

A Philosopher for Today?: Max Stirner's Egoistical Nihilism

David Holbrook

I believe that the underlying philosophy of our culture has become nihilistic. If we pursue the implications of nihilism to their ultimate conclusions, where do we arrive? Very few have dared to do this: Max Stirner, who published a book on this theme in 1845, was one who dared. If we turn back to him we can see that he is the unacknowledged prophet of today's fashionable culture.

The ultimate problems posed by nihilism are examined in a book on this German philosopher, by Dr. R. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner*, (Hull University Press, 1971). Stirner grew out of the neo-Hegelian movement, and published his one important work in 1845: *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*—'The Unique One and His Property'.

Stirner belonged to movements which Marx rejected as 'intellectual nihilists'. Following the nihilist logic to its ultimate implications, he denied God and Christian values, the State's authority, and all traditional morality.

But he went still further, and denied all ethical obligations. In the face of nothingness he embraced nothingness, and he sought no commitment or ultimate responsibility, to man or the universe. 'What is the commonweal to me?' All that he was left with was—self. The self and the world were ultimately Nothing—but the Unique One 'makes Nothing his cause'.

Stirner's nihilism, then, is very different from existentialism and philosophical anarchism. It seeks no new ethic beyond a present false or stale morality. Egoistical nihilism seeks no greater authenticity or better society like these. Stirner simply seeks to reduce the world—the others—to objects for consumption. 'Let us not aspire to community,' he said, 'but *one-sidedness*.' 'Let us seek in others only means and organs . . . For me no one is a person to be respected . . . but solely an object . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless.' The 'other' is but an object to be consumed 'whose only relation to me is that of useableness, utility, use'. We can hear in every phrase of Stirner's the attitude to life of today's cultural nihilist. (Today even the Annan Report has to warn us that 'the broadcaster should not imply that right and wrong do not exist' 16.42).

It is possible, of course, to reject Stirner's view, in the name of

love, if one is a Christian. But Stirner demolishes Christianity. Of course, in Christianity itself, there are those, like John Robinson, who seem willing to let God go, and apparently transcendental values too—to find ultimate meaning in the ‘personality’, declaring that ‘in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality’, (*Honest to God*). At least this is a quest for truth, if not for God. The Stirnerian has a quite different impulse. He will not give himself up to such an act of faith. He has no goal of discovery of the ‘other’ or the ‘Thou’. To Stirner, relationships ‘represent no more than pragmatic *investments*, in which part of his substance is expended in calculation of a direct and of course profitable return’, as Paterson says. (my italics).

He always ‘exact[s] a realistic price for any partial concessions he has to make to the ‘other’—no-one has any claims on him or his property, and he does not acknowledge the existence of any other person. He is Nothing, in that if he dies he is easily replaced: he represents no manifestation of God, or the universe. He is Nothing to Nothing. The only way of passing one’s time is not by any creative intentionality over against time and space, but by ruthless egoism, regarding everything and everyone as one’s property, if it is possible in any way to make them one’s own. Life is a pastime, merely, consuming time by ‘creative Nothingness’. This is the philosophy of *Penthouse* rather than of radical theology or even radical atheism like that of the Humanists.

This ruthless atheistical totality of Stirner is deeply disturbing—and yet challenges us, to declare what, then, we do stand for: what then can we say in answer? This was his challenge to Marx, who declared in favour of *praxis*—man’s creative engagement with reality. Stirner would ask, in the name of what? A myth of social existence, or the social good, or some common ideal which could easily be demolished, and shown as a mere cloak for disguised egoism, in each member of society? If we are truthful, egoism is the only reliable and dependable way of living, because that is how (undisguised) men live anyway: this is Stirner’s view. It is echoed, surely, in acerbic works like Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*: man is low and conditions are unpropitious. What is our answer?

