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# Infidels, Freethinkers, Humanists, and Unbelievers

Stirner, Max (1806 - 1856)

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Unknown

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## Comments by Contemporaries

Twenty years after the appearance of Stirner's book, the author Friedrich Albert Lange wrote the following:

Stirner went so far in his notorious work, 'Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthum' (1845), as to reject all moral ideas. Everything that in any way, whether it be external force, belief, or mere idea, places itself above the individual and his caprice, Stirner rejects as a hateful limitation of himself. What a pity that to this book – the extremest that we know anywhere – a second positive part was not added. It would have been easier than in the case of Schelling's philosophy; for out of the unlimited Ego I can again beget every kind of Idealism as my will and my idea. Stirner lays so much stress upon the will, in fact, that it appears as the root force of human nature. It may remind us of Schopenhauer

– History of Materialism, ii. 256

## Quotations

"The great are great only because we are on our knees. Let us rise!"

"The truth wears longer than all the gods; for it is only in the truth's service, and for love of it, that people have overthrown the gods and at last God himself. "The truth" outlasts the downfall of the world of gods, for it is the immortal soul of this transitory world of gods; it is Deity itself."

"Before what is sacred, people lose all sense of power and all confidence; they occupy a powerless and humble attitude toward it. And yet no thing is sacred of itself, but by my declaring it sacred, by my declaration, my judgment, my bending the knee; in short, by my conscience."

"The State calls its own violence law, but that of the individual crime."

many ideas associated with post-left anarchy criticism of ideology and uncompromising individualism - are clearly related to Stirner's. He has also been regarded as pioneering individualist feminism, since his objection to any absolute concept also clearly counts gender roles as 'spooks'. His ideas were also adopted by post-anarchism, with Saul Newman largely in agreement with many of Stirner's criticisms of classical anarchism, including his rejection of revolution and essentialism.

Stirner's demolition of absolute concepts disturbs traditional concepts of attribution of meaning to language and human existence, and can be seen as pioneering a modern media theory which focuses on dynamic conceptions of language and reality, in contrast to reality as subject to any absolute definition. Jean Baudrillard's critique of Marxism and development of a dynamic theory of media, simulation and 'the real' employs some of the same elements Stirner used in his Hegelian critique without, however, making recourse to very much that lies at the heart of the plumb-line libertarian core of Stirner's philosophy. Though many in the poststructuralist camp have championed Stirner's thought, the core tenets of these two entities are wholly incompatible; Stirner would never agree, for example, with that fundamental poststructuralist idea, that as a product of systems, the self is undermined. For Stirner, the self cannot be a mere product of systems. There remains, in the Stirnerian schema, as described in the above, a place deep within the self which language and social systems cannot destroy. This idea finds expression, perhaps, in a concept put forward by the contemporary philosopher Julia Kristeva; the 'semiotic chora', as she calls it, represents a state of mind which predates the inculcation of the social apparatus in the mind of the young child.

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the most tenaciously held tenets of the Western mindset yields a terrain which bears testimony to the radical threat he posed; most writers who read and were influenced by Stirner failed to make any references to him or *The Ego and Its Own* at all in their writing. As the renowned art critic Herbert Read has observed, Stirner's book has remained 'stuck in the gizzard' of Western culture since it first appeared.

It has been argued that Nietzsche did read Stirner's book, yet even he did not mention Stirner anywhere in his work, his letters, or his papers. Nietzsche's thinking sometimes resembles Stirner's to such a degree that Eduard von Hartmann called him a plagiarist. This seems too simple an explanation of what Nietzsche might have done with Stirner's ideas. Stirner's book had been in oblivion for half a century, and only after Nietzsche became well-known in the 1890s did Stirner become more well-known, although only as an awkward predecessor of Nietzsche. Thus Nietzsche - as with Marx's concept of historical materialism in 1845/46 - did not really plagiarize Stirner but instead "superseded" him by creating a philosophy.

Several other authors, philosophers and artists have cited, quoted or otherwise referred to Max Stirner. They include Albert Camus (In *The Rebel*), Benjamin Tucker, Dora Marsden, Georg Brandes, Rudolf Steiner, Robert Anton Wilson, Italian individualist anarchist Frank Brand, the notorious antiartist Marcel Duchamp, several writers of the situationist movement, and Max Ernst, who titled a 1925 painting *L'unique et sa propriété*. The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini read and was inspired by Stirner, and made several references to him in his newspaper articles, prior to rising to power. His later writings would uphold a view opposed to Stirner, a trajectory mirrored by the composer Richard Wagner.

Since its appearance in 1844, *The Ego and Its Own* has seen periodic revivals of popular, political and academic interest, based around widely divergent translations and interpretations - some psychological, others political in their emphasis. Today,

## Influence

Stirner's work did not go unnoticed among his colleagues, the Young Hegelians. Stirner's attacks on ideology, in particular Feuerbach's humanism, forced Feuerbach into print. Moses Hess (at that time close to Marx) and Szeliga (an adherent of Bruno Bauer) also replied to Stirner. Stirner answered the criticism in a German periodical, in the article *Stirner's Critics* (org. *Recensenten Stirners*, Sept 1845), which clarifies several points of interest to readers of the book - especially in relation to Feuerbach.

To begin with, Engels was spontaneously enthusiastic about the book, and expressed his opinions freely in a letter to Marx. Later, Marx wrote a histrionic indictment of Stirner, co-authored with Engels, spanning several hundred pages (in the original, unexpurgated text) of his book *The German Ideology* (org. *Die deutsche Ideologie*). The book was written in 1845 - 1846, but not published until 1932. Marx's lengthy, ferocious polemic against Stirner has since been considered an important turning point in Marx's intellectual development from "idealism" to "materialism".

While *The German Ideology* so assured *The Ego and Its Own* a place of curious interest among Marxist readers, Marx's ridicule of Stirner has played a significant role in the subsequent marginalization of Stirner's work, in popular and academic discourse.

