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Max Stirner

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Max Stirner (1806–1856) is the author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844). This book is usually known as *The Ego and Its Own* in English, but a more literal translation would be *The Unique Individual and their Property*). Both the form and content of Stirner’s major work are disconcerting. He challenges expectations about how political and philosophical argument should be conducted, and shakes the reader’s confidence in the moral and political superiority of contemporary civilisation. Stirner provides a sweeping attack on the modern world as increasingly dominated by “religious” modes of thought and oppressive social institutions, together with a much briefer sketch of a radical “egoistic” alternative in which individual autonomy might flourish. The historical impact of *The Ego and Its Own* is sometimes difficult to assess, but Stirner’s work can confidently be said: to have had an immediate and destructive impact on the left-Hegelian movement; to have played an important contemporary role in the intellectual development of Karl Marx (1818–1883); and subsequently to have influenced significantly the political tradition of individualist anarchism.

1. Stirner’s Life and Work

Stirner was born Johann Caspar Schmidt on 25 October 1806, the only child of lower middle class Lutheran parents living in Bayreuth. “Stirner” was originally a nickname, resulting from a large forehead, exaggerated by the way he pushed back his hair, and only later — in the form of “Max Stirner” — adopted as a literary pseudonym and his preferred name. His father died when Stirner was only six months old, and he was brought up by his mother (who subsequently remarried) and then later, when his mother moved from Bayreuth, by an aunt who looked after him in order that he could continue his schooling at the renowned local Gymnasium. Stirner subsequently pursued his undergraduate stud-

ies, with little notable academic distinction, at the universities of Berlin, Erlangen, and Königsberg. At Berlin, he is known to have attended three lecture-series given by G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831): on the philosophy of religion; on the history of philosophy; and on the philosophy of “subjective spirit” (which concerns the structures and processes of individual psychology).

Towards the end of his university career, Stirner devoted much of his time to “family affairs”, possibly a euphemism for his mother’s deteriorating mental health. In 1832, he returned with his mother to Berlin, and sought, with qualified success, to train as a teacher. (Stirner’s mother was committed to a mental home in 1837 and she would eventually outlive him by three years.) A period of private study and irregular work followed, including eighteenth months working unpaid as a Latin teacher. During this time he married Agnes Butz (1815–1838), a member of his landlady’s family. In August 1838, Agnes died giving birth to a still-born child. Edgar Bauer (1820–1886) would later record that Stirner had told him that, having once caught sight of his first wife naked, he was unable to touch her again.

Between 1839 and 1844 Stirner maintained something of a double life in Berlin. He obtained a position at a well-regarded private girls’ school, and spent the next five years teaching history and literature, establishing a reputation as a polite and reliable teacher in the process. Away from his teaching post, however, Stirner began to frequent the more avant-garde of Berlin’s intellectual haunts. He used the reading room of the novelist Willibald Alexis (1798–1871), spent afternoons at the Café Stehely, and from 1841 onwards was a regular visitor to Hippel’s wine bar on the Friedrichstrasse. The last of these was the main meeting place of “the free”, an increasingly bohemian group of teachers, students, officers, and journalists, under the loose intellectual leadership of the left-Hegelian Bruno Bauer (1809–1882). The latter had recently been dismissed from his teaching post at the University of Bonn, following an official inquiry into the orthodoxy of his writings on the New Testa-

- *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1972. (A modern edition of Stirner’s best-known work.)
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- “The Philosophical Reactionaries: ‘The Modern Sophists’ by Kuno Fisher”, translated and introduced by Widukind De Ridder, Saul Newman (ed.), *Max Stirner*, chapter 4. (A late text which is cautiously, and not uncontroversially, attributed to Stirner. It was published under the name ‘G. Edward’.)

effect of a growing egoistic disrespect for law, he suggests, would be to “scuttle” the “ship of state”. (54) Anarchists influenced by Stirner’s individualism and his suspicion of the state can be found in several European countries. In Great Britain, his ideas influenced Dora Marsden (1882–1960), and her journals *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*. In America, James L Walker (1845–1904), author of *The Philosophy of Egoism* was interested in, and influenced by, Stirner’s thought, although the best-known anarchist admirers of the latter in America were in the circle which formed around Benjamin R. Tucker (1854–1939) and the remarkable journal *Liberty* (founded in 1881). (Welsh 2010: 117–225.) It has often been individualist anarchists who were responsible for keeping Stirner’s ideas available to others, providing many of the editions and translations of his work.

