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Max Stirner as Educator

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Max Stirner’s earliest essay, *Über Schulgesetze*,¹ or ‘On School Rules’, is the earliest piece of his writing we have available. Dated 1834, ‘On School Rules’ is his original graduating dissertation. Whilst my command of the German language (although, as has been noted before, any language is more often than not a system or assemblage of commands *itself*)² is by no means sufficient to provide a translation as it stands today (yet), we anglophones do have some small insight into its content from R.W.K Paterson. Paterson briefly summarizes the themes of the text as a work that “treats of school discipline from a highly abstract, quasi-Hegelian standpoint”.³ The Hegelianism here is to be somewhat expected, as Schelling was not yet sent into the heart of German academia to begin his incendiary and ultimately futile purge of the Hegelian philosophy; a failed purging of Hegelianism from the lecture halls and from the minds of Hegel’s students. Further we may also consider this to be a trivial part of the Stirnerian corpus,

¹ <http://max-stirner-archiv-leipzig.de/dokumente/1834-Ueber-Schulgesetze.pdf>

² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Bloomsbury, 2018), 88.

³ Paterson, *Nihilistic Egoist*, (Oxford, 1971), 5n1.

irrelevant to his mature work and its reception. This seems fair given the text's supposed disciplinarian focus, especially as it concerns the 'abstract rules' which Stirner was to become so notorious for rejecting. The work can be written off as the product of an immediate academic necessity; as written for the purposes of edifying examiners for the sake of a grade (and this could indeed be true). Even so, that this was the chosen starting point of Stirner's writings, for me at least, points towards a central theme in this professional (he taught in schools throughout the earlier period of his life), as well as philosophical, trajectory that is often under-appreciated—that of Stirner as a theorist of *education* and not as a mere edifier of his educators. Paterson, to his credit, wrote his Bachelor's thesis on the matter, but as one can probably guess, this has been lost or is at least irretrievable to *me*.

That Stirner's focus on education was not a simple attempt to edify examiners is something that can be shown by an examination of Stirner's later works on education. Stirner wrote another such work on pedagogy, 8 years later, in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which we know as *The False Principle of Our Education*. From the title alone we can suggest a break with the original disciplinarian nature of the educational institution, but this break cannot be said to be with education itself. It is not simply broken away with as a constraint of that autonomous individuality that would go on to define Stirner's idea of the autonomous singularity of *Der Einzige*, the Unique One. Rather, *The False Principle* is instead a critique of the deployment of education, as a practice that aims towards producing the mere restraint or conditioning of individuals towards disciplined servile ends that only reproduce the established circumstances. Stirner's disgust is with an education system that cultivates creativity in order to limit it, to make creatures of habit out of us, remaking the world and furthering its structures only in ways that reinforce its *status quo*. Stirner speaks in this text like an insurgent element amongst the

as we have come to think of it in our times. To move education from knowledge to will is the pursuit of a practical robbery of the education's object in the insurrection against its domination. Yet the objects of education *are real objects*, and hence insurrection, insurgent education where fellow workers mutually liberate their own creative powers of knowing and willing becomes the praxis of an educated *Einzige*, one that remains active, engenders and enjoys itself as the creative life of an autonomous kind.

student body. Stirner provocatively asks, do the educators, or do *his* educators:

“Conscientiously cultivate our predisposition to become *creators* or do they treat us only as creatures whose nature simply permits training?”⁴

We are predisposed to become creators, we have a font of creativity within us, of play, and of the expression of our powers to form as well as to be formed. We are plastic, deposits of creativity, in our minds and our bodies. The established structures of education know this, they presuppose our plasticity in order to form us and condition our capacity to form the world, and yet we are only ever treated as objects of refinement, as creatures to be wrangled, neutered, spayed, and trained. We are only ever trained and disciplined as *a* creation gone by, something problematic, incorrect, not with the intention of being made *creators* capable of arranging ourselves with others in a new world of action. Let us expand with the following quote:

“Where then will a spirit of opposition be strengthened in place of the subservience which has been cultivated until now, where will a creative person be educated instead of a learning one, where does the teacher turn into a fellow worker, where does he recognize knowledge as turning into will, where does the free man count as a goal and not the merely educated one?”⁵

The discipline of the schoolhouse makes one subservient, not only the pupil, but equally the teacher. They, at least in Stirner's case, are not yet conscientious enough of the task

⁴ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-stirner-the-false-principle-of-our-education>

⁵ Ibid.

