

Stirner: The Ego and His Own

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I.

Benjamin R. Tucker has published the first English translation of “*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*,” written in 1845 by the ingenuous German thinker Kaspar Schmidt under the pseudonym of Max Stirner. The book has been translated by Steven T. Byington, assisted by Emma Heller Schumm and George Schumm. Mr. Tucker, however, informs us in his Preface to the book that “the responsibility for special errors and imperfections” properly rests on his shoulders. He is therefore also responsible for the Introduction by the late Dr. J. L. Walker, whose narrow-minded conception of Stirner is suggestive of Individualistic idolatry.

Stirner said: “*Ich hab’ mein’ Sach’ auf Nichts gestellt.*” (“I have set my cause on naught.”)¹ It seems that the Individualist Anarchists have set their cause on Stirner. Already they have sent money to Bayreuth and Berlin, for the purpose of having the customary memorial tables nailed to the places of Stirner’s birth and death. Like the devout pilgrims wending their way Bayreuth-wards, lost in awed admiration of the musical genius of Richard Wagner, so will the Stirner worshipers soon begin to infest Bayreuth and incidentally cause a raise in the hotel charges. The publishers of Baedeker will do well to take note of this prophecy, that the attention of the traveling mob be called to the Stirner shrines.

A harmless bourgeois cult. Involuntarily I am reminded of another theoretic Individualist Anarchist, P. J. Proudhon, who wrote after the Paris February Revolution: “Willy-nilly, we must now resign ourselves to be Philistines.”

Possibly Dr. J. L. Walker had in mind such resignation when he contemptuously referred in his Introduction to Stirner’s book to the “so-called revolutionary movement” of 1848. We regret that the learned doctor is dead; perhaps we could have successfully demonstrated to him that this revolution — in so far as it was aggressively active — proved of the greatest benefit to at least one country, sweeping away, as it did, most of the remnants of feudalism in Prussia. It were not the revolutionists who compromised the revolution and caused the reaction; the responsibility for the latter rests rather on the champions of passive resistance, à la Tucker and Mackay.

Walker did not scruple to insinuate that Nietzsche had read Stirner and possibly stolen his ideas in order to bedeck himself with them; he had omitted, however, to mention Stirner. Why? That the world might not discover the plagiarism. The disciple Walker proves himself not a little obsessed by the god-like attributes of his master, as he suspiciously exclaims: “Nietzsche cites scores or hundreds of authors. Had he read everything, and not read Stirner?”

Good psychologic reasons stamp this imputation as unworthy of credence.

¹ Erroneously translated by Byington: “All things are nothing to me.”

Nietzsche is reflected in his works as the veriest fanatic of truthfulness with regard to himself. Sincerity and frankness are his passion — not in the sense of wishing to “justify” himself before others: he would have scorned that, as Stirner would — it is his inner tenderness and purity which imperatively impel him to be truthful with himself. With more justice than any of his literary contemporaries could Nietzsche say of himself: “Ich wohne in meinem eignen Haus,”² and what reason had *he* to plagiarize? Was he in need of stolen ideas — he, whose very abundance of ideas proved fatal to him?

Add to this the fact that the further and higher Nietzsche went on his heroic road, the more alone he felt himself. Not alone like the misanthrope, but as one who, overflowing with wealth, would vainly make wonderful gifts, but finds no ears to hear, no hands capable to take.

How terribly he suffered through his mental isolation is evidenced by numerous places in his works. He searched the past and the present for harmonious accords, for ideas and sentiments congenial to his nature. How ardently he reveres Richard Wagner and how deep his grief to find their ways so far apart! In his latter works Nietzsche became the most uncompromising opponent of Schopenhauer’s philosophy; yet that did not prevent his paying sincere tribute to the thinker Schopenhauer, as when he exclaims:

“Seht ihn euch an —
Niemandem war er untertan.”³

Were Nietzsche acquainted with Stirner’s book, he would have joyfully paid it — we may justly assume — the tribute of appreciative recognition, as he did in the case of Stendhal and Dostoyevsky, in whom he saw kindred spirits. Of the latter Nietzsche says that he had learned more psychology from him than from all the textbooks extant. That surely does not look like studied concealment of his literary sources.

In my estimation there is no great intellectual kinship between Stirner and Nietzsche. True, both are fighting for the liberation of individuality. Both proclaim the right of the individual to unlimited development, as against all “holiness,” all sacrosanct pretensions of self-denial, all Christian and moral Puritanism; yet how different is Nietzsche’s Individualism from that of Stirner!

