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In 1844, Max Stirner (the pen name of the radical Hegelian philosopher Johann Kaspar Schmidt) published *The Ego and Its Own*, a work of astonishing ambition and iconoclasm.[1] Stirner's book sets out one of the earliest and most comprehensive attacks on several of the philosophies and ideologies today associated with the modern era and modern thinking, among them humanism, liberalism, nation-statism, and socialism. But if Stirner's masterwork anticipates existentialism and postmodernism, then Buddhist thought anticipates Stirner. The many fruitful connections between the ideas of the Buddha and Stirner have not been adequately explored, both because Stirner is regrettably unsung and because the secular, non-supernatural insights of Buddhist thought are likewise woefully underappreciated.

[1] Here, I've assumed some background knowledge of Stirner's ideas and Buddhism's. It's worth noting that *The Ego and Its Own* is not the easiest text, even among its peers in nineteenth-century German philosophy; and reading English translations further complicates matters by introducing the subjective judgments of translators. But the book rewards a close reading (or several of them, as it has certainly taken the author), and it remains ahead of its time, in 2021 even as in the mid-nineteenth century.

As Stirner's thought exorcises spooks, so does Buddhism exhort us to pursue enlightenment, emerging from behind a veil of self-imposed ignorance. The ontologies advanced by Buddhism and Stirner's egoism are remarkably similar. Both contend that our descriptions of reality—our models, explanations, and philosophies, even our so-called hard sciences—never quite capture reality, not fully or completely; they are always missing something, trying without avail to reduce the irreducible. Whenever our models isolate something *conceptually* that cannot be isolated *actually*, we advance "a kind of isolation and reduction that is inherently alien to the actual nature of the reality it is modeling." The human mind will never understand the full complexity of reality, which reveals itself as ever stranger as we understand more about it.

Thus, central to Stirner's unsparing critique of modernity is his resistance to "fixed ideas," the concepts, ideologies and philosophies that are treated by their adherents as fundamental or absolute. For Stirner everything is forever in flux—nothing is permanent or unchanging. Human systems of thought emerge from human minds and psychologies, which are ultimately also subjective, contingent and ungrounded. If human beings have invented our fixed ideas, then we should not feel bound by such ideas. Yet we do, and this willingness to allow our arbitrary fictions and superstitions to lord over us is a key cause of psychological discomfort, leading us away from genuine consciousness and liberation. In his blockbuster *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari could be describing Stirner's thought when he writes:

[N]one of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.

Harari's fictions are Stirner's spooks, stories we specially intelligent animals tell ourselves and each other. And though concocted and existing only in our minds, these stories hold

and particular, in the direction of human-scale social and economic arrangements, as a kind of sacrilege—at the very least a kind of perverse retrogression. The great gods of progress and growth, as they are called, are universal, their power unlimited. Human beings are the anointed masters of the biosphere and beyond. But as E.F. Schumacher pointed out, "Simplicity and non-violence are obviously closely related." Today, simpler and more modest ways of life—those ways more sensitive to the interdependence of all life, and more realistic about both the nature of human beings and the naturally imposed limits on the consumption of finite resources—are misunderstood as backward or grieving the loss of an Edenic past that never existed. A Buddhism-inspired anarchist project resists neither prosperity nor even high technology; it merely suggests that human beings now have far more power than we can responsibly use, that we ought to take a more mindful approach to the applications of our power. A more mindful approach must be one that does not so heavily discount our future on this planet, for we may be closer to the point of no return than we think.

at the creation of new political institutions and establishing political arrangements." Anarchism of some kind is the natural social complement—really implication—of Buddhism, both philosophies being concerned with suffering and the cessation thereof, both eschewing politics as violence institutionalized. The fact of human suffering (or anxiety, or general unsatisfactoriness) is one of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, and Buddhists place a special emphasis on non-violence as a way to reduce and ameliorate suffering. Indeed, to some practicing Buddhists, non-violence is "the essence of the Buddha's teachings." "Non-violence is," in the words of the Dalai Lama, "the reflection of inner peace." Though narrower than Buddhism in its philosophical scope and goals, anarchism opposes violence, domination, and exploitation, all of which cause harm and suffering. At a summary level, anarchism wishes to rid human society of arbitrary, coercive authority and hierarchy. Anarchism is therefore no respecter of persons; it is radically egalitarian in that it counsels treating all people as worthy of love and dignity. The teachings of the Buddha are likewise radically egalitarian, disregarding caste as unimportant and granting the status of nobility anyone who has attained wisdom. Because it emerges as a reaction to industrialization and the modern nation-state, anarchism pays particular attention to capital and the state (which I've elsewhere discussed as the two titanic meta-institutions of modernity). But anarchist arguments and insights certainly are not confined to these institutions, and anarchists have continued to develop and expand our criticisms of power and privilege in light of new social circumstances. A Buddhist anarchism might emphasize context, employ a dialectical approach, and point to personal enlightenment and right action rather than political action or revolution. Buddhists anarchists would look to cultivate a social and economic order in which all kinds of organizational forms balance one another. Here in the first half of the twenty-first century, almost everyone would regard an evolution in the direction of the local

sway over us; they are how, as Harari puts it, "history declared its independence from biology."

