

A UNION OF EGOISTS: MAX STIRNER AND MOSES HESS

LAWRENCE S. STEPELEVICH

Shlomo Avineri, in his study of Moses Hess,¹ writes that Hess, in his 1845 article, *The Last Philosophers* (*die letzten philosophers*),

gets into a detailed critique of Stirner's book, *The Individual and His Property* (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*),² which he sees as the most extreme philosophical expression of egoistic individualism. This criticism should not concern us here in its details.

Given the concise nature of his book (226 pages), Avineri's lack of concern over the details of Hess's criticism is understandable. However, not to consider the details of Hess's criticism of Stirner, as well as to ignore Stirner's rebuttal, is to lose sight of a most important philosophical confrontation between two antithetical and radical social thinkers: Stirner and Hess. As a survey of the literature indicates, Avineri is not alone in this avoidance of the confrontation. But nevertheless, the debate between Stirner and Hess is not only the first, but perhaps the most profound confrontation occurring between a powerful advocate of social communism and equally powerful advocate of capitalistic individualism.

Perhaps it is enough to mention the "qualifications" of both Hess and Stirner to indicate the significance of their confrontation. The importance of Hess is indicated in the subtitle of Avineri's work: the *Prophet of Communism and Zionism*. Other honorifics would be Hess as the "Father of Zionist Socialism," as well as Engels noting that Hess was "The First Communist in the Party."³ At the First

¹ Shlomo Avineri, *Moses Hess: Prophet of Communism and Zionism* (New York: New York UP, 1985) 138.

² (Berlin: Otto Wigand, 1845); the standard English translation is that of S. Byington, the latest edition *The Ego and Its Own* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). Hereafter cited as *Ego*.

³ *MEGA* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag) 1, 494.

Zionist Congress, he was termed “The Herald of Socialist Zionism.”⁴ As to Stirner, perhaps it is enough to note that his major work, the one to which Hess directed his criticism, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* [The Ego and His Own], has appeared in hundreds of editions, and has not been out of print for over 131 years. Unlike the little translated works of Hess,⁵ *Der Einzige* has been translated into over a dozen languages.⁶ His influence upon Anarchism has been consistent. This influence was first stated by Frederick Engels, who noted that “Bakunin has taken much from him [Stirner].”⁷

Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* appeared in November of 1844, and had the intention of presenting the atheistic and liberal humanism of his contemporaries as being nothing less than a deceptive restoration of the very religious faith, which they claimed to reject. For Stirner, their “*humane Liberalismus*,” was in fact nothing more than a word-game in which the term “God” was concealed under the names of “Man [*Mensch*]” or “Mankind [*Menschlichkeit*].” In short, these “pious atheists” had not transcended the religious consciousness, but had simply, if covertly, restored it. His work was directed against the radical humanistic doctrines of Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer. The work evoked an extraordinary response—not only from those named, but by those whose saw themselves as the objects of Stirner’s criticism, such as Marx and Moses Hess.

The principle intention of *Der Einzige* was to indicate that the lofty ideals of liberal and radical reformers were nothing other than the projection of their own alienated ideas. Nothing had been gained by the atheistic and humanistic struggles against a transcendent God other than “bringing him down to earth in the guise of ‘Man’.” The “revolution” was but a rotation of divinity, merely a formal revolution in which a new earthly God was set up to take the place of the failing old Christian God. The modern socialists were merely pressing along the same path that moralizing Christian Pietists had laid out for them—the only difference being that for these “moderns [Neuen]” God was no longer to be revered and served, but rather “Mankind.” The actual world was still set into opposition to an ideal world, one of total freedom and perfected humanity. The old oppressive order was merely restated:

The human religion is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion. For liberalism is a religion because it separates my essence from me and sets it above me, because it exalts “man” to

⁴ Edmund Silberner, *Moses Hess: Geschichte Seines Lebens* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) 444.

⁵ See Lawrence Stepelevich’s translation of Hess’s “Die letzten Philosophen” [“The Recent Philosophers”]: in his *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983). All citations from “The Recent Philosophers” will be drawn from *The Young Hegelians*.

⁶ Bernd Laska, *Stirner-Bibliographie* <<http://www.max-stirner-archiv-leipzig.de>>.

⁷ Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941) 17.

the same extent as any other religion does its God or idol, because it makes what is mine into something otherworldly, because in general it makes some of what is mine, out of my qualities and my property, something alien—namely, an “essence” in short, because it sets me beneath man, and thereby creates for me a “vocation.”⁸

As one commentator had it, Stirner’s book was “calculated to unnerve”—and so it did. Here are a few of its results:

In 1845, shortly after the first appearance of *Der Einzige*, the usually prolific Feuerbach only wrote one short item—his reply to Stirner. This change in Feuerbach’s thought followed shortly after he became aware that he was unable to refute Stirner’s critique. Certainly more than one Feuerbachian scholar, such as Eugene Kamenka, has agreed with the judgment of Simon Rawidowitz that “Max Stirner’s critique. . . appears to have impelled him [Feuerbach] to take a further step, to advance from anthropology to naturalism.”⁹ In short, he turned from his humanistic program to ultimately agree with the crude naturalism of Jacob Moleschett. It was not only Feuerbach who suddenly displayed a radical new turn of thought after reading Stirner but his young disciple, Marx. Within a year after he had read Stirner, he eased being a follower of Feuerbach and became his critic. His reasons appeared in 1845, in his “Theses on Feuerbach.” It has been well argued, by Nicholas Lobkowitz, that Marx radically revised his humanistic programs after reading Stirner.¹⁰ Indeed, in that same summer of 1845, Marx and his new-found friend, Engels, set about a hurriedly writing an exhaustive refutation of Stirner, *The German Ideology* [*Die deutsche Ideologie*]. Stirner had not even been mentioned in their first joint work of the previous year, which contained the usual vitriolic attack on all of the “Young Hegelians” whom Marx had found disagreeable. In this first joint effort, Bruno Bauer was the main target, as the full title of the work indicates: *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company*. However, in contrast, *The German Ideology* devoted more pages to criticizing Stirner’s work than are to be found in that work itself. Even Hans Mehring, the usually admiring biographer of Marx, had difficulty in finding any merit in this “super polemic.” He was forced to conclude that *The German Ideology* was characterized by “hair-splitting and quibbling, some of it of a rather puerile character.”¹¹

In late 1845, Bauer, in an anonymous article, “*Charakteristik Ludwig Feuerbachs*,” briefly discussed Stirner in the course of criticizing Feuerbach. He

⁸ *Ego*, 158.

