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Stirnerian Ethics

W. Curtis Swabey

1931.

All those who have been fortunate enough to read “The Unique and His Property,” by Max Stirner feel the deep desire to make his doctrine known to others, particularly to the workers. It is with that aim that I attempt to give, in a few lines, a glimpse of that doctrine. It does not seem that his book has been well understood by several of those who have attempted to give an account of it.

What Eltzbacher says about it in his book “Anarchism” is not very exact; he should first of all say that Stirner is not especially preoccupied with being clear and that he makes use of an individual philosophical jargon. We too often confuse the egoist — or rather nihilist — philosophy of Stirner, with the individualist philosophy of an Emerson for example.

Stirner has proclaimed, and this seems the fundamental point of his theory, the doctrine of the property of the self. That was a bold conception which will help one day to bring about a great revolution in philosophy. Here it is, in essence: “You are your own masters; work for your own interests. Respect no ideal; do not make your actions conform to any moral standard. Scorn custom, duty, morality, justice, law. I am God, and king, and law. — Hold as sacred only your appetites and de-

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Translator’s note: It’s possible that this is a translation of a translation, but I haven’t found an English version of the text.

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sires.” That is what he means by that nihilist expression: “All things are nothing to me,” “You are not bound if you refuse to believe yourself bound; you are to yourself the Most High; respect nothing, and be your own God. Obey no pact.” In short: “Nothing is more dear to me than myself!”

Now, between the nihilist and individualist philosophies, there is a rather subtle distinction that it is necessary to bring clearly to light. The individualist philosophy says: Be a strong individual! Raise yourself above the common! Develop your individuality!” The egoist or nihilist philosophy says: “You have no duty to fulfill. If you desire to be a strong man, an influential man, an individual really above, as much as is possible, the influence of the herd, in that case, be strong! Not as duty, but as privilege.” The first theory commands: “You must be a superman.” The second says: “Be what you want to be.”

The Stirnerian egoist — the man who accepts no morality — does not limit himself with regard to sympathy. He follows the impulses of his heart. He denies the rights, the titles of property; he fosters no respect the State, even if it was the freest Democracy that it was possible to imagine. He concedes no ethical view superior to his own desires. But there is nothing in Stirner that is contrary to the feeling of solidarity, to sympathy, or to fraternal love. Stirner proclaims the liberation from all that which can chain the individual; he is the prophet of unchained egoism. He makes litter of the ethical rubbish of the past, he shows the last ideal of an idolatrous race, morals, and he cries: “Look! It is an imposture.” He turns to the Ego, to all the Egos of the Universe and cries: “Each of you is for himself the true God, do as you please.”

Between the ethics of Kropotkin and that of Stirner there is no essential difference; what the first expresses in a simply scientific language, Stirner explains in metaphysical terms that are correct, but a little confused. When Kropotkin shows that, in each individual, there exists a passion for the good of the race, he gives a strong support to the thesis of Stirner. We have

hesitated to proclaim that morals are an illusion and duty an imposture until Kropotkin assured us that the sentiment of solidarity is inherent in the nature of man. This determined, we can cast morality in the trash without danger to the species.

According to the conception of Stirner, the good is that which pleases him, and evil is what he detests. That which wounds your sympathy is evil for you, so that, while denying absolutely any value whatsoever in morals imposed from outside, we find impossible to deny the existence of good and evil.

But it is me, the Ego, which will be its touchstone. A tyrant, a brutal murder committed by this blood-stained monster that is the law, a cruel act, what undermines my feeling of solidarity, that is evil.

Then we will add to our war cry a new call.

Before now, we have cheered the death of the all-powerful enemy, God; the fall of the law, the destruction of the rights of property, we can add: “Down with morality!”

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