Clarifying the Unique and Its Self-Creation

An introduction to "Stirner's Critics" and "The Philosophical Reactionaries"

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> **"The World has languished long enough under the tyranny of thought, under the terrorism of ideas; she is waking from the heavy dream..."** — Max Stirner, "The Philosophical Reactionaries" (1847)

Max Stirner's 1844 masterwork, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*[1] (*The Unique*[2] *and Its Property*), is one of the most subversive, radical and, therefore, extreme texts in all of history. It can

[1] Max Stirner's major work appeared sometime in the second half of 1844, though the publishing date was 1845. The original title was *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, though at some point towards the end of the 19th century the German spelling of "Eigenthum" was revised to "Eigentum." The English-language translation by Stephen Byington, was published by Benjamin Tucker in 1907 under the extremely unfortunate title of *The Ego and His Own*, despite the fact that a more accurate translation would have been *The Unique and Its Property*, which I will use here in accordance also with the translator's preference. (As indicated by the title of this introduction, I would consider *The Unique and Its Self-Creation* to have been a much more meaningful choice for Stirner's book. But Stirner never asked me, though he does use terminology of "self-creation" suggestively in his review of EugÃ¨ne Sue's *Les MystÃ¨res de Paris*, 1843.) As Benjamin Tucker says in his own introduction to the original edition, he alone is "responsible for the admittedly erroneous rendering of the title" as The Ego and His Own. However, little did he likely realize how much confusion and mystification his inaccurate title would create for English-speaking readers over the next century (even, eventually, helping to encourage misinterpretation by later German-language readers of the original text). This confusion and mystification has only been reinforced with the more recent (only slightly more correct) re-translation of the title as *The Ego and Its Own*, in which the possessive pronoun has been changed to a more accurate (non-gender-specific) form. Despite the "ego" in these titles, and interspersed occasionally in the only English-language translation of text, Stirner never once uses the word. It is only now that this confusion and mystification is finally being thoroughly dispelled, by this translation of "Stirner's Critics," along with publication of an edited version of the first part of my recent review of John Clark's *Max Stirner's Egoism* (published under the editors' title of "John Clark's Spook" in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #64, March, 2010). The publication of my entire, unedited review under the original title of "John Clark's Stirner" is also planned, as well as publication of a newly revised translation of Stirner's *The Unique and Its Property.*

[2] Following the translator's choice (which happens to be my own as well), I will speak of the "Unique" whenever I refer to Max Stirner's "Einzige." "Einzige" can be translated from the German to English most felicitously as "unique" or "unique one." However, within Max Stirner's texts, it should be remembered at all times that he explicitly intends to use this noun not as a typical concept (of an incomparable, particular individual, for example), but as a name which points to the actual, *nonconceptual* person's life—that life as it is experienced prior to any conceptual interpretation. Thus, when I speak of Stirner's "Einzige" I will employ "Unique" beginning with an upper-case "U" to indicate and reinforce his intended meaning. When I speak of "unique" entirely in the lower case, I will be intentionally employing the word as a concept, rather than as a name.

also be described as one of the most misread, misinterpreted and misunderstood books in the history of modern Western thought.[3] This should not be unexpected. Subversive, radical and extreme texts will always obtain hostile receptions from those targeted by their critiques, whether the critiques are accurate and justified or not.

The book is rather simply—though very cleverly—written with very little use of technical terminology. And Stirner goes out of his way in an attempt to use common language wherever possible, though he often does so very creatively and idiosyncratically. It is also a fairly demanding text for anyone (including nearly every contemporary reader) who is unfamiliar with the cultural background within which it was conceived, written and published. It *is* possible for it to be read and appreciated without knowledge of this background, however the prospect of adequate understanding—not only of the central points but also their extensive implications—definitely recedes the less a reader is familiar with topics like nominalism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, analytical and dialectical logic, and critiques of religion, ontology, epistemology, ideology and language that were current in Stirner's day.[4]

From the moment Stirner's text first appeared, it directly and fundamentally challenged every religion, philosophy and ideology. It didn't just politely challenge every existing *historical* religion, philosophy and ideology, which would already have been enough to have made its author many enemies. It also blatantly and scathingly challenged every existing *contemporary* religion, philosophy and ideology of the day. This, unsurprisingly, made its author *persona non grata* for all theologians, philosophers and ideologists busily working to perfect or put into practice their grand ideas and theories.[5]

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[3] It can be plausibly argued that Stirner's text is one of the most misread, misinterpreted and misunderstood books in the entire history of thought, West *or* East. But it certainly can be considered at least one of the more, if not *the* most misunderstood in modern Western thought. Paradoxically, as a European text it is definitely Western—though not necessarily in its perspective and orientation (being completely nominalistic, atheistic, anarchistic, amoral and egoistic at the same time, counter to the major themes of Western thought). Historically, though it falls squarely within the modern period, it is also clearly anti-modernist to a degree only vaguely hinted by the nominally *post*-modern texts of contemporary theory.

[4] I'm not speaking of particular forms of nominalism, phenomenology or analytical and dialectical logic here, but generically. Stirner is not merely a nominalist with regard to either essences or to universals in particular, but a generic nominalist. Nor is he a phenomenologist in the now predominantly understood philosophical sense of Edmund Husserl, nor in the particular philosophical senses in which Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty or others used the term in following decades or in the following century (although certain similarities or resemblances will be inevitable). Remember that Husserl, Heidegger and MerleauPonty followed earlier phenomenologists, including some like Stirner who did not use the term, among others who did use the term like Johann Heinrich Lambert, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G.W.F Hegel and Franz Brentano. For each of them phenomenology is a method, but for the philosophers—unlike for Stirner—it is always a method determined by presupposed fixed ideas. Stirner is an early, generic practical phenomenologist, developing the project of an empirical investigation without presuppositions (thus nonphilosophically) in an unprecedented manner which has yet to be fully appreciated. Nor—unlike Hegel, or Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels for that matter—does Stirner employ a metaphysical dialectic. Stirner's analytical and dialectical logic remains, like his nominalism and phenomenology, fully self-critical and uncommitted to any fixed metaphysical, epistemological or normative foundation or presupposition. It is merely an empirical method of self-understanding, a development of the lived, practical and conceptual logic of the immanent, phenomenal Unique. (Technically, it would be preferable to forego even the very broad description of the Unique as "immanent," "phenomenal" or even "nonconceptual," but it is very clear that most readers require these repeated hints or they immediately fall back into their (unthinking) habit of interpreting all names as names of symbolic concepts rather than as possible names of nonconceptual experiences.)

[5] Stirner's big crime, a crime that cannot be named without calling attention to exactly what all his enemies wish to hide, is his entirely transparent, sarcastically brutal charge that not only the emperor, but every empire and

Thus the stage was set for over a century and a half of (most often successful, because most often unopposed) mystification of Stirner's intentions by his many critics from 1844 through the present. Even the great majority of self-proclaimed proponents of Stirner's work too often tended to add to the mystification through their own misunderstandings and unself-critical oversimplifications.[6] The most common critical responses to Stirner's text have probably been dismissal or evasion—to simply disqualify it from discussion or avoid comment and change the subject as quickly as possible. But for those few critics unafraid to actually mention Stirner's name and ideas, the dominant response has been denigration and misinterpretation, often bordering on (or including) intentional misdirection. Sometimes it can be blatantly clear that misinterpretations are not accidental but quite deliberate, especially with regard to the more absurd attacks of ideologues. But often it is unclear whether Stirner's critics are too intellectually and emotionally challenged by his text to be held accountable for consciously knowing what it is that they are doing. Regardless, the net effect of the constant streams of denunciation and false portrayals—both pro and con—has unquestionably taken its toll.

Max Stirner's original published critics were all contemporaries writing from within the radical literary, philosophical and political milieu of Vormärz Germany.[7] They included Ludwig Feuerbach (the well-known author of *The Essence of Christianity*, a central founding text of mod-

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all emperors everywhere, have "no clothes." Their pretenses are all empty and cannot hide their actual nakedness. Their powers are composed of the naked self-alienation which constitutes a popular submission that must be continually implicitly encouraged at the same time that it is explicitly ignored and covered-up. Religion, philosophy and ideology are rationalist fetishizations. Their explanatory, normative and regulative powers are all based upon transparent lies, but lies which are for the most part welcomed, repeated continuously and ultimately enforced with violence in order to maintain institutional powers of every kind: religious, political, economic, social, academic, scientific and cultural. Hans Christian Andersen risked changing the ending of his original version of "The Emperor's New Clothes" just before publication to add the little child crying out: "But he has nothing on!" However, the expectation that the "whole people at length" would then go on to join the little child in repeating the child's charge is utterly fantastic. Even Andersen afterwards made no further criticisms aimed at the court, reportedly bought off with gifts of jewels from the king. The reception given to Stirner's critique is necessarily the norm for treatment of such unwanted and unrepentent outbursts—at least as long as the institutions of modern civilization hold sway. The second this fact changes the entire social world will also change.

[6] Just like his critics many, if not most, of Stirner's admirers often seem to latch on to one, two or a few of Stirner's concepts and arguments or attitudes, take them as Stirner's central message, and go on to attempt to reinterpret all of Stirner's work from the resulting narrow, often very one-sided, partial perspective they have derived. This is made all the more tempting by the lack of any genuinely coherent, generally accepted understanding of Stirner's work. Readers who are already predisposed to positively employ one of the traditional meanings of "egoism" are especially prone to then promote a misinterpretation of Stirner based upon their preferred use of this word, brushing aside any of the many glaring inconsistencies such readings produce as unimportant (as yet to be understood or worked out, as a result of one of Stirner's supposed "idiosyncracies" of expression or an unexplained lapse in Stirner's logic, as a problem with translation or the interpretation of 19th century word use, etc.). Stirner's more superficial critics (the great majority of all his critics) generally employ the same method, but their predisposition toward negative evaluations of traditional meanings of "egoism" often leads them to somewhat similar results, but with an emphasis on the problems and evils. They then have every reason blame any inconsistencies in their own misinterpretations on supposed lapses in Stirner's logic, excessively idiosyncratic modes of expression, untrustworthiness (because he is self-serving), etc. In either case, this is where the unfortunate English title translation and occasional entirely inappropriate use of the word "ego" in the translation tend to greatly reinforce erroneous tendencies in interpretation even for readers who think they are in agreement with Stirner. Given the contemporary denotations and connotations of the word "ego," its use in translating any but the most clearly critical references to a concept of the "ego" or "*the* I" in Stirner's text should be avoided, or at least clearly explained. At this point anything less will be considered unacceptable by any perceptive readers, commentators and critics.