Dr. Paterson discusses the difference between existentialism and philosophical anarchism. We would be wrong to take Stirner to be the most existential of philosophers, or the most ruthless of the anarchists, in the sense of pursuing a new human truth and ethical sense. Stirner is not to be taken in such a light. It is easy to mistake his energy for a creative one: after all, he speaks of ‘*creative nothingness*’. Stirner may even resemble Kierkegaard so closely, that there is an almost ‘*doppelganger*’ effect. Yet in fact Stirner is only a ‘kind of diabolical mirror-image’ of the Danish philosopher of Dread. While Kierkegaard emphasises our need to find

ourselves in the face of nothingness by choosing ('the choose-thyself may replace the know-thyself'), Stirner declares 'Get the value out of thyself!'. While Kierkegaard finds a new emphasis for ethical responsibility, Stirner merely moves from the transcendence of Nothingness to a 'creative Nothingness' that culminates in 'Egoistic Self-enjoyment'. As Camus said, 'There is no act of destruction from which Stirner will recoil'—and in the end, 'on the ruins of the world, the final victory of rebellion is celebrated by the desolate laughter of its egoistic monarch.'

Stirner affords a challenge to the 'old' existentialism. He represents the total encounter with nothingness: 'the existentialists need to acknowledge—in his unique one—the one finished, historical instance of that total encounter with nothingness from which they themselves have in the end recoiled.' The existentialists have clutched and clutched at some metaphysical and moral transcendent, says Paterson, 'to provide a meaningful foundation for their personal world, lest it be consumed by its own insecurity.'

For Sartre, man is nothing, 'a useless passion', and exists before he can be defined by my conception. To Sartre man's consciousness is identical with the individual's choice of himself as present to the world of his choice. By conscious choice he transcends himself. But Stirner too spoke of a 'finite, self-dissolving ego' that transcends the self it leaves behind, as 'a fresh moment of the future beckons.'

Yet Stirner's 'creative Nothingness' does not create the world in becoming conscious of it, in the sense the existentialist believes possible. Stirner's approach involves annihilating and dissolving the real world: the world is merely 'food' to the egoistic self. 'I am not Nothing in the sense of vacuity,' declares Stirner, 'but the creating Nothing, the Nothing out of which as creator I myself create everything.' Rather than bear the dreadful burden of solitude and responsibility that the recognition of nothingness imposes, men will lose themselves in the world and let themselves be taken over by it, Heidegger believed. But Stirner went further towards an ultimate denial of all essences, ideals, God-given, mythical forms of delusion about the real nature of our 'abandoned' state.

So while Sartre's existentialism strives towards constructing something 'albeit by *doing* rather than *being*' with evident solemnity, Stirner's philosophy moves towards 'criminal frivolity'. To us he says, 'it is precisely what you hold *sacred* that I would not respect.' For Sartre, the self that is chosen has value only because it is *chosen*. The freedom which I am is the freedom to choose. Both Stirner and Sartre reject any role, or self, imposed upon one without choice. 'If this freedom is surrendered, the alienation which I suffer is at once a servitude and a petrification'. Both are thus led to a negative attitude to relationship. 'While I seek to enslave the other, the other seeks to enslave me,' says Sartre. 'The

original meaning of Being-for-others is conflict.' For Stirner, too, 'there can be no relations, either for co-operation or of opposition, between individuals each of whom ultimately inhabits his own private and exclusive universe.' Both philosophers, says Paterson, work out a given pattern of endless conflict.

Sartre's lover 'does not desire to possess the beloved as one possesses a thing, he demands a special type of appropriation.' But although the attempt in the end is doomed to futility, Sartre's is at least an attempt to find the existence of the other, however much it becomes an attempt to 'seize and reduce the Other's subjectivity.'

At least in Sartre we have an objection to this objectification of the person: to Sartre it is terrible to be reduced to a thing.

By contrast, Stirner's principle is to exploit the other: 'I do not allow myself to be disturbed in my self-enjoyment', he declares, 'since I practise a Terrorism of the Self which drives off every human consideration.' This is the maxim of today's pornographer, film-maker and television producer, in the 'avant-garde' area.

The Unique One has purged his world of 'persons' and the nauseous 'values' which persons exude (Paterson, p. 184). The Unique One's project can be completely carried through by an act of self-consciousness in which his world will be simultaneously depopulated and devalued.

