur l’état moral de l’individu*]”; he then classifies “civilized humanity in[to] three grand categories: the regulars, the constipated, and the diarrheic [*on pourrait ranger,*

sous ce rapport, le genre humain civilisé en trois grandes catégories: les régulaires, les resserrés, et les relâchés]” (197, § 82).

viii “Isn’t there any substance that can replace the potato even among the poor classes and can at the same time instill a virile ethos and vigour? Yes – there is such a substance, a substance guaranteeing a better future, a substance containing the germ of a new, albeit slow and gradual, but thus more solid revolution: the bean [*Gibt es keinen Stoff, der die Kartoffel auch bei der ärmern Volksklasse ersetzen, der zugleich dem Volk männliche Gesinnung und Tatkraft einflößen kann? Ja, es gibt einen solchen Stoff, einen Stoff also, der Bürge einer bessern Zukunft ist, den Keim zu einer neuen, wenn auch langsamen und allmählichen, aber umso solidern Revolution enthält: Es ist der Erbsenstoff]*” (GW 10, 367).

ix For the fullest statement of this open dialect, see Desmond (1995). The meaning of this term will become clear below.

x “*So philosophische-primitiv war Feuerbach doch nicht, wie Manche glauben, behaupten zu dürfen*” (Rawidowicz, 203). See also his fascinating discussion framing this quotation.

xi See Feuerbach, *Die Naturwissenschaften und die Revolution* (GW 11, 360).

xii See Feuerbach, *Die Naturwissenschaften und die Revolution* (GW 11, 358).

xiii “Materialist and no materialist! Feuerbach himself often found it valuable ... to emphasize that he was neither an idealist nor a materialist [*Materialist und kein Materialist! Feuerbach selber hat häufig Wert darauf gelegt ... zu betonen, daß er weder Idealist noch Materialist sei]*” (Rawidowicz, 148); and again: “Even in the *Grundsätzen* and later, he remained neither an empirical nor speculative philosopher, neither an idealist nor materialist [*Er bleibt auch in den “Grundsätzen” und später weder Empirist noch spekulativer Philosoph, weder Idealist noch Materialist]*” (Rawidowicz, 149).

xiv Translations from the *Wesen des Christenthums* are my own; George Eliot’s translations are

beautiful, but do not preserve the Hegelian language Feuerbach employs. As an aid to the English speaking reader, I include references to page numbers in Eliot's translation, prefaced by EC.

^{xv} See Feuerbach, *Das Geheimnis des Opfers* (GW 11, 4).

^{xvi} “*Der Glaube ist die Macht der Einbildungskraft, welche das Wirkliche zum Unwirklichen, das Unwirkliche zum Wirklichen macht.*”

^{xvii} “... every human being is a mediated or indirect anthropophage; for, we eat and chew only animals and plants that are equivalent to our essence, animals and plants that are possible and mediated human flesh and blood [...*ein mittelbarer oder indirekter Anthropophag ist jeder Mensch, denn wir essen und verdauen ja nur von einem Tiere oder einer Pflanze, was unsersgleichen, unseres Wesens ist, was mögliches und mittelbares Menschenfleisch und Menschenblut ist*],” Feuerbach, *Das Geheimnis des Opfers* (GW 11, 47). See also Feuerbach, *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus, besonders in Beziehung auf die Willensfreiheit* (GW 11, 179), where Feuerbach talks about the the human incarnation of nature, or the “*Menschenwerdung der Natur.*” Finally, see also *Das Geheimnis des Opfers*, (GW 11, 48) for bread and wine treated specifically as the human body.

^{xviii} See Feuerbach, *Das Geheimnis des Opfers* (GW 11, 48 f.).

^{xix} I take the term from Smith (1996, 388).

^{xx} “I only posit an object, a you outside of me, because in and for itself, my I, my thinking, presupposes above all an object [*Ich setze nur ein Objekt, ein Du außer mich, weil an und für sich mein Ich, mein Denken ein Du, ein Objekt überhaupt voraussetzt,*” (*Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* , GW 11, 172). This is one of Feuerbach's oldest positions. In his dissertation he writes “The other can be called the alter ego. In turn, that alter ego is within me myself in thinking. I am equally myself and the other. Of course, only in an undifferentiated manner, and certainly not a determined other, but indeed simply the other (or as species) [*Alter appellari potest Alter Ego; contra in cogitando in memet ipso ille Alter Ego est, ipse sum simul Ego et Alter, idque*

modo indiscreto, neque certus quidam Alter, sed Alter omnino (sive in specie)” (GW 1, 16). This position over time, like so much else, undergoes a transformation from being a logical position to an anthropological position.

^{xxi} See Feuerbach’s *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus*: “That I can rationally posit [anything] outside of myself is only a consequence of this physical condition: that being preceeds thinking [*Mein verständiges Außermichsetzen ist nur eine Folge dieser physikalischen Voraussetzung; das Sein geht dem Denken vorher*]” (GW 11, 172).

