

Against Individualism

The Individual Is Not So

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Egoism – at least, egoism as it appears as a discursive formation – concerns a very particular ontology of the individual. Apio Ludd, known under many names, is perhaps the most well-known living egoist-theorist, and describes this ontology thusly:

...most of today's young "insurrectionary" communists believe that you and I don't really act, but are simply the puppets of invisible, bodiless actors like society, social relationships, movements, various collective forces that apparently come out of nothing but themselves, since if you try to bring them back to an actual source, you have to come back to individuals acting in their worlds and relating with each other. And that won't do, because then you'd have to recognize not "the commune," not "human community," certainly not that mystical absurdity "species being," but yourself here and now – a unique individual capable of desiring, deciding and acting – as the center and aim of your theory and practice. And a whole lot of the theorizing that communists carry out seems to be aimed precisely at avoiding this.

Before I get very ahead of myself, allow me to state that I do not intend this critique as a rejection of individualism (in a moral sense), nor as an affirmation of collectivism (in any sense.) It is also not directed towards Ludd per se – it is a view I have encountered "in the field" on countless occasions, by countless anarchists. Ludd has simply encapsulated a common attitude.

This critique, rather, is intended towards the ideology which affirms the spectral image of the Individual as an in-dividual, that is, unable to be divided – an atom, from which this egoist program is derived. Therefore, the deconstruction of the individual is the deconstruction of egoism. Perhaps it is not Stirnerite egoism per se – I have already discussed the placement of Stirner within my apophatic practice in Mortification of the flesh, and further, I consider him a major influential apophatic thinker. Again, I am considering a very particular ideology, not exactly endemic to Stirner's thought, which has appeared within the discursive formation of egoism – that is, the body of discussion that identifies with and is produced by those who identify as egoists.

Firstly, from a purely material standpoint, the individual has no independent, or even objective, existence. Experiments in which the corpus callosum (the thin, membranous barrier between hemispheres of the brain) is severed as a treatment for epilepsy creates "individuals" with,

seemingly, two separate wills. This can even lead to so-called "alien hand syndrome," in which these two separate wills are diametrically opposed to each other. The corpus callosum's primary anatomical function is to facilitate neurological communication between the "left" and "right" brains. When it is severed, this communication becomes impossible.

In biology, the primary units of natural selection are not individuals, nor masses of individuals (species.) Rather, it is genes – below the level of the individual – which are the primary actors in evolution. This is the true reason for biological altruism – while altruism, particularly kin selection, does *not* increase a particular individual's chances for reproduction, it *does* increase the overall occurrence of that particular gene. Seminal geneticist J. B. S. Haldane once remarked,

Would I lay down my life to save my brother? No, but I would to save two brothers,
or eight cousins.

The occurrence of such behavior implies (at least within this particular model) that the true actors within the Real are not "individuals" but alleles, and that individuals are better seen as merely vehicles for such "selfish genes," as Richard Dawkins describes them. Perhaps a more accurate term would be "egoist genes," if we were to accept Apio Ludd's argument – only applied to genes as real actors. This also implies that altruism in nature is really an expression of selfishness, negating naturalist groundings of mutual aid such as that presented by Kropotkin – perhaps genetic egoism isn't so bad after all?

From a slightly less material standpoint, the hypothesis of bicameralism suggests that, before a somewhat vaguely defined development of self-consciousness, the human mind was separated into two "chambers" – one that commands, and another that follows. Circumstantial evidence for such a state has been found in ancient literature, including both Ancient Greek epic poetry and early books of the Bible, in which characters do not appear to think for themselves, but are rather commanded to act by higher forces. Such evidence has been used to explain the origin of religion. Bicameralism is highly controversial, though worthy of note in this context.

From a last, only-marginally material perspective, there exists a highly specialized subculture of "individuals" who play and experiment with the very concept of individuality. This involves meditation practices which, supposedly, render the creation of a "tulpa" – a concept borrowed from Tibetan religion. Buddhism, the most popular religion within Tibet, holds the self to be illusory – anatta, no-self. Thus, these creations, while as "real" as any other person, are fundamentally illusory themselves – only images. Self-styled "tulpamancers" are not so sure – they hold steadfast the belief that tulpas are real, sentient beings; though one that shares an individual body with its creator. As I have never practiced such techniques, I cannot verify how true such claims are. Nor can I conceptualize any method for verifying such claims in an objective manner. Regardless, there seems to be an active community of those who at least claim to have divided the individual, and act as such.

'My point in referencing such obscure examples should be obvious – the individual is not as materially apparent, nor nearly as objective, as individualists seem to believe. Though it may appear to have some sort of objective, metaphysical existence, appearances fail. A closer inspection of the so-called individual reveals ever finer and finer grains, multiplicities of constituents.

Deleuze analyzes the concept of the individual in Postscript on the Societies of Control. He states:

We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks."

The suggestion is that societies of control make the distinction between individuals vague and ambiguous. It is irrelevant whether or not individuals truly are atomized actors as Ludd describes them in the material world – there now exist technologies of domination which can divide that which cannot be divided.