Stirner is unlikely to have regretted these disputes about the nature and influence of *The Ego and Its Own*. In considering various interpretative accounts of the Bible, he declines to adjudicate between the judgement of the child who plays with the book, the Inca emperor Atahualpa (c.1502–1533) who threw it away when it failed to speak to him, the priest who praises it as the word of God, and the critic who dissects it as a purely human invention. The plurality of interpretations of his own work might well have amused Stirner and encouraged him in his view that there could be no legitimate constraints on the meaning of a text. Stirner once described himself as writing only to procure for his thoughts an existence in the world, insisting that what subsequently happens to those ideas “is your affair and does not trouble me” (263).

Bibliography

Works by Stirner

ment. This group included Marie Dähnhardt (1818–1902) who became Stirner’s second wife (and the dedicatee of *The Ego and Its Own*). In this unconventional environment, and despite his calm and unassuming personal appearance, Stirner gained a reputation for his hostility to religion, intolerance of moderation, and ability to provoke fierce argument.

Stirner’s earliest published writings date from this time in Berlin. In addition to some short and unremarkable pieces of journalism for the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*, these writings include a knowing review of Bruno Bauer’s anonymous and parodic attack on Hegel in *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement* (1842) and an article on pedagogy entitled “The False Principle of Our Education” (1842). The latter, in particular, adumbrates some of the themes of his own later work; for example, contrasting the training of individuals to an alien calling with the cultivation of the predisposition to become “sovereign characters”). During this period, Stirner is said to have occasionally alluded to a book that he was working on, but it seems that few of his associates took its existence seriously. The impact of *The Ego and Its Own* on these left-Hegelian circles was considerable as well as unexpected. Stirner began serious work on the book in early 1843 and finished it in the middle of 1844. *The Ego and Its Own* was published by the Leipzig bookseller Otto Wigand (1795–1870) in an edition of a thousand copies. Although dated 1845 the book appears to have been widely available by November of the previous year.

Measured by the reaction that it produced, *The Ego and Its Own* might be described as a critical success. The book was widely reviewed, and attracted attention from such figures as Bettina von Arnim (1785–1859), the doyenne of the Berlin literati, and Kuno Fischer (1824–1907), later a distinguished neo-Kantian historian of philosophy. The book also generated responses from many of its left-Hegelian targets: Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), Moses Hess (1812–1875), Arnold Ruge (1802–1880), and oth-

ers, ventured into print in order to defend their own views against Stirner's polemic. (Stirner's various replies to some of these critics are discussed in Section 3 below.)

However, *The Ego and Its Own* was neither a popular nor a financial success. Stirner had left his teaching post shortly before the book was published, and, by 1846, was reduced to advertising in the *Vossische Zeitung* for a loan. Stirner had squandered much of his second wife's inheritance, and Marie Dähnhardt left him towards the end of the same year. Many years later she was traced to England by Stirner's loyal biographer, the poet and novelist John Henry Mackay (1864–1933). She refused to meet Mackay in person but wrote to him portraying Stirner as a very sly man whom she had neither respected nor loved, and describing their relationship together as more of a cohabitation than a marriage.

From 1847, Stirner's life was characterised by social isolation and financial precariousness. He remained detached from contemporary events — for example, he seems to have largely ignored the revolution of 1848 — and his daily life was dominated by domestic routine and economic hardship. Stirner continued to write intermittently, but commentators have generally found his later work to be of little independent interest; that is, of little interest apart from its disputed potential to illuminate *The Ego and Its Own*. He translated into German some of the economic writings of Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832) and Adam Smith (1723–1790), and may have written a series of short journalistic pieces for the *Journal des oesterreichischen Lloyd*. In 1852, he contributed some material to a *History of Reaction*, consisting mainly of excerpts from other authors, including Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Stirner's strategy for economic survival in this period involved repeatedly changing addresses in order to evade his creditors, although not quickly enough to avoid two brief periods in a debtors' prison in 1853 and 1854.

In May 1856, still living in reduced circumstances in Berlin, Stirner fell into a “nervous fever”, reputedly after being stung in

Ideology takes up over three hundred pages of the published text — abridged editions often omit much of this dense but fascinating material — and, although Marx is remorselessly critical of Stirner's position, it scarcely follows that *The Ego and Its Own* was without influence on the former's ideas. Not least, Stirner's book appears to have been decisive: in motivating Marx's break with the work of Feuerbach (whose considerable influence on many of Marx's earlier writings is readily apparent); in making Marx reconsider the role that concepts of human nature should play in social criticism; and in forcing him to think more clearly about how far communism should be, in some sense, individualistic.

