2007

An Analysis of Ludwig Feuerbach‟s Criticisms of Judeo-Christian Views of Nature in The Essence of Christianity

David Johnston

An Analysis of Ludwig Feuerbach's Criticisms of Judeo-Christian Views of Nature in *The Essence of Christianity*

by David Johnston

I. Introduction to Feuerbach's Thesis in *The Essence of Christianity*

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Ludwig Feuerbach puts forth the idea that God is an involuntary idealized projection of human nature. Since all statements about God are really just statements about human nature, Feuerbach states that "the true sense of Theology is Anthropology, that there is no distinction between *predicates* of the divine and human nature, and, consequently, no distinction between the divine and human *subject.*"[1] In other words, the believer, although he does not realize it, is really contemplating and worshipping an objectified idealization of his own nature which he calls God. Thus, as Feuerbach points out, "every advance in religion is therefore a deeper self-knowledge."[2] In the first half of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach interprets the major doctrines and dogmas of Christianity through this model and, in the second half, shows how contradictions arise whenever various predicates about human nature are combined into one absolute being, God. He sees his work as therapeutic since he believes that man, in order to come to better self-knowledge, must do away with God in order to reclaim God's predicates as descriptions of his own human nature.

Feuerbach's description of this process of subconscious objectification of human nature is largely indebted to Hegelian philosophy. In Hegel's model, the emphasis is on Spirit objectifying itself into finite creation. However, Spirit initially considers creation to be external and wholly other from itself and thus it becomes alienated from itself. Spirit must then reconcile itself to itself in the form of creation in order to achieve self-awareness. Hegel interprets history as Spirit coming to better self-understanding through mankind's better understanding of itself and its relation to Spirit. Feuerbach inverts this model; the finite individual objectifies his own human nature into an individual being,

God, and considers Him absolute and infinite. Like Spirit, the individual considers God and His attributes to be wholly other to himself and thus the individual alienates himself from his true nature. He must then reconcile himself to this objectification in order to come to self-realization. It is as if a man made a mirror and when he looked into it, did not realize he was looking at himself. He will not be able to utilize the mirror to its full capacity until he recognizes that he is looking at himself. Likewise, man must reclaim those human attributes he posited in God, such as perfect love and thought, as his own to come to self-understanding. The history of religious advancement in Feuerbach's system is understood as mankind coming to better and better understanding of itself as a species. Hegel and Feuerbach both hold Christianity to be the pinnacle expression of wisdom in each of their respective models. Jesus is the reconciliation of the Infinite to the finite, in Hegel; in Feuerbach, he is the reconciliation of the individual man with his objectified nature.

Feuerbach never systematically explains how this self-differentiation and objectification occurs, so I am largely indebted to Van Harvey's treatment of the process in *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. As in Hegelian thought, an individual person cannot immediately conceive of his individuality and become self-conscious in and of himself. "A man existing absolutely alone would lose himself... in the ocean of Nature; he would neither comprehend himself as man nor Nature as Nature."[3] What must occur is the I-Thou encounter. One person, the "I," physically encounters another person, the "Thou," in order to become aware of himself as an individual. According to Feuerbach, the realization of three other relationships occurs due to this encounter as well. First, one also has a sense that there is some commonality between himself and the

encountered other. Feuerbach calls this awareness of the "species nature." Second, the encounter with another person also conveys a sense of Nature and one's distinction from it. Third, one realizes one's connection to the world, not just physically, but also "in the sense that the world is not empty and meaningless because other human beings help it to become clear to the I."[4] Without the existence of other people, Feuerbach says: "the world would be for me not only dead and empty, but meaningless."[5] The bonds man forms with friends and family make life worth living and the belief that the human species as a whole will continue to live on eternally, a kind of natural immortality, alleviates the despair of personal mortality. The I does not live on, but mankind does.

The idea of species nature is that every species has a distinct power which determines how that species relates to the world. For example, the sightless Ozark cavefish utilizes sensory organs located in its head and tailfin to detect movements and chemical changes in the water. Its relationship to reality and thus its species nature is different than an eagle, which relies on its keen eyesight. Since the species' entire relationship to reality is determined by this power, the species, were they conscious, would hold this power to be absolute and perfect.

Feuerbach identifies reason, will, and love (alternately called affection or feeling) as the three essential characteristics of the human species nature. They are not characteristics that a man has as an individual separate from them, but rather "he is nothing without them, he is what he is only by them; they are the constituent elements of his nature, which he neither has nor makes."[6] Man holds these characteristics to be perfect since they are his highest powers. The individual, latently conscious of these human perfections, is simultaneously elated by them and painfully aware of how he falls

short of them. The individual is imperfect, finite, and mortal, and only the species in its totality is perfect, infinite, and immortal. The individual's shortcomings, such as in physical strength or intellectual prowess, are rendered inconsequential only whenever one considers humanity as a whole. Where one man may be too weak to lift a certain weight, another man can. In the human species nature, one admires all that mankind is capable of accomplishing or being.

II. Feeling, Imagination, and Van Harvey's Naturalist-Existentialist Paradigm

Religion arises out of the individual's juxtaposition with his species. The imagination, which is one's image creating capacity, in service of one's feeling (which yearns for the pain of imperfection to go away) takes these perfections and posits them as properties of an individual, perfect, divine being called God. "God is the notion of the species transformed by the imagination into a perfect exemplar of the species, a conscious being with perfect knowledge will, and, above all, feeling."[7] This projection becomes the object of worship and contemplation because it captivates the individual's emotions in a way that the purely abstract notion of the human species does not.