The Individualism of Stirner is fenced in. On the inside stalks the all-too-abstract I, who is like unto an individual as seen under X-rays. “Don’t disturb my circle!” cries this I to the people outside the fence. It is a somewhat stilted I. Karl Marx parodied Stirner’s *Einzigkeit* by saying that it first saw the light in the narrow little

² Literally, “I live in my own house.”

³ “Observe him — he is mastered by no one.”

Berlin street, the *Kupfergraben*. That was malicious. In truth, however, it cannot be denied that Stirner's Individualism is not free from a certain stiffness and rigidity. The Individualism of Nietzsche, on the other hand, is an exulting slogan, a jubilant war-cry; more, it joyfully embraces humanity and the whole world, absorbs them, and, thus enriched, in turn penetrates life with elementary force.

But why contrast these two great personalities? Let us rather repeat with M. Messer — who wrote an essay on Stirner — Goethe's saying with regard to himself and Schiller: "*Seid froh, dass ihr solche zwei Kerle habt.*"⁴

That the champions of pure-and-simple Individualism can be as captious and petty towards other individualities as the average moralist is proven by the extremely tactless remark in Tucker's Preface about Stirner's sweetheart, Marie Daehnhard. Stirner dedicated his book to her; for that he must now be censored by Mackay-Tucker in the following manner:

Mackay's investigations have brought to light that Marie Daehnhardt had nothing whatever in common with Stirner, and so was unworthy of the honor conferred upon her. She was no *Eigene*. I therefore reproduce the dedication merely in the interest of historical accuracy."

No doubt Tucker is firmly convinced that Individualism and *Einzigkeit* are synonymous with Tuckerism. Fortunately, it's a mistake.

Max Stirner and Marie Daehnhardt surely knew better what they had in common at the time of the dedication than Tucker-Mackay knows now.

But we must not take the matter too seriously. Stirner belongs to those whom even their admirers and literary executors cannot kill off. Mr. Traubel and the *Conservator* have not as yet succeeded in disgusting me with Walt Whitman; neither can the Individualists Anarchists succeed in robbing me of Stirner.

A great fault of the translation is the failure to describe the contemporary intellectual atmosphere of Germany in Stirner's time. The American reader is left in total ignorance as to the conditions and personalities against which the ideas of Stirner were directed. This is, moreover, dishonest — undesignedly so, no doubt — with regard to the Communists. Stirner's controversy was specifically with Wilhelm Weitling — who, by the way, is probably quite unknown to most American readers; it were therefore no more than common honesty to state that the Communism of Weitling bears but a mere external resemblance to modern Communism as expounded, among others, by Kropotkin and Reclus. Modern Communism has ceased to be a mere invention, to be forced upon society; it is rather a *Weltanschauung* founded on biology, psychology and economy.

⁴ "Rejoice that you have two such capital fellows."

The English edition of “The Ego and his Own” impresses one with the fact that the translator spared no pains to give an adequate and complete work; unfortunately, he has not quite succeeded. It is a case of too much philology and too little intuitive perception. Stirner himself is partly responsible for this, because in spite of his rebellion against all spooks, he is past master in playing with abstractions.

II.

Stirner’s “*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*” was a revolutionary deed. It is the rebellion of the individual against those “sacred principles” in the name of which he was ever oppressed and subjected. Stirner exposes, so to say, the metaphysics of tyrannical forces. Luther nailed his ninety-five accusations against Popery to the door of the Schlosskirche at Wittenberg; Stirner’s declaration of independence of the individual throws down the challenge to ALL things “sacred” — in morals, family and State. He tears off the mask of our “inviolable institutions” and discovers behind them nothing but — spooks. GOD, SPIRIT, IDEAS, TRUTH, HUMANITY, PATRIOTISM — all these are to Stirner mere masks, behind which — as from the holy mountain — issue commands, the Kantian categorical imperatives, all signed to suppress the individuality, to train and drill it and thus to rob it of all initiative, independence and *Eigenheit*. All these things claim to be good in themselves, to be cultivated for their own sake and all exact respect and subjection, all demand admiration, worship and the humiliation of the individual.