⁹ On Feuerbach’s reaction to Stirner, see Lawrence Stepelevich, “Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (3) (July–Sept, 1978): 451–63.

¹⁰ Nicholas Lobkowitz, “Karl Marx and Max Stirner,” *Demythologizing Marxism*, ed. Frederick J. Adelman (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969) 64–95.

¹¹ Hans Mehring, *Karl Marx*, trans. E. Fitzgerald (Ann Arbor: Michigan Press, 1962) 110.

agreed with Stirner's evaluation of Feuerbach, but in that Bauer's article appeared in the same issue in which Stirner's reply to his critics appeared, Stirner never responded to it. Nor would there be any particular reason to do so, as Bauer's view was earlier represented by one of his followers, Szeliga,¹² and Stirner had replied to it. In any case, with this critical study of Feuerbach, Bauer's atheistic crusade, his "*Feldzüge der reinen Kritik*" came to an end:

Bruno Bauer's campaign of pure criticism, which had begun in 1838, reached its highpoint . . . in 1844. . . . the campaign ended shortly thereafter. . . . It had simply faded away. As Ernst Barnikol writes, "All of its intellectual strength faded into an empty and impotent criticism."¹³ (author's translation)

And so, just as Marx and Feuerbach before him, Bauer after reading Stirner had also embarked upon another ideological course, and his earlier dedication to the "Good Cause" was soon forgotten—as well as Bauer himself. As to the final reaction of Hess to Stirner's criticism, it might be detected in the Hess's turn from economic socialism to Zionism. But in any case, unlike Stirner, who still attracts attention, Hess has been, in the main, forgotten, with almost all of his writings left untranslated and difficult to obtain.

Along with being "The First Communist in the Party," Hess might also claim to be "The First Communist to read *The Ego and Its Own*," as he and Engels read the proof copies of the work while both were in Cologne in late 1844.¹⁴ Their copy was set along to Marx. Moses Hess was not named in *The Ego*, but a quotation taken from Hess's 1843 essay "*Socialismus und Kommunismus*"¹⁵ appeared in it:

With the ideal of "absolute liberty," the same turmoil is made as with everything absolute, [and according to Hess¹⁶], it is said to "be realizable in absolute human society." Indeed, this realization is immediately afterward styled a "vocation"; just so he then defines liberty as "morality": the kingdom of "justice" (equality) and "morality" (liberty) is to begin, etc. . . . Ridiculous is he who, while fellows of his tribe, family, nation, rank high, is—nothing but "puffed up" over the merit of

¹² One of Bauer's followers, later a respected Prussian General, whose full name was Franz Szeliga Zychlin von Zychlinski.

¹³ [Bruno Bauers *Feldzüge der reinen Kritik*, die 1838 begonnen hatten, erreichten ihren Höhepunkt and die strategisch von der Kritik, wie sie meinte, vorbereitete letzte Zuspitzung der Fronten im Jarhe 1844;—bald danach is der *Feldzüge* beendet, nicht etwa weil der beiden Seiten die andere besiegt hätte, sondern weil die Kritik kampfflos das Feld räumt, sie is plötzlich weg—verpufft. "Alle geistige Kraft verpufft in leerer wirkungsloser Kritik" schreibt Ernst Barnikol.]. *Feldzüge der Reinen Kritik*, ed. Hans-Martin Sass (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968) 263.

¹⁴ Engels to Marx, *MEGA* 27, 9.

¹⁵ Moses Hess, "Socialismus und Kommunismus," *Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz*, ed. Geog Herweg (Zurich: Verlag des Literarischen Compstoirs, 1843) 89.

¹⁶ The phrase, "according to Hess," does not appear in the original text, but is interjected by the editor David Leopold in a recent edition of Stirner's work (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), which is entitled *The Ego and Its Own*, rather than the common *The Ego and His Own*.

his fellows; but blinded too is he who wants only to be “man.” Neither of them puts his worth in exclusiveness, but in connectedness, or in the “tie” that conjoins him with others, in the ties of blood, of nationality, of humanity.¹⁷

It is likely that Hess, upon reading this, decided to respond to the charge of being “ridiculous,” and in 1845, wrote his reply, which ran to about 30 pages, which Stirner termed a “Brochure,” *Die letzten Philosophen* [*The Recent Philosophers*].¹⁸

Unlike Marx, Hess never disowned his Jewish ancestry, and indeed saw in the history of Judaism the very center of European history itself. In his first work, *The Holy History of Mankind*, which appeared in 1837, he systematically divided world history into three periods: the first being that of Adam, the second that of Jesus, and the third by Benedict Spinoza. As one scholar noted, this “fantasy of a third and most glorious dispensation had . . . , over the centuries, entered into the common stock of European social mythology.”¹⁹ In his tripartite division of history, Hess had not only inherited, as so many of his contemporaries, the mystical “*dritter Reich*” of Joachaim de Fiori, but also reflected his reading of the influential 1835 work of August von Cieszkowski, *Die Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*. In it, Cieszkowski had radically revised Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*. He had transformed Hegel’s four-fold division into a “more” Hegelian triadic division: past, present, and future.²⁰ The schema also finds reflection in the three historical stages of Communism, in which social history ends in a “Classless Society.”

