

# **John Clark's Stirner: A critical review of Max Stirner's Egoism**

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# Contents

John Clark's ideology of the ego . . . . .	7
Max Stirner as bogeyman . . . . .	9
John Clark's Rorschach test . . . . .	11

By now a whole generation of radicals, philosophers and casual readers has received at least part (and too often all) of its introduction to the startling vision of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* through John Clark's blindered eyes. Why is this? Clark's slim book, *Max Stirner's Egoism*<sup>1</sup>, seems to have remained continuously in print since its publication by Freedom Press in 1976. It's also written in a straightforward and fairly simple style, with at least a superficial tone of scholarly neutrality. As such, unlike most of the rest of the extensive secondary literature on Stirner, it has been both more easily available and significantly more accessible, especially to Stirner's primary English-language readers amongst the broad libertarian milieu. Unfortunately, this has been no boon for those readers.

I first read Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* in 1971. I came to the book with few preconceptions. I had little knowledge of G.W.F. Hegel's formidable philosophy, nor of the post-Hegelian milieu within which Stirner's work gestated before appearing in the latter half of 1844.<sup>2</sup> But I did have the good fortune of familiarity with Paul Goodman's implicitly phenomenological anarchism and the work of the early Gestalt therapists<sup>3</sup>, as well as that of the Gestalt psychologists<sup>4</sup>, along with the more phenomenological and dialectical of the Eastern philosophical traditions like Taoism, Chan and Zen Buddhism. Undoubtedly, this background greatly facilitated my sympathetic reading and intuitive understanding of Stirner's text from another, quite different, time and place. What was then quite obvious to me in my initial reading of Stirner was, however, rather obviously – and apparently remains – opaque and obscure to those like John Clark who seem to have neither a familiarity with Hegelian philosophy in general nor an understanding of Hegel's phenomenology in particular. Yet Hegel's philosophy and, most importantly, his phenomenology are certainly crucial parts of the fertile ground from which Stirner's insights spring. Without any understanding of this grounding his work can easily appear empty, abstract and incoherent, unless the reader is prepared in some other way – as was I – to appreciate its meaning.

Undoubtedly, there were many more readers of his work who would have been intellectually (and emotionally) prepared and ready to understand and assimilate Stirner's uniquely profound insights at the time of its original publication than in the 165 years since that time. Then Hegel's work was extremely well known and the post-Hegelian critics (including Stirner) were scandalously fashionable, while an increasing radicalism within philosophy (as well as in society) was in the air during the Vormärz years.<sup>5</sup> However, unfortunately, there was not enough time for much to be written and published on Stirner's text before the revolutionary events of 1848,

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<sup>1</sup> The edition I read at that time was published by Dover and titled *The Ego and His Own*. The title of more recent editions has changed to a more accurate gender neutrality. Stirner's "I" is not a gendered "I," since its gender is not given, but constructed. The original German title was *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, however the standard German spelling of the latter word has changed in the last century and a half (apparently sometime around 1900) to "Eigentum."

<sup>2</sup> The publication date was 1845, but the book apparently appeared some time in the summer or fall of 1844, and had already been read by Friedrich Engels before December of that year, when he wrote about it to Karl Marx.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Frederick Perls, Paul Goodman and Ralph Hefferline's groundbreaking text, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. (1951) The seminal theoretical portion of the book was written by Goodman, whose phenomenological anarchist attitude appears throughout his wide-ranging works. See also Frederick and Laura Perls' earlier important text, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. (1947) This book seems almost always to be attributed solely to Frederick Perls, but it has been argued that Laura was just as much its author.

<sup>4</sup> See the work of Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, Max Wertheimer and Kurt Lewin. Especially interesting are parts of Lewin's *Principles of Topological Psychology*. (1936)

<sup>5</sup> The years before the March 1848 revolution in Germany, which in turn was part of the more generalized European upheavals at that time.

and especially the long reaction, resulted in the suppression and near disappearance of all public discussion until after Stirner was dead. All that is left now from that time are the criticisms from a few of Stirner's major colleagues and adversaries (like Ludwig Feuerbach, Szeliga, Moses Hess, Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx), along with Stirner's own lucid (but usually ignored) defense against the first three of these published criticisms, appearing in Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift as "Stirner's Critics" ("Recensenten Stirners") in September, 1845. (Unfortunately, Stirner never had a chance to see and dispense with the criticism from Marx and Engels in their sophomoric *Die Deutsche Ideologie*.<sup>6</sup>)

