

# **How the Stirner Eats Gods**

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## About his philosophical nickname

The author of the fine book *The Ego and its Own* was a man whose forehead sprouted a name: *Stirner* refers to his great brow. There is something charming about the fact that this book was signed with a pseudonym - this book that insists to the death on irreducible, irreparable uniqueness. As if one's proper name is never remarkable enough, and every Ego requires the artifice of a nickname to become a Unique signature. *Stirner* is his philosophical nickname, the signature of an unknown visage<sup>1</sup> who dedicates his book to his sweetheart, then passes it to us in all ambiguity and says: *use it*.

## About his allergy to the Cause

I have previously taken the liberty of calling Max Stirner an anarchist.<sup>2</sup> In the context of that discussion, as perhaps with most discussions of *The Ego and its Own*, I suppose that it worked. I do not doubt that he belongs to our genealogy. In the long run, however - in the name of a truly perspectival theory - I think one might understand Stirner as an anarchist and as something else as well. For there is no doubt that, for many, Anarchism is a Cause. What I have to say here is a gift to those who wish to betray that Cause.

To put Stirner in dialogue with our present, we have to get past a certain caricature of his thought (a caricature for which he is partly responsible, due mostly to his excessive prose style). Should you care to read the usually short section on Stirner to be found in introductory books on anarchism, you will find more or less this: Stirner, writing before Marx and Nietzsche, made a radical vindication of the freedom of the individual against all powers: the church, the state, all forms of authority. He did so in a way that was inspiring for many but at the same time could go no farther than a parodic exaggeration of liberal individualism. What you get is a vague, almost mythical, image, of someone who is completely out for him- or herself, and whose relations to all others are conditional on their own benefit. Benefit is understood in a typical capitalist, economic way: property and individual sovereignty. In a way that simultaneously includes and excludes Stirner's aberrant claim to ownness, this an imaginary that associatively gathers around it; it is dubbed "individualism." Naturally, this image presupposes the individual self (as psyche and as body) as a metaphysical given. Modern-day, free-market libertarian, anarcho-capitalist types seem to be inspired directly or indirectly by this caricature.

Now, I would not say that there is nothing in Stirner that opens onto such a caricature. After all, there are many caricatures in *The Ego and its Own*. And to each Ego her Own! If I set it all aside, though, and try to summon for myself his intuition in all its vertiginous danger, it seems to me that he must have had something rather different in mind than the stultifying conclusion that the greatest example of an egoist would be something like a Wall Street banker. As if he or she who is only out for themselves and wants to appropriate everything is exemplified by one of our great privatizers, those who attempt to turn as much of the world as possible into private property. Of course those little men and women are egoists. But so is everyone else: "Unconsciously and involuntarily we all strive towards ownness." "All your doings are *unconfessed*, secret, covert, and

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<sup>1</sup> It is additionally appropriate that there are no paintings or photographs of Stirner. There is, of course, that delightfully crude sketch made by Engels from memory - nostalgic, perhaps, for the company of the Free.

<sup>2</sup> "Two Styles of Anti-Statist Subjectivity."

concealed egoism.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, the real question is (and do please be kind enough to laugh at this): who will *confess*? We need better examples, far stranger examples; we need to finally meet or at least envision *confessed* egoists. We need, in all, another perspective.

This second perspective sets out from a consideration of the Ego as a kind of cipher or variable, something fundamentally unknown. The first thing we know of it is its allergy to any Cause that can be resolved into an Ism. Its characteristic activity—in Stirner’s time, in our own, perhaps for all time—is the *schism* in which one breaks with the Cause. I will have to come back, and soon, to this inadequately adequate denomination, Ego. For the moment let us play a provisional dialectical game, and suppose that Ego= x is defined in opposition to the Cause.

Cause, or, in German, **Sache**: either has one of those amusingly long dictionary entries which might make us laugh at the game of definition. Playing this game for a moment, we might read under *Sache* thing, object, article, cause, action, legal case... and so we might learn what game Stirner was playing. These are all things that, though they may seem to be objects of the subject that I am, are eminently marks or signs of my subordination to a greater subject. We know that it is a subject because that is how it appears in our speech. It is greater than me inasmuch as it is imagined as transcendent or eternal. It seems to constitute me in mediate relation to things and actions, by means of constituting me in immediate relation to itself, to its Cause.