[7] The Vormärz was the period before the German Revolutionary events of March, 1848 began.

ern humanism), Moses Hess (at the time a Feuerbachian communist associate of the young Karl Marx), Bruno Bauer (a former defender of conservative Hegelianism turned radical critic), Szeliga (pseudonym for Franz Zychlin von Zychlinski, a Prussian officer who was also a proponent of Bruno Bauer's "critical criticism"), Kuno Fischer (while still a student, author of a vociferous pamphlet denouncing Stirner—along with other left Hegelians—as a "new sophist," later a respectable historian of philosophy) and the pseudo-proletarian duo of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx (although Marx and Engels' criticism wasn't actually published until 80 years later!). Of these, three criticisms were published soon enough following the original issuance of his text for Stirner to respond in *Wigand's Vierteljahrschrift* in 1845, under the title of "Recensenten Stirner's" ("Stirner's Critics"). Although Stirner never replied to him in print, Bruno Bauer's response to Stirner's book also appeared in that same 1845 issue. Later in 1847 Stirner (writing as G. Edward) then responded to Kuno Fischer in the fifth volume of *Wigand's Epigonen*, under the title of "Die Philosophischen Reaktionaere" ("The Philosophical Reactionaries"). Unfortunately, Stirner never had a chance to dispense with Marx and Engels' lengthy, nearly unreadable, diatribe entitled *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (*The German Ideology*) since they were unable to get it published either in Stirner's or their own lifetimes.[8]

The massive tides of historical misreading, misinterpretation and misunderstanding have too-long tended to swamp any possibility of a genuine popular understanding of Stirner's work, especially in the English language given the mistranslated titles in every edition so far published. Along with publication of a much needed *revision* of the English translation and its misleading title, probably the most important place to begin the reinterpretation of Stirner's work on a much more accurate basis is with publication of this long-overdue translation of Stirner's responses to his initial critics.[9] But both Stirner's texts and his responses to his critics first need to be put in a comprehensible context.

[8] Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were unable to publish their *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, it was apparently not for lack of trying. At any rate, besides the problem of the apparent cluelessness of Marx and Engels regarding the most central aspects of Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* demonstrated by their flailing attacks in *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, the appearance of "Recensenten Stirner's" also completely undermined and refuted major arguments of Marx and Engels well before their text was even completed. Unfortunately, Marxist scholars, and even the critics of Marxism, all appear to remain ignorant of the latter fact to this day. So far as I have found, even those few academics who have been aware of the content of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* and "Recensenten Stirner's" have uniformly refused to follow its arguments to their logical conclusions. In *Die Deutsche Ideologie* Marx and Engels attempt to present a more sophisticated, Hegelianized, historical version of materialist philosophy in response to Stirner's destruction of the foundation of their previous Feuerbachian, humanist materialism. But the self-delusional, essentially religious, nature of their project of rationalist realization requires a (self-negating & self-alienating) identification with the ideological construction of a supposedly transcendent, collective historical subject. This makes the misinterpretation and intentional misrepresentation of Stirner's own immanent, intentional egoism a historical necessity for the survival of Marxist ideology in any form. This is the pathetic secret of the Marxist *ideological* critique of ideology in *Die Deutsche Ideologie*. In order to maintain the survival of Marxism as an ideology, Marxists are forced to paint the genuinely non-ideological as "ideology" even if this requires the maintenance of a permanent, blatant lie: anarchists must all be portrayed as bourgeois egoists from Max Stirner on. Anything less would be an admission of the ideological, self-alienating foundation of the Marxist "science" that perfected the mass-enslavement and genocidal campaigns of the Soviet and Maoist collectivizations, gulags, re-education camps, resettlements, etc., as if its obviously ideological nature should be in need of any additional revelation.

[9] A very incomplete English translation of "Stirner's Critics" has long been available, "abridged and translated by" Frederick M. Gordon and published in *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. viii, numbers 2-3-4; Spring 1977, pp. 66–80. More recently, an original and complete new translation of "The Philosophical Reactionaries" by Widukind de Ridder was published in *Max Stirner* (ed. Saul Newman, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2011), independently of the Wolfi Landstreicher's translation herein, which itself was completed in 2011, following his translation of "Stirner's Critics."

Max Stirner is the pseudonym of Johann Kaspar Schmidt, born on the morning of October 25, 1806 in Bayreuth, Bavaria, just after the Battle of Jena and the beginning of the Napoleonic occupation of Prussia. He was the son of a flute-maker who died when Johann was only an infant. Before he reached the age of three his mother remarried an older apothecary (pharmacist) and thereafter moved with him to Kulm on the Vistula River in West Prussia (now Poland). As soon as possible (in 1810) Johann was also brought to live in Kulm, where he spent his boyhood. Then in 1818 Schmidt moved back to Bayreuth to live with his uncle and godfather as he began his humanistic Christian education at the famous gymnasium there founded in 1664. He proved to be "a good and diligent pupil," and left the gymnasium with high marks in September, 1826.[10] He then moved to the city of Berlin where he would continue his education at the university until 1835, live most of his remaining life, and finally die in 1856.

Before his unexpected book, *The Unique and Its Property*, briefly lit up the literary firmament after its initial appearance in late 1844, Stirner (as Schmidt) was most notably a respected teacher in a "Teaching and Educational Institution for Young Ladies" from 1839 until 1844 in Berlin. After he became infamous as the author and critic Max Stirner, he started an ill-fated dairy business and worked as a writer and translator, producing the most important German translations of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Jean-Baptiste Say's *Traité d'Économie Politique*.

Stirner studied for many years under the heavy influence of Hegelians, both at his gymnasium and at the Universities of Berlin and Erlangen. In Berlin he began his university studies in 1826 and ended his institutional enrollment after several interruptions in 1834, completing his *pro facultate docendi* exams in 1835.[11] In Erlangen he studied only briefly in 1829. His Hegelian influences included the rector at the gymnasium in Bayreuth where he had studied for eight years, Georg Andreas Gabler. (It is important to note that it was Gabler who went on to take over the University of Berlin chair in philosophy when Hegel died.) They also included other prominent Hegelian professors like P.K. Marheineke, Christian Kapp and Karl Michelet under whom Stirner studied. Most importantly, Stirner attended the lectures of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel himself at the University of Berlin in 1827 and 1828 at the height of Hegel's popularity. In addition to the Hegelians, in Berlin Stirner also studied most notably under Friedrich Schleiermacher (the-

De Ridder's translation confirms most, though not all, of Landstreicher's choices in his own translation presented here.

[10] John Henry Mackay, translated by Hubert Kennedy, *Max Stirner: His Life and his Work* (Peremptory Publications, Concord, CA, 2005), page 32.

[11] In 1835 he was granted *qualified facultas docendi* status following extensive examinations. Stirner could have qualified for doctorate status, but he never applied.

ology),[12] Heinrich Ritter (logic), and (in classical philology studies) Philipp August Böckh and Johann August Wilhelm Neander.

Following the completion of his studies and the beginning of his career as a teacher, Stirner began to socialize with the group of radical intellectuals around Bruno Bauer then called *die Freien* ("the Free"). This group can be considered a successor to an earlier group called the *Doktorenclub* ("Doctors' Club"), which according to one member had consisted "of aspiring young men, most of whom had already finished their studies" in which "reigned supreme … idealism, the thirst for knowledge and the liberal spirit…"[13] Aside from Bruno Bauer's central role, the earlier group had also been notable for the participation of the young student, Karl Marx. However, by the time Stirner began his long association with *die Freien* Marx had moved on, rejecting any further association with most of its members. At one time or another many of those identified as "Young Hegelians" or "Left Hegelians"[14] seem to have shown up at meetings of either the *Doktorenclub* or *die Freien*. *Die Freien* usually met in the evenings at one or another Berlin wine bar or beer tavern—eventually settling on Hippel's as its most stable venue—for conversation, criticism, debate, jokes, card-games, smoking and drinking. And it was there that Stirner found an ever-changing group of intelligent, often challenging and outspoken comrades with whom he could feel at home as long as he continued living in Berlin. Amongst the more notable participants in *die Freien*, Bruno Bauer became one of Stirner's best friends (attending both his second marriage as witness, and his funeral) and the young Prussian officer Friedrich Engels for a time also became an enthusiastic duzbruder with Stirner before beginning his later intense friendship with Karl Marx.

It was during the apogee of Left Hegelian ascendance in the social and political thought of the time, while Stirner was fully engaged with *die Freien*, that Stirner began contributing to the radical press as correspondent, reviewer and essayist. Most importantly this included his contribution of essays entitled "The False Principle of our Education" and "Art and Religion" to *Rheinische Zeitung* supplements in April and June 1842 (both coincidentally appearing just before Karl Marx took over as editor). Other contributions appeared elsewhere. And eventually, he began hinting that he was even writing a book. However, none of his comrades was prepared for the radical power and scope of *The Unique and Its Property* when it actually appeared. As it turned out, Stirner had not only been working on a critique of particular philosophical ideas or positions, nor even a critique of the entire Hegelian philosophical system and its own radical critics. Stirner had, instead, completed an unprecedented critique of every possible religious, philosophical and ideological system.

[12] Stirner's studies under Friedrich Schleiermacher, although centering on theology (philosophical, historical and practical theology), also integrally included Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, criticism, ethics, and dialectics. It is likely that Stirner learned much more from the latter four than from Schleiermacher's presentation of theology, with its apologetics, polemics, dogmatics, statistics and symbolics, and in the case of practical theology, such exciting topics as principles of church service, pastoral work, and principles of church government. (See Friedrich Schleiermacher, revised translation of the 1811 and 1830 editions by Terrence N. Tice, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 3rd Edition [Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2011].) Although Stirner was certainly influenced by the whole range of (especially German) Romantics, it seems likely that Schleiermacher's emphasis on perception and feeling—and their central place in hermeneutics—constituted a significant influence helping Stirner to undermine and overthrow Kantian and Hegelian rationalism, right along with Schleiermacher's own dogmatic Christianity.

[13] David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (Harper & Row, New York, 1973) p. 32.

[14] "Left" Hegelian in this case indicated one's stance towards religion. Those on the left were critical of religion while those on the "right" were supporters of a Christian interpretation of Hegelianism in one form or another.

