

Max Stirner: Ontology, Ethics, Politics

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree:

Master of Arts

in

Philosophy

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Abstract

For all the charges laid against him—sophistry, nihilism, greedy individualism, ego-tism, radical nominalism—I attempt to rescue something affirmative, something joyful in the work of Max Stirner. I argue that there exists another Stirner, one hidden beneath the fiery rhetoric and frenzied prose, a Stirner attentive and responsive to the intricate uncertainty of existence. Not without a hint of irony, I have found in his destructive anarchism a spirited celebration of invention and creation; in his wild anti-humanism, a gentle sympathy for the human life; in his aggressive atheism, an unwavering clemency for the heathen. Yet this other, joyful Stirner is not opposed to the dominant, ruinous image; rather, they are intimately bound up in one another. Stirner’s warm sympathy for those of us who are less than perfect—those of us who fail in our aspirations, who let ourselves down—is not opposed to his rejection of the human as such, but is in fact made possible by it. The rejection and the affirmation exist in and as a single motion, a single strike: this is perhaps the central idea in my reading of Stirner, borne out through analyses of his non-dialectical ontology, his descriptive ethics, and his anarchic politics.

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Acknowledgments

My undertaking of this project was made possible only by the labour of others. While I cannot for account for the full spectrum of support I received, the following individuals named or mentioned deserve explicit praise and gratitude for their contributions.

I was afforded the space and resources to complete my degree by the work of various union members, as well as the administrative and custodial staff at the University of Ottawa. The material conditions of our daily lives directly affect our ability to learn and to philosophize; without their efforts, I could not have navigated my graduate studies.

I am indebted to my supervisor and to my committee for not only their insightful feedback, but for their patience and trust in my abilities. Dr. Reid, Dr. Moggach, and Dr. Sparling—thank you for humouring me all this time.

Mentorship is a rare gift—coupled with friendship, it is rarer still. Matthew McLennan, Devin Zane Shaw, Thomas Abrams, Gary Thibert, T. Mars McDougall, Mariful Alam, Julia Blakey, Alex Liepins, and Lung Chieh Lim: each of you, in your own unique ways, have been central to my life during this process. Over and above the theoretical contributions you have made to my development as an academic, you have all tended to my affective and emotional well-being outside of the institution—a task both difficult and taxing, to be sure. My accomplishment here is a minor victory at best; yet, the weight of your love is immense. Thank you all.

My family has extended me endless care, support, and encouragement throughout my entire life. The love and labour of my parents, Velma and Ali, has been nothing short of miraculous. My sister, Sabrina, has shown me time and time again what it means to love with beautiful, reckless abandon. And Tiffany MacLellan: thank you for holding tension, for affirming ambiguity, for practicing failure, for cultivating openness, for encouraging vulnerability, for witnessing life in all its movement, for [loving] in all its uncertainty. You do this with strength unspeakable.

Thank you.

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Introduction

Living is quite another thing in—enjoyment!
—Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

There are other ways of being. This is the most fundamental meaning of Max Stirner's anarchism: a simple affirmation of possibility. It is an an-archism, a resistance to *archism*, and one that runs 'all the way down': at the level of ontology, a rejection of universality and necessity; at the level of ethics, a refusal of the principle; at the level of politics, a resistance to structures of control.¹ Yet immanent in the singular motion of refusal, rejection, and resistance, there exists another, vital movement: at the level of ontology, a defence of singularity; at the level of ethics,

¹ I here borrow two framing devices from James Martel: 'archism', and 'anarchism all the way down'. Through personal correspondences and his work in political theory generally, James Martel has alerted me to the importance of calling attention to the suffix of 'anarchism'—i.e. an-archism as non-*archism*. 'Archism' names structures which for their operation make recourse to fixity, stability, universality, order, necessity, teleology, eschatology, principle, etc.—in other words, archism is *regulative*, a form of binding, limiting, determining, and policing what are otherwise chaotic, unstructured movements of life. Describing our social and political institutions as 'archic' (or producing/requiring 'archism') is partly a pragmatic political tactic—one that simultaneously normalizes or demystifies 'anarchism' in contemporary political discourse while also calling into question the specter of necessity and universality projected by these institutions. Yet I argue that archism, taken as a concept, also carries significant theoretical weight—and indeed, it neatly encapsulates much of what Stirner rages against.

Martel develops what he calls "anarchism all the way down" in two different registers. In the first register, a nuanced and somewhat specific sense of the phrase is developed through a close reading of Walter Benjamin; in the second, the phrase gains a more general, broad-stroked application. These two registers are not mutually exclusive—the first is simply a specific application of the second. Martel argues in the second formulation that an 'anarchism all the way down' is an anarchism that is exercised "not just in our political practices and the way we treat one another, but even in ourselves, in our innermost lives and identities". In other words, 'anarchism all the way down' challenges politics to turn "an eye toward subjectivity". However, in Martel's first, more nuanced formulation of this idea, he argues that Benjamin's work is anarchist "theologically, politically, and linguistically". That is, it combats or effaces authority at every level, on every register, both in form and in content. I have a suspicion that Stirner too practices an anarchism 'all the way down' in the earlier, more nuanced sense, insofar as the form and content of his work are coextensive. Although I believe this type of interpretive framework would be quite generative for a study of Stirner, I simply do not have the space to produce it in full in this thesis. However, I believe that the later, broad-stroked explanation Martel provides is also a useful way to read Stirner. Though we have different touchstones, I am quite indebted to Martel's approach to anarchism in general. See: James Martel, "Anarchist All the Way Down: Walter Benjamin's Subversion of Authority in Text, Thought, and Action", *Parrhesia*, No. 21 (2014): 3-12; James Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 26, 31, 270, 274.

an affirmation of desire; at the level of politics, the invention of new tactics. These two movements—the refusal and the affirmation, the rejection and the assertion, the resistance and the invention—are inextricably linked: the defence of singularity *is* the rejection of universality, the affirmation of desire *is* the refusal of the principle, the invention of tactics *is* the resistance to structures of control. At stake in this double-articulation, in which the an-archist moves in two directions at once, is only the opening-up of possibility, only the celebration of life in all its ambiguity, in all its dissonance, in all its clamour and cacophony.

This dual movement, this single strike which hits from two sides at once, is yet another way Stirner's anarchism runs all the way down: not only does he argue for the collapse of means and ends in our ethical and political actions, but he actively performs this collapse in the very formulation of his egoism. Stirner does not subordinate one to the other, forcing means and ends into yet another hierarchy: anti-authoritarian means cannot safeguard us from authoritarian outcomes; anti-authoritarian ends risk themselves becoming structures of control by fixing, delimiting, and foreclosing the possibilities of our actions in the present. Form and content coincide. Insurrectionary action, as both means and end, is the rejection of authority and the affirmation of ownness at once. Anarchism, in its strongest formulation, must run all the way down because *archism* itself runs all the way down: the forces that organize, limit, and pacify us reach down to our daily lives and routines, taking hold of our very identities, our very subjectivities. Stirner's egoism—as 'self-interest', or a concern with the self—begins with the recognition of this fact, and seeks to combat archism at the site of its most intense manifestation: the singular individual.

This coinciding of form and content is present not only in Stirner's own novel political theory, but also in his critical engagements with the political, religious, and philosophical discourses contemporary to his time—namely, Young Hegelianism. Below, I briefly discuss two themes central to my reading of Stirner: his ironic method, and his view of language. Both of these themes emerge in light of his engagements with Young Hegelianism; they require attention in order to distinguish between Stirner's rejections and affirmations, between his statements of mockery and his serious claims. Moreover, attention to both themes helps to unconceal the nuances of his terminology and writing style generally: although he speaks in the language of dialectics—property, alienation, appropriation, dissolution, and so forth—I argue that his egoism is non-dialectical. Heightened attention to the ways in which Stirner radically revises and redeploys common Young Hegelian concepts is therefore necessary to establish a non-dialectical reading of his egoism—one that bears witness to the true novelty of his work.

Irony

The clearest expression Stirner gives of his intended irony is found in an article originally published in 1847 called “The Philosophical Reactionaries”; written under a *second* pseudonym, ‘G. Edward’, it is primarily a response to a young critic named Kuno Fischer.² Fischer's original

² The name ‘Max Stirner’ is itself a pseudonym for Johann Kaspar Schmidt; however, his real name was almost never used, neither publicly nor privately. For clarity and consistency, I only use the name Stirner (both for Schmidt and ‘Edward’) in the body of my thesis, but I do use ‘Edward’ when citing this article in my footnotes and bibliography. Widukind de Ridder, commenting on his translation of this text, provides what I believe to be conclusive evidence of Stirner's authorship. For the sake of space, I do not reproduce the evidence here but simply accept it. In either case, the article provides strong arguments for an ironic and non-dialectical reading of Stirner's egoism. It should also be noted that Wolfi Landstreicher, unaware of De Ridder's translation and commentary, produced his own translation of the same text only a year later; he attributes authorship to Stirner without qualification. As a final piece of evidence, John Henry Mackay—Stirner's first and most rigorous biographer—includes the article in his edited collection of Stirner's minor works. See: Widukind De Ridder, “Introductory note on the text: ‘The Philosophical

article charges Stirner with sophistry, described as the “inverted mirror-image of philosophy”: it reverses truth, producing only a “formal volubility”—all talk, no substance.³ Stirner’s response to this charge is surprising. Rather than refute the label, he embraces it, claiming: if I am a sophist, it is only because “Hegel is a ‘Sophist’ as well”.⁴ This is a direct acknowledgement of his intended irony, as well as an explanation of its purpose or function: he performs a parody of Hegelianism in order to expose its weaknesses. Yet Stirner’s confession runs deeper than this:

Have you philosophers really no clue that you have been beaten with your own weapons? Only one clue. What can your common sense reply when I dissolve dialectically what you have merely posited dialectically? You have showed me with what kind of ‘volubility’ one can turn everything to nothing and nothing to everything, black into white and white into black. What do you have against me, when I return to you your pure art?⁵

Initially, this passage points to a lapse in Fischer’s argument: if sophistry is the mirror-image of philosophy, and sophistry is ‘all talk’, then philosophy too must be all talk. But an even deeper thread runs through it, one tying together the broader method Stirner employs in *The Ego*. This method, he tells us plainly, is to perform dialectical reversals in order to expose the contingency and arbitrariness of the dialectic itself. The ‘pure art’ of dialectical philosophy is simply returned to the philosophers; their own weapons and tactics are turned against them, exposing their inefficacy in the process. As I argue in the first chapter, this tactic is not a true dialectical reversal,

Reactionaries: ‘The Modern Sophists’ by *Kuno Fischer*”, *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 89-96; G. Edward, “The Philosophical Reactionaries: ‘The Modern Sophists’ by *Kuno Fischer*”, *Max Stirner*, trans. de Ridder, ed. Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 96-109; G. Edward, “The Philosophical Reactionaries: A Response to Kuno Fischer’s ‘The Modern Sophists’”, *Stirner’s Critics*, trans. Wolfi Landstreicher, (California: LBC & CAL Press, 2012): 103-117; Max Stirner, “Die philosophischen Reactionäre. Entgegnung auf “Die modernen Sophisten” von Kuno Fischer”, *Kleinere Schriften und sein Entgegnungen auf di Kritik seines Werkes: “Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum”*, *Aus den Jahren 1842-1847*, ed. John Henry Mackay (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1898): 167-185.

³ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 96, 99.

⁴ *Ibid.* 96

⁵ *Ibid.* 99.

but rather something non-dialectical that I call an *ironic inversion*. This ironic inversion tactic is used even in the title of Stirner's response: whereas Fischer considers sophistry to be "nothing but a *reaction*" against "the ethical and scientific positing of the human essence", Stirner claims that philosophy *is itself* a reaction against a primordial, chaotic egoism—one that attempts to organize what is fundamentally disorganized, limit what is fundamentally open.⁶

The ironic inversion tactic allows Stirner to clear the ground of misrepresentations before presenting his own egoistic affirmations. While the affirmative side of his work is, I argue, found mostly in the second half of *The Ego*, the first half presents much more than just a simple exercise in self-amusement. It is, rather, a necessary step toward distinguishing his own, unique usage of common Hegelian concepts. Indeed, in the first reply to his critics—an article from 1845 entitled "Stirner's Critics"—Stirner is at pains to clarify his non-dialectical understanding of the unsayable-singular as *uniqueness*; in the "The Philosophical Reactionaries", he points back to this first reply, lamenting Fischer's "comical misunderstanding" of egoism.⁷ The misreading Stirner laments is produced by a lack of appreciation for the way he plays with traditionally Hegelian language—the way he transforms and revises concepts for his own ends. The 'comical misunderstanding', therefore, is that he *really is* a dialectician, that he *really is* a Hegelian, in the same sense as, for example, Bauer and Feuerbach. Stirner's ironic performances of both Feuerbach and Bauer—which push their respective conceptual frameworks to points of extremity—thus allow him to 'get behind' their philosophies by pushing them toward their final outcomes. Bauer's concept of dissolution, for example, is redeployed in the second half of *The Ego* as a non-dialectical, non-

⁶ De Ridder, "Introductory note", 91.

⁷ Edward, "Reactionaries", 102. See also: Max Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", *Stirner's Critics*, ed. Wolfi Landstreicher, (California: LBC & CAL Press, 2012): 53-102.

conceptual, and non-universalizable practice central to Stirner's own egoism. To better understand why and how Stirner retains certain Young Hegelian motifs and not others, his view of language itself must be addressed.

Language

I noted above that Stirner affirms the non-capturability of the singular. This is a result of both his opposition to dialectics as well as his skepticism toward language itself: he argues that "with phrases one can relate everything to everything".⁸ This statement signals the above-noted disdain Stirner harbours for dialectical thought while specifically attributing its weakness to its faith in the truth and objectivity of language. But it also signals Stirner's *acceptance* of a twofold claim made by Hegel concerning the nature of language: that language speaks only in universals and, therefore, that "absolutely *singular, wholly personal, individual* things [...] *cannot be reached* by language".⁹ Stirner accepts the inherent universality of language, but views it as a weakness rather than a strength: he does not accept the corollary to Hegel's claim that the absolutely singular is unessential. In other words, Stirner is not content to relegate the unsayable-singular to the status of something useless, lacking value, void of meaning; rather, he takes this element of *uniqueness* as the starting point of his entire egoistic project. The unique [*Einziger*], for Stirner, is a demonstrative or ostensive term containing no content of its own: it simply points out that which is beyond the ability of language to express. Stirner emphasizes the demonstrative or ostensive function of the term 'unique' by consistently italicizing the word '*this*' [*dieser*] in the

⁸ *Ibid.* 98.

⁹ G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 66.

explanations and descriptions in which it is deployed. I argue for this interpretation robustly in Chapter 1.3; for now, suffice it to say that, unlike Hegel, Stirner does not hold language to be either the site or vehicle of truth and objectivity. Rather, Stirner puts language to use as *property*: that which can be used, transformed, or discarded at will.

In both accepting the universalism of language while simultaneously defending a conception of singularity as uniqueness, Stirner therefore operationalizes something non-linguistic and non-conceptual in his egoism: singular ontology, singular ethics, singular politics. His skepticism toward language is coextensive with his anti-dialectical ontological position: the opposition between the real and the ideal is irreconcilable.¹⁰ Thought and language only express content that is proper to themselves, i.e. proper to the *ideal*, and never what is proper to the real, the material, the corporeal. To the extent that the real becomes expressed in the ideal, it dies, ceases to be real—and so too in the opposite case. Stirner’s defence of the unsayable-singular is thus a defence of the non-discursive content—minor inflections and miniscule shifts in our affects and perceptions—that make each life, each experience of being in the world, *unique*. The project of egoism, therefore, is to defend this uncapturable content without qualifying it, without weakening it, without rendering it vulnerable to capture.

In a moment of self-reflection, Stirner laments that philosophical language has been “ruined by philosophers, abused by the state-, religious- and other believers”; this, subsequently, has “enabled a boundless confusion of ideas”.¹¹ This sentiment, appearing in his second response to his critics, was already expressed in *The Ego*. In a passage critiquing traditional conceptions of

¹⁰ Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 320.

¹¹ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 104.

freedom, Stirner warns against the valorization of language: “Language or ‘the word’ tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against us a whole army of *fixed ideas*”.¹² The fixity or stability of thoughts, concepts, and ideas presents the biggest threat to Stirner’s unsayable-singular: language—saturated with the residue of specifically Christian universalism and notions of absolute truth—supplements and enables this fixity.¹³ This is precisely why Stirner criticizes his Young Hegelian peers for advancing an atheism that was, in reality, only “a step *forward* in the domain of religion” rather than “a step out beyond it”: stepping out beyond religion, and specifically the Christian religion, leads necessarily into the unsayable, the “unspeakable” [*Unsagbare*], the uncapturable.¹⁴ Stirner’s skepticism toward language thus applies even to his *own* use of language: because he is stuck in the domain of Christian universalism, his own words necessarily fail to express the kind of singularity at stake in his egoism.¹⁵ This failure, however, is itself generative of new possibilities, new ways of being in the world. At the level of ontology, the failure to capture singularity makes space for the re-inscription of power back into the unique individual. At the level of ethics, the failure of calculation and measure allows for the celebration of the ambiguity of desire. At the level of politics, the failure of structural interpellation opens space for new possibilities of political resistance and the emergence of new kinds of subjectivities. In reading Stirner, one must therefore take seriously his self-effacement, his

¹² Stirner, *Ego*, 305.

¹³ Stirner, *Ego*, 261. Stirner insists on the fact that “our language has largely adapted to the Christian point of view [*Unsere Sprache hat sich so ziemlich auf den christlichen Standpunkt eingerichtet*]”. See: Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991): 186. See also: Stirner, *Ego*, 153.

¹⁴ “Der Schritt darüber hinaus führt ins *Unsagbare*”. Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 201; Stirner, *Ego*, 164.

¹⁵ Indeed, Stirner writes that he is “already compliant when [he uses] language” because he, as a singular, unique individual, is fundamentally “inexpressible”—using language is simply a necessary but inadequate means of showing oneself [Ich bin schon nachgiebig, wenn Ich mich der Sprache bediene, Ich bin das “Unsagbare”, “Ich zeige mich bloss”]. See: Stirner, “Reactionäre”, 182.

displacement and refusal of even *his own* authority and mastery over the text: Stirner's anarchism, in other words, runs all the way down.

Chapter Overview

Explicit discussion of Stirner's ironic method and skepticism toward language figures primarily into the first chapter of this thesis; however, this discussion creates room for the presentation of his novel ethical and political insights in the second and third chapters respectively. It should be noted from the outset that the divisions I present between the domains of ontology, ethics, and politics are mainly heuristic and organizational devices: there exists no clear separation between these domains within Stirner's own work. Indeed, Stirner often presents a single argument or insight bearing ontological, ethical, and political consequences coextensively—that is to say, arguments whose effects run all the way down. Although I argue that political concerns underpin Stirner's ethical and ontological discussions, this is not because he subordinates ontology and ethics to politics—for this would both presuppose the validity of the distinctions in the first place and run counter to his radical refusal of hierarchy. Rather, I argue that political concerns underpin the other discourses precisely because Stirner recognizes their interconnectedness: Feuerbach's humanist ontology, for example, imposes both a moral imperative and a specific socio-political vision, neither of which can be effectively combatted in isolation. I name Stirner's concern 'political' because it centers the action, movement, practice, and experimentation involved the fight to affirm other ways of being in the world. The distinctions I make are therefore deployed solely for the purpose of clarity in my excavations and interpretations of his work.

In Chapter One, I show how Stirner makes use of the previously noted ironic inversion tactic to engage with the philosophies of Feuerbach and Bauer. I argue that his ironic inversions reveal, at the level of ontology, the inability of both Feuerbach's humanism and Bauer's pure criticism to properly account for singularity. In Feuerbach's case, this inability to properly account for singularity is shown to stem from his valorization of universality; in Bauer's case, it stems primarily from his conception of particularity as false-universality. Stirner's engagement with these philosophical frameworks does not lead to a total abandonment; rather, Stirner retains certain motifs and ideas found in both Feuerbach and Bauer, subsequently redeploying them in the development of his own egoism. I focus on three terms central to his egoism: property, the unique, and dissolution. The chapter concludes with my interpretation of these three terms; this discussion functions both as groundwork for the next two chapters and as the core of my own, non-dialectical reading of Stirner's egoism.

In Chapter Two, I turn to ethics. I argue that Stirner's ethical discourse is both descriptive and sensitive to the ambiguity of desire. That is, Stirner does not present moral prescriptions or make appeals to universal values; rather, he simply describes situations that involve ethical decision-making processes in order to illustrate of the difficulty of navigating the world and of navigating oneself. Stirner's ethics thus do not present obligations, imperatives, or principles for action, but instead challenge us to reflect critically on our own desires and values, inviting us to self-dissolution. The fundamental question is thus whether it is I who desires, or something external desiring through me. This question, however, is impossible to answer—since we are always in the throes of fixed ideas, always caught up in the web of ideology, it is not possible to be completely autonomous, completely one's own. Yet this neither entails hedonism nor pure

nihilism; rather, it suggests that ownness and servitude, autonomy and slavery, are a matter of degree, a matter of extent. I therefore argue against several common interpretations of Stirner's ethics which consider him nihilistic or wholly individualistic. Rather than delineate what kinds of acts are prohibited or permitted, I assert that Stirner offers to the domain of ethics a way to question the status and legitimacy of permission and prohibition in the first place.

In Chapter Three, the political stakes of egoism come to the fore. Building on the developments of the previous chapters, I argue that Stirner is concerned with the ways in which hierarchy and authoritarianism are imbricated in the construction of subjectivity and identity themselves. By discussing literature which debates Stirner's place within the history of anarchism, I follow Stirner in rejecting identity as the primary method or site of resistance to power and authority; rather, Stirner argues that identity more often functions as the site of their manifestation. I argue that Stirner's discourse on ideological subject-formation reveals how interpellation is not only enacted by the state, but by other social forces as well. Stirner's anarchism is therefore self-interested in that it is both *self-directed* and *directed at the self*: our resistance to archism begins in and as a resistance to ourselves. I turn to two tactics of resistance Stirner invents—the insurrection and the union of egoists—in order to explain how uniqueness can be operationalized in political action. Concluding the thesis, I meditate on the limits of politics grounded in identity and recognition, and point to the contemporary relevance of a politics grounded in singularity.

Chapter One: Ontology

It is believed that one cannot be more than man.

Rather, one cannot be less!

—Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

Stirner's work appears on the scene firmly entrenched in the debates of *Vormärz* Young Hegelianism.¹⁶ This period is one marked by myriad religious, political, economic, and social tensions—debate abounds. The terms of this debate, on all sides, are marked by the roles of history and religion in society; the stakes, on all sides, are social and political freedom. The attempt to think through these tensions forces battle lines to be drawn and divergent camps to be formed—even among those subscribing to similar broadly-Hegelian frameworks. The nominal 'Left-Right' divide among the Young Hegelians is telling: privileging collective good over individual autonomy tends to push political and philosophical frameworks toward the left, i.e. toward socialism and communism; the prioritization of individual autonomy, on the other hand, tends to push toward the right, i.e. toward market-capitalist and/or state-minimalist forms of republicanism. These are, of course, broad-stroked descriptions. The strongest philosophies of this period attempt to either reconcile or, at the very least, adequately account for the tension between these two poles; upon attentive reading, quick and easy assimilation of the various

¹⁶ The term *Vormärz* indicates a period of German history leading up to the revolutions of March 1848. This period is specifically marked by a turn toward conservatism, embodied in the ascendance of Friedrich Wilhelm IV to the throne of Prussia in 1840. The new prince specifically attacked Hegelianism, viewing it as a threat to both religious and political order. The Young Hegelians (or Left Hegelians), in turn, were specifically targeted for their opposition to this order: their project was, broadly speaking, to fulfill the task of the Enlightenment—the objective realization of reason in the world. This involved, in various forms, transforming understandings of God as transcendent into Spirit as something immanent—a move considered pantheistic and heretical to the new conservative order. See: Douglas Moggach, "Reconfiguring Spirit", *Politics, Religion, and Art: Hegelian Debates*, ed. Douglas Moggach, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011): 5-26.

Young Hegelians to either ‘left’ or ‘right’ political frameworks becomes impossible. The stakes of this debate, which I hereafter refer to as ‘the social question’, are expressed concisely by Massimiliano Tomba:

The political reflection of the Hegelian school was confronted by the task of rethinking the relation between the individual and the state, on the one hand and, on the other, of finding a new organizational principle capable of holding together the mass of atoms liberated by the dissolution of the old estate order.¹⁷

I argue that Stirner presents a radical defence and rearticulation of *singularity*—ontologically, ethically, and politically—that is best understood within the context of the specifically Young Hegelian social question. As I argue below, Stirner strips singularity of its universality by conceiving of it as *uniqueness*—incomparability and inexpressibility. Stirner’s position in this debate is therefore ‘unique’ in that it pushes further left than socialism or communism on many fronts while unequivocally defending individual autonomy against universalism and collectivism. Severely complicating the common discourse of a ‘Left vs. Right’ Hegelianism, Stirner’s work has been subject to a plethora of competing interpretations. While other interpretive frameworks such as existentialism and anarchism are often generative of novel and interesting readings of Stirner, I argue that these interpretations are strengthened and clarified by referring back to this Young Hegelian context. As such, this chapter functions both as a framing device for the proceeding chapters as well as a novel interpretation in its own right.

¹⁷ Massimiliano Tomba, “Exclusiveness and Political Universalism in Bruno Bauer”, *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, trans. ed. Douglas Moggach, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 91.

Stirner himself discusses the social question in these terms early on in his critique of liberal conceptions of freedom. He discovers connections between the socio-political, economic, and religious tensions within the *Vormärz*, writing: “Because one is no longer separated from the state by intermediaries, but stands in direct and immediate relation to it [...] political liberty, this fundamental doctrine of liberalism, is nothing but a second phase of—Protestantism”. See: Stirner, *Ego*, 96.

My ‘novel’ contribution, however, has its predecessors. As I noted in the Introduction, I read the first division of *The Ego* as an ironic performance of Young Hegelian philosophy. In this respect, I am in full agreement with Widukind De Ridder; however, we do have slightly different focuses and concerns. De Ridder largely grounds his reading of Stirner’s irony in the first two chapters of the first division of *The Ego*, i.e. in Stirner’s account of the history of consciousness and the *Menschenleben*.¹⁸ While I do not contest this reading, I focus more on excavating one particular tactic Stirner uses: something I call an ‘ironic inversion’. My use of this term is meant to strike a contrast with a more common Hegelian concept—the ‘dialectical reversal’. A somewhat cursory distinction here suffices: a dialectical reversal changes the places and priorities of subject and predicate (or negative and positive, universal and particular, transcendent and immanent, being and nothingness, and so forth) for the purposes of continued *conceptual development*. That is, Feuerbach’s dialectical reversal of subject (God) and predicate (Man) sought to raise the concept of Man to a higher plane, to approach the Absolute. Stirner’s ironic inversion, by contrast, is not meant to posit, advance, elevate, or develop concepts. Rather, it exposes the contingency or arbitrariness of the ontological frameworks he works against from the inside. That is, his ironic inversion of Feuerbach’s own dialectical reversal—which now posits Man as a predicate of the *individual*—does not proceed to exalt the individual to the position of the proper subject, but instead renders *both* positions inadequate, deflating and devaluing their conceptual content.¹⁹

¹⁸ Widukind De Ridder, “Max Stirner, Hegel, and the Young Hegelians: A Reassessment”, *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 34 (2008): 285-297.

¹⁹ In Slavoj Žižek’s formulation, the dialectical reversal is a “purely formal shift”: it is not that a defeat turns into a triumph in reality, but rather that “a change of perspective” takes place whereby a defeat is “presented as a triumph”. This is a kind of retroactive restructuring or re-valuation whereby what was once considered contingent, for instance, is now understood to have been necessary. The event, in other words, is re-inscribed. Indeed, this seems to be Feuerbach’s claim: that Man does not spontaneously become divine but simply recovers a lost or alienated essence which was always already divine. Žižek poses this formulation in order to combat one specific criticism of Hegel—

Stirner's method, with both Feuerbach and Bauer, aims to "push the thinking otherwise to its last extremity", or to the point at which each framework stands the best chance of accounting for *singularity*—only to then abandon them.²⁰ This method is, on the one hand, a form of argumentative charitability; on the other, it seeks to expose the gaps and failures of philosophical positions through a kind of performative stress-test. However, Stirner himself does not attempt to capture this missing singularity; instead, he affirms the *impossibility* of capturing it, affirms its non-recuperability into philosophical discourse. His problem with Young Hegelian ontology, therefore, is not that Feuerbach and Bauer define singularity inadequately, but that they even attempt to define it in the first place: uniqueness not only exceeds language, but problematizes the entire enterprise of representing life in language.

In what follows, I first examine Stirner's engagement with Feuerbach; I then proceed to Stirner's engagement with Bauer in the second subchapter. These are not totalizing accounts, nor are they meant to be; rather, I focus my analysis on the specific themes relevant to the reading of Stirner's ethics and politics I present in the proceeding chapters. For this reason, I conclude the

namely, that he fails to properly account for "negativity, failure, collapse, etc." because the dialectic has built into itself a magical "mechanism of redemption". This seems to be quite close to Stirner's own criticism of Hegel in "The Philosophical Reactionaries", as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. However, Stirner's criticism is actually posed at philosophical language in general, and not only dialectical thought. Furthermore, Stirner's concern with the *political* stakes of operationalizing universality severely complicate an easy Hegelian response to his challenges. There is thus a weighted tension between Stirner's criticism of Young Hegelianism, which may very well be inadequate or lackluster, and the affirmation of his own unique political insights, which I argue are novel and rigorous. See: Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, (New York: Verso, 2012): 197, 204, 520, 535-538.

²⁰ Stirner continues: the last extremity of thinking about an object (including a purely conceptual object) is "therefore thinking its nothingness, crushing it". Performing this task reveals that "*conception* itself has an end, because there is no longer anything to conceive of". As I will explain in the final subchapter, Stirner makes a turn to the body as the site of resistance to the domination of the realm of thought, to the Christian standpoint, to fixed ideas. I take the description he provides here as evidence for my reading of his 'ironic inversion' method. See: Stirner, *Ego*, 33.

present chapter with a discussion of a few key terms central to my own reading, and likely any reading, of Stirner's egoism.

1.1: Stirner's Ironic Inversion of Feuerbach's Humanism

Stirner establishes his multi-faceted fight against humanism from the very first pages of the Introduction to *The Ego and Its Own*. He sets the stakes clearly and directly: divinity “is God’s concern; the human, ‘man’s’”; by distinction, Stirner’s concern “is not the good, the true, the just, the free, etc., but only my own, and it is not general, but is—unique, as I am unique.”²¹ Though seemingly innocuous, this oft-quoted line is the source of much confusion in the secondary literature as to the nature of Stirner’s point. There are at least two assertions made here. The first and more obvious is that self-interest is inescapable: even God acts according to His own interest—and, in fact, God may be the paradigmatic example of the egoist. This applies equally to ‘Spirit’, ‘Humanity’, the ‘State’, ‘society’, and so forth. Although Stirner holds them to be ‘spooks’, these concepts are spoken of by their respective proponents *as if* they were subjects with agency, as if they acted in their own interests.²² Stirner’s ironic position in the introduction—and many of the proceeding arguments—simply grants this specter of agency, and asks why he should not claim such agency for *himself* as a singular and unique individual: if God acts only for his own interest, and I am made in God’s image, why should I not act in my own interest?

The second point, embedded in the undertone of Stirner’s rhetoric, reveals a deeper concern: how best to defend real singularity without appealing to essences, attributes, and

²¹ Max Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property*, trans. Wolfi Landstreicher, (Baltimore: Underworld Amusements, 2017), 27.

²² The English term ‘spook’ is a translation of either *Spuk* or *Gespenst*. As is made clear through his rhetorical word-play, Stirner uses *Gespenst* (and its variations) for its etymological connection with *Gesit* (Spirit) in the Hegelian parlance; *Spuk*, on the other hand, is used to tease out the phantasmagoric, paranormal, and mystifying workings of religion and morality. Unfortunately, the English term ‘spook’ was used as a racial epithet in the mid-20th century, especially in the United States. This is, clearly, unrelated to Stirner’s usage. Although something like ‘specter’, ‘ghost’, or ‘phantasm’ might work, I have decided to generally opt for ‘spook’ for the sake of consistency with the secondary literature. See: Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, 38, 112-113, 149-150, etc.

concepts. This, I argue, is the main thrust of his egoism. While the bulk of Stirner's engagement with Feuerbach attempts to highlight the common structure humanism shares with religion, I argue that this is merely the first step in exposing two complimentary failures: on the one hand, the falseness of *all* universals; on the other, the inadequacy of Feuerbach's framework to address real singularity.

Essences and Attributes

Stirner's ironic method seeks to push philosophical positions to the point at which they stand the best chance of accounting for singularity understood as uniqueness. That is, Stirner performs a kind of stress-test with Feuerbach's humanism in order to expose its weaknesses. Since Feuerbach mobilizes essences as the driving force of his philosophy, Stirner takes essences as his main target. He provides an exegesis of Feuerbach's humanist ontology early on in *The Ego*, writing,

What [Feuerbach] says is that we had only mistaken our own essence, and therefore looked for it in the other world, but that now, when we see that God was only our human essence, we must recognize it again as ours and move it back out of the other world into this. To God, who is spirit, Feuerbach gives the name 'our essence'. Can we put up with this, that 'our essence' is brought into opposition to *us*, that we are split into an essential and un-essential self?²³

The groundwork of Stirner's critique is, first and foremost, Feuerbach's positing of the truth of the individual in the existence of the species, or 'species-being' [*Gattungswesen*]. For Feuerbach, individual human beings are finite while the species is infinite; it is, by that criterion, only the

²³ Stirner, *Ego*, 33.

species rather than any specific individual that contains “essence and existence in one”.²⁴ The unification of essence and being had traditionally been accorded to God, either in theological or secular conceptions. The Young Hegelians generally express this unification via Hegel’s *Geist*, or, like Feuerbach, a variation of Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura*. Feuerbach holds that “the idea of the deity coincides with *humanity* [emphasis mine]”, and that “all the attributes that make God God” are merely “attributes of the species”: *homo homini deus est*.²⁵ This principle is established and supported by one fundamental step, or logical maneuver: *reversing* the metaphysical relation of subject and predicate.²⁶ By ascribing these divine predicates to humanity itself, as the proper subject, Feuerbach’s dialectical reversal of a generalized classical metaphysics becomes the locus of his self-proclaimed atheism, aiming to dethrone God traditionally conceived. As I argue below, Stirner transforms Feuerbach’s dialectical reversal into the vehicle of his own ironic method.

Stirner’s citation of Feuerbach’s reversal of subject and predicate with respect to the affect of *love* is indicative of this transformation. Reading later essays alongside *The Essence of Christianity*, Stirner describes Feuerbach’s position succinctly: “we no longer say ‘God is love’, but ‘love is divine’”.²⁷ However, Stirner then claims that if this reversal were granted and affirmed, the ‘Christian standpoint’ would only be fixed more oppressively.²⁸ That is, the form or structure of Christianity—its ontological *hierarchy*—is only preserved and emboldened by Feuerbach’s atheism. This is the basis of Stirner’s constant charge of ‘pious atheism’: in reversing subject and

²⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, (California: MSAC Philosophy Group, 2008): 8.

²⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 115, 121, 221-222.

²⁶ Feuerbach is insistent on this inversion throughout *The Essence of Christianity*. See pages: 26, 33, 178, 197, 217, 224.

²⁷ Stirner, *Ego*, 47. Stirner here provides a footnote for a citation from Feuerbach’s ‘Preliminary Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy’, cited from Arnold Ruge, *Anekdoten zur neuesten deutschen Philosophie und Publizistik*, Volume II (Zurich, 1843): 64. See also: Feuerbach, *Christianity*, 82, 216-224.

²⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 47.

predicate, Feuerbach has merely orchestrated a “*change of masters*”.²⁹ From the perspective of the individual, nothing changes—the really existing, singular individual is still subordinated to a higher power.

That Feuerbach merely enacts a ‘change of masters’ results from the splitting of the individual into an ‘essential’ and ‘un-essential’ self. For Stirner, an essence is simply not equivalent to the thing of which it is the essence. Essences, in other words, have an existence of their own, separate from the existence of living, material bodies; subsequently, they cannot take the place of the individual within any philosophical discourse concerning the actions and interests of real, living beings. This position on essences is expressed in a particularly clear passage from *The Ego*, where Stirner claims that “*Man* reaches beyond every individual man, and yet—though he be ‘his essence’—is not in fact *his* essence (which rather would be as single as he the individual himself)”.³⁰ Stirner insists that any general, common, or shareable essence cannot properly account for true individuality—that is, real singularity or *uniqueness*. Stirner draws attention to this very point for a second time in “*Stirner’s Critics*”, wherein he interrupts a citation from Feuerbach with another citation from his own work in *The Ego*. There, he argues that “your essence [...] is not a higher one, is not higher and more general than you, [but] is unique [*einzig*] like you yourself, because it is you”.³¹ The essence of Man is distinct from the essence of any specific ‘man’, any specific individual; for an essence to really express or account for singularity, it must be just as specific or unique as the existing individual themselves.

²⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 55.

³⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 39.

³¹ Max Stirner, “*Stirner’s Critics*”, *Stirner’s Critics*, trans. Wolfi Landstreicher (California: LBC & CAL Press, 2012), 89. Original quotation taken from: Stirner, *Ego*, 42.

Here, Stirner does not immediately deny the existence of essences *simpliciter*—at least not while engaging with Feuerbach. Instead, he *inverts* Feuerbach’s own description of the relation between subject and predicate. This method of inversion is made clear toward the end of his pseudo-developmental account of Young Hegelianism:

The sentence God has become man is now followed by the other, ‘man has become I’. This is *the human I*. But we invert it and say: I was not able to find myself so long as I sought myself as man. But, now that it appears that man is aspiring to become I and to gain a corporeity in me, I note that, after all, everything depends on me, and man is lost without me. But I do not care to give myself up to be the shrine of this most holy thing, and shall not ask henceforward whether I am man or un-man in what I set about; let this *spirit* keep off my neck!³²

What Feuerbach holds to be the essence of an individual—‘humanity’—Stirner relegates to one of the individual’s many qualities or traits.³³ This second, ironic inversion is again made transparent much later in *The Ego*, where Stirner claims that “Man is something only as *my quality* [*Eigenschaft*] (property [*Eigentum*])”, which is held at the same level of generality as, for example, “masculinity or femininity”.³⁴ Because both ‘masculinity/femininity’ and ‘humanity’ are idealizations or abstractions whose criteria can *fail* to be met or fully embodied by any particular person, there is no reason to endorse one over the other as the true or ‘highest’ essence of an individual. Moreover, these essences contain their own content: when applied to an individual, the essence only expresses what is common to *itself* in the individual—or what is common *between* the essence and the individual, and not what is different or unique.

³² Stirner, *Ego*, 124.

³³ “You are more than a human being, therefore you are *also* a human being; you are more than a male, but you are *also* a male; but humanity and masculinity do not express you exhaustively, and you can therefore be indifferent to everything that is held up to you as ‘true humanity’ or ‘true masculinity’”. Stirner, “Stirner’s Critics”, 90.

³⁴ Stirner, *Ego*, 163.

For this reason, Stirner does not only decry essences set *outside* of the human being, but those set *within* the human as well. Stirner writes,

The Supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his *essence* and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as 'God', or find it in him and call it 'essence of man' or 'man'. *I* am neither God nor *man*, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me.³⁵

Here Stirner makes clear, once again, the problem with the distinction between the essential and un-essential self. His insistence on the 'un-essential' components of individuality is part and parcel of his insistence on singularity as *uniqueness*: the individual is *not* their essence, precisely because the 'non-essential' components of their existence are what make them a truly singular individual in the first place. In other words, what is by privation considered unessential for generic essences is in fact 'essential' or necessary to account for the *uniqueness* of specific existences. Indeed, Stirner goes so far as to claim that "attributes have reality only through [...] uniqueness" — in having *unique* existences, individuals are, at the most basic level of analysis, *incomparable*.³⁶ An essence-concept or master-signifier such as 'humanity' or 'masculinity', insofar as they can be predicated of many individuals, can only describe something general, shareable, or common: as expressions or representations, they can never fully exhaust the life or lived experience of an individual. Moreover, they are wholly unable to express the *differences* between individuals; they cannot capture the various ways unique individuals give them expression.³⁷ The construction of

³⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 34. It should be noted that the phrase 'highest essence' [*Das höchste Wesen*] has the dual connotation of 'Supreme Being' — a common description of God. This double-meaning is not lost on Stirner; in fact, he employs precisely this sort of word-play in order to expose the religious character of the Young Hegelians' allegedly atheistic humanism.

³⁶ Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", 90.

³⁷ In a comedic tone, Stirner asks whether it could have been Ludwig Feuerbach's brother Friedrich, who, having fit the essence-concepts of 'humanity', 'maleness', and even the 'Feuerbach' name, penned *The Essence of Christianity*. See: Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", 90.

the species as an essential category can therefore only make sense of singularity or individuality if one affirms the existence of as many different species as there are individuals—or, as Stirner puts it, that the individual “is the whole of the species too”.³⁸

This is, evidently, quite far from Feuerbach’s own position. Stirner’s intent, however, is simply to run a diagnostic test for singularity. By rearranging the pieces of Feuerbach’s position according to the rules of his own game, Stirner brings Feuerbach closer to capturing singularity understood as *uniqueness* than Feuerbach himself. Even this attempt, however, falls flat—which is precisely why Stirner abandons the language of essences for ‘principles’ later on in *The Ego*. If the language of subject and predicate are granted—and, as will be shown, Stirner shifts toward the language of ‘ownness’ and ‘property’ in its place—the singular, unique individual would be the subject, while humanity would be merely a predicate among others. This is the first step in pushing Feuerbach’s position to its extremity, pushing it closer to singularity.

Religion and the Sacred

Stirner’s understanding of religion is at once quite broad and slightly peculiar. As we have seen, he accuses his Young Hegelian peers of failing to escape the religious perspective: “Our atheists are pious people”.³⁹ This seemingly self-contradictory phrase wittily reveals his understanding of *religion* (and its counter-part, *atheism*) as something much more fundamental than a position on the existence of God. Rather, Stirner claims that “to know and acknowledge essences alone and nothing but essences [...] is religion”, and that “its realm is a realm of

³⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 164.

³⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 166.

essences, spooks, and ghosts”.⁴⁰ Religion, for Stirner, is any mode of thought or action that founds itself on the separation between essence and existence; thus, almost any institution—especially the moral and political—can potentially be ‘religious’. For this reason, Stirner attacks any political, philosophical, or properly religious framework which “consists in discontent with the *present* men, in the setting up for a ‘perfection’ to be striven for, in ‘man wrestling for his completion’.”⁴¹ By contrast, Stirner’s “vagabond ontology” celebrates the individual as they are—moving, changing, dissolving, failing, and faulting.⁴²

The problem is one of *sanctification*. Stirner is weary of anything held ‘sacred’ [*Heiliges*]—untouchable, unobjectionable, absolute, or inalienable. In *The Ego*, Stirner constantly uses this religious term to denote the fixity or rigidity of what he calls *fixed ideas*. That which is sanctified appears *alien*, and appears to be constituted by “something ‘uncanny’, that is strange”—it is something we are “not quite familiar” or “at home in”.⁴³ Thus anything exalted above the individual, anything imparted to us, anything that “is not our own” but is to be striven for, is *sacred*.⁴⁴ Stirner does explicitly equate the sacred with both ‘fixed ideas’ and ‘principles’; however, his language tends to shift toward favouring principles both near the end of *The Ego* as well as in his later responses to his critics. This indicates that his concern lies with the *hierarchical structure* common to both. That is, Stirner is concerned with the relation of subordination that

⁴⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 41.

⁴¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 216. Stirner here cites: Bruno Bauer, “Was ist jetzt der Gegenstand der Kritik?”, *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, ed. Bruno Bauer, Vol. 8, (July 1844): 22.

⁴² Banu Bargu employs the term “vagabond ontology” to describe Stirner’s attentiveness to the movement, change, and dissolution inherent in individuality. She notes that Stirner’s *unique* is opposed to conceptions of “an I that is constituted by the determinations of its qualities”, insofar as the unique is not reducible to its qualities or attributes. See: Banu Bargu, “Max Stirner, Postanarchy *avant la lettre*”, *How Not to Be Governed: Readings and Interpretations from a Critical Anarchist Left*, ed. Jimmy Casas Klausen and James Martel, (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011): 108.

⁴³ Stirner, *Ego*, 38.

⁴⁴ Stirner, *Ego*, 62.

obtains when the individual holds something to be sacred (inalienable), or reveres something as a principle (as something obligatory): “whether the church, the Bible, or reason [...] is the *sacred authority* makes no difference in essentials”.⁴⁵ The change of masters—from pious to secular—retains the same relations of authority and subordination. The political stakes of Stirner’s project concern the ways authority becomes fixed into a hierarchical structure; Feuerbach’s humanism constructs and justifies hierarchy at the level of ontology.

Thus, while Stirner disputes the ontological groundwork of the Feuerbachian project, he also takes aim at its moral and political implications. Insofar as the essence of an individual is separated from their particular existence, that essence is always regarded as something to strive toward, to obtain, to fulfill, to reach, or to cultivate. In other words, “under religion and politics man finds himself at the standpoint of *should* [*Sollens*]: *he should* become this and that, should be so and so”.⁴⁶ Humanist ontology always contains a prescription or calling, however innocuous it may seem. Stirner elsewhere describes the normative aspect of religion as the creation and prescription of a *vocation*. He writes,

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 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’.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 304.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 215.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 158.

It is for this reason Stirner maintains that “every higher essence [...] is an essence *over* us”.⁴⁸ Taking one attribute or quality of an individual’s existence and exalting it to the status of an essence always comes at the expense of the other attributes which might make that individual truly singular or unique. Humanism, in its failure to capture singularity, is thus “nothing more or less than a new—*religion*”.⁴⁹ The creation of a universal vocation is both a cause *and* an effect of the negation or papering-over of the minor differences and inflections which differentiate individuals from one another. Even if constituted by myriad social factors, common attributes, or shared knowledges, an individual life is a singular and unique assemblage of these forces. This assemblage, however, is itself radically unstable; it is vulnerable to unforeseen seismic shifts, to its very ground being swept out from under it. The world strikes at us with an over-determination of forces too great in either quality or quantity to ever be successfully fixed and known, to be calculated, to be represented. This insight into the radical instability of subjectivity and identity is at the core of Stirner’s rejection of universalism, his search for a non-qualifiable singularity, and his affirmation of egoism: a concern with the self in its ambiguity and contingency.

Stirner’s project, in rejecting universalism, aims to provide a heightened attentiveness to the ambiguity of our experience. Although Stirner does not necessarily deny the existence of essences *simpliciter*, his project is to shift the language away from essences and universals in order to develop a narrower scope of analysis, i.e. to present the tensions present in any attempt to account for singularity philosophically. In carrying out this project, language *itself* comes under fire; the following section, for this reason, addresses a particular Feuerbachian criticism

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

concerning language and communication. While I appeal to Stirner's texts directly, I also extrapolate, offering part of the response in the 'spirit' of Stirner.

Language and Intersubjectivity

Stirner's central ontological criticism—that if Feuerbach's ontology were granted, there would have to be as many species as individuals—has been addressed by commentators; however, it is generally taken either as evidence of Stirner's extreme nominalism, or as the potential launching point of social and political atomism.⁵⁰ Both points are levelled against Stirner by Todd Gooch, who, in his defence of Feuerbach's *intersubjective* conception of humanism, focuses on the role of language in the construction and expression of consciousness. Although he does not cite Stirner's own argument, Gooch repositions Stirner's central criticism in favour of Feuerbachian intersubjectivity while at the same time arguing that it exposes a radical incoherency in Stirner's position. He argues that Stirner fundamentally misunderstands the intersubjective character of Feuerbach's species-being, and further, that Stirner himself performatively admits the value and necessity of intersubjectivity through the very act of writing a book.⁵¹

According to Gooch, "the contents of sensuous consciousness remain ineffable", for Feuerbach, "until they have been attached to universally communicable predicates"; therefore,

⁵⁰ Nielsen, for example, makes both the charge of social atomism (which he calls "isolation") and a deflationist-nominalism. See: Donald A. Nielsen, *Horrible Workers: Max Stirner, Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Johnson, and the Charles Manson Circle: Studies in Moral Experience and Cultural Expression* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 13-26; R.W.K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971): 288-289.

⁵¹ Todd Gooch, "Max Stirner and the Apotheosis of the Corporeal Ego", *Owl of Minerva*, Vol. 26-2 (2006), 181.

consciousness is not solely unique, but is always general or shared—it is “no longer mine alone”.⁵² The specific individual’s unique consciousness is transcended by her participation in a linguistic community: *intersubjectivity* (singularity already mediated by universality) is thereby the condition for the possibility of *singularity*, and the realization of the species-being is coextensive with the realization of an individual’s own, unique being. In other words, we only become ‘individualized’ *after* becoming communalized. Gooch here unknowingly reproduces the very same point as Stirner but positions it as a privative argument for the universality of reason: “If the human species did not share a single universal consciousness, then there would have to be as many consciousnesses or rational faculties as there are individual conscious beings, and the ability of one person to understand another would become unintelligible”.⁵³

This leads Gooch to his final concern: Stirner demonstrates a performative contradiction by acknowledging the necessity of intersubjectivity. This argument contains three assertions: firstly, all writing implicitly acknowledges the existence of other individuals; secondly, others’ engagement with the ideas of one’s writing “requires a willingness or desire on their part to listen”; and finally, since the fulfilment of the individual writer’s will requires the will and desires of others to engage, there must exist more than one ego.⁵⁴ I am here concerned with the relationship between language and singularity; I return to Gooch’s criticism to address the other points in the second chapter of this thesis. Therefore, a response to Gooch’s Feuerbachian position made on Stirner’s behalf—one defending singularity as *uniqueness*—could make two counter-points: firstly, asking *how* the ‘ineffable contents of sensuous consciousness’ can be

⁵² Gooch, “Apotheosis”, 163.

⁵³ Gooch, “Apotheosis”, 162.

⁵⁴ Gooch, “Apotheosis”, 181.

expressed in the first place; secondly, asking if it really is the case that individuals must understand each other to the extent and capacity that Gooch (via Feuerbach) claims is necessary.

The first point attacks the understanding of singularity as something that is itself constituted by the contents of consciousness. If these contents of sensuous consciousness are ‘ineffable’—indescribable or unrepresentable *in and of themselves*—it would not be possible to communicate them at all, or at least for others to understand them, unless these contents *did not* pre-exist the intersubjective situation. In this case—if the contents of sensuous consciousness were in fact produced by the intersubjective situation—singularity or individuality *itself* would be relegated to merely being the effect of a universal, intersubjective process. However, this form of intersubjectivity does not reach ‘all the way down’ to singularity because it cannot account for the real differences between individuals—differences which render separate lives truly distinct from one another, i.e. *unique*. This ontology is instead something like an *intra*-subjectivity—or just plain abstract universality—rather than a multiplicity of unique individuals acting together to form and create a truly *inter*-subjective situation.⁵⁵ Moreover—and this is the big problem—this view renders singularity simply equivalent to the *contents* of consciousness, rather than the uniqueness of consciousness itself. That is, this ‘intra-subjective’ view still holds the ‘attribute’ (quality, property, etc.) to be the subject of which the really-existing individual is predicated. But even this criticism is not Stirner’s own position. As I have hinted, Stirner understands singularity as uniqueness, and the unique cannot be accounted for in thought alone: it is decidedly *non-conceptual*. The response I am presenting here is thus an ‘extrapolation’ of Stirner’s ironic

⁵⁵ This is precisely the ‘Spinozist’ or ‘pantheist’ reading of Feuerbach presented in the scholarship, notably by Douglas Moggach. Cf. Douglas Moggach, “The Subject as Substance: Bruno Bauer’s Critique of Stirner”, *The Owl of Minerva*, 41:1-2 (2009-10): 65-67.

method: appropriating the coordinates of a framework and pushing them closer to real singularity.

Now to continue: Gooch's presentation of Feuerbach would also fail to leave room for the supposed 'ineffability' of the contents of individual consciousness in the first place. Because for Gooch intersubjectivity means *communicability*, and truly unique consciousness is marked by *ineffability*, concrete singularity could never actually occur if it were only ever produced intersubjectively. The temporal language in Gooch's reconstruction works to smuggle in this false sense of singularity: contents "*remain*" ineffable "*until*" they are attached to universal predicates. The attempt to have the cake and eat it too leads to aporia: intersubjectivity is here presupposed as the necessary condition for the possibility of individuality; individuality, subsequently, is required to justify the (practical) necessity of intersubjectivity in the first place. Feuerbach's humanism attempts to provide the conditions by which particularity and egoism (understood in the political sense as interests and desires cultivated by the appeal to a false universality) can be transcended—but Gooch's reconstruction merely narrates it away.

The second concern follows directly from the first: it is unclear why Gooch deems it necessary for individual conscious beings to understand each other in this highly abstract sense. Feuerbach mobilizes the concept of *need* as the material basis of his humanism; yet, in order for our social and political needs to be met, it seems to be enough to simply be able to work and act together. Even if it were possible to accurately represent and communicate the 'contents of our sensuous consciousness' to one another, it is unclear why this would be a necessary condition for

every-day social life or collective political projects.⁵⁶ A quick reflection on our own daily lives reveals that the more likely and more common communicative possibility is rather that of failure: we often misinterpret, reinterpret, or even fail to *attempt* to interpret the expressions of others. The possibility of communication's failure—which threatens at every moment to pierce the shallow surface of our social interactions—is perhaps most strongly felt in the domain of love: a domain Feuerbach exalts to the supreme attribute of humanity. Who, in the throes of desire, has not felt the sharp, anxious pang of inadequacy imbricated in the very attempt to express the depths of their love to their beloved? Why, for all his literary acumen, did Petrarch pen more than a single sonnet?

⁵⁶ To advance the point, one might appeal to an example of a Wittgensteinian 'language game'. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1986): §2.

1.2: Stirner's Ironic Inversion of Bauer's Pure Criticism

Stirner's engagement with Bauer is in many respects more complicated than his engagement with Feuerbach. Stirner appropriates Feuerbach's dialectical reversal and transforms it into an ironic inversion by thrusting it back onto Feuerbach's own ontology. Stirner does the same with Bauer's philosophy of 'pure criticism'; however, Bauer's understanding of *dissolution* is carried through to what I consider to be the real, affirmative core of Stirner's egoism (which I develop in the proceeding chapters). That is, Stirner also performs an ironic inversion of Bauer's framework, but retains Bauer's motif of dissolution unironically. Further complicating the matter is the fact that after performing his ironic inversion, Stirner does not seem to retain much from Feuerbach at all—it is unclear, as a matter of intellectual history, whether Stirner learned the motif of a dialectic reversal from Feuerbach or whether he found it elsewhere.

Stirner projects Bauer's form of criticism back onto the figure of the critic themselves. It is Stirner's defence of *singularity* as uniqueness which leads him to reject the humanist 'calling' at the foundation of pure criticism: rather than striving to transform oneself into a true or complete human being, one can instead "invert the case, and say to yourself, *I am a human being!*".⁵⁷ Stirner claims that the individual does "not need to begin by producing the human being" in themselves, for the human *already* belongs to the individual as a *quality*.⁵⁸ This means that neither Spirit, nor reason, nor the human essence need to be striven toward or realized for a *particular* subject to become an *individual* subject—but, more importantly, it also means that what Feuerbach and Bauer call 'particular' human subjects are *always already individuals*, i.e.

⁵⁷ Stirner, *Ego*, 114.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 114.

singular and unique.⁵⁹ The following subchapter thus begins with a discussion of universality and particularity in Bauer's critical philosophy before passing through Stirner's own criticism and reappropriation of it.

Universality and Particularity in Bauer's Pure Criticism

On Stirner's reading, Bruno Bauer takes issue with both Christianity and Judaism for failing to affirm and advance "true universality", understood as "the immanent striving of reason to realize itself in the world, and thus to further the cause of emancipation".⁶⁰ What characterizes the *false* universalism of both religions is an understanding of their own standpoints as 'privileged' with respect to other modes of knowing and understanding the world.⁶¹ The setting-up of false universals, or *hypostasis*, makes way for both religions to embody and promote forms of political and social egoism, or *particularism*.⁶² According to Bauer, both Christians and Jews see themselves as having "some point of advantage over the other"; subsequently, this point of advantage—'privilege' or 'prerogative' [*Vorrecht*—yields fragmentation and exclusivity [*Ausschließlichkeit*] with regard to the wider political community.⁶³ In other words, the emergence of Christianity as a *religion* involves the social and political construction of a "community of Christians"; the act of constructing a Christian community, in turn, "presupposes

⁵⁹ Note Stirner's oft-repeated remark that the individual has no need to strive for a higher mode of existence because she is 'already perfect'. For example, in opposition to religion, which sets "up the proposition that we are sinners altogether", his egoism sets "over against it the other: we are perfect altogether!" Stirner, *Ego*, 317.

⁶⁰ Douglas Moggach, "Post-Kantian Perfectionism", *Politics, Religion, and Art: Hegelian Debates*, ed. Douglas Moggach, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 187.

⁶¹ Moggach, "Perfectionism", 187.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Stirner, *Ego*, 184.

[...] the exclusion of non-Christians”.⁶⁴ The community therefore cultivates particularity by striving for a universalism that is not truly universal: social exclusivity is the political instantiation of ontological particularity, which stems from false universalism. For Bauer, attaining freedom is therefore a question of uniting heretofore disparate communities by negating or dissolving, through the act of criticism, the particularism inherent to mutually exclusive religious standpoints. Therefore, the task of criticism is to transcend all particularism and adopt instead “the general rights of man [*Menschenrecht*]”.⁶⁵

As Douglas Moggach argues, Bauer’s understanding of political freedom or autonomy is closely related to Hegel’s notion of the ‘ethical life’ [*Sittlichkeit*].⁶⁶ For both Hegel and Bauer, ethical life is composed of universalism on two sides, both of which are necessary for “the attainment of [...] rational freedom”: on the one hand, “outward expansion, or engagement with and refashioning of objectivity in light of subjective purposes”; on the other, an “inner conscious reflection” toward a unification of thought and being.⁶⁷ This means that objectivity is shaped by subjective action, but subjective action is also influenced by an objectivity toward which it must take a critical stance. The individual’s pursuit of freedom and virtue, in other words, requires a correspondence between their subjective moral will [*Moralität*], as thought, and the objective social structures and institutions of material reality.⁶⁸ This formulation is part and parcel of Hegel’s attempt to marry two distinct lineages: the Spinozist, and the Kantian-Fichtean. Indeed, a

⁶⁴ Tomba, “Exclusiveness”, 92.

⁶⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 162.

⁶⁶ Douglas Moggach, “Republican Rigorism: Hegelian Views of Emancipation in 1848”, *The European Legacy*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2003): 441-457.

⁶⁷ Douglas Moggach, “Rigorism”, 449.

⁶⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, ed. Stephen Houlgate, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50-51.

topography of divergences and disagreements among the Young Hegelians can be traced according each philosopher's commitment to either side of this lineage: the objective, 'substantial', or 'Spinozist' side of universality is emphasized by Hegelians like Feuerbach and Strauss, while Bauer stresses the 'subjective', Fichtean side.⁶⁹ Bauer's commitment to subjectivity over substantiality does not, however, entail a totalizing denial of objectivity, nor does it constitute a pure transcendental idealism. Rather, Bauer understands the Spinozist moment in Hegel's philosophy as a necessary stage in the historical development of self-consciousness. By expressing the universal as immediately given and independent of consciousness, this substantial stage presents particular subjectivities with the need to transcend their own particularity in order to pursue rational freedom and autonomy—i.e. real, mediated individuality. This self-transcendence is achieved by understanding that the substantial stage *itself* must be critically sublated by particular subjects, transforming both the universal and the particular in the process of becoming a singular subjectivity. Through this act of critique, the universal is stripped of its transcendence and made immanent to history, understood here as the collected (but transformable and transforming) accounts of social and political action. The historical development of self-consciousness, as taken up and driven forward by individual subjects, is thus the central driving force of Bauer's ethics. Although the historical development of self-consciousness (as substance) is shaped and produced by the work of subjectivity, it doubles back and presents an *obligation* for subjects to mediate their own particularity, to elevate *themselves*

⁶⁹ Moggach, "Subject", 66.

toward that universality. As Moggach notes, this doctrine closely resembles Kant's *Vollkommenheit*, or "perfectionism".⁷⁰

Bauer holds that individuals "must not simply abstract from their particular interests and identities", but "must instead radically transform them".⁷¹ That is, Bauer is not content to allow any distinction between external, political acts and internal, moral motivations: the two must be consistent. Moreover, Bauer's commitment to the Fichtean branch of subjectivity prioritizes individual autonomy as a necessary *cause* (and not only an *effect*) of the construction of rational and just political institutions. The requirement that particular subjectivities not simply remain fixed in their particularity (or false universality) stems from his Hegelian understanding of freedom as necessarily involving real universality—the relationship between objective institutions and subjective will is dialectical. According to this framework, fixed particularity leads to social atomism, and is criticized as a vestige of the Enlightenment view of autonomy: its ahistoricism and its overdetermination of the merely *negative* form of freedom must be transcended in order for rational freedom to be fully expressed objectively in the world. Drawing on Hegel, Bauer therefore distinguishes between 'particularity' and 'individuality' (or singularity)—the particular is only fully realized as the *individual* through mediation by the universal. Universality is in this sense "not a property merely distributed or shared unselfconsciously among its many particular bearers", but is instead "taken up or posited by them, and is directive of action".⁷² Individual autonomy thus appears as the spontaneous choice of individuals to discipline themselves, normatively, in accordance with universal principles as they

⁷⁰ Moggach, "Perfectionism", 187.

⁷¹ Moggach, "Rigorism", 449-450.

⁷² Moggach, "Subject", 65.

are developed and revealed historically. Particular interests, understood as immediately given and unreflective, must be submitted to criticism: the transformation of one's subjectivity is moral, political, and revolutionary. This process is the core of Bauer's dialectic, which flips the traditionally Hegelian script: rather than universal thought subsuming the particular, the unity of thought and being are only "achieved by subjective activity".⁷³

Stirner's Ironic Inversion of Criticism

Stirner's retort to Bauer's position is multi-faceted, but I here focus on the roles of universality, particularity, and individuality in the dialectical achievement of autonomy. Initially, Stirner's retort rests on the claim that 'exclusivity' (i.e. particularism as false universality) is always already present in the world—not only between heterogeneous religious or political groups, but among *and within* individuals themselves. This is a key element of Stirner's insistence that egoism is a *description* (an argument I develop in the second chapter)—that individuals, whether or not they believe themselves to be acting for external, universal ends, are always acting from self-interest. The 'advantage', 'privilege', or 'prerogative' one individual has with respect to another lies not only in their particularism, but precisely *in and through* their individuality [*Einzigkeit*], or uniqueness. The type of exclusivity (as metaphysical, ethical, and political difference) appearing between, for example, Christianity and Judaism, occurs further down-stream of the exclusivity (as *uniqueness*) inherent to individuals themselves: Christianity or Judaism are merely qualities of *already* singularized individuals. In other words, particularity considered in Bauer's formulation

⁷³ Widukind De Ridder, "Max Stirner: The End of Philosophy and Political Subjectivity", *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 144.

as false universalism or exclusivity is merely political, a form of social atomism, and does not yet account for real the real, irreducible differences between individuals. For this reason, Bauer's account of particularity cannot fully explain the *Vorrechte* individuals have over and among one another—neither can it account for the different and unique ways in which universals (false or otherwise) gain unique meanings and unique expressions *through* individual subjects. This very simple fact—that *my* skin is not *your* skin, *my* thoughts are not *your* thoughts—is, as stated, the basis of Stirner's insistence that egoism is a *description* of an ever-present condition of human thought and action.⁷⁴ Stirner once again affirms the uniqueness at the heart of existence in his response to what he calls Bauer's 'humane liberalism': one can never really be a Jew in general, categorically, since one is always "*this Jew*".⁷⁵ As we saw in relation to Feuerbach, Stirner affirms that attributes—regardless of their application to true or false universals—have reality and gain meaning only in and through the existence of a unique individual. Individuality understood as *uniqueness* thus poses a problem for the pure critic, who is tasked to sublate and negate all particularity, exclusiveness, and egoism in order to achieve singular self-consciousness and rational autonomy.

Stirner exposes, performatively, the lack of 'substance' in Bauer's understandings of particularity and individuality. If the critic is a particular subject *before* having critically sublated

⁷⁴ Once again, Stirner affirms the inadequacy of categories to capture and express singularity. He elaborates: "Doubtless I have *similarity* with others; yet that holds good only for comparison or reflection; in fact I am incomparable, unique. My flesh is not their flesh, my mind is not their mind. If you bring them under the generalities 'flesh, mind', those are your *thoughts*, which have nothing to do with *my* flesh, *my* mind, and can least of all issue a 'call' to mine." Stirner, *Ego*, 124.

⁷⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 114. The original German reads [...vermag er nicht zu sein, schon weil er *dieser* Jude ist]. I argue that Stirner's italicization or highlighting of [*dieser*] is meant to emphasize the demonstrative and ostensive nature of the term 'unique'. As a pure 'pointing-out', Stirner's term 'unique' can be considered non- (or extra-) discursive. Stirner again italicizes 'this' (as *diese* and *dieses*) in "Stirner's Critics" in order to speak about the unique form and expression of a specific type of affective 'self-forgetting'—something I discuss in the second chapter. The ostensive character of the term 'unique' will be explored more robustly below, in the final subchapter.

and internalized its alleged history, the obligation to perform the task of criticism must *itself* be open to criticism and dissolution. It is history—or, more precisely, the act of critically subsuming history—which delivers to us the obligation to transcend particularity toward true individuality and thus toward rational autonomy; yet, if criticism claims to ‘leave no stone unturned’, this task must necessarily include *itself*. The performance of criticism toward universal ends thus relies on the will and interest—the individual, *egoistic* will and interest—of the critic. In order to accept the obligation, calling, or vocation, the critic must *already* be resigned to the value and purpose of criticism: the particular critic must already desire a transcendence of their particularity toward rational autonomy. But since this desire is given to us in and through a critique of history, we are left with two options: either the moral obligation to pursue rational autonomy through a critique of history is exempt from criticism, or Bauer’s accounts of particularity and individuality are inadequate. The call to critique is therefore either arbitrary (unexplainably exempt from criticism) in the former instance, or contingent (dependent on the particular will) in the latter—it is not a necessary outcome of the historical development of Spirit, nor a binding obligation on the individual.

In the first instance, Bauer runs into a hermeneutic circle; in the second, his account of particularity is already mediated by universality and thus cannot be ‘pure’ particularity. That is, in the second instance, Bauer’s understanding of particularity already contains the locus of rational autonomy (or individuality) he seeks by imbuing ‘particular’ subjects with the autonomy to either accept or reject the call. Stirner, in fact, makes *both* criticisms. When, near the end of *The Ego*, he presents his criticism of truth, he begins with an argument repeated throughout the book: “If I

am free as ‘rational I’, then the rational in me, or reason, is free”.⁷⁶ This argument is presented against almost every ‘spook’ Stirner deals with: ‘freedom of religion’ is freedom *for religion* to use me for its own ends; ‘freedom of the press’ is freedom *for the press* to express itself through me; ‘rights of the citizen’ are the freedoms of the State to govern in and through me, and so on. This argument—its central logic—will be revisited throughout the remainder of this thesis in various contexts; for the sake of convenience, I name it the ‘inverted freedom argument’. Applied to Stirner’s critique of Bauer, the inverted freedom argument reveals that the will of the particular subject to transcend their own particularity for universal ends is in reality only the *universal expressing itself through the particular subject*. Put differently, the call-to-critique at the foundation of Bauer’s project is a call for the *voluntary servitude* of the particular subject.⁷⁷

Now to return to the first point concerning exemption. Since Bauer’s critique of Stirner rests on the claim that he attempts to exempt something from criticism—namely, the *unique*—we have adequate grounds to believe Bauer would vehemently reject the assertion that he commits this very crime. Stirner does, in fact, make this argument against Bauer, effectively ‘inverting’ Bauer’s own critique against him:

It is precisely the keenest critic who is hit hardest by the curse of his principle. Putting from him one exclusive thing after another, shaking off churchliness, patriotism, etc., he undoes one tie after another and separates himself from the churchly man, from the patriot, until at last, when all ties are undone, he stands—alone. He, of all men, must exclude all that have anything exclusive or private; and, when you get to the bottom, what can be more exclusive than the exclusive, single person himself!⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Stirner, *Ego*, 305.

⁷⁷ I develop the notion of voluntary servitude (along with the corollary concept of a ‘passionate attachment’) in the second and third chapters of this thesis via of Saul Newman’s reading of Stirner.

⁷⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 121.

This, as I argued above, corresponds to Stirner's point that the form of exclusiveness Bauer is primarily concerned with occurs further down-stream of the kind of 'exclusiveness' inherent to individuality itself. Yet Stirner is not content to merely abandon criticism altogether for this reason. He sees immense value in Bauer's method—namely, in his tactic of 'dissolution'. Although Stirner does turn the charge of 'exemption' back onto Bauer, he ironically indicates that it is ultimately the second possibility—that Bauer does not adequately account for real individuality—with which he is most concerned. The task, moving forward, is to establish how one might go about practicing dissolution while at the same time affirming individuality as *uniqueness*, i.e. without being obligated to perform the task by universal ends, without needing to rid oneself of egoism and self-interest. Before accounting for Stirner's appropriation of dissolution, his commentary on pure criticism must be further examined.

Criticism and Humanism

While Stirner opposes Bauer's conceptions of particularity and individuality on these grounds, I argue that he is at the same time highly sympathetic to the ethical and political functions of criticism. The question, for Stirner, is how to hold onto the tactical benefits of pure criticism without relying on its universalizing, humanist, or normative foundations. Stirner is undeniably insistent on this latter point. In fact, David Leopold notes that Stirner refers to pure criticism as either 'critical liberalism' or 'humane liberalism' because criticism itself "does not go beyond the principle of liberalism, man".⁷⁹ Yet Stirner's descriptions of the structure and function of criticism indicate a charitable engagement and relatively positive assessment. He writes,

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 111

Among social theories criticism is indisputably the most complete, because it removes and deprives of value everything that *separates* man from man: all prerogatives, down to the prerogative faith. In it the love-principle of Christianity, the true social principle, comes to the purest fulfilment, and the last possible experiment is tried to take away exclusiveness and repulsion from men: a fight against egoism in its simplest and therefore hardest form, in the form of singleness [*Einzigkeit*], exclusiveness, itself.⁸⁰

Stirner reads Bauer's criticism as the most advanced form of humanism—this is, to be sure, a slightly back-handed compliment, especially given his previous remarks on Feuerbach. Stirner praises Bauer for having carried the humanist principle to its most extreme point while simultaneously berating him for accepting the terms of the debate in the first place. Stirner's task *is* in fact to defend 'egoism in its simplest form' as pure individuality, difference-in-itself, or *uniqueness*. This is precisely what leads Stirner to reject the humanist and universalist elements of Bauer's criticism while also affirming its practical utility for his task.