I will rehearse the enumeration of causes in the delightful opening rant of the book, entitled “All Things are Nothing to Me.” Stirner opens *The Ego and its Own* in the first person: “What is not supposed to be my concern!” (5). What follows is a list of Causes that I am asked to accept as my own: the Cause of God, the Cause of Humanity, the Cause of the State, etc, etc. In each case I am asked to identify with a Cause alien to my interest. The terms of this offer are hardly delicate. Stirner observes: what we can say about God is that God is God’s main concern. What we can say about Humanity is that Humanity is Humanity’s main concern. What we can say about the State is that the State is the State’s main concern. But inexplicably I find myself in this statement: “I myself am my concern” (7). My Cause will be my own. I note with interest that Stirner gives *no explanation* as to how he or any of us might come to make such a claim. Now please read those statements again and observe for yourself. The relation of *being its own main concern* is said of an entity that is totally hypothetical. More precisely: imaginary. Stirner never gives us any reason to believe that there is God or Humanity beyond the quasiexistence that constellations of fixed ideas in the imagination might be said to have. As for the State, according to a definition that ought to be familiar to anarchists, it can be clearly shown to be the modes of behavior of those who live in accord with that profoundly inadequate constellation of ideas, that Cause.<sup>4</sup> So, through a more circuitous route, the same difference. None. A paradoxical question: if all of these Causes-Subjects are imaginary, am *I* imaginary? What was I before this constitutive event, before this process began? What am I once I break with the Cause? Was I ever, can I ever be again, its orphan and its atheist?<sup>5</sup>

In the sacred and sacrificial logic of every Cause except perhaps my own, the imaginary greater subject (God, Humanity, the State, etc, etc.), the one that defines me, forcibly constitutes me in mediate relation, not only to things and actions, but above all to myself. One could say, as Debord

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<sup>3</sup> *The Ego and its Own*, 316,149. All other references in parentheses in the essay.

<sup>4</sup> I am alluding, of course, to Landauer’s famous description: “The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” Cited in Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, 46. Goldman and many others have given similar accounts.

<sup>5</sup> As has been said of a person free of myth, or of the unconscious. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 58.

did that its operation is separation, the introduction of a “scission within human beings.”<sup>6</sup> But that cannot be the whole story. I agree with Stirner that there is no Man: Humanity is another Cause. Scission or separation within what, then? Just this cipher we call the Ego, this variable that names not generic humanity but individual human bodies. Individuals? Humans? I will come back to individuals and humans.

The imagination does not speak. *Someone* has spoken. He or she is a representative of the Cause, or wants you to think so. He does not speak in his own name. She says she speaks for the Cause. He shares, without invitation, his imagination. She insists that you accept her gift of words, sometimes even of organs.<sup>7</sup> As David Hume once put it: “In vain, by pompous phrase and passionate expression, each recommends his own pursuit, and invites the credulous hearers to an imitation of his life and manners.”<sup>8</sup> *Someone* says (usually repeats) to you that you must take this Cause as your own; that without it, your life is meaningless. “Every man must have something that is more to him than himself” (254). Stirner implies that, in such moments, you might accept, even embrace, the possibility of meaninglessness. He does not assume that, now that the God Cause, the State Cause, etc, etc; is no longer my own, I immediately know what I am doing, or what to do next. To assume my Cause as my own does not mean that I know what I am or what I want to do.<sup>9</sup> I can say that I will make my Cause my own, but I may not know what that means. I might trip up in my imaginary self-constitution. Not knowing is not only possible but probable. Someone sure of the next step has probably just switched Causes. Sometimes that is called progress.

Towards the end of the opening rant, Stirner affirms: “If God, if mankind, as you affirm, have substance enough in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that I shall still less lack that, and that I shall have no complaint to make of my ‘emptiness.’ I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything” (7). His rhetoric is fascinating: *If, as you affirm ... - but why grant anything to this interlocutor? If, as the credulous affirm, then I feel...* Nothing has been proven. What, then, is Stirner evoking? What is this creative nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything? What is this inexplicable and perilous moment wherein I subtract myself from a Cause that appears to give meaning to my life from beyond? (I repeat that this is first and foremost to subtract myself from the gift of meaning offered or imposed by one who imagines the Cause as their own.) It includes the possibility of being nothing or of doing nothing. This experience of nothingness recurs regularly in *The Ego and its Own*. But the crucial difference between nothing in the sense of emptiness and the creative nothing is that the first is not-Cause (to be rid of it, or *freedom*) and the second is beyond any serious relation to Causes (to be myself, or *ownness*), not defined in terms of contradiction or breaking-with. This is a gesture of autonomy - to speak in one’s own name. But, rhetorical disavowals aside, the name is empty; it is a mask. So maybe the dialectical game ends here.

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<sup>6</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, § 20, translation modified. Debord’s concept of spectacle usefully illustrates the social machines through which such imaginary subjects come to appear real.

<sup>7</sup> The idea of a gift of organs was suggested in a different context by Jean-Francois Lyotard. I am thinking of all of the nonverbal ways in which we are invited or seduced to join a Cause.

