Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* has been called 'the most revolutionary [book] ever written'. First published in 1844, Stirner's distinctive and powerful polemic sounded the death-knell of left Hegelianism, with its attack on Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess and others. It contains an enduring, and strikingly written, critique of both liberalism and socialism from the perspective of an extreme and eccentric individualism. Karl Marx was only one of many contemporaries provoked into a lengthy rebuttal of Stirner's argument. More recently, Stirner has been variously portrayed as a nihilistic anarchist, a precursor of Nietzsche, a forerunner of existentialism, and as manifestly insane.

This edition of Stirner's work comprises a revised version of Steven Byington's much-praised translation, together with an introduction and notes on the historical background to Stirner's text.

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MAX STIRNER

The Ego and Its Own

EDITED BY
DAVID LEOPOLD
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Introduction

I

The Ego and Its Own has been called 'the most revolutionary [book] ever written',[1] and yet, when the Leipzig Kreisdirektion seized part of the first edition, the Saxon Minister for the Interior ordered the release of the confiscated copies on the grounds that the book was 'too absurd' to constitute a danger to social or political order. Of all possible responses to Max Stirner's work, indifference is perhaps the most unlikely.

But Stirner's book is not only striking and provocative; it has also played an important, if neglected, role in the history of political thought. Stirner's polemic was, most obviously, an impulse to, and an indication of, the decline of the Hegelian left as a coherent intellectual movement. But it was, also, central to the formation of Marxism, forcing Karl Marx to break with left Hegelian modes of thought (he discusses the book in unparalleled detail over some 400 pages of *The German Ideology*). Since then *The Ego and Its Own* has appeared ambiguous enough to provide subsequent generations with their own Stirner. For example, at the turn of the century, *The Ego and Its Own* was taken up – not least because of its adumbration of libertarian themes in its discussion of property and the state – as a founding text of individualist anarchism (especially in America, where it was an important influence on Benjamin R. Tucker and the journal *Liberty*). Stirner has been counted, moreover, as an important precursor of Friedrich Nietzsche; although, despite the claims of some commentators, he cannot be definitively shown to have directly influenced

[1] James Huneker, *Egoists. A Book of Supermen* (New York, 1909), p. 350.

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Nietzsche, Stirner's work anticipates, both stylistically and substantively, certain Nietzschean motifs in modern political thought. Then in the 1960s Stirner was rediscovered again, this time as a thinker with conceptual affinities – for example, in his anti-essentialist conception of the self as a 'creative nothing' (p. 7) – with existentialist thought. This plurality of interpretations should scarcely disappoint Stirner himself, since, rejecting any notion of external constraints on our understanding, his claim about the Bible would seem to apply equally to his own work:

> In fact, the child who tears it to pieces or plays with it, the Inca Atahualpa who lays his ear to it and throws it away contemptuously when it remains dumb, judges just as correctly about the Bible as the priest who praises in it the 'Word of God', or the critic who calls it a job of men's hands. For how we toss things about is the affair of our *choice*, our *free will*: we use them according to our *heart's pleasure*, or, more clearly, we use them just as we *can*. (p. 297)

Apart from his authorship of this remarkable book, Stirner's life was largely unexceptional. Born as Johann Caspar Schmidt on 25 October 1806 in Bayreuth, to conventional lower-middle-class parents of Lutheran persuasion, 'Stirner' was a childhood nickname (referring to his large forehead, exaggerated by the way in which he parted his hair) that he subsequently adopted as a literary pseudonym and then as his preferred name. He passed through university without distinction, eventually becoming a teacher at a respectable private girls' school in Berlin. His spare time, in contrast, was spent in the more avant-garde of Berlin's intellectual haunts, mixing in particular with 'the free' – the increasingly Bohemian group of teachers, students, officers, and journalists organized largely under the tutelage of the left Hegelian Bruno Bauer. During this period, Stirner often alluded to the existence of a *magnum opus*, on occasion even pointing to the desk which supposedly concealed the work, to the general scepticism and straightforward disbelief of his associates. When that work did appear (although dated 1845, *The Ego and Its Own* was published towards the end of October 1844), Stirner quickly discovered that widespread critical reaction does not necessarily translate into financial reward, and he fell back on hack journalism and competent translation (of the economic writings of Adam Smith, and his popularizer Jean-Baptiste Say, into German) to support himself.

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From this point onwards, Stirner increasingly adopted a solitary and rather pathetic existence; his second wife left him (his first wife had died giving birth to a still-born child) although not before he had frittered away the bulk of her inheritance, and he mainly expended his energies on continually moving to evade creditors (although not quickly enough to escape two brief periods in a debtors' prison). Finally, after being stung in the neck by a winged insect, Stirner contracted a severe fever, and, after a brief remission, died on 25 June 1856, largely unnoticed by the outside world.

