

# **In Defence of Stirner**

Enzo Martucci

Professor Ernesto Serafini, an academic who has polemicized with me before, now wants to start again and has written, amongst other things:

You who boast of not being of the school of a Malatesta, but rather of Stirner, and who present the latter as a philosopher whose thought has a logic free from the contradictions one finds in the great Nietzsche, do not understand, nor wish to understand, the contradictions that also exist in Stirner. But Ettore Zoccoli answers you well in his book *Anarchy*. Indeed, he writes on page 410:

Although supposed to be politically and socially disintegrated, other individuals still remain. Well, says Stirner, it is up to the individual to make sure that those who surround him should be only a means to his ends. Briefly, it is an egoistic antimony raised by a metaphysician, that makes of each individual, at the same time, by a transcendental hypothesis, the supreme end and the most ignored means. In fact, while offering to the individual every possibility against his fellows, it denies them any possibility of being anything but mere means. Then it offers to each of them in relation to the first individual every chance to reduce him to simply being a means. 30 that, at the same time in which an individual acts with the aim of considering others as means, he is faced with the action—not associated and therefore not multiplied, it is true, but numerically additional—of all those others who invert the role regarding him. The absolute autonomy of the individual is obliterated by the absolute autonomy of all others. This imperative of absolute egoism is either impossible if the atomistic aggregation of individuals represents even a system of force in equilibrium, or, if applied, would result in the reduction to nothing of any social aggregate no matter how elementary. It is an ethical imperative that even a cannibal would be ashamed to accept.

To Serafini and Zoccoli it seems a contradiction to consider the individual as the only reality there is, having no other end than himself, and, at the same time, to accept that this same reality can be considered by others as a means to their ends. But, in substance, there is no contradiction. There would be if we referred to the same individual, if I should regard myself as the only existing reality who, as the supreme end, cannot be a means, and, at the same time, accept the demand of other individuals to serve them as means to their ends. Then I must choose if I am the ultimate end or the least of means. But since I regard myself as the end and the others as means, the two opposed values are not attributed to the same subject but to different ones, and so there is no contradiction. Can I not regard myself in one way and others to the contrary?

No, says Serafini, because others are individuals like you. But even if they are individuals like me, I cannot consider them as I do myself.

I know myself to be the *only* reality because I can sense myself. If I did not exist I could not sense. Therefore, I am. And I recognize not only my reality, but also an external "reality" — the material world, the spirit of other men, etc. But is this other "reality" imagined by me, or does it exist in itself? According to philosophic idealism matter does not exist, but is no more than a representation of the human spirit.

The universe is created in the mind which projects it outside thereby giving it objectivity, but retaining the power to differentiate and control it.

There is no argument [writes Leibnitz] with which one can demonstrate in any absolute manner that bodies exist and nothing prevents our minds presenting them as well-ordered dreams, which we judge as real and for harmony we accept as equivalent to the truth.

But if the material world is a representation of the spirit in which it alone exists, the spirit of other men can equally, as can their bodies, be a representation of my Spirit in which they alone exist, together with the material world. Where is the proof that they continue to exist if I do not think or feel about them? And where is the proof that the universe continues to exist when I neither think of it, nor sense it, given that the only means of knowledge are thought and senses?

In this way, one arrives at solipsism and, in accepting it, I become certain only of my own reality, my own being, and I make myself my end and use as my means the world and other individuals, *these being my creation which I can make use of as I will*.

If, instead, as philosophic realism claims, the material world and human beings have an objective existence, not as I will, but in themselves, then these individuals *look like me but are not the same as me*. Each of us is a microcosm with his own way of feeling and thinking that gives him particular needs and aspirations which cannot always be satisfied without conflicting with others. In this case, because I live for myself and not for others, to respect and serve them in the way that I respect and serve myself is not obligatory for me. Since, they are different, therefore, I can very well use them as means to my own ends, even if I feel myself being used as means to an end.

Ergo: from the standpoint of all philosophical conceptions of reality, the contradictions which Zoccoli points out in Stirner's thought do not exist.

Nor does one find the

egoistic antimony raised by a metaphysician, that while offering to the individual every possibility against his fellows, denies them any possibility of being anything but mere means.

