

Svein Olav Nyberg

The union of egoists

A common misconception about egoism, and about the egoism of Stirner in particular, is that it is a reclusive, anti-social kind of behaviour. As far as Stirner is concerned, such commentators must have been asleep through that half of his book which is devoted to describing exactly the social interactions of an egoist, or more precisely — what social interactions are like when they are not mediated by ideals or “natural bonds”.

Egoism is not anti-sociality, like some believe, but is better seen as a more mature kind of sociality.

Stirner is a dialectical philosopher, and as such his focus is on relations. As is with relations, it often comprises three elements, the two relata, and the relation itself, and hence the famous triad is a common occurrence in dialectical philosophy. So also with Stirner. Stirner’s main triadic development is that of (1) The “natural” or material bond of the ancients, (2) The bond by ideas, our “equality before reason”, into (3) the *willed* or *owned* relation.

In his book, Stirner starts the description of owned relations with relations to material objects and ideas. A willed relation to these are said to be that they are your *property* (“*eigentum*”).

The opposite of the willed relation is, as indicated, the bond, the “ought” and the “shall”. These are simply relations that are not mine to dispose of, but which are given me from without — without also in the sense of an “essence” I must confirm to and cannot dispose of.

A particular case of such a bond is when you are not to let go of an idea. In Hegelian terms: When that thought is seen as exempt from and sacred to “the power of the negative”. Such an idea is called a fixed idea. It is, in Stirner’s words “An idea that has subjected the man to itself” — an idea that you are not to criticise. [Recall that *Der Einzige* is “the power of the negative” to himself.]

Ideas are often expressed in the material world, as we call it. One such idea is that of “property”. It should be noted that the common use of this word is that of conformation to an idea — a Fixed Idea — about what you can [“morally”] lay your hands on. By Stirner, however, property in this sense, “sacred property” or as he even calls it “state property”, is not exempt from criticism and from — his laying hands on it. It is in the sense of idea already his property in his thinking it as such — in the intentional, willing act. However, factual possession, laying hands on it, depends also on “my might”, as Stirner expresses it.

Now, once the relation of “*Eigentum*” — of “property” in the *Stirnerian* sense has been understood — and not before, can we proceed to the meeting of two *Einzige*, two Subjects. There are several ways in which two people can meet:

1. **The Bond.** This is a meeting of two people according to how they “ought to” behave towards one another. It is not as such a meeting which is *willed*, but rather a meeting according to the “ought”. Examples of such are when the father and

the son meet *in the roles* of father and son. “Father” and “son” they will always remain in a descriptive sense. But when they meet according to such roles, they meet by an “ought” and not by a “will”. Roles are ascribed when the relation is seen as a static object.

2. The property. The relation can be a one-sidedly willed one. In this, the one is an Einzige whereas the Other has become Eigentum (for the one who is Einzige). Perhaps this is the state of things where we can say “Hell is the Other” (i.e. when that Other guy is Einzige and I am reduced to a role as Eigentum).

However, Moses Hess criticised Stirner’s conception of what Stirner call “Verein der Egoisten” [“The Union of Egoists”] along the lines that in such a meeting, there would have to be one who dominated and one who submitted to domination. That is, Hess imagined that “The Union of Egoist” would be a relation of the kind (2) described above.

Now, (2) might describe a Hobbesian egoist. But can it describe *la derniere mallon de la chaine Hegelienne* (as Stirner has been called)? No, that is a bit too crude. Stirner did himself reply to this criticism by pointing to examples: Two friends playing with their toys, two men going together to the wine shop. These do of course not comprise an exhaustive list of unions, and our man Stirner does indeed speak of unions consisting of thousands of people, too, unions uniting to catch a thief or to get better pay for one’s own labour.

More philosophically, Moses Hess describes a one-sidedness, and thinks it is a necessary one for an Stirner. What is then more natural than to apply a little dialectical reasoning to figure out what Stirner really *did* mean. I propose it is

3. The union. The relation is understood as a process. It is a process in which the relation is continually renewed by that both [/all] parts support it through an act of will. The Union requires that both/all parties are present through conscious egoism – i.e. own-will. If one part silently finds him/her-self to be suffering, but puts up and – keeps the appearance, the union has degenerated into something else.

Only after development has come to the understanding of the union of egoists does Stirner come to the ultimately important relation – the relation of me to myself. In the section entitled “My self-enjoyment”, Stirner sets up mere valuing of life against enjoyment of life. In the former view, I am an object to be preserved. In the latter I see myself as the subject of all my valuing relations.

In this sense, Stirner can rebuke the question “what am I?” and replace it with “who am I?”, a question which has its answer in this bodily person who asks the question. This is the “nothingness” of which Stirner speaks of as I. “Not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but a creative nothing.”

My relation to myself is thus a meeting of myself as willer, a union with myself and a consumption – appropriation – of myself as my own.

«There is no room for God in the man who is full of himself.»

— Posted outside a local church

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