'I want merely to be I,' declares Stirner. 'I think nothing of Nature, men and their law, human society and its lore, and I sever every connection with it, even that of language. To all the demands of your Ought, to all the pronouncements of your categorical Judgement, I oppose the 'ataraxy' of my Ego.' (*Kleiners Schriften*) As Paterson points out, while the world inhabited by the Sartrean existentialist, by Heidegger's 'authentic individual', and by Stirner's Unique One may be essentially the same, they have different views of the way in which one exerts one's personal mode in it. To Heidegger, to live as an egoist merely enjoying one's status and possessions, is to be a 'fallen being'. To reduce others to objects is to Sartre inevitably suicidal. Moreover, for Sartre, self-realisation is doomed since man in his attempt to find himself by losing himself reveals himself as a 'useless passion'. But even in the 'old' existentialism, there is an emphasis on 'commitment' and 'responsibility'. From this position a new direction remains possible—and in the 'new' existentialism of Ludwig Binswanger we find a quite different mode, emerging: an existentialism based on *liebende Wirheit*, 'loving we-hood'.

By contrast the philosophy of the Unique One is a philosophy of *disengagement*—a refusal to become involved, even with those you enjoy. It is a philosophy of ultimate irresponsibility: there is nothing and nobody in Stirner's universe to respect. Such concepts

as 'authenticity', summoning man to a high existential 'resolve', or of the recognition of 'concern' at the root structure of human existence have no place in Stirnean nihilism. 'Rootless and unconcerned, the Unique One traces the changing circles of his factitious identity in consultation with himself alone, and without reference to any ideal of personal 'integrity' other than the integrity which comes from refusing to be debauched by personal ideals,' says Paterson (p. 187).

Even the most pessimistic existentialists represent their situation in an alienated world as a 'predicament' which demands to be *overcome*. Authentic choice for them is a *solution*. 'Fundamentally, it is the truth of nihilism which has to be overcome, and it is the artifice of commitment which is his chosen solution.' Only in this can the existentialist achieve a solution to the *Dasein* problem.

The response of the nihilistic egoist, by contrast, is an artifice which 'reflects and carries forward' the *nihilistic egoism*, '*gratuitously adopted in a world in which all responses are gratuitous, and consciously withholding meaning from a situation which it found to be originally meaningless.*' (Paterson p. 188, my italics). The posture of the egoistic nihilist is thus an act of supreme treachery to man. Finding the problem of meaninglessness in the world, he plunges into a solipsistic answer which finds a meaning for *him*, in the embracement of disintegration and doom: but he eats *his* 'food'—and grows fat on the consumption of those he has made his 'property'. As Paterson says: 'the nihilistic egoist's original project of self-satisfaction can only be carried through in a world which mirrors his own disintegration.'

Is it true (as Paterson seems to think) that existentialism, as one central mode of belief in our culture, must come to this conclusion? Is it precisely in this world that, 'according to his own avowals, the existentialist's project of personal integrity is doomed?'

It is true that in the 'old' existentialism of Sartre since everyone and everything are doomed to nothingness, while we must choose and try to define ourselves thus, there is no chance of ever succeeding in this. The only response to existence is thus one of futility and despair. But there is now developing a 'new' existentialism which takes a very different view: as in the work of Ludwig Binswanger and Michael Polanyi, meaning is possible—the world is full of meaning, and we are full of potentialities. From this kind of philosophical anthropology it is possible to see Stirner's falsities. For one thing, Stirner *used the language*: writing itself represents a manifestation of togetherness, union, communication, concern and values. It is an act of the animal symbolicum and unites us with all human beings. As Paterson points out, Stirner is not strictly a solipsist, since *Der Einzige* is full of references to other egos,

and he speaks to them in the first person plural: 'You are not to me, and I am not to *you*, a higher being ... Let *us* aspire to one-sidedness.' The Unique One is not literally unique: it is a meta-physical entity with which he identifies. For Stirner to write a book addressing others was a betrayal of his nihilistic position itself. And from this an unwinding of Stirner's absolute nihilism must inevitably follow—since, once he implicitly recognises others in this way, Stirner's 'use' of them must impair their capacity to pursue *their* own integrity. Moreover, to write a book is to seek to persuade others, and thus to affirm purpose and imply values of the kind he denies. We may suspect that such a person, who enters into discourse but then denies it, is schizoid.