It was in the fall of 1844 that the initial public copies of Stirner's *The Unique and Its Property* first appeared. Assuming the inevitable public controversy ahead, Stirner had already given notice to quit his teaching position as of October 1st. The book was initially received with a wide range of reactions from excitement to outrage, and confusion to consternation. A few laudatory comments were made, notably in letters from Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Engels and Arnold Ruge.[15] But, in the most prominent cases, any initial openness to Stirner's critique quickly gave way to a closing of minds, superficial dismissals, and shudders of contempt for the manifest evils Stirner was then alleged to have unleashed on an unsuspecting world.

Max Stirner announced his intentions in the opening pages of his book. He argued that if egoism was suitable for God, humanity or the sultan, why not for me? Why is it always only the actually-existing, individual egoist who is disparaged, while the imagined masters of the world are so lauded? Why don't we learn from these imagined masters and put ourselves in their place as masters of our own lives? Stirner goes on to do just this for himself, inviting us to follow his lead. The rest of the book is an examination of the implications which follow from this change of perspective from willing servitude to conscious self-creation.

For the vast majority of thinking human beings, it was in Stirner's time—and remains—God or gods, humanity, Man, society, the political state, the economy, or particular figures like emperors, kings or presidents who were not merely allowed, but often expected, to proclaim their power—their egoism—without any necessity of justifying themselves. These figures, all imaginary to one degree or another, depend for the largest part of their existence and powers precisely on the *mass belief* people have in their imagined reality and power. On its most important level, Stirner's masterwork is a consistent examination and critique of this phenomenon, depicting where and how people in practice invest aspects of their own reality and powers in these phantoms through a process of self-alienation.[16] Stirner's critique of this nearly ubiquitous, but most of the time

[15] Ludwig Feuerbach wrote about Stirner's book in a letter that: "It is a brilliant and ingenious work…" And after giving criticisms of Stirner, he then went on to say that: "He is nonetheless the most ingenious and freest writer I've had the opportunity to know." In a letter to Marx dated 19 November 1844, Friedrich Engels wrote that "Clearly Stirner is the most talented, independent, and hard-working of the 'Free'…" Arnold Ruge, publisher of the *Hallesche Jahrbücher für deutsche Kunst und Wissenschaft* and co-editor (with Marx) of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, announced in a letter to his mother that it was "the first readable book in philosophy that Germany has produced." (Max Stirner, edited by David Leopold, *The Ego and Its Own* [Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995] p. xiii. I cite David Leopold's Cambridge University Press edition of Stirner's work, not because it is adequate, but merely because it is the best of an otherwise worse lot. The sad state of Stirner scholarship in general is exhibited in the inadequate—and in some sections incompetent—introduction by Leopold in this edition, although his extensive notes and the index in this edition are themselves competent and important achievements. All citations from the English translation of *The Ego and Its Own* in this essay refer to this edition.)

[16] In his unprecedented critique of self-alienation, Stirner ultimately focuses on the centrality of religion since, historically, all systematic self-alienation begins with religion. Etymologically "religion" is a "Romance word" expressing "a condition of being bound." (Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 48) But, as Stirner earlier points out in his essay on "Art and Religion," religion is first of all "a thing of the understanding," which means that it is actually a *conception* to which we are *bound*. Since there has never proven to be any genuinely credible empirical evidence for the actual existence of any transcendental spiritual beings, religion is in actuality a conceptual *fetishization*. Phenomenally, religion is the self-alienation of one's own powers and activities through the imagination and belief that they are manifestations of a (fantasized) spiritual being. However, self-alienation is by no means confined to religion as such.

unquestioned, phenomenon is at the same time necessarily an immanent critique. It is an immanent critique because Stirner does not lay claim to any transcendent or absolute Truth, Value or Reality (which would itself require the same type of self-alienation to create) or access to any other privileged perspective which would allow him to speak from any position beyond his own particular, finite, unique perspective.[17] That no person before him (nor in fact many after) had similarly made this simple observation and critique only confirms its central importance and his original, incredible audacity.

Despite the mightiest of efforts, once this Pandora's box had been opened it could not be closed. However the efforts continue every moment of every day from theologians, philosophers, preachers, moralists, politicians, economists, judges, police, ideologists, psychologists and all the other technicians of sacred power. They all want each of us to join the chorus disparaging the egoism of any and all actually-existing, particular individuals in order to pledge our allegiance to whichever of the imagined egoist masters we prefer to serve. Do you want to subordinate your life and prostrate yourself to God, to Nature, to Jesus, Ecology, Peace, Love or Science? Or to the Proletariat or Communism, to Free Enterprise or Capitalism, to Language, Freedom or the Void? To many people it matters much less in whom or what you believe enough to pledge your self-enslavement than that you at least believe in *something*, anything that you imagine to be greater than yourself! The biggest tabu is non-belief.

Only immanent critique (critique from within) can hope to dislodge those who insist on their self-enslavement to a reified or imaginary ideal (to a "spirit," "ghost," conceptual "essence," or "fixed idea" in Stirner's terms). Any successful transcendent critique, on the contrary, merely removes this self-enslavement from one imaginary ideal or reification in order to restore it to some other imaginary ideal or reification. To remove every form of self-enslavement from any possible reification or ideal requires not the critique of particular ideals to which people enslave themselves, it requires the critique of the *practice* of self-enslavement itself. And this is where Stirner devotes his primary efforts. He understands that attempts from outside to liberate passive people from one institution of slavery will usually only leave them ready to re-enslave themselves in another form. The abolition of all forms of slavery requires that those who are enslaved fight for their own liberation to reclaim their own practical autonomy and self-possession. Each of those enslaved must construct her or his own immanent, practical critique of every form of enslavement. Or else condemn themselves to remain enslaved.

[17] The distinction and dispute between attempts to posit "transcendent or absolute Truth, Values or Reality" that are supposed to rule over our lives versus Stirner's "own particular, finite, unique perspective" comes down to whether the ultimate rationale for rationalist reification makes any sense: the need to somehow guarantee a special status for oneself in one's world. A special access to nonsubjective, eternal, transcendent Truth, Value or Reality. A version of Juvenal's question then always arises in one form or another: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" ("Who will guard the guardians?" Or in this case, implicitly, "Who can know a truth is *the* Truth, a value is *the* Value, or a reality is *the* Reality?") Rather than providing a foolproof solution to one's problems, subjecting one's life to a higher level of rule in order to guarantee adoption of appropriate beliefs and actions leads to a recursive nightmare. Instead of directly appropriate decision-making based on the actually experienced situation here and now at hand, the decision is in advance "kicked upstairs," where there is no knowledge or understanding of the particular situations in which the decisions will actually be applied and thus no possibility of full responsibility—no ability to respond according to one's own felt, sensible and engaged recognition and understanding. In this rationalist mirror-world Truth, Value and Reality are all representations rather than lived activities in themselves. Stirner radically reverses this perspective and admits only his *own* truths, his *own* values and his *own* reality, and invites us all to do the same. Especially since it is impossible for any nonsubjective Truth, Value or Reality to exist for *anyone* in the first place except as that person's *own* imagined projections of such things.

Like anyone else, Stirner constructed his critique from within a particular time and place, history and culture, situation and milieu. His critique, while certainly applicable to anyone able to read, reason and relate it to his or her own life, can appear narrower or more particular than it actually is if those who read it do not have an understanding of the particular context of the situation in and from which he wrote and its relation to our contemporary situations as readers. The relationships between particular ideas, phrases and themes in *The Unique and Its Property* and understandings of our more generally shared contemporary situation can be described from different perspectives and more or less accurately phrased in a variety of manners and styles. Some of the most important of these ideas, phrases and themes include the nature of Stirner's understanding of egoism, self, concepts, names and language, property, alienty and ownness in relation to his understanding of the sacred, spirit, essence, fixed ideas, religion, language, philosophy, society, humanity and nature. Interpretation of Stirner's perspective on each of these most often founders in the translation of his own words from their particular contexts in his text into the chosen language of each individual interpreter's own particular context of understanding and interpretation and, at the same time, within the more general context of prevailing social, linguistic and cultural reifications—compulsory presuppositions or prejudices that cannot be questioned within an imagined consensus reality of ubiquitous self-alienation. This includes the greatest prejudice of all (especially for all those who remain self-enslaved), that of the impossibility of selfcreation and self-possession.

One way to better understand what Stirner does in *The Unique and Its Property* is to grasp his effort as an attempt to employ a particular method to all of the general cultural phenomena of religion, philosophy, morality, science and ideology. This method was an *egoist* method, possibly modeled in part on Ludwig Feuerbach's anthropological method.[18] But whereas Feuerbach was concerned to reduce the imaginary ideals of religion to the supposed reality of "Man" or the "Human," Stirner had a much more radical concern. His *own* concern, and by implication each of our *own* concerns. Instead of reducing imagined ideals into another supposedly more *real* conceptual ideal as does Feuerbach, Stirner dissolves every imaginary ideal into himself and suggests that we all choose to do likewise. What ultimately makes Stirner's critique so powerful and irrefutable is that it does not, like Feuerbach's (or any other possible) critique begin from *any* fixed-idea or ideal. Not even any conceptual ideal of an "I" or an ego. Instead it begins from his own, and by implication each individual person's own particular, phenomenal, uniquely lived experience.[19] Thus, Stirner's egoism and his egoist method do not involve any reference to any other of the usual depictions (conceptions or representations) of these "ego" words as aiming at

[18] Stirner's egoist method was possibly modeled in part on Ludwig Feuerbach's anthropological method, but may have been developed independently as part of an ongoing process of which Stirner's seminal "Art and Religion" essay (published in early 1842, and most likely written in late 1841) is one milestone. However, given the publication date of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841 and ensuing likelihood that Stirner read it soon after, the probability that Stirner's egoist method was strongly influenced by Feuerbach should not be discounted. Feuerbach's method was in turn undoubtedly derived from David Strauss's earlier *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835–1836).

[19] Neither, of course, does it begin from any particular *fixed* idea of what each person's uniquely lived experience is supposed to be. It begins from that experience as it is non-conceptually *lived*.

self-transcendence (whether "egoistic" or "altruistic"). They resolutely and consistently express a nominalist, or phenomenal—and thus an immanent—understanding. This nominalist or phenomenal or immanent egoism is purely descriptive and empirical, with no normative or metaphysical content in itself. It is an egoism of intentionality that cannot itself be alienated, because it is exactly what one chooses and does, nothing more and nothing less. (It's definitely not an egoism of ends or goals oriented towards some self-alienated image of self-interest.) As Stirner says, it "points" to something which it cannot possibly explain or define in words. It is not an ultimate reality or truth, since these concepts cannot possibly express what it is. Stirner's egoism points to Stirner's figure of the Unique, which points merely to Stirner himself.[20] Similarly, according to Stirner's usage, any particular person's egoism will point to the whole of that person's uniquely lived experience.

