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Anarchism, Individualism and Max Stirner

Anonymous

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After a break of a few years the attack on the conscious egoism of Max Stirner has resumed. Now Mr. Roger P. Clark has written a book entitled “Max Stirner’s Egoism” in which he argues as one who was “once quite sympathetic to individualism” but now has his head firmly stuck into the tarbucket of “social anarchism”. The result is a dismissal of “metaphysical egoism” as a “groundless superstition”.

I do not propose to deal here with the more abstruse philosophical objections that form a large part of Mr. Clark’s indictment. To do this properly would need a reply almost as long as his book. For the time being, therefore, I will confine myself to certain of his views on the relationship of Max Stirner to anarchism and individualism.

Nonetheless, before doing so, it is worthwhile noting that Mr. Clark does not hesitate to resurrect a few hoary old philosophical chestnuts in making out his case. One of these is the “groundless” notion that Stirner, despite his explicit disavowals, conceived of his ego as an “Absolute” (Mr. Clark seeks to add impressiveness to his charge by describing it as “the mystic ab-

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solute”). And he rejects his fellow-critic R.W.K.Paterson’s denial of this by claiming that “this is what Stirner does when he raises the ego to an independent reality contrary to its objective place in the course of nature”. After such a piece of baffle-gab, I am not in the least surprised that he can ascribe some “rational significance” to “traditional mysticism”...

Like Mr. Paterson, in his much profounder work “The Egoistic Nihilist: Max Stirner”, Roger P. Clark claims that the conscious egoist *must* want everyone else to be supine and servile so that he can best take advantage of them. In doing so he ignores, amongst other things, Stirner’s contention that “He who, to hold his own, must count on the absence of will in others is a thing made by these others, as the master is a thing made by the servant. If submissiveness ceased, it would be all over with lordship.”

But why should the egoist not enjoy testing his strength against a worthy opponent or relish the company of shrewd and strong friends? It is really amazing how quick moralists are to fasten upon egoists a new categorical imperative: that they should live up to the Judeo-Christian conception of what an egoist ought to be! Stirner himself disposed of this particular puerility as follows:

“The egoist, before whom the humane shudder, is a spook as much as the devil is: he exists only as a bogie and phantasm in their brain. If they were not unsophisticatedly drifting back and forth in the antediluvian opposition of good and evil, to which they have given the modern names of ‘human’ and ‘egoistic’, they would not have freshened up the hoary “sinner” into an “egoist” either, and put a new patch on an old garment.”

Mr. Clark acknowledges Stirner to be an anarchist, but thinks that his anarchism is of the most “inconsistent and

contradictory type”. This is because it appears that, while Stirner rejects domination over the individual by the State, he “still accepts the authoritarian consciousness”. Mr. Clark identifies “authority” with any form of domination and so, when Stirner said that “might is right”, he is immediately condemned as an authoritarian.

But authority is not the same as power, nor do all forms of domination rest on authority. *Authoritative* power dominates primarily by means of the allegiance it commands from those who *believe in and support it*. Authority is therefore *legitimized power*. A power, as Enzo Martucci once put it, “which all must adore and serve even if they possess the energy and capacity to overthrow it” . While it certainly matters if some individuals try to become authorities vis-a-vis other individuals, the natural impulse to be dominant vis-a-vis others does not seem to me to matter so much. Indeed, as James L. Walker observed in his *The Philosophy of Egoism*, “if vigilance be the price of liberty, who will deny that the tendency, within Egoistic limits, to vaporizing, non-Egoistic philosophers would place tolerance upon a cloud-bank foundation of sentiment and attempt to recompense with fine words of praise the men who can be persuaded to forgo any advantage which they might take of others. Like the preachers who picture the pleasure of sin and urge people to refrain from it, their attempts are inevitably futile.”

For me Max Stirner’s egoism has nothing to do with whether his views do or do not fit in with someone else’s conception of an “anarchist” utopia. It is true that, since he was still to some extent the child of his time, his ideas are not entirely free from utopian speculations. In this respect, although for quite different reasons, I agree with Mr. Clark that Stirner was “over-optimistic” about his “associations of egoists” becoming universalized. But such speculations are only froth on the fundamentals of his philosophy and for realistic anarchist-individualists living in the here and now

they can safely be regarded as of mere historical interest. What is important about his magnificent defence of the individual against authority is its value as an intellectual armoury that can be appropriated by those like myself who view the conflict between the individual and the collective as endless.

Mr. Clark tries to counter Stirnerian egoism by invoking certain vagaries of Arthur Koestler about “holons” or “self-regulating systems which display both the autonomous properties of wholes and the dependent properties of parts” — a sort of philosophical version of the stage-magician’s “now you see it and now you don’t”. He also refers to Lewis Mumford’s ecologism and A.N.Whitehead’s woolly-headed “philosophy of organism”. After all this it is not surprising that he concludes by claiming that Hegel and his ‘Whole-i-ness’ “appear to be justified”. Of course, none of these profundities are spelt out in concrete detail, but, then, one does not expect that purveyors of social dreamlands and defenders of the ‘ghost of God’ would stoop to such mundane things. To be unfashionable enough to see merit in Stirner’s radical nominalism is obviously sufficient ground in the eyes of Mr. Clark for one to be shoved aside as “superstitious” — but we shall see who laughs last...

Anarchism is an individualism, not a socialism!

(MAX STIRNER’S EGOISM by Roger P. Clark. Published by Freedom Press, 84B, Whitechapel High Street, London, E.1. 111pp. Price £1.50. USA 3 dollars. Paperback)