

A Left-Hegelian Anarchism

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Introduction

It is a commonplace to observe that the left-Hegelian Max Stirner (1806–56) is a little-known figure in the history of political and philosophical thought. However, that obscurity should not be exaggerated. The author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (a work known in English as *The Ego and Its Own*) is not only familiar to certain rather specialised and largely academic circles—those with an interest in Hegelianism, for example, or in the early intellectual development of Karl Marx (1818–83)—he is also, and more widely, known as a member of, and influence upon, the anarchist tradition. Stirner’s best-known work is often excerpted in anthologies of anarchist writings, and his name is regularly included as part of the modern pantheon in historically orientated surveys of anarchist thought.¹

This characterisation of Stirner as an anarchist forms the subject of the present paper. I am interested in its plausibility, in what kind of an anarchist Stirner might be, and in the nature and worth of his ideas both about the state and what might replace it.

The anarchist tradition is a diverse one, and any account of the core beliefs that its members share is likely to be contentious. The account which I utilise here is both minimal and negative. Namely, that anarchists share a disapproval of the state, and, more precisely, maintain that the state is an illegitimate institution. This brief statement of anarchist beliefs has a number of advantages: it is supported in the literature; it has an etymological rationale; and (unlike some more expansive definitions) it stands a chance of including the considerable variety of anarchist positions.²

Stirner’s account of the state would appear to fit this definition of anarchism with little straining. In *The Ego and Its Own*, he portrays the state as a repressive and illegitimate institution, whose “sole purpose” is “to limit, tame, subordinate the individual.”³ This basic picture is reiterated in a bewildering variety of images. The state is variously described as: a collection of “snares and nets” set for the individual to run into;⁴ a “machine” directing the “clockwork” of individual minds “none of which follow their own impulse”;⁵ the “devil” demanding that the individual pledge his very soul to it;⁶ a stern father (“Papa State”) keen to discipline his “children”;⁷ the “king of beasts” waiting to turn against the individual “with all the force of its ‘lion-paws’ and ‘eagle-claws’ ”;⁸ and “God,” who, requiring faith and prescribing behaviour, would dominate and “drive away” the individual’s own spirit.⁹

¹ Anthologies of anarchist writings which contain excerpts from *The Ego and Its Own* include: Irving L. Horowitz, ed., *The Anarchists* (New York: Dell, 1964); and George Woodcock, ed., *The Anarchist Reader* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977). Historically orientated surveys which describe Stirner as an anarchist include April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 1; Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 220; and George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 81.

² For similar definitions, see, for example, Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism*, 14; and Alan Carter, “Some Notes on ‘Anarchism’,” *Anarchist Studies* 1 (1993): 141.

³ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 201. All references to Stirner’s book are to the English edition: Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

This fundamental antipathy between state and individual is, on Stirner's account, resistant to mediation. He maintains not only that "we two, the state and I, are enemies," but also that these two protagonists are irreconcilable.¹⁰ There are only two possible outcomes in the conflict between us: the defeat of "it or I."¹¹

Stirner identifies the state as illegitimate. He condemns all states as "despots" which seek to make a "slave" of the individual, and insists that such slavery is never justified.¹² "No one," he remarks, "has any business to command my actions, to say what course I shall pursue and set up a code to govern it."¹³

Note that although Stirner condemns all states as despotisms, he does not fail to discriminate between state forms. He acknowledges that there are differences in the degree of despotism that different states exercise over the individual. Interestingly, it is the modern state which is said to be more despotic than its predecessors. Stirner replaces the familiar portrait of the French Revolution as embodying a transition from absolute to limited government, with an account of the Revolution as having "effected the transformation of limited monarchy into absolute monarchy."¹⁴ The moderns may be "zealots" for reason rather than faith, but their enthusiasm for playing the "guardian" over the individual, he suggests, is at least as great as that of "the most absolute rulers" of feudalism. Moreover, the means at the disposal of the moderns in the pursuit of that paternalism are much greater.¹⁵ Under feudalism the individual was separated from the state by a series of intermediaries (corporations, nobility, cities, and so on) which acted as countervailing powers limiting the monarch. In removing the privileges of these intermediaries, the Revolution freed the state from the constraints of "a thousand little lords."¹⁶ In this way, Stirner suggests that it was the bourgeoisie who had finally realised the dream of absolutists throughout the centuries, namely "to find that absolute lord beside whom no other lords and lordlings any longer exist to clip his power."¹⁷