Feuerbach's incorporation of the imagination and feeling in his model differentiates it from a simplistic inversion of Hegel's model. Although Feuerbach does not address feeling or imagination in his initial chapter, Harvey identifies them as important elements in a subordinate, secondary strand of argumentation that he terms the "naturalist-existentialist paradigm," which will be addressed later. Feuerbach defines feeling as "the oblique case of the *ego*, the *ego* in the accusative."[8] In other words, it is the human capacity to posit oneself or another human being as a sympathetic object. It is one's feeling that enables one to witness another human in a bad situation, such as suffering from a natural disaster, and put oneself in the other's place. Feeling is not bound by reason and assumes that one's deepest desires are true. It longs for the unity of one's wishes and reality.

Religious projection is a result of what Feuerbach alternately calls the "omnipotence of feeling" or "unlimited subjectivity," which is feeling unchecked by reason. It is stronger than reason and rushes to believe there is a personal, loving deity

concerned about man. Christians declare the primacy of feeling in the expression from 1st John: "God is love."[9] Feuerbach further explicates this expression: "God is the Love that satisfied our wishes, our emotional wants; he is himself the realised wish of the heart, the wish exalted to the certainty of its fulfilment, of its reality, of the understanding, no difficulty of experience or of the external world, maintains its ground."[10] Feeling is also passive, since a man would rather enjoy the idea that he has been saved by God than suffer the anxiety and pain of trying to save himself.

The original organ of religion in Feuerbach's system is not feeling, but the imagination working in the service of feeling. The imagination has the power to create images that appeal to the emotions. The imagination can take abstractions and put them into images, so that they can be better dealt with, which feeling is unable to do. In this process, the imagination also filters out anything that would be limiting or painful to the feelings and makes the unlimited and satisfying subjective desires of the feelings objective to man.

Feuerbach's analysis in the chapter "The Mystery of the Christian Christ" illustrates the roles of the feelings and imagination. Although Feuerbach does not explain why, he states that "morality is the condition, the means for happiness."[11] Man feels painfully aware of how he falls short of being moral, which in this case is adhering to God's law as found in the Old Testament. Man is incapable of being moral by his own strength, according to Christian belief. Man wants to appease God but finds himself incapable of doing so. The law is an impersonal abstraction of morality that stands above man and offers no aid in how to fulfill itself. Jesus Christ, as a perfect exemplar of fulfilling the law and as man's redeemer from falling short of the law, satisfies the

imagination and feeling and relieves this tension. "For in place of the merely imperative law, he presents himself as an example, as an object of love, of admiration and emulation, and thus becomes the Saviour from sin."[12] Jesus, unlike the law, captures the imagination, and one is able to imagine him extending a helpful hand to aid a person in being like him. An example of how to live in accordance with the law is much more powerful than the law itself, since an example is an image more easily grasped than abstract laws.

It is this kind of argumentation which deviates from a purely Hegelian model, and Harvey identifies it as the "naturalist-existentialist paradigm." He believes that this subordinate strand in Feuerbach is worth salvaging from the Hegelian model. He summarizes the two strands and what they entail:

> The Hegelian [paradigm] contains the familiar pattern said to be intrinsic to the self-realization of Spirit: objectification-alienation-reappropriation. The naturalist-existentialist strand, by contrast, emphasizes (a) the embodiedness of the I-Thou relation; (b) the notion that the species is distinguished not only by consciousness but by sexuality; (c) that the encounter with nature is mediated through the I-Thou relation rather than being the first self-expression of spirit; (d) that nature is seen to be indifferent to the raging desire of the self for life; and (e) the omnipotence of feeling and wish, especially the wish for a personal god who will intervene in nature in the interests of the self.[13]

Harvey indicates that Christian doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, are interpreted through the inverted Hegelian model while Christian beliefs, such as in miracles and providence, are interpreted through the naturalist-existentialist paradigm. In the latter model, man is under the control of his feelings and desires. The important part of this model for my study is how it is used to interpret the existence of certain Christian beliefs as arising to fulfill man's desire for freedom from Nature and to be recognized and loved (parts *d* and *e* above). The ego wants to be saved from impersonal

Nature and death as well as to be valued and loved by other people. God satisfies both of these desires by exercising complete control over Nature, including suspending its laws, for the benefit of the believer and by loving and valuing him. God's exercise of control over Nature and His ability to suspend its laws are not idealizations of man's ability to do these things, such as controlling Nature through science. One might expect this interpretation from Feuerbach's primary interpretive method of objectifying and idealizing human attributes; but, this aspect of Christianity is analyzed through this subordinate strand which involves human feeling and imagination.

The "felicity principle" is a particular tool which Harvey identifies within the naturalist-existentialist paradigm. The felicity principle applies to those beliefs that arise from the desire that the individual's happiness be of ultimate concern to God. It is especially important to Harvey because he believes it is a "prime candidate" of Feuerbach's interpretive tools to be "abstracted from the 'outdated nonsense' concerning the objectification of the species idea."[14] It helps to make sense of the existential questions that fuel Christian beliefs, such as trusting in providence, and it does not need the Hegelian model to do so. For example, the believer maintains that God will perform a miracle on his behalf in order to make him happy or to keep him from pain. The believer's desire to maintain his happiness against reality is a powerful mechanism in the subconscious development of religious thought.

