



Reply to Orsini

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Reply to Orsini

Journal of the History of Ideas 30 no. 1 (January–March 1969), 91–5; a reply to G. N. G. Orsini, 'Feuerbach's Supposed Objection to Hegel', *ibid.*, 85–90; abstract in *The Philosopher's Index* 3 (1969), 138



Gian Orsini, 1961

ABSTRACT

Orsini charges Berlin with (a) giving (in his book on Marx) an inaccurate reference to one of Marx's criticisms of Feuerbach; (b) mistakenly representing Feuerbach's criticism of the central doctrine of Hegel's ontology as being in line with contemporary positivist empiricism, and finally (in a review) of underestimating the importance of Croce as a philosopher. Berlin corrects a confusion in the relevant reference to Marx, and explains how his conflation of two texts arose, but sees no reason for retracting his thesis that Feuerbach's position rests on the view that Hegel's 'deduction' of the real world from the idea works only because all the characteristics of the real world have (by Hegel) been previously imported into the idea, which, as both Feuerbach and modern positivists maintain, is nothing but a mythological projection of empirical material reality. Against Orsini's charge that Berlin underestimates Croce's relation to other modern philosophers, Berlin replies that in his review of a Croce anthology, from which Orsini quotes, he gave Croce his full due. The

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principal purpose of Berlin's piece is to rebut Orsini's charge that Berlin misrepresents Feuerbach's central criticism of Hegel.

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PROFESSOR ORSINI brings two specific charges of unequal gravity against me. He accuses me (a) of describing a reference by Marx to the writings of Feuerbach in a way that is inaccurate to the point of being misleading; and (b) of seriously misrepresenting Feuerbach's criticism of Hegel, and, as a direct consequence of this, making unjust charges against Croce.

On (a) I plead guilty. If Professor Orsini had confined his strictures to my bibliographical shortcomings I should, without more ado, having acknowledged their justice and, after due acknowledgement, taken steps to correct the relevant reference in the text of my book on Marx to which he refers. I am, however, far more concerned about Professor Orsini's more serious charges collected under (b). These seem to me baseless, and I see no reason for withdrawing the relevant statements either in the review or in the book in which Professor Orsini discovered them.

(a) Firstly, Marx on Feuerbach. When Professor Orsini points out that Marx not only did not, but could not, review Feuerbach's *Theses on Hegelian Philosophy*,¹ because no such work can be found in the twelve (surely not twenty?) volumes of Feuerbach's collected works, what he says cannot be controverted. The document of which I had been thinking (and to which I should have made a more precise reference) is not a review but a letter, written by Marx on 13 March 1843 to Arnold Ruge, in which he refers not, indeed, to *Theses on Hegel*, for that is not the title of Feuerbach's work in question, but to his 'Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie' (in fact the philosophy of Hegel),² which appeared, as Professor Orsini correctly states, with Marx's own article on the Prussian censorship

¹ [Orsini calls it 'The Theses on Hegelian Philosophy', IB 'the Theses on the Hegelian Philosophy' (KM1 76 – not 75 as Orsini has it), 'Theses on Hegelian Philosophy' (here) and 'Theses on Hegel' (next sentence). In an argument about accuracy it is remarkable that neither author can achieve it, even about a non-existent work.]

² 'Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy'; for Marx's letter see Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1956–83) [MEW], 27: 417; Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London, New York and Moscow, 1975–2004) [CW], 1: 400.

in Ruge's.³ In this essay Feuerbach expounds some of the anti-Idealist doctrines to which Marx alludes in his *Theses on Feuerbach* and elsewhere. Professor Orsini, it is clear, accepts Mehring's assertion in his *Karl Marx*⁴ that it was indeed this work by Feuerbach, and not, as Engels asserts, the celebrated *Essence of Christianity*, that proved to be 'a revelation for Marx', but I have never felt at all convinced by Mehring's argument. It has always seemed to me that Engels probably knew the facts; but that in any case, an even clearer formulation of the relevant thesis is to be found in Feuerbach's *Zur Kritik der Hegel'schen Philosophie* (written in 1839, two years before *Das Wesen des Christentums*) – an essay which Marx, who refers to Feuerbach's views even before 1839, can scarcely not have known. Marx was, after all, not notable for acknowledging intellectual debts. It was this work that, thirty years ago, I misnamed *Theses on* (instead of *On the Critique of*) *the Hegelian Philosophy*, and supposed to have been the subject of Marx's 'review', i.e., letter to Ruge. For this confusion of titles with references I apologise.

