

# **The Straitjacket of Humanity**

**A discussion of the philosophical argument between Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach, in the wake of Max Stirner's "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (Leipzig 1844)**

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2001

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# The Matrix

In the American sci-fi blockbuster *The Matrix*<sup>1</sup>, the young hacker Neo is faced with a choice. To succumb to an oblivious existence as clerk in a multinational software firm, in what he himself considers “reality”, or realize that his reality is an illusion; a complex system of digital, sensible delusions. A perfect, yet artificial simulation of the world as we know it, created with the sole purpose of enslaving the human race.

The rebel leader Morpheus explains: There has been a devastating war between man and AI controlled machines. The machines invented “the matrix” in order to feed on the vast energy created by human bodies. There’s a small group of partisans however, who has realized the true condition of things and is fighting the system. The prophecy tells that someday one will be born inside the system who is able to command the structure of “the matrix”. Morpheus believes that Neo is “The One”.

Neo faces a choice: On one hand, his comfortable, but ultimately frustrated life as an obedient taxpayer in society. On the other; a dangerous existence as a digital freedom fighter, “The One”, a unique individual, mentally struggling to break down the power which habitual perceptions and concepts have taken over men.

Should he choose the red pill, he will be thrown right out in the open, shocking revelation of the fraud. If he takes the blue pill, he will be sent right back to his enslaved, but safe, oblivious existence. Neo chooses the red pill, and consequently the film depicts his struggle to overcome the mental barriers of his self and break down the illusion that has been haunting him his whole life. The thing is, that only when he admits to the illusion and sees that the world is only what he can make of it, can he take action. The film takes shape as a breathless tour de force of visually stunning action sequences. The young hero is being chased by the guards of “the matrix”; deadly computer programs visually represented by a secret police, until finally he has grown sufficiently in his mind to deal with the artificial reality and its enforcers. By then, he is able to do anything. He is in fact able to accomplish the impossible.

The interesting thing is that this development is expressed visually as well as in the film’s content. “Some rules can be bent, others broken”, as Morpheus puts it to Neo at one point, his name bearing several references, to the ancient Greek god of sleep, as well as the English word “morph”, a computer slang reference to some kind of indefinite change, or “bending”. And it shows. The main characters can instantly “download” weapons or definite skills, and likewise, if they are mentally capable, they can “bend” the visual representations of their actions. Scenes or characters can instantly change and turn out to be something else than what they seem to be. While the popcorn audience gets all the action they anticipated, and a little more, the academics are in for a ride in the philosophical roller coaster. *The Matrix* somehow manages to question just about everything we usually take for granted, and the philosophical logic is largely intact. In this film the conflict between man and machine becomes an existentialist battle which pits the

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<sup>1</sup> Directed by [Lana] and [Lilly] Wachowski, USA 1999.

single, unique individual against suppressing, habitual conceptions of the world as a community of plight and duty.

The proclaimed anarchist band Rage Against The Machine concludes the film with the song "Wake Up". And exactly this is what the individual has to do. The individual must shake off the suppressing concepts of society in order to enable himself to act freely. To do this means acting against authority; turning against all concepts and institutions of law, state, society, and the guardians of these institutions, by all necessary means.

One can only wonder how it has come so far that a commercial Hollywood production like The Matrix not only surfaces such openly anarchist views, but in addition displays such a powerful argument, visually as well as philosophically. But the thoughts and arguments of the Matrix are not new. In the following I'll try and shed some light on the philosophical heritage in which The Matrix has its roots.

# Stirner

The German philosopher Max Stirner (1806–1856) proposes much the same anti-authoritarian and individualist approach to reality as *The Matrix*. In contrast to some of the political anarchists of his time, for whom revolution was the breaking point from which events and arrangements of society were then to be taken, Stirner’s anarchism is about self-realization all the way. His greatest and only work *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*<sup>1</sup> has as its focal point that the individual’s self-realization begins with the realization that reality consists of “empty” concepts—concepts which the subjective individual is left to fill out. Only when one realizes that law, right, morality, religion, etc. are nothing other than artificial concepts, and not holy authorities to be obeyed, can one act freely.

