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Max Stirner's Anarchist Gospel

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SIXTY years ago, a book entitled “Der Einzige und sein Eigentum” (generally translated “The Individual and his Property”) was published in Berlin. It has been described as “the most revolutionary book ever written,” and its author, Max Stirner, was perhaps the leading intellectual precursor of modern philosophical anarchism. When he died, in 1856, in comparative poverty and obscurity, his theories had made but little headway; but during the years that have passed since then both book and author have commanded increasing study and respect. It begins to look as if Max Stirner might yet take rank with the great philosophic thinkers of the nineteenth century. He exerted profound influence over Nietzsche, and, in the opinion of no less an authority than Eduard von Hartmann, his work surpasses that of Nietzsche “by a thousand cubits.” “Der Einzige” has been translated into French, Spanish, Russian and Italian; and critical studies popularizing its arguments have appeared in almost all the European countries. George Brandes, a critic of rare discernment, is one of Stirner’s interpreters, and John Henry Mackay, the German poet,

has written his biography. On Mackay's initiative a suitable stone has been placed above Stirner's grave in Berlin. and a memorial tablet upon the house in which he died; and this spring another tablet is to be set upon the house in Bayreuth where he was born in 1806.

An English translation¹ of "Der Einzige," which has just appeared in New York under the title, "The Ego and His Own," makes Stirner's gospel accessible for the first time to American and English-speaking readers. He is difficult to read, and his oddities of composition and terminology often tend to obscure his meaning. "There is nothing more disconcerting," one of his French commentators has confessed, "than the first approach to this strange work. Stirner does not condescend to inform us as to the architecture of his edifice, or furnish us the slightest guiding thread... The apparent divisions of the book are few and misleading. The repetitions are innumerable. At first one seems to be confronted with a collection of essays strung together, with a throng of aphorisms... But, if you read this book several times; if, after having penetrated the intimacy of each of its parts, you then traverse it as a whole—gradually the fragments weld themselves together, and Stirner's thought is revealed in all its unity, force, and depth."

There are many points of similarity between the philosophies of Stirner and of Nietzsche. Both might take as their creed the ringing lines of Swinburne:

Honor to man in the highest!
For man is the master of things.

But while Nietzsche speaks with the inspired accents of a poet, Stirner writes as a philosophical partizan. The former fires the imagination with an essentially aristocratic vision of the

¹ THE EGO AND HIS OWN. By Max Stirner. Translated from the German by Steven T. Byington, with an Introduction by J. L. Walker. Benj. R. Tucker, New York.

“Superman”; the latter proclaims that each individual man is supreme and perfect in himself. Against the opening words of his first chapter, Stirner sets two mottoes, one from Feuerbach, that “man is to man the supreme being”; the other from Bruno Bauer, that “man has just been discovered.” He adds the comment: “Then let us take a more careful look at this supreme being and this new discovery.”

With a confidence worthy of Carlyle, who once declared that there were twenty-seven million people in England, “mostly fools,” Stirner says that when he looks out on the modern world he can only regard the majority of men as “veritable fools, fools in a madhouse.” He means that we do not know how to think, how to *be ourselves*. We take our lives and opinions as they are handed to us; we believe in “spooks” of all kinds; we have “wheels in our heads;” we are all slaves of *fixed ideas*. It is “fixed ideas” that especially excite. Stirner’s wrath, and by this term he means ideas of God, marriage, the state, of law, duty, morality. Humanity will only begin to *live*, he avers, when it gets rid of all fixed ideas.

The trouble with all of us to-day, he asserts, is that we think in crowds, and that our knowledge is alien to us. To follow his argument:

“God, immortality, freedom, humanity, etc. are drilled into us from childhood as thoughts and feelings which move our inner being more or less strongly, either ruling us without our knowing it, or sometimes in richer natures manifesting themselves in systems and works of art; but are always not aroused, but imparted, feelings, because we must believe in them and cling to them...

“Who is there that has never, more or less consciously, noticed that our whole education is calculated to produce *feelings* in us, *i.e.* impart

them to us, instead of leaving their production to ourselves however they may turn out? If we hear the name of God, we are to feel veneration; if we hear that of the prince's majesty, it is to be received with reverence, deference, submission; if we hear that of morality, we are to think that we hear something inviolable; if we hear of the Evil One or evil ones, we are to shudder. The intention is directed to these *feelings*, and he who *e.g.* should hear with pleasure the deeds of the 'bad' would have to be 'taught what's what' with the rod of discipline. Thus stuffed with *imparted feelings*, we appear before the bar of majority and are 'pronounced of age.' Our equipment consists of 'elevating feelings, lofty thoughts, inspiring maxims, eternal principles,' etc. The young are of age when they twitter like the old; they are driven through school to learn the old song, and, when they have this by heart, they are declared of age.

"We *must not* feel at every thing and every name that comes before us what we could and would like to feel thereat; *e.g.* at the name of God we must think of nothing laughable, feel nothing disrespectful, it being prescribed and imparted to us what and how we are to feel and think at mention of that name.