^{xxii} “Hegel begins with Being, i.e., the concept of Being; why shouldn’t I start with Being itself, i.e., actual being [*Hegel beginnt mit dem Sein, d. h. dem Begriffe des Seins, warum soll ich nicht mit dem Sein selbst, d. h. dem wirklichen Sein, beginnen können*]?” (GW 9, 23). Please see Walter Jaesche’s insightful critique (1990) of this critique. He accuses Feuerbach of silently equivocating between four senses of being.

^{xxiii} See Feuerbach, *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 174).

^{xxiv} See Feuerbach, *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 174).

^{xxv} “The cat indeed kills the mouse, however, it only kills one and not all mice, because it would itself be sublated in the sublation of all the animal objects it enjoys, because it, in being able to keep living, must leave others alive [*Wohl tötet die Katze die Maus; aber sie tötet nur einige, nicht alle Mäuse, weil sie mit der Aufhebung aller für sie genießbaren tierischen Objekte sich selbst aufhöbe, weil sie, um selbst leben zukönnen, anderes muß leben lassen*]” (GW 11, 175).

^{xxvi} “... we only digest by virtue of the “negativity” of our stomach or will what is positively digestable by virtue of its own natural character, we thus only eat what is edible, only see what is visible, only touch what is tangible ... consequently the so-called mere *object* is just as well an *object-subject* like the so-called mere subject is the inseperable *subject-object*, i.e., the I is a you-I, man is a *world-* or *nature-*man, just like the cat is essentially a mouse-cat [...*wir nur verdauen kraft der "Negativität" unseres Magens oder Willens, was positiv, kraft seiner eigenen*

Naturbeschaffenheit verdaulich ist, nur also essen, was eßbar, nur sehen, was sichtbar, nur tasten, was tastbar, ... folglich das schlechthin sogenannte Objekt ebensogut Objekt-Subjekt als das schlechthin sogenannte Subjekt wesentlich und unabsonderlich Subjekt-Objekt, d. h. das Ich Du-Ich, der Mensch Welt- oder Naturmensch, gleichwie die Katze wesentlich Maukatze]” (GW 11, 175).

^{xxvii} Before Feuerbach settled on the title *Wesen des Christentums*, he wanted the title to express somehow that the work was a *Kritik der unreinen Vernunft*. See Schuffenhauer’s comments in the introduction to *Das Wesen des Christentums* (GW 5, 6).

^{xxviii} “Leben ist Stoffwechsel.”

^{xxix} See Feuerbach’s *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 177).

^{xxx} See Feuerbach’s *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus* (GW 11, 177).

^{xxxi} “... nichts anderes als Identität, Einigkeit von Subjekt und Objekt.”

^{xxxii} See Feuerbach’s *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* (GW 1, 302 f.).

^{xxxiii} “... the only sounds of wisdom that come out of you are the sounds of pain, for the essence, the species, the absolute perfectly general, whose actuality in your understanding you deny, you affirm and assent to in your pains; these and your sighs are the only ontological argument that you give for the existence of a God [... die einzigen Laute der Weisheit, die aus dir kommen, sind die Töne des Schmerzes, denn das Wesen, die Gattung, das absolut vollkommene Allgemeine, dessen Wirklichkeit in deinem Verstande du verleugnest, affirmierst und bejahst du in deinen Schmerzen, diese und deine Seufzer sind die einzigen ontologischen Argumente, die du vom Dasein eines Gottes gibst]” (*Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit*, GW 1, 302). This argument also mirrors Descartes discovery of infinity through his finitude in the third Meditation.

^{xxxiv} See Feuerbach’s *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik* (171-178) and *Einleitung in die Logik und Metaphysik* (81 ff.).

^{xxxv} *“Inde enim manifestum est omne agens agere propter finem, quia quodlibet agens tendit ad aliquod determinatum. Id autem ad quod agens determinate tendit, oportet esse conveniens ei: non enim tenderet in ipsum nisi propter aliquam convenientiam ad ipsum. Quod autem est conveniens alicui, est ei bonum.”*

^{xxxvi} *“Wir können nicht genießen, wenigstens nicht verdauen, was schlechterdings unserer Natur widerspricht, kein Gift zu uns nehmen, ohne von ihm vergiftet, vernichtet zu werden.”*

^{xxxvii} *“Das Sein ist eins mit dem Essen; sein heißt essen; was ist, ißt und wird gegessen. Essen ist die subjektive, tätige, Gegessenwerden die objektive, leidende Form des Seins, aber beides unzertrennlich.”*

^{xxxviii} *“Wir zerkauen und zermalmen es mit unsern unästhetischen Zähnen ... um es uns förmlich einzuverleiben, in Fleisch und Blut zu verwandeln, sein Wesen zu unserm Wesen zu machen.”*

^{xxxix} *“Wir zerkauen und zermalmen es mit unsern unästhetischen Zähnen ... um es uns förmlich einzuverleiben, in Fleisch und Blut zu verwandeln, sein Wesen zu unserm Wesen zu machen.”*

^{xl} *“... unterscheiden und doch unzertrennlich verbunden.”*