

Nihilism, Egoism and the Trajectory of Critique

Anarchblr

April 13, 2021

Contents

I	3
II.	7
III.	9
IV.	10
Appendix A.: “Truth”	11
Appendix B.: Of Empiricism	11

Any movement, goal, or discipline can exist without the egoist lense to filter it through and in fact most, if not all, already do; but I don't think you will get as much out of it as another might. If that's all you need then there you have it. It doesn't need to be a thorn at your side, you can ignore it, but I imagine you will be frustrated if you run into a lot of other people who have taken a so-called "egoist" outlook on things.

Thirdly, for the length of a non-answer. Hopefully, however, you will still find it useful to formulate your own answer and if anything, it still manages to convey theoretical points adequately enough for anyone to weather a storm with.

I.

Individual Anarchists of the Egoist bent are indebted to Stirner's language and categories however, it would be shortsighted to identify "egoism" exclusively with Stirner. Take Postone, for example, when he talks about how there is "no transhistorical man", identifying in the negative what Stirner does in the positive, "the Unique".

I think Ludd's introduction is succinct here:

How broadly Stirner understood both the unique and its property is quite clear in this passage from Stirner's Critics: "You, the unique, are 'the unique' only together with 'your property.' ... Meanwhile, it doesn't escape you that what is yours is still itself its own at the same time, i.e., it has its own existence; it is the unique the same as you." So there is nothing humanistic in "the unique." Every animal, every tree, every rock, etc. is also, for itself, the unique with its own property, its own world, that extends as far as its capacities, as Stirner would put it. And for Stirner, my property is precisely the whole of my world to the extent that I can grasp it. Your property is the whole of your world to the extent that you can grasp it. Property then is a "phenomenology of perception" combined with my capacity to take in and act on that perception. When I become aware of my own power in this, why would I ever choose to reduce my property to what the state permits to me? How could I ever limit it to economics?

[A. Ludd, *About the Translation*. 2017]

You are only unique *together with your property*. You, the unique individual that is you, are only unique because you are *contextualized* with everything around you, everything that you are a part of is also a part of you; it constitutive to your individuality, there's no abstract you. There's no you across all epochs. Your real *concrete* self is realized in the real *concrete settings* you are in, develops and *unfurls* in these settings, changing them and yourself *at the same time*.

This is simultaneously a critique against empiricism and the 'Robinsonades' Marx criticized in the Grundrisse "of the eighteenth-century prophets, in whose imaginations this eighteenth-individual [...] appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past."

Afterall, Marx goes through great pains to hammer out that the general isn't the particular; "*Production in general* is an abstraction [...] and fixes the common element and thus saved us repetition. [...] [T]he elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from their determinations valid for production as such, so that their unity [with the general ones]—their essential difference is not forgotten."

Forgetting to do so, Marx reminds us, allows space for the idea that “capital is a general, eternal relation of nature.”

Or, later, when he says,

To summarize: There are characteristics which all the stages of production have in common, and which are established as general ones by the mind; but the so-called general preconditions of all production are nothing more than these abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped.

[*The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd Ed.: Grundrisse, p. 226*]

We see this at play when he muses over the method of political economy.

It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production.

[*Ibid. p. 237*]

Quickly turning this naively correct approach on its head,

However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements in which they rest.

[*Ibid.*]

And goes on to say

Thus, if I were to begin with the population, [...] I would then [...] move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I arrived at the simplest determinations.

[*Ibid.*]

Now, contrast this to Stirner,

My affair is neither the divine nor the human; it is not the good, the true, the just, the free, etc., but only my own, and it is not general, but is—unique, as I am unique.

[*The Unique et al. 1844*]

That there is a great gulf in simply the topics they talk about can be explained that Marx was already studied in political economy whilst Stirner was responding to the contemporary rift between the Right and Left Hegelians —this is hardly a skewer to Stirner’s critique: either he’s right and the individual in the particular of a contextualized —*historic*— development, or he’s wrong and it is a transcendental, eternal being outside of the historical process.

In *Critics* he elaborates,

Stirner names the unique and says at the same time that “Names don’t name it.” He utters a name when he names the unique, and adds that the unique is only a name. So he thinks something other than what he says, just as, for example, when someone calls you Ludwig, he isn’t thinking of a generic Ludwig, but of you, for whom he has no word.

What Stirner says is a word, a thought, a concept; what he means is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said.

[*Stirner's Critics. 1845*]

In opposition to mystifying the individual, he's actually *demystifying* it, acknowledging it's full total concreteness. It is in this way that Stirner avoids the problem of the proper name, not create another.

