

LIBRARY OF RATIONAL SOCIALISM

THE UNIQUE AND ITS PROPERTY

By MAX STIRNER

The following work was written for *L'Humanité Nouvelle*, at the request of M. Hamon. It could not be included there due to lack of space, although its importance had been recognized by the editors of that Review.

I give it as it was written for *L'Humanité Nouvelle*.

I took on, perhaps a bit lightly, the commitment to review *The Unique and Its Property*, by Max Stirner, about which I had heard a lot. I say *lightly*, because that was before I had read the work.

Since then, I have read and reread it, and, I confess, the result of this work has been that I almost regret the promise I thoughtlessly made. But not wishing to extricate myself, I will try to keep it.

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The first condition for being able to give an account of a work is certainly to understand the author well; this is obvious. However, this is not always possible when one reads *The Unique and its Property*.

Here are some samples of how the author presents his ideas:

— “To Feuerbach's theological doctrine,” says Max Stirner, “let us oppose in a few words the objections it suggests to us: ‘The being of man is for man the *supreme being*. This supreme being, religion calls God and makes of him an *objective* being; but he is in reality only man's own being; and we are at a turning point in the history of the world, because henceforth for man it is no longer God, but man who incarnates divinity.”

“To this we reply: The Supreme Being is the being or essence of man, I grant you; but it is precisely because this supreme essence is his ‘essence’ and not ‘him,’ that it is completely indifferent whether we see it outside him and make it ‘God,’ or whether we see it in him and make it the ‘Essence of man’ or ‘Man.’ I am neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and it is fundamentally all one whether I conceive the essence in me or outside me. Moreover, the supreme essence has always been conceived in this double beyond, the interior beyond

and the exterior beyond; for according to Christian doctrine, the 'spirit of God' is also 'our own spirit' and 'dwells in us.' It dwells in heaven and dwells in us. We are only its 'dwelling.'" (P. 36.)

— Feuerbach's words obviously have no definite meaning. But is Mai Stirner's answer clearer?

— "At the dawn of the new times," he says further on, "rises the God-Man. At their decline, will the only God have vanished and can the God-Man truly die if the only God dies in him? This question has not been asked; we thought we had done everything when in our days we had victoriously completed the work of light and vanquished God; we did not notice that Man killed God only to become in his turn 'the only God who reigns in the heavens.' The *outer beyond* is swept away and the colossal work of philosophy is accomplished; but the *inner beyond* has become a new Heaven and calls us to new assaults; God had to make room for — Man and not for — us. How can you believe that the God-Man is dead, as long as in him, besides God, man has not also died?" (P. 184.)

— What does Max Stirner mean by his *God-Man*, with his *inner* and *outer beyond*? What did he hope to achieve with such gobbledygook?

Yet another string of incomprehensible proposals.

— "*Myself* who *is*, and myself alone, I am not purely an abstraction; *I am* everything in everything and consequently I am even abstraction and nothing. I am everything and nothing. I am not a mere thought, but I am full, among other things, of thoughts; I am a world of thoughts." (P. 417.)

— Is it certain that Max Stirner understood himself when he wrote such mumbo-jumbo?

I could cite other sentences as meaningless as the preceding ones. But I consider that the examples cited sufficiently show that the author under examination sometimes, if not often, lacks clarity and precision in his ideas.

This judgment should not come as a surprise. Max Stirner confessed his guilt. Here is what Mackey, his biographer, reports:

"Stirner," he himself says, "presents his book only as the often *clumsy* and *incomplete* expression of what he wanted; this book is the laborious work of the best years of his life and it is nevertheless true that it is only an *approximation*. So much so that he had to struggle against a language that the philosophers have corrupted, that all the devotees of the State, the Church, etc., have distorted, and which has become susceptible to *endless confusions of ideas*." (P. XVIII.)

It is therefore not surprising that Max Stirner's book is not always understandable? Who knows if he even always understood himself?