The consequence of this is first and foremost a radical political anarchism. For how can I realize this in a society which is based precisely on the individual’s duty to the community, and which asks unquestioned obedience to the institutions of law, morality and society? The political passion and wit of Stirner’s anarchism travels far beyond the trenches of time, and reaches the modern reader without much difficulty. To fully appreciate Stirner’s philosophical argument, however, is to understand his philosophical and historical context. Plato’s theory of ideas, Hegel’s dialectics, and Stirner’s contemporary Feuerbach’s critique of religion, all contain important entries to Stirner’s philosophy.

Stirner and Feuerbach belonged to the inner circle of the so-called Young Hegelians, also referred to as the Left Hegelians. Eager subscribers to Hegel’s dialectical method, the Young Hegelians applied a dialectical approach to Hegel’s own conclusions, which led to not only new, politically more radical and disturbing conclusions than Hegel’s own, but also to internal dispute and disruption. The publishing of Stirner’s *Der Einzige* gave rise to a philosophical argument between Stirner and his friend and colleague with the Left Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach,<sup>2</sup> which I will use here to try to shed light on some of the points of dispute in Stirner’s philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Danish edition “*Den Eneste og hans Ejendom*”, København 1902. Translated and reworked by Axel Garde, with an introductory essay by Georg Brandes. This edition has been used throughout this article, although excerpts have been replaced with the appropriate quotes from the english edition, in the translation of Stephen T. Byington, “*The Ego and His Own*”, New York 1907.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872)

# The Objective Idea

It all begins with Plato's theory of ideas. This is not a chair. It is the idea of a chair. A horse is not just a horse. It only becomes a horse with the idea of what makes a horse a horse. The things surrounding us, the world around us, only exist by the virtue of ideas, of concepts. In other words, one could say, reality is conditioned by our concepts of reality.

With this theory, Plato thought to have gained an entry to the truth. The ideas behind the sensible world, behind reality, for him constituted a possible, objective truth, which in contrast to the sensible world was unchangeable and ideal. The ideas exist independently of their physical objects. Whereas the concrete, living horse is born, lives and dies, thus being transitory and changeable, the idea of horse exists forever. The ideas, therefore, exist independently, they are of an eternal and perfect nature.

And thus was the starting signal given for seeking the ideal. Following Plato's thinking, it was actually possible to argue, that political reality should seek towards an ideal of "the good society", for instance. The hectic race for "the good" and "the true" could begin. By no means would it become as easy as it sounded.

With Christianity the ideal became divine. The unconditioned, independently existent truth became God. The Christian church obtained a monopoly on the truth. Only with the reformation of the 1500s did the discussion catch fire. Could one really trust the truth of the church? As it turned out, there were different opinions about this; what was the right faith, the right truth. The discussions led to endless executions of heretics, and to wars, from which our hands are still soaked in blood. But Christianity first and foremost put its fingerprints in virtue of a Christian dualism; a splitting between good and evil, truth before falseness, spirit over body.

The formation of strong, sovereign national states eventually succeeded in establishing some sort of religious tolerance. The arena now became political. Revolutions followed, exchanging kings with parliaments. Enlightenment, science, and reason led to ever new opportunities for development and progress, embraced by capitalism and ideology. Which gave birth to the social sciences and to modern philosophy. And thus, Hegel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

# The Dialectical System Of Hegel

With Hegel's influential, yet much debated dialectical system, there's a decisive break with Christian dualism. Or it was supposed to be. On one hand, Hegel reckons with the notion of a definite, eternal truth within our reach. On the other, he believes to have found precisely the truth of everything.

“The dialectical method is the philosophical dialogue, by which discussion of opposing points leads towards a more true position. With Hegel, the theoretical conversation as well as the concrete historical process, is said to be of a dialectical nature. In theory, the dialectical aspect manifests itself by concepts and positions reaching out of themselves, towards more adequate positions, and in practice, in that the different transcendental horizons of understanding develop themselves towards their completion in the state. (...)

Hegel conceives the driving force in the reflectory process of formation as a striving towards abolishing the defects of the fundamental concepts that prevail. The reflection is the driving force, because it is negating. It tracks down the “defects” and by this creates a desire to abolish the shortcomings.”<sup>1</sup>

In Skirbekk and Gilje it is furthermore said that Hegel's dialectical method, in contrast to empirical observation or deductive analysis, where assumed “laws” or given truths are only to be “found” or “realized”, is based on the case itself. It is the shortcomings of the case itself, the negation, which shows the way to a new position. The case in question can be anything from political institutions to philosophical concepts, as well as completely trivial phenomena.

