Feuerbach's Anthropological Appropriation of the Ontological Argument in the *Essence of Christianity*

In this paper, I claim that an ontological argument lies at the root of Feuerbach's anthropological projection theory. After some preliminary considerations regarding Feuerbach's dynamic position within the history of dialectical philosophy, this paper will illustrate how Feuerbach appropriates the ontological argument within the *Essence of Christianity* (*EC*), and will continually suggest how we may understand his entire anthropological reduction as consonant with his early Hegelian career – in fact, he was a student of Hegel[1] – even though at the height of his fame Feuerbach expressly contested this

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dependency.

An ontological argument is simply an argument that attempts to prove the existence of a necessary being through a pure concept alone – *a priori*, with no help from any empirical data. This distinguishes an ontological argument from what Kant calls cosmological arguments – arguments

[1] Feuerbach did well as student of Hegel: "I testify herewith that Herr Feuerbach attended my above mentioned lectures with the most praiseworthy diligence and demonstrated an excellent interest in philosophy. Berlin, March 18, 1826. Hegel, Ordinary Professor of Philosophy at this Royal University [*Daß Hr Feuebach die oben verzeichneten Volesungen mit dem rühmlichsten Fleiße und bewieenem ausgezeichneten Intereße für die Wißenschaft bey mir gehört hat, bezeuge hiemit Berlin den 18 März 1826, Hegel, Prof. p. o. der Philosophy, an hies. Kön. Univers.*]" [*VG*, xxi].

based on causality – and physico-theological arguments – arguments based on design or morality.[2] Now, although the necessary being denominated in the ontological argument is usually God, in the history of the argument other names have emerged, especially *substantia* (the *causa sui* of Spinoza) and *Geist* (the absolute concept of Hegel). Both of these names are parasitical on Christian notions of God, but deserve their own appellations simply because despite similarities with Christianity they remain essentially concerned with an immanent Being. One could also call the cogito an immanentized ontological argument, as do both Hegel and Feuerbach. Likewise, I wish to add one more name as alien to the transcendent Christian God as those of Spinoza and Hegel: the human *Gattungswesen* of Feuerbach.

Feuerbach finds the truth of the ontological argument in Hegel's good infinity, an infinity that Schopenhauer in one of his typical barbs calls a "monstrous amplification of the ontological argument."[3] The good infinity is the infinity in which the One contains its opposite,[4] the other – an infinity in which all opposition is really only an appearance of opposition: the other is really nothing more than the objectification, or as Feuerbach would say, the forgotten projection of the One. In the end, this One is nothing more than the ground of all identity and difference: both collapse back into the One ground. The One, then, the true positivity, is paradoxically the true negativity as the negative unity of all alterity because it absorbs all alterity. Here, like every other moment in Hegel, the positive and the negative are intimately related and their denominations depend merely on perspective. This interplay between the positive and the negative dynamizes Feuerbach's argument. Indeed, in his preliminary lectures on Hegel's logic,[5] not only does Feuerbach echo Schopenhauer's equation of the

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2 *CPR*, A 591 / B619.

3 *FFW*, section 7. Of course, Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will follows Hegel in allowing for no real alterity. Difference is purely phenomenal for Schopenhauer.

4 Hegel says that the "self-sublation of [the] infinite and of the finite, as a single process" is the "*true* or *genuine infinite*" [*Science of Logic*, 137]. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the key to unlocking the *Science of Logic*.

5 These were delivered in 1829/1830 but first published quite posthumously in 1975 as the *Einleitung in die Logik und Metaphysik* (ELM). 1999 saw the publication of a critical edition, which I here follow: *Einleitung in die Logik und Metaphysik*, ed. Ch. Weckwertg and W. Schuffenhauer, GW 13, 3-205

ontological argument with the core of Hegelian philosophy, but he identifies this good infinity as the true expression of the ontological argument.[6] For in the good infinity, he finds the argument's *ens realissimum*, which he identifies as the material ground of the *omnitudo realitatis.*

In his maturity, Feuerbach claims to see the traditional ontological argument simply as one moment of the conversion between the divine and the mundane; hence, he grows to see it only as the ontotheological expression of the transition from mere representational thought to actual thinking.[7] But as a young man lecturing in 1829, Feuerbach himself champions just this transition as something with ontological import, for he sees thinking and being as identical ("the reality of the object is inseparable from the reality of thought"):[8] "this extremely important proof for the existence of God can, at the same time, serve us as the transition to thought."[9] Feuerbach takes "thought" here to mean thought in its true Hegelian shape, true thinking, neither intuition nor mere representation. And his "us" here likewise rests on the Hegelian "we" – we, those "phenomenological students" of spirit tracing its necessary development through its "kaleidoscope of objects".[10] For the young Feuerbach, the thought of God in the ontological argument, expressed as the *omnitudo realitatis* or the most perfect being, is the "sum total of all realities [*Inbegriff der Realitäten*]" understood as the "living comprehension of all these realities [*lebendige Zusammenfassung aller dieser Realitäten*]," and not a mere thesaurus into which various predicates of God are thrown and held together merely by "a loose *And* and *Also* [*in einer Verbindung, die nur ein lockeres* Und *und* Auch *macht*]" [GW 13, 103]. Since Feuerbach translates *omnitudo* with *Inbegriff* and glosses it with *lebendige Zusammenfassung*, we

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6 "That which constitutes the distinction between being or reality and representation, this limit is overcome in this thought [of God] [*Was den Unterschied zwischen Sein oder Wirklichkeit und der Vorstellung ausmacht, diese Grenze ist in diesem Gedanken verschwunden*]" [GW 13, 103].