Stimulated by the revolutionary expectations of his age, and, as so many of his contemporaries, such as Feuerbach, Hess also determined that the future age, the third and final age of mankind, would be one in which a universal community founded upon mutual love would prevail. Humanity would then live under the inspiration of Spinoza’s “*amor intellectus dei*,” and live under a “law of love” in which “freedom and order do not collide with each other.” Hess, in his 1843 work, “*The Philosophy of the Deed*” [*Die Philosophie der Tat*] encouraged Hegelian philosophers to turn from their impotent theorizing to a “*praxis*” (a term devised by Cieszkowski), to action which would bring forth the future society in which “The majesty and sovereignty of the One has transformed itself into the majesty

¹⁷ *Ego*, 216–17.

¹⁸ Moses Hess, *Die letzten Philosophen* (Darmstadt: C. W. Leske, June 1845) IV+28 S. Found also in Kurt W. Fleming (Hg.), *Recensenten Stirners. Kritik und Anti-Kritik*, ed. Kurt W. Fleming (Leipzig: Verlag Max-Stirner-Archiv, 2003) 27–43. Translated by the author as Although the “*letzten*” in the title lends itself to being translated as “The Last Philosophers,” a reading of Hess’ work indicates that it was directed against “recent” philosophers,” such as Bauer and Stirner.

¹⁹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970) 109.

²⁰ See Lawrence Stepelevich, “Making Hegel into a Better Hegelian: August von Cieszkowski,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (2) (April 1987): 263–73.

and sovereignty of Everyman.”²¹ A new international union of national cultures would press beyond the petty interests of nationalism and proceed to establish a new world order based upon the shared principles of German philosophy, French politics, and English economics. In time, Hess’ vision of a future world unhampered by competitive nationalism would find political reflection in the international aspirations of Marxism.

However, Hess was disturbed by certain “recent philosophers,” such as Bauer and Stirner, who persisted in theorizing rather than enlisting in revolutionary praxis. They were unconscious that they were defending the ancient Christian “unhappy consciousness [*unglückliche Bewußtsein*]” so well described by Hegel. This self-contradicted consciousness was of the essence of Christianity, it had generated a false world-view that envisioned social reality as torn between two contradictory elements: a future theoretical heaven of communal happiness, confronting the present world dominated by the conflict of self-interest. This self-interest, this Egoism, was but the covert expression of the divided reality of Christianity, and it first had to be banished before the practice of the future, a unifying love, could come into being. To this end, “*The Recent Philosophers*” focused upon refuting the misguided and unconscious Christian Egoism of Bauer and Stirner.

Hess’ essay runs to about 7,000 words. It evidences all of the usual virtues and vices of a work written by an autodidact—often quite creative, but sometimes marked by an imaginative excess which tended to an excited polemic. But this polemical “excitement” was not uncommon among the Young Hegelians of the pre-revolutionary *vormärz*. The impending revolution of 1848 seemed confirmation of Hegel’s own philosophy:

It is not difficult to see that our epoch is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things hitherto prevailing, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation.²²

Although he was no Marx when it came to vitriolic debating, Hess did well enough. However, considering the widespread anti-Semitic attitudes of his age, Stirner might have found some *non sequitur* support for his argument by simply echoing Arnold Ruge—who dismissed Hess as “the Communist Rabbi.” But he did not. There is no anti-Semitism to be found in any of his writings. However, if Stirner was silent about Judaism, Hess did have something to say about Christianity.

²¹ Moses Hess, “Die Philosophie der Tat,” *Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz*, ed. Georg Herwegh (Zurich: Literarischen Comptoirs, 1842) 309–31; rpt. (Vaduz: Topus Verlag, 1977).

²² G. W. F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 6–7.

Neither Bauer nor Stirner ever allowed themselves to be influenced from *without*. It is rather the case that this “insanity” emerged directly from the *inner* living development of this philosophy and so it is that exactly in this manner, and no other, must the progeny of the Christian ascetics take their departure from the world.²³

This remark contains the essence of Hess’ critique, and if Bauer had introduced “The Jewish Question,”²⁴ it was Hess who introduced “The Christian Question.” The Christian religion had set a chasm between the real and the ideal, the world and a heaven, the soul and the body. It was their covert Christianity, which drove these Bauer and Stirner, these “progeny of the Christian ascetics” to “take their departure from the world.” Their Egoism reflected their contempt for the world, leading them to retreat into the “insanity” of Egoism. Early in his essay, Hess briefly presents the problem of “recent philosophy” and his solution:

Since the rise of Christianity men have worked to resolve the difference between the Father and the Son, the Divine and Human—in a word, between the “Species-Man [*Gattungsmenschen*]” and the “bodily” man. But as little has become of this effort as has come to Protestantism in its annulment [*Aufhebung*] of the visible Church—for the invisible Church (Heaven) and the invisible Priest (Christ) endure—and so a new clergy is permitted to rise up. The recent philosophers will gain just as little by casting off [*aufhoben*] this invisible Church and establishing the “Absolute Spirit,” “Self-Consciousness,” and “Species-Being [*Gattungswesen*]” in the place of Heaven. All of these attempts to *theoretically* resolve the difference between the particular man and the human species must miscarry, for even if the singular man does comprehend the world and mankind, nature and history, he yet in actuality remains only a sundered man [*Vereinzellung*] as long as the division of man is not *practically* overcome. But this separation of man will only be practically resolved through Socialism—that is, if men unite themselves in community life and activity, and surrender private gain.²⁵

With this, Hegel’s “Absolute Spirit,” Feuerbach’s “Species-Being” and Bauer’s “Self-Consciousness” are drawn into Hess’s circle of theoretical solutions which failed to resolve the divided reality inherited from “Christian dualism.” Hess’s own attempt to “resolve the difference between the particular man and the human species” called for the “surrender of private gain.” This solution could hardly be expected to find Stirner in agreement, as his “Egoism” was expressed in “private gain” only to be surrendered at the cost of private destruction. For Stirner, Socialism was in the last analysis nothing less than the demand that the individual commit suicide. It was a radical and unacceptable resolution to the Christian

²³ Hess, *Recent Philosopher*, 359.

