

Self and Others: Max Stirner and Revolutionary Anarchism

**Review of Jacob Blumenfeld. *All Things Are Nothing to Me: The Unique
Philosophy of Max Stirner.***

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December 15, 2020

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Max Stirner was the pen name of Johann Kasper Schmidt (1806–56). He was part of a milieu of young philosophers who sought to develop further the philosophy of the great German thinker Georg W. F. Hegel, who had died in 1831. This milieu has been referred to as the Young Hegelians or Left Hegelians. While Hegel's system had solidified into a reactionary form, they mainly tried to rework it in more humanistic, naturalistic, and democratic directions. The most well-known of these young men today (there were women in the grouping, but their names have dropped out of history) are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. (Engels had been a personal friend of Stirner's for a time.) Michael Bakunin—later a founder of revolutionary socialist-anarchism—also studied Hegel and was in contact with this milieu.

Stirner wrote his masterwork, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, in 1844. In 1907 it was translated into English as *The Ego and His Own*, although a current translation by Wolfi Landstriecher (2017) more correctly has it as *The Unique and Its Property*. At the time, its extreme individualism and amorality created a stir. Various Young Hegelians wrote rebuttals. Marx and Engels wrote a lengthy book, *The German Ideology* (1846), most of which was a response to Stirner.¹ However, interest died down, especially after the 1848 failed European revolution. Marx and Engels did not publish their book. Stirner had no influence on the anarchist movement of the time.

John Henry Mackay was to rediscover Stirner and published his biography in 1897. Individualist anarchists, such as Benjamin Tucker, adopted Stirner's book into their canon. Emma Goldman also admired his work. Today he is included in selections of anarchist theorists. Some regard him as a predecessor of "postanarchism," which seeks to integrate anarchism with poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postleftism. This brings me to Jacob Blumenfeld's *All Things Are Nothing to Me: The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner*.

Stirner's Thought

Most of this work is an exposition of Stirner's thought. But that is not a simple matter and this is not a simple (or clear) book. According to Blumenthal, this is at least partially due to Stirner. The author refers to "Stirner's erratic thinking" (p. 3); "Stirner's language cannot be taken at face value.... I propose numerous translations of Stirnerisms in order to make sense of what appears senseless" (pp. 15–16). Stirner's theory has a "fundamental ambiguity" (p. 23). Blumenfeld refers to "the strange logic of Stirner's argument" (p. 51). The writer chides Marx for misreading Stirner: "He takes him to be laying out thesis after thesis, building up a system" (p. 15). Then Marx criticizes his system for being illogical. Instead, Stirner was providing a poetic "performance," using "deduction, dialectic, etymology, allegory, repetition, shock, syllogism, metaphor, neologism, aphorism" to provide "a text which provokes an experience in the reader" (p. 15).

To fill in the holes in Stirner's work and to clarify the ambiguities, Blumenthal uses other philosophers. These include Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Hegel, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, and Emmanuel Levinas. Using Baruch Spinoza's philosophy, "it is possible to reconstruct an ontology that makes sense of Stirner's views" (p. 60). The thinker he most uses is Marx. Except for a few brief statements, he does not cite other anarchists, with the exception of Gustav Landauer. Borrowing from such sources, and relying on his own insights, Blumenthal creates his personal Stirner, whom he refers to as "My Stirner" (p. 51).

¹ Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx; Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962).

Stirner was a supreme nominalist. While admitting that abstractions may be useful at times, he insisted that they did not exist. The “I” would be mistaken to be committed to them or to be guided by them. This was not only true of God but also of humanity, not only of the state, but also of society, not to mention love, justice, mercy, kindness, country, class, freedom, chastity, honor, property, and so on. These were all “spooks” in the head, fixed thoughts, delusions foisted upon the I by society (p. 18). The only thing which mattered was the I (“Ich,” also translated as “ego”). Even that does not truly exist, since labels are not reality; the self is an undefinably unique, creative, nothing (no-thing). Out of this void, motives, behavior, and thoughts are produced. Only my own motives count, since otherwise I am an alienated thing.

