

Max Stirner And The Heresy Of Self-Abundance

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Any book that lays bare the limitations and fallacies of prevailing doctrines can be called a ‘dangerous’ book – dangerous to the spokesmen for those doctrines. From such a standpoint Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity* is ‘dangerous’; so is P. W. Bridgman’s *The Intelligent Individual and Society*; and a third, Max Stirner’s *The Ego and His Own*;¹ the object of this study, long ago was called ‘dangerous in every sense of the word,’ and ‘the most revolutionary ever written.’² To link Stirner, an obscure nineteenth-century Berlin schoolmaster, with two contemporary non-aristotelians, and then to call them all ‘heretics,’ would be meaningless for our purposes, were that the only thing they had in common. But behind their ‘heresies’ lie evaluative systems all formulated on the same basis: on how to help you, as Stirner puts it, to ‘*Get the value out of thyself.*’ (419)

Not only is Stirner ‘extensional,’ in Korzybski’s sense of the word, and ‘operational’ in ways corresponding consistently to Bridgman’s, but his dynamic use of language – including extensional devices: ‘etc.,’ italics, quotation marks, etc. – suggests that he tried to extend its range in order to increase the probability of communicating his ideas. While lacking the full sweep of knowledge available today, Stirner starts with a premise, terminology and insight which are surprisingly ‘modern.’ His non-aristotelian ethical evaluations, based upon a theory of sanity, read, page after page, like an uncanny paraphrase of Bridgman’s application of his operational technique to ethics.

No analysis of Stirner’s method for helping the individual to get the value out of himself will be properly placed unless it is considered in the light of historical reaction to what he said. For like Nietzsche, Stirner has been all things to all men. He is known as the founder of ‘egoism’ as a way of life (invariably with elementalistic connotations of ‘selfish’ or ‘inhuman’);³ as the ‘father of anarchism,’ as a ‘nominalist,’ as a ‘subjective idealist,’ whose only appeal is to ‘the decadent bourgeoisie,’ as a spokesman for the ‘young atheist school,’ as ‘a petty bourgeois in revolt’;⁴ as a ‘positivist’ living as the ‘only Individual’ in the ‘misty region of “Cloud-cuckoo-land”’;⁵ as a ‘nihilist’;⁶ as ‘a prophet of a rebellion of the working classes that may give for the first time a plebeian tone to philosophy’;⁷ as one who will convince only ‘those unscientific and half-educated minds who after having

¹ *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Leipzig. 1844. Translated by S. T. Byington (London: A. C. Fifield, 1912). All numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers of this edition.

² James Huneker, *Egoists, A Book of Supermen*, 1909, pp. 371, 350.

³ Jacques Barzun, *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*, 1943, p. 132.

⁴ G. Plechanoff, *Anarchism and Socialism*, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1912, pp. 39, 48, 10, 45, 52.

⁵ E. V. Zenker, *Anarchism*, London, 1898, pp. 46, 83.

⁶ Huneker, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

⁷ G. Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy*, 1916, p. 99.

surrendered their traditional faith find themselves without any authority in either religion or politics’;⁸ etc., etc.

Another contribution to this historical misunderstanding, especially when Stirner is read in English, is made by an almost total confusion over the terms, ‘ego,’ ‘egoist,’ and ‘egoism’; invariably they are read to mean the opposite of ‘altruism,’ and therefore are anathema in the eyes of all ‘moral’ people. Actually, ‘ego’ is the English translator’s reluctant rendition of Stirner’s *Einzig*, which means approximately a unique but not superior individual. Stirner’s American publisher makes this point explicit: ‘Stirner’s *Einzigkeit* is admirable in his eyes only as such, it being no part of the purpose of his book to distinguish a particular *Einzigkeit* as more excellent than another.’ (p. x)

Einzigkeit and Reality

When William James said, ‘The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places — they are strung upon it like so many beads,’⁹ he was close to Stirner’s position. A recent re-appraisal of Nietzsche makes the same point: ‘He wishes to free men of the bad conscience about egoism induced by the old morality; to encourage them to undertake that “rigorous selfishness” which is the most fundamental condition of thriving life.’¹⁰ A century ago, in advocating such a corrective egoism, Stirner fell victim to what Erich Fromm has called the ‘tabu on selfishness’ which pervades modern culture.¹¹ And today, as the mills of the various Absolutes grind individuals exceeding small, we might well launch a frontal attack on that tabu, if we are to be more than faceless units grubbing for survival in mass social situations. Stirner’s formulations on ‘egoism’ afford us various clues with which to go into extensional battle.

