

MAX STIRNER AND LUDWIG FEUERBACH

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In the long series of studies directed to either Stirner or Feuerbach, no one has considered, in any detail, the relationship between these two Young Hegelians. This is regrettable, since it can be argued that their relationship—which took the form of a debate—exercised a powerful influence not only upon Feuerbach, but upon Marx as well. In another context, that of the recent “Hegel renaissance,” the study of their debate takes on an even wider significance, for both Feuerbach and Stirner have been declared Hegel’s most logical heirs. If, to some, it appears that “Feuerbach was Hegel’s fate . . . Feuerbach belongs to Hegel as much as the beaker of hemlock to Socrates,”¹ and if to others, Stirner appears as “the last link of the Hegelian chain,”² or as “an ultimate logical consequence of Hegel’s historical system,”³ then their debate cannot but be of interest, for the logical future of Hegelianism, has, in effect, already occurred. In sum, the “concrete universality” which stood at the logical terminus of Hegel’s doctrine bifurcated, in full accordance with the so-called laws of dialectic, into two antithetical viewpoints: Stirner’s concrete egoism and Feuerbach’s universal altruism. This paper is intended to outline the nature and consequences of the debate which occurred between Feuerbach and Stirner.

It appears certain that Stirner and Feuerbach were not personally acquainted. At the same time, it also appears improbable that they should not have met. Born in 1804, Feuerbach was Stirner’s senior by two years, but both were, by at least a decade, senior to many of the

¹ Hermann Glockner, *Die Voraussetzungen der Hegelschen Philosophie*, quoted in Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962), 220.

² Henri Avron, *Max Stirner* (Paris, 1954), 177.

³ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (New York, 1964), 103. Other commentators support Löwith’s contention: “Quotations from the work of Marx and from Feuerbach’s *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, make it appear that Max Stirner is the one who really represents the culminating point of the tendency begun by Hegel.” Johann Erdmann, *German Philosophy Since Hegel*, trans. W. C. Hough (London, 1890), 100. Feuerbach has been similarly evaluated, as in the remark of Manfred Vogel, “The line of the development leading to and culminating in Feuerbach is the theme of man’s apotheosis which is being proclaimed with ever-increasing consistency and clarity. It reaches new heights in Hegel and culminates in Feuerbach.” Translator’s introduction to Feuerbach’s *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Indianapolis, 1966), xlv. In sum, the “logical consequence” of Hegel’s principles, in following the course of dialectic, will generate a viewpoint totally antithetical to Hegelianism itself.

more famous of the Young Hegelians, such as Marx and Engels, or the less famous, such as Cieszkowski and Edgar Bauer. This seniority gained them the opportunity of learning their Hegel directly from Hegel, an almost rare occurrence among the Young Hegelians. In particular, it is known that they at least shared the experience of hearing Hegel's lectures on religion, Feuerbach attending the Summer series of 1824, and Stirner those of the Summer of 1827. Nevertheless, they could not have met in Berlin, for Feuerbach left in the Summer of 1826, shortly before Stirner arrived to begin his studies. In time, both transferred from Berlin to the University of Erlangen, but again, by the space of a few months, they lost their last likely opportunity for a personal encounter. However, even if they had met, it seems certain that they would not have become close enough to influence one another personally. Stirner's improvident bonhommie, which drew the youthful Engels into becoming his "duszbruder"⁴ among Berlin's noisy and notorious "Free Ones," would hardly be expected to attract the retiring and studious Feuerbach.

As they grew older, they shared a fate common to most Young Hegelians—they were forced out of their academic careers by reason of their outspoken and programmatic atheism. But despite these shared experiences, the personal fortunes of Feuerbach and Stirner were in sharp contrast. Feuerbach came from a large and famous family, whose name was known throughout Germany. On the other hand, Stirner was an only child, and his baptismal name, Johann Caspar Schmidt, was pressed into even greater obscurity by the use of his pseudonym. (Indeed, "Max Stirner" translates into "highbrow," but that has little to do with Stirner's background.) In 1837, Feuerbach entered into a happy and lifelong marriage with the daughter of a wealthy porcelain manufacturer. Stirner also married that year, but his young bride, the daughter of his landlady, died having a still child-birth the following year. He was left with neither heir nor security. His sudden death, after years of miserable poverty and loneliness, went unnoticed by the public. Only Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Buhl represented the Young Hegelians at his funeral. Of course, Feuerbach had the usual share of human unhappiness, but he lived longer and suffered far less than Stirner. Now the growing temptation to speculate upon the possible interdependency of their public doctrines and their private lives must be resisted.