For Hegel, the “spirit of history” lifts the existing, inadequate truths and concepts to better and more true positions. It does so by means of a dialectical change, in other words by a negative criticism. The spirit of history is an objective force, which steadily preserves the best of the old, and by the negative critique contributes the new and better, expanding our horizons of understanding and, accordingly, improving society's institutions.

The break with dualism consists in that history will constantly seek to unite the opposites into newer and more true syntheses. So there will be no definite opposites. On the other hand, the dialectical process constantly leads to new opposites, which by critique leads to new syntheses etc.

This raises the question, if this new “dialectical truth”, or “spirit of history” so to speak, is open to a new dialectical critique, or is the definitive, irreplaceable truth. There were to be different opinions about this.

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje: *Filosofiens Historie*, bd. 2, p.108–109. Quotes translated from the Danish edition to English by the author.

# The Young Ones

Hegel inspired several generations with his dialectical method. The subscribers roughly divided themselves into two camps. The Old Hegelians, who largely felt that with Hegel's system, philosophy had practically come to an end, and the Young Hegelians, who believed the dialectics could be applied in a radical critique of especially the church and the state. Where the Old Hegelians meant that Hegel's spirit of history was a guarantee for a politically stable, conservative tide of affairs, which would only naturally strengthen the unshakeable institutions of man's society, the Young Hegelians used the dialectics in their rebellion against those self-same institutions.

The key argument of the Left Hegelians is that this "spirit of history" in itself leads to another kind of dualism, a new eternal truth, which man has to obey as his master.

The 1830s witnessed the formation of that group of Young Hegelians in Berlin, which referred to themselves as "Die Freien". The group met regularly in Hippiel's Weinstube in Friedrichsstrasse, where problems of a philosophical or theological nature were debated. The group consisted primarily of Ludwig Feuerbach, David Strauss, the brothers Bruno and Edgar Bauer, Arnold Ruge, and Max Stirner, and in the 1840s additionally such famous characters as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They all contributed in important ways to the development of German philosophy after Hegel, but I'll limit my interest here to just a few.

David Strauss sets the stage with *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), which rejects the Christian notion of Christ being the son of God, and dialectically expands the concept of Christ and the life of Jesus to metaphors of mankind and the history of mankind. Yes, Jesus has been a historical and exceptional person, but not the son of God. It is mankind itself, which is the medium of God.

Strauss lays the foundation for Ludwig Feuerbach's important work *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841).<sup>1</sup> Not only is Jesus a metaphor for mankind. Mankind itself is God. Feuerbach first argues what separates man from the animal, and finds that this is man's self-conscience, as opposed to the animal's instinct. Through religion man mirrors his own conscience. Recognizing this is also to recognize that the ideal concepts which have been attributed God, really are attributes of man. The expression "God is love" leads to the expression "love is divine", and so it is with all those concepts attributed to God, like wisdom, goodness, righteousness, truth, etc. Once transcended, says Feuerbach, everybody can recognize these attributes as straight-forward aspects of human life. God does no longer exist. But love is divine. And thus man is divine. The consequence becomes a humanism of mankind, where man, liberated from religion, truly can unfold his fellowship, his true spirit. It is a grand, magnificent message.

The final battle stands with Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844), wherein Stirner applies Hegel's dialectical method to breaking down each and every "absolute concept" which is outside and above the unique individual, including Feuerbach's "humanity". Feuerbach creates another dualism, says Stirner, wherein being a human demands exactly the same obedience to

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<sup>1</sup> The English edition has been used throughout this article. *The Essence Of Christianity* (New York 1957). Translated by George Eliot.



morality, as under Christianity, just dressed a little differently. What happens if one is “inhuman”; an egoist who does not will the better for mankind, but only for himself? He must be disciplined, for he is not a real man. He does not live up to those attributes Feuerbach is so busy attributing to him.

This, even though God does not exist for any other cause than his own, and the sultan rules his people, i.e. his property, out of pure egoism, and the same goes for humanity, which supposedly wills whatever is best for humanity, and couldn't care less for anything else. Stirner has learned the lesson, as he says, and accordingly, will also base his position on himself alone.

The task for Stirner's unique individual now is to apply the sharp knife of critique to the cutting down of absolute institutions and concepts. By insight and might to claim these as his property, and recreate the world in his own image. The dialectical critique of the absolute concepts leads to a synthesis, wherein the individual self is the point of departure, as well as the objective.

