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Feuerbach's Anthropomorphic Critique of Kant's Theism

LOU MATZ, Department of Philosophy, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, USA

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Scholars have not noticed that Immanuel Kant's theoretical and practical (moral) conceptions of God inspired the structure of Ludwig Feuerbach's general account of God in his *The Essence of Christianity* and that Kant's theism is a primary target in Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique. To recognize the role of Kant's account of God in Feuerbach's *Essence* opens up new vistas in understanding both philosophers on the origin, nature and reality of the concept of God. I conclude by defending the plausibility of Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique of Kant's theism, although Feuerbach does not always construe Kant's views accurately.

Keywords: Feuerbach – Kant – God – anthropomorphism – morality

While Feuerbach's relation to Hegel is well established,[1] Feuerbach scholars have not noticed that Immanuel Kant's theoretical and practical (moral) conceptions of God influenced the structure of his analysis of God in his *The Essence of Christianity*.[2] Moreover, they have not acknowledged and assessed Feuerbach's specific criticisms of Kant's conceptions of God that Feuerbach formulates in the first three chapters of the *Essence,* although some have noted the vulnerability of Kant's theistic views to Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique.[3] I contend that to recognize the role of Kant's account of God in Feuerbach's *Essence* opens up new vistas in understanding both philosophers on the origin and nature of the concept of God.

On the one hand, reading the *Essence* through the frame of Kant's theoretical and moral accounts of God helps to accentuate the serious threat of

[1] See Stewart (2021, 89 – 119); Bosáková (2023). See also Šajda (2023); Dacuy (2025).
[2] See Harvey (1995), Wartofsky (1977, Chapter VIII), and Kamenka (1970, Chapter 3).
[3] Louden 2015a, 98 – 99. In a different article, Louden also briefly contrasts Kant's view of God as an independently existing being with "a mere Feuerbachian projection of human thought" (Louden 2015b, 125).

anthropomorphism in them. Kant was well aware that his account of God implied the threat of anthropomorphism – transferring the "predicates from the world of sense to a being quite distinct from the world" (Kant 1977, 92 [358]) – but he mistakenly assumed that his "subtle" (Kant 1965, A700 / B728) or "symbolic" (Kant 1977, 91 [357]) anthropomorphism eliminates the anthropomorphic challenge. On the other hand, reading the *Essence* through the frame of Kant's accounts of God from the standpoints of theoretical and practical reason also makes more explicit how Kant inspired Feuerbach in the structure of his analysis of God and that Kant's theism is a principal target in Feuerbach's analysis of God from theoretical and practical standpoints.

Kant and Feuerbach use a similar verb to describe the cognitive process of positing or creating an intelligible object to correspond to the concept of a transcendent God: *hypostasieren* (Kant) and *vergegenständlichen* (Feuerbach). This cognitive process of objectifying or reifying thought into an object produces the *illusion* of an independently existing entity which, paradoxically, creates contradictions with reason itself and empirical reality, generating theoretical and practical (moral) antinomies for Kant and theological / philosophical contradictions for Feuerbach (Part II of the *Essence*). Nonetheless, they resolve these necessary illusions and contradictions in metaphysically opposing ways. Whereas Kant's transcendental idealism is consistent with the possibility of a Being that transcends the human conditions of experience, Feuerbach's empirical realism fully secularizes or naturalizes Kant's account of God since the imagination's projections are ultimately only a reflection of the nature of human needs and powers, "reducing theology to anthropology."

In what follows, I describe Kant and Feuerbach's views on God and how Feuerbach appropriates and criticizes Kant's account in his analysis of God as a being of theoretical and practical (moral) understanding. I conclude by assessing Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique of Kant's theism.

I. Kant on God

For Kant, there are two necessary conceptions of a transcendent God that cannot be shown to be contradicted by experience and that serve useful human purposes. One is a creation of pure theoretical reason that makes it possible to give a complete understanding of the natural world and to guide scientific reasoning and understanding as if the world were a result of a divine intelligence. The other is a creation of pure practical reason that makes it possible for the moral law to have the fullest effect on human beings in creating a kingdom of moral ends.