That words and language—especially in their conventional usages—are inadequate to fully convey the meaning here is obvious, and is part of the problem of both adequately understanding Stirner and avoiding all the (more or less easy and more or less consciously intentional) misinterpretations of Stirner's work. The process of self-alienation—of separating an idea or representation of oneself from one's living self and then subordinating one's living self to that image—which Stirner describes and criticizes is so ubiquitous and fundamental to the functioning of modern societies that it permeates nearly every aspect of social life.[21] Enslaving oneself to a fixed idea or imaginary ideal (or any number of them) is not a simple thing. It requires an immense amount of effort to work itself out in practice. This effort, in large part, it has been the primary function of all religion, philosophy and ideology to facilitate from the earliest days of symbolic communication. This effort also is embodied in a large number of habits, attitudes, modes of thought, and techniques of subordination that must be and have been learned and perfected by the masses of people in contemporary societies. And it is enforced by the sanctions of social, economic, political and military institutions that are constructed and maintained through the same types of self-alienated acts *en masse*.

To refer to the absence of all these processes of mass self-alienation is what Stirner intends with his figure of the Unique and the practice of *conscious* egoism. That this would mean that Stirner is a mystic[22] and that the Unique is some sort of conceptual absolute, as many suggest

[20] As Stirner proclaims in *The Unique and Its Property*, the "Unique" points to that which precedes all conceptualization. This means the "Unique" does not point to any ideal individual person, not to a physical person, not to some conception of a soul or a self. But to the entire lived experience of the person. It therefore includes one's entire life, including both objective and subjective aspects, which must themselves be artificially determined and separated from each other in order to be brought into being—out of the always pre-existing nonconceptual Unique—as concepts.

[21] The process of self-alienation—of separating an idea or representation of oneself from one's living self and then subordinating one's living self to that image—is not just the foundation of modern life or modernity, it is also the foundation of so-called "traditional" societies, basically from the neolithic age onwards up to modernity. Though it appears it was precisely *not* the foundation for the earlier (one could argue more aptly-named "traditional") paleolithic and, later, gathering and hunting societies that are now usually called "primitive." What distinguishes non-primitive traditional societies from modern societies can be characterized as the intensity and ever-wider dispersion of this self-alienation throughout all aspects of life, including every social institution and form of social practice. Although it is proper to call Max Stirner the most radical, coherent and consistent critic of modernity, it would be incorrect to understand him as defending these traditional institutions or life-ways. He is equally a critic of premodern traditional and modern societies. (Given the limits of archaeological and anthropological knowledge in his time, it is not surprising that Stirner never mentions or hazards any guesses regarding what are now called "primitive" societies.)

[22] Mysticism is derived from the Greek "mystikos," and generally used to indicate some claim to direct or immediate knowledge transcending normal human experience, especially of a sacred or divine nature as in communion with

(most often, it would seem, precisely *for* purposes of mystification or muddling the issue), is absurd. It does not follow that Stirner is speaking of an *imaginary ideal* or a *fixed idea* of an ineffable, transcendental reality simply because words cannot adequately describe the nonconceptual, self-determining figure of Stirner's critique, his own immanent life-experience as it is lived here and now prior to its conceptual representation. To understand Stirner is to understand that he refuses any and all forms of self-alienation. He refuses to separate himself (as his nonconceptual life process) from himself in *any* fixed symbolic form, while at the same time—given the nearly ubiquitous diffusion of language into nearly every aspect of our culture—he cannot escape expressing himself and communicating with those same symbolic forms. But his expressions are always intended in non-fixed, atheistic, nominalist, immanent ways that together function as a critical self-theory.

Although Stirner himself uses few of our common contemporary theoretical categories to express himself, the meaning and implications of his Unique are clearly indicated in his text if we but pay close enough attention, prefiguring to one degree or another the vocabulary of modern hermeneutics, phenomenology and existentialism (though always in a consistently non-fixed, atheistic, phenomenal and nominalist manner). Stirner's full embrace of the nonconceptual in the Unique as prior to any conceptual understandings can be seen in particular as prefiguring Wilhelm Dilthey's "life as it is lived" or "Lebenskategorie" ("category of life"), albeit in a much more radical, presuppositionless form. Dilthey followed Stirner in abandoning the common notion of the centrality of language for all understanding in favor of Stirner's much more nuanced and coherent (reversal of) perspective on language in which conceptual understanding is seen as built upon a more fundamental level of nonconceptual understanding (or preconceptual, bodily, perceptual or lived understanding) as a process of that nonconceptual lived understanding itself.[23] Similarly, Stirner's discussion in "Stirner's Critics" of the "worlds" of Feuerbach, Hess

gods. Stirner, on the contrary, is completely concerned with the here and now, the immanence of mundane, everyday experience—an atheistic, anarchistic, egoistic immanence. Although many mystics tend to refer to "immanence" or at least imply some *form* of "immanence" in their statements, they in fact—as mystics—are always referring to religious forms of the "immanence" of otherwise transcendent ideas or pirits. This means that they are never speaking of any actual immanence, but of the self-alienation of human qualities which are then re-imported back into everyday life in some sense in which these self-alienations are then said to lie within reality, the world, the person, etc. The title of Leo Tolstoy's Christian homily *The Kingdom of God is within You* (based on Luke 17:21) is a typical example of this genre of religious, if not mystical, "immanence."

[23] Wilhelm Dilthey obtained his doctorate in philosophy in Berlin in 1864 from the same university where Stirner studied, and less than twenty years after that university's most radical student had published the most outrageously notorious *critique of philosophy* ever written. While there is a slight possibility that Dilthey was completely unaware of Stirner's work, it is much more likely that he was extremely aware of it. Especially given the existence of other more reputable sources that contributed to his developing understanding of understanding, if Dilthey borrowed anything at all from an encounter with (and inevitably *a rejection of* the most radical aspects of) Stirner's work, he would not by any means be the first to do so (both) without mentioning the debt. (Where, for example, would Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have ended up without their debts to Stirner's work—gained through its partial appropriation while rejecting its most fundamental and radical basis? It has only recently begun to be appreciated how much their metaphysical dialectics of historical materialism and their ideological critique of ideology owe to their encounter with his work—even if they never actually understood Stirner, nor the full import of their own rationalist metaphysics. And what about Nietzsche's later encounter with Stirner, which he strove so hard to hide? Instead of looking for similarities and plagiarism, anyone who understands the shallowness of Nietzsche's rhetoric will realize that he didn't *steal* from Stirner, so much as he *fled* from the radical implications of the iron logic of Stirner's critique, while appropriating a few of the less central themes from Stirner that Nietzsche was then never able to fully master). The similarities between some of the fundamental attitudes of Dilthey's work (from its beginnings) and Stirner's would be somewhat uncanny if there is no connection. For one example, Dilthey's critiques of Kant and Hegel clearly echo (obviously, in

and Szeliga make it clear that he is speaking of what we would now be more likely to call "life-worlds" after Edmund Husserl's usage ("Lebenswelt") introduced nearly a hundred years later in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* in 1936.[24] And, not least in importance, Stirner's Unique should obviously be seen to prefigure Martin Heidegger's "Dasein," albeit, once again, in a much more radical, presuppositionless form. While Heidegger's attempt, with his conception of the "preunderstanding" of "Dasein," to reject the Cartesian Cogito while hanging on to Being, ultimately fails, Max Stirner's more radical rejection of Descartes' Cogito and his dualism of mind and body succeeds by insisting on abandoning not only the reification involved in any fundamental *concept* of an independent ego as a thinking subject, but also the reification necessarily involved in the construction of any and all fixed ideas of speculative ontology, including even phenomenologi-

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a much less radical manner) Stirner's. For another, Jacob Owensby's characterization of the foundation of Dilthey's historical understanding could almost serve as a partial (though less than adequate) description of Stirner's project: "…all knowledge is rooted in life itself as it is given in lived experience. Life is not, however, reducible to subjectivity. Rather, life is an I-world relation prior to the subject-object distinction." (Jacob Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History*, p. ix.) What probably clinches Dilthey's acute awareness of Stirner's work *and* the extreme danger, if not impossibility, of his acknowledging *any* debt to Stirner's work is the fact that Dilthey's original mentor was the same Kuno Fischer whose attempted critique was so unceremoniously demolished by Stirner in "The Philosophical Reactionaries." Kuno Fischer was Dilthey's teacher in Heidelberg, *before* Dilthey began studying at the University of Berlin in 1853, itself only six years after Fischer's antiStirner pamphlet had been published. It is also important to note that any acknowledgment that he borrowed anything, even critically from a hyper-radical source like Stirner could have meant the early destruction of Dilthey's academic career in a potential scandal similar to the one which temporarily derailed Kuno Fischer's career in Heidelberg over the latter's alleged ties to Spinozism. On another tangent, Dilthey was also influenced by two of the same University of Berlin professors who had earlier taught Stirner, and from whom both undoubtedly learned much of their philology, hermeneutics and criticism, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Philipp August Böckh. There are other connections which could be cited as well. For more information on Dilthey, see Jacob Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1994).

[24] As were very probably a majority of the most noteworthy Germanlanguage radicals, philosophers, critics and literary figures since the mid-nineteenth century, Edmund Husserl was at least in some fashion familiar with the nature and meaning of Stirner's work. Bernd Laska reports that "Edmund Husserl once warned a small audience about the 'seducing power' of *Der Einzige*—but never mentioned it in his writing." (Bernd Laska, "Max Stirner, a durable dissident—in a nutshell," available on the internet on the lsr-projekt.de web site in a number of languages, including English.) However Dermot Moran, in Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology (Polity, Cambridge, 2005, p. 131.), also reports that "…in publications from *Logische Untersuchungen* to *MÃ©ditations CartÃ©siennes*, Husserl's approach is predominantly individualist, or 'egological', describing conscious life primarily in the context of the individual self, for which he even invokes Max Stirner's title,… (*der Einzige und sein Eigentum*; 35: 94)." Husserl's distinction (developed from Bolzano's distinction between subjective and objective ideas or representations) between "noesis" (the intentional process of consciousness) and "noema" (the object of conscious intention) is a weak alternative (relegated only to consciousness) to Stirner's nominalist and non-metaphysical distinction between "egoism" (nonconceptual or phenomenally-lived intentional activity) and "property" (the object of egoist action, including acts of consciousness). Similarly, Husserl's conception of "intentionality" (adopted from Brentano—who adapted the scholastic version of Aristotle's conception) is also a weak philosophical (metaphysical) alternative to Stirner's phenomenal "egoism." Husserl cannot avoid reproducing most of Stirner's distinctions in the later phenomenology he "invented," though each of his inventions pale before Stirner's creative appropriation and synthesis of Fichtean, Hegelian and Feuerbachian phenomenological currents.