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On the other hand, Max Stirner is, in some cases, very clear. Whenever he has a good grasp of his subject, he presents it in such a way that one can perfectly grasp the meaning of his words. I will take advantage of the passages in his book where he shows himself in this light, to give an idea of what the author thinks about certain questions.

I have based my cause on nothing, says Max Stirner in his introduction, and he ends his book with the same words.

This is not lacking in clarity. But if the cause he defends lacks a basis, how will he be able to make it stand? Max Stirner's proposition invalidates, from the outset, everything he may subsequently say in favor of his thesis.

— “God and humanity,” says the author, “have based their cause on nothing, on nothing but themselves. I will therefore base my cause on myself: as well as God, I am the negation of all the rest, I am for myself everything, I am the unique.” (P. 3).

— From which it follows that the self is nothing, and that, at the same time, it is everything.

But there is more to it than that. Max Stirner adds, in fact:

— “I am not nothing in the sense of ‘nothing but vanity,’ but I am the creative Nothing, the nothing from which I draw everything.” (*Ibid.*)

— The creative Nothing! This is the height of absurdity. The hypothesis of a creator God, having drawn everything from nothing, was already fairly illogical. But nothing drawing everything from nothing, this truly surpasses what the most delinquent imagination can find most fantastic.

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Here, painted by Max Stirner, is the portrait of the man who, having reached the age of reason, reflected and examined.

— “Today, I destroy these lying incarnations (God, the emperor, the pope, the fatherland), I regain possession of my thoughts and I say: I alone have a body and am someone. I no longer see in the world anything but what it is for me; it is mine, it is my property. I relate everything to myself.” (P. 13.)

— The man who reasons always relates everything to himself, in fact, because reasoning is only a relationship to oneself. Every man who reflects never acts except in his own interest, even the one who is about to hang himself, as Pascal remarks.

How is it then that Max Stirner, after saying that there are no disinterested actions, since the one who reasons relates everything to himself, was able to write the following passage?

— "Doesn't there exist any disinterestedness and can we never encounter it? On the contrary, nothing is more common! We could call disinterestedness a fashion item of the civilized world and we consider it so necessary that when it costs too much in solid fabric we buy one in junk: we ape disinterestedness." (P. 69.)

— A disinterested act is an unreasoned, mechanical, instinctive act. It is therefore not an act in the strict sense.

I repeat that there is no, and cannot be, any action properly speaking that is not at the same time self-interested. Max Stirner is, moreover, and rightly so, of the same opinion. Did he not put forward the following proposition?

— "Those who place "disinterestedness" in the heart of man think they are saying a great deal. What do they mean by that? Something very close to "self-denial." Self? Whose self? Who will be denied and whose interest will be set aside? It seems that it must be oneself. And for whose benefit is this disinterested self-denial recommended to you? Again for your benefit, for your benefit, simply on condition that you pursue your "true interest" through disinterestedness. (P. 68.)

— It is worth noting that this passage precedes by a few lines the one where Max Stirner asserts that nothing is more common than disinterestedness.

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The author of *The Unique and its Property* therefore admits that man never acts except for his own advantage; that, at bottom, there is no truly disinterested act. And he devotes the greater part of the beginning of his book to proving that man is, and can only be, egoistic.

He is right in his plea for egoism; we must recognize this, and approve of the author for having had, a rare thing, the courage to explain himself frankly. But he made the very great mistake of not having distinguished two kinds of egoism, or at least of admitting the possibility that there are two kinds.

This negligence or forgetfulness was the cause of all his mistakes.

Let us explain.

The motive of every action is pleasure, advantage, the interest of the one who acts, or self-love, egoism in a word.

But the hoped-for profit may be immediate, or expected in a more or less distant future. This is how, sometimes, one harms oneself now in the hope or certainty of a good to come sooner or later, more considerable than the harm suffered in the present moment.

This truth, which would be difficult to deny, must be accepted by everyone.

This being said, let us now take into account a new element.

Let us suppose — it is only a simple hypothesis — let us suppose, I say, the existence of good or bad reasoning, but in the latter case accepted as good, reasoning admitting as true that if man harms himself in the present existence for the good of his fellow men, he will be amply rewarded for it in a future life.

