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TO “LET RELIGION ITSELF SPEAK:” FEUERBACH AND RELIGIOUS
CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN CULTURE¹

In an essay in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Scott Davis describes what he names the “pragmatic turn” in the study of religion over the last forty years. This idea is largely dependent upon a Peircean notion that “logic is a normative science,” meaning that concepts of reality involve a larger community to test and revise assertions.² Contemporary theorists in this camp include such figures as Proudfoot, Stout, Rorty, among others. Although there are many reasons that could be offered for this shift in religious studies, my concern is that it has come at the expense of essentialist or *sui generis* accounts of religious experience that we see in figures like Schleiermacher or Otto. Such accounts present the unique qualities of religious experience in a manner that is sympathetic to the authentic experience of the believer without being subsumed by larger social or cultural applications. This apparent “either-or” between socially located communities of inquiry and first-personal engagement should compel the contemporary theorist to question if it is possible to adhere to guidelines proposed by post-Kantian and pragmatic allowances of religion and society *while also* allowing for accounts of originary religious experience *qua* religious experience.³

¹ In *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Eliot with an introductory essay by Karl Barth and foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), xxxvi, Feuerbach explains that as the “listener and interpreter, [but] not...prompter” of religion, he only desires to “let religion itself speak.”

² G. Scott Davis, “The Pragmatic Turn in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 33, no. 4 (JRE 33.4) (2005) : 659. Quoting Peirce further on the following page (660), he writes that “attempts, be they philosophical or pseudo-scientific, to locate some prelinguistic reality are chimerical; ‘the absolutely incognizable,’ Peirce writes, ‘does not exist.’”

³ While here I will be focusing specifically on the discussion related to the aforementioned “pragmatic turn” and how Feuerbach can contribute to it, an interesting debate relating to the subject of religion as *sui generis* has also been offered by Russell McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, and Kevin Schilbrack. McCutcheon’s assertion that religion as *sui generis* is the unfortunate residue of a ideological politics of nostalgia (*Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) resulting from Eliade’s Chicago School, and that scholars should only explain religion in terms of larger socio-political categories (*Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 23), as well as Fitzgerald’s notion in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) that the term religion is “analytically redundant” (17) and should therefore be abandoned as a distinct category for favor of other categories like humanities, cultural studies, or ethnography (224) are certainly in the back of my mind as positions that I would like to challenge. Schilbrack’s advocacy of a “critical realist” view of religion that allows for a consideration of the social and political manifestations of religion, while still understanding a “social reality that in the crucial aspects is independent of the scholar”

In the spirit of mashup philosophy of religion, here I will assert that Ludwig Feuerbach is in a unique position to respond to both issues. In spite of the fact that we largely discuss Feuerbach today in relationship to post-Hegelian or pre-Freudian accounts of religion, projection, and alienation, his larger project was devoted to what he coined “natural philosophy,” which involved among other things, a sustained critique of the speculative trend in Western thought.⁴ Such an approach has many important points of intersection with issues raised in the pragmatic project named by Davis. However, Feuerbach’s model also demonstrates a careful and nuanced consideration of self-consciousness as mediated by religious feeling and affect that is lacking in these pragmatic thinkers, and hearkens back to the Schleiermacher-Otto model. Feuerbach’s interpretation of the natural-existential dimensions of religious experience considers how non-linguistic feelings of affectivity serve as conduit to the awareness of one’s human identity and participation in the community, adding an unarticulated viewpoint to the current discussion. Feuerbach’s model offers an opportunity to take phenomenological and experiential accounts of religion seriously while also avoiding the epistemological problems that some of these essentialist models face. Ultimately by bringing Feuerbach into conversation with contemporary theorist in the academy study of religion will also give us opportunity to reconsider broader issues regarding the trajectory of the types of conversations we are currently having about “religion” in general.

For the “classical” theorists like Schleiermacher and Otto, religion must be considered as its own modality of thought. The experience of the believer described in the first person is given primacy over other frames of reference. In this perspective, fundamental aspects of religious experience are both immediate and non-linguistic. Rather than being characterized in relation to such categories as *ethics* or *society*, these experiences are better described as a kind of originary sensibility that subsequently sets the horizon for which one may interpret the significance of social or linguistic structures.

