

Nihilism as Egoism

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1. Stirner's Context

While Dostoevsky and Nietzsche must be acknowledged as the thinkers who plumbed the depths of nihilism most deeply, we can see the outlines of nihilism—though not fully developed as such—in an earlier work published by Max Stirner in 1844, *The Ego and His Own*.¹ Thanks to the revival of interest in Stirner's work by J. H. Mackay (*Max Stirner, Sein Leben und Sein Werk*, 1897), attention has been drawn to various similarities between Stirner's ideas and those of Nietzsche. It is almost certain that Nietzsche did not read Stirner's work. If he was acquainted with Stirner at all, it was probably indirectly through Lange's *History of Materialism*.² In the absence of direct and substantive influence, the presence of such similarities raises a number of questions.

At the same time, comparisons must not be allowed to obscure the great difference in the foundations of their philosophies and in the spirit that pervades the entirety of their thought. Although Mackay regards Stirner far more highly than he does Nietzsche, there is in Stirner nothing of the great metaphysical spirit excavating the subterranean depths we find in Nietzsche. Stirner's critiques do not display the anatomical thoroughness of Nietzsche's painstaking engagement with all aspects of culture; nor does one hear in Stirner the prophetic voice of a Zarathustra resounding from the depths of the soul. The unique style of Stirner's thinking lay in a combination of a razor-sharp logic that cuts through straight to the consequences of things and an irony that radically inverts all standpoints with a lightness approaching humor. In this regard his work is not without its genius. Feuerbach, even though he was one of the primary targets of Stirner's criticisms, admired *The Ego and His Own* greatly, referring to it in a letter addressed to his brother shortly after the book appeared as "a work of genius, filled with spirit."

¹ Max Stirner (real name: Johann Kaspar Schmidt), *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (Stuttgart, 1981); English translation by S. T. Byington, *The Ego and His Own* (New York, 1963). A more recent English edition of selections from the text is the volume by John Carroll, *Max Stirner: The Ego and His Own* in the "Roots of the Right" series edited by George Steiner (New York, 1971), which appeared the same year as the only recent book-length study of Stirner in English: R. W. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (London and New York, 1971). The classic study locating Stirner's work in the more general development of nineteenth-century German philosophy is Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*. I retain the translation of the title as "The Ego and His Own" only because the book is so widely known under this name. The German title is admittedly difficult to translate, but "Ego" is not a happy rendering of *Der Einzige*—Stirner's espousal of (a peculiar form of) egoism notwithstanding. "The Unique One and Its Own" would not only be a better translation of the German but also of Nishitani's rendering of it as *Yuiitsusha to sono shoyu*.

² On the question of Stirner's influence on Nietzsche, see Carroll, pp. 24-25, and Paterson, chapter 7. For a recent treatment of Lange's influence on Nietzsche, see George J. Stack, *Lange and Nietzsche* (Berlin, 1983).

Feuerbach allowed that even though what Stirner had said about him was not right, he was nevertheless “the most brilliant and liberated writer I have ever known.”

Stirner’s book showed him at his best in his confrontation with the turbulent *Zeitgeist* of the period, set in a highly charged political atmosphere culminating in the outbreak of the February Revolution of 1848. Among the intelligentsia the radical ideas of the “Hegelian left” were in high fashion. As Nietzsche was to write later: “The whole of human idealism up until now is about to turn into *nihilism*” (WP 617); and indeed such a turn was already beginning to show signs of emerging from the intellectual turmoil of the earlier period. It was Stirner who grasped what Nietzsche was to call the “turn into nihilism” in its beginning stages, presenting it as *egoism*.

Around the beginning of the 1840s a group of people who called themselves “*Die Freien*” used to gather in Hippel’s tavern on the Friedrichstrasse in Berlin. The central figure of the group was Bruno Bauer, and such people as Marx and Engels occasionally attended as well. Stirner was among these “Free Ones.” The trend at that time was a sharp turn away from idealism and romanticism in favor of realism and political criticism. The criticism of the liberals was focused on overthrowing the coalition of Christian theology, Hegelian philosophy, and political conservatism. It was only natural that Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* which appeared in 1841 would cause a great shock through its severe critique of religion. The current of thought broke forth into a rushing torrent. In no time Marx and others had developed Feuerbach’s ideas into a materialism of praxis and history, while Bruno Bauer developed them in the opposite direction of “consciousness of self.” Stirner then took the latter’s ideas to the extreme to develop a standpoint of egoism. It was only three years after Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* that Stirner’s *The Ego and His Own* was published, which shows how rapidly ideas were changing at the time. His critique of Feuerbach is directed at his basic principle of “anthropology,” the standpoint that “human being” is the supreme essence for human beings. In this sense, Stirner and Marx exemplify two entirely opposite directions of transcending the standpoint of humanity in human beings.

As mentioned earlier, Feuerbach represented a reaction against Hegel’s philosophy of absolute Spirit, in much the same way as Schopenhauer had, since both criticized the idealism of the speculative thinking in Hegel and the Christian “religious nature of spirit” at its foundation. But just as Nietzsche detected a residue of the Christian spirit in Schopenhauer’s negative attitude towards “will to life,” Stirner recognized vestiges of the religious spirit and idealism in the theological negation of God and Hegelian idealism in Feuerbach. Both Nietzsche and Stirner, by pushing the negation of idealism and spiritualism to the extreme, ended up at the opposite pole of their predecessors. This may account for some of the similarities between them.

2. The Meaning of Egoism

At the beginning of his major work Stirner cites the motto "*Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt.*" Translated literally, this means "I have founded my affair on nothing." Here we have Stirner's basic standpoint in nuce: the negation of any and all standpoints. Nothing, whether God or morality, may be set up as a ground to support the self and its activity. It is in effect a standpoint that rejects standing on anything other than the self itself, a standpoint based on "nothing." The motto is ordinarily used to express the attitude of indifference to everything, the feeling of "I don't care."³ It means a lack of interest in anything, a loss of the passion to immerse oneself in things, and a feeling of general apathy. But it also includes a kind of negative positiveness, a nonchalant acceptance of things which appropriates them as the life-content of the self and enjoys the life of the self in all things. (There are affinities here to the idea of acting in "empty non-attachment" in Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu.⁴) Its positiveness negates any positiveness that makes something other than the self the affair to which one devotes oneself. It is an attitude of enjoying what one has rejected from the self as the content of one's life, transforming everything into the *self's* own concern. It is, in short, the "egoistic" posture.

One normally considers the higher things to be those that relate to a universal apart from the self. One devotes oneself to such matters and makes them the concerns of the self. The religious person serves God, the socialist serves society, patriots their country, the housewife her home, as the concern (*Sache*) of the self. Each sees the meaning of life in this concern and finds his or her mission in it. To efface the self and devote oneself to one's concern is regarded as a superior way of life. By making God, country, humanity, society, and so forth one's own concern, one forgets the self and invests one's interest in something outside the

³ Löwith points to the source of this motto in one of Goethe's *Gesellige Lieder* entitled "Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!" which begins with the lines: "I have founded my affair on nothing./That's why I feel so well in the world." I have to thank my friend Eberhard Scheiffele of Waseda University for pointing out that Goethe is here parodying a Pietistic hymn which begins: "I have founded my affair on God . . ." Löwith notes that Kierkegaard was also acquainted with the line from Goethe and thought it interesting as "the nihilistic 'summation of life' of a very great individuality (From Hegel to Nietzsche, p. 411, note 155).