Finally, and over a longer period of time, the author of *The Ego and Its Own* has become best-known as a member of, and influence upon, the anarchist tradition. In particular, Stirner's name regularly appears in historically-orientated surveys of anarchist thought as one of the earliest and best-known exponents of individualist anarchism. The affinity between Stirner and the anarchist tradition lies in his endorsement of the claim that the state is an illegitimate institution. His elaboration of this claim is an interesting and distinctive one. (Leopold 2006) For Stirner, a state can never be legitimate, since there is a necessary conflict between individual self-rule and the obligation to obey the law (with which the legitimacy of the state is identified). Given that individual self-rule trumps any competing consideration, Stirner concludes that the demands of the state are not binding on the individual. However, he does not think that individuals have, as a result, any general obligation to oppose and attempt to eliminate the state (insofar as this is within their power). Rather the individual should decide in each particular case whether or not to go along with the state's demands. Only in cases where there is a conflict between the autonomy of the egoist and the demands of the state, does he recommend evading the requirements of law. That said, whilst individuals have no duty to overthrow the state, Stirner does think that the state will eventually collapse as a result of the spread of egoism. The cumulative

Stirner's insistence that his radical Hegelian contemporaries had failed to break with religious modes of thought prompted most of the leading left-Hegelians to defend their own work in public against this attack. In perhaps the most important of these replies, Feuerbach — who appeared defensive and irritated (suspecting Stirner of trying to make a name for himself at his own expense) — was widely seen as struggling to maintain a besieged and outdated position. Bruno Bauer also offered a critical response, seeking to defend his own philosophy of self-consciousness against what he saw as Stirner's inadequate form of subjectivity. (Moggach and de Ridder, 2013.) Stirner replied directly to three of these left-Hegelian reviews—the defence of Bauer's "humane liberalism" by "Szeliga" (the pseudonym of Franz Zychlinski (1816–1900)); the defence of socialism by Moses Hess; and the defence of Feuerbach by Feuerbach himself—in an article entitled "Stirner's Critics" (1845). In this confident rejoinder, Stirner reiterated some of the central themes of *The Ego and Its Own* and clarified the character of his own commitment to egoism. Stirner may also have provided a final reply to contemporary critics in a pseudonymous article entitled "The Philosophical Reactionaries", in which the author responds to a young Kuno Fischer. (The caution is needed since the identification of "G. Edward" as Max Stirner is plausible but not incontrovertible.)

Stirner's work also had a significant impact on a then little-known contemporary associate of these left-Hegelians, one Karl Marx. (Stirner mentions Marx indirectly, in a footnote which treats him as something like a radical Feuerbachian.) Between 1845 and 1846, Marx collaborated with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) on a group of manuscripts now usually called *The German Ideology*, which included a fierce and sustained attack on their erstwhile philosophical contemporaries. Most of these texts were not published at the time, and it was 1932 before this critical engagement with the work of Bauer, Feuerbach, and Stirner, appeared fully in print. The account of Stirner contained in the so-called *The German*

the neck by an insect. Following a brief remission, he died on 25 June (aged 49 years and 8 months). His death went largely unnoticed by the outside world.

There looks to be a fairly stark contrast between the often melodramatic and provocative tone of Stirner's best-known work, on the one hand, and the rather more mundane, sometimes poignant, events of his somewhat solitary life, on the other. However, commentators have frequently tried to link his life and philosophical views together. John Henry Mackay, for instance, emphasizing the "ataraxic" dimension of *The Ego and Its Own*, portrayed Stirner's life as an authentic embodiment of the emotional detachment that the egoist must cultivate in order to avoid being enslaved by his own passions and commitments. Even the pathos of Stirner's death was said to reflect the egoist's refusal to love life, or fear death, excessively. (Mackay 1914: 212.) Such claims are not without interest, but the lack of direct evidence regarding Stirner's own interior life makes them difficult to evaluate and endorse.

2. *The Ego and Its Own*

2.1 Form and Structure

Modern readers hoping to understand *The Ego and Its Own* are confronted by several obstacles, not least the form, structure, and argument, of Stirner's book.

Much of Stirner's prose—crowded with aphorisms, emphases, and hyperbole—appears calculated to disconcert. Most striking, perhaps, is the use of word play. Rather than reach a conclusion through the conventional use of argument, Stirner often approaches a claim that he wishes to endorse by exploiting words with related etymologies or formal similarities. For example, he associates words for property (such as "*Eigentum*") with words connoting distinctive individual characteristics (such as "*Eigenheit*") in order to promote the claim that property is expressive of

selfhood. (Stirner's account of egoistic property—see 2.4 below—gives this otherwise orthodox-looking Hegelian claim a distinctive twist.)