In *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher argues that religion is “sovereign,” and should be understood as its own experience. He asserts that the very essence of religion is “intuition and feeling,” or the taste of the Infinite, but is not “thinking nor acting;” neither metaphysics nor morals.⁵ In this regard, the religious sensibility is one that grips the human subject and places him in an existential awareness about matters greater than oneself (which would certainly include an awareness of ethical responsibility), but it would be a grave mistake to say that religion is, in its essence, *about* matters of the world.

offers a very interesting critique of these positions, in Schilbrack, “Religions: Are there Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 78, No. 4 (2010) : 1113.

⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Eliot with an introductory essay by Karl Barth and foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), xxxiv. This passage is related to his criticism of Christianity more specifically, but I will argue that it also reflects his larger criticism of the speculative in Western theology and metaphysics. On both epistemological and humanistic grounds, Feuerbach is critical of a notion of the “incognizable” absolute that is similar to the position described above by Davis via Peirce.

⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

Otto echoes Schleiermacher’s description of religion’s irreducibility to human beings’ structures of meaning. In his description of the *mysterium tremendum*, he articulates religious sensibility as a mystery, an element of awe, or a “shuddering” at something greater than oneself.⁶ Otto emphasizes that this feeling is what constitutes the awareness of one’s “creaturehood”⁷ through an awareness of the “wholly other.”⁸ The intuitions of the *mysterium tremendum* arise from “first-hand personal divination,” establishing the autonomy of religion.⁹ Simply put, these are *a priori* experiences, not dependent on social-moral structures for their signification.

The notion that anything of value can be obtained through an account of religion that is based only on first-hand experience is not supported in discussions of comparative religious ethics after the pragmatic turn. For example, Davis identifies as one of the features of this turn the assertion that “first person reports do not have a privileged status” in the interpretation of religious language.¹⁰ This is so for a number of different reasons, including concerns of epistemic accuracy, ethical commitments, and justification for behavior. With reference to Stout in particular, this turn is heavily reliant on an interpretation of Robert Brandom’s theory of making explicit the implicit rules of religious commitment that are decipherable through practice and linguistic justification.¹¹ The permissibility of religious identity is based on the ability to give our reasons for why we wish to act. From a practical perspective, this helps to foster dialogue among people with different belief systems. A conversation between a believer and a non-believer may not gain a lot of traction if the former’s premises are based only in scripture or revealed sources of truth. However, religious commitments are also embedded in a larger network of social rules and practices, a conversation in which all can easily participate. It is possible for people to discuss social practices that at the same time implicitly carry with them religious beliefs and commitments.¹²

Within this group, the range of acceptance for explicit religious commitment is somewhat broad. Proudfoot will dismiss a phrase like “intuition of the infinite” as a “placeholder,” or when “a person identifies an experience as religious when he comes to believe that the best explanation of what has happened to him is a

⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 13.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰ Davis, 663.

¹¹In “Comments on Six Responses to *Democracy and Tradition*” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.4, Stout responds to the comments to his *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). In this work, Stout also discusses the process of deontic scorekeeping discussed in Robert Brandom’s *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹²Besides the more political applications of Stout’s work, as I will discuss in a moment, Davis also considers how this pragmatic element affected religious studies in terms of the anthropological approaches demonstrated by Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz. Davis explains that “one of the things the anthropologist does, is to make explicit the ways in which a particular community talks at a particular time and place, what inferences are sanctioned, and the interesting ways in which different communities balance the rules and inferences they make,” p. 661.

religious one.”¹³ This isn’t quite saying that a *sui generis* religious experience is illusory, but it is very close to doing so: the use of such a concept is acceptable only in the absence of a more logical explanation. Proudfoot does allow for the legitimacy of religious experience insofar as they embed rules implicit in the language of communities, however. For example, he explains nirvana “by reference to the rules that govern the behavior required to achieve it.”¹⁴ While one might appreciate the value of this perspective as a tool for anthropological analysis, or helping someone outside the tradition understand the practical import of the term, one also has to ask what happens to the actual meaning of the concept (and its referent) from the believer’s perspective. Does it make sense to explain a term that believers equate with absolute liberation and weightlessness in the context of “rules” and “achieve[ment],” as Proudfoot does here? In the effort to understand these valuable pragmatic applications, one could also argue that we have at times rendered these terms unintelligible from how the adherents actually understand them.