[92] (b) Now as to the weightier charges. In the *Critique* Feuerbach advances the proposition which he is to repeat in many guises later, that Hegel's efforts to deduce the real from the ideal, existence from essence, succeed only in establishing in the conclusion what had been assumed in the premisses: that Hegel can extract whatever he wishes – e.g. the historical process – out of the category of pure Being because he has already inserted all that he needs into it at the outset. Let me cite Feuerbach's words from the *Critique of Hegel*⁵ of 1839: 'The Absolute Idea [...] posits itself in advance as the truth. What it posits as "the Other" (to itself) already posits in its very essence the truth of the Absolute Idea again. The proof is therefore purely formal', i.e. circular.⁶

³ [*Anecdotes on the Latest German Philosophy and Journalism*: the two volumes of *Anekdoten* were published as a single book in 1843. Marx's article, 'Bemerkungen über die neueste preußische Censurinstruction', is in the first volume, 56–92, Feuerbach's work in the second, 62–86.]

⁴ Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* [1918], trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York, 1935), 79–81.

⁵ [sc. *On the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*.]

⁶ Translated from *Ludwig Feuerbach's sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1846–66), vol. 2, 209, by Sidney Hook in *From Hegel to Marx* (London, 1936), 229.

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What these dark words come to (pace Professor Orsini's admiration for Feuerbach's 'terse and vigorous'⁷ style) is that the 'deduction' of the real world from the Idea works only because all the characteristics of the real world have been previously imported into the Idea, and that therefore all that is being proclaimed by Hegel is that things are as they are in the real world because they are as they are in the Idea, which, according to Feuerbach, is nothing but a mythological projection of, and requires to be translated back into, the real, empirical world of which it is a kind of transcendent copy. Indeed, this is the very process of 'demythologising' of which Feuerbach was one of the original champions, a method which Marx later used to such devastating effect. In *The Holy Family* Marx says that 'the speculative philosopher' smuggles the well-known characteristics of the apple and the pear as they are in experience into the logical determinations which he affects to have discovered and then pretends to 'deduce' them as 'differentiations' of an 'organic' whole or (concrete) 'universal', which he calls 'the fruit'.⁸ This is pure Feuerbach.⁹

In the previous year, towards the end of the Paris MSS, Marx gives this account of Feuerbach's dialectic: 'Hegel begins from the alienation of substance ([...] from the infinite, abstract universal) [...] – i.e., in ordinary language, from religion and theology. Then he supersedes the infinite and posits the actual, the perceptible, the real, the finite and particular (philosophy, supersession of religion and theology). Then he supersedes the positive and re-establishes the abstraction, the infinite (restoration of religion and theology).'¹⁰ This is the circle which Marx, in my view quite correctly, regards as the heart of Feuerbach's critique of Hegel. Feuerbach's central thesis is that the abstract understanding can only give things names, not create entities; empirical characteristics are first transmogrified into mysterious metaphysical entities, and then used to account for their

⁷ op. cit. (headnote), 89.

⁸ Chapter 5, section 2, 'The Mystery of Speculative Construction': MEW 2: 59 ff., CW 4: 57 ff. (mostly a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation).

⁹ Arguable.

