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# Stirner, the Wise Guy

## Introduction to The Unique and Its Property

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Almost every scholar of Stirner, whether self-taught or university-trained, insists on referring to the author of *The Unique…* as a philosopher. I can't recall Stirner ever referring to himself as such, and certainly, by the time he wrote his book, he had concluded that philosophy was a joke that its purveyors took far too seriously, buffoonery deserving only laughter. And to call the mocker of philosophy a philosopher is as absurd as calling the *impious* atheist[1] a theologian.

Philosophers pursue answers in the ultimate sense—universal answers. And so they are, indeed, *lovers* of wisdom. They conceive of wisdom as something objective, as something that exists in itself, *beyond* any individual, and so as something they have to pursue, rather than as their own *property*, their attribute, to use as they see fit. They are still attached to the idea of a "wisdom" that is greater than them, you or me. Stirner called them "pious atheists," a particularly biting barb in a country where the most extreme Christians were known

[1] As opposed to both the theist and the *pious* "atheists" who replace god with another deity.

as "pietists." So long as a person continues to pursue this *external*, supposedly universal wisdom, he may well be a *wise man* (whatever that means), but he will never be a *wise guy*. Stirner was a wise guy, because he recognized that there is no ultimate, universal wisdom to find; the philosopher's goal is a pipe dream worthy only of mockery and laughter. And Stirner mocked and laughed often in the most delightfully crude ways in his writings. Unfortunately, both his critics and his disciples have largely missed the joke.[2] And explaining a joke is never as much fun as playing the joke. Hence, Stirner's increasing exasperation (still humorously and even savagely expressed) in *Stirner's Critics* and "The Philosophical Reactionaries."

Despite the tedium of explaining a joke, I will make the effort to do so to some extent, largely because some who have taken Stirner too literally and seriously have drawn the most ridiculous conclusions about him and those rebels who have found his writings useful in developing their own rebellious thought.

To begin with, Stirner is mocking philosophy itself. This is evident in his comments on Socrates in *The Unique and Its Property*, as well as in "The Philosophical Reactionaries." Though he certainly aimed his laughter most fiercely at the philosophy and the philosophers of Germany in his time—Hegel, his precursors, his disciples and his "left Hegelian"[3] critics—Stirner's mocking, playful logic undermines the whole of the philosophical project, leaving no place for metaphysics, ontology, ethics,

[2] No one who got the joke could ever be a *disciple* of Stirner, since he provided no *answers*, nothing whatsoever to believe in, nothing more than some tools for undermining all belief, all fixed thought.

[3] This term was not one used by any of those given the label, but one imposed later by historians of philosophy to make it easier to distinguish these mid-nineteenth-century critics of Hegel from the more orthodox followers of Hegel. A number of them were friends or at least associates in groups like *die Freien* (the Free Ones), who met in Hippel's wine bar. Stirner took part in this group.

etc., beyond an individual's own personal preferences in behavior.

The main focus of his mockery is the Hegelian method, as this had become the dominant philosophical method in Germany at the time Stirner lived. And his joke is woven throughout this book. First of all, he carefully constructed the outline of *The Unique* to parallel that of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, while undermining the foundations of both works. Some scholars have called him the ultimate Hegelian, because he makes use of Hegel's dialectical method[4] in his book. However, in "The Philosophical Reactionaries," Stirner explains that this too was part of the joke: "Do you philosophers actually have an inkling that you have been beaten with your own weapons? Nothing but an inkling. What retort can you hearty fellows make against it, when I again dialectically demolish what you have just dialectically put up? You have shown me with what 'eloquence' one can make all into nothing and nothing into all, black into white and white into black. What do you have against it, when I turn your neat trick back on you? But with the dialectical trick of a philosophy of nature, neither you nor I will cancel the great facts of modern natural research, no more than Schelling and Hegel did."[5] Stirner chose to use the methods of those he was mocking to undermine what they claimed those methods showed, not because he believed in those methods, but because he wanted to show that, at best, they were mere intellectual tools, ones

[4] I specifically say "*Hegel's* dialectical method," because his dialectic was a very specific, progressive formulation which was supposed to achieve an ultimate synthesis at the end of history, unlike the ancient Greek dialectic which simply referred to ongoing discussion of ideas with no final culmination.