Dr. Paterson is clear himself that Stirner is schizoid. His description of how Stirner's Unique One is born is (unconsciously) a description of a birth: 'The vacuous, impenetrable self of the 'free person', who negates and consumes the world in the act of exploiting it, is the embryo of that 'creative nothingness' in which the identity of the Unique One is centred and from which he emerges to disembowel and caress the physical and social universe in which he alights.' (p. 52)

The physical terms used by Stirner ('my food') have a physical undercurrent that manifest the 'mouth ego' of the 'unborn child'. The world is to Stirner a primitive breast, to caress and empty: a body to be scooped out. His fear of relationship as likely to lead to servitude and petrification is a schizoid fear (p. 179). His impulse to 'use life up' is a schizoid impulse too: 'enjoyment of life means using life up ... consuming it in the way that one uses a candle in consuming it ...' (p. 180). Only to a schizoid individual would it seem that there is only a certain quantity to be 'used up' in life, or that one's manifestation towards life should display such a 'sucking impulse'.

Stirner's whole way of seeking *autonomy* can be understood in the light of Laing's analysis of the schizoid predicament in *The Divided Self*. He operates and creates his philosophy by 'false male doing', and intellectual hate. His identity seems composed of haphazardly assembled fragments—his real name was Johann Casper Schmidt.

In reality, after writing *Die Einzige und Sein Eigenthum* Stirner settled down to an indolent, dilatory existence. The book was his single act of self-assertion: constructing a negative intellectual system in which to exist. Stirner was indifferent to other personalities and circumstances. His was a not-life, with a not-philosophy. The implications for our egoistical-nihilistic culture, whose world-view so closely resembles his, should be taken. Stirner became boring and ineffectual: his future died. The same psychopathological 'loss of future' is everywhere evident in our culture today, not least in growing indifference to the welfare of

the child.

Ernst Schultze (in *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, 'Stirner'sche Ideen in einem paranoischen Nahnsystem') argues that Stirner's book exhibits many of the features of paranoid delusion—though it escapes psychiatric condemnation because Stirner is willing to extend to others the boundless egoistic irresponsibility which he claims for himself.

But Paterson admits that: 'A case might well be made, then, that the self-absorption, the destructiveness, and the negativism advocated and practised in *Der Einzige and Sein Eigentum* represent the conceptual expression of the paranoid schizophrenia suffered by the philosopher who was at once the book's author and its subject.' (p. 18). It must be said, however, that to devise a paranoid-schizoid intellectual system, a person need not be 'schizophrenic': as Guntrip shows, there are many schizoid individuals at large, who are by no means schizophrenic, but quite able to carry on a normal life. Dr. Paterson pleads that we must not reject *Der Einzige* as a 'pathological tissue of obsessional fantasies'. We must make an unbiassed exposition and analysis of the contents of the book itself first. But the schizoid nature of Stirner's nihilism is, all the same of great importance to our analysis.

He was the only child of parents who were old, and his father died when he was an infant. His mother married an oldish man, and left him for several months when he was four years old. His home life consisted of several uprootings, and the parental roles were supplied by god-parents. His mother was mentally ill and totally incapacitated for the last twenty-four years of her life. His life is the record of a repeated failure to pursue any goal consistently or to form any stable and enduring relationship.

Stirner made two marriages—both failures. One day, during the first marriage, he accidentally caught sight of his wife's unclothed body: from then on he recoiled from any physical contact. The second wife said she 'had neither respected him nor loved him'. He 'left no record of a single person with whom he established a relationship of mutual affection.'