Yet from the perspective of promoting religious dialogue and tolerance, there is indeed a significant benefit to this move in religious studies. While it does run the risk of altering the understanding and meaning of certain religious concepts, it still allows for the consideration of religious tradition in the public sphere, which has historically been problematic from a variety of academic, social, and political perspectives.¹⁵ From a pragmatic-linguistic perspective (consider Wittgenstein’s famous private-language argument), the idea of a claim that is both immediate and intentional is problematic because it makes an assertion that refers to a private referent of truth, and therefore has no grounds to question if it is to be taken as true by the larger community. This is especially valid in the wake of concerns over seemingly “religiously-motivated” global terrorism and violence. While the concern that one could justify abhorrent behavior in the name of God is itself quite reasonable, this has also produced a significant gray area about the kind of conversations about religion that one is allowed to have both in the academy and also in society in general. For some, this might mean that the more diplomatic, and inclusive, conversations are only those in which religion is left out. Here the pragmatic turn is quite helpful: while a non-believer is allowed to be dubious of the believer’s claims that use non-linguistic, non-empirical sources of justification, this model gives us another way to consider these claims and continue the conversation.

Of course, it should also be noted that this more “tolerant” or “liberal” account is presented as an alternative to the “classical” model, which runs the risk of allowing these obscure and untestable religious claims into reasoned discourse. Jeffrey Stout suggests that Schleiermacher has smuggled in “extensive cognitive

¹³Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 108.

¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty is certainly a prime representative of this academic view, as I will consider in a moment. Another much more critical perspective from popular culture is that of the New Atheists, who argue that religion is a fundamentally irrational and dangerous tradition that needs to be abandoned altogether for favor of science. See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hatchette, 2007) and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

commitments past his own Kantian censor” and is concerned about theology’s relevancy to public society when isolated from the realm of public reasoning.¹⁶ He argues that religious commitments can be viewed as valid only if they are subject to justification in the public sphere, because this gives us a way to condemn the violent actions of a person using religious belief to justify them while also allowing the believer to describe his religious experience in a way that others can appreciate. Stout sees this modified proposal as an alternative to Richard Rorty, who has famously described religion as a “conversation-stopper” and viewed the “secularization of public life as the Enlightenment’s central achievement.”¹⁷ Rorty explains religion as part of a “search for private perfection,” comparable to the influences of family life or poetry, but suggests that it must be left out of public society as part of the “Jeffersonian compromise” that is necessary for modern democratic communities.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Rorty argues that “religion is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized.”¹⁹ While he grants that believers and non-believers can come to common ground in their conversations, he argues that this is only achieved through “secular premises” such as discussions of maximizing human happiness.²⁰ Even in later essays, when his “atheism” transforms into a more modest “anti-clericalism,” he still believes that the dangers religion poses to democracy are evident.²¹

Yet, one has to ask what happens on such a model to the notion of possibly genuine religious experience and the subsequent ability of the believer to express herself freely in relation to it. Importantly, for some such religious experience is taken as constitutive of their self-identity and the lens through which virtuous consideration of the community is possible. Even operating generally within this pragmatic tradition, Nicholas Wolterstorff has criticized Stout for not adequately articulating how religious (for Wolterstorff, Christian) commitment can positively fill out the substance of a liberal democratic society. Certainly the pragmatic commitment places a strong emphasis on the role of the *larger community of which one is a part* for justification of truth-claims. Part of the issue here is the inherent difficulty in filling out the substance of what a democracy “is,” and what values it is allowed to hold.²² For Wolterstorff, such pragmatic restrictions threaten to undermine the significance of not only his own religious

¹⁶ Stout, *Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 133.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 168.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁹ Rorty, “Anti-clericalism and atheism,” *Religion after Metaphysics*, edited by Mark A. Wrathall, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39.

²⁰ Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” 172.

