

Max Stirner

Review of Max Stirner. His Life and Work. By John Henry Mackay

Rudolf Steiner

1898

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Berlin 1898, Schuster u. Löffler*

“The Germans have forgotten their most daring and consistent thinker for so long and so completely that they have lost all right to the gift of his life.” The brave poet of the world view that is imbued with the spirit of this daring thinker, John Henry Mackay, utters these words on the first page of the book in which he describes Max Stirner’s life. I believe that there are not many people today who would feel the bitterness of these words to be justified. But there are some people in the present day who must have the same feeling of pain when they think that *Max Stirner’s* main work, “Der Einzige und sein Eigentum” (The Ego and Its Own), which was published in 1845, was completely forgotten in Germany for decades until it fell into the hands of Mackay, who was a kindred spirit of Stirner, in the British Museum in London in 1888 and experienced a revival through his tireless work. This feeling of pain must be present in those who spent their youth during the time when Stirner’s book was forgotten. For it is not the same at what age one lets a book work on oneself. The effect that a work has on us in the mid-twenties cannot be aroused in us at a later age. And so many of us will feel it a great loss that the so-called Zeitgeist has deprived them of the “Der Einzige und sein Eigentum” at the right time. One of the greats of the present day would have felt this way if a malicious illness had not put an abrupt end to his work at the very moment when he was about to accomplish a spiritual act that would have joined Stirner’s life’s work in the most dignified way. I am referring to Friedrich Nietzsche. He would have written his “re-evaluation of all values” from the same way of thinking that flowed from Stirner’s “Der Einzige”. And Friedrich Nietzsche probably never read a line of Stirner. In my opinion, Nietzsche would have felt at home in Stirner’s world of ideas, as if in an element that needed his intellectual organization to bring it to joyful, fresh life. Instead, he had to move through Schopenhauer’s way of looking at things, which only after painful disappointments allowed him to come to those ideas in which he could live alone. This was the fault of the spirit of the time in which he spent his youth, the spirit that greedily absorbed Schopenhauer’s undignified doctrine of killing the will to live, and which had no inkling of the proud thinker who taught the joy of living because he

had recognized that the life of the “unique” is the most valuable in the world and that it is a vain superstition if a person does not want to live for his own sake but for the sake of another. But how many such other entities has man created over the centuries, for which he wants to sacrifice himself! The individual wants to “sacrifice” himself for God, for the people, for all of humanity, and he sees the highest moral perfection in “selflessly” killing off all self-will and devotedly placing his life in the service of a higher being, a collective or an idea. Stirner counters these self-sacrificing people: “What should not all be my concern! Above all, the good cause, then the cause of God, the cause of humanity, truth, freedom, humanity, justice; furthermore, the cause of my people, my prince, my country; finally, the cause of the spirit and a thousand other causes. Only *my* cause shall never be my cause... Let us see how those who are working for the cause we are supposed to work for, devote ourselves to and get enthusiastic about...» Let us take just one example: the cause of humanity. “What is the situation,” says Stirner, “with the cause of humanity, which we are supposed to make our own? Is its cause that of someone else, and does humanity serve a higher cause? No, humanity only looks to itself, humanity only wants to promote humanity, humanity is its own cause. In order to develop, it lets peoples and individuals toil in its service, and when they have done what humanity needs, it throws them on the dung heap of history out of gratitude. Is the cause of humanity not a purely selfish cause?” From this insight, Stirner draws the lesson: “... instead of serving another egoist whom I place above myself, I would rather be the egoist myself. I want to live like those whom people in their humble delusion strive to serve,” says Stirner. ‘Why should it be evil if I do what those do whom I make my masters?’

The most valuable idea that man could form for himself is certainly that of a being that has enough content within itself to be everything in itself, that can set itself a goal from within itself and follow only this goal of its own in complete self-sufficiency. This idea is an old one. People have always had it. But they have not thought that if they bring out everything that is in them, they themselves are beings that correspond to this idea. They have considered themselves unworthy, too weak to be such beings. That is why they have invented other beings that are more worthy of bearing a character that corresponds to this idea. *Stirner* calls on people, each and every one of them, to look at themselves to see that the essence that they imagine is above them lies within themselves. “If God, if humanity, as you assure us, has enough content within itself to be everything in everything, then I feel that I will lack even less of it, and that I will have no complaints about my ‘emptiness’. I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but the creative nothing, the nothing from which *I* myself create everything as a creator.” Stirner wants people to recognize that they are themselves that and represent that in life, which they only believe they have to worship and adore.”