The case of Brentano is interesting since it brings up the likelihood that Stirner was, like Brentano (with his conception of intentionality), also in part influenced by Aristotle's *De Anima* in developing his nominalist/phenomenal conception of egoism. Once Stirner conceived and developed his egoist method, he undoubtedly brought it to bear in reclaiming all of the self-alienated predicates of every major conception of god, soul and spirit. This means that he most likely examined the general range of results produced by applying the egoist method to every one of the major philosophies *before* proceeding to compile the first draft of what would become his *magnum opus*.

cal ontological *concepts* such as Dasein.[25] Even more radically, Stirner's nonconceptual Unique is explicitly non-dualistic, undermining the dualism of both Descartes' and all of Western philosophy.[26] It is beyond (or prior to) any subject/object dualism because both subjectivity and objectivity are understood as merely self-created abstractions derived from the nonconceptual totality of the Unique, and not conceived as ontological entities with any real existence of their own.

"Both religion and philosophy," as one of Stirner's teachers, Philipp August Böckh has written, "…work by a priori reasoning."[27] This is another way of noting that all religion and all philosophy exist only as long as they include a dogmatic or rationalist doctrinal moment, since unprincipled empirical investigation—conceptually presuppositionless phenomenology—cannot qualify as either religion or philosophy.[28] Even philosophers not generally considered counted amongst

[25] Ultimately, Heidegger's concepts of "Sein" and "Dasein" are highly abstract, cognitive metaphysical categories, and as such remain compatible with the Cartesian tradition of rationalist philosophy of consciousness. To this type of preaching, Stirner explains: "… for absolute or free thinking…, thinking itself is the beginning, and it plagues itself with propounding this beginning as the extremest 'abstraction' (such as being). This very abstraction, or this thought, is then spun out further."

Absolute thinking is the affair of the human spirit, and this is a holy spirit. Hence this thinking is an affair of the parsons, who have 'a sense for it,' a sense for the 'highest interests of mankind,' for 'the spirit.'"

[26] All dualism is necessarily conceptual in nature. By starting directly from the nonconceptual, from which subjective and objective poles (or mind and body, or self and world) have not yet been abstracted, Stirner deftly bypasses the most fundamental problem for all philosophy, the metaphysical problem which actually founds and defines philosophy. Although the attempt is often made by philosophers to avoid conceptual dualism with the creation of monistic metaphysical systems (for examples, Schelling's and Hegel's), these attempts always founder immediately on their invariably conceptual nature. Even when they are supposed to point to something nonconceptual (for example with Schelling's idea of Nature), this nonconceptual is still immediately then metaphysically *conceptualized* in non-nominalist ways (as Being, God, Nature, the Absolute, etc.), rather than simply left unaltered as with Stirner. This always leads to the reproduction of the originally evaded overt dualism *within* the monistic principle itself. Within Kantian philosophy the metaphysical dualism is overt. Within Fichtean philosophy the overt dualism is avoided, but then immediately reproduced within a phenomenological subjectivity. Within Schelling's philosophy the overt dualism is avoided, but then immediately reproduced within objectivity. Hegel merely retraces Fichte's route, avoiding overt dualism, while reproducing it within subjectivity, but a subjectivity combining being and reason.

[27] Quoted from Böckh's "Formal Theory of Philology" in Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Continuum Publishing Co., New York, 1997) p. 133. At the University of Berlin Stirner studied philology and hermeneutics under Philipp August Böckh (who, according to Mueller-Vollmer, "combined the ideas of Schleiermacher with the exacting methods of classical philology taught by Wolf and Ast" [p. 132]). Stirner also studied under Schleiermacher himself. Among the other possible perspectives on his critical self-theory expressed in *The Unique and Its Property*, we can also characterize it as a practical hermeneutics of self-understanding and a critical hermeneutics of self-alienation and self-enslavement.

[28] To my knowledge there is no significant writer or theorist in all of history who has ever made any logically consistent claim that completely unprincipled (in the sense of no a priori, necessary, eternal or absolute metaphysical principles or laws) empirical investigation or conceptually presuppositionless phenomenology could constitute what is called religion or philosophy (or in most cases, if not all, science as well). On the other hand, it is no problem to find explicit evidence that every major theology, revealed religion and philosophy fundamentally depends upon claims to such principles and presuppositions. There *have been* confused claims from many recent philosophers and scientists that they employ no metaphysical principles or presuppositions even as they at the same time claim or assume (sometimes apparently without realizing it) that their theories can provide some form of (metaphysically) a priori, necessary, eternal or absolute knowledge!

rationalists, from Heraclitis to David Hume, among many others, dogmatically maintain rationalist doctrinal presuppositions, though they are not always obvious.[29]

Yet modern philosophy also always contains a restless, skeptical, self-critical moment. The critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, by setting limits to undisciplined flights of pure reason, aimed to deflate the most dogmatic and illogical forms of religion and metaphysics, but primarily served to validate what proved to be less-obvious but in many ways even more potent forms of metaphysical dogma.[30] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel attempted in his own novel way to advance Kant's critical impetus, even though Hegel's dialectical philosophy was also at least partly a critique of Kant's rigid conception of the categories of understanding and of Kant's attempt to completely separate appearance from things-in-themselves, as well as pure from practical rea-

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These naively self-contradictory theorists most often claim to be empiricists, defenders of science or postmodern critics. However, one of the more sophisticated and sometimes-influential claims in a related but different direction is Klaus Hartmann's quite-justifiably controversial attempt at a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel's philosophy made in "Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View" (Klaus Hartmann, *Studies in Foundational Philosophy* [Editions Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1988] p. 267–287). But, as Hartmann at one point confesses, even with the "categorial" and "systematic understanding" of Hegel that he advocates, "we realize that the notorious transition from Idea to Nature, or from the *Logic* to 'Realphilosophie,' can only be a metaphor." (p. 277) Either Hegel is read metaphysically (as Hegel explicitly asks), or his "philosophy" or "metaphysics" can be read non-metaphysically as mere *metaphor*, and any claims regarding the real world vanish, and with them so vanishes the metaphysical claims of the *Logic* as well. Similarly, the "presuppositionless" nature of Hegel's categories in the *Logic* is also hedged by Hartmann, as a mere "reconstruction," whose "sequential forward reading cannot be the whole story. How could a presuppositionless beginning lead to anything…?" Only Stirner's nonconceptual Unique offers the genuine possibility of a conceptually presuppositionless beginning, and does so only by intentionally abandoning philosophy.

[29] The rationalist moment in Heraclitus was, of course and not least, his apparently metaphysical answer to the search for the ultimate substance of reality (the noumenon beyond the phenomenal world), which he decided was fire, modified by stages of rarefaction and condensation. Consistent with the unstable and transient image of fire, Heraclitis maintained a dynamic perspective on this reality in which change or flux is constant. But he certainly did not renounce metaphysical speculation, portraying his views not as mere poetic art, but as a revelation of an eternal Logos. His belief that one cannot step into the same river twice did not stop him from believing that he had some special knowledge of the transcendent foundations of the world.

Despite David Hume's well known empiricism and skepticism, his philosophical speculations (like all *philosophical* empiricists and skeptics) also contain unmistakably rationalist moments, metaphysically necessary or a priori presuppositions that remain unproven and unprovable, but are not to be questioned or in most cases even acknowledged. For Hume this includes the usual naive empiricist presupposition of a metaphysical subject-object dualism, in which atomistic sense-data or perceptions are conceived as the subjective representations of a supposed—though not necessarily proveable—objective world.

Despite the fact that many philosophical empiricists and skeptics have genuinely attempted to reduce their fetishizations of reason, as long as they fail to reject the alleged independent truth of *every* rationalist presupposition they in fact invariably remain in thrall to rationalist reification in those remaining unquestioned forms. For more examples and detailed examination of relation of reification to empiricist philosophy, see the longer version of note 29 in an earlier version of this essay appearing in *Modern Slavery* #1/Spring-Summer 2012 (CAL Press, POB 24332, Oakland, CA 94623; http://modernslavery.calpress.org).

[30] Kant himself claimed to have destroyed all previous forms of metaphysics. He was more reticent and ambiguous regarding claims to religious critique, though he did openly take on some of the more obviously illogical or irrational claims like that of the supposed ontological proof of the existence of God. In their place he elevated the analytic and synthetic a priori, a metaphysical conception of mathematics, fixed categories of the understanding, wiggle room for the possibility of religion, and an intractable metaphysical dualism of appearance and thing-in-itself. As Kant himself explains: "All pure a priori knowledge… has in itself a peculiar unity; and metaphysics is the philosophy which has as its task the statement of that knowledge in this systematic unity. Its speculative part, which has especially appropriated this name, namely, what we entitle metaphysics of nature,…considers everything in so far as *it is* (not that which ought to be) by means of a priori concepts,…" (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A845 B873).

son (by way of a partial appropriation of Fichte's phenomenology and Schelling's philosophy of identity). However, Hegel's metaphysical conception of a transparently self-conscious dialectical logic of historical spirit once again reinstated dogma in place of consistent critique.[31] It was at this point that Hegel inadvertently started the reductionist process which ultimately deconstructed his own (and all) philosophy by himself reducing Christianity to historical Spirit.[32] It was left to the post-Hegelians to then relentlessly carry on this critique to its end. David Strauss next reduced the Christ figure to the concept of the human species in his *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835–1836).[33] In 1841 Ludwig Feuerbach extended Strauss' insights in his critique of Christianity and religion as a whole, replacing them with a philosophy of Man ("…no abstract, merely conceptual being, but a *real* being," as he said), which he then went on to suggest was actually a "negation of philosophy."[34] However, as Stirner easily shows, Strauss and Feuerbach merely replaced the religion of gods with the religion of an abstract ideal of Man or Humanity. This ultimately left Feuerbach increasingly silent in the face of Stirner's unanswerable critique. Around this time Bruno Bauer also advanced a project of critical criticism, a commitment to the critique of all transcendent universals from a perspective of free, infinite self-consciousness, implying the individual critic's divestment of any and all "private" concerns—thus reducing him to a mere shell of abstract universality.[35] Moses Hess (at the time a comrade of Marx and Engels),

[31] Hegel claimed to carry on Kant's critique in an attempt at a presuppositionless phenomenology and logic, but in practice only begged the question (the logical fallacy of already assuming that which is to be proven) by implicitly presupposing his conceptual or logical metaphysics from the beginning. For example, in his doctrines of being and essence, Hegel always already assumes that an immediate experience (lived experience, unmediated by conceptual thought) does not and cannot exist, by always beginning from thinking (mediation) itself, rather than beginning from outside of thought. He then concludes, quite logically given his implicit presupposition, that immediacy is impossible. As Hegel states in his *Science of Logic* (translated by A.V. Miller and published by Humanity Books, 1999, p. 50.): "… what we are dealing with … is not a thinking *about* something which exists independently as a base for our thinking and apart from it … on the contrary, the necessary forms and self-determinations of thought are the content and the ultimate truth itself."

