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On Revisiting “Saint Max”

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Increasing academic attention to the philosophy of Max Stirner has not meant any greater accuracy in interpretation. A case in point is an essay by Kathy E. Ferguson which appeared in a recent issue of the philosophical review *IDEALISTIC STUDIES*¹ entitled “Saint Max revisited”. Ms Ferguson makes some perceptive remarks. She writes of Stirner’s view of the self as being “not a substantive thing ... but rather a process” which cannot be confined within any net of concepts or categorical imperatives. It is “an unbroken unity of temporal experience that is ontologically prior to any essence later attributed to [it] ... or any role, function or belief that [it] ... might embrace.” Stirner, she says, calls “the irreducible, temporal, concrete individual self ... the Unique One; the Unique One is both nothing, in the sense of having no predicate affixed to it as a defining essence, and everything, in that it is the source of the creative power which endows the whole of reality with meaning.”

More’s the pity then that these suggestive insights are followed by a whole series of misinterpretations of Stirner’s ideas. Some of these have their origin in that hoary old spook “the

¹ Vol XII, No. 3, 1982

human community as a whole”, others in what appears to be a sheer inability to grasp what Stirner’s egoism is about. Here are a few examples.

Ferguson considers that Stirner was an anarchist. As evidence for this belief she cites John Carroll’s “Break Out From The Crystal Palace” and John P. Clark’s “Max Stirner’s Egoism”. Carroll’s conception of an anarchist, however, embraces not only Stirner but also Nietzsche (who called anarchists “decadents” and blood-suckers) and Dostoyevsky, although he admits that the latter’s anarchism is “equivocal”.

As for Clark, he certainly regards Stirner as an anarchist and claims that Stirner’s “ideal society is the union of egoists, in which peaceful egoistic competition would replace the state and society” (a piece of doubtful extrapolation). However, he does not appear to be very convinced by his own claim for he comments that “Stirner’s position is a form of anarchism; yet a greatly inadequate form” because “he opposes domination of the ego by the state, but advises people to seek to dominate others in any other way they can manage. Ultimately, might makes right.” Since Clark defines anarchism as being opposed to *all* domination of man by man (not to mention the domination of “nature” by human beings) it is clear that Stirner’s “anarchism” is not “greatly inadequate” but, given his own definition, *not anarchism at all*.

It can be seen, therefore, that Ferguson’s effort to include Stirner in the anarchist tradition is not very plausible. Stirner did not claim to be an anarchist. Indeed, the one anarchist theoretician with whose writings he was familiar, Proudhon, is one of his favourite critical targets. Undoubtedly, there are some parallels between certain of Stirner’s views and those of the anarchists, but, as I discovered after many years of trying to make the two fit, in the last analysis they do not and cannot. Anarchism is basically a theory of *renunciation* like Christianity: domination is *evil* and for “true” relations between individuals to prevail such a *sin* must not be committed. Stirner’s

philosophy has nothing against domination of another if that is within my power and in my interest. There are no “sacred principles” in conscious egoism — not even anarchist ones ...

Ferguson also falls victim to a common mistake made by commentators on Stirner: that of confusing the account he gives of ideas he is opposing with his own views. She writes that Stirner “speaks with great disdain of ... commodity relations” and gives as an example a passage in *THE EGO AND HIS OWN* containing the words “the poor man *needs the rich*, the rich the poor ... So no one needs another as a person, but needs him as a giver.” What she ignores is that this passage occurs in a chapter in which Stirner is *describing the socialist case* before subjecting it to his piercing criticism. It is not possible, therefore, to deduce from this passage that it reflects his “disdain” for “commodity relations”, any more than it is possible to deduce from his poetic description of the argument from design that he believes in a god.

Ferguson claims that Stirner does not recognize the “sociality” of human being and that “anthropologically and psychologically, it must be acknowledged that human being are born into groups.” But Stirner quite clearly *does* acknowledge this fact. “Not isolation”, he writes, “or being alone, but society is man’s original state ... Society is our state of nature.” To become one’s own it is necessary to dissolve this original state of society, as the child does when it prefers the company of its playmates to its former “intimate conjunction” with its mother. It is not, as Ferguson contends, “our connection with others” that “provides us with our initial self-definition”, but our awareness of *contrast* to them, our consciousness of being *separate* individuals. In other words, “self-definition” is a product of *individuation*, not *socialization*.

Nor is Stirner an advocate of “the solitary” as she implies. Both in *THE EGO AND HIS OWN* and his *REPLY TO CRITICS* he rejects such an interpretation of his ideas. Nor is he a moralist — he is an amoralist. Presenting as evidence for his belief in

“moral choice” an erroneous statement by John Carroll will not do. Nor does he reject “all socially (sic) acquired knowledge” if by that is meant “culture” (acquired by individuals, not by “society”). On the contrary, he states “I receive with thanks what the centuries of culture have acquired for me.”

Ferguson questions why the conscious egoist should not “wish to be free” from ownness. Why not “take a leap of faith into something like Christianity as did St Augustine or Kierkegaard?” Precisely because ownness is the *condition* for what she calls “the ontology of the self as process” — that is, ownness is *me* possessing *me*. Were I to abandon it by committing myself to the nonsense of Christianity, this would not be *my* self, but a “redeemed self” shaped according to an image prescribed by others.

In her concluding remark Ferguson backs away from the challenge of Stirner’s egoism. “Ownness is not a sufficient base for human life,” she claims, because “authentic individual life requires that we have ties to others.” She admits that such ties can become stifling and that Stirner sees this danger, but contends that “he does not see the necessity or possibility of a liberating sociality.” She thus ends up indulging in that half-this and half-that waffle that Stirner so unerringly dissected 140 years ago. Once one begins to think in terms of “authentic individual life” then that “authenticity” has to be distinguished from that “inauthentic”. Once it is defined one is once again subjected to that “rule of concepts” that Stirner is so “startling acute” in rejecting. “Liberating sociality” based upon “authenticity” is simply a verbalism disguising the intent on deciding our lives for us. It is a philosophical confidence trick for which no conscious egoist will fall.