Over the course of the last hundred and fifty years, Stirner's thinking has proved an intellectual challenge, reminiscent of the challenge Cartesian criticism brought to western philosophy. His philosophy has been characterized as disturbing, sometimes even considered a direct threat to civilization; something that ought not even be mentioned in polite company, and that should be, if encountered by some unfortunate happenstance, examined as briefly as possible and then best forgotten. Stirner's relentlessness in the service of scuttling

"The truth wears longer than all the gods; for it is only in the truth's service, and for love of it, that people have overthrown the gods and at last God himself. "The truth" outlasts the downfall of the world of gods, for it is the immortal soul of this transitory world of gods; it is Deity itself."

- Max Stirner

Johann Kaspar Schmidt, better known as Max Stirner (the nom de plume he adopted from a schoolyard nickname he had acquired as a child because of his high brow [Stirn]), German philosopher, who ranks as one of the literary grandfathers of nihilism, existentialism and anarchism, especially of individualist anarchism. Stirner himself explicitly denied holding any absolute position in his philosophy, further stating that if he must be identified with some "-ism" let it be egoism - the antithesis of all ideologies and social causes, as he conceived of it.

Stirner's main work is *The Ego and Its Own*, also known as *The Ego and His Own* (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* in German), which was first published in Leipzig, 1844, and has since appeared in numerous editions and translations.

Stirner was born in Bayreuth, Bavaria, on October 25, 1806. What little is known of his life is mostly due to the Scottish born German writer John Henry Mackay, who wrote a biography of Stirner (*Max Stirner - sein Leben und sein Werk*), published in German in 1898. A 2005 English translation has now appeared.

Stirner attended university in Berlin, where he attended the lectures of Hegel, who was to become a vital source of inspiration for his thinking, and on the structure of whose work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), he modelled his own book. (Hegel's influence on Stirner's thinking is debatable, and is discussed in more detail below.)

While in Berlin in 1841, Stirner sometimes participated in a discussion group of young philosophers called "The Free" [Die

Freien], and who historians have subsequently categorized as so-called Young Hegelians. Some of the best known names in 19th century literature were members of this discussion group, including Bruno Bauer, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Arnold Ruge.

While some of the Young Hegelians were eager subscribers to Hegel's dialectical method, and attempted to apply dialectical approaches to Hegel's conclusions, the "left wing" members of the Young Hegelians, e.g. those named above, broke with Hegel. Feuerbach and Bauer led this charge.

Frequently the debates would take place at Hippel's, a *Weinstube* (wine bar) in Friedrichstrasse, attended by, amongst others, the young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, at that time still adherents of Feuerbach. The only portrait we have of Stirner consists of a cartoon by Engels, drawn forty years later from memory on the request of Stirner's biographer John Henry Mackay.

Stirner worked as a schoolteacher employed in an academy for young girls when he wrote his major work *The Ego and Its Own*, which in part is a polemic against both Hegel and some Young Hegelians (e.g. Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer), but also against communists as Wilhelm Weitling and against the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, not to mention Feuerbach. He resigned his teaching position in anticipation of the controversy arising from his major work's publication in October 1844.

Stirner married twice; his first wife was a household servant with whom he fell in love at an early age. Soon after their marriage, she died due to complications with pregnancy in 1838. In 1843 he married Marie Dähnhardt, an intellectual associated with *Die Freien*. They divorced in 1846. The bitter ironic dedication of *The Ego and Its Own* - "to my sweetheart Marie Dähnhardt" - may hint at the reasons for the shortness of their liaison. Marie later converted to catholicism and died 1902 in London.

a philosophy exclusive to their race, and to their time) is really just a throwback to an ancient and repressive notion that was already prevalent in classical China (or "Mongoldom" as Stirner styles it).

Certainly, it is no accident that the passage in question is extremely offensive; most modern readers will likely feel insulted by it, or by the (now antiquated) terms it employs. Stirner clearly lacked any detailed understanding of classical Chinese civilization, and simply employs a limited sketch of its repressive, hierarchical elements as part of a reproach against European civilization in his own times. The primary purpose of the passage seems to be to upset the long-standing conceits of European pre-eminence, and it does not establish a racist historiography of its own. What Leopold and other critics seem to have failed to understand is that what Stirner dubs climbing "the ladder of culture, or civilization" [p. 64] is not a process that he seeks to glorify (as Hegel and so many others did), but rather to repudiate; thus, it is not inconsistent that Stirner identifies the culture of Confucian China with greater advancement and yet, at the same time, considers it abhorrent. In this passage "Civilization" is glossed as the subordination of the individual and the world to the rule of "the hierarchy of the spirit", viz., the inculcation of "habit, or second nature", and the proliferation of "principles" and "laws" on the basis of the enjoined obligations of man to "heaven". [p. 64] Thus, only at the conclusion of the passage does Stirner define what he means by the term "Mongolism", viz., "[the] utter absence of any rights of the sensuous, [it] represents non-sensuousness and unnature...". [p. 65] In some respects, this critique of civilization and culture (as such) seems to anticipate much later thinkers such as John Zerzan.

"Negro", including the (much mythified) Athenian Greeks and Romans. He briefly expands on this to say that all of classical "Europan" philosophy is in fact African in character, a clear attempt to lampoon the historicist racialism of authors such as Hegel. His next assertion is that currently (viz., in the 19th century) Europeans are ethnically Mongoloid, not Caucasian: they follow a Mongolian religion, are worshipping a Mongolian god, and have the same social ideals as those of dynastic China. Thus, while European Christians imagine themselves to be superior to Asian idolators, Stirner asserts that Europeans have merely "wrestled for thousands of years with [the same] spiritual beings" as the Chinese, and still dream of going to "the Mongolian heaven, Tien", after they die. [p. 64] As with the first phase of the argument, it is clear that Stirner is not using these terms to insult Asians, but is throwing the established (Eurocentric) preconceptions of history back upon Europeans, and judging them to be (in their own racist terms) merely "Mongoloid" in their beliefs. [p. 63-5]

Although the passage is likely to be offensive to members of any religion (or almost any ethnicity) it is also noteworthy that Stirner here asserts that the dynastic empire of Confucian China is a more advanced civilization than that of Europe, but, from his perspective, this advancement is in precisely the wrong direction, viz., toward hierarchy, patriarchy, and the repression of the individual by obligation and law. For those who have studied Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Stirner seems to have included a direct inversion of the Hegelian conception of freedom (based as it was upon a racist historical dialectic, and the glorification of law and obligation as the precondition of "freedom of the spirit"):

To want to win freedom for the spirit is Mongolism; freedom of the spirit is Mongolian freedom, freedom of feeling, moral freedom, and so forth.

