Friedrich Engels, looking back on the early 1840s, wrote, ‘we were all Feuerbachians then’ (Wartofsky 1977, xix). Marx enthusiastically wrote of and corresponded with Feuerbach, holding that ‘there is no other road... to truth and freedom except that leading through the Fire-brook [the Feuer-bach]’ (cited in Hanfi 1972, 41–2). Yet a few short years later, in 1845, Marx wrote his theses on Feuerbach, proclaiming the shortcomings of Feuerbach’s thought.

Since that time, many have approached Feuerbach through Marx: as Hanfi (1972, 1) put it, they ‘read [Feuerbach’s philosophy] as a chapter in the book called Karl Marx’. Writers such as Althusser and Balibar (1997) and Meszaros (1970) have treated Marx’s engagement with Feuerbach as merely a transitional ‘period’ and look to the theses and The German Ideology as a ‘break’ or ‘rupture’ from which the true or mature Marxism emerged. As a consequence, Feuerbach is rarely treated as having a serious contribution to make to our understanding of Marx. However, in more recent scholarship, notably Breckman (2001, 2006), Brudney (1998), Caldwell (2009), Johnston (1995), and Leopold (2007), more attention has been paid to Feuerbach’s works. Like them, I demonstrate here that Feuerbach addressed some of the essential questions Marx also addressed and shaped the development of Marx’s thinking. I share Wartofsky’s (1977, 1) position: whilst weaknesses in both style and substance detract from Feuerbach’s work, he should be treated ‘seriously’ for the originality of his insights.

In the early 1840s, Marx, Engels, and many others were all ‘Feuerbachians’, if by this we mean that Feuerbach gave expression to the radical freedoms promised by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He covered ground that was, as Hans Kung emphasised, previously ‘terra incognita’ (Johnston 1995, 205). Kung is one of those who called for
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the originality and insight of Feuerbach's work to be recognised. He argued that Feuerbach had progressed past the Enlightenment position in treating religion as ‘man's self-worship’ rather than merely a ‘fraud’ or ‘illusion’ (1995, 205).

Feuerbach is best known for his work on religion, having begun his assault anonymously with Thoughts on Death and Immortality. However, it was Essence of Christianity, widely regarded as a tour de force, that made Engels and others ‘all Feuerbachians’ (Wartofsky 1977, xix). Having surveyed a range of key Christian beliefs, Feuerbach argued persuasively that those beliefs, whilst expressing genuine desires, projected (and exaggerated) human characteristics on an imagined divine being. He also cogently argued, in the second half of the Essence, that the genuine human impulses expressed in religion were distorted and betrayed by the artificial abstractions of theological thought.

This aspect of Feuerbach's work is also one of the most widely recognised connections with Marx's thought. Both criticised religion as distracting its adherents from a better understanding of experience, and both understood its appeal in the comfort its beliefs provided. Marx, in subsequently criticising Hegel's works (particularly his ‘inversion’ of subject and predicate), drew that method of ‘inversion’ from Feuerbach: Hegel's Absolute, like the gods Feuerbach considered, was a projection of human attributes.

Feuerbach is also well known for his rejection of Hegel's idealism in favour of his theory of ‘sensuousness’. Feuerbach's perceived claims to some form of immediate knowledge through the senses, independent of some cognitive mediation, together with Marx's criticism of their ahistorical character, have no doubt contributed to the lack of interest in this part of Feuerbach's work. They have, instead, been seen as a transitional influence on Marx's road to a more credible materialism.

Whilst Feuerbach's works do lack depth in some instances and fail to adequately address some key issues, they are worthy of a more detailed examination. This is particularly the case with his work in relation to philosophy, which both preceded and followed his more famous works on religion, as they reveal Feuerbach's long-standing objection to abstract understandings of human nature. Even whilst adhering to Hegelian thought, Feuerbach understood his task to be the ‘overthrowing from its throne the ego, the self in general’ (letter to Hegel in 1828; cited in Breckman 2001, 1).

Feuerbach's work needs to be taken seriously. Much more than just a transition to Marx, it needs to be understood, rather, as an engagement with the character or substance of ‘man himself’. Feuerbach's