[32] See Nicholas Lobkowicz, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner" in Frederick Adelmann, *Demythologizing Marxism* (Boston College, Chestnut Hill, 1969) pp. 64–95. (Especially relevant are pages 74–75.)

[33] Strauss was actually influenced far more by Friedrich Schleiermacher than Hegel, but he is usually represented as the first of the post-Hegelians, having coined the terms "right Hegelian" and "left Hegelian" to describe more tradition-oriented Christian Hegelians (like Bruno Bauer in 1838) and more liberal or progressive approaches to scriptural interpretation (as was his own). Strauss wrote: "This is the key to the whole of Christology… In an individual, a God-man, the properties and functions which the Church ascribes to Christ contradict themselves; in the idea of the race, they perfectly agree." And "By faith in this Christ, especially in his death and resurrection, man is justified before God; that is, by the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity, the individual man participates in the divinely human life of the species." David Friedrich Strauss, translated by George Eliot, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1892) p. 780.

[34] See Ludwig Feuerbach, translated by George Eliot, *The Essence of Christianity* (Barnes & Noble Books, New York, 2004) p. xix. Feuerbach argues that his philosophy: "…does not rest on an Understanding per se, on an absolute, nameless understanding, belonging one knows not to whom, but on the understanding of man;—though not, I grant, on that of man enervated by speculation and dogma;—and it speaks the language of men, not an empty, unknown tongue. Yes, both in substance and in speech, it places philosophy *in the negation of philosophy*, i.e., it declares that alone to be the true philosophy which is converted *in succum et sanguinem*, which is incarnate in Man;…"

[35] "Reason is the true creative power, for it produces itself as Infinite Self-consciousness, and its ongoing creation is…world history. As the only power that exists, Spirit can therefore be determined by nothing other than itself, that is, its essence is Freedom…Freedom is the infinite power of Spirit…Freedom, the only End of Spirit, is also the only End of History, and history is nothing other than Spirit's becoming *conscious* of its Freedom, or the becoming of Real, Free, Infinite Self-consciousness." Bruno Bauer, "Hegel's Lehre von der Religion und Kunst von dem Standpunkte des Glaubens aus Beurteilt" (1842), translated by Douglass Moggach, 2001. Anticipating his later, more detailed arguments,

in 1844, argued on the contrary that the "essence of man is…social being," moving further from the species to society—as "the cooperation of various individuals for one and the same end."[36] Later still, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels attempted to salvage a critical social theory from the wreckage of Hegelian dialectics and their own by-then-discredited (by Stirner) Feuerbachian materialism. However, this attempt at critical social theory amounted to an obviously *ideological* critique of ideology, itself requiring uncritical belief in a metaphysically materialist dialectical logic, supposedly immanent in history. We now know from its subsequent development where that story leads: Marx's project of the realization of philosophy is (to paraphrase Stirner) necessarily another form of slavery.

It was left for Max Stirner to advance his egoistic critique, a critical self-theory which did not (unlike every religion, metaphysics or ideology) advocate the self-alienation of anyone's actual powers or life-activity. Stirner's egoistic critique has two sides. Negatively, it is a critique of all rationalist religious, philosophical, moral and ideological presuppositions. Positively, it provides a phenomenal description of unalienated self-possession or completely self-determined activity, which can also be characterized as undetermined self-creation. (That is, self-creation undetermined by heteronomous powers.)

There are three integral moments to Stirner's immanent, egoist critique. Each one, without the others would leave the critique, not only incomplete, but incoherent and ineffective. The three moments can be characterized as nominal, phenomenal and dialectical. The nominal moment consists in the refusal to invest symbols or concepts with any special ontological status of their own. The phenomenal moment consists in a presuppositionless phenomenology or empiricism (a *presuppositionless*—and thus a completely non-metaphysical, non-philosophical and non-scientific—empiricism). And the dialectical moment consists in a perspectival, contextual and pragmatic logic that allows a completely dynamic, fluid use of conceptual distinctions and relations (with no necessary, a priori, fixed ideas). However, given the extreme creativity of Stirner's unprecedented critical synthesis of these moments, additional explanation of each of these moments is required to avoid the typical misinterpretations and incomprehension that too often greets unwanted innovations which upset received dogmas and prejudices. This is in part because, despite the relative simplicity and elegance of presentation of Stirner's critiques, he never speaks directly about the nature of his methods. Like the early Taoists Lao-tsu and Chuang-tsu, and the proto-Taoist Yang Chu (whose texts all share some notable similarities to *The Unique and*

Max Stirner implicitly criticized Bauer's "infinite self-consciousness" with his own critique of Hegel's teaching in an essay titled "Art and Religion," which also appeared in 1842.

[36] "Feuerbach says that the essence of God is the transcendent essence of man, and that the true doctrine of the divine being is the doctrine of the human being. Theology is anthropology. This is correct, but is not the whole truth. One must add that the essence of man (*das Wesen des Menschen*) is the social being (*das gesellschaftliche Wesen*), the co-operation of various individuals for one and the same end…The true doctrine of man, true humanism, is the doctrine of human socialization, that is, anthropology is socialism." Moses Hess, " ber die sozialistische Bewegung in Deutschland," *Neue Anekdota*, edited by Karl Gr n (Darmstadt, 1845), p. 203, quoted in Nicholas Lobkowicz, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner," Frederick Adelmann, *Demythologizing Marxism* (Boston College, Chestnut Hill, 1969) p. 75.

Its Property[37]), Stirner leaves it up to us—if we wish—to observe and describe the methods for ourselves.

As Stirner understood well, if the word is sacred, then I am its slave. In *The Unique and Its Property* he says: "For me paltry language has no word, and 'the Word,' the Logos, is to me a 'mere word.'"[38] This means that for Stirner a complete nominalism must be central to any consistent critique of reification. Historically, various types of nominalism developed through a series of critical responses to belief in the *real* existence of Platonic forms, essences, universals or other abstract concepts like Pythagorean numbers supposedly existing somewhere independently outside of space and time. Stirner uses nominalism in its widest possible meaning as the refusal of any belief that symbols or concepts can be more than mere arbitrary objects used for thought and communication. Even though there is no valid or coherent argument that can be made for a rationalist (non-nominalist, realist) understanding of symbols and concepts that doesn't in some central way beg the question (by assuming as a premise what is to be proved), most traditional and modern forms of thought reject nominalism, anyway, out of hand.[39] And those that do accept

[37] Max Stirner was undoubtedly aware of at least the *Lao-tsu*—or *Tao-te-ching*, since it was included in Hegel's lectures on the History of Religion attended by Stirner in the winter of 1827–1828. Many of the early Taoist texts share distinct nominalist, phenomenological and dialectical traces (in which the nonconceptual nature of the Tao is sometimes expressed similarly to the nonconceptual nature of Stirner's Unique). The most remarkable for their similarities with Stirner's work—including their wide disrepute amongst humanists of both East *and* West—may be the texts attributed to Yang Chu. The question of whether Stirner may have had any direct familiarity with the Chuang-tsu texts or Yang Chu texts requires further investigation. Interestingly, though, as far as I have been able to find to date, the first published German translation of Yang Chu's texts was prepared by someone very familiar with Stirner's work, Martin Buber. Buber, who—though he was quite (uncomprehendingly) critical of Stirner—was also a very good friend of Gustav Landauer, whom it should be noted, was at one point enthusiastic enough about Stirner's work that he used Stirner's given name for his own pseudonym. Landauer, of course, is most widely known for a quotation in which he paraphrases Stirner (while leaving out the mediation of people's belief in fixed ideas): "The state is a social relationship, a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships, i.e. by people relating to one another differently."

[38] Max Stirner, edited by David Leopold, *The Ego and Its Own* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p. 164.

[39] Critiques of nominalism have historically relied on premises provided by unexamined rationalist presuppositions. These presuppositions are either smuggled in through unexamined metaphysical or epistemological contextual assumptions, or both. Typically, for a start, some type of ontological subjective/objective dualism and rationalist, representational epistemology is presumed. Then nominalism is usually rejected because it is inconsistent with or cannot provide proofs for the presupposed rationalist forms of reality or knowledge. That the demands imposed by adoption of rationalist presuppositions do not and cannot logically justify any general, presuppositionless critique of nominalism is never considered. This is a corollary of Hume's critique of induction and Stirner's critique of rationalist presuppositions, which I call "McQuinn's Law." (Since I'm an anarchist, this is—at least partly—a joke!) McQuinn's Law can be stated as: Given any genuinely *presuppositionless* empiricism, there is no possible way to prove the existence of any necessary, a priori entity. Every form of conceptual cognition cannot be more than a hypothesis or postulate which must be continually proven in practice. (Obviously, this also includes McQuinn's Law itself, which is why it actually is not a law at all! But what did you expect from an anarchist?)

This means that, as usually conceived, there is no non-dogmatic justification for the presumption of the existence of *any* natural law or timeless or a priori universal, absolute, number, necessity, reality, truth, value, being, beauty, gods, dogmas or any other fixed idea (rationalist reification) which is not discovered and interpreted in one's particular experience as it is lived. These entities may all be postulated, but they are never proven. Show me (I'm a Missouri empiricist!) any a priori or timeless postulate, and I will show that it cannot be proven to be a priori or timeless without begging the question. This may not actually be a law, but it certainly trumps all laws. Just as immanent, phenomenal anarchy trumps the existence of all historical states. (What existed before the first political state was created? Anarchy—the ground of all social existence!)

nominalism usually do so in only narrow or incomplete ways, always preserving some form(s) of non-nominalist, rationalist belief in other areas.