²¹ In Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* vol. 33, no 4 (2003) : 146, he uses as examples of anti-clericalism Catholic bishops and Mormon General Authorities having influence in laws that discriminate against homosexuals in housing, employment, and marriage. See also Rorty, “Anti-clericalism and atheism”, p. 40, where he specifies that “anti-clericalism” is the rejection of ecclesiastical institutions “rallying the faithful” to support such specific political proposals.

²² Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Jeffrey Stout on Democracy and its Contemporary Christian Critics,” JRE 33.4, 639). On similar grounds, Stout has also criticized Rorty’s assertion that religion is “essentially” a “conversation-stopper” because religion is “not ‘essentially’ anything,” paraphrased by Rorty in “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 : 148 (which is also his response to Wolterstorff).

identity as that which undergirds his democratic commitments, but also the role that religion has played in a number of democratic achievements, including MLK’s “I Have a Dream Speech” and the civil rights movement, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, and revolutions in South Africa, among others.²³ For this reason, Wolterstorff asserts that liberal democracy is not inherently secularist,²⁴ and further that there is no reason to assume that a secular society is necessarily just or democratic, citing as examples the “great murderous secularisms” of Nazism and Communism.²⁵ For Wolterstorff, secular society and appeals to public reason do not protect against the “violence” that is often attributed to religion by its critics.

There are decided advancements in the academic study of religion and political philosophy due to the pragmatic turn in both disciplines, including an emphasis on epistemic accuracy, public justification, and the individual’s possible interaction with the larger community. All of these characteristics are crucial to a sustainable model of responsibility in relation to the formation of vibrant democracies. However, the academic study of religion occurring in departments of religious studies and also in departments of philosophy has suffered for its growing intolerance of the classical model. As a result, a very truncated view of how we understand religion often seems to be the only available option in play in the academic debates. I want to suggest that there is a way in which scholars can account for unique religious experience that is characteristic of the classical model, while also taking seriously the lessons of the pragmatic turn.

In order to develop such an account, we shall turn to Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach’s identification as a natural philosopher and criticism of speculative thought coincides with the epistemic concerns raised by the pragmatists, and his discussion of religious sensibility and affect relates to key components of both camps. Feuerbach’s ability to advance the conversation in the contemporary scholarship lies in the fact that his discussion of unique religious experience is also conditioned by his naturalism.²⁶ Feuerbach’s interpretation of the natural-existential dimensions of religious experience considers how pre-linguistic

²³ Wolterstorff, “Jeffrey Stout on Democracy and its Contemporary Christian Critics,” 637, and Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1: 133.

²⁴ Wolterstorff, “Jeffrey Stout on Democracy and its Contemporary Christian Critics,” 637.

²⁵ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” 133.

²⁶ Admittedly “naturalism” is a term that can have a lot of different applications in religion and philosophy. As a proponent of “philosophical naturalism,” Brian Leiter’s *Why Tolerate Religion?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) argues that we should allow religion not for its own sake but because of its relation to liberty and claims of conscience. A certain understanding of “naturalism” in its prioritization of the natural sciences is also present in movements like New Atheism, as mentioned previously. Yet in Feuerbach’s case I am saying something much different: specifically this concept is the cornerstone of his criticism of the speculative tendencies in Western metaphysics and theology, but interestingly it also leaves open a point for awareness of a certain type of religious consciousness. This paradigm has its basis in the “naturalist-existentialist” strand of his work as observed by Harvey and others, discussed momentarily. In spite of the fact that he is most well-known as a humanist and critic of religion, Feuerbach’s training and writings demonstrate a very sophisticated, yet troubled, understanding of religion and theology. In his own words, “[my writings] have only one aim, one will, one thought, one theme. This theme is religion and theology, and whatever is connected with them,” found in Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 35.

feelings of affectivity (as demonstrated by feeling [*Gefühl*] and sensuousness or sense-perceptibility [*Sinnlichkeit*]) serve as conduit to the awareness of one’s human responsibility and participation in the community, adding an unarticulated viewpoint to the current discussion.²⁷