Stirner says that, for the individual to realize his proper egoism, he can do all that he wants as long as he has the power. But he does not deny to other individuals the possibility of not being used as means. To these he says that they too can defend themselves and not let themselves be reduced to slavery by an aggressor who intends to make them his tools. He urges the attacked to counter-attack anyone who would make them into means. In time, as individuals developed their power to the maximum, they would control each other reciprocally—only the weak, the cowardly, the lazy (in other words, the ballast) —would disappear. Then there would remain a select humanity, which would form itself into an oscillating equilibrium, which would allow each individual, at least once, to realize himself integrally, to live as he felt and willed. In a social and civic world, however, based on a general mutilation, as Brunetiere called it; in a perfect world of which the utopians dream, in which each man disciplines himself to the maximum and always restrains and suffocates his own instincts and needs so as not to tread on his neighbor's toes—in such a world there cannot be an equilibrium, which implies a differentiation and opposition of

elements and forces, but a stupid, softening harmony which would take everyone through life without ever having lived and would send them to the grave having seen nothing.

In the meanwhile, in the present world, imperfect but social and civic, a minority of tyrants and cheats impose themselves, making use of every kind of astuteness, violence, riches and power, and reducing everyone else to obedience and misery, trying to convince the oppressed with the nonsense of religion, metaphysics, ethics and legalism, to resign themselves and not to use any means of liberation. And fiercely condemning the few who rebel. So there is formed a stable disequilibrium with the result that a few are always on top, happy and ruling, and the rest are always at the bottom, suffering and serving.

If that which Zoccoli called "the imperative of absolute egoism" were applied, it would probably reduce all organized society to nothing, and would be willingly accepted by men restored to natural spontaneity and sincerity – men who find insufferable that social and civic hypocrisy which pretends to organize and govern individuals *for their own good*, but machine-guns them, or throws them into prison, when they try to escape from the exploitation and oppression imposed by their *great-hearted* directors and masters.

## 2

Zoccoli [continues Sarafini] rightly says that the Stirnerian ethic is far removed from any possible application and merely has a sad speculative interest as the sophisticated and delirious manifestation of a fortunately solitary thinker. Only if we returned to the life of the caveman could Stirner's teachings come true. You will have to agree also, Signor Martucci, that this is impossible.

I do not agree at all. I do not regard history as an infinite process. I believe that it must end one day. In spite of what philosophers from Aristotle onwards have said about the social tendency of man, history is nothing but the treatment of the organized and directed history of mankind, which has created conditions contrary to, and causing degeneration from, our natures. Either man will disappear, and with him history, or he will react healthily, destroy history and return to nature, gaining new strength as did Antacus when he touched the earth. Man is capable of evolution and improvement, but only by following his natural inclinations, not by suffocating them and transforming himself into a sheep or, worse still, a robot.

Education does not develop the individual, but depreciates or subdues him.

Education [says Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*] takes the innate vigor from children and renders them weak. It makes them all alike and trains them for servile obedience. We take the best and strongest children and train them like lion cubs. We stun and fascinate them with our chattering and train them by teaching them that they have to be the same as all the others and that the beautiful and the good consist of this equality. But if there were a man who had sufficient force, he would shake off and break through, and escape from all this; he would trample underfoot all our formulas and spells and charms and all our laws which are against nature, then he who was our slave would reveal himself as the master.

But would civilization disappear? It would be better if it did. It also contributes to keeping man in shackles and it would be a good thing if it vanished. Besides, there does not exist only

one civilization that presents a straight and evolutionary conception of history. As Spengler has so well shown, there have existed distinct and separate civilizations, which have all had a birth, a youth, a maturity, a decline, and a death. And all of these civilizations — except, perhaps, the Creek at the time of Pericles and the sophists — have tried to crush the originality and spontaneity of the natural individual, burdening his mind with dogmas and imposing laws on his conduct. One has done it in one way, another in another, and for different reasons, but all have agreed at least in this: the need to bridle the individual. Thus a new type of human being—who would be similar to Stirner's Unique or Nietzsche's Overman—would be unable to adapt himself to a civilization, but would want only to live in the free and luxuriant bosom of nature.

