Stirner and Marx

Alexander Green

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Max Stirner: a historiographical sketch

The impact of Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1844)[1] on the modern European thought has been strangely neglected. Few other figures in the history of philosophy have been as systematically misread, misunderstood, suppressed and pigeonholed as that of Max Stirner. He has been labelled an anarchist, a nihilist, a crude "proto-Nietzsche" and his influence constantly overlooked by both philosophical movements and intellectual historians alike. Whilst there is no direct recipient of Stirner's version of egoism, it appears to exert a diffuse yet substantial influence on modern philosophical thought. Identifying the ultimate or unintended beneficiaries of Stirner's ideas is challenging. Recognition of his only major work emerged half a century after its conception when *The Ego*surfaced in a range of intellectual projects, recently including feminism and postmodernism. What is paradoxical about Stirner's impact is that his most critical influence – on the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, has been obscured from the field of intellectual history. Stirner's official role in the philosophically fraught period which saw the birth of historical materialism (1844–5) was relegated to more "deviant tributaries" of European philosophy.[2]

Despite its apparent distinctiveness, *The Ego* was very much a product of the milieu of the eighteen forties and of the Left Hegelian movement in particular. Ironically, it is in this context that some of the most genuine praise for Stirner's surprising contribution to Left Hegelianism was voiced, despite the critique of the group's theoretical leaders that had prompted *The Ego*. "The Free Ones" (hereafter *Die Freien*) were a group of radical Berlin publicists, poets and philosophers who gathered daily in Hippel's *Weinstube*; many of its members were imbued with revolutionary fervour, others were simply inebriated.[3] The group's leaders were the Bauer brothers, Bruno and Edgar. Marx, Engels and the poets Herwegh and Hoffmann von Fallersleben were occasional visitors.Hence Bauer's later characterisation of the group as Berlin's "beer literati".[4] Ludwig Feuerbach, Moses Hess, Ludwig Bühl, Adolf Rutenberg, Eduard Meyen, and Julius Faucher also frequented Hippel's. Arnold Ruge, the self-appointed godfather of these Hegelians, carried on nightly debates which were often very bitter.[5] Engels gives a description of Stirner at such a gathering in his comic poem "The Triumph of Faith":

> Look at Stirner, look at him,
> the peaceful enemy of all constraint.
> For the moment, he is still drinking beer,

[1] *The Ego and Its Own* (Leipzig, 1845). This work appeared in December of 1844, and press copies were available even earlier, as Moses Hess had read and forwarded his copy to Fredrich Engels no later than early November of 1844. I will use David Leopold revised version of "The Ego and His Own" (Cambridge 1995) based on Steven Byington's original translation. This edition will hereafter be referred to as *The Ego*.

[2] Patterson (1971): 102.

[3] Hence Bauer's later characterisation of the group as Berlin's "beer literati".

[4] Patterson (1971): 8.

[5] On *Die Freien* see: Patterson (1971) : 67–93; and Gustav Mayer, "Die Anfange des politischen Radikalismus im vormarzlichen Preussen," in *Zeitschrift für Politik*. (1913) 6: 45–72.

soon he will be drinking blood
as though it were water.
When others cry savagely
“down with the kings”
Stirner immediately supplements
“down with the laws also”.
Stirner full of dignity proclaims;
you bend your will power,
and you dare to call yourselves free,
You become accustomed to slavery;
Down with dogmatism, down with law.[6]

[6] Quoted in Henri Arvon (1954) : 14.

Fig. I: Pencil sketch by Engels, Stirner stands on the middle right, leaning against the table. He is a lonely figure: highbrowed, bespectacled and smoking a cigarette. For Engels illustrated letters see: *Zwischen 18 und 25 Jugend Briefe von Friedrich Engels.*

Die Freien were the last remnants of Bruno Bauer's "Doktorklub" – the same club had once counted Marx as a member. Stirner cannot have joined before the end of 1841. At that time the young Marx was leaving for Paris and, as a result, the two were never to meet. Stirner spent most of 1843 completing *The Ego*; it was published in November of 1844. For English readers, the English-Latin word *ego* comes constrained by nuances of a possible Freudian or Protestant analysis. However a careful reading suggests that "The Unique One & His Property" (or Ownness) would better elucidate Stirner's intentions. "The Unique One" might be best understood as the individual self, not in opposition to later concepts of the Freudian *id* or *libido* or even the "spirit" or "soul", but as a certain kind of absolute. *The Ego* immediately established Stirner as one of the most formidable opponents of the very people with whom he had seemed to have so much in common. Communists, critical philosophers, humanitarians and reformers of every degree were attacked in Stirner's philosophy, a philosophy that Engels labelled "Egoism".[7]) Among the Young Hegelians, Bauer, Ruge, Moses Hess and even the famous Feuerbach joined forces in order to combat what they saw as the menacing nihilism of Stirner's egoism.

Bruno Bauer and Szeliga both wrote articles, Feuerbach also replied. Hess wrote an essay whilst Marx and Engels wrote the best part of a book.[8] All seemed happy to admit Stirner was an adversary of note. Bauer wrote that Stirner was "the most capable and courageous of all combatants" of his own theory of "pure criticism",[9] whereas Feuerbach described Stirner as "the most gifted and the freest writer it has been given me to meet".[10] Arnold Ruge even heralded Stirner as the "theoretical liberator" of German philosophy; *The Ego* had represented a triumph on behalf of the concrete living individual over abstract generalities. Engels himself, in a letter to Marx, wrote that "among the *Freien* it is plain that Stirner has the most talent, personality and energy".[11] S.E. Parker[12] notes that Engels's initial sympathetic response to Stirner was probably subject to a severe reprimand from Marx. Engels' views radically changed as we shall see, and deference is made to Marx in dealing with the chimera of Stirner's egoism. Nevertheless, Stirner enjoyed fleeting and alarming fame, his "conscious egoism" was parodied in a popular novel and he himself had even appeared, thinly disguised, as a philosophical character in another novel.[13]

However, the speculative excitement over *The Ego* was as frantic as it was transient, and the political events of 1848 obliterated the traces of those philosophical struggles which had preceded them. In that year, along with the revolutionary hopes of German radicals, the Left Hegelian movement "collapsed into itself, becoming insignificant in both intellectual and political life",[14] emasculated "in the face of an adamant union between a defensive Church and a reactionary Monarchy".[15] *The Ego* had sounded the theoretical death knell for the group and Left Hegelianism reached "a final and angry impasse".[16] Stirner had made a "clean sweep of everything, leaving

[7] First usage: Engels to Marx, 19th November 1844 in *MECW*, 38: 11.
[8] See Hess' "The Recent Philosophers" in Stepelevich (1983).
[9] Cited by McLellan (1969): 130.
[10] McLellan (1969): 130.
[11] Engels to Marx, 19th November 1844, *MECW*, 38: 13.
[12] Parker, S.E, "Introduction" *The Ego and Its Own* (1982).
[13] Patterson (1971) : 98.
[14] Stepelevich (1983): 14.
[15] Stepelevich (1983): 14.
[16] Stepelevich (1983): 14.

only naked self-assertion"; with *The Ego* he had taken the Hegelian system to its dialectical limit "… and transformed it into its opposite".[17]

[17] Stepelevich (1983): 14.

Fig. II: Max Stirner Pencil sketch, inscription reads “Max Stirner. Drawn from memory by Frederick Engels, London, 1892” reproduced in *MECW* 5:267, (Moscow 1976).

Johann Caspar Schmidt (1806–56), who wrote and was known as Max Stirner, had been a close friend of Engels during the year he spent in Berlin. Engels was evidently impressed by Stirner, who was his senior by a number of years. He was able to render a pencil sketch of Stirner fifty years later, and recalled that they were "great friends" [*Duzbrüder*].[18] However, it was Engels who helped in obscuring evidence of Stirner's influence on his colleague and lifelong friend, Karl Marx. After reading *The Ego*, Engels wrote to Marx explicitly stating his opinion, one which would powerfully colour Stirner's legacy: "We must not simply cast it [*The Ego*] aside, but rather use it as the perfect expression of the present-day folly, and, while inverting it, continue to build on it."[19] Marx responded by burying himself in *The Ego*, and constructing his reply in *The German Ideology*.[20] For Marx and Engels, coming to terms with *The Ego* was a deeply fundamental moment in the development of Communist theory. Marx claimed that the aim of *The German Ideology* was simply "to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience".[21] First published in 1932, the bulk (three quarters) of the work is a chapter entitled "Sankt Max", Marx's epic yet uncomfortable diatribe on *The Ego*. The unpublished status of *The German Ideology* did not allow for public discussion of Marx's criticisms of Stirner, in his own words it was "left to the gnawing criticism of mice".[22]

Stirner's legacy suffered yet more interference from Engels' essay "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy" (1886), his account of the development of historical materialism. It attempted to minimise the importance of *The German Ideology*, and therefore *The Ego* in Marx's formative philosophy. Engels claimed Darwin's theory of evolution had played a critical role in the route to dialectical materialism, though Marx was always more of a Hegelian than Engels would give him credit for. However, Engels at least recognised Feuerbach's influence whose concept of "species-being"/essence was easily transposed onto Marx's "social being", conveniently replacing the old materialism with a new "dialectical" form. There is no mention that Marx's rejection of Feuerbach's humanism was only made possible by reading *The Ego* in 1844. Engels' account mentions Stirner only in passing: "Stirner remained an oddity, even after Bakunin blended him with Proudhon and labelled the blend 'anarchism'. Feuerbach alone was of significance as a philosopher".[23] Engels occluded Stirner's self-evident "catalytic"[24] contribution to the young Marx's early philosophic formulations. By labelling him the "prophet of contemporary anarchism", Engels misaligned Stirner with Proudhon and Bakunin, two thinkers he had openly condemned.