An Anarchist Typology

Stirner may endorse the minimal and negative anarchist consensus that the state is illegitimate, but there are important areas of dispute amongst anarchists about the proper interpretation of that claim. Following the account of A. John Simmons, two central areas of disagreement can be identified.¹⁸

The first area of disagreement concerns the status of the core anarchist claim, and in particular whether it is *a priori* or *a posteriori* truth that the state is illegitimate. According to *a priori* anarchism all possible states are illegitimate. Typically *a priori* anarchists hold that some essential

¹⁰ Ibid., 161.

¹¹ Ibid., 227.

¹² Ibid., 97.

¹³ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92. Stirner's comments on the Revolution are intended to parallel his account of the Reformation, since he maintains that political liberty is a phase of Protestantism.

¹⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ See A. John Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," in *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 105. The following two paragraphs draw heavily on Simmons' work.

feature of the state (its coercive or hierarchical character, for example) makes it impossible for something to be both a state and legitimate.¹⁹ In contrast, *a posteriori* anarchists maintain only that all known states lack legitimacy, and that they do so by virtue of some contingent characteristic that they possess. *A posteriori* anarchists do not claim that it is impossible for something to be both a state and legitimate (they might hold this position, for example, because they are not persuaded by arguments purporting to establish this impossibility).

The second area of disagreement concerns the consequences of the core anarchist claim, and in particular whether a rejection of the legitimacy of the state entails more than a denial of political obligation (roughly speaking, a denial that subjects have a moral obligation to obey the law). Weak anarchism maintains that the illegitimacy of the state entails only that individuals have no reason to obey the law simply because it is the law. For weak anarchists, there is no presumption in favour of obedience to the state, rather individuals are encouraged to decide on a case-by-case basis how best to respond to the state's commands. Those individuals might still do what the law requires, albeit on the basis of other (moral or prudential) reasons (and not because it is required by law). In contrast, strong anarchism maintains that the illegitimacy of the state, and the consequent absence of a foundation for political obligation, provides the grounds for a positive obligation to oppose and attempt to eliminate the state (insofar as this is within our power). This is an obligation that weak anarchists will deny.

Stirner's Egoism

In order to place Stirner within this typology, it will help to have a clearer understanding of his basic standpoint in *The Ego and Its Own*. Stirner propounds a position which he calls "egoism." However, his elaboration of that position is far from transparent, and commentators differ markedly in their interpretation of it.

Egoism is perhaps most often identified with the pursuit of self-interest. Stirner is held to have believed that the individual ought to act in order to maximise his own self-interest, and hence to promote the interests of others only where and insofar as it is conducive to his own. In short, Stirner is thought to be committed to the position usually known as ethical egoism.

It is as well to admit that this interpretation of Stirner has some textual justification. However, despite his occasional use of the vocabulary of ethical egoism, it is a mistake to think of Stirnerian egoism as simply endorsing a normative proposition about the pursuit of self-interest. Note, in particular, that Stirner is often critical of self-interested action simpliciter. Indeed, he refuses to endorse what he calls egoism "in the usual sense," that is the "sober" and "calculating" motivation of "selfish people, looking out for their advantage."²⁰

Stirner's reasons for rejecting what might be called ordinary egoism are instructive, and they are illustrated in his response to a recent work by the left-Hegelian Bruno Bauer (1809–82) on the history of the French Revolution.²¹ Bauer had identified the modern middle-classes as exemplifying the ordinary egoistic attitude to life, and then gone on to bemoan the bourgeois failure to be more "self-sacrificing." Stirner agrees with Bauer's description of the relation between ordinary

¹⁹ R. P. Wolff, *In Defence of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) is perhaps the best known modern defence of *a priori* anarchism.

²⁰ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 70.