This rejection of conventional forms of intellectual discussion is linked to Stirner's substantive views about language and rationality. His distinctive style reflects a conviction that both language and rationality are human products which have come to constrain and oppress their creators. Stirner maintains that accepted meanings and traditional standards of argumentation are underpinned by a conception of truth as a privileged realm beyond individual control. As a result, individuals who accept this conception are abandoning a potential area of creative self-expression in favour of adopting a subordinate role as servants of truth. In stark contrast, Stirner insists that the only legitimate restriction on the form of our language, or on the structure of our arguments, is that they should serve our individual ends. It is the frequent failure of conventional meanings and received forms of argument to satisfy his interpretation of this criterion which underpins the remorselessly idiosyncratic form of Stirner's prose.

The Ego and Its Own has an intelligible, but scarcely transparent, structure. It is organised around a tripartite account of human experience, initially introduced in a description of the stages of an individual life. The first stage in this developmental narrative is the *realistic* one of childhood, in which children are constrained by material and natural forces such as their parents. Liberation from these external constraints is achieved with what Stirner calls the self-discovery of mind, as children find the means to outwit those forces in their own determination and cunning. The *idealistic* stage of youth, however, contains new internal sources of constraint, as individuals once more become enslaved, this time to the spiritual forces of conscience and reason. Only with the adulthood of *egoism* do individuals escape both material (external) and spiritual (internal) constraints, learning to value their personal satisfaction above all other considerations.

3. Stirner's Influence

At the time of his death, Stirner's brief period of notoriety was long over, his book had been out of print for several years, and there was little sign that his work might have any longer term impact. Since then, however, *The Ego and Its Own* has been translated into at least eight languages, and appeared in over one hundred editions.

Subsequent interpretations of Stirner have often followed contemporary intellectual fashion. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Stirner was frequently portrayed as a precursor of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), as having anticipated, if not influenced — it is far from certain that Nietzsche had read Stirner's work— both the style and substance of Nietzsche's work. (Carus 1914: 74–99.) In the 1960s and early 1970s, Stirner was rediscovered as a forerunner of existentialism, whose anti-essentialist concept of the self as a 'creative nothing' had affinities with the notion of human nature employed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). (Paterson 1971.) More recently, Stirner has been identified as a nascent poststructuralist (linked not least with Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995)), rejecting the idea of a universal human nature, employing a genealogical critique of humanist discourses of power and identity, and opposing various forms of state-centric thought. (Newman 2009.) These parallels are often plausible and interesting, although the sceptic might suspect that they reveal changing historical enthusiasms as much as they illuminate aspects of Stirner's philosophical and political thought.

The historical influence of Stirner's work is perhaps more plausibly located in two different contexts. Concerning its contemporary impact on the intellectual life of *Vormärz* Germany, *The Ego and Its Own* had a destructive impact on Stirner's left-Hegelian contemporaries, and played a related and significant role in the evolution of the thought of Karl Marx. Concerning its longer term historical influence, Stirner's best-known work has become a founding text in the political tradition of individualist anarchism.

as things — as a property relation. The egoist properly stands in a relation of “ownership” to the wider world. This notion of “egoistic property” is not to be confused with more familiar juridical concepts of ownership (such as private property or collective ownership). These more familiar forms of property rest on notions of right, and involve claims to exclusivity or constraints on use, which Stirner rejects. Egoistic property is rather constituted by the “unlimited dominion” (223) of individuals over the world, by which Stirner appears to mean that there are no moral constraints on how an individual might relate to these persons and things. Stirner sometimes describes the resulting association between people as involving relationships “of utility, of use” (263). The egoist, he suggests, views others as “nothing but—my food, even as I am fed upon and turned to use by you” (263). Stirner embraces the stark consequences of this rejection of any general obligation towards others, insisting, for example, that the egoist does not renounce “even the power over life and death” (282). Over the course of the book, he variously declines to condemn the officer’s widow who strangles her child (281), the man who treats his sister “as wife also” (45), and the murderer who no longer fears his act as a “wrong” (169). In a world in which “we owe each other nothing” (263), it seems that acts of infanticide, incest, and murder, might all turn out to be justified.

At one point, Stirner acknowledges that few readers of *The Ego and Its Own* will draw any comfort from his vision of an egoistic future, but insists that the welfare of this audience is not of any interest to him. Indeed, Stirner suggests that, if he had been motivated by a concern for others, then he would have had to conceal rather than propagate his ideas. As it is, Stirner maintains that even if he had believed that these ideas would lead to the “bloodiest wars and the fall of many generations” (263) he would still have disseminated them.