⁴ *Kyomu tentan*-Chinese: *hsü-wu t'ien-t'an*. Although this term does not actually appear in the Lao-tzu it is a quintessentially Taoist phrase, and appears frequently, for example, in the *Huai Nan Tzu*, a later Taoist text from the Han dynasty. In chapter 15 of the *Chuang-tzu* the phrase *hsü-wu rien-t'an* occurs in a description of the Taoist sage, of whom it is said: "in emptiness and nothingness, calm and indifference, he joins with Heaven's Power"-see A. C. Graham, *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London, 1981), p. 266. This joining with the power (*te*) of heaven (*t'ien*) involves emptying the self in such a way that the forces of the natural world can operate through it unobstructedly-which may result in a condition not unlike the one Stirner is talking about, though from an opposite direction.

self which then becomes one's own *affair*. This is one's *Sache*, the focus of ideals or values regarded as sacred. The foundation of such concern could be religion or ethics, which are standpoints in which one makes something beyond oneself the self's *Sache*, in such a way that the self loses its own *Sache*. But even where religion and ethics have been shaken by some "revolution" or other, these revolutionary standpoints continue to acknowledge something other than the self as the proper object of one's devotion, thus restoring in a new guise the very religious and ethical standpoints they had negated. Stirner steps in here to advocate egoism as the utter negation of all such standpoints.

Nietzsche thought that the ideals and values that had controlled European history up to the present were hastening the advent of nihilism as their own logical consequence. He himself pre-empted this advent voluntarily and carried it out psychologically and experientially in himself, and by living nihilism through to the end turned it into a standpoint of will to power. Though he did not use the word "nihilism," Stirner tried-as Nietzsche was to do later-to demonstrate logically that previous ideals and values undermine themselves and collapse into nothing precisely as a result of the effort to make them consummate and exhaustive. He proposed his idea of egoism as the inevitable result and ultimate consequence of such a collapse. His egoism emerged from his discovery of the hollowness of the foundations on which previous religion, philosophy, and morality had rested. As a result, it attained an ironic depth not achieved by ordinary forms of egoism.

In religion and philosophy God is "all in all," and all things other than God are to devote themselves to him. From God's point of view, everything is part of the divine *Sache*. God is One, and as a unique being does not tolerate anyone's refusing to be part of the divine economy. "His *Sache* is-a purely egoistic *Sache*."⁵ It is virtually the same with human beings. All sorts of people devote themselves to the service of humanity, but for humanity the only concern is that it develop itself through such devotion. For humanity, humanity itself is the *Sache*. As Stirner asks: "Is the *Sache* of humanity not a purely egoistic *Sache*?" (4/4).

God and humanity have set their concern on nothing, on nothing other than themselves. I may then set my concern similarly on myself, who as much as God am the Nothing of all else (*?das Nichts von allem anderen*), who am my all, who am the only individual. . . . What is divine

⁵ The Ego and His Own, p. 4; Der Einzige und sein Eigentum, p. 4. References to Stirner's book, separated by a slash, refer to the page numbers first of The Ego and His Own and then of the German edition. For the German text I have given references to the new Reclam edition rather than to the 1901 edition used by Nishitani, since the latter is no longer readily available. As usual I have translated from the original German while "leaning" toward Nishitani's Japanese rendering, but the results are similar enough to Byington's to enable the reader to locate passages in his translation.

is God's concern (*Sache*), what is human is "man's" concern. My concern is neither divine nor human, nor the true, the good, the just, the free, and so on; my concern is only mine, and is not universal but *is unique*, as I am unique. (4-5/5)

This is the standpoint of "the unique one and its own," which, as we shall see presently, is all there is.

Why does Stirner refuse to acknowledge a higher self in something universal above the self? Why can he not acknowledge a truer life than the life of the self, for example in God or humanity, nation or society? According to Stirner, at the basis of such religious or ethical ideas-and even of ideas opposed to them-there is a standpoint of "spirit" (*Geist*) and the "spiritual" world. Once this spirit world has been exposed as a lie, the religious and ethical ways of life based on it are forced into hypocrisy.

In coming to this conclusion, Stirner took a position in direct confrontation to the ideas of his immediate milieu, principally those of Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and the Communists. In a time of historical crisis such confrontations take on the quality of a face-off with history as a whole. In Stirner's own words, the problem is that "several thousand years of history" (as Nietzsche also realized) come to a head in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus Stirner's critique of history has a very different character from the typical observations of the general historian. As with Nietzsche, his philosophy confronts history existentially and sees the whole of world history perspectively. Marx criticizes him for numerous inaccuracies of historical fact, but for a thinker like Stirner, what is important are not the particular data but the understanding of history as a whole.

3. Realist, Idealist, Egoist-"Creative Nothing"

Stirner divides history into three periods, which he compares to three stages in the development of the individual: namely, boyhood, youth, and the prime of manhood. The boy lives only in relation to things in this world, unable to conceive of anything like a spiritual world beyond it. In that sense he is a realist. In general the boy is under the control of the power of nature, and things like parental authority confront him as natural rather than spiritual powers. Still, from the beginning there is a drive in the boy to "strike to the ground of things and get around behind them" (*hinter die Dinge kommen*);⁶ and through the knowledge he gains he can elude or get the better of the powers that govern him. When the boy knows some-

⁶ 9/8; I have translated Nishitani's phrase rather literally; a more idiomatic rendering of "hinter die Dinge kommen" would be simply "to get to the bottom of things."

thing to be true, its truth is not some independent being transcendent to the world; it remains a truth within things. In this sense the boy lives only in this world.

The youth, on the other hand, is an idealist. He feels the courage to resist things before which he had once felt fear and awe. He prides himself on his intelligence in seeing through such things and opposing them with something like reason or conscience. His is the “spiritual” attitude. In the young man, “truth” is something ideal that exists by itself from the beginning, independent of the things of the world; as something “heavenly” it is opposed to all despicable “earthly” things. From this standpoint thoughts are no more than disembodied abstract ideas, pure “logical” thoughts, “absolute” ideas in Hegel’s sense.

Once in the prime of life, however, the youth turns into an egoist. He knows that the ideal is void. Instead of looking at the world from the standpoint of ideals, he sees it as it is. He relates to the world according to his concern in the interest of the self. “The boy had only *unspiritual* interests, free of thoughts or ideas; the youth had only *spiritual* interests; but the man has bodily, personal, and egoistic (*leibhaftig, persönlich, egoistisch*) interests.” Or again: “The youth found himself as spirit and lost himself again in universal spirit, in [the consummate,] holy spirit, in *the* human, in humanity, in short in all kinds of ideals; the man finds himself as bodily spirit” (13/14).

The growth of the individual through the stages of realist, idealist, and egoist is a process of discovering and attaining the *self*. At first the self gets behind all things and finds itself—the standpoint of spirit. The self as spirit acknowledges the world as spirit, but the self must then go behind this spirit to recover itself. This consists in the realization that the self is the creator-owner of the spiritual world, spirit, thoughts, and so on. Spirit is “the *first* self-discovery” (10/10); the self as egoist is “the *second* self-discovery” (13/14), in which the self becomes truly itself. With this latter stage, the self is released from its ties to this real world and to the ideal world beyond, free to return to the vacuity at the base of those things. The vacuity of *this* world was already realized in idealism; the egoist goes on to see the vacuity of the *other* world.