Effectively, Stirner is here saying that what Germans imagine to be the "new" philosophy of freedom (according to Hegel,

One of the most curious events in those times was that Stirner planned and financed (with his second wife's inheritance) an attempt by some Young Hegelians to own and operate a milk-shop on co-operative principles. This enterprise failed because the German dairy farmers harboured suspicions of these well-dressed intellectuals with their confusing talk about profit-sharing and other high-minded ideals. Meanwhile, the milk shop itself appeared so ostentatiously decorated that most of the customers felt too poorly dressed to buy their milk there.

After *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner published German translations of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Jean-Baptiste Say's *Traite d'Economie Politique*, and a set of his replies to his critics were collected in a small work titled *History of Reaction* (1852).

In 1856, Stirner died in Berlin, Prussia from an infected insect bite. As the story goes, Bruno Bauer was the only Young Hegelian present at his funeral.

## **Stirner's (Assigned) Place in the History of Philosophy**

The status of the philosophy of Max Stirner has been largely determined by his criticism of others, and his treatment by his critics. His lengthy repudiation of Hegelian philosophy has reserved an historically dubious niche for his name in the list of "Young Hegelians" offered in standard histories of 19th century philosophy, and, perhaps more importantly (so far as keeping his works in print), the perceived importance of his philosophy in the intellectual development of the young Karl Marx has earned him a footnote in many reading lists.

The number of pages Marx and Engels devote to attacking Stirner in (the unexpurgated text of) *The German Ideology* exceeds the total of Stirner's written works. Marx's incoherent

(and frequently ad hominem) screed has led a few of his followers in each generation to investigate the source text that inspired so much vituperation. Leaving aside Stirner's critical engagement with Feuerbachian Humanism, German Liberalism, and other ideologies of his era, we may say that Stirner's purely negative associations with Hegel and Marxism alone have been sufficient to assign him a permanent place in the canon of Western philosophy –albeit a place of infamy. Even those who value Stirner's contribution to the Western tradition tend to focus on the negative arguments of *The Ego and its Own*, viz., his condemnation of the social, moral, religious and political conditions that surrounded him in 19th century Europe.

Although Stirner provides plenty of such "negative" material for our consideration, it is disappointing to find that the "positive aspect" (or "posited tenets") of his philosophy has been so rarely taken into consideration in evaluating his significance. Although less overtly prejudicial to Stirner's work, the small literature of comparative essays that have attempted to relate Stirner in Nietzschean terms (e.g., R.W.K. Patterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, & John Carroll, 1974, *Break Out from the Crystal Palace*) have also obscured the primary source text by reducing Stirner's work into a set of points that can (or cannot be) validated in the light of later philosophical developments.

The root of the problem is partly methodological: to describe Stirner simply in contradistinction to Hegel (or Marx, or Feuerbach, etc.) must inevitably fail to touch on the heart of his own philosophy, for the plain reason that his own arguments stand independent of (and in radical contradistinction to) the common assumptions of the 19th century German tradition.

## Philosophy

Stirner's main work is *The Ego and Its Own* (orig. 'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum'), which appeared in Leipzig

opposition, but without having sunk back into "unity" and unison. As unique you no longer have anything in common with the other, and therefore nothing divisive or hostile either; you are not seeking to be in the right before a third party [viz., god, the state, etc.], and are standing with [others] neither on "the basis of right" nor on any other common ground. The opposition vanishes in complete severance or singleness. This might be regarded as the new point in common, or as a new parity, but here the parity consists precisely in the disparity, an equality of disparity, and [even] that [distinction arises] only for him who poses the two in "comparison". [p. 184-186]

Unfortunately, David Leopold has badly misinterpreted one of the most inflammatory passages (dealing with race) in his introduction to the Cambridge edition (op. cit. supra). The passage appears as a non-sequitor ("episodically", in Leopold's terms) from pg. 62-65, and certainly does employ offensive racial terms, but, significantly, these terms are employed to ridicule the (then mainstream) European conceptions of their own history and ethnic heritage.

The passage in question begins [p. 62-3] by claiming that the period Western scholars commonly refer to as "European antiquity" (viz., classical Greece and Rome) should instead be termed "the Negroid age", viz., the period in which "Egypt and... northern Africa in general" are culturally predominant over Europe. Leopold's assessment seems to ignore the fact that this passage is not intended to insult black people, but is rather a pointed attempt to upset the (historically false, but still prevalent) European assumptions that paint modern racial prejudices onto ancient history, e.g., claiming that the Athenians, or even the Egyptians, were in some sense "Europeans" or ethnically "Caucasian", whereas the Hittites, and adjacent peoples of Asia Minor, etc., are presumed to be "non-white" enemies in this apocryphal racialization of bronze age history. Against this miasma of racial prejudices, Stirner brashly asserts that these ancient peoples were all