For Kant, in trying to understand the natural world, pure theoretical reason creates the Idea of an unconditioned ground that is distinct from the conditioned world of events, "a substratum, to us unknown, of the systematic unity, order, and purposiveness of the arrangement of the world" (Kant 1965, A697 / B725). This Idea is converted into an individual being (what Kant terms an "Ideal") and functions as a regulative principle that guides empirical understanding and reason in their investigation and ordering of nature, as if the world of appearances and natural laws are a result of a God who orders the natural world with purposes, as reflected in the traditional design argument as well as in alleged moral purposes of natural desires (like self-preservation and sexual feeling) and capacities (like speech and the nutritive faculty).[4]

In the creation of this theoretical Ideal of God, pure theoretical reason makes an object to correspond with it so that its attributes can be determined since it is only by an entity's attributes that anything about it can be known. Kant states,

> reason cannot think this systematic unity otherwise than by giving to the idea of this unity an object…this object, as thus entertained by reason (*ens rationis ratiocinatae*), is a mere idea; it is not assumed as a something that is real absolutely and *in itself*, but is postulated only problematically...in order that we may view all connection of the things of the world of sense *as if* they had their ground in such a being (Kant 1965, A681 / B709).

In another passage, Kant explains that

> this ideal of the *ens realissimum* [the most real being], although it is indeed a mere representation, is first *realised*, that is, made into an object, then *hypostatised* and finally, by the natural progress of reason towards the completion of unity, is…*personified* (Kant 1965, A583 / B611, footnote).

Kant acknowledges that this transcendental Ideal is "a mere creature of its [pure theoretical reason's] own thought" (Kant 1965, A584 / B612) and is "a mere fiction in which we combine and realise the manifold or our idea in an ideal, as an individual being [God]" (Kant 1965, A580 / B608). Nonetheless, it is not merely a subjective or arbitrary concept since Kant assumes it is a "pressing need of reason to presuppose something that may afford the understanding a sufficient foundation for the complete determination of its concepts" (Kant 1965, A583 / B611).

[4] For these alleged moral purposes in nature, see Kant's account of perfect ethical duties to oneself as an animal and moral being in his Doctrine of Virtue in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1991, 218 – 227).

Kant realizes that God's attributes, like intelligence and causal power, involve "a certain subtle anthropomorphism (without which we could not think anything whatsoever in regard to it)" (Kant 1965, A700 / B728). In the *Prolegomena*, Kant elaborates much further on the threat of anthropomorphism since he had read Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which were not published in German after the publication of his first critique. Kant distinguishes between a justified "symbolic" anthropomorphism from an unjustified "dogmatic" anthropomorphism (Kant 1977, 91 [357]). Dogmatic anthropomorphists attribute empirical qualities to God, such as will and understanding, as if they are actual qualities of God. However, symbolic anthropomorphists attribute will and understanding to God as reflections of how humans understand God in relation to their *a priori* (non-empirical) forms of cognition, and not to God in itself. Kant states that "reason is thereby not transferred as a property to the First Being in itself, but only to its relation to the world of sense, and so anthropomorphism is entirely avoided. For nothing is considered here but the cause of the rational form which is found everywhere in the world" (Kant 1977, 92 [359]). God is the power of intelligence that is the cause of the *a priori* categories of the pure part of human understanding, making an orderly and coherent experience of the world possible. These categories (like substance and causality) are not empirical facts – what he described above as the "predicates of the world of sense" – but are formal *a priori* principles of human cognition. As Wood puts it,

> Kant draws a distinction between God's "ontological" predicates, which can be derived from the pure categories, and his…"anthropological" predicates, based on empirical features of the world (especially features of ourselves) (Wood 1992, 398).

Kant is thus making two fundamental arguments about pure theoretical reason's creation of an unconditioned divine being: it is naturally driven to do so in order to explain the origin and apparent purposiveness of the natural world, and it is justified in attributing the causal power of will and understanding to this Being since these qualities are not empirical but are *a priori* forms of human cognition. As a result, he has allegedly taken "away the objective anthropomorphism from our concept of the Supreme Being" (Kant 1977, 92 [358]).