7 "Only when thy thought is God dost thou truly think, rigorously speaking; for only God is the realised, consummate, exhausted thinking power" [EC, 36-37], runs Eliot's now quaint translation of the EC.

8 "*Von der Wirklichkeit des Gedankens ist die Wirklichkeit des Objekts unzertrennlich*" [GW 13, 104].

9 "*Dieser ohnehin äußerst wichtige Beweis vom Dasein Gottes kann uns dienen zugleich zum Übergang zum Gedanken*" [GW 13, 102].

10 J. N. Findlay, Foreword, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), xv.

must here be sensitive to the Hegelian nature of his early project; logically speaking, the Concept [*Begriff*] is best understood as the living systematic totality of concrescent determinations. And here is where we find the transition to real thought: the mere position of predicates in representational thought lacks the necessity of the self-development of reason. But once consciousness tires of the apparently arbitrary nature of its predicative power, a weariness that Kant's critical philosophy both announces and attempts to overcome, Hegelian logic shows how consciousness leads itself to the awareness that the predicates of thinking are in fact not predicates, but rather determinations held together by the necessity that thinking embodies in its role as their negative unity. This consciousness is reason's self-consciousness, whose burgeoning awareness Hegel traces in the *Phenomenology* according to its own necessary development, and whose fundament he is to outline in the *Logic*.

Feuerbach's publications cease to toe this explicitly Hegelian line from about 1839 onward. Nevertheless, that it continues to function silently as the core of Feuerbach's philosophy. This debt is clearly evident in his anthropological re-appropriation of the ontological argument, which forms the second chapter of his *Essence of Christianity* (*EC*). It is precisely this necessary development as the *Inbegriff* that the thought of God first supplies. An analysis of this chapter is instructive concerning the logic that drives the whole of Feuerbach's anthropological reduction in the EC.

Chapter Two of the *EC*, the first chapter of Part I, is an explicit treatment of the ontological argument. In it, we find a rather traditional ontological argument offering Feuerbach the groundwork for exhibiting the "True, or Anthropological, Essence of Religion," the famous title of the first section of the work in the second and third editions [B and C].[11] The placement of this discussion, which Feuerbach calls a religious or positive account, is of immense importance for his anthropological reduction, and its placement mirrors that of his attack on the traditional ontological argument, which forms the first theological or negative chapter of the *EC*'s second section.[12] The pride of place that

[11] The title in A runs "Religion in its Conformity with the Essence of Humanity [*Die Religion in ihrer Übereinstimmung mit dem Wesen des Menschen*]."

[12] The first theological chapter Part II is actually its second chapter; its first chapter is merely a summary of the findings of the first section, and never discusses Christianity as theology.

Feuerbach gives to the ontological argument emphasises the special role that the argument plays in the development of ontotheology: in the ontological argument we find the "mathematical point of religion" [*EC*, 44] — the God of the philosophers of the understanding. Since he holds that this God is the basis for all Christian *concepts* of God, Feuerbach must first turn to this God – God as a theoretical or purely rational being – before he moves on to the phenomenal characteristics known to the tradition as the positive *attributa divina.*

Feuerbach's religious account of the ontological argument in the *EC* holds a unique place in the history of the critiques of the proofs because instead of being merely a hostile account of ontotheological reasoning (which it certainly is), it is also an anthropological re-appropriation of such. Indeed, Feuerbach offers the chapter as proof that "in religion man objectifies his own secret essence" [*GW* 5, 75; *EC*, 33].[13] Therefore, "it must be shown" that at stake here is a "differencing of man with his own nature" [*EC*, 33]. God is the secret exaltation of humanity – God is simply the mirror, the first visible, the idol, of humanity, to use the well-publicised terminology of J.-L. Marion.[14] Hence, the anthropological appropriation of the ontological argument in the first half of the *EC* is an attempt to unify the essence of God with humanity, or put differently, to turn the unity of existence and essence in God into the very meaning[15] of humanity — in short, the ontological argument provides the conformity [*Übereinstimmung*] that the section title of the first edition trumpeted. As Feuerbach holds, the unity of essence and existence in God is a projection of a unity that is found first in the understanding, which sees essence as the formal ground of God in the collection of perfections (i.e., *omnitudo realitatis*), and which sees existence as the material ground of God in the positive being holding the perfections (i.e., *ens realissimum*). The concept of God in the ontological argument is the good infinity: the negative unity of total human determination.