2

The Ego and Its Own is not always an easy work to engage with. Stirner's unyielding prose has its admirers – Arnold Ruge, a contemporary left Hegelian, for example, proclaimed it 'the first readable book in philosophy that Germany has produced'[2] – yet almost every feature of his writing seems calculated to unnerve. The use of aphorism and metaphor, the neologisms, the mixture of self-consciously obscure terminology with colloquial language, the excessive italicization and hyperbole, all confound the received framework in which philosophical argument is conducted. Perhaps most striking is Stirner's repeated juxtaposition of words with formal similarities or related meanings not simply for humorous effect, but as a way of presenting his views. This method of proceeding by assertion (rather than by argument) exploits etymological connections – for example, between words with connotations of individuality and words referring to ownership, as in the play between *Eigentum* and *Eigenheit* ('property' and 'ownness' or 'belonging distinctively to oneself') – in order to insist on (rather than demonstrate) a claim – here, the Hegelian assertion that property is expressive of selfhood.

The point, however, is not simply that Stirner has a highly idiosyncratic and somewhat relentless style, but that there is a connection between the form of Stirner's writing and his conception of language and rationality as human creations that have come to bind and restrict their creators. This dominance of language and reason is sustained, for Stirner, by a conception of truth as constituting a privileged

[2] Letter to his mother, 17 December 1844, Arnold Ruge, *Briefwechsel und Tagebuchblätter aus den Jahren 1825–1880*, ed. Paul Nerrlich (Berlin, 1886), volume I, p. 386.

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domain lying beyond the individual. As long as you believe in this truth, he insists, you are a '*servant*' (p. 312). To subvert this tyranny, truths must be deprived of 'their sorry existence' as independent subjects and subordinated to the individual. '*I*', he insists, 'am the criterion of truth' (p. 314). It is this radical assertion of the relativity of rationality, truth, and language, that grounds Stirner's bizarre prose. The only restriction on the forms of expression and mode of argumentation acceptable to him is that they serve our individual ends, and it seems that received meanings and traditional standards of argumentation do not always satisfy that criterion.

Despite its appearance as an inchoate *mélange* of aphorisms and word plays, *The Ego and Its Own* has a decipherable, if complex, architecture, structured around Stirner's tripartite division of human experience into the categories of *realism*, *idealism*, and *egoism*, embodied in his accounts of individual development, of human history, and in his racial rereading of that history.

This division is introduced in Stirner's account of 'A human life', which treats individual development as a difficult process of self-discovery divided into the three chronological stages of childhood, youth, and adulthood. Children are *realistic*, their development frustrated by the external forces of their world (parental disapproval, for example). This initial and inadequate stage is overthrown when, with the self-discovery of mind, children discover in their own courage and shrewdness a means to outwit those powers. However, this liberation is simultaneously a new enslavement, since the youth is released into a still more exhausting battle with conscience and reason which constitutes the period of *idealism*. This dialectic of progression and curse is broken only with the transition to adulthood which takes place with a second self-discovery, of the corporeal self, in which individuals discover their own embodiment, their existence as individuals with material interests of their own. In this adulthood of *egoism*, individuals deal with everything as they wish, setting their personal satisfaction above all else.

Stirner sees this dialectic which organizes the experience of individual development as an analogue of a process being played out on a grander scale throughout history. The tripartite division of history into the ancient or pre-Christian, the modern or Christian, and the future, corresponds to the epochs of realism, idealism, and egoism, and structures the remainder of the book.

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The First Part of *The Ego and Its Own* is concerned with an account of human history up to the present, although its primary focus is on the nature of the modern epoch of *idealism* – the ancient world is discussed only insofar as it contributes to the genesis of modernity. Stirner begins with an analogy between the historical development of humankind and the stages of a human life; although the received nomenclature for pre-Christian societies is 'the ancients', he suggests that 'they ought properly to be called children' (p. 19). The ancient world stands in the same relation to the Christian world as the child stands to youth: they are opposites, the former concerned with material and natural, rather than intellectual and spiritual, relations, and Stirner's concern is to trace how that opposite gave birth to its other. The ancients, of course, had thoughts, but they were always thoughts of *things*; an attitude which, in Stirner's reproduction of a familiar Hegelian conceit, he describes as having been carried down to the present day by the Jews, the 'precocious children of antiquity' (p. 23). The ancient world, in short, is an epoch of *realism*, characterized by a deference to natural relations, overthrown only with the self-discovery of mind that Stirner portrays as the cumulative result of the intellectual history of fifth-century Athens. His highly abbreviated account runs from the Sophists to the radical nominalism of Timon and Pyrrho. It was the latter's break with the natural world – in which all social bonds are dissolved and dismissed as burdens which diminish spiritual freedom – which constituted a final successful revolt against the natural and this-worldly, and formed the ancients' bequest to the moderns.

Stirner's account of the historical development of modernity is essentially reduced to a single event, the Reformation, which punctuates the succession of Catholic to Protestant hegemony. His primary concern is to show that, from the perspective of the individual, this fracture constituted an extension and intensification of, rather than a break with, the domination by spirit. First, whereas the Middle Ages had maintained the distinction between the spiritual and the sensuous, the Reformation extended the religious principle to the sensuous (allowing its priests to marry, for example), thereby destroying the independence of the latter. Second, the Reformation bound the religious principle more effectively to the individual, by virtue of the more inward faith of Protestantism which established a constant 'tearing apart of man' into natural impulses and sacred

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'Max Stirner. Drawn from memory by Friedrich Engels, London 1892.'

duties. Stirner captures the resulting internal conflict in the striking image of the modern self as a country divided between the populace on the one hand and the secret police, the spies and eavesdroppers of conscience, on the other.