<sup>8</sup> “The Platonist,” 92.

<sup>9</sup> The event of breaking with the Cause is not itself a Cause: however, it is common enough that instances of such breaks are eventually memorialized as part of a new Cause.

Gilles Deleuze gives Stirner a special place in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, as the last gasp of dialectics, its parody- moment for that Free generation. “The dialectic cannot be halted until I become a proprietor. Even if it means ending up in nothingness.”<sup>10</sup> Briefly, it’s that Stirner implodes the dialectical mechanism, finally having done with breaking- with, absolutely negating negation, leaving nothing. “Stirner is the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic.”<sup>11</sup> This in the sense that if God, Humanity, and the other Subjects-Causes do not exist, I have no grounds to assert that I do merely because I have scornfully reduplicated the broken logic according to which those more credulous than I superstitiously suppose they do. Deleuze is right: “Stirner is too much of a dialectician to think in any other terms but those of property, alienation, and reappropriation - but too exacting not to see where this thought leads: to the ego which is nothing, to nihilism.”<sup>12</sup> But (and this is the crucial question): *which* nihilism? *Whose*? The problem Deleuze set himself was to enlist Nietzsche in an escape from dialectical reasoning, with all of its sloppy logic and its priestly morality. For my part, I want to meet today’s confessed egoists and nihilists. Especially since they seem to have responded intelligently to the fact that our present evidences ever more images of catastrophe, of absolute annihilation.<sup>13</sup> (Three provisional figures of catastrophe in our time are nuclear warfare, environmental devastation, and the company of people with no essence.) Perhaps there is no Nihilism, just these curious nihilists.

## About the Unique and the Id

If we are able to grasp what is parodic in Stirner, if Ego is not a Cause in the same sense as the others, an Ego can be neither an object nor a subject. It must be a process. Any Ego has, perhaps as its beginning, certainly and repeatedly as part of its process, a creative nothing. The process is not a process that fills the void. It is rather an atomic, irreversible way of acting in a void: these acts are called appropriating, misappropriating, disappropriating, expropriating, finding, losing... Translating the book’s title literally, we understand what it underlines>Not *The Ego and its Own*; rather something like *The Unique and Its Property*,<sup>14</sup> For the funny Latin- English term Ego translates *Ich*, “I,” not *Einzig*, “Unique.” It is not easy to say Unique the way that we say I. What we might hear in this awkwardness is a way to say singularity, expressed appropriately, perhaps even poetically, by replacing a pronoun with an adjective. I am not abstract me but myself with all of my qualities - my properties. Unique. The paradoxical vindication of my Cause as my own says that nothing can replace the singularity that I am or that I have. That I call I. That I cannot exchange. Ego is the name of the “unutterable” (275), unnamable Unique.

Stirner was one of those few philosophers who are more interested in having than being. Probably the most succinct way to describe this Unique, this Ego, is to say that I am exactly what I

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<sup>10</sup> *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 160.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 162. Maurizio Lazzarato once made the same claim for the Situationists: in *their* generation, they took the dialectic to its limits: “It is the honor of the situationists to have led the dialectic right to its point of disintegration, within the impasse that restrained it, beyond Marx.” I cite from my unpublished translation of “Hurlements en faveur du situationnisme.”

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hardt has written some profoundly lucid pages on the relation between absolute annihilation (what some Scholastics called *pars destruens*) and the dissolution of dialectics in the introduction to his *Gilles Deleuze*.

<sup>14</sup> One can find some remarks along similar lines in Hakim Bey’s communique “Black Crown and Black Rose: Anarcho-Monarchism and Anarcho-Mysticism.” Some of what I write below on the Id also echoes this fine missive.

can appropriate *right now*, what I can say is proper to me *at this moment*. As though in my process I affirm a series of parts of me as Unique (my properties) and disavow another series as all those things through which I am possessed by an alien Cause. What is left is ownness. “My own I remain” (143). This corresponds exactly with Spinoza’s formula: *aquiescentia in se ipso*.

Keeping in mind what I have written about dialectics, clearly there is something very strange happening in Stirner with regard to having, with the concept of property. On one side there is a language that seems to parrot good old free- market capitalism: there is an individual who must appropriate to survive. On the other side, we find the claim that this appropriation is what is going to *dispossess* me. It is not only what is going to free me from having been possessed by these Causes but also the very event of my self-affirmation. This has to do not with survival but with life. Simply put, it is not about things, but about actions or events that I may affirm as me or as mine. Stirner offers many wonderful images of how we allow constellations of inadequate or fixed ideas to rule us. He uses the language of ghosts. “The whole world is haunted.” (36); “Ghosts in every comer!” Credulous, we are “enthusiastic” and possessed (48).<sup>15</sup> The desire, then, when I proclaim my Cause, when I affirm myself, is to be a dispossessed Ego, playing in, wandering about, the fields of ownness.