Stirner portrays this dialectic of individual growth as an analogue of historical development, and it is a tripartite account of the latter which structures the remainder of the book. Human history is reduced to successive epochs of realism (the ancient, or pre-Christian, world), idealism (the modern, or Christian, world), and egoism (the future world). Part One of *The Ego and Its Own* is devoted to the first two of these subjects (providing a negative critique of the past), whilst Part Two is concerned with the third of them (providing a positive account of the future).

In both individual and historical forms, the second stage of this developmental narrative is presented as a negation of the first, and the third stage, in turn, as the negation of that negation. The triadic structure of this argument has been read as confirming Stirner’s Hegelian formation and commitments (Stepelevich: 1985), but might also be seen as embodying a self-conscious parody of Hegelianism. In this context, Stirner has plausibly been understood as offering both a provocation and a knowing attempt at humour, utilising a dialectical structure in order to advance his own anti-Hegelian position. (De Ridder: 2008.)

2.2 The Ancient and Modern Worlds

Part One of *The Ego and Its Own* is backward-looking, in that it is concerned with the ancient and modern worlds rather than with the future, and negative, in that its primary aim is to demonstrate the failure of modernity to escape from the very religious modes of thought which it claims to have outgrown. The bulk of Stirner’s genealogical account is devoted to the modern epoch, and he only discusses the ancient world insofar as it contributes to the genesis of modernity. In both cases, however, the majority of his examples are taken from the realm of cultural and intellectual affairs. Cumulatively these examples are meant, not only to undermine historical narratives which portray the modern development of humankind as the progressive realisation of freedom, but also to support an ac-

count of individuals in the modern world as increasingly oppressed by the spiritual. For Stirner, the subordination of the individual to spirit—in any of its guises—counts as religious servitude.

Stirner's account of the historical development of modernity largely revolves around a single event, the Reformation. He attempts to show that, from the perspective of the individual, the movement from Catholic to Protestant hegemony is not a liberating one, but instead constitutes both an extension and intensification of the domination of spirit. The Reformation extends, rather than contracts, the sphere of religious control over the individual because it refuses to recognise the distinction between the spiritual and the sensuous. Rather than preventing priests marrying, for example, Protestantism makes marriage religious, thereby extending the sphere of the spiritual to include the sensuous. The Reformation also intensifies, rather than relaxes, the bond between individuals and religion. The more inward faith of Protestantism, for example, establishes a perpetual internal conflict between natural impulses and religious conscience. In a typically vivid and combative metaphor, Stirner describes this internal conflict in the individual as analogous to the struggle between the population and the secret police in the contemporary body politic.

Stirner's claim that the modern world reproduces, rather than abolishes, religious modes of thought provides the opportunity for a sustained attack on the writings of his left-Hegelian contemporaries. Ludwig Feuerbach, in particular, is singled out for failing to overcome the subordination of the individual to spirit.

The centrality of the critique of Feuerbach to Stirner's project is clear from the form of *The Ego and Its Own* which embodies a structural parody of Feuerbach's best-known work. Where the two halves of Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* had been entitled *God* and *Man* — with the first attacked and the second celebrated — the two corresponding parts of Stirner's opus are named *Man* and *I*. More substantively, Stirner seeks to challenge the pro-

That said, it is far from certain that all of the relationships that he mentions would survive intact from their reincarnation in egoistic form. Consider, for example, Stirner's contrast between two different kinds of love: the "bad case" where "ownness" is sacrificed, and egoistic love in which self-rule is retained. Egoistic love allows the individual to deny themselves something in order to enhance the pleasure of another, but only because their own pleasure is enhanced as a result. The object of egoistic love, in other words, remains the individual themselves. The egoist will not sacrifice their autonomy and interests to another, but rather loves only as long as "love makes me happy" (258). At one point, Stirner characterises this relationship as one in which the individual "enjoys" the other (258). The description is a revealing one, since enjoying another person and loving them would appear to be rather different matters. Loving another person in the conventional (and non-egoistic) sense might be thought to include the desire to promote the welfare of that person, even when it is not in our interests, or when it conflicts with our own wants and happiness. In this respect, it stands at some distance from Stirner's account of egoistic love. The point here is not a terminological one—Stirner rightly cares little whether we call egoistic love "love" and "hence stick to the old sound" (261) or whether we invent a new vocabulary—but rather that a world without this experience would be an unfamiliar and impoverished one. Stirner has not obviously succeeded in establishing that this particular familiar and worthwhile relationship would survive reestablishment on egoistic premises.

