

Morality vs. Egoism

Robert LeFevre & Sidney E. Parker

1967–1968

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Morality vs. Egoism — Robert LeFevre

I have noticed the letter from Dr. Murray Rothbard which appears in your publication, “Minus One,” for July of 1967. By this means I discovered for the first time that some of my views have been the target of discussion in an earlier publication apparently under the title: “Slings and Arrows.” That earlier publication escaped my notice, so I wish to use this means to thank Dr. Rothbard for coming to my defence in the absence of my knowledge that I had been attacked.

I have often been puzzled by the emotional intensity of those Dr. Rothbard classifies as “Stirnerites,” but your own observations following his letter have helped me to understand. If I grasp your point correctly, you object to moral instruction on the ground that this merely replaces the State and/or God and the idea of external punishment of prison or hell with the idea of internal punishment and guilt.

In other words, the Stirnerite must insulate himself against any concept of error at all. Whatever a Stirnerite wishes to do is “right” by definition, since there is no real “right” or “wrong” and the will of the individual is triumphant and always justified even against self-correction.

But how does the Stirnerite become a Stirnerite? He can only move to this position by correcting prior conclusions he may have reached. Thus, the Stirnerite must use the process of self-correction UNTIL he becomes a Stirnerite, after which further correction becomes impossible.

This is to say that the Stirnerite, in order to maintain his position, must do so with a closed mind. Any possibility of acceptance of any other thought than Stirner’s would lead the Stirnerite into an unacceptable position of admitting the possibility of error (guilt?) and this must be rejected as an inviolable absolute. Thus, the Stirnerite is guilty of the very worst of crimes which he lays at the door of the mystic. For he has created a god and he worships at the shrine without the willingness or even the capacity to consider that his god may be a false god.

Worse than this, this god of the Stirnerites is his own ego, which is always right. And like most mystical structures, a prophet of this mystique has been provided in the person of Stirner who, like the ego, can never be wrong.

With this before me, I can understand the religious intensity of the Stirnerite who is so fearful of being shown in error that it is a part of his theology that guilt (recognition of error) is impossible. I am now wondering if the real problem here may not lie in the too sweeping rejection of guilt as a necessary result of the recognition of error. It seems to me that moral instruction does not necessarily lead to the acceptance of guilt, although I grant that this is always a possibility. What the Stirnerite seems to imply is that moral instruction is, of necessity, unnatural and therefore contrary to nature. And why should anyone have a sense of guilt simply because of his nature? Obviously, to feel guilt because of the function of a man’s nature would be a kind of folly IF that were all that was involved. But this is to see man as having a one-dimensional nature, not as he is, but as Stirnerites think he is. And that is the prime folly of the Stirnerite faith for it rests upon a one-dimensional philosophy which is hopelessly contrary to the nature of man.

Man is a creature in contradiction. He is an organism that is motivated by a complexity of drives which serve to check and countercheck. He is capable of nobility and virtue, in his behavior. He is equally capable of ignominious and ignoble conduct. And all of these drives stem from his ego. He is paradoxical, quixotic, and ambivalent. But the high priesthood of the Stirnerite cult rejects all ambivalence by the happy hurdle method known to all fictions writers. He re-

defines man as a creature who cannot be right or wrong, who has no complexities and no inward struggle at all AFTER he has attained to the faith.

It is marvelously simplistic and beautiful. It also denies reality. By his fear of finding himself guilty of ignobility the Stirnerite defines ignobility as equivalent to nobility, pretending to see no differences in behavioral patterns.

May I respectfully suggest that the publisher of MINUS ONE is guilty of non-Stirnerite behavior in his efforts as a publisher? For, referring to other portions of his comments to the Rothbard letter it appears that it is none of the publisher's business what Mr. A or MR. B does or thinks, since his concern is purely with himself. But since his concern is purely with himself, he can have no interest or concern with the thoughts and behavior of others. And having no interest or concern with the thoughts or behavior of others, why does he publish articles which may or may not stimulate others to particular courses of thought or action? Apparently, he has some kind of non-Stirnerite motivation for he pretends to find some of my thoughts and actions in error. But they cannot be in error, for there is no error, by definition. It is moral judgement, utterly unworthy of a true Stirnerite.