What will come of this?

All those who have faith or knowledge will act in such a way as to merit this ultra-vital happiness.¹ Their actions will always be determined by the profit they expect from them, but this time that profit is realized only in a future existence. It is still egoism that will guide their actions, but an egoism of a particular kind.

It follows from these premises:

That we must distinguish two kinds of egoism, one which relates to this life, and the other which relates to a future life;

That to disregard ultra-vital egoism, by considering only earthly egoism, is a logical error, as long as the supposition of an ultra-vital sanction is not demonstrated to be absurd; because it is to suppress, without any valid reason, one of the possible elements of the problem.

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This is precisely the mistake that Max Stirner has fallen into. He spoke exclusively of egoism relative to this life, without first proving that the other egoism was an absurd thing that should not be taken into account.

This error is all the more regrettable as it has serious consequences from a social point of view.

Let us consider successively the situations created by each of the two types of egoism.

When everyone believes or knows that devotion to one's fellow men will be rewarded in a future life, the consequence of this generalized intellectual state is necessarily the happiness of humanity and, consequently, the maintenance of order. This is so obvious that no one, not even an anarchist, could dream of questioning it.

But everything changes if we stick exclusively to earthly egoism, denying any ultra-vital sanction.

What will happen in this new hypothesis?

That each person, taking his current pleasure, his good in this world, as his goal, and conforming to the rule of true anarchists: *Do what you want*, will not

¹ *Ultra-vital* here means simply “beyond life,” in the “afterlife.” — TRANSLATOR

worry at all about what may result from his actions, for good or for bad, for his neighbors; if he reasons, he will not even refrain from exploiting them, if that can bring him the slightest profit. One must be of a more than phenomenal naiveté not to understand this; but what I understand perfectly is that it is not admitted.

But is this widespread mutual exploitation a very favorable condition for maintaining social order? One would have to be even more naive to dare to claim it.

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Let us find out what Max Stirner thinks about this.

His starting point is that man is necessarily egoistic, which is true, and that only earthly egoism exists, which has not been demonstrated. He therefore actually starts from a hypothesis, which is illogical.

What must result from the bringing together of all these egoisms, from the meeting of people who think exclusively of their happiness on this earth? Inevitably, a clash, a struggle, as a result of which there will be victors and vanquished, hence, the crushing of the weak by the strong. Right, then, is what the strong desire.

— “It is up to me,” says Max Stirner, “to decide what is right for me. Outside of me, there is no right. What is right for me is right. Others may not judge it to be right for that reason, but that is their business and not mine: it is up to them to beware! Even if something seemed unjust to everyone, if it were right for me, that is to say, if I wanted it, I would care little for anyone. This is how all those who know how to value themselves behave, more or less according to their degree of egoism; for might takes precedence over right,² as it is, moreover, fully — its right.” (P. 226.)

— All this is very true, as a deduction from the proposition: that egoism relating to a future life is nonsense, and that each self determines its right. But how is it possible to imagine that a society can last under such conditions?

— “But,” Max Stirner objects, “everything would quickly turn upside down if everyone could do what they wanted.” And who says that everyone could do everything? Aren't you here, and are you obliged to let everything happen? Defend yourselves and nothing will be done to you!”

— If you are strong enough, of course. Otherwise, you'll be beaten outrageously. But that, apparently, is a detail for Max Stirner. So he insists.

² We see that this maxim dates back a long time. Max Stirner's work was indeed published in 1844. — AUTHOR'S NOTE

— “He who would break your will is your enemy; treat him as such. If a few million others are behind you and supporting you, you are an imposing power and you will have little difficulty in winning. But even if, thanks to your power, you succeed in imposing on the adversary, he will not therefore consider you, unless he is a poor sire, as a sacred authority. He owes you neither respect nor homage, although he must be on his guard in measuring your power.” (P. 234.)

— That is to say, as clearly as possible: in a gathering of earthly egoists, where each self has as its exclusive goal its happiness on this world, one must attack the others, when one is the strongest, and always be on the alert, for fear that the others will attack you, when one is the weakest.