The first great revival of Max Stirner's work occurred in the midst of the growing popularity of Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century, a time during which Stirner's meager biography also appeared through the work of the poet John Henry Mackay. This resulted in the accelerated republication – and multiple translations – of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, along with the appearance of new commentaries on the text and comparisons with Nietzsche's philosophy (with inevitable suggestions of Nietzsche's likely plagiarism for reasons quite obvious to anyone familiar with both writers' works). Unfortunately, this also resulted in tendencies to interpret Stirner's work in terms derived from then contemporary understandings of Nietzsche's work. However, then as now, interpreting Stirner in terms of anyone else's work is always dangerous given the frequent antipathy with which it has been received by philosophers and scholars. With Nietzsche, as with most others who have encountered Stirner's *Einzige*, the primary result of this contact was a desire to escape the implications of Stirner's complete rejection of religion and philosophy, not any desire to embrace and take Stirner's method and intent forward in any way.

The second revival of Stirner, still ongoing and beginning to gather more steam, began in the post World War II breakdown (and recomposition) of modernism with the growth and culmination of hyperindustrialism in the spectacular consumer capitalism of the latter half of the 20th century. By the mid-twentieth century all the alienating social forces which had helped lead to the creation of Stirner's ingenious libertarian anti-philosophy a century before had become much more powerful and much more threatening, both for individuals and for the intersubjective and natural worlds in which we all live. As (mostly ineffective) attempts at resistance to these social forces<sup>7</sup> have multiplied and proliferated it was probably inevitable that an increasing number of aspiring rebels would eventually find Stirner's work. With the decline and fall of Marxism as a socio-religious force leftist illusions no longer monopolize and recuperate their attentions. We can fully expect that Stirner's insurrectionary egoism will become much more influential (and effective) worldwide as the early twenty-first century matures and the American empire crumbles to dust.

Mention of Stirner in most quarters these days is still greeted with disdainful bile whenever the almost inevitable attempts at evasion of discussion are unsuccessful. Among philosophers and social theorists (whose jobs largely depend upon their abilities to rationalize the institutions of

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<sup>6</sup> According to Lawrence Stepelevich, even Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' extremely sympathetic biographer Franz Mehring, called their long-unpublished *Die Deutsche Ideologie* "an oddly schoolboyish polemic." ("*Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians*," published in Simon Critchley, *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, p. 112.)

<sup>7</sup> These "social forces" are actually constellations of concrete decisions of individual women and men in their everyday lives to live in various forms of institutionalized enslavement. For Stirner the idea of society is one of the more obviously imaginary and ghostlike of the abstract rationalizations (reifications) through which people justify the self-alienation of their activities.

enslavement and the self-alienation which greases their wheels) Stirner is demonized as a nihilist and anarchist with nothing to contribute to the advancement of philosophy, morality, civilization and empire (exactly!) – and who must therefore (by their alienating logic) be in favor of social isolation, anomie, immorality, random violence, terrorism and chaos at best. Among wanna-be leftist radicals and revolutionaries (whose confused identities depend upon their abilities to recuperate any genuine revolt back into reformed versions of those same institutions of enslavement) Stirner is held in even deeper contempt as the epitome of anarchism – the theorist of a mindless egoism of the masses which will short-circuit any attempts to mold them into the fodder of socio-political change engineered by the party under the leadership of the correct ideology of the day. And among most anarchists (currently nearly as confused, divided and demoralized as the explicitly political left, but not quite as efficient at recuperation, since it's harder for anarchists to rationalize the moral importance of self-enslavement) Stirner is greeted with a special degree of hatred as the black sheep of an already marginalized family, who must be suppressed, disappeared or at least highly sanitized in order to prevent its even greater marginalization from the centers of political, economic and ideological legitimacy.

However, within this pregnant situation it has become clear that simple denunciations and ritual accusations (such as “petty bourgeois,” “individualist,” “fascist,” “heretic,” “traitor,” etc.) no longer work as well as they once did for Stalin, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao (or even an anarcho-commissar like Murray Bookchin) and their ilk. Nor, in an era of cell phones, internet connections and worldwide web communications, can the evasion and suppression of Stirner's work conceivably continue much longer as an effective tactic ... even in China. This leaves the (largely intentional) ideological mystifications and falsifications of Stirner's work as the major remaining roadblock to an increasingly widespread and generalized understanding of Stirner's subversive message(s). Which is where the inertial power of ideological texts like John Clark's *Max Stirner's Egoism* gain a strategic importance for those who maintain any interest in continuing Stirner's heretofore effective quarantine from otherwise impressionable minds. Thus the relevance of examining these texts and exposing once and for all their real importance and effects. I begin with Clark's book because it is almost single-handedly responsible for the (semi-effective) marginalization of Stirner's work within the English-language anarchist milieu.<sup>8</sup> Without Clark's book to fall back on as an at least apparently legitimate philosophical justification for ignoring Stirner

