

Panelo, Sandra H.

AB PHILO 2-3

# Analyzing *Karl Marx's* First Thesis on Feuerbach

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*The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included— is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism — which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.*

*Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *The Essence of Christianity*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary,' of 'practical-critical,' activity.<sup>1</sup>*

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One of the fundamental issues that philosophers have had to contend with over the history of philosophy is the question of what reality is made of what the world is. And materialism is a position you can take on that issue. Materialists assert that there is only one thing that exists, and as the name would imply, that one thing that exists is physical matter.<sup>2</sup> Because of that, they deny the existence of anything that is not matter. So that includes spirits, gods, the supernatural—there can't be any supernatural forces because there's only one nature, and that's the physical nature.

Now, Marx himself is a materialist<sup>3</sup>, and he has no issues with either of these. He has no problem asserting that matter is the only thing that exists. He has no problem

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl. n.d. "Theses on Feuerbach."

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfe, Charles T. 2016. *Materialism: A Historico-Philosophical Introduction*. 1

<sup>3</sup> Levine, Norman. 2012. *Marx's Discourse with Hegel*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 245-246.

denying the existence of spirits, gods, or supernatural forces. He doesn't have a problem with these assertions per se; rather, it's the implication, or one of the implications, of these statements that is related to something Marx considers crucial for the type of philosophy he wants to be doing.

To gain a more profound insight into the initial portion of the first thesis, I plan to explore a supplementary source that has proven highly beneficial during my research on this subject, Sydney Hook's "Marx and Feuerbach," published in 1936. Hook quoted:

*No matter what form traditional materialism took, it explained not only the composition of man's body but the contents of his mind as resultant effects of elements and **energies streaming into him from without**. The human mind was conceived as passive and plastic. Even where, as in Locke, the mind was endowed with certain powers by which it combined the original ideas derived from without, there was no adequate recognition of the part which human beings played in reacting upon, altering, and transforming their environment. Since materialism, operating with a simple cause-effect relationship, could not account for the redirective activity of man, it could not account for the actualities of human thinking and its practical fruits. At most it pictured thinking as a private, subcutaneous reflection upon what had already happened, an incandescent after-glow – beautiful, perhaps, in design and color, but absolutely impotent to affect the course of things.<sup>4</sup>*

What is Hook talking about in this passage? Let's consider a person and their mind. Marx references Locke<sup>5</sup>, known for the famous "blank slate" idea, suggesting that our minds are empty at birth, and all ideas are acquired through education and cultural influences. There are no ideas that are really ours; they just come from society, and Hook describes the minds, therefore, as passive. And that's kind of what it sounds like: these elements and energies flowing in from without. Think of all this space as the world, as

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<sup>4</sup> Hook, Sydney. n.d. "Sydney Hook: Marx and Feuerbach (1936)."

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/hook/1936/04/feuerbach.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Murat Birdal, "Locke's Theory of Property and Its Marxist Critique: Locke and Marx on Property Rights and Individual Liberties," İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası 57, no. 1 (2007): 46-47, <https://arastirmax.com/en/system/files/dergiler/273/makaleler/57/1/arastirmax-lockes-theory-property-and-its-marxist-critique-locke-and-marx-property-rights-and-individual-liberties.pdf>.

society, and this is the human mind. You see it's unidirectional; society, the world, everything flows into the mind. But the human mind, nothing comes out of there; it's passive, it's not active. That's the problem for Marx. Marx wants to do philosophy with praxis in mind, and we can't do that kind of philosophy if the mind is the recipient and never the active participant.

Materialism, as Sydney Hook writes, is cause and effect.<sup>6</sup> The cause has the effect whatever's in our mind, but it doesn't seem to go the other way. And Marx is totally fine with the idea that nature influences man. What he's not okay with is the fact that materialists have neglected what Marx thinks is a pretty observable reality: the fact that man is just as capable of influencing nature as nature is of influencing man.