The I owns itself and owns whatever it has the power to take from others. The central life process is not labor but consumption—of others, of their ideas, of their property. Socialization is only participated in for what each one can get out of it. This is the hypothetical Association (or Union) of Egoists. These views are opposed to republican democracy, because that would make the state dominate the I, and to socialism, because that would make society dominate the I.

Rather than argue the weaknesses of Stirner’s nominalist egoism, I contrast his views with those of the socialist anarchist Michael Bakunin. Bakunin referred to “the materialistic conception of freedom” (from his 1871 *God and the State*): “Man completely realizes his individual freedom as well as his personality only through the individuals who surround him and thanks only to the labor and the collective power of society.... I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation. It is the slavery of other men that sets up a barrier to my freedom ... [and] is the negation of my humanity.”²

If we agree with Bakunin that individuals develop out of and through the society of other individuals, then values and ethics are not extrinsic to the self. Individuals are born with feelings of empathy, dependence, and other social emotions (even hatred is a social emotion). And society has norms, rational and irrational, that keep it functioning. These are passed on to individuals (mostly through the family). As individuals mature, some accept these standards unthinkingly. Others work their way through them, to develop their own values. But no one starts from an asocial blank slate.

Stirner and Marx

Rarely noted, Marx saw positive aspects in Stirner’s work. These are summarized by Sidney Hook (written when he was a revolutionary Marxist): “The realistic impact of [Stirner’s] criticism of the empty and abstract appeal to reason, justice, and humanity served as an effective antidote to ... vapid sentimentalism.... Stirner’s repudiation of inherent natural rights cleared the ground for the revolutionist’s attacks upon the absolute right of property.... [He attacked] the absolutist state as a fiction imposed on the community for the benefit of a few.... The most significant of all of Stirner’s views was his emphasis upon the fact that formal freedom was an empty abstraction. Freedom is a freedom to do.”³

Blumenthal makes a similar analysis. He writes, “It was Marx’s brilliance to embed Stirner’s critique of ideology within a historical analysis of class antagonisms and social relations of pro-

² Cited in Sam Dolgoff, ed. and trans., *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 236–37.

³ Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, 174–75.

duction” (p. 132). Both Stirner and Marx rejected abstract moral generalizations in favor of the self-interest of individuals. This included groups of individuals, particularly for Marx, classes. What drives people to struggle for a better world is not a vapid belief in Justice but the actual experience of oppression on their own backs. Engels said of Stirner, “His egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism” (p. 133).

Even for those not directly oppressed but who chose to identify with those who are, Engels wrote, “We must certainly make a cause our own, egoistic cause, before we can do anything to further it—and hence that in this sense, irrespective of any material aspirations, we are communists out of egoism also” (p. 133).

Self-determining, unique selves can only flourish in a stateless communist society. Blumenthal concludes, “Stirner’s unique individual, the Einzige or I capable of fully developing its own powers, is only possible in fully developed communism” (p. 138). Conversely, as Engels wrote, “Society cannot free itself unless every individual is freed. The old mode of production must therefore be revolutionized from top to bottom.”⁴

Contradictions

So far, such views are consistent with those of the socialist anarchists, from Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin to the communist-anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. But while Blumenthal believes that a full egoism is consistent with communism, this was not Stirner’s opinion. Stirner was not interested in working out a new society with freedom for all individuals. His primary focus was on the self-development of the I, by itself.

Stirner and Marx had a nonmoral approach in common. They rejected an abstract, suprahuman, and classless morality in favor of a focus on self-interest. Marx and Engels were clearly motivated by moral values, but this was not part of their system. They never wrote that people should be for communism.

But a rejection of an abstract pie-in-the-sky morality does not rule out the possibility of a naturalistic and nonmoralistic ethics. This was the opinion of Bakunin and Kropotkin. A completely nonmoral view of socialism has led many socialists to accept the totalitarian, mass-murdering, Stalinist regimes as “socialist.” They appeared to be the product of the historical process. These Marxists lacked ethical standards rooted in historical reality. If Marx developed his nonmoral approach through responding to Stirner (as Blumenthal suggests), then Stirner’s influence was not all positive.