²⁴ Bruno Bauer, Stirner’s friend, was first to employ the term “The Jewish Question [*Die Judenfrage*]” within German intellectual circles. See Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975) xxi–xxiii.

²⁵ Hess, *Recent Philosophers*, 360.

problem of being “a sundered man [*Vereinzelung*].”²⁶ As Stirner had looked to a fully conscious Egoism as a remedy to resist the oppressive demands for communal enslavement, so Hess took it as the principle source of all past and present oppression. The curse of Egoism was, in religious form, nothing less than the “Original Sin,” which had alienated man from both his world and himself. For Hess, the curse was now fulfilled by the creation of a fallen “mercenary world”:

The “free competition” of our modern mercenary world is not only the perfected form of *rapacious robbery*, but it is also the perfected *consciousness* of the complete diversity of human estrangement. The pre-historical world, classical slavery, Roman bondage, were all more or less unfitted to the essence of this estrangement. They still had limited perspectives, and so had not attained to the universality and general justification of rapacity now found in our commercial world. The present mercenary world is the developed, essentially befitting, “conscious” and “principle” form of Egoism.

And further, even the most liberal politics are but the expression of the “modern mercenary world” (which Marx simply termed “Capitalism”):

Not only is the beast of prey [*das Raubtier*] perfected in our mercenary world, but the consciousness of this highest expression of the animal world is perfected as well . . . Privileged plundering comes to an end; the arbitrary exercise of power is now universal human right. . . The celebrated declaration of “The Rights of Man” is celebrated in that henceforth all preying beasts are equally justified . . . because they are autonomous and free beings, justified because they, as Egoists, as “independent individuals” are now recognized and legally acknowledged.²⁷

Clearly, Hess has expressed the central moments of Marx’s “materialist conception of history,” from the role of economics upon ideology, and the progress of egoistic doctrine from its initial support of slavery, to its historical termination in Capitalism. However, despite these major contributions to Communist theory, Hess was badly treated—as any competitor to Karl Marx might expect—and Marx dismissed Hess’s work as but

a robe of speculative cobwebs, embroidered with flowers of rhetoric, steeped in the dew of sickly sentiment, this transcendental robe in which the German Socialists wrapped their sorry “eternal truths,” all skin and bone, severed to wonderfully increase the sale of their goods among such a public.²⁸

Stirner might well have agreed with Marx.

²⁶ In the 1840 *German-English Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Mentz and Son), the term “*Vereinzelung*” not only connotes “dismembering” but also “retailing; selling in single portions,” a usage undoubtedly known and appreciated by Hess.

²⁷ Hess, *Recent Philosophers*, 369.

²⁸ *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972) 357.

For Hess, Stirner was alone in proposing a practical (and for him an absurd) solution to the issue of human self-alienation—a *Verein von Egoisten* (Union of Egoists).²⁹ The idea of such a Verein is touched upon only a few times in the *Ego*, but it drew Hess' attention in that it was, however it might appear as an oxymoron, given as an alternative to the desired Socialist society, in which "Everyone can cultivate, exercise and perfect their human qualities."

Considering the relative length and emotional energy that both invested in the debate over the nature of this "Union," it seems that both understood it to be a matter of considerable importance. It can be argued that the essential moral opposition between free-market Capitalism and a regulated Communistic society is present in the debate between the Stirner's idea of a "Union of Egoists" and Hess's "social union with our neighboring men."³⁰ However, what Hess might define as a "social union" is never fully presented in any clear and positive idea, and what might be understood of it is found by only reversing his unsparing criticism of Stirner's "Union." However, here is one of the rare, more or less clear, statement of Hess's own "solution" to the divisive state of human society:

A Socialist establishes the proposal that we should become *real species-being* [*wirkliche Gattungswesen*], and thereby proposes a society in which everyone can cultivate, exercise and perfect their human qualities. Stirner wants to know nothing of *this* actual man.³¹

Hess's notion as to the actual specifics, either of the political character or the legal structure of his proposed future Communist³² society, is left unstated. This silence is not unexpected, as all world reformers, from before Christ to beyond Marx, all those who call for a "better world"—a future world usually without either sin or money—leave its necessary details to the imagination of their followers.³³ Nevertheless, what is absolutely necessary in all visionary calls for the future which "ought to be" is the specific enumeration of present evils—which are always clearly in evidence in the eyes of the reformers. In the case of Christ, it was

²⁹ The "*Verein von Egoisten*" has commonly been translated as a "Union of Egoists." However, the term "Verein" can also mean an "Association," "Club" or a "Society"—which suggests a more informal gathering, and seems more in accord to what Stirner's had in mind.

³⁰ Hess, *Recent Philosophers*, 360.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 373. Hess, as was common practice, was prone to italicize terms to suggest that they have a deeper meaning, but the obscure term "*Gattungswesen*" [Species-Essence] is not clarified by being italicized.

³² The terms "Socialist" and "Communist" were used indifferently at the time.

³³ Stirner's treatment of idealistic reformers as adolescents closely follows Hegel's discussion of the adolescent mind. See Lawrence Stepelevich, "Ein Menschenleben: Hegel and Stirner" *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 166–75.