Recent scholars have noted this “naturalist-existentialist” trend and the significance of *Sinnlichkeit* in Feuerbach’s thought, including Van Harvey, Marx Wartofsky, and Zawar Hanfi.²⁸ While Harvey and Wartofsky see naturalism as a component of Feuerbach’s later work and eventual shift away from Hegel, I argue that this is a significant thread throughout his body of work. Going back to his dissertation (1828) and continuing throughout his major works, Feuerbach argued that Western rationalism had rendered the specific activity of human thinking into an abstraction. The drive to explain philosophy as being part of a universal rationality had removed human thought from the realm of things and/or matter [*die Sache oder Substanz*] and suggested that it belonged instead to a disembodied Intellect (in the case of Kant) or infinite consciousness (in the case of Hegel),²⁹ thus prohibiting a true account of lived human experience because of the emphasis on “the ideated being, *not* the raw being which meets us in sensation.”³⁰

Feuerbach describes the natural world as “unstable” and “internally antagonistic” [*innerliches widerstreben*], which underscores the particularity of the subject’s experience in the world³¹ and the vulnerability of existing in it. The confrontation with nature is a theme that Feuerbach will return to time and again. Feuerbach’s views on ethics, epistemology, and human consciousness are all tied to the multivalent qualities he attributes to realm of nature, which serves as a lens to illustrate the picture of the human species that is supplied in the awareness of its limitations.³² For Feuerbach, everything that the human being aspires to know, or be, or act upon, should have a natural referent: in this sense, nature serves as both epistemic limit and also personal inspiration. These observations are part of Feuerbach’s larger thesis: the universalist tendencies of

²⁷ Feuerbach’s naturalism is the foundation of his criticisms of Hegel, Hegelian idealism, and theistic religions. While this theme remained consistent throughout his work, his vocabulary is not always the same. I contend that Feuerbach’s use of the terms *Sinnlichkeit* (sensuousness or sense-perceptibility), *Gefühl* and *Empfindung* (feeling), *Natur* (nature), and *Wesen* (nature, being, or essence) connote the meaning of his paradigm he sought to establish. James A. Massey has discussed how nature [*Wesen*] was for Feuerbach both the indicator of finitude and condition of self-consciousness in “Feuerbach and Religious Individualism,” *Journal of Religion* Vol. 56, No. 4 (October 1976): 373.

²⁸ See Van Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Marx Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Zawar Hanfi’s foreward in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

²⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Auszug aus der lateinischen Dissertation de Ratione, Erlangen 1828,” [Dissertation] in *Feuerbach in seinem Briefwechsel und Nachlass: Sowie in seiner philosophischen Charakterentwicklung*, K. Grün, ed., (Leipzig and Heidelberg: C.F. Winter, 1874), 209.

³⁰ Charles A. Wilson, *Feuerbach and the Search for Otherness*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1989), 5.

³¹ Feuerbach, Dissertation, 210.

³² For example, consider Feuerbach’s discussion of the “moon, the sun, the stars” in comparison to the personal feeling of love in chapter one of *The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 4-5.

Western rationality from Plato to Hegel—and certainly Christianity—inevitably created a dualist system in which the realm of thinking was viewed as separate and privileged from the realm of humanity. In an 1838 essay, Feuerbach equates intellectual perception found through this universalist-rationalist model with “a violent act” insofar as it requires a break with real human perception.³³ The “violence” he describes is here only metaphorical as it pertains to philosophical paradigms, but this idea is certainly also present in *The Essence of Christianity* in his discussion of religious fanaticism and the dichotomy between faith and love. Feuerbach suggests there that the desire to harm another human being in the name of God is the product of this same ontological hierarchy or need to please a supra-natural God.³⁴

For Feuerbach, what is *real* is what is *perceived* by human consciousness: “the reality of sensuous and particular being is the truth that carries the seal of our blood...”³⁵ Feuerbach suggests here that natural, non-speculative methods of investigation carry an implicit moral compass. When our assertions are based in experience and about real people perceiving and experiencing real things, he contends that they inherently bring a sense of authenticity and responsibility that is not present in assertions that require justification by a Being outside of human existence. That said, this awareness of the human condition that is both lacking in speculative thought, but also the ground of possibility for ethical concern, is also conditioned by the subject’s sensuously-perceived affect. *Sinnlichkeit* indicates the structure of otherness that is built into human nature. We consider our own possibilities as personal subjects, as well as our relationship to the larger community and human species, insofar as we are othered—by the insurmountability of existence and the natural world, as well as by the unassailability of our own traits when we are inherently affected by them. The appreciation of such otherness is precisely what happens in consciousness of religious experience.

