

Introduction to “The Ego And Its Own”

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“A man can only liberate himself by himself and for himself. There is no other way
— all else is madness or collaboration.”
— Paul Herr, *Journey Not To End*

Max Stirner, whose real name was Johann Kaspar Schmidt, was born in 1806 and died in 1856. He studied the classics, philosophy and modern languages at several universities. Before the 1848 Revolution he was a frequent visitor to the meetings of “The Free”, a circle of radical intellectuals who met at a Weinstube in Friedrichstraße, Berlin. He wrote several essays on such subjects as education, art and religion, and the novels of Eugène Sue, compiled and edited a *History of Reaction*, translated works by Adam Smith and J.-B. Say, and contributed to various journals and newspapers. Among other jobs, he taught literature and history at a girls’ school for five years.

His real claim to our attention, however, is his *magnum opus*, *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner throws down his challenge to thousands of years of religious, philosophical and political depreciation of the individual:

“Away...with every concern that is not altogether my concern! You think that at least the ‘good cause’ must be my concern? What’s good, what’s bad? Why, I myself am my concern, and I am neither good nor bad. Neither has meaning for me. The divine is God’s concern; the human, man’s. My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but is— *unique*, as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!”

From this uncompromisingly egocentric stand-point, Stirner proceeds to criticize mercilessly all those doctrines and beliefs that demand subordination of the interests of the individual to those of State, God, Humanity, Society, or some other fiction. He investigates what these terms mean; what, if anything, they are based on; and clears away the mental rubbish that surrounds them. He exposes the bondage of the individual to fixed ideas. He declares his hostility to every creed that would crush or deny individuality. His call to self-liberation is no mealy-mouthed carping about this or that restriction placed upon us by one or another authority. It is not designed to set up a new authority in place of the old. His message is to those who wish to affirm their self-sovereignty to the fullest extent of their power — here and now. To those who want to remain

members of a herd, who feel an imperative need to merge themselves into some present or future collectivity, his philosophy will have no appeal.

Stirner's affirmation of amoralistic egoism and his celebration of the unique individual, has of course, provoked cries of pain and horror from moralists of all kinds: right and left, religious and secular. They have classified him as a bloodthirsty terrorist, even though he regarded terrorists as being among the possessed. They have described his book, to quote a recent critic, as "the *reductio ad absurdum* of the alienated subjectivity of modern society...one of the numerous blind alleys into which bourgeois individualism necessarily leads." They have denounced him as the nihilist *par excellence*, as an absolute irrationalist incapable of making any "meaningful" assertions, and held him up as an awful example to those who would live "beyond good and evil". Confronted with Stirner's contemptuous dismissal of their cherished principles, moralists invariably and loudly prophesy the terrible doom facing "humanity" should anyone take notice of what he says.

In doing so they turn a resolutely blind eye to the pernicious effects of morality, its staggering ineffectiveness in preventing the things it is supposed to prevent, and its provision of all manner of rationalizations for slaughter and torture of a magnitude beyond the scope of any "malevolent", conscious egoists's desire of capacity. The moral many thousands of infidels and heretics who fell before the fury of the faithful. Our contemporary political saviours are not restrained, by the moralities they profess, from eliminating those who step out of line and threaten the success of their schemes for redeeming the world. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of an individual motivated purely by self-interest who could effectively compete with moralists in the market for atrocities. As Benjamin DeCasseres once pointed out, those who claim to "love humanity" are usually sentimental butchers.

This is not the place to deal at length with all the incredible banalities, silly trivialities and downright misrepresentations resorted to by Stirner's critics. Mention must be made, however, of the reaction of his contemporaries, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, since Marxists have persistently abused Stirner and distorted his philosophy from their time until now.

Engels' first response to *The Ego and Its Own* was not unsympathetic. He wrote in a letter to Marx: "this work is important, far more important than Hess believes...the first point we find true is that, before doing whatever we will on behalf of some idea, we have first to make our cause personal, egoistic... Stirner is right to reject the 'Man' of Feuerbach...(since) Feuerbach's Man is derived from God... among all of the 'The Free' Stirner obviously has the most talent, personality, and dynamism.' Marx's reply has not been preserved, but it must have contained something of a severe reprimand because, in his next letter to Marx, Engels withdraws his praise of Stirner and submissively agrees that he now finds in *The Ego and Its Own* "what you find".