¹⁰ Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, ['Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole'], MEW 40: 570; CW 3: 329.

own original empirical selves, which they are held, in some sense, to have generated.¹¹

Professor Orsini complains that I have reduced Feuerbach to a nominalism that might ‘have come straight out of an Oxford Common Room of the present day’. Indeed, and why not? When, for example, Feuerbach says: ‘My brother is called John, Adolf, but in addition to him there are innumerable others who are called John, Adolf. Shall I conclude from this that my John is no reality, that only in Johnness [*Johannheit*] is truth? For sense perception [93] all words are names, *nomina propria*,¹² [...] only signs to be used in order to achieve its ends in the shortest way.’¹³ Hook’s translations and account of the matter seem to me quite correct. What is there in this passage to which an ‘Oxford nominalist’ could take exception? Whether the Absolute Idea is Hegel’s equivalent of God, or a mythical projection of the real world (which to Feuerbach is the same), makes no difference to the central thesis of the positivist creed – that to find the origin of things in the Absolute Idea is to invent imaginary entities and realms of theology and transcendental metaphysics, which can and should, in the interests of truth, be ‘demystified’ into their unmysterious empirical bases. Indeed this doctrine is Feuerbach’s link with eighteenth-century materialism – a common-place of all monographs on Feuerbach and histories of Western ideas.

On this view, to explain empirical phenomena by reference to an impalpable *Geist* or ‘Absolute’ (or, in the case of history, the *Zeitgeist*), is to explain these phenomena in terms of an occult relationship to a mythical version of them, i.e., to pretend that a heavily disguised form of the original question is itself the answer to it. This is the tautology of which I spoke, and which Professor Orsini fails to find in Feuerbach. Yet this reduction of a priori metaphysics to empirical states of mind or feeling – in Feuerbach’s case a reduction to propositions of psychology – is the weapon which made a deep impression not on Marx alone, despite all his strictures, but on others, from Wagner to Lenin. It is at once one of

¹¹ IB is paraphrasing Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (mainly the first), though arguably somewhat inaccurately. I am grateful to Terrell Carver for guidance on this and other points in the article.

¹² ‘Proper names’.

¹³ Feuerbach, *op. cit.* (note 6), 212; translated by Sidney Hook, *op. cit.* (note 6), 231.

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Feuerbach's primary claims to fame and the central thesis of naturalist positivism of all breeds. When Marx in a celebrated passage of *Das Kapital* says that 'the ideal is only the material world reflected by the human mind',¹⁴ he is echoing his own summary of Feuerbach's theses in the Paris MSS cited above, a position he shares with Holbach and his fellow materialists of the eighteenth century, with Feuerbach, Bakunin, Comte, as well as the nominalists and positivists of our day, influenced by the development of modern logic and analysis, some of whom are undeniably members of the Oxford Common Rooms to which Professor Orsini has directed a rhetorical flourish. I cannot therefore, see where I have gone astray. It seems to me that I merely reaffirmed what has always been considered Feuerbach's just historical due. And this brings me to Croce, and Professor Orsini's complaint that I criticise Croce for ignoring Feuerbach's central objection to Hegel's metaphysics, which, according to my opponent, Feuerbach never propounded.

That Feuerbach did propound it seems to me sufficiently established by the quotations I have given (even if we pay no attention to the general consensus of scholars). But when Professor Orsini assumes that my motive for so perversely denying Croce and Collingwood a place among 'the intellectual innovators of our time'¹⁵ comes solely from my belief that they failed to meet the arguments of Feuerbach and Marx, this is not so. My sole and sufficient reason for making this historical judgement is that it asserts a historical fact. It seems to me that no reasonably objective historian of philos[94]ophy could deny (even if he thought it a disaster, as Russell, for example, regarded the influence of Kant, or Broad that of Hegel) that it is the new logic, which began with Frege and Russell, and the new analytic movement closely connected with it, and not the neo-Idealist school, that constituted a turning point in the history of modern philosophy. This truism was, in any case, only an *obiter dictum* in a review concerned with Croce's opinions in the translated collection the title of which Professor Orsini, I expect rightly, considers inappropriate. I did not wish to do an injustice to a thinker with those views I did not feel myself to be in particular

¹⁴ Afterword to the second German edition: MEW 23: 27, CW 35: 19.

