

Hegel, Marx and the Enlightenment

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Smith elaborates on the humanist conception of Marxism, and its historical background over Hegel, the enlightenment movement and the medieval scholastics. This text is based on the [MIA version](#), which reminds the reader that some of the ideas “remain half-baked”.

1. Marx's work centres on the notion of true humanity as freely-associated in collective, mutual and individual self-creation. That is the content of his critique of political economy, which exposes the inhuman, unfree forms in which humanity has encased itself and thus shows how the proletariat – in Marx's all-sided conception of that word – can find the path to universal human emancipation.
2. This critique penetrates the false conception of 'single individuals in civil society', which was the advance/retreat of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It was an advance, because its conception of the individual free from state and church control opened the way for huge scientific, political and social changes. But it was also a retreat, whose effects are felt to this day, because it put a stop to all attempts to think about ourselves as a part of a unified self-changing world.
3. It was this Enlightenment conception which underlay the idea of nearly all varieties of socialism. The socialists wanted to overcome the lunacy of modern society by rationally rearranging the social-economic connections between 'citizens'. Each of these single individuals was left untouched until his or her 'circumstances' were altered. So the work of rearrangement had to be carried out by somebody else, an educated elite or party, which has somehow managed to escaped the power of the old order to mould individual consciousness. 'Theory' and 'doctrine', enterprises which stand apart from their subject-matter, are the business of an elite of this sort, which aims to enlighten the ignorant masses on the virtues of some prefabricated scheme. Marx himself, far from being an advocate of any activity like this, engages in the critique of all such plans, which, whatever their intentions, themselves express the class divisions of the existing social order.¹
4. Let us look briefly at some of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment way of thinking, the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when modern bourgeois society was taking shape. This is more or less what Hegel calls 'the Understanding', [*Verstand*, as opposed to *Vernunft* = Reason]. It sees the world from the point of view of one of these social atoms. The natural world and society looked like collections of discrete bits and pieces, machines made up of smaller machines. When the 'single individual' thought about this mechanical world, he could only think of himself as yet another machine, quite unchanged by interaction with the rest. In trying to think about these assemblies of atoms, many problems arose, but

¹ I used to link the critiques of political economy and Utopia with the critique of Hegelian dialectic, but I now want to place this third critical operation on a separate plane, for it includes and underlies each of the other two.

these could be answered if you broke each of them into separate sub-problems.

5. The individual got his knowledge of the world by logically decoding messages conveyed to him through his senses. Apart from these bulletins, the knowing subject and the object of knowledge were utterly different and separate from each other, as were Nature and humanity. Freedom, which for this outlook means the removal of 'external' restrictions on the individual, did not exist in nature, where movement was rigidly determined. To be 'objective' you had to expunge everything subjective, like feeling, will or free creative activity. This was how reason, the equipment of each individual human, worked in opposition to superstition of all kinds, which churchmen and monarchs instilled into the heads of the masses. The Enlightenment's defeat of 'superstition' was an advance, without doubt, but one for which we paid a price: it walled us off from many centuries of thought about humanity and its world, for this had almost entirely been couched in religious terms.
6. This outlook made possible modern natural science, which seeks 'objectivity' by separating its subject-matter from everything human, that is, by separating itself from its object. But what did that allow it to say about human society? Homo sapiens, like all biological forms, was part of this blind rushing about, and whether humans were put here by an absent Deity, or got here by chance, their social relations could only be understood as given externally to subjectivity. Political economy, and later sociology, studied social machines, made up of atoms driven by self-interest. However, since Reason was eternal – eternally in battle against superstition – thought itself could not have a history: either a proposition was eternally true or it had always been false. The social order and its movement were governed by laws as fixed as the ones that ruled the solar system. By the end of the eighteenth century, Rousseau and Kant had begun to illuminate the weaknesses and contradictions underlying this Enlightenment project. What was the rational justification for Reason? If humans are 'radically evil' (Kant), democracy is not for them, but for angels. Humans will have to be 'forced to be free' by the Enlighteners (Rousseau).
7. Marx spent his entire working life as a pupil and critic of Hegel² The significance of this dual relationship was lost, along with Marx's humanism, in the Enlightened, scientifically rational 'Marxism' of the Second International. The Third International never recovered it, and in general continued the Enlightenment tradition, despite Lenin's heroic effort to read Hegel's 'Science of Logic' in 1914-5.
8. Hegel must be taken as a whole. In particular, his Berlin years are crucial for what we need from him, including his work (a) on the State (1821); (b) on the history of philosophy; (c) on Aesthetics; (d) on the philosophy of religion; (e) on the philosophy of history.³
9. Each part of Hegel's programme, while preserving many of the advances of the Enlightenment, stands in opposition to its basic conceptions. In particular, where the philosophers either discarded religion or attempted to rationalise it, theology is central to all of Hegel's work. After his grappling with Christianity in his student years, his turn to philosophy ['science' = *Wissenschaft*] is inseparable from his peculiar views on God. Even when the 'Marxists' did bring themselves to peep into Hegel,