# The Concept Of God

Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence Of Christianity* is first and foremost a break with the notion of God as a spiritual entity outside man. The ideal concepts, which man relates to God, make him appear inferior. Man stands in religion in an unequal relationship to God, and will remain frustrated and unable to fulfill his true potential as long as God is seen as a goal in himself. But the fact remains that these ideal concepts attributed to God are just simple sensible phenomena, common to every man. Once man sees that divine qualities such as love, goodness, truth, etc. really are the essence of man, those qualities will be liberated in man's best interest. In the words of Frederick M. Gordon:

“The regard which was formerly directed toward God, and consequently denied to humanity, would be turned toward one's fellow human beings, in whom is embodied the rich diversity of human capacities. Bonds of solidarity would unite the human species in relations of democratic respect.”<sup>1</sup>

In his argument, Feuerbach applies Hegel's dialectical method in an elegant manner. By the critique of religion, man breaks down the suppressing and false conception of God as an entity in himself, and then creates a synthesis on a higher level, in which he freely can unfold his divine qualities.<sup>2</sup>

Feuerbach then differentiates between the limited individual and mankind. The single individual is limited in several ways, and will seek to liberate himself from these limitations.

“Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species. No individual is an adequate representation of his species, but only the human individual is conscious of the distinction between the species and the individual; in the sense of this distinction lies the root of religion. The yearning of man after something above himself is nothing else than the longing after the perfect type of his nature, the yearning to be free from himself, i.e., from the limits and defects of his individuality.”<sup>3</sup>

The only way in which the individual can become one with his perfect being, now that God has been abolished, is through humanity. Feuerbach's humanism is consequently the grand message of the true brotherhood of man, which can be accomplished, once man has shaken from his shoulders the burden of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick M. Gordon: “The Debate Between Feuerbach and Stirner: An Introduction”, *Philosophical Forum*, vol.8, no. 2-4, USA 1976.

<sup>2</sup> *The Essence Of Christianity* is structured as a chain of different arguments, which shows the contradictory positions of Christianity. All do they lead to this new synthesis, that the divine attributes really are nothing but the common, sensible qualities of man himself. The dialectical model shown here is from Skirbekk and Gilje, *Filosofiens Historie*, vol.2, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> Feuerbach: *The Essence Of Christianity*, p. 281.

# The God-Man

For Max Stirner, however, this is not adequate. In *The Ego and His Own*, he launches a sarcastic critique against Feuerbach's humanism. To him, it appears to be another religion in disguise.

“At the entrance of the modern time stands the “God-man”. At its exit will only the God in the God-man evaporate? And can the God-man really die if only the God in him dies? They did not think of this question, and thought they were through when in our days they brought to a victorious end the work of the Illumination, the vanquishing of God: they did not notice that Man has killed God in order to become now—“sole God on high”. The other world outside us is indeed brushed away, and the great undertaking of the Illuminators completed; but the other world in us has become a new heaven and calls us forth to renewed heaven-storming: God has had to give place, yet not to us, but to—Man. How can you believe that the God-man is dead before the Man in him, besides the God, is dead?”<sup>1</sup>

Stirner strikes at Feuerbach's two concepts “man” and “humanity”, which he finds precisely as claustrophobic as the Christian concepts of God and morality. The spooks of alienation, which Feuerbach was attempting to deal with, appears in the guise of these ideal concepts of man. Feuerbach's attempt at defining the human essence, splits man into an essential and unessential Self.

“What he says is that we had only mistaken our own essence, and therefore looked for it in the other world, but that now, when we see that God was only our human essence, we must recognize it again as ours and move it back out of the other world into this. To God, who is spirit, Feuerbach gives the name “Our Essence”. Can we put up with this, that “Our Essence” is brought into opposition to us—that we are split into an essential and an unessential self? Do we not here with go back into the dreary misery of seeing ourselves banished out of ourselves? What have we gained, then, when for a variation we have transferred into ourselves the divine outside us? Are we that which is in us? As little as we are that which is outside us. (...) With the strength of despair Feuerbach clutches at the total substance of Christianity, not to throw it away, no, to drag it to himself, to draw it, the long yearned-for, ever-distant, out of its heaven with a last effort, and keep it by him forever.”<sup>2</sup>

Stirner terms the resultant predomination of ideal concepts, spooks. Through its upbringing, the child learns to strive for the ideal and beware of the evil. The spook comes into existence, in that not only the “essential” qualities are made to appear desirable, like when the child is

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ego and His Own*, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ego and His Own*, p. 40.

praised for “being good”, but the undesired, “unessential” qualities are set forth as frightening and dangerous. The child learns to nurse the aspects of itself which matches the ideal, and to fear and suppress those that do not. This quickly becomes a splitting in the human individual. The ideal becomes an obsession, a so-called spook or fixed idea, which will enforce itself on the individual. But the suppressed feelings and qualities will still be there, and will haunt the individual, with fear and powerlessness as direct consequences.