For some of us Ego has a psychoanalytic resonance. It fits in the infamous second Freudian topology (that of *The Ego and the Id*) between the Id and the Super-Ego. If we were to redraw this picture, to playfully illustrate Stirner with Freud’s topology, it would look something like this: the Super-Ego is the Causes. That is to say, everything with which I stupidly or superstitiously identify, precisely the litany of ways I am possessed. It is what I have to get rid of, what I have to break with, free myself from. But the Id, the *It* in me, the source of bizarre impulses, that, for Freud, I cannot ever quite identify with, is, for Stirner, just as much me as the Ego. The Unique affirms the Ego and Id indistinctly. Stirner writes, clearly and often, that there is no interest in saying I am more the rational series than the irrational series. I am “an abyss of unregulated and lawless impulses, desires, wishes, passions, a chaos without guiding light or star!” (146). *Chaos ergo sum*.

For the sake of discussion, I propose a distinction between two concepts of Self in Stirner, corresponding roughly to unconfessed and confessed egoism. The first would be everything we discover by thinking about the self as a subject or object of possession: it is what I undergo when I carelessly accept the gift of words or organs. Indebted, I mistake another’s Cause for my own, and I do so in my most intimate sense of belonging: to God, to the nation, to some moral code, to a community that takes good care of me. (Notice that these tend to involve what is called Truth). I take myself to be substantial and full; I draw meaning from the identification-operation. Clearly this involves one or more fundamental self-deceptions, manifest as a separation in the Unique. This is a historical and contingent Self inasmuch as nobody chooses what he or she is possessed by. At least at first.

Another sense of Self could be called transhistorical and creative. I am thinking again about the process, about what Stirner could have intended by writing “I am the creative nothing.” One outcome of the dispossession, of what one could call the exorcism, would be to realize that the

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<sup>15</sup> Stirner’s occasional references to enthusiasm are important. First, they align his thought with a philosophy, stretching back at least to the Enlightenment, that connected revolutionary activities with the dangerous fanaticism they so often reproduce. Second, they underline that the haunting of the world is not merely a matter of minds and ideas. Possession has a strong affective component, and perhaps not even a component. Perhaps all we are thinking through here are forms of the transmission of sadness.

self is nothing. To take the intimacy of belonging to its degree zero. That is, if I am only what I can possess or affirm, this never excludes the possibility that I have nothing or can affirm nothing. All the courage in Stirner's book, all of its scattershot nobility, has to do with accepting this possibility. It is a kind of psychic mortality: the fact is that the psyche can vanish and a point of view, one or more, that says I, remains. I recall here the countless people confined to asylums. I also remember here peoples who, as a result of processes of colonization or war, have lost all access to what they once called their culture, their land, or their language. Any of these peoples, and so many others of us who feel ourselves without essence, may still try to identify with something.<sup>16</sup> But when we try to access it, we have nothing. We are only beginning to learn how to think through and truly feel such experiences, or gaps in experience, and the way people act and think politically or antipolitically out of them. Stirner, in his particular European geopolitical trajectory, seems to have arrived at something like this vertiginous *zeroself*.<sup>17</sup> With regard to the countless Causes through which peoples have thought of themselves as inhabiting or developing a collective sense of self (more or less successfully distributed to individuals),

I conclude that at least some of us are breaking out of History. That some of us never entered it. That many of us feel ourselves empty.

## About the funny term *Police-care*

The empty transhistorical or creative self, the Unique, enacts appropriation, making everything proper to itself, at least everything that it wants. By now this should mean: it indefatigably discovers or invents a singular perspective on itself, and by extension on everything else. What is funny about this is that we might also call this to *consume*. The empty Ego consumes whatever it desires. But unlike a full and substantial self, unlike the possessed, it consumes events and actions and makes them appropriate to nothing, to something that is ultimately empty. This is a . mockery of that "sacred" (220) notion of property which concerns things. It takes the relations of property to such an excessive point that they simply fail to work and so is, in the strictest sense, a destruction of property To make sense, property requires legal and economic individuals. 'Legal and economic individuals' describes at least two causes, two forms of possession, two imaginary substances. If Stirner only said to us: *I want to use you; I want to make you my own*, then he would still be a weird, exaggerated variant of a liberal. But he also says: *I want you to use me. I expect you to use me. I don't want you to ask me for help; I want you to take from me. And I'm going to take from you.* "I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as *my* property,' in which I need to 'respect' nothing. Pray do the like with what you call my property!" (220). Now this is a description of an economy, however rudimentary. In fact, we could call it Stirner's outlandish idea of mutual aid.

