

## non serviam #8

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Editor's Word

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In this issue, Ken's article comes on its own. Today's chapter is an exposition of his ideas on egoism, viewed from a political point of view. Nothing more needs to be said. Enjoy!

# A Critique of Communism and The Individualist Alternative

Ken Knudson  
(serial: 8)

EGOISM:  
THE PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM

*Many a year I've used my nose  
To smell the onion and the rose;  
Is there any proof which shows  
That I've a right to that same nose?*

—Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller

The philosophy of individualist-anarchism is "egoism." It is not my purpose here to give a detailed account of this philosophy, but I would like to explode a few of the more common myths about egoism and present to the reader enough of its essence so that he may understand more clearly the section on individualist economics. I am tempted here to quote long extracts from "The Ego and His Own," for it was this book which first presented the egoist philosophy in a systematic way. Unfortunately, I find that Stirner's "unique" style does not readily lend itself to

quotation. So what I have done in the following pages is to dress up Stirner's ideas in a language largely my own.

Voltaire once said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Bakunin wisely retorted, "If God DID exist, it would be necessary to abolish him." Unfortunately, Bakunin would only abolish God. It is the egoist's intention to abolish GODS. It is clear from Bakunin's writings that what he meant by God was what Voltaire meant - namely the religious God. The egoist sees many more gods than that - in fact, as many as there are fixed ideas. Bakunin's gods, for example, include the god of humanity, the god of brotherhood, the god of mankind - all variants on the god of altruism. The egoist, in striking down ALL gods, looks only to his WILL. He recognises no legitimate power over himself.<sup>1</sup> The world is there for him to

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<sup>1</sup> He does not, of course, claim to be omnipotent. There ARE external powers

consume - if he CAN. And he can if he has the power. For the egoist, the only right is the right of might. He accepts no "inalienable rights," for such rights –by virtue of the fact that they're inalienable– must come from a higher power, some god. The American Declaration of Independence, for example, in proclaiming these rights found it necessary to invoke the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." The same was true of the French Revolutionary "Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen."

The egoist recognises no right –or what amounts to the same thing– claims ALL rights for himself. What he can get by force he has a right to; and what he can't, he has no right. He demands no rights, nor does he recognise them in others. "Right - is a wheel in the head, put there by a spook," [73] says Stirner. Right is also the spook which has kept men servile throughout the ages. The believer in rights has always been his own jailer. What sovereign could last the day out without a general belief in the "divine right of kings"? And where would Messrs. Nixon, Heath, et. al. be today without the "right" of the majority?

Men make their tyrants as they make their gods. The tyrant is a man like any other. His power comes from the abdicated power of his subjects. If people believe a man to have superhuman powers, they automatically GIVE him those powers by default. Had Hitler's pants fallen down during one of his ranting speeches, the whole course of history might have been different. For who can respect a naked

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over him. The difference between the egoist and non-egoist in this regard is therefore one mainly of attitude: the egoist recognises external power as an enemy and consciously fights against it, while the non-egoist humbles himself before it and often accepts it as a friend.

Fuehrer? And who knows? The beginning of the end of Lyndon Johnson's political career might well have been when he showed his operation scar on coast-to-coast television for the whole wide world to see that he really was a man after all. This sentiment was expressed by Stirner when he said, "Idols exist through me; I need only refrain from creating them anew, then they exist no longer: 'higher powers' exist only through my exalting them and abasing myself. 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'." [74] The one thing that makes a man different from any other living creature is his power to reason. It is by this power that man can (and does) dominate over the world. Without reason man would be a pathetic non-entity - evolution having taken care of him long before the dinosaur. Now some people say that man is by nature a social animal, something like an ant or a bee. Egoists don't deny the sociability of man, but what we do say is that man is sociable to the extent that it serves his own self-interest. Basically man is (by nature, if you will) a selfish being. The evidence for this is overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> Let us look at a hive of bees to see what would happen if "reason" were suddenly introduced into their lives:

"In the first place, the bees would not fail to try some new industrial process; for instance, that of making their cells round or square. All sorts of systems and inventions would be tried, until long experience, aided by geometry, should show them that the hexagonal

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<sup>2</sup> Many people cite trade unions as a "proof" of man's solidarity and sociability. Just the opposite is true. Why else do people strike if not for their own "selfish" ends, e.g. higher wages, better working conditions, shorter hours?

shape is the best. Then insurrections would occur. The drones would be told to provide for themselves, and the queens to labour; jealousy would spread among the labourers; discords would burst forth; soon each one would want to produce on his own account; and finally the hive would be abandoned, and the bees would perish. Evil would be introduced into the honey-producing republic by the power of reflection, - the very faculty which ought to constitute its glory." [75]

So it would appear to me that reason would militate against blind, selfless cooperation. But by the same token, reason leads to cooperation which is mutually beneficial to all parties concerned. Such cooperation is what Stirner called a "union of egoists." [76] This binding together is not done through any innate social instinct, but rather as a matter of individual convenience. These unions would probably take the form of contracting individuals. The object of these contracts not being to enable all to benefit equally from their union (although this isn't ruled out, the egoist thinks it highly unlikely), but rather to protect one another from invasion and to secure to each contracting individual what is mutually agreed upon to be "his."