Images do as much work as arguments in Stirner's text, and his images of modernity are always stark and unsettling. At one point he describes the activity of the moderns as 'the bustle of vermin' moving about on a 'stony and indomitable' other, 'like parasitic animals on a

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body from whose juices they draw nourishment, yet without consuming it' (p. 63). But the dominant images of the modern – playing, not least, on the many connotations of *Geist* – are of the spectral and the insane. The modern world is peopled by 'ghosts', 'spirits', 'phantasms', 'demons', and 'bogies' of every kind. But the spectral does not merely walk abroad; the individual in the modern world, in imagining both the world and her corporeal self as the merest semblance, is, for Stirner, literally possessed. This image of modernity as an asylum is, he insists, not intended figuratively; almost all of humankind are fools in a madhouse, their illusion of sanity and freedom only the result of that asylum's extent.

Most of Stirner's illustrations of progressive Protestant hegemony are taken from the realm of ideas, and combine to make up a short, schematic, and typically idiosyncratic history of modern philosophy. Descartes is the Luther of philosophy, inaugurating the break with a common consciousness which dealt with things whether rational or not. Descartes' conception of the self as constituted by thought alone, and his rejection of anything that mind does not legitimate, establishes the Christian principle on which modern philosophy is founded, namely that 'only the rational is, only mind is!' (p. 78). This struggle to seek out and demonstrate the spiritual in the mundane, initiated by the Cartesian ego, culminates in the rational theodicy of Hegel, in which an ordered hierarchy of concepts governs the world. The move beyond the sensuous to spirit, which makes German thought paradigmatically philosophical and excludes the English 'clear heads' (p. 79), like Hume, from the canon, is perfectly captured, for Stirner, in Chamisso's account of the *wundersame Geschichte* of Peter Schlemihl – the archetype of the Christian rejection of the physical, a man so modern he could not even cast a shadow.

Individual and historical development are the two primary forms of the Stirnerian dialectic, but in order to clarify its form he inserts 'episodically' a racial (and racist) analogue of the historical account. Human history, in this new narrative, 'whose shaping properly belongs altogether to the Caucasian race', is divided into three 'Caucasian ages'. The first, in which the Caucasian race works off its 'innate *Negroidity*', is vaguely located as including the era of Egyptian and North African importance in general and the campaigns of Sesostris III in particular, but its importance is clearly symbolic.

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'Negroidity' is the racial parallel of antiquity and childhood, representing a time of dependence on things: 'on cock's eating, bird's flight, on sneezing, on thunder and lightning, on the rustling of sacred trees and so forth' (p. 63). The second epoch, in which the Caucasian race escapes its '*Mongoloidity* (Chineseness)', includes 'the invasions of the Huns and Mongols up to the Russians', and parallels the modern age and youth in representing the time of dependence on thoughts. Stirner's concern with the continuity of this Christian epoch is emphasized by his choice of 'Mongolism' as the parallel of the modern, 'Chineseness' being a standard and pejorative Hegelian shorthand for lack of qualitative change. 'Reserved for the future' is the '*really Caucasian*' era in which, having thrown off the Negroid and Mongol inheritance, the egoistic self can escape its dependence on both natural forces and ideas.

Stirner's dialectic is obviously repetitive (Karl Marx, exasperated by this reiteration, wrote 'Repetitio est mater studiorum'[3] against his notes on Stirner's conception of history) but also both highly schematic and derivative. First, empirical detail, insofar as it appears at all, functions solely as the bearer of conceptual development. The ancients, for example, like the child and 'Negroidity', are not serious objects of investigation, but simply the disguises of 'realism'. In *The German Ideology*, Marx calls the book a *Geistergeschichte*, a history of 'ghosts' within which empirical details are utilized only to provide convenient bodies for the 'spirits' of realism, idealism, and egoism in turn. The point is not simply that this is not good history, but also that it begins to look suspiciously like the very 'Christian' vice that Stirner denounces elsewhere at length – the neglect of the concrete and the particular in favour of abstract conceptual categories. Second, much of the content and structure of Stirner's history is derived from Hegel or his followers. There are scarcely digested 'borrowings' from Hegel's own work throughout. To take only one example, apart from schematizing what are prefatory and passing remarks in Hegel into all that needs saying, Stirner's portrayal of the epoch of 'Negroidity' does little more than reproduce the description of Africa in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History:*

[3] 'Repetition is the mother of learning', *The German Ideology, Marx Engels Collected Works* (London, 1976), volume 5, p. 186.

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Introduction as 'the land of childhood', where humankind 'has not progressed beyond a merely sensuous existence'.[4] However in its overall construction or structure, Stirner's dialectic is derivative of Hegelian*ism* more generally. In particular, in his two most obvious 'innovations' in regard to Hegel's own historical schema – first, in following a tripartite rather than quadripartite division of history; and second, in treating the future as the third synthesizing dimension in that configuration – Stirner's predecessors include both August Cieszkowski, in his opuscule *Die Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (1838), and Moses Hess, in *Die europäische Triarchie* (1841). Both Cieszkowski and Hess, themselves consciously following Herder, also draw analogies with individual development, the three stages of history representing the childhood, youth, and maturity of humankind.