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<sup>8</sup> Originally, when John Clark's book first appeared in the late 1970s, I thought I would be able to talk to the author and help him understand the fundamental errors of his perspective on Stirner. In fact, I did get to meet him briefly in 1981 at an anarchist conference reception in Montréal, during which I was able to ask to speak to him about my phenomenological interpretation of Stirner's work. However, he responded only that he was “finished” with Stirner and didn't want to speak to me about either Stirner or his own book. Since that time I have brought up the subject a total of about three more times, as I recall. So far as I can tell, Clark has never changed his attitude. After my original lack of success with Clark, I planned to eventually travel to Berlin for a year in order to do some intense research and write a definitive book on the many misinterpretations of Stirner. However, almost thirty years later that has yet to happen, though I still plan to do this. In the meantime, many other projects and life changes intervened, including my editing and production of *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* for 25 years, and my editing and production of *Alternative Press Review* for many years as well. I ended up publishing a handful of intelligent, witty, often humorous, and always well-written pieces by John Clark in these magazines and consider John to be a friend (or, at least, a friendly acquaintance). However, I have decided at this point that my silence regarding his abominable *Max Stirner's Egoism* has lasted much too long already. I won't be surprised if John decides that I have crossed the line and made myself his enemy, but I hope instead that he understands the opportunity this review will open up for further understanding regarding Stirner for many, many people who otherwise might never realize what he has to say to us today.

there would be no other effective contemporary left-anarchist critique.<sup>9</sup> Nor, if Clark's meager arguments are demolished, would there likely be anyone else creative enough to invent any new critique with any power.

Therefore, this will be the beginning of a series of critical reviews of the most important anti-Stirner ideological texts. I'll probably continue in the future with an examination of R.W.K. Paterson's bizarre, but readable and still somewhat influential, denunciation of Stirner in *The Nihilist Egoist: Max Stirner*. (1971) And, if I can force myself to look over the entire text of Karl Marx's unabridged *The German Ideology* (1932) in detail, I'll attack the task of demolishing that distasteful piece of unsuccessful agitprop. Not because anyone actually reads it (that is, the largest part of it dealing with Stirner), but simply because Stirner's opponents (for one example, John Clark) continue to selectively recount or quote some of the few semi-plausible criticisms an immature, mostly clueless and semi-hysterical Marx could mobilize in this unreadable diatribe.

Aside from these few major critical commentaries (whose aim is clearly and universally dismissal of Stirner's work) available in the English language, there have been hundreds of short commentaries, polemical essays, ideological diatribes and significant mentions of Stirner's work in the secondary and tertiary literature.<sup>10</sup> Most notably contributing to the current revival of Stirner's critiques – besides the multiple English-language editions of *The Ego and Its Own* now available – are the excellent essays of Lawrence Stepelevich like “Max Stirner as Hegelian”<sup>11</sup> and “Hegel and Stirner: Thesis and Antithesis,” Stepelevich's collection, *The Young Hegelians: An*

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<sup>9</sup> Although I've been considering doing this book review for years, my decision to proceed with it at this particular time was actually prompted by two recent events. The first was my recent failed attempt to elicit some real dialogue on Stirner with a prominent left anarchist and anthropologist, Brian Morris, whose fall-back position was to throw out-of-context Stirner quotes my way, while refusing to engage with me in any genuine way and, instead, referring to Clark's book as if Clark was an authority on Stirner! This got me thinking about how much the ideologists of social anarchism rely on (their unreal image of) Clark's book to repel any temptation to actually engage non-ideological anarchists in dialogue. But the final straw was my even more recent decision to pick up a copy of a fairly new book by Derek Robert Mitchell on Heidegger's *Philosophy and Theories of the Self*. I'm not usually very interested in reading about the pretentious existential fascism of Heidegger (especially when it is presented uncritically), but I picked up this book for its unusual method, in part contrasting the positions of Stirner and Heidegger! Of course, I fully expected Stirner to be cast as the evil villain, but I thought a work of philosophy on Heidegger, also including chapters on Descartes, Hume, Kant, Sartre and R.D. Laing might also attempt to take Stirner seriously. However, I was completely surprised by the reversal of roles in which the clueless author cast Stirner as the most extreme of Cartesian dualists, while Heidegger was cast as a sage attempting to overcome the Cartesian tradition! If anything, the two roles should, of course, have been cast the other way, with Heidegger understood more correctly as continuing the Cartesian tradition in ameliorated form after Stirner had already left Cartesianism far behind him. Paterson's and Clark's books were cited by the author as “useful in elaborating and extrapolating Stirner's work.”