III. Feuerbach's Assessment of Judeo-Christian Attitudes Towards Nature

Christianity sees no value in Nature because of the omnipotence of feeling. Christians desire freedom of imagination and feeling unchecked by reason and by the contemplation of Nature. Thus they desire freedom from Nature altogether. In the face of impersonal Nature and death, Christians declare their freedom from it by putting their faith in God who exercises complete control over Nature and can alter its laws or even destroy it for the benefit of the believer. Creation is nothing compared to its Creator, and the fate of man is more important than anything else in Nature, even Nature as a whole (the felicity principle). One of God's most important attributes is personality, and his possession of personality is a divine truth; so Nature, being impersonal, has no such significance. The combination of the beliefs in miracles, in prayers, in providence, and in *creatio ex nihilo* shows a powerful and disturbing disregard for Nature.

Feuerbach contrasts Christian views of Nature with those of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, who, although they held the powers of reason and intelligence in high regard, were capable of limiting their subjectivity by contemplating Nature. Feuerbach believes that the "heathen" philosophers proved that they valued Nature by studying it, whereas the Christians maintained an extreme abhorrence of Nature, which led to a decline in the sciences. "With Christianity man lost the capability of conceiving himself as a part of Nature, of the universe."[15]

This emphasis on the believer's happiness began in Judaism with the Hebrew creation story and stories of miracles performed on behalf of the Hebrew people and was transmitted to Christianity. Feuerbach considers the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that

God spoke creation into existence out of nothing, especially telling of Judaism and Christianity:

> To speak is an act of the will; thus, creation is a product of the Will: as in the Word of God man affirms the divinity of the human word, so in creation he affirms the divinity of the Will: not, however, the will of the reason, but the will of the imagination—the absolutely subjective, unlimited will. The culminating point of the principle of subjectivity is creation out of nothing.[16]

He contrasts this view to the "heathen" philosophers who held matter to be eternal. "As the eternity of the world or of matter imports nothing further than the essentiality of matter, so the creation of the world out of nothing imports simply the non-essentiality, the nothingness of the world."[17] Feuerbach maintains that Christianity also has the doctrine of the destruction of the world, which further shows the "non-essentiality" of creation. According to Feuerbach, Christians could ensure the immortality of their subjectivity only by destroying Nature, with its laws and the certainty of death.

Feuerbach claims that both the Hebrews and Christians saw themselves as the culmination of Nature. All else was created for their benefit and for them to rule over. God is providential and ensures that Nature operates in the best interest of the believer. God will violate the laws of Nature, in the form of miracles, to ensure the believer's interests are maintained. In a sense, creation is the first miracle, both in time and significance, since it was done by God on behalf of man. The laws of Nature are first violated by God in order to benefit the Hebrews, such as when God set plagues upon Egypt in the Exodus story or stopped the sun so that Joshua and the Hebrews could be victorious at Gibeon. Later, God does the same for Christians, such as when Jesus curses a fig tree, which Feuerbach believes was done "in order to give men an example of the power of faith over Nature."[18] Believers are encouraged to pray to God concerning all of

their apprehensions and physical and spiritual needs. In the Gospel of John, Jesus promises his disciples that whatever they ask for in his name will be given to them.[19] When the beliefs in providence, miracles, and prayer are all taken together, Nature seems to have no worth of its own, since it is violated in order to benefit the believer. The believer's omnipotence of feeling triumphs over Nature.

The problem with the imagination's role in shaping attitudes towards Nature is that the imagination impedes true self-understanding. The imagination desires to eliminate Nature in order to remove all limitations. Thus, the believer retreats to his imagination where his religious desires, like freedom from Nature, are satisfied. Marx W. Wartofsky puts Feuerbach's analysis in terms of praxis, which is "man's interaction with the world."[20] The believer functions within a religious praxis. It is "confined to man's felt needs, as they are reflected and dealt with in consciousness. Religion, as Feuerbach says, deals with the image, not the reality," or in other words, "it is, in effect, a psychological reality."[21] The issue Feuerbach has with the beliefs which the religious person holds is that they never translate into action in the world. Only God fulfills the desires that arise in the religious praxis and this fulfillment remains internal, within the believer's consciousness. Wartofsky goes on to explain: "As a human praxis, it realizes itself in the incorporation of wish into an objective form. But this objective form, the objective form of *human religious praxis*, is belief—belief in miracles, belief in providence, belief in God's love of man." To relate this back to Harvey's analysis, the religious praxis satisfies the desires of the naturalist-existentialist paradigm for recognition and for freedom from Nature.

Wartofsky points out that the alternative praxis proposed by Feuerbach is lacking as well. In place of religious praxis, Feuerbach posits man's relation to Nature as being purely conceptual with relation to understanding and the human sciences. He fails to describe what a real praxis, what a man actually *does* in the world, would look like. This is ironic, due to Feuerbach's criticism of speculative philosophy. Marx leveled this same criticism against Feuerbach. Praxis "needs to become, says Marx, a social and political praxis and preeminently a historical one."[22] Wartofsky goes on summarizing Marx's criticism: "Thus, in Marx's view, Feuerbach fails to fulfill his very intentions, by conceiving of this concrete praxis as an abstract one, in the sense that it is ahistorical and remains concerned with belief, feeling, and awareness of needs as human." Feuerbach offers no alternative to what Wartofsky criticizes, and thus much of his thought was appropriated by Marx and Feuerbach has faded somewhat into obscurity.

