

Saint Max: Stirner and Eastern Orthodox Theology

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Presented on 29/04/2026

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While attempts to integrate Christian theology with the philosophy of Nietzsche have been and are still being made, the same cannot be said in the case of a thematically similar, yet even more radical thinker: the German philosopher Max Stirner (Johann Caspar Schmidt, 1806-1856). Similarly, contemporary scholarship on Stirner (Newman, Blumenfeld) tends to see him mostly as a political theorist or a critic of ideology. Max Stirner, whose political and philosophical matrix is rooted in the Left-Hegelian current, is famously known for his egoism and philosophy of the "Unique" (Der Einzige). He envisions a subject whose absolute character cannot be defined by, much less reduced to, its national, political or religious belongings. My paper shall argue that, despite the fact that the resolutely atheistic and egoistic character of his philosophy is, on the whole, absolutely irreconcilable with the communal and spiritual nature of Eastern Orthodox theological anthropology, Stirner's rejection of every reductionism makes him a more fruitful dialogue partner for Orthodoxy than generally assumed. Outstanding Orthodox authors from St. Gregory of Nyssa to Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev articulate a religious anthropology that is fundamentally rooted in God's infinite depth and, as such, escapes every conceptualization from the social to the metaphysical, thus sharing Stirner's non reductionistic approach. Hence, a closer reading of Stirner, paired with an

equally close reading of the aforementioned, and of other, Orthodox theologians and philosophers,
will show that the philosopher of Bayreuth can become a challenging and, in a sense, kindred spirit
to modern Orthodox approaches to contemporary problems on human dignity and personhood, and
establish a new and unexpected bridge between the intellectual traditions of the East and the West.

Introduction

Eastern Orthodox thought, especially in modern times with the so called neo-patristic synthesis
represented by authors such as Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky and by their successors, has
usually been very careful to highlight the differences between itself and Western theological and
philosophical systems. This did not, however, deter modern Orthodox thinkers from acknowledging
their debt to Western philosophy, and even from seeking out similarities and parallelisms between it
and Orthodox theology. A case in point is represented by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre,
whom the Russian Orthodox theologian Pavel Evdokimov considers especially close to Orthodoxy
(1989, p. 37). The Greek Orthodox philosopher Christos Yannaras reaches independently the same
conclusion (2015, p. 248).
Something similar is true when we switch our attention to another situation, namely, the German
philosophical landscape in the wake of Hegel. Even here, post-Hegelian philosophers would not
concern themselves to a tradition like that of Orthodoxy, and, when they analyzed and criticized
Christianity, it was mostly Catholicism and Protestantism that they had in mind. Yet, the scenario
changes when we acknowledge that, on the part of the Orthodox, there was a significant interest in
Hegel and in his philosophical heirs.
To demonstrate this, we need to look no further than the example of Ludwig Feuerbach. Once a
brilliant student of Hegel, Feuerbach became, later in life, one of his fiercest critics. In any event,
Feuerbach is most famous as a foremost antagonist of Christianity, and of religion in general. His

so-called projection theory is of utmost interest here, for it received much attention not only from

his fellow German left-Hegelian philosophers, but also from foremost Eastern Orthodox thinkers.

Simply put, this theory argues that it is not God who created human beings, but it is rather human

beings that, in a sense, created God. Thus, God is but a projection of the human being's idea of his

own fulfilled potential, externalized in the lofty concept of an omnipotent God (see Feuerbach 1989).

Feuerbach's reversal of the traditional account of creation may be seen as one of Max Stirner's fundamental points of departure. "Saint Max", as Marx and Engels sarcastically dub him in their

book *The German Ideology*, does fundamentally share Feuerbach's view that Christianity is a form

of alienation, but argues that Feuerbach's logic needs to be pushed further ahead. In Stirner's own

words:

The highest essence may be the human essence, but precisely because it is his essence and not he

himself, it doesn't matter at all whether we see it outside him and view it as God, or find it in him

and call it "human essence" or "the human being.. (...) It dwells in heaven and dwells in us; we

poor things are just its "dwelling," and if Feuerbach destroys its heavenly dwelling and forces it to

move, lock, stock and barrel, into us, then we, its earthly lodgings, will be very much over-crowded.

