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Stirner, Wittgenstein, and Anarchism

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The work of Max Stirner is a contentious topic among anarchists, with numerous interpretations of his work, ranging from descriptive, presenting a certain framework of thought, to prescriptive, advocating for anti-authoritarianism, and expressing a commitment to “individualism.” It is my position that egoism is primarily descriptive in nature. The key distinctions Stirner makes, those between fixed and unfixed ideas, and conscious and unconscious egoism, do not lead us to any normative conclusions, despite Stirner’s clear personal opposition to the state and authority in general. Rather, many anarchists are egoists because they find personal value in this perspective. Egoism has both everything and nothing to do with anarchism.

In *The Unique and Its Property*, Stirner writes that he has “based [his] affairs on nothing.” The nothing he refers to is the “creative nothing” or the unique, an internal emptiness, or indeterminacy, the *absence* of any rule that determines how we ought to form concepts. It is comparable to other ineffable non-concepts like the *Śūnyatā* of Buddhism or the *Dao* of Daoism. Stirner does not com-

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ment on what those affairs are, or what form they should take, only what they are “based on.” Therefore, to base one’s affairs on nothing is to consciously base one’s affairs on emptiness, a non-concept that escapes definition, lacking in any essential or ideal forms, or reference to any concept, including desire, thought, mind, and so on.

The process of becoming from an underlying emptiness can be expressed as momentary desire or will, arising from the creative nothing, forming concepts that “please” or are useful to it. Every subject can be said to express and act on their desires, and so Stirner would contend that everyone is an egoist, which mirrors the theory of psychological egoism. The individual who consciously develops out of nothing is referred to as a *conscious egoist*. Stirner contrasts the conscious egoist to the *unconscious egoist*, one who lacks consciousness of the unique, and instead attributes desire to abstractions such as the self, the mind, the brain, Platonic forms, and so on, as opposed to the creative nothing, resulting in what Stirner calls *fixed ideas*, concepts that are deemed to exist in the world, not prefigured by emptiness, but as objective features of a predefined existence.

Stirner’s approach bears similarities to the skeptical problem Wittgenstein expresses in *Philosophical Investigations*, which notes that there is no principle “out there” that determines how we *ought* to form meaning in terms of definitions, grammar, and logic, undermining any notion of fixed meaning. Reality is defined into existence, using language. Although Wittgenstein does not explicitly posit an “emptiness” beneath these definitions, it is implicit in his reasoning. He notes that every “thing” appears to lack any kind of fixed essence. Rather, concepts are useful abstractions that dissolve when we adopt slightly different perspectives; zooming in, zooming out, making observations over vast time scales, etc. Insofar as these perspectives are simplifications or generalizations, we have to ask, relative to what? And the answer is, typically, relative to an alternative lexicon, using particular definitions of “simplification”

and “generalization.” Nothing can be said to exist in an unchanging, discrete sense, independent of thought; rather, concepts lack inherent existence. Moreover, existence itself is a category we attribute to concepts, it is ultimately ephemeral, washed away in a shifting of perspectives and constant change. Hence, no-thing exists in itself.

Stirner’s position can be described as nihilistic, in that it denies existence itself, along with all other fixed categories, like selfhood. Following skeptical inquiry beyond Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* simply leads us to “thought,” subjectivity devoid of any content or further categories. Concepts are recursively generated in thought, which assigns itself the label of “thought,” “subjective experience,” or “being,” and so on. The self, the object of introspection, is a formation in thought and develops in relation to other concepts, all of which stem from the creative nothing. There is no normative notion of how one ought to conceptualize selfhood, or whether we should have any concept of it whatsoever. Stirner denies the inherent existence of the self, just as he denies the inherent or objective existence of all concepts.