IV. Criticisms of Feuerbach's Assessment

In my criticism of Feuerbach's analysis of Judeo-Christian views of Nature, I will work under one of the same premises Feuerbach did. Feuerbach states that "the mode in which the genesis of a thing is explained is the candid expression of opinion, of sentiment respecting it."[23] Therefore, I will mainly focus on a close reading of the creation story in Genesis in order to analyze Nature as a creation of God and what that says about Nature. Where it is appropriate, I will offer alternative ways Feuerbach could have interpreted the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, providence, and prayer utilizing his two forms of explanation. Also, it is my intention that, through these reinterpretations, to offer a real praxis where Feuerbach did not and show that a religious praxis can be a real praxis too.

It is unclear why Feuerbach equates finitude and something being created out of nothing with worthlessness. Certainly within Christianity, this is not the case considering the fact that humans are created beings and, yet, are of great importance to God. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 formally declared:

> We firmly believe and simply confess that there is only one true God ... the Creator of all things visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal; who from the very beginning of time by His omnipotent power created out of nothing [*de nihilo condidit*] both the spiritual beings and the corporeal.[24]

Christianity has no doctrine of the human soul existing prior to birth, yet the soul is important to God. Therefore there is no reason to assume that non-eternal existence means worthlessness. God's power of creating establishes His sovereignty over His creation and the inferiority of created things and beings to uncreated God, but it does not necessarily imply worthlessness.

Feuerbach, through either ignorance or oversight, never addresses the fact that the Gnostic and Manichean duality of matter and spirit, with the former being considered

inherently evil, was considered a heresy. The formation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, was a response to Neo-Platonic emanation models of creation or Marcionite teachings of an evil demiurge creating the earth, which portrayed matter as corrupting and evil.[25] In response to this, early Christian theologians such as St. Augustine[26] and Irenaeus[27] argued that matter was something created by God and was capable of becoming something good. One could go so far as to argue that *creatio ex nihilo* is not an original belief of Judaism or Christianity but a doctrine later developed by theologians arguing with other theologian and philosophers who were trying to make compatible the belief that God is good and that God created everything including the existence of evil. Palestinian Judaism did not originally formulate a definate concept of *creatio ex nihilo*[28] and the "primitive" Christians did not initially consider it an issue.[29] Naturally the theological development of God's creative act lead to contradictions, as Feuerbach states that theology does,[30] as when a perfect God would create a worthless Nature. God must have had a good motive for all of His creation, since He is all good.

Feuerbach argues that, within a Judeo-Christian context, Nature has only the utilitarian value of existing for Jews and Christians. "All things exist, not for their own sake, but for the sake of man."[31] However, a closer reading of the first creation story in Genesis indicates otherwise. Everything else in Nature is created prior to the creation of man and God deems that it was all good. The early theologian Iranaeus, who set out *creatio ex nihilo* in one of its earliest and most explicit forms, argued that "the ground of creation was God's goodness."[32] St. Augustine, who was influential on later developments of *creatio ex nihilo*, also affirms the inherent goodness of created things: "You, therefore, O Lord, who are beautiful, made these things, for they are beautiful; you

who are good made them, for they are good."[33] Therefore, Nature has an inherent, non-utilitarian value. Part of Feuerbach's confusion is because he works under the assumption that "according to religion man does not spring from Nature, but is of divine race, of divine origin."[34] In the first creation story, man is created by God in the same manner as dry land, plants, fish, and animals; and in the second creation story, God creates man out of dirt, out of Nature itself. God creates man in His image, yet man is still formed out of Nature. St. Augustine also quite explicitly refers to man as being "part of [God's] creation."[35] In both of these cases, there is no distinction made between man and Nature or man and creation.

In the second creation story beginning at 2:4, where man is created prior to plants and animals, it is never stated that the Garden of Eden or anything in it was created solely for man. Furthermore, man was set in the garden not to exploit it, but "to till it and keep it."[36] For example, domesticated animals are expected to share in resting on the Sabbath.[37] And when God decides to send a flood to start His creation over, Noah is charged with collecting and preserving all the other animals on earth in order to ensure their survival. God could have just as easily let them be destroyed and create them again, yet He did not. When God establishes a covenant after the flood, it is not just with Noah, but "with every living creature that is with [him], the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with [him], as many as came out of the ark."[38]

According to Feuerbach, the ontological difference, then, between Nature and man is the doctrine of the destruction of the world. Christians "secured the eternity of their subjective life only by annihilating, as in the doctrine of the destruction of the world, the opposite of subjectivity—Nature."[39] Granted, if God is omnipotent and the

sole sustainer of creation, He is perfectly capable of causing everything to cease being. However, the future of creation as depicted in the Bible is not one of annihilation but renewal. A few passages suggest that Christ came not just for the salvation of people but to reconcile creation to God. Nature is not just the backdrop for the God/human drama to play out, a backdrop that will be destroyed. Instead, it will be renewed in the future Messianic age. The coming of the Messiah has implication not just for humanity but all of creation. Paul says that "through [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross."[40] Jesus charges the remaining eleven apostles to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to *the whole creation*."[41] Later, Paul describes the gospels as having been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven."[42] Humans are not the only created beings that are important to God and they are not the only created things that have a stake in the gospel.