The egoist bases himself on absolute “nothing,” and this is neither realism nor an idealism. Where formerly “spirit” was conceived as the creator-owner of this

⁷ 5/5. The German reads: “Ich bin [nicht] Nichts im Sinne der Leerheit, sondern das schöpferische Nichts, das Nichts, aus welchem Ich selbst als Schöpfer alles schaffe.” Nishitani translates *Leerheit* as *ku o*, which is here rendered, as usual, as “void.” *Nichts*, with its obviously “positive” meaning, he translates as *mu*, “nothing.” This is a remarkable passage, which surprisingly anticipates both Nietzsche and Heidegger and resonates deeply with a whole range of Buddhist and Taoist ideas. A couple of sentences later, in response to his own rhetorical question concerning the need for his *Sache* at least to be “good,” Stirner exclaims: “What is good or evil! . . . I am neither good nor evil. Neither of them has any sense for me.”

world, the egoist's standpoint sees the self as the creator and owner of spirit and the spiritual world. This is what it means to "set one's concern on nothing" "not in the sense of a void, but creative nothing (*das schöpferische Nichts*), the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything."⁷ At the basis of Stirner's egoism is the Hegelian idea of absolute negativity (*absolute Negativität*) in which realism and idealism are superseded.

Parallel to the development in the individual from realism to idealism and egoism, Stirner sees a similar development in world history. He distinguishes between "ancients" and "moderns," the line between them being drawn at the birth of Christianity. Among these latter he also distinguishes "free people," a general term for radical liberals of the period who criticized the Christian worldview and its morality. According to Stirner, even these "free people" had not yet escaped the foundation of the Christian morality they were busy negating and hence were not yet true egoists. In the following section we shall trace this development from paganism to Christianity, and from Christianity to the liberalism that necessarily results in egoism.

4. From Paganism to Christianity

According to Stirner, the ancient pagans and the Christians after them had completely opposite ideas of truth. For the pagans, things and relations of this world and this earth were true, whereas for Christianity truth resided in heaven. While the pagan held ties to homeland and family as sacred, to the Christians these were so many empty fictions. For the latter the earth was a foreign land, and their true home in heaven. Under the influence of Hegelian thought, Stirner viewed the development from paganism to Christianity dialectically, insofar as Christianity was the inevitable unfolding of the opposite standpoint of paganism.

"For the ancients the world was a truth," says Feuerbach, but he forgets to add the important proviso: a truth whose untruth they sought to discover-and eventually did discover (15-16/16).

Like the young boy who naturally wants to get behind things, primitive peoples were possessed of a drive to discover the untruth of things within the very perspective that regards things as true. This dialectical irony is typical of Stirner's historical perspective.

The first signs of this dialectical progression appear, according to Stirner, with the Sophists. Realizing the power of intellectual understanding, they grew progressively critical of established authority. Socrates internalized this criticism further and brought it deep into the heart. In Socrates the efforts of the heart to purify

itself came to term, and this purification grew more and more rigorous until nothing in this world was able to meet the standard of the heart's purity. Out of this developed the standpoint of the Sceptics, who refused to let themselves be affected by anything in this world. What began with the Sophists, Stirner said, was carried ahead by Socrates and completed by the Sceptics. With the Sceptics the human individual was liberated from the bonds of life, grew indifferent to the world, and developed a posture that refused to have to do with anything—a state of mind that did not care if the whole world were to collapse. Karl Jaspers considers the scepticism represented by Pyrrho as a kind of nihilism.⁸ In any event, this mentality paved the way for Christianity, since for the first time the self had come to be experienced as “worldless” (*weltlos*), as “spirit”: “That one became aware of oneself as a being that is not related to anything, a worldless being, *as spirit*, was the result of the enormous labor of the ancients” (19/20). Christianity was in this sense the “result” of the development of paganism.

For Stirner, the standpoint of spirit in the true sense is not one of passive negation and *refusing to relate* to the things of this world, but an active standpoint of *choosing to relate* to spiritual things, and to spiritual things exclusively. Initially, these spiritual things are the thoughts grasped in reflection, but the spirit goes on to create a spiritual world really existing behind things. In Stirner's view, “Spirit is spirit only when it creates spiritual things.” Spirit is regarded as spirit only over against spirit; it takes shape only through continued positive interest in spiritual things. This is the difference between the worldless standpoint of the Sceptics and the standpoint of true spirit in Christianity's creation of a new spiritual world. And only in this kind of creation of a world unique to itself is spirit able to become *free*. In contrast, the pagans remained in the standpoint of being “armed against the world” (24/25).

5. From Christianity to Liberalism

When Christianity set up God in the world beyond, according to Stirner, this was the inevitable result of the notion of spirit itself. Your self is not your “spirit,” he says, and your “spirit” is not your self. In spirit you split yourself into two; your spirit, which is called your true self, becomes your center, and this center of the spirit is spirit itself. Even though you are more than spirit and all spiritual things come from you, you consider yourself lower than spirit. This spirit is your ideal and as such is set up in the world beyond as something unattainable. As long as spirit is imagined to be in control, it must reside in the world beyond. This is why

⁸ *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, pp. 296-300.

the Christian theological worldview eventually requires an idea of God as spirit. [See pp. 30-32/31-34.] The irony of history for Stirner is that the truth of the other world which Christianity opposed to the pagan truth of this world is something of which the Christians themselves tried “to disclose the untruth-and eventually succeeded” (24/26).

During the centuries prior to the Reformation, intellectual understanding, long shackled by dogma, showed the ardor of a Sophist-like rebellion. Only with the Reformation did the problem of the heart which Socrates had pursued come to be taken up seriously. At the same time, however, the notion of the heart became so vacuous, as in the case of the so-called liberals from Feuerbach to Bruno Bauer, that “only an empty *cordiality* (*leere Herzlich it*) remained, as universal love for all human beings, love of ‘humanity,’ consciousness of freedom, self-consciousness” (25/27). This corresponds to the posture of the ancient Skeptics, ending up in the “pure” standpoint in which the heart not only criticizes everything but also keeps the criticism entirely free of any egoistic concern of the criticizer. It is the standpoint of criticism of the critical standpoint itself, or absolute criticism. Even though this view of the heart derived originally from Christianity, the religious content able to put up with criticism from the standpoint of the heart could no longer be found there. The heart, or spirit, standing in front of itself, spontaneously sees itself as having been a fiction, and with that all things become fictions. “Driven to the extreme edge of disinterested cordiality we must finally acknowledge that the spirit which the Christian loves is [nothing, or that the spirit is]-a lie” (26/27). This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s view that through the sincerity cultivated by Christian morality the values and ideals established by that morality itself are revealed as fictions.⁹

At this point Feuerbach’s anthropology steps in to liberate people from the standpoint of Christian theology. As Stirner points out, however, the attempt itself is entirely theological. Feuerbach’s anthropology internalized the divine spirit into the essence of humanity (“*unser Wesen*”). As a result, we are split into an essential self and a non-essential self, and we are thus again driven out of our selves [33/34]. As long as we are not our own essence, it is really the same whether it be seen as a transcendent “God” external to us, or as an “essence” internal to us: “I am neither God nor ‘humanity,’ neither the supreme *essence* nor my *essence*” [33/35]. Feuerbach’s idea that my essence is “humanity” and I am supposed to realize this essence is not really any different from the Hegelian idealism he rejected. I am a human being, to be sure, but “humanity” is not me. Being a “human being” is an attribute or predicate of mine, but the “humanity” that is presumed to give laws to the self and transcend the self is a ghostly illusion for the very reasons that

⁹ See above, chapter 3, sec. 4.