Often, when we try to think about or practice mutual aid, we drag into our activities an entire alien morality, thinking and living in terms of what Stirner calls the *police care*, in short mak-

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<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben writes: "Do we not see around and among us men and peoples who no longer have any essence or identity - who are delivered over, so to speak, to their inessentiality and their inactivity - and who grope everywhere, and at the cost of gross falsifications, for an inheritance and a task, *an inheritance as a task*?" (*The Open*, 76).

<sup>17</sup> See my "Two Styles ..." I think there are also many points of comparison, geohistorically speaking closer to Stirner, with the Russian nihilists. We probably need these comparisons since Stirner is clearly the stupidest - not to mention most preposterously racist! - when he stages a crude universal history at the outset of *The Ego and its Own*.



ing the community another Cause. As Cause, the Community is already a micro-State, a “tissue and plexus of belonging and adherence” (198). It is all too common for people to feel a horrible obligation to the Community and therefore to feel guilty when they fail, which of course they inevitably do. Somewhere a standard or measure arises or is borrowed, and immediately someone starts measuring. Someone else accepts the measure and asks: how *much am I* giving? Stirner observes: “The spy and eavesdropper, ‘conscience,’ watches over every motion of the mind, and all thought and action is for it a ‘matter of conscience,’ that is, police business. This tearing apart of man into ‘natural impulse’ and ‘conscience’ (inner populace and inner police) is what constitutes the Protestant” (81-82). Need I say that this is not only about certain sects of Christianity, but many more of us besides; first of all those of us, atheist or not, who have absorbed what is still called a work ethic? The State, or the States *in ovo* that so many Communities manifest, are gatherings of people that take good police care of each other. As Causes they maintain themselves first of all. “Every ego is from birth a criminal to begin with against the people, the State. Hence it is that it does really keep watch over all. It sees in each one an egoist and is afraid of the egoist. It presumes the worst about each one and takes care, police care, that no harm happens to the State” (179).

That is how a moral or, of course, political ideal is invoked as the Super-Ego of the group or of the Community. Remember someone’s repetitive chatter: *Don’t we all believe in this and so don’t you want to be doing it?...* Of course this is the very form of the dialogue—if we can still call it that—in which someone invokes the Cause, and more or less politely demands allegiance, threatening meaninglessness as the terrible alternative. What I am asked to do is to sacrifice myself for the sake of belonging in exchange for the gift of meaning, of words and organs. This is the blueprint for all moralizing politics. Some of that should have been obvious in the preceding. If I emphasize the Community as a Cause, as it so often and so sadly is, if I indulge my wish to bring this phrase, *taking police care of one another*, into the everyday lexicon, it is because it is comparatively easy to call someone out for being bossy, for telling other people what to do. It is more difficult to think of and intervene in the subtle and insidious forms that police care takes. A rich terrain.

For those of the Community, any alternative to belonging seems like it will fail. Indeed, it will fail the Community, or the Community will fail in and through it. What is outside Community, since coexistence is in some sense inevitable? I learned this lesson in reflecting on something I do constantly: public speaking. Of this activity Stirner writes that it is to ask others to consume me (305). Enjoy me, the Unique invites you, consume me. (To this I am tempted to add the masochist’s erotic whisper: “use me.”) Render inappropriate what I appropriated. But what is this gathering of consumers who feel allegiance to nothing, not even to the Community?

## **We are all Unions of Egoists**

Peter Lambom Wilson has noted in several places that perhaps the Ego is another ghost, well on its way to being another Cause. One can, after all, take oneself too seriously. Referencing Landauer, Wilson suggests the Ego “still retains - despite all Stirner’s determination - a taint of the

Absolute.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly when I read Stirner I sometimes have to pause to cleanse the unpleasant aftertaste left by too much comparison of Self with God. It’s what is still all too dialectical in Stirner, the desire to invert the monotheist nightmare rather than just wake up from it. Certainly I have witnessed people assimilating such an Ego to an individualism that is rugged, all too rugged. I mean that the theoretical mistake of identifying what makes me Unique with what I think I am (Ego as conscience or consciousness) is perhaps a variant of the more ordinary mistake of believing that one can just be an individual in some simple way. Reflecting on the phenomenon of life, Henri Bergson wrote: “Individuality is never perfect ... it is often difficult, sometimes impossible, to tell what is an individual.”<sup>19</sup> As though we are not all divided within and sometimes against ourselves first and foremost, before and after possession! But that is *not* separation. To disattach the Ego from the Cause, to allow it to float off in a nominal or indexical way instead of delivering it to oneself and others as though it bears the heaviest weight (conscience or consciousness, terrible psychological depths, etc) has this happy consequence: I can affirm myself as multiple and have done with pledging allegiance to the Unified Self and the Cause for which it stands.