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[13] "*Aber der Mensch vergegenständlicht in der Religion sein eignes geheimes Wesen.*"

[14] J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*, Trans. Thomas A. Carlson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9 ff. Claude Bruaire beats Marion to this terminology; see Claude Bruaire's piece on Feuerbach, "L'Homme mirior de Dieu," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 101: 3 (1972), 345-354.

[15] I think here of meaning as projection, in a proto-Heideggerian sense.

Feuerbach, claiming in the *EC* that religion glorifies humanity's secret essence, is not claiming that modern philosophy correctly grasps this essence. In fact, he thinks that it has largely done so wrongly, for he holds that it has reduced the essence of humanity to the understanding, to thought. Feuerbach in 1841 is no longer the same absolute idealist that he was as a student and post-doctoral lecturer: rather, for the Feuerbach of the *EC*, humanity is tripartite: reason, will, and love – and not simply reason, as it is for Hegel, the young Feuerbach, and most of the modern tradition.[16] Simply, the older Feuerbach maintains that modernity's general account of the human essence privileging one aspect of mind, an account that modernity generally extends to the divine as well, is too abstract. Along with Kant, Feuerbach calls this abstract tendency ontotheology, or metaphysical theology.[17] He holds that ontotheology has projected its particular mindfulness, which has attenuated into mere rationality, onto God at the expense of the rest of the human essence. However, signalling his intent to take ontotheology seriously and likewise mirroring Kant's treatment of the *Gottesbeweise* in the *CPR*'s transcendental dialectic, in the *EC*, Feuerbach first turns his attention to the ontological argument and its *ens realissimum*, that purely rational concept of God thoroughly external to experience. Although one moment of Feuerbach's task is indeed to show that the identification of God with reason or the understanding is *abstract* because it only projects *one aspect* of the human essence, his more important task is to show that this mistaken identification is equally a clandestine glorification of humanity. Hence, as he tells us in a footnote, he is quite content to leave aside his own anthropology and to "place himself on the standpoint of ontotheology, in order to show that

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[16] Says Rawidowicz: "*Hier könnte man auch darauf hinweisen, daß Feuerbachs Auffassung vom Bewußtsein als der Einheit von Vernunft, Liebe und Wille nicht ganz unabhängig ist von der älteren Psychologie mit ihren drei Vermögen: Erkenntnisvermögen, Gefülhsvermögen und Begehrungsvermögen.*" Wartofsky simply glosses this: "it [the model of human nature that Feuerbach adopts] is not a new model, but, on the contrary, the most classical model of all: the 'tripartite soul' of Greek thought, which dominated philosophy for more than two millennia" [262]. As far as I can see, neither Rawidowicz nor Wartofsky question this composition of consciousness, nor, more importantly, inquire into the unity of its moments. This unity, to use the terminology of Jacques Maritain, is the "primitive fact" of Feuerbach's path of thinking.

[17] "Transcendental theology either thinks that the existence of an original being is to be derived from an experience in general ... and is called **cosmotheology**; or it believes that it can cognize that existence through mere concepts, without the aid of even the least experience, and is called **ontotheology**." [CPR, A 632 / B 660; emphasis in original].

metaphysics is resolvable into psychology, that the ontotheological predicates are merely predicates of the understanding" [*EC*, 40]. Feuerbach sees the understanding as the ground of the hidden unity of humanity and God, but this must be brought out, shown, *proven*.

So, we see at least that Feuerbach himself is involved in a proof [*Beweis*], and a *Gottesbeweis* at that, because he wants to show that God exists not as a singular being apart from creation or a particular species, but instead as that species itself: to wit, that God exists as the human species. In short, he wants to show that God *exists*. He finds the logical necessity for this proof in that disunion implies union: "disunion [*Entzweiung*] only exists between beings who are at variance, but ought to be one, who can be one, and who consequently in essence [*Wesen*], in truth, are one" [*GW* 5, 76; *EC*, 33]. Thus he sees this necessity to be logical necessity: just as there is no finite without the infinite, there is no disjunction without junction, nor two without one; two implies one. This is standard Hegelian fare: the one splits itself in two [*sich ent-zwei-en*], only to recover its unity in what is only putatively a third.[18]

According to Feuerbach the essence from which the human being feels separated is inborn, but since it seems external, it seems to have a different "character" than the essence which gives the feeling of unity with God [*EC*, 33]. Note well that only the "character" or state or quality ["*Beschaffenheit*," *GW* 5, 75] seems different; it is the same essence. The hidden union and apparent disunion are simply differing moments of the same larger essence, viewed anthropologically. This essence, says Feuerbach in the first edition of the *EC*, is the understanding. In the B and C editions, he modifies this to "the intelligence — the reason or the understanding" [*EC*, 34], which seems to blur Feuerbach's previously held Hegelian distinction between the two.[19] However, except for a few

[18] For this reason, William Desmond claims that one must count to four to achieve two. Hegel's two is simply the one doubled, a counterfeit two, as Desmond might say. That is, there is no second in the Hegelian third, and thus only a first.