By referring to a man's selfishness, you know where you stand. Nothing is done "for free." Equity demands reciprocity. Goods and services are exchanged for goods and services or (what is equivalent) bought. This may sound "heartless" - but what is the alternative? If one depends on kindness, pity or love the services and goods one gets become "charity." The receiver is put in the position of a beggar, offering nothing in return for each "present." If you've ever been on the dole, or know anyone who has, you will know that the receiver of such gifts is anything but gracious. He is stripped of his

manhood and he resents it. Now the egoist isn't (usually) so cold and cruel as this description makes him out to be. As often as not he is as charitable and kind as his altruist neighbour. But he CHOOSES the objects of his kindness; he objects to COMPULSORY "love." What an absurdity! If love were universal, it would have no meaning. If I should tell my wife that I love her because I love humanity, I would be insulting her. I love her not because she happens to be a member of the human race, but rather for what she is to me. For me she is something special: she possesses certain qualities which I admire and which make me happy. If she is unhappy, I suffer, and therefore I try to comfort her and cheer her up - for MY sake. Such love is a selfish love. But it is the only REAL love. Anything else is an infatuation with an image, a ghost. As Stirner said of his loved ones, "I love them with the consciousness of egoism; I love them because love makes ME happy, I love because loving is natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no `commandment of love!'" [77]

The lover of "humanity" is bewitched by a superstition. He has dethroned God, only to accept the reign of the holy trinity: Morality, Conscience and Duty. He becomes a "true believer" - a religious man. No longer believing in himself, he becomes a slave to Man. Then, like all religious men, he is overcome with feelings of "right" and "virtue." He becomes a soldier in the service of humanity whose intolerance of heretics rivals that of the most righteous religious fanatic. Most of the misery in the world today (as in the past) is directly attributable to men acting "for the common good." The individual is nothing; the mass all.

The egoist would reverse this situation. Instead of everyone looking after the welfare of everyone else, each would look

after his own welfare. This would, in one fell swoop, do away with the incredibly complicated, wasteful and tyrannical machinery (alluded to previously) necessary to see to it that not only everyone got his fair share of the communal pie, but that everyone contributed fairly to its production. In its stead we egoists raise the banner of free competition: "the war of all against all" as the communists put it. But wouldn't that lead to (dare I say it) ANARCHY? Of course it would. What anarchist would deny the logical consequences of the principles he advocates? But let's see what this "anarchy" would be like.

The egoist believes that the relationships between men who are alive to their own individual interests would be far more just and equitable than they are now. Take the property question for example. Today there is a great disparity of income. Americans make up about 7% of the world's population, but they control over half of its wealth. And among the Americans, nearly one quarter of the wealth is owned by 5% of the people.<sup>3</sup> [78] Such unequal distribution of wealth is due primarily to the LEGAL institution of property. Without the state to back up legal privilege and without the people's acquiescence to the privileged minority's legal right to that property, these disparities would soon disappear. For what makes the rich man rich and the poor man poor if not the latter GIVING the former the product of his labour?

Stirner is commonly thought to have concerned himself little with the economic

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<sup>3</sup> Contrary to popular belief, this gulf is getting larger. Since 1966, despite a constantly mushrooming GNP, the American factory workers' REAL wages (as opposed to his apparent, inflationary wages) have actually declined. [79]

consequences of his philosophy. It is true that he avoided elaborating on the exact nature of his "union of egoists," saying that the only way of knowing what a slave will do when he breaks his chains is to wait and see. But to say that Stirner was oblivious to economics is just not so. On the contrary. It was he, after all, who translated into German both Adam Smith's classic "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations" and Jean Baptiste Say's pioneering work on the free market economy, "Traite d'Economie Politique." The few pages he devotes to economics in "The Ego and His Own" are among his best:

"If we assume that, as ORDER belongs to the essence of the State, so SUBORDINATION too is founded in its nature, then we see that the subordinates, or those who have received preferment, disproportionately OVERCHARGE and OVERREACH those who are put in the lower ranks....By what then is your property secure, you creatures of preferment?...By our refraining from interference! And so by OUR protection! And what do you give us for it? Kicks and disdain you give to the 'common people'; police supervision, and a catechism with the chief sentence 'Respect what is NOT YOURS, what belongs to OTHERS! respect others, and especially your superiors!' But we reply, 'If you want our respect, BUY it for a price agreeable to us. We will leave you your property, if you give a due equivalent for this leaving.'...What equivalent do you give for our chewing potatoes and looking calmly on while you swallow oysters? Only buy the oysters of us as dear as we have to buy the potatoes of you, then you may go on eating them. Or do you suppose the oysters do not belong to us as much as to you?...Let

us consider our nearer property, labour...We distress ourselves twelve hours in the sweat of our face, and you offer us a few pennies for it. Then take the like for your labour too. Are you not willing? You fancy that our labour is richly repaid with that wage, while yours on the other hand is worth a wage of many thousands. But, if you did not rate yours so high, and gave us a better chance to realise value from ours, then we might well, if the case demanded it, bring to pass still more important things than you do for the many thousand pounds; and, if you got only such wages as we, you would soon grow more industrious in order to receive more. But, if you render any service that seems to us worth ten and a hundred times more than our own labour, why, then you shall get a hundred times more for it too; we, on the other hand, think also to produce for you things for which you will requite us more highly than with the ordinary day's wages. We shall be willing to get along with each other all right, if only we have first agreed on this –that neither any longer needs to–PRESENT anything to the other....We want nothing presented by you, but neither will we present you with anything. For centuries we have handed alms to you from good-hearted - stupidity, have doled out the mite of the poor and given to the masters the things that are - not the masters'; now just open your wallet, for henceforth our ware rises in price quite enormously. We do not want to take from you anything, anything at all, only you are to pay better for what you want to have. What then have you? 'I have an estate of a thousand acres.' And I am your plowman, and will henceforth attend to your fields only for a full day's wages. 'Then I'll take another.' You won't find any, for we plowmen

are no longer doing otherwise, and, if one puts in an appearance who takes less, then let him beware of us. There is the housemaid, she too is now demanding as much, and you will no longer find one below this price. 'Why, then it is all over with me.' Not so fast! You will doubtless take in as much as we; and, if it should not be so, we will take off so much that you shall have wherewith to live like us. 'But I am accustomed to live better.' We have nothing against that, but it is not our lookout; if you can clear more, go ahead. Are we to hire out under rates, that you may have a good living? The rich man always puts off the poor with the words, 'What does your want concern me? See to it how you make your way through the world; that is YOUR AFFAIR, not mine.' Well, let us let it be our affair, then, and let us not let the means that we have to realise value from ourselves be pilfered from us by the rich. 'But you uncultured people really do not need so much.' Well, we are taking somewhat more in order that for it we may procure the culture that we perhaps need....'O ill-starred equality!' No, my good old sir, nothing of equality. We only want to count for what we are worth, and, if you are worth more, you shall count for more right along. We only want to be WORTH OUR PRICE, and think to show ourselves worth the price that you will pay." [80]

Fifty years later Benjamin Tucker took over where Stirner left off:

"The minute you remove privilege, the class that now enjoy it will be forced to sell their labour, and then, when there will be nothing but labour with which to buy labour, the distinction between wage-payers and wage-receivers will be wiped out, and every man will be a

labourer exchanging with fellow-labourers. Not to abolish wages, but to make EVERY man dependent upon wages and secure to every man his WHOLE wages is the aim of Anarchistic Socialism. What Anarchistic Socialism aims to abolish is usury. It does not want to deprive labour of its reward; it wants to deprive capital of its reward. It does not hold that labour should not be sold; it holds that capital should not be hired at usury." [81]

Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his second inaugural address that "We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; we know now that it is bad economics." I've tried to show in this

section that self-interest is "good morals." I now intend to show that it is also good economics.

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#### REFERENCES

- [73] Stirner, op. cit., p. 210.
- [74] Ibid., p. 319.
- [75] Proudhon, op. cit., pp. 243-4.
- [76] Stirner, op. cit., p. 179.
- [77] Ibid., p. 291.
- [78] "At the Summit of the Affluent U.S. Society," "The International Herald Tribune." March 19, 1971, p. 1.
- [79] "Newsweek," February 1, 1971, p. 44.
- [80] Stirner, op. cit., pp. 270-2.
- [81] Tucker, "Instead of a Book," p. 404. Reprinted from "Liberty," April 28, 1888.

EGOTIST, n.: A person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.

From "The Devil's Dictionary" by Ambrose Bierce