Buddhism likewise rejects absolutes, positing that there is no permanent essence defining any natural phenomenon—that everything that exists, has existed, and will exist in the universe is impermanent and changing, even the individual and her consciousness. This idea of impermanence (*anicca*) is among Buddhism's Three Marks of Existence, along with suffering (*duḥkha*, which we may translate also as unsatisfactoriness, anxiety, etc.) and non-self (*anattā*). Non-self is a particularly startling and difficult concept for our primate minds perceiving reality as such. Buddhists contend that a powerful source of each individual's suffering is her ever-gnawing suspicion not just that she is tiny and unimportant on the scale of an infinite universe, but that she herself is an illusion, her very consciousness dissolving into a vast sea of more fundamental activity. Being what we are, we want (perhaps need) to believe that we are special, both as individuals and as a species. Buddhism is radical in its claim that a human being has no soul or permanent substance, maintaining that to believe in either consciousness or the soul as a concrete entity is to indulge in a reification fallacy.

It may appear, at first blush, that Stirner's egoism, with its focus on "the sole ego" and "the unique," cannot be reconciled with the Buddhist idea of non-self. Upon closer inspection, though, we see that Stirner articulates something very much like that idea, explaining that even his concept of the unique is a fundamentally incomplete description of reality. Of the unique, Stirner explains that "[n]ames don't name it," that it is irreducible to language: "What Stirner says is a word, a thought, a concept; what he means is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said." It is clear that Stirner does not take the unique to be fundamental, or to possess in any way some true essence. In remarkably similar ways,

the Buddha and Stirner make the individual a font out of which reality—more accurately the perception of reality, and that's crucial here—flows. Consider first the words of the Buddha: "All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world." Now compare this statement with Stirner's formulation: "I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything." Here, these two revolutionary thinkers, separated by more than two millennia, arrive at the radical, potentially terrifying conclusion that there is no unmediated, pure and true reality beneath or at the heart of anything; rather, everything is defined—and thus, in a very real sense, *created*—by the observer. When we experience qualia, our minds are "misrepresent[ing] complex patterns of brain activity as simple phenomenal properties." Philosopher Keith Frankish explains,

It is phenomenal consciousness that I believe is illusory. For science finds nothing qualitative in our brains, any more than in the world outside. The atoms in your brain aren't coloured and they don't compose a colourful inner image. (And even if they did, there is no inner eye to see it.) Nor do they have any other qualitative properties. There are no inner sounds, smells, tastes and pains, and no inner observer to experience them if there were.

Developments in physics, particularly in quantum mechanics, also seem to lend scientific credibility to the idea that we are, in a sense, creating reality (or at least affecting it merely by observing). We've learned, for example, that the behaviors of subatomic particles mock the laws of classical physics, seeming to us to act randomly. As we get closer to a representative picture of the unimaginable strangeness that is reality, we may begin to see that the Buddha and Stirner were correct in the deepest, most literal possible sense. Consciousness may be at once illusory and capable of exerting an influence on observable reality. Indeed, some physicists actually "argue that conscious observation is a necessary element to achieve the transition from quantum to classical states during measurement[;] some go even further and propose a more active influence of the human mind on the probabilities of quantum measurement outcomes." These are, no doubt, controversial claims. Quantum mechanics remains extremely mysterious, despite the fact that much of our technology relies on its application. While we know that the calculations work, we don't know what they *describe*—that is, we don't know what it is that we're really talking about. Whatever it is seems to boil down ineluctably to things subjective and personal, a fact that is perhaps unnerving, for we yearn to know for certain that there is *something* to hold onto. Some theoretical physicists suggest that *there are no fundamental laws*, not really. And it would stand to reason that the apparently fundamental laws of physics are in fact emergent, appearing stable and permanent only from our vantage point, just as Mount Everest appears to be standing still, thumbing its nose at time. We observe phenomena as the fragile, short-lived animals we are, doomed to know only very little about the universe in which we evolved. Indeed, we might even regard it as strange—out of keeping with the entropic, ever-in-flux nature of reality—if the laws of nature really were static, fixed in place for eternity. More likely is the admittedly abstract idea that there is continuous change at the margins, that space, time and the laws that govern everything are emergent (and thus relative) phenomena, that everything is defined in terms of something else, something prior.

Stirner's egoism and Buddhism are also similar in their emphasis on inner awakening, the idea that "[o]nly a personal transformation, based on insight and wisdom, will end interpersonal conflict and lead to real happiness." Thus, if Stirner's egoism and Buddhism can be said to have a political character, which is arguable, then it is one that "aims for social change by increasing individual compassion and through non-violent social action." As the Buddhist monk K. Sri Dhammananda explains, the Buddhist way of life is explicitly "not directed