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Notes on Stirner and Nietzsche

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During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of this there was a great awakening of interest in the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. At the same time there began an assiduous search for his precursors. The philosopher of egoism, Max Stirner, was one of those suggested and some commentators even went so far as to claim the Nietzsche was his disciple. Others vehemently rejected this claim and argued that either Nietzsche knew nothing about Stirner or, if he did, was not influenced by him. It is certainly true that there are parallels between the thinking of Stirner and Nietzsche on some points, but are these enough to identify one with the other? I do not think so.

Both Stirner and Nietzsche are outspoken iconoclasts. Both emphatically reject the Judeo-Christian-humanist moral code. Both savage the idiocies of democratic egalitarianism. Both express anti-statist sentiments, but both scorn anarchists – Stirner in the figure of Proudhon, one of the first theoreticians of anarchism, and Nietzsche anarchists in general. Indeed, so often do they appear to speak with one voice that the claim that Nietzsche was a disciple of Stirner seems, at first glance, plausible. A few examples will show their similarities.

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For Stirner, as for Nietzsche, “truth” is an instrument, not a sacred “thing-in-itself”. Stirner writes “before me truths are as common and indifferent as things... There exists not even one truth... that has stability before me, and to which I subject myself” (The Ego and His Own – all quotations from Stirner are from this, his main work). This is not to say that there are no truths in the sense of the “fact of the matter” since “for thinking and speaking I need truths and words as I do food for eating,” but that “all truths beneath me are to my liking; a truth above me, a truth I should have to direct myself by, I am not acquainted with.” Nietzsche, too, states that the truths he proclaims are “my truths” (Beyond Good and Evil).

Stirner rejects possession by fixed ideas. When an idea becomes a “maxim” for a man “he himself is made a prisoner of it, so that it is not he that has the maxim, but rather it has him... The doctrines of the catechism become our principles before we find it out, and no longer brook rejection.” For Nietzsche, also, convictions are prisons: “The man of faith, any kind of ‘believer’, is necessarily subservient to something outside himself: he cannot posit himself as an end... Any kind of faith is the expression of self-denial, and of estrangement from self.” (The Anti-Christ)

Both Stirner and Nietzsche proclaim an “ethic of power”. Stirner states: “Might is a fine thing, and useful for many purposes; for ‘one goes further with a handful of might than with a bagful of right’. You long for freedom? You fools! If you took might, freedom would come of itself.” According to Nietzsche life is “appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of its own forms, incorporation, and, at least, putting it mildest, exploitation. (Beyond Good and Evil) When Stirner writes “what I can get by force I get by force, and what I do not get by force I have no right to, nor do I give myself airs, or consolation with my imprescriptible right” one cannot imagine Nietzsche disagreeing.

However, despite their apparent agreement about certain matters, Stirner and Nietzsche are not one but two and their destinations lie in different directions. Both, for example agree that “God is dead”, but their responses to this realization are not the same. For Stirner it is not enough that “God is dead” – “Man” must also perish in order to make way for himself, the unique one. “At the entrance to modern times stands the God-man. At its exit will only the God in the God-man evaporate? 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’.”

For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the “death of God” creates an anguishing moral void that must be filled with a new ideal for “mankind”: the creation of the Superman. “All beings have created something beyond themselves, are ye going to be the ebb of this great tide? Behold I teach you Superman” (Thus Spake Zarathustra). Indeed the language he uses to describe the advent of his ideal being is that of religious prophet: “Awake and listen ye lonely ones! From the future winds are coming with a gentle beating of wings, and there cometh good tidings for fine ears/Ye lonely ones of today, ye who stand apart, ye shall one day be a people; from you, who have chosen yourselves, a chosen people shall arise and from it Superman (Thus Spake Zarathustra) In order to achieve this “elevation of the type man (Beyond Good and Evil) Nietzsche demands the sacrifice of self. Stirner, in contrast, repudiates any setting up a goal for future being and does not worry himself about “Man”. For him the question is: “Why will you not take courage now to really make yourselves the central point and the main thing altogether?” The Stirnerian egoist’s reply to the Nietzschean ideal is succinctly put by J. L. Walker: “We will not allow the world to wait for the overman. We are the overmen” (The Philosophy of Egoism).

Again, Nietzsche, for all of his fierce onslaughts on Judeo-Christian morality, is a moralist. In place of the levelling doctrines preached by the pious of the pulpit and the political platform, Nietzsche seeks to create two types of morality: that of the masters and that of the slaves. In negating existing morality his concern is to replace it with a new morality. Although Zarathustra is a “destroyer” and breaks “value to pieces”, he does so in order “to be a creator of good and evil”. Stirner, too, negates existing morality, but he does so not that he may cleanse it of any poison he believes infects it, but that he can put his own satisfaction in its place. He does not wish to submit to any moral principle no matter what fixed [idea] is invoked to sanction it: God, Man or Superman. However much Stirner might have relished reading Nietzsche’s caustic criticism of current moralizing his conclusion would have been that Nietzsche is incapable of ridding himself of the domination of morality itself and so remains – a possessed man. The conscious egoist is literally “beyond good and evil” and accepts with an untroubled mind that all things within his power are “permissible” even if they are not all expedient.

In his *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* Georges Chatterton-Hill claims that Nietzsche “depasses” Stirner because “with Stirner the individual is himself the ultimo ratio, and his own individual satisfaction constitutes the justification of his egoism.” With Nietzsche “the egoism of the individual is justified only in the light of its ultimate value to the race... Nietzsche has gone out beyond Stirner. He has adopted Stirner’s conception and depassed it.” Chatterton-Hill is wrong. Nietzsche does not adopt “Stirner’s conception” and hence cannot “depass” it. At bottom Stirner and Nietzsche are two disparate facts that cannot be reasoned into one. Despite Nietzsche’s scintillating idol-smashing he is haunted by yet another idol: the idol of an abstractified “Man” scheduled for redemption by the creation of the Superman. Nietzsche’s championing of “egoism” is conditioned by the achievement of this goal and he frankly states

that when an individual does not correspond to his prescriptive ideal of an “ascending course of mankind” then “it is society’s (sic) duty to suppress egoism” (*The Will to Power*) This is not the view of an egoist, but that of a moralist demanding that a choice be made of his view that “mankind” is more important than individuals. Nietzsche’s philosophy implies that supra-individual “entities” like “mankind” or “race” are entitled to the subordination of my interests and even the sacrifice of my life. Stirner, on the contrary, rejects all such sacrificial creeds. He joyfully prizes himself as more important than “mankind” or its “ascending course”. He does not concern himself with myths of human redemption, but with the real world of his own, unique being.