Might I suggest that "guilt" when it is no more than a recognition of prior error, is the principal method by which we all learn? We learn by "trial and error," not by the process of self-justification. I wonder if Stirnerites wish to be known as people who are incapable of learning? If so, their minds are locked in concrete and there is no point at all in communicating with them.

So, in one sense, it might be reasoned that Stirnerites are cowed by an enormous spook—the fear that they might even think for a moment that they had done or thought something incorrectly. This fear is so gigantic that they cannot even admit it into their consciousness.

In Reply — S.E. Parker

"Moral people skimmed off the best fat from religion, ate it themselves, and are now having a tough job to get rid of the resulting scrofula."

Max Stirner

Mr. LeFevre's whole wondrous case against "Stirnerites" rests on his fallacious identification of "guilt" with "recognition of error." In his view any action which is liable to go "wrong" (and this means *every* action) is by virtue of this a moral or an immoral action. But I find a mistake in a mathematical calculation is my correction of this "error" a moral action? Mr. LeFevre seems to believe that it would be. But this is to completely confuse the issue even from a moralist standpoint. "Moral conduct," wrote Lan Freed "is conduct motivated by the aim of acting self-sacrificingly, is obedience to the 'voice' whose first command is 'act *not* as you desire to act, nor as you consider it expedient to act, but as you feel that you ought, morally speaking, to act.'" (*Social Pragmatism*) A moral action is therefore an "ought" action purely and simply. To argue otherwise is to apply moral value judgements to areas in which, morally speaking, they do not apply.

The "Stirnerite," egoist standpoint is that a "right" action is simply one appropriate to the end desired, and a "wrong" action one inappropriate to the end desired. In other words, there are expedient and inexpedient actions for an egoist—nothing more. There is no question of moral "guilt" involved if an egoist makes a mistake and recognizes that he has done so. He merely

corrects it if he can, and if he cannot he takes more care next time. How, from a logical angle, it follows that if there is no real “right” or “wrong” then a “Stirnerite” is “by definition” always “right” I fail to see. Perhaps Mr. LeFevre follows a different logic than mine.

I do not know any member of the “high priesthood of the Stirnerite cult” who rejects “all ambivalence.” They can’t belong to *my* church and certainly haven’t read their Stirner properly! However, I promise Mr. LeFevre I will raise this grave matter at the next Bayreuth College of Cardinals Conference when the spirit of Saint Max will be amongst us to assist us in our debates. Seriously, an egoist is only concerned to “define” himself, contradictory or otherwise, not “Man.”

Because I wrote that what Mr. A does to Mr. B “only concerns me if my interests are threatened” it by no means follows that I *cannot* concern myself with other individuals or their ideas. If Mr. B is a friend of mine I have an interest in him and will concern myself with his defence if I can because my interest is being threatened by Mr. A.

Again, I am interested in certain ideas and concern myself with publicizing and discussing them. One of my means for doing this is MINUS ONE. But I only do so because it pleases me to, not out of any moral obligation to preach a gospel, save the world, or even point out the errors in other people’s thinking. If these ideas did not interest me, I would not bother about them, anymore than I do about an argument between two orthinologists as to the best way to catch butterflies.

“Stirnerites,” therefore are not cowed by any spooks. I doubt if they lose much sleep over any guilty fear that “they had done or thought something incorrectly.” I leave the spook of morality to haunt the devisers of systems of moral instruction who, by “definition,” have a vested psychological interest in guilt or fear.

No one who has read and understood “The Ego and His Own” would ever regard Stirner’s ideas as sacred or unquestionable. It is up to the reader to make what use he can of the ideas it expresses. “The Ego and His Own” is neither a revelation from above nor from below. It is a consistent exposition of individualist anarchism; it can inspire or enrage, according to one’s taste; but it is nothing more than a book written by an individual. To try, even in sarcasm, to label it as a holy gospel simply puts the labeller out on a limb. He has only himself to blame if someone saws off the limb behind him.