However, for Kant, the ultimate path to a religious theism is not through pure theoretical reason, which culminates in deism, but through the moral law of pure practical reason. On the one hand, God is neither necessary to know the moral law nor to be motivated to act according to it since the moral law is

legislated a *priori* by pure practical reason. Kant says in the Preface to the first edition of *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, "for its own sake morality does not need religion at all (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards ability [to act]); by virtue of pure practical reason it is self-sufficient" (Kant 1960, 3). On the other hand, Kant contends that while virtue – the "law-abiding disposition resulting from respect for the [moral] law" – is the supreme (*oberste*) good, it is not "the entire and perfect (*vollendete*) good as the object of the faculty of desire of rational finite beings. For this, happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) is required" (Kant 1988, 135 [128]; 116 [110]). Since happiness (satisfaction of desires) is a natural good, within, of course, the limits of the moral law, Kant asserts that there might be an ultimate end to the moral life, which is the perfect or highest good, the notion that virtue will be rewarded proportionately with happiness and vice with unhappiness. Pure practical reason thus creates the concept of the highest good as a necessary component of the moral law because it demands that humans not only strive to be virtuous but that they "produce and further the highest good in the world" (Kant 1988, 132 [125]), that is, humanity is obligated to arrange its ethical conduct, culture and institutions to realize the highest good as an ultimate, all-encompassing end of human practical life.

The concept of the highest good provides an answer to the question "*What is to result from this right conduct of ours*?" (Kant 1960, 4). It satisfies "our natural need to conceive of some sort of final end for all our actions and abstentions, taken as a final whole, an end which can be justified by reason and the absence of which would be a hindrance to moral decision" (Kant 1960, 5). Just as an intelligent Author of Nature is a created Ideal of pure theoretical reason that can unify the disparate laws in the natural world into a systematic and purposive whole, so too the Idea of the highest good is a created Idea of pure practical reason that can unify the moral and natural (happiness) ends of human nature.

With the establishment of the highest good as a necessary corollary of the moral law, pure practical reason must thereby postulate an afterlife and God as the conditions for its realization. The afterlife is necessary since humans cannot attain moral perfection in this life, yet they are obligated by the moral law to attain it,[5] and an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God is postulated since humans cannot fully know their moral character and motives

[5] Kant goes beyond his argument in the *Groundwork* by assuming (problematically) that humans should not only act out of duty to the moral law but should seek perfect virtue, "complete fitness of dispositions to the moral law" (Kant 1988, 128 [122]).

and don't have the power to reward virtue and vice proportionately with happiness and unhappiness. So from a practical perspective, it is "morally necessary to assume the existence of God" (Kant 1988, 132 [125]) since it is necessary to realize the highest good.

And like the postulation from the standpoint of theoretical reason, Kant notes that the necessity in postulating God's existence is ultimately "subjective, i.e., a need, and not objective, i.e., duty itself" (Kant 1988, 132 [125]), that "morality…shows we have need of God" (Kant 1996, 407, 28:1072). This rational need to postulate God's existence also strengthens moral dispositions and the commitment to the moral life. In his *Lectures on the philosophical doctrine of religion*, Kant states "for if there is a supreme being who can and will make us happy, then our moral dispositions will thereby receive more strength and nourishment, and our moral conduct will be made firmer" (Kant 1996, 343, 28:996). He reiterates the salutary effect of the belief in God in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, stating that godliness is a "means of strengthening that which in itself goes to make a better man" (Kant 1960, 171), and, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, that the Idea of God is one "we ourselves make…for the purpose of serving as the incentive in our conduct…where it is of the greatest moral fruitfulness" (Kant 1991, 238).

Ultimately, the understanding of moral experience "leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind" (Kant 1960, 5).[6] Kant asserts that it is the natural tendency of human conscience – the consciousness of an internal court in a person – to form an ideal lawgiver, judge, and executive (Kant 1991, 234). This "schematism of analogy" is not an anthropomorphism since it does not extend human knowledge, which is what a "schematism of objective determination" does (Kant 1960, 58). Rather, it is how humans can legitimately conceive of God from a practical point of view since this three-fold function represents the moral attributes of God as holy, benevolent and just.[7] Moral faith has thus

[6] In *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant says, "*morality and religion stand in the closest combination*…moral duties are carried out from principles of every rational being, which is to act as a member of a universal system of ends; whereas here [in religion] these duties are regarded as commandments of a supremely holy will, because the fundamentally the laws of morality are the only ones that agree with the idea of highest perfection" (Kant 1996, 430, 28:1102).

[7] Kant says, "A being who is to give objective reality to moral duties must possess without limit the moral perfections of *holiness, benevolence, and justice*. *These attributes constitute the entire moral concept of God*…Thus through morality we recognize God as a *holy lawgiver*, *a benevolent sustainer of the world*, and a *just judge*" (Kant 1996, 408, 28:1073).