Prior to the appearance of his *magnum opus*, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*⁵ in November 1844, Stirner was a minor figure among

⁴ In a letter of Engels to Marx, Nov. 19, 1844; Marx-Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1965), XXVII, 13. The term "duszbruder" refers to a close friend, one with whom the familiar pronoun "du" is exchanged.

⁵ (Leipzig, 1845). The work actually appeared in late 1844, although the

Berlin's radical Young Hegelians. He had, since 1841, written a number of small and generally unimpressive articles and reviews,⁶ most of which appeared in the short-lived *Rheinische Zeitung*, a newspaper now remembered only by reason of Marx's tenure as its editor. Stirner's obscure status was precisely illustrated by Engel's mock-epic poem of 1842, *Der Triumph des Glaubens*.⁷ The poem was written to mark Bruno Bauer's return that year to Berlin after having lost his *licentia docendi* at Bonn by reason of his atheism. It affords an interesting glimpse, through the eyes of young Engels, of Berlin's "Free Ones." In the strained exuberance of over 700 heroic couplets, most of which celebrate Bauer, Stirner receives mention in but ten lines, less even than that accorded such forgotten "Freien" as Friedrich Köppen and Eduard Meyen. At that time, Stirner's obscurity stood in direct contrast to Feuerbach's popularity.

Feuerbach's fame among the radical Hegelians, or notoriety among the conservatives, was early and immediately assured upon the publication, in 1830, of his work, *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit*. As its thesis denied the immortality of the soul, it marked an irreparable break with his orthodox Hegelian past, as well as destroying his opportunity for any future academic career. This first declaration of his freedom from Hegelianism developed into ever more complete and positive forms. By 1841, just before the appearance of his masterwork, *Das Wesen des Christentums*,⁸ the culmination of what he termed the "genetico-critical examination" of past thought, Feuerbach had written over a dozen influential studies. From 1841 until the appearance of Stirner's work in 1844, Feuerbach published nine further studies, including the two major essays, *Vorläufige Thesen zur Reform der Philosophie* and its more comprehensive successor, the *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*. And so, while Stirner remained almost silent and without influence, Feuerbach displayed his talent in a proliferation of popular essays and books, all setting forth his "new philosophy."⁹

It is not surprising that Feuerbach's work drew an enthusiastic response from Germany's liberal intellectuals, for his vision was both simple in form and excitingly unique in content. It represented a radical turn from Hegelianism which seemed, nevertheless, not to collapse into the expected pietism or pessimism of previous departures. It drew its

title page gives 1845 as the date of publication; trans. as *The Ego and His Own* by Steven T. Byington (New York, 1963).

⁶ The most comprehensive bibliography of Stirner literature is appended to Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft* (Cologne, 1966).

⁷ Marx-Engels, *Werke: Engels Ergänzungsband* (Berlin, 1965), 281-316.

⁸ *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York, 1957).

⁹ The most comprehensive and accurate bibliography of Feuerbach's works is appended to Michael von Gager, *Ludwig Feuerbach* (Munich, 1970).

most devoted followers from the *Vormärz* (the “pre-March,” the time prior to the outbreak of the Prussian Revolution in March 1848) heirs of Young Germany, the Young Hegelians. By June 1842, a youthful Marx, who had been Feuerbach’s disciple since 1839,¹⁰ was heatedly proclaiming the pun that “there is no other road for you to *truth* and *freedom* except that leading *through* the stream of fire [the Feuer-bach]. Feuerbach is the *purgatory* of the present time.”¹¹

Marx’s enthusiasm, and naturally that of Engels, was shared by the political theorist Arnold Ruge, the theologian David F. Strauss, the poet Herwegh, the novelists Gottfried Keller and George Eliot, and the young revolutionary and composer Richard Wagner. Stirner, upon reading the *Wesen des Christentums*, set about composing his reply to the “new philosophy.”