Marxists studying the theoretical development of the young Marx tend to follow Engels and ignore the criticisms of Stirner featured in "Sankt Max". For the purposes of the "Marxist exegesis", Marx's most characteristic aphorisms are to be found in the deceptively short yet lucid chapter on Feuerbach, the most bona fide "Marxist" chapter of *The German Ideology*. However, as we will learn, Marx's criticisms of Feuerbach were merely "perspectives" which "had been

[18] Cited by Stepelevich (1974) : 323.
[19] Engels to Marx, 19th November 1844 in *MECW*, 38 : 11.
[20] *The German Ideology* in *MECW* (1976) 5 : 19–539.
[21] Marx *Selected Writings* ed. D. McLellan (2000) : 177.
[22] McLellan (2000) : 177.
[23] Engels, F. "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy" in *MECW*, vol. 26.
[24] Patterson (1971) : 105.

progressively opened to Marx and Engels in the course of their study of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*".[25]

At the close of the nineteenth century John Henry Mackay, a Scottish poet turned Germanophile, rediscovered Stirner and initiated what has since been called the "Stirner renaissance".[26] Mackay happened to find a brief citation regarding Stirner in Lange's *History of Materialism*: "The man who in German literature has preached Egoism most recklessly and logically, Max Stirner, finds himself in distinct opposition to Feuerbach". After finding a copy of *The Ego*, Mackay immediately became a disciple, and claimed the role of necromancer to the lifeless corpse of Stirner's thought. Stirner's revival was also concurrent with the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche's work. As Karl Löwith points out "Stirner has often been compared with Nietzsche, to the point of asserting that Stirner was 'intellectual arsenal' from which Nietzsche derived his weapons".[27] Some went further in this comparison, Eduard von Hartmann claimed "not only is this [*The Ego*] a brilliant work not inferior in respect of style to Nietzsche's work, but in respect of philosophical value it surpasses the latter a thousand times".[28] The spreading of Nietzsche's celebrity ignited a fresh and sympathetic interest in Stirner's ethic of self-will and indirectly helped to sustain historians' interest in *The Ego* into the twentieth-century.

Few historians have found consensus when discussing Stirner's place in the history of philosophy, not to suggest that they should. Scholars remain divided in determining the place that *The Ego* might belong in European thought, or even if it should belong at all. Mackay's resurrection of Stirner's book caused a more extensive response; it confirmed Stirner's identification with his most commonly assigned philosophical genre. For over a century *The Ego* has maintained a place among the founders and luminaries of modern anarchism. Woodcock states that "of all the libertarian classics [*The Ego*] remains the expression of a point of view that belongs clearly to one end of the varied spectrum of anarchist theory".[29] The anarchic elements in Stirner's thought are even pronounced enough for Avron to declare Stirner "anarchism's most original and most consistent thinker".[30] The orthodox Marxist Hans G. Helms has argued that the influence of *The Ego* has been as much political as philosophical. In his recent study, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*,[31] he argues that Stirner inspired various German groups who were the immediate precursors of fascism. Stirner has even been used by the New Right specifically to evoke the darkness of the "interregnum" and emphasise the need for a total cultural transformation.[32] In the 1963 Libertarian Book Club edition of *The Ego*, James J. Martin wrote "it is at once a historical document, a pamphlet of the intellectual disturbance of the mid-nineteenth century, and a timeless classic".

The publication history of *The Ego* also shows the strength of this initial revival of Stirner. Forty-nine editions appeared between 1900 and 1929. However, after the 1930s, *The Ego* again slipped into relative obscurity. Even amongst the thinkers who knew Stirner, opinion was radically divided. There were a few during that period who had a better insight into the meaning of

[25] Avron (1954) : 149.

[26] Mackay (1898).

[27] Löwith (1967) : 187.

[28] Quoted in Basch, *L'individualisme anarchiste: Max Stirner* : ii-iii.

[29] Woodcock, *Anarchism,* ch. 4. cited by Patterson (1971) : 126–127.

[30] Avron (1954) cited by Patterson (1971) : 127.

[31] Helms (1968).

[32] Griffin, R. "Between metapolitics and *apoliteia*: the New Right's strategy for conserving the fascist vision in the "interregnum", *Modern and Contemporary France* 8 : 2 (2000).

Stirner's thought. In 1939, Sidney Hook indicated that the forgotten debate between Marx and Stirner involved "the fundamental problems of any possible system of ethics or public morality",[33] and later in 1963 Isaiah Berlin noted that "the theory of the alienation of the proletarians was enunciated by Max Stirner at least one year before Marx."[34] These voices were in the extreme minority, yet significantly they identified the unresolved nature of the Stirner-Marx relationship, and suggested that Stirner's influence might not be as negligible as was previously thought. These writers have paved the way for a revaluation of Stirnerian thought.

In 1968 a new German edition of *The Ego* made its appearance. It had been preceded, two years earlier, by a full study of Stirner's thought and influence, the first since Henri Avron's in 1954, which had linked Stirner with existentialism.[35] 1971 saw the publication of the first extensive study of Stirner's philosophy ever to appear in English: R. W. K. Patterson's *The Nihilistic Egoist.* Paterson's study sought to be the most comprehensively objective treatment of Stirner to date, yet Marx's accusations against Stirner are restated, minus the vitriol, and Stirner's vision is described as "frivolous". *The Nihilistic Egoist* remains a useful, if dated, springboard for a revisionist perspective aiming to rediscover Stirner's own intentionality.

In John Carroll's *Break-out from the Crystal Palace, The Anarcho-Psychological Critique: Stirner, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky* (1974), a sociological approach was applied to Stirner's thought. Carroll recognised the psychological dimension of anarchism beyond its more familiar appearance as political ideology. Whilst identifying Stirner's radical individualist psychology, he sees Stirner much like Georges Sorel in considering society as senile, in need of fresh, invigorating passions; a view that appealed to the young Mussolini and to the French fascist aesthete Robert Brasillach (see William Tucker's *The Fascist Ego*). Carroll ultimately presents Stirner as a difficult, inspiring, yet flawed champion of rebellion and the unceasing quest for self-understanding, self-realization, and new values.

William Brazill's recent work, *The Young Hegelians* (1970) as well as David McLellan's *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (1980) both direct considerable attention to Stirner's thought. In addition, John Edward Toews has significantly revised Stirner's place in the history of philosophy in his recent study *Hegelianism, The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805–41* (1980), opening the way up for a more historically sensitive, rather than philosophical/ideological interpretation of Stirner's contribution to the history of philosophy. Toews contextualises Stirner's position amongst the Left Hegelians, and attacks those who see Stirner's egoism as "purely subjective".[36] He identifies the core contradiction that Hegel's radical heirs had to wrangle with during the 1840s, that self-liberation and self-affirmation required "revolutionary destruction" in order for their "concrete historical actualisation".[37] However, revolution necessitated "commitment to suprapersonal values" and "a belief in an objective meaning in history".[38] Such values were a direct denial of the "individual autonomy, self-expression and self-enjoyment" that constituted Stirner's aim of an inward rebellion which sought to end the "historical pathology of self-alienation".[39] Toews' penetrating work indicates that *The Ego* was deeply rooted in the strug-

[33] Hook (1962): 165.
[34] Berlin (2000) : 143.
[35] Avron (1954).
[36] Toews (1985) : 368.
[37] Toews (1985) : 369.
[38] Toews (1985) : 369.
[39] Toews (1985) : 369.

gles of Hegelian thought during the 1840s and importantly Stirner is given an independent and original role in disintegration of the Left Hegelian movement. As Lawrence Stepelevich notes hopefully, we may be seeing the "beginning of another cycle of interest in Stirner".[40] The continued publication of the journal *Stirner-Studien* since 1994 similarly reflects the renewed academic interest in Stirner in his native Germany.[41]

The debate of 1845 still reverberates in late twentieth-century European intellectual discourse. Indeed, there are many unusual and overlooked parallels between Stirner's critique of Enlightenment humanism, universal rationality and essential identities, and similar critiques developed by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and others. Such intellectual affinities have recently prompted Saul Newman to attempt to reconcile classical anarchism with poststructuralist thought (in order to define "postanarchism") using Stirner to "break out of the Enlightenment humanist paradigm of essentialism … which continues to inform radical political theory".[42] Stirner's ideas are also discernible in "primitivism" (John Zerzan), "immediatism" (Hakim Bey) and "insurrectionary anarchism" (Alfredo Bonnano).

This thesis aims to assess the difficult relationship between Marx and Stirner and their respective ideas. It is timely to reconsider Stirner's place amongst the philosophic heavyweights of the nineteenth century, after years where he has suffered under the suffocating modernity of Marx and Nietzsche and been misconstrued by many as an intellectual oddity. It is high time that the relevance of Stirner's thought, especially in relation to the development of Marx's theories, was restored to its correct place in history of philosophy. When we examine Marx's critique in *The German Ideology*, it will emerge that Stirner's legacy is more than that of an "anarcho-existentialist" whose egoism is untenable. Both thinkers will be firmly set against the context of the rise and fall of Left Hegelian humanism. Whilst by 1845 its key luminaries accused each other of retreating to abstract and undialectical positions of either metaphysical idealism or materialism, all (including Marx and Stirner) had laid claim to dialectical inheritance (Hegel). Therefore, it is instructive to see the thinkers on a level playing field, Marx, Feuerbach, Bauer and Stirner all sharing this "existential" ontology. We should similarly regard their opposing solutions as embedded in their own context, remembering that the "existential reductions" of 1844–5 were put forward as constructive appropriations of the real content of Hegelian thought. Stirner was no exception as his form of nihilism did not abandon the redemptive core of the Hegelian project. Rather than a simple appendage of Marx's early formulations, *The Ego* must be given independent value and seen as serious attempt to tackle the problems facing German philosophy in the 1840s. The main objective of this thesis will be to extricate Stirner from Marx's rambling, left-handed invective and reinstate him as a thinker who deserves our attention and whose relevance and influence have not been fully appreciated. We cannot simply overlook "Sankt Max" as key evidence of Marx's formative intellectual development. Marx clearly exerted much cerebral effort to write a critique that ended up being lengthier than *The Ego* itself. In short, the full effects of *The Ego*upon the philosophy of the young Marx "have yet to be fully assessed".[43]

It is relatively easy to grasp the basic contemporary relevance, significance and durability of *The Ego* in the history of philosophy. Yet we still need to perceive more about Stirner's complex, often incongruous, relationship with Karl Marx – a figure who seems destined to remain signif-

[40] Stepelevich (1974) : 325.
[41] Laska, Bernd A. LSR Publishing House, Nuremberg.
[42] Newman (2001) : 9.
[43] Stepelevich (1974) : 328.

icant, despite the recent interest in Nietzschean thought. What Derrida says of Marx is equally applicable to Stirner: “a ghost never dies” nor can there be any “future” without “the memory and inheritance … of at least one of his spirits”.[44]

[44] Derrida (1994) : 99.

Chapter I: Context and purpose in *The Ego and Its Own.*

Figure III: Stirner's birthplace, from John Henry Mackay's book *Max Stirner: Sein Leben und Sein Werk*.