This fact is evidenced not only by his discourse and commentary on criticism itself, but by the very structure of *The Ego and Its Own*: in Stirner's account of the history of philosophy, Bauer appears *after* Feuerbach. Indeed, Stirner's engagement with critical liberalism is the last section ('The free') of the last stage ('Men of the old time and the new') of his own historical narrative—his parody of Hegel's history of philosophy—which comprises the first part of the book ('Man').⁸¹ Here again form and content coincide, this time as a parody of the notion of historical development: Bauer's criticism outwardly differs from Feuerbach's humanism, but retains the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 120

⁸¹ The argument for Stirner's parody of Hegelian dialectics—specifically Hegel's philosophy of history—is best presented by Widukind De Ridder. See: Widukind De Ridder, "Max Stirner: The End of Philosophy and Political Subjectivity", *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 143-166; De Ridder, "Reassessment", 290-291.

religious and hierarchical principle at its core. That is, the political outcomes of Feuerbach's privileging of the *Gattungswesen* and Bauer's privileging of the critical dissolution of history appear to be different; both, however, retain the hierarchical logic imbricated in the move to champion universality over particularity, in the move to transcend egoism.

Stirner's last amendment to the manuscript of *The Ego* is also telling of this mockery-through-structure motif—or the coinciding of form and content. Immediately after Stirner completed the first draft of *The Ego and Its Own*, an article entitled 'Was ist jetzt der Gegenstand der Kritik' was published anonymously in the eighth edition of Bruno Bauer's *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*.⁸² The article was evidently written by Bauer himself. Stirner promptly added a postscript to the very end of the first division of *The Ego and Its Own* in order to engage with Bauer's reformulation of his position, now called 'free human criticism'. According to Leopold, Bauer's article was both a self-criticism and a response to critics, wherein he "chastises himself for having been too 'political' and for having offered a critique of liberalism from within the framework of liberalism".⁸³ As I argued above, a key point in the section preceding Stirner's postscript makes this same criticism—that Bauer's pure criticism does not go beyond the principle of 'man' central to liberalism. While Bauer's reformulation does still privilege 'the general interests of society', Stirner notes that he has dropped the language of the state: no longer is 'the free state' equivalent with human society.⁸⁴ While previous critical efforts were aimed at the 'unhuman' character of statehood and divinity, the target of the newly reformulated 'free human criticism' is the inhumanity of the masses: those populations who were left disgruntled or

⁸² Stirner, *Ego*, 129; 354 (footnote).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 354 (footnote).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 129.

unsatisfied with the Enlightenment's political and intellectual revolutions. By failing to understand the Enlightenment as a necessary step in the historical development of consciousness, the masses are seen as "the natural opponents of theory": the new task of the critic is therefore "to 'uplift' those who were only disgruntled, to give them the right attitude toward those results of the revolution which are to be overcome".⁸⁵ Put differently, the new task is to *humanize* the masses—or at least to create the conditions whereby they may humanize themselves—as a means of fulfilling the Enlightenment project to have reason manifest objectively in the world.

This task, however, still rests on conceptions of *humanity* and *freedom*—ends toward which criticism must be oriented. Stirner's retort is twofold: firstly, as we have seen, to flip the argument back onto Bauer; secondly, to juxtapose Bauer's free human criticism with a new, non-humanist form he calls 'own criticism'. He makes this clear toward the end of *The Ego*, in a section describing 'the owner', where he writes,

True or human criticism makes out only whether something is *suitable* to man, to the true man; but by own criticism you ascertain whether it is suitable to *you*.⁸⁶

This statement appears within a lengthy critique of both *truth* and *thinking*. Stirner lists the differences between Bauer's criticism—also called 'free', 'human', and 'servile' [*dienstbarer*] criticism—with his 'own' [*eigener*] criticism. There are several important arguments made in this section of *The Ego* which clarify his understanding of *ownness*, but more immediately significant for his response to Bauer is his demonstration of the task-oriented nature of criticism.⁸⁷ This 'task' of criticism reproduces the relation of subordination and hierarchy Stirner considers *religious*, i.e.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 130.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 314

⁸⁷ 'Ownness' and its relation to 'property' are dealt with in subchapter 1.3.

humanist, as demonstrated with Feuerbach. Stirner asserts that “even the most inexorable criticism, which undermines all current principles, still does finally *believe in the principle*”.⁸⁸ That is, the critic must have faith in the logic of a ‘pure principle’: the task of criticism is described as “a work of love”, love of and for *the good* (“returning under a thousand names and forms”), which remains a fixed idea.⁸⁹ Recall that Stirner, again playing with religious language, affirms that “possessions of the devil are not the only ones”—that is, it is not only *vice* which ‘possesses’ people, but *virtue* as well.⁹⁰ The problem is precisely one of ‘exempting’ something from criticism, since that which is exempted becomes the principle at the heart of the critical task—and principles call for the subordination of particular, egoistic interests for the expression of their own interests and ends. This is why such things as ‘the true’ or ‘the good’, innocuous though they may seem, must also be abandoned. It is also precisely what Stirner references in his acceptance of “criticism’s lesson to let no part of our property become stable, and to feel comfortable only in—*dissolving* it”.⁹¹ The point is that “if anything plants itself firmly in me, and becomes indissoluble, I become its prisoner and servant, a possessed man”.⁹² Principles, unless they are themselves open to dissolution, must be abandoned lest they become fixed ideas, ‘passionate attachments’, *manias*—lest we become enthralled to them.

By contrast, Stirner’s ‘own’ criticism is described in terms of pleasure, amusement, and *self-enjoyment*. He affirms that it does not proceed from any specific starting point or principle: the Cartesian picture, in particular, is abandoned. Stirner even argues that a self-reflexive

⁸⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 309.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 44.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 127.

⁹² *Ibid.*

knowledge of his own existence—self-consciousness—is unnecessary (though implicated) in processes of dissolution and criticism. Free criticism takes a specific ‘thought’ or ‘idea’ as its criterion for the measure of truth, attempting to dissolve thoughts by thoughts; these thoughts and ideas remain *alien* to the critic, independent of him. This attempt to ‘dissolve thoughts with thoughts’ alone may lead the critic to “come to ataraxia before ideas”, but will never allow the critic to “[get] *rid* of them”.⁹³ Own criticism, on the other hand, affirms that the reality of the idea “consists in the fact that I, the bodily, have it”.⁹⁴ Stirner’s ‘own’ criticism thus attempts to carry out the act of dissolution *without principle*—this is, quite literally, ‘anarchism’: *an-archē*.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 314.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

1.3: Stirner's Egoism: Property, The Unique, Dissolution

In the preceding subchapters, I reconstructed Stirner's ironic inversions of the two most highly developed Young Hegelian positions: Feuerbach's humanism, and Bauer's critical criticism. In presenting these ironic inversions, I established Stirner's concern with ontological singularity—namely, his concern with the ways Young Hegelian philosophy attempts to capture or account for it. This failure to account for singularity is due in part to the generalized Young Hegelian need to abolish egoism. Because egoism is understood to emerge from particularity (or false universality), and particularity itself must be sublated or transcended in the dialectical development of concrete singularity, egoism is conceived as antithetical to real, mediated singularity. Stirner's reformulation and transformation of the traditionally Hegelian conception of singularity thus underpins his ethical and political criticisms of his peers while also providing the framework for his own ethical and political interventions into Young Hegelian discourse on the social question.

In the previous subchapters I hinted that unlike his Young Hegelian peers, Stirner's own position is *non-dialectical*—that is, Stirner's appropriation of both Bauer and Feuerbach is not a developmental appropriation, not a mediation or a progression upon their thought. Two questions now emerge in light of these analyses: how exactly does this non-dialectical appropriation function? And what are we left with in its wake? These questions unfold primarily in ethical and political terms; subsequently, they are found over the next two chapters. However, to better ground this ethical and political unfolding, I here discuss three terms crucial to any reading, non-dialectical or otherwise, of Stirner's egoism: property [*Eigentum*], dissolution

[*Auflösung*], and the unique [*Einziger*]. The discussion of these terms presented below is therefore meant to be primarily exegetical, serving as foundations for the rest of the thesis.

Property

The role and status of property—specifically *private* property—is central to the Young Hegelians’ engagement with the social question. Stirner’s discourse on property shares much of its language with this Young Hegelian discourse generally. First and foremost, this discourse is related to Hegel’s own work, wherein property is understood to be the first objective expression and extension of selfhood or “personality” into the world.⁹⁵ Like Hegel and the Young Hegelians after him, Stirner’s discourse also connects property to the will or power, which is expressed in both a positive and negative formulation: having property, but—more importantly—having the capacity to dissolve or discard one’s property.⁹⁶ However, Stirner’s understanding of property differs crucially from the Young Hegelians along two axes: the nature of the socio-political relationship between egoism and property, and the kinds of objects that are considered property in the first place. While the former grounds my reading of Stirner in a broad sense, the latter does more to ground Stirner’s an-archic ethics and politics later in the thesis.

To elucidate the context of the relationship between property and egoism, I turn to Karl Marx’s early, Young Hegelian texts. For the Young Hegelians generally, the proliferation of private property—protected by the state through laws and constitutional rights—was directly related to the proliferation of egoism, and therefore the spread of political isolation or social atomism. Marx

⁹⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 57-58.

⁹⁶ For example, see: Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State”, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1992): 57-198.

attempts, like Feuerbach and Bauer before him, to think through the relationship between ideological egoism and socio-economic conditions. Indeed, Marx begins to develop early formulations of his theories of alienation and commodity fetishism by performing his own dialectical reversal of Hegel: in our modern societies, property, rather than an attribute of man, has instead become the subject.⁹⁷ Therefore the state, providing ever more protections to the ownership of private property, becomes the engine of its own ruin: it impedes its own attempt at universality by protecting particularity and egoism in the form of private ownership.⁹⁸ Marx transforms and expands the Young Hegelian understanding of egoism to encompass not only religious, moral, and social self-centeredness, but also an economic-utilitarian and individualist ideology of “practical need”.⁹⁹ While his later, post-*German Ideology* works posit ideological egoism (a mode or level of consciousness) as a product of capitalist social relations, his early works—like Feuerbach and Bauer—still tend to position it as a *cause* of these relations. Egoism in these early texts is thus conceived as both the practical and ideological motor of capitalist competition, of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*; private property, as the objective manifestation of egoism, must be abolished or dispersed in order for freedom and autonomy to

⁹⁷ Lucio Colletti, “Introduction”, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1992): 37. In many of his works published before *The German Ideology*, Marx positions consciousness as being interlinked with the development of material and economic conditions—if not a direct cause. I therefore take Marx’s theory of property in his early texts—especially the ones cited in this chapter—to be the most developed of the Young Hegelian positions on the social question.

⁹⁸ “Whereas according to Hegel primogeniture represents the *power of the political state over private property*, it is in fact the *power of abstract private property over the political state*”. Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 167. On the noted contradiction, see: Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 178.

⁹⁹ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1992): 238, 241.

prosper.¹⁰⁰ In Marx's early texts, the point can be put the other way: egoism, as the motor of social atomism, must be abolished for the emancipation of society.

This picture of egoism is, however, not quite the same as Stirner's—and part of this difference revolves around the very definition of property. Although Stirner uses Young Hegelian language, his discourse on property is not, in the first instance, posed in terms of economic or material relations: property also, and perhaps primarily, includes *ideological* objects. He makes the shift from material to ideological property clear near the end of his tirade against the various ideologies of *Die Freien*, but before his Postscript to Bauer's reformulated position, writing:

The socialists, taking away *property* too, do not notice that this secures itself a continued existence in *self-ownership* [*Eigenheit*]. Is it only money and goods, then, that are a property, or is every opinion something of mine, something of my own?¹⁰¹

Stirner here extends the concept of property outside of its colloquial sense to encompass immaterial entities, or “spiritual goods”.¹⁰² Just as natural Being “has become a *material*” for human appropriation, “so the spirit too as property must sink down into a *material*” to be appropriated or dissolved.¹⁰³ What were considered ‘qualities’ (such as ‘humanity’, ‘spirit’,

¹⁰⁰ Marx, “Jewish Question”, 221. It must be noted that Marx's article, along with the articles by Feuerbach and Bauer to which he responds, are dangerously anti-Semitic. In point of fact, Marx radicalizes Feuerbach and Bauer's anti-Semitism not only through the use of racial epithets, but by constructing a political and philosophical basis for the stereotype of the ‘greedy Jew’. This has largely been dismissed or passed over in the history of Marxist scholarship; generally, scholars claim that Marx was critical of all religion, and not just Judaism. The problem, for Marxists, is of course history—the catastrophic events of the 20th century simply cannot be overlooked. Marx here directly ties a moral egoism (or the alleged tendency for Jewish peoples to support their own oppressed communities economically) with economic greed—both of which, he claims, are essential to Judaism. This picture of Judaism, with its admonition of the (alleged) economic tendencies of Jewish peoples in Germany, is all too similar to Nazi ideology and propaganda. Furthermore, if it is the case that a broad critique of egoism necessitates the kind of discourse and analysis presented in this article, Marxist dialectics—seeking to sublate or abolish egoism—may be in serious need of revision. See: Marx, “Jewish Question”, 236-237, 239, 241. See also: Lawrence Stepelevich, “Max Stirner and the Jewish Question”, *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 34:1 (2014): 42-59.

¹⁰¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 115.

¹⁰² Stirner, *Ego*, 247.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 315.

‘masculinity’, etc.) during his engagement with Feuerbach are now, in the second division of *The Ego*, explicitly considered *property*.¹⁰⁴ Identifying entities such as thoughts, ideas, opinions, values, affects, attributes, and desires as property is the first step toward establishing his true concern: not the content of property in-itself, but the *relation* between property and its owner. Stirner, like Marx, distinguishes property from mere *possession*, but applies it more radically to ideological entities: thoughts and ideas can “become *property* only by not being able to become masters”.¹⁰⁵ In other words, as long as the individual can dissolve or transform their relationship to an object, whether material or ideological, that object is their *property*; if, on the other hand, the relationship cannot be dissolved or transformed, the object is a possession.¹⁰⁶ Possessions therefore exercise control over individuals who possess them, while a true owner exercises control over their property. The corollary of this relation is also affirmed by Stirner: that which can be taken from the owner—by law or other means—is not truly property, but again a form of possession. That is, one does not truly *own* what they are merely permitted to have by some higher power or authority. This includes nearly every material object imaginable—hence Stirner’s radical claim: “my property is not a thing, since it has an existence independent of me”; rather, it is only “my might or control over” property which is properly *my own*.¹⁰⁷ What the owner owns as property, therefore, has less to do with the object and more to do with the owner’s will, power, and might. Stirner’s egoism, as self-interest, is therefore not a form of individualist-utilitarian greed, but rather a form of analysis that takes seriously the limitations of the individual’s power.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 156-158, 163.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 302

¹⁰⁶ Recall Stirner’s play with the demonological connotation of ‘possession’, discussed earlier in the chapter via Feuerbach.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 245. See also: Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 169.

This latter formulation—that objects which can be taken from us are not our property—is the basis of Stirner’s critique of both socialism and liberal rights discourse. These critiques will be discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, while the ethical and political implications of Stirner’s ideological understanding of property will be discussed in the second and third chapters respectively. The relationship between property and the owner will therefore emerge slowly throughout the later chapters—suffice it to say, for now, that “property depends on the *owner*”.¹⁰⁸ This is why Stirner turns to a neologism—*ownness* [*Eigenheit*—as an alternative to empty conceptions of rights and freedoms: for autonomy to obtain, it is not enough that one has the freedom or the right to have this or that thing—one must really own that thing, must have real power over it. Thus, when Stirner makes statements insinuating that the entire world belongs to him alone, this is best read as a statement of *possibility*—a meditation on what the singular individual has and does not have in their power, a meditation on what one can and cannot do.

The Unique

Thus far I have argued that Stirner’s *unique* is a response to his peers’ inadequate formulations of singularity, or individuality. I can now, having gone through Stirner’s criticism of universality and particularity in Feuerbach and Bauer, finally add nuance to this claim: Stirner’s unique, as it turns out, *does not* formulate or capture singularity. Rather, the phrase ‘unique’ points to the *impossibility* of capturing singularity, the inability to represent individuality in

¹⁰⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 220.

thought and language. To elucidate this point, I turn primarily to Stirner's own attempts to explain himself to his critics.

The main charge against Stirner's description of the unique, launched early-on by his Young Hegelian peers, runs as follows: attempting to dissolve all essences, fixed ideas, and rigid principles, Stirner posits and relies on the unique as an essential, transcendental, or foundational concept to carry out this act of dissolution.¹⁰⁹ In other words, Stirner's project runs into a contradiction by requiring something *necessary* (the unique) in order to expose the *contingency* of all things; Stirner, in effect, posits the "spook of all spooks".¹¹⁰ Responding to this criticism, Stirner writes:

Stirner names the unique and at the same time says: names name thee not; he speaks a name when he names the unique, adding that the unique is only a name. So he means something different from what he says, just as, for example, when someone calls you Ludwig, he does not mean a Ludwig in general, but means *you*, for whom he has no word.

What Stirner *says* is a word, a thought, a concept; what he *means* is not a word, not a thought, not a concept. What he says is not what he means, and what he means cannot be said.¹¹¹

The second paragraph of this quotation references Hegel's arguments concerning the universality of language. Not only does it draw on the Sense-Certainty chapter of the *Phenomenology*, but the last line in particular is quite similar to a line from Hegel's *Lesser Logic*. There, Hegel writes: "What

¹⁰⁹ Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", 53-54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ "[Stirner nennt den Einzigen und sagt zugleich: Namen nenn Dich nicht; er spricht ihn aus, indem er ihn den Einzigen nennt, un fügt doch hinzu, der Einzige sei nur ein Name; er meint also etwas Anderes, als er sagt, wie etwa derjenige, der Dich Ludwig nennt, nicht einen Ludwig überhaupt, sonderu Dich meint, für den er ken Wort hat.

Was Stirner sagt, ist ein Wort, ein Gedanke, ein Begriff; was er meint, ist kein Wort, kein Gedanke, kein Begriff. Was er sagt, is nicht das Gemeinte, und was er meint, ist unsagbar]". Max Stirner, "Recensenten Stirners. Entgegnung an Feuerbach, Szeliga und Hess", *Kleinere Schriften und sein Entgegnungen auf di Kritik seines Werkes: "Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum"*, *Aus den Jahren 1842-1847*, ed. John Henry Mackay (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1898): 113. See also: Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", 54-55.

I only mean [*meine*] is mine [*mein*]; it belongs to me as this particular individual. But if language expresses only what is universal, then I cannot say what I only mean".¹¹² To recapitulate the argument I presented in the Introduction to this thesis, Stirner concedes to this Hegelian position concerning language: that it speaks in universals and, therefore, that one cannot express only what they mean to signify when speaking of singular, unique objects. Yet, Stirner disagrees with Hegel's corollary: that "*what cannot be said*—feeling, sensation—is [...] what is most insignificant, most untrue".¹¹³ Stirner's egoism, on the contrary, affirms the truly singular as that which is most significant—even though it is inexpressible.

What Stirner is getting at in this article is the notion that language has its own subject matter, its own content distinct from the other kinds of content that make up life. Stirner's insistence on addressing and activating the unsayable-singular is a defence of this other, non-conceptual content; indeed, it is the starting point of Stirner's egoism because it is precisely what makes each of our experiences of being in the world varied, multiplicitous, and—most importantly—*unique*. The ironic appropriation of Hegel's play with *Mein/Meinung* is central to this project of defending the unsayable-singular: as I argued in relation to Feuerbach, attributes only gain meaning and legitimacy through the unique individual's internalization and expression of them.¹¹⁴ This play with *Mein/Meinung* is unsurprisingly also present in *The Ego*, where Stirner

¹¹² Hegel, *Lesser Logic*, 50-51.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 51.

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting Landstreicher's translation of the last line of the block quotation cited above: "[...] or is every view my thing, a thing of my own?" The word 'view' here is used instead of Leopold's 'opinion'. In the preface to his translation of "Stirner's Critics", Landstreicher notes that *Meinung* can also be translated as 'judgment' or 'estimation' rather than 'opinion', but he prefers 'view' because of Hegel's use of the term in Part I of the *Encyclopedia*. There, Hegel plays with the etymological relationship '*Meinung*' has to '*Mein*', which means "mine" in English. For Hegel, '*Meinung*' is a mode of signification that distinguishes between particulars: it operates at the level of *representation*, which is a mode of thinking but is not yet properly *thought*. Representation is a slightly curious mode of thinking because unlike mere sensibility it involves some degree of universality while at the same time holding its contents in isolation. That is, representation has sensible material as its object, but it also provides the

specifically attacks Hegel's condemnation of both "the own" [*das Meinige*] and "opinion" [*Meinung*], as well as the valorization of "Absolute thinking".¹¹⁵ Stirner argues that the individual who has faith in Absolute thinking "forgets that it is *my* thinking" and forgets that "it exists only through *me*".¹¹⁶ This is perhaps the core of Stirner's critique of fixed ideas: that they express themselves—their own content and their own interest—in and through us because we subscribe to them and sustain them unconsciously. That is, we fail or forget to interrogate our own thoughts and desires: is it I who thinks, or something else which thinks through me?

object with additional content produced by "self-conscious thinking". Moreover, while sensibility does not posit relations between its contents (holding them in mutual externality), representation does posit a relation between its contents, thereby rendering them *determinate*. However, as the contents of representation are only ever simple self-relations, the relationship between distinct representations is only ever the simple 'and': representations stand side-by-side "upon the broad field of inner, abstract universality". Representation is thus distinct from the understanding as a mode of thinking "because [the understanding] posits relationships of universal and particular, or of cause and effect". The understanding, in turn, must be applied to representations in order to grasp the necessary or objective relations between them, thereby elevating mere representation to the level of true thought. The important point here is that representations lack concrete universality: they are determined only in "being mine", by being "in me", and not by their relations to other representations. This fact of 'being mine' is the only content supplied to representations by self-conscious thinking, which means representations can only be grasped in their particularity, and/or abstract universality.

Now to return to Stirner. Landstreicher claims Stirner "is likely to have found [Hegel's play with *Mein/Meinung*] amusing", because it describes "how you and I actually experience our world" and implies that every individual has a unique perspective. This claim stems from his reading of Hegel's discourse on representation: Landstreicher argues that, for Hegel, representations are "of no significance to universal Reason or universal Thought". This, I believe, is a misreading of Hegel: on the contrary, representations are necessary steps toward thought, which can in turn become elevated into the Concept by the work of philosophy. Landstreicher's interpretation seems to correspond to an anti-dialectical reading of egoism similar to my own; however, it presents egoism as a simple disavowal or dismissal of dialectical thought, i.e. as a kind of subjectivist or social-atomist perspectivism. This reading lacks nuance. I argue instead that Stirner attempts to show, performatively, how the dialectic can get stuck at the point of negation or particularity because it relies on the will (or obedience) of the singular individual to actively desire concrete universality in the first place. In other words, Stirner's egoism does not simply posit an 'outside' of the dialectic, but, like his politics, it seeks to expose its contingency, arbitrariness, and failure to capture real singularity. This performance is perhaps best witnessed in Stirner's critique of Bauer, discussed earlier in this chapter, wherein the 'call to critique' is stripped of its specter of necessity. The radically an-archic element of Stirner's work is not found in its affirmation of individuality against authority, as Landstreicher would have it, but rather in its demystification of the divine principles that anchor our world. See: Stirner, *Unique*, 145; Wolfi Landstreicher, "Translator's Preface", *Stirner's Critics*, (California: LBC & CAL Press, 2012), 49; G.W.F Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 49-52, 351 (fn. 33), [hereafter referred to as the *Lesser Logic*].

¹¹⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 300.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Stirner does not conceive of the unique as a concept or category under which objects can be subsumed, nor does he posit the unique as an essence to which attributes can be ascribed. His example—the name ‘Ludwig’—affirms the ostensive character of the term ‘unique’; it merely ‘picks something out’, and does not “say what you are”.¹¹⁷ This act of ostension is an affirmation of “content *outside of or beyond*” concepts, ideas, and thought.¹¹⁸ The unique *can* be grasped as a concept, but in so doing the problem of language’s universality is reproduced: the unique is given a definition, determined, and therefore made to express something other than what is really meant by it. Rather than a concept, the unique is instead only an empty phrase: when one uses the term ‘the unique’, one is in fact “expressing nothing”.¹¹⁹ The difference, then, between Stirner’s unique and the concept of a ‘human being’, for example, is that the latter “has a conceptual content of its own”, while the former does not.¹²⁰ For Stirner, the concept of a ‘human being’ is only an *attribute*; if taken as an essence or universal, it only expresses what is proper to *itself* in you, such that “*you* can remain completely out of play”.¹²¹ Stirner elucidates this point by drawing a distinction between what he calls *thought* content and *specific* content. He writes,

You—unique! What thought content is here, what sentence content? None! Whoever wants to deduce a precise thought-content of the unique as if it were a concept, whoever thinks that with ‘unique’ one has said about you *what* you are, would show that they believe in phrases, because they don’t recognize phrases as phrases, and would also show that they seek *specific* content in phrases.

You, inconceivable and inexpressible, are the phrase content, the phrase owner, the phrase embodied; you are the who, the one of the phrase. In the unique, science can dissolve into life, in which your *this* becomes your *who* and this who no longer seeks itself in the word, in the Logos, in the attribute.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Stirner, “Stirner’s Critics”, 55-56.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 57.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 55.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.* 59.

Prior to this, Stirner affirms that because the content of the unique “cannot be thought or said”, it is, strictly speaking, “*not even a phrase*”.¹²³ The phrase ‘the unique’—“the last possible phrase”—is therefore unthinkable in terms of Hegelian logic: if language expresses what is universal, and to be unique is to share no common attributes with any other thing, then language cannot express the content of the unique.¹²⁴ This is why Stirner claims, somewhat mystically, that the unique is “logic dying in a phrase”.¹²⁵ This inexpressible content is what Stirner, in the above-cited passage, terms *specific* content—or, more poignantly, *life*. Both thought content and ‘science’—Hegelian science—are relegated to the realm of language and concepts. Thought content and science can express *what* you are—human, German, male, and so on—but not *who* you are; the unique, as mere ostension, aims to affirm this ‘who’ without qualification. However, this point—that the unique is not a phrase, has no content, expresses nothing, etc.—must be tempered by Stirner’s skepticism toward language itself.

In the Introduction, I briefly noted Hegel’s position on demonstrative terms and ostensive acts—specifically, his argument that even mere ostension does not capture real singularity, but always has as its true content universal Being.¹²⁶ This is where Stirner’s skepticism toward

¹²³ *Ibid.* 57.

¹²⁴ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 102.

¹²⁵ Stirner, “Stirner’s Critics”, 59.

¹²⁶ Hegel himself deals with demonstrative language, specifically with regard to the word ‘this’. For Hegel, it is the faculty of sense-certainty which presents the I with an object referable to immediately by a demonstrative ‘this’; the demonstrative, subsequently, takes two forms: ‘Here’ and ‘Now’. Because the content of the demonstrative dissolves as soon as it is posited—i.e. the *referent* of the word ‘now’ is never the same twice—the *content* pointed-out by the demonstrative cannot be its essence. In other words, the essence of the demonstrative is indifferent to any of the infinite content it can possibly represent. However, the demonstrative is nevertheless preserved in-itself, in its own being, by *negating* in each and every utterance the object it signifies: not-now, now-here, not-this, and so forth. Because it preserves itself in its own determination *through* negation, the demonstrative is not in fact immediate, but rather something always *mediated*. This means that the demonstrative is not ‘purely ostensive’ because it never points *solely or exclusively* to the object; rather, it always contains something else supplied to it by the faculty of sense-certainty itself. The object, insofar as it is picked-out by a demonstrative, is always already

language is most important: even the unique, because it is still a linguistic phrase, *fails* to capture real singularity. Stirner himself acknowledges this failure when he describes his own work as a “clumsy expression”; this clumsiness is, in turn, a necessary by-product of his being stuck using “a language ruined by philosophers”—i.e. language that trades exclusively in identity and representation.¹²⁷ This affirmation of the failure of his own writing is precisely why Stirner claims that he is “already lenient when [he makes] use of language”: it is a weak tool, one which comes at a great cost—but it is the only one available.¹²⁸ However, this does mean that the unique lapses back into abstract universalism, that it really does have conceptual content. Rather, the failure of the unique to capture singularity is itself indicative of the weakness of representation in general, and points to the importance of tending to the non-conceptual specific-content that makes up life: the unique is not a solution to the problem of the unsayable-singular, but rather a way of doubling-down on the impossibility of solving it. Like Hegel’s demonstratives, the phrase ‘unique’ *expresses* universal being, but it *means* a singular instance of a radically unstable, infinitely variable, inherently multiplicitous being. The problem is that the meaning of the unique can never be spoken without qualifying and therefore destroying it: every representation is a *misrepresentation*—and it is a strength of the unique that it reveals this to us. The cut between Hegel and Stirner is therefore found in their respective approaches to language itself: for Hegel, the impossibility of expressing the singular means that the objectivity of truth is found in the

permeated by the I. The demonstrative never refers *only* to singular things; its true content is therefore not the object, to which it is always indifferent, but *universal Being*, which it always expresses. Both ‘Here’ and ‘Now’, when we utter them, express Being in general, even when *what we mean to signify* is entirely singular. Thus we never say *only* what we mean when we use demonstratives or ostensive gestures—we always say something else, too. See: Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 58-66.

¹²⁷ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 104.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 103.

universal; for Stirner, the impossibility of expressing the singular means that the objectivity of truth *is never found in language at all*.¹²⁹ Stirner's unique can only be (mis)understood as an abstract universal if his own skepticism toward language is papered-over; that is, if one wilfully ignores what he *means*. The failure of the unique to capture singularity does not require the deflation of singularity, but the deflation of language itself.

The unique, in its *meaning*, therefore expresses nothing for thought and language. This nothing is "not nothing in the sense of emptiness", but is rather "the creative nothing [*schöpferische Nichts*], the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything".¹³⁰ The unique, therefore, is 'nothing' in the sense that it is *indeterminate*—it is merely an open space of possibility, "an open field of action, flux, and becoming".¹³¹ This aspect of uniqueness is what distinguishes Stirner's ego from Fichte's: "it is not that the ego *is* all, but the ego *destroys* all".¹³² Here, in *The Ego*, Stirner affirms the *Einzig*e as both transitory and finite in his most succinct formulation: "never-being-I [*das nie seiende Ich*]"'.¹³³ As we will see in the proceeding chapters, Stirner's egoism attacks the very notion of subjectivity itself. This formulation of the unique, as mere *possibility*, allows Stirner to affirm the social and political forces that work to construct, stabilize and fix identities while also pointing toward the possibility of resistance to those forces

¹²⁹ Jeffrey Reid, writing on the role of language in Hegel's system, argues that objective truth is accomplished in scientific discourse *as discourse*. That is, language "does not simply reflect what is otherwise 'real'", i.e. objective, but actually *is* the object of Hegelian science. Language does not serve as the vehicle for the correspondence of thought and being; language *is* the realization or accomplishment of their conjunction. By expressing rather than simply denoting its objects, language is therefore both "objectively true" and the "true objectivity" of Hegelian science. See: Jeffrey Reid, *Real Words: Language and System in Hegel*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007): 5-6.

¹³⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 7.

¹³¹ Saul Newman, "Introduction", *Max Stirner*, ed. Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 8.

¹³² Stirner, *Ego*, 163.

¹³³ *Ibid.* I here change the translation from Leopold's 'never-being ego' to distinguish it further from Fichte's formulation.

at the level of the singular. I term this understanding of the unique *individuality without identity*: it points-out or names the ‘who’ or the ‘thisness’ of being without recourse to the ‘what’ of being, without *qualifying* being. Refusing to speak the ‘what’ of an individual’s existence, Stirner guards space for the change, flux, and messiness of being in the world.

This ‘never-being-I’ formulation of the unique is, moreover, non-dialectical. Although it is marked by change and becoming, Stirner is insistent on the fact “there is no conceptual development of the unique”; instead, the unique “puts an end to *all conceptual development*”.¹³⁴ As opposed to concepts—such as Being, thought, the I—the unique is not negated or limited (i.e. determined) by other concepts. The unique does ‘develop’, in a certain sense, but only through what Stirner calls “self-development”—a form of development that is both non-conceptual and necessarily as unique as each unique individual themselves.¹³⁵ Stirner again acknowledges that the development of the unique *can* be grasped conceptually, but in so doing one necessarily fails to capture the individuality—the *uniqueness*—that makes up the specific content of individuals’ lives. The formulation ‘never-being-I’ is simply meant to indicate, not capture or express, the ‘thisness’ of the changes and minor inflections that make up our unique lives, marking them as an open space of possibility. Rather than a complete void of being, the term ‘unique’ instead marks the radical contingency of being:

I on my part start from a presupposition in presupposing *myself*; but my presupposition does not struggle for its perfection like ‘man struggling for his perfection’, but only serves me to enjoy it and consume it. I consume my presupposition, and nothing else, and exist only in consuming it. But that presupposition is therefore not a presupposition at all: for, as I am the unique, I know nothing of the duality of a presupposing and a presupposed ego (an ‘incomplete’ and a ‘complete’ ego or man); but this, that I consume myself, means only

¹³⁴ Stirner, “Stirner’s Critics”, 56.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 56

that I am. I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself, and am I only by being not presupposed but posited, and, again, posited only in the moment when I posit myself; that is, I am creator [*Schöpfer*] and creature [*Geschöpf*] in one.¹³⁶

To grasp the full ontological weight of Stirner's *unique*, one needs to account for the various formulations he gives it: the 'creative nothing', a 'never-being-I', the 'mortal' and 'finite I', and, of course, 'indeterminacy itself'. The problem, ontologically, is how best to understand the unique as being both finite and indeterminate. This understanding rests, of course, on the interpretation of dissolution. Here, Stirner uses the language of 'consumption'; however, I argue that this is simply 'dissolution' with rhetorical flourish. In this context, the term 'consumption' does have a specific benefit: occurring at the very end of his engagement with Bauer, Stirner indicates that the presuppositions dissolved by criticism "must not be dissolved into a higher presupposition again".¹³⁷ Consumption is here used only to call attention to his own form of egoistic, non-dialectical dissolution, distinguishing it further from Bauer's dialectical model of dissolution. Abandoning the purely conceptual element of dissolution, Stirner then makes a turn to the body.

Dissolution

Dissolution [*Auflösung*] is a term appearing often in Young Hegelian philosophy. For Hegel and Spinozist-Hegelians like Feuerbach, dissolution describes a process in which the universal absorbs and sublates the particular; for Bauer, however, this type of dissolution signals how universality often suppresses and eradicates the particular entirely.¹³⁸ Bauer thus performs his

¹³⁶ Stirner, *Ego*, 135.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ De Ridder, "Reassessment", 294.

own dialectical reversal by reducing Hegel's Absolute into an infinite consciousness, i.e. an individual subject who has transcended their particularity. As I argued in the previous subchapter, Stirner appreciates Bauer's dialectical reversal—holding that the particular dissolves the universal rather than the other way around—but rejects the teleological movement back toward universality embodied in the call to transcend particularity and exclusiveness. This rejection of universality is one element of Stirner's non-dialectical, ironic inversion; the other is Stirner's condemnation of Bauer's attempt to dissolve thoughts through *thinking* alone. For this reason, De Ridder rightly argues that "egoism [...] was not a way of thinking but a practice".¹³⁹ The practice of egoism does involve dissolution—not letting "our property become stable", not letting our relation to our property become fixed and rigid—but turns to something other than thought to perform it.¹⁴⁰

While I argue that Stirner is primarily concerned with the ideological side of property relations, he does express a kind of materialism by making a turn to the body. This turn to the body is central to both his affirmation of the unique as merely the *name* of inexpressible singularity, as well as his non-dialectical appropriation of Bauer's dissolution as a *tactic*. It is no coincidence that the first division of *The Ego*, concluding with his ironic inversion of Bauer's pure criticism, ends in the "full dissolution" of thought itself; the second division—wherein we find the bulk of Stirner's properly egoistic discourse—begins with an affirmation of the body.¹⁴¹

The full weight of this radical shift from thought to the corporeal has never been fully appreciated. While sources often quote Stirner's assertion that "only thoughtlessness really saves

¹³⁹ De Ridder, "Reassessment", 294.

