

Max Stirner (1806 – 1856)

by Karl Löwith

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Stirner's book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* has usually been considered the anarchic product of an eccentric, but it is in reality an ultimate logical consequence of Hegel's historical system, which — allegorically displaced — it reproduces exactly. Stirner himself admits this derivation from Hegel in his discussion of Bauer's *Posaune*. At the conclusion of his history of philosophy, Hegel himself summoned men to grasp the spirit of the age and bring it from obscurity into the light of day — each in his own place. Marx, too, saw Stirner's book as a study of history after the pattern of Hegel, and furnished evidence in detail.¹ Stirner's Hegelianism is disguised by his ascription of names to the Hegelian categories which are popular, and thus gives an impression of being more concrete, presuming himself thereby to be above the history of the “spirit.”²

The “individual and his individuality” draws life from the belief that it is the beginning of a new epoch, in which each individual “I” becomes the owner of his individual world. For this revolution, Stirner returns to “creative nothingness.” Starting from this point, he outlines the history of the “old” and “new” world of paganism and Christianity against an eschatological horizon: “I” am the new beginning. To the citizens of the old world, the world was a material truth, after which came Christianity; to those of the new, the spirit became supernatural truth, after which comes Stirner, following upon Feuerbach. The last offshoot of the “spiritual” history of Christianity is the political, social, and humane “liberalism” of the left-wing Hegelians, which Stirner overtrumps with his “alliance of egoists.” Radical — that is, without roots — as he is, he has put behind him the “worldly wisdom” of the Greeks, the “theology” of the Christians, and the “theological insurrections” of the most modern atheists.

1 See K. A. Mautz, *Die Philosophie M. Stirners im Gegensatz zum Hegelschen Idealismus* (Berlin, 1936). Remarkably, this work treats Marx's analysis of Stirner's Hegelianism as though it did not exist, although it is the only work which provides documentation for the thesis of the author. [This is note 151 in section “II Old Hegelians, Young Hegelians, Neo-Hegelians” - Transcribers note]

2 V, 109 ff., 118 [Note 152]

For two thousand years, man has been at work trying to profane the spirit which originally was holy. The Christian faith in the spirit which gives life reached its final and highest form in Hegel. The process which began at the close of the Catholic Middle Ages came to a climax in him. Luther sanctified all secular being through faith; Descartes, through foundation in thought; and Hegel, through speculative reason. "Therefore Hegel, a Lutheran, succeeded . . . in applying the notion to everything. In everything there is reason, that is, Holy Spirit."³ But in light of the "perfect bagatelle" achieved by Stirner, the difference between Luther, Descartes, and Hegel shrinks to nothing. They all believed in something divine within man, they were not yet aware of completely ordinary man, just as he is, who is his own "I." Finally, the "man" of humanitarianism still seemed to be a divine truth; but he is only a "solemn cliché," which Stirner transcends with his "absolute cliché" of the individual as the end of all clichés. Therefore his point of departure is neither spirit nor man, but exclusively himself. At the utmost limit of a lost faith in the Christian spirit and the pagan world, Stirner's "I" creates its world out of nothing. And it becomes evident that man has no universal "destiny" and "duty" at all,⁴ for the significance of the individual resides solely and uniquely in his own individual power of acquisition.

If one nevertheless inquires after a universal destiny of man, one is still within "the magic circle of Christianity," and within the state of tension between universal (divine) "essence" and individual (earthly) "existence." Christianity, which was as concerned as was antiquity about the divine, never achieved an unambiguous history within the world. The Christian had before his eyes the salvation of the world as the "end of days," or the salvation of man as the "goal of history"; neither saw history in the immediate "moment,"⁵ which is the temporal locus of the "I." Only man as "I," freed from magic, neither a citizen of the Christian kingdom of God nor an official in Hegel's spiritual kingdom of the world, is per se the history of the world — "and that transcends Christianity!" The individual has no concern for the rest of the world, which lies at his disposal. "If I rely upon myself, an individual, I am grounded upon the transitory, mortal creator of myself, consuming myself, and I may say: I rely upon nothing." Thus Stirner ends his

3 *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 111. [Note 153]

4 *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 369. [Note 154]

5 The inspiration for Stirner's motto probably was Goethe's poem "Vanitas vanitatum vanitas." Kierkegaard, too, was acquainted with it. In his *Journals* (ed. Ulrich, p. 145), he describes it as being "very interesting," because it is the nihilistic "summation of life" of a very great individuality. [Note 155]

historical system, based on the consummation achieved by Hegel, on a note of extreme reduction of everything to the finite and temporal, no longer considering the general “species” of man as Marx, but only the “I.”

From the standpoint of the materialistic conception of history, Marx tore into this system in his criticism, Sankt Max, as a “spiritual-history” which has become “phantom-history.” Stirner confuses the “local outcome in Berlin,” that the entire world “is sick and tired of Hegelian philosophy,” with his “individual” world empire. “In the case of a provincial Berlin schoolmaster or writer, . . . whose activity is restricted to hard work on the one hand and intellectual pleasure on the other, whose world extends from Moabit to Kopenick and is boarded up behind the Hamburg gate, whose connections with this world are reduced to a minimum by his miserable position in life, it is unavoidable, in the case of such an individual, that he have an intellectual need to make his thought as abstract as his person and his life.”⁶ Such a thinker must let philosophy come to an end “by proclaiming his own lack of thought as the end of philosophy and its triumphant entrance into corporeal life,” while in reality he was only “spinning upon his speculative heel.”

Marx’s purpose is to demonstrate positively that Stirner is merely the most radical ideologue of decayed bourgeois society, a society of “isolated individuals.” What Stirner liberates himself from are not real-life situations, but merely intellectual situations. He himself never sees through them because he is trapped in the private egoism of bourgeois society. Therefore he makes of the private individual and private property an absolute “category” of the individual and property in general. In opposition to this thesis of the property of the “individual,” Marx demanded an expropriation, in order to give to man as “a member of a species” the world as his own. Stirner and Marx philosophize against each other in the same desert of freedom: Marx’s man, alienated from himself, must transform the entire existing world through revolution, in order to be at one with himself under the new order; on the other hand, Stirner’s “I,” having freed itself completely from everything, has nothing else to do than turn back to its own nothingness, in order to make use of the world just as it is, to the extent that it is serviceable to him.