Born in 1806, Johann Caspar Schmidt was the son of Albert and Sophia Schmidt who lived in a comfortable house overlooking the Marktplatz in Bayreuth. The Schmidts were a lower-middle-class family of evangelical Lutheran denomination. In 1826 Stirner matriculated in the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Berlin and spent two years studying a range of subjects including logic, Greek literature and geography. Whilst at Berlin, unlike Marx, Strauss or Engels, Stirner attended Hegel's lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, the History of Philosophy, and in the winter of 1827 his lectures on the Philosophy of the Subjective Spirit. In 1832 Stirner returned to Berlin, where he would spend the rest of his life. Continuing his philosophical studies, he attended a two-semester course on Aristotle conducted by the Hegelian philosopher Karl L. Michelet. Stirner's formal acquaintance with Hegelian philosophy, as well as Hegelian philosophers themselves, far surpassed that obtained by other Left Hegelians. However, Stirner fell short of academic success in his formal examinations in the upper forms of the gymnasium and was awarded a conditional *facultas docendi*, never realising his ambition to become a *Gymnasiallehrer*.

In 1839, Stirner obtained regular employment at a Berlin girls' school. He taught both history and literature with great success, and for next five years enjoyed a relatively stable and ordered life, with a modest income and ample freedom to pursue his philosophical reflections. Ostensibly, this quiet middle-class school teacher hardly seems a likely candidate to produce what has been called the "most revolutionary [book] ever written".[1] However, 1840's Berlin was a melting pot of political disaffection and intellectual unrest, whilst the revolution was not being fought for in blood, the clubs and cafes of Berlin formed political hubs in which groups of young radicals could meet and make preparations. Stirner began attending meetings of *Die Freien* in 1841; his formal education was undoubtedly supplemented by meetings with Hegelians at various clubs and *Weinstuben*. During long boisterous evenings at their favourite haunt (Hippel's), Stirner would have had the chance to review the metaphysical exuberance of Berlin's disaffected and rootless intelligentsia and literati. In the midst of such radical clamour, Stirner met Bruno Bauer, the only member of *Die Freien* in the Left Hegelian circle with whom he maintained a close relationship until his death. It was through socialising with *Die Freien* that Stirner also met his second wife (his first wife had died giving birth to a still-born child), Marie Dahnhart. Marie was an uninhibited cigar smoking, beer-drinking 25 year old who was about to enjoy an inheritance of 30,000 thalers. In 1843, Stirner astutely married her.

The years between 1815 and 1848 have been seen as an "era of polarisation",[2] a conflict between modernity and tradition. However, the post-1815 era of German restoration was not threatened by philosophical trends; neither the moral creeds and entrenched dogmas of rigid conservatives, nor the passionate individualism of the Romantics sought to challenge the feudal complacency that still survived in some German states. The loathed German Confederation soon showed its true colours, with censorship and surveillance laws embodied in the Karslbad Decrees of 1819 and the "Final Act" of 1820. Both ushered in an era of oppression and illiberality for the German states, one that would be strongly attacked by many contemporary thinkers.

During the 1830s the movement known as *Junges Deutschland* (Young Germany), produced poets, thinkers and journalists, all of whom reacted against the introspection and particularism of Romanticism. The Romantic Movement was seen as apolitical lacking the activism that Germany's burgeoning intelligentsia required. Decades of compulsory school attendance in German

[1] Huneker (1909) : 350.
[2] Clark (1997) : 38.

states had resulted in mass literacy and an excess of educated males which the establishment could not subsume. Combined with the advantage of the low cost printing press these factors caused a rush into the so-called "free professions".

The German states, specifically the Prussian government, had a basic distrust of speculative thought. On occasion the state would sometimes sponsor philosophical teachings that offered an intellectual foundation for the authoritarian organisation of society.[3] Hegelianism was adopted as the academic standard for appointments in 1820s and 30s. To begin with, Hegelianism was regarded as "the staunchest ideological bulwark of Prussian aristocracy", yet by the 1840s devotion to Hegelian thought had led to a period of readjustment, and the late 1830s and early 1840s resembled more a post-mortem of Hegelianism in which thinkers extended or recast Hegelian phenomenology.[4] One outcome of this method of criticism was the radical Left Hegelianism of the early 1840s, which Stirner found himself heir to. The "Young Hegelians" (hereafter referred to as "Left") sought to decisively challenge both Church and State, finding resonance with the "Young Germany" of the 1830s; no longer allies of the establishment, they were rejected as intellectual outcasts. The official Hegelianism that was extolled in lecture theatres in Stirner's undergraduate days had become the "philosophy of disaffection".[5]

Stirner occupied a unique position among the Left Hegelians, sharing an essentially similar methodology to his closest contemporaries. By using classical Hegelian concepts and modes of argument, the Left Hegelians quickly reached conclusions that in effect nullified the whole upshot of Hegel's original system. Hegel's universal synthesis of Being had begun to produce discordant results. By reviving the republican idealism of the eighteenth century, Left Hegelians believed education and political liberties would solve all social problems without changing the system of property on which material production and economic exchanges were based. Stirner's early work reflected these broad aims.

The False Principle of Our Education is considered the "most valuable and significant of Stirner's shorter works".[6] Stirner, for the first time, can be seen in pursuit of the goal of individual self-awareness and an insistence on the primacy of the individual personality. He rejected both humanism and realism as authorities external to the individual that limited his freedom. In formal education, Stirner saw that "the world of antiquity through classics and the Bible rule over us as a *mistress*".[7] He went on to stress the importance of personality and the "free-moving ego" in education, insisting bluntly that education is the most important "social question" in the world. Stirner's surprisingly modern insistence on the primacy of education and knowledge was tied to man's self-discovery: through "Truth" man discovers himself and experiences "the liberation from all that is alien, the uttermost abstraction or release from all authority, the re-won naturalness".[8] However, the Left Hegelians sought in vain to "educate" their fellow countrymen and the 1840s brought disenchantment and schism; political rulers and academics strove uselessly to restore a cultural unity and a national idealism to Germany.

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[3] Patterson (1971): 22.

[4] Patterson (1971): 33.

[5] Patterson (1971): 33.

[6] Mackay (1914) : 235.

[7] Stirner, *The False Principle of Our Education Or Humanism And Realism*first published in the supplements to four numbers of the *Rheinische Zeitung*between the 10th and l9th of April, 1842 edited by James J. Martin (Colorado Springs 1967).

[8] Stirner, *The False Principle of Our Education* from http://www.nonserviam.com/egoistarchive/stirner/articles/false.html

The disintegration of the Left Hegelian movement was born out of the inability to make its philosophy the focus of any political movement, especially one involving the country's social forces. Mass poverty, economic dislocation and social unrest had been rife in Germany, from the student protests of the 1830s to the "hungry 1840s". In some areas socialists and communists had taken advantage of this. Yet unlike Marx's experiences in Britain, industrialization had only made very modest advances in German states by 1848. German society was overwhelmingly rural even during the 1840s; 70% of the population still worked on the land. Within a short space of time the Left Hegelians became static and ineffective, wrecked by their own internal theoretical disputes and confined to Berlin's bourgeois, pre-industrial world.

Before its disintegration, the Left Hegelian movement underwent a series of "transformations". The "emanation of divergent positions", is crucial in regard to Stirner, who inherited and then reacted against the semiotic system or "distinctive" language that Hegelian thinkers created and altered.[9] The period between 1835 and 1843 can be seen as a period in which thinkers attempted to translate the original metaphysical Hegelian language of Absolute Spirit into the language of Hegelian humanism. During this period the concept Absolute Spirit was replaced by "the idea of humanity", "human species-being" or "human self-consciousness".[10] This secularisation or humanisation of Hegelian thought was the basis for the radical Left Hegelian movement. Strauss began this trend with his *Life of Jesus* (1835) where he asserted that religious representation was the objectification of human essence, thus religious consciousness contributed to alienation and kept human beings from their own essential nature. By the time Strauss had cemented his new humanist outlook in 1840–41, Bruno Bauer had developed his own variant of the transformative humanist interpretation of the Hegelian language of Absolute Spirit. For Bauer, Strauss had not gone far enough; the "idea of humanity" itself remained enigmatic unless it actualised itself in human history through its internalisation in the "free activity of human self-consciousness".[11] In book and articles published in 1840–42, Bauer denounced terms such as "God", "Absolute Spirit" and "world-spirit" as deceptions implying a supranatural transcendent power realising itself in human self-consciousness. Bauer's critical theory of human self-consciousness therefore sought to liberate "the I" which "lives, creates, works and is everything" and "is the only power in the world and history, and history has no other meaning than the becoming and development of self-consciousness".[12]

A third version of the humanist translation of Hegelianism was constructed by Ludwig Feuerbach around 1840. Hegel's "Absolute Spirit" was a transcendent mystification, a self-alienation of a human process and limitation on human thought. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1840–41) Feuerbach claimed religious consciousness and language meant "a projection of humanity's essential nature as an emotional and sensuous being, governed and made happy only by images".[13] Whilst the rightful content of Hegelian metaphysics was thus affirmed by Bauer as human self-consciousness, for Feuerbach such essential human content was more a sensuous and emotional "essence". By 1841, these thinkers were publicly attributed with developing a distinctive theo-

[9] Toews (1993) : 378.

[10] Toews (1993) : 391.

[11] Toews (1993) : 393.

[12] Bauer, B. *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts über Hegel den Atheisten und Antichristen: Ein Ultimatum* (Leipzig, 1841) : 77, 70.

[13] Feuerbach, (1957) : 75.

retical perspective, and Bauer and Feuerbach accepted their roles as the intellectual mentors of radical "Left" Hegelians.

Historical reality ultimately undermined Hegelian humanism when its theoretical practice failed to gain wide appeal. Left Hegelianism was in terminal decline when *The Ego* was published in 1844. Academic positions were denied to the Left Hegelians in the city that they deemed philosophically and politically the capital of Germany. The constant pressure of governmental censorship and academic rejection meant that even Arnold Ruge's attempts to rally a political party around the banner of Left Hegelianism soon failed. In 1843, the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* was prohibited from publication, even in "liberal" Saxony. It was equally a defeat by politics as it was by abstract thought itself. Soon most members of the movement became disillusioned with the idea of a political public as the agent of liberation. The declarations of Feuerbach, Bauer, Hess and Ruge in 1841 had set the Left Hegelians against all prevailing orthodoxy be it religious, philosophical, economic or political; yet all had failed at insurrection of existing institutions or a political association based its ideas.