¹⁴⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 127.

¹⁴¹ "Alas, not my spirit alone, but my body thirsts for [freedom] hourly!". See: Stirner, *Ego*, 135, 141.

me from thoughts”, the corollary—the affirmation of the body—has gone mostly unnoticed.¹⁴²

Immediately after his defence of thoughtlessness as the method of dissolving thoughts, he provides a simple yet powerful example:

A jerk does me the service of the most anxious thinking, a stretching of the limbs shakes off the torment of thoughts, a leap upward hurls from my breast the nightmare of the religious world, a jubilant whoop throws off year-long burdens. But the monstrous significance of unthinking jubilation could not be recognized in the long night of thinking and believing.¹⁴³

Stirner’s imagery here functions primarily through its relatability: one knows intuitively how good it feels to stretch after hunching over a computer screen for hours—the release of tension in the body seems to correspond, at times, to the release of tension in thought. In the following chapters, I argue that Stirner’s egoism is a resistance to processes of subject formation; subject formation, in turn, requires the subject’s voluntary, affective attachment to fixed ideas: the ability of the body to shake-off or *dissolve* thoughts is therefore a vital component of his egoism. This affirmation of the body is not merely a question of analytical preference, but is a vital tactic in reshaping a world which “has suffered long enough under the tyranny of thoughts, under the terror of the idea”.¹⁴⁴ That is, Stirner’s dissolution—and indeed, the whole of his egoism—does not merely operate at the level of thought alone, but proceeds from an understanding of thought and material as being both inextricably linked and irreducible to one another at the same time.

¹⁴² Stirner, *Ego*, 132-133. Banu Bargu, in her recent essay on Stirner, appreciates this turn but unfortunately spends very little time discussing it. She argues that Stirner presents “a materialist critique of epistemology”, whereby the violence of misrepresentation occurs not solely at the discursive level, but “between the signifier and the signified object”. See: Bargu, “*avant la lettre*”, 110.

¹⁴³ Stirner, *Ego*, 133.

¹⁴⁴ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 100.

The passage cited above is not, however, the only evidence for this reading. Recall that for Stirner, it is *religion* in the broad sense that privileges the ideal over the material, finding in the ideal a higher, more noble existence than the earthly or corporeal. Early on in *The Ego*, while Stirner is still establishing his broad definition of religion, he makes the same point found in the above passage: “it is only through the ‘flesh’ that I can break the tyranny of mind; for it is only when a man hears his flesh along with the rest of him that he hears himself wholly”.¹⁴⁵ This statement appears after an ironic inversion of the generalized religious catechism: tame your appetites, your corporeal desires, so as not to be determined by nature. Stirner’s inversion, as noted, applies this very injunction back onto religion itself: dissolve whichever thoughts, concepts and ideas that threaten to become fixed so as not to be determined by *spirit*.

Stirner consistently describes the unique as “flesh-and-blood”; the materiality of the body is a tool at its disposal.¹⁴⁶ Returning to this point near the end of *The Ego*, Stirner argues that the pure critic will never break out of a fundamentally religious mode of action because the call to perform criticism in the first place is itself a religious command, i.e. a moral injunction separating spirit from body, separating essence from existence. Stirner’s inversion does not negate or dismiss the *existence* of this calling, but instead reveals its contingency: “its reality consists in the fact that I, the bodily, have it”.¹⁴⁷ In other words, callings, injunctions, vocations, ideas, duties, and so on, are sustained by the maintenance-work of singular individuals who are free to reject them. This holds true of fixed ideas and interests generally: Stirner consistently argues that interests and ideas external to us gain their power and efficacy by our own work to sustain them.

¹⁴⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 60.

¹⁴⁶ “You can emerge [as unique] only if you appear *in the flesh*”. Stirner, *Critics*, 58.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Bauer's dissolution is dialectical and developmental; Stirner's appropriation of dissolution, on the other hand, is neither developmental nor dialectical. Stirner's dissolution has no end or final goal, no point of completion: "dissolution is not your 'destiny' because it is current [*Gegenwart*]"'.¹⁴⁸ In Bauer's critical dissolution, thoughts and presuppositions are dissolved toward "higher thoughts" and "higher presuppositions"; in *egoistic* dissolution and 'own criticism', "nothing [is] brought to a higher" point and "secured".¹⁴⁹ For the Hegelians, dissolution involves negation in its sublative process; this, in turn, allows thoughts and ideas to gain determination—to become what they are. Stirner's dissolution, however, does not concern the *content* of objects, their determination, but rather the *relation* the unique individual themselves has to these objects. This form of dissolution is more robustly explained in the third chapter, as it takes on an explicitly political function.

¹⁴⁸ Stirner, *Ego*, 294.

¹⁴⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 132; De Ridder, "Reassessment", 295.

Chapter Two: Ethics

*Who does not forget themselves from moment to moment, who does
not lose sight of themselves a thousand times every hour?*

—Max Stirner, “Recensenten Stirners”

In the first chapter, I presented Stirner’s engagements with Young Hegelianism in order to arrive at a central concern: the uncapturability of individuality conceived as uniqueness. I argued that the *unique* names, ostensibly, the inexpressibility and uncapturability of individuality in thought and language. The focus of these discussions was ‘ontological’ in so far as they primarily concerned the existential status of the various kinds of things found in our world (material objects, ideal objects, universal and particular, and so on). The present chapter now turns to ‘ethics’; or, a concern with the nature of our actions and expressions in the world. This involves not only meditations on the permission and prohibition of specific actions and expressions, but the status and validity of obligation, duty, and responsibility themselves.

Any discussion of Stirner’s ‘ethics’, however, is plagued by the prominence of exclusivity and self-interest in his egoism. Ethics, as a discourse, is generally concerned with the Other—yet this is precisely what Stirner is weary of.¹⁵⁰ In direct opposition to his Young Hegelian peers, Stirner identifies a *lack* of self-interest (rather than an excess of it) as an impediment to improving social and political conditions for those disenfranchised by the state and society. For this very

¹⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps the paradigmatic ethical thinker, writes that ethics is the “calling into question of my spontaneity by the Other”. Stirner does not deny the existence of other unique individuals, nor does he deny the existence of powers greater than his own; however, Levinas’ use of terms like ‘obligation’, ‘sacrifice’, and ‘responsibility’ to establish his notion of ethics as first philosophy poses a stark contrast to Stirner’s insistence on self-interest and ownness. See: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007): 43.

reason, many commentators struggle to define Stirner's egoism as wholly relativist, subjectivist, or completely nihilistic. These readings are not wholly incorrect: Stirner does not present any kind of moral philosophy whereby prescriptions for certain kinds of actions are offered. Instead, I argue that Stirner provides *descriptions* of events, actions, and decision-making processes—ones which generally belong under the domain of ethics as a discourse.

However, this descriptive (rather than prescriptive) approach does not render Stirner's egoism wholly useless to ethics. Rather, I argue that Stirner is highly attuned to the tensions and ambiguities imbricated in the project of living in the world. His descriptions of ethical situations reveal, at the level of the individual, the uncertainty involved in deciding what the best course of action might be regardless of the coordinates of one's normative framework—they are attentive to the ambiguity of desire. The fundamental ethical question for Stirner is therefore: *is it I who desires, or something else which desires in me?* The difficulty of broaching this question is all the more apparent upon the realization that any answer to it fails: the unique is nothing but its various relations to its various property, which at every moment threaten to become possessions, threaten to subdue it. It is simply not possible to know, in full, the source and origin of a given desire: it is a matter of degree, not a matter of absolutes.

Nihilism

As Deleuze notes, Nietzsche's genius was to have transformed the question "what is...?" into "which one is...?"; Stirner makes the same transformation: the question of 'what' becomes the question of 'who'—"Who is Man and what is God? Which is particular and what is

universal?”¹⁵¹ Deleuze, however, fails to see three important threads in Stirner’s work: his *ironic* appropriation of Young Hegelian language, the roles of desire and affect in his egoism, and his anarchic political tactics. He thus argues that Stirner “lacks a method, a typological method” needed to address the question he himself poses in a way that would point the way out of nihilism.¹⁵² Although both Stirner and Nietzsche reveal “nihilism as the truth of the dialectic”, Deleuze maintains that Stirner is stuck in that very dialectical language (and thus nihilism): he cannot “think in any other terms but those of property, alienation, and reappropriation”.¹⁵³ For Deleuze, Stirner is content to “dissolve the dialectic in the nothingness of the ego”, and go no further—he offers no alternative to the nothingness he drives himself into.¹⁵⁴

Paterson also reads *The Ego* as an exercise in nihilism. He defines nihilism succinctly as the “obliteration of the world as a meaningful unity”.¹⁵⁵ Stirner’s unique—in fact, Stirner *himself*—is, for Paterson, the paradigmatic ‘nihilistic egoist’. That is, unlike the existentialists who affirm nihilism but seek to overcome it, the unique “affirms the truth of nihilism” but only to will it and live it through.¹⁵⁶ The existentialists attempt to overcome nihilism through the notion of “existential commitment”; as “the crucial and saving existential response”, existential commitment combats nihilism by conferring “significance and value upon the apparently meaningless and purposeless world”¹⁵⁷. Paterson claims that Stirner’s unique, however, would

¹⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): xi.

¹⁵² Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 163.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 162. Deleuze’s reading, though generative, also fails to account for Stirner’s critique and restructuring of Hegelian terminology. While it is true that Stirner employs the language of dialectics, I argue that he radically revises or discards its essentializing and universalizing elements. This is made clear in his skepticism toward language in general, as I argued in the Introduction and the first chapter of this thesis.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 163.

¹⁵⁵ R.W.K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971): 243.

¹⁵⁶ Paterson, *Nihilistic Egoist*, 238.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 237.

reject any form of existential commitment because the unique “refuses to be bound by the past or to bind himself to the future”.¹⁵⁸ The glaring hole in Paterson’s argument is its reliance on a hidden premise—that universality and transcendence are essential criteria for ‘meaning’. It is unclear why something finite, immanent, or mortal must be meaningless—why a lengthy duration, a ‘forever-and-always’ are required for something to be meaningful. In addition to rejecting existential commitment, Paterson holds that Stirner’s unique would also reject a Nietzschean transvaluation of values—and seemingly *any* creation of value—because the unique rejects morality *tout court*.¹⁵⁹ It is unclear why value and morality are, for Paterson, conflated.

This is far too broad of a view to ascribe to Stirner’s egoism. Stirner does not object to morality because of its content (i.e. the values of ‘courage’, ‘cruelty’, ‘nobility’, etc.), but because of its *form*—he rejects the structure of authority imposed by moral *obligation*. Stirner has no problem with ‘courage’ or ‘cruelty’ in themselves, but only objects to them insofar as they are raised to the status of a duty, insofar as they become a “vocation” or calling, insofar as they impose a ‘should’. This objection to moral obligation attacks its spectre of *necessity*: Stirner’s project, to repeat, concerns the affirmation of possibility.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that Stirner’s unique looks to dissolve its ties to pasts and futures. We often become beholden to a particular value or duty by exalting the legitimacy of history to set imperatives on us; we often become enthralled to one specific future, a romantic idealization to which we orient all our action in the present. Pasts and futures—projections of *specific* pasts and futures—in other words, can become fixed ideas, or sites of ‘passionate

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 235.

attachment' which shape and limit subjectivity in the present. Yet the exaltation of a specific past or future is not ruled out or prohibited universally by Stirner: he simply points out the ways in which this activity *can* produce fixed ideas and, in turn, describes how these fixed ideas can limit possibilities—how they can foreclose other ways of being in the world. That is, idealizing a specific future—the proletarian control of the means of production, for example—lends itself to the creation of a blueprint, a plan of action, which in turn sets boundaries on our actions in the present: they determine what even *appears* to be possible. This is not a problem for Stirner *unless the future and its blueprint are not dissolvable*. Indissolubility impedes ownness.

Against Deleuze and Paterson, I argue that Stirner affirms *possibility*. Whether or not the revelation of the dialectic's contingency and the affirmation of the unique's creative nothingness constitute moral nihilism depends, in part, on the interpretation of Stirner's one and only injunction: "Use thyself!" [*Verwerte Dich*].¹⁶⁰ I argue that this injunction is not a moral prescription, but a *challenge*: it is a probing or questioning, not a command or a (universal) value. Stirner himself argues for this kind of distinction between a moral injunction and what amounts to a warning early on in *The Ego*: "if I say to a child 'you will go hungry if you will not eat what is put on the table', this is not moral influence".¹⁶¹ Moral prescriptions ('moral influence'), by contrast, encourage "self-abasement" by establishing "something *higher*" than the child, some external will to which they must bend—something "*instilled and impressed*" in the child as part

¹⁶⁰ Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 353. Leopold's translation reads "get the value out of thyself!", while Landstreicher's reads "actualize yourself!": the former is cumbersome, while the latter is wildly un-Stirnerian. Moreover, Leopold's use of the term 'value', if overemphasized, risks leading us into the very moral terrain to which Stirner is opposed. Landstreicher's use of 'actualize', on the other hand, moves us away from the language of property, alienation, dissolution, etc. and toward an Enlightenment view of the subject—imbued with essential or transcendental capacities awaiting activation. Neither translation corresponds to my reading of egoism. See also: Stirner, *Ego*, 278; Stirner, *Unique*, 327.

¹⁶¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 75.

of the process of subjectivization.¹⁶² One is free to dismiss the former, the challenge, as petty, poorly framed, or irrelevant insofar as it does not accord with one's own interest—and therefore one is free to decline Stirner's invitation to self-reflection and self-dissolution. But if we are attracted to the picture of domination and subordination he presents—one occurring at the level of desire, at the very core of the individual's own identity—Stirner's descriptions of ethical situations open onto new and radical tactical possibilities. These tactical possibilities are the domain of the third chapter of this thesis; however, they do occasionally figure into the arguments of the current chapter. It bears repeating that the distinctions I make between 'ontology', 'ethics', and 'politics' are not categorical or scientific, but mainly heuristic devices: in Stirner's egoism, these discourses are interwoven. It is therefore worth providing some provisional discussion of a few of these tactical terms for context and clarity.

Passionate Attachments and Voluntary Servitude

Stirner's concern with the uniqueness of living a life brings ethics, along with ontology and politics, to the site of the individual: one's very subjectivity is at stake. Although this framing is expanded upon in the third chapter in an explicitly political context, it figures into the current chapter through the notion of "passionate attachments". Saul Newman, borrowing this term from Judith Butler, uses it as one of two grounding devices for his reading of Stirner's ethics and politics.¹⁶³ The other grounding device is the central thematic of Étienne de la Boétie's *Discours*

¹⁶² Stirner, *Ego*, 75.

¹⁶³ Saul Newman, "Voluntary Servitude Reconsidered: Radical Politics and the Problem of Self-Domination", *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1 (2010), 39-41.

de la servitude volontaire.¹⁶⁴ For Newman, la Boétie was the first—while Stirner was perhaps the most detailed—to articulate a problem with a long history: voluntary servitude.¹⁶⁵ Voluntary servitude is the condition whereby a subject willingly participates in their own subjection, i.e. when the subject desires and actively cultivates their own domination, repression, or enthrallment. This can happen consciously or unconsciously; in many ways, the unconscious form of voluntary servitude is subtler, and therefore more dangerous. In this thesis, I am concerned primarily with the unconscious form—that is, the ways in which voluntary servitude is built into the structures of subjectivity and identity.

Judith Butler, developing the notion of “passionate attachments” through her readings of Freud, Lacan, and Foucault, is highly attuned to the process of subject formation. She describes a passionate attachment as a working of power on the psyche of the subject, rather than a psychic force or drive originating in a pre-existing or neutral subject. Passionate attachments are therefore both external and internal to the individual: external as movements of power, internal as the site of manifestation of these movements. The individual internalizes a specific power relation as an unconscious desire; becoming sedimented or *fixed*, the unconscious desire subsequently functions as an anchor for the individual’s identity or subjectivity itself. While external power relations make these attachments possible, the subject, in constantly making or

¹⁶⁴ Étienne de la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (Alabama: The Mises Institute, 1975).

¹⁶⁵ The problem of self-domination has a long lineage after, and possibly before, la Boétie, and it has appeared in many contexts. For only a few examples, see: Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50; Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 54-60; Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Silverthorne and Israel, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6; etc.

maintaining their own subjectivity, actively participates in sustaining them—even when they decrease, impede, or subordinate the individual, limiting their possibilities.

Drawing on Foucault, Butler adopts a broadly-postmodern reading of subordination: it not only dominates the subject, but forms or constitutes the subject simultaneously.¹⁶⁶ That is, passionate attachments are reflexive forces, but they do not posit or pre-suppose a pre-existing subject; rather, reflexive movements of power and desire give rise to subjectivity in the first place. Butler draws on Foucault's play with the dual connotation of term 'subject': no subject exists without *subjection*. That is, subjectivity arises in conjunction with—and is always tied to—forms of subjection.¹⁶⁷ Stirner's egoism, like the broadly-Foucauldian framework Butler and Newman assume, does not seek a total abolition or an 'outside' of power relations; rather, the fight is to keep power relations fluid, dynamic, and decentralized. That is, power itself is not always a force of domination and subordination but can be productive and affirmative as well;

¹⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-10. See also: Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power", *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208-226.

¹⁶⁷ Butler's discourse on passionate attachments is, of course, heavily informed by her readings of Freud and Lacan. I here flag one particular issue in the psychoanalytic discourse. Slavoj Žižek, in his reading of Butler's *Psychic Life of Power*, seeks to undermine or complicate Butler's theory of passionate attachments by returning to Lacan. Lacan, he claims, already accounted for passionate attachments in his theory of the *fundamental fantasy*. Žižek criticizes Butler for conflating two sides of an important distinction Lacan made regarding the logic of passionate attachments and their role in subjugation: fundamental fantasy, on the one hand, and symbolic identification on the other. Symbolic identification is the subject's response to the trauma of becoming conscious of one's fundamental fantasy (passionate attachment or unconscious desire) and is thus the 'forced choice' of participating in their own ideological interpellation. This 'forced choice' can function either as an affirmation or, more radically, a disavowal of one's passionate attachment. However, I believe the practical element of symbolic identification is covered adequately by Saul Newman's theory of voluntary in/servitude. While I believe Lacanian insights into passionate attachments can be useful in developing an understanding of the inner workings of subjects' desires, I do not consider it a necessary component of my reading of Stirner's ethical and political egoism. Passionate attachments, as 'inner workings', certainly serve as the site of the unique's insurrectionary action, but my concern in this thesis lies with the tactics and practices of insurrectionary and an-archic egoism rather than its psychological motivations. See; Slavoj Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification, *UMBR(a)*, vol. 1 (1998): 3-17.

power relations turn into relations of domination and hierarchy once they become *fixed* and *stabilized*—hence Stirner’s warning against ‘fixed’ ideas.

As noted, this discussion of power, subjectivity, and passionate attachment prefigures arguments that are mostly found in the third chapter of this thesis. With respect to this thematic, the current chapter is something like a lead-up to the final chapter. In this chapter, I begin by using the literature on the relationship between Stirner and Nietzsche as a launching point into broader ethical themes in Stirner’s work. The task here is to reframe these ethical themes in two ways: first, by recalling the tactical and ironic reading of Stirner presented in the first chapter; second, by anticipating the discourse on subject formation found in the third chapter. After discussing the Stirner-Nietzsche scholarship, the remainder of the chapter looks to various examples Stirner provides of ethical situations. I argue that these examples are best read as *descriptions* of the roles that desire, passionate attachments, and self-interest play in his egoism, rather than moral prescriptions advocating certain actions over others.

2.1: Stirner and Nietzsche

Rather than directly compare the work of Stirner and Nietzsche, this subchapter takes the current literature on their historical relationship as a launching point into ethical themes in Stirner's work. This scholarship—though seemingly a curious hobby of intellectual historians—explores into Stirner's potential influence on Nietzsche, and generally finds Nietzsche to be the more rigorous and important philosopher. As the intent of my work is to unconceal the nuances of Stirner's work rather than Nietzsche's, I make no substantive contestations to this judgment. This debate over Stirner's potential influence makes no real contribution of philosophical importance; however, I argue that this failure is itself generative for thinking through Stirner's relation to ethics. I begin by tracing the history of the debate before opening onto these larger ethical questions.

Nietzsche's Predecessor: Historical Records and Personal Correspondences

The question of Stirner's influence on Nietzsche has produced a subset of scholarship that looks to empirical evidence as a means of establishing a concrete or objective historical link between the two thinkers. Within this debate there are, of course, opposing views. There are two camps in particular which directly contest one another: those who present library records and personal correspondences as evidence to establish Nietzsche's knowledge of Stirner, and those who claim that this evidence is inconclusive, denying Stirner's influence. This debate stems back to the very early 20th century when, immediately following Nietzsche's death, scholars fought over not only the interpretation of his texts but their novelty or originality. The question of

Nietzsche's innovativeness produced, generally, two factions. On the one hand, the "Weimar" camp, following Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth's authority, attempted to preserve an image of a "creatively pure Nietzsche" whose true genius was unfortunately neglected in his own time; on the other, the "Basel" camp sought to demonstrate Nietzsche's orthodoxy and congruency with the political and intellectual climate of the time—i.e. establish that he was a "relatively normal" thinker.¹⁶⁸ Within this context, Stirner became a sort of "shibboleth with which to undermine" the Weimar interpretation: Nietzsche's philosophy, if shown to be indebted to Stirner, would lose its veneer of novelty.¹⁶⁹

The debate over the Stirner-Nietzsche relationship, although mired in rumour and conjecture, had significant academic implications; it was not long before the 'influence question' left the rumour-mill and made its way into formal academic venues. Albert Lévy's *Stirner and Nietzsche* is one of the earliest texts to address this relationship, inaugurating the tradition of empirical research on the question.¹⁷⁰ His main argument proceeds by an examination of the records at the University of Basel's library between 1870 and 1880: *The Ego* was only borrowed three times, and never by Nietzsche himself.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, Lévy finds one of Nietzsche's students on this list; corroborating his evidence, this student, M. Baumgartner, claims that Nietzsche personally recommended *The Ego* to him.¹⁷² Now certain that Nietzsche was at least aware of Stirner, the question for Lévy becomes one of location: *where* did Nietzsche come across

¹⁶⁸ John Glassford, "Did Nietzsche (1844-1900) Plagiarise from Max Stirner (1806-56)?", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No. 18, (1999): 77.

¹⁶⁹ Glassford, "Plagiarise", 77.

¹⁷⁰ Albert Lévy. *Stirner and Nietzsche*, trans. Anon, *The Anarchist Library*, 2009. Taken from: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/albert-levy-stirner-and-nietzsche>. Originally published in French: Lévy, Albert. *Stirner et Nietzsche*, (Paris: Société Nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition, 1904).

¹⁷¹ Lévy, *Stirner and Nietzsche*, 3.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Stirner's name? The possible answers to this question are meant to highlight another, deeper concern: *why* did Nietzsche forego any reference to Stirner in his works, even where their thought seems to align?

Lévy's answer to this deeper question revolves around the role of Friedrich Albert Lange's widely influential study, *The History of Materialism*.¹⁷³ Through an account of Nietzsche's personal correspondences, Lévy establishes Nietzsche's deep knowledge of Lange's book; however, Lange himself only dedicates approximately twelve lines to Stirner, rendering his work "a kind of introduction to the philosophy of Schopenhauer".¹⁷⁴ For this reason, Lévy concludes that Stirner's only use to Nietzsche was to embolden his early engagements with Schopenhauer. Subsequently, Stirner warranted no consideration once Nietzsche, in his own philosophical development, had left Schopenhauer behind.¹⁷⁵ Lévy's text thus simultaneously inaugurates the historical debate while denying any serious link between Stirner and Nietzsche.

Levy's position is directly contested, albeit by less empirical means, by Paul Carus only a few years later. Carus takes note of both the common rumours concerning the Stirner-Nietzsche relation as well as a few early scholarly sources in order to state his belief in Nietzsche's indebtedness to Stirner. His most interesting argument, however, concerns the *lack* of evidence in Nietzsche's own texts: the very absence of citations to Stirner in Nietzsche's texts reveals his attentiveness to Stirner's philosophy itself.¹⁷⁶ According to Carus, Nietzsche borrows and develops not only Stirner's notion of the self-interested individual but, moreover, his complete

¹⁷³ Friedrich Albert Lange, *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, 3rd Edition. Trans. Ernest Chester Thomas, (London: Trübner & Company, 1925).

¹⁷⁴ Lévy, *Stirner and Nietzsche*, 5.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 5-6.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Carus, "Max Stirner: The Predecessor of Nietzsche", *The Monist*, Vol. 21, (1911): 396.

denunciation of authority and morality in all its forms, affirming instead the value of appropriation: “Nietzsche uses Stirner as Stirner declares that it is the good right of every ego to use his fellows”.¹⁷⁷ Although Carus ultimately denounces the thought of both philosophers as nihilistic, he affirms a direct link between them through their similar personalities, gleaned by the attitude, tone, and rhetoric of their works.

More recently, John Glassford has articulated a position closer to Lévy’s, albeit by different means.¹⁷⁸ Glassford argues that many themes and passages in Nietzsche’s works are eerily similar to Stirner’s; however, he follows Löwith in concluding that these similarities are merely coincidental, occurring primarily “because of the inevitable logic of post-Hegelian philosophy”.¹⁷⁹ This conclusion, though it coincides with readings of Stirner as thoroughly Hegelian, invites another difficult question once other thinkers are roped in: why only Nietzsche? If their philosophies are truly ‘inevitable’ as historical developments of post-Hegelian thought, where are the others?

Glassford ultimately discounts Lévy’s evidence as insufficient: although it may be true that Nietzsche never borrowed *The Ego* between 1870-1880, he points out that “Nietzsche’s most studious period probably antedates 1869”.¹⁸⁰ He thus turns to Karl Löwith’s study to examine other evidence—namely, the testimonies of Franz and Ida Overbeck. Löwith himself cites C.A. Bernoulli, a pseudonymous student of Franz Overbeck, who conducted interviews with Ida after the death of her husband.¹⁸¹ In these interviews, Ida recounts a particular visit from Nietzsche

¹⁷⁷ Carus, “Predecessor”, 396-397.

¹⁷⁸ John Glassford, “Plagiarise”, 73-79.

¹⁷⁹ Glassford, “Plagiarise”, 78.

¹⁸⁰ Glassford, “Plagiarise”, 75.

¹⁸¹ Glassford, “Plagiarise”, 76. See also: Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green & Hans-Georg Gadamer, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 423.

during which he mentioned enjoying Stirner, but immediately expressed regret for having done so. This statement of regret was, according to Ida, accompanied by a change in his facial expression, “something like a gesture of dismissal or defense”, and an acknowledgment that if his admiration of Stirner were made known, he would be accused of plagiarism.¹⁸² Nietzsche thus acknowledges Stirner, but only in order to deny any significant influence.

Glassford, via Ida, presents an argument that strikes quite closely to Carus’ position: holding a *lack* of evidence as itself evidence, or at the very least grounds for suspicion. This form of evidence-by-privation is highly tenuous, especially given the heightened insistence on empiricism and non-circumstantial evidence within this long-standing debate. Paradoxically, Glassford insists on the need for greater *textual* evidence to answer the plagiarism question while at the same time dismissing Ida’s testimony on non-textual grounds. Glassford does dismiss Ida Overbeck’s testimony—not because of the logical double-bind it presents, but rather because he reads the testimony as a political maneuver. That is, Ida, being committed to the aforementioned Basel camp, can “stick the knife in while maintaining her own public respectability as a Nietzsche loyalist”.¹⁸³ The irony of Glassford’s dismissal is heightened if the actual content of both Stirner and Nietzsche’s philosophies are taken into consideration: both depose the category of truth by appealing to a notion of power underlying it; moreover, both philosophers either explicitly defend—or at least refrain from condemning—*lying* as a tactic against weak or religious morality. If we were to push the evidence-by-privation maneuver further, it could be argued against Glassford that Ida’s testimony *is* in fact ‘truth-telling’ in either case. On the one hand, if it is

¹⁸² Sander L. Gilman and David J. Parent, *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 113-114.

¹⁸³ Glassford, “Plagiarise”, 77.

empirically true, it constitutes evidence; on the other, if empirically false, it performatively exposes a rather specific conceptual link between Stirner and Nietzsche: lying as a tactic of self-interested re-appropriation.

On the other end of the spectrum, Thomas Brobjer directly contests Glassford's conclusion. Conceptually, Brobjer denies a strong similarity between Stirner and Nietzsche; where similarity does exist, he argues it is generalized to the extent that the same claims could be made with many other non-congruent philosophers.¹⁸⁴ The conclusion that the 'inevitable logic of post-Hegelian philosophy' produced both Stirner and Nietzsche is thus also denied. Yet, at the same time, Brobjer also supplies new empirical evidence to augment the claim that Nietzsche was likely familiar with Stirner through secondary sources.¹⁸⁵ Brobjer attacks Glassford's position not for a lack of empirical evidence, but on the grounds of Stirner's philosophical relevance to Nietzsche. Brobjer thus takes the same position as Lévy's article nearly a full century later.

It is quite hard to see what the stakes are in this long-standing debate—or, more poignantly, why those stakes would be of interest to the Stirnerian or Nietzschean in the first place. Indeed, the focus of the literature is largely Nietzsche's legacy rather than Stirner's; it is a wonder, then, why it is nowhere mentioned in this debate Nietzsche's explicit acknowledgement of his own predecessor: Spinoza.¹⁸⁶ Nietzsche's own affirmation of a 'precursor'—albeit coming later in his life—would seem to damage the aforementioned Weimar interpretation; moreover, his statement appears in a letter to Franz Overbeck. This postcard, perhaps revealing Nietzsche's

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Brobjer, "A Possible Solution to the Stirner-Nietzsche Question", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No. 25 (Spring 2003): 109.

¹⁸⁵ Brobjer, "Solution", 111-112.

¹⁸⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, ix.

vulnerability, trust, and openness with the Overbecks, would appear to add legitimacy to Ida's testimony since it in no way shies away from acknowledging his similarity with other thinkers.

Yet even admitting this simple fact risks missing more significant and philosophically generative questions by conceding to the terms of the debate in the first place—it risks admitting to the value of simple empiricism, the value of novelty, the taboo of plagiarism, and so on. It seems to me that if we are to speak of the inspirations, influences, and predecessors of a particular philosopher as a way to embellish our understanding of their *work*, it would be worthwhile to take into account the roles and functions of things like creativity, critique, and history in their works themselves.¹⁸⁷ Failing to do this in any substantial form, these articles come across as hobbyist, hagiophantic pursuits disconnected entirely from the values, stakes, and directions of the philosophies ostensibly under consideration.

¹⁸⁷ Deleuze, addressing this body of literature, puts it succinctly: “The philosophical learning of an author is not assessed by numbers of quotations, nor by the always fanciful and conjectural check lists of libraries, but by the apologetic or polemical directions of his work itself.” Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 162.

2.2: Egoism and the Ethical

The questions raised in the articles discussed in the previous subchapter can open onto larger philosophical problems if pressed into service. The particular accusation of Nietzsche's plagiarism of Stirner can be seen as a gateway into the deeper, more generalized problem of the very *purpose* of writing—or, more broadly still, the nature of our individual expressions in the world. Through a narrow scope, we can ask whether the egoist—given Stirner's insistence on use and appropriation—would be bothered by plagiarism at all; a wider lens quickly probes into the ethical contours of egoism itself. What, if anything, is permitted by egoism? What is the status or function of permission in the first place? Indeed, much of the secondary literature on Stirner takes an explicitly ethical slant, and the question of moral nihilism is at the forefront of most analyses of his work. There are several angles: Paterson finds moral nihilism to be a necessary outcome of Stirner's ontology, David Leopold connects nihilism with the consequences of his political anarchism, and Carroll locates it in a Stirnerian psychology.¹⁸⁸ Each of these angles produce

¹⁸⁸ Carroll's reading of Stirner is excessively Nietzschean; indeed, the two figures are simply conflated at many points in his text. This, I believe, is a by-product of the stakes he sets for his book. By aiming to establish an "anarcho-psychological lineage" as a coherent alternative to the dominant liberal and Marxist "social images of Man", Carroll is forced to paper over differences in the philosophers he takes as his representatives of the lineage he constructs. For example, he writes that both Stirner and Nietzsche turn to "the Will" as "their answer to nihilism"; however, he characterizes the Will—in explicit opposition to Schopenhauer—as never "turning back on itself and destroying the ego". This characterization—"never turning back"—is, for Carroll, an essential component of the *affirmative* nature of both Stirner and Nietzsche's thought; affirmation, in turn, is for him the arch-enemy of nihilism. The problem, of course, is that Stirner's ego *does* turn back on itself in order to destroy itself; indeed, self-dissolution is the ego's only real function. On my reading, dissolution and 'turning back on the self' are not nihilistic endeavours but actually quite affirmative, powerful, and joyful. But regardless of interpretation, this one example (among many others) indicates that Carroll's reading of Stirner is really just his reading of Nietzsche with the added insistence that Stirner inaugurated this particular lineage. Although Carroll does offer some important interpretations of Stirner—he gets close to a theory of passionate attachments and subject formation, for example—his overly Nietzschean tendencies have forced my attention away from his work. This is of course also a matter of limited scope on my part—I simply did not have space to provide a thorough comparative study of Stirner and Nietzsche. See: John Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace: The anarcho-psychological critique: Stirner, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973): 1, 106-107.

slightly different concerns and critiques: the inauthenticity of a purely abstract conception of the self, the moral danger of a purely individualistic hedonism, and the political inefficacy borne of the egoist's hopeless and pessimistic attitude. Before addressing these larger concerns, we first tackle the smaller problem of writing using one particularly instructive passage *The Ego*.

Writing and Communicative Expression

In the first chapter, it was noted that Todd Gooch reads Stirner's act of writing as a performative contradiction. Gooch claims Stirner concedes to the necessity of Feuerbachian intersubjectivity (even while denouncing it) by writing and publishing texts for others to engage with. This admittance of intersubjectivity—or at least the practical need for others' ears, eyes, and attentiveness for our expressions in the world—is positioned both as an argument against Stirner's self-interest in a social context as well as an argument against his prioritization of ontological individuality. Unfortunately, neither Gooch (nor the hagiophants, for that matter) look too closely at Stirner's own texts in their analyses. As it turns out, Stirner gives us something concrete to work with concerning the acts of writing and other communicative expressions. Concerning the 'narrow scope' question, Stirner more or less explicitly tells us that the egoist would not be bothered by plagiarism, explaining,

Do I write out of love to men? No, I write because I want to procure for *my* thoughts an existence in the world; and, even if I foresaw that these thoughts would deprive you of your rest and your peace, even if I saw the bloodiest wars and the fall of many generations springing up from this seed of thought—I would nevertheless scatter it. Do with it what you will and can, that is your affair and does not trouble me.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 262-263.

Stirner here pre-emptively combats Gooch's Feuerbachian criticism, whereby intersubjectivity is held to be a condition for individuality. Stirner does, in the end, admit a need for others; however, this need neither orients nor grounds the action of the egoist by necessity. Rather, Stirner contests the jump from an obvious ontological fact—that "[the world] comes in my way everywhere"—to the moral injunction to orient ourselves *toward* that world, to cut ourselves to fit it.¹⁹⁰ Concluding the discussion in the above cited passage, Stirner again quotes Goethe, proclaiming "I sing because—I am a singer".¹⁹¹ Stirner draws playfully on the etymological connection between 'use' [*gebrauche*] and 'need' [*brauche*] in order to illustrate his point: while singing makes the singer, others are *used* for their ears.¹⁹² Just as the singer's song is open to interpretation or reappropriation by those whose ears are used, so too is the writer's text. This notion of 'use' is not necessarily opposed to the 'need' of intersubjectivity as an ontological fact, nor is it opposed to something like a baseline social-constructivist view of subjectivity. The world not only 'comes in our way' but shapes us in doing so. The point, rather, is that ontological positions, facts, and frameworks do not necessarily produce specific moral positions, facts, or frameworks—that "nothing at all is justified by *being*".¹⁹³ Feuerbachian intersubjectivity may very well exist in the world at certain times and in certain places, but it always appears further downstream than self-interested action. That is, Stirner *inverts* Feuerbach's dialectic rather than simply denying the existence of intersubjectivity. Stirner is concerned with the unique forms of

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 263.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 301.

self-interest imbricated in individuality, which—as I argued in the first chapter—is the prerequisite for intersubjectivity and social need.