“sinners,” in the case of Marx “Capitalists”—and their followers were given the task to purge the world of evil and remake it into what it “ought to be.” On this matter, and surely to Hess’s chagrin, Stirner seems to have taken Hegel’s advice when he cautioned philosophers not to teach “what the world ought to be [*wie die Welt sein soll*], since “Philosophy always arrives too late to do any such teaching.”³⁴ Certainly, considering Stirner’s whole passivity, if not irritated rejection of all social reformers, it is likely that he did indeed take Hegel seriously. Hess would have read the very first lines of *The Ego and Its Own*, which clearly sets him and Stirner at odds:

What is not supposed to be my concern ! [*Was soll nicht alles Meine Sache sein!*] First and foremost, the good cause [*Sache*], then God’s cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of Mind, and a thousand other causes. Only my cause is never to be my concern. “Shame on the egoist who thinks only of himself!”³⁵

By late 1845, Stirner was prepared to defend himself against his critics.³⁶ In his defense, Stirner (who throughout refers to himself in the in the third-person) takes on three “notable writings”: Szeliga’s critique in the March edition of the “Northern German Gazette”;³⁷ Feuerbach’s “On The Essence of Christianity in Relation to The Ego and Its Own,” which had appeared in Wigand’s *Vierteljahrsschrift*; and the “brochure” of Moses Hess, “*The Recent Philosophers*.” Stirner’s response to his three critics ran to about 50 pages, with his rebuttal taking on each of his opponents, and dealing with a clarification of what he meant by his *Einzigkeit* [“uniqueness”], as well as his understanding of Egoism. Although Hess had joined Bauer and Feuerbach in their questioning of what Stirner had meant by “*Einzig*” and “*Egoismus*,” only he had questioned Stirner’s contribution to social theory, the “Union of Egoists.”

At the onset of his rejoinder to his critics, Stirner takes up a key factor in all of his philosophy, the indefinable meaning of the term “*Einzig*,” which appears in the title of his main work in which he terms himself *Der Einzige*. Stirner is clear: The word “*Einzig*” can only be spoken or written, but cannot be employed as a logical predicate. As reference to a “this,” it is only able to be pointed out or

³⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952) 12.

³⁵ *Ego*, 5.

³⁶ Max Stirner, “Recensenten Stirners,” *Max Stirner: Kleinere Schriften*, ed. John Henry Mackay (Stuttgart: Bad Cannstatt, 1976). The English translation by Wolf Landstreicher, *Stirner’s Critics* (Berkeley: LBC books, 2012) will be used when citing from Stirner’s text.

³⁷ “*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*.” Norddeutschen Blätter für Kritik, Litteratur und Unterhaltung. March, Berlin, 1844–45, published by Adolph Riess.

indicated. It cannot be defined. The term is what in classical logic would be termed a “*flatus vocis*,” a word that indicates but does not define:

What Stirner *says* is a word, a thought, a concept; what he *means* is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said.³⁸

Stirner’s view regarding the impossibility of defining “*Der Einzige*” is fully in accord with a fundamental principle of classical Logic:

It should first be noticed that definition is never of an individual, but always of what is universal, predicable of individuals—whether it be what we call their “kind,” or some state or attribute of them, or relation in which they stand. For what is defined is thereby marked off and fixed in our thought as a determinate concept; but the individual is made the individual he (or it) is by an infinity of attributes; he is as it were the perpetual meeting-place of concepts; we can neither exhaust what is to be said of him, nor make a selection, and declare that this is essential to him, and that unessential. Moreover, even if we could, we should still only have settled what he in fact is, but a second person also might be; for every concept is universal. What makes him *this* individual and not another we should not have defined, nor could we. . .³⁹

But yet, despite the logic, Stirner’s critics have all proposed a definition for the *Einziger*. This, for Stirner, was a futile exercise, as a universal cannot be predicated of a unique individual, such as himself, as “*this* individual,” this “*Einziger*.”

What Stirner says is a word, a thought, a concept; what he means is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said. The unique . . . has no content; it is indeterminacy in itself; only through you does it acquire content and determination. There is no conceptual development of the unique, one cannot build a philosophical system with it as a “principle,” the way one can with being, with thought, with the I. Rather it puts an end to all conceptual development [*Begriffsentwicklung*] . . .

With the unique, the rule of *absolute thought*, of thought with a conceptual content of its own, comes to an end, just as the concept and the conceptual world fades away when one uses the empty name: the name is the empty name to which only the view can give content.⁴⁰

Szeliga, “in all seriousness. . . identified it [*Der Einzige*] with a ‘man’ then proceeded with a rather vague middle term, an “individual in world history” to draw the conclusion, “after a definition of spooks (from which it emerges that “a spirit lacking thought is a body, and that the pure and simple body is the absence of thought”), that the unique is “the spook of spooks.” Stirner rejects the whole confused syllogism:

³⁸ Stirner, *Critics*, 55

³⁹ H. W. B. Joseph, *An Introduction to Logic* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1916) 81–82.

⁴⁰ Stirner, *Critics*, 55.

Szeliga hasn't in the least entered into the innermost depths of Stirner's book, as we've shown, and so we would like to consider him here not as the pure critic, but simply as one of the mass⁴¹ who wrote a review of the book.⁴²

It is evident here, as later in his response, that Stirner considered Szeliga as but a poor representative of Bauer's "pure critic," and hardly deserving of rebuttal.

Feuerbach is taken a bit more seriously, but still dismissed in that he defines the *Einzigster* as a "unique individual [*einziges Individuum*], which indicates that Feuerbach does not comprehend the indefinability of the subject.

Hess never directly engages in any effort to define the indefinable, but

... only alludes to the unique. He first identifies Stirner with the unique, and then says of the Unique: "He is the headless, heartless trunk, i.e., he has the illusion of being so, because in reality he doesn't just lack spirit, but body as well; he is nothing other than his illusions." And finally he pronounces his judgment on Stirner, "the unique": "He is boasting."