Despite this ethic which, according to Zoccoli, even the cannibal would reject, but which, according to Serafini, the caveman might accept, Stirner, "breaking his rigid individualism", endeavors to have it accepted by a social class: the proletariat. And for Zoccoli, Stirner does this in order

to pay a necessary debt to the Left Hegelian school of thought from which he came, pointing out that as it was possible to use the individualist premise as a preparation for his own egoism, so it was also possible for the same consequences to find a more organic elaboration among the writers and successive movements of revolutionary communism.

It seems to Serafini that this is yet another contradiction in the author of *The Ego and His Own*, but in fact it is not. In 1845 the proletariat was not the organized, guided, well-paid and powerful proletariat of today, but a crowd of down-and-outs, unorganized and dissatisfied, who were chomping at the bit and in whom Stirner tried to arouse their egoism so that they could oppose it to that of their masters, and take from them their wealth. And this not in order to create a new society, but solely to satisfy the needs of the oppressed individual, who can, if necessary, resort to crime to obtain his own ends. Then he will become master of that which is his own—that is to say, that which he has the might to make his own. The State, which exists only to protect the interests of the property owner against those of the expropriated, would be abolished, but there must not be created a communist society in which everyone would belong to the organized collective and the individual would be unable to own anything, not even that which he is able to conquer and keep.

When the proletarian shall really have founded his purposed 'society' [says Stirner] in which the interval between rich and poor is to be removed, then he will be a ragamuffin, for he will feel that it amounts to something to be a ragamuffin, and might lift 'Ragamuffin' to be an honorable form of address, just as the [French] Revolution did with the world 'Citizen'. Ragamuffin is his ideal, we are all to become ragamuffins.

This is the second robbery of the 'personal' in the interest of 'humanity'. Neither command nor property is left to the individual; the State took the former, society the latter.

Stirner, then, tends towards individualist anarchy and this always follows from his premise whether he is urging the individual to realize his value in relation to others, or the proletariat not to respect the property of the rich and to destroy the State, but not to create a communist

society. He is against collective property, which is sacred and inviolable, and against individual property conceived as a right with the corresponding duty to respect it on the part of the destitute. He defends the egoistic property of the individual who has conquered and keeps it, and who no longer remains the owner when he allows others to take what he has gained.

Before Nietzsche announced the death of God, Stirner declared the end of the Sacred:

In crime the egoist has hitherto asserted himself and mocked at the sacred: the break with the sacred, or rather of the sacred, may become general. A revolution never returns, but a mighty, reckless, shameless, conscienceless, proud crime —does it not rumble in distant thunders, and do you not see how the sky grows presciently silent and gloomy?

The individual has to destroy in himself the ghosts which dominate him—god, Morality, Humanity, Society, etc.—and which impose duties, renunciations, and chains. He must understand that these ghosts do not represent any Superior Beings or Objective Entities, but are his own thoughts and creations projected outside and above him which he regards with timid reverence. But when he becomes aware of the real origin of these presumed supreme beings, and of the damage they cause—oppressing his spirit and impeding his actions—then he will repudiate them and, since they were his creations, destroy them. He becomes a self-owning individual.

This self-owner, who, in Zoccoli's opinion:

acts with the aim of considering others as means, is faced with the actions —not associated and therefore not multiplied, it is true, but numerically additional —of all those others who invert the role obliterated by the absolute autonomy of all others.

This is not true. It would be if all the other self-owners simultaneously acted against me. But since they would not be organized this could not happen. They could only attack me singly or in small groups. Therefore I could defend myself, possibly with success. In more dangerous situations, I could resort to free alliances with others who, at that time, would benefit from supporting me, or in fighting my enemies. In brief, the struggle would not develop out of proportion and if I were overpowered today I could compete again tomorrow. And if I should die I would do so with the satisfaction of having tried to conquer a full and free life for myself. I would not have cowardly resigned myself to the chains of slavery and been content with the little others would allow me to have.

Today, in the civilized society Zoccoli so admires, if I do not want to adapt myself to a maimed and faded existence and rebel against it, I have all of organized mankind (a force far superior to mine and with far more formidable means) against me and, in spite of my heroism, would soon be crushed as were Jules Bonnet, Renzo Novatore, and Severino di Giovanni (Illegalist anarchists who were killed by the State in France, Italy and Argentina).