Against all this is directed the rebellion of the I with its *Eigenheit* and *Einzigkeit*. It withholds respect and obedience. It shakes from its feet the dust of “eternal truths” and proclaims the emancipation of the individual from the mastery of ideals and ideas; henceforth the free, self-owning Ego must master *them*. He is no more awed by the “good”; neither does he condemn the “bad.” He is sans religion, sans morals, sans State. The conception of Justice, Right, General Good are no more binding upon him; at the most, he uses them for his own ends

To Stirner, the Ego is the centre of the world; wherever it looks, it finds the world its own — to the extent of its power. If this Ego could appropriate the entire world, it would thereby establish its right to it. It would be the universal monopolist. Stirner does not say that he wants his liberty to be limited by the equal liberty of others; on the contrary, he believes that his freedom and *Eigenheit* are bounded only by his power to attain. If Napoleon uses humanity as a football, why don’t they rebel?

The liberty demanded by his democratic and liberal contemporaries was to Stirner as mere alms thrown to a beggar.

J. L. Walker entirely misunderstands the very spirit of Stirner when he states in his Introduction: “In Stirner we have the philosophical foundation for political

liberty.” Stirner has nothing but contempt for political liberty. He regards it in the light of a doubtful favor that the powerful grant to the powerless. He, as *Eigener* would scorn to accept political liberty if he could have it for the asking. He scoffs at those who *ask* for human right and *beg* liberty and independence, instead of *taking* what belongs to them by virtue of their power.

It is this very criticism of political liberty that constitutes one of the most ingenious parts of Stirner’s book. This is best proven by the following quotation:⁵

“Political liberty,’ what are we to understand by that? Perhaps the individual’s independence of the State and its laws? No; on the contrary, the individual’s *subjection* in the State and to the State laws. But why ‘liberty’? Because one is no longer separated from the State by intermediaries, but stands in direct and immediate relation to it; because one is a — citizen, not the subject of another, not even of the king as a person, but only in his quality as ‘supreme head of the State.’ ...

“Political liberty means that the *polis*, the State, is free; freedom of religion that religion is free, as freedom of conscience signifies that conscience is free; not, therefore, that I am free from the State, from religion, from conscience, or that I am *rid* of them. It does not mean *my* liberty, but the liberty of a power that rules and subjugates me; it means that one of my *despots*, like State, religion, conscience, is free. State, religion, conscience, these despots, make me a slave.”

Stirner is anti-democratic as well as anti-moral. He did not believe that the individual would be freed from his moral fetters by “humanizing the deity,” as advocated by Ludwig Feuerbach; that were but to substitute moral despotism for religious. The divine had grown senile and enervated; something more virile was required to further keep man in subjection.

By embodying the “God idea” in man, the moral commands are transformed into his very mental essence, thus enslaving him to his own mind instead of to something external; thus would the former merely external slavery be supplanted by an inner thralldom through his ethical fear of being immoral. We could rebel against a mere external God; the moral, however, becoming synonymous with the human, is thus made ineradicable. Man’s dependence and servitude reach in this humanizing of the divine their highest triumph — freed from the thralldom of an external force he is now the more intensely the slave of his own “inner moral necessity.”

Every good Christian carries God in his heart; every good moralist and Puritan, his moral gendarme.

⁵ We quote Byington’s version.

The freethinkers have abolished the personal God and then absorbed the ethical microbe, thus inoculating themselves with moral scrofula. They proudly proclaimed their ability to be moral without divine help, never suspecting that it is this very morality that forges the chains of man's subjugation. The rulers would cheerfully ignore the belief in God if convinced that moral commands would suffice to perpetuate man in his bondage. While the "hell of a sick conscience" is in yourself – in your bones and blood – your slavery is guaranteed.

In this connection Stirner says:

"Where could one look without meeting victims of self-renunciation? There sits a girl opposite me, who perhaps has been making bloody sacrifices to her soul for ten years already. Over the buxom form droops a deathly-tired head, and pale cheeks betray the slow bleeding away of her youth. Poor child, how often the passions may have beaten at your heart, and the rich powers of youth have demanded their right! When your head rolled in the soft pillow, how awakening nature quivered through your limbs, the blood swelled your veins, and fiery fancies poured the gleam of voluptuousness into your eyes! Then appeared the ghost of the soul and its external bliss. You were terrified, your hands folded themselves, your tormented eye turned its look upward, you – prayed. The storms of nature were hushed, a calm glided over the ocean of your appetites. Slowly the weary eyelids sank over the life extinguished under them, the tension crept out unperceived from the rounded limbs, the boisterous waves dried up in the heart, the folded hands themselves rested a powerless weight on the unresisting bosom, one last faint "Oh dear!" moaned itself away, and – *the soul was at rest*. You fell asleep, to awake in the morning to a new combat and a new – prayer. Now the habit of renunciation cools the heat of your desire, and the roses of your youth are growing pale in the chlorosis of your heavenliness. The soul is saved, the body may perish! O Lais, O Ninon! how well you did to scorn this pale virtue! One free grisette against a thousand virgins grown gray in virtue!"

