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Pioneering Egoist Texts

Sidney E. Parker

Every man is an egoist — whoever ceases to be one becomes a thing. He who pretends it is not necessary to be one is a thief. Anselme Bellegarrigue

The only consistent philosophical basis for anarchist individualism is conscious egoism, which finds its most radical and extensive expression in Max Stirner's pioneering epic *The Ego and His Own*. Stirner's work, however, is not easy to read, but for many years it was the only durable account of philosophical egoism available. Now, with the reissue of James L. Walker's long-neglected classic *The Philosophy of Egoism* and John Badcock's *Slaves to Duty*, it is possible to approach *The Ego and His Own* by an easier route. Together with the first of The Libertarian Broadside Series, Stirner's *The False Principles of Our Education*, they provide a fitting supplement to, and an illuminating comment on, Stirner's *magnum opus*.

Walker deservedly earned the title of "Father of Egoism" in the USA. By his early twenties he was expounding an embryonic form of egoism and had reached substantially the same conclusions as Stirner before he heard of the latter in 1872. Under the pseudonym of Tak Kak he opened a debate on the subject in the columns of Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty* in the 1880s

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and succeeded in carrying most of the Tuckerites, including Tucker himself, into the egoist camp. The bulk of *The Philosophy of Egoism* however, appeared serially in the magazine *Egoism*, published by Georgia and Henry Replogle from 1890-1898. In 1905, it was published in its entirety by Walker's widow, a year after his death from smallpox in Mexico.

When the book first appeared it was described in *Liberty* as “no more concise exposition of the philosophy of egoism has ever been given to the world. In this book Duty, Conscience, Moralism, Right and all the fetishes and superstitions which have infested the human intellect since man ceased to walk on four feet, are annihilated, swept away, relegated to the rubbish heap of the waste of human intelligence that has gone on through the progress of the race from its infancy.”

Little has appeared in the English language since then to alter this judgment. Indeed, reading Walker in the light of certain recent “egoists” one sees how he stands head and shoulders above them, particularly those who retail constipated moralisms from under the sign of the Randian Revelation. How Walker would have been amused by their interminable mental gymnastics over “rights” and “force” which resemble nothing so much as the legendary medieval debates on how many angels could dance on the point of a needle. For him both “right” and “force” were expediencies to be claimed or exercised as an individual saw fit— and had the power!

In a style alternating between the magisterial and the pithy, and lit and lightened with flashes of telling eloquence, walker launches broadside after broadside at the ramparts of altruistic idealism. Every type of “supernal altruist” from the priest to the moralizing freethinker, from Nietzsche (yes, Nietzsche who wanted us to live for the Overman!) to the quasi-individualist Herbert Spencer, comes under his withering fire. I am tempted to quote from many passages in which he deftly turns the tables on the anti-egoists and shows how nearly 2,000 years of Judeo-Christianity has covered what Stirner called “the noble nature

of egoism” with the rancorous slime of the self-sacrificed, but I will content myself with only one in which Walker is replying to some of his critics writing in “libertarian papers”:

Many show absolutely no understanding of Egoism. It is an affair of objective classification of acts, they suppose. Thus if I have an apple and eat it, that is Egoism, they suppose. If I give the apple to my friend, that is Altruism, they suppose. How simple! Then I, being an Egoist and liking to see some of my friends eat my apples, must not indulge this pleasure unless I can stand certain persons’ charges of inconsistency. Let me give them a point: I select my friends. My apples are not for everybody to help himself. Let me give them another point: The man who eats his own apple, not because he likes it, but because he thinks it is Egoistic to eat it—not to talk of duty—is only a deluded Egoist, by which I mean that he has missed being an Egoist in the definite sense in which I am using the word in these closing chapters. As James J. Martin remarks in his foreword: Walker was one of “the giants of philosophical egoism”.

Badcock’s essay “Slaves to Duty” nearly suffered the same fate as Walker’s book, but was saved from complete neglect by Laurance Labadie who reprinted it in 1938. First delivered as a lecture in 1894 to the London South Place Junior Ethical Society, it appeared shortly afterwards as a pamphlet. Badcock subjects the “duty” spook to a thorough investigation and after he has finished it there is not enough left to give even a modicum of consolation to the most credulous member of the Society for Psychical Research.

Since I have written the Introduction to this corrected and annotated edition I will leave it at that— adding, however, that

the appendix is a much needed reprint of John Beverley Robinson's little 1915 masterpiece "Egoism"- I doubt if anyone else has surpassed Robinson in compressing so much about egoism into just four pages.

The fourth of the Libertarian Broadside Series consists of three of Benjamin Tucker's most pertinent essays: "State Socialism and Anarchism", "The Attitude of Anarchism Towards Industrial Combinations" and the personal, little-known, "Why I Am An Anarchist". For anyone wanting to grasp the salient ideas of Tucker's interpretation of anarchism, these essays can be recommended. Tucker was a stylish writer and always presented his case with impeccable polish.

The essays are preceded by an outstanding Introduction by James J. Martin, which, for me, was the most important part of the booklet: particularly since Martin is the greatest living "authority" on Tucker's life and ideas.

After paying tribute to Tucker's intellectual eminence and literary ability, Martin goes on to consider the relevance of Tuckerism today. This is a crucial question for anarchist individualists, since Tucker and his contemporaries not only lived, as Martin puts it, in a "mainly stable world State system at the height of the era of world colonialism", but were necessarily strangers to our air-conditioned nightmare of nuclear weapons, concentration camps, gas chambers, and the sophisticated repressive techniques of modern collectivist manipulators. The corporate, corporation and warfare states were largely smudges on the horizon when they were most active in formulating their ideas. The problem of the individual versus organized collectives loomed large seventy years ago, but its growth since then has been so staggering that one cannot conceive of its solution, even if one were convinced that individualism could become the active concern of the majority of mankind. As the hero of Paul Herr's novel *Journey Not to End*, remarks: "The true radical in the Age of Organization is a hermit in a cave."

An exaggeration, perhaps, but a pardonable one!

Martin asks what can be done now in this "Age of Organization". Intellectually, those of the opposition who claim Tucker as a precursor, simply repeat the critiques of the past "disguised by present day fashionable stylistic conventions". Actively, there have been no significant operational improvements on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

One would be inclined to conclude from the evidence at hand that no new day in the affairs of men is about to dawn. An interminable period of Statist nighttime lies ahead, during which the matter of individual survival will supersede all other goals. It remains to be seen whether radical political activity along the traditional lines of mass politics, which always runs the risk of succeeding and thereupon creating an even worse State, or anonymous individualist philosophical strategies, best lend themselves to meeting the objective adequately.

Not a conclusion to commend itself to those who, seeking utopia, at the same time seek to cripple individualism within the fetters of mass politicking. But for those who are beyond such stupidities, for the remnant who understand what individualism is really about, such strategies will be among the first of their priorities. From "internal exile" to the desperate heroism of militant illegalism, the options lie open. What each will do is up to each...Individualist strategies are the products of individuals — not of groups or parties.