(Stirner 2017, pp. 54-55).

Thus, Stirner is employing his typical rhetorically charged language to argue that Feuerbach is, in a

last analysis, guilty of the same error that he imputes to Christianity. Feuerbach has merely shifted

the focus from an external idea of God to a likewise external and general idea of Man. But the philosopher of Bayreuth is by no means content to bow to such general idea, for he does not accept

to let himself be defined even by his own humanity. In other words, to both theism and humanism,

Saint Max opposes his egoism. By this word, we should note, Stirner does not mean some kind of

crude selfishness or narcissistic pettiness, but rather the rejection of all "fixed ideas" that reduce and

subordinate me to a general whole. In his estimation, God is one such idea, just as are the State and,

as we have just seen, Man.

Whence Comes the Unique?

As we already saw above, there is much in Stirner that may remind us of the theories of a later and

much more famous German philosopher, namely Friedrich Nietzsche. It is unclear how familiar

Nietzsche actually was with Stirner, and if he ever had the chance to read his master work The

Unique and Its Property. In any case, the 20th century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze felt the

urge to address Stirner in the very book that he devoted to the study of Nietzsche. The latter is in the

end a more original philosopher than the former, argues Deleuze, because Stirner, as radical as he

was, and despite his own efforts, does not carry forward a true rupture with Hegelian dialectics¹.

According to Deleuze, Stirner does indeed poke a massive hole in the Hegelian system, but he does

so unwittingly, for his intended critique of Hegel is not the strongest weapon he has against his

master. To be more specific, Stirner, with his focus on appropriation and on use of fixed ideas (“ghosts”) as mere tools to be discarded once the egoist no longer needs them, reveals that he is

himself a dialectician, for, Deleuze says, “the unique ego turns everything but itself into nothingness,

and this nothingness is precisely his own nothingness, the ego’s own nothingness” (1983, pp. 161-

162).

Modern Stirner scholars, however, tend to be skeptical about Deleuze’s interpretation. Jacob Blumenfeld, for instance, calls our attention to the fact that Stirner does not postulate his ego as the

philosophical foundation upon which his philosophy is to be built, for, otherwise, the ego would end

up merely another spook just like God, Feuerbach’s Man and Hegel’s Absolute Spirit². Stirner, pace

Deleuze, should not be counted among the dialecticians, for his philosophy does not presuppose a

first moment of a dialectic which sublates a second moment and reaches a synthesis in which it is

itself and other than itself at the same time. Identity is, with Stirner, a much more slippery affair.

Stirner’s ego does indeed take appropriation of things and ideas, but this does not mean that such

appropriation involves a change or a becoming within the ego itself. Stirner’s ego, as we already

saw, is not just another fixed idea, nor does it lay claim to be a sort of static foundation, but can only

be approached phenomenologically. Thus, the ego consumes things and consumes even itself, but

from this it does not follow that the ego which consumes is always the same, fixed reality. As Blumenfeld has it: “to “consume myself” is thus to continually negate and recycle my own self-

expression of who I take myself to be; I block myself from becoming fixed in an identity.” (2017, p.

24). In other words, I may avail myself of the attributes of Man or even of those of God, if those

things align with my purposes, but not necessarily is the “I” which takes the attributes of Man the

1 Of course, the one who supposedly accomplishes this task is none other than Nietzsche himself, who, according to

Deleuze, is thoroughly familiar with the philosophy of Hegel and his heirs, including Stirner.