Phenomenology is a generic term referring to the empirical investigation of the phenomena of experience. The philosophical use of the term was originated by the mathematician and scientist Johann Heinrich Lambert (*Neues Organon*, 1764), before being prominently used by Kant (*Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, 1786), Fichte, and Hegel (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807), and long before it was nearly monopolized by Edmund Husserl and those influenced by Husserl (clearly both Husserl's descriptive and transcendental phenomenologies are merely types of possible phenomenologies, not some sort of phenomenology-in-itself, as is too often implied). Stirner's innovation is to insist on a completely presuppositionless phenomenology or empiricism. Before Stirner, every attempt at empirical or phenomenological investigation presupposed the necessary existence of a (metaphysical or religious) conceptual context of one sort or another (including, especially, the whole range of ontologies—dogmatic theories of God, Being, Substance or Mind, along with a subject/object or mind/body dualism since Descartes). Stirner dispensed with this type of *conceptual* presupposition by rejecting a beginning from any *conceptual* context at all, leaving only himself (as nonconceptual, lived experience, both pre-subjective and preobjective) as foundation.[40] Beginning from the Unique, his phenomenally-lived experience beyond words, Stirner's descriptive phenomenology then proceeds from the most basic conceptual distinction between a completely insubstantial subjectivity ("creative nothing") and its object-world (its "property"). Not as some sort of absolutely given metaphysical distinction, but as a practical, finite, conceptual self-creation whose origin (self-constructed from out of the nonconceptual Unique) is never forgotten. Every phenomenal distinction which follows is a part of his self-creation, a fundamentally aesthetic project pursued for his own self-enjoyment (both appropriative and self-expressive), with no (possible) claim to any transcendental objectivity, absolute truth or reality beyond his own experience or power. Although often accused of solipsism for his refusal to believe in any imaginary (rationalist) conceptual guarantee that other individuals are somehow objectively, absolutely or ontologically real, Stirner then goes on (in a refutation of any possible solipsistic intention) to invite others to play the same type of game he does. Without any rules legislated from the outside, Stirner argues that we are each responsible for creating our own conceptual understanding of ourselves and our world, and for communicating as best we wish and are able with others to create our common social world. It should be no surprise that this often seemingly vertiginous choice of a free-falling self-creation in a world without conceptual limits has proven to be too much for most commentators to handle. For theologians, metaphysicians, epistemologists, moralists and ideologists it is simply inconceivable. (They instinctually grab for the nearest fixed idea and hang on for their lives, since they have convinced themselves that life is impossible without fixed ideas to guide them and anchor them in the void left if no external meanings are given from gods or masters!)

Stirner's logic is an analytics and dialectics released from the prison of metaphysics—Hegelian, Aristotelian or otherwise. It is humanly constructed rather than a priori, transcendent or abso-

[40] Whereas most philosophers since Descartes have begun from thinking and thought or conceptual consciousness, Max Stirner begins from non-thought, from his nonconceptual life. Stirner calls himself "the Unique" or "the Unique One" ("der Einzige") to point to himself as an "empty concept," a concept without any content aside from the nonconceptual experience to which it points. An "empty concept" could also be termed a "nominal" or "nominalist concept," a type of concept that always necessarily corresponds perfectly to its object.

lute in any way.[41] Analytic (or deductive) logic derives from analysis—the derivation of conclusions according to (any accepted) rules of logical operation from premises (including the most often ignored, but required lived-context) within which these conclusions are already present. It produces an endless variation of the same thing, but said in different ways, which reveal the implications of particular symbolic relations according to the accepted rules of operation (rules of the game).[42] Dialectical logic, on the other hand, derives initially from dialogue, questioning or argument, from the pragmatic play of different perspectives encountering each other, employing distinctions and removing contradictions, from which a larger, more encompassing perspective can be constructed and understood.[43] The keys to Stirner's use of dialectic are his refusal of any

[41] As it is usually formulated, belief in any a priori is necessarily always a belief in an unverifiable conceptual presupposition. After all, from the instant we create a conceptual understanding of our lives temporality in some form is already there, implied (if by nothing else) in the very act of creation of conceptual categories (of thinking). Prior to our memories of our own acts in the past (which are always memories within the present) and following our current acts (in a future which is only ever projected from the present), how can we possibly know if any particular concept or symbol existed or will exist? Certainly not based on any empirical, experiential evidence. The usual practice of rationalists is to consider thinking as outside of space and time (which is fine if you really believe *you* are fundamentally only a spirit or ghost, but isn't very convincing for those of us who empirically consider our bodies and worlds to be nonexpendable), and therefore its contents as somehow a priori. However, if thinking is considered from a presuppositionless phenomenological perspective as merely an activity of a living person, whose actual essence (as Stirner would say) is nonconceptual, then the existence of any thoughts *prior* to that thinking and outside of experience (a priori concepts) will never be found—only asserted on no (or highly impeachable) empirical evidence. It is not likely that Stirner would have missed (among other similar statements from the philosophers of his time), in an introduction to his *Science of Knowledge* (Nabu Press edition, 2010, p. 26), Fichte stating—as part of a longer argument—that: "Philosophy anticipates the entirety of experience and *thinks* it only as necessary, and to that extent it is, by comparison with real experience, a priori. To the extent that it is regarded as given, the number is a posteriori; the same number is a priori insofar as it is derived as a product of the factors. Anyone who thinks otherwise, simply does not know what he is talking about." What does a priori mean here except a statement that is already contained in some way in its premises (factors). Stirner easily recognized that either the premises themselves must already be a priori rather than empirical, in which case we have a vicious circle in which we will never reach any presuppositionless phenomenon from which we can derive an a priori (and it is obvious that the a priori is just a baseless presupposition), or the supposed a priori thought is really a given (an a posteriori) phenomenon (unless thinking is metaphysically considered somehow to be outside of experience, itself an a priori presupposition).

[42] After standing largely intact for thousands of years, Aristotle's analytic, or syllogistic, logic (reconstructed in the *Organon*) was only replaced by modern formal deductive logics in the 19th and 20th centuries, largely after Stirner's death. During Stirner's lifetime there were, however, already hints at some of the major, imaginative changes on their way. For a much more detailed discussion of the implications of Stirner's analytic perspective, see note 42 in the earlier version of this essay in *Modern Slavery* #2/Spring-Summer 2012 (CAL Press, POB 24332, Oakland, CA 94623), pp. 177–178.

[43] Developing from its earliest practices, Aristotle's formulation of dialectic (also reconstructed in the *Organon*) operates through a limited number of potential practical strategies of argumentation, depending upon the type of context and audience. From its beginnings, dialectic implied a logic of communicative (social) understanding embedded in time and history that became, especially within Hegel's conception of dialectic, increasingly explicit. In fact, dialectic is composed at its most basic phenomenal level of *all* the extra-analytical (contextual, interpretive, discursive and rhetorical) aspects of logic. However, whereas Hegel's dialectic ultimately remains (whatever Hegel's actual intention) no more than a self-alienated, rationalist objectification, Stirner's dialectic is his own self-creation as both self-expression and self-possession. It is a continually recreated and flexible process whose objectifications Stirner creates and consumes at his pleasure for his own purposes—for his self-enjoyment.

In practice, this means that since Stirner takes full responsibility for creating all aspects of his self-expression, he also can take full account (to the extent he wishes in any given particular instance) of every expressive move he makes. Thus, for each distinction Stirner employs, he always understands that it is *his* act of distinction, it occurs in a particular life *context* (including natural, social, historical and personal moments), and it is based upon and operates within—but also always creatively beyond—social and historical systems of both preconceptual and symbolic

rationalist metaphysical or epistemological claim to absolute or objective Truth and his complete openness with regard to the construction and use of categories, as long as all of the logical implications (the currently accepted rules of the logical game of conceptual understanding one is playing) are considered.

Traditional and modern philosophy have always been made up of (revealed or dogmatic, sometimes unacknowledged) rationalist presuppositions, along with phenomenal or empirical descriptions, developed analytically to reveal their implications and dialectically (pragmatically), according to a logic of argumentative assertion which takes a certain consideration of perspective and context in the use of categories in order to be convincing. Hegel's innovation was to collapse the rationalist premises into the phenomenological development of his dialectical logic, identifying his dialectical logic with an historical unfolding of Being. Stirner's refusal of all rationalist presuppositions including his adoption of a thoroughgoing nominalism amounts to a refusal of philosophy. And his critical self-theory thus becomes a presuppositionless hermeneutical phenomenology developed through nominalist analytic and dialectical logic.

Stirner's dialectical phenomenology of self-creation ("ownness," "my power") is also a dialectical phenomenology of appropriation ("my property") and self-expression ("my self-enjoyment") in association with others ("my intercourse"). These are the remaining keys to understanding Stirner's critical self-theory. As Stirner puts it at one point:

> "My power is *my* property
> My power gives me property.
> My power *am* I myself, and through it am I my property."[44]

In his dialectical analysis of the phenomenon of the Unique, Stirner begins by making a purely phenomenal distinction between himself as "creative nothing" and as property as horizons of his life. The boundary or mediating relation between the two, which is also their unity, is his egoism or power. The conceptual distinction through which these two opposed terms are created brings forth an entire conceptual universe of further phenomenal distinctions and relations. Yet this entire conceptual universe is continually and fundamentally acknowledged to be an abstract, conceptual creation with no necessary validity beyond its appropriative and expressive contributions to his self-enjoyment! Its truth is always a function of its power as his self-created, self-expressive property, the artistic self-creation of his life. The extent to which he exercises power over and through his property is the extent of his life. As it is for ourselves our own.

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communication. For each particular conceptual distinction he makes, then the symbolic distinction will nominally denote (or point to) a particular indication whose content is only part of a story that always includes its entire context. And that context will always include everything that the indication leaves out—its entire ground or background, all that is not indicated. This (more narrowly) includes everything that is not conceptually indicated, which would be the other conceptual side of any distinction (for example, the other side of every abstract, polar *evaluative* distinction like desirable/undesirable, good/bad, right/wrong, true/false, real/unreal, beautiful/non-beautiful, spiritual/non-spiritual and material/non-material or the other side of every particular or universal, *objective* distinction like table/non-table, Joan/non-Joan, sleep/awake, aware/unaware, eagle/non-eagle, dust mote/non-dust mote and god/nongod or blue-flying-elephant/non-blue-flying-elephant). According to Stirner's critique, since only particulars actually exist in our experiences, it becomes especially important to maintain an awareness of what is necessarily suppressed by (left out of) every rationalist (abstract, universal) distinction, since it is his goal to restore for himself—and to help all of us begin to restore for ourselves—every particular moment or aspect of life that we currently suppress through our rationalist self-alienations.