ahead of them, and only ever reproduce the domination, the conditioning, the *discipline of education*, that produced them. They are created as teacher, they learn and as learned they reproduce themselves in the learner, but only ever as generic repetition, as repetition bound by the established law. The law that commands education to reproduce society in preparing the latest creatures of the work force. This establishment even conditions and educations new creatures such as that of the teacher. The teacher is a fellow traveller in this hierarchy. The teacher, as with every individual of education, was once a student, and remains like their students a disciplined, captured, and repressed creator. The creator has learned to be a creature that never creates for itself to any explicit degree, but only for others, and in this they reproduce the same structures of learning that ultimately keep both trained in confinement. One learns, yes, but the knowledge that turns into will has not yet been affirmed as a will with its own power, one that can liberate itself through knowledge, and *past* it, where the objects of its education embolden the will to possess these objects, enjoy itself, and eventually lose itself in the treasures of its objects of knowledge. The free creator is free to ecstatically dissolve oneself in emancipatory knowledge, and enjoy it.

I talk of 'self-enjoyment' and 'dissolution' here is to lay the opening for where we see this similar theme re-presented in *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum*, where he talks of the education of the human being, the 'humanist' education as he saw it in the landscape of Germany at the time, which was one of the targets of the *False Principle*:

“The human being is now no longer creating, but *learning* (knowing, inquiring, etc.), i.e., occupied with a fixed *object*, engrossing himself in it, without coming back to himself. The relationship with

my desires, shall not be lost to me; the experience that I can conquer the world through educational means is purchased at too high a price for me to be able to forget it. But I want even more.”¹¹

That education has taught him discipline, restraint, given him the work ethic of study, he does not resent. Education gave him, in a sense, an incomplete liberation in the discipline that allows for desire to be—as Hegel would put it—“held in check”¹² such that it would not dominate him as an addict; but this has not so far given Stirner the self-consciousness that would let his desire hold itself back for greater autonomy and greater self-enjoyment. It is not yet a freedom like that of the absolute Spirit of the System that toys with the dissolution and activity within its own thinking conceptions and their realizations. Thought transgresses itself all the time, enters into differences and contradictions with itself, and preserves these contradictions in the development of its own form,¹³ he has the knowledge now, the logic of objects and subjects and their speculative unity, why couldn't he? *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum*, his most famous and extensive work is, I wager, best read as a kind of education, that wants to educate the creativity of the creative nothingness, to seize the riches of the spirit in thoughts. Yet this is only one aspect, the thoughts may hold one back from appropriation but transgress them, defile the abstract, and one fights against the whole world of transcendence in self-affirmation, the ideological system that compels individuals to reproduce the existing order with their own bodily material existence, clear that way, and one has a wholly razed, as well as a *raised* consciousness, the object of knowledge, as a *real object* becomes ripe for the seizing, from the wealth of thinking to the objects that generate such wealth

¹¹ UP, 344-345.

¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford, 1977), Section 195.

¹³ Ibid, *Science of Logic*, (Cambridge, 2010), 745.

he relates to and consumes other existences, the point that the subject as a singularity contains the principle, the onto-logical motor of the Absolute Idea itself is something that I think holds considerable explanatory value. Each moment itself contains the principle of the whole and its development, there are no abstractions that stand as pure immediacies outside, nor any pure particulars that stand opposed to universality. The concept has reality in each us as particular, and as an autonomous, self-developing power through negation, we find this power seated within ourselves, equally as the personality that finds itself in thought, Stirner saw that the personality of the individual can find itself through education, yet one that does not hold all of the riches and the creative potential only for the distant, transcendent personality of the abstract *spirit* of knowledge itself. Stirner does not want to relinquish his education, but to radicalize it and raid the riches of creativity that have been held back. Take the following quotes:

“Without a doubt education has made me *powerful*. It has given me power over all *impulses*, over my natural drives, as well as over the impositions and outrages of the world. I know-and have gained the strength to act on the knowledge through education—that I need not let myself be compelled by any of my desires, lusts, emotional surges, etc.; I am their—*master*, in like manner, through the sciences and the arts, I become the *master* of the stubborn world, whom earth and sea obey, and to whom even the stars must give an account of themselves. The spirit has made me *master*... I take in with thanks what centuries of education have acquired for me; I am not willing to throw away and give up any of it: I have not lived in vain. The experience that I have *power* over my nature, and do not need to be a slave of

the object is that of knowledge, discovery, validation, etc., not that of *dissolution* (abolition, etc.).”⁶