Stirner represents the worldview of the proud, self-sufficient individual. *Mackay* summarizes it in the following sentences: “*Stirner* proclaims nothing more and nothing less than the declaration of the sovereignty of the individual, his incomparability and uniqueness. So far, we have only spoken of his rights and duties, and where they begin and end; but he speaks of being free from the former and powerful in the latter. We have to decide. And since we cannot return to the night, we must enter the day.” And Mackay looks into the future of this day and says: ‘In place of our tired, tormented, self-tormenting race, there will be that proud, free race of the ‘unique ones’ to whom the future belongs.”

What was the life of the man who wrote the gospel of the proud, self-aware human being? Mackay answers this question in his book “Max Stirner”. It was not easy to describe this life. For

just as his work has been forgotten, so too has the story of Max Stirner been completely neglected by posterity. With infinite effort, Mackay had to piece together the details of this valuable life, which had been shrouded in darkness. The biographer questioned everyone he could think of who might know something about the missing person. Everything that had been preserved from the time in which Stirner lived had to be carefully examined. Mackay devoted ten years of hard work to the biography, a work that can only arise from the most intense desire for knowledge.

Max Stirner lived, as the herald of the sovereignty of the individual, at a time when all institutions were based on views that were opposed to his own. He went his own way, away from the hustle and bustle of his contemporaries. He was only able to maintain his independence by refraining from utilizing his labor and his mind in any official position. He lived as a true cultural gypsy; and he could only buy his freedom by foregoing what he could have earned in abundance if he had put his abilities to the service of his time. He could not integrate into any whole.

Everything we learn about Stirner shows him to be a man for whom any restriction of his freedom is like a terrible poison. Mackay was right to describe in detail the circle that Stirner counted among its members in the 1840s. It consisted of men who, each in his own way, were convinced that human views and institutions needed to be thoroughly improved, and who criticized the existing order in a ruthless manner. They called themselves the “Freien” (Free Men) and held their informal gatherings in Hippel’s wine bar on Friedrichstraße. *Bruno Bauer* and his brothers, Ludwig Buhl and a large number of others who were actively involved in the intellectual movement of the time, could be found at Hippel’s every evening. Mackay says of this circle: “Hardly ever in the history of a people — except at the time of the French Encyclopedists — has a circle of men come together that was so significant, so unique, so interesting, so radical and so unconcerned about any judgment as the ‘Freien’ (Free Men) at Hippel’s in Berlin in the fourth decade of the century. It was a circle, perhaps not worthy, but also not unworthy of the man who was one of its most loyal members and its greatest adornment, a man through whom it has gained for posterity a significance and an interest that will carry the name of the “Free” with him into the memory of the future.” However, Stirner seems to have had little to say here. These “free people” had not yet penetrated to the idea of the free individual as it had developed in Stirner; but at least he found opponents here whose views were worth the most radical thinker of his time to deal with them.

It was in this circle that Stirner also found the woman with whom he was able to lead a marriage that corresponded to his views for several years: *Marie Dähnhardt*. This marriage was the cohabitation of two people who supported each other as far as each was able, and who otherwise went their own ways. And when, after two years, the cohabitation no longer suited the feelings of the spouses, they separated without rancor. The only work that Stirner gave us, “The Ego and Its Own,” was written during the years of this marriage. In it he laid down his entire world of thought. What he otherwise published are smaller essays that preceded his main work, and responses to the attacks that it has received. Mackay has just compiled these works in a small volume, “Max Stirner’s Smaller Writings” (Berlin 1898, Schuster & Loeffler). I will speak of them in this journal soon. This will also provide an opportunity to say what needs to be said about the development of the man. The “History of Reaction” and the work “The National Economists of the French and English” are only a small part of Stirner’s own work and do not enrich our understanding of his nature.

After the publication of his main work, Stirner led a life of complete seclusion, constantly struggling with the bitterest poverty; but a life that he bore with dignity and contentment, for he knew that anyone who does not want to be a citizen of his time must live like that.

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