What Marx found had clearly enraged him, aware that in Max Stirner he had an important opponent of the communist creed he and Engels were in the process of elaborating. In *The German Ideology*, written mostly in 1846, Marx and Engels therefore launched a monomaniacal attack upon Stirner's philosophy, covering over 300 pages. It is an attack described by Eugene Fleischman as "notoriously misleading. It is not just that ridicule of a man's person is not equivalent to refutation of his ideas, but the reader is also aware that the authors are not reacting at all to the problems raised by their adversary."

Throughout their "reply", which is undoubtedly one of the most indigestible pieces of polemical vituperation ever composed, Marx and his faithful echo shower Stirner with so many *ad hominem* criticisms that they serve to reveal rather than conceal the fears that his ideas had

aroused, Stirner is “the emptiest, shallowest brain among the philosophers”; he has a “philosophical mental vacuity”; he is “the weakest and most ignorant” of “the whole philosophical fraternity”; “our holy father”; “a parochial Berlin schoolmaster” whose “whole activity is limited to trying a few, hackneyed, casuistical tricks on the world handed down to him by philosophical tradition” — these are only a few of the frenetic descriptions applied to Stirner by the founding fathers of Marxism. It is clear that there could be no absolution in their eyes for someone who could presciently write:

“Communism, by the abolition of all personal property, only presses me back still more into dependence upon another, viz, on the generality or collectivity and loudly as it always attacks the ‘State’, what it intends is itself again a State, a *status*, a condition hindering my free movement, a sovereign power over me. Communism rightly revolts against the pressure that I experience from individual proprietors; but still more horrible is the might it puts into the hands of the collectivity.”

The thoughtful reader may well wonder why, if Stirner was such an intellectual imbecile as Marx and Engels tried to make him out to be, they considered it necessary to subject him to such inordinately lengthy and vitriolic abuse. The reason is that, despite their bluster, they correctly saw his individualism as the most dangerous enemy their new religion of social salvation could have. It is crucial to their sociocentric doctrine that individuals must be regarded as cellular parts of a social whole, the nature of which is determined by the stage of development reached by mysterious “productive forces”. Despite their occasional lip-service to individuality, Marx and Engels in reality regard “society” as a kind of god from which all blessings flow; the source of our being and the root of our lives. In other words, they believe that the *We* is more important than the *I*.

It is against this deification of “social man” that Stirner protests. This is what he means when he states:

“That society is no ego at all, which could give, bestow or grant, but an instrument or means, from which we may derive benefit; that we have no social duties, but solely interests for the pursuance of which society must serve us; that we owe society no sacrifice, but, if we sacrifice anything, sacrifice it to ourselves — of this the Socialists do not think, because they... are imprisoned in religious principle, and zealously aspire after — a sacred society, such as the State was hitherto. Society, from which we have everything, is a new master, a new spook, a new ‘supreme being’, which ‘takes us into its service and allegiance.’”

Marx and Engels, in true theological fashion, attribute causal efficacy to abstractions which they seek to disguise as “empirical” forces. Their “Historical Dialectic”, to which we are expected to submit, is simply the “Will of God” re-stated in pseudo-secular terms. Their concern is not with the specific, living individual who exists in present time, but with the “New Man” of some remote, utopia which they promise will be achieved by the true believer in some indefinite future. Stirner, on the contrary, speaks to those of today who want to live their own, unique lives without ideological crutches and to whom millennial dreams are the narcotics of the deluded.

The Ego and Its Own is not the easiest of books to read. At the same time, it is not impossible for those undaunted by its seemingly odd construction. In his preface to the original 1907 edition

of this translation, Benjamin R. Tucker quotes a passage from Victor Basch's pioneering study of Stirner, part of which can usefully be repeated here:

“At first one seems to be confronted with a series of essays strung together with a throng of aphorisms... But, if you read this book several times; if, 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, in all its force, and in all its depths.” Tucker also pointed out the need to be on guard against Stirner's habit of stating some views opposite to his so well that an unwary reader may take them to be Stirner's own.

James Huneker described this book as the most revolutionary ever written. James J. Martin, in his introduction to the 1963 Libertarian Book Club edition, remarked that “it is at once a historical document, a pamphlet of the intellectual disturbances of the mid-nineteenth century, and a timeless classic”. Its continual re-publication testifies to its staying power and to its value for generation after generation of readers. What use you make of it now is up to you.

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