Feuerbach regarded God as an illusion. This ghost drains the ego of its content, leaving it null and void. Feuerbach preached love of humanity, where “the human is God for the human.” But for an “I” to love the “humanity” within a Thou does not indicate true love, any more than the old religion which spoke of loving God in one’s neighbor. True love means that I as an individual love a Thou as an individual. In this way, Stirner argues, Feuerbach merely substituted “humanity” for God. Ethical love (*sittliche Liebe*) is no more than a modern substitute for religious love (*religiöse Liebe*), which had become difficult to sustain. True love must be totally egoistic, individual love, the love of a Thou as an individual.

From this perspective, Stirner would have us understand spirit as a sort of ghost. The modern world may disclaim belief in ghosts, but what they call spirit (*Geist*) is precisely that—a disembodied spirit or specter. Spirit is still thought to be behind everything. The world remains full of specters because both those who believe in ghosts (*Spuk*) and those who believe in spirit are seeking some kind of suprasensible world behind the sensible world. In other words, they fabricate a kind of other world and then invest belief in it.

There are ghosts everywhere in the world (*es spunkt in der ganzen Welt*). [Only in it?] No: rather, the world itself is a kind of ghost; [it is uncanny-*unheimlich*-through and through.] it is the wandering apparitional body [*Scheinleib*] of a spirit. . . . and don’t be surprised if you find nothing other in yourself than a ghost. Does your spirit not haunt your body, and isn’t that spirit what is true and actual, and the body only something “ephemeral, null” or mere “appearance”? Aren’t we all ghosts, uncanny beings awaiting “redemption”—that is, “spirits”? (35/37)

Spirit, it is said, is holy. God is holy, humanity is holy, and so on. But what on earth does it mean to regard something as holy? Here Stirner launches an attack against the subjectivity behind the objective standpoint of spirit: “There is a ghost in your head, and you are crazy (*du hast einen Sparren zu viel*).”¹⁰ What is this one rafter [*Sparren*] too many? It is nothing more than an ideal created in the head, an ideal to which one feels called or to the actualization of which one feels obligated to devote oneself, such as the kingdom of God, the realm of spirit, or what have you. Stirner claims that the various ideals emphasized in religion, morality, law, and so on are all *idées fixe*¹¹ that lead people around by the nose and make them possessed.

¹⁰ 43/46. “Du hast einen Sparren zu viel” means literally “you have one rafter too many,” equivalent to the English expression “to have a screw loose.”

¹¹ At the end of the Preface to *The Essence of Christianity*, written shortly before Stirner’s book was published, Feuerbach referred to Christianity as a “fixed idea.”

They breathe spirit into people, inflating them with inspiration (*Begeisterung*) and enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*). They move people and drive them into frenzy and the fanaticism of a blindly unquestioning fascination with “holy” things.¹² Whether it is a matter of harboring ghosts and blind faith (*Spuk und Sparren*) or of being possessed by a certain *idée fixe*, the fanaticism is basically the same. It makes no difference whether one takes religious ideals as holy, or merely regards ethical ideals as holy out of a mistrust of religion. One can be just as fanatical in one’s mistrust of religion and faith in ethics—just as possessed by an *idée fixe*—as in one’s religious trust [46/49]. In both cases one remains fettered, which is the essence of “spirit.” Religion means to “be tied,” as indicated by its etymology in the word *re-ligare*. Religion and the holy occupy the deepest part of our inner being, where freedom of the spirit emerges. “Spirit” becomes freedom within us, but in that very fact our self becomes fettered [pp. 49-52/52-5].

Feuerbach undertook to internalize spirit as humanity and to transpose religion into ethics. According to Stirner, this means making “humanity” the lawgiver rather than God, and placing the self under the governance of ethical rules rather than God. This amounts only to a change of rulers, and does not affect the self’s enslavement [p. 58/62]. In fact, those who have ruled from the standpoint of spirit have done so by means of such ideas as the state, emperor, church, God, morality, law, order, and so on, thereby establishing political, ethical, and religious hierarchies. Indeed, for Stirner, hierarchy itself means the rule of ideas and spirit [pp. 65-74/69-79]. Spirit constructs systems of rule and obedience by sacralizing law and duty and transforming them into matters of conscience. The only thing that can fundamentally destroy this kind of hierarchical system is the standpoint of the egoist which discloses “spirit” as a fabrication. It is not hard to see how Stirner’s ideas came to provide an influential philosophical foundation for anarchism.

6. From Liberalism to Egoism

The curtain came down on ancient history when the world ceased to be seen as divine. The self as spirit became master of the world and conquered it as its own possession. There God appeared as the Holy: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father” (Matthew 11:27) [p. 94/102]. Thus the self became master of the world but did not become master of its own ideal, since the spirit was sacralized as “Holy Spirit.” A Christian “without the world” could not yet become a person “without God.” If the battle during the ancient period had been waged against the

¹² The word “fanatic” comes from the Latin *fanum*, meaning “temple.” *Enthusiasmus* has a similarly religious connotation, being derived from the Greek *entheos*, which means “having god or divinity in one.”

world, the medieval Christian battle was fought against the self itself. The battleground shifted from outside the self to within it. The wisdom of the ancients was a wisdom of the world, a philosophy; the wisdom of the “moderns” is a knowledge of God, a theology. Just as philosophy got around behind the world, so theology tries to get around behind God. The pagans completely disposed of the world, but now the problem is to dispose of the spirit. For almost two thousand years, Stirner says, we have striven to conquer the “spirit that is holy,” the “Holy Spirit.” However many times its holiness has been plucked off and trampled underfoot, the gigantic enemy continues to rise up anew, changing its shape and names [94-95/103].

As a prime example of this phenomenon Stirner, like Nietzsche, cites modern liberalism. He usually refers to modern liberals as “the Free Ones” [*die Freien*] in contrast to the “ancients” and “moderns” mentioned earlier. What they have in common is that they plan the social actualization of the standpoint of humanity and try to negate the various ideals of previous religion and metaphysics as lies. Stirner distinguishes three kinds of liberal thought: political, social, and humanitarian.

Political liberalism is the standpoint of the freedom of citizens. The citizen class eliminated the absolute monarch and the privileged class. No longer a class, they universalized themselves into a “nation” [98/107]. Under the constitutional state of liberalism, the people gain *political* freedom and equality as members of the state. They regard this system as an actualization of their pure humanity and see anything extraneous to it as merely private or egoistic, adventitious, and therefore inhuman. For Stirner, what has happened is that tyranny of the law has replaced tyranny of the monarch: “All states are tyrannies. . . . I am the arch-enemy of the state and am suspended in the alternative choice between the state and me.” Political freedom is not my own freedom because my *own will* (*Eigen-wille*) is negated. It is true that in the citizen state each citizen negates the will of the ruler, who had suppressed individual will up until then, and takes a stand on personal free will. But at the same time the citizen voluntarily suppresses individual will to seek an idealized actualization of the will and freedom of the self through the state [106-109/116-119]. This political freedom means that the *polis* becomes free and the concern (*Sache*) of the *polis* becomes my concern-but this means precisely that I am tied to the state from within myself.