Here, it’s important to note that none of this entails opposition to any given concept, only a framework of how ideas are conceptualized, as fixed or unfixed. That is, one can have an indeterminate, unfixed self, generated out of utility, and a fixed self, conceptualized as static and uniform. This framework can be extended to everything else. For example, anarchism, the rejection of authority, can be conceptualized as a moral duty, or a personal preference, or a desire that provides utility. This utility shouldn’t be confused with selfishness. One can find utility in any number of things, including altruism. Another example might be a chair, an emergent property we affix to an assemblage of other objects, each of which is also an assemblage, composed of different parts that can be infinitely subdivided, which only take shape in relation to other objects. Furthermore, as the “chair” decays, it changes from moment to moment, until at some point we might say that it no longer “ex-

ists.” Is the “chair” a particular orientation of the objective joints in nature, or is it a useful concept within our frame of reference, defined in terms of our ends, in this case, something to sit on? As the former, the chair is a fixed idea, as the latter it is unfixed, existing for one’s own ends.

This requires us to ask, if egoism has nothing to do with the *content* of ideas, what is the point of conscious egoism? Nothing follows from egoism, it is not authoritarian or anti-authoritarian. Rather, it negates fixed ideas, making a distinction that puts it in a similar position to meta-ethics in relation to ethics, a framework that does not concern itself with the content of concepts, but the emptiness underpinning them.

For example, take the issue of “moralism,” which many self-described egoists oppose. For a consistent conscious egoist, morality is a fixed idea by definition, a statement of truth, and something that objectively exists, embedded in the structure of the brain or floating around as a set of platonic forms. The egoist might instead express values as personal preferences, where truth value is something attached to expressions out of utility, forming tautologies based on the application of logic and useful definitions. To say that “theft is wrong” is to define theft as non-consensual appropriation, on grounds that one opposes for their own reasons. Similarly, the statement that a “chair is red,” is not inherently true, it is true based on one’s own definitions of “red” and “chair,” with reference to a certain portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, the practical utility of an object for sitting on, and the use of logical operators to convey “truth.” Of course, this is a matter of definition. “Morality” is not necessarily defined in objective, fixed, or essential terms, rather, the nature of morality is debated in the field of meta-ethics, but here I am laying out how an anti-moralist can consistently hold this position in light of Stirner’s main distinctions.

However, accusations of “moralism” are often employed in an inconsistent manner, as a way to short-circuit discourse; the use of meta-ethical claims to invalidate normative values is inconsistent

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says, “don’t think, but look.” What he meant by this is that, given that all attempts to define the world in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions are insufficient, it might be better to describe the world as we experience it. The nature of this “experience” may be a complex, reciprocal system of signs, or a simple, monolithic set of definitions that does not map onto individual subjectivity. Hence, in order for the world to be *organized* according to a monolithic worldview, there would have to be some form of top-down enforcement. However, again, someone with a subjective theory of morality can still hold views that pave over subjectivity, they simply do not use the language of objectivity to express their own positions. In the same sense, someone who conceptualizes things as objective may reject enforcing their views onto others, while nevertheless holding them to be true. Conscious vs. unconscious egoism is a meta-awareness of all values. One either views values as stemming from nothing or from objective systems like natural rights. Objectivity vs. subjectivity is a useful distinction in this sense but does not come with any prescriptions of its own.

because egoism does not prescribe the content of desire. Telling someone that their moral beliefs do not “exist” does not address the content of their belief, in the same way that telling someone that a chair does not “exist” will not make them stop believing in the chair. Instead, it makes more sense to point out inconsistencies and problems in one another’s positions based on shared axioms. For example, one can say that “theft is wrong,” without engaging in moralism, which depends on how one conceptualizes “wrongness” in meta-ethical terms. To take a more controversial example, it is not *necessarily* moralistic to state that “one has a duty to serve the nation,” which depends on how one conceptualizes “duty,” and the “nation.” Granted, “duty” and the “nation” are usually fixed ideas, but this example helps further illustrate what exactly fixed ideas refer to, not to mention the fact that I have encountered people in the political right with fairly consistent interpretations of Stirner. If one experiences a “higher calling,” what matters in terms of Stirner’s distinction is the specific nature of the higher calling: is it a conscious expression of desire that springs from nothingness, or does it justify itself in relation to a network of external concepts? No word is inherently moralistic (I am defining moralism in terms of fixed ideas here), although many are more likely to be used in moralistic ways.