[5] Stirner, Max, "The Philosophical Reactionaries," in *Stirner's Critics* (translated by Wolfi Landstreicher), pp. 106—107, LBC Books and CAL Press, 2012.

that could be turned to damn near any use in the realm of ideas.

In fact, what Stirner has to say leaves no room for any sort of universal or historical *progress*, dialectical or otherwise. It is no accident that Stirner begins and ends his book with the same words, taken from Goethe's poem "Vanitas! Vanitatum Vanitas!" I have translated these words (fairly literally) as: "I have based my affair on nothing." Goethe's poem has the feel of a drinking song, something friends might sing laughingly together at a bar. Stirner's use of it at the beginning and the end of the book was a way of saying, "I'm having fun, and that's all that matters, so don't take any of this too seriously." And what he proposes—fully aware *self-enjoyment* and *self-creation for your own enjoyment*—are as thoroughly ahistorical and anti-progressive (in any universal or historical sense) as moralists and ideologues of the left and right may claim. But this is what makes his proposal genuinely rebellious and genuinely anti-authoritarian. Because history and progress have always been the history and the progress of ruling powers who want everyone to live for them and the ideals and values they impose.

In light of Stirner's anti-historical, anti-progressive, thoroughly in-the-moment, self-centered perspective, readers need to realize that any talk of historical processes and any apparently *progressive* descriptions in Stirner's book are part of the joke, part of his mockery of the positions he is tearing apart. I recently read a pamphlet[6] in which one of the writers assumes that the section in *The Unique* entitled "A Human Life" expresses Stirner's view of how individuals develop. But in the very title of this section, Stirner gave us a heavy-handed hint that this is not his viewpoint, that it is part of the joke. Though Stirner's mockery is an attack on all fixed ideas, on all ideals placed above each unique being and his self-enjoyment,

[6] *Max Stirner's Political Spectrography* (Spectral Emissions, Seattle, 2015), by Fabian Ludueña, introduction by Alejandro de Acosta.

religious (including ideologues like Marx and his followers, Hitler and his, or Mises[11] and his). You could let it overwhelm you and fall into a new religion of cosmic pessimism, where the absurdity is a horrifying god (whether you call it by that name or not), and so again become a "duped egoist." Or you could do what Stirner did and see the humor in the ultimate absurdity, recognizing that this lack of universal meaning and purpose is what gives you and I the capacity to willfully create our lives for ourselves. Stirner willfully grasped his own self-creative power and took aim at all that was considered sacred with the intention of demolishing it. He knew the best weapon for demolishing the sacred is mocking laughter. Instead of being a wise man, Stirner chose to be a *wise guy*, and if you don't get the joke, the jokes on you…



its central attack is on the *humanism* that Feuerbach, Bruno and Edgar Bauer (and the other "critical critics"), and the various liberals and radicals of the time, put forward as the replacement for christianity and theism. When Stirner speaks of a "human life," he is not talking about his life, your life, my life, or the life of "humanity" in general[7] (since for Stirner, "humanity" itself is a mere phantasm—as he explicitly says more than once). He is telling the reader who gets the joke that he is presenting a caricatured, mocking perspective of how his opponents view human development, with the intent of twisting it against them.

In the same way, the picture Stirner presented of a supposed historical progress in "Part I: Humanity" (and particularly in "The Hierarchy) was not his own perspective on history. Stirner was quite intentionally ahistorical. Instead he was making a mockery of Hegel's dialectically progressive view of history in order to twist it back on those who used this Hegelian view to support their perspectives. The apparent racial hierarchy found in the perspective Stirner was mocking comes straight out of Hegel[8] (though Hegel, like most of the progressive thinkers of the time, did not understand race biologically and assumed all humanity could eventually achieve the progressive transformation in which he believed), and Stirner's mockery is a delightfully politically incorrect *joke* on the cultural hierarchy Hegel assumed. Stirner's playful argument is that, even if you assume that there is a history that progresses, by Hegel's own logic, you have to end up back at *egoism*. All that progress won't bring us anywhere else… And his attribution of "Mongolism" to his German contemporaries shows that even one of his tactics for avoiding the censors (using "China" or "Japan" instead

[7] To use the phrase of Alejandro de Acosta, "a more or less intentional gesture towards a prehistoric anthropogenic moment" (*ibid.*, p. vii).

