

Preface to *The Ego and His Own*

Georg Brandes

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The book "The Ego and His Own" was published in Leipzig in the year 1845—a book that got no small attention by its rebellious daringness. It has in our days been brought up and examined anew as a precedent to present individualist or anarchist teaching, and has now also found a Danish admirer and translator.

The author called himself Max Stirner, but his real name was Johann Kaspar Schmidt. He was born in Bayreuth in 1806, and lived as a poor teacher, a job he had to give up as a consequence of the publishing of his book. For some time he tempted a life as an author and a translator. He died a forgotten man in Berlin in 1856.

Followers of Friedrich Nietzsche have returned to Max Stirner driven by the widespread urge to find an ancestor, and modern anarchism lays claim to him, as he has influenced one of their most important men, Bakunin.

Max Stirner descends in a straight line from the Nominalists of the early Middle Ages that about 800 years before his time already claimed that universals like those he fights by the name of ghosts ("Man" and "Mankind" in particular), had no reality of their own, but were mere words and names. Their fight continued through all of the 14th and 15th century, and they suffered persecution for their convictions, as later did Stirner.

Stirner seems to have been moved into action by the publishing of Ludwig Feuerbach's "The Essence of Christianity" (1841), a book seen as the last word in progressive thought at the time. In this book the most radical conclusions of the day were drawn. The book turned theology upside-down in that it claimed that the truth was revealed by substituting "Love is divine, goodness is divine" for "God [The divine] is love, God is good," and praising everything human; Man was holy, friendship and marriage were holy. It appeared to Max Stirner that by this turning upside-down of theology, the basic outlook of theology was preserved, and he rebelled rightly against it. As far as he as spirit and writer might have been inferior to Feuerbach in style, he was nevertheless as an improvement upon him as a thinker that went beyond him.

In that religion of Humanity, that Feuerbach had left standing, Self-denial was hardly less praised than in Christianity. Self-love was seen as the Unhuman, and was to be sacrificed. With a passion, that might have received its nourishment through the study of Helvétius, and that precedes Nietzsche, Max Stirner fights against the religiously influenced view of self-love as the Evil Principle. To him the unique Self is the only real Self, and thus the only source of power and right. Man, the People, the Church, the State, these secretive moral or political persons, are

lost personalities, asses in the lion hide of the Self, that Stirner pulls down over their ears. That I love myself, does in his opponents' view imply that I care only for the sensual Self, whereas he claims that my Self is not exhausted by my sensuality. He demonstrates on what superstition the commandment of self-denial can rest, and portrays emphatically the victims of unnatural abstinence.

In the talk of his opponents he finds a hidden, unconfessed Self-love. He himself openly endorses Self-love as a principle, and shows how I assure my freedom only through using what surrounds me in my own best interest. Like all thinkers of this creed he claims that any sacrifice that I bring to my friend or to my lover, I do not bring for their sake alone, but for my own sake, as I cannot stand seeing them suffering or wanting. But nobody has a claim to my love—and love is no commandment, but a free service, through which the I relates to itself.

The philosophy of Egoism is (just like Pessimism) a conceptual attempt—the attempt to see whether we can attain illumination of being by the unique Self. It is worth noticing that by Stirner, just as by the speculative philosophers, the Self never occurs as a result, a product, but always as the ever-new starting-point, unexplained. But it is instructive to follow him, when he rightly shows that neither does the discoverer follow his discovery, nor does the author follow his fundamental idea of love of Humanity, but do it solely to express themselves, just as the bird sings because it is a—songbird. One need not, he says, look at the welfare of humanity in order not to lie and deceive, but might perfectly well refrain from it for purely selfish reasons.

When he establishes the principle of Self-love as the one true and blessed, and on purpose uses the offensive expression that we see each other as objects, he probably means that nobody gives money or good-will to that for which he has no use. The North Americans ask themselves, “Do we require a king?” and answer, “Not a farthing are he and his work worth to us.” And when he states that the egoist does not expect his possession by hand-outs, but conquers what is in his might, in that all that he can appropriate is his property—he does not conceive the word as raw and pertaining to superficial things. “What a competence¹”, he says, “does not the child possess in its smiling, its playing, its screaming! in short, in its mere existence! Are you capable of resisting its desire?”