Such failure was reflected in the thought produced during the period 1843–46, which saw the publication of *The Ego*. It was a divisive process of mutual criticism, where Stirner and others criticised the "theological" illusions of a movement caught in a language of essence. Stirner inherited the problem that "reality" must be comprehended and described as contingent, concrete, finite "existence" with reason and meaning emerging from actions of individual beings. The "analytic of existence" was self-consciously presented not merely as a translation, but as a step beyond Hegelian thought in some respects, seeking to transcend it.[14] The humanism that had for a short time enjoyed the attention of the movement's most able thinkers was scoffed at by Stirner: "In our days, … they have not realised that man has killed God in order to become – "sole God on high" … God has had to give place, not to us, but to – humanity".[15] Stirner specifically condemned Feuerbach and Bauer for creating this new god, "Humanity" to replace the Christian god. For Stirner this was simply a "change of masters".[16]

Hegelian humanism encountered strong criticism from former disciples and comrades, most significantly in the publication of Stirner's *The Ego* and Marx's *The German Ideology*. Both thinkers proposed a more radical break with past Left Hegelian positions, and the language that had justified it. Despite accusations of nihilism, Stirner's "heaven-storming" dismissal of the objectivity, universality, value, truth and meaning still presented a description of individual-centred existence, with the ego as sovereign as a positive appropriation of the true content of his cultural and philosophical inheritance. It is a mistake therefore to see Stirner as an anomaly in the history of philosophy or even as "discordant" in some way.[17] *The Ego* did not exist in an intellectual vacuum, and the context of Left-Hegelianism reveals how Stirner's thought was a legitimate product of this movement's wider discourse, a serious attempt to understand the transition from religion to philosophy. Stirner (as all Left Hegelians did) saw himself as dialectically concluding and fulfilling the Hegelian project. Similarly Marx saw that within Hegelian thought were the means, and even the imperative, to go beyond Hegel. He understood

[14] Toews (1993) : 400.
[15] Stirner (1995) : 140.
[16] Stirner (1995) : 204.
[17] Patterson (1971) : 20.

exactly what Stirner was attempting, "a step which leads beyond Hegelian idealism and negates it";[18] he also knew how potentially damaging this could be to the direction of his own work.

Rather than view *The Ego* as some wild or "severely mutilated"[19] transformation of Hegel's characteristic concepts, its construction should be seen as a result of that philosophical paradigm which all Left Hegelians practiced and embraced: dialectical development. There is even room to regard Stirner as a concordant Hegelian *par excellence*. His intimacy with Hegel has been explored by Stepelevich, who argues that Stirner reinterprets Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* with new and improved vision.[20] For Hegel, the "Absolute" is "the power of the negative";, i.e. that which views and criticises every determinate thought – the Subject. For Stirner, in his critique, this "power of the negative" is the single consciousness – himself, or the ego. Karl Löwith similarly detected a logical connection stating that *The Ego* "is in reality an ultimate logical consequence of Hegel's historical system".[21] Whilst these interpretations elevate Stirner from the often eccentric billing he is given in intellectual history, describing Stirner as the "Last of the Hegelians" implies that *The Ego* is the "end of a historical series of ever more decadent inheritors of Hegel's doctrines".[22] We should recognise that whilst he attacked Hegelianism, Stirner's thought was still a product of it, bound within its parameters, be they linguistic or logical. Therefore the choice lies between seeing a "*terminal* or*antithetical*" relationship, one which could make Stirner, in a sense, "the *perfected* Hegelian".[23]

[18] Lobkowicz (1969) : 85.
[19] Patterson (1971) : 20.
[20] Stepelevich (1985) : 601.
[21] Löwith (1967) : 102.
[22] McLellan (1969) : 119 cited by Stepelevich (1985).
[23] Toews (1985) : 604.

Chapter II: The crisis of 1845: *The Ego* and the origins of historical materialism.

The dissolution of Left Hegelianism coincided with the early thinking of Marx who grew up among the ruins of their philosophy. Together with Stirner, Marx accepted the philosophical categories and problems of Hegelian thought. Placing Stirner among the many strands and mutations of Hegelian thought highlights his intellectual proximity to the thought of the young Marx. Whilst preparing to demolish German Idealism, Marx entered the metaphysical fray at the same moment as Stirner, and wrestled with the same ontological questions. The publication of *The Ego* shook the pro-Feuerbachian position Marx found himself in 1844 and perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, Marx was to experience the depth and implications of Stirner's criticism. Marx had originally planned to write a review of *The Ego*; however he stalled whilst Bauer and Feuerbach fielded their responses. Then, feeling clearly personally provoked, Marx postponed previously commissioned works to pen "Sankt Max". After completing the work, Marx wavered and the criticism of Stirner remained unprinted. Within this privately led dispute, *The German Ideology* contained the seeds of a new philosophy, created to be immune to a Stirnerian criticism: historical materialism. The birth of this radical new theory was muted. These ideas were left in a drawer along with "Sankt Max", whilst Marx, wishing to escape the idealist philosophy of the Left Hegelians, charged into political life, into intellectual feuds with Proundhon and Bakunin.

Between 1844 and 1846 Marx and Engels were busy forging their new revolutionary outlook. *The German Ideology* was composed in Brussels, where Marx had moved in 1845 following his deportation from Paris by the Guizot government who had been pressured by Prussia to expel the leading collaborators of *Vorwärts*. During the last three months of 1845, Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology*. In early 1846, both men visited London in order to found a network of communist correspondence committees to provide German, French and English socialists with access to each other's ideas and activities. The backdrop to Marx's life was one of financial struggle, censorship and political activity and exile. However, the pair had integrated their theoretical and practical aims, revolutionary communist teaching and rallying the progressive elements of the proletariat and revolutionary intelligentsia.

In theoretical terms, this revolutionary outlook was partially created through the intellectual struggle with what Marx saw as bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideology of the Left Hegelians, of which Max Stirner was seen as the perfect embodiment. *The German Ideology* directed criticism against the many apparent failings of Left Hegelianism, many which echo Stirner's own critique of the movement. For Marx, however, the authority of delusions or Stirner's "spooks" over human minds was not a result of mental distortion cured by working upon the consciousness, but rather rooted in social conditions. For both Stirner and Marx, Left Hegelian humanism was governed by false ideas where men are enslaved to the creations of their minds. For Marx, the power of philosophy was to expose and destroy these false ideas and revolutionise society. In the Preface

of *The German Ideology* Marx outlined his objections to the Left Hegelians, and saw clearly his task in:

> "uncloaking these sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves; of showing that their bleating merely imitates in a philosophic form the conceptions of the German middle class; that the boasting of these philosophic commentators only mirrors the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany."[1]

Throughout *The German Ideology* Marx clearly enjoys making fun of the philosophical pretensions of the Left Hegelians, yet he also levels the serious claim that the movement's achievements only embodied a corruption of Hegel, i.e. "the putrescence of the absolute spirit".[2]

Why then compose such a lengthy rebuttal of German post-Hegelian philosophy if all it amounted to was "shadows of reality"?[3] The answer is simple: Stirner. Marxists tend to regard *The German Ideology* as nothing more than a secondary attack against Left Hegelians, even an enlarged version of *The Holy Family*. However, *The Ego* had unsettled Marx; regardless of whether a public debate was to be had, he felt inclined to convince himself at least that Stirner was wrong. Marx realised that Stirner's position was perfectly concordant with general development of post-Hegelian dialectics in German philosophy and thus an alternative to his profanization of the Hegel. In reading *The Ego*, Marx came to reject Feuerbachian humanism, of which he had previously thought highly, praising Feuerbach's "brilliant arguments" in the *Essence of Christianity* and defending his "real humanism" in *The Holy Family*. Now revealed as a "pious atheist" by Stirner, Marx could not avoid denunciating Feuerbach, but equally had to avoid an association with the powerful Stirnerian position that had originally prompted the rejection.[4] *The German Ideology* was less an attack, but more as an angry defence against the theologically inspired and passivist humanism of Feuerbach and the extreme voluntarism and subjectivist individualism of Stirner.[5]

Marx's familiarity with the aims of Left Hegelianism meant he agreed that the more progressive an idea was, the more it desecrated the quasi-religious status Hegel's legacy. In *The German Ideology* Marx attempted to be more radical than both Bauer and Feuerbach in profaning the regions of Hegel's thought which had been "transfigured". However whilst Marx believed that, like Stirner, he could fight against illusions and opiates, against religion, political ideals and eventually against Hegelian philosophy itself, he still retained the hidden "eschatological attitude" and "implicit revolutionary drive" underlying Hegelianism in mid-1840s.[6] Unlike Marx, Stirner didn't retain Hegel's eschatology and regarded it as simply another "phantom" to be exorcised from the mind, one perhaps essential if Hegelian thought was to be overcome. Marx adhered to Hegel in so far as he chose not to abandon some form of philosophical reconciliation, though not of the speculative sort. For reconciliation to be attained in the *material*transformation of the real world, Marx would have to elaborate and expound one of his most controversial and debated theories: historical materialism.

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[1] Marx (1976) : 23.
[2] Marx (1976) : 27.
[3] Marx (1976) : 24.
[4] Stirner (1995) : 166
[5] Lobkowicz (1967) : 394.
[6] Lobkowicz (1967) : 395.

Rather disingenuously the old Marx considered the birth of historical materialism as simply theoretical analysis eschewing from purely theoretical research.[7] Unfortunately there was no comprehensive or detached study of "socioeconomic realities" that came to support Marx's theory in 1845; instead he was motivated by his desire to defend the "passion and idealism" emanating from the dissolution of Hegel's philosophy against Stirner's noxious philosophy of "total disillusionment".[8] Stirner, as a minority of commentators have observed, played a decisive role in motivating Marx's socialist thought in this direction. The subjective origins of the "materialistic conception of history" reflected Marx's attempt to show that "the putrescence of the absolute spirit" must not go as far as it does in *The Ego*, yet it was perfectly acceptable to be a Hegelian of "revolutionary" inspiration. It seems paradoxical to think that historical materialism, Marx's great epistemological "break", could have emerged from the context described above. Stirner's impact has been displaced. Regardless of the self-assured position Marx felt he had reached in *The German Ideology* with regard to the specific criticisms of Left Hegelians, the real gem of the work was clearly the materialist conception of history. For Marx, it provided an ingenious escape route from the all-too parochial problems of Left Hegelianism and German Idealist Philosophy, whilst it also served as a methodological prerequisite for a new political economy. In a letter to German publishers in Leske on August 1 1846, Marx pointed out that the publication of a polemical work against the German philosophers was necessary in order to "prepare readers for his point of view in this field of economic science". *The German Ideology* should therefore be seen chiefly as a polemical work; one that Marx felt sure would lift him up and away from the ontological squabbling of the Left Hegelians towards economics, historical analysis and socialism.