Nature will also share in the future redemption along with man; it will not be destroyed. It will "be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."[43] The glory of the Messianic age is shared by man and Nature alike. The prophecies of the Messianic age contained in Isaiah also indicate that Nature will change, such as animals that were formally antagonistic towards each other being at peace and "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord."[44] The author of Revelation also depicts the new heaven and new earth as something renewed, not newly created, and God will dwell with humans on the new earth, not with them in heaven as merely spiritual beings.[45]

According to the Christian interpretation of Genesis, the need for Nature's renewal is not due to an inherent defect in its creation (since as the Genesis story states all was originally good), but due to man's sinfulness. Adam broke God's command not to eat from the tree of knowledge and the ground is cursed because of him.[46] The earth is destroyed and started over again with the flood because "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually."[47] Isaiah also indicates that there is a bond between human sinfulness and negative consequences for the natural world: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; / for they have transgressed laws, violated the statues, broken the everlasting covenant. / Therefore a curse devours the earths, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt."[48] In Hosea, the Israelites are no longer keeping God's commandments and the influence spreads beyond just the land to the animal kingdom as well: "Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; / together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing."[49] Upon the completion of the temple, God appears to Solomon and tells him that whenever undesirable acts of nature, such as drought or locusts: "if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."[50] Again, the concept here is that the people must make reparations due to sinful, or self-centered, behavior. During the End Times of Revelation, a time will come when God will destroy those who are responsible for destroying the earth.[51] Based on this passage, Christians would have a great concern for Nature, its preservation, and the study of it to understand how not to destroy it.

Feuerbach argues that the kind of providence which extends beyond mankind to animals or other parts of creation is not the providence of religion. "General providence—the providence which extends itself equally to irrational and rational beings, which makes no distinction between man and the lilies of the field or the fowls of the air, is nothing else than the idea of Nature—an idea which man may have without religion."[52] God's providence must be specifically concerned with man and, even then, God must fulfill man's desires not "naturally" through Nature but supernaturally by violating Nature. However, scripture supports the idea that man can know of God through creation since God reveals Himself through it by His sustaining it. For example, the beginning of Psalm 19 indicates the God reveals Himself through his creation. Jesus teaches that God's providence for man and his basic needs can be inferred from God providing for ravens.[53] This comparison suggests that God provides for man's needs naturally as He does for ravens, since it is not Christian belief that God provides for ravens supernaturally. God is the sustainer of Nature, causing water to flow and crops to grow and providing food for animals.[54] Paul states that all people will be judged because "what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."[55] Therefore, there is no reason to believe that it would not be compatible with Christianity that God could reveal His nature, such as His providential nature, through His creation.

V. A Feuerbachian Reinterpretation of Creation

Instead of interpreting God's creating as establishing human desires over Nature, it is possible to interpret God's act of creation as celebrating human creativity. Feuerbach does state in the second half of *The Essence of Christianity*: "The idea of activity, of making, of creation, is in itself a divine idea; it is therefore unhesitatingly applied to God."[56] However, he dismisses it as being distinct from acts of human creation since God's creation is an indeterminate act of creation. One could not say how God created, and God created without using preexistent materials as man does. Asking "How did God create?" thus leads to doubt that God *did* create, and "it was this question which brought man to atheism, materialism, naturalism."[57] In the recent debate over evolution versus creationism, I think it has become obvious that atheism, materialism, and naturalism did not arise due to this question but as a result of the misleading assumption that the stories in Genesis are the answers to this question. The stories in Genesis and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* exist in order to establish God's sovereign goodness over everything and man's role in the world. The important thing is not *how* God created but *that* God created.

Based on the accounts in Genesis, one could formulate metaphorical responses to questions about how God creates, despite what Feuerbach believes. Much of the first story suggests that God brings order to a primordial chaos, by forming a "formless void." To make day and night, God separated them from each other.[58] God makes the earth by separating the waters above and the waters below.[59] Dry land is made by gathering the waters together into seas.[60] God then forms man and animals out of the dust of the

ground and, later, forms woman from a rib taken from Adam.[61] The common theme in all of these examples is that God creates with the materials at hand, albeit materials He originally made, just as man often creates things. The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo made the point that "the non-origination in time of matter does not exclude origin in time of the cosmos: God can have made the latter out of eternal matter, just as an artist makes his work out of material he did not produce."[62] It is possible that the materials were created by God out of nothing prior to their use in creation. The early Christian theologian Tatian, who May identifies as the first Christian theologian to argue that God created matter, believed that matter was first created and then formed by God into the creation we know.[63] Regardless of whether matter was created or coeternal, the focus of the story is on world formation. World formation is God making or fashioning the world in a sequential series of events in time, which is comparable to human acts of creation. Other early Christian thinkers (such as Justin Martyr,[64] Athenagoras,[65] and Theophilus[66]) also strongly believed in world formation. I agree with Feuerbach's assessment that the doctrine of God creating out of nothing as a pure act of will is far removed from human acts of creation, but the retained *stories* of God's creation reflect an act to which man can relate.

Interpreting the Genesis creation stories in this way, God's act of creation is the idealization of human creativity in God. God's creation is like a work of art which has an inherent, non-utilitarian value. Like a piece of artwork, it is valued even though its creator could easily destroy it or create another work like it, just as God could utterly destroy and re-create the world. Therefore, Feuerbach's criticism that Nature has no value because it could be destroyed or created on a whim by God is not valid, because the

same could be said of art, yet it is valued. The existence of high quality prints of painting do not detract from an artwork's aesthetic value or from the wonder the viewer may feel while looking at it. God's ability to duplicate His creation does not diminish its value either. God's creation has an aesthetic value which inspired the Psalmists numerous times. So, the believer can value God's creation without any thought or concern over the technical aspects of how it was made, just as most people can enjoy music without any knowledge of music theory and songwriting or painting without any knowledge of painting techniques and materials.