<sup>10</sup> Just about every major figure in German philosophy and theology, along with many others throughout Continental European philosophy, and a scattering of those in other areas (most notably in North American and Japanese philosophy) in the last century and a half have been aware of Stirner's work. Most have assiduously avoided any mention of it in their own work (sometimes – as with Nietzsche, Husserl or Adorno – betrayed by their comments to friends, colleagues or students). Of those who have mentioned him, the dominant theme is his lack of importance except as a footnote indicating the perils of egoism, individualism, nihilism, nominalism, atheism or anarchism (or some other highly unpopular “ism”). Less common, but not uncommon, is a theme of denunciation of Stirner's alleged depravity, insanity, immorality, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Stepelevich, probably the most perceptive academic writer on Stirner in recent decades, includes a couple of possible put-downs of John Clark's book on Stirner in this essay. In the first place, in an overview of the current English-language literature on Stirner Stepelevich doesn't mention Clark's book at all, while listing the “two major English commentators on Stirner as [R.W.K.] Paterson and David L. McLellan.” In the second place, Stepelevich suggests that “a lack of philosophic interest and insight” is “often evidenced even among ‘professional’ philosophers” (possibly suggesting an intention to include the unreferenced John Clark in this classification).

Anthology (1983), the Non-Serviam web site ( [www.non-serviam.com](http://www.non-serviam.com) ), Bernd Laska's amazing journal, Stirner Studieren (especially useful given his many English translations available on the web site [www.lsr-projekt.de/poly/en.html](http://www.lsr-projekt.de/poly/en.html) ), and Douglas Moggach's anthology titled *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School* (2006), among others. I also intend to write an extended survey of the secondary and tertiary literature available in English in the future, where there are a great variety of viewpoints expressed, and much that can be learned.

## John Clark's ideology of the ego

The primary criticism of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* made by philosophers, social theorists and, especially, leftists of every type is based on an alleged unsuitability of Stirner's concept of the ego to occupy the center of his critiques. This has to be the first place to start to make any sense of the otherwise amazingly incoherent critical literature. The simple central strategy attempted, from Stirner's original contemporary critics on to the present day, is to more or less openly switch some foreshortened concept of an ego in one form or another for the actual center of Stirner's anti-philosophy, the incomparable, inconceivable *Einzige*. I can't speak directly about all the German-language critics of the original German text, nor of all the critics using other languages than German or English. But it is clear that at least in the English-language literature (including all the available translations into English from other languages that I've encountered) this is universal. There may be some hedging, and sometimes a little concession to Stirner's actual words pointing to *der Einzige* for some marginal purpose, but when any actual arguments are rolled out that are supposed to do damage to his project, they inevitably involve the shortcomings of various concepts of a generic ego, none of which Stirner ever actually employs. This is also where John Clark begins.

Of course, there has to be at least some tiny shred of seeming plausibility to this kind of blatant falsification of Stirner's position in order for it to have been used as an effective strategy for so long. Any such minimal plausibility is primarily provided by<sup>12</sup> the centrality of egoism to Stirner's own critiques and<sup>13</sup> the English-language title of the book, *The Ego and Its Own*.

The usually implicit argument of his critics is then that, if Stirner is an unrelenting egoist, he has to be proposing a philosophy of the ego, despite the lack of any textual evidence and despite the many protestations to the contrary he may make. Since Stirner actually never speaks about an "ego" using that particular word (the originally Latin "ego" is also used in German – just as in English, but it doesn't appear once in Stirner's text), the use of "ego" to describe Stirner's position would seem to require at least some explanation. However, for any explanation of why Clark insists that Stirner is a philosopher of a generic ego, the reader will look in vain. It may then be argued that Stirner does speak of the ego by speaking of "I" and "the I" (translated from his use of the German "Ich" and "das Ich," "dem Ich" or "des Ichs" throughout his text), assuming that one understands "ego" to always mean only "I," as it originally did when introduced from

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<sup>12</sup> The edition I read at that time was published by Dover and titled *The Ego and His Own*. The title of more recent editions has changed to a more accurate gender neutrality. Stirner's "I" is not a gendered "I," since its gender is not given, but constructed. The original German title was *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, however the standard German spelling of the latter word has changed in the last century and a half (apparently sometime around 1900) to "Eigentum."

