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Max Stirner on education

Sidney E. Parker

1968

“The False Principle of Our Education, or Humanism and Realism” by Max Stirner. Translated from the German by Robert H. Beebe, Edited and introduced by James J. Martin. Published by Ralph Myers, P.O. Box 1533, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80901, USA, 1967. 60 cents.

Most people who have heard of Max Stirner know only two things about him: that he wrote *The Ego and His Own* and that Karl Marx attempted to refute his ideas in an essay included in *The German Ideology* that must be the most tedious and unreadable piece of prose ever written. But Stirner’s major work did not come from nowhere. He prepared the way for it with a number of seminal essays, among which was *The False Principle of Our Education*—described by John Henry Mackay, his biographer, as “the most valuable and significant of Stirner’s shorter works”. *The False Principle of Our Education* was originally published in 1842. The present edition is its first appearance in the English language. In it one can detect hints of that magnificent outburst of a unique ego. *The Ego and His Own*, although its style is more formal and academic than the latter, which was published two and a half years later.

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In 1842 a bitter controversy was raging in German educational circles. On one side were the champions of “humanism”, who emphasized the need for continuing the traditional and exclusive education of the classical style, and whose aim was the cultivation of an aristocratic taste. On the other side were the champions of “realism” who emphasized the need for a new, practical education, open to all, and whose aim was preparation for everyday living. Although he tended to favour the “realists”, Stirner asked them, as he did their rivals, do you want us to become *creators*, or merely *creatures*? He concludes that neither humanists nor realists wanted to treat their pupils as anything but creatures. But self-revelation, which is what genuine education is about, means “the liberation from all that is alien, the uttermost abstraction or release from all authority”. If such men were to exist, he said, they would exist “in spite of school”:

“... in the pedagogical as in certain other spheres freedom is not allowed to erupt, the power of the *opposition* is not allowed to put a word in edgewise: they want *submissiveness*. Only a formal and material training is being aimed at and only scholars come out of the menageries of the .. humanists, only ‘useful citizens’ out of those of the realists, both of whom are indeed nothing but *subservient* people.”

Stirner would like to see an education which favours the development of individual will, which rejects the formal externalisms of both humanists and realists. Knowledge should not be something that exists outside the pupil:

“a knowledge which only burdens me as a belonging and a possession, instead of having gone along with me completely so that the free-moving ego, not encumbered by any dragging possession, passes through

the world with a fresh spirit, such a knowledge then, which has not become *personal*, furnishes a poor preparation for life.”

Knowledge, to be real, must be experiential, because

“as scholarly and profound or as wide and as comprehensive as it may be, (it) remains indeed only a possession and a belonging so long as it has not vanished into the invisible point of the ego, from there to break forth all-powerfully as will.”

The theme of the conflict of egos as a source of creativity and of individual growth, which is developed in detail in *The Ego and His Own*, is touched on here in relation to the child. Stirner sees the child as neither an angel nor a devil and while he refuses to be an authority over the child, he resolutely opposes letting the child dominate the adult:

“Childlike obstinacy and intractability have as much right as childlike curiosity. The latter is being stimulated; so one should also call forth the natural strength of the will, *opposition*. If a child does not learn self-awareness, then he plainly does not learn that which is most important. They do not suppress his pride or his frankness. If pride turns into spite, then the child approaches me with violence. I do not have to endure this since I am just as free as the child. Must I however defend myself against him by using the convenient rampart of authority? No, I oppose him with the strength of my own freedom: thus the spite of the child will break itself up. Whoever is a complete person does not need—to be an authority.”

Here Stirner tackles a problem that still troubles educational “progressives” today. The biological dependence of the child on

the adult prevents the practice of complete “freedom” in education. Whatever theories may be propounded, in practice the “freedom” offered is a varying amount of permissiveness, with adults having the final say in important matters.

And it is difficult, from an anarchist point of view, to see how it could be any different. A “freedom” that is given or permitted is no real freedom at all since it can be withdrawn when the giver sees fit. The only freedoms that are worth having are those that the individual takes for himself and his ability to do this depends upon his power to take and to keep. The child, therefore, is in no position to compete with adults on these terms and, while he is often competent to achieve much, cannot hope to win freedom for himself until he has the power (the “adulthood”) to do so.

But because the adult has to use his will against that of the child and usually wins because of his greater strength, at the same time he does not need, as Stirner says, to pose as a sacrosanct authority. This opposition and conflict of wills can be as much a part of the child’s development of self-awareness as can be love and care. The view that the child is an innocent perverted by wicked adults is no more than an inversion of the view that he is an evil being to be kept in check by moralizing and punishment. Indeed, the child may be just as browbeaten by the sweetness and light of those who are always “on his side” as he is by cruelty and discipline.

Dr. James J. Martin, author of *Men Against The State*, contributes an excellent introduction to this edition of Stirner’s essay. He relates Stirner’s ideas to the contemporary educational scene and concludes:

“The war of wills between the individual and the collectivity will undoubtedly go on as long as the race of man persists, and the schoolroom will continue to be one of its ubiquitous battle grounds. As the school training machinery of the State grows ever more pervasive and inescapable, and no less so even in most of

the privately organized institutions, it may be that, for some time to come, such as one may number among Stirner’s ‘free men’ are most likely to come into existence and endure in an autodidact underground.”