So we see Stirner prefigures Marx when the latter one says,

[German critics] polemics against Hegel and against one another are confined to this—each extracts one side of the Hegelian system and turns this against the whole system as well as the sides extracted by the others. To begin with they extracted pure unfalsified Hegelian categories such as “substance” and “self-consciousness”, later they desecrate these categories with more secular names such as “species” [Feuerbach], “the Unique” [Stirner], “Man”, etc.

[*K. Marx & F. Engels, The German Ideology. ca. 1845*]

when the former says,

Where Stirner says: “I have based my cause on nothing,” Feuerbach makes it “*the Nothing*,” and so concludes from this that the egoist is a pious atheist [read: secular priest]. However, the Nothing is a definition of God [that is, of an abstraction instead].

[*Critics.*]

Further on,

Feuerbach asks: “How does Feuerbach allow (divine) attributes to remain?” and answers: “Not in this way, as attributes of God, no, but as attributes of nature and humanity, as natural, human properties. When these attributes are transferred from God into the human being, they immediately lose their divine character.” Stirner answers against it: Feuerbach allows the attributes to exist as *ideals* — as essential determinations of the species, which are “imperfect” in individual human beings and only become perfect “in the mass of the species,” as the “essential perfection of perfect human beings,” thus as ideals for individual human beings. He doesn't allow them to continue to exist as divine attributes, insofar as he doesn't attribute them to their subject, God, but as *human attributes*, insofar as he “transfers them from God to the *human being*.”

[¶] Now Stirner directs his attack precisely against the human, and Feuerbach ingenuously comes back with the “human being” and means that if only the attributes were made “human,” or moved into the human being, they would immediately become completely “profane and common.” But human attributes are not at all more common and profane than divine attributes, and Feuerbach is still a long way from being “a true atheist” in the way he defines it, nor does he want to be one.

“The basic illusion,” Feuerbach says, “is God as subject.” But Stirner has shown that the basic illusion is rather the idea of “essential perfection,” and that Feuerbach, who supports this basic prejudice with all his might, is therefore, precisely, a true christian.

“Feuerbach shows,” he continues, “that the divine is *not* divine, God is *not* God, but only the human essence loving itself, affirming itself and appreciating itself to the highest degree.” But who is this “human essence”? Stirner has shown that this human essence is precisely the spook that is also called the human being, and that *you*, the unique essence, are led to speak as a Feuerbachian by the attaching of this human essence to “self-affirmation.” The point of contention that Stirner raised is thus again completely evaded.

[*Critics.*]

In other words, Marx was right to criticize the young Hegelians, but he didn’t do anything that Stirner hadn’t already laid the groundwork for in 1844, which is why Pearlman writes,

a year later, in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, Marx expresses dissatisfaction with Feuerbach’s grasp of the human essence. “Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man”, but for Feuerbach the essence of man remains something isolated, unhistorical, and therefore abstract. For Marx, “the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each particular individual. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations.” Marx generalizes his dissatisfaction with Feuerbach: “The chief defect of all previous materialism (including that of Feuerbach) is that things, reality, the sensible world, are conceived only in the form of *objects of observation*, but not as *human sense activity*, not as *practical activity* ...” Marx makes this charge more specific in a later work, where he says that Feuerbach “still remains in the realm of theory and conceives of men not in their given social connection, not under their existing conditions of life, which have made them what they are”, and therefore “he never arrives at the really existing active men, but stops at the abstraction ‘man’ ... he knows no other ‘human relationships’ ‘of man to man’ than love and friendship, and even then idealized. Thus he never manages to conceive the sensuous world as the total living sensuous activity of the individuals composing it.”

[*F. Pearlman. Commodity Fetish. 1968*]

This is also what Heinrich uncovers when this one writes,

In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Feuerbach was still extremely highly valued by Marx. The same applies to the *Holy Family*, which was closed in November 1844. Here too, Feuerbach is still highly praised. Only six months later, in April/May 1845, Feuerbach’s assessment changed fundamentally. What happened?

[..] For Marx and Engels, Max Stirner’s criticism of Feuerbach, which was contained in his book *The Unique and Its Property*, which was delivered in October 1844, seems to have been much more important than the disappointment with Feuerbach’s political reluctance [to embrace communism]. Stirner criticized Feuerbach, who already

wanted to move away from Hegelian abstractions and towards “real man”, that his idea of the “essence of man” was still “theologically” limited, that it was an abstraction from real individual man.