² Those who say that Marx did not completely understand Hegel are, of course, absolutely correct. Every great thinker must yield a mass of ideas which transcend any particular reading of his work. That is why Marx continually returned to Hegel to win yet further insights and to criticise him anew. Naturally, similar considerations apply to any reading of Marx.

³ Note how these cover the items which Marx listed in the 'superstructure' in his 1859 *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*. Marx's idea of 'free association' implies the transcendence of each of these fields, that is, their dissolution in a human world of free creation.

they just couldn't handle this aspect. Lenin's panic every time Hegel mentions God is comical. For Lukacs, who knew a great deal about Hegel, his religious views are a shameful secret.

10. When Hegel frequently professes his Lutheran convictions, this is not, as some Young Hegelians supposed, just an attempt to stay within the bounds of respectability and keep his job. But what kind of Lutheran is Hegel? Here are some peculiarities: (a) Hegel does not conceive of the Christian Trinity as belonging to particular events in history: the Creator does his work all the time. The Book of Genesis must be taken together with the Prologue to John's Gospel. The Son of God is not merely to be identified with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. (b) God creates the world and humanity within it because he has to, not out of free choice. He needs his creation: without it 'God is not God' and without our consciousness God is not self-conscious. (c) Hegel agrees that the Trinity is a mystery, and identifies his own 'speculative philosophy' as 'mysticism'. But this does not imply that its truth is hidden: on the contrary, God reveals himself through it, and Hegel sees his own system as the self-thinking Idea which is at the same time the self-consciousness of God.⁴ So when Hegel says: 'The world is something produced by God, and so the divine idea always forms the foundation of what the world as a whole is' (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*), he is a million miles away from the orthodox Christian understanding of God the Creator.
11. It is important not to overlook the depth to which Hegel's system is penetrated by this particular view of religion. For example, look again at the triadic divisions which abound throughout the system:

Logic, Nature, Mind;
Universal, Particular, Individual;
Being, Essence, Concept;
Abstract Right, Morality, Ethical Life;
Family, Civil Society, State.

Each element of each triad is itself a triad. But each of these is an expression of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the relationships between the members of each triad cannot be properly appreciated unless this is grasped. At every level, Hegel is showing how these three 'Persons' actively create and determine each other. Hegel sees God creating and being created by humanity.⁵

12. Hegel turns both the Enlightenment conception of Reason and its religious opposite inside-out. Hegel's Reason is identified with divine wisdom. It does not merely exist passively in human history, but expresses itself as 'purposive activity' in the course of that history. 'In our knowledge, we aim for the insight that whatever was intended by the Eternal Wisdom has come to fulfilment – as in the realm of nature, so in the realm of spirit that is active and actual in the world.' (*Reason in History*, p 19.) Spirit is the activity of humanity. But the consciousness of an individual human ('finite spirit') is no more than a fragment of the whole story, which is only found in the Self-consciousness of Spirit, an alias for the Self-consciousness of God. (By the way, Hegel has no use for the immortality of an individual soul, 'finite spirit'.

⁴ See, for instance, the last paragraphs of the *Encyclopedia*, the *Philosophy of Mind*, including the final quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Compare Hegel's concluding three syllogisms, relating Universal, Particular and Individual, with the syllogisms of the holy Trinity, as few paragraphs earlier.