3

Throughout the First Part of *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner constructs a lengthy and unorthodox genealogy of the modern, not only in the mundane sense of tracing a linear progression through modes of experience, but also in the Foucauldian sense of trying to unsettle by demonstrating that modernity fails to escape from the very thing that it claims to have outgrown – namely religious modes of thought. This is clearest in Stirner's treatment of Ludwig Feuerbach, the leading figure of the Hegelian left. The very structure of the book would have revealed Feuerbach as the primary target of Stirner's polemic to contemporary readers. The two parts of Stirner's book headed *Man* and *I* are an implicit structural parody of the sections *God* and *Man* of Feuerbach's best-known work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

Stirner rejects the contemporary consensus that Feuerbach had completed the critique of religion, and provocatively insists that the Feuerbachian problematic reproduces the central features of Christianity. For Feuerbach, the central error of religion was that it separated human attributes from actual individuals by transferring the predicates of the species into another world as if they constituted a self-sustaining being. But, for Stirner, the errors of religion are not

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 172.

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overcome with a rejection of God as transcendent subject; rather, religion is defined formally as the subordination of the individual to spirit in any of its guises. Because Feuerbach's transformative criticism leaves the divine predicates untouched, he is charged with allowing the sacred to remain, if not as God then as 'Man with a capital M!' (p. 55). Feuerbach had not revealed human nature as it was, but rather deified a purely prescriptive account of what being human involved, thus leaving the 'real kernel' of religion, the positing of an 'essence over me' (p. 46), intact. Indeed, Feuerbach's achievement was a '*change of masters*' (p. 55) which actually established a more complete tyranny than before, tying the individual even more securely to a divine ruler: first, by rejecting the transcendence of religion in favour of an *immanent* divinity, making a God of our supposed nature; second, in thus discovering a 'God' who could possess *all*, believers and unbelievers alike.

Feuerbach's failure to escape from the religious is no isolated incident for Stirner, but is rather paradigmatic of modernity. 'The free', who do not constitute a distinct epoch in their own right, but are included as the most modern of the moderns, are found guilty of the same offence. Although Stirner's characterization of 'the free' owes much to the eponymous Berlin Hegelians with whom he had earlier associated, they are clearly intended to embody more widespread intellectual temptations, which, subdivided into 'political', 'social', and 'humane' 'liberalisms', he discusses in turn. Although they disagree about the exact nature of our humanity (identifying the species respectively with citizenship, labour, and critical activity) all the 'liberals' reproduce the Feuerbachian problematic, whereby, first, individuals are separated from their human essence, and, second, that essence is set above those individuals as something to be striven for. For Stirner, this modern propaganda for the species, which culminates in the demand that the mundane and private individual must work to become truly human (he refers, as an example, to an article by an obscure contemporary, the young Karl Marx), simply reproduces the religious division of individuals into 'an essential and unessential self' (p. 34). For the individual, the experience of alienation remains the same. Whether we strive to become more like God or more like the 'true man', Stirner insists that 'I can never take comfort in myself as long as I think that I have still to find my true self' (p. 283).

In contrast, Stirner 'will hear nothing of this cutting in two' (p. 32)

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Engels' caricature of 'die Freien'. Reading from left: 'Ruge, Buhl, Nauwerck, [Bruno] Bauer, Wigand, Edgar [Bauer], Stirner, Meyen, stranger, Koppen the Lieutenant'. The squirrel in the top left corner represents the Prussian minister Eichhorn.

and insists that alienation can only be overcome by rejecting the human essence of the 'liberals' as the enemy of selfhood rather than its true content and aspiration – as the striking epigraph to the Second Part has it, 'Man', as well as God, must die. In its place Stirner seeks to rehabilitate the prosaic and mortal self, the 'un-man [*Unmensch*]' for whom the notion of a 'calling' is alien, the 'man who does not correspond to the *concept* man' (p. 159). For Stirner, because there are no universal or prescriptive elements in human nature, the concept cannot ground any claim about how we *ought* to live:

> I am a man just as the earth is a star. As ridiculous as it would be to set the earth the task of being a 'thorough star', so ridiculous it is to burden me with the call to be a 'thorough man'. (p. 163)

Rather, we need to learn, as Stirner's Nietzschean injunction has it, to give up our 'foolish mania to be something else' (p. 149) and become what we are.

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4

Whereas the negative project of the First Part of *The Ego and Its Own* was to demonstrate that modernity had striven unsuccessfully to overcome religious modes of thought, the positive project of the Second Part is to characterize the future epoch of egoism.

Egoism, for Stirner, is not self-interested action *simpliciter*, but is rather related to another good which he values above all else, characterized, somewhat opaquely, as the 'ownness [*Eigenheit*]' of individuals. The centrality and importance of 'ownness' for Stirner can hardly be exaggerated – not least it was the 'ownness' of individuals that was suppressed in the ancient and modern worlds, and 'ownness' which is fully realized in the epoch of egoism.