All these details help to establish a phenomenological picture of a schizoid individual who had to hold himself together by whatever scraps he could steal. The philosophy seems to follow inevitably: 'our only relation to one another is *usableness*, utility, use': 'I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego.'

Stirner speaks of 'creating himself'—and this is what the schizoid individual feels he has had to do. Since he has had to steal and create a factitious Self from fragments, he has no respect for natural creative processes. 'I think nothing of Nature, man and the laws, human society and its love, and I sever every general connection with it ...' To all of these Stirner opposed 'the ataraxy' of 'my Ego'.

If we accept Winnicott's views, that play is both the origin of culture, and the way in which the self develops, then we can see how certain forms of thinking and culture may be desperate attempts to solve such problems when they have not been solved in infancy in the normal way. (Extending Winnicott's theories, Masud Khan sees perversions as this kind of phenomenon). Paterson has a chapter on 'philosophy as play': 'Stirner's attitude to the World-system, or system-world, over which he presides as the Unique One, is essentially that of the *player* ... To be a nihilist, Stirner has surely well illustrated, is essentially to play at being nihilist... (p. 310).

This is not so much a moral comment, as a phenomenologically diagnostic one. We may link it with the analysis made by Robert Stoller and Masud Khan of the perverse forms of play in sexual deviance which have as their undercurrent the impulse to exploit and even annihilate the other. There is a strange combination of "acting out" and frivolity in many of today's phenomena on the borders of a sick culture. Many cultural perversions today belong to 'criminal frivolity' and tend to promote an impulse to annihilate the 'other'. The element of 'acting out' is seen by Dr. Paterson: 'Unlike the existentialist, the self-consistent nihilistic egoist—settles, without guilt or recrimination, for a life in which he will accordingly do no more than 'act out' the nihilistic identity which he has chosen.'(p. 310).

The nihilist does not commit himself, and refuses to take anyone seriously: 'His choice of a nihilistic identity, within a nihilistic world, is neither privileged nor inevitable; but given this basic choice, the quality of *frivolity* with which it has to be willed and lived *is* inevitable. Since, in the last analysis, nihilism is the refusal to take anything or anyone seriously. To 'be' a nihilist, Stirner has surely well illustrated, is to play at being a nihilist.'(p. 310).

While the cultural nihilist today is applauded in his 'play', every week brings evidence that this nihilism is having appalling effects.¹ Yet because the 'play' has a meaning of a kind, the public and critics hesitate to discriminate, and so discourse fails.

But if egoistical nihilism were to become the fundamental attitude to life purveyed by our culture, what are the political implications? Not only would a society 'in which Stirner's self-centred indifference becomes a generally held attitude' ... be 'a society on the brink of dissolution', as Paterson says. Of course, 'rootlessness, irresponsibility, destructiveness, and self-seeking' are becoming predominant in a world which has (whether or not it has ever

¹ This week in *The Times* a reviewer applauds a novel in which a woman has sex with a bear: a film is discussed in which a man has sex with a pig (to be shown with support from public funds). *Studio International* recently argued that Brady's child murders could be seen as works of art as the landscape looked different to him afterwards: this is to imply acceptance of deadly perverted play.

heard of Max Stirner) adopted his position towards existence. But the decline has a metaphysical significance, representing 'an experience of the apparent worthlessness of everything, of general futility, of profound and all-consuming meaninglessness'. Stirner's position thus promotes that 'longing for non-being' of which Saul Bellow writes in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*: an incapacity to feel confidence in any existing mode of being—a serious disaster to consciousness, and to democracy.

Moreover, the danger is that people seek to arouse themselves from apathy and anomie by violence, as Rollo May argues. There could be a collective infection of hate arising from egoistical nihilism. It may well seem, as Paterson says, that Stirner's philosophy is too egoistic even to become collective—since collectivity, even in destructiveness, implies submission to an ideal, and ideals are abhorrent to the Unique One. But a philosophy which does not shrink from any destructiveness can teach bloody instructions, even in 'play', as we know—for example, from the way in which youths have dressed up to act out the hate-play glamourised and vindicated in certain films whose 'philosophy' is clearly Stirnean.

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