Like a painting or musical composition might, God's work of creation expresses aspects of His nature. This idea finds its most explicit reference in Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen *through the things he has made*."[67] It is also found in Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; / and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."[68] The language employed in both of these verses is that of creating using materials or "handiwork," just as human do in their works of creation. When Isaiah has a vision of God enthroned in majesty, the seraphim who attend Him call to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; / *the whole earth is full of his glory*."[69] When God is displeased with the actions of the Israelites, His creation reflects this, and when God is pleased by His people, there is prosperity given through the bounty of Nature. Creation is not a worthless, transient clod of dirt, arbitrarily brought into existence by God. It is something carefully crafted and sustained by God, and, in turn, it reveals truths about God. In Feuerbach's objectification paradigm, this account of creation would translate

into idealizing the creative aspect of human nature and the ability of man's creative works to reveal truths about himself, truths that do not translate easily into words.

Man does not play a passive role as a mere observer of God's creation, but is an integral part of it. Man is both a part of Nature and yet has a role that gives him dominion over it. In the same way, the president of the United States is both a citizen of the United States and in a position of power over it. In the first creation story, man is assigned the tasks of having dominion over the other animals and subduing in the earth. Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden for the specific task of tilling it and caring for it.[70] These two tasks, tilling and subduing the earth, are both creative acts through which order is brought to chaos similar to how God created the cosmos from the "formless void."

Man's role in the world is one of participation in the will of God. With relation to Nature, the will of God idealizes man's tilling and caring for the earth and having dominion over animals in a responsible manner until the eventual redemption of creation. With relation to other human beings, man has the responsibility of loving one's neighbor as oneself and being concerned about the well being of others. The believer hopes for the coming world and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth while at the same time praying that God's "will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."[71] He hopes that God's will, through his life, will become more manifest upon earth. His hope is not that God's will will only be revealed at some future point of time nor is he reduced to living in his imagination in the mean time. The full realization of God's will would be man living in harmony with Nature and his fellow men, being the perfect caretaker of the earth and the perfect lover of his neighbor.

This interpretation of Judeo-Christian stories and their role within Feuerbach's theory offer the "real praxis" for man that Marx and Wartofsky criticize as lacking in *The Essence of Christianity*. Nature is not rendered worthless by an imagination set on some future, supernatural existence of the soul nor held purely within the scientific understanding. However, it does not do away with these two view points entirely but incorporates them while removing their passivity. Man still maintains his hope of a brighter future in the imagined renewed world while working towards improving the world he is currently in. Thus, the pain of the impersonality of Nature is removed within man's consciousness but man still relates to the world in a real way through trying to improve it. Man must also continue on with scientific inquiry in order to better tend to the earth, work towards a sustainable ecology, and most efficiently fulfill the physical needs of his fellow man. Although these goals are not able to be instantly realized, they do fit Wartofsky's criteria for "real praxis," which is "limited to what it can accomplish in the world, to what it is within human power to achieve."[72]

VI. Reassessing Providence and Prayer - Satisfying the Naturalist-Existentialist Paradigm

What remains to be answered is how the two elements of the naturalist-existential paradigm, the problem of impersonal Nature/death and the desire to be loved, are to be satisfied in this scheme. God still loves and cares about the individual believer; this is because the believer objectifies his own feeling of self-worth, as Feuerbach argues. However, Feuerbach's understanding of providence is not that of a mature believer, but the understanding of an immature one who delights his own, selfish will, and who thinks that his selfish will ought to be that of God. A mature believer understands that his own will does not necessarily coincide with God's will, and thus, favorable outcomes or miraculous turns of events will not occur in every situation he faces, even if he should pray otherwise. Providence does not mean that God intervenes in the world so that those who believe in Him always benefit. Providence is the belief that whatever happens, whether favorable or not, is the will of God. The believer does not have to retreat from reality to some fantasy world provided by his religious praxis where everything is going his way. He does not, as Feuerbach believes, use providence to except himself "from the connection of the universe."[73] Instead, he submits to reality and, by saying that it is the will of God, affirms that he does not know why it happened. Perhaps the tragedies of life are punishment, perhaps not. Paul believed that the thorn in his flesh, which he pleaded with God to remove, was left there to keep him humble.[74] The believer maintains hope that life nonetheless serves some higher purpose.

For example, the local newspaper of Baton Rouge, The Advocate, ran a story entitled "Did God Do This?"[75] in which religious leaders from both Jewish and Christian backgrounds were asked if God caused hurricane Katrina. It is probable that most of these leaders, either privately or publicly with his or her religious community, prayed that God intervene in some way to prevent Katrina or to lessen its destruction. Nevertheless, the destruction caused by the hurricane was the greatest ever seen in American history. Thus, the question of whether or not God was in control of these events arises. Naturally, the responses were varied but they illustrate this understanding of providence. Some of the religious leaders believed it was a sign of the end times. Others believed it was God's punishment of a sinful city or nation. Some admitted that, while they believe God is sovereign over Nature, they did not ultimately know why the hurricane occurred. However, God could be seen in the outpouring of aid and kindness in response to it. Regardless of which of these responses one might agree with or object to, it is clear that they are all an attempt to seek purpose behind the destruction, to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless event.