It is characteristic that the most perfect example of that self-love and self-assertiveness that he praises, he finds in Jesus, who in his opinion was not (like Julius Caesar) a mere revolutionary turning over the State only to make room for a new one, but was an *insurgent*, who lifted himself above everything that seemed sublime to the government and its opponents, and absolved himself from everything that they remained bound to. In particular Stirner glorifies Jesus that he did not waste his power on turning over the established, but rather immured it, as he walled it in, confidently and recklessly carrying up the building of *his* temple over it, without heeding the pains of the immured. He then of course suggests that the Christian world order will see the same fate as once did the heathen one.

Self-will, as he portrays it, is by its being the corruption of the State. What his contemporaries desired by the name of political freedom, was bondage to the State and its laws. None should, according to their opinion, ridicule what was sacred to others. Extramarital sex was seen as “immoral”. When only an impersonal ruler came in place of the personal arbitrariness, they were satisfied, and they desired “Freedom”, a so-called free constitution, as a bestowal from the Powers that be. Stirner vigorously attacks them: You long for freedom? You fools! If you took might,

¹ Also “possession”. or “power”.

freedom would come of itself; I can have only so much freedom as I procure for myself; It is not given to me, and I let myself be robbed! And he mocks those who believe freedom can be bestowed, just like those who believe that right has no other base than might. The tiger that assails me is in the right, and I who strike him down am also in the right.

To him, as later also to Henrik Ibsen and Nietzsche, the State is the curse of the individual. The State is a ruler just as the church was, and builds its case on “morality” just as the church built its case on “piety”. The State does from the first moment on apply the scissors of State culture against the individual, and any creative work against the state is punishable. The freer the people as such is said to be, the stronger the bonds of the individual to State, Society and Party. But popular freedom was at that time a mere ideal, and Stirner’s well of mockery of the contemporary political opposition in Germany never goes dry—the law-abiding and loyal opposition that hold even the most wretched laws in high esteem as laws, and found whoever tried to evade censorship to be immoral. Against the socialist opponents of the State he affirms that as Society is capable only of organizing work for the common good, he who produces something unique cannot become an object of its care, but will rather be seen as a disturbing element. He draws his parallels all the way back to Antiquity. The Athenians were not Socrates’ judges, but his enemies.

In the year 1843 the German empire celebrated its thousandth anniversary. Stirner must have started working on his book already then. For as he states in it: “Listen, even as I am writing this, the bells begin to sound, that they may jingle in for tomorrow the festival of the thousand years’ existence of our dear Germany. Sound, sound its knell! You do sound solemn enough, as if your tongue was moved by the presentiment that it is giving convoy to a corpse... The *people* is dead. Up with *me!* ... Tomorrow they carry thee to the grave; soon thy sisters, the peoples, will follow thee. But, when they have all followed, then mankind is buried, and I am my own, I am the laughing heir!”

That close a victory the first German anarchist envisioned for his ideas. Little did he know that 60 years later, Germany would entertain the idea of the State to an unprecedented degree.

To the question what will happen when the great revolution that he is awaiting, comes, he is at loss for an answer with the phrase that one might just as well expect him to do the horoscope of a child. The only suggestions to be seen, is that he envisions the State society replaced by a free union, in which I sacrifice a part of my freedom, not for the sake of others, but for myself.

Stirner’s form and course of action as a thinker have been outdated; but his work abounds with thoughts that belonged to the future, some of which are already realized, and some whose realization seem close at hand.

One will naturally encounter a lot that will seem unreasonable and pushed to an extreme, and also some clear cases of a dream of the past. But all the more frequently the modern reader will run into Stirner’s clairvoyance.

GEORG BRANDES.

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Published in the 1902 Danish edition of *The Ego and His Own*. Translation by Svein Olav Nyberg. So James J. Martin (see his foreword) was right: There was a Scandinavian edition. This preface by Brandes has been translated into English by Svein Olav Nyberg.

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