I like to think that the process of appropriation and misappropriation, of making proper and making improper, is happening in the emptiness of the self, as its effort of selfconstitution, as much as it is happening beyond, as relations with others. Stirner does sometimes write about internal conflicts, but I rarely have the sense of clarity about what I want that he tends to assume. (Perhaps my mask does not fit as well as his did.) One could express the process of individuation that makes me Unique as a series of inner conflicts. That is, we could concretize the concept of the Ego by adopting another perspective in which there are many processes, not just one. Something like that is a concrete aspect of embodiment. I find that I am composite, that I am composed by many Ego nodules, partial or micro selves<sup>20</sup> that crop up and fade away depending on what activity I take up or abandon. They are in some conflict with each other inasmuch as there are different kinds of available activities and pleasures that tempt me, attract me, repel me, and seduce me. The process or processes are the chaos together with unregulated impulses as emergent desires.

Tempt us; attract us; repel us; seduce us. All of us. For now ji.am many. Too many for a Cause - for we do not all agree. \*That, it seems to me, would be a better reason to say that ||o Cause can be mine but my own. If there were some kind of absolute limit it would be: my body is my own. Stirner’s parodic seizure of power over himself echoes this weirdest of all feelings. Perhaps that nonsense is how the sense of what is appropriate or proper arises. It could also be how the concept of property is ultimately dissolved.

We could understand this still empty, now multiple, self in *and* as the famous Union of Egoists that Stirner presents as annihilating society and State. “Society is our state of nature ... But the dissolution of society is intercourse<sup>21</sup> or union” (271) “It is not another state that men aim at, but, their *union*, uniting, this ever-fluid uniting of everything standing” (199). “The State and I are

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<sup>18</sup> *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, 10. My sense of Landauer is that he would have dissolved this Absolute in the direction I outlined in the previous section—that of annihilating the self. In his case, the inspiration was probably mystical, given his interest in Meister Eckhart and Jewish mysticism.

<sup>19</sup> *Creative Evolution*, 15. But “life nevertheless manifests a seatSh for individuality, as if it strove to constitute systems naturally isolated, naturally closed.”

<sup>20</sup> I take inspiration here from Felix Guattari’s idea of “vectors of Rectification.” See his discussion in *The Three Ecologies*, 44-45.

<sup>21</sup> Intercourse can refer to economic exchanges or sexual pleasures. “Intercourse is the enjoyment of the world” (282). Both senses converge here.

enemies. I sacrifice nothing to human society, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely I transform it into my property and my creature, that is, I annihilate it, and form in its place the *Union of Egoists*" (161). The Union of Egoists is precisely what made so many communists - even the Situationists - turn away and run from Stirner.<sup>22</sup> His suggestion was, simply, that the inevitable processes of formation of groups would involve folks joining and leaving the group at will. "If a union has crystallized into a society, it has ceased to be a coalition; for coalition is an incessant self-uniting; it has become a unitedness, come to a standstill, degenerated into a fixity; it is — *dead* as a union, it is the corpse of the union or coalition, it is - society, community. A striking example of this kind is furnished by the *party*" (271). The Union does not, cannot, operate through separation or the police care that manages it. I approach or recede, variously saying: I want to use the group and be used by it; now I don't - I withdraw myself.

If we start from the Ego, as the imaginarily full and substantial individual, and conceive of *that* entity entering and exiting the Union of Egoists, there are many reasons to conclude that this is not a viable scheme for cooperation or coexistence. However, from the perspective of an empty and creative self, we are thinking of multiple selves already going on in one body. There is no particular reason to think of (always imperfectly) individual bodies as the best or highest instance of the Unique, as opposed to unique desires and impulses - or unique groups. Individuality is not absolute, but relative. There are actions in which I act as one; there are also actions that are profoundly conflicted and even self-contradictory. This is not necessarily a weakness and it is not always a mark of separation in me. For we are each of us already a Union of Egoists. My part in composing a group as a Union of Egoists is to disband one Union and convene another, setting multiple selves in circulation, so that certain of mine connect with certain of yours. In the group, these impulses or micro-Egos circulate in a way both related and unrelated to their circulation in me. Naturally all of what goes on in my body is not connected to all of what goes on in your body. A Union of Egoists is an "ever- fluid" circulation of selves, a circulation of affects or desires. Thus what ends up being *I* or *me* - my Cause, my property, ownership, finally - has to be redefined beyond the individual body. For the exact duration of a Union of Egoists, I is distributed in it. When others appear or disappear, *I* is redistributed. That is precisely what is already happening in individual bodies.<sup>23</sup> If you have been unlucky enough to sleep through the lessons in which life teaches you the multiplicity of your body, you might still think that the Ego is the liberal individual, the full and substantial self, and that the Union of Egoists is a temporary association among them. Of course *that* ought to sound ridiculous, because nothing will get done except through some combination of coercion and good luck. If you cease to divide up *self* by individual body specifically, feeling the many Unique selves in each body, there must also be equally complex collective selves beyond individual bodies. That would be truly following Stirner's intuition: the paradoxical statement that I have assumed my own Cause means that in