Such reliance on so-called individuals, even when applied as a mere conceptual framework, reveals itself as untenable and reductionist for any practical or useful analysis. The operation of masses, collectives, and aggregates is complex, more complex than the sum of its parts. Aggregates of individuals can exhibit behavior that can not simply be reduced to its elements, such behavior is referred to as emergent and appears commonly in nature. Other such models become necessary. Further, such an atomized conception of the individual fails to capture those sometimes contradictory interests within persons – hopes, desires, ideologies, drives – which constitute divisions, and which have actual consequences in the material world.

Here I must stress the disconnect between the ego (the so-called individual) and what is referred to as the Unique. Firstly, ego is a particularly bad translation of the German *einzig*. *Einzig* translates literally to "one," whereas *einzig* is literally "only one." Stirner's use of *einzig* is traditionally translated to mean "ego," rendering "egoism." Contemporary translators, such as the aforementioned Apio Ludd, have went with the much more accurate "unique." Note the Latinate root, "uni-", denoting one. In following the apophatic tradition, I generally translate this as simply One, that is, *the* One. Such is an epithet for God in the Christian tradition, and for divinity in neoplatonism, which predates and influences the former. Stirner explicitly references this particular tradition in *The One and Its Own*:

They say of God, "Names name thee not." That holds good of me: no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names.

Stirner appropriates Christianity in interesting, but undoubtedly critical ways.

Stirner speaks of the Unique and says immediately: Names name you not. He articulates the word, so long as he calls it the Unique, but adds nonetheless that the Unique is only a name. He thus means something different from what he says, as perhaps someone who calls you Ludwig does not mean a Ludwig in general, but means You, for which he has no word. [...] It is the end point of our phrase world, of this world in whose "beginning was the Word."

Stirner's constant explanations for his failure to reach the Real mirror that of apophatic philosophers who predate him by millennia. Whereas Stirner, in the third person as is the style of *Stirner's Critics*, explains:

What Stirner says is a word, a thought, a concept; what he means is no word, no thought, no concept. What he says is not what is meant, and what he means is unsayable.

An anonymous commentator on the Parmenides, perhaps by Porphyry of Tyre (c. 300 AD, who – before I am accused of Christian undertones – authored *Against the Christians*) similarly apologizes:

I realize...that I am uttering unclear things because of the weakness of language in these matters...

Whereas Stirner proclaims "All things are nothing to me," of the One, Porphyry (?) describes of God:

It is necessary, however, to know that the things which exist due to him are nothing in relation to him.

The great neoplatonist sage Plotinus similarly speaks of the Unity (the One, the Unique) in similar terms in the *Enneads*:

Generative of all, the Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quantity nor quality nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time: it is the self-defined, unique in form or, better, formless, existing before Form was, or Movement or Rest, all of which are attachments of Being and make Being the manifold it is.

Stirner responds:

For 'being' is abstraction, as is even 'the I'. Only I am not abstraction alone: I am all in all, consequently, even abstraction or nothing: I am all and nothing...

The Creative Nothing, the Unique, thus, is separate from – indeed, prior to – such reified conceptions of the so-called individual. The association of the Creative Nothing with Ludd's individual in the "here and now" (that is, the human being) is a falsehood, for the Creative Nothing is beyond being and thus material existence. The Creative Nothing truly *cannot be spoken of*, nor cannot it be associated with *anything* – all attempts end in utter failure because the Creative Nothing is prior to even language, in fact it is the origin of language, that which creates the necessary circumstances for *nous* to come about. In fact, the negation of the self is employed in a number of mystical practices in order to transcend the self and reach the ineffable One, to become, as St. Paul states, "no longer I." Plotinus even refused portraits to be made of him during his life, so deeply was he committed to this particular practice.

The only way language can work towards understanding the One is by negation, that is, by negating all positive conceptions of it. Thus is the project of negative theology. If all speech that aims or points towards the Unique fails – what is to be done, then, within anarchism? Simply *nothing*. Refusal to articulate. One must throw out *all* conceptions – completely throw them out, not only stating that one has done so – and dwell in complete, in-fant silence. This is the non-essence of nihilism – silence, nothing, nothing-past-negation, negation-of-the-negation-which-is-not-positive. Silence is the entrance to uniqueness, that is, perfect attainment; for it is only within this silence that one can shed themselves of themselves and work towards union, oneness, uniqueness, anarchy (*anarkhos*, without-beginning, "What is divine? That without beginning, nor end."). This is the truest liberation possible, liberation from being itself. For truly, the One is the

only in-dividual, hail to the unknown God! All desire is desire for union – union with objects and people, union in some manner with the Other; and I tell you that union is becoming-One, *henosis*, in which there is no subject nor object, the non-ascension away from being to the superior Non-being, that is, beyond being, for being is the prison of language and symbolic existence. One must step outside themselves, become "no longer I," flee away from their name, become unobtainable by language.

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