Stirner addressed himself to a doctrine which held, in sum, that the traditional notion of God was nothing more than the abstract and therefore alienated essence or idea of man set over and against man as an object of worship. In Feuerbach’s words:

Man—and this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself.¹²

It was Feuerbach’s therapeutic intention to see to it that human consciousness developed to the point where it immediately understood the principle that *Homo homini deus est*, that “Man is the true God and Savior of Man.”¹³ The knowledge of this alienation from one’s true essence, which is ultimately a noesis of feeling and sensuous engagement rather than an intellectual grasp, is, to Feuerbach, the real solution to the fact of that alienation. It was destined to be his philosophy which would carry forth the work of the new age, “the realization and humanization of God—the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology.”¹⁴ This was indeed a “new philosophy” appropriate to a new age which would be marked by mankind becoming aware of itself as the true God.

But at this point a question is in order. If, to Feuerbach, man is the true object of religious feeling, the basis of all notions of divinity, is this “man” the concrete and particular conscious subject, the personal ego, or is “he” a universal essence shared by those known as men? Feuerbach left the issue unresolved. Manfred Vogel, in his fine introduction to his translation of Feuerbach’s *Principles of the Philosophy of the*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹¹ Marx-Engels, *Werke*, I, 27.

¹² *Essence of Christianity*, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis, 1966), 5.

Future, has clearly expressed this fundamental ambiguity and incompleteness found at the core of Feuerbach's religious anthropology:

Eliminating God and concretizing man were for Feuerbach, two sides of the same coin. The less real God is, the more real man is, and conversely. Feuerbach's reduction, however, remains in the end ambiguous. On the one hand, God is radically eliminated. But, at the same time, man is not completely concretized. Feuerbach stops short of fully and completely concretizing man. Sometimes he speaks of man as indeed fully concretized—as the earthly, finite human individual—but at other times he is speaking of generic man, of man in general, of the human species.¹⁵

It is Feuerbach's failure to resolve this issue in favor of concrete individuality, a resolution in accord with his sensuous epistemology, which leaves him open to Stirner's charge of presenting nothing more original than another form of theism. Marx, incidentally, soon shared Stirner's rejection of Feuerbachian abstractions,¹⁶ but Marx treated Feuerbach rather mildly, and his criticisms contained in *The German Ideology*¹⁷ as well as his *Theses on Feuerbach*¹⁸ were unpublished and so unknown to Feuerbach. The same restraint cannot be said of Stirner's criticism, which, as Sidney Hook describes it, "exploded like a bombshell among the ranks of his former comrades-in-arms."¹⁹ Windelband, the historian, simply describes the work as "wunderlichen."²⁰ The Marx scholar, Jean-Yves Calvez notes that "Elle fait scandale dans le public lettré."²¹

Not unexpectedly, Feuerbach was soon aware of Stirner's critical work. In early December 1844, a month after its premature appearance in press copies, Feuerbach had read *The Ego and His Own*, and had set about establishing a defense. At this time, he wrote to his brother that Stirner had written:

A highly intelligent and ingenious work, and it contains the truth of egoism itself—but established eccentrically, one-sidedly, and incorrectly. I give him his due—up to one point: he essentially doesn't touch me at all. Nevertheless, he is the most talented and most natural writer I know.²²

A short time later, on December 13th, Feuerbach again wrote to his brother, but this time, with an acidity uncharacteristic of him, he complained that Stirner's "attack betrays a certain vanity, as if he would

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹⁶ Henri Avron, *Ludwig Feuerbach ou la transformation du sacré* (Paris, 1957), 125ff. ¹⁷ (London, 1965). ¹⁸ Marx-Engels *Werke*, III, 353-55.

¹⁹ *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962), 173.

²⁰ *History of Philosophy* (New York, 1958), II, 676.

²¹ *La Pensée de Karl Marx* (Paris, 1956), 115.