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<sup>22</sup> "The one-sidedness of Stirner's notions on the relations with the organization that he enters or leaves at whim (though it does contain a kernel of truth regarding *that aspect* of freedom) does not allow any independent basis for his passive and defenseless ghost of an 'organization.' Such an incoherent and undisciplined organization is at the mercy of any individual 'egoist,' who can cynically exploit it for his own ends while disdaining any social aims it might have" ("The Ideology of Dialogue," in Knabb, 231). This in the course of a defense of the presumably 'disciplined practice of exclusion.

<sup>23</sup> Bergson again: "The organized elements composing the individual have themselves a certain individuality, and each will claim its own vital principle if the individual pretends to have its own. But, on the other hand, the individual itself is not sufficiently independent, not sufficiently cut off from other things, for us to allow it a "vital principle' of its own" (Creative Evolution, 42-43).

such moments of mutual appropriation and disappropriation we clear the sort of space in which the nothing creates. He was after the greatest possible intensity of the creative moment. How do we take it to where it has almost no limit? What is the plateau of maximum circulation?

There can be no single answer to these questions. I will offer a somewhat abstract description of the feeling involved, though. Stirner has a strange passage that relates to how you and I might meet: “The last and most decided opposition, that of unique against unique, is at bottom beyond what is called opposition, but without having sunk back into unity and unison” (186). There are not two; there is not one. The empty Ego is nondenumerable, or beyond measure.

Indeed: Vinciane Despret suggests in her ethnopsychological study *Our Emotional Makeup* that one can crudely classify responses to theoretical and practical crises of notions of the self into two sets.<sup>24</sup> The one that has been more common in the so-called Western tradition is to multiply selves, severing a supposedly unified being into various sub-selves invariably distributed in hierarchical structures. (The first cleavage, from Plato to Freud and after, divides the rational and the irrational.) The one that has been less popular, always controversial, sometimes heretical, in that tradition is to erase or annihilate the self. Stirner plays and in playing transforms all three games of the self: the unified self (Unique and unnamable), the multiple self (from the abyss of unregulated impulses to the Union of Egoists), and no self (Nothing, emptiness, “thoughtlessness”). The Ego’s process extends in both directions. Uniquely.

## About how he Eats Gods

All of us return, then, if we are fortunate, to the destruction of property—to consumption. One of the plans for thinking modernity that Nietzsche sketched out in his notebooks reflects on unfortunate, sad modern people who cannot digest anything. We might understand all of modernity “using the metaphor of feeding and digestion.”<sup>25</sup> “Sensibility unutterably more excitable (- the increase in excitability dressed in moralistic finery as the increase of *compassion* -), the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever before - the *cosmopolitanism* of dishes, of literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes, etc. The tempo of this influx is *prestissimo*; the impressions efface each other; one instinctively resists taking something in, taking something *deeply*, ‘digesting’ something - this results in a *weakening* of the digestive power.”<sup>26</sup> For Nietzsche, what one can digest is a test of one’s health, strength, and power. Metaphorical or not, this Alimentary Logic is profoundly consonant with Stirner’s thought: what we have digested is literally what we have made our own, and digesting or consuming something else is also how we become more than what we are.

Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert’s 1898 article on “the nature and function of sacrifice” could be read, in all its glorious sociological dryness, as an expose of the sacrificial logic of the sacred Cause. They describe religious rituals in which the credulous one eats: “By eating the sacred thing, in which the god is thought to be immanent, the sacrificer absorbs him. He is possessed by him...”<sup>27</sup> The sacrificial logic is a logic of absorption: and in absorption, possession. Absorption would then be the psychological or physiological prerequisite for identifying yourself with an

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<sup>24</sup> Despret, 97 and passim.

<sup>25</sup> *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Sacrifice*, 62.

alien Cause. It/should not surprise us, then, that *The Ego and its Own* is peppered with constant references to eating: eating things, eating other people, eating gods too. Stirner's rejection of the Cause is a rejection of the practice of sacrifice, and of every politics and morality based on a sacrificial logic.<sup>28</sup> "Everything sacred is a tie, a fetter" (176).

For every Cause is indigestible to the credulous. "What I take as absolute, I cannot devour" (183). It remains and separates me from myself, by and painfully redistributing the micro-Egos, generating an imaginary fullness, fixing an identity.