Thus the chains fall one by one from the sovereign I. It rises ever higher above all "sacred commands" which have woven his strait-jacket.

That is the great liberating deed of Stirner.

Abstractly considered, the Ego is now *einzig*; but how about his *Eigentum*?⁶ We have now reached the point in Stirner's philosophy where mere abstractions do not suffice.

⁶ Meaning, in this connection, property.

The resolving of society into *einzig* individuals leads, economically considered, to negation. Stirner's life is itself the best proof of the powerlessness of the individual forced to carry on a solitary battle in opposition to existing conditions.

Stirner demolishes all spooks; yet, forced by material need to contract debts which he cannot pay, the power of the "spooks" proves greater than that of his *Eigenheit*: his creditors send him to prison. Stirner himself declares free competition to be a mere gamble, which can only emphasize the artificial superiority of toadies and time-servers over the less proficient. But he is also opposed to Communism which, in his opinion, would make ragamuffins of us all, by depriving the individual of his property.

This objection, however, does not apply to a very large number of individuals, who do not possess property anyhow; they become ragamuffins *because* they are continually compelled to battle for property and existence, thus sacrificing their *Eigenheit* and *Einzigkeit*.

Why were the lives of most of our poets, thinkers, artists and inventors a martyrdom? Because their individualities were so *eigen* and *einzig* that they could not successfully compete in the low struggle for property and existence. In that struggle they had to market their individuality to secure means of livelihood. What is the cause of our corruption of character and our hypocritical suppression of convictions? It is because the individual does not own himself, and is not permitted to be his true self. He has become a mere market commodity, an instrument for the accumulation of property — for others.

What business has an individual, a Stirnerian, an *Eigener* in a newspaper office, for instance, where intellectual power and ability are prostituted for the enrichment of the publisher and shareholders. Individuality is stretched on the Procrustes bed of business; in the attempt to secure his livelihood — very often in the most uncongenial manner — he sacrifices his *Eigenheit*, thus suffering the loss of the very thing he prizes most highly and enjoys the best.

If our individuality were to be made the price of breathing, what ado there would be about the violence done to personality! And yet our very right to food, drink and shelter is only too often conditioned upon our loss of individuality. These things are granted to the propertyless millions (and how scantily!) only in exchange for their individuality — they become the mere instruments of industry.

Stirner loftily ignores the fact that property is the enemy of individuality, — that the degree of success in the competitive struggle is proportionate to the measure in which we disown and turn traitors to our individuality. We may possibly except only those who are rich by inheritance; such persons can, to a certain degree, live in their own way. But that by no means expresses the power, the *Eigenheit* of the heir's individuality. The privilege of inheriting may, indeed, belong to the veriest numskull full of prejudice and spooks, as well as to the *Eigener*. This leads to

petty bourgeois and parvenu Individualism which narrows rather than broadens the horizon of the *Eigener*.

Modern Communists are more individualistic than Stirner. To them, not merely religion, morality, family and State are spooks, but property also is no more than a spook, in whose name the individual is enslaved — and how enslaved! The individuality is nowadays held in far stronger bondage by property, than by the combined power of State, religion and morality.

Modern Communists do not say that the individual should do this or that in the name of Society. They say: “The liberty and *Eigenheit* of the individual demand that economic conditions — production and distribution of the means of existence — should be organized thus and thus for *his* sake.” Hence follows that organization in the obedience or despotism. The prime condition is that the individual should not be forced to humiliate and lower himself for the sake of property and subsistence. Communism thus creates a basis for the liberty and *Eigenheit* of the individual. I am a Communist *because* I am an Individualist.

Fully as heartily the Communists concur with Stirner when he puts the word *take* in place of *demand* — that leads to the dissolution of property, to expropriation.

Individualism and Communism go hand in hand.

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