In the citizen state, political equality was achieved but not equality of property. Thus in place of political liberalism, *social liberalism*-namely, communism-appears on the stage. In the same way that in political liberalism each person renounces the self’s immediate right to rule and transfers it to the state, thereby indirectly regaining the right to rule, everyone now has to renounce the *property* (*Eigentum*) of the self and transfer everything to the society, so that the people as a whole may recover the property that belongs to them. According to communism, it is

not that our dignity as human beings consists in an essential equality as children of the same state, as the bourgeoisie says; rather, our human dignity consists in our not existing for the sake of the state but for each other, so that each person exists essentially through others and for the sake of others. All of us become workers for the others. Only in this way are all people equal and repaid in equal compensation. This is how Stirner sees communism [117/129]. Just as his critique of democracy is directed at the state as the supreme ruler, so his critique of communism is directed at *society* as the supreme property owner.

That we become equal as members of the state and grant it the status of supreme ruler actually means that we become equal zeroes. In the same way, when society is made the supreme property owner we become equally “tramps” (*Lumpen*). In the name of the interests of “humanity,” the individual is first deprived of the right to rule by the state, and then even the individual’s property is taken away by society. What is more, in communism we are for the first time equal only as workers, not as human beings or individual selves [119/130].

That the communist sees in you “humanity,” or a brother, is only the “Sunday-side” of communism; from the perspective of the weekday [he] never accepts you simply as a man, but merely as a human worker or a working man. The liberal principle can be found in the first aspect, but in the second the unliberal is concealed. (122/133)

The satisfaction that communism offers the spirit it takes away from the body by compelling one to work. Communism makes workers feel this compulsion as social duty and makes them think that being a worker and abandoning egoism is the essential thing. Just as “citizens” devote themselves to the state, so do “workers” obey the rule of society and serve it. But society is a tool that should rather be serving our interests. Insofar as socialists seek a sacred society, they are as shackled to religious principle as the liberals: “Society, from which we receive everything, is the new master, a new ghost, a new ‘supreme being,’ which makes us bear the burden of ‘devotion and duty’ “ (123/135). Such is Stirner’s conclusion.

The third form of liberal thought is *humanitarian liberalism*, as represented by Bruno Bauer and his followers. For Stirner, this form most thoroughly pursues the standpoint of “humanity” as the principle of liberalism, and is therefore the consummate form of liberalism. With the individual as citizen in political liberalism and as worker in communism, human being is understood from the perspective of the fulfillment of desire. Even in the case of a worker who regards labor as a duty to society and works mutually for the sake of others, an egoistic interest, the fulfillment of the materialistic desire of the self, lurks beneath the surface. It is the same with the citizen who regards devotion to the state as a duty. The attack of

humanitarian liberalism is directed precisely at this point. The humanitarian liberalist criticizes the socialist: “As the citizen does with the state, so the worker *makes use* of society for his own egoistic purposes. After all, don’t you still have an egoistic purpose-your own welfare?” (124/136). The humanitarian demands that human action be completely free of egoistic concern. Only there is true *humanity* found and true liberalism established. “Only *humanity* is dinterested; the egoist is always concerned with interests” (125/137). Thus humanitarian liberalism tries to press the negation of private and egoistic concerns to the innermost heart. It is a critical liberalism that does not stop short with criticizing others, but goes on to criticize itself.

While the politicians thought they had eliminated *each individual’s own will*, self-will (*Eigenwille*), or willfulness, they did not realize that this self-will found a safe refuge through *property* (*Eigentum*).

When socialists take away even property, they do not notice that ownership secures its continuation within ownness (*Eigenheit*).¹³

No matter how much property is taken away, opinion (*Meinung*) in the heart remains mine (das *Meinige*), and to that extent ownership remains.¹⁴ Therefore, we must eliminate not only selfwill or private ownership but also private opinion.

Just as self-will is transferred to the state and private property to the society, private opinion also is transferred to something *universal*-namely, to ‘man’-and thereby becomes general human opinion. . . . Just as self-will and property become *powerless*, so must ownness [or egoism] in general become powerless. (128-129/141)

Humane liberalism demands that we abandon welfare-ism, voluntarily criticize all egoistic and “inhuman” things and attain “consciousness of self” as “humanity.” Further, with respect to labor, it demands that we understand it in a universal sense, as encompassing all of humankind in such a way that spirit reforms all material things. Labor for communism, in contrast, is merely “collective labor without spirit.”

Stirner says that with this kind of humanitarian liberalism, “the circle of liberalism is completed” (127-128/140). Liberalism in general recognizes in humanity and

¹³ 128/141. Nishitani translates *Eigenheit* as *gasei*, literally “I-ness,” which emphasizes its connection with *jiga*, or “ego.”

¹⁴ Hegel had earlier pointed to the significance of the connection between *Meinung*, “opinion,” and “mineness”; see *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, section A, chapter I, which bears the title: “Sense-Certainty: or the ‘This’ and ‘Meaning’ [Meinen].”

human freedom the principle of the good, and in all egoistic and private things the principle of evil. This standpoint is taken to the extreme in humanitarian liberalism in its attempt to eliminate egoistic and private concerns from the human heart. The critique that includes this self-criticism may be the best of the critical social theories, but for Stirner, it is precisely because of this that the contradiction inherent in liberalism in general appears most clearly in humanitarian liberalism. For in spite of the elimination of self-will, private property, and private opinion, for the first time the unique individual who cannot be eliminated comes to light. "Ownness"-the selfness of the self-is revealed. Critical liberalism tries through its "criticism" to eliminate from the individual everything private and everything that would exclude all others. But the ownness of the individual is immune to this purging. Indeed, the person is an individual precisely because he or she excludes from the self everything that is not self. In this sense we might say that the most unique person is the most exclusive. This eliminates even the "criticism" that tries to exclude the very thing that excludes others (namely, one's private affairs). As Stirner says: "It is precisely the sharpest critic who is hit hardest by the curse of his own principle" (134/148).

The pursuit of freedom, once arrived at humanitarian liberalism, goes to the extreme of making humanity everything and the individual person nothing. We are deprived of everything and our *Lumpen*-condition is made complete. A radical reversal now becomes possible:

If we want to attain the nature of *ownness* we must first decline even to the most shabby, the most destitute condition-because we must remove and discard everything that is foreign to the self. (139/153)

The utmost *Lumpen*-condition is that of a naked man, stripped even of his tatters (*Lumpen*). Therefore, when one removes and discards even one's "humanity" true nakedness-the condition (*Ent-blössung*) in which one is stripped of all that is alien to the self appears.¹⁵ The tramp escapes his condition by tearing off his rags. Such is the standpoint of Stirner's egoist. The egoist is the archenemy of all liberalism as well as of Christianity: to human beings he is inhuman; to God, a devil. Though repudiated by all forms of liberalism, the egoist goes through them one after another, eliminating from the self all ghosts and rafters of *idée fixes*. Finally, with *the*

¹⁵ On Nishitani's use of the verb *datsuraku* for "removes and discards," see chapter five, note 6. The idea of "casting off all robes" of any kind figures prominently in the ideas of Rinzai; see *The Record of Lin-chi*, Discourse 18. Stirner's admonition to strip away everything that is alien to oneself, everything that is not truly one's own, is a remarkable anticipation of the respects in which the "existential" aspects of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger are congruent with later Buddhist ideas.

turn from the absolute destitution of the self, the egoist for the first time can truly say “I am I.”