"cleansed the moral relation of men to the Supreme Being from harmful anthropomorphism" (Kant 1960, 132) since the attributes of God as moral lawgiver, judge, and executive do not have an empirical basis but are necessarily connected to an *a priori* feature of pure human practical reason – the moral law and its necessary corollary of the highest good.

II. Feuerbach on God and His Anthropomorphic Critique of Kant

For Feuerbach, religion begins with interpersonal awareness, of "I and Thou" (Feuerbach 1989, 2), which creates the self-consciousness of belonging to particular communities and ultimately to a species that has essential but limited powers and essential but unsatisfied needs.[8] The imagination makes the human species (the universal) the object of its consciousness, which is why "the brutes have no religion" and why "consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought" (Feuerbach 1989, 1). Beings who are aware that they are part of a species become aware of its essential powers as well as their limitations, and they can thereby imagine the perfection of these powers. Feuerbach characterizes the perfection of human powers as the "infinite," the consciousness of humanity's species-being that he considers to be the essence of religion (Feuerbach 1989, 2).[9]

For Feuerbach, all conceptions of a divine being or beings result from imaginative objectifications or projections (*vergegenständlichen*) that reflect essential human powers and the fulfillment of emotional needs. Feuerbach claims,

> Physical strength is an attribute of the Homeric gods; Zeus is the strongest of the gods. Why? Because physical strength, in and by itself, was regarded as something glorious, divine. To the ancient Germans the highest virtues were those of the warrior; therefore their supreme god was the god of war, Odin (Feuerbach 1989, 21).

He quips, "if God were an object to the bird, he would be a winged being" (Feuerbach 1989, 17). In the case of the monotheistic religions, God has the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, a projection of

[8] In *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach states, "the single man *in isolation* possesses in himself the *essence* of man neither as a *moral* nor as a *thinking* being. *The essence* of man is contained only in the community, in the *unity of man with man – a* unity, however, that rests on the *reality* of the *distinction* between "I" and "You" (Feuerbach 1972, 244, § 59).
[9] In his later writings, Feuerbach diminishes the importance of species-being and elevates the importance of the desire for happiness. See Gooch (2023, 641).

the human powers of thought, will, and affection but perfected and without limitation – "reason, love, force of will" (Feuerbach 1989, 3). In the case of Christianity, the highest value is love, and so God takes the form (*kenosis*) of a perfect loving human being. God is a being who can "rescue man from the tyranny of the forces of Nature" (Feuerbach 1989, 104) and satisfy and validate the meaning of "our wishes, our emotional wants" (Feuerbach 1989, 121). God is "the echo of our cry of anguish" (Feuerbach 1989, 121), and the use of "father" in prayer is a pledge that "my wishes will be fulfilled" (Feuerbach 1989, 125). The cosmic importance of human needs, wants, and feelings is expressed in religious practices like prayer and in beliefs like miracle, a providential God, and heaven.

For Feuerbach, the concept of God is not a product of some pure dimension of theoretical or practical reason but of the imagination, which "is the original organ of religion" that expresses a "limitless activity of the senses" (Feuerbach 1989, 214). All concepts derive from, or are based on, experience, and in this way, Feuerbach's metaphysical assumptions are similar to empiricists like Hume. And like Hume, Feuerbach argues that it is the imagination that works on the materials given by the senses, and the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all – loving Being is a result of denying or "negativizing" (Feuerbach 1989, 215) the limitations of human experience by creating a being free from the conditions of the empirical world, what Feuerbach terms "the realm of second causes, the sensible world, Nature" (Feuerbach 1989, 189).[10] The notion of an omnipotent Being "is nothing else than subjectivity exempting itself from all objective conditions and limitations, and consecrating this exemption as the highest power and reality" (Feuerbach 1989, 101 – 102).

Like Kant, it is essential to Feuerbach's account that the imagination not only creates a concept or idea of a divine being but objectifies it to itself (*vergegenständlichen*) as an independently existing being. Why? Because humans come to know about existence and their powers through their experience with external objects, and humans' experience of the world reflects their nature and how they are able to perceive it. Feuerbach states, "in the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man. We know the man by the object, by his conception of what is external to himself; in it his nature becomes evident" (Feuerbach 1989, 5). In sensing, understanding

[10] For Hume's account of the origin of the idea of God, see Hume (1993, Section II).

and feeling the world, "we can affirm nothing without affirming ourselves" (Feuerbach 1989, 6).