⁵ The picture by MC Escher, in which each of two hands draws and is drawn by the other, might be a helpful. In each triad, the third term not only reconciles the opposition between the first two, but contains and preserves it.

Only the Infinite, the World Spirit, is eternal.)

13. A major problem arises in many religions: if God created and maintains a world which contains evil, was he then the creator of evil? But then what chance do we have of making the world a decent place to live? The Catholic Church in particular fought for centuries against any kind of dualist answer to this conundrum. It objected to any idea that the world is a product of both Good and Evil, 'matter' being the evil part. Hegel faces this problem in a manner which entirely separates him from orthodoxy.⁶ For Hegel, Evil is a part of God's creation. Indeed, the contradiction between Good and Evil is the driving force of all movement and development, and without it, there is no humanity. Thus Hegel's account of the Fall tears Genesis apart.
14. In this approach, Hegel closely follows another professed Lutheran, born two centuries earlier: the mystic shoemaker Jakob Boehme (1585-1696). Boehme is crucial, not just for Hegel's religious ideas, but for his entire philosophical work. For example, Hegel, who devotes about 30 pages of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* to Boehme, quotes him as saying:

Nothing can be revealed to itself without opposition: For if there is nothing that opposes it, then it always goes out of itself and never returns to itself again. If it does not return into itself, as into that from which it originated, then it knows nothing of its origin. Boehme, 'The Way to Christ'. Hegel, 'Lectures on the History of Philosophy', Volume 3, p 203.)

Hegel is also well aware that Boehme stands in a long line of mystical monks, Catholics whose ideas were condemned by the Church. Although Hegel only studied one or two of these in depth, they all contain ideas which are echoed in his work.

- Eriugena (= 'born in Ireland'), also known as John the Scot (810-877), believed that God does not create the world in one go, but eternally; everything finite is contained within his infinite nature and returns to it.
- Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) was a Calabrian abbot. His account of the unity of truth and ignorance and his conception of Divine Knowledge anticipated Hegel in many ways. Joachim believes that God is knowing. His identification of the structure of the Trinity with three stages of divine history formed the basis for centuries of social struggles. The third of these stages, identified with the Holy Spirit, was about to begin at any time, when the ending of the corruption of the Church would usher in a thousand-year Utopia.
- The German monk Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) was the first to develop the terminology of philosophy in German, translating and adapting Latin terms. For him, God becomes conscious of himself only within his creation. Eckhart also argues that Divine Knowledge is 'the negation of negation'. As with other mystics, Eckhart's aim was the unification of the soul with God. Christ is continually born within each believing soul. Using a passage passed on to him by the mystic von Baader, Hegel quotes Eckhart:

The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see Him;
my eye and His eye are the same... If He did not exist, nor would I; if
I did not exist, nor would He.⁷

⁶ No wonder he was denounced while he was at Berlin, as both atheist and pantheist. In reply, he aggressively defended his Lutheran orthodoxy.

⁷ It turns out that this is a Hadith, a saying much loved by the Sufis.

- Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464) argued that God was united with his creation, so that the universe, including the human being, must be infinite and divine. This 'coincidence of opposites' opened the way for Copernicus (1473-1543), who cautiously published his rather scaled-down version of this idea only on his death-bed.
- Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the Nolan, was not at all cautious, openly taking Nicolas's ideas much further. He was arrested by the Inquisition and burnt after several years of torture.⁸ Hegel celebrates Bruno in several places. He praises him for asserting
 - (i) 'the unity of life and the unity of the World-Soul'; and (ii) 'the indwelling presence of Reason'.

Bruno, who asserts the final cause to be immediately operative, and the life immanent in the universe, asserts it also to be existent as substance; he is therefore opposed to the conception of a merely extramundane understanding.

And Hegel quotes Bruno as saying

To recognise the unity of form and matter in all things, is what reason is striving to attain to. But in order to penetrate to this unity, in order to investigate all the secrets of Nature. We must search into the opposed and contradictory extremes of things, the maximum and the minimum.