7. Ownness and Property-All and Nothing

The self as egoist was present all along as the object of the most basic negations of the God of religion or the ethical person. The self was repudiated as “sinner” and “inhuman wretch.” But nothing could erase the self’s being the self-this bodily self, with its inherent I-ness, its ownness (*Eigenheit*). Beaten down by God, the state, society, and humanity, it nevertheless slowly began to raise its head again. It could do this because fanatics brandishing Bibles or reason or the ideals of humanity “are unconsciously and unintentionally pursuing I-ness” (358/403). Firstly, it was revealed that “God’s” true body was “man,” which represented one step toward the selfdiscovery of the ego. The search for the self remained unconscious as the ego lost itself in fanaticism over reason or the idea of humanity. In humanism’s denunciations of the egoism of the ego as inhuman and selfish, the more vigorous its efforts, the clearer it became that the ego was not something to be set aside. It was only from the depths of nihilism to which the ego had been banished that it could, in a gesture of negating all negation, rise to reclaim itself.

In the first half of his work, Stirner develops this ironical dialectic; in the second half, he deals with the positive standpoint of egoism, showing how the ego claims its uniqueness and ownness, embraces within itself all other things and ideas, assimilates and appropriates them to itself as owner (*Eigner*), and thus reaches the awareness of the unique one (*Einzige*) who has appropriated everything within his own I-ness and has made the world the content of his own life.

Stirner understands the *ownness* of the self as the consummation of “freedom.” “Freedom” is originally a Christian doctrine having to do with freeing the self from this world and renouncing all the things that weigh the self down. This teaching eventually led to the abandoning of Christianity and its morality in favor of a standpoint of the ego “without sin, without God, without morality, and so on” [157/173]. This “freedom,” however, is merely negative and passive. The ego still had to take control of the things from which it has been released and make them its own; it must become their owner (*Eigner*). This is the standpoint of ownness (*Eigenheit*).

What a difference there is between freedom and I-ness. . . . I am free
from things that I have got rid of but I am the owner (*Eigner*) of

¹⁶ 157/173. Stirner’s use of *Macht* and *mächtig* here and elsewhere gives the entire text a quite different illumination when read-as Nishitani reads it-in the light of Nietzsche’s *Wille zur Macht*, as a power that is not primarily physical.

things which I have within my power (*Macht*) and which I control (*mächtig*).¹⁶

Eigenheit is the standpoint of the *Eigene*; in this standpoint freedom itself becomes my property for the first time. Once the ego controls everything and owns it as its property, it truly possesses freedom. In other words, when it overcomes even the “form of freedom,” freedom becomes its property. Stirner says that “the individual (*der Eigene*) is one who is born free; but the liberal is one who seeks freedom, as a dreamer and fanatic” (164/181). And again: “Ownness has *created* a new *freedom*, insofar as it is the creator of everything” (163/179). This ownness is I myself, and “my entire essence and existence.” Stirner calls the essential being of this kind of ownness “unnameable,” “conceptually unthinkable,” and “unsayable” (148/164, 183/201). The ego thinks and is the controller and owner of all thinking, but it cannot itself be grasped through thought. In this sense it is even said to be “a state of *thoughtlessness* (*Gedankenlosigkeit*)” (148/164). In contrast to Feuerbach, who considers “humanity” as the essence of human being and the egoist who violates humanity as “an inhuman wretch,” Stirner claims that there is no way to separate the notion of a human being from its existence (178/195). If anything, Stirner’s existentialism dissolves the essence of human being into its unnameable Existence.

From everything that has been said, Stirner’s deep affinity with Nietzsche should be clear. His standpoint of the “power” to assimilate everything in the world into the self is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s idea of will to power. In Nietzsche it is folly as the culmination of knowledge, and in Stirner it is “thoughtlessness” that makes all thinking my property. The ego in Nietzsche is also ultimately nameless, or at most symbolically called Dionysus. In Stirner’s case we also find the element of “creative nothing,” a creative nihilism. This latter point merits closer examination. In a remarkable passage, Stirner confronts the “faith in truth,” just as Nietzsche does, and emphasizes “faith in the self itself” as the standpoint of nihilism.

As long as you believe in truth, you do not believe in yourself and are a —*servant*, a *religious* person. You alone are the truth, or rather, you are more than the truth, which is nothing at all before you. Of course even you inquire after the truth, of course even you “criticize,” but you do not inquire after a “higher truth,” which would be higher than you, and you do not criticize according to the criterion of such a truth. You engage thoughts and ideas, as you do the appearances of things, only for the purpose of making them . . . your own, you want only to master them and become their *owner*, you want to orient yourself and be at home in them, and you find them true or see them in their true

light . . . when they are right for *you*, when they are your *property*. If they should later become heavier again, if they should disengage themselves again from your power, that is then precisely their untruth—namely, your powerlessness. Your powerlessness [*Ohnmacht*] is their power [*Macht*], your humility their greatness. Their truth, therefore, is you, or is the nothing¹⁷ that you are for them, and in which they dissolve, their truth is their *nullity* (*Nichtigkeit*). (353-541/397-98)

Stirner's assertion here that the truth of thought is one's nihilism, and the power of truth one's powerlessness, comes to the same thing as Nietzsche's assertion that "the will to truth" is the impotence of the will, that "truth" is an illusion with which the will deceives itself, and that behind a philosophy that seeks truth runs the current of nihilism. Further, Stirner's idea that when thought becomes one's property it becomes true for the first time parallels Nietzsche's saying that illusion is reaffirmed as useful for life from the standpoint of will to power. In Stirner's terms, nihilism as powerlessness turns into creative nothing. This "self-overcoming of nihilism" and "faith in the self" constitute his egoism. He goes on: "All truth in itself is dead, a corpse; it is alive only in the way that my lungs are alive—namely, in proportion to my own vitality" (354/398). Any truth established above the ego kills the ego; and as long as it kills the ego, it is itself dead, and merely appears as a "ghost" or an *idée fixe*.

Every truth of an era is the *idée fixe* of that era . . . one wanted after all to be 'inspired' (*begeistert*) by such an 'idea.' One wanted to be ruled by a thought—and possessed by it! (355/399-400)

It is thus possible to discern a clear thread of nihilism running through the fifty years that separate Nietzsche from Stirner, each of whom recognized his nihilism as the expression of a great revolution in the history of the European world. As Stirner says: "We are standing at the borderline." Both were truly *thinkers of crisis* in the most radical sense.

We saw how Feuerbach criticized Hegel's absolute spirit as an "abstraction" and offered a posture of truly real existence in place of it. According to Stirner, this "existence" of Feuerbach's is no less of an abstraction.