"That is the meaning of the *care of souls*—that my soul or my mind be tuned as others think right, not as I myself would like it. How much trouble does it not cost one, finally to secure to oneself a feeling of one's own at the mention of at least this or that name, and to laugh in the face of many who expect from us a holy face and a composed expression at their speeches. What is imparted is *alien* to us, is

“As you produce innumerable things by your activity, yes, shape the earth’s surface anew and set up works of men everywhere, so too you may still ascertain numberless truths by your thinking, and we will gladly take delight in them. Nevertheless, as I do not please to hand myself over to serve your newly discovered machines mechanically, but only help to set them running for my benefit, so too I will only use your truths, without letting myself be used for their demands.

“All truths *beneath* me are to my liking; a truth *above* me, a truth that I should have to *direct* myself by, I am not acquainted with. For me there is no truth, for nothing is more than I!”

not our own, and therefore is ‘sacred,’ and it is hard work to lay aside the ‘sacred dread of it.’”

In the terminology of Stirner’s subversive gospel, “everything sacred is a tie, a fetter.” According to his view of life, all progress consists in the breaking of previously accepted laws. “The history of the world,” he says, “shows that no tie has yet remained unrent, that man tirelessly defends himself against ties of every sort.” And so he adjures the youth of his age, and of every age, to become rebels, to “practise refractoriness, yes, complete disobedience.” Such adjuration, he is aware, is likely to fall, for the most part, on deaf ears.

“One needs only admonish you of yourselves to bring you to despair at once. ‘What am I?’ each of you asks himself. An abyss of lawless and unregulated impulses, desires, wishes, passions, a chaos without light or guiding star! How am I to obtain a correct answer, if, without regard to God’s commandments or to the duties which morality prescribes, without regard to the voice of reason, which in the course of history, after bitter experiences, has exalted the best and most reasonable thing into law, I simply appeal to myself? My passion would advise me to do the most senseless thing possible.—Thus each deems himself the—devil; for, if, so far as he is unconcerned about religion, etc., he only deemed himself a beast, he would easily find that the beast, which does follow only *its* impulse (as it were, its advice), does not advise and impel itself to do the ‘most senseless’ things, but takes very correct steps. But the habit of the religious way of thinking has biased our mind so grievously that we are—terrified at *ourselves* in our nakedness and

naturalness; it has degraded us so that we deem ourselves depraved by nature, born devils. Of course it comes into your head at once that your calling requires you to do the 'good,' the moral, the right. Now, if you ask *yourselves* what is to be done, how can the right voice sound forth from you, the voice which points the way of the good, the right, the true, etc.? What concord have God and Belial?

"But what would you think if one answered you by saying: 'That one is to listen to God, conscience, duties, laws, and so forth, is flim-flam with which people have stuffed your head and heart and made you crazy'? And if he asked you how it is that you know so surely that the voice of nature is a seducer? And if he even demanded of you to turn the thing about and actually to deem the voice of God and conscience to be the devil's work? There are such graceless men; how will you settle them? You cannot appeal to your parsons, parents, and good men, for precisely these are designated by them as your *seducers*, as the true seducers and corrupters of youth, who busily sow broadcast the tares of self-contempt and reverence to God, who fill young hearts with mud and young heads with stupidity."

The real gist of Stirner's argument is already apparent. His logic can have but one eventuation. He challenges men everywhere simply—*to be themselves*. "I recognize no other source of right," he says, "than *me*." He continues: "If religion has set up the proposition that we are sinners altogether, I set over against it the other: we are perfect altogether! For we are every moment all that we can be; and we never need be more."

you men, etc. But to me you are only what you are for me—to wit, my object; and, because *my* object, therefore my property."

The question arises finally: What is truth? With relentless logic, Stirner replies: "As long as you believe in the truth you do not believe in yourself, and are a—*servant*, a—*religious* man (that is, a *bound* man). You alone are the truth, or, rather, you are more than the truth, which is nothing at all before you." He says, in concluding:

"The truth is dead, a letter, a word, a material that I can use up. All truth by itself is dead, a corpse; it is alive only in the same way as my lungs are alive—to wit, in the measure of my own vitality. Truths are material, like vegetables and weeds; as to whether vegetable or weed, the decision lies in me.

"Objects are to me only material that I use up. Wherever I put my hand I grasp a truth, which I trim for myself. The truth is certain to me, and I do not need to long after it. To do the truth a service is in no case my intent; it is to me only a nourishment for my thinking head, as potatoes are for my digesting stomach, or as a friend is for my social heart. As long as I have the humor and force for thinking, every truth serves me only for me to work it up according to my powers. As reality or worldliness is 'vain and a thing of naught' for Christians, so is the truth for me. It exists, exactly as much as the things of this world go on existing although the Christian has proved their nothingness; but it is vain, because it has its *value not in itself* but *in me*. *Of itself* it is *valueless*. The truth is a—*creature*."

possessedness; for you love not *men*, but *man*. But I tell you, you have never seen a sinner, you have only—dreamed of him.”

“I want to be all and have all that I can be and have.” *This*, says Stirner, is the inevitable basis of conduct. To this we must all come sooner or later. He adds:

“Whether others are and have anything *similar*, what do I care? The equal, the same, they can neither be nor have. I cause no *detriment* to them, as I cause no detriment to the rock by being ‘ahead of it’ in having motion. If they could have it, they would have it.