²² Quoted in J. H. Mackay, *Max Stirner: sein Leben und sein Werke* (Berlin, 1910), 180; also in W. Bolin, *Ludwig Feuerbach: sein Wirken und sein Zeitgenossen* (Stuttgart, 1891), 107. (All translations mine.)

make a name for himself at the cost of my name. But one must allow people the childish joy of a momentary triumph."²³

Feuerbach's first impulse was to publish an open letter in response to Stirner, but this idea was abandoned in favor of placing an anonymous reply in *Wiegands Vierteljahrsschrift*.²⁴ Along with Feuerbach, representatives of the whole spectrum of post-Hegelianism rose up to refute Stirner. Leading the Berlin Young Hegelians, Bruno Bauer published an anonymous response to Stirner's attack.²⁵ Moses Hess defended the socialists with an angry essay.²⁶ The hectic reply of Marx and Engels was contained in their unpublishable polemic, *The German Ideology*.²⁷ From "left-wing" radicals such as Arnold Ruge, to the right with Karl Rosenkranz, passing through less easily categorized figures as Kuno Fischer and Bettina von Arnim, a line was formed against a common enemy—Max Stirner.

A full opening page of *The Ego and His Own* is set aside to proclaim Stirner's intention: "*Man is to man the supreme being*, says Feuerbach. *Man has just been discovered* says Bruno Bauer. Then let us take a more careful look at this supreme being and this new discovery." This declaration is followed by four hundred pages directed to that "more careful look." In the main, it is Feuerbach, that "pious atheist," who bears the brunt of Stirner's criticism, and Bauer is left relatively unabused. One reason for this, philosophically, is that Bauer's "pure criticism" bears a closer relation to Stirner's individualism than Feuerbach's altruistic anthropology.²⁸ Another reason, less philosophical, is that Bauer and Stirner were close friends both before and after the publication of *The Ego and His Own*. Knowing the circumstances and iconoclastic attitudes of the "Freien," one can even imagine Bauer enjoying Stirner's criticism. Nevertheless, he did turn his attention from philosophy and theology to the subject of political history after 1845.²⁹ Of course, Marx's criticism of Bauer, as found in *The Holy Family*,³⁰ could also have occasioned Bauer's turn from philosophy.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181; Bolin, 108.

²⁴ Otto Wiegand, of censor-free Leipzig, was the favorite of the Young Hegelians, and had published the major works of Stirner, Feuerbach, Bauer, Marx, and Engels, among others.

²⁵ "Characteristic Ludwig Feuerbachs," *Wiegands Vierteljahrsschrift*, 3(1845), 126-46.

²⁶ *Die letzten Philosophen* (Darmstadt, 1845).

²⁷ Even the otherwise admiring biographer of Marx, Franz Mehring, is constrained to admit that it displays "a rather puerile character." It was finally published for the first time in 1932, by the Moscow Institute of Marxism-Leninism.

²⁸ William Brazill, *The Young Hegelians* (New Haven, 1970), 199ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; also Bruno Bauer, *Feldzüge der Reinen Kritik*, ed. H. Blumenberg, et al. (Frankfurt/M., 1968), 263ff.

³⁰ (Moscow, 1956).

Stirner's development of philosophic egoism, as well as his consequent denunciation of Feuerbach's altruism, reveals itself in a glittering literary style, a style so "compulsively readable,"³¹ that it tends to detract from the content of the work itself. The earliest remark upon this style was made by Arnold Ruge, Marx's passing associate, who declared that Stirner was responsible for "the first readable book in philosophy that Germany has produced."³² His judgment is perhaps too generous, but there has never been any doubt as to Stirner's mastery of language.³³

The philosophic content of *The Ego and His Own* is focused upon revealing the actual dependency of all normative and regulative concepts, such as God, man, mankind, state, society, or law, upon the willful determinations of the singular ego. This concrete ego, *der Einzige*, which in its concreteness and uniqueness, its *Einzigkeit*, transcends all classifications, is the real source of all values that its creations, its *Eigentum*, are prone to claim. Stirner rejects the autonomy of all abstractions that claim his personal allegiance, and views them as entirely dependent upon his will. For Stirner, the religious mind—and Feuerbach's is a prime example—has been terrorized and awed, like Frankenstein, by monsters of its own creation. In sum, to employ Santayana's not so complimentary language, Stirner's work is:

a bold, frank, and rather tiresome protest against the folly of moral idealism, against the sacrifice of the individual to any ghostly powers such as God, duty, the state, humanity, or society; all of which this redoubtable critic called "spooks" and regarded as fixed ideas and pathological obsessions.³⁴