What Stirner expresses in this passage is also, at the same time, an anti-humanist conception of finitude. Stirner's egoism presents a radical critique of the very universalizing and ends-based moral reasoning essential to what he calls religion. I interpret this passage as a thorough rejection of calculation itself as a necessary criterion of decision making: it is simply not possible to calculate, in an absolute way, the effects of my actions upon the outside world. We have seen already how Stirner exaggerates and embellishes for rhetorical effect. In this context, his colourful imagery—"the bloodiest wars and the fall of many generations"—is preceded by a future-conditional modifier: *even if*. The individualist-utilitarian reading of this passage takes Stirner's "even if" in its more colloquial sense, as 'regardless' or 'despite', thereby framing it as a statement of moral nihilism—i.e. expressing an absolute lack of concern for external consequences.¹⁹⁴ This passes over the deeper, ontological sense of egoism: given the primordial ubiquity of self-interest and appropriation, one cannot measure or foresee the ways in which their expressions in the world will be re-appropriated by others. One does not condemn the inventor of the airplane for the existence of the aerial bomb. There are, as they say, no absolutes in human suffering, and our conditions are always vulnerable to worsening.¹⁹⁵ Yet the admission of this fact does not signify a total indifference to ethical consequences; instead, it is an affirmation of finitude, an affirmation of the real limitations to one's power and control over the external world: it is a true acceptance of the possibility of failure. Rather than fall into a kind

¹⁹⁴ Paterson, *Nihilistic Egoist*, 86-87.

¹⁹⁵ I here paraphrase American novelist Cormac McCarthy. See: Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992): 372.

of crude individualist-utilitarianism, Stirner in fact offers its death-blow in the absolute refusal to place faith in calculation and measure.

Finally, the last line of the passage expresses Stirner's lack of concern with how his writing might be used by others. Simply put, he writes for himself, for his own self-enjoyment, and no one else. Stirner makes a similar point in an earlier passage from *The Ego*, wherein he criticizes the broadly humanist understanding of labour. He gives an example: "the discoverer of a great truth knows that it can useful to the rest of men, and [...] communicates it"; however, this truth is not communicated "for the sake of the rest" in the strictest sense, but rather because "[the discoverer] himself desired it".¹⁹⁶ On the surface, Stirner seems to argue that the discoverer is motivated first and foremost by his own passion for truth rather than the desire to benefit humanity. But the deeper point is that even if the discoverer believes himself to be acting for the benefit of humanity rather than himself alone, his action *still* comes from self-interest: he has a desire and interest in benefitting humanity. Since the egoist both pursues action out of self-interest and refuses to place hope and faith in the calculation of its effects, we can conclude that in undertaking a communicative expression such as writing the egoist would not be concerned with the possibility of plagiarism.

The points raised here open onto two further questions central to discussions of egoism: what does other-centered action look like if framed as egoistic? And in what way does self-interest function if the individual believes themselves to be acting in and for the interest of an Other? The answers lie in the general framework of egoism itself: it is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive account of human action and existence. Indeed, Stirner's egoism appears to be in

¹⁹⁶ Stirner, *Ego*, 119.

flux or feel ambiguous at various points in *The Ego*; this dynamism, I argue, is a direct result of his attentiveness to the variability and instability of being in the world. In what follows, we first work through Stirner's commentary concerning *love* as a way to illuminate this descriptive attentiveness. This discourse on love grounds the subsequent discussion, which returns to the above-cited passage to present two alternate ways Stirner cuts egoism: along its 'principle/interest' and 'conscious/unconscious' axes.

Love and Slavery: Egoism as Descriptive

The above-cited passage can also be read as a statement about love; in fact, this reading might reveal more about the ethics of egoism than a focus on moral consequences and motivations. It may be argued that this hermeneutic decision requires evidence lest it appear unfounded and arbitrary; to this, one might respond by simply reproducing the sentence introducing the passage: "Let us choose another convenient example".¹⁹⁷ The act of writing is, at least in the first instance, simply a convenient example Stirner chooses to elaborate the egoistic understanding of love against its dominant religious formulations. The distinction between 'egoistic' love and 'religious' love recalls our earlier, ontological discussions: the religious is that which is alien to me while the egoistic is my own. The term Stirner uses—*religious love*—denotes much more than just the Christian commandment (although that is of course included); he uses the name "sensuous love" if the beloved object has a profane rather than holy origin or existence.¹⁹⁸ Both forms, taken together, are referred to somewhat sarcastically as "unselfish

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 262.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 260.

love”, and they share the same relation of dependency; namely, that “the dominion of the object over me is the same in both cases”.¹⁹⁹

Unselfish love, in the form of a fixed idea, risks enthralling and enslaving the individual, rendering them *possessed*. Thus, when Stirner describes love as *property*, we must keep in mind his play with the term he positions as its opposite: mere *possession*. We noted in the first chapter that *property* includes any object—material, ideal, or affective—that I have the capacity to dissolve *my relation to*; a *possession* is that which I cannot dissolve my relation to. A possession thus ‘possesses’ me. Love understood as property is thus primarily negative in its formulation since it is an affect toward an object which I can dissolve my relation to. At first glance this appears strange: a love so easily dissolved must be a weak, passionless, and false love. However, Stirner is not necessarily asking that *love* should be dissolvable, but only our *relation to the beloved*. That is, he is concerned with the effects of love on the subjection of the individual: if love is *obligated*—as in the Christian commandment—it “cuts no better figure than any other passion that I obey blindly”.²⁰⁰ This type of subjection holds sway even if the source of the obligation is thought to be *internal* to the subject; the source matters not, but only the relation of dissolubility.

Young love is perhaps the most telling example of the danger Stirner alerts us to. Reflect back on your high school sweetheart—now, think of those moments of emotional turmoil: anxiety, jealousy, insecurity, and so forth. Perhaps these were produced by a doubt, a skepticism of the other’s own love for you, perhaps by a suspicion of infidelity. Were these affects produced

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 259.

²⁰⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 258.

by the truth or the magnitude of your love for the other, or rather a *possessiveness* of the other? Was dissatisfaction produced by the affect of love in-itself, or rather the failure to realize or manifest an ideal and idealistic projection of romance? Was it *love itself* that failed, or your attachment to a spectral, Hollywood image? Your love toward the other is your property; if either the other or a projection of romantic love becomes fixed, it *possesses you*.

Returning now to the liberal-humanist-utilitarian reading of Stirner noted above: citing this passage without first grounding it in a discussion on love can be highly problematic if it quickly produces a reading in which egoism is understood as *ego-tism*.²⁰¹ The common, positivist interpretation of this passage—egoism as *egotism*—presents egoism as essentially utilitarian, but with a yard-stick that measures no further than the measurer themselves. Egoism is thus read as selfish and narcissistic in the colloquial sense, or as propagating a form of greedy individualism directly in line with liberal, utilitarian, and ultimately humanist philosophies: external consequences being unworthy of moral consideration.²⁰² This form of moral nihilism thus generally elicits criticism through a kind of affective recoil, provoking reactions of abhorrence. It is quite often the concluding sentence of the above-cited passage that comes under fire.

David Leopold's reading, for instance, implies this very interpretation of Stirner's egoism. Leopold argues that a "positive social vision" can be constructed from the anarchism of *The Ego*; quite importantly, this reading attempts to combat the perception of Stirner as wholly

²⁰¹ Perhaps the most egregious example is George Santayana's reading. See: George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy*, (New York: Maskell House Ltd, 1976).

²⁰² Paul Thomas, in his Marxist critique of Stirner's lack of a coherent political economy, writes: "Stirner seems to be the theorist *par excellence* of what C.B. MacPherson was to call 'possessive individualism'". Paul Thomas, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner", *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1975): 169.

nihilistic.²⁰³ However, with respect to the social and political consequences of egoism, Leopold argues that Stirner is “pulled in two rather different directions”: on the one hand, a widespread embrace of egoism would *not* yield radical consequences for currently existing social relations; on the other, an embrace of egoism would allow extremely “unfamiliar” acts, such as “infanticide, incest, and murder”, to be justified.²⁰⁴ The case for the first direction points to the examples Stirner himself gives of the *union of egoists*: friends conversing at the bar, children playing in the street, and so forth.²⁰⁵ Yet Leopold ultimately argues that it is the second direction, the “dominant and bleaker account [...] which more accurately captures the nature of the egoistic union”.²⁰⁶ The case for this bleaker direction makes an appeal to love. According to Leopold, love would “not survive the reconstruction of social relations on egoistic lines” because “there would be no place [...] for the familiar commitment to promote another person’s good even when it conflicts with our own happiness”.²⁰⁷ To provide evidence for this reading, Leopold cites the passage on writing we have been discussing, claiming: “The ‘trouble, combat, and death’ that might result from the publication of *The Ego and Its Own* (presumably from the consequent spread of egoism) are of no concern to [Stirner]”.²⁰⁸ Leopold therefore does eventually find in Stirner’s politics the potential for a kind of moral or ethical nihilism.

It is telling that in formulating his criticism Leopold smuggles in a normative apparatus, employing the terms “familiar” and “unfamiliar” to endorse the dominant forms of love as they

²⁰³ David Leopold, “A Left-Hegelian Anarchism”, *The European Legacy*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (June, 2003): 782.

²⁰⁴ Leopold, “Left-Hegelian Anarchism”, 783.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 783.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 784.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

are found “in established society”.²⁰⁹ Stirner, however, is clear to dismiss certain existing forms of love—forms which at times require self-sacrifice to a greater Other—as thoroughly religious. The simple fact that egoistic love is unfamiliar is not in-itself a criticism, but rather an endorsement of Stirner’s argument: that our servitude feels comfortable and familiar is precisely the problem. Stirner attacks forms of servitude that mask themselves as freedom; love, especially Christian love, is one such form. It is the commitment to an idealized version of love—eternal, unconditional, singular, self-effacing—that produces moral indignation toward, for example, non-monogamous relationships. Is it not that case that love differentiates itself in its affect and expression in accordance with each different, unique, beloved individual? Is it not possible to love more than one person, or to love multiple people in multiple ways? Is it not possible to be physically intimate with one person whilst in love with another?²¹⁰

The problem with Leopold’s reading lies, in part, in his understanding of self-interest. Although Leopold’s project is meant to construct a coherent anarchism from Stirner’s work, it is apparent that the positivist, individualist-utilitarian understanding of egoism lurks behind his speculations about what an egoistic society might look like. We will defer the problem of revolutionary-utopian thinking until the third chapter; for now, we will train in on the more immediate concerns: what kinds of acts, if any, are ‘justified’ by egoism, and whether love, devotion, or altruism are possible for the egoist.

The first concern is dealt with rather simply. Stirner never explicitly advocates things like rape, murder, or incest—rather, he simply refrains from condemning them wholesale. Without

²⁰⁹ Leopold, “Left-Hegelian Anarchism”, 784.

²¹⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 45; 183.

attentiveness to this distinction, Leopold produces the very inconsistency and incoherency he claims to find in Stirner's own position. It is not the case, for Stirner, that 'after the death of God, everything is permitted'; rather, the dissolution of our belief in God renders frameworks for permission or prohibition arbitrary and contingent, i.e. neither necessary nor universal. The argument that all acts receive moral *justification* after the collapse of legal and moral institutions misses the more radical implication of Stirner's project: that justification does not flow directly from transcendental entities but is instead enforced by institutions of authority coupled with our own passionate attachments to them. Moreover, if our actions require permission from a higher authority or institution, we are neither self-determining nor acting autonomously; where these institutions come in the way of our interests, we discover tactics to subvert, escape, or dissolve them. The 'authority of authority' always requires the subject to legitimize and supplement that authority through their own will: as I will elaborate in the third chapter, this occurs primarily through passionate attachments. Leopold's version of ethical discourse is further down-stream than Stirner's own concern: not an account of what acts are legitimated or prohibited, but *how* and *why* we desire to commit certain acts in the first place. Stirner's ethics, like his ontology and his politics, center the *individual* and their desires. Self-interested ethics, as an ethical concern with the self, operates at the level of our very subjectivity—its construction, sustenance, and dissolution.

The second concern—whether other-centred action is possible for the egoist—requires a little more attention. Yet Stirner is in fact quite clear on this matter, writing that

Egoism, as Stirner uses it, is not opposed to love nor to thought; it is no enemy of the sweet life of love, nor of devotion and sacrifice; it is no enemy of intimate warmth, but it is also no enemy of critique, nor of socialism, nor, in short, of any *actual interest*. It

doesn't exclude any interest. It is direct against only disinterestedness and the uninteresting; not against love, but against sacred love, not against thought, but against sacred thought, not against socialists, but against sacred socialists, etc.²¹¹

As we can see from his response to critics of *The Ego*, Stirner goes to great lengths to clarify the ethical stakes of egoism. Indeed, Leopold's suggestion that the proliferation of egoism would abolish certain things we want to hold on to—love, devotion, altruism—was part of the dominant criticism of *The Ego* in 1845-46. Yet Stirner is quite clearly unopposed to things like altruism, devotion, love, and self-sacrifice *in themselves*; his concern is rather the sources and conditions of these phenomena, i.e. whether or not they are 'fixed', alien, and indissoluble. That is, if self-sacrifice is *obligated* of me by some sacred and external thing—be it social tradition, a punitive institution, or my own faith in a normative moral framework—I am at the mercy of some other interest than my own. Under the condition of obligation, self-sacrifice looks less like martyrdom and more like exploitation. Being at the mercy of some other interest can occur even in situations where I willingly participate, where I believe myself to be acting in my own interests. The point, for Stirner, is not so much about weighing the pros and cons of any given other-centred action, but rather my *relationship* to the action—whether it is obligated of me, or whether I myself desire it regardless of obligation. This, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, is an impossible question. This is partly due to how often these phenomena align: one might feel a moral obligation to donate money to charity and simultaneously believe it to be a good thing—i.e. one might have a *selfish* interest in altruism. The logic is clear in *The Ego*: the other's welfare can be my own selfish interest—and indeed, this approach to the other often feels more authentic and

²¹¹ Stirner, *Critics*, 81.

sincere than mere duty. Stirner does not present a moral injunction against taking the other as one's own interest, but merely signals a warning against the possible conditions of enthrallment and servitude that can grow out of a commitment to altruism as a *principle*. Stirner issues this warning not in spite of the impossibility of arriving at a true, foundational source or origin of our desires, but *because of it*. We are always caught in the web of myriad fixed ideas—or ideology. The most we can achieve, regarding ownness, is therefore a matter of degree. The ethical and political task of combatting fixed ideas, of attempting to centre our own desires against external principles, is infinite and endless.

A Law unto Oneself: Hedonism and Self-Dissolution

Stirner himself argues for the endlessness of combatting fixed ideas in no uncertain terms. In a succinct passage from 'The Owner', he first establishes that ownness is strived toward unconsciously [*unbewußt*] and involuntarily [*unwillkürlich*], and then describes what happens to the subject after a fixed idea is dissolved: "after every victory over a faith I become again the *prisoner* (possessed) of a faith which then takes my whole self anew into its *service*".²¹² One is never free of passionate attachments entirely. The litmus test for Stirner is only whether or not our attachments to these obligations or obligating institutions can be dissolved: if I have the option—not only in terms of external material conditions, but also my own affective conditions—to withdraw, avoid, or deny the self-sacrifice demanded of me, then I still remain *my own*. On the other hand, I am possessed if I am unable to stop myself. The affective and ideological side of

²¹² Stirner, *Ego*, 316.

this relation is stressed by Stirner: not only do I risk enthrallment to external principles, institutions, or individuals, but to *myself* as well. Once again, Stirner's own words here are clear and warrant reproduction:

The ambitious man, who is carried away by ambition and remains deaf to every warning that a calm moment generates in him, has let this passion grow up into a despot against whom he abandons all power of dissolution: he has given up himself, because he cannot *dissolve* himself, and consequently cannot absolve himself from the passion: he is possessed.²¹³

Immediately prior to this passage, Stirner affirms that we “can with joy sacrifice to [the other] numberless enjoyments”, denying ourselves “numberless things for the enhancement of *his* pleasure”.²¹⁴ Among these numberless things, Stirner includes that which is dearest to us: our lives, our welfare, our freedoms. In direct opposition to Leopold's claim about love, Stirner here affirms that all of these forms of sacrifice can be undertaken egoistically.

This notion—that other-centred action can still be *egoistic* and self-interested—also serves as a response to the common charge of Stirner's *hedonism*.²¹⁵ Douglas Moggach, building on Bauer's critical project, develops a critique of Stirner's unique along these lines: the Stirnerian self, embodying pure particularity (i.e. desiring exclusivity), is not only “heteronomously shaped by the impress of the existing order”, but is subservient to its own “momentary impulses” and

²¹³ Stirner, *Ego*, 257-258.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ John Carroll, for example, argues that morality's “undesirable effect, according to Stirner, is the repression of natural instincts”, while “Stirner's egoist [...] is purely impulsive and spontaneous”. More poignantly, Frederick Beiser elevates hedonism to an essential feature of Stirner's egoism. He writes that Stirner's hedonism does not even contain the Romantic ethical “ideal of self-realization”, but merely “consists in” the fulfillment of “my present desires and needs, whatever they are”. I argue, in opposition to this reading, that Stirner merely contests the *obligation* to perform the religious-humanist form of self-realization or self-criticism, and is not opposed to those projects or actions in-themselves. See: Frederick Beiser, “Max Stirner and the End of Classical German Philosophy”, *Politics, Religion, and Art: Hegelian Debates*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011): 287; John Carroll, *Break-Out*, 30, 37.

“immediate interests”.²¹⁶ Stirner’s unique, understood as an “abstract self-relation”, never submits its own desires to criticism, and thus “falls short of rational self-determination”.²¹⁷ Freedom or autonomy in the Stirnerian picture therefore consists in “self-assertion” and the “immediate gratification” of desire.²¹⁸

The above-cited passage from Stirner seriously complicates this interpretation. In the discourse on property presented in the first chapter, I argued that Stirner focuses on the relationship the unique has to *ideological* objects. This includes affects and passions. Stirner agrees that the individual is shaped by the impress of social structures; indeed, his ethical and political project starts from this very position (even at the level of theology: ‘if I am made in God’s image, let me act as He does—only out of self-interest’). But Stirner also clearly values the critical act of dissolution as a *tactic* against heteronomous determination where and when we recognize that determination as limiting or oppressive. Because an interest—even a selfish, *unique* and *own* interest—will enslave the individual if they ‘cannot get away from it’, Stirner accepts “criticism’s lesson to let no part of our property become stable”; *dissolution* becomes the primary function of the unique.²¹⁹ Where he diverges from Bauer is only with the *obligation* to dissolve attachments (and posit new ones), especially obligations posed in light of universal ends: if universal ends are obligated of the individual, is this not another form of heteronomous determination, i.e. the ‘impress’ of social and historical imperatives on the individual? As I argued in the first chapter, the very concept of a universal end, within the context of criticism, must itself

²¹⁶ Moggach, “Subject as Substance”, 75.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 76.

²¹⁸ Moggach, “Perfectionism”, 187.

²¹⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 127. Recall the discussion of Stirner’s appropriation of Bauer’s critical dissolution from the first chapter.

be open to dissolution. In this current chapter's ethical framing, Stirner's injunction is now posed as a challenge open to refusal. Instead of following Bauer toward universality, Stirner keeps trained in on the unique expressions given to the ethical by individual, unique subjects: the first site of dissolution is oneself, *for oneself*. In the above-cited example, the ambitious man—unable to dissolve *himself*, his very subjectivity—is enthralled and enslaved to his own passions and becomes *possessed* by them. Egoism is not a prescription to simply do whatever one desires but is rather a method of probing into the sources and conditions of these desires themselves. Pursuing immediate gratification is therefore not the sole or necessary road to ownness and self-determination, not the only form of the egoist's action or expression in the world—it is, on the contrary, more often the road to possessedness. Ownness thus obtains when one not only has the real capacity, resources, and power to act as they desire, but also the power to *refrain* from acting as they desire.

Stirner also articulates this theme in reference to law broadly-conceived. Against collective-will formulations of the State and societies, Stirner denies any obligation to follow a law even he himself created or consented to. Simply put, one need not remain a fool today simply because one was a fool yesterday.²²⁰ Stirner disputes the distinction between “law” [*Gesetze*] and “arbitrary orders” [*Befehl*]²²¹—a distinction which generally holds law to originate from right [*Recht*] in a transcendental sense while orders originate “from a duly entitled authority”, i.e. contingently.²²¹ Both *Gesetze* and *Befehl* are in fact arbitrary and contingent exertions and expressions of will and power—including, of course, our own will and power. Stirner's discourse

²²⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 175.

²²¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 174.

on law again reinforces his insistence on a non-qualified, non-fixed and radically unstable form of individuality by situating the unique itself as the site of resistance to this arbitrary, heteronomous will: “Yes, even if I myself gave myself the law, it would yet be only under my order, to which in the next moment I can refuse obedience”.²²² In other words, *even my own will need not be obeyed*. Stirner effaces and combats even his own authority over himself: egoism is not a pursuit of pure and total self-mastery, but a fight against mastery itself in its fixed and hierarchical forms. Although Stirner’s egoism does not necessarily rule out self-gratification or the unreflective pursuit of unmediated desire, it certainly does not endorse it over other ways of being in the world—much less does it posit hedonism as the essential form of egoistic action.

Moreover, Stirner’s insistence on this aspect of the will’s self-dissolution complicates interpretations of his egoism which posit the individual will to be the source and measure of good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, and so on. Yet authors such as Frederick Beiser continue to describe Stirner’s egoism in precisely these terms. Drawing on the distinction between *Gezetze* and *Befehl* noted above, Beiser describes Stirner’s egoism as necessarily involving what he calls *individualistic voluntarism*.²²³ This doctrine holds that the “individual will is the source of all value”, that the will is “the ultimate source and basis of right and wrong”, and also that “what makes something right and wrong is an act of will or decision”.²²⁴ This is not necessarily incorrect, but misses the more radical implication of Stirner’s description of the individual will’s capacity for its own self-dissolution: rather than a simple affirmation of the individual as the sole authority, Stirner’s an-archic egoism combats authority ‘all the way down’—

²²² Stirner, *Ego*, 174.

²²³ Beiser, “End”, 284-285.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

including the individual's *own authority over themselves*. Beiser does comment on Stirner's critique of the self-given law discussed above, but positions Stirner's argument as an affirmation of individualistic voluntarism: the will is wholly unconstrained because the individual "can change the law whenever [they] want".²²⁵ Again, this view is true in a certain sense, but it papers-over not only the importance of critical self-reflection as a *tactic* for the ethical and political dimensions of egoism, but also the problem of *voluntary servitude* noted in the introduction to this chapter. That we have the capacity to act in accordance with our desires is only one side of the equation; the other is the ability to *refrain* from doing so. Acting as we desire does not necessarily constitute ownness in cases where what one desires is primarily something external *desiring itself through us*. But, to repeat, the distinction is never clear, never absolute—there is no final and fixed state reached in which the unique is wholly self-determining, their actions entirely consciously and voluntarily egoistic. Beiser's interpretation, in which Stirner is read as accepting but radicalizing the Kantian critical project, drags egoism back into the moralizing and idealistic language of means, ends, laws, values, autonomy, and so on. This framing forces Beiser to interpret ownness as the extreme end-point of Kantian autonomy, self-interest as mere selfishness, and 'conscious egoism' as an end or telos of our actions.²²⁶ Beiser therefore cannot account for the radical ambiguity and tension Stirner holds in his work—he cannot account for Stirner's affirmation of *individuality without identity*.

The radically an-archic vision of the individual Stirner presents us with—unstable, ungrounded, recalcitrant to fixed identity—admittedly feels tense, uncomfortable, and

²²⁵ *Ibid.* 291

²²⁶ *Ibid.* 293-294.

disruptive; yet what it amounts to in practical terms is not as severe as it seems *prima facie*. First and foremost, Stirner's discussion of self-dissolution simply denies that hedonism, impulsiveness, and absolute spontaneity or immediacy are necessarily pathways to (or expressions of) autonomy and ownness. This denial, in other words, is only a rejection of *necessity*. It is not, however, an absolute negation of all spontaneity, and it is not posed in light of a higher principle (Feuerbach) or a need for universality (Bauer). Rather, Stirner's argument that even a self-given law need not be obeyed merely points to the fact that hedonism *can* be a form of servitude if unchecked, if indissoluble. What cannot be dissolved cannot engender autonomy and ownness—regardless of whether the object is internal or external to me. Yet in some cases the capacity to act spontaneously can function as an expression of ownness. That is, spontaneity and immediacy can at times be operationalized as *tactics* to combat fixed ideas or passionate attachments, to combat the organized violence of institutions, to combat our own structuring and limitation, to combat the social and political forces that dream our dreams for us and posit stability as a supreme value—these tactics can be affirmations of possibility. As Walter Benjamin puts it: “Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed”.²²⁷

More importantly, however, is that the self-given law argument reveals Stirner's attentiveness to the messiness of being in the world and his refusal to force organization upon it. Individuals change, grow, become, and do not necessarily have reasons to be beholden to their pasts. As a younger man, I believed that lying was wrong under any circumstance; as I have aged, I understand that there are certain situations in which it is good, useful, or preferable. This

²²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street”, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, (London: NLB, 1979): 49.

innocuous ‘change of heart’ is, on the one hand, part of the complicated and difficult process of dissolving one’s passionate attachments and reconstituting one’s own subjectivity; on the other, it is simply a result of living in the world, being struck by its movements and determinations. Stirner’s fiery rhetoric can lead us to pass over his heightened attentiveness to the every-day, mundane, and yet radically unstructured facets of human existence—but these, I argue, are absolutely vital to his egoism. In fact, he lambasts his critics for failing to grasp this very notion, this very attentiveness, which he describes as a “powerful implication” found only by reading “between the lines” of *The Ego*.²²⁸ In other words, “the philosophers”, who “only deal with ‘men’, ‘spirit’ in itself”, have no understanding of “actual human beings”: we who fail, fault, and fracture.²²⁹

Interests, Principles, and the Sacred

The nature of other-centred action within the framework of Stirner’s egoism necessitates a discussion of the ways in which Stirner cuts egoism. Although self-interest is ever-present in any action, it can occur in different degrees of magnitude, and take on different forms of expression. As noted, Stirner cuts egoism along two axes. The first of these cuts to be discussed is the principle/interest divide. While *actual* interest (i.e. unique and individual interest) is juxtaposed primarily with the *sacred* or *absolute* (as ‘sacred interest’ and ‘absolute interest’) in “Stirner’s Critics”, it is juxtaposed primarily with ‘principles’ in “The Philosophical Reactionaries”; both are used in *The Ego*. My concern in the following section lies less with the content of either

²²⁸ Edward, “Reactionaries”, 103.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 103.

sacred interest or principles and more with their function. This function is simply one of dominance, control, and limitation: “Everything sacred is a tie, a fetter”.²³⁰

To begin, Stirner’s understanding of religion once again comes to the fore. He rearticulates his position from *The Ego* in “Stirner’s Critics”: “All behaviour toward anything considered absolutely interesting, or valuable in and for itself, is religious behaviour or, more simply, religion”.²³¹ This definition of religion now explicitly invokes the notion of ‘absolute’ interest. Religion, alienating objects by rendering them sacred, separates the individual from that which is within their power—that which the individual can own as property becomes mere *possession* under religion. This separation, as discussed in the previous chapter, produces an ‘ought’ or a ‘should’; the sacred (or absolute), in turn, “at all times demands blind reverence, submission, and self-sacrifice”.²³² Sacred or absolute interest is thus “interest for its own sake”: separate, alien, and indifferent to the individual who “takes interest in it”.²³³ The logic of sacred or absolute interest corresponds to the question posed in the introduction to this chapter: sacred interest is something external that desires *through me*. This, as will be discussed in the third chapter, is one of the primary motors of subject formation. What Stirner refers to as “actual interest”, on the other hand, is individual and unique. That is, it is *owned*—and not merely *possessed*—by the individual.

Interest is, in a sense, the defining feature of Stirner’s egoism. Stirner’s detractors read egoism as a “philosophy of the unique”; on my reading, egoism is more like a phenomenology—

²³⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 192.

²³¹ Stirner, “Critics”, 66.

²³² Stirner, *Ego*, 268.

²³³ Stirner, “Critics”, 66.

it strives to avoid foundational principles, conceptual frameworks, and normative prescriptions. Instead, egoism provides a *description* of specific actions and situations. This description, in turn, reveals to us the ways in which we can become subordinated, oppressed, and servile. Self-interest is described as being ever-present in our actions, even when we believe ourselves to be acting out of duty, obligation, responsibility, or by command. Indeed, Stirner claims that if “Feuerbach does absolutely nothing but the Feuerbachian, Hess does nothing but the Hessian, and Szeliga does nothing but the Szeligan”, they would all rightly be called *egoists*.²³⁴

Before continuing, I provide some prophylaxis against a potential criticism: that the reading of self-interest as ever-present implies a kind of universality—one which, if affirmed, would damage Stirner’s commitment to a form of ‘individuality without identity’. However, Stirner is clear to affirm that it is only ‘absolute interest’ that tends toward universality: absolute interest and sacred interest are therefore *uninteresting* because they are indifferent to their subjects, i.e. “because [the sacred] has the pretension of being interesting even though no one is interested in it”.²³⁵ While absolute or sacred interest is “without interested parties”, real interest, by contrast, “can only be interesting through *your* interest”, just as “the valuable [*das Werthvolle*] can only have value insofar as you give it value”.²³⁶ That is, interest always contains an element of *uniqueness*, not universality, because it is only given life through the actions and expressions of unique individuals. The sacred and absolute project the *specter* of universality onto themselves by papering over their own machinations: they invest themselves into the unique individual who, in turn, ‘takes an interest’ in them, sustaining them along with their

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 62.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* 67.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* 66; Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, 126.

spectral universality. Thus, when Stirner says that an absolute interest is ‘without interested parties’, this does not imply that nobody expresses interest in them. Rather, it means only that absolute or sacred interests desire themselves in and through individuals, rendering the individual servile and enthralled.

Now to continue. The fact that self-interest is ever-present in our actions remains true in both cases: when we believe that we are acting from our own interests, and when we believe that we are acting from external principles. It also remains true when we believe ourselves to be acting either freely or by coercion. This implies that we are complicit in our own subjugation (an uncomfortable thought, to be sure, and one that will be explored more robustly throughout the third chapter). Yet for Stirner the point is not simply to avoid all responsibility, duty, obligation, or self-sacrifice; rather, he affirms that these situations are common and unavoidable. The best we can do is therefore to attempt to construct our relationships in such a way that they can be *dissolved*. It is not enough that we merely act in and from our own interests; in order for *ownness* to obtain, we must be able to *refrain* from acting as we desire. This is, again, the locus of Stirner’s critique of freedom: that it is empty without the resources and conditions—the real capacity—to act otherwise.

Conscious and Unconscious Egoism

Parallel to the principle/interest divide, Stirner also cuts egoism along what he calls its conscious and unconscious sides. Conscious egoism describes action springing from self-interest and ownness; unconscious egoism, on the other hand, describes action that is imagined to spring only from duty, obligation, or responsibility to an external source. To act unconsciously is, in other

words, to *believe oneself to be* acting for the sake of some greater cause or interest. In both cases, self-interest is present; yet in the latter case it is concealed or narrated away. The terms ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ are thus somewhat misleading if taken to mean ‘aware’ and ‘unaware’ of *what* we do. Instead, Stirner uses these terms to refer to the awareness of *self-interest* present in any action. For example, if a soldier wants to return home from war but decides to stay on the front lines out of a sense of duty, we say that the soldier has an interest in following duty, or an interest in avoiding punishment, etc. Thus, while unconscious egoism is still self-interested, the individual is unaware that their self-interest is involved in their actions and decisions. It is important to keep in mind that wholly self-interested action is impossible—and even if it were possible, one could never be absolutely sure that it was entirely self-interested. Ownness and autonomy, I argue, are a matter of degree.

Moreover, ownness and autonomy are never absolute because of the limitations material conditions place on our abilities and capacities to act. Coercion and the threat of violence—especially under capitalism—are all too common as we move through our lives. Contrary to Marxist criticisms, Stirner nowhere denies this. It is in fact quite the opposite: he claims that “it would be foolish to assert that there is no power above mine”.²³⁷ The point of difference between the Stirnerian and Marxist positions is the attitude the egoist takes toward that higher, external power. Stirner’s discussion of slavery, although presented as a means of distinguishing freedom from ownness, can illustrate this distinction in attitude between conscious and unconscious egoism. Stirner writes,

The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment.
But *my own* I remain. Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself

²³⁷ Stirner, *Ego*, 165.

and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not *free* from them; but I endure them only for *my benefit*, perhaps in order to deceive him and make him secure by the semblance of patience, or, again, not to draw worse upon myself by obstinate resistance. But, as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slaveholder into the dust.²³⁸

As we can see, Stirner in no way denies the existence of material and external limitations to one's own self-interest. In fact, the conditions of the world in all cases make up the material over which I can exercise my will and interest. In the case of slavery, the possibility of self-interested action is of course severely complicated by coercion and the threat of violence. Yet possibility still remains, however small: the *consciously* egoistic slave can use the slaveholder's violence to their advantage, biding time to plan a revolt, to develop strategies and tactics of resistance. The implied flip-side of this argument is, to be sure, somewhat disconcerting: the *unconsciously* egoistic slave plays a part in willing their own enslavement. This idea—what I have been calling *voluntary servitude*—is extremely important for my development of Stirner's political philosophy in the third chapter; however, it must not be over-exaggerated. No slave is responsible in either the moral or practical sense for either the conditions or the facts of their own enslavement. The point is rather that we must at all times weigh our desires, attachments, relationships, and expectations so as not to be pacified, rendered docile and complacent. In the case of slavery, the conscious egoist asks: what is it that I really desire? Is the violence I may suffer as a consequence of my attempt to revolt more undesirable than the conditions I currently face? What stock, hope, or faith do I place in my expectations of retributive violence, in my ability to calculate

²³⁸ *Ibid.* 143.

consequences? What powers of acting do I have, what powers do I lack, and what tactics are at my disposal?

Authors such as John Jenkins, Sidney Hook, and David Leopold reject this descriptive reading, arguing instead that egoism is a prescriptive, explicitly moral framework and therefore directive of action.²³⁹ Jenkins and Leopold argue this position in part by appealing to one particular example Stirner presents in *The Ego*: a woman decides to abandon her love interest at the behest of her family.²⁴⁰ Leopold specifically claims that her decision, in this instance, was “ruled by piety *as opposed to* egoism”; indeed, Stirner seems to suggest this—but only on the surface.²⁴¹ Stirner in fact positions this example against a shallow reading of egoism—one that would understand the woman’s choice to be a selfish, *ego-tistic* act—whereby the woman is said to have made a calculation, valuing her family more than her love interest. Leopold takes this as proof that egoism is not descriptive of an ever-present phenomenon since piety is here ‘opposed

²³⁹ Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962): 172; John Jenkins, “Max Stirner’s Ontology”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1: 19; David Leopold, “Introduction”, *The Ego and Its Own*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995): xxiv.