In the Introduction to the *Essence*, Feuerbach describes a theological and philosophical conception of the traditional monotheistic God, and the latter is a direct engagement with Kant. The theological conception is that God's qualities are entirely unknowable and beyond human experience. Feuerbach counters that this position is essentially atheistic. He states,

> that which has no predicates or qualities, has no effect upon me; that which has no effect upon me has not existence for me…A being without qualities is one which cannot become an object to the mind, and such a being is virtually non-existent. Where man deprives God of all qualities, God is no longer anything more to him than a negative being (Feuerbach 1989, 14).

Feuerbach then proceeds to describe another "still milder way of denying the divine predicates" (Feuerbach 1989, 15) than claiming that God cannot be defined. This approach is to ascribe human qualities to God but nevertheless to maintain that "in relation to God, it is said, these predicates are certainly without any objective reality" (Feuerbach 1989, 16) because there is a distinction between what God is in itself and what it is for human beings. Feuerbach is directly referring to Kant's subtle or symbolic anthropomorphism. However, Feuerbach finds

> this transcendentalism is only an illusion; for I can make the distinction between the object as it is in itself, and the object as it is for me, only where an object can really appear otherwise to me…if my conception is determined by the constitution of my species, the distinction between what an object is in itself, and what it is for me ceases; for this conception is itself an absolute one. The measure of the species is the absolute means, law, and criterion of man (Feuerbach 1989, 16).

Feuerbach's point is that the notion of God in itself can have no meaning since it is not possible to experience such a Being since humans can only experience objects or entities based on the conditions of their understanding. Moreover, Feuerbach notes that the very notion of a thing in itself is a product of human understanding, "*i.e.*, an idea of my own, a conception which falls within my power of thought, and thus expresses my understanding" (Feuerbach 1989, 41). The capacity to consider an object independently of human conditions of knowing is a human capacity that doesn't necessary reflect any reality in the world. Feuerbach's conclusion is that Kant's transcendental Ideal of God is a

complete anthropomorphism. He states, "existence is first made known by quality; not existence first, and after that quality" (Feuerbach 1989, 176). Entities are known by qualities that are experienced. If humans cannot experience the attributes or predicates of an entity, then the subject of those predicates is not real. He says, "if thy predicates are anthropomorphisms, the subject of them is an anthropomorphism too" (Feuerbach 1989, 17).

After the Introduction and before he attempts to demystify the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, Feuerbach proceeds to analyze the concept of God from two standpoints – from the (theoretical) understanding and from the (practical) moral understanding. This structure appears inspired by Kant, especially since Feuerbach directly quotes from and alludes to him in both sections and references few others. As a being of the understanding, God is the unconditioned ground and first cause of the conditioned and orderly world of experience, an intelligence that places "all things in reciprocal dependence and connection" (Feuerbach 1989, 37). Feuerbach claims the understanding has no trouble in conceiving such a cause since it comes to this idea by reflecting on its own spontaneity, i.e., its independence from the mechanistic causal relations in nature. As a result, since human understanding necessarily seeks causes in the world and is itself an unconditioned or spontaneous activity, "it inquires for the cause of all things, because it has its own ground and end in itself" (Feuerbach 1989, 37). Feuerbach says, "the understanding derives all things from God as the first cause; it finds the world, without an intelligent cause, given over to senseless, aimless chance; that is, it finds only in itself, in its own nature, the efficient and the final cause of the world – the existence of the world is only then clear and comprehensible when it sees the explanation of that existence in the source of all clear and intelligible ideas, i.e., in itself..." (Feuerbach 1989, 37). In an apparent reference to Kant's account of the dialectic of reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Feuerbach claims that this conception of God is "a need of the intelligence, a necessary thought" (*ein Bedürfnis des Denkens, ein notwendiger Gedanke*) (Feuerbach 1973, 80) because "reason cannot rest in sensuous things; it can find contentment only when it penetrates to the highest, first necessary being, which can be an object to the reason alone" (Feuerbach 1989, 36). And why is this? Because "it is a general truth, that we feel a blank, a void, a want in ourselves, and are consequently unhappy and unsatisfied, so long as we have not come to the last degree of a power" (Feuerbach 1989, 36). Feuerbach states, "the pure, perfect divine nature is the self-consciousness of the understanding, the consciousness which the understanding has of its own perfection" (Feuerbach 1989, 34).