Alternatively, to think of ourselves as eating something and not being possessed by it is to think ourselves dispossessed. Stirner writes, as I mentioned, about the world being haunted: always more ghosts, more and more spirits, more and more things that possess, more and more guilt, and so on. He writes about how this is growing. Here he is navigating Nietzsche's accelerating world:

Around the altar rise the arches of the church and its walls keep moving further and further out. What they enclose is *sacred*. You can no longer get to it, no longer touch it. Shrieking with the hunger that devours you, you wander around about these walls and search for the little that is profane. And the circles of your course keep getting more and more extended. Soon that church will embrace the whole world, and you will be driven out to the extreme edge. Another step and the *world of the sacred* has conquered: you sink into the abyss. Therefore take courage while there it is yet time, wander about no longer in the profane where now it is dry feeding, dare the leap and rush the gates into the sanctuary itself. If you *devour* the *sacred* you have made it your *own*. Digest the sacramental wafer and you are rid of it. (88-89)

Yes, digest! For you are the "desecrator" (165). But observe: Stirner assumes that you are hungry. To be hungry, to be desirous in any way, corresponds to the feeling of being empty. Such feelings are indices. They are clues for patient meditators who stubbornly insist, on slowing down the *prestissimo* of our present. These conditions testify to emptiness and not to a lack that could be filled. They tell me not just that I need to eat (to consume so that I will be something) but also that I am to set off across what others call sacred space; to me it is a void. I continually discover and lose myself in the void. Yet I continue to act. That is what Stirner meant, I think, by excessive remark: "I do not love [the world], I *annihilate* it as I annihilate myself; I *dissolve* it" (262). To seriously take up Ego as a Cause to which I am obligated would inevitably mean to be possessed by myself, by some element that I no longer want to be. It would be my horrible apotheosis. That cannot be ownness. So, repeatedly, patiently, Stirner interrupts such moments, returning to these sentiments. I'm hungry. I'm dispossessed. I'm nothing. As Unique, the creative nothing is not the beginning of a theogony, much less an anthropogony: it is the ever-repeated destruction of property in oneself.

## About the Fields of Ownness

What could Vaneigem have intended in his often invoked distinction between life (*vie*) and survival (*survie*)?<sup>29</sup> Although he often deployed it in a simplistic way, the idea is beautiful in

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<sup>28</sup> This notion of sacrifice was clearly important to Raoul Vaneigem in the writing of "Basic Banalities," reprinted in *Situationist International Anthology*, and is taken up again in chapter 12 of *The Revolution of Everyday life*. In this sense he represents the aspect of Situationist theory and practice more receptive to Stirner.

<sup>29</sup> Aside from his better-known texts referenced above, see also *The Movement of the Free Spirit*.

its inversion of the apparently obvious dominance of the economy (understood in a restricted sense): survival is not what is basic, primary, of the body and its needs, but rather a weakening, a vampirism, the imposition of a superior (sur) element on life (vie). And this by life itself. Vaneigem perhaps invited us to try to conceive of life itself - life *by* itself, life's ownness, without transcendent illusions.

In this sense life cannot be conceived, much less lived, in terms of any transcendent meaning or project. Contemplating our emptiness, considering the swarming micro-Egos that compose us, we might learn the lesson of our irreparable relations to something alive but impersonal, inhuman. It could be what Stirner called "The Un-man who is in some sense in every individual" (125). It could be the pre-human or for-human, if I understand what Frère Dupont was grasping after with these notions in the book, *species being*.<sup>30</sup> It could be what Bergson called "a haunting of the social form in the genesis of the individual."<sup>31</sup> It could be everyday life - but not the everyday life (*le quotidien*) of citizens (of the *polis*) that the Situationists described, after Lefebvre, as colonized. Not *le quotidien*, then, but what Bergson, again, called *le courant*: literally, the flowing. The flux of life in and beyond the human.

life in this sense is ultimately an impersonal circulation of desires, impulses, affects. That is what an egoist paradoxically, impossibly almost, speaks in the name of when he rejects the Cause, when she joins or parts ways with the Union of Egoists. So many masks at play on the fields of ownness: hello, egoists. Hello, nihilists. And all of this has been my fancy decoration on another such mask, one I wear today, to tell you that if anything is worth reading, it is not to find something to believe in. That other mask that accepted the gift of a nickname, *Stirner*, wrote: "We read it because we are interested in handling something and making it ours."

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<sup>30</sup> My understanding of this fine book (also, I might note, signed with a pseudonym) leads me to think that much of what I have written here ought to be consonant with its provocations.

<sup>31</sup> *Creative Evolution*, 260.

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