2 For another critique of the post-structuralist reading of Stirner see Newman (2001).

same as the “I” who will later go on to appropriate those of God. With this move, one may suppose,

Stirner is attempting to overcome both Hegel and Descartes. The former he fights by beginning his

case with nothing, with the absolute negation of positive and universal principles (instead of postulating them first, and then proceed to negate them), the latter he challenges by denying any

fixed substance even to the ego cogito, for the ego cannot demonstrate its own existence by way of

appeal to universal elements like thought or reason.

Mystery and Man

If we take seriously, as Stirner does, the famous Athanasian formula according to which “God became a human being to make human beings divine” (2017, p. 330) then it becomes clear that in

Christian theology in general, and Orthodox theology in particular, humankind occupies a place of

primary importance. Therefore, if we accept Christianity, then the doctrine of the Incarnation reveals itself as the ultimate anthropodicy: we are no longer allowed to philosophize as though human beings were but a meaningless phenomenon in a largely blind and impersonal universe, but

are obliged to accept that God took human nature upon himself in order to raise and mingle it with

his own divine nature. Certainly, Orthodox eschatology tends to be cosmic, in the sense that everything that is actively created by God will in the end be transfigured and joined with him, yet

human beings are created in a place of royalty within creation. We can now see why Orthodox thinkers such as Viktor Nesmelov or Sergei Bulgakov tend to see Feuerbach's project with some sympathy, even though, as can be easily imagined, they do not share his conclusion that "therefore God does not exist" (Zwahlen 2012, p. 188). The similitude between God and human being, in the Orthodox tradition, is not due to an idealization and an externalization of humankind's own qualities into the idea of God, but to the very fact that humanity was created in God's image. There is no space here to elaborate on the debates concerning the interpretations and theological understandings of the notion we have just seen, so we need to move directly to one implication that should be crucial for any attempt to put Stirner and Christianity in dialogue, and whose credits belong to the 4th century Church Father St. Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory, as one of the major figures in the development of Christian apophatic theology, chooses divine mystery as the point of departure for his own anthropological theories. If humanity can be truly said to mirror his Creator, then it needs to mirror every one of his attributes. Now, if God is unknowable in his essence then Man must by necessity mirror such unknowability. In other words, if humanity was created in the image of the ineffable God then it must, in a last analysis, be ineffable as well (Op. Hom, PG 44, 11). It may be pointed out that unknowability and ineffability are not positive qualities that one possesses, but rather presuppose an observer who fails to know or conceptualize something, yet it seems clear from Gregory's apophaticism that God escapes every conceptualization for he exceeds the mental or linguistic categories necessary for such conceptualization to take place. So, if human nature carries a similarity with divine nature, and divine nature is impossible to grasp for the senses, then the same will be true in the case of human nature as well. Thus, if with Feuerbach we see Man projecting into God his own attributes, with Gregory the situation it is reversed, for Man does indeed display all the attributes that pertain to God, but he does so because he mirrors them by way of carrying God's image. Now, for someone like Stirner, this would probably make little difference: whether human nature is rooted in God or not, in the moment in which it is taken as a fixed idea, then the ego will dissolve it whenever it sees fit. The

problem is, however, that if we follow Gregory of Nyssa instead of Feuerbach (and, unavoidably, of

Stirner) then humanity can no longer be said to be “fixed” but it is rather mysterious and fundamentally unknowable. As a result, human essence holds out nothing for Saint Max to truly

appropriate, it cannot be dissolved or reduced to nothing, for, in a way, it is already nothing, namely,

it cannot be reduced to a thing, nor can it be deduced from general rules or observations. According

to the bishop of Nyssa, “concepts create idols” (PG 44, 376C; 1978, p. 81), and the dissolution of

idoltrous conceptualizations is a necessary part of the mystic’s ascent towards God.