²¹ The first part of Bauer's two part *Die Septembertage 1792 und die ersten Kämpfe der Parteien der Republik in Frankreich* (Charlottenburg, 1844).

egoism and the modern middle-classes, but inverts Bauer's complaint. The real problem with the modern middle-classes is that their egoism is overly self-sacrificing. That is, Stirner condemns egoism in the ordinary sense as a form of heteronomy, observing that individuals can sacrifice their self-determination to "petty" as well as "idealistic" passions.²² Avaricious individuals who devote themselves single-mindedly to the pursuit of material gain are clearly self-interested (they act only to enrich themselves), but this ordinary egoism is incompatible with egoism properly understood. The avaricious individual, Stirner suggests, is "driven by the thirst for money," he does not live his own life but is rather dragged along by this appetite, he is "not a self-owned man, but a servant," a "slave of" filthy lucre.²³

These remarks confirm both that, far from endorsing ordinary egoism, Stirner rejects conventional self-interestedness as "a one-sided, unopened, narrow egoism" which might better be called "possessedness," and also that Stirner's own conception of egoism is best thought of as a species of self-mastery or individual autonomy.²⁴ Egoism, properly understood, is to be identified with a type of autonomy which Stirner calls "ownness [*Eigenheit*]." "I am my own," Stirner elaborates, "only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered ... by anything else."²⁵ This egoistic ideal of self-mastery has both external and internal dimensions. Self-owning individuals must not only avoid subjugating their will to that of another, they must also avoid being "dragged along" by their own appetites.²⁶

This interpretation—according to which egoism properly understood is primarily concerned with self-determination rather than self-interest—is confirmed by the examples and elaborations of egoism that appear throughout *The Ego and Its Own*. Thus, Stirner repeatedly describes God as a paradigmatic egoist not because He is self-interested but because He "serves no higher person" and "acts only from himself."²⁷ Similarly, Stirner contrasts egoism not with altruism (or some related concept) but rather with the subjugation of the individual. I am said to deny "ownness," for example, not when I act generously, but when "I give myself up, give way, submit" to another.²⁸

Two features of Stirner's position emerge as fundamental. First, he views autonomy as of overriding value. He is not prepared to countenance any trade-off between self-mastery and other goods. Second, autonomy is interpreted in an idiosyncratic and stringent manner. Many accounts of autonomy allow individuals to be subject to obligations, for example, and yet still count as autonomous. What matters, according to these alternative accounts, is not the mere existence of an obligation but rather how it came about (for example, whether it was generated by the individual's own authentic choices). Stirnerian egoism, however, is incompatible with any subjugation; even self-assumed obligations are deemed illegitimate. With this account of egoism in place, I return to the topic in hand.

²² Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6 and 146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

Stirner's Place In The Typology

In order to determine whether Stirner is to be classified as an a priori or an a posteriori anarchist, it is necessary to ascertain whether he considers the illegitimacy of the state to be a contingent or necessary matter. Note that Stirner identifies the claim to exercise "sovereignty" as central to what it is to be a state.²⁹ The claim to direct and control the individual will is portrayed as a necessary aspect of the behaviour of states.³⁰ "The state," he maintains, "cannot forebear the claim to determine the individual's will."³¹ It is this characteristic of the state which brings about its conflict with egoism. No state can forego the claim to bind the actions of its subjects, and no such subjugation could ever be justified because "no one has any business to command my actions, to say what course I shall pursue and set up a code to govern it."³² The state, in short, is necessarily illegitimate.

The characterisation of Stirner as an a priori anarchist is consistent with his attack on those authors who "fill whole folios on the state without calling into question the fixed idea of the state itself."³³ Stirner chastises his left-Hegelian contemporaries, in particular, because although they feel few scruples about "revolting against the existing state," they do not dare "to sin against the idea of the state."³⁴ At one point, Stirner considers a recent work in which Edgar Bauer (1820–86) had defended the notion of a "people's state" in which the government would no longer exist, being replaced by an executive authority.³⁵ Stirner insists that the essential feature of the state, its claim to subjugate the individual, would remain the same. Edgar Bauer is seen as offering merely "a change of masters,"³⁶ and of having failed to understand that "every state is a despotism, be the despot one or many."³⁷ Even in the hypothetical case of a direct democracy in which a collective decision had been made unanimously, Stirner denies

that the egoist would be bound by the result. To be bound today by "my will of yesterday," he maintains, would be to turn my "creature," that is "a particular expression of my will," into my "commander"; it would be to freeze my will, and Stirner denies that "because I was a fool yesterday I must remain such."³⁸

In order to determine whether Stirner is to be classified as a strong or a weak anarchist it is necessary to ascertain whether he maintains that individuals have a positive duty to oppose, and attempt to eliminate (insofar as this is within our power), the state. As may already be apparent, egoism would seem to conflict with this notion of a duty. The strong anarchist claim that individuals are morally required to act in a particular fashion is incompatible with Stirner's insistence that the egoist recognises "no duty," no binding constraints on his autonomy.³⁹ Strong anarchism appears to fall foul not only of Stirner's rejection of "the standpoint of should [Sollens]" but also

²⁹ Ibid., 166.