[19] Feuerbach's *Lectures on Logic and Metaphysics* (*VLM*) clearly delineate these two moments of spirit. However, by the time of the *EC*, Feuerbach lets this distinction drop. Hence, we read in a footnote to A that Feuerbach "intentionally adopts" ["*absichtlich wird ... genommen*"] a vulgar ["*populärer*"] use of "understanding" as "an expression of intelligence" [*als Ausdruck der Intelligenz*] because it is "sharper, more determinate, and more spicy" ["*scharfer, bestimmter, pikanter*"] [*GW* 5, 76]. Typically, we are given no reason for the acuity of the vulgar terminology.

scattered references, especially in the chapter's last paragraph in the B and C editions, we hear largely only of understanding. Understanding, taken loosely, is Feuerbach's ontotheological name for God: the chapter title is "God as a being of the understanding." Feuerbach dedicates no corresponding chapter nor systematic analysis to reason in the *EC*.[20] This is remarkable as previously Feuerbach's idealism found God solely in reason.[21]

The understanding gives the feeling of unity with the divine because, according to Feuerbach, the understanding is its own perfection. The understanding is neutral: it is free from desire, want, passion, and the like. We see this in the image of the wise man: disinterested and thus able to see beyond a properly egoistic standpoint. Feuerbach's reasoning is clear: the understanding is at rest; to be at rest is to be divine; therefore understanding is divine [*EC*, 34]. This dispassionateness of the understanding shows itself even more clearly in that the understanding can problematise our own personal existence, and, throwing "us into a painful collision with ourselves" [*EC*, 34], it displays our own faults. Hence, the unity of understanding is not just the unity of the self with the self, which, taken as absolute would be an inert, solipsist, and truly psychotic unity. Rather, the understanding is "the power proper to the species [*das eigentliche Gattungsvermögen*]" [*GW* 5, 78; *EC*, 35], and thus it shows us our shortcomings in relief against the background of the species-perfection, a theme intimately related to one of Descartes' own ontological arguments[22] that Feuerbach has carried over from the logic lectures of 1829-1830 and the *TDI*.[23]

This unenlightening note falls away in B and C.

[20] The English reader must be careful for George Eliot does not consistently translate *Verstand* with "understanding"; at least once she renders it as "reason" (i.e. on the last line of *EC*, 34), and once more as "mind" (i.e. at the top of *EC*, 36).

[21] ELM, VLM, and TDI.

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[23] "And when one fixes the defect merely on the side of his own defectiveness, so then precisely does the individual fixate on himself. He attaches himself precisely to that which could bring him to consciousness of his own finitude, and takes himself as something more serious and more meaningful and more real than thinking, which is free from individuality [*Und indem [man] das Mangelhafte nur von Seite seiner Mangelhaftigkeit fixiert, so fixiert sich eben das Individuum selbst, befestigt sich gerade in Dem, was es zum Bewußtsein seiner Endlichkeit bringen konnte, und hält sich für etwas Wichtigeres und Bedeutenderes, und Reell[er]es, als den individualitätslosen Gedanken*]" [GW 13, 132].

For this reason, the God of the philosophers, the ontotheological God, is the God of negative theology: “God as God, that is, as a being not finite, not human, not materially conditioned, not phenomenal, is only an object of thought. He is the incorporeal, formless, incomprehensible — the abstract, negative being” [*EC*, 35]. For Feuerbach, this sort of negative theology only knows God as an intellectual object, which it projects by abstracting away the limits of individuality. Hence, not only is God nothing sensible (which is always individual), but this theology also posits God’s positive predicates as *negative*, since they are *not* human: “the ‘infinite Spirit’ in distinction from the finite, is therefore nothing else than the intelligence disengaged from the limits of individuality and corporeality ... intelligence posited in and by itself” [*EC*, 35]. Hence, “the schoolmen, the Christian fathers, and long before them the heathen philosophers” all held God to be “immaterial essence, intelligence, Spirit, pure understanding” [*EC*, 35]. But, asks Feuerbach in a Spinozistic moment, what sense is there in talking about more than one kind of intelligence? There could only be one kind, for our intelligence of any other kind of intelligence could only come through our own intelligence: “every understanding which I posit as different from my own, is only a position of my own understanding, i.e., an idea of my own, a conception which falls within my own power of thought, and thus expresses my understanding” [*EC*, 41]. Negative theology then is really a kind of positive theology, and in two ways. First: because this intelligence, even though infinite, is still a human concept. And second: as negations, God’s qualities remain negations of a finite (negative) being – the individual. In other words, this negative theology is a negation of a negation, and hence surprisingly Hegelian in its actual positivity. This Feuerbachian negative theology is simply the stripping of the limits from positive theology, and not the supposedly naive negative theology that claims it can say nothing about God (indeed, Feuerbach identifies this second kind of negative theology with atheism). But here the negative moment of God re-asserts itself: how does one make an image of this unlimitedness that Feuerbach calls mind? “Has mind a form?” asks Feuerbach [*EC*, 36]. God is only thinkable, and not representable. Therefore, God is merely “an object to reason [*Vernunft*] — [God] is nothing else than reason in its supreme being [*höchsten Wesen*] become objective to itself” [*GW* 5, 79;

EC, 36]. George Eliot translates *höchsten Wesen* as "utmost intensification," but in so doing she clearly misses the classical formulation of God embedded within the quotation, a formulation intimately tied with Descartes' ontological argument.