For what happens to the man who commits an offence against love, the so-called “human essence”? He is not human, but inhuman; an egoist who has not understood his own essence! He must be disciplined! This leads to precisely the same suppression of the “unessential” qualities, which Feuerbach was about to abolish.

Stirner accuses his contemporaries among the Young Hegelians for being unconfessed egoists in disguise, possessed by fixed ideas in a way not particularly different from the Christian moralists. He compares modern man with a poor madman possessed by the idea of being the emperor of Japan or God Almighty. In the same fashion modern man, and not least the free-spirited humanists among Die Freien, is possessed by the ideas of liberty, equality, humanity, etc. The only great difference is that the size of the asylum in which they walk about, takes up such a vastly larger space!<sup>3</sup>

According to Stirner, we could therefore say that Feuerbach, with his concepts of “man” and “humanity”, creates a straitjacket of humanity: Not only must modern man fight his inferiority to Christian ideals and morals, as he had to do when God was established as an entity outside man; he must now even contain these concepts as his own essence, inside himself. “If Feuerbach goes on to destroy its heavenly dwelling and force it to move to us bag and baggage, then we, its earthly apartments, will be badly overcrowded.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Ego and His Own, p.55–56.

<sup>4</sup> The Ego and His Own, p.42.

# The Creative Nothing

Stirner's work, however, is more than a critique of Feuerbach's humanism. According to Lawrence Stepelevich<sup>1</sup>, *The Ego and his Own* is modeled on the structure of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology Of The Spirit*). Stirner describes the development in a human life, from the first steps of the child, eager to explore the world in a material-sensible phase, through the youth's spiritual attempts at "getting behind" and changing the world in an idealist phase, to the adult recognition of one's own interest in using the world, the final, egoist phase.

Subsequently, Stirner has this development in the human life take place in the concrete historical process. Highly simplified, from the materialism of the antique (the past) through the idealism of Christianity (the present), to the modern, incipient egoism (the future).

This development parallels that of Hegel's philosophy of history, but where the dialectics of Hegel concludes in an abstract concept, "the spirit of history", Stirner's conclusion is quite another. His dialectical rejection of all absolute concepts, with reference to their inadequacy in describing the unique individual satisfactorily, leads him in reality to nothing.

When no concept can describe the unique individual adequately, or in a definite manner, language comes to an end, and one has to realize that concepts are nothing but names. Or in other words, references to something else; to point out, to choose. To choose one thing before the other.

This choice springs from an interest. My own interest. I gain consciousness of myself, before this sun of nothingness.

"They say of God, 'Names name thee not'. That holds good of me: no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names. Likewise they say of God that he is perfect and has no calling to strive after perfection. That too holds good of me alone. I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I set my affair on myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: I have set my affair on nothing."<sup>2</sup>

Stirner's quite consequent application of Hegel's dialectics accordingly leads him far beyond Hegel as well as Feuerbach, to a nothingness, which by sheer necessity creates a consciousness of

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stepelevich: "Stirner As Hegelian", cited by Svein Olav Nyberg in "Max Stirner's Philosophy".

<sup>2</sup> *The Ego and his Own*, p.490. The two sentences of the translator "If I concern myself with myself" and "All things are nothing to me" have been replaced with the sentences of the notes, "If I set my affair on myself" and "I have set my affair on nothing", which I feel is the more accurate translation, and without which the argument in point is somewhat blurred.

self. It is this self, the unique individual, or in Stirner's terminology, the concept of "The Unique One", which is the point of dispute in the debate between Stirner and Feuerbach.