'Ownness' is best understood as a variety of self-mastery, a form of substantive individual autonomy which insists that any actions or desires which involve waiving or suspending individual judgement violate the self-mastery and independence of the person concerned. 'I am my *own*', he writes, 'only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered . . . by anything else' (p. 153). Stirner accepts that for some it may well be the case that 'I can make very little out of myself', but insists that 'this very little is everything', that any existence I create for myself is 'better than what I allow to be made out of myself by the might of others' (p. 163). Occasionally 'ownness' is described in terms of a prescription of law to oneself; autonomous individuals, he claims, 'bear their law in themselves and live according to it' (p. 182). But some care is needed here, since law is a declaration of will that is supposed to be binding on the individual, and yet Stirner insists that the individual cannot legitimately bind herself. Even a law that we prescribe for ourselves does not bind, since 'in the next moment I can refuse obedience' (p. 174). Importantly, Stirner is here rejecting the classic modern method, perhaps most familiar from the social contract tradition, for reconciling autonomy and obligation, by claiming that even *self-assumed* obligations are incompatible with autonomy – a self-assumed obligation is still a duty, and 'ownness' can be realized 'only by recognizing no *duty*, not *binding* myself nor letting myself be bound' (p. 175).

In places Stirner simply *identifies* the concept of egoism with autonomy, as in his provocative description of God as an egoist on the grounds that 'He serves no higher person' (p. 6), or in repeated

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references to heteronomy (rather than altruism) as the antonym of egoism. However, it might be clearer to talk here of egoism being *subordinated* to 'ownness', of an egoism which is not literally 'self-sacrificing' (p. 70). This is perhaps most marked in those passages where Stirner discusses the case of individuals who venture everything for a single end or passion. Take the example of the 'avaricious man' who sacrifices everything else in order 'to gather treasures' (p. 70); his actions are clearly self-interested (he acts only to enrich himself), but it is an egoism that Stirner rejects as 'a one-sided, unopened, narrow egoism' (p. 70), because with the subordination of everything to a single end, that end begins to 'inspire, enthuse, fanaticize' us, it 'becomes our – master' (p. 58). In short, this one-sided, 'self-sacrificing' egoism is rejected because it violates our 'ownness'; the avaricious man, Stirner suggests, rather than being self-determining, is 'dragged along' (p. 56) by his appetites.

Stirnerian self-mastery thus has both external and internal dimensions, demanding not only that we avoid subordinating ourselves to others, but also that we avoid submitting to our own appetites or ends. Stirner accepts the claim that if any idea or desire 'plants itself firmly in me, and becomes indissoluble', then I have 'become its prisoner and servant, a possessed man' (p. 127). This attack on the Christian 'fixedity' of ideas does not entail that the egoist can no longer allow herself to have ideas, but rather that she must never allow an idea to make her 'a tool of its realization' (p. 302). The egoist must exercise 'power' not only over 'the exactions and violences of the world', but also exercise this '*power* over my nature' and avoid becoming the 'slave of my appetites' (p. 295). Stirner thus encourages the individual to cultivate and extend an ideal of emotional detachment towards both her passions and her ideas.

5

Morality is defined for Stirner by its positing of an obligation or duty on the individual to behave in certain ways, and by its 'fixedity': morality is 'a rigid unbending *master*' (p. 60). Like religion, morality demands that the individual sacrifice her autonomy to an alien end, that she give up her own will 'for an alien one which is set up as rule and law' (p. 75), and it is this opposition between individual autonomy and moral obligation that grounds Stirner's rejection of the latter.

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However, although egoism is opposed to, rather than a form of, morality, it does not follow that the egoist is immoral – Stirner rejects the idea of an exclusive opposition between morality and immorality as 'antediluvian' (p. 317) – or that Stirner is inconsistent in stressing the evaluative superiority of egoism over other modes of experience and action. Stirner's rejection of morality is grounded not, as is often suggested, in a rejection of values as such, but in the affirmation of what might be called *non-moral goods*, that is, he allows a realm of actions and desires which, although not moral (because they involve no obligations to others), are still to be assessed positively. Stirner's conception of morality is in this sense a narrow one, and his rejection of its claims is in no way coextensive with a rejection of the validity of all evaluative judgement. Consider his discussion of Nero, where he asserts that both the egoist and the moralist would agree that the emperor's behaviour is to be rejected, but on very different evaluative grounds. The egoist despises Nero not because the emperor was immoral (that is, violated his duties to others), but rather because, like the moral man, he was *'possessed'* (p. 53), because, that is, Nero's obsessive predilections violated his self-mastery. Similarly, there is no inconsistency in Stirner's explicitly evaluative vocabulary when he talks positively of the egoist having 'the courage of a lie' (p. 265), or, in a negative example, of the abdication of an individual's own judgement to her family as a 'weakness' (p. 197). Stirner is clearly committed to the 'non-nihilistic' view that a certain kind of character and mode of behaviour (namely, autonomous individuals and actions) are to be valued above all others.