But *I am* not merely abstraction, *I am* all in all, and consequently myself am abstraction or nothing. I am all and nothing; [I am no mere thought, but I am at the same time full of thoughts, a world

¹⁷ I have translated Stirner's Nichts here as "nothing," even though Nishitani uses *kyomu*; for *Nichtigkeit* later in the sentence he uses *kümusei*, which is rendered, as usual, "nullity."

of thoughts.] Hegel condemns I-ness, what is mine (*Meinige*)-that is, "opinion" (*Meinung*). However, "absolute thinking" . . . has forgotten that it is my thinking, and that it is I who think (*ich denke*), that it itself exists through me . . . it is merely my *opinion*. (339/381-82)

The same can be said of Feuerbach's emphasis on sensation [*Sinnlichkeit*] in opposition to Hegel:

But in order to think and also to feel, and so for the abstract as much as for the sensible, I need above all things me myself, and indeed me as this absolutely definite me, this *unique individual*. (340/382)

The ego, which is all and nothing, which can call even absolute thinking *my* thinking, is the ego that expels from the self all things and ideas, reveals the nihilism of the self, and at the same time nullifies their "truth." It is the same ego that then makes them its own flesh and blood, owning them and "enjoying" (*geniessen*) the use of them. The ego inserts nihilism behind the "essence" of all things, behind the "truth" of all ideas, and behind "God" who is at their ground. Within this nihilism these sacred things which used to reign over the ego are stripped of their outer coverings to reveal their true nature. The ego takes their place and makes all things and ideas its own, becoming one with the world in the standpoint of nihilism. In other words, Stirner's egoism is based on something similar to what Kierkegaard called "the abyss of pantheistic nihilism" or to what Nietzsche called "pantheistic faith" in eternal recurrence. This is why Stirner called this "ownness" the creator of all things, born free. From this standpoint he can claim that, for the individual, thinking itself becomes a mere "pastime" (*Kurzweile*) or "the equation of the thoughtless and the thoughtful I" (150/166). I have already touched on the way in which the abyss of nihilism reveals the true face of life as boredom (*Langweile*) in connection with Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. The creative nihilism which overcame this kind of nihilism appears as "play" in Nietzsche and as "pastime" in Stirner.

8. The State and the Individual

Stirner differs from Nietzsche in being primarily a social thinker. The emphasis of his major work is on a critique of various social ideas and on the advocacy of a society "without government or law." Here I forgo taking on this manifold argument in order to focus on its foundational philosophical ideas of human existence itself. Social ideas are, of course, important, but for me what makes them important would be something along the lines of Dostoevsky's understanding of socialism as

atheism. It is nevertheless necessary to touch upon Stirner's social ideas to some extent in order to give a comprehensive exposition of his nihilism.

Stirner exhibits the same irony toward the *state* as he does toward "truth."

It is no longer so much a matter of the state but rather of me. With this all problems regarding sovereign power, the constitution, and so on completely sink down into their true abyss and nihility [*ihr wahres Nichts*]. I-this nihility-shall drive out my various *creations* from myself. (235/259)

Stirner means that the nihility of the ego is inserted behind the authority of the state, and that in this light the fundamental hollowness of the state's authority is revealed. At that point the human relationships that are to replace the state emerge from the "creative nothing" of the individual. The same is true of political parties and *factions*: "Precisely those who shout most loudly that the state needs an *opposition* oppose most eagerly every kind of disharmony within the party. This is proof that they, too, only want-a state" [235/260]. Neither the state nor the opposition party is able to bring about the collapse of the other; rather, both collapse when they collide with the ego. This is because the citizens and party members are more than the fact of their belonging to the nation or party. Ownness, which contains at its roots something unpolitical, cannot be extinguished, no matter how much state and party strengthen their binding power. Once the ego becomes aware of its inherently unpolitical nature and becomes egoistic, state and party collapse. It is the same way with the contradiction between the state and *humankind*.

The nationalists are right: one cannot negate one's nationality. And the humanists are right: one should not remain in the narrowness of nationalism. The contradiction is resolved only within *unique individuality* [*Einzigkeit*]: nationality is a property [*Eigenschaft*] of mine. But I am not reducible to my properties, just as humanity is a property of mine though it is only through my individuality that "man" receives Existence. (244-45/270-71)

Proudhon and the communists say that the world belongs to everybody. They make the ghost called "everybody" holy, and set it up as a terrifying ruler over the individual. But this *everybody* is actually each individual self for itself, and it is to this self that the world belongs. Stirner says: "Just as the isolated individual (*Einzelne*) is the whole of nature, he is also the whole species"; or "I am the owner

of humankind, I am humankind . . .”¹⁸ This kind of egoistic standpoint has been recovered as creative nothing from the abyss of nihilism after having been negated by all other standpoints and having itself broken through and negated all other standpoints. Now everything lives as my own, “like my lungs.”

From Protagoras to Feuerbach it has been said that “man is the measure of all things” (352/395); but it is rather the ego that is the measure of all things. This egoistic posture allows us for the first time to “judge from the self,” while other standpoints oblige us to “judge from the other.” Furthermore, the dissolution of all things into the “vitality” of the self as the property and “enjoyment” of the self sets up a new mode of intercourse with the world for the individual. “My intercourse with the world . . . is enjoyment of the world (*Weltgenuss*) and belongs to my self-enjoyment” (319/358). The standpoint of enjoyment of the world as enjoyment of the self in Stirner is reminiscent of the *samadhi* of “self-enjoyment,” an important state in Buddhist practice. The difference is that in Buddhism the *samadhi* of self-enjoyment cannot be separated from the *samadhi* of “the enjoyment of the other.”¹⁹ This is, I would say, the locus of the fundamental distinction between nothingness [*mu*] in Buddhism and Stirner’s nothingness. Nothingness in Buddhism is “self-benefit-benefitting-others,”²⁰ which is a higher and more comprehensive standpoint. Stirner is thinking about an “association” (*Verein*) of individuals sharing the standpoint of the unique individual, and he imagines the citizen-state of the political liberals and the society of the communists dissolving into this kind of association.

The association of unique individuals differs from the state or society in not being master over individuals and making them its servants: “You can assert yourself as an individual only within the association” (312/349). It is a relationship of individuals without mutual domination or enslavement, mutually enjoying and making use of each other. How can we conceive of egoists uniting together? Obviously we cannot take egoism in its ordinary colloquial sense. Stirner says that the happiness or welfare of others is a genuine concern of his. In order to increase the *other’s* pleasure one is willing “to sacrifice gladly innumerable pleasures” [290/323]. I am prepared to risk “my life, my welfare, my freedom”-because to enjoy the other’s happiness is my happiness. “However, I do not sacrifice *me, me myself*

¹⁸ 183/201; 245/271. This anticipates another important theme in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: the identity of each individual with the entire race.

¹⁹ Jijuyo zammai and tajuyo zammai; on the idea of the *samadhi* of self-enjoyment, see Dogen, Shobogenzo, “Bendowa,” 15 i. Nishitani discusses “self-joyous *samadhi*” in the context of the “dropping-off [datsuraku] of body-and-mind” in chapter 5 of *Religion and Nothingness*.

²⁰ Jiririta kakugyo uman. This idea is another expression of “the bodhisattva ideal” of Mahayana Buddhism, in which a person’s enlightenment conduces to the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

to the other, but remain an egoist and-enjoy him” (290/324). There should be no misunderstanding the import of these words: Stirner means that one can sacrifice one’s life for the other but not one’s self. To sacrifice oneself for the other is to grant the other a “ghostly” power and enslave oneself to it, the self thereby failing to be itself. This is entirely different from ordinary egoism. But can we then conceive of an association of egoists in this sense? Stirner answers this question as follows:

If they were able to be perfect egoists, they would exclude each other *entirely* and hold together that much more strongly. Their disgrace is not that they exclude each other, but that they only *half* do this. (181/198)

In another passage Stirner pursues this issue further in suggesting, perhaps with Hegel in mind, that to try to dissolve the opposition of two things into a third thing is to understand their significance in too weak a sense. Opposition should rather be intensified. That we are not entirely *separated* from others, that we seek a certain “community” or “bond” with others and recognize a certain ideal within the community, is, according to Stirner, our weakness. From this he draws the following remarkable conclusion, which is probably one of the clearest answers to the question of how the relationship between one human being and another should be set up from a standpoint of affirmative nihilism.