# The Cradle Of Communism

To begin with, Feuerbach was enthusiastic for Stirner's work, and felt that Stirner's critique was based exclusively on misinterpretations of *The Essence of Christianity*. But gradually, as the book circulated and won popularity among the Young Hegelians, he was forced into print.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Das Wesen des Christentums auf Beziehung den Einzigen und sein Eigentum", which was printed in a German periodical,<sup>2</sup> Feuerbach answers the criticism raised by Stirner.

First and foremost Feuerbach repudiates Stirner's claim that he splits man into an essential and an unessential self. The divine properties, which Feuerbach attributes to man, are not properties which are strange to man, but can pure and simply be observed and sensed in the world. The essence of man can thus by no means be strange to man.

Consequently, the Christian dualism between body and spirit is not carried on with the "essence of man", because the sensible, corporeal, profane being is precisely the same as the absolute, spiritual, higher being. On the other hand, there is a human essence which is of a higher nature than the other. There is a difference between humanity, "the essence of man", and the single individual's self consciousness.

Feuerbach's argument gives rise to some difficulties here, because it sounds like he is contradicting himself. In order to explain Christianity and "the essence of religion", he says, he has to base his position initially on the difference between man and God, and by this, in a difference between the unique individual and the universal human being.

If one bases one's position on the unique individual (like Stirner), and by this raises this very individual to a special, holy position, one is in fact creating a new religion.

"For, in exactly that standpoint, consists the essence of religion, at least in this connection, viz. That it selects from a class or species a unique individual and sets him up as holy, unapproachable by all the others. This man, this "Unique One", "Incomparable One", this Jesus Christ, exclusively and alone is God. This oak, this place, this bull, this day, is holy, not the rest. To transcend religion therefore is not something different than to demonstrate the identity between consecrated objects or individuals and the other profane ones. (...)

Religion can only be transcended if you bring this incomparable individual down out of the blue haze of his supernatural egoism into a world of profane sensible appearance; and this would demonstrate to you, unmistakably and undeniably, also his identity with other individuals, his commonness, despite his individual differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Arvon, p.130, cited by Frederick M.Gordon in *The Debate between Feuerbach and Stirner*.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Wigand's *Vierteljahrsschrift*, 1845. Of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Samtliche Werke*. English translation by Frederick M.Gordon, "The Essence of Christianity in relation to the Ego and His Own". *Philosophical Forum*, Vol.8, No.2-4, USA 1976.

(...) Strike down the "Unique One" in heaven, but also strike out of your head the "Unique One" of this world."<sup>3</sup>

To be a man is certainly to be an egoist. But it implies also to be social, to be a communist. The single individual, yet quite limited in comparison to man as such, needs other people, and needs the opportunity for completion and perfection which mankind implies. For instance, there is the kind of love where one's being is fulfilled, which is an unselfish kind of love towards all of mankind, and then there is the love that is selfish and limited, and consequently not nearly as satisfactory. But also on a purely practical level do humans need each other; like the child needs its father, the sick needs a doctor, and the poor man depends on the charity of the rich. There are limitations to human existence which we can only overcome in our companionship and community with others.

Accordingly, as in *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach invites us into his brotherhood of man, in which individuals are enabled to their completion in mankind, because the single individual in himself is inadequate. If the individual does not get this opportunity to develop his potential in the concept of "mankind", he will simply reinvent God and religion once again, because his limitations will feel too overwhelming.

Stirner is placing his "Unique One" as a new sanctuary, a new absolute. Stirner's "nothing" is really a divine designation, i.e. Stirner has after all based his affair on God...! Which is not far from true, as this is precisely what Stirner does in his opening chapter. Examining "the essence" of God and God's cause, he concludes:

"Now it is clear, God cares only for what is his, busies himself only with himself, thinks only of himself, and has only himself before his eyes; woe to all that is not well-pleasing to him. He serves no higher person, and satisfies only himself. His cause is—a purely egoistic cause."<sup>4</sup>

It is not clear who is being satirical of whom here. Stirner in the first place, imitating Feuerbach's "examining the divine essence", or Feuerbach the second time around, comparing Stirner's "unique one" with Christ. Either way, Feuerbach clearly misses Stirner's point, which the following will show. However, his argument still stands.

Some of Feuerbach's points are thought-provoking, as they anticipate a socialist way of thinking. We are in fact witnessing here the theoretical shaping of socialism. Frederick M. Gordon is highly critical in his analysis of Feuerbach's argument. He points out that Feuerbach leaves his initial thesis which is based on the "spontaneous" feeling which originally is supposed to be the essence of man.<sup>5</sup> Instead, "the essence of man" becomes a doctrine, which is supposed to "save" man from the alienation of religion. And from there, there's not a great distance to a Lenin or Stalin.