From this, the unique appears as "the spook of all spooks;" as "the sacred individual, which one must chase from the head" and as the "pale boaster."⁴³

It seems to Stirner that all of his critics failed to comprehend that the *Einzigster* cannot be comprehended, and so could not be gathered up into a generic collective—moral or otherwise. To understand what led Stirner to define the individual as a being without definition, to be "beyond" all definition, beyond absolute thought, is to also understand the rationale of his Egoistic philosophy. If nothing can be predicated of the "*Einzigster*" then nothing can be said of any generic normative thought or behavior—even what it is to act or think as a "human being [*Mensch*]." The "*Einzigster*," being beyond definition, can be termed just as much an "*Unmensch*"⁴⁴ as "*Mensch*"—just as much an inhuman as a human. Stirner takes this confusion of labels as the ground which directly leads to the humanistic condemnation of Egoism:

⁴¹ "*Die Masse*," Bauer's designation of the unreflective public who could not or would not engage in "critical criticism."

⁴² Stirner, *Critics*, 82.

⁴³ *Ibid*: 54.

⁴⁴ In the "Translator's Preface" to *Stirner's Critics*, Wolfi Landstreicher notes that "In Byington's translation of *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum*, he usually chose to simply translate the latter word as "unman." But in German, the word refers to a "monster," and knowing Stirner's enjoyment of playing with words and ideas in ways that are likely to get the goat of his opponents, I think that he most likely meant just that. To further emphasize Stirner's intent of contrasting this with the abstract, conceptual human being, I chose to translate the term as "inhuman monster." This leads to such delightful statements as: "You are an inhuman monster, and this is why you are completely human, a real and actual human being, a complete human being." Delightful, perhaps, but Byington's translation is exactly what Stirner intended by the term "Unmensch"—an "unman," or as the recent Editor of the *Ego* has it, "non-man."

A UNION OF EGOISTS

It is necessary to say a further word about the human being. As it seems, Stirner's book is written against the human being. He has drawn the harshest judgments for this, as for the word "egoist," and has aroused the most stubborn prejudices. Yes, the book actually is written against the human being, and yet Stirner could have gone after the same target without offending people so severely if he had reversed the subject and said that he wrote against the inhuman monster [Unmenschen]. But then he would have been at fault if someone misunderstood him in the opposite, i.e., the emotional way, and placed him on the list of those who raise their voice for the "true human being." But Stirner says: the human being is the inhuman monster [Unmensch]; what the one is, the other is; what is said against the one, is said against the other.⁴⁵

Stirner's effort to clarify what he meant by the "Einzig" being just as much inhuman as human by setting the two antithetical terms into a synthetic union, in which "what the one is, the other is" was certainly "misunderstood" by such as Hess. It was in this very misunderstanding that led humanists to fear Egoism as simply an inhuman display:

The human being, which our saints agonize so much to recognize, insofar as they always preach that one should recognize the human being in the human being, gets recognized completely and actually only when it is recognized as the inhuman monster.⁴⁶

So it would come as no surprise to Stirner that Hess would see in him an advocate of an inhuman Egoism which would directly lead to a Hobbesian world, wherein "the war of all against all is *sanctioned*." Hess chose another world, one in which "men unite themselves in community life and activity, and surrender private gain." However, there was an option which neither Hess nor any of the others who raise their voices for "the true human being" recognize: egoistic competition.

When what Hegel terms the "logic of the understanding," the either/or logic that characterizes "common sense," there seems only two exclusive alternatives when it comes to choosing a socio-economic model: either communistic cooperation, in which there are no individual decisions or actions to be made other than the decision and action benefitting the whole (the One), or, on the other hand, the free and unrestrained decisions and actions of each and every individual seeking their own "selfish" good. Hess chose the former.

It is important to note that in his defense of competitive human relations, Stirner implicitly defends what might now be termed "free-market Capitalism":

Hess calls free competition the complete form of murder with robbery and also the complete consciousness of the mutual human alienation (i.e., Egoism). Here again, Egoism should still be

⁴⁵ Stirner, *Critics*, 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*: 79.

guilty. Why then did one decide on competition? Because it seemed *useful* to each and all. And why do socialists now want to abolish it? Because it doesn't provide the hoped-for *usefulness*, because the majority do badly from it, because everyone wants to improve his position and because the abolition of competition seems advisable for *this purpose*.

Is Egoism the "basic principle" of competition, or, on the contrary, haven't egoists just *miscalculated* about this? Don't they have to give it up precisely because it doesn't satisfy their Egoism?

People introduced competition because they saw it as *well-being for all*; they *agreed* upon it and experimented *collectively* with it. This thing, this isolation and separation, is itself a product of association, agreement, shared convictions, and it didn't just isolate people, but also connected them. It was a *legal* status, but this law was a common tie, a social federation. In competition, people come to *agreement* perhaps in the way that hunters on a hunt may find it good for the hunt and for each of their respective purposes to scatter throughout the forest and hunt "in isolation." But what is most *useful* is open to argument. And now, sure enough, it turns out—and, by the way, socialists weren't the first ones to discover it—that in competition, not everyone finds *his profit*, his desired "private advantage," his value, his actual interest. But this comes out only through egoistic or selfish calculations.⁴⁷

The desire to correct "private advantage" is the moral ground for socialism, and it follows from the fact that in a competitive economy "the majority do badly." However, it is not only Stirner who sees this lack of universal reward, the "to each according to his need," lacking in the Capitalist (competitive) world, but also Hegel. It is presented as a simple expectation that there will be "losers." Competitive economic life is the compromise resting between individual "egoistic" struggle and "communal" agreements. The failure to successfully compete, in any arena of human relationships, cannot be denied. As Jesus had it, "The poor are with you always." Both Hegel and Stirner agree that although competition is the only "useful" relationship, nevertheless, one of its necessitated results is failure. As in the case of any competition, including writing articles for journals, not all can be "successful" and so publishable. In his excellent study of the issue, Michael Hardimon briefly summarized Hegel's view on the issue of poverty:

Hegel maintains that the modern social world is a home despite the fact that it contains poverty. In his view, poverty is not an accidental or contingent feature of modern society but is instead systematic and structural: the fact that people in modern society tend to fall into poverty and form an underclass is the result of the normal operation of the economy (*Ph. of Right*, ¶ 241). Even though Hegel is acutely aware of the horrors of poverty, he still maintains that the modern social world is a home.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid: 79.

