

Young Hegelianism in Engels's Evaluation of Feuerbach and Hegel

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In 1886, Friedrich Engels first published his influential article, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy”. Nominally, the occasion was the publication in German of the Danish philosopher C. N. Starcke’s 1883 *Habilitationsschrift* on Feuerbach the year before, which Karl Kautsky, then the editor of the journal *Neue Zeit*, asked Engels to review. He complied, and the article was printed in the April and May issues of *Neue Zeit* 1886. It was an immediate success, and already in December 1887 the publisher, Johann Dietz, suggested to Engels that it be published as a stand-alone pamphlet. Engels again complied, and in May 1888 – exactly two years after it was originally published – a second edition with only minor revisions appeared. There was one major addition, though: Eleven short notes on Feuerbach written by Marx in 1845, which Engels attached as an appendix. Why, however, did Engels decide to comply? It had been 40 years since he and Marx left their engagement with Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians to the ‘gnawing criticism of the mice’, so why take it up again just because some Danish philosophy historian was working on Feuerbach? The answer should be found in the original context of its publication.

After Engels’s death the essay quickly took on an after-life of its own, morphing in the canon of so-called ‘Traditional Marxism’ into an accessible introduction to the genesis of Marxism parallel only to Lenin’s famous essay “The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism” (1913). However, just like Engels’s other most famous work, *Anti-Dühring*, the Feuerbach essay was not originally conceived as a *general introduction*, but as a *specific refutation*. At the time, as the appearance Starcke’s book attests, and as Starcke himself mentions in the foreword, there was a

resurgent interest in Feuerbach in German public life.¹ This interest was also spreading to the German labour movement where an eclectic mix of naturalist materialism, positivistic realism, and Neo-Kantian epistemology was making the rounds.² Starcke's book was thus a welcome opportunity for Engels to confront these retrogressive tendencies and assert the primacy of Marx's dynamic materialism. In the word of Renate Merkel-Melis and the MEGA editors:

Sein zentrales Anliegen war dabei, in den aktuellen politisch-wissenschaftlichen Diskussionen der deutschen Sozialdemokratie die aus seiner Sicht notwendige historisch-materialistische Begründung des Sozialismus zu verdeutlichen.³

This context is important for understanding why Engels decided to engage with Starcke's book and, by extension, with Feuerbach, Hegel, and philosophy more broadly. What I will argue in the following, however, is that Engels did this in a distinct and peculiar way. Not only did he assert the historical materialist basis of socialism, he did so in a way that employs the very Hegelian philosophy he is arguing against and in a mode that recalls his own and Marx's background as precisely Young Hegelians themselves.

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In the Feuerbach essay, Engels begins by sketching out the internal contradictions of Hegel's philosophy and their relation to the dissolution of the Hegelian school. He then proceeds in the second part to comment on philosophy as such as well as Feuerbach and Starcke specifically. Then, in the third part, he comments more closely on the philosophy of Feuerbach, especially the decomposition of a genuine materialist impulse into what Engels characterises as abstract morality. Finally, Engels evaluates some of the other Young Hegelians and then proceeds to demonstrate how the emergence of Marxism is the fulfilment of the original critical impulse of Hegelian philosophy sketched out in the first part of the essay.

In his depiction of Hegel's philosophy and the post-Hegelian developments of philosophy more broadly, Engels continuously employs the classic Hegelian distinction between on the one hand 'form' and 'content' and on the other 'essence' (*Wesen*) and 'appearance' (*Erscheinung*). In Hegel, both the form and the content of a phenomenon are sides of its appearance, which is always the appearance of something else, viz. its essence. In the last instance, only the phenomenon which, in

¹ C. N. Starcke, *Ludwig Feuerbach* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1885), xvii.

² MEGA I.30 (Apparat), 781-82.

³ MEGA I.30 (Apparat), 783.

both its content and form (i.e., in its appearance) corresponds to its essence can be said to possess *active reality* (*Wirklichkeit*). This is, of course, a perversely truncated version of Hegel's notion of essence and appearance, but it serves only to emphasise this last part: That to Hegel, only that phenomenon which in its appearance corresponds to its essence is real in an active sense (as opposed to the mere predicate of existence).