In the early pages of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach begins with a description of sensuously-perceived affectivity that illustrates to the self what he deems the “power” of the predicates.³⁶ There is a sense in which we are rendered passive by our own feelings. He writes, “Is it man that possesses love, or is it not much rather love that possesses man?...” We learn of traits like love when they *affect*, or perhaps even *afflict*, us. Feuerbach describes the unique nature of human

³³ Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy (1838),” in *The Fiery Brook*, 76. He writes that, “This means that I enter the *Logic* as well as intellectual perception only through a violent act, through a transcendent act, or through an immediate break with real perception. The Hegelian philosophy is therefore open to the same accusation as the whole of modern philosophy from Descartes and Spinoza onward—the accusation of an unmediated break with sensuous perception and of philosophy’s *immediate* taking itself for granted.”

³⁴ This issue is of primary concern in *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter twenty-six, “The Contradiction of Faith and Love.” Feuerbach explains that the false essence of religion (theology) that locates our true sense of goodness in the supernatural God comprises the dangerous nature of faith, or the prioritization of the other-worldly over the worldly. This is in contrast to love, which necessarily oriented toward other human beings in the natural/social world.

³⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 77.

³⁶ See Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 3, where he describes the “power” of such human traits as “reason, will, affection” as “absolute perfections of being.”

feeling as an “inward power” that is at the same time “independent and above” oneself.³⁷ The truly profound aspect of these sensuously perceived characteristics of human nature, according to Feuerbach, is that they exist independently from our intentionality. Our own feelings and senses have the ability at times to render us into objects.³⁸ This relates to his famous projection theory of God, in which he observes that the traits used to describe God are actually the idealized version of human traits (wise, all-knowing, just) projected onto a supreme being. In such a process, we consider the depths of human nature insofar as we consider God.³⁹ While a specific person may demonstrate wisdom about particular matters, in particular circumstances, God is Wisdom incarnate. We see the specificity and limitations of these traits when depicted in human behavior, but in God we see the full potential of meaning of these traits. There is a sense in which we ponder the possibility of human transformation best by seeing our own traits displayed outside of ourselves, in their fullest potential, through the image of God. This is part of Feuerbach’s deeply ambivalent view towards religion, making the distinction between negative aspects of theology (what he equates to anti-naturalism and a denigration of the self) and the more positive side of religion (in which human beings consider the depths of our nature and potential).⁴⁰ His later works after *The Essence of Christianity* and *The Essence of Faith According to Luther* consider affectivity and *Sinnlichkeit* more generally, outside of the Christian tradition and as part of the subject’s confrontation with nature.⁴¹

In light of this general presentation of some of the key aspects of his thought, we can see that Feuerbach’s observations serve as critique for both the pragmatic

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³⁸ Ibid., 4. Feuerbach explains, “But the object to which a subject necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject’s own, but objective, nature.” With reference to intentionality and phenomenological observations regarding religion, Dilthey explained an interesting relationship between the individual subject and its own faculty of consciousness: while radically one’s own, one’s consciousness nonetheless possesses its own autonomy beyond the subject’s intentionality: “the expressions of human consciousness always point beyond themselves to something else,” in “Editors’ Introduction,” Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser, Jr., *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 6.

³⁹Feuerbach’s description of nature and the “power” of the predicates suggest that the self is actually much more passive in this process of self-understanding, which is precisely the need for the projection in the first place. The inherent value of the human predicates *beyond* the self’s present understanding implies that they have their own identity beyond the human ego.