For Marx, speculative philosophy had resulted in idealist self-deception epitomised in the work of the Left Hegelians. Marx frequently attacked the sterile and static nature of his milieu, stating "German critique has, right up to its latest efforts, never left the realm of philosophy".[9] The movement's ignorance of both of the need to specify an agent for revolutionary change and of the nature of social and historical explanation had meant their philosophy failed. Despite the decline of Left Hegelian humanism, Marx's complaint was essentially methodological.[10] The Left Hegelians, like Descartes, thought that the illusions of social life could be left behind if one takes the standpoint of "self-consciousness", "species" or the "ego". For Marx, this was a truly insulated standpoint. However, Stirner too had attacked the Archimedean standpoint or standpoint "outside the world" in 1844: "This foreign standpoint is the *world of mind*, of ideas, thoughts, concepts, essences; it is *heaven*".[11] In concordance with Marx, Stirner attacked the Left Hegelians with similar gusto, identifying the same weaknesses:

> "Now nothing but *mind* rules in the world. An innumerable multitude of concepts buzz about in people's heads, and what are those doing who endeavour to get further? They are negating these concepts to put new ones in their place! … Thus the confusion of concepts moves forward."[12]

[7] Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy", *MECW*, 8 : 362.
[8] Lobkowicz (1967) : 397.
[9] Marx (1976) : 28.
[10] Brudney (1998) : 272.
[11] Stirner (1995) : 64–5
[12] Stirner (1995) : 88

In recognising the force of Stirner's criticism and the implications for Left Hegelian modes of thought, Marx had to be just as "hard-line" on idealism as Stirner had been. He had to adopt a position in which all ideas were divested of their independence and autonomy. For a moment at least, Marx was allied with Stirner's heaven-storming nihilism, but only in order to escape it:

> "Morality, religion, metaphysics … have no history, no development; but human beings, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this, their reality; also their thinking and the products of their thinking."[13]

Marx's response, that the "material world" takes primacy over the ideal, consciousness or thought itself, was not merely a major development in terms of his thinking, but was the "thermonuclear" antidote to Stirnerian egoism he desperately needed.[14]

Hegel had maintained that the ideal determined the material; Marx's supposed modernism was finding the Hegelian dialectic "standing on its head" and turning it "right side up again".[15] Quite what Marx means is not readily apparent. He inverted the primacy of the ideal found in German Idealist, Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy by replacing it with an older form of materialism. The materialist conception of consciousness can be summed up Marx's famous axiom "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (1846). Marx's paradigmatic shift invoked eighteenth-century materialism, which took matter as primary and regarded consciousness, thought and sensation as secondary. The French materialists of the eighteenth century provided Marx with the simple mechanical categories that constituted the terms in which the origin and history of man were to be explained. The "newness" of Marxian materialism, the idea of conceiving of matter dialectically, highlights Marx's innate debt to Hegelian thought. Yet historical materialism was also a backwards step. Marx wanted to reassert the fundamental principle of eighteenth-century historical naturalism; that historical events have natural causes. Hegel had broken away from naturalism but had not demanded an autonomous history, "Marx went back on this demand and swept Hegel away; he subjected history to dominion by natural science which Hegel had freed it from".[16] Thus Marx took a "*retrograde* step", which was simultaneously also prelude to an advance in terms of political economy.[17] Despite cryptic statements such as "standing Hegel on his feet instead of his head", Marx's "conjuring trick" essentially took over the idea, inherited from both Kant and Hegel, in which history culminated in the complete unity of man, the identification of existence with essence and the abolition of contingency in human life. For Marx, humanity was not doomed to contingency, as Stirner maintained.[18]

As his response to Stirner suggests, Marx's theory had no real scientific basis, and its genesis appears in a somewhat dubious light. Whilst it allowed Marx to condemn the present world order in terms of the immanent laws of history itself, as a solution it was both "ingenious and disingenuous".[19] Stirner's nihilism meant Marx had to defend the basic claim to seek meaning in an ideal, rather than giving up the whole conception of a salvation of man. Marx was of course keen to emphasise that he was not really pursuing an ideal at all; his presuppositions were "not

[13] Marx (1976) : 36–37.
[14] Stedman-Jones (2002) : 144.
[15] Marx (1972–73) 1 : 19, 20.
[16] Collingwood (1956) : 125.
[17] Collingwood (1956) : 125.
[18] Kolakowski (1978) 2 : 403.
[19] Stedman-Jones (2002): 145.

arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real presuppositions from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination".[20] Marx saw them as empirical facts. Stirner, on the other hand claimed "I presuppose only myself – and since it is I who presuppose myself, I have no presuppositions".[21] Marx painstakingly insists Stirner himself does have ideals and even his own morality. Yet, the materialistic reduction of ideals to historical necessities very closely resembles a Stirnerian abandoning of ideals; nihilism was inherent in both positions. How can Marx's thought retain its revolutionary aspect if economic patterns and laws thoroughly determine man's historical existence? Yet far from relinquishing his revolutionary ideals, Marx believed he had succeeded in preserving by integrating them into real history. This was the core of both Marx's defence against Stirner and the essence of the materialistic conception of history: the ideals pursued by the Left Hegelians were declared to be the "immanent telos of history itself".[22] The Left Hegelian revolutionary force became an immanent law of objective history. In other words, Marx turned an *ought* into an *is*.

It has not been properly acknowledged just how much *The Ego* is responsible for pushing Marx into this epistemological corner. By attempting to incorporate ideals into actual history, Marx went as far as it is possible to rationalise the Left Hegelian revolutionary drive without abandoning the "basic Left Hegelian insight".[23] Marx had reached an impossible dilemma, one which has haunted his more intelligent disciples until today. As such, Marx could no longer encourage action as he now predicted change; history did not depend upon man's conscious intentions; it depended on what humans *do*. This seems incompatible with Marx's dismissal of ideals and represents the basic ambiguity of his thought, a blind spot which he left for Marxists to excuse or explain. The contradictory nature of Marx's position reflected how "almost against his will" Marx was forced into dismissal by Stirner.[24] On the one hand we have Marx the determinist, who will later refer to laws and tendencies that work "with iron necessity towards inevitable results",[25] on the other we have Marx the voluntarist, keen to incite the proletariat to rebellion. However, the materialist conception of history was, in itself, a change of consciousness, merely a new theory of reality and thus "recognition of the existing order by means of another interpretation".[26] The real difference between Marx and the Left Hegelians was that instead of pretending to save the world by changing their ideas, Marx arrived at an idea that couldn't be changed, a theory in which humanity *saves itself*, regardless of philosophical speculations.

Historical materialism was the result of an attempt to preserve the Left Hegelian humanist heritage in spite of Stirner's challenge. Stirner's exposure of quasi-religious basis of Man undermined the idiom developed by Marx in his pre-1845 writings. To escape the neo-Christian ethics of humanism it was not enough to simply discard the legitimacy of the humanist or socialist goal. In a totalitarian fashion, Marx divested all ideas of any "autonomous" role whatsoever. Many commentators have argued that the doctrine of historical materialism provided Marx with his most powerful weapon against idealist philosophy. It did not – despite how much Marx may have convinced himself – deal sufficiently with Stirnerian thought. Like Marx, Stirner's project

[20] Marx (1976): 31.

[21] Cf. Stirner's anonymously published article, "Recensenten Stirners" in *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* 3 (1845) 183. Cf. *MECW* vol 3. cf. 248.

[22] Lobkowicz (1978) : 412.

[23] Lobkowicz (1978) : 415.

[24] Lobkowicz (1967) : 413.

[25] Marx (1972–73) 2 : 863.

[26] Lobkowicz (1967) : 413.

was destructive. *The Ego* sought to simply abolish philosophy *in general* by affirming that it was all nonsense, summed in Stirner's famous aphorisms "I have set my cause upon nothing" and "Nothing is more to me than myself".[27] Stirner's modernity resides in this progressive leap beyond Marx, beyond a revolutionary mentality which required "moral postulates" or an *ought*. For Stirner, uniqueness and creativity begin only when a person goes beyond social identity and roles. He had shocked Marx into revising the ethical and humanistic assumptions of a socialist agenda. At the same time Stirner indirectly contributed to the creation and evolution of the distinctive and classical "Marxist" doctrines.

In short, *The Ego* moved Marx from a passionately moral, even sentimental, commitment to communism as a humanitarian creed, to a sociological affirmation of communism as the historical outcome of objective economic forces. During the mid-1840s Marx and Engels saw themselves at a decisive stage in working out the philosophical principles of scientific communism or "the scientific world outlook of the revolutionary proletariat".[28] Marx must have been painfully aware, therefore, of the need to qualify his own *action* in theory. This crisis for Marx reached its height in 1845, when *The German Ideology*indicated Marx's final abandonment of the speculative abstractions of Feuerbach and others; the very abstractions which had served as the metaphysical foundations of his socialism. The unresolved nature of Marx's uncomfortable encounter with Stirner is also evident in the development of the materialist conception of history. Historical materialism's more inconvenient implications and thus the spectre of *The Ego* haunted Marx; burdening him with the "self-defeating task of reconciling a "voluntarist movement" in an "economically determined historical process".[29]

By revealing "the hollowness of slogans which appealed to humanity, country, or abstract freedom…" Stirner had "prepared the way for a realistic analysis of the issues these phrases were used to conceal".[30] Despite Stirner's nascent influence on the thought of the young Marx, Marx came to dominate the historical era, his solution to the crises of Hegelian ontology emerged as legitimate, whilst the history and intentionality of Stirner's thought were "excluded" in a Foucauldian sense. However, as I have demonstrated by studying of the genesis of historical materialism, the impact of *The Ego* on the evolution of socialist thought was far from negligible.

[27] Stirner (1995) : 5, 7.

[28] Preface to *The German Ideology*, Lev Churbanov, *Institute of Marxism-Leninism* in Marx, K, *The German Ideology*, *MECW* 5 : xiii.

[29] Stedman-Jones (2002) : 146.

[30] Hook (1962): ch.5, sec. II, I (a).

Chapter III: Stirner contra Marx: morality, society and liberty.