One can reasonably claim some contradiction in that Feuerbach first obstinately denies splitting man into an essential and unessential self, and thereafter makes the point, that one has to differentiate between the single, limited individual, and the higher, common cause of "mankind". Which somehow leads to a confirmation of Stirner's assertions. But one doesn't do Feuerbach justice by dismissing him solely on this account. He doesn't have the wit or sharpness of a Stirner,

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<sup>3</sup> "The Essence of Christianity in Relation to the Ego and His Own", p.3.

<sup>4</sup> The Ego and his Own, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick M. Gordon: "The Debate Between Feuerbach And Stirner".



but there's a lot in Feuerbach's thinking that actually makes sense on a practical level. And the more disturbing is his claim that men simply cannot live as unique individuals without some kind of substitute for religion. Is this void, the "nothing" of Stirner, of such an incomprehensible, terrifying oblivious nature that we simply cannot cope facing it?

# The Swan Song Of The Concepts

Stirner addressed the critique in an essay entitled “Recensenten Stirners” (Stirner’s Critics)<sup>1</sup>. Here he elaborated on the concept of “The Unique One” in particular, and argued that precisely this concept and the self-interest of the individual, in all ways stands in opposition to religion.

“Stirner speaks of the Unique and says immediately: Names name thee not. He articulates the word, so long as he calls it the “Unique”, but adds nonetheless that the Unique is only a name. He thus means something different from what he says, as perhaps someone who calls you Ludwig does not mean a Ludwig in general, but means you, for which he has no word. (...) The Unique One is the straight-forward, sincere plain-phrase. It is the end-point of our phrase.world, of this world in whose “beginning was the Word”.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of “The Unique One” is in contrast to the concepts of man, spirit, essence, etc., an empty concept, because it doesn’t imply anything except saying “you are you”. It does not imply an ideal, as Feuerbach accused Stirner of, but is a plain empty phrase, which it is up to the individual to fill out. It is simply the indefinable self, which can only be expressed by its own presence, its own subjective existence, not by any kind of absolute definition. It is impossible to base a definition of the “essence of man” on referring, as Feuerbach, to the properties which two or more people have in common. That two people both are animals, does not mean that the animal is the definition of a man. Stirner firmly rejects Feuerbach notions of the “universal human being”, sarcastically referring to the fact that prisons for centuries have been full of “in-humans”, which did not find themselves comprised by “humanity”.

“The reviewers show still more anger to the “Egoist” than to the “Unique”. Instead of trying to get close to the meaning of egoism as Stirner understands it, they stick with their customary conception of it that they’ve had since childhood, and read off the list of sins familiar to all. See here Egoism, the ghastly sin—that’s what Stirner “commends”! (...)

Does Feuerbach live in some other than his own world? (...) Isn’t the world, just because Feuerbach lives in it, the world that surrounds him, the world that is thought, experienced, contemplated by Feuerbach? He lives not merely in the middle of it, but is its middle himself, is the midpoint of his world. And as with Feuerbach, so no one lives in another than his own world; as with Feuerbach, so everyone is the center of his world. World is really only what one is not oneself, but what belongs to one, what stands in relationship to one, what is for one. (...) Your world extends as far as

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Frederick M. Gordon. Notice that Stirner and Feuerbach consequently speak of themselves in the third person.

<sup>2</sup> Max Stirner: “Stirner’s Critics”.

your power of conception, and what you grasp is your own by your mere grasping. You, Unique One, are Unique only together with “your Property.”<sup>3</sup>

Stirner points out that even if the individual by his conscience or “grasping” acquires the world as his property, one cannot avoid that this property likewise is its own; it could very well be a unique individual like yourself. This makes it possible for human beings to be united, in love, for instance. Our pleasure with our property, with our world, shows, in that we forget ourselves.

Religion arises only when we throw ourselves into the dust before a “holy”, elevated world, and by doing so keeps it sacred. The sacred is a maintained claim to our interest, even if we don’t have an own interest in it. Marriage, for instance. “Now what is marriage, which is praised as a relation”, save the fixing of an interesting relation despite the danger of its becoming uninteresting and senseless?”<sup>4</sup>

“The belief that something other than an interest can justify a sympathetic attitude toward some-thing—this belief, that goes beyond interest, is what begets disinterestedness, indeed begets “sin” as one’s disposition toward one’s own interests. (...) The interesting can be interesting only through your interest, the worthwhile can be worthwhile only by your giving it value. What is worth while despite you is something despicable.