<sup>13</sup> The publication date was 1845, but the book apparently appeared some time in the summer or fall of 1844, and had already been read by Friedrich Engels before December of that year, when he wrote about it to Karl Marx.

the Latin into both English and German discourse. However, this would really be plausible only if Stirner were to speak extensively of “das Ich,” “dem Ich” and “des Ichs” in the presentation of his position, unless we are prepared to extend this sort of speculative, implicit argument to any and every philosopher or critic who has ever used the first person singular in her or his expositions. In fact, Stirner does refer to “das Ich” (or “dem Ich” or “des Ichs”) a number of times in his text, however, when he does so he is most often saying “which I ...” rather than “the I,” and in the few times Stirner actually does clearly use “das Ich” (or other similar constructions) to refer to “the I,” he is referring to it as a concept of the ego as abstraction toward which he is explicitly critical. Stirner goes to great lengths to make a very emphatic, consistent and clear distinction between “the I” (or ego) considered as a concept about which he is not speaking, and “der Einzige,” the nonconceptual actuality which is at the center of his critique. Stirner was well schooled in the Hegelian notion of determinate versus abstract concepts, and anyone who takes the time to actually read what he has written can see that Stirner is completely uninterested in the idea of an indeterminate, abstract “I” like that – as he mentions more than once – of the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

In addition, readers should all be made aware that the English-language title of the book is not in any way a faithful reflection of its original German title. The actual title is, of course, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, which is much more accurately translated into English as “The Unique One and Its Property.” No mention of an ego there. Whereas “der Einzige,” or “the unique one,” is the center of Stirner’s critique. Inevitable reader confusion can only be prevented by a conscientious description of this problem. Any serious, competent commentary on Stirner’s English-language translation would have to mention this prominently. Conversely, any commentary, like Clark’s, which doesn’t mention this perpetrates a false image of Stirner’s text and there can be no excuse for this. Even worse is the deliberate conflation of “the ego” with the “der Einzige,” which has been both the prevalent historical practice of Stirner’s critics, as well as Clark’s central ideological *modus operandi*. This would be equivalent to (for one very comparable example) an author of a major commentary on Heidegger referring to every mention of “Dasein” (one of his central concepts, literally translated as “being there”) in the original text of *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) as simply “the ego,” which would be made that much worse if a major English translation were produced which also occasionally substituted “the ego” for “Dasein,” at the same time that its publisher arbitrarily decided to change the title translation to “Ego and Time.” In the case of Heidegger these actions would justly be called either an incompetent or fraudulent mistranslation and misreading. In the case of Stirner it is no less so. From this day on I challenge John Clark or anyone else to attempt to honestly and rationally justify this conflation of *der Einzige* with “the ego” before uttering such nonsense ever again. It cannot be done. This fraudulent conflation must stop.

The ego that Clark attributes to Stirner is, thus, really Clark’s ego. The fetish for this ego is entirely Clark’s fetish. The ideological conception of the ego of which Clark continually speaks is derived directly from Clark’s own ideology of the ego. Stirner never mentions any sort of generic ego in any positive light in his entire substantial text. Yet Clark alleges (explicitly or implicitly) that he does so literally hundreds of times in his relatively short text by constantly referring to “ego” on almost every page, sometimes a dozen or more times per page, as if it is the subject about which Stirner has actually written. To make this all even worse, despite the fact that Clark, from the very beginning of his book, alleges that Stirner is a philosopher of an ego – an ego which Stirner never actually anywhere advocates – Clark doesn’t even attempt



to describe what this indeterminate, abstract concept of ego is supposed to be until well into the book. As, once again for example, with Heidegger, it would be incompetent or fraudulent to simply substitute “ego” for “Dasein” as if it was unproblematically what Heidegger meant by this term. But it would be even worse to, in addition, not specify what this “ego” even was until well into the text! And what complicates this type of extremely problematic approach even more, and what is left entirely unmentioned in Clark’s text are the additional confusions attendant upon the English translations of the works of Sigmund Freud, which have resulted in sowing even more misunderstandings about the possible meaning of “the ego” for Stirner. It reflects even further incompetence to refrain from mentioning that Max Stirner wrote well before Freud was ever born, and that Stirner’s texts should be properly read with exactly zero psychoanalytic overtones of meaning added to the (already entirely misleading) references to “ego” made by Clark. It is not uncommon for naive readers[12] to read Stirner as if his supposed “ego” concept is derived at least in part from Freud. No competent commentary on Stirner should allow this to go unchallenged.

## **Max Stirner as bogeyman**

If no concept of the ego of any sort is at the center of Stirner’s anti-philosophy, then what is it that is at the center? What actually is *der Einzige*? What is it that Stirner’s critics do not want us to understand? And why are they so afraid of it?