In many respects, Stirner's work stands as an anticipatory attack on Marx's thought. Modern critics of Marxism have frequently pointed out inadequacies in the Marxist conception of history, especially concerning what the theory had rendered obsolete in traditional philosophy. *The Ego* essentially anticipated these inadequacies. 1845 is judged to be the moment in Marx's philosophical career where he "left behind" a fundamental discourse on ethics; one that Hook argues "still occupies us today".[1] Marx's new theory of historical materialism cut short a discussion about any systems of ethics or public morality. Many have recognised this negation in Marx's work. For Marx, the crucial issue was the validity of his theory of history; he felt notions of morality and of religion had finally been eliminated from his work. However, the old assumption that "scientific socialism" was a scientific system has yielded to the notion that such a system of thought is in essence moralistic or even religious; what Martin Buber calls a "socialist secularisation of eschatology".[2] If we accept this radical new perspective, as many do, then Stirner's stance in *The Ego* emerges as more modern and radical than was previously considered. Stirner would no doubt have agreed that the materialist conception of history was eschatological; a religious mode of thought. Therefore, Stirner's early, if somewhat undeveloped attack on morality, often disguised as ideology, assumes a vital position as the original critique of the young Marx.

In spite of the anti-moral nature of historical materialism and Marx's explicit repudiations of morality, his early thought was packed with moral judgements, (e.g. condemnations, directions etc). Whether or not we see Marx as moralist is beside the point. Marx did not practice moral philosophy in the traditional sense of developing any form of system of ethics, or enquiry. Whilst criticising *The Ego,* Marx was inspired to claim:

> "The communists … preach no *morality*, which Stirner does too much … on the contrary, they know well that egoism as well as self-sacrifice is, in certain circumstances, a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals."[3]

The question of Marx's status as a clandestine moralist who openly opposed moral philosophy remains a key contradiction, especially in his early thought. It represents a temporal rip in the fabric of Marxian thought that still plagues its acolytes today. Its origins, found in young Marx's reading of *The Ego*, may further unsettle his adherents. If Marx needed inspiration, or even encouragement to abandon his more explicit moral leanings, then he needed to look no further than Stirner's polemic. Stirner had refuted Left Hegelian humanism, especially targeting its innate moral content. He also attacked most forms of moral convention, challenging the absolute basis of moral edicts against polygamy, blasphemous desecration and even incest. Such acts

[1] Hook (1962) : 165.
[2] Buber (1949) : 10.
[3] Marx (1976) : 247.

were still able to cause a "moral shudder"[4] in the common man, an indication for Stirner that the actual emancipation of the ego, what others might call spiritual emancipation, had yet to be realised.

For Stirner, self-possession was to be sought by the judicious organisation of desire, rather than its arbitrary suppression. Taking his cue from Charles Fourier, Stirner lauded animal appetites as more healthy and poetic than a life of abstinence. Just as Feuerbachian humanism was seen as the negation of traditional theology, Stirnerian egoism was hailed the "negation of traditional ethics".[5] Instead of Man creating God in his own image, Stirner taught that the *individual ego* had created Man in his own image. In *The Essence of Christianity*(1841) Feuerbach believed he was being truly radical by having dissolved the subject (God) into all of its predicates (Man); Stirner had simply demonstrated how far such dialectical sabotage could logically go, he chose to dissolve the predicate Society, into the *individual* pronouns – I, me, myself. The individual ego was Stirner's "laughing heir" to the whole Hegelian project.[6] Stirnerian egoism was not conceived of as a new form of morality, rather it was opposed to morality. This is not to say egoism was inherently immoral; Stirner rejected the idea of absolute opposition between moral categories, "good" and "evil", regarding them as "antediluvian".[7]

Stirner's claims of ethical antinomianism were deeply felt and taken seriously by Marx. *The Ego* encouraged him to dispel any ethical ideas from the new direction of his thought. Marx already regarded the Hegelian accounts of political, judicial and moral conceptions as critically wrong, but *The Ego* tipped the balance. If Marx's moral or metaphysical scepticism stems from Stirner, then the potency of his criticism of the nihilism inherent in *The Ego* needs to be reassessed. Marx used Stirner's desecration of morality to justify his own thought, then proceeded to decry Stirnerian egoism as religious thought, as even "preaching" a morality. Classifying all idealistic philosophies as theodicies, a "surreptitious sort of clericalism"[8] that must be repudiated, was a result of the dogmatic materialist positions that Marx and Engels came to adopt. All idealists were by default religious thinkers, yet the materialistic basis of their thought did little to elucidate their position on moral teaching. The mystification surrounding Marx's conception of morality finds its basis in his distortion of Stirner's moral nihilism. Rather than offering an alternative moral theory for communism Marx had disregarded *all* morality in the pursuit of revolution and class struggle.

In truth, evacuating the moral content of his thought was something Marx only aspired to. Ultimately, Stirner had pushed Marx to a philosophical position where the moral content of his work now had to be implicit. Sidney Hook states "Marx leaned so far backward that, soon after his death, the myth became current that he had no place for any ethics in his philosophy of social activity".[9] Marx's reaction was a tactical manoeuvre, allowing him to preserve the silent moral content of his work. Karl Popper saw Marx as a man for whom "principles of humanity and decency … needed no discussion" they were "to be taken for granted".[10] However, if Marx decided to adopt a personal notion of moral principles, why respond to Stirnerian egoism which was so

[4] Stirner (1995) : 45.
[5] Hook (1962) : 171–172.
[6] Stirner (1995) : 286.
[7] Stirner (1995) : 317.
[8] Hook (1928) : 121.
[9] Hook (1962) : 51
[10] Popper (2002) : 187–8

obviously an aberration? It is difficult to believe that Marx simply avoided explicit moral theory because he disliked "preaching", as Popper assumes. Marx's real antipathy for moral philosophy was rooted in his actual thought. The very thought consolidated in *The German Ideology* as a result of reading *The Ego*.

Regardless of the problems Marx left unresolved, the crisis of 1845 had helped him finally realise the aim of his thought: to prove future world revolution. However, yet again another Marxian impossibility emerged; the problem of reconciling historical inevitability with an ethical model. Historical inevitability could hardly function as an inherent moral value for Marx.[11] The determinism of the materialist conception of history had necessitated an angry confrontation with Stirner. It also illuminated a displeasing characteristic of the young Marx, his inability to recognize any opposition to *his* revolution. Further, it showed that Marx underestimated the role of discontent in historical events, which Stirner and Hegel did not; they had allowed contingency an important role in the historical process. Crucially, unlike Marx, Stirner argued that the historical process had to be the work of human hands; history was never an abstraction that caused events. It was concrete, specific and human in all its forms. He also recognised that certain thinkers had hijacked history, and divested it of its autonomy:

> "History seeks for *man*: but he is I, you, we. Sought as a mysterious *essence*, as the divine, first as *God*, then as *man* (humanity, humaneness, and mankind), he is found as the individual, the finite, the unique one."[12]

Stirner saw that all kinds of politics wanted to educate man, to bring him to the realisation of his "essence", to give man a "destiny" to *make* something out of him – namely, a "true man".[13] This itself was a ruse, making thinkers fall for "the proper error of religion".[14] Whether one saw destiny as divine or human was of no concern. Stirner found that both positions held that man should become this and that: this postulate, this commandment, to be *something*.

Incongruously, in his reading of *The Ego* Marx felt he could finally reject a system of morality and yet maintain moral positions. He was extremely anxious about the fact that his description of socialism could become tainted by abstract moral ideals, ideals which Stirner had shown to be transcendent. However, it was Stirner who had equipped Marx with the very tools to wage a methodological campaign against Feuerbach's quasi-religious conception of "Man", enabling him to reject an "ethics of love" or a "politics of socialism" through his analysis of the social nature of man. Such a solution would have been implausible to Stirner. To many, the religious essence of historical materialism was "superficially obscured by Marx's rejection of the traditional religions".[15] However, Stirner had already identified such religious essence in Marx's pre-1845 intellectual allies. His criticisms of Feuerbach were equally applicable to the young Marx who had stated: "The criticism of religion ends with the precept that the supreme being for man is man".[16] In the same way Stirner observed the religious essence of Left Hegelian humanism and early socialism, Marx too stands accused, his atheism was still a categorically religious proposition.[17]

[11] Tucker (1972) : 22.
[12] Stirner (1995) : 217.
[13] Stirner (1995) : 215.
[14] Stirner (1995) : 215.
[15] Tucker (1972) : 22.
[16] 1844, cited by Tucker (1972).
[17] Tucker (1972) : 22.

Thus, Stirner's original accusation of the "pious" atheism of the Left Hegelians is particularly compelling when applied to the thought of young Marx.[18]

It is probable that Stirner would have seen the young Marx as a kind of post-theological moralist attempting to solve problem of original sin and ethical commitment through the redemptive power of human "History". The picture that Marx paints of capitalists and the bourgeois as manifestations of evil, and his dismissal of the individual's responsibility for their own misery would surely be seen as the personification of "clericalism". Stirnerian critique would no doubt pronounce Marx a vulgar moralist, subordinating the individual to the new God, "History". Now that history itself was moralised, the profound Hegelian awareness of history as amoral was lost.

Like morality, Stirner regarded society as an equally fictive notion, and saw that moral obligation was presumably derived from the social nature of man. Stirner observed that man's social dimension was merely an alternative type of religious and moral ideology. His hostility to "sacred society" abounds in *The Ego*; it was the arena in which "the most oppressive evils make themselves felt",[19] its domination was more brutal and insensitive than any previous despotism. Not only was Stirner's notion of state antithetical to Marxism, but by utterly rejecting the constructions of idealist philosophers he could only discover consciousness inside the mind; not in some trans-empirical ego or the Marxian "social being". For Stirner, emphasis upon the social nature of the mind, the evaluation of all ideas in relation to the social whole (or state), represented a menace to individual freedom and to the autonomy of the individual. He considered social duties as purely self-legislated. Our relationship to society was seen as one mediated by the ego. Whilst society may pattern self-realisation and define the egoist's rebellion, its formative influence fades in favour of the individual until "society" itself is entirely displaced. For Marx, however, the "atomism" of civil society was offensive – and had to be transcended: Stirner had failed to root his ideas in the social process, hence the arbitrary nature of his ideology. However, Stirner implied that certain ideas are not merely reflections of their social environment and can remain outside the appraisal that they are socially conditioned by. For Stirner these were the figurative orderings of experiences, the result of the irreducible egocentric nature of the individual; self-reflection mediated by personal drives and private needs.

