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Tracing Ludwig Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity Through  
Daniel Deronda**

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## **'IN ISOLATION HUMAN POWER IS LIMITED, IN COMBINATION IT IS INFINITE': TRACING LUDWIG FEUERBACH'S *ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY* THROUGH *DANIEL DERONDA***

By Milena Schwab-Graham

The beings closest to us, whether in love or hate, are often virtually our interpreters of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Written between January 1873 and June 1876, *Daniel Deronda* was George Eliot's final and most ambitious novel. The Jewish-born, later excommunicated Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose *Ethics* Eliot translated in 1856, would perhaps seem the more obvious choice of philosophical context for our analysis of *Deronda*, owing to his religious affinity with the eponymous protagonist. However, Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, translated by Eliot in 1854, provides a more thorough basis for drawing out the ethical complexities of her final novel. Feuerbach's philosophy, the influence of which is integral to all her novels, hinges upon 'the moral [...] qualitative, critical distinction between the *I* and the *thou*', or the self and the other (*Essence of Christianity*, p. 158).<sup>2</sup> This is especially pertinent to *Deronda* because the novel magnifies such a relationship on a national, political scale, as shown by the distinction made between Jews and non-Jews. Eliot is most explicitly indebted to Feuerbach's influence in this novel because of her emphasis on 'fellow-feeling'. In seeking to counter anti-Semitism by encouraging her readers to embrace Jewish people as her 'fellow-men', Eliot enforces a double imperative. First, she demands further tolerance and greater sympathetic understanding of Jews, whose influence on culture and intellectual life extends far beyond England or Continental Europe. Second, she renders this experience of increased sympathy paradigmatic to furthering our sympathetic interaction with all people suffering oppression as a result of their identity. How explicitly Eliot makes this last point has unsurprisingly been a source of contention, as Eliot's novels show her radicalism to be frequently anticlimactic.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous critics regard *Deronda* as a novel which tests the limits of sympathy. While they frequently draw on cosmopolitanism or nationalism to frame Eliot's ethics of sympathy, this seldom involves discussion, or even mention of Feuerbachian philosophy. Lisabeth During explores the ethical implications of *Deronda*, in which 'the action of sympathy fills up all the empty spaces where a private subjectivity might come to exist', and how, 'for Eliot, becoming Jewish legitimizes *Deronda*'s otherwise puzzling selflessness'.<sup>4</sup> Leona Toker claims that *Deronda* emphasizes 'the danger of excessive sympathy to its donor [...] at least as strongly as its positive effects on its recipient'.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Thomas Albrecht's focus on 'cosmopolitan ethics' suggests 'Eliot demonstrates in *Daniel Deronda* that a wholly impartial ethics ultimately works simply to subsume differences within a universal homogeneity'.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Eliot's ethics were greatly shaped by her reading and translation of Feuerbach's *Essence* goes unmentioned by Albrecht, During and Toker. Jonathan Loesberg does write on Feuerbach's *Essence* in relation to *Deronda*, but his argument fails to create a convincing dialogue between the texts.<sup>7</sup>

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot displays a commitment to a political stance which is uniquely explicit amongst her oeuvre, as shown in her letter to Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe on 29 October 1876. She writes:

As to the Jewish element in 'Deronda', I expected from first to last, in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance, and repulsion, than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid, when viewed in the light of their professed principles, *I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to.*<sup>8</sup> (emphasis mine)

*Deronda*, then, obtained its political emphasis from Eliot's deeply engrained sense of ethical responsibility. However, 'such sympathy and understanding as [her] nature and knowledge could attain to' was itself indebted to her absorption of the philosophy of the Higher Critics, most importantly Feuerbach. The following sentence of her letter attests to the philosophical origins of her sympathy, as this is described in the Feuerbachian lexis of 'fellow-men'; 'there is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs'.<sup>9</sup>