Many secondary authorities have portrayed Stirner as a 'psychological egoist', that is, as holding the *descriptive* claim that all (intentional) actions are motivated by a concern for the agent's greatest interest. However, the textual evidence for this characterization of Stirner is sparse, typically consisting of those passages where he draws a contrast between the egoist proper, who consciously rejects all heteronomy, and the 'involuntary egoist', who serves a higher being (God or humanity) but does so only because this gratifies her own desire. It should be said that if any of these passages is supposed to constitute an argument for psychological egoism then it is not obviously successful. Even if we always (intentionally) do what we want to do, this might only show that

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our motivations are *our* motivations rather than anyone else's, and not that these motivations are of self-interest. But, in context, these passages are inadequate as evidence of any commitment to psychological egoism on Stirner's part. First, it is not clear that the contrast between proper and involuntary egoism is exhaustive – that is, includes all actions across all times – which is what psychological egoism requires. The 'involuntary egoist' is rather portrayed as the contemporary product of an age which hangs uncomfortably between 'two domains', where individuals are unable to defend morality vigorously, and yet are not reckless enough to live egoistically either. The First Part of the book might confirm this reading since it is structured around the opposition between egoistic and other modes of experience, indeed it suggests that non-egoistic action is historically predominant. Second, it seems that for Stirner this 'involuntary egoism' is in fact not egoism, but its opposite; 'unconscious egoism', he insists, is '*not egoism*, but thralldom, service, self-renunciation' (p. 149). Finally, in an important discussion of the case of a woman who sacrifices her love for another in order to respect the wishes of her family, Stirner appears explicitly to consider psychological egoism as an explanation – one might say, he concedes, that 'here too selfishness prevailed' since the decision 'came from the feeling that the pliable girl felt herself more satisfied by the unity of her family than by the fulfilment of her wish' (pp. 196–7) – only to reject the suggestion, insisting that if 'the pliable girl were conscious of having left her self-will unsatisfied and humbly subjected herself to a higher power' (p. 197), then her actions are ruled by piety *as opposed to* egoism.

6

Stirner's images of the state are dramatic and varied. The state is both beast and machine: the rapacious king of the animal world, simultaneously 'lion and eagle' (p. 226); but also a giant mechanism, a complex system of cogs moving 'the clockwork of . . . individual minds' (p. 201) no longer capable of following their own impulse. The state is also both God and the Devil: grounded in the self-renunciation of the individual, the state, he insists, in a mocking echo of Hegel, is sacred, 'the lord of my spirit, who demands faith and prescribes to me articles of faith, the creed of legality' (p. 273); but

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the state is also Satan, behaving in practice as the Devil behaves in theory, demanding that we pledge our very 'souls' (our autonomy) to it (p. 273). What this complex of images shares is the connotation of an antipathy between state and individual. The state always involves the 'limiting', 'taming', 'subordination', and even 'slavery' of the individual. As Stirner repeatedly insists, 'we two, the State and I, are enemies' (p. 161), between which there are only two alternatives: 'it or I' (p. 227). This relationship of absolute hostility between the state and individual is based on the incompatibility between individual autonomy and obligations to obey the law. 'Own will and the State', he writes 'are powers in deadly hostility, between which no "perpetual peace" is possible' (p. 175).

Since individual autonomy is incompatible with, and more important than, a general duty to obey the law, Stirner rejects absolutely the legitimacy of political obligation. This rejection stands irrespective of the foundation of that obligation and whatever the form of the state: '*I*', writes Stirner, 'am free in *no* state' (p. 201). He discusses, for example, the participatory republic proposed by the left Hegelian Edgar Bauer, in which there is no government established apart from and above the citizen body, and insists that even here there is only a 'change of masters' (p. 204) and not the end of the relationship between ruler and ruled – there might be no government as distinct from the people, but there is still clearly a government or people standing over the individual, expressing a will other than our own which we are expected to obey. 'Every state', he insists, 'is a *despotism*, be the despot one or many' (p. 175). Even in the hypothetical case of unanimous agreement of a citizen body, Stirner denies that the autonomous individual would be bound by the result. To be bound today by 'my will of yesterday' would be to turn my 'creature', that is 'a particular expression of will', into my 'commander'; it would be to freeze my will, and Stirner denies that 'because I was a fool yesterday I must remain such' (p. 175).

Stirner sees the state as a human product, albeit one that dominates its own creators. What generates and sustains the state, on his account, is the willingness of individuals to subordinate their own will to the 'will' of their own creation, expressed in law. Stirner's characterization of this relation between individual and state alludes, in its choice of vocabulary, to Hegel's dialectic of *Herrschaft* and *Knechtschaft* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

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> He who, to hold his own, must count on the absence of will in others is a thing made by these others, as the master is a thing made by the servant. If submissiveness ceased, it would be all over with lordship. (p. 175)

But this promotion of Hegel's moment of 'recognition' in dominion into a complete account of the sources of state power results in what might be called an idealist sociology. The state exists only because of 'the disrespect that I have for myself' (p. 252), and 'with the vanishing of this undervaluation' the state itself will be 'extinguished' (p. 252). This idealist account of the sources of state power, in which it is the abdication of selfhood which maintains the integrity of the state, grounds Stirner's very different responses to the questions of civil disobedience and crime.