Marx's communist vision would still require the individual to conform to a pattern of behaviour, though not through traditional morals, but through collective obligation. Stirner's critique of Feuerbach and Proudhon had already shown that socialist morality was full of superstitions, just as much as the Apostles' creed. Julius' article in the second volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrschrift* (1845) attacked the essentially Feuerbachian character of Marx's "practical humanism", which Julius considered "religious alienation" – clearly inspired by Stirner's perception of socialism.[20] Stirner's criticisms anticipate much later accusations, especially from contemporary existentialists, against Marxism: "Society … is a new master, a new spook, a new "supreme being" which takes us into its service and allegiance".[21] If society held the individual back from achiev-

[18] However, Tucker like so many others, misses the importance of *The Ego*. Stirner not only voiced essentially *modern*criticisms of communist ideology, but he did so long before Marx's thought was formally consolidated in *The Communist Manifesto*.

[19] Stirner (1995) : 106.

[20] Arnold Ruge's thought was influenced in the same way, and expressed his admiration in his work entitled *Our Last Ten Years*.

[21] Stirner (1995) : 131.

ing autonomy then communism was its most severe form of suppression. In criticising Weitling's communism, Stirner stated that the Communists sought the welfare of all, "true welfare", which would eventually degenerate into fixity.[22] Stirner regarded communism as the "strictest" or most dogmatic paradigm based on the idea of "Man". It was a sovereign power exalting itself over men, becoming their supreme essence, a new god. "Do we not with this come right to the point where religion begins its dominion of violence?" Stirner argued.[23] The philosophy of community was enshrined in the old Feuerbachian problem: separation from human essence. Essence was set above individuals as something to be striven for, and Stirner argued that both "Communism, and, consciously egoism-reviling humanism, still count on *love*".[24] The socialist stipulation that individuals must work to become truly human simply reproduced the *religious* division of individuals into "an essential and unessential self".[25] Here, Stirner refers to an obscure article by a contemporary – the young Karl Marx. The dualism that supported social liberalism in all of its various guises could not be tolerated and was brashly dismissed by Stirner: "we will hear nothing of this cutting in two".[26]

Marx misread *The Ego*, regarding Stirner as an ideologue embroiled in the malicious circle of critical diatribe which had crippled Left Hegelian philosophy. Stirner, however, consciously refused to uphold egoism as a set of ideas or principles.

> "Owness includes in itself everything own, and brings to honour again what Christian language dishonoured. But owness has not any alien standard either, as it is not in any sense an *idea* like freedom, morality, humanity and the like: it is only a description of the – *owner*."[27]

Stirner desired above all to break free of the conceptual quagmire of the 1840s where to *postulate* revolution was the trend. Stirner's critique of morality and society had shook the young Marx, forcing him to abandon notions of "species", "man" and "estrangement" that had previously been assigned crucial roles in his earlier thought, but Stirner's attack on the whole host of*isms* went deeper still. If Marx's repudiation of *The Ego* necessitated expunging the questions of ethical meaning from his thought, then the issues of individual fulfilment and emancipation – the very nucleus of Stirner's thought – would also have to be negated.

Freedom for Stirner was always *freedom from* some thing or other. Human freedom was better interpreted as "freedom to action"; Stirner logically concluded "my freedom becomes complete only when my – *might*".[28] Neither is freedom something to be given, it must be taken and defended: "If you took might, freedom would come of itself".[29] Ideologues of political liberty were more dangerous, in Stirner's mind, than even religious or philosophical thinkers. The idea of a society based upon a single principle (e.g. Communism) was simply an obligation putting man at the service of the state: "Liberty of the *people* is not *my*liberty!".[30] Stirner saw that modern

[22] Stirner (1995) : 271.
[23] Stirner (1995) : 273.
[24] Stirner (1995) : 274.
[25] Stirner (1995) : 34.
[26] Stirner (1995) : 32.
[27] Stirner (1995) : 154.
[28] Stirner (1995) : 151.
[29] Stirner (1995) : 151.
[30] Stirner (1995) : 190.

socialism, especially the kind espoused by Proudhon, interposed a new "principle" between the individual and the property of all, the socialist notion of "social justice", a concept just as potentially oppressive as the religious notion of "divine grace". Both socialism and communism left the individual's mind unchanged; it was still "a mind of dependence".[31] Communism was a backward step, a "dependence on another … on the generality or collectivity", a "*status*, a condition hindering my free movement, a sovereign power over me".[32]

Marx's new form of "social justice" was founded on the notion of labour, compulsory work done in the service of society. For Stirner, the division of labour, with all its subdivisions, was simply a conceptual apparatus directed against the individual. This of course led to alienated labour, which Marx too would later claim to resolve. Stirner argued that for the individual to negotiate so many forms of alienation in the world he simply had to "expropriate" his property, his creative strength and activity, to enable him to rely peacefully on himself again. Like Hegel, true concrete individuality (*Einzelheit*) was a return from alienation. Stirner's notion of the *Einzige*, the "Ego", more helpfully translated as "The Unique One" clarifies his whole project. "The Unique One" is man in his irreducible uniqueness, thus egoism is the final definition of the human "essence", not the subject of an ethical category, but an uncomplicated existential fact. If one could perceive this, all conceivable forms of alienation, conscious or unconscious, would be impossible. *Eigentum* (Own-ness or Property) did not mean a seizure of some *moral content*, but a man's identity with his manifestations, above all, with his individual existence. The notion has Hegelian heritage: In *Philosophy of Right* the immediate manifestation of right (*liberty*) was the possession by man of his body and his bodily functions (*work*). Stirner took his position from the minor degree of liberty advocated by Hegel. But the idea of liberty, like so many concepts for Stirner, had been set up as a new absolute, that man *should* be free. Stirner declared such a concept was nothing more than "… a new longing, a new torment, a new deviation, a new deity, a new contrition … ".[33]

Stirner's opposition to the dogmatic ideologues clearly engaged the thought of the young Marx. However, their two antithetical worlds – the concrete direct experience of *The Ego* and the world of universal labour outlined in *The German Ideology* – would never be reconciled. Marx, as ever the disciple rather than the usurper of Hegelian thought, had still sought some kind of accord. In attempting reconciliation, Marx decided to put forward the doctrine of individual consciousness mediated by social consciousness. The real question was to what extent social ties necessarily determined individual consciousness. Marx could not give a definitive answer. Such ambiguity lends support for Stirner; for if consciousness was completely determined by society then nothing was to be done, and an upheaval in the minds of men was therefore not possible. Stirner allowed individual consciousness to retain some autonomy, epitomised in the individual ego.

Marx could not perceive of any form such "oppositionist consciousness"[34] that characterised Stirner's position and surely must arise if credence is given to ideas that intend to transform political reality. Both Stirner and Bauer held that recognition of dissent or "oppositionist consciousness" was essential to their project: the merciless use of the principles of criticism, the

[31] Stirner (1995) : 228.
[32] Stirner (1995) : 228.
[33] Stirner (1995) : 216.
[34] Hook (1967): 176.

principle of the dialectic that would destroy the empty forms founded on dualism.[35] For Marx, criticism or thought alone was not enough. Thought was the acknowledged servant of human needs, and desired that philosophy (generalised thought) become an instrument in changing the world. There was no "oppositionist consciousness"; only moments of opposition that were inevitably transformed into successive phases of development in the historical process. Marx's notion of social consciousness allowed him to transcend Stirner's individualism and as well as the abstract morality of French materialism, and modify their historical conceptions with the notion of a dynamic, propelling movement in nature and human thinking – the dialectic.

Stirner saw man as progressing through stages of conflict and alienation. He understood as Hegel had, that freedom in contemporary society was explainable in terms of an individual's orientation to a set of moral postulates and social practices. Whilst opposing Hegel, Stirner ironically posed a truly Hegelian problem: Could the "negativity" inherent in Hegel's process of change, the dialectic, ever be halted for any possible ideological reasons? Both Stirner and Marx laid claim to the Hegelian dialectic, and both claimed they were demystifying its nature. Yet Marx's "fundamental difficulty *vis-à-vis* Stirner" was the question of "how will man *be* once he is free of alienation?".[36] Stirner refused to observe that the ideological process required an intermediate stage; a "total alienation" of consciousness. For Marx, this stage was to be found in the proletarian classes and necessitated revolution. Stirner's reality was the world of his immediate experience; he wanted power straight away, not after some remote and hypothetical "proletarian revolution".

Despite Marx's own revolutionary tactics and tendencies of the future he saw displayed in his own age, historical materialism meant he lacked a doctrine for the immediate present – least of all for those whose existence was resigned to the limits of the capitalism's grasp and economic process. On the other hand, for dissenting members of society who had yet to become socialist and look forward to the dawn of a "new order", Stirnerian egoism provided an alternative protest: disobedience, radical questioning, active resistance and bodily enjoyment. Most importantly, it aimed at the deconstruction of linguistic "spooks", fixed ideas which ruled the real world. For Marx, Stirner's radical resistance did not engage the working class and was dismissed as a "petty bourgeois essence". It is ironic that Marx considered Stirner as a quintessential wallflower of history, epitomising a shopkeeper's egoism. Stirner considered himself as going beyond dissent, conjuring a picture of insurrection, rather than the polarised image of society that engendered a new, Communistic change of masters: a new religion of society. Stirner saw it as deceptive that the Enlightenment had simply amounted to transferring the balance of religion to humanism in its various bogus guises. Out of this last divisive stage of Hegelianism, Stirner saw no reason for the dialectic to be subsumed in history. Unlike Marx, he laid claim to its destructive force in the battle against alienating concepts:

> "… why should I only dissent (think otherwise) about a thing? Why not push the thinking otherwise to its last extremity, that of no longer having any regard at all for the thing, and therefore thinking its nothingness, crushing it? Then the *conception* itself has en end, because there is no longer anything to conceive of it."[37]

Now it is possible to understand how Stirner would seen have the "historical dialectic" as the "Will of God" reiterated in pseudo-secular terms, and that Marx, in true theological fash-

[35] Brazill (1970) : 177–225.
[36] Hook (1962): 227.
[37] Stirner (1995) : 299.

ion, attempted to mask the causal efficacy given to ideological abstractions as "empirical" forces. Stirner's position was clearly nihilistic, but by attacking the very idea of European Enlightenment in the nineteenth-century he had called into question much more than its socialist doctrines, and insisted that we lose all of our ideological props.

Conclusion: The divergent perspectives of "intimate" enemies: Marxian history and Stirnerian egoism.

