

Max Stirner, the Lunatic and Donald Trump

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Abstract

German philosopher Max Stirner (1806-1856) published his major work, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* ('The Ego and His Own') in 1844, and it attracted short-lived critical acclaim. A half century or so later there was revival of interest and then again in the 1970s, enough so that his name and work is generally recognized to casual students of philosophy. This paper presents the basic elements of Stirner's thought and explores them against the backdrop of an academic article published in 1903 by a German psychiatrist who compared the ravings of an asylum inmate to Stirner's ideas. The paper concludes with Stirner's insight applied to the political success of Donald Trump, whose bombastic and contentious style bears resemblance to Stirner's musings about political strategy.

Keywords: Max Stirner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Donald Trump, Nihilism, Philosophy, Insanity

1. Introduction

German philosopher Max Stirner is best known for his treatise *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* ('The Ego and His Own'), an influential work in the intellectual history of nihilism, anarchism, communism and National Socialism, each of which movements have been radical challenges to the status quo. In 1844, a reviewer proclaimed Stirner's work to be the "first readable philosophical book in Germany" when it appeared that year, coincidentally the year of Friedrich Nietzsche's birth (Leopold xiii). Nietzsche's well known aphorism, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" in all probability was influenced by his reading of Stirner, who had written in *Der Einzige* that "[M]an has killed God in order to become [the] sole God on high" (85). Stirner's biographer Henry MacKay, writing in 1910, unearthed evidence suggesting that Nietzsche had indeed "shyly buried in himself the overwhelming force of *Der Einzige*," and he concluded that Nietzsche's uncompromising anti-authoritarianism most likely originated in Stirner's thought. But the biographer recoiled at the thought to liken the two: "to compare this eternally vacillating, muddled spirit [Nietzsche], who is repeatedly self-contradictory, almost helplessly tumbling from truth to error, with the deep, clear, calm, and superior genius of Stirner is an absurdity not worth serious refutation . . . The fever of the Nietzsche sickness is already collapsing. One day the "superman" will be shattered on the uniqueness of [*Der Einzige*]" (29).

MacKay wrote these words during the first Stirner revival, in the early 20th century, a time also of renewed enthusiasm for Nietzsche. Stirner has of course never reached Nietzsche's stature and fame and was all but forgotten until MacKay's campaign to resurrect him. In the 1970s, there was renewed interest in Stirner, and occasionally there have been articles and even books taking up this original philosopher, in some cases contrasting and comparing him, for example, to thinkers such as Ayn Rand, Rudolf Steiner, and Karl Marx.

2. Thesis and Methodology

This paper presents the basic elements of Stirner's thought and explores them against the backdrop of an academic article published in 1903 by a German psychiatrist who compared the ravings of an asylum inmate to Stirner's ideas. The paper concludes with Stirner's insight applied to the political success of Donald Trump, whose bombastic and contentious style bears resemblance to Stirner's musings about political strategy.

3. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* ('The Ego and His Own')

Der Einzige was a critical success in Stirner's own time, the tense years just prior to the failed revolution of 1848, a period of strict censorship in Germany. "I will manage to print by force or ruse," declared Stirner. "I get my permission to print only from myself and my strength." And he succeeded, for Prussia's Ministry of the Interior cleared the book during initial seizures of copies, reckoning it "too absurd" to be dangerous (MacKay 87).

So this "absurd" book got past the censors, an irony and neat trick, since its main theme is freedom of expression, obviously a provocative topic in a repressive environment such as pre-Revolutionary Germany. Yet Stirner is quite specific about the types of expression he has in mind, and because the intended readership was largely made up of his comrades in the so-called 'Young Hegelian' movement of the 1840s, he lays out his argument as a dialectical exercise, following the methodology set forth by Hegel, whose lectures he had attended at the University of Berlin (Schiereck 7).