15. Many of Boehme's notions, often expressed with great obscurity, were linked with the Jewish mystical tradition called the Cabbalah, as well as with the Islamic movement, Sufism. All three, Christian, Jewish and Islamic heresies, maintained a centuries-long collaboration and dispute. (All this needs a lot of study, as well as the related movements within Buddhism.) Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism are also explicitly connected with Hegel's discussions of these topics. However, he combines approval of many of these ideas with critical re-appraisal.
16. But Boehme is also a link between Hegel and another, closely related set of ideas and activities.⁹ Through his idiosyncratic mystical terminology, Boehme connects with the Hermetic tradition via Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Bruno, both of whom were represented in Hegel's library, as was the magician Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535).¹⁰ Towards the end of the fifteenth century, translation of Greek authors, preserved until then only by Islamic scholars, opened up new ways of thought. The writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were widely studied as a body of work whose roots are extremely ancient. Together with Cabbalah, they had for centuries formed the basis for alchemy, astrology and natural magic, but now, and for the next three centuries or more, they were the background to the thinking of the leading figures in European thought in the run-up to modernity. It was this intellectual world that actually saw the birth of modern science.
17. As a scientific picture of the world, many of the results obtained by the alchemists and magicians look somewhat bizarre today. But the undoubted triumphs of the new scientific rationalism can blind us to what is important in the world outlook of the Hermetists. First of all, they saw that the contrasts and oppositions between the divine and the human, and between spirit and nature, were not unbridgeable. The cosmos was a whole, united by a series of internal relations, correspondences and

⁸ To make its Christian point quite clear, the Inquisition also carefully smashed his bones to pieces.

⁹ Glenn Magee's book *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Cornell 2001), was one of the starting-points for this work.

¹⁰ Goethe's *Faust* is a mixture of Paracelsus and Agrippa. Hegel's friend Goethe was a practising alchemist.

'sympathies' between its parts. In the most important of these, the connection between humanity and nature, the human individual was a microcosm whose structure corresponded to that of the macrocosm. Each individual included the whole world within itself. This was an active connection: when God created the world, he had not completed the job, and to rectify the remaining imperfections required human subjective activity. Indeed, the question: 'why did God create the world?' could only be answered in terms of his need for humanity to do this work. Through his own personality and imagination, the Magus called down cosmic forces, which his knowledge enabled him to direct. This was the Great Work of creation, in which he participated. Thus he identified himself with the world, even with God. (You had to be careful: in the wrong hands, this knowledge could bring demons instead of angels into the picture: big trouble. So to become an 'adept' required a long apprenticeship, in which false ideas were purged.) Boehme, and following him Hegel, used many of these notions to link God, Nature and individual psychology. Thus Boehme writes:

The book in which all secrets lie hidden is man himself; he himself is the Book of the Essence of all Essences... He is like unto God... Why do you seek God in the depths or beyond the stars? ...Seek him in your heart, in the centre of your life's origin. There shall you find Him.

18. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment, denouncing such notions as superstitious nonsense, swept them aside or forced them underground. But they did not entirely disappear. Not only did Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry preserve some of their symbols, but Hermetic ideas as a whole remained current. Their adherents included people like Fichte, Schelling, Goethe, Shelley and Blake. In the twentieth century, trends as diverse as WB Yeats, Surrealism and Jungian psychoanalysis have drawn on them with enthusiasm.
19. Opposing Enlightenment thinking at every point, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the prologue to Hegel's system, was designed to overcome formal rationality, which walls us off from the truth. Science [*Wissenschaft*] can then enter 'the realm of pure thought', which, Hegel explains 'is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and of a finite mind.' (*Science of Logic*, Introduction.)