The final and most decisive opposition, that of the unique individual against the unique individual, is basically beyond what is called opposition, yet without sinking back into “unity” and unanimity. As a unique individual you no longer have anything in common with the others and therefore also nothing divisive or hostile; you do not seek your right with respect to him before a *third* party nor stand with him either on a “ground of law” [*Rechtsboden*] or on any other communal ground. Opposition disappears in perfect separation (*Geschiedenheit*) or uniqueness . . . here equally consists precisely in inequality and is itself nothing other than inequality . . . (208-09/229)

The passage clearly exemplifies the close connection between Stirner’s social ideas and their philosophical foundation. Individuals are individuals because they stand on “nothing.” And for the same reason “decisive opposition” and its “complete disappearance” arise simultaneously between individuals entirely separated. This is the “association” of the egoists: because they are entirely separated, they are a firm unity. “Only with the ultimate separation does separation itself come

to an end and turn into unity” (231/254). Moreover, there are no bonds to a third party and therefore no community existing independently of the individuals, so that relationships in terms of rights and legalities disappear. This idea of Stirner’s might seem no more than a trick of logic. But insofar as only the “ego” has the attribute of being absolutely unique, it cannot be a specimen of something universal. For this very reason, it is possible to conceive of “nothing” at the ground of the ego. If such egos are, moreover, to associate with each other, there is a sense in which Stirner’s understanding of their mode of association grasps something that even Kant and Hegel were unable to appreciate. It would seem that he has hit on something totally familiar and yet deeply hidden concerning our association with others.

Stirner’s view appears at first glance to be close to Fichte’s standpoint of pure ego, but he repeatedly emphasizes the difference between them. According to Stirner, Fichte’s ego is the generalization of an “I” that ultimately exists outside of me. “I am not, however, one I alongside other I’s, but the one and only I . . .” (361/406). Here, a general person in any sense, even an “I” in general, must be negated. In spite of the abyss of nihilism this leaves us with, or rather because of it, I am a bodily ego. Stirner repeatedly emphasizes the fact of embodiment: “there does not exist anything higher above the *bodily human being*” (356/400). This bodily human being, as I said earlier, is understood as something that has gone through Hegel’s absolute spirit and passed beyond it. Similarly, Stirner emphasizes the self’s *finitude*:

When Fichte says, “The I is everything,” this appears to be in perfect harmony with my own expositions. But it is not that the I is everything, but rather the I *destroys* everything, and only the I that dissolves itself, that never “is,” the —*finite* I, is really 1. Fichte speaks of the “absolute” I, whereas I speak of me, the perishing 1. (182/199)

The background to the finitude of which Stirner speaks lies in the dissolution of the self and the destruction of everything. Feuerbach’s “humanity” is not a “perishing and individual self,” insofar as the individual is said to raise itself beyond the limit of individuality, and enter into the unity of love between one human being and another. Even here the individual is seen as unable to go beyond the various laws governing this unity, “the positive and essential determinations of the [human] species.” Stirner counters:

But the species is nothing, and if the individual raises himself beyond the boundaries of his individuality, this is rather precisely he himself

²¹ 182/200. Through a slip of the tongue, or pen, Nishitani translates the penultimate phrase

as an individual; he is only insofar as he raises himself, he is only insofar as he does not remain what he is; otherwise he would be finished, dead.²¹

Stirner is saying that “the human species” is merely a conceptualized ideal. This negation of the “species” is the standpoint of nihilism without any kind of general person, and in this standpoint “going beyond the boundaries of individuality” has an entirely different significance. It is not that one enters into communal relationships with others at the standpoint of the species as Feuerbach would have it, but rather that the life of the individual overflows, so to speak, the limits of the self. With this, the individual becomes for the first time the living individual. This is the meaning of the terms “dissolving the self,” “perishing,” or not remaining in the mode of fixed “being.” On this standpoint, everything that the self touches fuses with the self. This is also, I think, what Stirner means by saying that it is not that the ego is everything but that it *destroys* everything. Thus what he means by the *perishing* and finite ego is a continual overflowing of the self, where everything is melted into the self’s vitality, and “enjoyed.” This flow of nihilism Stirner’s “*creative nothing*,” represents a *fundamental unity of creative nihilism and finitude*.

Nietzsche, it will be recalled, also emphasized the bodily aspect of human being: “the awakened one, the one who knows, says: I am entirely body and nothing besides; and soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason . . .” (*Za* 1,4). Moreover, he holds fixed “being” to be an illusion, based on the “perishing” of becoming, and affirms a Dionysian life that makes this perishing one’s own “ceaseless creation.” He, too, subscribed to the fundamental unity of creative nihilism and finitude, which he expressed by speaking of “*this life-this eternal life*.” Here Stirner, breaking with Feuerbach, and Nietzsche, breaking with Schopenhauer, meet at a deep level, even though their points of departure, their concerns, their perspectives, and also the character, scale, and profundity of their philosophies are somewhat different.

Marx’s satirical critique entitled “Saint Max” does not show a very profound understanding of Stirner’s enterprise. It rather gives the impression that the materialistic view of history does not have the wherewithal for understanding Stirner. For example, where Stirner writes: “I am not nothing in the sense of a void but creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything,” Marx turns the words around by saying: “The Holy Father [Stirner] could have expressed this as follows: I am everything in the void of nonsense *but* the null creator, the all from which I myself as creator create nothing.”²² Stirner could well have responded to this as follows: “You have said something wise by mistake in

as: “insofar as he remains what he is.”

²² See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, III “Sankt Max,” sec. 1.

saying that Stirner creates nothing from everything. My standpoint is exactly as you say, but its meaning is entirely different from what you think.”

For both Stirner and Nietzsche their nihilism was their existence, and, as a self-interpretation of their existence, their philosophy. Philosophy in turn was a stimulus toward Existence, but not yet scientific in the original sense.²³ From the viewpoint of the human way of being, both criticized the scientific standpoint. This accounts for their negative attitude toward traditional metaphysics. But can a standpoint of the fundamental unity of creative nihilism and finitude lead to a scientific philosophy? Can the inquiry into nihilism as the self-interpretation of existence yield a thinking in the form of scientific philosophy? Or to put it the other way round, can the thinking of scientific philosophy constitute a standpoint of Existence as the self-interpretation of existence? It is not until Heidegger that we have an existential *philosophy* in this sense, where the standpoint of scientific philosophy for the first time appears on the ground of nihilism. His attempt to reconnect with the tradition of metaphysics by “destructing” it²⁴ opened up a new and expansive phase in the development of nihilism.

Notes

²³ “Philosophy had not yet become *gaku*”—this word, which appears many times in the course of the next several pages, has the connotations of “learning, study, scholarship, science.” It is often an apt translation of the German *Wissenschaft*, which has a much broader range of meaning than the English “science”; I have consequently rendered it variously through terms like “discipline” and “scholarship” as well as “science” and other cognates.

²⁴ The reference is to Heidegger’s project of “the destruction (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology” as announced in §6 of *Being and Time* taking apart of the tradition, with what Heidegger calls a “positive intention,” which is an important forerunner of the contemporary movement of “deconstruction.”

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Nihilism as Egoism
Max Stirner
1990

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