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978-0-521-45016-4 - Max Stirner: The Ego and Its Own

Edited by David Leopold

Excerpt

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MAX STIRNER  
THE EGO AND ITS OWN

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To my sweetheart

Marie Dähnhardt<sup>1</sup>

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## All things are nothing to me<sup>2</sup>

What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost the good cause, then God's cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of mind<sup>3</sup> and a thousand other causes. Only *my* cause is never to be my concern. 'Shame on the egoist who thinks only of himself!'

Let us look and see, then, how they manage *their* concerns, they for whose cause we are to labour, devote ourselves, and grow enthusiastic.

You have much profound information to give about God, and have for thousands of years 'searched the depths of the Godhead', and looked into its heart, so that you can doubtless tell us how God himself attends to 'God's cause', which we are called to serve. And you do not conceal the Lord's doings either. Now, what is his cause? Has he, as is demanded of *us*, made an alien cause, the cause of truth or love, his own? You are shocked by this misunderstanding, and you instruct us that God's cause is indeed the cause of truth and love, but that this cause cannot be called alien to him, because God is himself truth and love; you are shocked by the assumption that God could be like us poor worms in furthering an alien cause as his own. 'Should God take up the cause of truth if he were not himself truth?' He cares only for *his* cause, but, because he is all in all, therefore all is *his* cause! But we, we are not all in all, and our cause is altogether little and contemptible; therefore we must 'serve a higher cause'. – Now it is clear, God cares only for what is his, busies himself

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*The Ego and Its Own*

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only with himself, thinks only of himself, and has only himself before his eyes; woe to all that is not well-pleasing to *him*! He serves no higher person, and satisfies only himself. His cause is – a purely egoistic cause.

How is it with mankind, whose cause we are to make our own? Is its cause that of another, and does mankind serve a higher cause? No, mankind looks only at itself, mankind will promote the interests of mankind only, mankind is its own cause. That it may develop, it causes nations and individuals to wear themselves out in its service, and, when they have accomplished what mankind needs, it throws them on the dung-heap of history in gratitude. Is not mankind's cause – a purely egoistic cause?

I have no need to take up each thing that wants to throw its cause on us and show that it is occupied only with itself, not with us, only with its good, not with ours. Look at the rest for yourselves. Do truth, freedom, humanity, justice, desire anything else than that you grow enthusiastic and serve them?

They all have an admirable time of it when they receive zealous homage. Just observe the nation that is defended by devoted patriots. The patriots fall in bloody battle or in the fight with hunger and want; what does the nation care for that? By the manure of their corpses the nation comes to 'its bloom'! The individuals have died 'for the great cause of the nation', and the nation sends some words of thanks after them and – has the profit of it. I call that a lucrative kind of egoism.

But only look at that Sultan who cares so lovingly for 'his people'. Is he not pure unselfishness itself, and does he not hourly sacrifice himself for his people? Oh, yes, for 'his people'. Just try it; show yourself not as his, but as your own; for breaking away from his egoism you will take a trip to jail. The Sultan has set his cause on nothing but himself;<sup>4</sup> he is to himself all in all, he is to himself the only one, and tolerates nobody who would dare not to be one of 'his people'.

And will you not learn by these brilliant examples that the egoist gets on best? I for my part take a lesson from them, and propose, instead of further unselfishly serving those great egoists, rather to be the egoist myself.

God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves. Let me then likewise concern myself for

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*myself*, who am equally with God the nothing of all others, who am my all, who am the only one [*der Einzige*].

If God, if mankind, as you affirm, have substance enough in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that *I* shall still less lack that, and that I shall have no complaint to make of my 'emptiness'. I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing [*schöpferische Nichts*], the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.

Away, then, with every concern that is not altogether my concern! You think at least the 'good cause' must be my concern? What's good, what's bad? Why, I myself am my concern, and I am neither good nor bad. Neither has meaning for me.

The divine is God's concern; the human, 'man's'. My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* [*das Meinige*], and it is not a general one, but is – *unique* [*einzig*], as I am unique.

Nothing is more to me than myself!

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FIRST PART  
MAN

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‘Man is to man the supreme being’, says Feuerbach.<sup>5</sup>

‘Man has just been discovered’, says Bruno Bauer.<sup>6</sup>

Then let us take a more careful look at this supreme being and this new discovery.

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## I

## A human life

From the moment when he catches sight of the light of the world a man seeks to find out *himself* and get hold of *himself* out of its confusion, in which he, with everything else, is tossed about in motley mixture.

But everything that comes in contact with the child defends itself in turn against his attacks, and asserts its own persistence.

Accordingly, because each thing *cares for itself* and at the same time comes into constant collision with other things, the *combat* of self-assertion is unavoidable.

*Victory or defeat* – between the two alternatives the fate of the combat wavers. The victor becomes the *lord*, the vanquished one the *subject*: the former exercises *supremacy* and ‘rights of supremacy’, the latter fulfils in awe and deference the ‘duties of a subject’.