²⁴⁰ Jenkins, “Stirner’s Ontology”, 19. Incidentally, Jenkins makes what is perhaps the most disingenuous possible argument against the ethics of Stirner’s egoism: the unique is logically self-defeating and impossible because it must follow the principle to “never follow principles”. Firstly, to criticize Stirner for insufficient rationalism misses his ethical and political critique of Reason entirely. Moreover, the demand that ethics be subordinated to propositional logic is absurdly machine-like—it is also quite an excellent example of Stirner’s lamentation that ‘philosophers do not know real human beings’ and deal only with abstractions. But to quell Jenkins’ line of inquiry, we’ll follow him down the rabbit hole just a little bit further. Aside from the fact that Stirner never makes this prescription or states this as a principle, Jenkins’ argument dubiously conflates the rejection of prescription in general with the presence of a specific prescription. One might appeal to Bertrand Russell’s pragmatic solution to the liar’s paradox: ‘never follow principles’ can be understood as a ‘second-order’ or meta-prescriptive statement, whereas ‘follow this principle’ is a first-order, direct prescription. They are, in other words, not the same *type* of statement, do not address the same object, and therefore do not produce a paradox. But the more poignant response simply returns to my claim in the introduction to this chapter: if Stirner had actually stated that “one should never follow principles”, this would be a *challenge* rather than a moral prescription. It is therefore akin to asking: why are you attached to these principles, these laws, these values? Do you have the strength and autonomy to break your own rules, or are you *compelled* to follow them?

²⁴¹ Leopold, “Introduction”, xxv.

to' egoism rather than a form or expression of it. Leopold, however, both mis-quotes and mis-contextualizes the passage. I first clarify the context.

Stirner's example occurs in the chapter on 'The Owner', near the beginning of the second section entitled 'My Intercourse'. In this section, Stirner spends some time developing the notion of the *union*: a social relation made up of self-interested action, or egoistic 'intercourse', so as not to collapse into authoritarian, hierarchical structures. He develops his understanding of the egoistic union against the foil of non-egoistic (or non-consciously egoistic) forms of social relations. These include, for example: the state, prisons, churches, conceptions of 'society' or 'community', the family, and so on. The task is to present various social institutions as antithetical to individual intercourse, and he refers to these types of institutionalized social relations as 'communions'. He notes that if properly egoistic *unions* were allowed to proliferate within these communions, it would lead to their dissolution. His central example here is the prison: comradery, solidarity, intercourse, and reciprocity of egoistic social relations among the imprisoned population "is in hostile relations to the prison society and tends to the dissolution of [...] this joint incarceration".²⁴²

In the particular passage Leopold works from Stirner shifts his focus to the family. His transition from a critique of the prison to a critique of the family comes with an explicit statement of intent: to reveal the danger of communions "we remain in gladly and voluntarily, without wanting to endanger them by our egoistic impulses".²⁴³ This statement explicitly brings passionate attachments and voluntary servitude to the forefront of the discussion. The prison,

²⁴² Stirner, *Ego*, 194-195.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* 195.

for Stirner, is an easier communion to criticize because it is quite rare that individuals enter them voluntarily. The family, on the other hand, is something we often wilfully participate in and desire to maintain, even in situations where it opposes our interest or hurts us. The operative understanding of the family Stirner works with (and against) is one in which the members of a given family hold the family bond itself to be “fixed and sacred”; the unifying family tie is itself the supreme value—blood is thicker than water.²⁴⁴ In this model, a member who secedes from the sacred bond commits an act of heresy, becoming “a ‘criminal’ against the family”.²⁴⁵ Therefore, in presenting the specific example of a woman abandoning her love interest for the sake of her family, Stirner is criticizing our voluntary servitude and passionate attachment to and within communions which may not in all cases benefit us. This context is not grasped by Leopold.

Over and above missing these key contextual points, Leopold also misquotes the passage: Stirner in fact presents *two* examples. Leopold leaves out the first of these: Shakespeare’s Juliet. The anonymous, second woman—who has “a less passionate and wilful heart”—is directly contrasted with Juliet concerning the decision to disobey the wishes of her family.²⁴⁶ Both women are contemplating a potential spouse; the anonymous woman “makes a marriage which suits the claims of the family”, while Juliet, pursuing her love interest, “prefers to become a ‘criminal’ against the family and to throw off its laws”.²⁴⁷ Rather than condemn one and affirm the other, Stirner uses this example to illustrate the difficulty and ambiguity involved in understanding ourselves, in understanding our desires, in confronting the instability of our own

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 196.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 195-196.

identities. Two questions emerge. The first and more readily apparent asks: which of the two values, my family's wishes or my own love interest, lies nearer to my heart? Yet the true difficulty comes not from this question of measure, of pro and con, but from the attempt to answer the second, deeper question: *why* do I desire what I happen to desire?

This deeper question does not point toward the discovery of something like a true, secret and unconscious desire, an essential inner-self awaiting realization and expression. Rather, the purpose is to understand the extent to which my desires are really my own, or the extent to which they are imposed from the outside. The ambiguity involved in this process has its source in our passionate attachments and the facts of life that feed them. Communions are, of course, not always limiting. Stirner readily acknowledges that in many cases one's interests and the interests of one's family "go peacefully together", in mutual advantage.²⁴⁸ Moreover, material conditions are often the catalyst for this sort of critical self-reflection—some decisions are time-sensitive, some are limited by economic necessity, and so on. This self-reflection upon *why* we desire what we desire is a key part of the process of self-dissolution: Stirner describes the second, "pious" woman as having traces of remorse in the consciousness or recollection of the love she sacrificed. These affective traces, through a kind of sedimentation, can form passionate attachments if left unattended, undissolved. These passionate attachments, in turn, form the very core of our subjectivities and identities.²⁴⁹ Self-dissolution, as an un-making of our calcified,

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 196.

²⁴⁹ Before introducing Juliet's case, Stirner writes: "A wish [*Wunsch*] rises in my soul, and, growing from hour to hour, becomes a passion [*Leidenschaft*]. To whom does it immediately occur that even the slightest thought against the spirit of the family, family piety, carries within it a deeper transgression—who is immediately, in this moment of passion, completely aware [*bewußt*] of the thing?" This is a description of how one can lose sight of themselves and the breadth of their self-interest by being caught up in a moment, by being overwhelmed by an affective intensity. This is neither a condemnation of passion nor an endorsement of stoic *ataraxia*. Rather, it is an empathetic recognition of the real movements of desire in our lives—a recognition of our fluctuations and inflections, of the

fixed identities, is not an easy endeavour—matters of the heart leave lasting impressions, for they tread heavily upon us. But a weakness of will is not an absence of will—far from it—and piety, therefore, is not opposed to egoism. Piety is rather self-interest in a “weak” and unconscious form.²⁵⁰

The second woman *does* sacrifice her interest but does so for the sake of another interest. That this is still egoistic (rather than *opposed* to egoism) is consistently affirmed by Stirner, as evidenced by another analogy he provides in the midst of this discussion: he draws a connection between Juliet’s choice and the Protestant split from the Catholic church. The church, prizing piety to the bond of the church itself, did not ‘cast out’ the Protestants. To make this claim would be to neglect the wilfulness and passion—i.e. the *interest*—the Protestants had in prizing their own forms of piety above the church’s bond. In other words, the Protestants played a significant role in casting themselves out. So too with Juliet.²⁵¹ Stirner’s examples here are not meant to prescribe certain actions over others; rather, they are simply illustrations of the difficulty and ambiguity involved in ethical decision making. This is precisely why Stirner does not present a final judgment or evaluation of either woman’s actions—he simply compares and contrasts the different forms and degrees of self-interest involved in their decision-making processes. Leopold holds the opposite view: he claims that Stirner uses “explicitly evaluative vocabulary” and is therefore “clearly committed” to valuing certain actions and behaviours over others.²⁵² Pointing

tensions and ambiguities of desire we as individuals have to deal with. It is also part and parcel of the formation of passionate attachments. It is important to note that this kind of self-forgetting can happen in *either* case—both Juliet and the anonymous woman can become enthralled to their own passions. Stirner’s contrast between these two cases is thus an illumination of his ethical *challenge*: to contend with the question of ambiguity in the face of impossibility. See: Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 290.

²⁵⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 197.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* 196.

²⁵² Leopold, “Introduction”, xxiv.

to Stirner's use of the terms 'courage' and 'weakness' to describe the act of lying and the anonymous woman's choice respectively, Leopold rejects the descriptive function of Stirner's egoism. I argue that the use of evaluative vocabulary—even if containing explicit statements of preference—does not immediately imply a prescriptive project: one can offer their own preferred choice for a given situation without universalizing it, without imposing a 'should' on others.

Moreover, we can understand the relationship between Stirner's evaluative language and his descriptive project by reading his ironic inversions of Young Hegelian philosophy as a kind of meta-ethical practice: Stirner *himself* is attempting to dissolve his own passionate attachments to not only his state-subjectivity, but also to his earlier Hegelian education. His use of evaluative language—his preference for actions positioned against the dominant social script—can therefore be read as his own, individual, and unique method of self-dissolution and subjective-reconstitution, rather than a prescription for 'correct' or morally superior decisions across ostensibly similar situations. As I argue more robustly in the next chapter, the forces that shape, limit, and organize our lives are multiplicitous; our tactics of resistance to these forces, therefore, must also be multiplicitous and variable. There are many starting points within ideology and many paths toward ownness, and they all depend on the *unique* elements at play in any given situation. It is important to keep in mind that Stirner's examples are precisely that—*examples*, and they are always spoken of at the level of commonality or generality. Where and when these situations actually occur in our lives, there is always more at play than one could ever properly account for. Recall that at the level of the singular people are simply incomparable to one another.

Against Leopold's reading, I argue that egoism does not present a concrete system of ethics or morality. It is instead a practice of reflecting upon desire and self-interest, on what we have in our power and what we do not. What each of us has in our power varies not only from person to person, but from moment to moment. This is why Stirner's insistence on the ambiguity of desire is intimately bound up with the project of a *descriptive* egoism. Stirner's descriptiveness sets the stakes of subordination and enthrallment at the level of the individual desire and unique subjectivities. It therefore clears the ground for the invention of new tactics of resistance, new possibilities of life.

Chapter Three: Politics

We two, the state and I, are enemies.
—Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

Throughout the previous two chapters, I danced around the term ‘politics’ without providing a real definition of it. Stirner himself, however, never provides us with a concrete definition: he uses the term quite broadly—here positively, there disparagingly. Nevertheless, I hinted that Stirner’s engagements with both ontology and ethics are motivated primarily by what I called the political stakes underlying those discourses; any attempt at distinguishing between them is rendered all the more difficult in light of this fact. Indeed, there is no clear separation between them within Stirner’s texts. I noted previously that the separations I introduce—specifically between ethics and politics—are meant to be primarily heuristic and explanatory devices. All of this being said, I use the term ‘politics’ broadly to signal egoism’s relation to authority, governance, and control; Stirner’s *an-archism* here finds its most explicit formulation.

Now in this current chapter, the aforementioned political stakes finally come to the fore. To put it simply (and perhaps repetitively), what is at stake is the limiting of possibility. In the previous chapter, I framed Stirner’s injunction—“*use thyself!*”—as an ethical challenge rather than a moral prescription. This challenge was presented as an invitation to an infinite labour, to an endless task. I argue that this task—confronting the constellation of fixed ideas, dissolving our passionate attachments to them—is infinite or endless precisely because of the impossibility of achieving a complete and totalizing state of ownness. We are always vulnerable to the violence of the phantasmagoria and its mystifying shroud of representation, always vulnerable to the pull

of subjectivizing institutions and the false comfort of stable identity that they offer. We are always vulnerable to the failure of our own tactics and, most of all, to the weakness of our own will to resist. Yet this, in my reading, neither constitutes nor endorses nihilism.

Stirner's politics—beginning from the impossibility of a total and permanent victory—do not lapse into the manufacturing of hope or the production of faith but see to the invention of new tactics for affirming only this: that there are other ways of being. I noted in the Introduction that this affirmation of possibility is the most fundamental meaning of Stirner's anarchism; it is also, at the same time, a resistance to *archism*. In the first chapter, I argued that Stirner's resistance to archism manifests as a rejection of universality and necessity at the level of ontology; in the second chapter, at the level of ethics, I argued that it manifests as a refusal of both principle and prescription. Here, at the level of politics, Stirner's anarchism initially consists in a resistance to structures of control and governance: not necessarily the state, the economy, the law, etc. in-themselves, but a resistance to the ways these structures regulate and order life, the ways they limit possibility. That is, the limiting of possibility is not simply a matter of coercion or repression, but primarily concerns the *construction* of subjectivity and political identity. Stirner's defence of the unsayable-singular, now at the level of politics, sets its sights on subjectivity itself.

But there is another, crucial side to Stirner's political anarchism: alongside a rejection of structures of control, Stirner offers something affirmative in his discussions of *insurrection* and the *union of egoists*. These two tactics also concern the construction of subjectivity; affirming the unsayable-singular at the level of the politics, they are tactics of affirming a form of *individuality without identity*. That is, Stirner presents a kind of individuality that bears witness to the aspects

of life that are in excess of identity categories.²⁵³ These two tactics might—to confront Deleuze—point the way out of nihilism; ending on a happy note, I present them in the final subchapter. Stirner’s discourse on structures and mechanisms of control—namely, the state, society, and ideology—serve as a lead-in to this final discussion; it is therefore presented in the penultimate subchapter.

To begin, I discuss Stirner’s relation to the anarchist canon as a means of introducing a concern central to his politics: the relationship between identity and authority. My analysis of this relationship is presented through an examination a single book—one which argues for Stirner’s *exclusion* from the anarchist canon. Like the Stirner-Nietzsche scholarship discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, this book is generative not so much because of its content, but because of its form. Moreover, the controversy surrounding its publication invites a Stirnerian critique. This critique is meant to highlight two important points: what holding anarchism ‘all the way down’ looks like in practical terms, and what the danger is in positing identity as the vehicle of resistance to authority rather than the site of authority’s manifestation.

²⁵³ Saul Newman, *Postanarchism*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016): 20.

3.1: Stirner and the Anarchist Canon

In their ground-breaking and highly praised study, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, authors Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt aim to provide consistency and coherency to the “broad anarchist tradition”.²⁵⁴ Anarchism, in their view, has always suffered at the hands of its own outward appearance: chaos, disorganization, and lack of rigour. While they acknowledge that anarchism contains within itself “many differences and debates”, they hold that there exist several “core ideas that are sufficiently coherent to be thought of as a shared ‘broad anarchist tradition’”.²⁵⁵ These ‘core ideas’ become strict criteria for the authors’ construction of a ‘true’ or ‘proper’ anarchism; these criteria, in turn, are used to either exclude or categorize particular historical figures commonly associated with anarchism from or within the canon. The aim of their project thus forces them to downplay difference, minor or otherwise, for the sake of consistency—in this respect, it is similar to John Carroll’s approach, noted in the second chapter. It is no surprise, then, that the authors hold syndicalism—a platformist, mass-movement oriented approach to revolutionary politics—to be the “most important strand in anarchism”.²⁵⁶ Rather than provide a simple working definition of anarchism and proceeding to add nuance and detail, the authors seek to position anarchism as a kind of stable and essential identity category. From the outset, they position themselves against another earlier text with similar aspirations: Paul Eltzbacher’s *Anarchism: Exponents of the Anarchist*

²⁵⁴ Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, (Canada: AK Press, 2009), 7-8.

²⁵⁵ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, 7.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

Philosophy.²⁵⁷ Eltzbacher's book organizes anarchism around "seven sages"—William Godwin, Max Stirner, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Benjamin Tucker, Leo Tolstoy, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin. These sages, by symbolic representation, are meant to account for all of the possible variants of anarchism; for Schmidt and van der Walt, however, "only Bakunin and Kropotkin" are true anarchists according to their own criteria.²⁵⁸

The problem with the authors' methodology can already be felt at the outset—they attempt to 'limit' anarchism. As a result, they not only omit Stirner based on their criteria, but explicitly argue to justify his exclusion. Schmidt and van der Walt provide three arguments for Stirner's exclusion from the pantheon: first, he is anti-revolutionary; second, his (overly-individualist) account of freedom is not socialist; and finally, underscoring both, egoism's compatibility with capitalism.²⁵⁹ While the first two statements are true in a certain sense, Schmidt and van der Walt assert them for the wrong reasons. Firstly, Stirner *is* skeptical of revolution insofar as 'revolution' is taken as an abstract concept and subsequently used to orient the behaviour of individuals—that is, if it functions as a *fixed idea*. Stirner is therefore not opposed to a revolution actually occurring, but he is concerned with the ideological effects the *concept* of capital-R 'Revolution' might have on individual autonomy in the present. As I argue further on in this chapter, Stirner pits a notion of 'insurrection' against broadly-socialist conceptions of revolution. Schmidt and van der Walt's argument corresponds to the letter of the

²⁵⁷ Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism: Exponents of the Anarchist Philosophy*, (London: Freedom Press, 1960).

²⁵⁸ van der Walt and Schmidt. 18.

²⁵⁹ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, 36, 41, 47-48, 52, 64-65, 67, 71, 241-242, etc. Their criticisms are posed in strangely moralistic and *archist* terms. They lament two points in particular: that Stirner (allegedly) affirms "the *right* of the individual to do whatever she or he pleased [emphasis mine]", and that he asserts "there [is] nothing *wrong* with one individual constraining another [emphasis mine]". On top of severely misreading Stirner, their attempt at posing an *anarchist* criticism grounded in appeals to rights discourse and moral normativity is highly tenuous, if not strictly paradoxical. See: Van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, 36.

law, but not its spirit: the point of a revolution, for anarchists and other leftists alike, is presumably to bring about a fundamental change in social relations—clearly, Stirner is unopposed to this.

Schmidt and van der Walt's second argument—that Stirner is opposed to freedom—suffers the same problem as the first: Stirner *is* opposed to freedom insofar as it is a spook or fixed idea. This is especially true if freedom is understood to be attained through the granting and bearing of rights. Stirner makes at least three arguments against the exaltation of rights: first and foremost, rights do nothing to actually empower, enable, or motivate the individual to *exercise* those rights. Secondly—as I argued in the first chapter—Stirner's ironic inversion tactic applies to his analysis freedom: the state's granting of various freedoms to the individual is, in reality, only the state's own freedom to exercise *its own will* upon and through the individual. Rights thus merely grant the individual the 'freedom' to obey, to submit, to authorize, and to sustain the state itself. Human rights are therefore the rights of 'humanity' to express itself *in and through the individual*: if one is respected for their humanity, it is only the 'human' in the individual—and not the individual themselves—that is valued and respected. Thirdly, any right or privilege that is *given* or *permitted* is no freedom at all: the act of granting permission is a movement of an authority that affirms and solidifies its own power to authorize.²⁶⁰ This is precisely why Stirner is adamant to draw a distinction between "self-liberation" and "emancipation" within his critique of freedom: the individual "who is set free", rather than having

²⁶⁰ Stirner writes: "If they nevertheless give you freedom, they are simply rogues who give more than they have. For then they give you nothing of their own, but stolen wares: they give you your own freedom, the freedom that you must take for yourselves; and they *give* it to you only that you may not take it and call the thieves and cheats to an account to boot". See: Stirner, *Ego*, 151.

freed *themselves*, is merely “a dog dragging a piece of chain with him”, an ass in lion’s skin.²⁶¹

There is thus a twofold danger in defending a rights-based conception of freedom: firstly, it is a *false* freedom, one that can be taken away or displaced at will; and secondly, it placates and pacifies potentially radical subjectivities.

Yet, in opposition to Schmidt and van der Walt’s assertion, Stirner explicitly states that he has “no objection to freedom”—he simply desires something “more than freedom” for the individual: “you should not merely *be rid* of what you do not want”, but “you should be an ‘owner’ [*Eigner*] too”.²⁶² Stirner illustrates that freedom in-itself is “empty of substance” by drawing a distinction between wanting “the freedom to have” something, and wanting to *really have* that thing.²⁶³ By insisting on maximizing the power and ownness of the individual, Stirner therefore advances a more radical form of freedom than state-focused or rights-based revolutionary positions. Schmidt and van der Walt’s reading of Stirner misses the true kernel of his anti-authoritarianism by papering over these nuances in Stirner’s critique of freedom. Rather than being formed by a lack of “attention to the social context that made freedom possible”, Stirner’s critique of freedom is borne of a heightened attention to it: as I argue in the following subchapter, the state itself is not the only source of domination, hierarchy, and oppression.²⁶⁴

The final justification for Stirner’s exclusion from the anarchist canon centers his failure to be truly anti-capitalist. The authors claim that self-interest is the central idea of economic liberalism, embodied in the competition of the free market; Stirner, while not being “an advocate

²⁶¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 152.

²⁶² *Ibid.* 142.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* 141.

²⁶⁴ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, 48.

of the free market”, shares the liberal-economic “virtue” of self-interest.²⁶⁵ Stirner, therefore, shares the “basic sentiment of laissez-faire capitalism”—and as part of their proof, the authors note that Stirner had the audacity to translate Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. This argument simply pays no attention to the ways Stirner severely complicates the language of self-interest and property in explaining his egoism.

My concern with *Black Flame*, however, is not so much with the content of their criticisms of Stirner—there exist even worse interpretations, even less genuine readings. My concern is instead the text’s method of organization, and—as I discuss below—its relationship to a rather specific problem with the identity of one of its authors. This relationship invites a Stirnerian analysis which, in turn, highlights the ways in which hierarchy, authoritarianism, and identity can become tangled up in one another.

Authoritarianism and Identity

It is here worth noting, briefly, the recent controversy surrounding this book. In 2015, the publisher AK Press released a statement claiming they had compiled “incontrovertible evidence” that one of the authors, Michael Schmidt, was an undercover “white nationalist trying to infiltrate the anarchist movement”.²⁶⁶ As a result, AK Press put out of print all of their publications of Schmidt’s work, including *Black Flame*, as well as canceling his (at the time) forthcoming book. Disputes exploded onto the scene, many of which took place online and informally through

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 52.

²⁶⁶ AK Press Collective, “Important and Unpleasant News From AK Press”, *Revolution by the Book: The AK Press Blog*, WordPress, September 25, 2015. <http://www.revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/important-and-unpleasant-news-from-ak-press/>.

academic blogs, social media, and political forums. It is important to note that prior to the news about Schmidt's identity, *Black Flame* was already subject to much scholarly debate. The general consensus seemed to be that despite its questionable organizational criteria and methodology, the book was a significant contribution to the history of anarchism. It made such a large splash that some journals dedicated entire editions to discussing and reviewing it; the book, in these journals and elsewhere, achieved the rare distinction of being praised even while criticized. However, this positive response changed drastically after the news of Schmidt's identity was published. A cry emerged to boycott Schmidt's work (no doubt lead by the publisher's actions), and a startling position emerged from the uproar: "I always knew he was a fascist!"; "he was never one of us!"; "this is not us, not our history!", and so forth—the immediate reaction was, ironically, to *exclude* Schmidt and his work from anarchism.²⁶⁷

This incident, like the Stirner-Nietzsche scholarship discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, is itself generative of important philosophical and political questions. Putting the content and methodology of *Black Flame* into conversation with the discourse surrounding its controversy, we can probe a little deeper into the relationship between identity, authority, and political tactics. I am of course concerned primarily with a Stirnerian approach to such ideas. Keeping in mind the discussion of desire and passionate attachments—such as the Juliet example from the previous chapter—one might ask: what does it really mean to have a 'secret' identity? The problem, for both the publishers and the community, seems to be that Schmidt 'secretly'—i.e. privately or inwardly—held onto racist and fascist beliefs while pretending to be an

²⁶⁷ Duane Rousselle, "Michael Schmidt", *Dingpolitik*, WordPress, February 9, 2017: <https://dingpolitik.wordpress.com/2017/02/09/michael-schmidt/>. Rousselle originally posted this blog entry on his personal Facebook page on September 25, 2015; it was later uploaded to his more formal blog at my request.

egalitarian, an anti-authoritarian, an anarchist, etc. But where exactly does the pretense lie? What does it mean, socially and politically, to act in accordance with one set of beliefs while ‘believing in’ another? Or to (seemingly) act in two contradictory ways, for two contradictory ends, at once? In what ways does insisting on the efficacy of a secret identity re-inscribe the kind of essentialism anarchism itself rallies against? On at least two levels, the anarchist community’s response is itself quite revealing of anarchism’s own troubled relationship with its most fickle enemy: authority.

The two responses—before and after the revelation—invite a Stirnerian discussion. Prior to the news, critics generally failed to connect the book’s controversial methodology with its alleged, post-revelation authoritarianism; after the news, the anarchist community committed the very same purifying maneuver as the book itself. Both instances reveal specific ways in which our passionate attachments to authority can seep into even our most anti-authoritarian endeavours. Rather than simply discredit the text, it seems more generative to ask: does the secret identity—or ‘true’ identity—of the author negate the work or the *usefulness* of the text? More importantly, does it negate the work that *we can do* with the text? Can it be appropriated in such a way that its authoritarian and anarchist tendencies are dissolved?

To ask these questions does not imply that Schmidt is ‘not really a white nationalist because he wrote an anarchist book’—that would miss the point. Instead, I argue that while conducting research and writing for the book, Schmidt *acted like an anarchist*; he produced *anarchic effects*. Identity—as we learn from Stirner—is neither totalizing nor static. There are times and places, even during the book-writing years, where Schmidt may very well have acted like a white nationalist, producing authoritarian effects, while at other times acting like an

anarchist, producing anarchic effects. One need not exclude the book based solely on the political identity of its author—where would that get us?—but instead, the work can be poured over with immense scrutiny in order that any traces of fascist and authoritarian rhetoric it contains are brought to light. This seems to me a more theoretically generative and politically effective approach to combatting fascism and authoritarianism. As Stirner teaches us, ownness involves a constant reflection upon the ways we are complicit in structures of authority, including in our own subjugation to those structures. It is no secret that anarchism—specifically academic anarchism—can often be dominated by white, masculine, and upper or middle-class voices. This means that regardless of Schmidt’s ‘true’ political affiliation or identity, there would undoubtedly exist traces of colonial and white-supremacist ideology saturating the text. This is not due to the colour of Schmidt’s skin or his ethnicity; it is due instead to the social and cultural ubiquity of white supremacy and colonialism, reduplicated and proliferated in the tacit, implicit, minor and micro-actions each of us participates in *and are constructed by* daily, throughout our lives. White supremacy and colonial-settlerism—especially in Western and Global-North contexts—are part of the social fabric and are therefore part of us. Acting anarchically—*reading* anarchically—to produce anarchic effects must mean a refusal to concede to the authority of the text, especially the authority of the text’s author. Put in Stirnerian terms, we can always attempt to re-appropriate the text for our own use and enjoyment in spite of its own moral or political intentions.

The point, then, is neither to produce an ‘ideologically pure’ text, nor to ‘exclude’ texts that fail the litmus test for purity; this would be to commit the authoritarian fallacy at the heart of liberal humanism. Rather, the point (if we are at all concerned with authority and hierarchy) is

to constantly revisit the texts *along with ourselves*—our desires, attachments, deeds—in order that we may be vigilant in rooting out forms of authority that we both obey and implement. The act of dissolution cannot be suspended simply because the text claims to have an interest that coincides with our own. Conceding to the truth of the text or the authority of the author is yet another form of voluntary servitude, self-bondage, or enthrallment. Ironically, insisting on the fascist-identity of the author as a means of criticism or outright rejection often leads commentators to miss what is perhaps the most significantly fascist element of the book itself: its attempt to construct an ideologically pure lineage of anarchism. Moreover, insisting on the author's secret identity can itself be read as a move to innocence, a type of political posturing, or a denouncement of the outside to affirm the purity of the inside: "this is not us!"

As I noted, even those who criticized the methodology of *Black Flame* prior to the identity-revelation seemed to miss this meta-political issue. However, there exists at least one counter-example. Kathy E. Ferguson criticizes *Black Flame* for excluding the entire insurrectionary tradition of anarchism.²⁶⁸ In mounting her criticism, she cites and describes the works of an impressive number of artists and political activists explicitly influenced by Stirner; moreover, she attacks the authors' methodology on the same grounds as I do. She writes,

There is no need to throw Stirner and the creative world of anarchist art out of the tradition in order to tell the rich story of anarchism's labour history. Schmidt and van der Walt toss Stirner out, I speculate, because

²⁶⁸ Kathy E. Ferguson, "Why Anarchists Need Stirner", *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). It is important to note that Ferguson's text was published before knowledge of Schmidt's secret identity was made public; she does not, in this article, comment upon the controversy. My commentary thus seeks not to criticize her article—which would be anachronistic—but rather to use it to illustrate the ways in which authoritarianism can saturate even our purportedly anti-authoritarian work, functioning 'behind the scenes' as it were. New knowledge of Schmidt's identity thus supplements her criticism of *Black Flame*: it is, of course, easier to see the text's meta-textual and methodological authoritarianism once the authoritarian identity is revealed.

doing so firms up their idea of the proper anarchist inside by creating a despised outside against which to position themselves.²⁶⁹

This insight is more Stirnerian than Ferguson lets on. Throughout *The Ego*, Stirner defends what I call the “shadow-figures” of society: the madman, the criminal, the vagabond, the pauper, and of course, the un-man (‘inhuman monster’). These shadow-figures exist in the liminal, interstitial spaces, the margins of society and the state. Stirner’s defence of these figures is not a simple inflammatory, nihilistic gesture, one posed only to align himself symbolically with the state’s enemies. Instead, I read Stirner’s defence of these shadow-figures as a thorough critique of the universalizing logic of identity itself as it is engendered by the state and society, i.e. through the vehicle of *subject formation*: the outside is required for the inside’s posturing, for the inside’s justification of its own authority, legitimacy, and continued functioning. Stirner shows that regardless of how widely the net is cast, there always exists something intractable, something non-recuperable, something that eludes its capture. Stirner defends singularity as uniqueness, or what I have been calling ‘individuality without identity’, precisely because he understands how identity itself often serves as the throne of authoritarianism. In the following subchapters, the relationship between authority, hierarchy, identity, and subjectivity is explored. I first discuss Stirner’s discourse on the state and ideology.

²⁶⁹ Ferguson, “Anarchists”, 180.

3.2: The State and Ideology

Stirner has come under heavy scrutiny at the hand of Marxist scholars. They attack two distinct but interrelated features of *The Ego*: Stirner's ontological idealism, and his anarchistic political theory. On the one hand, Stirner's unique is read as an empty, abstract essence; on the other, Stirner's discussion of property and the *union of egoists* is read as overly-individualist and/or capitalist in nature. Marx and Engels' lengthy criticism of Stirner in *The German Ideology* is reproduced by a host of contemporary Marxist scholars and can be summarized succinctly: Stirner only managed to destroy the *idea* of the state but did nothing to damage the state itself in reality.²⁷⁰ This argument, merging both broad strands of criticism found in *The German Ideology*, attacks both Stirner's inadequate materialism and his one-sided individualism at once. There are of course more nuanced analyses to be found in this body of scholarship, but they eventually find their way back to this main point.

The following subchapter addresses these criticisms in a slightly indirect fashion. I have hinted, throughout the thesis, that political stakes are the central concern lurking behind Stirner's engagement with both ontology and ethics. These stakes still need to be fleshed out in full. In both this subchapter and the next, I therefore continue to build my own interpretation (and, at times, my extrapolation) of Stirner's politics. The aforementioned criticisms inform my reading by acting either as a foil or a launching point into the nuances of Stirner's political egoism; that

²⁷⁰ For instance, Paul Thomas writes: "A reality such as the state cannot be abrogated by revealing *at the level of consciousness* its unsound character—although this is exactly what Stirner believed". Paul Thomas, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner", *Political Theory*, Vol. 3 No.2 (May 1975), 162-163. See also: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. ed. Dixon et. al. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976): 254; Sidney Hook, *Hegel to Marx*, 176.

is, they are addressed ‘indirectly’ because my own interpretation is positioned against them from the outset.

In what follows, I build on several discussions found earlier in the thesis. Specifically, my readings of Stirner’s discourse on passionate attachments, property, and materialism come to the fore. Materialism is especially at issue for the Marxists. While it is certainly true that Stirner does not provide the same level of detail as Marxists do concerning economic and labour relations, I argue that this is a question of scope rather than a lack of rigour. Stirner’s politics, like his ontology and ethics, center singularity and individuality; he therefore does not present the kind of materialism we have come to expect from Marxism and leftist political theory generally. Stirner instead turns his attention to *ideology* and the role of the individual within ideological structures; material and economic factors are of concern primarily because of their ideological function.

The State

As noted, the main charge Marx and Engels bring against Stirner concerns the idealism central to his discussions of the state and other socio-political institutions. Following *The German Ideology*, Marxists hold that, for Stirner, “materiality [does] not play a decisive role in the sculpting of actuality”.²⁷¹ It is seldom acknowledged by Marxists that Stirner offers some discussion of material conditions; however, even when this is acknowledged, Stirner’s materialism is taken as an “uncritical belief in the material power of reflective categories”.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Norman Levine, *Marx’s Discourse with Hegel*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 263.

²⁷² Paul Thomas, “Marx and Stirner”, 167.

Stirner's *magnum opus* is thus read as a mere catalogue of "obstacles grounded in consciousness" which obstruct "the free play of the ego".²⁷³ Stirner's politics, on this reading, amount to nothing more than a simple prescription: "all we need to do to change reality is to master our thoughts, instead of letting them master us".²⁷⁴ This claim is precisely—in fact, almost word for word—how Marx and Engels criticize the whole of Young Hegelianism.²⁷⁵ Stirner, having failed to surpass the idealism of the Young Hegelians, has an inverted view of the true source domination and subordination: he "imagines that the various ideas created the various conditions of life", rather than the other way around.²⁷⁶ For this reason, Paul Thomas asserts that Stirner severely downplays the state's coercive and repressive power; he therefore understands Stirner's critique of the state to be "less forceful than that of almost any other anarchist".²⁷⁷ The problem, according to Paul Thomas, is that Stirner discovers false relations between "disparate elements of reality" by overemphasizing their ideological or abstract qualities; Stirner only fights at the level of concepts and principles.²⁷⁸

This reading misses the political stakes of Stirner's project by, ironically, inverting its structure. It is not that Stirner links disparate elements of reality by discovering relations between their abstract principles; rather, Stirner demonstrates how principles and fixed ideas—having gone undissolved—organize the 'disparate elements of reality' into fixed, hierarchical structures through sedimentation and calcification. This process of sedimentation is central not only to the

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 164.

²⁷⁴ Paul Thomas, "Max Stirner and Karl Marx: An Overlooked Contretemps", *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 115. See also: Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): 106; Sidney Hook, *Hegel to Marx*, 165-183.

²⁷⁵ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 298-299, 493-494.

²⁷⁶ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 444.

²⁷⁷ Thomas, "Marx and Stirner", 168.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 167.

creation and maintenance of socio-economic hierarchies, but to the production of subjectivity itself. Stirner's focus is on the ideological function of the State and its role in shaping and forming subjects rather than its economic and distributive role. This is not to say that materiality or economics play no role in subject-formation whatsoever but only that they are not always decisive. Stirner's critique of the state seems to lack force from the Marxist perspective only due to a difference in scope and concern, not rigour or consistency.

It is true that Stirner regards the state as, first and foremost, a fixed idea. Yet this implies neither that the state is completely illusory, nor that the state operates in and through thought alone. While Stirner affirms that the state and other fixed ideas "exist only for the mind", this does not necessarily imply that the state does not have real, material effects.²⁷⁹ The nature of a fixed idea is to be an object of passionate attachments *in addition to* any material elements it might be composed of or have at its disposal. This is especially relevant when it comes to the state. The state certainly plays a part in the ordering and regulation of life but, perhaps with the exception of militaristic or fascist dictatorships, it "cannot operate through simple coercion or repression" alone.²⁸⁰ The police force, as the military arm of the state, surely has weapons at its disposal; yet it is not a gun to the head keeping the impoverished masses from stealing bread on a daily basis. The *threat* of punishment coupled with impressed notions of dutiful citizenship and

²⁷⁹ Stirner, *Ego*, 68. In a private, online seminar and roundtable discussion conducted via Google Hangouts, Saul Newman responded to a question I posed about his reading of Stirner's theory of power as being closely related to Foucault. He argued that, for both Stirner and Foucault, "power is not real, but it does have real effects". I slightly disagree with this position (at least as it relates to Stirner). I hold that rather than power it is more accurate to speak of the fixed idea as that which is not 'real' but which has real effects. This distinction will be borne out somewhat implicitly and indirectly over the remainder of the chapter. See: Saul Newman and Duane Rousselle, "Postanarchism and Subjectivity", Roundtable Discussion, *The New Centre for Research and Practice*, (Online: November 14th, 2015).

