

Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder Der Mensch ist, was er ißt The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is what he eats

by

Ludwig Feuerbach

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### Introduction to Feuerbach on Sacrifice

For more than 100 years every text on the subject of sacrifice has alluded to the historical importance of the work of William Robertson Smith, a Scottish orientalist and Old Testament scholar, whose writings influenced several generations of anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists and students of religion. Emile Durkheim, for example, lauded Smith's original contributions to the understanding of sacrifice when he wrote the following in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995: 340–41): It is well known how much the works of Robertson Smith have revolutionized the traditional theory of sacrifice. Until Smith, sacrifice was seen only as a sort of tribute or homage, either obligatory or freely given, and analogous to those that subjects owe to their princes. Robertson Smith was the first to draw attention to the fact that this traditional explanation did not account for two fundamental features of the rite. First, it is a meal; the substance of sacrifice is food. Second, it is a meal of which the faithful who offer it partake at the same time as the god to whom it is offered... In many societies, the meal is taken in common to create a bond of artificial kinship among the participants. Kin are beings who are made of the same flesh and the same blood. And since food constantly remakes the substance of the body, shared food can create the same effects as shared origin. According to Smith, the object of sacrificial banquets is to have the faithful and the god commune in one and the same flesh, to tie a knot of kinship between them. Its essence was no longer the act of renunciation that the word "sacrifice" usually expresses, as was so long believed; it was first and foremost an act of alimentary communion.

Almost every twentieth century textbook or monograph on the subject of sacrifice, sets out by nodding respectfully towards William Robertson Smith and his seminal ideas on the topic, as

originally presented during April, 1887, in the first series of his Burnett Lectures at Aberdeen, and subsequently published in 1889 under the title *The Religion of the Semites*. Most commonly, reference is made to Smith's core concept of sacrifice as an age-old liminal experience of communion between the human and divine worlds. Around the same time, Sigmund Freud (1960), in the fourth essay of *Totem and Taboo*, made Smith's view of sacrifice (which establishes kinship among a people and its gods through a process of oral incorporation of the same substance), into the lynchpin of his argument concerning the phylogenetic origins of the Oedipus complex.

More recently, Gordon Booth (2002, 255) reiterated the historical importance of Smith's views on sacrifice more generally. And most recently, Robert Allun Jones (2005, 59–103) underscored Smith's importance in his own study of the totemism debate in late nineteenth, early twentieth century anthropology.<sup>1</sup> In 1862, Ludwig Feuerbach wrote an essay entitled: *Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder der Mensch ist was er isst* [The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is What he Eats]. The essay was published in the first edition of Feuerbach's collected works in 1866 but it was not to become one of his more famous or celebrated pieces. In fact, Friedrich Jodl, who along with Wilhelm Bolin, edited a later edition of Feuerbach's collected works (1903–1911), felt called upon in his introduction to Volume X (which contained the essay in question) to defend the seeming one-sidedness of Feuerbach's writing. Jodl described the essay as containing "numerous crudities" describing the "almost suicidal zeal" of Feuerbach's one-sided argumentation against speculative philosophy. Jodl [Feuerbach: (1862) 1960, VII–VIII] then went on to justify this one-sidedness as a kind of necessary strategy that Feuerbach was forced to adopt. Feuerbach (1866: X, 41) himself made no such apologies to German philosophy, as we can see in the opening paragraph of his essay below.

The essay is of scholarly interest and hence worthy of translation into English (for the first time here) for a number of reasons. First, it contains most of the core theoretical points made by Smith and taken up by Durkheim, Freud, many of their contemporaries, and students of sacrifice down to the present. Even those Feuerbach commentators such as Harold Lemke (2004, 117–140) who have singled out this essay for detailed treatment, have not called attention to Feuerbach's originality and priority in relation to the modern literature on sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

A second reason for offering an English translation of this text at the present time concerns the recent growth of interest in the nature and meaning of sacrifice as seen in the writings of Bakan (1968, 1971), Burkert (1983, 2001), Ekroth (2002), Girard (1977, 1986, 1987, 2001), Jay (1992), Kristeva (1982, 1995), Osman (2004) and many others in a wide variety of fields.