The Unique and Human Personhood

One thing that must be pointed out given all of the above is that Gregory of Nyssa was still talking

about human nature in general terms, rather than trying to formulate a philosophy of human individuality. Throughout the entire 20th century, Eastern Orthodox theology has been animated by

ardent debates concerning personhood. One of the protagonists of these debates is the Russian Orthodox existential philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, who is of particular interest here because he

comments directly on Stirner in several of his works. Berdyaev reaches a similar conclusion as

Deleuze, in the sense that he also considers Stirner the one who reveals the nihilism to which the

Hegelian dialectics leads (2009, p. 26), albeit he does not seem to see particular similarities between

him and Nietzsche. While Berdyaev accepts Stirner’s rejection of fixed ideas and of the primacy of

the general over the particular, he nevertheless cannot conceal a hint of disappointment when he

says:

It might be expected that Max Stirner would be an extreme individualist and that to him the highest

value would be the individually unique. Nothing of the kind. (...) It is absolutely clear that the Unique of Max Stirner is not the single man, not the human person, but a pseudonym of the divine.

(1949, p. 33).

By positing the ego as the only reality, and the rest of the world as tools to be used for the ego’s

benefit, Stirner is effectively denying any intrinsic value to the cosmos and to the Other. The “union

of egoists”, a non-committal agreement in which each egoist will benefit from the others so long as it suits his own purposes, that Stirner theorizes is thus far from the spiritual community based on love and freedom that Berdyaev has in mind. Stirner, perhaps surprisingly given the “destructive” nature of his philosophy, is a pedagogical and upbuilding author.³ He does not affirm his ego by actively seeking domination over others or by ranking human beings in categories like Nietzsche will do. Nevertheless, the very fact that the ego will resist its own objectification by affirming himself and only himself, with the entire world as its property, will ultimately condemn him to commit to the very logic of objectification that he sought to reject. If the world is for my ego to consume and the relationship with the Other is reduced to a temporary association, then I end up seeing the world and the Other as objects of which I avail myself only so long as that helps me attain my goals.⁴

Conclusion

One of the most suggestive passages in *The Unique and Its Property* reads as follows: Christianity took away from the things of this world only their irresistibility, it made us independent of them. In the same way, I raise myself above truths and their power: as I am above the sensory, so I am above the truth (2017, p. 396). Stirner’s criticism revolves around the notion that truths are merely tools to appropriate, they are not sacred, and Christianity promotes a servile attitude to them. It is clear, however, that he is talking of truths in the sense of fixed ideas, of ghosts that we are led to believe would be such as they are even without us observers. Stirner acknowledges that Christianity liberated us from the bondage of “the world”, but the liberation does not stop there. As it were, it is precisely the truth that shall set us free. In order to take truths as things that can be appropriated, Stirner necessarily takes for granted that they are also fixed ideas, which only the ego can surpass. We therefore see how, to employ Berdyaev’s terminology again, Stirner can only save the ego from objectification, but will nevertheless yield the world to its hands.

Despite all this, Stirner may join Nietzsche in the ranks of the brilliant diagnosticians who exposed the faults of a Christianity too entrenched in this-worldly logic and oblivious to the infinite royalty

3 “You are certainly more than a Jew, more than a Christian etc., but you are also more than a human being. Those are

all ideas, but you exist in the flesh” (Stirner 2017, p. 156). We should also remember that Stirner spent many years

as a teacher, and his first published essay, *The False Principle of Our Education*, deals precisely with these matters.

4 For a direct comparison of Stirner with Berdyaev, see Tsonchev (2021).

of humankind. Christian, and Orthodox theologians in particular, may thus benefit from a confrontation with Stirner in matters of anthropology and synergetic soteriology and eschatology.

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Giulio Ardenghi
Saint Max: Stirner and Eastern Orthodox Theology
Presented on 29/04/2026

Conference Presentation at the 4th Academic Conference "Philosophy of Religion in the East and West". Almaty Theological Seminary and John Paul II University in Krakow, 27/04/2026 - 02/05/2026. Almaty, Kazakhstan.

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