

EGO

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THE EGOISM OF MAX STIRNER

S. E. Parker

(The following extracts are taken from my booklet entitled The Egoism of Max Stirner: Some Critical Bibliographical Notes to be published by The Mackay Society of New York)

Albert Camus

Camus devotes a section of The Rebel to Stirner. Despite a fairly accurate summarization of some of Stirner's ideas he nonetheless consigns him to dwelling in a desert of isolation and negation "drunk with destruction". Camus accuses Stirner of going "as far as he can in blasphemy" as if in some strange way an atheist like Stirner can "blaspheme" against something he does not believe in. He proclaims that Stirner is "intoxicated" with the "perspective" of "justifying" crime without mentioning that Stirner carefully distinguishes between the ordinary criminal and the "criminal" as a violator of the "sacred". He brands Stirner as the direct ancestor of "terrorist anarchy" when in fact Stirner regards political terrorists as acting under the possession of a "spook". He furthermore misquotes Stirner by asserting that he "specifies" in relation to other human beings "kill them, do not martyr them" when in fact he writes "I can kill them, not torture them" – and this in relation to the moralist who both kills and tortures in order to serve the "concept of the 'good'".

Although throughout his book Camus is concerned to present "the rebel" as a preferred alternative to "the revolutionary" he nowhere acknowledges that this distinction is taken from the one that Stirner makes between "the revolutionary" and "the insurrectionist". That this should occur in a work whose purpose is a somewhat frantic attempt at rehabilitating "ethics" well illustrates Stirner's ironic statement that "the hard fist of morality treats the noble nature of egoism altogether without compassion".

Eugene Fleischmann

Academic treatment of Stirner is often obfuscating even when it is not downright hostile. A marked contrast is Fleischmann's essay Stirner, Marx and Hegel which is included in the symposium Hegel's Political Philosophy. Clearly preferring Stirner to Marx, Fleischmann presents a

straightforward account of his ideas unencumbered by “psychiatric” interpretations and ad hominem arguments. He correctly points out that the “human self” signifies for Stirner

“the individual in all his indefinable, empirical concreteness. The word ‘unique’ (einzig) means for Stirner man as he is in his irreducible individuality, always different from his fellows, and always thrown back on himself in his dealings with them. Thus, when he talks of ‘egoism’ as the ultimate definition of the human ‘essence’. it is not at all a question of a moral category... but of a simple existential fact.”

Fleischmann contends that “Marx and Engels’ critique of Stirner is notoriously misleading. It is not just that ridicule of a man's person is not equivalent to refutation of his ideas, for the reader is also aware that the authors are not reacting at all to the problems raised by their adversary”. Stirner is not simply “just another doctrinaire ideologue”. His “reality is the world of his immediate experience” and he wants “to come into his own power now, not after some remote and hypothetical ‘proletarian’ revolution. Marx and Engels had nothing to offer the individual in the present: Stirner has.”

In his conclusion Fleischmann states that Stirner's view that the individual “must find his entire satisfaction in his own life” is a reversion “to the resigned attitude of a simple mortal”. This is not a serious criticism. If I cannot find satisfaction in my own life where can I find it? Even if it is the activity of another that gives me satisfaction it is my satisfaction that I experience, any satisfaction that the other may have being something that he or she experiences – not me. If this constitutes being a “simple mortal” then so be it, but that it is a “resigned attitude” is another matter.

Benedict Lachmann and Herbert Stourzh

Lachmann's and Stourzh's Two Essays on Egoism provide a stimulating and instructive introduction to Stirner's ideas. Although both authors give a good summary of his egoism they differ sufficiently in their approach to allow the reader to enjoy adjudicating between them.

Lachmann's essay Protagoras – Nietzsche – Stirner traces the development of relativist thinking as exemplified in the three philosophers of its title. Protagoras is the originator of relativism with his dictum “Man (the individual) is the measure of all things”. This in turn is taken up by Stirner and Nietzsche. Of the two, however, Stirner is by far the most consistent and for this reason Lachmann places him after Nietzsche in his account. For him Stirner surpasses Nietzsche by bringing Protagorean relativism to its logical conclusion in conscious egoism – the fulfillment of one's own will.

In fact, he views Nietzsche as markedly inferior to Stirner both in respect to his style and the clarity of his thinking. “In contrast to Nietzsche's work,” he writes, The Ego and His Own “is written in a clear, precise form and language, though it avoids the pitfalls of a dry, academic style. Its sharpness, clarity and passion make the book truly shattering and overwhelming”. Unlike Nietzsche's, Stirner's philosophy does not lead to the replacement of one religious “spook” by another, the substitution of the “Superman” for the Christian “God”. On the contrary, it makes “the individual's interests the centre of his world”.

Intelligent, lucid and well-conceived, Lachmann's essay throws new light on Stirner's ideas.

Its companion essay, Stourzh's Max Stirner's Philosophy of The Ego is evidently the work of a theist, but it is nonetheless sympathetic to Stirnerian egoism. Stourzh states that one of his aims in writing it

"is beyond the categories of master and slave to foster an intellectual and spiritual standpoint different from the standpoint prescribed by the prophets of mass thinking, the dogmatists of socialism, who conceive of the individual only as an insignificant part of the whole, as a number or mere addenda of the group."

Stourh draws a valuable distinction between the "imperative" approach of the moralists and the "indicative" approach of Stirner towards human behaviour. He also gives an informative outline of the critical reaction to Stirner of such philosophers as Ludwig Feuerbach, Kuno Fischer and Eduard von Hartman. Stourzh mars his interpretation, however, by making the nonsensical claim that Stirner's egoism "need in no sense mean the the destruction of divine mystery itself". And in line with his desire to preserve the "sacredness" of this "divine mystery" he at times patently seeks to "sweeten" Stirner by avoiding certain of his most challenging remarks.

References:

- Camus, Albert: The Rebel: An Essay On Man In Revolt. Knopf, New York. 1961
- Fleischmann, Eugene: The Role Of The Individual In Pre-Revolutionary Society: Stirner, Marx and Hegel in Hegel's Political Philosophy. Cambridge University Press, London. 1971.
- Lachmann, Benedict and Stourzh, Herbert: Two Essays On Egoism. To be published by The Mackay Society, New York.

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High positions are like the summit of high, steep rocks: eagles and reptiles alone can reach them.

Mme. Necker