[44] Max Stirner, edited by David Leopold, *The Ego and Its Own* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p. 166.

Stirner already makes most of this quite clear in the text of *The Unique and Its Property*, at least for any careful and perceptive readers. And it doesn't take all that much effort to fill in any of the few remaining blanks he has left for us. Yet, the history of Stirner's reception is largely a history of the incomprehension of—and unthinking antipathy to—his work. Where Stirner makes it clear that the "Unique" is *not* a concept in *The Unique and Its Property*, most of his readers—and especially his critics—insist against all evidence on interpreting him as speaking about not just a concept, but a concept of "the ego," or even an "absolute ego," at that. Where Stirner makes it clear that he speaks of egoism as the unavoidable phenomenal experience that appears wherever I and my world are conceptually brought into being, his critics merely see the various forms of philosophical egoism: ethical or moral, rational or psychological. And this, once again, despite all the abundant evidence to the contrary. When Stirner makes it clear that the egoism he describes is not an egoism of absolute, sacred or transcendent ("jenseits") interest, or an egoism involving any sort of separation of his life and acts from any kind of imagined conceptual essence, his critics ignore all of this and proceed to instead mindlessly attribute various forms of isolated, anti-social, calculating, narrowly self-serving egoism to him. Though, as Stirner makes clear, his "Egoism … is not opposed to love nor to thought; it is no enemy of the sweet life of love, nor of devotion and sacrifice; and it is no enemy of intimate warmth, but it also no enemy of critique, nor of socialism, nor, in short of any actual interest…" Instead, Stirner says, "The 'exclusiveness' of the egoist, which some want to pass off as isolation, separation, loneliness, is on the contrary full *participation* in the interesting by—exclusion of the uninteresting." And, finally, despite the fact that Stirner subverts and destroys all of the pillars of philosophy, while only speaking of philosophy with contempt in *The Unique and Its Property*, his critics usually then insist on portraying him precisely as a *philosopher*!

In "Stirner's Critics" and "The Philosophical Reactionaries" Stirner takes these key points (with a few less key) and remakes them, at times in more detail than he did in his original text, and restates them in even more clear and unambiguous terms. In their critiques Szeliga, Feuerbach and Hess each insist on mischaracterizing Stirner's figure of the "Unique" in various conceptual guises, which earns them in turn well-deserved ridicule from Stirner. They each self-congratulatingly portray their sacred conceptual ideals of the human essence as the True and Real, apparently totally unaware of Stirner's forceful and categorical critique of just that sort of mistake. And they each portray the egoist as a sinner against their preferred absolute external scales of value. Finally, when Kuno Fischer treats Stirner as a "reactionary" "sophist" inferior to the philosophers who have supposedly "overcome" sophism, Stirner laughs at his preposterously "earth-shattering thoughts."

Stirner's critical self-theory is fundamentally a practical, self-critical attitude towards self-understanding (which necessarily includes understanding of others and of one's world) and self-activity that is adopted by anyone who refuses to be pushed around by symbolic, conceptual or linguistic theoretical constructs or formations of any type. He has systematized one basic

approach to an attitude which itself refuses any possible final systematizations, and has done so in a manner which closes off no other paths to self-creation except any easy return to the fitful, occasionally nightmarish, slumbers of religion and rationalism and their concomitant self-alienation and self-enslavement.[45]

We each have the power to make our own phenomenal and dialectical distinctions and relations, in ways more or less nominal and presuppositionless, or more or less rationalistic. We each have the power of our own conceptual self-creation which we can use for purposes of constructing our ownness or constructing our self-alienation, our own self-possession or our own self-enslavement. If we refuse any and every dogma, there is no objective, absolute or transcendent reality or truth, beauty or morality[46] which can stop us from being who we are and aiming at whatever we wish within the limits of our powers, including the power of our relationships within our worlds. If we accept any dogma, then according to that dogma we may still imagine that there is an objective, absolute or transcendent reality, truth, beauty or morality.[47] We can

[45] Stirner makes it hard to return to the self-alienating and self-defeating incoherence of religious-rationalist thought—the dogmatism of religion and the built-in nihilism of every form of modern religion, philosophy and ideology (in which frustrating, unreachably abstract Realities, Conceptions and Values are set up as the only acceptable objects or goals of life). This is because his critique is not only devastating for every form of religion, philosophy and ideology themselves, but also—when properly understood through his complete reversal of perspective—his critique reveals the path to the subversive completion of each religiously rationalist project, through completion of the hidden phenomenal, living core of each of these projects. This is the case for the particular projects of ancient philosophers, the project of Christianity, for the Cartesian project and the Kantian project, the Fichtean and Schellingian projects, for Schleiermacher's project, for the Hegelian project, the various Romantic projects of Novalis and others, all of the ideological projects the nationalists, socialists, communists and corporativists, and all the rest of the rationalist projects which have followed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Taking each of these projects individually, we can—from Stirner's critical, egoistic perspective—trace the particular forms of religious or rationalist dogma presupposed a priori in each case. (These presuppositions are always centered around the choice of an initial symbolic inversion, fetishizing a religious or rationalist (representational) mirror-image of our phenomenally-experienced lives, which is invested with the "reality" that is torn and self-alienated from the nonconceptual unity of our actual lives.) These presuppositions then logically lead further to more and more complex structures of self-alienation, more and more intricate excuses for self-enslavement, and more and more arcane attempts at explaining the resulting (ultimately inexplicable) self-contradictions which result from the assumption of the initial inversion of lived reality with its symbolic representations.

[46] See note 41.

[47] Max Stirner's critique of morality is one of the hardest things for his critics to stomach. Even when they seem to understand it in theory, his critics remain so wedded to the self-subordination of their own activities to moral rules in practice that they are for the most part unable to consistently step outside their own habitual commitments, even in their imaginations. This leads to a complete inability to understand why the fetishized belief in compulsory morality of any kind is absurd for those who refuse to live as slaves.

Stirner's whole critique is founded on the refusal of all forms of self-alienation. And compulsory morality is one of the archetypal forms of self-alienation. It involves either creating before the fact, or (more often) claiming to find (or to have imposed on oneself), predetermined rules of conduct that must be followed regardless of one's situation. The absurdity of this becomes even clearer when we read the religious, political, economic, and social moralists, or moral philosophers, and discover that each seeks to find some way to claim that moral rules should always trump the existential choices of particular individuals, though none are ever able to make a logical case for this without introducing dogmatic presuppositions that already contain the justifications for requiring the moral rules. As soon as we disallow these dogmatic presuppositions, these moralists can only flop around like dying fish out of water, rehashing their baseless arguments but going nowhere.

Even though—with their dogmatic foundations removed—moralists can only operate with *no rational basis*, they still insist on claiming that the absence of morality either is—or else definitely leads to—the most heinous of crimes. The typical illogical argument is that the absence of morality means the absence of "moral responsibility," and the absence of moral responsibility leads to heinous behavior. Yet, when moral responsibility is examined, it turns

imagine and believe with all our power that we are ruled by God or Nature, subject to laws, compelled by morals, condemned to sin, controlled by our past, our psychic drives or our genes, alienated from Truth, Beauty and Justice, or puppets of any other half-plausible conceptual construction we can create. Our choice lies between these two visions. It is our choice and, for each of us, our choice alone: conscious self-creation or unself-conscious, self-alienated, enslavement to fixed ideas (and to the institutions which take advantage of them in order to aggregate and exercise people's self-alienated powers).

Over one hundred years following the initial publication of Steven Byington's English translation of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthum* is one hundred years too long to have had to wait to be able to read an adequate translation of Stirner's own words in response to the major published critics of this work in his lifetime. Let's thank Wolfi Landstreicher for producing this highly readable and enjoyable translation not a moment too soon.

— **Jason McQuinn** (Originally written July-September 2011 and revised with additional notes added October 2011 and December 2012.)

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out that it consists of the "good German" rule of just following orders. Of course, it is the *correct* orders that are supposed to be followed, say the moralists. But few ever agree on which are the correct orders. There can never be any unquestionably true, universal criteria that lead us to the correct orders for everyone to follow. And those who yell the loudest that we need to follow *their* "correct" orders are usually the most ignorant and illogical of the bunch: Marxists, liberals, Nazis, racists, Christians, Islamics, Hindus, etc.

What is actually at stake with any submission to morality is the necessary abdication of any directly *personal* responsibility for one's actions, instead of accepting the inevitability that one always chooses one's actions and cannot escape this lived fact. Moral responsibility is an ideological mirage through which people can attempt to displace responsibility from the *actual* agent—themselves—on to the set of moral rules and its alleged source.

Genuine personal responsibility is only accepted when we make each decision for ourselves—unavoidably in our own interests. Unless you believe that your own interests are actually different from the interests involved in your own actions, a highly convoluted and illogical idea, but typical of the distorted thought processes required for the proper functioning of compulsory morality.

Although it is often implied by his critics, it is untrue that Stirner rejects all questions of ethics per se (or non-compulsory morality, should one wish to use that term). If an ethical question or a noncompulsory moral question involves determining what is the best way (according to one's own criteria of "best") to achieve a particular goal, to what would Stirner object? It is only when an ethic is fixed, binding or compulsory in the sense in which morality is usually taken that Stirner could be said to reject ethics.

It should be clear that Stirner's entire argument here turns on the refusal to subordinate his actually lived activities to any self-alienated symbolic representations of himself and his activities. His egoism is an immanent, phenomenal, descriptive egoism and has no compulsory moral content. He has no desire to separate his lived interests from some sort of supposed "actual" or "real" self-interests that he should follow, just as he has no desire to somehow correctly isolate some sort of supposed "actual" or "real" external or heteronomous moral interests that he should follow. The desire to impose some sort of reified, rationalistic compulsory-moral mechanism between one's otherwise felt life choices and one's final actions functions as a fetishized (neurotic) repetition-compulsion preventing any exit from habitual self-alienation (see note 17, where I describe this "recursive nightmare" further). The choice of compulsory morality is necessarily the choice of self-enslavement to that morality—whether it is a supposedly "altruistic" or a supposedly "egoistic" morality. Moral altruism and moral egoism are two sides of the same phenomenon of self-alienation that Stirner consistently and conclusively rejects.

Jason McQuinn
Clarifying the Unique and Its Self-Creation
An introduction to “Stirner’s Critics” and “The Philosophical Reactionaries”
2012

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