This essay will attempt to elucidate *Daniel Deronda*'s Feuerbachian connection, the novel's 'vision of [unfamiliar] human claims' on the imagination. These claims become the central ethical method for interpreting and understanding the lives of the characters as diasporic citizens of Europe, and indeed the world. In a letter to the Hon. Mrs Ponsonby of 11 February 1875, whilst she was in midst of writing *Deronda*, Eliot asks, 'how can the life of nations be understood without the inward life of poetry – that is, of emotion blending with thought?'.<sup>10</sup> Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* offered the ideal template for Eliot to blend emotion with thought in her final novel. Through adoption of this template she was able to further her readers' understanding of 'the life of nations', as demonstrated via her example of the Jewish nation, and characterized by Daniel, Mordecai, Mirah, Leonora and others in the novel. In the same letter, Eliot affirms the Feuerbachian essence underlying her need to undertake such a momentous task. Her desire to facilitate a mind-broadening extension of sympathy towards others through her novel writing was itself a disavowal of didacticism. Instead, it is a reiteration of Feuerbachian 'fellow-feeling'; 'Please remember that I don't consider myself a teacher, but a *companion in the struggle of thought*' [emphasis mine].<sup>11</sup>

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot's eponymous protagonist embodies 'fellow-feeling', confirming Feuerbach's central tenet in *The Essence of Christianity*. Daniel's ready sympathy with others, most notably Gwendolen and Mordecai, renders him akin to the 'objective conscience' recurrent in Feuerbach. Yet he is also proof of the limitations inherent in such a philosophical doctrine. As with the influence and operation of Spinoza's thinking in *Middlemarch*, in *Daniel Deronda* Feuerbach's thinking enables Eliot to transcend the parameters of thought imposed by the form of philosophical argument. Feuerbach elevates the power of words precisely for their liberating quality:

Words possess a revolutionising force; words govern mankind. Words are held sacred: while the *things* of reason and truth are decried [...] the word is imagined, revealed, radiating, lustrous, enlightening thought. The word is the light of the world. (*Essence*, p. 78)

He echoes biblical language – 'In the beginning was the word', John 1.1 – for humanistic purpose. Feuerbach's religious humanism was controversial at his time of writing in 1840, but Eliot's incorporation of it into her novel writing necessitated a progression from

straightforward translation. Eliot's broadening of Feuerbach's philosophy to include social and political context was as necessary as her desire to balance creativity with fidelity to the original text.

Words are often quoted from a letter Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell, during the process of translating in 1854, that 'with the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree'.<sup>12</sup> The additional clause which completes the sentence, however, is all too frequently omitted, and considerably alters its meaning: '*but of course I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably*'.<sup>13</sup> Eliot did make numerous subtle alterations to the *Essence* in her translation, yet one change of hers has considerable implications for *Deronda*, as well as her other fiction. Feuerbach's philosophy refers to the un-gendered 'Mensch'. Eliot chose to alter this to 'Man' in her translation, rendering the constructions dependent upon 'fellow-men' rather than the more inclusive 'fellow-creatures', 'fellow-beings', or indeed either of these without the 'fellow' prefix.<sup>14</sup>

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot is offering more than an altered version of Feuerbach's phraseology. She sought to take Feuerbach's thought to its logical conclusion: to place 'the imagined, revealed, radiating, lustrous, enlightening thought' within a tangible context of actual human life on a macrocosmic national and even international scale, to enable a better understanding of its implications and consequences for the individual. *Deronda* displays its ethical debt to Feuerbach in the narrator's optimistic assertion that

In many of our neighbours' lives there is much not only of error and lapse, but of a certain exquisite goodness which can never be written or even spoken – only divined by each of us, according to the inward instruction of our own privacy. (p. 179)

The passage denotes the subtle interaction between the individual self and the other, based upon non-verbal, almost telepathic communication. The 'certain exquisite goodness' has indirect religious and definite humanist echoes, as it can only be understood through divination. Moreover, Feuerbach's influence is most evident in the fact that it is 'our neighbours' lives' which effect this psychological transition in our own lives, rather than this taking place entirely within an individual conscience. Through this recognition of another who is different from oneself, the narrative of *Deronda* offers a periphrasis of Feuerbachian philosophy, of human lives being mediated through the conscience of another:

The other is my *thou* – the relation being reciprocal – my *alter ego*, man objective to me, the revelation of my own nature [...] My fellow-man is my objective conscience. (*Essence*, p. 158)

*Deronda*'s narrator is able to raise these points in the abstract, whilst those abstractions are tempered, tested and actualized by existing alongside the narrative progression of parallel protagonists Daniel and Gwendolen in their respective, partially overlapping plots.