²⁸⁰ Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 73.

a passionate reverence for law are enough: these forces are ideological—and Stirner's contribution to anarchic political theory is to have discovered and expressed the affective element in the operation of ideology. Stirner's discussion of what I am here calling 'passionate attachments'—which I take as the crux of his anarchism—thus functions as a theory of ideology complementary to and not simply opposed to material considerations. That is, in the struggle for autonomy or ownness, navigating ideology is a necessary but not a sufficient condition.

In fact, Stirner does explicitly affirm the materiality of the state; he simply chooses to focus his analysis on its ideal elements. For Marx and Engels, the material conditions of society—specifically the individual's relation to the means of production—produce the consciousness of individuals in accordance with their class. The case is much less clear for Stirner: he holds that materiality and ideology can be reciprocally related even though they are irreducible to one another. In other words, fixed ideas can have real, material effects in our lives through our passionate attachments to them; at the same time—as I argued in the first chapter—material, bodily practices can help dissolve our passionate attachments or weaken the fixity of thought and desire. Moreover, Stirner also seems to be unconcerned with the historical origins of either consciousness or specific socio-economic relations, preferring instead to ask: now that I am here, what can I do? Against Marx and Engel's charge that Stirner believes the state only to exist in his head, one can point to a pithy remark from *The Ego*:

A state exists even without my co-operation; I am born in it, brought up in it, under obligations to it, and must 'do it homage'. Thus the independent establishment of the state founds my lack of independence; its condition as a 'natural growth', its organism, demands that my nature not grow freely, but be cut to fit it. That *it* may be able to unfold in natural growth, it applies to me the shears of 'civilization'; it gives me an education and culture adapted to it, not to me, and teaches me to respect the laws, to refrain from injury to state property (that is, private

property), to reverence divine and earthly highness, etc.; in short, it teaches me to be—*unpunishable*, ‘sacrificing’ my ownness to ‘sacredness’ (everything possible is sacred; property, others’ life, etc.) [...] it brings me up to be a ‘serviceable instrument’, a ‘serviceable member of society’.²⁸¹

It was established in the previous chapters that Stirner has no problem affirming the limitations material conditions place on our ability to act or make decisions. Here, Stirner clearly affirms the existence of the state as being independent of consciousness. The state is not created by consciousness, as Marx and Engels assert, but its *power* to govern and rule is certainly sustained or supplemented by consciousness. The question of materialism, for Stirner, has less to do with the historical origins of the state and more to do with the how the state limits possibilities of political resistance to its authority, to its ongoing regulation of life. The state, in other words, limits the *possibility of possibility*, and this limiting can occur in any individual, regardless of their social or economic class.²⁸² Both materialist-economics and idealistic-consciousness are thus questions of combatting ideology: one cannot resist the state or the societal division of labour if one is passionately attached to their mechanisms, i.e. if one believes that current social and material conditions are ‘natural’, ‘unmovable’, ‘the way things are supposed to be’, and so on. That resistance even *appears possible* to specific individuals is what is at stake.²⁸³ The possibility

²⁸¹ Stirner, *Ego*, 199.

²⁸² Our current political conditions reveal this: even a cursory glance at demographic poles reveal that both economic and social conservatism are widespread in not only the North American lower classes, but the middle and upper classes as well. The recent election of Doug Ford as Premier of Ontario might be an exemplary case: even though he campaigned without a fully costed platform, he won a majority vote by promising to roll back both the minimum wage and the high-school sex ed. curriculum (while promising one-dollar beer).

²⁸³ This point is almost redundant in its simplicity; yet, it is not fully expressed by Marx and Engels in their discourse on the division of labour or their criticism of Stirner’s inadequate materialism. That is, they do not address the *particular kind of consciousness* required for political resistance to get off the ground in the first place. This is similar to one side of Stirner’s criticism of Bauer, presented in the first chapter, wherein the task of criticism seems to require that particular subjects already be open to the obligation before receiving it. On the relationship between the division of labour and the production of consciousness (and/or Stirnerian ‘interest’), see: Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 85-87, 209-211, 263, 277, 348, etc.

of political resistance—the possibility of *being otherwise*—is not so easily received through the historical development of economic relations, but requires, at least in part, the will and desire of individual subjects. The question of the genesis of the singular and unique will to resist (or the will to *possibility*) unfolds over the next few sections of this thesis; for now, it is enough to note that it is not produced directly by the state’s interpellative processes, but indirectly through their failures, gaps, and misfirings.

The state, to repeat, *is* a fixed idea, but it is also more than that. Resistance is not a question of simply narrating the state away at the level of thought, desire, or discourse. Fixed ideas are ‘fixed’ because of our *inability* to dissolve our attachments to them—our inability to dissolve ourselves once we have internalized them as core values and become, in part, constituted by them. The state requires for its existence and efficacy not only the subordination but the *willing compliance* of its subjects. Stirner is careful to discern the roles affect and desire play for the state’s continual functioning: it is not that the state inhibits or discourages the individual’s desire but, more insidiously, “it seeks to direct his desire to itself alone, and to *appease* this desire with what it offers”.²⁸⁴ In both material and ideological terms, Stirner argues that the state “rewards the individual” with property; however, it does so only to “tame” the individual, i.e. to construct pacified, compliant subjects—to construct “a state-ego, a good citizen or subject”.²⁸⁵ The state attempts to render impossible the ability to appropriate property in accordance with one’s own interest unless it is also a state-interest. Property, therefore, is only a ‘reward’ for the individual because the state has already stolen and appropriated it from them.

²⁸⁴ Stirner, *Unique*, 324; Newman, *Universalities*, 73.

²⁸⁵ Stirner, *Ego*, 224.

The state, in other words, creates its own lack while giving individuals the resources and incentives to fill it in. It does this economically, as in the Young Hegelian concern with private property rights, but ideologically too, as in the state's granting of freedoms and civil rights.

This idea—that the state invests and encourages desire rather than simply repressing it—is often missed by interlocutors, even when discussion of 'willful subordination' is present. Leopold, for example, acknowledges that the state is sustained by "the willingness of individuals to subordinate their own will to the 'will' of their own creation", especially through the institution of law.²⁸⁶ However, he claims that Stirner turns Hegel's infamous master-slave dialectic "into a complete account of the sources of state power", and therefore produces "an idealist sociology".²⁸⁷ The state, on this account, is simply an expression of the master-slave dialectic. By Leopold's account, it is only the "abdication of selfhood which maintains the integrity of the state"; criminal activity, as a denial of the will of the state, becomes the primary motor of asserting individual autonomy.²⁸⁸

This reading, although not necessarily incorrect, misses the deeper concern Stirner has with the ideological function of the state. It is not that individuals always and continually make a *conscious decision* to subordinate themselves or abdicate their selfhood to the state as a sacrifice to a greater power; neither is it the case that individuals necessarily feel restrained by "their membership [in] communities that they neither create nor choose to belong to".²⁸⁹ The problem is much more insidious: Stirner argues that individuals actively desire membership in these

²⁸⁶ Leopold, "Introduction", xxvi.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* xxvii.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* xxvii-xxviii.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* xxviii.

hierarchies because the belief that they promote freedom and autonomy is built into subjectivity itself. It is much more than the simple abdication of selfhood sustaining the state: it is the creation and affirmation of a certain *type* of selfhood—one made in the state’s own image—that it requires. It is not a loss of individual identity, but rather the solidification of specific forms of identity (the citizen, the father, the public servant, the labourer, the good daughter, etc.) sustaining the state. This is precisely the meaning of ‘channelling’ rather than ‘repressing’ desire; it is also precisely why Stirner consistently defends what I call the ‘shadow-figure’ against the valorized subject: the un-man against Man, the sinner against the pious, the criminal against the citizen, and so on.²⁹⁰ These shadow-figures, in their moral and political criminality, present a resistance to the State and other institutions of authority at the level of individual subjectivity by disrupting identity itself.

Stirner’s Shadow-Figures

Stirner’s defence of these figures is not a question of simply stating allegiances with the enemies of any given institution—i.e. showing solidarity with the excluded ‘outside’ or ‘Other’ of the state. Rather, Stirner’s defence of these shadow-figures reveals the state’s dependency on the construction of compliant identities for its own operation. In fact, Stirner explicitly affirms both that “there is not one man who is a sinner” and that the very notion of “sin is imaginary”.²⁹¹ By simultaneously defending the figure of the sinner and rejecting sin as a real category, Stirner points to the failure of the church’s ideological interpellation: the sinner is not an essential, pre-

²⁹⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 131, 159, 179-183.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* 317.

existing subject, but is *created* by the movement of religion itself. Just as the priest needs the sinner to affirm and encourage the image of good piety, the state needs to invent the figure of the criminal or the vagabond in order to create or promote the figure of the respectable citizen. The channelling of desire to shape and construct certain kinds of identities—state-egos—is the mechanism by which the state achieves ‘political liberty’. Recall Stirner’s ‘inverted freedom’ argument: that political liberty is only the freedom of the state to rule, rather than the real political ownness of individuals.²⁹² Since ‘political liberty’ means the freedom of the state to express itself *in and through you*, resistance to state authority begins *in and through you*. This process of subject formation is the very reason Stirner pits ‘own will’ as antithetical to the state. He writes,

States last only so long as there is a *ruling will* and this ruling will is looked upon as tantamount to the own will. The lord’s will is—law. What do your laws amount to if no one obeys them? What your orders, if nobody lets himself be ordered? The state cannot forbear the claim to determine the individual’s will, to speculate and count on this. For the state it is indispensable that nobody have an *own will*; if one had, the state would have to exclude (lock up, banish, etc.) this one; if all had, they would do away with the state.²⁹³

When Stirner describes how the ‘ruling will becomes tantamount to the own will’, he is describing what I, following Saul Newman, call passionate attachments. These attachments reach down to the very core of our subjectivity. The assertion of one’s own will against the state’s is thus a kind of criminality, a mechanism of combatting one’s own subject formation.²⁹⁴ Subjects are formed

²⁹² *Ibid.* 96-97.

²⁹³ *Ibid.* 174.

²⁹⁴ Recall that, in discussing the case of two women contending with the tension between their love interests and their families’ interests, Stirner describes Juliet as a “‘criminal’ against the family”. Because ‘law’ is conceived broadly, i.e. as something social as well as strictly political, Stirner is consistent in describing conscious egoism as a crime, a “mighty, reckless, shameless, conscienceless, proud—*crime*”. See: Stirner, *Ego*, 196, 215.

and constructed in various ways: while the state certainly emboldens social subject-shaping processes (such as a community's moral policing of its members), these processes are not necessarily reducible to the state. Power and authority, therefore, are not necessarily centralized in the state as the sole source of their emanation: there exist not one but many hierarchies, not one but many masters. Stirner describes the state as "a tissue and plexus"—one which requires subjects to internalize its own will and imagine it to be their own. It thus creates a relationship of "dependency and adherence", or an "order of dependence [*Abhängigkeit*]", *among and between subjects*.²⁹⁵ This relationship of dependency and adherence is a product of a forced "belonging together [*Zusammengehörigkeit*]"—a structure of relation in which individuals "fit themselves to each other".²⁹⁶ Yet in addition to cutting subjects to fit itself, the state also drives and encourages subjects to cut *themselves* to fit each other.

The political implications of this analysis, in which the state is not considered the sole source of authority, are radical. After describing authority and hierarchy in these decentralized terms, Stirner writes,

Suppose the king, whose authority lends authority to all down to the beadle, should vanish: still all in whom the will for order was awake would keep order erect against the disorders of bestiality. If disorder were victorious, the state would be at an end.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 198.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 198.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 198. Stirner's account of the ways in which decentralized power sustains socio-political hierarchies is quite similar to Jacques Rancière's discussion of the relationship between the logic of policing and processes of subjectivation. As Devin Shaw argues, Rancière's understanding of the police "is less defined by techniques of discipline", as per Foucault, but more "by modes of inclusion and exclusion". Stirner's defence of society's shadow-figures and his analysis of police-care reveal a similar concern with logics of inclusion and exclusion over and above techniques of discipline. See: Devin Shaw, *Egalitarian Moments: From Descartes to Rancière*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016): 3. See also: Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Authority, in other words, is not merely repressive but constructive. The ordering, regulating, and policing of life is not a simple top-down, dominating endeavor: it is instilled in the very core of our subjectivities, in and as our political identities. We police ourselves more often and in harsher terms than any governmental agency or institution does: the “popular rage” for morality “protects the police institution more than the government could in any way protect it”.²⁹⁸ Stirner describes this phenomenon explicitly, naming it “police-care” or police sentiment: “the people is full of police sentiments through and through”.²⁹⁹ Against the Marxist criticism that Stirner only destroyed the idea of the state, we can point to this passage as an exemplary point of difference in scope between Marxists and Stirner: revolution, if aimed solely at the head of the beast, will never be enough to rid ourselves of hierarchical social formations simply because the will to authority (and the corollary will to obedience) is cultivated and engendered, through subjectivation, *socially as well as institutionally*. Authoritarianism, in other words, runs ‘all the way down’; our resistance to it must do the same. Stirner, ever defending the singular, therefore sets the site of political resistance at the level of subjectivity itself—hence his skepticism toward theories of revolution. Before turning to his critique of revolution and his affirmation of alternative tactics of social intercourse, Stirner’s discourse on ideology requires further elaboration.

Ideology and the Un-Man, or Inhuman Monster

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 215.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 179

Saul Newman positions Stirner's 'un-man' [*Unmensch*] as "a critical point of departure beyond ideology", uncontaminated by the dialectical mechanisms which shape subjectivity in the first place.³⁰⁰ This unsullied point of departure is necessary in order for ideology to be "analysed and resisted" at all; ideological critique, in other words, requires a non-ideological starting point.³⁰¹ Newman presents two distinct traditions that have historically theorized ideology and its possible critique: Enlightenment political philosophy and Marxism. Enlightenment thinkers—both liberal-humanists and classical anarchists alike—do in fact posit a place of departure uncontaminated by ideology; however, this point of departure relies on essentialist categories central to Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity. Rationality in particular is thought to be the vehicle of liberation for the Enlightenment tradition: the oppressed subject merely needs to discover their true, inner capacity for reason in order to step outside of ideology, brushing away its mystifying cobwebs to reveal new possibilities of freedom. Ideology in this picture *distorts* the subject's rationality, alienating them from their own true interests; true or pure reason is therefore the mechanism by which distortions can be corrected.³⁰² The Enlightenment picture thus proposes a separation or 'gap' between ideology and the subject—regardless of how deep the ideological rabbit-hole goes, the subject's own essence can always be recovered, and the subject always retains the possibility of liberating themselves. The Marxist account, on the other hand, seeks new ground from which to view ideological distortions through the development of

³⁰⁰ Newman, "Spectres", 325-326. Newman uses the original Byington phrase 'un-man' for a translation of *Unmensch*. Landstreicher prefers 'inhuman monster' instead. Landstreicher notes that *Unmensch* is used in German to name monsters—'inhuman monster' thus better connotes a perversion of humanity or, as I argue, its shadow-side. Although I also prefer 'inhuman monster', I use 'un-man' for the sake of consistency in my running commentary on Newman's position. See: Landstreicher, "Introduction", *Unique*, 19.

³⁰¹ Newman, "Spectres", 315.

³⁰² *Ibid.* 313.

a historical-materialist account of class consciousness. Historical materialism, like the Enlightenment picture, proposes an epistemologically privileged standpoint whereby those who are able to grasp the science of history can escape the trap of false consciousness. Newman contends that Marx also holds an essentialist position, in so far as the epistemologically privileged proletariat—those possessing class consciousness—can correct the distorted lens to realize their true interests. The science of history serves as the subject’s uncontaminated point of departure; its objectivity functions as an essentialist category.

The structuralist picture of the 20th century complicates the broadly-humanist Marxist picture. Althusser’s anti-humanist reading of Marx teaches us that there is no clear “division between ideological distortion and rationalist thought”; in other words, the very idea of a place outside of ideology is itself an effect of ideology.³⁰³ This means that there is no ‘false consciousness’ to do away with because no essence—whether it is a capacity for reason, true interest, or objective science of history—exists outside of or beyond ideological structures: there is no essence to be recuperated or returned to. This poses a problem for humanist interpretations of Marx because they position the realization or development of a true essence—situated either in the species or the class—as the method by which ideology can be dissolved. The structuralist picture, however, has its own problem: by expanding the concept of ideology to the point of utter ubiquity, it becomes both conceptually oversaturated—a ‘God-concept’—and impossible to resist. For Newman, the question of ideology (including its analysis and resistance) is thus caught in a double-bind: on the one hand, the Enlightenment and humanist-Marxist pictures leave space for an ‘outside’ of ideology, but only by relying on “spurious essentialist claims”; on the other

³⁰³ *Ibid.* 314.

hand, the structuralist picture, abandoning essences, regards absolutely everything as ideology, thereby removing the conditions for its opposition and rendering it practically and theoretically useless.³⁰⁴ Newman argues that while neither of these positions is sufficient, both are necessary for any critique of ideology to get off the ground: a critique of ideology requires the abandonment of essences *as well as* a point of departure uncontaminated by ideology. Stirner's un-man, fitting these criteria, is Newman's solution.

According to Newman, Stirner's theory of ideology mirrors the Enlightenment picture whereby individuals are alienated from themselves through ideological distortion; however, Stirner abandons the human essence as a site of distortion. Instead, Stirner argues that the "human essence is itself the ideological distortion", i.e. a fixed idea or spook.³⁰⁵ Stirner's point of departure then does not seek an essence to-be-recovered or developed. Newman instead holds that Stirner's 'un-man' is the point of departure, and a non-essentialist, "radical reformulation of the ideological subject".³⁰⁶ The 'un-man' carves out space for the possibility of resistance to ideology because it is not itself an identity, nor is it an essence which pre-exists the individual. It is instead only a lack or a "spectral remainder" at the heart of processes of symbolization, representation, and identification.³⁰⁷ This spectral remainder is an indeterminable point of excess in that it "does not entirely reflect the ideological symbols and images" that attempt to organize it. In Newman's framing, the un-man is "a distortion of a distortion": not a pre-existing essence, but something produced by the movement of interpellation itself.³⁰⁸ The un-man is thus the

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 315.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 320.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 319.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 326.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

unintended shadow-side of interpellation and ideological subject-formation. Rather than existing outside of ideology, it appears within its liminal spaces and along its boundaries, exposing the limitations, failures, and the falsity and arbitrariness of constructed or interpellated essences.³⁰⁹

This reading of Stirner's political theory corresponds for the most part with the reading I have been developing in this thesis. There is, however, a slight problem with the scope of Newman's interpretation of the un-man as a privileged point of departure for ideological resistance and critique. Although Newman insists that the un-man is not an essence in the same sense as the Enlightenment picture, he does position it as the necessary foundation from which resistance to ideology can begin. The un-man in Newman's account risks becoming the universal product of any act of interpellation whatsoever: to analyze and resist ideology, one simply needs to grasp the 'un-man' as a shadow figure, 'identify' with it, and activate it. The problem, however, is that not all moments or structures of interpellation work the same way. While Stirner's biggest enemy in *The Ego* is certainly 'Man', he is also consistent in pointing out other kinds of specters or shadow-figures produced through other kinds of interpellative and regulative processes.³¹⁰ It

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 327.

³¹⁰ In his first response to his critics, Stirner writes: "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* [...] Stirner says: the human being is the inhuman monster; what the one is, the other is". I read this statement in two ways simultaneously: first, that the inhuman monster is produced in the very same process as the human subject proper; second, that the inhuman monster risks becoming yet another essence if universalized. Elmo Feiten also criticizes Newman's reading of the un-man, arguing that Newman only reverses the hierarchy between Man and un-man whereas "Stirner abolishes the entire dichotomy" altogether. Feiten's reading, however, is a little too broad: he claims that Stirner "believes that it is possible for the individual simply to stop relating to themselves in terms of linguistic representation"—a sharp contrast to Newman's Lacanian, Foucauldian, and Althusserian framings. This leads Feiten to significantly downplay the nuances of subject formation and the role of ideology in *The Ego*. Against Feiten, I argue that Stirner does not believe this kind of de-subjectification is as easy—or even as *possible*—as Feiten would have it. We have already seen how in "The Philosophical Reactionaries" Stirner laments his own rhetorical clumsiness, laments being stuck in a language that has been "ruined by philosophers". We have also seen that Stirner affirms the impossibility of being wholly rid of all fixed ideas, or being wholly rid of all conceptual and linguistic determinations, all identities. The point is to constantly fight against them when and where they arrive—to constantly discover or invent new tactics for this fight against structures which perennially interpellate us in new and differing ways. While I agree that Newman over-determines

is not the case that the essence of 'Man' is every unique individual's biggest threat to their ownness at any given moment: 'criminal', 'madman', 'wife', 'citizen', and so on, all function through matrices of moral, legal, and physical policing to shape, limit, and interpellate subjects. Stirner's 'Juliet' example, discussed in the second chapter, illustrates the variability and multiplicity of mis-interpellation. In this example, the woman who chooses to respect the wishes of her family is limited by the obligation to fulfill the essence of a constructed subjectivity. This constructed subjectivity does not necessarily correspond to a generalized 'human essence'; rather, it is something more like the 'good daughter'-subject. This obligation, or 'vocation' in Stirner's language, is enforced not by black-letter law or threat of physical violence, but by *moral* policing, by punishment through shame and guilt: her own family's *police-care*. A spectral remainder of interpellation thus haunts both choices: in choosing to pursue her true love interest, the guilt of abandoning her family would haunt her; choosing to respect her family's wishes, a longing for true love would. In both situations, the project of dissolving her passionate attachments still remains the mechanism of ownness; however, neither choice necessitates the un-man as a point of departure. That is, either the image of the 'good daughter' or the idealized image of a 'romantic lover'—and their subsequent shadow-sides—appear as the starting point to affirming her ownness rather than the 'human' and 'inhuman' in general.

There are many kinds of essences and many kinds of subjectivities: recall that Stirner is highly critical of Feuerbach's positioning of the human essence as the *highest* essence. Positioning the un-man as a necessary or even sufficient point of departure for resisting

the role of the un-man, I disagree with Feiten's claim to the possibility of the total and complete abandonment of ideology. See: Edward, "Reactionaries", 104; Elmo Feiten, "Would the Real Max Stirner Please Stand Up?", *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, (1: 2013), 126-18; Stirner, "Critics", 73.

interpellation papers-over the decentralized, variable, and multiplicitous nature of subjectivation itself. What Newman's interpretation needs is therefore a greater attentiveness to the various kinds of tactics, processes, and practices that shape subjectivities—and the ways that they can often fail or misfire. Newman does in fact note the similarity between Stirner's discussion of punishment and Foucault's analysis of power, the latter being informed by an analysis of the "material practices and strategies that go into constructing subjectivity"; however, Newman reads this similarity first and foremost as a rejection of the Enlightenment human subject.³¹¹ Yet Foucault himself describes power as plural or heterogeneous, asymmetrical, and non-totalizing—i.e. that power does not always have a unidirectional flow, does not emanate from a single point, and that it does not always work as intended.³¹² Foucault undoubtedly questions the Enlightenment picture of the rational human subject, but not necessarily through a polar-opposite 'inhuman' subject. Rather, his material analyses of prisons and hospitals, for instance, reveal various *kinds* of subjects that, in their very being, complicate or undermine the Enlightenment picture.

I argue that the un-man, rather than being the necessary and foundational point of departure for all critiques of ideology, is merely one starting point among many. That is, a fight against the human essence may be the most significant battlefield for a particular individual at a particular time; however, it is not necessarily the case for all individuals at all times. The fight against the daughter-subject, citizen-subject, wife-subject, sinner-subject, and so on can be equally valid or useful points of departure given the corresponding social and material

³¹¹ Newman, "Spectres", 316.

³¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): 60, 88-89, 98-99, etc.

interpellative contexts. Thus, by universalizing the un-man, Newman risks committing the same error he criticizes the ‘classical anarchists’ for: viewing power as monolithic and essentializing it into a single source. For the classical anarchists, the single source of power enforcing all hierarchical or oppressive social relations is the state; if overthrown, liberation on all fronts would be achieved. Newman’s own postanarchist framework, however, claims to understand power as dispersed and multiplicitous—the state is merely one source of domination and authority, one source of *archism* among many. Patriarchy, for instance, is certainly emboldened and empowered by the state but is not wholly reducible to it; patriarchal social relations would not necessarily be abolished if the state were overthrown.³¹³ As I argued in the previous section, this is precisely Stirner’s position, and also the very reason for his confrontations with other leftists and socialists: Stirner warns us against revolutions reproducing existing hierarchical social relations with new names—Society, Community, the Revolution, and so on. There are many kinds of authority, many kinds of hierarchy, and therefore many kinds of subject-formation; for this

³¹³ Saul Newman, in his more recent work on postanarchism, has shifted to a more nuanced reading of what is generally termed ‘classical anarchism’. While earlier postanarchist texts (such as those by Todd May and Newman himself) previously held a view of classical anarchism as being fully entrenched in Enlightenment epistemological and metaphysical categories, postanarchist scholarship has discovered a greater pluralism and non-essentialism in the classical texts of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman. This shift was prompted, I believe, by excellent criticisms put forward primarily by Jesse Cohn. He notes that May, Newman, and Andrew Koch advanced overly-reductive readings of classical anarchism’s essentialism and foundationalism in order to exaggerate the novel break their own texts made. In turn, he argues that many of the poststructuralist themes these authors develop can be found in classical anarchism, given some elbow grease. For early postanarchist texts, see: Andrew Koch, “Poststructuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 23:3 (September 1993); Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995); Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, (UK: Lexington Books, 2001). For criticism of early postanarchist texts, see: Jesse Cohn, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation*, (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 56, 67-78; Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, “What’s Wrong with Postanarchism?”, The Anarchist Library, Retrieved July 14th, 2018: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jesse-cohn-and-shawn-wilbur-what-s-wrong-with-postanarchism>; Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (Toronto: Pluto Press and Between the Lines, 2005): 93-96; Duane Rousselle, “Postanarchism and Its Critics: A Conversation with Saul Newman”, *Anarchist Studies*, 21:2, (Autumn-Winter 2013): 74-96.

reason, no singular position can be universalized as the sufficient condition to combat subordination for every unique individual.

3.3: Stirner's Anarchic Egoism

The previous subchapter established that the primary concern of Stirner's discourse on the state is its ideological function. This ideological function is the production of subjectivity. However, I also argued that the production of subjectivity is not reducible to the state: the individual is caught in a matrix of forces, in a constellation of fixed ideas, in a 'tissue and plexus of dependency'. The state is merely one node in this network—though quite a large one. Therefore, resistance to the calcification of identity (as a 'good daughter', as a 'state-ego', etc.) does not necessarily mean a *direct* resistance to the state in the first instance. The archism which threatens at every moment to regulate and pacify us is strengthened by the interplay and mutual dependence of a multiplicity of subjectivity-producing institutions and mechanisms: the family, the prison, the division of labour, the community, and so on. They bolster each other—and, more dangerously, *we bolster them*. This happens in part through what Stirner calls 'police-care': individuals govern and regulate each other in accordance with the interests of larger regulating structures. I have been arguing in this thesis that Stirner's anarchism runs 'all the way down'. Through his discourse on ideological subject formation, we can grasp how *archism*, too, runs all the way down.

Just as in the realm of the ethical, we also find that in the political there exists 'no right way to go about it': despite the specter of universality and necessity projected onto the state, the family, the division of labour, etc. ideological subject formation is *itself* heterogeneous. This is why in his fight against archism Stirner does not make recourse to a defined set of practices—much less a single, unified strategy. Because subjects are formed in countless ways, we need

countless weapons at our disposal; because we police ourselves, we need tactics which are themselves non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical, non-archist—tactics which are ‘self-interested’ and interested in the self. These weapons and tactics are rarely given or permitted to us, and they can never guarantee success. They need to be constantly invented and re-invented, and they need to be dissolvable upon their inevitable recuperation and reterritorialization by archic forces, upon their lapse into authoritarian structures. In what follows, I argue that the two main tactics Stirner invents—the insurrection and the union of egoists—affirm possibility against limitation in and through their very *openness to possibility*.

Revolution and Insurrection

The pinnacle of Stirner’s political theory is his distinction between revolution and insurrection. This distinction is not only what separates Stirner’s political inclination from the vast majority of his peers—especially socialists and Marxists—but is also perhaps his most concrete argument for the importance of dissolving passionate attachments. As Stirner is exceedingly clear and gives us much to work with, I here must reproduce two paragraphs in full:

Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or *status*, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men’s discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising, but a rising of individuals, a getting up, without regard to the arrangements that spring from it. The revolution aimed at new *arrangements*; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on ‘institutions’. It is not a fight against the established, since, if it prospers, the established collapses of itself; it is only a working of my way out of the established. If I leave the established, it is dead and passes into decay. Now, as my object is not the overthrow of an established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed

are not a political or social but (as directed toward myself and my ownness alone) an *egoistic* purpose and deed.

The revolution commands one to make *arrangements*; the insurrection [*Empörung*] demands that he *rise or exalt himself*. What *constitution* was to be chosen, this question busied the revolutionary heads, and the whole political period foams with constitutional fights and constitutional questions, as the social talents too were unusually inventive about social arrangements (phalansteries and the like). The insurrectionist strives to become constitutionless.³¹⁴

I will first make some remarks about the context of this passage, then proceed to its analysis more or less line by line, and finally discuss some interpretive concerns. These two paragraphs occur in the second subsection ('My Intercourse'), of the second division ('The Owner'), of the second part ('I'), of *The Ego*. Immediately preceding the passage is, firstly, Stirner's lengthy critique of existing social structures and arrangements—states, communions, familial bonds, and so on—and secondly, his critique of property. In the previous chapter, I discussed the *ethical* contours of this critique of social structures with some attention paid to the ways they engender passionate attachments. Recall: this discussion established that social structures (such as the family) can often operate in ways that harm us, rather than working to serve our interests, if we subscribe to them uncritically or unconsciously. Stirner's discourse on property, discussed in the

³¹⁴ Stirner, *Ego*, 279-280. See also: Max Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property*, trans. Wolfi Landstreicher, (Baltimore: Underworld Amusements, 2017), 328-329. For this block quotation, as with the rest of this thesis, I primarily use Leopold's edition of *The Ego*; however, several key phrases are here taken from Landstreicher's newer translation. As I previously noted, their translations often betray their respective interpretive biases. For example, the two major translations differ here significantly. I use Landstreicher's "working of my way out of the established" rather than Leopold's "working forth of me out of the established". The difference is significant because of the implication it has for a reading of the relationship between means and ends in Stirner's political project. While Leopold reads Stirner as advocating a 'positive social vision' for which the egoist strives, Landstreicher insists that Stirner is strictly anti-utopian. The latter corresponds to the interpretation I have been building throughout the thesis. In addition, Leopold's translation of this line is fairly ambivalent: am I, by working, already located outside of the established? Or do I emerge *from* the established in working to leave it? Both interpretations pose problems; they are addressed in the following discussion.

first chapter, established two concerns: the *relation* between property and the owner, and the ideological or non-material content of property relations.

In forming these criticisms of social structures and property, Stirner slowly builds toward a proposed alternative tactic of social intercourse he calls the *union of egoists*. The *union* will receive its own section for analysis below; for now, it is enough to note two of its features. First, it must be emphasized that the union is not a stable structure in itself but merely a means or method of working, existing, or relating socially; second, Stirner provides very little detail about the forms and functions of these unions. This lack of detail—or perhaps intentional ambiguity—is entirely consistent with the very purpose of the union. Since each union is merely the voluntary association of self-interested actors *for their own self-interest*, each union is as unique as the will of any of its participants in any given moment. No universal concept of a union can exist without lapsing into paradox, and no fixed structure can be ascribed to the union from a position outside of it: unions are simply open to the possibilities of their actors and participants. I therefore read the union as closely related to insurrection.

Bearing this in mind, analysis can begin. Before discussing differences in tactics, Stirner first draws a distinction between the stakes of revolution and insurrection. Revolutionary action is here understood as *ends-oriented*. That is, its purpose is to bring about a radical shift in and reorganization of the social and political structures that order and mediate the lives of individuals. The point of a revolution, according to Stirner, is the creation and manifestation of a new constitution or a new model of social organization. A future revolution is itself the end to which the revolutionary subject orients their actions (and subordinates their means) in the present. We can already intimate what Stirner here only hints at but does not yet explicitly claim:

‘Revolution’ often operates as a fixed idea, a master signifier around which subjectivities are molded, or a spook to which individuals willingly subordinate themselves. Like Feuerbach’s ‘Man’ or Bauer’s call to critique, revolution can become a site of passionate attachments, hindering and impeding the oneness of individuals, imposing a vocation, and limiting their possibilities.

Insurrection, on the other hand, can potentially have this kind of societal reorganization as *its consequence*, but does not proceed from a specific, pre-determined vision of this reorganization. It proceeds instead from the individual’s ‘discontent with themselves’. I argue that this discontent springs from the consciousness of one’s own passionate attachments to authority or, in other words, recognition of one’s own voluntary servitude to and within structures of power.³¹⁵ It is important to note that the original German word translated as ‘insurrection’, *Empörung*, primarily connotes “indignation” in its etymological sense.³¹⁶ Thus any ‘discontent with oneself’ is also a discontent with the flows of power and desire which constitute and organize us as subjects. Recognizing that one’s commitments, values, and attachments are arbitrary, contingent, or self-harming can be a heavy burden. Self-dissolution, as the method of releasing oneself from these attachments, is thus the motor of insurrection—as the old adage goes, the first fascist the anti-fascist must kill is the one in his own head.³¹⁷

Insurrection cannot be ends-oriented because there is no “end” to the process of self-dissolution: self-dissolution is both the means and the end at once. When Stirner writes that

³¹⁵ Saul Newman, “Stirner’s Ethics of Voluntary Inservitude”, *Max Stirner*, ed. Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 189-209.

³¹⁶ Stirner himself provides a footnote indicating his intention to use this etymological meaning in order to avoid censorship and criminal charges; however, one might read a hint of ironic exaggeration or sarcasm into his word choice. See: Stirner, *Ego*, 280.

³¹⁷ This slogan is often repeated in anarchist journals, magazines, and articles. It is also commonly found in anarchist artwork, especially as graffiti. Fittingly an-archic, it seems to lack an origin; however, it may have emerged during the infamous May ’68 actions in Paris.

insurrection is “a getting up without regard to the arrangements that spring from it”, we once again hearken back to the critique of calculation established in the second chapter.³¹⁸ This critique of calculation is part and parcel of Stirner’s critique of revolution which, as he describes it, seeks only ‘new arrangements’. The logic here is consistent with another of Stirner’s arguments, discussed in the first chapter: Feuerbach’s replacement of ‘God’ with ‘Man’. Just as Feuerbach’s theological revolution merely “orchestrated a change of masters”, so too does the social or political revolution; insurrection, on the other hand, dissolves relations to mastery itself.

Stirner’s insurrection thus takes aim not at specific types of arrangements—i.e. capitalist or feudal modes of production—but at the very fact of *being arranged*, of being obligated, of being given a vocation or calling to pursue. One simply renders oneself ungovernable. As Saul Newman argues, the Marxist revolution allows the subject to throw “off the shackles of ideology and [...] develop according to his essence”, while Stirner’s *Empörung* “is a revolt against precisely this essence”.³¹⁹ Insurrection is not a direct fight against the institutions that organize our lives, but first and foremost against oneself—it is egoistic and *self-interested* in the strictest sense. In Newman’s terms, insurrectionary action transitions from voluntary servitude to voluntary *inservitude*; or, in more modern parlance, it is “micro-political”.³²⁰

There are, however, interpretive issues with an anti-dialectical reading of this passage. Two of Stirner’s phrases in particular seem to trouble this reading because they imply that insurrection

³¹⁸ N.B. the discussion of the purpose of writing and the inability to calculate the effects of one’s actions upon the world.