Stirner's central argument (or "method") on the question of racial identity hinges on his assertion that ethnicity is an illusory and invidious notion (variously exploited by nationalism, liberalism, and the Church in his contemporary Germany) and that can be broken by the uniqueness (and "nothingness") of the ego. With the latter breaking of the illusion a free intercourse between people of different ethnicities is supposed to ensue; this seems to work from a cosmopolitan or "multi-cultural" assumption wherein each distinct ethnicity or religion should "assert [its] distinctness or peculiarity: you need not give way or renounce yourself [viz., your ethnic identity]" (p. 185). This is a striking contrast to the widespread presumption of the time that ethnic minorities in Europe were obliged to assimilate or else depart. Stirner excoriates the presumption that ethnic divisions can be "dissolved" by the forced imposition of a nationalistic identity, and similarly rejects the liberal claims that the issue will disappear if only state power would provide "equal rights" to all:

The "equality of right" is a phantom ... people dream of "all citizens of the state having to stand side by side, with equal rights". As citizens of the state they are certainly all equal for the state. But it will divide them, and advance them or put them in the rear, according to its special ends, if on no other account... People conceive of the significance of the opposition [between ethnicities] too formally and weakly when they want only to 'dissolve' it in order to make room for a third thing that shall 'unite'. The opposition deserves rather to be sharpened. [...] Our weakness consists not in this, that we are in opposition to others, but in this, that we are not completely so; that we are not entirely severed from them, that we still seek a "Communion", a "Bond", that in communion we have an ideal. One faith, one god, one idea, one hat, for all! If all were brought under one hat, certainly no one would need to take off his hat for another anymore. The last and most decided opposition, that of unique against unique, is fundamentally beyond what is called

in 1844. One can chart the development of his philosophy through a series of articles that appeared shortly before this central work (the articles *The False Principle of Our Education* and *Art and Religion* furnishing particular interest).

In *The Ego and Its Own* Stirner launches a radical anti-authoritarian and individualist critique of contemporary Prussian society, and modernity and modern western society as such, and offers an approach to human existence which depicts the self as a creative non-entity, beyond language and reality, as generally conceived of in the western philosophical tradition.

In short, the book proclaims that all religions and ideologies rest on empty concepts, that, once undermined by individual self-interest, break apart to reveal their emptiness. The same holds true for those of society's institutions, that uphold these concepts, be it the state, legislation, the church, the systems of education, or other institutions that claim authority over the individual.

Stirner's argument explores and extends the limits of Hegelian criticism, aiming his critique especially at those of his contemporaries (particularly colleagues amongst the Young Hegelians, most importantly Ludwig Feuerbach), embracing popular 'ideologies', explicitly including nationalism, statism, liberalism, socialism, communism and humanism.

In the time of spirits thoughts grew till they overtopped my head, whose offspring they yet were; they hovered about me and convulsed me like fever-phantasies – an awful power. The thoughts had become corporeal on their own account, were ghosts, e. g. God, Emperor, Pope, Fatherland, etc. If I destroy their corporeity, then I take them back into mine, and say: "I alone am corporeal." And now I take the world as what it is to me, as mine, as my property; I refer all to myself.

## Egoism

Only when the false claims of authority by such concepts and institutions as the above, are revealed, can real individual action, power and identity take place. Individual self-realization rests on each individual's desire to fulfill his egoism, be it by instinct, unknowingly, unwillingly - or consciously, fully aware of his self-interest

The primary difference between an unwilling and a willing egoist, is that the first will be 'possessed' by an empty idea, or a 'spook', in the hope that this idea will make him happy, and the last, in contrast, will be able to freely choose the ways of his egoism, and enjoy himself while doing it. The contrast is also expressed in terms of the difference between the individual being the possessor of his concepts as opposed to being possessed thereby. Only when one realizes that all sacred truths such as law, right, morality, religion etc., are nothing other than artificial concepts, and not holy authorities to be obeyed, can one act freely. In Stirner's idiom, to be free is to be both one's own "creature" (in the sense of 'creation') and one's own "creator" (dislocating the traditional role assigned to the gods):

Sacred things exist only for the egoist who does not acknowledge himself, the involuntary egoist ... in short, for the egoist who would like not to be an egoist, and abases himself (combats his egoism), but at the same time abases himself only for the sake of "being exalted", and therefore of gratifying his egoism. Because he would like to cease to be an egoist, he looks about in heaven and earth for higher beings to serve and sacrifice himself to; but, however much he shakes and disciplines himself, in the end he does all for his own sake... [on]

In other words, to go beyond Hegel in true dialectical fashion is to continue Hegel's project, and Stepelevich argues persuasively that this effort of Stirner's is, in fact a completion of Hegel's project.

Stepelevich concludes his argument referring to Jean Hypolite, who in summing up the intention of the *Phenomenology*, stated : "The history of the world is finished; all that is needed is for the specific individual to rediscover it in himself"

Stirner as an *Einzig* took himself directly to be that 'specific individual' and then went on as a Hegelian to propose the practical consequence which would ultimately follow upon that theoretical rediscovery, the free play of self-consciousness among the objects of its own determination: "The idols exist through me; I need only refrain from creating them anew, then they exist no longer: 'higher powers' exist only through my exalting them and abasing myself... My intercourse with the world consists in my enjoying it, and so consuming it for my self-enjoyment" (*Ego*, 319)

— Lawrence Stepelevich, 'Max Stirner as Hegelian'

## The Question of Racism in Stirner's Oeuvre.

Opinions among scholars have been strongly divided as to how the terms "racism" and "racialism" apply to Stirner's oeuvre. Those who reject the accusation that Stirner was a racist can point to Stirner's protected (and consistent) opposition to bigotry and nationalism of any kind, and his many passages attacking the racism of Germans as narrow-minded "tribalism" and "Teutonomania". However, for many modern readers, Stirner's use of the (now odious) 19th century racial categories "Mongoloid" and "Negro" constitute powerful *prima facie* evidence, and may cause them to ignore his direct arguments against racist nationalism.

the child, that acquires its mothers' love, over the sensual and material pleasures and meanings of taking what one desires, to the wholesale attribution of meaning, value and existence in language and life. Power in this sense is synonymous with the dynamics of utter autonomy, and the ability of change, of existence, of life itself.