Stirner proposes the binary opposition of destruction and creation to enclose all forms expression intellectual, emotional, and sensual. Obviously this is a well-worn contrast, prominent for example in the Hindu religion: Shiva is the god of destruction, Brahma the god of creation. Life comprises these twin drives, suggests Stirner also, and he names what ought to be their targets: The creative drive should produce enjoyment of life, whereas the urge to destroy should aim at annihilating the tyranny of fixed ideas. So enjoyment of life on the one hand, and fixed ideas on the other are targets, are objects, and they are eminently worthy of the human gaze. Yet where is the subject in this formulation? What force controls the human gaze? Stirner's answer is deceptively banal. He declares that the subject, without exception, is the human ego, *der Einzige* (Schiereck 43).

Essentially we're all in it for ourselves alone, and in anticipation of Nietzsche's sad acknowledgement of the human condition that we are *human, all too human* we face continual assaults on our sovereign self. "What is not supposed to be my concern!" announces Stirner in the opening sentence of *Der Einzige* and then bombards the reader with a litany of oppressive fixed ideas threatening the self. "First and foremost, [there is] the Good Cause, 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," Stirner declares in mock admonishment to defy the fixed ideas strangling the self, the ego. God is a fixed idea, created by man, so resist it. Challenge it. Mankind is an abstraction, confront it. Freedom too, resist it. And so on (17).

But abstractions are not inert and unarmed, and this is because others have imbued them with the power of their own egos, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. They have taken possession of them. These abstractions, these fixed ideas belong now to the ego, hence Stirner's title, *The Ego and His Own*. The fixed ideas are property, jealously guarded by their owners and assail the individual from day one:

From the moment when he catches sight of the light of the world a man seeks to find out himself and get hold of himself out of its confusion, in which he, with everything else, is tossed about in motley mixture. But everything that comes in contact with the child defends itself in turn against his attacks, and asserts its own persistence. Accordingly, because each thing cares for itself at the same time [and] comes into constant collision with other things, the combat of self-assertion is unavoidable . . . The victor becomes the lord, the vanquished one the subject . . . both remain enemies, and always lie in wait: they watch for each other's weaknesses (17).

4. *The Lunatic*

Stirner's world view looks a lot like paranoia, and to be sure, others have come to this conclusion reading his opus. In 1903 a German psychiatrist wrote an article about him in a scientific journal devoted to psychiatry and nervous disorders, nearly a half century after Stirner's death. Entitled "Stirner's Ideas in a System of Paranoiac Delusion," the article is a bizarre case study of a well-read woman committed to an insane asylum, a poor soul suffering such extreme detachment from societal conventions that the psychiatrist believes that she *must* have been reading Stirner, though she steadfastly denied it when questioned, and so he has to admit there is no direct proof that she had (Schultze 813-814).¹

Even so, the psychiatrist claims to find uncanny similarities between the philosopher's world view and the paranoiac's, comparing Stirner's *der Einzige* with the voluminous hand-written notes the articulate inmate had presented to the asylum in an effort to prove her sanity.

With customary German diligence and care, he finds very many passages in Stirner's work ostensibly to prove that *der Einzige* is in fact a testimony to a diseased paranoid mind that in his estimation mirrors remarkably the thinking and words of the woman under his care at the asylum. He notes for example her insistence that she will not be bound whatsoever to rules, laws, or commandments and has no obligation to submit to any authority *unless* its chief role is to protect her above all (804).

Yet she makes the point that no matter how well-intentioned, any external authority stands in weak comparison to her own vigilant self (804). The doctor therefore concludes he is dealing with a person and a philosophy that is uncompromising in its defense of the ego. This is extreme individualism, he declares, and then finds gems of outlandish self-confidence in Stirner's rapid-fire prose to compare: "I am, and will continue to be, more than the state, church, and God. I alone can give myself rights. What is mine? Nothing other than what is in my authority. What is in my authority? Whatever I give myself permission to [seize]." Now only a severe personality disorder could explain such an attitude, suggests the psychiatrist and then describes the best he can the philosopher's *Weltanschauung*. According to Stirner, he writes, "our era does *not* follow the Apollonian dictum to "Know Thyself," but instead operates under the banner, "Defend Thyself" (810).