[Michael Heinrich, *Praxis und Fetischismus: Eine Anmerkung zu den Marxschen Thesen über Feuerbach und ihrer Verwendung*, 2004]

II.

So obviously, we want to start with the real concrete individual and avoid the “merely aesthetic semblance” of which “appears as an ideal, whose existence [capitalists] project into the past”.

You will recall that for Stirner “there is nothing humanistic in ‘the unique.’ Every animal, every tree, every rock, etc. is also, for itself, the unique with its own property, its own world, that extends as far as its capacities, as Stirner would put it. And for Stirner, my property is precisely the whole of my world to the extent that I can grasp it. Your property is the whole of your world to the extent that you can grasp it. Property then is a ‘phenomenology of perception’ combined with my capacity to take in and act on that perception.”

Unavoidably, this is a philosophical position, but then it is so in the school of *philosophical materialism*. But in particular it does not take a static view of the acquired means of production of man, material or intellectual, it can’t.

Starting with the real concrete individual, there is to start with ones self, though admittedly there are other round about ways that lead to similar conclusions as Marx is forced to admit “[f]rom there the journey would have to be retraced until I [...] arrive at [the real] again.”

This kernel taken to its logical conclusions or otherwise deducing its inferences leads us to a school of nihilism that not only claims there to be no God but, more importantly, that there is no Truth. In fact, here is where you will find a rich materialism.

It is this philosophical and materialist conception that leads one to say that,

The thesis that thoughts about things are not the same thing as the things about which we have thoughts has an important bearing on the question of what truth is.

[...] If we took another look at our lump of sugar, we might notice that it is white and sweet, but it is not true or false. In fact, no nonlinguistic object is true or false.

[...] Thus, no one who wants to be a consistent materialist can argue that Truth with a capital *T* is something “out there”, literally to be discovered like a buried treasure. Truth is not discovered or revealed, because statements are not discovered or revealed. Truth, and hence knowledge, is produced.

[M. Melkonan, *Marxism: A Post-Cold War Primer*. 1994]

And, who produces it? The real concrete individual!

The real and concrete, far from being objective positions, reveal themselves to be subjective and products of subjective beings who produce them, in their historicity!

Still on the topic of Truth, I would be remiss if I didn’t point you to @/quoms excellent and masterful *Ten theses on leftist epistemology* of which I’ll highlight just the 4th:

4a. Rational statements are made by appealing to a set of socially agreed-upon evaluative criteria, and therefore always leave themselves open to challenge and critique within their own discursive framework.

4b. Statements of Objectivity and Truth can only be made by appealing to external authority, and therefore do not leave themselves open to challenge and critique within their own discursive framework. (They can only be challenged by deliberately talking at cross purposes.)

Another excellent example I would like to point out on a different subject, this time Gender, would be from @/girl-debord's philosophical anti-essentialism, two thesis suffice for here:

1. Existentialism. There is no essence, or at least, essence does not, as the classical philosophers held, precede existence. This means that things exist before ideas about them or their purpose exist (what Plato calls "forms"). We find ourselves in a certain set of conditions and we ascribe meaning to those circumstances, not the other way around.

2. Gender is Not Real. Gender exists in our world sort of the way that the forms existed for platonic philosophers: as abstractions that are unattainable yet supposedly desirable. No one can fully conform to everyone's expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman, and no one can really claim authority on knowing what those categories entail. Even radfems who fall back on "biology" (as a defense of what is basically gender, even though they wouldn't call it that) don't really have definitive answers when it comes to, say, intersex people.

You ask how egoism and nihilism "fit" into a critique, whatever critique, and it is in that it informs the trajectory of the very critique itself. It eschews that Reason or Rationality or Truth are eternal, and thus external, positions one can appeal to in order to fully understand material reality as such; instead it posits that reality is dynamic, capable of understanding through our own phenomena and that, as part of it, be changed and changing us simultaneously in our intercourse with it.

So we see that, in contrast to someone like Mao who despite correctly saying that "[e]very difference in men's concepts should be regarded as reflecting an objective contradiction", or that, "contradictions cannot be treated in the same way since each has its own particularity; moreover, the two aspects of each contradiction cannot be treated in the same way since each aspect has its own characteristics", he falters in saying that, "[t]o be subjective means not to look at problems objectively, that is, not to use the materialist viewpoint in looking at problems", the truth [*badum tss*] is quite the opposite,

In avoiding humanism, some would also seek to avoid the theoretical areas of subjectivity. They are wrong. The path of materialism passes precisely through subjectivity. The path of subjectivity is the one that gives materiality to communism. The working class is subjectivity, separated subjectivity, which animates development, crisis, transition and communism.