In the second, and more predominant, of these moods, Stirner celebrates the radical and unfamiliar consequences of adopting an egoistic order. Indeed, in places, he seems to revel in acknowledging that his views have startling consequences from which few of his readers will take any solace. This is one of the sources of the melodramatic and provocative tone of parts of *The Ego and Its Own*.

Stirner describes the appropriate relation between the egoist and their objects — which include, of course, other persons as well

sible shape of egoistic relationships which do not conflict with individual self-rule. In particular, Stirner provides a brief sketch of what he calls the “union of egoists [*Verein von Egoisten*]” (161).

The egoistic future is said to consist not of wholly isolated individuals but rather in relationships of “uniting”, that is, in permanent connections between individuals who themselves remain independent and self-determining. The central feature of the resulting union of egoists is that it does not involve the subordination of the individual. The union is “a son and co-worker” (273) of autonomy, a constantly shifting alliance which enables individuals to unite without loss of sovereignty, without swearing allegiance to anyone else’s “flag” (210). This union of egoists constitutes a purely instrumental association whose good is solely the advantage that the individuals concerned may derive for the pursuit of their individual goals; there are no shared final ends and the association is not valued in itself. In his reply to “Stirner’s Critics”, he imagines two heart-warming street scenes to illustrate egoistic union: in the first, children happen upon each other and spontaneously engage in the “comradship of play [*Spielkameradschaft*]”; and, in the second, Moses Hess (one of the critics in question) bumps into friends before adjourning for a drink, not out of loyalty, but in the expectation of pleasure. (Stirner 1914: 295–6.)

Stirner sometimes seems torn as how best to elucidate this basic account of egoistic social relations. At least, in *The Ego and Its Own*, his elaboration of egoistic relations can appear to take divergent paths.

In the first, and least typical, of these moods, Stirner strives to avoid suggesting, at least too strongly, that his views might have radical and unforeseen consequences. More precisely, he seeks to suggest that certain familiar and worthwhile relationships (such as “love”) might continue into the egoistic future. This suggestion is presumably aimed at making that future appear more attractive, not least to those attached to these familiar and worthwhile relationships.

gressive verdict on Feuerbach’s achievement. He maintains that the celebration of Feuerbach for having completed the critique of religion, is not merely mistaken but nearer the opposite of the truth. Far from undermining religion, the Feuerbachian problematic is said to reproduce and amplify its central features.

For Feuerbach, the primary error of Christianity was that it took human predicates and projected them into another world as if they constituted an independent being. He saw religious belief as a necessary step in the progress of humankind to self-understanding. More precisely, it was through transformative criticism – recovering the correct relation of subject and predicate from its inversion in Christianity – that we first come to understand what human nature is. Moreover, Feuerbach maintains that, once liberated from their otherworldly form, these essential human characteristics – and especially perhaps our love for others – would come to form the basis of the unalienated social and political life of the future. This emancipatory ambition also helps to clarify Feuerbach’s insistence that he should be seen as a friend, and not an enemy, of religion; in particular, he sought not to destroy Christianity, but to liberate its content from otherworldly forms. This claim is also at the heart of his distinctive – and perhaps idiosyncratic – denial that he was an atheist. Feuerbach maintains that true atheism requires the rejection not only of God as subject, but also of those predicates – love, wisdom, justice, and so on – traditionally associated with divinity.

Stirner might be said to pick up this, perhaps idiosyncratic, characterisation of “true atheism” and run with it. Stirner maintains that religion, properly understood, is characterised by the subordination of the individual to “spirit” in any of its guises. Consequently, the rejection of God as a transcendental subject leaves the essential character and failing of religion intact. Feuerbach’s perfectionist problematic, Stirner remarks, might have altered “*the tinsel*” (the divine subject) but it leaves “the main thing” (the divine predicates) unchanged (56). (Page references in parenthesis are to the

1995 Cambridge edition of *The Ego and Its Own* cited in the Bibliography below.) The sacred is allowed to remain, if not as God, then as “*Man with a capital M*” in Byington’s inspired English rendering of Stirner’s “*Der Mensch*”. In short, rather than describing human nature as it is, Feuerbach is said to have deified a prescriptive account of what being human involves. As a result, the real kernel of religion, the positing of an “essence over me” (46), has been left intact. Indeed, Stirner suggests that Feuerbach’s achievement was to have effected a “change of masters” (55) which actually made the tyranny of the divine over the individual even more complete. First, it extends domination, because this new deity is no longer the preserve of the faithful, but can possess everyone, believers and unbelievers alike. And, second, it intensifies domination, because the scrutiny of our own conscience is much harder to evade than that of a transcendental subject that flutters “over our heads as a dove” (86).