In the first section of the essay, Engels applies this notion to Hegel's own philosophy. Like any phenomenon, it too can be separated into an appearance, which has a form and a content, which might again correspond to a greater or lesser degree to its essence. In the case of Hegelian philosophy, the content is the dialectical method, which is processual and revolutionary at its core:

[Precisely] therein lay the true significance and the revolutionary character of Hegelian philosophy (...) that it once and for all dealt the death blow to the finality of all products of human thought and action.⁴

While the true content of Hegelian philosophy thus emphasises *change*, the form it takes emphasises *stability*. This gives rise to Engels's famous distinction between the *method* (its content) of Hegelian philosophy and the *system* (its form), and according to him its subsequent development should be seen as a dialectic of this form and content.

Engels sums up this analysis as a difference in attitude towards Hegel's famous double dictum from the *Philosophy of Right*.⁵ While the conservative Hegelians put the emphasis on the first part ("what is rational is real") and thus on the system, the revolutionary Young Hegelians put the emphasis on the second part ("what is real is rational") and thus on the method.⁶ Engels makes no secret of his own allegiances. Hegel's philosophy, he writes, shows how "everything that is real in the sphere of human history becomes irrational in the course of time", and so,

in accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition of the rationality of everything which is real is dissolved to become the other proposition: All that exists deserves to perish.⁷

⁴ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy", in MECW 26 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 359.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 20.

⁶ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach", 363.

⁷ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach", 359. Engels is paraphrasing Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, Act I, scene 3: "I am the spirit, ever, that denies! / And rightly so: since everything created, / in turn deserves to be annihilated: / Better if nothing came to be."

In other words, his own analysis of Hegel's philosophy is, by his own standards, quintessentially Young Hegelian. It is worth here again to emphasise the main point, as it will be important later: though something might at some point be rational, *all will* – over the course of human history – *become irrational*, and as it becomes irrational, *it also becomes unreal* (*ad modum* the Hegelian notion of active reality). And so, in Engels's analysis, the post-Hegelian development of philosophy is actually the development of Hegel's philosophy toward an appearance where form and content are in accord, i.e., a form where philosophy is not only destructive in its content but also in its form.

As will be his habit throughout the text, Engels portrays this development as the progression of gradually more adequate forms or representations of this true, revolutionary and destructive content: first in a purely *philosophical* form as a debate over self-consciousness versus substance; then in a *theological* form as a discussion about the veracity of the Gospels; and finally in a *political* form as “the destruction of traditional religion and the state”.⁸ While these themes mentioned by Engels are indeed present in the post-Hegelian discussion, in no way did they proceed in such an orderly fashion or even in that order, as Engels – himself an active participant in these discussions – would have been well aware. What Engels is giving us is thus essentially a *logical reconstruction*: he is emphasising a dialectical development in post-Hegelian philosophy in a way that is, as I have said above, indicative of the wider theme of the text.

If this is the distinction Engels makes between the form and the content of Hegel's philosophy, i.e., its *appearance*, what then is its essence? To answer this question, we must turn to Engels's wider treatment of the development of modern philosophy as well as philosophy as such, which again progresses as a series of essences and appearances.

The first essence that Engels presents us with is the essence of philosophical questions as such. The “great basic question” in modern philosophy, Engels famously tells us at the beginning of the second section, “is that concerning the relation of thinking and being”.⁹ Throughout its history, the core problems of philosophy have all been (or are reducible to) appearances of this fundamental question, appearances which usually take on an *active form* and a *passive content*. For example, the question “Has God created the world?” is the active form of the passive question, “which is primary, mind or nature[?]”, and taken together they are an appearance of the basic question.¹⁰

⁸ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 363-64.

⁹ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 365.

¹⁰ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 366.

“Answers to this question”, Engels continues, “split the philosophers in two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of the mind over nature (...) [And the] others, who regarded nature as primary”.¹¹ These are the camps of idealism and materialism, and Engels then goes on to depict the development of modern philosophy as a *development toward gradually more adequate forms of materialism*. Here, we get our second essence, that of philosophy itself: materialism. The basic question as the essence of *philosophical questioning* is thus, in turn, only the appearance of a deeper essence still, viz. that of *philosophy as such*. In modern philosophy, Engels argues, there has been a progression from Hume to Kant, from Kant to Hegel, and from Hegel to Feuerbach, which has been a progression from the most crass idealism (Hume) to a provisional apex of materialism (Feuerbach), which – as we shall see – is then finally superseded by Marx. Hence, philosophy too has developed toward an ever-greater realisation of its essence, materialism, and Hegel’s philosophy is only a step on the way toward this teleological goal.