John Clark mentions “*der Einzige*” exactly once in Max Stirner’s *Egoism*. And even there he does not explain that it can be translated into English as “the unique one,” and not as anything resembling “the ego.” Clark does occasionally refer to “the unique” or “the unique one” in a few other places in his text. But he never actually explains to readers that there is a connection between the title of Stirner’s text and this nonconceptual phenomenon. Once again we have to ask, as with the investigation of any other major philosophical text, what the proper attitude and procedure would be to begin to genuinely understand a central figure, around which that text is carefully constructed? Would we first jump to a conclusion, as in a hasty decision that again, for example, Heidegger’s “Dasein” isn’t all that important as a designation for what, after all, is just another “ego,” close enough to any other ego-concept in any other context that we don’t need any special word for it, despite whatever a philosopher like Heidegger might have to say about it? Of course not. We would instead carefully examine every use of “Dasein,” paying special attention to its employment in various contexts. We would look to all of Heidegger’s hints about where his creation and construction of the figure of Dasein had its roots. We would look at Heidegger’s past experiences, especially checking on what he had read, with whom he’d spoken, and possibly most importantly under whom he’d studied as a student. With Stirner we could not do less.

Why is it then that a long line of would-be critics of Stirner have not felt that any of this had any importance in his case? Why have Stirner’s critics been so universally impatient to reduce Stirner’s *Einzige* to their own quite different (and easily disposed of) concepts of “the ego.” We can point to several factors which contribute to the near-universal tendency of Stirner’s critics to simply ignore what he has actually said and done in his writing. In each case these critics construct (often bizarre) critiques of what are largely their own seemingly arbitrary speculations and fantasies about what they apparently believe Stirner should have said. Any careful survey of the massive amounts of critical secondary and tertiary literature around Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* will frequently find that the range of responses often tells us more about each of the

critics themselves than about Stirner's work. Stirner's text has, in effect, been a Rorschach test for philosophers. And John Clark is, unfortunately, a rather typical example of this phenomenon.

First, there is the matter of Stirner's informal, very accomplished, often humorous and witty style and tone, which can encourage naive readers to mistake the content of his major text as light reading or as a patchwork of rather aimless remarks, rather than as an elegantly expressed, highly complex and intricately interwoven tapestry which effortlessly subverts and overturns most of the major conventions of philosophy. As one of the most perceptive commentators on Stirner's work, Lawrence Stepelevich, notes:

"[his] lesser writings reflect Stirner's stylistic élan, an ease of expression seldom encountered in philosophic literature. The earliest remark upon his style, made by Marx's one-time friend, Arnold Ruge, was that Stirner was responsible for 'the first readable book in philosophy that Germany has produced.' This early praise of Stirner's skill has found its most recent echo in the words of R.W.K. Paterson: 'Der Einzige is compulsively readable.... His style, direct, vivid, and economical, has a terseness and candour which cuts like a new knife through the turgid and obscure verbosity which characterized so much of the writing of his neo-Hegelian predecessors.'<sup>14</sup>

And, although most readers might see such "stylistic élan" as a boon, this would not likely be the response of Stirner's critics. Rather, this would easily tend to be seen as an insulting challenge to the all but unreadable pretensions of the serious professors of theology and philosophy and political economy whose magnificently abstract theories and absurd pet fetishes alike were so swiftly, unceremoniously and elegantly dispatched by Stirner to oblivion.

Secondly, the extremely subversive content of Stirner's critique simply has no peer in the history of philosophical critique. Instead, it approaches and often surpasses the intensity and scope of historical religious heresies which so often resulted in gruesome torture, executions or genocidal massacres for their proponents. When such heretical content is wedded to ease of expression, irrefutable logic, and the frequent use of ridicule and parody, it cannot but have alarmed, and more often been perceived as an existential threat by upholders of the Western philosophical tradition. Is it any wonder that, for one example, the other major English-language commentator on Stirner, R.W.K. Paterson, so frequently refers to Stirner with obvious revulsion in a wide array of distasteful terms, culminating in a revealing passage:

"To the religious believer, ... Stirner's account ought to shed a grim light on the nature and implications of 'sin', conceived as estrangement from God, from the ground and goal of our being; for in his proud self-sufficiency, the Unique One is the archetype of the sinful individual.