Reason, inseparable from the Will and a part of Being, is the realm where Nature and human spirit live and act. However, Hegel has reworked all these trends, absorbing many aspects of the Enlightenment in the course of his critique. In particular, Hegel's concept of Spirit, which is self-creating, like the heretic God, develops human social forms. For Hegel, family, civil society and the State make up 'objective spirit'. Religion presents in the form of 'picture-thinking' (eg mythology) the same content as philosophy develops conceptually.
20. To orthodox Christianity, humans were united, because they were all God's creatures. To the Enlightenment – for instance, in political economy – the relations between individual humans were external to them. Hegel rarely uses the word 'community' [*Allgemeinschaft*], but when he does it usually refers to the religious community, and all social unity, including the State, is something spiritual.
21. Humans have been trying to understand the world and their own place in it for a long time. This has generally taken the form of some kind of religious or mythical account which helped to shape the way people lived. This was how they thought about their lives, their origins and their destiny. In modern, more 'enlightened' times, the attempt is made to explain the world without such stories, dismissing them as mere superstition. But that leaves the big question unanswered: 'In what

kind of world is it possible for conscious humanity to exist?' In the orthodox versions of the three big Western religions, Almighty God, (who was, naturally, bound up with the almighty powers on Earth), produced the whole show and wrote the script. If you complained about how dreadful it was, you were fobbed off with a story about free will; this was God's alibi, a clever trick by the Divinity to put all the blame on us mortals.¹¹ Orthodoxy like this leaves no space for human freedom, for subjective activity: the Almighty has the whole thing sown up. In particular, our social relations are given to us by this higher power. But the atheists, and especially the Enlightenment materialists, who easily settled this entire discussion with the word 'superstition', left no more space for subjectivity than their opponents: we are just matter in motion, governed by the laws of Nature, they said. Spinoza had no trouble identifying the laws of nature with God's will, and Hegel shows that Enlightenment and superstition in the end agree with each other. 'Marxism', coming up with 'material laws of history', locked the gates still more securely.

22. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) abandoned his theological studies and decided – against parental disapproval – in favour of philosophy under Hegel in Berlin. At the end of the 1830s, the Hegelian school started to disintegrate. After writing some Hegelian books on the history of philosophy, Feuerbach began to break away from the Hegelian system, and was soon the leader of the 'Left' or 'Young' Hegelians. In 1841, he published his chief work, *The Essence of Christianity*, followed by *Preliminary Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* and *Foundations of the Philosophy of the Future*.

Like the other Left Hegelians, Feuerbach was first of all concerned with religion. Unlike some of his fellow-rebels, however, he did not merely denounce religion, which he described as 'the first and indirect self-consciousness of man'. Where his teacher Hegel had made human self-consciousness the way that God is conscious of Himself, Feuerbach makes 'what man knows of God' an upside-down form of 'what man knows of himself'. Religion is a projection of the best of humanity, 'the human essence', human feeling, willing, thinking, love, on to something which appears as other than human, the product of imagination [*Phantasie*]. But this is the root of human enslavement.

Man – this is the mystery of religion – projects his essence into objectivity and then makes himself the image of this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject, a person; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself. (*Essence*)

Feuerbach sees the demystification of this process as the way to freedom: 'What in religion is a predicate we must make into a subject'. Describing Hegel's 'theological idealism', he says that 'man's consciousness of God is the self-consciousness of God... Thus does absolute philosophy externalise from man his own essence and activity.' (*Principles*) Theology, not religion, is Feuerbach's target. When it formalises the study of God, theology becomes 'the worst enemy of the awakened spirit'. In his earlier writing, Feuerbach had quoted Boehme's personal understanding of God with approval. Now, he praises Boehme for understanding that God has His material body in nature. His critique of Hegel is that the formal reasoning of the Hegelian system is disguised theology, excluding the personal.¹² But in this, Feuerbach is criticising the whole of philosophy, philosophy as such.

¹¹ Buddhism is quite another matter, I'm told.

¹² It is also worth remembering that, in defending himself against the accusations of atheism and pantheism, Feuerbach wrote a book about Martin Luther, trying to show that the Great Reformer took his side in the argument.

That is what he means by 'the new philosophy'.

Just as theology transforms the determinations of man into divine determinations – through depriving them of their own determination by which they are what they are – so also in precisely the same way does philosophy deprive them... So does absolute philosophy externalise and alienate from man his own essence and activity. Hence the violence and torture that it inflicts on our minds. (*Principles*)

'The new philosophy makes man – with the inclusion of nature as the foundation of man – the unique, universal and highest object of philosophy.' (*Principles*) As he famously explained himself: 'My religion is – no religion. My philosophy – no philosophy.'