Stirner's brief and contrasting accounts of Socrates and Alcibiades can be read as an implicit indictment of the respect for law embodied in the practice of civil disobedience. Socrates' refusal to escape punishment, or even (earlier) to request banishment, was clearly grounded in a commitment not to weaken the community by undermining the system of law, and is roundly condemned by Stirner. Socrates was a 'fool' to concede to the Athenians the right to condemn him; his failure to escape was a 'weakness', a product of his 'delusion' that he was a member of a community rather than an individual, and of his failure to understand that the Athenians were his '*enemies*', that he himself and no one else could be his only judge (p. 191). Alcibiades, in contrast – who, amongst other infamies, fled Athens to avoid trial when he was suspected of complicity in the mutilation of the *Hermae* – is praised as an 'intriguer of genius' (p. 191), an egoist who undermined the state precisely by breaking with the ancient prejudice that individuals were free only if, and to the extent that, they were members of a free community.

In contrast to Stirner's rejection of civil disobedience is his notorious endorsement of crime. Stirner denies that crime is peculiarly concerned with direct relations between individuals; rather, it mediates the relation between an individual and the sacred (in the form of legality). The criminal is punished not by individuals for actions which have harmed them, but by the state for actions which have undermined some fixed idea (without the legal recognition of the sanctity of marriage, for example, infidelity is not a 'crime' whatever its effects on individuals). Crime will accordingly disappear with

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the epoch of egoism, when actions are judged by their effect on individual interests (not their effect on the sacred). Meanwhile, Stirner defends the individual act of crime as an assertion of individual autonomy against its chief usurper, weakening the 'cement' (respect for law) which holds the state together. In more generalized form – and drawing a distinction between 'revolution' (which seeks to erect a new social order) and 'insurrection' (which represents the opposition of individuals to any order) – Stirner even suggests that crime has a unique insurrectionary potential which might eventually destroy the state.

7

Individuals have also been held to have obligations generated by their membership of communities that they neither create nor choose to belong to, communities bound by 'natural ligature[s]' (p. 276) such as 'blood', locality, language, class, and common disposition. Stirner's predictable response to the resulting conflict between such obligations and 'ownness' is to reject the value of community in all its forms. The sentimental blandishments of German nationhood, for example, are ridiculed as '*general*, abstract, an empty, lifeless, *concept*' (p. 205); patriotism, he insists, is incompatible with egoism (p. 32). Similarly, because of the potential conflict between family obligations and personal interests, Stirner insists that individuals should act autonomously and follow their own good, rather than succumbing out of 'weakness' to either the will of another family member or the sacred in the form of 'family honour'; 'the forming of family ties', claims Stirner, '*binds* a man' (p. 102).

In outlining the egoist's attempt to emancipate herself from all obligations to 'natural' communities, Stirner makes no attempt to distinguish between feeling 'at home' and being subjugated. 'Belonging' can of course connote being a part of as well as being the rightful possession of; 'bonds' can similarly suggest solidarity as well as that which shackles; 'ties' can provide security as well as bind. Stirner, however, never seriously considers the possibility that these communities might fulfil, still less that they can empower, individuals. It seems that belonging to a 'natural' community is equivalent to being owned by another, and 'the individual', writes Stirner, 'is the irreconcilable enemy of . . . every *tie*, every fetter' (p. 192).

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Even 'society' falls victim to Stirner's claim that 'as long as there exists even one institution which the individual may not dissolve', individual autonomy cannot be realized (Stirner makes much in this context of a linguistic play, and doubtful etymological link, between society – *Gesellschaft* – and an early word for a hall – *Sal* – a building which contains and restricts its inhabitants). Stirner claims that society and not isolation was humankind's '*state of nature*' (p. 271), an original condition whose inadequacies are in due course outgrown. The historical relation between individual and society, he continues, is analogous to the developing relationship between a mother and child, starting before the foetus can breathe with life in 'the most intimate conjunction' (p. 271), moving as an infant from the lap and breast to the pram and leading reins, and then finally escaping to play in the streets outside. The conflict between individual and society, like the conflict between the child and mother, comes from the adult preference for a less suffocating environment, and society, like the mother, must strive to destroy the individual's autonomy and inhibit her maturity if the original relationship is to be maintained.

Stirner does not claim that relations between individuals end with the escape from 'society'; rather, he draws a distinction between relations of 'belonging', which characterize 'society' (as well as the 'state' and 'community') and which involve a tie *binding* individuals together, and the relations of 'uniting', which characterize the epoch of egoism and occur between individuals who themselves remain independent and self-determining. Just as, he claims, a father and son initially bound together in a relationship of subordination can, following the age of majority, establish a relationship of independent equals in which neither sacrifices his autonomy, so in the historical maturity of egoism individuals can establish a form of association – the *union of egoists* – which does not violate 'ownness' and so constitutes an appropriate vehicle for advancing egoistic interests. The *union of egoists* is characterized in many different ways: for example, as a deliberate product of individual action, unlike 'natural' communities which '*are* without our *making* them' (p. 198). But above all else, the *union* is an association which does not involve the subordination of individuals, the *union* is 'a son and co-worker' (p. 273) of our autonomy, a constantly shifting alliance which enables individuals to unite without loss of sovereignty, without swearing allegiance to anyone else's 'flag' (p. 210) – 'if it no longer pleases me', writes Stirner, 'I

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become its foe' (p. 211). The union constitutes a purely instrumental association whose good is solely the advantages that individuals derive from pursuit of their interests: there are no shared final ends, and association is not valued in itself.