[A. Negri. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. 1978]

Communism is after all the subjective project of those individuals who form the working class. It's little surprise then the similarities shared by Marx and Stirner, compare:

the proletarians, if they are to assert themselves as individuals, will have to abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto (which has, moreover, been that of all society up to the present), namely, labour. Thus they find themselves directly opposed to the form in which, hitherto, the individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective expression, that is, the State. In order, therefore, to assert themselves as individuals, they must overthrow the State.

[*The German Ideology*]

The workers have the most enormous power in their hands, and if one day they became truly aware of it and used it, then nothing could resist them; they would only have to stop work and look upon the products of work as their own and enjoy them. This is the meaning of the labor unrest that is looming here and there.

The State is founded on the—*slavery of labor*. If *labor* becomes *free*, the State is lost.

[*The Unique etc.*]

And the celebrated watchword of Communism, “to each according to their need, from each according to their capacity” finds itself on firm and solid ground within the egoist critique.

III.

It should be obvious that this position thus outlined is not a sort of naive solipsism nor Cartesian dualism; it was noted from the start that, “[e]very animal, every tree, every rock, etc. is also, for itself, the unique with its own property, its own world, that extends as far as its capacities, as Stirner would put it.”

The most striking part of this, in this regard for me, is the follow up:

my property is precisely the whole of my world to the extent that I can grasp it. Your property is the whole of your world to the extent that you can grasp it. Property then is a “phenomenology of perception” combined with my capacity to take in and act on that perception.

The individual complexity of others is affirmed and sought! Not brushed away in vainglorious philosophical riddles nor encumbered by that empirical shortsightedness.

It is in this way that we break common ground with Zapatista *insurgent universalism*

the world which we want is one where many worlds fit.

[*Marcos*. 1996]

Moradi writes,

As an abstraction, freedom feels unfamiliar. It possesses a bigness, an out-there-ness that feels out of reach from the here, the present. But when people come together to decide for themselves how to live life and care for one another [...] new powerful bonds based on struggle emerge.

[E. Moradi. *To All Those Who Fight etc.* 2019/20]

The author continues, and I agree,

In other words, “friendship is the root of freedom.” It is what makes freedom flow into tangible existence.

[Ibid]

To make it tangible is to subject it to me. One cannot help but be reminded of @/soul-hammer’s heartfelt rallying cry:

lmao @ people who think being a communist is about being selfless and not greedy, or that being a capitalist is about being selfish and greedy. [...] personally? i’m a commie because i’m a fuckin selfish bitch, and my greed is far less myopic than capitalist greed. capitalist greed can’t see how other people benefit it. capitalist greed would destroy the world in the long run because it can’t fathom how short-term gains might fuck everything up. a capitalist sells you the noose you hang him with because, in the moment, he gets more cash. capitalism destroys itself in this way, because its greed is not grand enough.

i *want* my family to grow up in a world free of environmental devastation, and i *want* [...] healthcare. i know *my* liberation is tied intimately to *everyone’s* liberation. my greed is *collective!* you think i’m giving out food or going to protests or agitating for higher wages and collective bargaining rights and fighting against racism and protesting ICE’s existence out of some patronizing white savior goodness of my heart bullshit? *no!!* it’s all for *my future world!!!* a world in which *my* is synonymous with *our*, because there can be no other way!!!!

IV.

Why anti-civ or whatever other endeavor would appeal to egoists and nihilists of our stripe should be obvious: it allows the theoretical possibility of radical change never once denying the individual complexity.

If we want to “start from the real and concrete”; if for us communism is not “a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself”; if we “call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things”; if we want a “*ruthless critique of everything existing*”; I see no richer ground upon which to do so than nihilism which abrogates even faith in Truth as its point of departure.

Appendix A.: “Truth”

“There is a tendency for people to think that there is such a thing as the true definitions of concepts like christianity or socialism. I think this is a mistake.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that, quote,

‘Only something which has no history can be defined.’

By this he meant that, the reason why one can define concepts like ‘triangle’ or ‘atom’ in terms of essential and unchanging, necessary and jointly sufficient conditions is that they lie outside of history, and so do not vary within and between places. [...] The same is not true of concepts which are historical in the sense of being inherently connected to– and concerned with– human activity, such as ‘christianity’, ‘punishment’, and ‘socialism’.