23. Does Feuerbach represent a step backwards from Hegel towards the Enlightenment? Yes and no. It is more of a sideways move. While it does not ignore Hegel's critical attitude to Kant and his predecessors, it still denies its religious implications and re-establishes the Enlightenment's view of the human as an isolated individual. The only social relation Feuerbach knows is the 'love' (what kind is unspecified!) between two characters called 'I' and 'thou'. To illustrate all this, it might be helpful to sketch briefly the history of Anselm's so-called 'ontological proof of God's existence. Tidied up by Descartes, this says that, since God is the most perfect being we can conceive, and since perfection must surely include existence... Kant famously and unceremoniously knocked this on the head: if I think I have 100 talers in my pocket, that is not the same as actually having them!

Hegel is not impressed with this wisecrack. 'When we speak of "God", we are referring to an object of quite a different kind than one hundred talers'. 'The true cognition of God begins with our knowing that things in their immediate being have no truth.' Feuerbach (*Principles*, para 25), however, wants to re-establish Kant's argument against Hegel's mockery.

24. Karl Marx, when he submits his Doctoral Thesis in 1841, is quite cheeky about religious ideas in general, of course. But he agrees with Hegel that Kant has proved nothing.

The proofs of the existence of God are... mere hollow tautologies. Take for instance the ontological proof. This only means: 'that which I conceive for myself in a real way (*realiter*) is a real concept for me' something that works on me. In this sense, all gods, the pagan as well as the Christian, have possessed a real existence. Did not the ancient Moloch reign? Was not the Delphic Apollo a real power in the life of the Greeks? Kant's critique means nothing in this respect. If somebody imagines that he has a hundred talers, if he believes in it, these hundred imagined talers have for him the same value as a hundred real talers. For instance, he will incur debts on the strength of his imagination, his imagination will work, in the same way as all humanity has incurred debts on its gods.

The analogy between religion and money was to remain a focal point of Marx's work for the rest of his life. But before he can even begin to clarify this powerful notion, he has to undertake a critique of Enlightenment political ideas.

25. For over two years, Marx is a great admirer of Feuerbach. This covers the period of some of his most important early work: the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State*, the *Introduction* to this, *On the Jewish Question*, the *Holy Family* and, above all, the *Paris Manuscripts of 1844*. And yet, whatever Marx himself might have thought, these works give a very different content to Feuerbach, even when Marx uses the same words. Look, for example, at the famous passage on religion from the *Introduction*.

The basis of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is the world of men, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence, because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Karl Marx is not an atheist, merely saying 'No' where religion says 'Yes'. His fight against all mystification preserves its truth and makes it available to everybody. As he explains in a letter of late 1842,

I requested further that religion should be criticised in the framework of criticism of political conditions rather than that political conditions should be criticised in the framework of religion, since this is more in accord with the nature of a newspaper and the educational level of the reading public; for religion itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself. Finally, I desired that, if there is to be talk of philosophy, there should be less trifling with the label 'atheism' (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen, that they are not afraid of the boggy man), and that instead the content of philosophy should be brought to the people.

Marx follows Feuerbach in tracing the basis of religious belief in human life, but while Feuerbach locates this in individual human psychology, Marx is concerned chiefly with the social conditions of the human.

26. In 1844, Marx embarks on his life-long task: the critique of political economy. In his reading of James Mill, he turns again to the analogy between economic relations and religion:

Since man alienates this mediating activity itself, he is active here only as a man who has lost himself and is dehumanised; the relation itself between things, man's operation with them, becomes the operation of an entity outside man and above man. Owing to this alien mediator – instead of man himself being the mediator for man – man regards his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them.

This analogy of Christ as the mediator and monetary relations was to recur many times in Marx's work. It enables him to begin to grasp the nature of social relations in general and the process through which social labour creates the truly human and opens the path to human freedom. At the same time, in its modern alienated forms, it blocks this path.