Fraudulent egoism consists therefore in the belief in an absolute interest, in an interest that does not spring from the egoist, i.e. from one who is self interested, but from an “eternal interest” which is imperious against the interest of the egoist and which firmly maintains itself. The egoist is “fraudulent” because his own interests, “private interests”, are not just ignored, but even damned, but it remains nonetheless “egoism” because he takes up this alien or absolute interest only in the hope that it will make him happy.”<sup>5</sup>

It is our own interest that creates our world, in that it springs from our self-conscience. When we think, speak, feel, live, come into existence, we create the world from our consciousness, i.e. from our egoism. The world is therefore simply our property, open to our pleasure and consumption. As far as we’re able to take it into our possession. As far as we’re able to grasp it.

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<sup>3</sup> “Stirner’s Critics”, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> “Stirner’s Critics”, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Stirner’s Critics”, p. 5–6.

# The End Of Philosophy?

Stirner's dialectical critique of the absolute concepts leads him to a vacuum, void of language. A nothingness. This creates the utter need for an expression, a consciousness, a self. This unique self can then build its world in its own image. Applying Hegel's dialectics, it became possible for Stirner to reach an unspeakable endpoint of not only Hegel's philosophy, but of philosophy and language as such.

Stirner does not have any rational explanation of this "creative nothing", which seems to be the end point of his thinking. Feuerbach's accusations of Stirner placing his "unique one" as "holy, unapproachable" is largely left unanswered, except for Stirner's remarks on "the holy" as noted above. Stirner may in fact do precisely what Feuerbach claims. When Stirner claims the undefinability of the self, and "names name thee not", one could justifiably say that he takes the attributes of God as his own, and becomes "unreachable" by others. But it seems to me that this is exactly the point. He is unreachable, undefinable, incomprehensible. If people believe otherwise, they're fooling themselves. He takes God's attributes as his own. But he might throw them away again the next minute.

It seems that in the utter ability of change, of creation, of one thing being fitting at one time, and restraining the next, there is no room left for something sacred.

And it seems evident, that Feuerbach misses this point entirely. The philosophical argument between Stirner and Feuerbach is, in Stirner's terms, the struggle between a stagnant, if not slowly dying, Christian idealism, and the incipient, ever adaptable, modern egoism.

Feuerbach's ideas of a "brotherhood of mankind" gave nourishment to not only the socialist thought and movement, but has been profoundly influential to the humanist basis of "man", which can today be found in science, society, the church, legislation, and not the least, in the UN and modern "holy" wars for human rights. Stirner died in 1856 in the shade of Marxism, but the force and cogency of his words hardly ever die. The notion is no longer possible, that one should ever be able to define, and thus subdue the single, unique individual.

But if philosophy in fact does draw to an end with Stirner, because one can no longer base reason and argument on absolute concepts and definitions, but on the individual's own interest alone, what is left then?

"One has always flattered oneself that one was talking about the "actual, individual" man when one spoke about man. But was that possible so long as one wanted to express this man through something general, through a predicate? Doesn't one have to, in order to indicate a thing, instead of taking refuge in a predicate, rather rely on pointing, whereby the intention, i.e. what is unexpressed, is the main thing."<sup>1</sup>

Here we get close to an explanation of the powerful philosophical argument of an American blockbuster movie like The Matrix. Film can reach beyond language, in a manner that closely

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<sup>1</sup>"Stirner's Critics", p. 1.

resembles Stirner's notion of "pointing". With the camera, one cannot define any truth, only record a certain intent, when you point the camera at an object. There is always a subject in a film, namely he who gets to decide the object of the camera, its framing, and the direction of its movement. This subject is indefinable, ever changing and recreating itself, as Stirner has shown. One realizes the strength of this indefinability, this "creative nothing", when one sees that when these motion pictures are shown, this subject is handed over to the audience.

The indefinable self becomes the essence of man.

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The Straitjacket of Humanity

A discussion of the philosophical argument between Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach, in the  
wake of Max Stirner's "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (Leipzig 1844)

2001

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