[...] At any given historic moment, people will (in virtue of their different life experiences, social positioning, personality, and other such idiosyncrasities) think and act differently in response to the same intellectual, social, and political context. As a result, there will always be competing and contradictory conceptions of a historical concept since different people will disagree with one another on how a concept should be understood [...].”

[Z. Baker. *What Nietzsche Taught Me About Definitions*. 2017]

”[T]hese hard, severe, abstinent, heroic spirits who constitute the honor of our age; all these pale atheists, the anti-Christians, immoralists, nihilists, ephectics, *hectics* of the spirit [...]; these last idealists of knowledge in whom alone the intellectual conscience dwells and is incarnate today—they certainly believe they are all as completely liberated from the ascetic ideal as possible, these ‘free, very free spirits’; [...] They are far from being *free* spirits: *for they still have faith in truth*.

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient encountered the invincible order of Assasins, that order of free spirits *par excellence*, whose lowest ranks followed a rule of obedience the like of which no order of monks ever attained, they obtained in some way or other a hint concerning that symbol and watchword reserved for the highest ranks alone as their *secretum*: ‘Nothing is true, everything is allowed,’ — Very well, *that was freedom* of spirit; in *that* way the faith in truth itself was *abrogated*.”

[F. Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals* 1887]

Appendix B.: Of Empiricism

“According to the *German ideology*, Marx turned away from the unreflective empiricism represented there. The stages of this process can only be determined very vaguely, but the result is reflected in another largely programmatic text, the *Introduction* from 1857. Marx is clear here that the understanding of social relationships is not simply dependent on the ‘Establishing’ can proceed from prerequisites and empirical facts, but is only possible through the *production* of terms. The understanding of a thing is based on a conceptual act of production, on the production of *abstract categories* and not simply on the faithful translation of something empirically observed. In the *Holy Family* and the *German Ideology*, such abstractions were generally criticized from an empirical-nominalist standpoint, but now Marx knows that he cannot do without them. Although concept formation is not possible without an empirical basis, it is not enough

to simply translate empiricism into concepts: only by means of the conceptual representation of the *context* of the categories, the ‘reproduction of the concrete is possible in the way of thinking’. Concrete reality is only understood when it is possible to reproduce it as a ‘spiritual concrete’; the way to get there is the ‘method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete’ (which is often misunderstood as a simple guide).

Now that Marx himself uses abstractions again, the blanket criticism is replaced by *demarcation* on their idealistic-speculative use in Hegel. On the one hand, Marx now holds that the ‘world that is grasped’, the ‘concrete totality as a totality of thoughts, as a concretum of thoughts, is in fact a product of thinking, of understanding’. For him it is no longer a question of denying that the ‘movement of categories’ is the act of production of this concrete thought. His aim is to make it clear that this act of production is not the act of ‘the concept that thinks outside of or above intuition and representation and gives birth to itself, but rather the processing of intuition and representation into concepts’. Overcoming empiricism does not lead to a renunciation of empirical knowledge and research, but to renouncing the idea. Beyond any conceptual construction, knowledge consists only in the most precise possible understanding of empiricism.

[..] Opposite the Young Hegelians, Marx had himself in the *German ideology* ridiculed their notion that people are ruled by abstractions. Now he has to admit that this is true in a certain way: people are dominated by the fact that their work products are ‘values’, that they are not only objects of use but also objects of value, whereby the value cannot be grasped anywhere which is why the goods turn out to be ‘sensual-supersensible’ things, but this intangible value at the same time has a sensually tangible existence in money. As Marx writes metaphorically, all of this takes place ‘in the natural instinct of the commodity-owner’, i.e. the commodity-owner follows the laws of the nature of commodities without being clear about these laws. The goods owners follow in their economic actions (and, as can be shown by the form of wages, also in the ethical evaluation of these actions) a rationality that is given to them by the economic structure of society, a rationality that appears to them to be completely natural, however absurd it may be on closer analysis. The agents of the capitalist mode of production (namely all: rulers *and* ruled), [per] Marx at the end of the third *Capital* volume, live in an ‘enchanted, inverted and upside-down world’, they are subject to the fetishisms and mystifications that are brought about by economic conditions. *One* can no longer speak of the increasing transparency of social conditions, which was assumed in the *Communist Manifesto*.

So it is not simply ‘the thoughts of the rulers’ that dominate people, but in a certain sense ‘abstractions’, albeit very different from what the Young Hegelians spoke of. In any case, these abstractions cannot simply be ‘knocked out of your head’.”

[*M. Heinrich, Praxis etc.*]

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April 13, 2021

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