27. The last of the Paris Manuscripts, '*Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole*', begins with some of Marx's most fulsome praise of Feuerbach. And yet the ideas Marx begins to develop here leave Feuerbach far behind. Marx enters into a detailed critical discussion of the last chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, 'Absolute Knowing'. Philosophy transcends 'Revealed Religion', which, Hegel says, is

defective only in that it has not made 'its actual self-consciousness the object of its consciousness'. Having learned from Feuerbach that Hegel makes the human being 'the same as self-consciousness', Marx is able to transform Hegel's upside-down picture into an understanding of man as a 'human natural being', not an isolated individual, but a social being.

As everything natural has to come into being, man too has his act of origin – history – which, however, is for him a known history, and hence as an act of origin, is a conscious self-transcending act of origin...

Within his inverted philosophical picture,

Hegel conceives labour as man's act of self-genesis – conceives man's relation to himself as an alien being and the manifestation of himself as an alien being to be the emergence of species-consciousness and species-life.

28. It is some time in 1845 before Marx has seen how great was the distance between his critique of Hegel and that of Feuerbach. When he scribbles down his *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*, this is how he begins:

The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object [*der Gegenstand*], actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object [*Objekts*], or of contemplation [*Anschauung*], but not as human sensuous activity, practice [*Praxis*], not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. In *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of practical-critical, activity.

The doctrine which called itself 'Marxism' was never able to handle this. Plekhanov, the man who formulated the main ideas of 'Marxism' – 'dialectical materialism', 'historical materialism' etc. – never brought himself to discuss this text, and nor did his most famous pupil, VI Lenin. Marx criticises materialism as it had grown up in the eighteenth century and lumps Ludwig Feuerbach's materialism together with it. The defect of this outlook, Marx explains, is that it is able to grasp knowledge only in opposition to both the object of knowledge and the knowing subject. It could not understand the activity of knowing the world in terms of the rest of human social and individual activity. It was German idealism – not just Hegel but Fichte and Schelling too – which 'developed the active side'. We have been discussing the long tradition of religious and magical thought associated with this achievement.

29. Thesis 3 is also important here.

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must therefore divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

So the 'active side' is not just a matter of material productive activity. It also arises if you consider the transformation of the social relations and conditions within which production takes place. Marx now knows that freedom has to include the creation by humans of the relation between them. It is worth recalling here a well-

known passage in the *German Ideology*, written just after the *Theses*.

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessarily, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.

Here too, when he speaks about the communist revolution, Marx is focussing on the notion of self-change. 'The alteration of men on a mass scale' can only be the work of these same humans. He never had any time for transformation brought about by people at the top, well-meaning chaps who could be trusted to look after the interests of the little people.

30. A major task still lies ahead, for I have not touched Marx's most important – and unfinished – contribution: *Capital*. I think that reconsideration of many familiar passages in all three volumes would show a different side if read in the light of Hegel's theological ideas and Marx's critical reworking of them. (Two examples: in Volume 1, like Chapter 1, Section 4, 'The Fetish-Character of Commodities':

The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, ie the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely-associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.

Or Chapter 7, Section 1, on 'The Labour Process':

He acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.

Just to suggest what this might yield, let us look at a few sentences from the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production'. (This is the planned Part 7 of Volume 1 which Marx decided not to include.)

...Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer. For the commodities that become the instruments of rule over the workers (merely as the instruments of capital itself) are mere consequences of the process of production; they are its products. Thus at the level of material production, of the life-process in the realm of the social – for that is what the process of production is – we find the same situation that we find in religion at the ideological level, namely, the inversion of subject into object and vice versa. Viewed historically this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, ie the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone form the material base of a free human society, could not possibly be created by force at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid the stage in which his spiritual energies are given a religious definition as powers independent of himself. What we are confronted by here is the alienation [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour.¹³

Here we can see Marx's acceptance of Feuerbach's influence and as well as that of Hegel's counter-influence, and the critique of both. Behind Hegel stretches

¹³ *Capital*, Volume 1, Penguin Edition, p 990.

centuries of mystical heresy. In front of Marx lies the prospect of a human society, one in which humans, social individuals, freely associate in creating their own life and their own interrelations.