So: reason is the Supreme Being when it becomes objective to itself. But why? Or rather, what does this mean? Here Feuerbach dips back into a logical analysis couched in the Hegelian dynamic of necessary self-emergence, necessary self-development. "Everything," says Feuerbach in a fit of *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, "must express itself, reveal itself, make itself objective, affirm itself" [*EC*, 36]. Reason affirms itself, or makes itself into its own object, relatively in its pure operation, i.e., in logic. But reason affirms itself absolutely in God because God is the highest thought, that thought which thinks itself: the self-thinking thought in its supreme necessity, the thought over which no thought can triumph. Thought puts itself in relation to itself with the thought of God. Hence, we can here fruitfully use Eliot's phrase: God is the "utmost intensification" of the mystery of self-consciousness, that "enigma of enigmas," as Feuerbach calls self-consciousness [*EC*, 36]. For Feuerbach, we must remember, this thought-thinking-itself is humanity. However, this thinking takes place in the individual for whom this absolute self-consciousness emerges relatively as an apparently distinct being, and thus incognito to the very self whose putative consciousness has been lain bare. This means that God is the individual's first unconscious recognition of absolute reason and thus of a moment of the individual's own essence. Nevertheless, this God, this unconscious recognition, remains the implicit self-recognition of absolute reason.

The content of this self-recognition of reason is simply necessity, for reason is the domain of the necessary. Thus, unknowingly, it must take itself as its own ground since the necessity that it seeks is contained analytically in its own quest: necessity is nothing but a concept of reason. In thus absolutising its own necessity, it finds the absolute necessity it needs to ground itself. But again this is unconscious, because reason fails to see that this projected absolute necessity, this supreme objectification, is identical with itself; instead, it finds this necessity as an object unconsciously projected outside of itself and names this ground 'God'. God is thus a "need of thinking [*Denkens*]"

[*GW* 5, 79; *EC*, 36] in providing the ultimate ground of necessity. This position of God as the need of the intelligence is a Kantian position of God as transcendental; without God science cannot make sense of the world: "God is a necessary idea of our understanding," writes Kant, "because he is the substratum of the possibility of all things" [*LPT*, 46]; "the highest being remains an ideal free from faults, anchoring and crowning the whole of human knowledge" [*LPT*, 69]. God is thus not a contradiction to the understanding, but rather its completion. God is the Kantian "necessary thought — the highest degree of the thinking power" [*EC*, 36]. This necessity is clearly a modern appropriation of the Anselmian "*id quo nihil majus cogitari potest*," as Feuerbach relates in those very words [*EC*, 36].

This is the hard core of Anselm's ontological argument. Feuerbach, as is always the case, needs to give an immanent, anthropological meaning to this name for God, which is no simple task given its transcendent nature. He does so through a classic formula: any given activity is most truly that activity only in its highest achievement ("only in the highest proficiency is art truly art"); thus thinking is only thinking in its highest achievement ("only in its highest degree is thought truly thought, reason") [*EC*, 36]. Now, since God is that beyond which nothing greater can be thought, God is the highest degree of thinking (note here that Feuerbach substitutes the superlative for Anselm's original comparative degree[24]) — "only when thy thought is God dost thou truly think, rigorously speaking; for only God is the realised, consummate, exhausted thinking power" [*EC*, 36-37], as I quoted above.

Having claimed this position, Feuerbach moves on to an empirical proof for the divinity of the understanding, which we can read as a weak reflection of Leibniz's cosmological argument[25] as caricatured by Kant.[26] Kant, in a nutshell, claims that the cosmological argument takes the principle of sufficient reason as axiomatic, or transcendental, and then expects that the universe, as an effect, demands a cause that is sufficient, proximate, and efficient. Since an infinite chain of causes would

[24] Hartshorne etc

[25] Monadology

[26] CPR

never result in anything, a first cause must exist at the head of the series. The cosmological argument calls this being God. Hence, for Kant, the cosmological argument postulates a necessary being that provides a jump start for the chain of efficient causality. But this necessary being needs content. Kant then shows how the necessary being claimed by the cosmological argument can in fact only rely on the *ens realissimum,* since the only way to arrive at a necessary being with true content is to posit a being that must be completely determined by every possible reality: that is, of each possible opposed pair of predicates, the *ens realissimum* must have only the positive one. Such a being, though, is beyond experience, and logic cannot demonstrate its necessary existence; it can only demonstrate that in order to predicate anything, we must implicitly recognise the *thought* of a transcendent *ens realissimum* – the thought, but nothing more.