At the outset of his article the psychiatrist mentions hesitation at devoting so much probing analysis to this one mad woman's perception of reality, a unique case for him and for numerous colleagues also: none had come across anything like it. Nonetheless, he felt justified to submit his findings to the *Archive of Psychiatry and Nervous Disorders*, and he states as much, commenting that she had provided him an unprecedented amount of conceptual fodder to hold up against Stirner's *Der Einzige*. In his view, to compare the perceptions of a lunatic with the insight of this philosopher, this would serve to illuminate trends in philosophy that were very much in vogue at the time thanks to the Nietzsche revival. Anarchism, nihilism, and extreme individualism: no one expressed these ideas so "crassly and decisively" as did Stirner, claims the psychiatrist, who evidently believed he was sounding an alarm about dangerous ideas (807).

This is clearly not a remarkable discovery: that psychiatry might collude to suppress ideas threatening the state. Political dissidents in the former Soviet Union were routinely branded insane and committed to asylums to rid the government of their agitations, real or suspected. Incarcerated far-right extremists in today's Germany are subjected to exhaustive psychiatric evaluations in the hope that they too will be institutionalized and that their ideas are removed from political discourse (Böhle; Herwig). To be sure, these are extreme examples of thought repression, and the observer sees tyranny in brute relief. But many violations of the self are not so obvious. In *der Einzige*, Stirner addresses the issue and recommends a "sharpening of the opposition" in order to reveal and then to shatter external threats to the inviolate ego. While the threats are fixed ideas fortified and ego-charged by others, they are by no means invincible (110).

To illustrate the point, he reaches back to the ancient Greeks to show that bringing into sharp focus an opposing belief will reveal that the original fixed idea is fragile, not to be taken seriously and so can be thoroughly vanquished. "Let us plunge at once into the midst of the most brilliant years of the ancients, into the Periclean century," he announces theatrically, referring to the Golden Age of Athens, a time when intellect replaced the senses as the guiding principle. This change was a complete about-face on the path to a meaningful life, and "the ancients themselves worked toward making their [former] truth a lie . . . Greece [now] made a pastime of what had hitherto been to her a monstrously serious matter" (26).

Stirner attributes the playful victory to the Sophists, the silver-tongued philosophers who ridiculed sensuality and feeling, and whose "courageous sauciness pronounce[d] the reassuring words, "Don't be bluffed. . . . Use your understanding, your wit, your mind, against everything; it is by having a good and well-drilled understanding that one gets through the world best, provides for himself the best lot, the most pleasant life." So the idea that the good life can only be lived in sensuality now yielded to another fixed notion, that the life of the mind is the way to go. And the Sophists invested their own egos into this new belief, using "dialectic skill, command of language, the art of disputation, etc. They announce[d] that mind is to be used against everything . . . for to them it is a means, a weapon, as trickery and defiance serve children for the same purpose; their mind is the unbribable understanding" (26).

5. Donald Trump

Sophistry pervades our own time, and Stirner's insights are helpful to understand today's political discourse.

Tricky orators command the stage; media pundits ‘spin’ the news; and President Donald Trump turns the phrase “fake news” into a weapon to disarm political enemies. During the 2016 election, he wooed followers for seemingly saying what’s on his mind without filtering; he attacked “political correctness” to ride a groundswell of resentment against the status quo and continues to oppose with bombast and reality-TV techniques. To use Stirner’s term, he “sharpens” the opposition to his political agenda, bringing his enemies into stark relief so that they may be ridiculed and assailed by his political allies. Because of the stranglehold on US politics by the two-party system, it is perhaps a logical development that divisiveness would escalate in this binary field of battle. To follow the example of political correctness, this is an abstract concept that has become a “fixed idea,” to use Stirner’s lexicon. Vested with the emotional power of ego, political correctness is now property protected with vigilance by its owners. While President Trump and his proxies sharpen its contours for strategic targeting, the proprietors themselves participate in the phenomenon. In “How the P.C. Police Propelled Donald Trump,” commentator Tom Nichols of the leftist *The Daily Beast* observes: “Today ... we have a new, more virulent political correctness that terrorizes both liberals and conservatives, old-line Democrats and Republicans, alike.” He claims that violating political correctness “can lead to public ostracism and the loss of a job.” Be that as it may, Stirner’s concept of “sharpening the opposition” is perhaps the most useful explaining the success of Donald Trump, whose legendary braggadocio finds natural affinity to Stirner’s *The Ego and His Own*.

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¹All quotes from Schultze are translations by author.