In commenting upon the scientific revolution of which Einstein is commonly considered the leader, Korzybski points out that at the same time that ‘*the* universe of Newton’ became with Einstein ‘*a* universe,’ man himself was reoriented: ‘*The* man became *a* man, otherwise a “conceptual construction,” one among the infinity of possible ones.’¹² Stirner, in 1844, was perfectly aware of the revolutionary nature of this new emphasis:

Man with the great M is only an ideal, the species only something thought of. To be *a* man is not to realize the ideal of *Man*, but to present

⁸ Carus, *Nietzsche and Other Exponents of Individualism*, 1914, p. 90.

⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Modern Library, p. 489.

¹⁰ G. A. Morgan, Jr., *What Nietzsche Means*, 1943, p. 182.

¹¹ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 1947, p. 119.

¹² Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, p. 86.

oneself, the individual. It is not how I realize the *generally human* that needs to be my task, but how I satisfy myself. *I am my species, am without norm, am without law, without model, and the like.* (238)

Hence my wants too are unique, and my deeds; in short, everything about me is unique. And it is only as this unique I that I take everything for my own, as I set myself to work, and develop myself, only as this. I do not develop man, nor as man, but, as I, I develop – myself.

This is the meaning of the – *unique one.* (483)

Stirner was in agreement with Korzybski's observation that on the threshold of every beginning – including that of positing a 'unique one' – 'we must start with undefined terms which express silent, structural creeds or metaphysics.'¹³ When Stirner said, 'I on my part start from a presupposition in presupposing *myself*,' he was stating his metaphysics and suggesting its unspeakable nature. (199) 'They say of God, "Names name thee not." That holds good of me: no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names.' (490)

But if, in Stirner's own words, his unique one is 'unspeakable' and 'unutterable,' how do we identify him? Stirner's response is couched in terms that Korzybski himself might have used, while pointing silently to a thing on the objective level: Instead of attempting to describe in high-order abstractions 'the conceptual question, "what is man?";' put 'who' in place of 'what'; 'with "who" it is no longer any question at all, but the answer is personally on hand at once in the asker: the question answers itself.' (489–490)

This is Stirner's 'self-conscious egoism,' the foundation beneath his 'ownness,' or 'extensionality'¹⁸⁴⁴. Just as Korzybski claims that in the 'manhood of humanity' the individual will possess some of the semantic reactions of so-called 'genius,' so Stirner claims that the exercise of 'ownness' will raise men above the 'human' (more abstract) level, will make 'un-men' of them. Korzybski sees this greater integration as a step from the 'animal' to the 'true' (adult) man; Stirner, as proceeding from 'man' to 'un-man'; their viewpoints are essentially the same.

But always conscious of abstracting, Stirner makes it clear that his un-man, as 'self-conscious egoist,' is not un-man on the level of a superman, or a 'god,' for this formulation he rejects. His 'unique one' is not a conscious aristocrat like that of Nietzsche, but if he should prove 'superior' (by some evaluation made outside himself), that superiority would be only the outgrowth of 'ownness,' of extensionality, if you will. This orientation is the basis for Stirner's preference for the term 'un-human' instead of 'human.' The latter 'is not *my* world. I never execute anything *human* in the abstract, but always my *own* things; *i.e.* my human act is diverse

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

from every other human act, and only by this diversity is it a real act belonging to me. The human in it is an abstraction, and, as such, spirit, *i.e.* abstracted essence.’ (234–5) But the fact that ‘human’ is a higher-order abstraction does not mean that Stirner advocates dispensing with it and with other abstractions. Abstractions and thoughts are simply more of his ‘properties,’ existing on different levels, and to be used for his unique purposes.