... to live as a truly radical atheist is to live the life of the nihilistic egoist, to live in deliberately chosen estrangement from God and man. In The Unique One Stirner has attempted to describe someone who has unflinchingly chosen to live in this desolate dimension of total estrangement."<sup>15</sup>

However, far beyond these challenges of "stylistic élan" and extremely subversive or heretical content is the third, most threatening of Stirner's challenges to every theology, philosophy and ideology of past, present and future civilizations. And this may, I believe, be seen as the central or key reason why Stirner is so uniformly misrepresented, maligned, and denounced by his critics. Stirner's text can be read first and foremost as an immediately personal provocation, as a once and future ad hominem argument aimed at each individual's self-alienations and directed toward each and every reader perceptive enough to understand to even a small degree what unrepen-

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence S. Stepelevich, "Hegel and Stirner: Thesis and Antithesis."

<sup>15</sup> R.W.K. Paterson, *The Nihilist Egoist: Max Stirner*, 1971, pp. 317-318.

tent mischief he is up to (though this is at the same time precisely not an argument ad unicem, not aimed at anyone as a unique, particular individual). When Stirner says things like “Man, your head is haunted; you have wheels in your head!” he is issuing a personal slap in the face to every theologian, philosopher and ideologist who reads his words. And, for any perceptive reader, his text is full of these ad hominem challenges, challenges which attack not the unique individual, but every fixed (false) identification that the reader brings with her or himself to his or her reading of Stirner’s words. It would not be unique in itself to see forceful, well-conceived, highly-irritating challenges to particular theological, philosophical or ideological systems. What results in Stirner’s position being so frequently denounced from every side is the unprecedented simplicity and scope of his critique – of every position not his own, but also even including his own if it were to ever become fixed or threaten to escape his powers to continually consume and destroy it.

As a result of these three, together very powerful, reasons for a near universal hostility to Stirner’s critique, we should not be surprised that he is persona non grata in the polite, civilized company of believers in gods, metaphysics, and social or political causes alike. We should not be surprised that for most of his critics Stirner is the ultimate bogeyman. Stirner’s Einzige is quickly identified with the devil of each of their sacred systems of reified thought, a devil whose unique, individual determinants are defined by each system according to its own standards of good and ultimate evil.

## John Clark’s Rorschach test

John Clark wasn’t forced to write Max Stirner’s Egoism. One might assume from the information he reveals in his text<sup>16</sup> that he did so in order to at least partially settle a score with his old “individualist” self once he had acquired a new ideological identity as a “social anarchist.” We can assume from his own words that Clark at one time considered Stirner’s text to have something important in common with his previous individualism, whatever form that might have taken. In choosing to write a thesis (which resulted in his book) on Max Stirner, we can guess that Clark felt some need to overcome the influence it once had for either himself, or at least for some of those like himself who found confirmation for their individualism (now rejected by Clark) in Stirner’s book (if not, as we have already seen, in Stirner’s actual ideas). Here we have the likely original source of Clark’s personal motive for conflating Max Stirner’s entirely unique anti-philosophy of the particular concrete individual, der Einzige, with generic philosophies and ideologies of the individual or the ego. One might suppose that Clark was never all that interested in actually discovering the details and coherence of what Stirner had to say simply because, by the time Clark began writing about *The Ego and Its Own*, for him Stirner was already only one example among others of a general phenomenon that could be adequately treated as such. Only specific details would need to be adapted to account for Stirner’s excessive idiosyncracies and peculiarities, details which would make a thesis, and eventually a book, on Stirner a more

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<sup>16</sup> “The perspective from which I criticize Stirner is, as will become apparent, a form of social anarchism. While I was once quite sympathetic to individualism, I am now convinced of the inadequacy of that position. Although this discussion deals in particular with Stirner’s own metaphysical and ethical egoism, and the resultant social theory, the points made here have, I believe, considerable relevance to many related forms of individualism and which depend on similar philosophical underpinnings.” (John P. Clark, *Max Stirner’s Egoism*, 1976, p. 9.)

significant project than one more ideological denunciation of a generic individualism and egoism already unfashionable in the academia he inhabited.

But Clark highly underestimated Stirner. So much so that Clark's (thin) book-length attack on Stirner will only be really convincing to those who know little or nothing significant about Stirner's actual text. This is partly because, not only does Clark substitute a generic concept of ego for Stirner's *Einzig*, but every one of Clark's major arguments against Stirner is obviously false if it is investigated to any significant extent. I don't have the time or space to go into this in detail here, but I will do so elsewhere, in a longer and more complete version of this review, in the near future.<sup>17</sup> Part, but only part, of the reason why Clark is unable to pin down and successfully criticize Stirner's arguments is that he himself has almost no understanding of what Stirner is doing, since Stirner is not in any way a philosopher who can be classed with any other historical "egoist" or "individualist" philosopher for purposes of understanding and criticizing his work. Clark simply hasn't done the legwork necessary to tackle Stirner as a world-historical thinker. (This legwork would have to include, at a minimum, at least a brief investigation of the history of philosophy, along with an in-depth survey of German philosophy prior to Stirner's writing. Clark evidences neither.) Another part of this reason is that Clark's antagonisms toward egoism and individualism in general and Stirner in particular have left him blinded to the huge deficits of his own self-defined "social-anarchist" position, dependent as it is on naively unquestioned, naturalistic and metaphysically holistic ideological pillars. And a third part of this reason is that Clark spends almost all of his time simply sparring with himself, examining and attacking what are apparently versions of his own former positions in a game of *solitaire* in which Stirner's text serves as a sort of pre-interpreted ideological foil (with no meaning of its own ever to be allowed), while Stirner himself serves as little more than an abstract place-marker for the generic "individualist" and "egoist."