In *Deronda*, Eliot is enacting a subtle, reflexive process, alternately differentiating between and paralleling her characters, vacillating between potential definitions of what is 'English' and what is 'Jewish', between what is gendered male or female, between what is part of a pan-European identity, or what is restricted to identification with a single nationality. The novel is defined by 'the balance of separateness and communication', a term used by *Deronda*'s grandfather, the Jew Daniel Charisi, and of which the protagonist learns second-hand through his grandfather's friend, Joseph Kalonymos (p. 724). This dictum originating from the

Orthodox grandfather forms the questioning ideological basis of the novel; is such a balance even possible? For Daniel Charisi, it is 'what the strength and wealth of mankind depended on', and a notion which Daniel Deronda takes on as part of hereditary tradition upon his discovery of his Jewish heritage;

I think I can maintain my grandfather's notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done towards restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation. (p. 725)

Feuerbach arguably presents a similar mediation between difference and understanding in the *Essence*. For him,

The cosmogonic principle in God, reduced to its last elements, is nothing else than the act of thought in its simplest forms made objective. If I remove difference from God, he gives me no material for thought; he ceases to be an object of thought; *for difference is an essential principle of thought.* (*Essence* p. 86. Emphasis mine)

Yet emphasis upon difference alone has isolating implications in both Feuerbach and *Deronda*. It is what initially divides Daniel from his Jewish brethren, most significantly his visionary guide Mordecai, and his eventual bride, Mirah. While it is essential to thought for Feuerbach, recognition of difference alone is meaningless to the philosopher. It can only have a philosophical benefit when our awareness of difference is matched with a means of overcoming this divide through sympathetic imagination with the other person, the object of difference.

Feuerbach's understanding of human limitation prefigures *Daniel Deronda*, which tests the limits of sympathy through its portrayal of human relationships which are fraught by divisively held faith; Christian, and Jewish. In the *Essence*, Feuerbach writes that

Consciousness of the world is the consciousness of my limitation: if I knew nothing of a world, I should know nothing of limits; but the consciousness of my limitation stands in contradiction with the impulse of my egoism towards unlimitedness [...] *I must introduce, prelude, moderate this contradiction by the consciousness of a being who is indeed another, and in so far gives me the perception of my limitation, but in such a way as at the same time to affirm my own nature, make my nature objective to me.* (*Essence*, p. 82. Emphasis mine)

In *Deronda*, the parallel protagonists, Daniel and Gwendolen, gradually gain an implicit understanding of Feuerbach's realization in themselves, through interaction with each other and others. Eliot translates Feuerbach's need to 'introduce, prelude, moderate this contradiction' of 'consciousness of [one's] limitation' into dual narrative trajectories which must diverge geographically and ideologically, so that they may paradoxically become closer in the emotional and psychological sense. Gwendolen's *Bildung* characterizes her gradual consciousness of her limitations, as a wife, as a singer, and as the potential lover of Daniel. Her character development brings about her gradual ethical redemption, as she is shown to be increasingly capable of Feuerbachian 'fellow-feeling'. The climax of this is foreshadowed in Book VIII, Chapter 54, where the sailing holiday in the Mediterranean will soon relieve Gwendolen of her sadistic husband when he drowns. At this point, she already harbours capability for fellow-feeling: '*She had a root of conscience in her*, and the process of purgatory

had begun for her on the green earth; she knew that she had been wrong' (p. 669).

While these setbacks are shattering blows to her ego, Gwendolen embodies the Feuerbachian contradiction inherent in such negative events. She is able to 'affirm [her] own nature, make [her] nature objective to [herself]' precisely through living through these events (*Essence*, p. 82). Gwendolen repeatedly attempts to overcome her problems by cleaving to Daniel, making him her 'objective conscience':

she had learned to see all her acts through the impression they would make on Deronda: whatever relief might come to her, she could not sever it from the judgement of her that would be created in his mind. [...] and amid the dreary uncertainties of her spoiled life the possible remedies that lay in his mind, nay, the remedy that lay in her feeling for him, made her only hope. (p. 673)

Yet it is only when Daniel reveals his Jewish identity to her, and any possibility of their being married is lost, that she is able to truly understand and follow Daniel's Feuerbach-inflected advice to 'Look on lives besides your own ... try to care for what is best in thought and action – something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot' (p. 446). In a reiteration of Feuerbach's contradiction, Daniel and Gwendolen's friendship is closest and most sincere after their time of parting; as Gwendolen says, 'it shall be better with me because I have known you' (p. 810).

