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Some Thoughts on the Creative Nothing

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The phrase “creative nothing” is one of the more interesting phrases found in Stirner’s masterwork “The Unique and Its Property”¹ (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*). The phrase only appears twice, once in the introduction titled “I Have Based My Affair On Nothing”, and again in the final chapter titled “The Unique One”. What exactly is the creative nothing, or perhaps more succinctly, what did Stirner mean by the phrase “creative nothing”?

The first instance of “creative nothing” accompanies Stirner’s opening salvo in his critique of ideas:

If God, if humanity, as you affirm, have enough content in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that I would lack it even less, and that I would have no complaint to make about my ‘emptiness.’ I am

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¹ – This is my preferred translation, although you will most often find “Der Einzige und sein Eigentum” translated into “The Ego and Its Own”, which is a terrible translation of the title.

not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself create everything as creator.

The second instance is found in the last sentences of his book:

I am owner of my power, and I am so when I know myself as Unique. In the Unique the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, from which he is born. Every higher essence over me, be it God, be it the human being, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and only pales before the sun of this awareness. If I base my affair on myself, the Unique, then it stands on the transient, the mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: I have based my affair on nothing.

Stirner is quick to point out in the opening introduction, that the nothing that he speaks about is not actual “nothingness”, i.e., the absence of something, or emptiness, but the “nothing” of which Stirner himself creates everything as creator. What is this “nothing” that Stirner speaks about – and how does Stirner create himself from this nothing?

The nothing that Stirner speaks about is his nothing. This must be seen in the overall context of “The Unique and Its Property”, Stirner’s project, and his critique. Stirner advances the critique that the conceptual, ideal, and symbolic determinations that individuals use to identify each other and themselves, are not actually equal to that which the symbolic determination attempts to determine.

Stirner’s point was that each conceptual determination used to refer to you or identify you be it man, woman, German, Chinese, American, white, black, asian, etc, is merely a conceptual idea that attempts to determine what you are, but these “whats”, cannot possibly say or conceptualize what Stirner or any of us actually “are”.

So what am I then?

Stirner replies: Nothing. You aren't anything, you aren't a word, you aren't a concept, you aren't an idea, you are more than all of this. You are unique.

Any word used to determine "what" you are immediately fails, because you cannot be determined by a word. A word is always a word, it is not you, and it could never be you. You are you, and you are the only you there is. Stirner's critique pointed out that when one was given a conceptual identity, one was expected to fulfill the roles of this identity, that we are to work towards or aspire to the conceptual content of the symbolic identity in question, and that we are to regard such ideas as sacred ideas.

So when Stirner speaks of the "nothing" in the phrase "creative nothing", Stirner is speaking about himself, not as a concept, but as a non-concept – something beyond the realm of language and words. Stirner is "nothing", because there is no word to express what Stirner is, or what any of us are. The example that best illustrates this is perhaps from Stirner himself: I equal I.

I do not equal human, or man, or any other conceptual identity you could use to describe me. I am always only myself, all words are merely descriptors, attributes of me, but will never actually "be me". If we then examine the first instance of the creative nothing, we see that Stirner is creating "everything" from "his nothing", or as Stirner says: "the nothing out of which I myself create everything as creator." If Stirner is conceptually nothing, then he is creating himself from his non-conceptual existence. Jason McQuinn likens this to: ". . . in which conceptual understanding is seen as built upon a more fundamental level of nonconceptual understanding (or preconceptual, bodily, perceptual or lived understanding) as a process of that nonconceptual lived understanding itself"

My creative nothing, is my non-conceptual immanent experience, as encountered and experienced by me in my moment-to-moment interactions and encounters with my world. It is from this non-conceptual lived experience that which I can create myself conceptually, and express myself in any conceptual manner

(lingual, written, symbolic, etc) that I feel best represents my non-conceptual experience with my world.

If we are to go “towards the Creative Nothing”, as Novatore wrote, then we merely need to realize that we are already the creative nothing, that each of us, in our unique lived and experienced existences, is creating ourselves from the creative nothing at every moment, and that all concepts and ideas are nothing but words to us, which we may use and destroy at our will. Perhaps this is what Novatore meant when he said:

“Because every person who, searching his own inwardness, extracts what was mysteriously hidden therein is a shadow eclipsing any form of society which can exist under the sun!

All societies tremble when the scornful aristocracy of tramps, inaccessible, unique ones, rulers over the ideal and conquerors of the nothing resolutely advances. So, come on, iconoclasts, forward!

Already the foreboding sky grows dark and silent!”