Once God is posited by the understanding, the conception of God becomes subject to the understanding, that "reason is not dependent on God, but God on reason" (Feuerbach 1989, 37). On this point, Feuerbach makes explicit reference to Kant's analysis of the God of onto-theology – the *ens realissimum* [the most real being] – in Kant's *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*. This God has all realities (knowledge, power, eternality) without limitations because it is the greatest being, an *ens maximum*, that serves as the standard to judge limitation (Kant 1996, 358, 28:1013). Kant says, "If we now ask how we come to the concept of a maximum of all realities, then insofar as the reality is finite we must leave every limitation out of its concept if we want to apply it to the concept of a *realissimum*. For fundamentally, we can think of God only by ascribing to him without any limitation everything real which we encounter in ourselves" (Kant, 1996, 361). Feuerbach quotes the last sentence here, but he draws an opposite, anthropomorphic conclusion. He says, "Thus the *understanding* [and not God] [11] is the *ens realissimum*, the most real being of the old onto-theology" (Feuerbach 1989, 38) because it is human understanding that does away with the limits. A few sentences later, Feuerbach exclaims, "What, according to this, is the nature conceived without limits, but the nature of the understanding releasing, abstracting itself from all limits? As though thinkest God, such is thy thought; – the measure of thy God is the measure of thy understanding" (Feuerbach 1989, 39).

In a similar way to Kant, Feuerbach notes that the God of the understanding has no relevance for human existence since the essence of religion is the happiness and salvation of human beings (Feuerbach 1989, 45), whereas the essence of scientific or theoretical understanding is the contemplation of nature and things outside of human beings. Feuerbach claims, "The understanding is universal, pantheistic, the love of the universe; but the grand characteristic of religion, and of the Christian religion especially, is that it is thoroughly anthropotheistic, the exclusive love of man for himself" (Feuerbach 1989, 46). And like Kant, Feuerbach contends that God's real religious connection to humanity is conceived through morality. He says, "God…especially in the Christian religion…is moral perfection. But God as a morally perfect being is nothing else than the realised idea, the fulfilled law of morality, the moral nature of man posited as the absolute being" (Feuerbach 1989, 46). In the third edition (1849) of the *Essence*, Feuerbach includes a footnote referencing Kant's *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* to support the aforementioned

[11] My emphasis and parenthetical addition.

characterization of God: "Gott ist gleichsam das moralische Gesetz selbst, aber personifiziert gedacht" (God is as it were the moral law itself, but thought of as personified) (Feuerbach 1973, 95, my translation). However, Feuerbach's quotation does not appear in any known edition of the *Lectures*,[12] and nowhere in Kant's writings does he describe God in this way.

Feuerbach proceeds to describe the consequence for human beings when God is conceived as moral perfection. Unlike the God of the understanding with its omnipotence and eternity, God's moral perfection implies an obligation for human beings, namely, to strive for moral perfection. He says,

> I cannot conceive perfect will, the will which is in unison with law, which is itself law, without at the same time regarding it as an object of will, *i.e.*, as an obligation for myself. The conception of the morally perfect being is no merely theoretical, inert conception, but a practical one, calling me to action, to imitation, throwing me into strife, into disunion with myself. For while it proclaims to me what I ought to be, it also tells me to my face, without any flattery, what I am not (Feuerbach 1989, 47).

Feuerbach adds a footnote to this passage with a quotation from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*: "that which, in our own judgment, derogates from our self-conceit, humiliates us. Thus the moral law inevitably humiliates every man when he compares with it the sensual tendency of his nature" (Feuerbach 1989, 47).[13]

However, God as moral law only affirms human beings as abstractions and as inadequate, whereas it is the feeling of love that makes humans feel real as particular beings and that is the source of forgiveness. Love is the middle term between the universal moral law and the individual. Feuerbach's analysis here is an explicit critique of Kant's misplaced emphasis on the abstract universality of moral law and reflects what Feuerbach considers a dialectical advancement of the meaning of the place of morality in a proper understanding of God. For Feuerbach, it is only through love – the perfection of the essential power of feeling – that individuals can be forgiven for failing to live up to the moral law and overcome the moral condemnation of the

[12] The closest statements in Pölitz's first edition (1817) of Kant's *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* are "God is thought of as the author of our moral laws" and "God…as the supreme principle in the realm of *ends*" (Kant 1996, 348, 28:1002). He also states that God has the moral attribute of holiness (Kant 1996, 408, 28:1073).