As Stirner would have it, Feuerbach is merely the most recent representative of those preachers of pathological obsessions and fixed ideas. In this instance, the "spook" now being presented as a "higher essence" is termed "man." Feuerbach has merely uncovered another idol, another unreal ideal. Far from actually freeing individuals, and permitting them to take pleasure in themselves, Feuerbach is but an ethical *false prophet* leading them into a new servitude, a new self-denial. The "epochal new method of transformational criticism"³⁵ turned the God-

³¹ Ronald K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (London, 1971), 64.

³² Ruge to his mother, Dec. 17, 1844, in *Briefwechsel und Tagebuchblätter aus den Jahren 1825-1880*, ed. Paul Nerrlich (Berlin, 1886), 1, 386.

³³ James Huneker, *Egoists: A book of Supermen* (New York, 1932), 356. Cf. the judgment of James L. Walker; "In style Stirner's work offers the greatest possible contrast to the puerile, padded phraseology of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and its false imagery." *Introduction to The Ego and His Own* (New York, 1918), x.

³⁴ *The German Mind: A Philosophical Diagnosis* (New York, 1968), 99.

³⁵ Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1961), 103. It is of interest to note that Tucker does not even mention Stirner's name in his study, despite drawing upon Feuerbach's reply to Stirner!

Man into the Man-God while retaining the religious attitude of self-debasement or other-love; such linguistic sleight-of-hand serves only to intensify human alienation rather than to abolish it. As Stirner notes, "Feuerbach thinks that if he humanizes the divine, he has found the truth. No, if God has given us pain, 'Man' is capable of pinching us still more torturingly."³⁶

In two brief paragraphs, Stirner has stated his position as well as his understanding of Feuerbach:

Let us in brief, set Feuerbach's theological view and our contradiction over against each other: "The essence of man is man's supreme being; now by religion, to be sure, the *supreme being* is called *God* and regarded as an objective essence, but in truth it is only man's own essence; and therefore the turning-point of the world's history is that henceforth no longer *God*, but man, is to appear to man as *God*."

To this we reply: The supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his *essence* and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as "God," or find it in him and call it "Essence of Man" or "Man." I am neither God nor Man, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me. Nay, we really do always think of the supreme being as in both kinds of otherworldliness, the inward and outward, at once; for the "Spirit of God" is, according to Christian view, also "our spirit," and "dwells in us." It dwells in heaven and dwells in us; we poor things are just its "dwelling," and if Feuerbach goes on to destroy its heavenly dwelling and forces it to move to us bag and baggage, then we, its earthly apartments, will be badly overcrowded.³⁷

Stirner is the first to declare, from arguments as above, that "Our atheists are pious people,"³⁸ a line echoed later by Engels, whose criticism of Feuerbach traced the path first opened by Stirner. Engels is merely repeating Stirner when he says of Feuerbach, "He by no means wishes to abolish religion: he wants to perfect it."³⁹

And so, just as Feuerbach's "genetico-critical examination" had earlier revealed Hegelian philosophy to be a covert theology, so Stirner revealed Feuerbach's humanism as a covert religion. If, to Feuerbach, "Speculative philosophy is the true, consistent, and rational theology,"⁴⁰ so then, to Stirner, "The HUMAN religion is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion."⁴¹ Neither the esoteric formulas of Hegel's doubtful theism, nor the bravest declarations of his most atheistic students had served to free any of them from the iron grip of Christianity's "magic circle." It is Stirner's desire to break out of this obsessive circle

³⁶ *The Ego*, 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁹ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York, 1941), 33.

⁴⁰ *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Indianapolis, 1966), 6.

⁴¹ *The Ego*, 176.

which leads him to develop a radical egoism, an individualism which must stand in direct contrast to Feuerbach's altruistic humanism.

Feuerbach's public response to Stirner was only a dozen pages in length. It was, not uncommon for the time, left unsigned. A year later it reappeared, slightly expanded, in the first volume of Feuerbach's own edition of his *Sämtlichen Werke*.