Rather than attempting to debunk these proofs as did Kant, Feuerbach's interest in the first part of the *EC* is to show what is anthropological about them, as is his interest in any (onto)theology, religiously considered. Since divinity is immanent in Feuerbach's version of the cosmological argument, the proof does not result in an illusion but rather claims to strip one away such as to reveal a putative truth of anthropology. Since the understanding can only understand things ultimately as having been caused, it necessarily develops the need for a first cause, which it then projects outward onto the real order. We have already seen this movement above: the understanding only projects itself. But this projection initially has a different significance with the cosmological argument; for in it, the understanding becomes the first cause. How? "It finds the world, without an intelligent cause, given over to senseless, aimless chance; that is, it finds only in itself, in its own nature, the efficient and the final cause of the world" [EC, 37]. It provides the cause of all things, insofar as it alone is driven by the necessity to trace the chain of causality. Since it alone understands causality, and since its grasp of the world is thus synonymous with this causal chain, it needs a necessary being at the root. But a necessary being is an intelligible being, and an intelligible being is nothing more than a being of the understanding. Following the principle of projection, in an imaginative act, human understanding objectifies and hypostatises this necessary, intelligible, and radical cause as a being external to itself,

and external to the world. Feuerbach thus tells us: "the understanding posits its own nature as the causal, first pre-mundane existence — i.e., being in rank the first but in time the last, it makes itself the first in time also" [*EC*, 37], which is to say that the understanding goes beyond its true role (i.e., the "first in rank"), and, in objectifying itself through the imagination, it takes itself as creator (i.e., the "first in time"). It divinises itself, for what does it take as a proof of God? Why, nothing less than that being that works according to its own powers: "the being which works with design towards certain ends, i.e., with understanding, is alone the being that to the understanding has immediate certitude, self-evidence" [*EC*, 37].[27] Thus, "reason [*Vernunft*] can only believe in a God who is accordant with its own essence [*Wesen*] ... reason believes only it itself, in the absolute reality of its own essence [*Wesens*]" [*GW* 5, 81-82; *EC*, 38].

This last step provides the transformation from the cosmological argument (God as a causal agent) to the ontological argument (God as transcendent), since it seems to move us from the formal ground of the understanding's essence as a complete collection of perfections or causes[28] (the *omnitudo realitatis*) to its material ground in the "absolute reality" of its own unity (the *ens*

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[27] Here, for good measure, Feuerbach introduces a physico-theological proof as well; for, that proof concerns design, not simply cause. His interest in that proof is typical of works after the EC, especially in his *Lectures on the Essence of Religion.* Another interesting study, not undertaken in these pages, would be to analyse Feuerbach's view of nature from the standpoint of the physico-theological proof. To wit: nature "is the secret of physiotheology" [LER, 21], and thus we see clearly that Feuerbach's use of nature too touches upon the proofs of God. Just as the ontological argument leads directly to the existence of God, so too does Feuerbach's anthropological reduction or inverted ontological argument lead to humanity, and just as the physico-theological argument leads indirectly to the existence of God, so too does Feuerbach's inverted physico-theological proof lead indirectly to humanity. Nüdling is helpful here: "The *Wesen der Religion* therefore provides a real reduction of theology to anthropology, even if it does not immediately and exclusively identify the essence of God with essence of humanity. One could call the EC's analysis of religion the direct and immediate dissolution of theology into anthropology; and so one could consider the reduction developed in the *Wesen der Religion* the indirect dissolution of theology into anthropology through nature [*Das W. d. R. gibt darum eine wirkliche Zurückführung der Theologie auf die Anthropologie, wenn auch das Wesen Gottes nicht unmittelbar und ausschließlich identifiziert wird mit dem Wesen des Menschen. Man könnte die im W . d. Chr. gegebene Religionsanalyse bezeichnen als die directe, unmittlebare Auflösung der Theologie in Anthropologie; die im W. d. R. entwickelte wäre dann zu bestimmen als die indirekte, durch die Natur vermittelte Auflösung der Theologie in Anthropologie*]." [187]

[28] Etymology hints at a conceptual relationship between perfections and causes. *Perfectum*, the past participle of *perficio* (*per* + *facio*), is composed of *per* + *factum*, i.e. thoroughly made, or completed. That is, its causality is thorough.

realissimum). For, the innumerable causes or perfections that the understanding seeks to discover and order find their unity in the understanding itself, and hence the understanding is the negative ground of this causality. Thus Feuerbach's anthropological appropriation of the cosmological argument for the divinity of the human understanding appears to lead back to the ontological argument, and its reliance on the *ens realissimum* — and with the necessity that Kant first explained.