[13] "If anything checks our self-conceit in our own judgment, it humiliates. Therefore, the moral law inevitably humbles every man when he compares the sensuous propensity of his nature with the law" (Kant 1988, 77 – 78 [74]).

understanding. He exclaims, "Not abstract beings – no! only sensuous living beings are merciful" (Feuerbach 1989, 49). And this love is represented in the Christian religion by a "Divine Being not only as law, as a moral being, as a being of the understanding; but also as a loving, tender, even *subjective* human being" (Feuerbach 1989, 47), i.e., as the God-man Jesus.

For Feuerbach and contra Kant, the true basis of religion is not the abstract universal moral law of pure practical reason but feeling (*Gefühl*) and sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*), which he examines in his chapter on the mystery of the Incarnation that directly follows his account of God as a moral being. Feuerbach's analysis of the Incarnation is the heart of his interpretation of the essence of Christianity and represents the final movement in the dialectical understanding of God in the *Essence* that began with God as a being of the understanding. Feuerbach states,

> *the distinction between the…philosophic, and the Christian God…reduces itself only to the distinction between the understanding or reason and the heart or feelings*. Reason is the self-consciousness of the species, as such; feeling is the self-consciousness of individuality; the reason has relation to existences as things; the heart to existences as persons…*Cogito ergo sum*? No! *Sentio, ergo sum* (Feuerbach 1989, 285).

Love is the deepest feeling in relation to others, "which reconciles man himself with God, or rather with his own nature as represented in the moral law" (Feuerbach 1989, 50). Feuerbach says "love is not holy because it is a predicate of God, but it is a predicate of God because it is in itself divine" (Feuerbach 1989, 273), that is, humans experience the power of love as an ultimate truth and reality.

As a result, love, the natural and known quality, must be made the essential and substantial thing, rather than a supernatural and unknowable God. Feuerbach rhetorically asks, "Who then are our Saviour and Redeemer? God or Love? Love… As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God" (Feuerbach 1989, 51). In another place, he entirely secularizes 1 John 4:8 by saying "Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God" (Feuerbach 1989, 48). For Feuerbach, the ultimacy of human love in Christianity also affirms the paramount moral value of love in what he calls the "new philosophy" in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. He says, "the new philosophy bases itself on the *truth of love*, on the *truth of feeling*. In love, in feeling in general, *every human being confesses to, the truth of the new* philosophy" (Feuerbach 1972, 226, § 34).

III. Assessment of Feuerbach's Anthropomorphic Critique of Kant

I've attempted to show that Kant's views of God inspired the structure of Feuerbach's analysis in the *Essence* and that Feuerbach incorporates, and specifically responds to, Kant's accounts of God from a theoretical and moral point of view. Despite Feuerbach's compressed and at times opaque references, Kant's accounts are a central target for Feuerbach. But how accurate is his understanding of Kant's theism, and how plausible is his anthropomorphic critique? Feuerbach's most significant oversight is that he does not acknowledge the role of the highest good in Kant's moral theism. This is puzzling since Feuerbach quotes from both from the *Critique of Practical Reason* and Kant's *Lectures* on religion. God is not, as he attributes to Kant, the realized idea of morality but a necessary postulate to realize the highest good. Moreover, while Feuerbach generally understands "Kantian idealism, in which things conform to the intellect and not the intellect to things" (Feuerbach 1972, 200, § 17), he does not make explicit Kant's distinction between empirical and a *priori* qualities, which Kant believed saved his theism from an anthropomorphic critique.

Despite these shortcomings in his account of Kant's theism, Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique is compelling. Feuerbach is right to challenge Kant's transcendent theology based on Kant's appeals to the subjective (human) needs of theoretical and practical reason – the desire to have a complete understanding of the conditioned world of nature and to have an ultimate justice. These desires might just reflect human needs and not any necessities about the universe. Kant would insist that his subtle anthropomorphism is not contradicted by anything in experience. But in Kant's characterization of God as a creation of pure (theoretical and practical) reason with attributes that reflect the *a priori* aspects of human cognition, it's understandable that Feuerbach would find this type of anthropomorphism to be a projection of human nature as well. For Kant to claim that these qualities are not empirical and hence escape the charge of anthropomorphism is difficult to defend. Qualities attributed to God that are (allegedly) *a priori* – like substance, intelligence, causal power for the God of pure theoretical reason and omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence for the God of pure practical reason – are *nonetheless still qualities of human cognition* that need not be applicable for other kinds of beings aware of the essential qualities of their species.[14]