I agree with Zoccoli about one thing only and that is where he recognized the perennial topicality of Stirnerian philosophy. In fact, after having established an ideological point of contact between Stirner and Hobbes, Zoccoli writes:

While the doctrine of Hobbes is now recognized by scholars as evidence that cannot be ignored, so the doctrine of Stirner, while constructed on an erroneous and transcendental egoistic antinomy, as has been pointed out, still preserves a current importance and gives birth to many advocates.

### 3

But not only bourgeois thinkers, like Zoccoli and Serafini, have stormed against Stirner. Revolutionary or pseudo-revolutionary thinkers have done the same.

Marx, in his book *The German Ideology*, spits venom at the author of *The Ego and His Own*. Gille, in his *Outline of a Philosophy of Human Dignity*, violently attacks Stirner as the theorist of an individualism which is not at all anarchist. Kropotkin tries to shatter him in a few words and believes he has won the game.

Following these great masters, who wanted to change the world, but had neither the courage nor the logic to persevere to the extreme limits at which Stirner arrived, the disciples parrot the judgments of their oracles. Some time ago a Sardinian who calls himself a follower of Malatesta wrote to me from America and asked

Don't you find yourselves in contradiction, you and that German philosopher who call yourselves anarchists and predicate egoism without understanding that anarchy is only love for humanity and cannot be realized without general agreement?

I replied then, and I repeat now, that there is no contradiction if we call ourselves anarchists—that is, without government—and at the same time proclaim ourselves egoists. On the contrary, I want to be without government in order to be able to realize my egoism freely and completely, without being restrained and sanctioned by a sacred authority.

But what is egoism? It is an incoercible need that impels every living creature to provide for itself, to satisfy and enjoy itself. to avoid pain and preserve its life. The individual has no other end than his own ego, he cannot get out of his skin and all that he does he does for himself. He does nothing for the sake of others. When I deprive myself of my last piece of bread and give it to my neighbor who is hungry, I do so because the pain in my generous heart at his torment is less bearable than my hunger. If his agony did not pain me I would not give him my bread. Therefore I am an egoist, as is the sadist across the street who enjoys torturing animals and beating his wife and children.

The ascetic who renounces the pleasures of the flesh and consumes himself in penance, thinking that his temporary suffering will be compensated for by the eternal delights of heaven; the idealist who feels happy fighting for his ideal, which in reality exposes him to persecution and brings him misery; the ambitious man who uses every means and risks his life to conquer power; the miser who condemns himself to stinting and deprivation for the pleasure of hoarding money; the hedonist who, to enjoy the sensuality of the (of a) moment, squanders his money and spends his old age in poverty; the rebel who gets the satisfaction of striking at the master he hates and pays with his life or segregation in prison —these are egoists.

We are all egoists, even if the actions of one are different or opposed to those of another — the temperaments of individuals being as diverse as the passions that move them.

Altruism does not exist. It is no more than a Christian falsehood preserved and secularized by Auguste Comte with his religion of humanity when it seemed that the old faith was losing its power.

Therefore, to predicate egoism means also to arouse it in those in whom it has been made dormant by the theological and metaphysical narcotics administered by their masters. And when these slaves have rebelled and opposed their own egoism to the insatiable and hypocritical egoism

of governments the situation will change. Then there will be no more resigned sheep on one side and commanding wolves on the other—only anarchism.

Anarchy, then, is not love for humanity but simply lack of government. In this absence of government and in the freedom that will come from it, those who feel love will love, and those who do not will not, and will maybe fight each other. We do not understand the motive that identifies freedom with universal harmony and would create one idyllic type of life in place of innumerable different ones. Therefore not even anarchy will produce a general agreement based on an absolute conformism but many free and relative agreements—unions of egoists—and many discords ranging from individual isolation to struggles between individuals and groups. This will be a return to nature, to the jungle, you say. Yes, but the natural jungle will be shown to be a thousand times preferable to the asphalt jungle.