Tied in with Feuerbach's immature view of providence is his view of prayer. I would not argue with his assessment that, in prayer, man "confesses to God, as the being nearest to him, his most secret thoughts, his deepest wishes, which otherwise he shrinks from uttering."[76] I do disagree with Feuerbach's next statement: "But he expresses these wishes in the confidence, in the certainty that they will be fulfilled." Prayer as a device used purely for wish fulfillment, whether in reality or in the imagination, is a child's understanding of prayer. In offering up his prayer, the believer places his concerns before God, not in the hope that the believer's limited will be done, but, as the Lord's

Prayer states, that God's will be done. Prayer aids the believer in dealing with whatever outcome may result in the situation about which he prayed because he believes that God's will has be done. Concerning prayer, Paul says: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."[77] The outcome of prayer is a sense of peace, not necessarily wish fulfillment, for the believer. Paul also advises to "pray without ceasing, give thanks *in all circumstances*; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."[78] Again, prayer is not a guaranteed method for all of an individual's desires to be fulfilled, but is a method for aiding the believer in dealing with negative outcomes and "bad luck" in his life.

The believer's happiness is tied to God's will. This connection satisfies the previously mentioned felicity principle which Harvey identified. When one prays, the underlying hope in the prayer is for happiness. This belief does not mean that the believer gets whatever he wants. For example, if one prays for a million dollars it is because one believes that the million dollars would bring happiness. One really wants happiness, not the million dollars. After years of failed attempts at winning the lottery or get-rich-quick schemes, one might learn to be happy with what one has and thank God for this revelation. The believer's happiness is in God, or as St. Augustine says of God: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[79]

A recent study conducted by Harvard[80] about the effects of intercessory prayer, which was widely reported by the media, illustrates that believers hold this deeper understanding of prayer. The study had three groups of patients undergoing heart

surgery: one that was prayed for but was uncertain of this fact, one that was not prayed for and was uncertain of it, and one that was prayed for and knew it. The patient's names and descriptions of their conditions were given to Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist prayer groups. The study found that there was no real difference in the rate of occurrence of complications in the two groups that were uncertain about being prayed for (52% rate of complication for those prayed for versus 51% who were not) while there was a higher rate of medical complications found among those who knew they had been prayed for (59%). The study concluded: "Intercessory prayer itself had no effect on complication-free recovery from [coronary artery bypass graft], but certainty of receiving intercessory prayer was associated with a higher incidence of complications." Despite the fact that these findings were reported by popular American media sources, there was no mass bout of atheism or abandonment of prayer within the United States.

Here is an example that illustrates the function of prayer in a more individual role. A recent college graduate applies to a prestigious graduate school, which he hoped to attend for most of his undergraduate career. He prays that he gets in with all of his heart, believing that this school is the best place for him. When he receives a rejection letter from the graduate school, he does not become angry with God or doubt the power of prayer. Instead, he reassures himself that this outcome is God's will for his life and that something better or more important awaits, perhaps in some situation he currently thinks of as undesirable.

A biblical example of this view of prayer can be seen in the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The story shows Jesus in an intimate and very human moment, voicing his concern about his upcoming crucifixion. He prays: "Father, for you all things

are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."[81] Jesus, who is held to have the most direct connection to God and the power to work miracles, does not have the cup of suffering removed. So, in a sense, the prayer is unanswered. But in another sense it is answered. For beneath his desire to escape his suffering is his fundamental prayer that God's will be done, not his own. He offers up his concern and apprehension to God and is able to find the strength to face his future, whatever the outcome may be.

The believer's hope is that, at the very least, his suffering is a justifiable element of God's plan for His creation. Perhaps he too will be able to look back at the unfolding of history and understand the necessity of suffering. For example, the disciples did not understand until after Jesus' resurrection the necessity of his suffering and crucifixion for the redemption of the world. The believer, too, will see that the suffering in his life was necessary for his future happiness, either as a necessary part of enjoying happiness in God or to aid in his perfection, as the thorn in his flesh did for Paul. Jesus told his disciples prior to his crucifixion: "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy."[82] The believer hopes that he will be resurrected and will participate in God's kingdom in the new creation, which the believer had been working towards in his life. The new creation and God's kingdom will be the vindication of all suffering (human or animal), natural disasters, and exploitation of Nature. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."[83]

The believer's hope would even sustain him in a way that Feuerbach's belief that man can take comfort in the immortality of humanity as a species does not. Many other

species have gone extinct and there is no reason to believer that humanity is somehow immune. Humanity could easily become extinct due to over use of earth's resources, nuclear fallout, or a cataclysmic meteor strike. One who places his hope in the continuance of humanity and that his life will live on through it has no real hope in the face of such situations. The believer, on the other hand, would accept such actions as the will of God, hoping that there was a higher purpose served despite all of senseless destruction and loss of life.

VII. Conclusion

Apart from his reliance on Hegel's system of alienation and self-realization, Feuerbach offers a method of interpreting Christianity in the naturalist-existentialist paradigm that is worthy of study. Although this paradigm is a subordinate strand of Feuerbach's argumentation, it provides compelling theories for why certain Christian doctrines and beliefs, such as providence and prayer, arose. In order to deal with the human desire to feel self-worth, the Jews make God ultimately concerned about the fate of their nation and the Christians make God ultimately concerned about the individual believer. In response to the impersonality of Nature and the inevitability of death, the Judeo-Christian believer declares the worthlessness of Nature by positing an omnipotent God capable of violating the laws of Nature, even nullifying death. The beliefs in prayer, providence, miracles, and *creatio ex nihilo* combine to have severely negative consequences for the formation of Judeo-Christian attitudes about Nature. If God will violate the laws of Nature on behalf of the individual believer, then there is no value in the physical laws. If God created Nature from nothing and will one day destroy it, returning it to nothing, then Nature must be worthless.

