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The Union of Egoists – Comments

Sidney E. Parker

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A reply to Svein Olav Nyberg's *The union of egoists*, published in
Non Serviam #18 (1997).

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1. You write that “The Union requires that both/all parties are present though conscious egoism.” I do not think that the examples of ‘unions of egoists’ given by Stirner in his reply to Hess — i.e. some children playing, a couple of sweethearts, some friends going for a ink -support your view. The children, sweethearts and friends-were hardly likely to be *conscious* egoists, students of Stirner. Much more likely they would be in various ways possessed by fixed ideas such as Christianity, good citizenship, “mummy and daddy know best,” etc. The same goes for “unions uniting to catch a thief or to get better pay for one’s labour.” Your conception of the union of egoists strikes me as a *very idealized* one, similar to those promised, but never delivered, by religio-therapeutic cults. If we have to wait for fully conscious egoists, free from all possession, before we can form such unions than we are condemned to waiting for the advent of the *ideal* man, a spook belonging to never-never land.

2. Stirner seems to me to be sometimes using the conception of ‘the union of egoists’ as a metaphor to describe a *change of attitude* rather than an actual ‘institution’. For example, when he writes “therefore we two, the State and I are enemies. I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this ‘human society’. I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it I transform it rather into my property and my creature; that is I annihilate it and form in its place the Union Of Egoists,” it appears to me that he is not here claiming that he wants *to literally* destroy the State as an *institution*, but as an *idea, a sacred principle*. Otherwise, what point would there be in seeking to utilize the ‘human society’ of the State if one is going to abolish it? You cannot use something which no longer exists. Indeed, Stirner himself bears this out when he states “only when the State comes into contact with his ownness does the egoist take any active interest in it. If the condition of the State does not bear hard upon the scholar, is he to occupy himself with it because it is his ‘most sacred duty’? *So long as the State does according to his wishes* (my italics) what need has he to look up from his studies?” Here Stirner is treating the State as a mere instrument, not as ‘ruling principle.’ Stirner’s own vagueness about the exact nature of ‘the union of egoists’ is partly to blame for the fantasies that some have woven about it as a means of ‘world transformation’. However, the considerably less weight he gave to it in his replies to his critics and his locating it in the examples he gave there, supports the view of Henri Arvon (Aux Sources de l’Existentialisme: Max Stirner, 1954) that in The Ego and His Own Stirner had not “succeeded in freeing himself completely from the climate of social reform that surrounded him” when writing of the union of egoists.
3. You reject Hess’s criticism of Stirner’s conception of the union of egoist as consisting of a relationship between

an Einzige and an Eigentum — i.e. that I treat you as my property. You see this sort of relationship as “one-sided” and contend that Stirner really meant something else. Did he? Nothing could be clearer to my mind than he did *not* mean something else. What else does he mean when he says “Let us therefore not aspire to community, but to *one-sidedness*. Let us not seek the most comprehensive commune, ‘human society,’ but let us seek in others only means and organs which we may use as our property! As we do not see our equal in the tree, the beast, so the presupposition that others are *our equals* springs from hypocrisy. No one is *my equal*, but I regard him, equally with all other beings as my property”? Of course, such a view of the other as property does not rule out coming to “an understanding ... in order, by agreement, to strengthen *my power*, and by combined force to accomplish more than individual force can effect ... thus it is a – union”. Stirner, then, regarded treating the other as his property as compatible with forming a union with him! What Stirner means by “union” is not what Hess said he meant, but nor did he mean what you say he meant...

(S. E. Parker)