The Fiction of Altruism

Since Stirner rejects ‘altruism,’ as non-existent except as a high-order abstraction, all individuals are by his formulation self-motivated or ‘egoistical.’ And he recognises two kinds of egoists:¹⁴ the ‘transitory’ and the ‘involuntary.’ The transitory egoist is our unique, ‘extensional’ 1844 individual, again, but with the further property of being in process, flux, and conscious of that fact. While the involuntary egoist is a fanatical, ‘possessed’ man, whose ‘intensional’ 1844 thinking has filled his head with high-order abstractions as absolutes: ‘He who cannot get rid of a thought is so far *only* man, is a thrall of *language*, this human institution, this treasury of *human* thoughts. Language or “the word” tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against us a whole army of *fixed ideas*.’ (462) Besides ‘fixed ideas,’ Stirner calls these abstractions ‘spooks’ and ‘ghostly ideas,’ the unconditional belief in which makes the involuntary egoist a ‘lunatic’:

Man, your head is haunted; you have wheels in your head!...

Do not think that I am jesting or speaking figuratively when I regard those persons who cling to the Higher, and (because the vast majority belongs under this head) almost the whole world of men, as veritable fools, fools in a madhouse. What is it, then, that is called a ‘fixed idea’? An idea that has subjected the man to itself. (54–5)

A fixed idea is also a ‘standpoint’ outside reality, like the one from which Archimedes said he could move the earth. ‘This foreign standpoint is the *world of mind*, of ideas, thoughts, concepts, essences, etc.; it is *heaven*.’ (80) This ‘spiritual’ life, ‘this life turned away from things,’ is not ‘life’ at all; it is *thinking*, by which Stirner meant intensional 1844 thinking. ‘Now nothing but *mind* rules in the world. An innumerable multitude of concepts buzz about in peoples heads ...’ (125)

¹⁴ Morgan, *op. cit.*, points out that Nietzsche distinguished between six kinds or degrees of egoism. Stirner implies several kinds, but judging by the traditional misunderstanding of Nietzsche, despite his greater explicitness, Stirner would have been just as misunderstood even if he had used subscripts: egoism1, egoism2, etc.

Fixed ideas are represented by the ‘dignified’ words of our culture, behind which lurk ‘prolific misunderstandings.’ As sacred ideas, as absolutes before which the individual is ‘powerless and humble,’ God, Man, State, Nation, Family, Reason, Truth, etc., must be sought out and exposed for what they are – high-order abstractions for which there are no self-evident operational tests. ‘As long as there still exists even one institution which the individual may not dissolve, the ownness and self-appurtenance of Me is still remote.’ (284) For, continues Stirner, ‘no thing is sacred of itself, but by my *declaring it sacred*, by my declaration, my judgment, my bending the knee; in short, by my – conscience’ (92) Not that we have no use for thoughts, formulations, ‘mind,’ etc.: ‘We are indeed to have *mind*, but mind is not to have us.’ (81) Because possessed men are dangerous men: ‘Touch the fixed idea of such a fool, and you will at once have to guard your back against the lunatic’s stealthy malice.’ (55)

The Transitory Egoist

While the involuntary egoist is thus preoccupied with ‘creating sanctuaries that must not be touched,’ the transitory egoist travels with much less metaphysical baggage. For this reason, Stirner starts and finishes his book with a quotation from Goethe: ‘All things are nothing to me’ (literally: ‘I have set my affair on nothing’). This ability to dispense with all absolutes is Stirner’s ‘ownness,’ his ‘extensionality’ 1844, by which he is showing his acute awareness of his central position as a unique individual, whose life experiences consist of a constant process of abstracting from ‘reality’:

... every judgment which I pass upon an object is the *creature* of my will, and that discernment again leads me to not losing myself in the *creature*, the judgment, but remaining the *creator*, the judge, who is ever creating anew. All predicates of objects are my statements, my judgments, my – creatures. If they want to tear themselves loose from me and be something for themselves, or actually overawe me, then I have nothing more pressing to do than to take them back into their nothing, *i.e.* into me the creator... As I once willed and decreed their existence, so I want to have license to will their non-existence too; I must not let them grow over my head, must not have the weakness to let them become something ‘absolute,’ whereby they would be eternalized and withdrawn from my power and decision. (449–450)

Stirner, in showing that intensionality is acquired, again anticipates Korzybski: ‘We were already thinking when we were children, only our thoughts were not

fleshless, abstract, *absolute*... On the contrary, they had been only thoughts that we had about a *thing*... Any thought bound to a *thing* is not yet *nothing but a thought*.' (12–13) Soon, however, our parents and teachers begin 'imparting' thoughts, and our chances of remaining extensional are jeopardized.

The transitory egoist, while in constant transformation, is no ghostly, fugitive thing. In defending the 'whole chap,' Stirner again recalls Korzybski: 'for it is only when a man hears his flesh along with the rest of him that he hears him self wholly, and it is only when he hears *himself* that he is a hearing or rational being.' (81) 'If it is said that even God proceeds according to eternal laws that too fits me, since I too cannot get out of my skin, but have my law in my whole nature, *i.e.* in myself' (211)

The transitory egoist must never forget, however, that he cannot subdue the world entirely; that he is not seeking absolute freedom, or, necessarily, even particular freedoms. He should remember that, for his *own* sake, even bondage — 'e.g. the gently but *irresistibly commanding* look of your loved one' — may be more desirable.

You gladly let freedom go when unfreedom, the 'sweet *service* of love,' suits *you*; and you take up your freedom again on occasion when it begins to suit *you* better ... Therefore turn to yourselves rather than to your gods or idols. Bring out from yourselves what is in you, bring it to the light, bring yourselves to revelation. (210,211)

For in contrast to the self-contempt bred into us by 'parsons, parents, and good men,' — those 'true seducers and corrupters of youth' — who saw to it that we are 'terrified at *ourselves* in our nakedness and naturalness,' and who have left us self-degraded, 'so that we deem ourselves depraved by nature, born devils,' ownness calls us to self-enjoyment, to self-realization. (212, 213) 'Over the portal of our time stands not that "Know thyself" of Apollo, but a "*Get the value out of thyself*."' (419)

This exhortation to action does not imply a feeling of omnipotence on Stirner's part; repeatedly, he makes it clear that the transitory egoist is not necessarily able to realize himself, but that the *emphasis* is the important thing. Still, liberty is only relative, and each individual — egoist — has his limitations:

That a society ... diminishes my *liberty* offends me little. Why, I have to let my liberty be limited by all sorts of powers and by every one who is stronger; nay, by every fellow-man ... But *ownness* I will not have taken from me. And ownness is precisely what every society has designs on, precisely what is to succumb to its power. (407–8)

Consequently my relation to the world is this: I no longer do anything for it 'for God's sake,' I do nothing 'for man's sake,' but what I do I do 'for my sake.' (425)

Operational Ethics

In showing that most of his contemporaries were 'haunted' by verbal and mystical sanctions, Stirner exposed himself to attack. His emphasis upon the things called 'force,' 'might,' and 'power' — as his tools, as 'egoistic' tools — only added to the number and bitterness of his critics. His insight into the hypocrisy and delusions motivating most people, was considered evidence of a cynical and 'inhuman' man. If there were not an extensional idea in his entire work, a century's misevaluation of it would still present a fascinating semantic study. Criticism of Stirner is strewn with evidence of wholesale signal reactions and confusion of abstraction levels, despite Stirner's efforts — unparalleled in his time — to anticipate and counteract just such confusion. His reception offers an object lesson to all those persons who are intent upon formulating non-aristotelian systems, and who are compelled therefore to deal with the life-situations among which are those named 'force,' 'might,' 'power,' etc.