Man establishes himself as the culmination of Nature by making himself the end of God's concern and denying any worth to Nature or its physical laws beyond how they may serve man. The believer maintains his confidence that he is of ultimate concern and that his desires are the most important, even if reality seems to say otherwise. The danger of this view is that the believer, seeing no worth in Nature, will not study Nature and thus further scientific understanding nor adjust his self-understanding according to rational and natural constraints.

Feuerbach's critique of Christian views of Nature stems from his simplistic understandings of *creatio ex nihilo* and his seeming lack of knowledge of its development; his ignoring of the roles of Nature and man in the Bible; and his immature understanding of providence and prayer. *Creatio ex nihilo* was first developed within Christian theology in response to heresies claiming matter and the physical world were inherently evil or created by an evil god. It was meant to establish that God, who is good, created the universe, which was originally created good. The Genesis stories, which depict God forming the world, illustrate how God fashioned parts of creation out of already existent materials, much the same way man creates. God then sets man as the caretaker of His creation and tells him to subdue it, to bring further order to God's creation. Through these stories, man objectifies his role in and difference from nature. Man is capable of understanding the chaos of Nature and ordering it. He objectifies and deifies this role by attributing the same actions to God and making his imitation of God a divine imperative. Whenever man's sinful nature gets the better of him, God may punish him through natural disasters or other negative events in the Natural world.

In order to cope with the troubles that happen to him, the believer maintains hope that his suffering and the suffering of others serves a higher purpose by acknowledging that the undesirable event is the will of God. The believer uses prayer in order to cope with his apprehensions about a given situation. When the outcome is not what he desired, he hopes that it is because God has other, better plans for him and his happiness. Paul puts it quite succinctly: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer."[84]

This understanding of Genesis and the roles of prayer and providence offers the believer a real, active praxis in the world which neither Feuerbach's interpretation of Christianity nor his alternative, making Nature the object of scientific understanding, do. Man is able to feel that his role as one who orders Nature, tills the ground, and cares for his neighbor is holy and important. The occurrences of natural disasters or other undesirable events, although disturbing, do not cause him to be paralyzed in existential uncertainty about the value of human life or to escape to a religious fantasy world in which God more actively shows His concern for the believer. Man is empowered to work towards improving the world he is in, while hoping for the future glory of God's kingdom, which will be the vindication of all suffering and the justification of all injustice.

Endnotes

[1] Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989) xvii.
[2] Feuerbach 13.
[3] Feuerbach 82.
[4] Van Harvey, Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 36.
[5] Feuerbach 82.
[6] Feuerbach 3.
[7] Harvey 39.
[8] Feuerbach 140.
[9] 1 John 4:16 (Note: All biblical citation are from the New Revised Standard version.)
[10] Feuerbach 121.
[11] Feuerbach 141.
[12] Feuerbach 141.
[13] Harvey 50.
[14] Harvey 85.
[15] Feuerbach 133.
[16] Feuerbach 101.
[17] Feuerbach 101.
[18] Feuerbach 104.
[19] John 16:24
[20] Marx W. Wartofsky, Feuerbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 324.
[21] Wartofsky 326.
[22] Wartofsky 21.
[23] Feuerbach 115.
[24] Paul Copan, "Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* A Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal," Trinity Journal Spring 1996. 17.1: 77-93.
[25] see Gerhard May, Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004) especially 164, 179-180.
[26] John K. Ryan, tr., The Confessions of Saint Augustine (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 11.4.6
[27] May 176.
[28] May 22-26.
[29] May 26-31, 179.
[30] Feuerbach xvi-xviii.
[31] Feuerbach 106.
[32] May 176.
[33] Confessions 11.4.6
[34] Feuerbach 222.
[35] Confessions. 1.1.1
[36] Genesis 2:15
[37] Exodus 23:12
[38] Genesis 9:10
[39] Feuerbach 150.
[40] Colossians 1:20, emphasis mine
[41] Mark 16:15, emphasis mine
[42] Colossians 1:23
[43] Romans 8:21
[44] Isaiah 11:9, see also v. 6-8
[45] Revelation 21:1-5
[46] Genesis 3:17
[47] Genesis 6:5
[48] Isaiah 24:5-6
[49] Hosea 4:3

[50] 2 Chronicles 7:14
[51] Revelation 11:18
[52] Feuerbach 299-300.
[53] Luke 12:24
[54] see Psalms 65, 104
[55] Romans 1:19-20
[56] Feuerbach 217.
[57] Feuerbach 219.
[58] Genesis 1:4
[59] Genesis 1:7, also echoed in 2 Peter 3
[60] Genesis 1:9-10
[61] Genesis 2:7,19,22
[62] May 14.
[63] May 149-150.
[64] May 132.
[65] May 138-139.
[66] May 162.
[67] Romans 1:20, emphasis mine
[68] Psalm 19:1
[69] Isaiah 6:3, emphasis mine
[70] Genesis 2:15
[71] Matthew 6:10
[72] Wartofsky 328-329.
[73] Feuerbach 105.
[74] 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
[75] Mark H. Hunter, "Did God do this? Opinions vary as to the role of deity in Katrina's devastation," The Advocate. 25 March 2006, Louisiana ed.: F1-2.
[76] Feuerbach 122.
[77] Philippians 4:6-7
[78] 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, emphasis mine
[79] Confessions 1.1.1
[80] H. Benson, etc. "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: a multicenter randomized trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer," American Heart Journal. April 2006. 151(4):934-42.
[81] Mark 14:36
[82] John 16:20
[83] Romans 8:18
[84] Romans 12:12