But both remain *enemies*, and always lie in wait: they watch for each other’s *weaknesses*, children for those of their parents and parents for those of their children (their fear, for example); either the stick conquers the man, or the man conquers the stick.

In childhood liberation takes the direction of trying to get to the bottom of things, to get at what is ‘behind things’; therefore we spy out the weak points of everybody, for which, it is well known, children have a sure instinct; therefore we like to smash things, like to rummage through hidden corners, pry after what is covered up or out of the way, and try what we can do with everything. When we once get at what is behind things, we know we are safe; when, for example, we have got at the fact that the rod is too weak against our obduracy, then we no longer fear it, ‘have outgrown it’.



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Behind the rod, mightier than it, stands our – obduracy, our obdurate courage. By degrees we get at what is behind everything that was mysterious and uncanny to us, the mysteriously dreaded might of the rod, the father's stern look, etc., and behind all we find our ataraxia – our imperturbability, intrepidity, our counter forces, our odds of strength, our invincibility. Before that which formerly inspired in us fear and deference we no longer retreat shyly, but take *courage*. Behind everything we find our *courage*, our superiority; behind the sharp command of parents and authorities stands, after all, our courageous choice or our outwitting shrewdness. And the more we feel ourselves, the smaller appears that which before seemed invincible. And what is our trickery, shrewdness, courage, obduracy? What else but – *mind* [*Geist*]!

Through a considerable time we are spared a fight that is so exhausting later, the fight against *reason*. The fairest part of childhood passes without the necessity of coming to blows with reason. We care nothing at all about it, do not meddle with it, admit no reason. We are not to be persuaded to anything by *conviction*, and are deaf to good arguments and principles; on the other hand, coaxing, punishment, and the like are hard for us to resist.

This stern life-and-death combat with *reason* enters later, and begins a new phase; in childhood we scamper about without racking our brains much.

*Mind* is the name of the *first* self-discovery, the first undeification of the divine; that is, of the uncanny, the spooks, the 'powers above'. Our fresh feeling of youth, this feeling of self, now defers to nothing; the world is discredited, for we are above it, we are *mind*.

Now for the first time we see that hitherto we have not looked at the world *intelligently* [*mit Geist*] at all, but only stared at it.

We exercise the beginnings of our strength on *natural powers*. We defer to parents as a natural power; later we say: father and mother are to be forsaken, all natural power to be counted as riven. They are vanquished. For the rational, the 'intellectual [*Geistigen*] man', there is no family as a natural power; a renunciation of parents, brothers, etc., makes its appearance. If these are 'born again' as *intellectual, rational powers*, they are no longer at all what they were before.

And not only parents, but *adults in general*, are conquered by the young man; they are no hindrance to him, and are no longer regarded; for now he says: One must obey God rather than men.<sup>7</sup>

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From this high standpoint everything ‘*earthly*’ recedes into contemptible remoteness; for the standpoint is – the *heavenly*.

The attitude is now altogether reversed; the youth takes up an *intellectual* position, while the boy, who did not yet feel himself as mind, grew up on mindless learning. The former does not try to get hold of *things* (for instance, to get into his head the *data* of history), but of the *thoughts* that lie hidden in things, and so, therefore, of the *spirit* of history. On the other hand, the boy understands *connections* no doubt, but not ideas, the spirit; therefore he strings together whatever can be learned, without proceeding *a priori* and theoretically, without looking for ideas.

As in childhood one had to overcome the resistance of the *laws of the world*, so now in everything that he proposes he is met by an objection of the mind, of reason, of his *own conscience*. ‘That is unreasonable, un-Christian, unpatriotic’, and the like, cries conscience to us, and – frightens us away from it. Not the might of the avenging Eumenides,<sup>8</sup> not Poseidon’s<sup>9</sup> wrath, not God, far as he sees the hidden, not the father’s rod of punishment, do we fear, but – *conscience*.

We ‘run after our thoughts’ now, and follow their commands just as before we followed parental, human ones. Our course of action is determined by our thoughts (*ideas, conceptions, faith*) as it is in childhood by the commands of our parents.

For all that, we were already thinking when we were children, only our thoughts were not fleshless, abstract, *absolute*, that is, **nothing but thoughts**, a heaven in themselves, a pure world of thoughts, *logical* thoughts.

On the contrary, they had been only thoughts that we had about a *thing*; we thought of the thing so or so. Thus we may have thought ‘God made the world that we see there’, but we did not think of (‘search’) the ‘depths of the Godhead itself’; we may have thought ‘that is the truth about the matter’, but we do not think of truth itself, nor unite into one sentence ‘God is truth’. The ‘depths of the Godhead, who is truth’, we did not touch. Over such purely logical (theological) questions, ‘What is truth?’, Pilate<sup>10</sup> does not stop, though he does not therefore hesitate to ascertain in an individual case ‘what truth there is in the thing’, whether the *thing* is true.

Any thought bound to a *thing* is not yet *nothing but a thought*, absolute thought.