So far, I have discussed about what Marx means by materialism and the problems he's seen in materialism over the course of the history of philosophy. But recall that in the first sentence of the first thesis, he doesn't just mention hitherto existing materialism; he also mentions the materialism of Feuerbach included. So there's a specific problem that Marx finds with Feuerbach's attempts at doing materialist philosophy. And I think the best place to find the real difference between Marx's philosophy and Feuerbach's philosophy is in how these two philosophers understand the human being. The passage I want to highlight from this text is found in Part One, Section One, titled "Being of Man in General."<sup>7</sup> In this paragraph, Feuerbach is talking about what makes humans different from animals.

To summarize it, we can say that one of the principal differences between Feuerbach and Marx's conception of the human being is that what differentiates us from

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<sup>6</sup> Hook, Sydney. n.d. "Sydney Hook: Marx and Feuerbach (1936)."

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841), GW, vol. 5, translated by George Eliot, with an introduction by Karl Barth and a foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

animals for Feuerbach is that we have consciousness, specifically self-consciousness. For Marx, what differentiates us from animals is the fact that we're able to produce what we need to survive. To be clear, Marx is not talking about the fact that we're able to produce what we need to survive, but rather that we are able to produce that which produces what we need to survive.

There's a great quote from the same section of "The Essence of Christianity" where Feuerbach writes, "Man is nothing without the objects that express his being."<sup>8</sup> So what is he talking about there? Feuerbach is describing all these objects, a lot of celestial imagery, suns, moons, stars. Feuerbach thinks that the kind of consciousness that differentiates us from animals is the sort of consciousness where I am able to know that I am me. And the way that I know I am me, according to Feuerbach, is I know that something else is not me. This is, again, unidirectional. I'm contemplating these objects. I'm aware of these objects. I'm aware of myself. It really hits that point home that we are self-aware, but awareness is mental. We have not actually left the mind and interacted with this world in a way that is tangible. We have interacted with the world in the sense that we've observed it, we've contemplated, as he says, we're aware of it, and we're even aware of ourselves. But is that the same thing as saying that we're actually influencing the world or interacting with the world physically? Well, no. We still haven't left the mind.

In "The Essence of Christianity," Feuerbach argues that instead of God creating man, man creates God, projecting human qualities onto the divine. However, there are issues with this thesis. Feuerbach's analogy likens his philosophy to a piano playing itself like in Western thriller movies, which, though approaching autonomy, still relies on human

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841), 24

input. Another problem arises as Feuerbach claims that humans are self-conscious but argues that the projection onto God is not done self-consciously, creating a contradiction. Marx, on the other hand, believes that human essence lies in activity, not consciousness, sarcastically referencing Feuerbach's views on religion and consciousness. The use of irony is a recurring theme in "The German Ideology."

According to Marx, the issue with Feuerbach wasn't a lack of commitment to materialism but rather an excessive adherence to idealism. Marx contends that Feuerbach aspired to be a proficient materialist philosopher but was held back by what Sydney Hook aptly characterizes as "vestigial idealism."<sup>9</sup> This term, denotes something that remains though it is no longer necessary, similar to an appendix in the human body. That's what Sydney Hook is referring to when he mentions that Feuerbach has this "vestigial idealism."<sup>10</sup> Even though Feuerbach is critiquing Hegel and idealism, attempting to embrace materialism, he seems unable to fully let go of his abstract thinking.

In scrutinizing Karl Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach and delving into the complications of materialism, it becomes evident that Marx is not merely concerned with asserting the primacy of matter over the metaphysical. Instead, he grapples with the limitations he perceives in existing materialist philosophies, notably those of Feuerbach. The key deficiency Marx identifies is the neglect of sensuous human activity and practice, reducing reality to contemplation and objectification. This deficiency, Marx argues, stems from a historical tendency within materialism to develop its active side abstractly through the lens of idealism, divorcing it from real, sensuous activity.

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<sup>9 9</sup> Hook, Sydney. n.d. "Sydney Hook: Marx and Feuerbach (1936)."