Initially this picture might appear attractive. Rather than present a single model of self-realization, Stirner portrays a meta-utopia of shifting patterns of association designed to realize our varied individual ends without sacrifice. Moreover, Stirner occasionally suggests that some familiar and worthwhile relationships – for example, love – can survive the transfer into egoistic instrumentalism. However, there are grounds for scepticism about both the continuance of these customary relationships and the appearance of pluralism in the epoch of egoism.

Take Stirner's distinction between two kinds of love: an egoistic love which does not involve the sacrifice of our autonomy, and the 'bad case' (p. 258) where ownness is sacrificed. Egoistic love allows us to deny ourselves something for the enhancement of another's pleasure, but only because our pleasure and happiness are enhanced as a result. The object of egoistic love, in other words, remains oneself; the egoist loves only as long as 'love makes *me* happy' (p. 258), and cannot sacrifice her autonomy and interests to another, but must 'remain an egoist and – enjoy him' (pp. 257–8). But, however familiar this experience might be, and however much someone who acted in this way might look *as if* she loved the other person, it conflicts with any understanding of loving as including the desire to promote another person's good, their wants and needs and self-evaluation, even when that may not be in our own interests or when it may conflict with our other wants or our own happiness. The point is not terminological – Stirner rightly cares little whether we call egoistic love 'love' and 'hence stick to the old sound' (p. 261) or whether we invent a new vocabulary – but rather that a world without this experience would be an unfamiliar and impoverished one.

The relationship between the egoist and all her objects is characterized by Stirner as a property relation: the egoist as 'owner', it seems, stands in a proprietorial relation to the world. However, modern juridical notions of property, for example as a sophisticated complex of incidents attached to ownership, are of little use in elucidating Stirner's meaning. Stirner sharply distinguishes 'egoistic property' from both private property and collective forms of ownership as

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traditionally understood. These 'civic' and 'collective' forms of property rest on notions of right, and include claims to exclusivity and constraints on (or liabilities attached to) use, which Stirner rejects. Egoistic property is rather constituted by '*unlimited dominion*' (p. 223), an unqualified effective control; '*my* property', he writes, is 'nothing but what is in my *power*' (p. 227). Even in those cases where you also claim ownership over an object, it 'remain[s] mine nonetheless' (p. 302). Egoistic property here seems to collapse into a notion of instrumental treatment, and when Stirner talks of the egoist being 'owner' of the world it seems simply to indicate the absence of obligations on the egoist – a bleak and uncompromising vision, that he captures in an appropriately alimentary image:

> Where the world comes in my way – and it comes in my way everywhere – I consume it to quiet the hunger of my egoism. For me you are nothing but – my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you. We have only one relation to each other, that of *usableness*, of utility, of use. We owe *each other* nothing. (p. 263)

The consequences of Stirner's rejection of all obligations to others are stark. The institution of promising is an early victim: the egoist must break 'even his oath', writes Stirner, 'in order to determine himself instead of being determined' (p. 210). Rights are also rejected, on the basis of their contestable and external foundations (whether in God, nature, or human well-being), their superfluity (where they express actual relationships based on power), their reflection of wishful thinking (where they are unrealized), and, above all, their incompatibility (in generating duties) with 'ownness'. For the egoist, there are no rules for resolving conflicts between competing interests, and no constraints, other than autonomy, on the pursuit of her own enjoyment. Stirner does not shy away from the consequences of this rejection of any notion of respect for persons, and he accepts explicitly that incest, infanticide, and murder cannot be ruled out; '*my satisfaction*', he disarmingly concludes, 'decides about my relation to men, and . . . I do not renounce, from any fit of humility, even the power over life and death' (p. 282).

As Stirner's own meiotic prediction has it: 'very few' of us will 'draw joy' (p. 263) from this picture. The pluralism of his portrait of egoistic association, like the plausibility of his suggestion that familiar relationships would survive within his conception of others as '*mater-*

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ial for enjoyment' (p. 281), is more apparent than real, undermined, not least, by his hostility to any values which conflict with 'ownness'. But this charge of neglecting the 'weal' of his readers, is unlikely to have troubled Stirner. Discussing his own authorial intention, Stirner acknowledged that he saw humankind as 'fretted in dark superstition' (p. 262), but denied that he sought their enlightenment and welfare; had that been his concern, Stirner confided that he would have had to conceal rather than publish *The Ego and Its Own*:

> Do I write out of love to men? No, I write because I want to procure for *my* thoughts an existence in the world; and even if I foresaw that these thoughts would deprive you of your rest and your peace, even if I saw the bloodiest wars and the fall of many generations springing up from this seed of thought – I would nonetheless scatter it. Do with it what you will and can, that is your affair and does not trouble me. (pp. 262–3)

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