It is of interest to note that this brief reply of 1845 was Feuerbach's only publication for that year. This stands in marked contrast to his previously high level of productivity. The tenor of Feuerbach's essay has been best described by his contemporary, the historian Johann Erdmann: "Feuerbach seems to have been somewhat taken by surprise—at least he never replied with such moderation and humility as on that occasion—when the work of Max Stirner . . . appeared."⁴²

This reply, delivered as if by a third party, is, in the main, intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*. The same technique, delivered with greater skill, was later employed by Moses Hess in his reply to Stirner.

Each of the fourteen paragraphs comprising Feuerbach's response contains an argument, sometimes little more than a positional restatement. The first argument that he employs is suggestive of the strength of those to follow, and its concluding lines deserve to be cited in entirety:

"I have set my cause upon nothing" sings the Unique One [*der Einzige*]. But is not *Nothing* a predicate of God? is not the statement "God is nothing," a religious expression as well? So, the "Egoist" also sets his cause upon God! So he also belongs to the "pious atheists!"

At this point, the reader is surely reminded of what Engels once said in reply to one of Feuerbach's arguments: "Such etymological tricks are the last resort of idealist philosophy."⁴³

Feuerbach's third argument begins with a citation from Stirner:

"Even Feuerbach himself says that he is concerned only with annihilating an illusion"; yes, but an illusion upon which all illusions, all prejudices, all—unnatural—limits of Man depend, but not, however, immediately; because the fundamental illusion [*Grundillusion*], the fundamental prejudice, the fundamental limit of Man is God as Subject. Who turns his time and energy to undoing the fundamental illusion and fundamental limit, cannot be expected, at the same time, to set about solving the peripheral illusions and limits.

Here, somewhat peevishly, Feuerbach is simply ignoring Stirner's objection—touched upon in the opening citation⁴⁴—that he is engaged

⁴² *A History of Philosophy*, trans. W. S. Hough (London, 1890-92), III, 96-97.

⁴³ *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 34.

⁴⁴ *The Ego*, 59. Feuerbach's reply "Über das 'Wesen des Christentums' in Beziehung auf den 'Einzigen und sein Eigentum'" can be read in a critical reissue in *Ludwig Feuerbach: Kleinere Schriften II*, ed. Werner Schuffenhauer (Berlin, 1970), 427-41.

in a quixotic struggle with the “spooks” and “fixed ideas” of the idealists. But at this point it is best to turn directly to Stirner’s rejoinder to his critics, where he takes each of Feuerbach’s arguments in turn, and where his response to the third argument is as brief as that argument.

Stirner’s first and final answer to his numerous critics appeared as a fifty page article in the third issue of *Wiegands Vierteljahrsschrift* for the year 1845. It was cryptically signed “M. St.,” with Stirner referring to himself throughout in the third person. His specific reply to Feuerbach was brief, with only seven pages set aside to answer Feuerbach’s fourteen defensive arguments.

Just as in the case of Feuerbach, the temper of these counter-arguments are best illustrated by citing Stirner’s full answer to Feuerbach’s first charge that to say “God is Nothing” is to say something religious.

Feuerbach has removed the “nothing” from Stirner’s “I have set my cause upon nothing,” and so concludes that the Egoist is a pious atheist. Nothing is certainly a definition of God. But Feuerbach is playing with a word. . . . Besides, it is said, in *The Essence of Christianity* “Hence he alone is the true atheist to whom the predicates of the Divine Being—for example, love, wisdom, justice—are nothing; not he to whom merely the subject of these predicates is nothing.” [p. 21] Isn’t this the same with Stirner, especially since, to him, Nothing cannot be attributed to Anything? [wenn ihm nicht das Nichts für Nichts aufgebürdet wird?]⁴⁵

This brief and slightly flippant rejoinder to Feuerbach’s first argument is followed closely by an even briefer retort to Feuerbach’s third contention—that he is applying his “time and energy” to solving the *Grundillusion*.