The ethical agreement between Stirner and Bridgman is striking. Both men, in denying the sacredness of institutions, are simply demanding, in Bridgman's words, that 'society be so constructed that it serves the individual, not that the individual serve society.'¹⁵ On this matter of force, Bridgman is in exact accord with Stirner: 'The only compulsion that society can exert on me is the compulsion of superior and external force.'¹⁶ And Bridgman adds that he will have no part of the 'conspiracy of silence ... which attempts to shield my children from the realization that society must rest on a background of force.'¹⁷ Nor should we lose sight of the fact that the 'altruist' (an 'involuntary' egoist) assumes that he has the right to use force to gain his 'altruistic' ends.

Thus, every person is self-motivated, every person uses force, and, furthermore, the interests of individuals and groups making up society are not always the same. What, then, is the individual to do? Having destroyed all institutions as absolutes, is he to resist all institutional dictums? No, say Bridgman and Stirner; that would be to replace absolutes with another absolute. Instead, sometimes we will resist authority, sometimes we will bow to it, but in the latter case we will be using institutions *for our sakes*, and in terms of concrete situations. Our personal 'force,'

¹⁵ P. W. Bridgman, *The Intelligent Individual and Society*, 1938, p. 283.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

then, is relative, conditional, and present in all of our life-situations, by our own formulation.

The problem becomes one of how to present these life-situations so as to obtain extensional results, without causing people to assume that the 'forces,' 'mights,' and 'powers' are invariably gross, brutish, barbaric acts — 'physical' in the old-fashioned sense. How to convey the fact that these terms are many-valued, and that the things they represent are ubiquitous? How to make palatable the fact that society is based upon conflicts as much as upon co-operations? Why, for instance, should not people who study 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' understand that they are cultivating personal force, so as to wield personal power? and that for them, as judged by their subsequent actions, their developed 'might' is 'right'? Why should they not face the fact that a raised eyebrow or a cleared throat may exercise a power of oppression more ruinous for other lives than a thousand trips to the woodshed? And why not emphasize the fact that extensionality, as well as Stirner's 'ownness,' is one's basic and most potent property? — one's personal power?

A curious thing about Stirner's reputation is the consistency with which his critics point out that here was a man who advocated using force, but who in reality lived a singularly mild and obscure life, thus negating everything he stood for in his writings. Because 'ownness,' for Stirner, did not call for a Napoleon-like conquest of Europe, or for some other manifestation of 'physical' power then he was not a powerful man; he was purely theoretical and utopian, etc. Nothing could be more untrue. From such facts of his life as are available, it seems probable that few men so completely *lived* their philosophy as Stirner did. He understood that personal 'power' can be turned to quiet self-conquest as well as to world-conquest. He makes it very clear, in fact, that he believes one of the consequences of 'ownness' to be the ability of the individual to live without subjugating others through the use of brute force. And, like Bridgman, Stirner insists that such an awareness of the nature of 'force' induces the self-conscious egoist to limit his use of it beyond the ability of the conventional 'altruist' to understand or to follow.

Stirner's non-aristotelian formulations on the nature of self-motivation take on a fresh significance at a time when Harvard University has just announced an 'anti-hate' research center, to be headed by Pitirim A. Sorokin. The purpose of this research is to increase the production of 'love' and to decrease the production of 'hate' in the world. The center will study the 'great altruists of history... to find out how these altruists succeeded in becoming altruistic.' And it will study 'the most efficient techniques of transmutation of selfishness into unselfishness.' The archaic assumptions present in such a program represent an emphasis, as Stirner's viewpoint suggests, which might prove fatal to accomplishing the improvements in human relations which are the research center's avowed purpose. To presume

an elementalistic 'love-hate' dichotomy is to perpetuate the misevaluations usually lumped together under each term in it. Stirner's insights offer an effective antidote to such primitive misevaluations.

A Union of Egoists

In contradistinction to those fanatics who love 'man,' the abstraction, but who torture individual men in order to win converts to their several faiths, Stirner exposes the hidden hate in the tyranny of 'altruism.' 'Love' and 'egoism' are to him many-valued terms, their degrees of intensity being implicit in the context in which they are used. To love 'with the consciousness of egoism' is to have a 'fellow-feeling' with all men. Thus Stirner's individualism contains a strong social sense.