Marx's critique of Stirner in *The German Ideology* was a means of distinguishing himself from what was, in his eyes, the impotent Left Hegelian movement. For Marx, alienation was no longer a spiritual phenomenon, but the objective forms of man's economic products, the separation of man from his production. Nevertheless, Marx's position can be interpreted as a relapse into Left Hegelianism: He urged a change of consciousness in order to observe the correctness of a new standpoint; the communist*Betrachtungsweise* (mode of view). Instead of the standpoint from which consciousness is taken as the living individual, Marx wanted to highlight the rational superiority of his new position adopted in 1844 i.e. that consciousness was a "social product". More generally, Marx wanted to establish that labour was our fundamental human relation to the world and must be regarded as the "celebrated unity of the human being and nature".[1] In line with his attempt to leave behind "philosophy" as he saw it, Marx refused to treat this as a metaphysical question to be answered by the creation of a metaphysical premise.

Stirner, as opposed to Marx and many others, saw no prescriptive or essential elements in human nature. He had acquiesced "I am a man just as the earth is a star".[2] Neither would Stirner fall into the trap of picturing a future for man, since it would entail constructing another external ideal:

> "People have always supposed that they must give me a destiny lying outside myself, so that at last they demanded that I should lay claim to the human because I am – man. This is the Christian magic circle."[3]

Stirner's greatest fear was the "transcendent alternatives" that those philosophically closest to him were creating: the state, humanity, politics and the newest "spook" offered by the socialists: society. Like all Left Hegelians, Stirner knew that he was experiencing the initial stages of the apocalypse that would replace the old Christian world with philosophical humanism. This fear is reflected in the "dynamic titanism" of his own ego which became its own sort of absolute.[4] Dispossessed by academic and political circumstances of any real power in shaping humanity and its institutions, the Left Hegelians, particularly Stirner, had to satisfy themselves with the role of subjective critics.[5] Social or political action, vindicated by the younger generation of Hegelians

[1] Brudney (1998) : 287
[2] Brudney (1998) : 163.
[3] Brudney (1998) : 318.
[4] Brazill (1970) : 224.
[5] Brudney (1998) : 224.

(especially Marx and Engels), was held in contempt. Stirner's inherent social atomism was evidently incompatible with the idea Marx shared with the Utopian French socialists: the desire for a truly "human" society.

If we regard Hegel as the last of the contemplative philosophers who possessed the "secret of contemplation", post-Hegelian philosophy becomes what one commentator has called a "lost paradise".[6] Stirner reverted to the acquiescent attitude of a self-effacing mortal who must find his entire fulfilment in his own life. Marx, to counter what he perceived as Stirner's and Hegel's quietism, developed a universal theory of action where contemplation was replaced by intolerance of those who seek out a better state of things. Marx's answer was a form of materialistic fatalism that operated through economic laws. Stirner had forced not so much an Althusserian "epistemological break" in the young Marx's thought, but had required him to retreat from a normative conception of human nature. Marx's historical ontology meant either equating *good* with what happens or denying that there is any good: The outcome was either way a form of nihilism. Whilst apparently repudiating Stirner's nihilistic egoism, Marx incorporated this nihilism into his theory of history. For if man creates himself in history, then there is no human essence from which he can be alienated. Therefore Marx cannot justifiably assert the pre-eminence of communist society. The incoherence of Marx's philosophical anthropology was as much a result of his intense encounter with Stirner as well as with non-German philosophical concepts that had entered his work. In the mid-eighteen forties Marx and Engels absorbed French ideas into the Hegelian metaphysic. The French experience as well as that of the wider industrial world – such as the advanced industrialisation of Victorian England – dictated that the social question of industrial change and labour emerged as the most significant of their age.[7]

Occupying another world, isolated and thoroughly bourgeois, the "Berlin Buddhists" remained indifferent to these apparently epochal changes. Only in Germany, where intellectuals inhabited an eccentric world of blithe fantasy, would Marx's reading of the "social question" not be explicable. For Marx, German theoretical engagement with political forms had consequently assumed a more abstract form than prevalent elsewhere.[8] Nonetheless this context affords Stirner the unique position of a disenfranchised academic dissenter, a point of disinterestedness between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Stirner occupied a disoriented historical moment, one before the experience of capitalism and industry had been filtered through the paradigmatic Marxian idioms. Moreover, Stirner did attempt to tackle the social phenomenon of "pauperism" (the progressive impoverishment of the lower social strata) which has been identified as the "dominant" social issue of "pre-March" period.[9] Unlike the social problems that Marx identified, pauperism was not a direct result of capitalism or even of rapid industrialization, but a problem of demographic growth and was a singularly (ignoring Berlin) rural phenomenon. Pauperism differed much from traditional poverty. It was collective and structural rather than determined by individual contingencies. Stirner recognized this social phenomenon and discussed it at length in *The Ego*.[10] He was not failing to grasp the true "social question" as Marx makes out; instead he was analyzing his own reality: the parochial, yet unique, pre-Industrial phase of

[6] Stern (2002).
[7] Brazill (1970) : 271.
[8] Marx (1976) : 489, 493
[9] Clark (1997) : 53.
[10] Stirner (1995) : 224–227.

German history – what Eric Hobsbawn called "the last, and perhaps worst, economic breakdown of the *ancien régime*".[11]

Stirner, along with the other Left Hegelians, saw himself as exclusively concerned with the historical transition from religion to philosophy, the fall-out of Hegelian thought. Marx, on the other hand, had already proposed to disentangle himself from what he called "philosophy" through his theory of history. It is therefore little wonder that these two thinkers clashed theoretically, and that the specific ontological debates would be forgotten. In a crossed sentence from *The German Ideology* Marx confessed "We know only a single science, the science of history".[12] Marx's conception of history meant every profound philosophical problem would resolve itself as an empirical fact, and thus Marx felt free to abandon the metaphysical conception of essence that had been central to his thought up to 1845. With the division of labour, one's orientation to the world was a less important concern. By rejecting this significant component of his conception of human nature, Marx struggled to avoid his philosophical obligations. *The German Ideology* was an attempt to avoid having to defend one's standpoint philosophically, to escape the Hegelian prerequisite to occupy a supposedly epistemologically privileged position.

For all the progression that Marxists like to attribute to it, *The German Ideology*was also a reductive exercise. Marx and Engels swept aside certain issues (ethics, individuality, consciousness) which they longer wanted on their "erstwhile philosophical conscience". *The Ego* had conditioned Marx's ontological response to Left Hegelian humanism. As we have already seen, *The Ego* was not only a catalyst in Marx's adoption of the philosophical method of historical materialism, but also stood as an anticipatory critique of its emergent form. Stirner had forced Marx to break with Left Hegelian modes of thought, fracturing the epistemology and materialism Marx had developed in *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In doing this, he forced Marx to fundamentally reappraise his position on the role of human nature in relation to his social criticism.

As a theoretical conclusion to the criticism of religion, the "materialist conception of history" was an ambiguous explanation. Rather than *settling*Marx's conscience, *The German Ideology* emphatically displayed it as a *bad*conscience. For many, Marx's anger seems disproportionate to the threat posed by Stirner, yet a closer analysis has revealed just how much was at stake in their encounter. Marx chose to make Stirner into a scapegoat, an opportune external object onto which to project the unresolved inner conflict of his early thought. The garrulous "Sankt Max" was the work of an intellect under threat. Derrida recognised this:

> "My feeling … is that Marx scares himself, he *himself* pursues relentlessly someone who almost resembles him to the point that we could mistake one for the other: a brother, a double, thus a diabolical image. A kind of ghost of himself."[13]

Parallels between the two thinkers are often neglected. However, as we have seen, Marx and Stirner shared much in terms of philosophical language and theoretical goals. Regardless of the claims about Marxian humanism, Stirnerian egoism was just as much the "true" heir to German Idealist Philosophy. Stirner had realised the fundamental nihilistic element present in secularised Hegelianism and – through dialectics – fearlessly drawn the consequence that "everything is

[11] Cited by Clark (1997) : 53.
[12] Marx (1976) : 28.
[13] Derrida (1994) : 139–140.

permitted".[14] Or as Giles Deleuze more boldly claimed, "Stirner is the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic".[15] Stirnerian nihilistic egoism, not Marxian humanism, certainly seems more consistent with an overthrow of suprahistorical values. The sovereignty of the ego and the exercise of self-assertion are the more spontaneous consequences of the "death of God" and transcendent norms, as opposed to a philosophy of community.

Marxists who see Marx and Engels' socialism eschewing naturally from Left Hegelian humanism remain blinded by the alternative, highly inaccurate, account of their early thought which both men later developed. *The Ego* remains a unique and powerful attack on Marxism as well as all forms of socialism; Stirner highlighted the contradictions and problems inherent any form of socialist or communist society. Yet ironically for Max Stirner, the force of *The Ego* pushed Marx to embrace the totalising perspective of an essential communism, nascent in *The German Ideology*, rather than devalue the future of socialist thought which it had, in part, helped create. With the advent of Marxism, Stirner's work was displaced in intellectual history. If Stirner is to undergo rehabilitation as a thinker, it is important that this must not revolve solely around Marx's "leading role", or in assigning debt to Stirner where it is due. Future scholarship must attempt to escape his status as the "too much intimate enemy" of Marx.[16]

In conclusion, Stirner's answer to problems of the Hegelian dialectic was to rewrite in existential terms as the historico-cultural narrative of the self-actualisation of the spirit. His book described the liberated, self-expressive, contingent, existing individual as the "laughing heir"[17] of a dialectical development from immediacy through self-division, to self-conscious freedom and transparency. In *The Ego*, the Hegelian description of redemption found an existential form in "living oneself out".[18] Stirner set his existential perspectives against the essentialism of Marx and others. Marx's *The German Ideology* was an attempt to wrench socialism from its utopian yearnings and transform it philosophically into an empirical science. In doing so, Marx escaped the Hegelian conception of "consciousness" by turning consciousness into a by-product, socially determined. These two terminal and antithetical standpoints occupied by Stirner and Marx in 1845 have allowed fragments of the Hegelian project to continue to shape and frame the Marxist/Existentialist debate of the last and present century.

[14] Myers (1976) : 193.

[15] Deleuze (1985) : 161.

[16] Calasso, R. "Accompagnamento alla lettura di Stirner", in Max Stirner, *L'Unico e la sua proprietà, Adelphi*, (Milan 1999), 412.

[17] Stirner (1995) : 286.

[18] Stirner (1995) : 293, 294.

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Alexander Green
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