## Stirner as Hegelian?

Stirner's critique of Hegel shows a profound awareness of Hegel's work, and, argued by scholars such as Karl Löwith and Lawrence Stepelevich, suggests a vital influence of Hegel's thinking, in Stirner's intellectual development and line of thinking – even if Stirner's mature philosophy may comprise a thorough repudiation of Hegelianism, in form as well as content.

Stirner employs some of the most important elements of Hegelian structure and many of Hegel's basic presuppositions to arrive at his conclusions. Stepelevich argues, that while The Ego and his own evidently has an "un-Hegelian structure and tone to the work as a whole", as well as being fundamentally hostile to Hegel's conclusions about the self and the world, this does not mean that Hegel and Stirner are not related on the most intimate level.

The main juncture leading from Hegel to Stirner is found [in The Phenomenology of the Spirit] at the termination of a phenomenological passage to absolute knowledge. Stirner's work is most clearly understood when it is taken to be the answer to the question, 'what role will consciousness play after it has traversed the series of shapes known as 'untrue' knowledge and has attained to absolute knowledge?

– Lawrence Stepelevich, 'Max Stirner as Hegelian, Journal of the History of Ideas, v.15, pp. 597-614 (1985).

this account I call him the involuntary egoist. ...As you are each instant, you are your own creature in this very 'creature' you do not wish to lose yourself, the creator. You are yourself a higher being than you are, and surpass yourself ... just this, as an involuntary egoist, you fail to recognize; and therefore the 'higher essence' is to you –an alien essence. ... Alienness is a criterion of the "sacred". [Ibidem, Cambridge edition, p. 37-8]

Stirner has been broadly understood as a proponent of both psychological egoism and ethical egoism, although the latter position can be disputed, maintaining that there is no sense in Stirner's writing, in which one 'ought to' pursue one's own interest, and further claiming any such category of 'ought' would be a new 'fixed idea'. The notion that one's own interest (or one's own nature) is a calling to which one is beholden (or "ought to follow" in any moral or imperative sense) is, strictly speaking, contrary to Stirner's tenets. However, he may be understood as a rational egoist in the sense that he apparently considered it irrational not to act in one's self interest.

On the other hand, Stirner repeatedly refers to a fundamental state of existence, which he seems to view as ideal, 'like the bird, who sings because it is a singer'. He provokes his readers with references to their christian-adopted fear of their own nudity, encouraging them to throw away such fixed ideas, to see and become 'who they really are'. In such terms, Stirner's egoism may be seen as 'ethical' and perhaps even as idealistic.

## Anarchism

The political ramifications of Stirner's work are sometimes described as a form of individualist anarchism. Stirner however does not identify himself as an anarchist, and includes anarchists among the parties subject to his criticism. In particular,

Stirner's political doctrine repudiates revolution in the traditional sense, and ridicules social movements aimed at overturning the state as tacitly statist (i.e., aimed at the establishment of a new state thereafter), putting forth instead a unique model of self-empowerment and social change through "union activism" –although the definition and explanation of the latter is unique to Stirner, and does not resemble a standard socialist doctrine of trade unionism. Some people see Ernst Jünger's revolutionary conservative concept of the anarchist as a more faithful rendition of Stirner's thought.

## 'The creative nothing'

Stirner's demolition of 'fixed ideas' and absolute concepts (derided as 'spooks' of contemporary philosophy) lead him to a nameless void, without meaning and without existence; a so-called 'creative nothing' from which mind and creativity will arise. The 'nothing' Stirner arrives at, in the process of tearing down every absolute concept (every absolute description) outside of himself, he later described as an 'end-point of language', meaning this is where all description comes to an end; it cannot be described. But this is also the place where all description begins, where the individual self can describe (and therefore create) the world in its own meaning.

In order to understand this 'creative nothing', which Stirner strives so hard to argue for and explain, to the extent that his work invokes poetry and vivid imagery to give meaning to his words - but helplessly cannot describe by words alone, it is worth bearing his Hegelian origins in mind. The 'creative nothing' by its dialectical shortcomings creates the need for a description, for meaning. You need the word 'nothing' to describe nothing - therefore nothing is a paradox. You cannot say 'nothing' without someone saying it, at the very least. And you need

which I subject myself. [...] In words and truths [...] there is no salvation for me, as little as there is for the Christian in things and vanities. As the riches of this world do not make me happy, so neither do its truths. [...] Along with worldly goods, all sacred goods too must be put away as no longer valuable. (p. 307)

Truths are material, like vegetables and weeds; as to whether vegetable or weed, the decision lies in me. (p. 313)

In place of such systems of beliefs, Stirner presents a detached life of non-dogmatic, open-minded engagement with the world "as it is" (unmediated by such hypostatizations, unpolluted by "presupposed truth" of any kind), coupled with the awareness that there is no soul, no personal essence of any kind, but that the individual's uniqueness consists precisely in its "creative nothingness" prior to all concepts.

## Power

'Power' is of central importance for Stirner, and can best be described as a form of mental creativity, represented as the key to psychological and social possibility of radical change. Stirner counterposes his notion of "power" to the liberal discourse on social rights that was ongoing in his contemporaneous Europe:

The polemic against privilege is a characteristic feature of liberalism, which fumes against "privilege" because it [instead] appeals to "right". But it cannot carry the matter any further than this fuming; privileges do not fall before right, because they are merely forms of right. Right falls apart into nothingness when it is entwined with might, e.g., when one understands what is meant by "might goes before right" [i.e., that "right" is established by force]. [*The Ego and its Own*, Cambridge Edition, p. 229, translation amended by E.M.]