⁴⁸ Michael Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 32.

What Hegel means by the “world is a home” is evident, that is, it is not a “home” to be displaced by an ideal, a future “home.” Neither Hegel nor Stirner were revolutionary reformers. As to the matter of a synthesis between self-interest and communal life, Stirner also followed Hegel’s view:

As everything is useful for man, man is likewise useful too, and his characteristic function consists in making himself a member of the human herd, of use for the common good, and serviceable to all. The extent to which he looks after his own interests is the measure with which he must also serve the purpose of others, and so far as he serves their turn, he is taking care of himself: the one hand washes the other. But wherever he finds himself there he is in his right place: he makes use of others and is himself made use of.⁴⁹

In this, both Hegel and Stirner reflected the economic theory of Adam Smith. In 1845, shortly after concluding the *Ego*, Stirner became both the editor and translator of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, and Jean-Baptiste Say’s *Traite d’Economie Politique*. His translations, contained in multi-volume series commissioned by Otto Wigand,⁵⁰ appeared in 1846–47, and remained the standard translation for some years. It is interesting to note that Smith’s well-known example of the “pin factory” appears in the *Ego*.⁵¹

As to what is “useful,” the egoist concludes that

I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this “human society;” I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely I transform it rather into my property and my creature; that is, I annihilate it, and form in its place the Union of Egoists [*Verein von Egoisten*].⁵²

A contemporary analogue to the “Verein,” and possibly inspired by it, can be found in the popular work of Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*. In this novel, a group of conscious individualists, similar to Stirner’s “conscious egoists,” have taken refuge in a hidden camp to escape the restrictions upon their freedom by the over-regulatory Socialistic society of bureaucratic “looters and moochers” which had, in a slow revolution, replaced the free-market Capitalism of the United States. They hold that

⁴⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 342–43.

⁵⁰ Max Stirner was first to edit and translate into German Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, and Jean-Baptiste Say’s *Traite d’Economie Politique*. [*Die National-Okonomen der Franzosen und Engländer*, 1.-4. Band, Ausführliches Lehrbuch der praktischen Politischen Okonomie, Deutsch mit Anmerkungen von Marx Stirner (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1846–1847)]. His translations remained standard for some years.

⁵¹ “He who in a pin factory only puts on the heads, only draws the wire, works, as it were, mechanically, like a machine; he remains half-trained, does not become a master.” *Ego*, 108.

⁵² Stirner, *Critics*, 161.

No matter whose welfare he professes to serve, be it the welfare of God or of that disembodied gargoyle he describes as “The People,” no matter what ideal he proclaims in terms of some supernatural dimension—in fact, in reality, on earth, his ideal is death, his craving is to kill, his only satisfaction is to torture.

Stirner would agree with this, and wrote that those such as Hess, that “You love man, therefore you torture the individual man, the egoist; your philanthropy (love of men) is the tormenting of men.”⁵³

For Stirner, as with Hegel, dialectical logic was not the same as the common logic “either/or” of the understanding, which forced an absolute choice between contradictory terms, but rather the case that both could be obtained only if neither of the alternatives was taken as the fixed and exclusively “true” element. In the “*Verein von Egoisten*” the antithetical terms, “*Verein*” and “*Egoisten*” find their dialectical unity. Although at first it might not seem at all the case, there is nevertheless a deep similarity between Hegel’s conception of the State and Stirner’s “*Verein*.” For Hegel,

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interest not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for the right . . . they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal.⁵⁴

Hess, as the “True Communist,” always maintained that an irreconcilable contradiction, an unbridgeable chasm, divided the abstract universal of the “Community” and the concrete “particular interest” of the individual. Taken in their fixity, as simple irreconcilable contradictories, the individual “of its own accord” could *not* pass over “into the interest of the universal”—and it is this passage which would have to be forced upon individuals. The power of the state would force the passage. Individuals as such, “egoists,” would have to be subordinated to that universal (be that universal either God or the State). And so, for Hess, there were only two antithetical options: either one must live in world of alienated (sinful) individuals engaged in “rapacious robbery” or to live an ideal universal (a Heaven on Earth) in which that savage individuality was annihilated (Hell). For Hess, the very conception of a “*Verein von Egoisten*” was an oxymoron. However, Stirner is prepared to defend the conception by an appeal to common experience:

Hess reprimands Stirner like this: “Oh, unique, you are great, original, brilliant! But I would have been glad to see your “union of egoists,” even if only on paper. . .”

⁵³ *Ego*, 258.

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 160.

A UNION OF EGOISTS

It would be another thing indeed, if Hess wanted to see egoistic unions not on paper, but in life. Faust finds himself in the midst of such a union when he cries: "Here I am human, here I can be human"—Goethe says it in black and white. If Hess attentively observed real life, to which he holds so much, he will see hundreds of such egoistic unions, some passing quickly, others lasting. Perhaps at this very moment, some children have come together just outside his window in a friendly game. If he looks at them, he will see a playful egoistic union. Perhaps Hess has a friend or a beloved; then he knows how one heart finds another, as their two hearts unite egoistically to delight (enjoy) each other, and how no one "comes up short" in this. Perhaps he meets a few good friends on the street and they ask him to accompany them to a tavern for wine; does he go along as a favor to them, or does he "unite" with them because it promises pleasure? Should they thank him heartily for the "sacrifice," or do they know that all together they form an "egoistic union" for a little while?