³⁰ Ibid., 175.

³¹ Ibid., 174.

³² Ibid., 174.

³³ Ibid., 44.

³⁴ Ibid., 80.

³⁵ See Ibid., 202. The work in question is Edgar Bauer, *Die liberalen Bestrebungen in Deutschland* (Zurich and Winterthur, 1843).

³⁶ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 204.

³⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁸ Ibid., 175.

³⁹ Ibid., 175.

of his more general suspicion of political movements.⁴⁰ The claim that individuals are morally bound to oppose a social evil would appear liable to attract the scorn that Stirner reserves for “plans for the redemption or improvement of the world.”⁴¹ Egoism, he insists, rejects any notion of idealistic devotion to “a great idea, a good cause, a doctrine, a system, a lofty calling.”⁴²

As well as these reasons for thinking that Stirner would reject strong anarchism, there is some evidence that he endorses weak anarchism. Note that, although the weak anarchist can never act in a particular way because it is required by law, he can act in the way required by law for some independent reason. The weak anarchist is not under any obligation either to obey or to disobey the law as such, but rather decides in each particular case whether or not to go along with the demands of the state. This seems close to Stirner’s own attitude. He accepts that there can exist a happy coincidence between the goals of the egoist and the particular demands of social institutions, observing that “in innumerable cases both go peacefully together.”⁴³ “Only when the state comes in contact with his ownness,” Stirner suggests, “does the egoist take an active interest in it.”⁴⁴

Moreover, in these cases of conflict, Stirner does not recommend that individuals seek to overthrow the state, but rather suggests that they seek to evade its constraints in order to pursue their own cause. To illustrate the proper attitude of the egoist towards the state, Stirner alludes to the response of Diogenes the Cynic to Alexander the Great: “So long as the state does according to his wish,” Stirner asks rhetorically, “what need has [the egoist] to look up”; and when the state and the egoist come into conflict, the egoist “has nothing to say to the state except ‘Get out of my sunshine’.”⁴⁵

Stirner’s distinction between revolution (which the egoist is to reject) and insurrection (which he is to embrace) is of relevance in this context. Whereas revolutionary activity is motivated by a discontent with the existing state or society, and aimed at “overturning” those established conditions; insurrectionary activity is motivated by the “discontent” of individuals “with themselves,” and is aimed at no longer letting “ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves.”⁴⁶ Stirner appeals to the example of Jesus in order to clarify the insurrectionary attitude. Jesus is said to have been an insurgent rather than a revolutionary, in that he was not interested in pursuing a political fight with the powers that be but rather “wanted to walk his own way, untroubled about, and undisturbed by, these authorities.”⁴⁷

Note that although Stirner rejects the view that individuals have a duty to overthrow the state, he does appear to hold that the state would be undermined by the spread of egoism. This surprising conclusion is generated by what has been called his idealist sociology. Stirner holds that the state exists only because of “the disrespect that I have for myself,” and draws the conclusion that “with the vanishing of this undervaluation” the state itself would be “extinguished.”⁴⁸ His elaboration of this claim alludes to the famous dialectic of master and servant in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). Stirner insists that “he who, to hold his own, must

⁴⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁴¹ Ibid., 29.

⁴² Ibid., 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 281.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 252.

count on the absence of will in another is a thing made by these others, as the master is a thing made by the servant. If submissiveness ceased, it would be all over with lordship.”⁴⁹ In this way, Stirner promotes what is, in Hegel’s work, one part of a wider story (the moment of “recognition” in relationships of domination) into a complete account of the sources of state power. The cumulative effect of a growing egoistic disrespect for law, Stirner suggests, would be to “scuttle [*anbohren*]” (literally, to drill holes into) “the ship of state [*Staatsschiff*].”⁵⁰

Stirner’s Positive Vision

Thus far, I have been concerned with the core beliefs of anarchism, beliefs which I have characterised as minimal and negative. However, it is clear that many anarchists subscribe not only to a negative account of the failings of the state but also to a positive account of the social arrangements that might replace it.