“To cause other men no *detriment* is the point of the demand to possess no prerogative; to renounce all ‘being ahead,’ the strictest theory of *renunciation*. One is not to count himself as ‘anything especial,’ e.g. a Jew or a Christian. Well, I do not count myself as anything especial, but as *unique*. Doubtless I have *similarity* with others; yet that holds good only for comparison or reflection; in fact I am incomparable, unique. My flesh is not their flesh, my mind is not their mind. If you bring them under the generalities ‘flesh, mind,’ those are your *thoughts*, which have nothing to do with *my* flesh, *my* mind, and can least of all issue a ‘call’ to mine.

“I do not want to recognize or respect in you any thing, neither the proprietor nor the ragamuffin, nor even the man, but to *use you*. In salt I find that it makes food palatable to me, therefore I dissolve it; in the fish I recognize an aliment, therefore I eat it; in you I discover the gift of making my life agreeable, therefore I choose you as a companion. Or, in salt I study crystallization, in the fish animality, in

From this it follows that there is no absolute standard of right or wrong. What is right for one man may be wrong for another, and *vice versa*. Moreover:

A man is ‘called’ to nothing, and has no ‘calling,’ no ‘destiny,’ as little as a plant or a beast has a ‘calling.’ The flower does not follow the calling to complete itself, but it spends all its forces to enjoy and consume the world as well as it can—*i.e.* it sucks in as much of the juices of the earth, as much air of the ether, as much light of the sun, as it can get and lodge. The bird lives up to no calling, but it uses its forces as much as is practicable; it catches beetles and sings to its heart’s delight. But the forces of the flower and the bird are slight in comparison to those of a man, and a man who applies his forces will affect the world much more powerfully than flower and beast. A calling he has not, but he has forces that manifest themselves where they are because their being consists solely in their manifestation, and are as little able to abide inactive as life, which, if it ‘stood still’ only a second, would no longer be life. Now, one might call out to the man, ‘use your force.’ Yet to this imperative would be given the meaning that it was man’s task to use his force. It is not so. Rather, each one really uses his force without first looking upon this as his calling: at all times every one uses as much force as he possesses. One does say of a beaten man that he ought to have exerted his force more; but one forgets that, if in the moment of succumbing he had the force to exert his forces (e.g. bodily forces), he would not have failed to do it: even if it was only the discouragement of a minute, this was yet a—destitution of force, a minute long. Forces may as-

surely be sharpened and redoubled, especially by hostile resistance or friendly assistance; but where one misses their application one may be sure of their absence too. One can strike fire out of a stone, but without the blow none comes out; in like manner a man too needs 'impact.'

"Now, for this reason that forces always of themselves show themselves operative, the command to use them would be superfluous and senseless. To use his forces is not man's *calling* and task, but is his *act*, real and extant at all times. Force is only a simpler word for manifestation of force."

The argument that the world will "go to the dogs" in the moment that each man does as seems best in his own eyes, is met, in part, in Stirner's apostrophe to youth, already quoted. He returns to the point again and again. To those who exclaim, "Society will fall to pieces!" he replies: Men will seek one another as long as they *need* one another. "But surely one cannot put a rascal and an honest man on the same level!" To this Stirner makes answer:

"No human being does that oftener than you judges of morals; yes, still more than that, you imprison as a criminal an honest man who speaks openly against the existing constitution, against the hallowed institutions, and you entrust portfolios and still more important things to a crafty rascal. So *in praxi* you have nothing to reproach me with. 'But in theory!' Now there I do put both on the same level, as two opposite poles—to wit, both on the level of the moral law. Both have meaning only in the 'moral world, just as in the pre-Christian time a Jew who kept the law and one who broke it had meaning and significance

only in respect to the Jewish law; before Jesus Christ, on the contrary, the Pharisee was no more than the 'sinner and publican.' So before self-ownership the moral Pharisee amounts to as much as the immoral sinner."

Carrying this startling argument still further, Stirner brands the philanthropists of today as "the real tormentors of humanity." He cries:

"Get away from me with your 'philanthropy'! Creep in, you philanthropist, into the 'dens of vice,' linger awhile in the throng of the great city: will you not everywhere find sin, and sin, and again sin? Will you not wail over corrupt humanity, not lament at the monstrous egoism? Will you see a rich man without finding him pitiless and 'egoistic?' Perhaps you already call yourself an atheist, but you remain true to the Christian feeling that a camel will sooner go through a needle's eye than a rich man not be an 'un-man.' How many do you see anyhow that you would not throw into the 'egoistic mass'? What, therefore, has your philanthropy [love of man] found? Nothing but unlovable men! And where do they all come from? From you, from your philanthropy! You brought the sinner with you in your head, therefore you found him, therefore you inserted him everywhere. Do not call men sinners, and they are not: you alone are the creator of sinners; you, who fancy that you love men, are the very one to throw them into the mire of sin, the very one to divide them into vicious and virtuous, into men and un-men, the very one to befoul them with the slaver of your