This immanent Feuerbachian *ens realissimum* answers one of Kant's more weighty objections to the ontological argument. The *ens realissimum* as the transcendent ideal of the *omnitudo realitatis* [*CPR*, A576 / B605] is illusory in the eyes of the critical philosophy because we can never know what this means, nor hold it to actually exist.[29] Kant maintains that we can never know if an *ens realissimum* is in fact synthetically possible because we have no way of comprehending what Leibniz called the compossibility[30] of the positive realities it draws from the *omnitudo realitatis*: we can never know if any of the synthetically real predicates would in fact cancel out any of the others and hence render impossible the most real being. At best, says Kant, we can acknowledge its analytic possibility: i.e., that it is possible to think this being; hence, Kant charges Leibniz with conflating analytic and synthetic possibility [*LPT*, 55 f.]. For Kant, this pure concept of God has meaning, for instance, as the necessary ground of moral theology. However, since Feuerbach strips the *ens realissimum* of its ontotheological illusions and envisions it as providing nothing more than the *Inbegriff* of the immanent determinations of the understanding, Feuerbach supersedes Kant's objection: absolute understanding would indeed contain many contradictory moments, but this is of no concern because these contradictions are mediated over time and space and not in a single, atemporal, pure, and transcendent concept. The understanding is thus not properly God in the sense of a transcendent being, but rather God as a transcendental unity, i.e., as the infinite and ontological divine understanding in which every finite and ontic understanding takes place and finds its limit. Hence,

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[29] By transcendent, I mean noumenal. I try to hold a strict distinction between transcendent (noumenal) and transcendental (pertaining to the conditions of possibility). I do not use transcendental as the adjective for transcendent.

[30] Where does he mention this?

although Feuerbach is explicitly controverting Hegel, we can also think of Kant when we read in the Introduction to the B edition of the *EC*: "time, and not the Hegelian dialectic, is the medium of uniting oppositions, contradictions, in one and the same being [*Wesen*]" [*GW* 5, 61; *EC*, 23],[31] an idea he had first expressed a year earlier in a letter to Christian Kapp: "time is the only rational medium of joining contradictions" [*GW* 18, 156].[32] Like Kant, Feuerbach argues that when the ontological argument is stripped of its illusions, it gives us a true concept. Unlike Kant, however, Feuerbach does not hold the concept to be pure. Temporality permits that aggregation of contradictory predicates – just as I can happy now and mad tomorrow – a privilege denied to a pure concept like the God of ontotheology, among whose qualities is contained immutability. The human species essence, as temporal, is not merely the static Kantian material ground but rather a concrete and living Concept, a debt which Feuerbach's interpretation of the *ens realissimum* clearly owes to Hegel, despite his protests to the contrary.

Since the Concept is the self-expression of absolute human understanding and not the necessarily limited representation of a transcendent realm, and since Cartesian-inspired modern philosophy defines humanity as mind, Feuerbach holds that the Concept only has meaning when it underlies the psychological essence of humanity. For, the Concept that works itself out within time is the understanding that is the same in all humans, the understanding that is the concrete universal to each individual: "this other understanding is only the understanding which exists in each man in general — the understanding conceived apart from the limits of this particular individual" [*EC*, 42]. Hence, the Feuerbachian infinite is immanent *and* transcendental. For, Kant and Feuerbach see the

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[31] Note, however, that Kant tells us in the *CPR*: "it is only in time that it is possible to meet with two contradictorily opposed determinations in one thing, that is, after each other" [A31/B46]. Since the Kantian pure idea is outside of time (and therefore eternal, or incapable of change), it may not contain contradictions, whereas Feuerbach holds the idea as concrete, as the understanding, as mutable, and therefore as something to be worked out temporally. Feuerbach, in a letter to Kapp (Feb. 3, 1842), says apropos: "above all, the philosopher must be skilled in space and time. Theology is external to, and philosophy within, space and time [*Der Philosoph muß sich vor allem auf Raum und Zeit verstehen. Die Theologie ist außer, die Philosophie in Raum und Zeit*]" [Brief 285; *GW* 18, 155].

[32] "*Die Zeit ist das einzige vernünftige Mittel, Widersprüche zu verknüpfen.*"

infinity of God differently: Kant sees the infinite as a transcendent realm beyond the understanding for which the understanding can only be propaedeutic; Feuerbach, on the other hand, claims the infinite for thinking. Nevertheless, Feuerbach incorporates Kant's position that the understanding cannot go beyond experience, precisely because nothing is beyond experience: Feuerbach maintains that humanity is not able to surpass itself — whatever it posits is really a projection of itself. If nothing lies beyond experience, experience is not limited: and what is not limited is the infinite. Therefore experience, not taken as individual but as that of the human species, is the true infinite. Within the realm of ontotheology, the realm whose conceit Feuerbach here adopts, experience is reduced to the understanding. Thus, in the realm of ontotheology, whatever the understanding experiences in its grapsing is simply the expression or projection of the understanding. Since human understanding grasps God, God must be limited to human understanding; whatever protests against this that may be made in the name of negative theology in fact are the true expression of atheism since such protests deny the glory of the intellect: "to deny all the qualities of a being is equivalent to denying the being itself. A being without qualities is a non-objective being, and a non-objective being is a null being" [*GW* 5, 49; *EC*, 14].[33] He finds evidence for this in Kant, whose *LPT* he quotes approvingly: "we cannot conceive God otherwise than by attributing to him all the real qualities which we find in ourselves" [*EC*, 38; *LPT*, 47]. In the rest of the EC, Feuerbach is simply to expand this infinite far beyond the ontotheological reduction of experience to the understanding, and instead sees it in the totality of human experience.