There are two different kinds of questions that are often raised about these positive social visions. The first concerns their status, and, in particular, whether it is necessary to subscribe to such a vision in order to count as an anarchist. Unlike some commentators, I am reluctant to stipulate that anarchists must subscribe to a positive social vision.⁵¹ Indeed, I will refer to the positive social vision of anarchists as amongst their peripheral beliefs (as opposed to the core negative belief about the state which all anarchists share).

The second issue concerns the content of these positive visions. It will be apparent that anarchists frequently disagree about the content of that vision. Perhaps most obviously there are significant and oft-noted differences between individualist and collectivist forms of anarchism. These differences typically concern the kind of social arrangements that anarchists value, and make attempts to generalise about the location of anarchism along a single left–right political continuum both contentious and difficult.

Even a cursory reading of *The Ego and Its Own* reveals both that—whether or not anarchists are required to do so—Stirner does possess a positive social vision, and also that this vision is best characterised as an individualist one.

Stirner contrasts the relationships of “belonging” which characterise the established social order with the relationships of “uniting” which characterise the social arrangements of an alternative “egoistic” order. In each case, he is concerned with the impact of these different kinds of relationship on the individual. Relationships of “belonging” are said to involve ties which bind the individual. Existing social institutions (such as the family, party, nation, and state) are all portrayed as constraining and subjugating the autonomous agent. The duties which are attached to membership of these various communities are deemed incompatible with egoism properly understood. In contrast, relationships of “uniting” avoid this conflict with the self-mastery of the individual. The “union of egoists [*Verein von Egoisten*]” is portrayed as a nexus of impermanent connections between individuals who themselves remain independent and self-determining.⁵² It seems to constitute a wholly instrumental association whose good is solely the advantages that its members may derive from the pursuit of their individual goals (there are no shared final ends,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 175.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁵¹ For a more expansive definition of anarchism, see John P. Clark, “What is Anarchism,” in *Anarchism, NOMOS* Vol. XIX, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 13.

⁵² Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 161.

and the association is not valued in itself). Most significantly, the union is a form of association which does not conflict with individual self-mastery. It is said to be “a son and co-worker”⁵³ of autonomy, a constantly shifting alliance which enables individuals to unite without loss of sovereignty, without swearing allegiance to anyone else’s “flag.”⁵⁴

In elaborating this model of egoistic relationships, Stirner seems to be pulled in two rather different directions. In the first, and least typical, of these moods, he shies away somewhat from the suggestion that his views might have radical consequences. In *The Ego and Its Own*, for example, Stirner occasionally promotes the suggestion that many familiar and worthwhile relationships might continue to exist once social relations were reconstructed on egoistic lines. Thus, for example, he maintains that love—in the form of a “lively interest” in the “joy” and “weal” of another—would survive in an association of egoistic individuals.⁵⁵ The same accommodating tone is struck in his article “*Rezensenten Stirners*” (1845), in which he defended egoism against three contemporary critics (Moses Hess, Ludwig Feuerbach, and “Szeliga”). In remarks addressed to Moses Hess (1812–75), Stirner provides as examples of egoistic unions some everyday gatherings of friends, including a group of children running together past his window in the “comradeship of play [*Spielkameradschaft*]” and the spontaneous decision by Hess and his companions to visit a Berlin bar.⁵⁶

In the second, and more dominant, of these moods, Stirner acknowledges that an egoistic order might issue in more radical and unfamiliar consequences. Indeed, he often rather revels in the suggestion that his views will have startling practical results. (This is one of the sources of the melodramatic tone of parts of *The Ego and Its Own*.) Egoistic relationships are those in which I may “think and act as I will,” utilising others as I choose.⁵⁷ At one point, Stirner describes the egoist as viewing others as “nothing but—my food, even as I am fed upon and turned to use by you.”⁵⁸ Note, in particular, that the individual has no moral duties towards others, and does not renounce “even the power over life and death.”⁵⁹ Over the course of the book, Stirner variously condones the officer’s widow who strangles her child,⁶⁰ the man who treats his sister “as wife also,”⁶¹ and the murderer who no longer fears his act as a “wrong.”⁶² In a world in which “we owe each other nothing,” it seems that acts of infanticide, incest, and murder, might all turn out to be justified.⁶³

In order to react to Stirner’s positive social vision, it seems necessary to determine which of these two rather different moods best captures the nature of the egoistic union.