¹⁵ IB, review of Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy: And Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time*, ed. R. Klibansky, trans. E. F. Carritt (London, [1949]), *Mind* 61 no. 244 (October 1952), 574–8 at 577; bit.ly/bib47.

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sympathy. Consequently, it seems to me that I almost lean over backwards in describing Croce as a civilised, original, illuminating, penetrating thinker, a man of humane, fastidious and generous culture, the possessor of a richly imaginative mind, with a gift for original and fresh aperçus.

Yet none of this, I fear, satisfies Professor Orsini. For my crime is not only to be myself blind to the true character and value of Croce, although this would have been bad enough, but to have caused similar blindness in others. According to Professor Orsini, it is I, and none other, who have spread a heresy (by means of a short review) which has seeped into the opinions of Professor Guido Calogero, Father Vincent Turner, and (via, I gather, Mr Turner's essay) Professor Edgar Wind. These distinguished thinkers do not need me to defend them against Professor Orsini's thunderbolts. So eminent an Italian thinker and philosophical scholar as Professor Calogero may be assumed, I think, to have arrived at his opinion of Croce's thought independently of my brief remarks in the pages of *Mind* in 1952. Nor need Father Turner or Professor Wind be suspected of deriving their convictions of the fallacies of Hegel's Idealism, or of the criticisms of it by Feuerbach, from a few lines written by me, even if they do me the honour of agreeing with me on these points. But, of course, Professor Orsini is perfectly right in supposing that I regard Feuerbach's (and Marx's) criticisms of Hegel in this regard as possessing substance; and that I think that Croce's failure to meet them, his hostility to naturalistic explanations of historical, and, in particular, aesthetic and cultural developments – in short his 'spiritualism' (despite his disavowals of belief in transcendent entities outside empirical experience), and, indeed, his inability to free himself from hypostatizing empirical concepts and categories – that I think that all this does vitiate his and every other Idealism. This is, I take it, the view common to myself and to my three eminent 'victims', which Professor Orsini deplors. He may, on this, stand with Hegel and Croce and not with Feuerbach, Professor Calogero, or the empiricists; but I cannot for the life of me see where I can be considered to have misrepresented Hegel, Croce, Collingwood or anyone else.

These seem to me the only matters of serious importance raised by Professor Orsini. There remains the question of Croce's view of Feuerbach. I do not know whether Croce anywhere discussed Feuerbach's views at any length. Professor Orsini does not tell us.

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My assumption – not, it seems to me, wildly eccentric – was that Croce, who abhorred positivism and naturalism, could not have thought highly of Feuerbach, who was, to say the least, plainly influenced by such views. But on this Professor Orsini, who has, [95] after all, written an admiring monograph on Croce, speaks with authority, and I defer to his expert opinion. He tells us that Croce wrote sympathetically about Feuerbach's follower, Eugen Dühring. If Croce could admire Dühring, who but for Engels's famous onslaught would have been utterly (and justly) forgotten, it is, I admit, difficult to be sure what he might not have thought; his polemic against Comte and his followers, on which I relied, is evidently not a dependable pointer. Perhaps Croce thought that consistency is a virtue of small minds. At any rate I am ready to retract my rash extrapolation if only to please Professor Orsini, whose view on this must, I assume, carry weight.

As to my characterisation of Feuerbach's literary style, Professor Orsini is entitled to his preferences, and I to mine. Brought up as we evidently have been in somewhat different philosophical traditions, this is perhaps unavoidable. Fortunately Professor Orsini's own style, despite his admiration for them, does not seem to have been influenced by Hegel, Feuerbach or even Croce. For he writes so clearly and pungently that I have had no difficulty in understanding his assertions, and therefore in concluding that beyond my avowed bibliographical error, and my naive belief that Croce was a consistent anti-positivist, I have no need to apologise either to the reader, or to my three distinguished contemporaries, who have, according to my critic, so blindly followed me into the anti-Idealist abyss – least of all to the learned, mordant, but (I cannot help thinking) over-zealous champion of Croce, Professor G. N. G. Orsini himself.