Daniel is the principal locus for Eliot's hermeneutics of sympathy, which encompass both the microcosm of the individual, and the macrocosm of society. He seems initially to be a straightforward embodiment of the ideal Feuerbachian *Mensch*. However, this proves not to be the case, reiterating Eliot's attraction to complexity in her novels. Daniel's discovery of his Jewish identity creates more problematic associations with the philosophy of the *Essence*. Eliot thus offers a critique of Feuerbach rather than a simpler re-visioning of his ideas. Before Daniel knows he is a Jew, his ethics reiterate Feuerbach's creed of ready sympathy towards *all* others. Chapter 32 of Book IV reveals the caveats of Daniel's character in the amplest detail. Here, the narrative enacts its own sympathetic portrayal of Daniel's character, extolling his virtues. We learn that '[h]is early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy' (p. 364). Nonetheless, such kindness is simultaneously subverted by the narrator, who swiftly expounds the disadvantages of such a temperament, 'which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action' (p. 364).

According to Feuerbach,

My fellow-man is the bond between me and the world. I am, and I feel myself, dependent on the world, because I first feel myself dependent on other men.... Only through his fellow does man become clear to himself and self-conscious; but only when I am clear to myself does the world become clear to me. (*Essence*, p. 82)

It is clear from the outset of the novel that Daniel's conscience incorporates Feuerbach's first sentence, but he feels disconnected, rather than bonded to the world, owing to the absence, above all, of such a 'fellow-man'. However, he comes to conflate this 'fellow-man' with a social and national identity. Daniel's conflation of an individual and a collective identity is the fundamental ethical problem of the novel. His sympathy yearns to extend towards a communally shared conception of self. But when his desire is met and he is confirmed to be Jewish, the complex combination of a new-found religious *and* national identity shows

assimilation under the umbrella of 'Judaism' to be far from simple.

The narrative is at its most idealized, and thus ethically problematic, when we learn that Daniel 'came back with what was better than freedom – with a duteous bond which his experience had been preparing him to accept gladly' (p. 744). The partial sympathy which Daniel's Jewishness entails thus rejects Feuerbach's balanced contradiction between 'the consciousness of my limitation' and 'the impulse of my egoism towards unlimitedness' (*Essence*, p. 82). If Daniel's 'limitation' is his Jewishness, Eliot subverts the Feuerbachian 'impulse [...] towards unlimitedness', in that Daniel is assimilating into a collective Jewish identity. The politics of Jewish nationalism would imply that there is greater strength and authority in individuals thus becoming part of a whole.

Eliot takes Feuerbach's call for collective unity and translates it into the complications inherent in a politics of identity, especially when the religious and the national become conflated, as in Judaism. *Deronda* puts the Feuerbachian argument for human power as infinite in combination into practice. The relationship between Daniel and Mordecai tests the consequences of such combined human power, giving it a provocative, near-transcendental aspect. Mordecai evokes the spirit of Jewish nationalism via abstract, poetic language: 'The world grows, and its frame is knot together by the growing soul [...] so beings [...] are knit with us in the growth of the world' (p. 501). Mordecai embodies Eliot's attempts to understand the 'life of nations' through 'the inward life of poetry', combining thought and feeling. Mordecai's lexis is comparable to the lyrical, epigrammatic prose of Feuerbach in the *Essence*, in which 'the power of speech is a poetic talent', and 'he who speaks lays under a spell, fascinates those to whom he speaks; but the power of words is the power of the imagination' (*Essence*, p. 77).

Mordecai's terminal consumption heightens his urgency to realize his Zionist vision through the life of another as 'a new executive self' (p. 510), relocating a Feuerbachian community of fellow-creatures within a national, political identity: 'Ours is an inheritance that has never ceased to quiver in millions of human frames' (p. 536). Instead of desiring a community solely in the implicit, emotional, Feuerbachian sense, Mordecai wants it manifested in the tangible, externally recognizable community of Jewish nationalism; 'let the torch of visible community be lit!' (p. 536).