Feuerbach says that “the fundamental illusion is God as subject.” But Stirner has shown the fundamental illusion to be the thought of the “Perfect Essence.” Hence, Feuerbach, who defends this “fundamental prejudice” with all his energy, is exactly, in this respect, a true Christ.⁴⁶

And so the debate proceeds, with Stirner—throughout the serial of his responses to Feuerbach’s defensive arguments—conceding absolutely nothing. As to the matter of altruistic love, Stirner argues that a disinterested, an unselfish interest or love, is actually no interest or love, for these sentiments are rooted in one’s personal evaluation of the loved object. To love altruistically out of “sacred duty” is not to love but to obey, and obedience is the quintessential expression of self-denial, the opposite of egoism.

But finally, it is not necessary to catalogue in detail the dialectical display of these “hostile brothers”—as Karl Löwith has called them.

⁴⁵ *Kleinere Schriften*, ed. J. H. Mackay (Berlin, 1898), 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

Even less is it now required that a judgment be made declaring a victor in the contest. That judgment was made by the contestants themselves, and even if never openly declared, the consequent events of their professional lives and the transformations of their teachings bear mute but adequate testimony to anyone who thought himself defeated.

Their debate ended in 1845, a year which marked a turning point for both of them. For Stirner, it was more of a return rather than a turn, for the rest of his life was left unmarked by public attention or private success—just as it was before the debate. Fifty years were to pass from the initial publication of Stirner's major work to its recovery, a recovery gained only through the sacrificing efforts of a few anarchists.⁴⁷ Indeed, Stirner's life was not successful, but then, he would not find this at all inconsistent with his own thought, as such uniform criterion as "success" or "failure" must fade in the face of personal uniqueness.

The year 1845 also saw one of Feuerbach's principal disciples, Marx, replace his concern for "alienated Man" with a practice suited to "real historical man."⁴⁸ His sudden ideological departure followed upon his reading of Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*. Lobkowitz has convincingly argued that Marx ceased being a Feuerbachian upon reading Stirner.⁴⁹

It does appear that Feuerbach was profoundly affected by Stirner's attack, for his thought is said to have taken a "second turning" about 1845,⁵⁰ the "first turn" being, of course, away from his early stance as an orthodox Hegelian. The Feuerbach scholar, Gregor Nüdling, sets 1843 as the year in which Feuerbach had "already concluded his historically significant thought."⁵¹ However, in 1844, Feuerbach wrote several works that were significant and that continued the normal line of his thought.⁵² But, as noted above, in 1845, with the exception of his reply to Stirner, Feuerbach remained silent. Thereafter, he turned from maintaining an altruistic humanism, or what might be termed "his historically significant thought" to holding, by 1850—or even earlier⁵³—a doctrine characterized by Sidney Hook as a "degenerate sensationalism," or the "most 'vulgar' of 'vulgar materialisms.'"⁵⁴ Was Stirner responsible for this radical development in Feuerbach's thought? Simon Rawidowitz,

⁴⁷ See my "The Revival of Max Stirner," *JHI*, 35(1974), 323-29.

⁴⁸ *The German Ideology*, 57.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Lobkowitz, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner," *Demythologizing Marxism*, ed. Frederick J. Adelman (The Hague, 1969), 64-95.

⁵⁰ Carl Ascheri, "Feuerbachs Bruch mit der Speculation," *Kritische Studien zur Philosophie* (Frankfurt/Main, 1969), 110.

⁵¹ Ludwig Feuerbach's *Religionsphilosophie* (Paderborn, 1936), 72.

⁵² Cf. *Das Wesen des Glaubens im Sinne Luthers* (1844).

⁵³ Moleschott, whose physiological views were exclusively materialistic, found indication in Feuerbach's lectures during the winter of 1848-49.