However, the question between anarchists and archists has been badly stated from the beginning. In fact, we are not concerned with whether anarchy or archy can cement the best social relations, or bring about the most complete understanding and harmony between individuals. We try, instead, to discover which is the most useful for the realization and expression of the individual—who is the only existing reality. Is it anarchy, which offer me a free and perilous life, in which I might fall from one moment to another, but which allows me to affirm myself at least once? Is it archy, which guarantees me a controlled life in which I am confined and protected, but in which I can never live as I feel and will?

Which is preferable—intensity or duration?

Michelstaedter has said that preoccupation with tomorrow limits living.

I am for today. The sheep, even if they call themselves anarchists, long for tomorrow. And they die waiting for the sun of the future to rise.

To the anti-Stirnerism of the bourgeoisie, the Marxists and the libertarian socialist (Bakuninists, Kropotkinists, Malatestaians) must be contrasted the pseudo—Stirnerism of John Henry Mackay and E. Armand.

Pseudo-Stirnerism gives us a sweetened Stirner who tends towards the same end as the libertarian socialists — that is social harmony. But they do not think it can be achieved, as do the latter, by means of Bakunin's impulse to unity or Kropotkin's mutual aid, but rather through individual egoism. In order not to be attacked by others and have my life and freedom threatened, [respect the life and freedom of others. it is not from love of my neighbors that I do not look for well-being in their suffering, but from personal interest.

But Stirner said nothing about this. He understood very well that in certain cases I cannot obtain the satisfaction of some of my needs without damaging the needs of others. If, for example, I want your woman, and you do not want to give her up or share her with me, I would have to snatch away, use violence, or try seduction, to make her love me and induce her to leave you. If I did not do this, if I suppressed my passion and left her with you, I would spare your sorrow, but would inflict it on myself. I would not put myself in danger of your revenge, but I should have to renounce an ardently desired joy. And so, going from one renunciation to another in order in not to clash with others, I would end by never having lived my life at all.

Therefore struggle is inevitable, and it is impossible to eliminate it from any kind of society or co-existence.

But there will be other cases in which my interests will correspond with those of my neighbors. Then I agree with them and add my force to theirs in order to achieve a common end. In this way



is formed a union of egoists. But this union is based on a free agreement that can be cancelled at any time. Stirner explains it very clearly:

You bring into a union your whole power, your competence, and *make yourself count*; in a society you are *employed*, with your working power; in the former you live egoistically, in the latter humanly, that is, religiously, as a 'member of the body of this Lord', to a society you owe what you have, and are in duty bound to it, are possessed by 'social duties'; a union you utilize, and give it up undutifully and unfaithfully when you see no way to use it further. If a society is more than you, then it is more to you than yourself; a union is only your instrument, or the sword with which you sharpen and increase your natural force; the union exists for you and through you, the society conversely lays claim to you for itself and exists even without you; in short, the society is *sacred*, the union your *own*; the society consumes *you*, *you* consume the union.

Therefore the union of an egoist with other egoists is simply a temporary arrangement which can be quickly followed by disunion and struggle. It is not and cannot be a stable society based on the universal rule of "I respect you as long as you respect me".

E. Armand claimed outright that an individual could not break an agreement unilaterally — that is, leave an association without the consent of his fellow members. But this would mean that he would be dependent upon the others, he would be their slave, their property — just what Stirner did not want. To Armand's argument that I cannot abandon comrades who will not give me permission to do so because I must have regard for the pain my leaving would cause them, I have already replied that I do not concern myself with those who are not concerned with the pain they cause me by holding me back when I want to leave.

Certain authors confuse individualism with utilitarianism, Stirner with Bentham, the personal pleasure of the unique one with that of the majority or even of all. And they write works like Mackay's *The Anarchists* and Armand's *L'initiation individualiste anarchiste* which certainly do not contribute to the understanding of real Stirnerian thinking.

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Translated from the Italian by Stephen Marietta in 1967. The Zoccoli referenced repeatedly by Martucci in this article is the Italian scholar Ettore Zoccoli, who wrote a well-known general account of anarchism titled *L'Anarchia*, published in Turin in 1907. Ettore Zoccoli also translated the first Italian edition of *The Ego and His Own*, published as *L'Unico* in Turin in 1902.

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