In Stirner's sense power, also referred to as the acquisition of 'property', has a broad meaning, ranging from the smile of

everything is sung according to concepts and the real man, I, am compelled to live according to these conceptual laws. [...] Liberalism simply brought other concepts on the carpet; human instead of divine, political instead of ecclesiastical, 'scientific' instead of doctrinal, or, more generally, real concepts and eternal laws instead of 'crude dogmas' and precepts. [Ibidem, p. 87-8]

The thinker is distinguished from the believer only by believing much more than the latter, who, on his part, thinks of much less as signified by his faith (creed). The thinker has a thousand tenets of faith where the believer gets along with few; but the the former brings coherence into his tenets, and take the coherence in turn for the scale to estimate their worth by. p. 304

What Stirner proposes is a radical alternative to dispense with dogmatism, root and branch; it is not that concepts should rule people, but that people should rule concepts. The "nothingness" of all truth is rooted in the "nothingness" of the self, because the ego is the criterion of (dogmatic) truth. Again, Stirner seems closely comparable to the Skeptics in that his radical epistemology directs us to emphasise empirical experience (the "unmediated" relationship of mind as world, and world as mind) but leaves only a very limited validity to the category of "truth". When we regard the impressions of the senses with detachment, simply for what they are (e.g., neither good nor evil), we may still correctly assign truth to them, with the conscious awareness that our own desire is (in effect) the criterion of truth:

Christianity took away from the things of this world only their irresistibility [...]. In like manner I raise myself above truths and their power: as I am above the sensual, so I am above the truth. Before me truths are as common and as indifferent as things; they do not carry me away, and do not inspire me with enthusiasm. There exists not even one truth, not right, not freedom, humanity, etc., that has stability before me, and to

the concept of self to describe who is describing it. The nothing gives way to individual meaning, existence and power.

Stirner elaborated on his attempt on describing the undecipherable in the essay "Stirner's Critics", written by Stirner in response to Feuerbach and others (in custom with the time, he refers to himself in the third person) :

Stirner speaks of the Unique and says immediately: Names name you not. He articulates the word, so long as he calls it the Unique, but adds nonetheless that the Unique is only a name. He thus means something different from what he says, as perhaps someone who calls you Ludwig does not mean a Ludwig in general, but means You, for which he has no word. (...) It is the end point of our phrase world, of this world in whose "beginning was the Word."

— Max Stirner, Stirner's Critics

One might describe this place (if describable) as the place where we come into existence; where we are born (see reference to the modern theorist Julia Kristeva below).

## **"Self-Ownership" and the philosophy of "no self"**

In a peculiar but formally accurate sense, we could summarize The Ego and Its Own as "an ethic of owning the world". The book both opens and closes with a quotation from Goethe that reads "I have taken up my cause without foundation", with the (unstated) next line of the poem being "...and all the world is mine". Contrary to the common gloss on the Stirner, one of his central doctrines is that the self "is nothing"; and in realizing this one is said to "own the world", because (as the book states in its last line:) "all things are nothing to me" [Ibidem., p. 324].

This philosophical standpoint, and the type of imagery used to advance it, remains shocking to the Western philosophical tradition that Stirner emerged from, and still in our times, authors such as David Leopold (in his introduction to the Cambridge Edition of *The Ego...*, 1995 & reprinted in 2000) express stunned disbelief at most of what Stirner has to say about the nature of mind, world, and "property" (as he defines it). However, from other philosophical perspectives Stirner's conclusion that "the I" (or "the ego) is nothing is less surprising; both this and the related tenet that "the world is empty" have no similar Western precedent, but recall to mind closely comparable sentiments from canonical Theravada Buddhism:

By bringing the essence into prominence one degrades the hitherto misapprehended appearance to a bare semblance, a deception. The essence of the world, so attractive and splendid, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness; emptiness is –world's essence (world's doings). [Ibidem, p. 40]

... [F]or 'being' is abstraction, as is even 'the I'. Only I am not abstraction alone: I am all in all, consequently, even abstraction or nothing: I am all and nothing; I am not a mere thought, but at the same time I am full of thoughts, a thought-world. [Ibidem, p. 300]

I say: liberate yourself as far as you can, and you have done your part; for it is not given to every one to break through all limits, or, more expressively, not to everyone is that a limit which is a limit for the rest. Consequently, do not tire yourself with toiling at the limits of others; enough if you tear down yours. [...] He who overturns one of his limits may have shown others the way and the means; the overturning of their limits remains their affair.

## Critique of Christianity and/or/as Dogmatism

The passages quoted above seem to exhaust the few points of contact between Stirner's philosophy and early Christianity. It is merely Jesus as an "annihilator" of the established biases and preconceptions of Rome that Stirner can relate to –he has nothing but scorn for Christianity as the basis of a new dogmatism that was to ossify soon thereafter. His reason for "citing" the cultural change sparked by Jesus, is (explicitly) that he wants the Christian ideologies of 19th century Europe to collapse, much as the ideology of heathen Rome did before it (e.g., "[the Christian era] will end with the casting off of the ideal, with 'contempt for the spirit'", p. 320). As with the classical Sceptics before him, Stirner's method of self-liberation is expressly opposed to faith or belief in the broadest possible sense of the term; he envisions a life free from "dogmatic presuppositions" (p. 135, 309) or any "fixed standpoint" (p. 295). It is not merely Christian dogma that his epistemology would repudiate, but also a wide variety of European ideologies that are effectively condemned as crypto-Christian for putting hypostatized ideas in an equivalent, injunctive role:

Among many transformations, the Holy Spirit became in time the 'absolute idea' [in Hegelian philosophy], which again in manifold refractions split into the different ideas of philanthropy, reasonableness, civic virtue, and so on. [...] Antiquity, at its close, had gained its ownership of the world only when it had broken the world's overpoweringness and 'divinity', recognised the world's powerlessness and 'vanity'. [...] [The philosophers of our time say] Concepts are to decide everywhere, concepts to regulate life, concepts to rule. This is the religious world [of our time], to which Hegel gave a systematic expression, bringing method into the nonsense and completing the conceptual precepts into a rounded, firmly-based dogmatic. Ev-

who merely brings about a "change of conditions" by displacing one government with another:

The revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. It is not a fight against the established [...] it is only a working forth of me out of the established. [...] Now, as my object is not an overthrow of the established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not political or social but (as directed toward myself and my ownness alone) an egoistic purpose indeed. [Ibidem, p. 280]

It is hardly necessary reiterate that Stirner is using the language of ethical philosophy to direct the reader to pursue his or her own "upliftment" –both that they might liberate themselves from their own "limits" (elsewhere given a more detailed epistemological definition), and also that they might "rise above" limiting social, political and ideological conditions, and each walk their "own way". An attentive reader can also gathered a working definition of Stirner's sense of the term "egoistic" from the quotes provided above; the egoism that Stirner endorses is quite simply setting aside any interest in the social order to seek out one's own liberation –but, at the same time, serving to benefit others by demonstrating "the way and the means". The passages quoted above are clearly incompatible with Leopold's conclusion (in his introduction to the Cambridge edition) that Stirner "...saw humankind as 'fretted in dark superstition' but denied that he sought their enlightenment and welfare" (Ibidem, p. xxxii). Although it is technically true that Stirner refuses to describe himself as directly liberating others, his stated purpose these quotations is precisely to achieve the "enlightenment and welfare" of others by way of demonstration –and "insurrection" as he defines it.

Significantly, Stirner describes this world-view, in brief, as "enjoyment", and he frequently glosses the "nothingness" of the non-self as "unutterable" (p. 314) or "unnameable" (p. 132), "unspeakable" yet "a mere word" (p. 164; cf. Stirner's comments on the Skeptic concepts ataraxia and aphasia, p. 26). This ethic of self-liberation is a striking contrast to the exhortations on duty, obedience, and public morality common to Kant, Hegel, and even anti-establishment authors like Marx who drew so much of their vocabulary from the former generation.

## **Love Without Authority, Compassion Without Obligation**

Contrary to the common gloss on Stirner, this combined teaching of "egoism" and the illusory nature of the ego is not associated with a life of rapacious self-interest, but rather, as the author states repeatedly, is part of a life of "love" and "compassion" (for "every feeling being"); but this "consciously egoistic" love comes with the important caveat that these feelings are without the "alienness" of a religion, and are no longer social "duties", nor "fixed notions", nor even "passions":

<quote> ...[Love] cuts no better figure than any other passion [if] I obey [it] blindly. The ambitious man, who is carried away by ambition... has let this passion grow up into a despot against whom he abandons all power of dissolution; he has given up himself because he cannot dissolve himself, and consequently cannot absolve himself from the passion: he is possessed. I love men, too, not merely individuals, but every one. But I love them with the consciousness of my egoism; I love them because love makes me happy, I love because loving is natural to me, it pleases me. I know no 'commandment of love'. I have a fellow-feeling with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too... [Ibidem, p. 258] </quote>

## Interpreting Stirner's concept of "Ownership"

Turning to the introduction to the Cambridge edition of *The Ego and its Own* provided by David Leopold (Ibidem, pg. xxxi), we find a badly flawed sketch of this important aspect of Stirner's work:

... [W]hen Stirner talks of the egoist being 'owner' of the world it seems simply to indicate the absence of obligations on the egoist – a bleak and uncompromising vision that he captures in an appropriately alimentary image:

"Where the world comes in my way – and it comes in my way everywhere – I consume it to the quiet hunger of my egoism. For me you are nothing but – my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you. We have only one relation to each other, that of usability, of utility, of use. We owe each other nothing. (p. 263)"

The supposedly "bleak and uncompromising vision" that he alludes to on page 263 is in fact a description of a bird singing in a tree for the sheer joy of creating its own song; the image is not "bleak", but positively ebullient. Stirner's words immediately preceding the quotation that Leopold has taken out of context are as follows:

But not only not [sic.] for your sake, not even for the truth's sake either do I speak out what I think.  
No:

I sing as the bird sings,  
That on the bough alights;  
The song that from me springs

## Insurrection vs. Revolution

Stirner's ethic is not revolutionary (he does not call for his reader to rebel, as does Marx), nor is it one of enjoining a moral duty or obligation upon the reader (as with Kant, Hegel, and so many others), but he instead describes his own social and moral role as comparable to a figure no more obscure to the Western tradition than Jesus Christ:

The time [in which Jesus lived] was politically so agitated that, as is said in the gospels, people thought they could not accuse the founder of Christianity more successfully than if they arraigned him for 'political intrigue', and yet the same gospels report that he was precisely the one who took the least part in these political doings. But why was he not a revolutionary, not a demagogue, as the Jews would gladly have seen him? [...] Because he expected no salvation from a change of conditions, and this whole business was indifferent to him. He was not a revolutionary, like Caesar, but an insurgent: not a state-overturner, but one who straightened himself up. [...] [Jesus] was not carrying on any liberal or political fight against the established authorities, but wanted to walk his own way, untroubled about, and undisturbed by, these authorities. [...] But, even though not a ringleader of popular mutiny, not a demagogue or revolutionary, he (and every one of the ancient Christians) was so much the more an insurgent who lifted himself above everything that seemed so sublime to the government and its opponents, and absolved himself from everything that they remained bound to [...]; precisely because he put from him the upsetting of the established, he was its deadly enemy and real annihilator... [Ibidem p. 280-1]

As Stirner specifies in a footnote (p. 280), he here uses the word insurgent "in its etymological sense"; thus, "to rise above" the religion and government of one's own times by "straightening oneself up" is contrasted to the method of the revolutionary



ments that philosophers have so much praised, such as the love for humanity in general, and the love for truth, Stirner criticizes as "narrow" feelings compared to the open-minded impulse of one who loves from the free play of the passions (here posed as parallel to the bird singing from pure joy):

I do not limit myself to one feeling for men, but give free play to all that I am capable of. [...] With this, I can keep myself open to every impression without being torn away by one of them. I can love, love with a full heart, and let the most consuming glow of passion burn in my heart, without taking the beloved one for anything else than the nourishment of my passion, on which it ever refreshes itself anew. [Ibidem, p. 262]

In this quotation we find again that the "alimentary" imagery that Leopold complains of is far from "bleak"; it simply posits the role of the beloved as "fueling" the passion of lover (as akin to the audience "fueling" the passion of the performer – Stirner describes both as reciprocal relationships of "utility", and, thus, of "union").