One by one, Clark goes after this place-marker with standardized, mechanical criticisms. One by one, Clark vastly misinterprets Stirner's text, defeats his enemy only in his own mind, and moves on to the next distasteful task he has set himself in slaying his own past. Clark argues, amongst other ultimately indefensible points, that Stirner's *Einzig* is no more than a generic ego (throughout the book); that Stirner metaphysically prioritizes the ego (p.15); that Stirner is not quite a "solipsist" (p.20); that Stirner "seems to revert to a Platonic psychology" (p.24); that Stirner "fails to give sufficient grounds" for his nominalism (p.27); that Stirner "accepts a kind of determinism" (p.28); that Stirner "seems to go beyond determinism to a sort of fatalism" (p.28); that "although [Stirner] ... says that truth is subjectivity, what he means is that he thinks that subjectivity is more important than truth (p.30); that "as in other forms of mysticism, the Absolute is held to be beyond thought ... The ego itself is the mystical absolute" (p.31); that Stirner "raises the ego to an independent reality contrary to its objective place in the course of nature" (pp.31-32); that what Stirner "means is not that others are merely objects of the ego, but that the ego should treat them as if they were" (p.33); that Stirner "does accept the independent [I read this as: naturalistic] existence of the external world" (p.34); that Stirner is a (self-contradictory) "psychological egoist" (chapter II); that Stirner is a (self-contradictory) "ethical egoist" (chapter III); that "Stirner's error is his excessive faith in the benefits of universal self-interest" (p. 57); that Stirner "apparently shared some of [Adam Smith's] presuppositions" [certainly, many fewer than Clark

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<sup>17</sup> A longer, more complete version of this review will appear very soon in the upcoming (and long-overdue) C.A.L. Press anthology edited by myself, titled *Post-Left Anarchy*, to be published as soon as layout is completed.

does] (p.57); that possibly “Stirner’s thought is the application of the underlying assumptions of capitalist economics to every area of human existence, and that his philosophy is the reductio ad absurdum of classical capitalism” (p.58); that “all one does is ultimately for the sake of the ego” (p.64); that Stirner’s “position ... means that one cannot allow oneself to become deeply involved with either persons or things” (p.68); that Stirner “seems to have a preconceived idea of what an unprejudiced decision must be” (p.69); etc.

In addition, Clark frequently mentions and/or quotes others equally incomprehending of Stirner’s positions approvingly, including Feuerbach’s unsuccessful argument that Stirner’s “uniqueness” is “religious” and “a clear falsification of reality” [even the post-Hegelians couldn’t swallow this] (p.21); that there is a “close relation between an egoism like Stirner’s and an atomistic conception of the self” (p.21); that Herbert Read “admits that Marx was correct in his criticism and that ‘the unique one’ is a philosophical abstraction...” (p.22); that Eduard von Hartmann is correct to suggest that “Stirner attempts to put the ego in the position of an absolute” (p.28); that Shaw is correct to say “that Stirner would like to be a solipsist but is forced to reluctantly admit the existence of the world” (p.34); etc.

Clark is, at best, like one of the blind men and the elephant. He has a tenuous hold on one certain little part of Stirner’s critique, an undefined “egoism,” from which he attempts to deduce the whole of his thought and – more fundamentally – his attitude towards thought, despite the fact that he cannot even figure out what that “egoism” actually is! Clark’s monologue is pathetic as philosophy and even more wretched as critique.

[12]With the consolidation of the modern mass-misinformation media networks, most English-language readers of Stirner’s book can only be classified as not only philosophically, but also culturally, naive in general. Noting this implies not so much any particular criticism of English-language readers (who are, after all usually far ahead of their television and video-game-limited counterparts in philosophical and cultural knowledge) as a criticism of the entire mass consumer-industrial-dominated culture of the times.

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