However, not only has philosophy developed toward a gradually more full embrace of materialism, materialism itself has also undergone such a development, and so we arrive at a third essence, viz. that of materialism itself. Engels distinguishes between “materialism that is a general world outlook resting upon a definite conception of the relation between matter and mind” and the specific way that this expresses itself at a definite stage in history.¹² And, he continues, “just as idealism underwent a series of stages of development, so also did materialism. With each epoch-making discovery in the sphere of natural science it has to change its form.”¹³

Materialism has developed from the crude mechanical materialism of the eighteenth century via a fruitful encounter with Hegel’s dynamic and processual philosophy (at least in its content) to gradually approach its own true essence, viz. *natural science*. Because materialism asserts the primacy of the material world, it is dependent in its development upon our knowledge of this material world. In the same way that it was not possible for Hegel to give his philosophy a form that corresponded to its content – and thus to the essence of philosophy – because of the limits of his time, so the mechanical materialists of the eighteenth century were not able to formulate a more adequate materialism either because of the level of development of the natural sciences of their time. Their materialism was mechanical because their natural science was.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 369.

¹³ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 371.

Feuerbach's materialism, too, Engels tells us, was limited by its time. In order to realise materialism it must be given a form that corresponds to the development of its essence, i.e., the natural sciences – and Feuerbach fails to do this. In other words, his materialism is *unreal*, it does not correspond to its essence. “How was it possible”, Engels asks, “that the powerful impetus given by Feuerbach turned out to be so unfruitful for himself?”¹⁴ The answer is that Feuerbach clung ‘to the level of abstraction’, insisting on hypostasised concepts like ‘Man’ and ‘species-being’, or as Engels calls it: “Feuerbach's cult of abstract man”.¹⁵ The two sides of philosophy (i.e., idealism and materialism) had developed to the point where on the one hand Hegel's idealist philosophy was *correctly dialectical* in its content but *incorrectly idealist* in its form, while the French mechanical materialism was *incorrectly metaphysical* (i.e., un-dialectical) in its form but *correctly materialist* in its content. Feuerbach attempts a sublation of this dialectic, but takes the *false* form of Hegel's philosophy and turns it into his content, while he takes the *true* content of materialism and turns into pure form:

In form he [Feuerbach] is realistic since he takes man as his point of departure; but there is absolutely no mention of the world in which this man lives; hence, this man remains always the same abstract man who occupied the field in the philosophy of religion.¹⁶

This type of critique, which Frederick Beiser has described as a “trend toward *progressive de-hypostatization*”, where each thinker accuses his predecessor of not taking de-hypostatisation far enough, arguing that they are “still under the sway of hypostasis”, is fundamental to Young Hegelianism. While in Beiser's account it is a trend that can be seen in critical philosophy from Kant to Feuerbach, it is also a process visible internally in Young Hegelianism. David Strauss is accused of hypostatizing substance; Bruno Bauer is accused of hypostatizing self-consciousness; Edgar Bauer is accused of hypostatizing critique; Feuerbach is accused of hypostatizing man; and Max Stirner, ever the radical nominalist, simply accuses everyone of hypostatizing everything all the time. And here, 40 years later, we have Engels repeating this fundamentally Young Hegelian critique: the reason that Feuerbach is unable to realise materialism is that he makes the hypostasised and thus metaphysical (i.e., un-dialectical) categories of man and being the content of his philosophy, reducing materialism to pure form. In order to truly realise materialism (and thus realise philosophy), Engels

¹⁴ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 381.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”, 377.

argues, we must instead leave Feuerbach's 'cult of abstract man' and take the final step toward a "science of real men and of their historical development".¹⁷ This is, of course, the step taken by Marx.