Stirner extends this critique to the work of all the left-Hegelians, including those with whom he had associated in Berlin. Although they disagree about the content of human nature—for “political liberals” like Arnold Ruge human nature is identified with citizenship, for “social liberals” like Moses Hess human nature is identified with labour, and for “humane liberals” like Bruno Bauer human nature is identified with critical activity—all the left-Hegelians are said to have reproduced the basic Feuerbachian error: separating the individual from his human essence, and setting that essence above the individual as something to be striven for. In contrast, Stirner maintains that because it has no universal or prescriptive content, human nature cannot ground any claim about how we ought to live. His own intellectual project—which he describes as an attempt to rehabilitate the prosaic and mortal self, the “un-man”(124) for whom the notion of a calling is alien—is intended as a radical break with the work of these contemporaries.

It may seem obvious that Stirner subscribes to a resolutely anti-perfectionist position here. However, this obvious reading has been

On Stirner’s account, there is a necessary antipathy between the egoistic individual and the state. This inevitable hostility is based on the conflict between Stirner’s conception of autonomy and any obligation to obey the law. “Own will and the state”, he writes, “are powers in deadly hostility, between which no ‘perpetual peace’ is possible” (175). Since self-rule is incompatible with, and valued more highly than, any obligation to obey the law, Stirner rejects the legitimacy of political obligation. Note that this rejection stands irrespective of the foundation of that political obligation, and whatever the form of the state. “Every state”, Stirner insists, “is a despotism, be the despot one or many” (175). 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 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” (175).

Promise-keeping is another early victim of this commitment to, and understanding of, self-rule. Stirner associates the institution of promising with illegitimate constraint, since the requirement that duly made promises be kept is incompatible with his understanding of individual autonomy. Stirner rejects any general obligation to keep promises as just another attempt to bind the individual. The egoist, he suggests, must embrace the heroism of the lie, and be willing to break even his own word “in order to determine himself instead of being determined” (210). Note that Stirner’s enthusiasm is reserved not for those who break their word in the service of some larger spiritual goal (as Luther, for example, became unfaithful to his monastic vows for God’s sake), but rather for those individuals who are willing to break their word for their own sake.

As well as a negative account of the institutions and practices that egoists must reject as incompatible with autonomy, *The Ego and Its Own* also contains some positive suggestions about the pos-

moral claims is not to be confused with a denial of the propriety of all normative or ethical judgement. There is, as a result, no inconsistency in Stirner's frequent use of an explicitly evaluative vocabulary, as when, for example, he praises the egoist for having the "courage" (265) to lie, or condemns the "weakness" (197) of the individual who succumbs to pressure from their family.

Two features of Stirner's position emerge as fundamental. First, he values "ownness" not as one good amongst many, but as the most important good, a good which trumps all others. Second, he adopts an account of self-rule which is incompatible with the existence of any legitimate obligations to others, even those which an individual has voluntarily undertaken; thereby rejecting perhaps the most familiar way of reconciling individual autonomy with the existence of binding obligations. In short, Stirner appears to value individual self-rule above all else, and he interprets that self-rule in a stringent and idiosyncratic manner.

2.4 Some Consequences of Egoism

The consequences of Stirner's position appear extreme and far-reaching. As the example of morality suggests, egoists are likely to find themselves in conflict with some cherished social institutions and practices. Stirner consistently associates (non-egoistic) society with relationships of "belonging", which he treats as involving the subjugation of individuals. For example, he maintains that "the forming of family ties binds a man" (102). (Stirner never appears to consider seriously the possibility that belonging might, at least potentially or in some cases, have more positive associations; for example, of being at home or of feeling secure.) Confronted with the conflict between egoism and "society", Stirner is not prompted to re-examine his commitment to, or understanding of, self-rule, but instead confidently denies the legitimacy of those conventional institutions and practices. Two examples of this response may suffice.

challenged. Stirner certainly rejects what might be called "essentialist perfectionism"; that is, ethical theories which value certain characteristics of the individual precisely because they realise some aspect of human nature. However, he nonetheless continues to embrace a character ideal, a picture of a self-ruling individual whose perfection is valuable apart from any happiness or pleasure that it might bring. The Stirnerian egoist must not only avoid submission to external powers, but must also cultivate a kind of emotional detachment towards their own thoughts and feelings, ensuring that the latter do not subjugate the egoist, or make the egoist an instrument of their own realisation. The interpretative suggestion here is that an "anti-essentialist perfectionism" survives in this ideal of character, in Stirner's celebration of the "un-man" and the egoist. (Leopold 2019.)