It may be complained that Stirner is using needlessly cerebral (and unfamiliar) terms in describing the singer's impulse to perform as "the quiet hunger of egoism", or in speaking of the "nourishment" of passion. Nevertheless, it is intellectually dishonest for Leopold to characterize "the absence of obligations on the egoist" in negative terms by taking Stirner's psychologically loaded vocabulary out of context, and suggesting to the reader that the appearance of the word "use" means that Stirner endorses the "instrumental treatment" (xxxix) of people, or that Stirner is literally telling people they ought to regard one-another as food (in the quote that Leopold has taken out of context from page 263) when this is in fact an image employed in an argument that people should spread joy to one-another without any feelings of obligation, and moreover (in a separate but related argument) that authors should write without dogmatic preconceptions.

Is pay that well requites.

I sing because – I am a singer. But I use [gebrauche] you for it because I – need [brauche] ears. [Ibidem, 263]

Stirner's intended meaning for the word 'use' [gebrauche] in this excerpt is established in the context of the metaphor of the singing bird: the bird's song is reward enough for the act of singing, but yet the performer has some 'use' for an audience. The very next statement ("where the world comes in my way..." etc.) broadens the meaning to encompass all sorts of creative engagement with the world (i.e., Stirner's point is not limited to birds or vocalists), and the paragraph ends with a re-affirmation of the central point of the metaphor, namely, that the performer has no obligation to the audience, but sings out of sheer joy for the act of performing. Thus, it seems, the audience is encouraged to get the same 'use' out of the performance, viz., mutual joy/enjoyment without any obligations binding the two parties. By taking the quote out of context, Leopold effectively imposes an unintended meaning upon the verb "use" [gebrauche] as somehow implying "instrumental treatment" (p. xxxix), but the specific "use" that Stirner here describes is the enjoyment of a listener for a song, or of a singer for the very act of singing. This misuse of the source text is further demonstrated when we consider Stirner's words immediately following the quotation selected by Leopold:

We owe each other nothing, for what I seem to owe you I owe at most to myself. If I show you a cheerful air in order to cheer you likewise, then your cheerfulness is of consequence to me, and my air serves my wish... [Ibidem]

Whereas Leopold abruptly ends his quotation with "We owe each other nothing" (full stop, i.e., failing to provide

an ellipsis to indicate that he is breaking off Stirner in mid-sentence) the original text reiterates that the subject being discussed is, in fact, the imparting of cheerfulness (without any debt being owed between the parties cheered up, i.e., because each cheers the other for his own delight, as per the bird with its song).

## **Stirner's role as author and the problem of "Pessimism"**

There is a broad problem of interpretation in the assignation of "pessimism" to Stirner's philosophy, despite its frequently ebullient tone, and sometimes overtly optimistic imagery. This extends to the important issue of Stirner's writing about writing, viz., the role of the author (and "critic") in self-liberation and effecting social change.

In the foregoing section, readers were encouraged to decide for themselves if Stirner's thesis is truly "a bleak and uncompromising vision" as Leopold characterizes it in his introduction (op. cit. supra). In that instance, the source text actually presents a discussion of how people can spread joy to one-another (with detachment, and no sense of mutual obligation), explained by way of a rather impish and fey simile. What Leopold glosses as an "alimentary image" is in fact a bird's "hunger" for the sound of its own song in the act of cheering itself (and others) up.

Leopold abuses the same passage again (p. xxxi) when he attempts, in effect, to have Stirner condemn his own writing by taking a quotation out of context:

As Stirner's own meiotic prediction has it: 'very few' of us will 'draw joy' (p. 263) from this picture. [Ibidem, xxxi]

Is this a fair representation of Stirner's opinion of his own work as an author on page 263? No, it is not; on that page, Stirner specifically describes himself as comparable to

a singing bird in imparting joy to others (as shown above) without having any obligation toward his audience. His separate statement that 'very few will draw joy from it' is put forth in direct contrast to the Catholic Church's medieval policy of 'withholding the Bible from the laity' so that the ignorant bliss of the masses would not be troubled by its details. In the passage quoted by Leopold, Stirner is asserting that his writing will trouble the bliss of the ignorant, but (like the bird that is compelled to sing) he feels he must "scatter" his thoughts even if they "deprive you of your rest and sleep" (p. 263).

In the passage quoted, Stirner is definitely not conceding that his vision is so "bleak" that few can enjoy it; he is rather making an argument (sustained throughout the book, e.g., p. 127, 132, 309-12) that the correct attitude of the intellectual (or "critic") is to proceed with an open mind, and an open heart, not with the intention of protecting his audience from truths too terrible to tell. Specifically, in this passage, the emphasis is on writing without any preconceptions (viz., including such vague assumptions as what "the public good" might be), and without any sense of obligation to nationality, religion, or broader abstractions such as humanity, truth and justice. All such obligations, Stirner argues, entail prejudice, even when these obligations are represented as a kind of enthusiasm, passion, or love (e.g., censorship "out of love for the Church", "...for the Nation", etc.).

Although any such obligation may be portrayed as a form of love, Stirner's assertion is that "because preconceived, it is a prejudice" (p. 262). In terms closely comparable to the classical Skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, Stirner directs us to examine the criterion of truth that underlies our arguments as an unexamined proposition; this "first presupposition" perverts true philosophy (glossed as "discovery", and elsewhere as "self-discovery") into mere dogmatism (p. 309). Stirner maintains that love, too, can be subverted by "dogmatism", viz., senti-