Hence, in ontotheology, the understanding provides the autonomy that the tradition ascribes to the divine. Feuerbach describes this autonomy in terms of unity, where we are to understand unity as meaning unbounded by anything else – the good infinity. Feuerbach's entire anthropological

[33] "*Alle Bestimmungen negieren ist so viel als das Wesen selbst negieren. Ein bestimmungsloses Wesen ist ein ungegenständliches Wesen, ein ungegenständliches ein nichtiges Wesen.*" Hegel complains similarly: "naive knowledge proceeds polemically against cognition and is especially directed against the cognition or conceptual comprehension of God" [*1827 Religion*, 87], and again: "there is to be no progressing to the cognitive knowledge of God, to the divine content as this content would be divinely, or essentially, in God himself. In this sense it is further declared that we can know only our relation to God, not what God himself is" [88-8].

reduction is based on this Hegelian infinity, as I have outlined above. The reader who completes the EC will find that this description of the understanding as the negative unity of determinations gets played out over and over again in the EC, under different guises. And the reader who continues through the corpus will find the same movement: explicit in the early works, implicit in the latter. But the logic always remains the same: the objective is the expression of the subjection; the objective is projective subjectivity, and thus the subject is the negative unity of all objectivity: "the object of any subject is nothing else than the subject's own nature taken objectively" [EC, 12]. But this is not only a truth of ontogeny; it is also a truth of phylogeny, for all individual subjects are simply the objects of an even more encompassing subjectivity: the species: "the discrepancy between the understanding and the essence [*Wesen*], between the power of thinking [Denkkraft] and the power of production in human consciousness, on the one hand, is merely individual and lacks universal meaning; on the other hand, it is only phenomenal" [GW 5, 39; EC, 8][34] The individual is merely an appearance, merely phenomenal, the universal is the true – strange sentiments for a supposed anti-Hegelian. This is a tension that remains in Feuerbach; one which readers as early as Marx noticed.

As I clearly showed at the beginning of this article, the young Feuerbach considered this negative unity to be the true expression of the ontological argument. Essence is the negative unity of determinations; essence is hence found in going out of the subject, the subject finding itself in its other, and then re-appropriating itself. The essence of humanity is thus found outside of humanity as the living *Inbegriff* of human determinations called God, but this alterity is an illusion because this outside is really inside: it is only projected outward. It is an *Inbegriff*, not an "*Ausbegriff"* (were such a word to exist). This is the infinity of consciousness: it never leaves itself, and this is the mark of humanity: only humans are able to realise that the outer is the inner. But this is also the ontological argument, because, for Feuerbach, the ontological argument is precisely this non-ending passing away of the finite. The finite, in continually passing away, becomes its opposite: the infinite. The finite is

34 "*Der Zwiespalt von Verstand und Wesen, von Denkkraft und Produktionskraft im menschlichen Bewußtsein ist einerseits ein nur individueller, ohne allgemeine Bedeutung, andrerseits nur ein scheinbarer*."

thus its own limit, and properly speaking, becomes infinite as the good infinity. And in this way does Feuerbach argue for the existence of a necessary being from a concept alone.

In this paper, I have left many questions unanswered in an effort simply to lay bare Feuerbach's reliance on an ontological argument. First and foremost is how Feuerbach's approach is superior to the atheism of, say, a Mill, or a Hobbes, or a Petronius. In short, this disparate trio famously try, each in their own way, to arrive at the religious concept of an infinite being from one idea alone – fear. But just like their idea, their God too is but an abstract aspect, a mere representation, and does not speak to the richness of any religious concept. Feuerbach improves on them by accounting for a projected God based on the totality of the human essence, hence Feuerbach can systematically explain aspects of God that Mill, Hobbes, and Petronius cannot, such as love. By seeing the existence of a necessary being as emerging from the concrescence of total determination, Feuerbach's approach sums up all of the options of atheistic projection theory and restates them in one unified theory, tied together with an Hegelian ontological argument. But this also leaves him open to at least one more important line of inquiry. If Feuerbach's anthropological reduction is nothing but an ontological argument, even if it is inverted and remains immanent, does his anthropology withstand the many critiques aimed against the ontological argument? That is an excellent question for a another paper – a question that will prove to test the limits of any anthropological reduction.