There seems good reason to question the suggestion that certain familiar and worthwhile relationships would survive being transplanted onto egoistic foundations. In elaborating the claim that love would survive in an association of egoistic individuals, for example, it becomes clear that the egoist is concerned about the “joy” and “weal” of another only because, and to the extent

⁵³ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁵⁶ Max Stirner, “*Rezensenten Stirners*,” in *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Bernhard Zack, 1914), 396.

⁵⁷ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 189.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 282.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 281.

⁶¹ Ibid., 45.

⁶² Ibid., 169.

⁶³ Ibid., 263.

that, his own happiness is enhanced as a result.⁶⁴ As a result, Stirner's occasionally conciliatory tone appears misleading. It is clear that much of what is understood by love in established society would not survive the reconstruction of social relations on egoistic lines. There would be no place, for example, for the familiar commitment to promote another person's good even when it conflicts with our own happiness or our own interests.

It is the dominant and bleaker account—according to which the reorganisation of society on egoistic lines would have radical and unfamiliar consequences—which more accurately captures the nature of the egoistic union.

In that context, I would like to broach two responses to this positive vision, neither of which seem to me to be misplaced. Perhaps the most obvious reaction is one of abhorrence. The point should not need belabouring. Indeed, Stirner acknowledges that “very few” of his readers will “draw joy” from the idea of a world without moral duties, but expresses indifference at this response.⁶⁵ The “trouble, combat, and death” that might result from the publication of *The Ego and Its Own* (presumably from the consequent spread of egoism) are of no concern to him.⁶⁶ A second, and perhaps less obvious, reaction to this vision is to doubt its coherence. Stirner maintains that the egoistic alternative to established society involves not isolation but relationships of uniting. (There is perhaps a recognition here that some form of co-operation might be necessary in order to facilitate the goals of the individual.) However, there is reason to doubt whether it is possible to establish and sustain cooperation on egoistic premises. Cooperation appears to require either trust or coercion for its successful operation, but either of these solutions appears to be fraught with difficulties for the egoist.

Stirner cannot introduce coercion in order to ensure co-operation (after all, if the union of egoists were sustained by coercion, then it cannot accurately be described as the friend and ally of individual autonomy). But it is not obvious that he can rely on trust to solve the problem either. There is a normative (and not merely predictive) dimension to trust, and it is hard to see how that could be sustained between egoists. Indeed, Stirner implicitly acknowledges that egoism and trust might conflict. Not least, he accepts that the institution of promising would be an early victim of his commitment to, and understanding of, self-mastery. Promising is associated by Stirner with illegitimate constraint, since the requirement that duly made promises be kept is incompatible with “ownness.” The egoist must, he suggests, embrace the heroism of the lie, and be willing to break his word “in order to determine himself instead of being determined.”⁶⁷ What Stirner does not adequately consider is whether individuals whose word cannot be trusted could rely on each other (in other than the weak predictive sense that they could be relied upon to be unreliable) to the extent necessary to facilitate their “union.”

Conclusion

In summary, I have maintained that the characterisation of Stirner as an anarchist is a plausible one. Whatever other beliefs he may hold (and whatever the plausibility of other characterisations of his work) Stirner subscribes to the core anarchist claim that the state is illegitimate.

⁶⁴ See *Ibid.*, 258.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

More precisely, he holds both that the state is necessarily illegitimate, and that individuals are not under an obligation to oppose it. That is, in terms of the typology considered earlier, Stirner should be classified as an *a priori* weak anarchist. In addition, he subscribes to the peripheral anarchist belief in a positive social vision. In particular, he endorses an individualist vision of an unusually bleak kind, imagining a social world in which individuals have no duties towards others. Both the desirability and feasibility of this egoistic union, I have suggested, are open to doubt.

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