⁴⁰For one, the subheadings of Part I (“The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion”) and Part II (“The False or Theological Essence of Religion”) in *The Essence of Christianity* indicate this. Feuerbach suggests that the false or theological aspect of religion values faith (as only passivity or latency, a *waiting* in the impotent adoration of the supranatural God) over love (an actualized social ethic of responsibility, characterized by social responsibility and action). He writes on p. 247, “the separation of God from man [in faith] is therefore the separation of man from man, the unloosening of the social bond. By faith religion places itself in contradiction with morality...”

⁴¹ *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, translated and with introduction by Melvin Cherno (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, tr. Ralph Manheim, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) and *The Essence of Religion*, tr. Alexander Loos, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004).

and classical theorists.⁴² In his own response to Schleiermacher’s discussion of the “Whence,” Feuerbach wrote that “my feeling of dependency has eyes and ears.”⁴³ *Sinnlichkeit* offers a reasonable criticism of Schleiermacher’s account because it considers the individual’s experience of dependence with greater specificity and realism. And in a comment that could also be leveled to the pragmatists, Feuerbach describes the senses as “an enduring foundation” of philosophy that is more incisive than abstract reason because “man’s first belief is in the truth of the senses.”⁴⁴ In a philosophical sense, *Sinnlichkeit* is valid as a consideration of epistemological horizon; from a humanist perspective, in terms of considering the ground for ethical responsibility; and also as a function of religious consciousness, both in terms of a general feeling of dependency or with reference to a specific tradition like Christianity. The existential components of religious experience—passivity, perceptions of affect and limitation, contemplation of one’s nature and potential in relationship to human nature at large—are not only positive but fundamental aspects of authentic selfhood and ethical responsibility.⁴⁵

In its effort to achieve tolerance and democratic ideals for society, the pragmatic turn all but requires the suppression of this originary religious moment. Indeed, a concept of religious identity is considered on the level of shared social commitments, but there is still a strong dissociation of the *sui generis* religious accounts from most of the discussions taking place in this camp. As mentioned above, Wolterstorff has pointed out how Rorty, Stout and others have not adequately demonstrated how religious commitment is not a possible corollary to democracy. In my discussion of Feuerbach I am absolutely not advocating a particular religious position or asserting that religious affiliation is necessary for

⁴² Twiss and Conser suggest in *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion* that one of the problems of “essential” phenomenology of religion (i.e., Otto and Schleiermacher) is the fact that it “subscribes to a theory of experience or consciousness that implicitly values mental as contrasted with corporeal phenomena,” p. 22. The concern here is that a stress on mental phenomena (Otto’s *noumena*) privileges the subject’s inner experiences over physical or social reality. The authors note the irony in this trend in essential phenomenology considering the fact that one of Husserl’s objectives in his work was to overcome the mind-body dualism of Western philosophical thought. They suggest that another development within the tradition, “existential” phenomenology, sidesteps some of these problems in the other track. In particular, existentialist phenomenology (*a la* Feuerbach) highlights the intersubjectivity, linguisticity, and historicity as important modalities of experience, (p. 50).

⁴³ Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁵ Todd Gooch explains the “breakthrough to materialism” that is credited to Marx and his political philosophy is in fact inaugurated by Feuerbach and his critique of the ideology of the aristocratic class in “Some Political Implications of Feuerbach’s Theory of Religion,” *Politics, Religion, and Art: Hegelian Debates*, ed. Douglas Moggach, *Topics in Historical Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 273. Broadly speaking, Feuerbach’s effort to restore the self’s alienation as a result of supranatural influences (namely theology or speculative philosophy) is a result of the realized principle of *Sinnlichkeit*, which as discussed above, interestingly has a component in religious consciousness. Hanfi explains in *The Fiery Brook*, p. 35, “The practical-emancipatory value of this supersession of man’s self-alienation would be his elevation from a morally and socio-politically degraded, impoverished, unfree being into a free and dignified being. The principle in terms of which Feuerbach seeks to restore the independence of the real is none other than sensuousness [*Sinnlichkeit*].”

ethical and social deliberations, particularly given his own criticism for traditional theological traditions. However, Feuerbach offers a way to consider the type of *sui generis* phenomena of the classical theorists while still criticizing the speculative claims that are also condemned by the pragmatic turn. It is possible to discuss the profound, elusive aspects of religious experience without violating the so-called “Kantian censor” insofar as these experiences are described in the context of his naturalist-existentialist horizon, and also with special concern for violent or intolerant misappropriations.⁴⁶