[14] After noting Kant's frequent appeals to human moral needs as the basis for his moral theology, Louden appropriately asks "Is Kant's God simply a proto-Feuerbachian projection

In section 17 of his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach elaborates on his anthropomorphic critique of Kant in the *Essence*. Feuerbach contends that Kant does not bring his idealism to its logical conclusion – to eliminate the idea of God as an independently existing being, as a thing in itself. To retain the notion of an independently existing God represents what Feuerbach terms "a limited idealism – idealism situated on *the standpoint of empiricism*" (Feuerbach 1972, 201, § 17). Feuerbach's point is that for Kant to posit God as a thing in itself means that there is theoretically such a Being that could be experienced by humans, yet if it is beyond the capacity of human experience – objects are experienceable as a result of the structure of the human mind – then it is not possible to experience God. So what practical relevance can the idea have? As Feuerbach states, "it has ceased to have any truth for our actual being…but it still continues to be a theoretical truth; that is, a limit on our mind" (Feuerbach 1972, 201, § 17).

And according to Feuerbach, God is irrelevant in the moral sphere since humans are the source of the moral law. Feuerbach states, "Kant has realized and at the same time negated theology within the sphere of morality, and the divine being within the sphere of the will…the only significance his theism can have, therefore, is that of a theoretical limit" (Feuerbach 1972, 201-202, § 17). The implication of Kant's idealism is that the idea of God as an independently existing Being is merely an abstract idea that reason postulates or creates, yet it is has no practical import in human life since such a being is neither necessary for morality nor is possible to experience. However, in his neglect to acknowledge Kant's concept of the highest good, Feuerbach does not appreciate how this concept, and its necessary corollaries of an afterlife and God, provide a rational-based hope in an ultimate justice, which can have a real, practical effects on human conduct. Nevertheless, I believe Feuerbach's anthropomorphic critique still stands since (1) Kant's concept of the highest good itself reflects a human desire or need for an ultimate justice and (2) even in an afterlife, how could humanity ever know about God in itself if humanity is bound by its modes of cognition?

Kant invokes the concept of a "boundary" (*eine Grenze*) (Kant 1977, 94 [360]) to represent the rightful limit of pure reason in transcending the boundaries of experience in attributing to God a priori forms. Feuerbach's reflection on Kant's "subtle" anthropomorphic representation of a transcendent

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of human needs? …this is not where Kant wants to go, but the trajectory of his thought may have inadvertently opened the way for a quite different "true, i.e., anthropological, essence of religion" (Louden 2015a, 98 – 99).

God leads him back to what he believes is the ultimate reality, the immanence and truth of humanity's highest powers. This is the answer to Feuerbach's question whether the nature of man is "transcendental (*außerweltliches*) or immanent (*innerweltliches*), supranatural (*übernatürliches*) or naturalistic (*natürliches*)" (Feuerbach 1989, 107).[15] Feuerbach thereby replaces Kant's concept – literal and metaphorical – of an ultimate boundary with a different metaphor: a *mirror* (*ein Spiegel*). He states, "religion is human nature reflected, mirrored in itself" (Feuerbach 1989, 63), the essence of God "a mirror of human nature" (Feuerbach 1989, 221).[16] The ultimate in human life is not an unknowable God but the exercise, and enjoyment, of the essential human powers of thought, will, and feeling and the striving for their perfections in reason, freedom and love. This is the true meaning of the divine and religion.

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[15] Stewart rejects Feuerbach's claim that he is preserving theology and Christianity. He argues that theology is a legitimate realm of inquiry that cannot be reduced to anthropology, just as anthropology cannot be reduced to physics (Stewart 2020, 90 – 91). I agree with the latter claim, but there is a disanalogy with the former claim since Feuerbach defends an immanent, non-supernatural version of Christianity, which is theologically possible and actually has a basis in the Christian scriptures.

[16] In another passage, Feuerbach claims, it "is pleasanter to look in the love-beaming eyes of another personal being, than to look into the concave mirror of self" (Feuerbach 1989, 140).

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Lou Matz
Department of Philosophy
University of the Pacific
3601 Pacific Ave.
Stockton, CA 95211
USA
e-mail: lmatz@pacific.edu