He presents a world viewpoint which, by eliminating fanatical identifications of the self with racial, national, religious and class groups, serves universally human ends. He advocates a Union of Egoists made up of individuals with the property of 'ownness,' and therefore an organization which is the 'property' of its members, rather than an Over-State before which all are to bow and scrape. Utopian, like all 'good societies,' Stirner's 'Union' is rather vaguely outlined, and was probably dwelt upon at all only to show the logical outcome of 'ownness,' if universally applied. Stirner himself obviously felt that Union Now 1844 was unobtainable, and unnecessary for him personally. But even while dismissing it as visionary, he pointed out that his Union, too, was entirely conditional, and subject to constant revision or eventual abandonment, if unsatisfactory. Even so, it was no more visionary than to imagine a society of 'extensional' individuals who automatically solve all their problems through the semantic application of their 'genius.'

Despite the social and cultural limitations of his age, despite language difficulties, Stirner makes his position clear enough. That he sometimes uses elementalistic terms should not disenchant us so much as delight us that he used so few, and never at the serious expense of his 'whole man' formulations. If, as an enemy of abstractionism, he was overzealous in attacking institutions, his repeated qualifications indicate that his excesses were usually deliberate. His emphasis on 'egoism' may be repugnant to many, and they in particular should remember that neither the English word nor its usual meanings conform to Stirner's *Einzig*, a unique but not superior individual. Toward the end of his book, Stirner applies his own test to the word, 'egoist,' and declares it to be nothing 'more than a piece of nonsense.'

The egoist, before whom the humane shudder, is a spook as much as the devil is: he exists only as a bogie and phantasm in their brain. If

they were not unsophisticatedly drifting back and forth in the antediluvian opposition of good and evil, to which they have given the modern names 'human' and 'egoistic,' they would not have freshened up the hoary 'sinner' into 'egoist' either, and put a new patch on an old garment. (480)

Self-Abundance

Stirner's concern with the 'antediluvian' nature of the language that he was forced to use is implicit on every page of his book, and is explicit in dozens of important contexts. Repeatedly, he found that the old words and logic (aristotelian) frustrated the clear expression of his radical process ideas. But since he knew that he must 'stick to the old sounds' (391), he tried to put them to more extensional use. Nevertheless, his contemporaries and subsequent followers, whether friendly or hostile, generally failed to grasp the significance of his work. If it is claimed that the confusion over what Stirner 'means' indicates a failure in communication, that failure can in large part be attributed to linguistic difficulties. Extensional as he was, Stirner could have used more of Korzybski's recommendations. Then his ethical pronouncements might not have assumed such diabolical proportions in the minds of 'good' people.

And while men today are still 'stuck with the old sounds,' more and more of them are becoming aware of the inadequacy of those sounds and their static symbols for communication in a changing world. Knowing that egoism is not 'sin,' for example, they are capable of experiencing something other than outrage at Stirner's formulation, 'Get the value out of thyself,' for such is their aim, too. L. L. Whyte's 'unitary man,' Charles Morris' 'open self,' Erich Fromm's 'man for himself,' Oliver L. Reiser's 'higher egoist,' are like Stirner's 'own' man: they all aim at fullness, plenitude of self. They are the antidote to man's indifference to himself, which Fromm claims is our biggest moral problem today.

For only when men have found abundance of self, have they full capacity for including others in their lives. According to Stirner, this is the individual's only certainty in a life of uncertainty:

Not till I am certain of myself, and no longer seeking for myself, am I really my property; I have myself, therefore I use and enjoy myself. I am no longer afraid for life, but 'squander' it. (427)

Self-abundance, 'ownness,' extensionality, begin, therefore, in William James words, with the individual as 'the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress'; persistently they concern the individual's full awareness of

his continually transforming self; finally, says Stirner, they demonstrate that the '*enjoyment of life* is using life up.' (426)

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