Unlike the classical models, Feuerbach’s model locates such experiences within one’s lived social reality. Moreover, the justification for such claims is not found with reference to the transcendent or speculative, but empirically; as within the interpretive frame of material, embodied existence, and as such help to ensure the most nuanced and robust accounts possible.⁴⁷ It is part of our experience as humans *and* beings in nature to acknowledge how we are conditioned by experiences of affect, of otherness. This is the ground for not only self-awareness, but also the awareness of the needs of society and ethical responsibility. And in spite of Feuerbach’s many criticisms of traditional religion, he understood that religious consciousness also provided a possibility for this type of awareness, if properly understood.

Discussions like those highlighted earlier in the consideration of the pragmatic turn have their importance, but they also force us down a very narrow road in terms of how we understand religion from both philosophical and cultural perspectives. Inevitably, they place us in an apparent “either-or” in which religious claims that privilege interior experiences are either epistemologically obscure, if not even reckless—or, they allow for certain type of religious claims that relate to practical or performative effects, without reference to any notion of the essence of religion. Ultimately, this leads us to ask questions regarding what religion really is in contemporary society: can one refer to religious consciousness in public society without resorting to Rorty’s “anti-clericalism” that promotes an intolerant political agenda, or smuggling in unjustifiable philosophical claims, as Stout feared? Are these the only considerations of religion that are left in contemporary democratic societies? Is modern democracy inherently secular? If not, what would it look like to consider religion in contemporary society? Wolterstorff has countered that there is no reason to see religious commitments as incompatible with modern democratic society, and that we do have a history of how religion has aided such democratic achievements as the civil rights movement in the United States and revolutions around the world.

⁴⁶ “I unconditionally repudiate *absolute*, immaterial, self-sufficing speculation...for my thought I require the senses, especially sight; I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only through the activity of the senses,” Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xxxiv. As mentioned previously, Feuerbach believed his emphasis on lived experience as illustrated through the senses has an automatic link to social and moral responsibility.

⁴⁷ “I cannot know whether God is something else in himself or for himself than he is for me; what he is to me is to me all that he is. For me, there lies in these predicates under which he exists for me, what he is in himself, his very nature;” Ibid., 16.

Feuerbach’s place in this conversation adds an additional and much needed element: the condition for the possibility of our social awareness and ethical concern exists insofar as we are othered—by nature, by our own emotions, perhaps even by our image of God. While Feuerbach had great criticism for theistic religion, he also saw within religious consciousness generally speaking the condition for awareness of self and society—and the self who participates *in* society. He shared many of the concerns of those in the pragmatic turn that certain religious claims could be used to justify sloppy philosophy or even violent actions, but nonetheless his unique model still allowed for a notion of religious awareness built within the structure of our natural-existential identity. Unlike other accounts of religion, Feuerbach’s sense of religious consciousness does not rely on transcendent or supra-natural claims but on one’s sensually and materially-indicated reality.

Revisiting Feuerbach today, and “mashing” him up with debates in religious studies, philosophy of religion, and political theory, allows us to have a broader view of the spaces in which it is possible to consider religion. Too often we are quick to subsume discussions of religion into larger umbrellas—concerns over religious extremism, or as data for some larger form of analysis: sociological, anthropological, neurological, psychological, and the like. This loses the possibility of considering how religious consciousness lends itself to reflection about modes of being, and more specifically, ways of being in the world. Feuerbach’s discussions of religious affect and dependence are certainly compatible with *sui generis* or insider accounts, but they are this way without claiming religious affiliation and so do not require the philosophical or epistemic commitments that are untenable for many in a post-Enlightenment epistemological context. The location of religious consciousness within one’s natural-existential experience, as opposed to the supra-natural or transcendent, gives us an opportunity to avoid the “either-or’s” mentioned previously – either secularism or clericalism, either classical or pragmatic. Feuerbach, thus, offers a way to contextualize existential feelings of dependence and factors that influence the formation of self with larger components of society—culture, politics, ethics—with having to claim more robust commitments that are potentially more problematic.

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