In modern times, the natural sciences have progressed to their dynamical stage, embodied in what Engels terms the 'three great discoveries' of modern science: the discovery of the cell, of the transformation of energy, and finally Darwinism and the discovery of the developmental processes of organic nature. In order for materialism to be realised, it must therefore be given a dynamical form. Marx achieves this by reversing Feuerbach's appropriation of Hegel. Rather than making the idealist form his content and materialism pure form, he takes materialism as his content and turns what was the content in Hegel's thought, the dialectic, into form:

[It] was resolved to comprehend the real world—nature and history—just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from preconceived idealist quirks. It was decided mercilessly to sacrifice every idealist quirk which could not be brought into harmony with the facts conceived in their own.¹⁸

He thus provides materialism with a form that is adequate to its dynamic essence. Marx's great achievement, Engels says, is that his thought is fundamentally *scientific*; Marxism is the realisation of materialism because it is the actualisation of its essence. And so, Engels says, "In this way, the revolutionary side of Hegelian philosophy was taken up and at the same time freed from the idealist trimmings",¹⁹ i.e., liberated *both* from the inadequate form of the Hegelian system, *and* the inadequate content of Feuerbach's moralistic idealism.

Marx's thought is thus the realisation of materialism because it gives materialism an appearance that corresponds to its essence, i.e. natural science, but at the same time it is a realisation of philosophy, because philosophy's essence is materialism. When materialism is realised, philosophy is realised. Like the trend of progressive de-hypostatization, this idea of a realisation of philosophy is a constant theme of Young Hegelianism. To a greater or lesser extent, the Young Hegelians all agreed that Hegel's philosophy was, at least in its revolutionary (or Young Hegelian) form, the final stage of philosophy. In accordance with the principle sketched out by Engels himself in the beginning of the essay, any and all phenomena will over the course of history become irrational and must "perish", i.e., be sublated into a new and higher phenomenon. If Hegel's philosophy was, as the Young Hegelians believed, the final form of philosophy it begged the question what new form human

¹⁷ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach", 381.

¹⁸ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach", 382.

¹⁹ Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach", 383.

consciousness or knowledge would take. Engels's answer in the Feuerbach essay is clear: Marx's materialist conception of history, since such a dynamic materialism is in itself a realisation of philosophy's true essence as revealed by the Young Hegelians themselves.

However, this is not a true sublation in a Hegelian sense where the moments are preserved equally in the sublated position. Remember: "All that exists deserves to perish". Rather than the conciliatory understanding of sublation expressed by Hegel, it is a revolutionary and destructive form of sublation, a kind best expressed by Mikhail Bakunin, then an avid Young Hegelian, in his 1842 essay, "The Reaction in Germany":

Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternally creative source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too.²⁰

Engels's evaluation of vulgar materialism and of the resurgent Feuerbachian naturalistic and sensualistic materialism, Neo-Kantian epistemology, etc. should be seen in this light. They are not merely wrong, *they are unreal*, i.e., they no longer correspond to their times and have become irrational.

In this way, Engels's Young Hegelian inspired evaluation of Feuerbach mirrors his and Marx's evaluation of the so-called 'utopian' socialists. As David Leopold has argued, Marx and Engels give their qualified approval of the utopians *in their own time* – they were conditioned by historical development, and they *could not* have developed a better understanding of communism. However, Marx and Engels are furious in their scorn of *contemporary* Saint-Simonists, Owenites, etc. They *should* know better. They are not progressives, but retrogressive in their standpoint.²¹ Similarly, the French mechanical materialists of the eighteenth century *could not* have known better, because natural science – the essence of materialism – had not developed beyond its mechanical stage. However, materialists of the late nineteenth century who continue to hold these positions are *vulgar* materialists precisely because they *should* know better.

In conclusion, Engels's motivation for engaging with Feuerbach might very well be, as the MEGA editors assert, to put socialism on the proper footing of historical materialism vis-à-vis other resurgent tendencies in the German labour movement. His manner of argumentation, however, is not

²⁰ Mikhail Bakunin, "The Reaction in Germany. A Fragment from a Frenchman", in *Selected Writings*, ed. Arthur Lehning (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 58.

²¹ David Leopold. *The Young Marx. German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 282 ff.

simply asserting that such a historical materialist ground is *better*, but rather, in typical Young Hegelian fashion, to assert that it is *truer*, i.e., that it is *wirklich*.