Yet a third reason for the timeliness of this first translation of the essay is related to its relevance to the recent confluence of two disciplines — neuroscience and psychoanalysis. Harkening back to the work of the early Freud, especially to his so-called 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1971a, 1–60) in which he attempted to incorporate the brain and the mind into a unified system and failed.<sup>3</sup> The fact that neurobiologist Antonio D'Amasio was invited to give a keynote presentation at the last

Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (2004) was more than a symbolic gesture. D'Amasio, who had written several books on experimental neuroscience against the backdrop of 17th century European metaphysics, invoked the authority of Spinoza's unity of body and mind ('the mind is the idea of the body') against the dualism of Descartes and his followers. The unity of body-mind, brain-mind, was a pillar of Feuerbach's thinking and his writings in both anthropology and psychology became increasingly framed around this after his break with the Idealist philosophy in 1839.4 [Feuerbach's essays in philosophical physiology also predate the pioneering work by Bayliss and Starling (1902) in neurogastroenterology and can be seen as a philosophical forerunner of recent work by Gershon (1998) who writes of the brain in the gut and of the bowel as a second brain.]

Feuerbach's essay thus contributes to our understanding of the prehistory of both psychoanalysis and neuro-psychoanalysis. That Freud intensively read Feuerbach, in his second year as a student at the University of Vienna, 1874–75 (Boehlich, 1989: 82, 110–111), is evidenced by letters to his childhood friend, Eduard Silberstein. And, even though Freud denied any specific lasting effect of this reading in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger (op. cit., 242) in 1925, Dimitrov and Gerdjikov (1974), Hemecker (1991), Grubrich-Simitis (1986) and others suggest important ways in which Freud had been influenced by this early, intensive encounter with Feuerbach (Levitt, 2006).

In the translation that follows we can see how Feuerbach's emphasis on and approach to eating and drinking are reflected in Freud's understanding of orality as a psycho-sexual stage of development and in the themes closely related to it including: identification, incorporation, aggression, sadism, reaction-formation, etc. (Even if Freud had never read this particular essay by Feuerbach, and it is likely that he did not, the similarity between some of Feuerbach's ideas and those of Freud are truly remarkable). When a patient in analysis remarks: 'I loved her so much I could have eaten her up,' or: 'When she left me I ate my heart out,' Feuerbach would understand the real corporeal associative link in the metaphorical speech.

Finally, Feuerbach's emphasis on the mind-body or mind-brain in the latter part of the essay is relevant to the work of D'Amasio and other neuroscientists who look back to the ideas of the great metaphysicians as a mechanism for expressing their own views that have been formed on the basis of empirical research. Feuerbach, although influenced by Spinoza, went beyond the 17th century metaphysician to link up with the cutting edge of the physiology of the mid-19th century, especially with the work of the chemical physiologists Büchner, Vogt and Moleschott, who became supportive in varying degrees of Feuerbach's philosophy of science, nature and human nature. If contemporary neuroscientists like D'Amasio find important nuggets in the mighty thinkers of the past, a reconsideration of the writings of Feuerbach in relation to the mind-brain problem is not to be dismissed.

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1. Jones (op. cit., 308) suggests that Henry Sumner Maine adumbrated the theory of sacrifice as establishing kinship in his 1861 inaugural book: *Ancient Law*. There are two problems with this suggestion. The first concerns the reference only to sacrifice establishing kinship, whereas Smith's theories on sacrifice included numerous other aspects. Second, this element of the theory was known to classical antiquity, which will be clear in the translation that follows. Maine himself pointed out that 'nothing moves under the sun which is not Greek in origin.'
2. Most of the theoretical points made by Smith in his Burnett lectures in 1888–9 and a little later in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, cited by Durkheim, Freud and many others down to the present had already been made by Feuerbach in the essay that follows. It is entirely possible that Smith became acquainted with the Feuerbach essay during his sojourn in Germany. Smith's colleague and mentor at Greifswald, Julius Wellhausen, a distinguished Old Testament scholar, has suggested that: "Smith... was not a scholar, but clever at presenting other men's views." (Darlow, 1925, 41)
3. Although some neuroscientists understand his attempt as having reached an appreciation of a primitive neural network, which is astounding given the fact that the synapse had not yet been discovered, although Freud had already postulated its existence in the draft essay as a 'contact barrier.'
4. Even his early, anonymously published work, *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* [Thoughts on Death and Immortality] affirmed the unity of mind and body.