³¹⁹ Saul Newman, “Spectres of Stirner: A Contemporary Critique of Ideology”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 6:3 (2001): 327.

³²⁰ Saul Newman, “Postanarchism: A Politics of Anti-Politics”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 16:3 (October 2011): 313-327; Newman, “Inservitude”, 206-207. Newman consistently reads Stirner as a precursor to the theories of power, desire, and subjectivity developed by Foucault and Deleuze.

might be ends-oriented, developmental, or teleological. The first trouble-spot is Stirner's claim that the 'object' of insurrection is an 'elevation above' the established order; in the second phrase, Stirner claims that insurrection can bring about a revolution as its consequence. The problem with holding an interpretation of insurrection as ends-oriented is that it would seriously undermine Stirner's rejection of moral obligation and normative ethical frameworks. Moreover, if insurrection is understood as simply the means toward a revolutionary end, Stirner's criticisms of both Feuerbach and Bauer's projects lose consistency and his notion of 'ownness' becomes indistinguishable from the traditional concepts of freedom and autonomy he positions it against. In other words, Stirner's political project loses much of its efficacy and vigour if it is seen to waver between dialectical and anti-dialectical (or normative and non-normative) positions. Holding this reading, it then becomes much easier to dismiss Stirner's project as nihilistic or hopeless, as Leopold does.³²¹ It is against this interpretation that the noted concerns are addressed.

The first claim, that the object of insurrection is one's elevation above the established order, can be clarified by turning once again to the discussion of dissolution presented in the first chapter. Firstly, what Stirner means by 'the established order' is quite broad. Acting *within* the established order means acting not only in accordance with the state's laws, but with the norms and mores of societies or communions generally. Stirner gives various examples—the family, for instance—of social situations in which an individual is punished for deviance from these expectations, even without breaking any 'criminal' laws. The 'established order', as a phrase, thus

³²¹ Leopold, "Anarchism", 782. Leopold here attempts to mediate two claims: on the one hand, no moral obligation exists to overthrow the state; on the other, the state *will* be overthrown as a consequence of insurrection. Because the discourse of analytic anarchism he works within is almost exclusively concerned with the state, which it understands to be the sole source of power and authority, Leopold cannot avoid positing a dialectical relationship between insurrection and revolution.

signifies the myriad forms of regulation, ordering, and control exercised over individuals—or, more precisely, the ways in which individuals participate in their own self-regulation in service of the established order itself. Elevation *above* the established order in this sense simply means acting egoistically. That is, egoistic action—action that comes forth from me, from the dissolution of my attachments to external principles and obligations, and not *from* or *toward* the principles themselves—is both the means *and* the end of the action. Egoistic action therefore both dissolves the individual’s attachment to those established principles while simultaneously affirming their ownness. Because the means and ends of ownness are collapsed in egoistic action, it can also be put the other way: the affirmation of ownness simply *is* the dissolution of obligation and principle for the unique individual. Stirner affirms this collapse of means and ends when he uses the phrase “purpose and deed” to describe the self-oriented nature of insurrection. Notably, Landstreicher translates this phrase as “intention and action”, which is perhaps clearer in both highlighting and collapsing the distinction between the two themes I have been developing: tactics and passionate attachments.³²² Thus, when Stirner speaks of the ‘object’ of insurrection, it must be read as only one half of the picture. Stirner does not force means and ends into a hierarchical relationship wherein one justifies the other; rather, the ‘object’ of insurrection is collapsed into its ‘subject’ such that they become indistinguishable: elevation above the established order simply *is* insurrection itself, not its consequence.

The second claim, that insurrection can bring about a revolution (or an overturning of social relations) as its consequence bears the same teleological connotation as the first problem-phrase. However, as I have argued, the effects of our actions cannot be calculated. Imagined outcomes—

³²² Stirner, *Unique*, 329.

whether positive or detrimental—need not orient or generate our actions, for this would be yet another form of thralldom or servitude to fixed ideas. This is not to say that one should hold a stoic, emotional indifference toward better or worse consequences. Instead, the egoist simply acknowledges the possibility of failure. Placing hope and faith in the success of a single revolutionary event, or a single *form* of revolution, is utopian in the pejorative sense—perhaps even a form of nihilism. Insurrection by contrast is both multiplicitous and continuous. Because insurrection is marked by reflection on the ways we imbricate ourselves in various structures of power, it varies according to the unique constellations at play for any given individual at any given moment—hence Stirner’s defence of ‘shadow figures’, discussed above. There is no ‘end’ to insurrection—neither *telos* nor point of completion—simply because there is no end to power, to authority, to the process of subject formation. As we move through our lives, we attach ourselves to new spooks and dissolve our relations to old ones. The dissolution of the state, for example, is the dissolution of only one source of power among many others. Insurrection is therefore continuous in that our attachments to fixed ideas are always re-emerging, and it is pluralistic or heterogeneous in that different struggles require different weapons.³²³

What this means for the claim under consideration—that insurrection can potentially bring about revolution—is that a revolution, regardless of its intentions, cannot guarantee the prospering of freedom and ownness. Police-care, as noted above, is not reducible to the state. Because insurrection undermines the regular ordering and constitution of one’s own subjectivity,

³²³ Gilles Deleuze, commenting on the work of Foucault, presents a reading of subordination in a passage that would be well at home in Stirner’s book. He writes: “There is no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime, for it’s within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another [...] There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons”. See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992): 4.

it often throws a wrench in the established ordering-machine: the revolution's large-scale socio-political shift is already immanent in the micro-level insurrectionary action. Thus, even after a purportedly successful revolution—after the overthrow of an overtly repressive state and the manifestation of a new constitution, for instance—insurrectionary action would still occur where and when the new and improved ordering-machines hinder (or shape undesirably) the self-interest of individuals. Marxist revolutionaries perhaps know this better than anyone: it is no coincidence that, historically, anarchists are marched to the gulags hand-in-hand with the fascists and the aristocrats of the old order.³²⁴

The Union of Egoists

Stirner's infamous alternative to the stable structures of society is the "union of egos", or "union of egoists" [*Verein von Ichen; Verein von Egoisten*].³²⁵ Stirner provides very little detail about what a union of egoists is or what it does. I argue that this ambiguity or lack of detail is wholly consistent with the stakes of Stirner's political project—namely, the opening of possibility, the affirmation of ownness, and the resistance to servitude at the level of the singular, unique individual. Where Stirner does provide detail concerning the union, it is always against the foil of traditional social structures and is therefore primarily negative in its articulation. I here reproduce Stirner's most elaborate description of the union, which is presented in opposition to 'society':

³²⁴ Any text on the history and aftermath of the October Revolution or The Great Leap Forward worth its salt will reveal this. For a whole host of examples, see the incredible Kate Sharpley library: Kate Sharpley, "Bolshevik Repression of Anarchists after 1917", Kate Sharpley Library, accessed July 6th, 2018: <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/xpnx76>

³²⁵ Leopold's edition, drawing on the original Byington translation, uses this phrasing. It is by far the most common translation of the term; however, Landstreicher's recent work mostly opts for "association of egoists" instead. See: Stirner, *Ego*, 160-161.

You bring into a union your whole power, your competence, and *make yourself count*; in a society you are *employed*, with your working power; in the former you live egoistically, in the latter humanly, that is, religiously, as a 'member in the body of this Lord'; to a society you owe what you have, and are in duty bound to it, are—possessed by 'social duties'; a union you utilize, and give it up undutifully and unfaithfully when you see no way to use it further. If a society is more than you, then it is more to you than yourself; a union is only your instrument, or the sword with which you sharpen and increase your natural force; the union exists for you and through you, the society conversely lays claim to you for itself and exists even without you; in short, the society is *sacred*, the union your *own*; the society consumes *you*, *you* consume the union.³²⁶

The first thing to note is the existential status of the union: it is not a stable structure or an institution but rather an "ever-fluid uniting" of individuals—a *tactic* or method of social relations.³²⁷ In contrast to existing structures and institutions (the state, the political party, society)—which are described in egoistic terms as pursuing their own interests—the union has no interest of its own.³²⁸ It is instead merely a vehicle or tool used to amplify the interests, or multiply the forces, of unique individuals.³²⁹ Unions are therefore centered around a specific interest or task; insofar as an individual does not share the interest, they are under no obligation to join or participate.

Yet, as I have argued, Stirner acknowledges that the interests of individuals often change or dissolve over time: the union, therefore, is meant to be *finite and temporary*. This is precisely what Stirner means when he affirms that the union can be 'given up undutifully and unfaithfully': participants are not beholden to it, and the union *itself* is beholden to no one in particular. A union which has an interest in its own existence risks subordinating the interests of its individual

³²⁶ *Ibid.* 277.

³²⁷ *Ibid.* 199.

³²⁸ *Ibid.* 224.

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 276.

constituents for its own preservation.³³⁰ The union bond, in other words, is not sacred. In a moment of foresight, Stirner seems to foreshadow anarchist critiques of Maoist and Leninist revolutionary strategy in the 20th century by presenting the union as wholly incompatible with the political party.³³¹ Stirner claims that the political party is “a dead union, an idea that has become fixed”—and society too is a “corpse of the union”.³³² The union, in other words, must be *dissolvable*.

This notion of a *temporary* association has in recent anarchist scholarship been called a “Temporary Autonomous Zone”, or a “TAZ”. Hakim Bey, developing what he calls ‘ontological anarchy’, describes the TAZ as an “uprising that does not engage directly with the State”, but one which “liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it”.³³³ The TAZ skirts and evades the hegemony of both state violence and social police-care through its finite temporality and its very dissolvability. Although he forgoes citation, Bey pulls in scores of post-structuralist theory to develop and describe his account of the TAZ—perhaps at the forefront are Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘lines of flight’. His broader theoretical framework is, however, wholly Stirnerian: not only does he explicitly mention spooks and fixed ideas, but he positions the TAZ

³³⁰ Stirner writes, “In every party that cares for itself and its persistence, the members are unfree [...] The independence of the party conditions the lack of independence in the party-members”. Stirner, *Ego*, 211.

³³¹ *Ibid.* 209-211; 271. The generalized anarchist criticism of Leninist and Maoist strategy targets their valorization of the party (or the movement) *itself* over the particular interests of its constituents. The party is supposed to encapsulate and express the interest of the ‘masses’ or the ‘people’. Aside from the obvious problem of who gets to decide what those interests are, political action is always attuned to its own optics for the sake of recruitment. For example, while organizing a local action against a fascist group’s film-screening and recruitment event, certain tactical possibilities (such as damaging their a/v equipment) are often ruled out because the image of militancy or violence might alienate or discourage those outside the movement from joining or participating. The M-L-M party, in this instance, values its own image above combatting the spread of fascism!

³³² *Ibid.* 210; 271.

³³³ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontology Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2003): 99.

as an *insurrection* in opposition to traditional notions of the Revolution.³³⁴ Moreover, Bey insists on the collapse of means and ends within the TAZ: its very existence is the method and the outcome of insurrectionary action simultaneously.

What happens in both the TAZ and the union can never be wholly prefigured: in it, radically new and unfamiliar modes of relating to others obtain. The logic is that by participating in these zones and unions, individuals become temporarily unburdened by the threat of violence, the moral policing, and the sacred obligations that regulate our identities and organize our everyday lives. A rather extreme example is the infamous black bloc tactic: by physically combatting police during a protest, a physical and temporal space is opened up (in the middle of the street, in a building, in an alleyway) where surveillance and arrest become impossible. The police are *temporarily* out-flanked and out-strategized, and individuals are free to experiment, collaborate, and make decisions under radically different circumstances, with radically different power relations at play. Once the police have the opportunity to regroup, focus their forces, and reterritorialize the TAZ, it is evacuated and dissolved. The point of this practice, of opening up a TAZ, is to perform the work of *resubjectivization*—to dissolve calcified, state-sponsored subjectivities and state-egos while affirming, creating, and experimenting with new ones.³³⁵ It is an exercise in possibility: “if one knows how to move, the absence of a schema is not an obstacle but an opportunity”.³³⁶

³³⁴ Bey, *T.A.Z.*, 97-100.

³³⁵ Although he is skeptical of insurrectionary action in general, David Graeber provides an incredibly detailed ethnographic account of the use of black bloc tactics and TAZs in the context of mass protests. See: David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, (California: AK Press, 2009): 185-191.

³³⁶ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009): 19.

For Stirner, the work of resubjectivization in the union is posed in terms of property and dissolution. Recall that Stirner's discourse on property firstly centers the *relationship* between the owner and property and, secondly, counts ideological objects as property. In the state, all property is its *own*, and an individual only has 'property' as *possession* by the state's grace and permission; in the union, on the other hand, property can truly be realized *as* property for the individual because no individual "holds what is his as a fief from any being".³³⁷ That is, since the union is made up of shared interest and dissolves when interest is no longer shared, each member exercises total dominion over their property. Because Stirner's primary concern is with ideological property, the union becomes a site for the practice of dissolving passionate attachments, a site for the work of re- or de-subjectivization. In the first chapter, I argued that Stirner's turn to the body is an essential component of his egoistic, non-dialectical formulation of dissolution; here, in the political context, the union functions as the material, action-based site of *thoughtless, bodily dissolution*. The union opens space for the individual to turn their tactics of resistance inward, toward the archism imbricated in their very identity. On the other hand, the affirmative power of the union allows new types of relationships to blossom—relationships not limited by the performance of identity-roles or an adherence to the normative social script. Stirner writes that in the sacred family, the son and the father are merely "*bound together* by a tie"; dissolving the sacred relation and uniting as egoists, "sonship and fatherhood remain", but their relationship is no longer pinned down to their identities—they can come together as unique individuals.³³⁸

³³⁷ Stirner, *Ego*, 276.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* 122.

The union and the insurrection are therefore interlinked. Indeed, much of what Stirner says about insurrection equally applies to the union: the exaltation of the individual's interest over the structure itself, the lack of specific arrangements coupled with the affirmation of arranging oneself, the insistence on finite temporality, the lack of concern with directly combatting institutions, and so on. The term 'insurrection' has unfortunately become overdetermined and oversaturated; it quickly conjures in us sensationalized images of guerilla warfare, of masked protestors lobbing Molotovs at police cruisers, of chaotic looting and rioting. Although these actions can be insurrectionary or union-based, they in no way represent the full spectrum of possibility. By Stirner's own admission, unions are utterly common and mundane. This was already seen in the father-son example above, but is perhaps best described in "Stirner's Critics". Stirner, replying to Moses Hess, paints two light-hearted pictures: children playing a "friendly game" in the street, and a chance encounter between friends resulting in a trip to a tavern.³³⁹ These examples highlight the frequency, simplicity, and spontaneity of egoistic associations: they are a kind of improvisation. In this specific formulation, the union is not necessarily insurrectionary—Stirner is merely pointing to the self-interest involved in our everyday actions and social relations. The purpose of this response to Hess is threefold. First, these examples decisively establish that the union is not a structure or an institution but rather a way of being, a way of acting and relating. Second, the union is not an 'alternative' to contemporary social relations in the utopian sense as something that will necessarily replace existing institutions—it is already present, already immanent in our daily lives. Finally, these examples combat the sort

³³⁹ Stirner, "Stirner's Critics", 100.

of hysterical and sensationalized imagery that the terms ‘egoism’, ‘self-interest’, and ‘insurrection’ conjure up; it is a response to criticisms borne of reactions of abhorrence.

Insurrectionary action does not resemble the grand spectacle of the revolutionary event and the union does not take on the grand scale of the state or mass-society. Unions and insurrections do not directly target the state, society, or specific institutions—they are self-directed and directed at the self. They exist in and as the liminal spaces and gaps in the state’s regular functioning. They are *nothing* in-themselves but are instead always yet-to-be-determined: they are opportunities for the practice of self-dissolution. Because the union is a collective vehicle for pursuing unique, individual interests, it severely complicates the Young Hegelian view of the dialectical relation between the individual (particular) and the community (universal). More specifically, the union does *not* mediate the particular and the universal—which, in Young Hegelian philosophy, tends to privilege the universal—but rather dissolves the distinction entirely. The alignment of one’s unique interest with another’s is not a form of universality but rather of *plurality*, or a *multiplicity of singulars*—and, as I argued in the first chapter, it is not possible to carry this surface-level similarity or alignment ‘all the way down’ to the individual themselves.

Finding others who share one of my unique interests without dissonance sounds, on the surface, like an impossibly high bar to set. Yet, Stirner affirms that it happens all the time, in ways both mundane and innocuous. It is not impossible that a few neighbours—perhaps more strangers than anything—come together to fix a pothole on their street in light of the state’s ongoing failure to address the issue. One can imagine exchanges of frustration growing more frequent as weeks drag on: disgruntled side-walk utterings, glances of mutual recognition cast

across driveways, gestures of exasperation shared over the morning commute to work—all signaling to one another the contours of their affective states, each receptive to the plight of the other as it is their own plight just the same. And then the day of work arrives: a solitary individual takes it upon themselves to rid the hole of excess debris, gathering shovels and poles to pack down the new asphalt—several neighbours begin to congregate around the lone worker. Perhaps out of boredom or disapproval, some decide to leave in the middle of things—yet some join in half-way through, some ignore the event altogether, some see the task through to its completion, some suggest other uses for the excess asphalt. These neighbours, these strangers, having collectively amplified their power to exercise their own unique interests, dissolve the union once the task is complete. Perhaps months go by without even a chance encounter—perhaps a loving friendship plants its roots in the soil of their egoism.

Conclusion

*I do not limit myself to one feeling for men,
but give free play to all that I am capable of.*

—Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

Over the course of this thesis, I have sought to establish a non-dialectical, an-archic reading of Stirner's egoism. This project entailed the analysis of many competing interpretations of his work found in the secondary literature—namely, interpretations which cast Stirner as dialectical, non-ironic, nihilistic, or as some kind of trenchant individualist. But I was also led to explore new territory, new themes that have seldom been discussed in relation to his egoism. Surprisingly, Stirner's philosophy of language has hardly ever been commented upon in any systematic fashion; rarer still, his turn to the body as a tactic of dissolution. Where the literature does provide systematic commentary on specific issues, I often found it lacking in detail, regardless of whether or not I agreed with the interpretation. For instance, I took issue with Saul Newman's reading of Stirner's 'un-man' not because of its framing or its accuracy, but because it papers-over and potentially forecloses other types of interpellation, other subject-positions, other ways of being in the world. In presenting my own reading of Stirner, I have therefore attempted to do justice to these smaller details—the nuances, the accents, and the inflections that make his egoism important, rigorous, and unique in the history of philosophy.

For all the charges laid against him—sophistry, nihilism, greedy individualism, ego-tism, radical nominalism—I have attempted to rescue something affirmative, something joyful in his work. There is another Stirner, one hidden beneath the fiery rhetoric and frenzied prose, a Stirner attentive and responsive to the intricate uncertainty of being. Not without a hint of irony, I have

found in his destructive anarchism a spirited celebration of invention and creation; in his wild anti-humanism, a gentle sympathy for the human life; in his aggressive atheism, an unwavering clemency for the heathen. Yet this other, joyful Stirner is not opposed to the dominant, ruinous image; rather, they are intimately bound up in one another. Stirner's warm sympathy for those of us who are less than perfect—those of us who fail in our aspirations, who let ourselves down—is not opposed to his rejection of the human as such, but is in fact made possible by it. The rejection and the affirmation exist in and as a single motion, a single strike: this is perhaps the central idea in my reading of Stirner, borne out through analyses of his ontology, his ethics, and his politics.

In the first chapter, I argued that Stirner's ontology defends a conception of singularity as *uniqueness*—something fundamentally unsayable and unqualifiable. I excavated one particular tactic Stirner employs to arrive at this conception of singularity, developed through his engagements with Young Hegelian philosophy. This tactic, which I called an 'ironic inversion', shows through performance how both Feuerbach's humanism and Bauer's criticism fail in their attempts to properly account for singularity. Because the ironic inversion tactic mirrors the form of the more traditional 'dialectical reversal', it has a double-effect: it serves as a tool to deal with specific dialectical frameworks while simultaneously acting as a parody of dialectical thinking itself. That is, Stirner's ironic engagements with Feuerbach and Bauer are not true developments of their philosophical frameworks but instead serve to clear the ground for the assertion of his own, unique egoism.

Although Stirner uses much of the same language as his fellow Young Hegelians, he radically transforms and re-deploys several of their key concepts and terms. In discussing three

terms in particular—property, the unique, and dissolution—I laid bare these transformations and re-deployments. Stirner’s discourse on property was shown to primarily center ideological objects; his conception of the unique was shown to be neither subject, nor predicate, nor concept; finally, his re-deployment of dissolution was shown to make a turn to the body, privileging it over thought. These three terms were part and parcel of my broader interpretive framing of Stirner’s project as non-dialectical: because Stirner maintains a deep skepticism toward language’s claim to truth and objectivity, he also holds that the realms of the ideal and the material are irreconcilable and irreducible to one another. Stirner’s discourse on property, focusing on the ideal, does not overtake, sublate, or determine the material; his description of the unique does not develop by conceptual negation; his re-deployment of dissolution is not posed as a response to a higher calling or obligation and does not seek out higher thoughts, higher forms of development. Stirner’s non-dialectical egoism therefore does not rule out interaction or causal relationships between the material and the ideal, but only denies that one can be wholly expressed in the other, that one can be properly accounted for by the other, that one can completely determine the other.

This ontological position, in which Stirner defends the unsayable-singular, is severely tempered by his own self-effacement—the acknowledgment of his own failure to properly account for singularity as uniqueness. This self-effacement reveals in yet another way how Stirner’s fight against mastery and authority reach all the way down: even he himself does not hold complete authority over his own words, does not exert a total mastery of his own text. Yet the impossibility of capturing the unsayable-singular does not lead to the abandonment or negation of it but rather to its mobilization. Stirner defends uniqueness precisely *because* it

cannot be mastered, cannot be absorbed. The uniqueness of the singular individual's existence, as something recalcitrant to language, is therefore the starting point for his an-archic ethics and politics.

In the second chapter, I showed how Stirner deploys this recalcitrant uniqueness as the starting point for ethical decision making and critical self-reflection. I argued that Stirner's ethical discourse is both descriptive and attentive to the ambiguity of desire: both are corollaries of his ontological defence of the unsayable-singular. In other words, Stirner resists prescribing universal values and moral obligations precisely because of the uniqueness or exclusivity inherent in individuality; because individuals are always contending with myriad fixed ideas and attachments, desire is itself fundamentally unique and ambiguous. I argued that Stirner's ethical discourse, like his ontology and his politics, proceeds from and operationalizes impossibility—namely, the impossibility of knowing in full the sources and contours of our affects and desires. Rather than attempt to impose structure and organization onto *life*—desires, values, actions—Stirner's ethical discourse celebrates and safeguards its sheer possibility, bears witness to the multiplicity of being in the world.

I began the chapter by first considering the century-long debate concerning Stirner's possible influence on Nietzsche. This body of literature was used as a launching point into a specific ethical question concerning the nature of plagiarism and re-appropriation; subsequently, this specific question served as a second launching point into broader questions concerning the nature of artistic and communicative expressions. The failure of the Stirner-Nietzsche literature to address the real stakes of Stirner's own ethical discourse acted as a foil against which the deeper sense of egoistic ethics could emerge. My analysis of this body of literature therefore

highlighted, through an extrapolation of Stirner's own method, a hidden but vital thread running through the whole of his work: that failure is itself often generative and revelatory. In the first chapter, this thread was discussed in relation to language—namely, that the failure to speak the singular is itself generative for Stirner's vagabond ontology. Stirner's work attends to what presents itself but fails to be *re-presented*, to what exceeds representation. This is why I have insisted on the descriptive element of egoistic ethics.

In developing my argument for a descriptive reading of Stirner's ethics, I argued that Stirner's sole ethical injunction—*use thyself!*—is a challenge rather than a moral prescription. It therefore functions as an invitation to critical self-reflection—but one that can be refused at any moment, for any reason. I argued that Stirner holds self-interest to be ever-present in human action and that it can be present in various degrees or stronger and weaker forms. By showing how Stirner cuts egoism along its conscious/unconscious and principle/interest axes, I presented an interpretation of self-interest that is not congruent with the kind of *ego-tism* or selfish individualist-utilitarianism of which he is often accused. Rather, I argued that Stirner's understanding of self-interest is, on the one hand, an acknowledgment of the simple fact that my thoughts, my flesh, my desires, etc. are *mine* and not *yours*. Yet on the other hand, self-interest appears as a concern with the self as it is shaped, determined, and moved by external forces. The fundamental ethical question for Stirner is therefore whether it is I who desires, or if it is instead another force desiring in and through me.

Stirner's descriptions of ethical situations get to the heart of this question. I presented these descriptions as being directly opposed to the notion that one can calculate the effects of their actions upon the external world. I argued that his descriptions of ethical situations, instead

of leading to specific moral prescriptions or ethical values, simply reveal and bear witness to the complexity of desire, the ambiguity involved in ethical decision-making. I introduced the themes of 'passionate attachments' and 'voluntary servitude' in order to explain this difficulty and ambiguity, and to insist on the 'concern-with-the-self' understanding of self-interest. Focusing on the specific example of two different women deciding how or whether to pursue their respective love interests, I argued that Stirner's ethical concern is the degree of *ownness* (or, by extension, the degree of *servitude*) present in our decision-making processes. Ownness was thus argued to be a matter of degree and not a question of reaching a pure, absolute state of autonomy: one is never wholly free of fixed ideas and passionate attachments, and thus one is never completely one's own. Yet this does not entail nihilism: I argued that Stirner's ethics—as descriptive, as centering the singular-individual's desire—affirm and attend to this very impossibility of a totalizing ownness.

In the third chapter, I pressed forward with the use of passionate attachments and voluntary servitude as frameworks to understand Stirner's politics. Both framing devices helped clarify and elucidate the interplay between identity, subjectivity, and power—a constellation central to Stirner's egoistic anarchism. The central argument presented in the chapter was therefore that subordination, hierarchy, and authoritarianism are found in subjectivity itself—not only through its repression, but through its very construction and perennial maintenance. The chapter began with a look at a somewhat peculiar issue within the history of anarchist scholarship: Stirner's very identity as an anarchist. I considered one particularly controversial text, *Black Flame*, within this body of literature. Like the Stirner-Nietzsche literature discussed in the second chapter, I argued that the failures of both the text and its critical reception were

generative of important political-philosophical insights. Specifically, I argued that critics of the text often missed its most authoritarian element both before and after the revelation of Michael Schmidt's identity as a fascist. This discussion, as another Stirnerian performance or extrapolation of his method, revealed the importance of turning away from identity as a central site or mechanism of resistance to authority. Rather than a tool of resistance, I argued that identity, viewed through a Stirnerian lens, is more often a tool of organization, control, pacification, and authoritarianism.

Stirner's skepticism toward identity was then presented through an analysis of his own discourse on the state. I argued that, against the foil of Marxist criticisms, Stirner does not deny the objective existence or material power of the state but instead chooses to narrow his focus on its ideological function. This ideological function was shown to be the construction and maintenance of subjectivity itself. By encouraging and investing certain kinds of identities while punishing and demonizing others, the state sustains itself by investing itself in and through individual subjects: state-egos. The state's logic of interpellation—requiring the *willing* participation of its individual subjects—thus operates in accordance with the 'inverted freedom argument' I introduced in the first chapter: human rights are merely the rights of the 'Human' essence to express itself in and through me. In the first chapter, this argument was posed in ontological terms against Feuerbach's valorization of the Human essence; in the second chapter, it was posed in ethical terms relating to the sources and contours of desire; in the third chapter, it was posed not only in relation to the state, but in relation to society and 'communities' as well.

Stirner finds processes of ideological interpellation and identity-construction not only in legal and economic spheres, but dispersed and distributed throughout society and its various

institutions. The construction and maintenance of subjectivity is more commonly and more decisively enacted by the people themselves through moral and affective mechanisms Stirner describes as 'police-care'. I argued that the affective element in Stirner's discourse on ideology and interpellation is vital to his political theory: he understands the state to be one part of a larger network of forces of control and pacification. Individuals not only cut each other but cut *themselves* to fit the interests of the state and society. Voluntary servitude therefore sustains the state's ability to pursue its own interests. This cutting process is not always violent, not always repressive, not always conspicuous: police-care often masks itself as love, as mentorship, as guidance, as parenting, as *care*. This is why Stirner's heaven-storming of so many of the societal institutions we are comfortable and familiar with cannot be read as a simple inflammatory, nihilistic outburst.

I argued that Stirner's understanding of ideology does not hold it to be totalizing: his defence of what I call the 'shadow figures' of society is a means of spotlighting the gaps and failures of interpellative processes. These shadow-figures, though they are themselves constructed by ideology, nevertheless point to the possibility of resistance to our own subjectivization: in their moral and political criminality, they reveal the state's reliance on identity itself. The logic behind the political defence of the shadow-figure is the same as the ontological defence of singularity as uniqueness: Stirner begins from the intractable point, the point recalcitrant to mastery. Against Saul Newman's interpretation, I argued that Stirner's use of the 'un-man' as the shadow-figure of Man is not an essential point of departure for any and all resistance and critique, but merely one possibility among many. This follows from Stirner's understanding of authority and hierarchy as being dispersed throughout society: Man is not the

only identity shaping and limiting the possibilities of any given individual. I argued that the self-dissolution involved in resisting authority at the level of identity cannot be universalized: rather, it requires a heightened attention to the specific circumstances and material conditions the individual finds themselves in at any given moment. In this way, the 'pauper', the 'sinner', or the patriarchal 'wife', for example, can all be legitimate starting points for resistance through self-dissolution.

Yet resistance at the level of identity requires not only self-dissolution but experimentation. I discussed two tactics of resistance Stirner develops: insurrection and the union of egoists. Both tactics are self-interested in that they are self-directed and directed at the self: they proceed from the singular, unique desires of individuals rather than principles or blueprints for action, and they are aimed at combatting the individual themselves rather than directly combatting regulative or oppressive institutions. Insurrectionary action is therefore distinct from revolutionary action, while the union is distinct from other forms of community or society. Although these two tactics are closely related, I argued that they are not interchangeable: it is not the case that all unions are insurrectionary. I concluded the chapter by describing the ways in which these tactics combat authority and identity through their affirmation of experimentation and their openness to possibility.

Limits of Identity, Politics of Singularity

I have argued that the political stakes underlying Stirner's work concern the opening-up of possibility. Stirner rages against all that threatens to limit, organize, and repress the variability and multiplicity of being in the world: nothing is ruled out; experimentation is celebrated. The

prime suspect in the fight against archism is identity itself; the witness, the singular and unique individual. Yet Stirner's fight against identity does not proceed from the hope of a total, permanent victory—it does not suffer the illusion that absolute dis-identification, absolute ownness, is achievable. This is because language and ideology, the vehicles of representation, are themselves unescapable—but that is not to say they cannot be momentarily subverted. Stirner develops tools and tactics for these momentary subversions, these micro-insurrections, and points to the need for greater differentiation and greater experimentation in the development of our own tactics.

Yet it is not the case that identity is always wholly limiting or repressive. Many struggles for autonomy have begun in and from excluded identity-positions in order to win various freedoms. The point of Stirner's skepticism toward identity is therefore not to dismiss it entirely but rather to ask what exclusions are further enacted by demands for inclusion, to ask what possibilities are foreclosed in the demand that others be liberated. The point, in other words, is that the politics of identity, representation, and recognition often mask the ways they sustain the power dynamics and hierarchies of authority that create exclusion and oppression in the first place. There is a sense in which the politics of identity and recognition attack the symptom and not the disease; and, perhaps more dangerously, the methods they use are all too easily accommodated and recuperated by our current neoliberal order. Gay marriage, for example, has won its legal recognition largely by appealing to the broader hetero-normative images of romance, partnership, and familial structure. This victory of recognition, inclusion within the state, thus comes at the expense of other queer and non-colonial family structures: such things as inheritance, hospital visitation rights, or healthcare power of attorney are much harder to

access for those who do not or cannot participate in traditional family structures, queer or otherwise.

Yet Stirner's challenge to identity is not only aimed at its mobilization in the sphere of liberal political engagement; it reaches all the way down, challenging even ostensibly radical and revolutionary political identity in-itself. I can recall a particular evening spent at a somewhat-infamous anarchist squat in Montreal several years ago. This was a home for mostly queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming individuals practicing communal living, collective decision-making, anti-colonial activism, and prefigurative direct action politics. Discussion was lively and engaged: we spoke of tactics for de-escalating police violence, tactics for combatting border imperialism and anti-immigration policy, tactics for gathering and distributing food without spending money—tactics for combatting archism in all its various manifestations. We then shared our experiences with the kinds of violence we faced in our daily lives; this was both a practice of vulnerability and a method of fine-tuning tactics of resistance to fit our unique experiences. But in the midst of this latter conversation, archism reared its ugly head: it was made clear to me that during the discussion of specifically homophobic and gender-based violence, I was to be silent so as to make space for others to speak. I was, and still am, sympathetic to the underlying logic of this desire: presenting as straight, masculine, and cis-gendered, there are a great number of spaces both safe and accessible to me—I, unlike many others there, did not need this particular space at this particular time. However, when the conversation turned to the consideration of racist and xenophobic violence, I was called on to share my experiences. This call was not made from a prior knowledge of my unique experiences, my life, but rather my identity, my racialized name.

The problem is not whether I was included or excluded—that I really needed to share, that I really needed my voice to be heard at that particular time. Nor is it that I was ‘mis-identified’ or made to feel like an ‘other’. Rather, the situation revealed to me the way identity and identification most often function: it is ascribed to me more than I can ever ascribe it to myself. The problem, in other words, is that although I am not queer and have never identified myself as such, I have suffered more direct violence at the hands of homophobes than of racists. I have more stories to tell about sexual and gender-based violence than racist and xenophobic violence. If we are concerned with the invention of new tactics grounded in unique experiences, I have more to offer my queer friends than my racialized ones. This is not to say that the degree or consistency of my experience is on par with others—far from it—but only that identities, accurate or otherwise, often fail to capture or express the unique experiences we have and the unique ways in which we *experience those experiences*.

The fight against archism must reach all the way down because archism itself reaches all the way down. In making space for possibility, in bearing witness to multiplicity, one must be alive to one’s own possibilities, to one’s own multiplicities. That means, at the same time, bearing witness not only to the failures of our communities, but to our own failures as well. There is a certain irony in a queer anarchist commune re-inscribing essentialism—but an irony that is all too common, for indeed, the trap of essentialism is inescapable. Stirner alerts us to the fact that the forces of organization, limitation, and control are found in all manners of community, in all manners of identity. It is often believed that pursuing recognition from the state, from society, or even from our own communities places a demand on these structures to conform to us, to our own desires. It is more often the other way around. What this demand papers-over is the

affective function of ideology: that we desire inclusion within archic institutions signals that we may have already developed passionate attachments to them—that it is the institutions which express their own desires through us. The self-interest and egoism central to a Stirnerian politics of singularity therefore hold sympathy for these desires, hold a compassionate understanding for the drive toward identity and belonging. Egoism and self-interest make space for the individual to meet themselves as they are, where they are, and how they are without judgment—but they also challenge us to be otherwise, to feel otherwise, to live otherwise.

The movement of an an-archic and egoistic politics of singularity is therefore not to find the proper subject-position, the most radical type of identity, nor to push for greater and greater inclusion—but rather to recognize archism where and when it emerges, to contend with it where and when it emerges. It proceeds from recognizing that the movement of inclusion enacts further exclusions—it therefore seeks the invention of new, unique relations: relations not of mere belonging, but relations grounded in joy and affinity, grounded in egoistic and self-interested love. The politics of singularity challenges us to confront our own desires for inclusion, our own attachments to organization, our own voluntary servitude. It challenges us to affirm our own failures and to recognize our own violences. It asks us to enjoy the radical uncertainty of sheer possibility, to celebrate other ways of being in the world. And it begins in the refusal of oneself.

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