[8] See particularly Hegel's *Encyclopaedia and History of Philosophy*.

of "Germany" whenever he was making a critical reference to the German authorities of his time) was part of the joke.

In fact, Stirner may well have been making a deeper joke here. I realized on my first reading of Byington's translation of Stirner that there were many parallels between Stirner's ideas and aspects of taoism and buddhism. Already, in 1906, Alexandra David-Neel[9] compared Stirner's ideas to those of the taoist Yang-Chou. Stirner emphasized the transience of each individual and rejected any crystallized, permanent "I" as much as any other permanent idea, seeing it as yet another phantasm. He saw getting beyond the limits of thought as a necessary part of living fully as one's transient self here and now. He saw self-enjoyment as most fully achieved in *self-forgetfulness*. And in *Stirner's Critics*, he spoke of the unique (*der Einzige*) in ways quite similar to those used to speak of the *tao* in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Stirner names the unique and says at the same time 'names don't name it.' He utters a name when he names the unique, and adds that the unique is only a name. … What Stirner *says* is a word, a thought, a concept; what he *means* is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said."[10] Was Stirner aware of these similarities? I don't know which of Hegel's lectures Stirner attended while he was at the university in Berlin, but I have confirmed that Hegel gave lectures on Eastern philosophy. This indicates that buddhist, taoist, and other Eastern writings were available in Germany at the time. And I would like to think that Stirner

[9] Best known for her adventures wandering in Tibet and her writings on Tibetan buddhism that sprang from these adventures, Alexandra David-Neel was a young friend of Elisée Reclus and sometimes wrote for anarchist publications. In "The Theory of the Individual in Chinese Philosophy: Yang-Chou," she compared the ideas of an early (and somewhat controversial) taoist, Yang-Chou, to those of Stirner. This essay can be found in *Neither Lord nor Subject: Anarchism and Eastern Thought*, Enemy Combatant Publications, 2016.

[10] Stirner, Max, *op. cit.*, p. 54, p. 55.



read some of these and, as is appropriate for an egoistic self-creator, took what he found appealing and useful from these writings to enhance his own way of living and viewing the world. If so, this adds a certain ironic depth to his play on German "mongolism."

I could go on trying to explain more of Stirner's jokes, more of his humor, his sarcasm, his mockery, but as I said above, explaining jokes is never as much fun as making them. For Stirner, there was no ultimate aim of history, no inherent progress, and so for him the dialectic could never be anything more than a tool. The use he found for this tool was precisely that of using the dialectic to undermine the dialectic. And this worked best through mockery and sarcasm. Stirner was a thoroughly *impious* atheist, what I like to call a *barefisted* atheist. He had no need or desire for a god in his life, not even some ultimate crystallized "I" to be achieved, and he was willing—and in fact took pleasure in—accepting the full implications of his godlessness. Without a god there is no basis for morality; without a god there is no basis for the sacred; without a god there is no universal meaning, no universal aim, no universal purpose; in fact, no universal *universe*. *The* universe is an absurdity. The only meanings, aims, purposes, and *universes* are the very ephemeral, transient ones that individuals create for themselves. In the face of this overall absurdity, you could choose to ignore it and assume the universality of your own meanings, thus becoming what Stirner called a "duped egoist"; this is the path typical of the

[11] Ludwig von Mises was one of the major theorists of the Austrian school of economics, an extreme laissez-faire school of economic theory. The proponents of this school of economic thought remain thoroughly mired in Aristotelian thinking and so assume that Reason (in an absolute, unitary sense) provides the best understanding of economic forces at play. For this reason, they remain as religious in their thinking as marxists. A number of Libertarians, anarcho-capitalists, and other free-market anarchists adhere to the doctrines of the Austrian school.