2.3 The Egoistic Future

Part Two of *The Ego and Its Own* is forward-looking, in that it is concerned with the egoistic future rather than the ancient or modern worlds, and positive, in that it aims to establish the possibility that Stirner's contemporaries could be liberated from the tyranny of religion.

Stirner's account of the developing historical relationship between the individual and society is advanced in a series of parallels which are designed to portray egoism as the embodiment of a more advanced civilisation. At one point, he takes the early modern idea of a social contract, in which progress consists of a move from an individualistic state of nature to a communal civil society, and neatly inverts it. It is membership of society, and not isolation, Stirner suggests, which is humankind's "state of nature" (271), an early stage of development whose inadequacies are, in due course, outgrown. Elsewhere, he describes the developing relationship between the individual and society as analogous to that between a mother and her child. As the individual (the child) develops a mature prefer-

ence for a less suffocating environment, they must throw off the claims of society (the mother) which seeks to maintain them in a subordinate position. In both cases, Stirner draws the lesson that the individual must move from social to egoistic relationships in order to escape subjection.

What is meant by “egoism”, however, is not always clear. Stirner is occasionally portrayed as a psychological egoist, that is, as a proponent of the descriptive claim that all (intentional) actions are motivated by a concern for the self-interest of the agent. However, this characterisation of Stirner’s position can be questioned. Not least, *The Ego and Its Own* is structured around the opposition between egoistic and non-egoistic forms of experience. Indeed, he appears to hold that non-egoistic action has predominated historically (in the epochs of realism and idealism). Moreover, at one point, Stirner appears explicitly to consider adopting the explanatory stance of psychological egoism only to reject it. In a discussion of a young woman who sacrifices her love for another in order to respect the wishes of her family, Stirner remarks that an observer might be tempted to maintain that selfishness has still prevailed in this case since the woman clearly preferred the wishes of her family to the attractions of her suitor. However, Stirner rejects this hypothetical explanation, insisting that, provided “the pliable girl were conscious of having left her self-will unsatisfied and humbly subjected herself to a higher power” (197), we should see her actions as governed by piety rather than egoism.

It would also be a mistake to think of Stirner as advocating a normative proposition about the value of self-interested action as ordinarily understood. Stirnerian egoism needs to be distinguished from the individual pursuit of conventional self-interest. In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner discusses the important example of an avaricious individual who sacrifices everything in pursuit of material riches. Such an individual is clearly self-interested (he acts only to enrich himself) but it is an egoism which Stirner rejects as one-sided and narrow. Stirner’s reason for rejecting this form of egoism

is instructive. He suggests that the avaricious man has become enslaved to a single end, and that such enslavement is incompatible with egoism properly understood.

Stirnerian egoism is perhaps best thought of, not in terms of the pursuit of self-interest, but rather as a variety of individual self-rule or autonomy. Egoism properly understood is to be identified with what Stirner calls “ownness [*Eigenheit*]”, a type of autonomy which is incompatible with any suspension, whether voluntary or forced, of individual judgement. “I am my own”, Stirner writes, “only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered ... by anything else” (153). As already noted, this Stirnerian ideal of self-rule has external and internal dimensions, requiring not only that we avoid subordinating ourselves to others, but also that we escape being “dragged along” (56) by our own appetites. In short, Stirner not only rejects the legitimacy of any subordination to the will of another but also recommends that individuals cultivate an ideal of emotional detachment towards their own appetites and ideas.

Judged against this account of egoism, characterisations of Stirner as a “nihilist”—in the sense that he rejects all normative judgement—would also appear to be mistaken. The popular but doubtful description of Stirner as a “nihilist” is encouraged by his explicit rejection of morality. Morality, on Stirner’s account, involves the positing of obligations to behave in certain fixed ways. As a result, he rejects morality as incompatible with egoism properly understood. However, this rejection of morality is not grounded in the rejection of values as such, but in the affirmation of what might be called non-moral goods. That is, Stirner allows that there are actions and desires which, although not moral in his sense (because they do not involve obligations to others), are nonetheless to be assessed positively. Stirner is clearly committed to the non-nihilistic view that certain kinds of character and modes of behaviour (namely autonomous individuals and actions) are to be valued above all others. His conception of morality is, in this respect, a narrow one, and his rejection of the legitimacy of