Undoubtedly Daniel is sympathetically prepared for his eventual realization of Jewishness by the kindness and arresting mysticism of Mordecai. The conviction of the latter is such that he believes Daniel is Jewish long before this is confirmed, pre-emptively beseeching him that '[y]ou must be not only a hand to me, but a soul – believing my belief – being moved by my reasons – hoping my hope – seeing the vision I point to – beholding a glory where I behold it!' (p. 499). The friendship between Mordecai and Daniel attests to the combinatory, reciprocal force of fellow-feeling in Book VIII Chapter 63, when Daniel confirms his identity to Mordecai. Daniel acknowledges his debt to his friend: 'What I feel now is – that my whole being is a consent to the fact. But it has been *the gradual accord between your mind and mine* which has brought about that full consent' (p. 750, emphasis mine).

The ending of *Daniel Deronda*, in which the newly married Daniel and Mirah set out to reclaim the Promised Land, full of proto-Zionist idealism, is all the more poignant for its inconclusive nature. Daniel has found himself part of a collective, historic identity through discovery of his Jewishness, but his individual self has been subsumed, voluntarily, by the wider duties of vocation:

I consider it my duty – it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to then I shall choose to do it. (p. 661)

In this respect Daniel is similar to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, but Eliot's final novel *Daniel Deronda* is more explicitly concerned with the search for identity within a European and indeed global existence, and whether an individual can define themselves as part of such a community without losing their selfhood. This takes most experimental and controversial form in *Deronda* as selfhood is inextricably associated with the paradigm of Judaism as encompassing both spiritual and national identity. Judaism became the most intricate of all Eliot's vehicles for testing Feuerbachian 'fellow-feeling' in practice through her novels. *Daniel Deronda* frequently questions, even transgresses the parameters of Feuerbachian philosophy, where 'my fellow man is my objective conscience'. Nonetheless, Eliot acknowledges her debt to Feuerbach, whose ideas still shape the moral philosophy of this novel; only now, in artistic maturity, she has the confidence to question and re-interpret him:

The beings closest to us, whether in love or hate, are often virtually our interpreters of the world, and some feather-headed gentleman or lady whom in passing we regret to take as legal tender for a human being may be acting as a melancholy theory of life in the minds of those who live with them. (p. 672)

#### Notes

- 1 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), p. 672. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 2 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1957), p. 158. Hereafter abbreviated to *Essence*. All further quotations are from this edition.
- 3 See, for instance, Romola's quiet devotion to her husband's illegitimate family; Felix Holt's inability to achieve lasting political change; Dorothea's assimilation into the life of Will in *Middlemarch*.
- 4 Lisabeth During, p. 77 and p. 83, 'The Concept of Dread: Sympathy and Ethics in *Daniel Deronda*', *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 65-83.
- 5 Leona Toker, p. 569, 'Vocation and Sympathy in Daniel Deronda: The Self and the Larger Whole', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004): 565-574.
- 6 Thomas Albrecht, pp. 396-7, "'The Balance of Separateness and Communication': Cosmopolitan Ethics in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*", *ELH* (2012): 389-416.
- 7 Jonathan Loesberg focusses on Feuerbach's debt to Hegelian Idealism, and other philosophical questions, but a close reading of the texts of the *Essence* and *Deronda* remains absent. See Loesberg, 'Aesthetics, Ethics and Unreadable Acts in George Eliot', in *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Suzy Anger

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 121-147.

- 8 John Walter Cross (ed.), *George Eliot's Life: as related in her letters and journals*, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), pp. 555-6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Cross, p. 538.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *The George Eliot Letters*, Gordon S. Haight (ed.), 9 Vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954-1978), vol. II, p. 153.
- 13 *Letters*, *ibid.* Susan E. Hill is the only critic I have encountered who does not omit the second clause of the quotation. See Hill, 'Translating Feuerbach, Constructing Morality: The Theological and Literary Significance of Translation for George Eliot', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 65, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 635-53 (p. 643).
- 14 This point has been raised as a site for feminist criticism of *Deronda*. See Evelyne Ender's argument on the gendered implications for Gwendolen in 'Girls and Their Blind Visions', *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 229-272 (p. 243): 'in the original text [...] the word *Mensch* (expressing a non-gender-marked humanity) gives to Feuerbach's statement on reciprocity and intersubjectivity its full force. This confident universalism cannot be retrieved in the English translation "man", or, in Eliot's formulation, "fellow-man". Thus the writer's scepticism comes back like a ghost to haunt Feuerbach's theory, and it raises the question of gender'.