To be sure, Hess wouldn't pay attention to these trivial examples, they are so utterly physical and vastly distinct from sacred society, or rather from the "fraternal, human society" of sacred socialists.⁵⁵

However, it is upon these "trivial examples" that Stirner's argument is based. The "Verein" is justified by an inductive logic which rests upon empirical evidence; Hess' argument for the "Community" rests upon an *a priori* argument that finds its premise in the generic definition of "human being," of "Man," as a "Species-Being [*Gattungswesen*]." Stirner bases his case on the present reality of social life in which egoists gather together for their own pleasure. Hess looks to a future communal state in which the definition of "Man" as "Species-Being" is fulfilled; and he understood the present reality, justified by Stirner, as stifling human aspirations. It should be noted that Hess was not at all a dreamy idealist, and later corrected his more youthful "Messianic" ideals into a more realistic program of reform. Still, his idealism endured. In his first major work, the 1837 *Heilige Geschichte der Menschheit* [The Holy History of Mankind], a young Hess, in what Avineri described as a "messianic style," proclaimed a "New Jerusalem" in which

The politics of future society will be based on altruism, solidarity, and harmony. Peace will reign in society, both internally and externally; with the disappearance of class differences between the poor and the rich, the distinction between town and country will also disappear: "Villages will adorn themselves with stately buildings and towns with stately gardens."⁵⁶

A quarter of a century later, in his major work, *Rome and Jerusalem*, Hess still held to his vision of a redeemed humanity, this time cast as the fulfillment of the Jewish dream of returning to Zion:

⁵⁵ Stirner, *Critics*, 100.

⁵⁶ Cited by Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 39–40.

We see already from afar the Blessed Land of organized humanity; we can already reach out with our own eyes to the Promised Land, toward which all human history has been directed, despite the fact that we cannot yet cross over into it.⁵⁷

It was left to such as Theodor Herzl to “cross over into it,” and to transform the ancient dream into a practical reality, and so Hess received recognition as the “The Herald of Socialist Zionism.” Perhaps, in this turn from an idealized economic socialism to socialist Zionism, Hess also reflected the “unnerving” effect of Stirner’s *Ego*.

The Holy History of Mankind has the subtitle: “von einem jünger Spinozas”—from a young Spinozist. This is significant, as Stirner is considered as a leading “Junghegelianer”—a “Young Hegelian.” In looking upon their debate, it might be well argued that both Spinoza and Hegel have found their ideological representatives in Hess and Stirner. Hess, who called Spinoza “The Master” throughout *The Holy History of Mankind*, a work “bristling with a messianic message,”⁵⁸ fully accepted Spinoza’s doctrine that the “Absolute” rendered individuality metaphysically unjustified.⁵⁹ And as to Hegelianism itself, it was but another recrudescence of dualistic Christianity, which simply “preserved Christian dualism, and . . . In this way, Hess saw Hegelian philosophy as legitimizing social oppression, as did the philosophy of the Enlightenment.”⁶⁰

On the other hand, Stirner, well-versed and committed to Hegel’s dialectical logic, was not about to surrender his real individuality for the sake of an abstract ideal consistency (an “Absolute”) that could only satisfy a mind unable to transcend the “either/or” logic of understanding. To surrender to that common logic would insure “legitimizing social oppression.”

In the dense metaphysical thickets, which separated the two opponents, what one had taken as obvious that an undivided Community must encompass and absorb the “egoistic” many was taken by the other as merely a conceptual reduction based upon the false logic that antithetical terms could never be reconciled. It was Hess who proposed a communality in which “men unite themselves in community life and activity, and surrender private gain.” It was Stirner who defended the individual need for private gain. In retrospect, their debate reflected the difference between the philosophies of Hegel and Spinoza, which were themselves but the later reflection of the absolute opposition which held between the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Hegel candidly asserted that “there is

⁵⁷ Cited by Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 117.

⁵⁸ Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 22.

⁵⁹ See Yitzhak Melamed’s “Acomism or Weak Individuals? Hegel, Spinoza, and the reality of the Finite,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48 (2010): 77–92.

⁶⁰ Avineri, *Hess*, 125.

no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my logic.”⁶¹ Since “the reasoning of Parmenides and Zeno is abstract understanding”—and not speculative dialectic, so the Eleatics were unable to comprehend the contradictory nature of reality. The same Eleatic philosophy repeated itself in Spinoza:

The simple thought of Spinoza’s idealism is this: The true is simply and solely the one substance, whose attributes are thought and extension or nature: and only this absolute unity is reality, it alone is God. . . Taken as a whole, this constitutes the Idea of Spinoza and is just what *tô ov* (the One Being) was to the Eleatics.⁶²

For Hegel, and Stirner,⁶³ it was only with the advent of the dialectical philosophy of Heraclitus that the dead conceptual “Absolute” of Spinoza was displaced, and the undivided ideal “One” was replaced by the concrete “unity of opposites” which characterized absolute reality.

The future Communal society of Hess, in which “The majesty and sovereignty of the One has transformed itself into the majesty and sovereignty of Everyman” was inspired by Spinoza. The “One,” as with the Eleatics, was absolute. Marx would agree, for as he had it in his *Grundrisse*, “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.” But Stirner held to Hegel and Heraclitus, and justified the dialectical form of the present society, which as a “unity of opposites” was expressed as a competitive “Union of Egoists” in which individuals entered into relations with other individuals—and not with “relations.”

The debate between the “*jünger Spinozas*” and the “*Junghegelianer*” is as ancient as philosophy itself.

Villanova University

⁶¹ Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955) I, 279.

⁶² Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, III, 156–57.

⁶³ In 1827, Stirner attended Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, and would likely have heard Hegel’s rejection of Parmenides in favor of Heraclitus.

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