⁵⁴ *From Hegel to Marx*, 267ff.

whose major study of Feuerbach is yet to be surpassed, thinks this to be the case: "Max Stirner's critique . . . appears to have impelled him [Feuerbach] to take a further step, to advance from anthropology to naturalism."⁵⁵

Radowitz's contention, that Stirner pressed Feuerbach to the full, and sometimes embarrassingly crude, explication of his thought, is mentioned by other commentators. For example, some years before Rawidowitz, Eduard von Hartmann, who admired Stirner, wrote:

Feuerbach's anthropology, and the humanistic ideal generated from it, has been forever reduced to absurdity through Stirner's critique. For anyone who can think philosophically, it is evident that the only valid consequence of this line of thought is to be found in an egoistic scorn of all ideals, without exception, or a practical solipsism.⁵⁶

Friedrich Jodl, coeditor of the second edition of Feuerbach's *Sämtlich Werke*, and his disciple as well, agrees with both Rawidowitz and Hartmann that Stirner pressed Feuerbach's thought into its final form, but envisions that conclusion as lying somewhere between Rawidowitz's "naturalism" and Hartmann's "practical solipsism." For Jodl, the proper term is "realistic"—"through Stirner's influence, a more realistic, virile, tendency came into Feuerbach's ethics, one better in harmony with the actualities of moral history."⁵⁷

Others, such as Henri Avron⁵⁸ and Michael von Gagern⁵⁹—both scholars and admirers respectively of Stirner and Feuerbach—could be cited to indicate the rare and seldom discussed judgment that Stirner's criticism was a catalyst to Feuerbach, pressing him either to a coarse materialism, or crude realism, that ill-suited his earlier enthusiasms, or to silence.

In retrospect, it now appears that Feuerbach attempted to compromise, with infrequent bursts of rash sensualism—such as his review of Moleschott's work⁶⁰—alternating with lengthy periods of public silence and uncreative compiling. A glance at the dates of his bibliography and the data of his career confirms this opinion.

In his recent study of Feuerbach, Eugene Kamenka sums up the matter:

⁵⁵ *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie* (Berlin, 1964), 163.

⁵⁶ "Die Philosophie der Gegenwart," *Das Magazin für die Litterature des In- und Auslands*, Bd. 130 (Jan.-June 1888), 241.

⁵⁷ "Max Stirner und Ludwig Feuerbach," *Osterreichische Rundschau*, Bd. 26, H. 6(1911), 427; reprinted in F. Jodi, *Vom Lebenswege* (Berlin, 1916), 284.

⁵⁸ *Ludwig Feuerbach ou la transformation du sacré*, 125ff.

⁵⁹ *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 190.

⁶⁰ Die Naturwissenschaft und Die Revolution," review of Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*, 1850, in *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung* (Leipzig, 1850), 268ff.

The general view was, and to a large extent remains, that Feuerbach had said everything of importance that he had to say by 1845, and that his subsequent work is either a mere repetition or a falling-away into positions (such as “vulgar materialism”) which he had effectively criticized earlier.⁶¹

Unhappily, but not uncommonly, Kamenka suggests no reasons for this “mere repetition or a falling away” on the part of Feuerbach after 1845.

At this point, a new and relatively minor thesis suggests itself: that Feuerbach’s sudden movement from anthropology to naturalistic realism—or from humanism to materialism—was not only negatively provoked by Stirner’s criticism of his latent idealism, but positively assisted by Stirner’s willing acceptance of Feuerbach’s epistemological sensualism. According to Stirner, it was Feuerbach who at least brought “sensuousness to honor,”⁶² and for this he deserves credit, despite his failure to overcome the theological perspective. Indeed, even Marx retained that which Feuerbach retained after Stirner’s critique—an epistemic sensationalism, a “realistic” materialism. On this issue, grounded on a general distaste for idealism in any form, all three finally found themselves in unaccustomed agreement.

In 1888, Engels published a study which, for reasons often other than philosophical, has continued to exercise an undue influence upon the understanding of both Feuerbach and the other Young Hegelians. In concluding his criticisms of Feuerbach, criticisms initiated but never credited to Stirner, Engels noted that:

The cult of abstract man which formed the kernel of Feuerbach’s new religion had to be replaced by the science of real men and of their historical development. This further development of Feuerbach’s standpoint beyond Feuerbach himself was inaugurated by Marx in 1845 in *The Holy Family*.⁶³

We, however, propose that it was not Marx who inaugurated “this further development,” but Max Stirner. This proposal becomes all the more attractive upon noting that Marx wrote *The Holy Family* in 1844, and that he wrote it as a Feuerbachian. Engels was wrong on all counts.

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⁶¹ *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York, 1970), 156.

⁶² *The Ego*, 340.

⁶³ *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 41.