More on Morality vs. Egoism — Robert LeFevre

I was pleased to see my letter reproduced in MINUS ONE and was equally pleased to read your answer. When persons talk about different things or even about the same things at different levels, it is certain they will never agree. It is equally certain that agreement is not an essential, although it would be helpful if each disputant knew what the other was talking about so that disagreement would be meaningful rather than demonstrative of non-comprehension.

First, let me say that I am concerned with those actions or decisions which individuals take (including Stirnerites), which actions or decisions may further their ends, but which may constitute molestation of me or other persons. Now, this is a particular class of actions and not “any action,” as you erroneously contend.

I have no objection whatever to the Stirnerite or anyone else who does as he pleases with himself and his own property. Indeed, I support this concept and will defend this right. Here, as I see it, there is only right action, although there could be unwise action. If a Stirnerite decides to

commit suicide or to burn down his house, this is his business and I could not rightfully interfere. It may be unwise, but the wisdom of the Stirnerite is not my concern. He may do as he pleases with himself and his property irrespective of anything else.

But when the Stirnerite decides that it is to his advantage to kill me or to burn down my house, he has moved into the area of inter-human relationships. At this point, you have suggested that Lan Freed has provided the definition of morality. I don't subscribe to his definition. For the quotation you have used makes it appear that I must act self-sacrificingly at this point, or that if the Stirnerite refrains from burning my house or killing me he is sacrificing himself. And this is, it seems to me, limiting our behaviour by a definition of morality that is surely as savage as the barbaric notions it sought to eliminate.

If I follow this, what is being claimed is this: The Stirnerite (or any other) is compelled to sacrifice something. Either he will sacrifice me, whose property or life he covets, or he must sacrifice himself, since he may elect not to sacrifice me. And this is to say that all life and survival itself is a predatory matter and someone or something must be ravished. Either we will sacrifice others or we will sacrifice ourselves. And with this type of definition the Stirnerite says, I'll sacrifice others, but never myself. No Hitler or Genghis Khan could have stated it better. My own concept of morality does not adhere to barbarism nor arise from it.

But, indeed, it is at this point that the Stirnerites does reject any ambivalence in his own behaviour, for here the Stirnerite can't be wrong. Obviously, he cannot be wrong when it comes to the disposal of his own resources and assets. We would agree there. But when he proposes to dispose of his resources or assets (or proposes to dispose of mine) through processes of molestation, the Stirnerite cannot view this act as wrong either, for as he sees it there is no wrong for him. Whatever his ego tells him, is right by definition.

And now two Stirnerites confront each other, each coveting something the other has. Each is absolutely right and neither can suffer any qualms of indecision, remorse, or guilt. Following the Stirnerite code, which arises from a rejection of morality as defined by Freed, each Stirnerite must sacrifice the other or admit that he has sacrificed himself—unthinkable to an egoist.

Come to think of it, this might be a solution. If only we could arrange to pair off Stirnerites in some type of "life boat" situation, there probably would be few Stirnerites left around.

And in Reply — S.E. Parker

I agree entirely with Robert LeFevre about "non-comprehension." His reply to me is excellent example of what he is talking about. He completely ignores what I wrote about the egoist's *non-moral* use of the terms "right" and "wrong" and insists on treating egoism as if it were a moral philosophy. Just as his first attack rested on the fallacious identification of "guilt" with "recognition of error," so his second rests on the equally fallacious assumption that, because I accept Lan Freed's definition of morality, therefore my behaviour as an egoist must be judged according to morality as so defined! For this reason all his contortions regarding who sacrifices whom for what are wasted. Egoists are amoralists so the question of what is morally "right" or "wrong" for them is completely irrelevant. To repeat: The egoist standpoint is that a "right" action is simply one appropriate to the end desired, and a "wrong" action is one inappropriate to the end desired. In other words, there are expedient or inexpedient actions for the egoist—nothing more.

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