Egoism is also often likened to moral relativism and specifically used to critique the concept of morality, which is a misreading of Stirner. His notion of fixed ideas can be applied to all concepts. Moreover, an egoist can consistently impose their values on others, claim their values are more important than others, employ coercion, and even make “universal” claims (not as a truth, but as an assertion). For example, it is not necessarily moralistic to argue that we should be universally anti-racist. A nihilist can hold any position they happen to desire because nihilism does not justify or refute anything.

Now, keeping in mind these clarifications, we can go back to the question of “what exactly is the point of conscious egoism?” There

is no point in being a conscious egoist. This too, a consistent conscious egoist might say, boils down to one's own desires. Perhaps they find comfort in nothingness and flux. Stirner himself provides a reason, suggesting that one can be ruled by fixed ideas or "absolute thought," that morality has "power over" the spirit, and that the "spirit of love" can *enslave* a person — as if unconscious egoism is a form of self-betrayal. Here, by "rule," Stirner does not mean the rule of authority, but self-denial due to unconscious egoism. One example of it may be someone who engages in sexual abstinence out of a higher calling, despite their desire to have sex. In a similar sense, Wittgenstein claims that one can be "held captive by a picture," the "picture" being an objective framework of reality, not seen as useful, but necessary, leading one to endlessly seek truth where there is none. Despite the apparently prescriptive language, this is not exactly a contradiction in Stirner's thought, but an expression of his own preferences (not something that follows from egoism). An unconscious egoist emerges from nothing, albeit unconsciously, this emergence is still a function of desire, the property of the unique.

I personally do not care if it pleases one to view anarchy as a duty, as long as I do not disagree with the content of their actual beliefs. Holding onto fixed ideas, like asserting that existence is more than simply a useful concept, but an essential property of the universe, and believing that we can know the nature of existence with absolute certainty, are principles that many, if not most, people hold. The same goes for ideas like nationalism, which I oppose, not because they tend to be fixed (they aren't *necessarily*), but because of their content. Although one's desires may change after rejecting fixed ideas, the emergent values and ideals of the unconscious egoist can be identical to those of the conscious egoist, who may treat existence and truth as useful concepts that can be interacted with and formulated in different ways, some of which are more useful to them than others.

Even if there is no central point to egoism, we can still ask why anarchists, in particular, tend to be drawn to egoism. The first thing

that comes to mind is Stirner's union of egoists, an anarchic association of conscious egoists that is voided without ongoing consent. This idea is a conjecture of what *consensual* interactions between conscious egoists might resemble, people consciously cooperating with each other in pursuit of their own desires. However, a conscious egoist is not necessarily someone who participates in a union of egoists because they can impose their will on others, concepts like nationalism automatically preclude the possibility of a union of egoists because they rely on non-consensual relations. Furthermore, one does not necessarily have to be a conscious egoist to be an anarchist, one can participate in consensual, non-hierarchical associations while holding onto fixed ideas.

Another reason many anarchists seem to find value in egoism is that a rejection of fixed ideas suggests that there is no true paradigm, only paradigms that are useful to individuals, where everything is subjective. From this perspective, there is no fixed basis for any universal "ought" that can be used to legitimize rule, depriving it of any fixed ontological and epistemological foundation. For example, egoism invalidates stories like progress, gender, science, and nation as absolute truths, posing them instead as useful concepts that individuals adopt for their own reasons.

However, contrary to what many people think, the fact that egoism invalidates the idea of philosophical foundations does not entail that egoists are obligated to value subjectivity of others. There is no principle that derives from egoism according to which an egoist should *not* strive for epistemic and ontological authority for their own reasons, only how they conceptualize those reasons. Rather, consistent egoist anarchists choose to value subjectivity because it pleases them, they prefer a union of egoists. Someone who believes in truth, existence, and morality, may also place moral emphasis on, for example, the subjectivity of personal identity, even in the presence of apparent "contradictions." I personally reject constructions that invalidate self-expression or are historically, empirically, or intuitively wrong or useless to me.