In education, one is given fixed matters to concern oneself with (and this carries the dual term of the German *Sache*, as matter and *what matters*), one puts oneself into the objects of education, the disciplines given to you from above by the educator, but such an object remains distant, something only ever to be studied, confirmed in thought as knowledge. One relates oneself to the object, yes, but only *qua* object, as the opposed object to which the knowing subject much submit as the object of study, that which stands against the subject as its *Gegenstand* [object, literally stood-against] and to which the subject of education must limit itself only to studying and to acting towards it as something on its own account, which the knowing subject themselves must indeed *account for* in the confirmation of knowledge, yet must never transgress for knowledges own sake. One must have respect for the object of knowledge, take what it gives, and savour the riches in thought alone, or at least insofar as the object itself permits it. You cannot play with the object of knowledge (objects are objective! Toy with that, and we know that all civilization is lost!).

Yet, for Stirner, this reverence was really nothing on the object’s part. Whilst *I*, the student, the teacher, the labour whom am not exhausted merely by my thoughts and my thinking, can never toy with the object and the objective and can never take possession of it and enjoy it; *knowledge itself*, as an establishment has the rights over the objects of knowledge, the recognized expertise, property rights, and Encyclopedic authority, *Can*. The institution of knowledge, the ideal of *Wissenschaft* and of *Science*, has all the domain by which it can conquer all of objectivity and proclaim itself as unified with it in discovery. It was the right of the universal as much as it was the right of

⁶ Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property* (Underworld Amusements, 2017), 88. Hereafter UP.

the *university*. This was especially so in the thought of Hegel with the Absolute Knowledge, the Absolute Spirit of learning that understands the total system of objects, of nature, ethical life, politics, and logic reaches the end of the *System*, and then simply as the “eternal Idea, the Idea that is in and for itself, eternally remains active, engenders and enjoys itself as absolute mind.”⁷ Now *this* was what Stirner saw as suspect, as the establishment’s holding back from the subject of education. At its most basic level Hegelian system of philosophy, from the *Phenomenology* to the *Encyclopaedia*, was a *textbook*, a system of education itself, written down, and taught. As a developing education, it was both the development of the Absolute Mind at the same time as it was the mind of the reader in being taught to them. *The textbook, as an educational course, is a subject-making machine*, it made its students *as* Hegelian subjects, through *subjecting themselves* to the path of the system’s own development. So, why does the Mind get all the fun? Has Stirner not *also* undergone a similar process, miniaturized from all of supposed world history into the reader themselves? Stirner seems to be having none of it:

“For him [Hegel], actuality, the world of things, is supposed to conform completely to thought, and no concept is to be without reality. This gave Hegel’s system the reputation of being the most objective, as if in it thought and thing celebrated their unification. But this was just thought’s most extreme violence, its highest despotism and absolute dictatorship, the triumph of the spirit, and with it the triumph of *philosophy*. Hereafter, philosophy can achieve nothing higher, because its highest form is the *omnipotence of the spirit*, the almightiness of the mind.”⁸

⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, (Oxford, 2007), Section 577.

⁸ UP, 90.

We are subverted under the discipline of philosophy, this spectral, absolute *ghost* is taken by the establishment of Hegelian education to be the *real* thing developing through the course of the discovery of its knowledge, and it is the *really* free subject whom we at best partake in as spectators or subservient moments. The individual is left at the position of *training* in generically replicating it and handing it down, same as it ever was. We—I—am left to simply contemplate the necessity of this development as it relates to me, to see the objects as they are known, and to become educated, produced, in accordance with the thinking as it has been taught to me. The point is that in order for Hegel to educate me, what has developed before (including one’s relation to authority, to knowledge, and the state), should “thereby appear justified to free thinking”.⁹ My thinking is free, it has its own autonomy in the system, but my thinking is *another*. It is in the system, which I ought to respect and never take as my own. It is the spectral figure of the universal, its university and its discipline that I am to respect, the creative power that the system develops both in itself and in making me its subject? That is not for *I* to take.

Stirner’s rejection here is one that in Hegelian terms seems rather hard to explain, but one suggestion that I believe truly elucidates things is that of Philip Breed Dematteis in his *Individuality and the Social Organism*, where he suggests that Stirner’s rejection here is grounded on his reading of the Hegelian notion of ‘concrete universality’, which Stirner read as the thesis that “each particular, as bearing the universal within it, is totally independent of all others.”¹⁰ Whilst I think that this reading of ‘total independence’ is a bit too strong to capture some of Stirner’s more dialectical moments by which

⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, (Cambridge, 1991), 11.

¹⁰ Dematteis, *Max Stirner Versus Karl Marx: Individuality and the Social Organism*, (Stand Alone, 2019), 48.