On the other hand, Marx is often criticized as being a teleological determinist, who believed that “socialism is inevitable.” He is blamed for seeing the laws of political economy he developed as absolutely true laws that must dominate people’s behavior. It is argued that these failings led Marx’s “orthodox” followers in a totalitarian direction.⁵ Whether this is a correct interpretation of Marx is controversial. Some note that Marx and Engels had also said that the alternatives were “ruin or revolution,” providing more than one possibility.⁶ In my opinion, Marx was ambiguous in his determinism and abstraction, leaving room for various interpretations. In any case, Stirner’s complete rejection of determinism and abstractions has certain benefits compared to determinist interpretations of Marxism.

⁴ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring; Herr Eugen Duhring’s Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1954), 408.

⁵ Ron Tabor, *The Tyranny of Theory; A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism* (Edmonton, Canada: Black Cat Press, 2013).

⁶ Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, 228.

For both Marx and the revolutionary anarchists, there is a reason to look at class self-interest. They did not believe that the capitalist class would surrender its wealth and power to the workers because it is the right thing to do. They did not expect the bourgeoisie to give up its rule because the workers won a peaceful and legal democratic election. The ruling rich and their minions are not motivated by Christian or democratic ideals, whatever they say. Therefore Marx and Engels, Bakunin and Kropotkin, concluded that the exploited (out of their class self-interest) had to eventually take away the industries, land, and wealth of the rich, break up their military-police-bureaucratic state, and create new, radically democratic institutions. Marxists and anarchists often differ on what these new institutions might be, but agree that a revolution would be necessary.

At times, Stirner suggested support for expropriating the capitalists, but this was not his main interest. He rejected “revolution” in favor of “insurrection” (or “rebellion”). To him, that meant individual self-awareness and self-development, breaking free of the “spooks” in one’s head.

Blumenthal concludes, “To make the world one’s property cannot occur without the dissolution of the state and civil society, and replacing it with communes, associations, unions, and councils” (p. 144). Very good. This is consistent with both anarchism and libertarian versions of Marxism. But how can we dissolve the state and capital and replace them? Blumenthal’s response is essentially nonrevolutionary. He does not present a strategy for building popular movements which might lead to overthrowing capitalism and the state and replacing them with libertarian communism. Instead he suggests looking toward changes in the consciousness of individuals and small groups.

For example, he presents a section on Gustav Landauer, a German anarchist (1870–1919). He is the only anarchist besides Stirner whom Blumenthal discusses. Landauer proposed that workers withdraw from industry and cities to establish agricultural communes, or to build combination consumer-and-producer cooperatives. “Landauer’s mystical appropriation of Stirner is completely his own.... Against reform [or] revolution ... Landauer’s communism or anarchy is primarily ethical ... to foster the rebirth of the unique, the singular, the contingent” (p. 111). In 1919, a workers’ revolution broke out in Bavaria, Germany. To his credit, Landauer joined it—even though this had not been the strategy he had been advocating. Unfortunately he was murdered by counterrevolutionary thugs—similar to the fate of Rosa Luxemburg.⁷

Conclusion

This is not a Stirner-Made-Easy book. It seems to be written for graduate students who have some background in Hegel, Marx, and current French philosophy. The author grapples with Stirner’s not-always clear texts, and tries to make sense of them, often by integrating Stirner with other philosophers. The results are interesting, although not always Stirner. I doubt that Stirner would have agreed with Blumenthal’s integration of his work with that of Marx.

Radicals have varying responses to Stirner. For example, Daniel Guerin was a French revolutionary after World War II who wanted a synthesis of Marxism and anarchism. As might be expected, he focused on revolutionary, class-oriented anarchist-socialists. But he was also attracted to the individualist-egoist Stirner. As a gay activist, he valued Stirner’s opposition to

⁷ Wayne Price, “Landauer’s Fallacy,” *Anarkismo*, July 28, 2011, www.anarkismo.net.

puritanism, patriarchy, and moralism—very unlike Stirner’s anarchist contemporary, P. J. Proudhon.⁸

Many people might find this book interesting, especially if they are interested in abstract anarchist theory—particularly if they are already individualist anarchists. Others, committed to revolutionary anarchist-socialism, would probably find it less useful. It is not the place to start to learn about Max Stirner’s egoism and commitment to the unique self.

⁸ Daniel Guerin, ed., *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism, Book One*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998).

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