Such a society, if it could be maintained, would be a picture of hell.

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Generally, socialists of all stripes admit that, in order to annihilate pauperism, it is necessary to ensure that land and the majority of capital become collective property. This was not yet a question at the time when Max Stirner published his book. Moreover, it is certain that this measure would not have met with his approval.

— “It is,” he says, “by another way that egoism moves towards the suppression of the misery of the plebs. It does not say: Wait for what whatever authority is charged with sharing goods in the name of the community will give you in its fairness (for it is a gift that has always been a question in the ‘States.’ each receiving according to his merits, that is to say, his services); it says: Get your hands on what you need, take it. It is the declaration of war of all against all. I alone am the judge of what I want to have.” (P. 314.)

— We see it: the theory imagined by Max Stirner leads to universalized social war.

— “According to the communists, the community must be the proprietor. On the contrary, I am the proprietor and I only agree with others about my property. If the community goes against my interests, I rebel against it and defend myself. I am the proprietor, but property is not sacred. Am I then only the proprietor? No! Until now, one was only the proprietor, one only ensured the enjoyment of a plot by letting others enjoy theirs. But now everything belongs to me; I am the owner of everything I need and can seize. If the socialist says: Society gives me what I need, — the egoist replies: I take what I need. If the communists act like beggars, the egoist acts like the proprietor.” (P. 312.)

— Always the war of all against all, as the solution to the social problem.

— “Property,” continues Max Stirner, “must not and cannot be abolished; what is necessary is to tear it away from the phantoms and make it my property.” (P. 313.)

— That property cannot be abolished is obvious. But it can be organized for the benefit of all, or of a few, the strong naturally. In the first case, all are proprietors; in the second, when it is individual, the strong exclusively are proprietor. This is what Max Stirner wants, or more precisely, what he ends up with. Is he unaware of it?

After saying that the principle of the society of beggars is the principle of *equal division*, the author continues thus:

— “The individual cannot bear to be considered only as a fraction, a tenth of society, because he is *more* than that; his uniqueness rebels against this conception which diminishes and demeans him.

“He therefore does not allow others to award him his share; already, in the society of workers, he suspects that equal sharing will have the effect of stripping the strong for the benefit of the weak. On the contrary, he expects his wealth only from himself, and he says: What I am capable of procuring, that is my wealth.” (P. 320.)

— Thus, Max Stirner does not want social organization to favor the weak at the expense of the strong; he prefers that everyone possess wealth in proportion to their strength. I suspected this; but I am not sorry to receive the admission from the mouth of the anarchist writer himself.

But this mode of wealth distribution is precisely the one that exists in today's society. Hadn't Max Stirner then noticed it?

Let us continue to account for what society should be according to Max Stirner, that is to say the gathering of individuals whose motto is: *Post mortem nihil*.

— “The egoist practice consists in not considering others as owners or as beggars or workers, but in seeing in them a part of your wealth, objects that can be of use to you.” (P. 321.)

— It is to make society a vast enterprise of mutual exploitation.

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In the following examination I shall show what is the source of all Max Stirner's errors.

— “The relations between men are governed, for all those who live religiously, by a formal law whose observance one may sometimes, at the risk of

sinning, neglect, but whose absolute value one would never dare to deny. It is the law of Love..."

— Love of whom, or of what? Max Stirner does not say. Why, I do not know. However, if he had asked himself the question, he would have found himself, in seeking an answer, on the path to the truth.

The law of which the author speaks here is that of self-love, or egoism, which, for those who live religiously, aims at happiness in a future life.

— "If we try to formulate this law," continues Max Stirner, "we will say something like this: Every man must hold something for more than himself. You must forget your 'private interest' as soon as it is a question of the happiness of others, the good of the Fatherland or of society, the public good, the good of humanity, the good cause, etc. Fatherland, humanity, society, etc., must be for you more than yourself, and your 'private interest' must give way to their interest; for one must not be an egoist." (P. 349.)

— Complete error.

The law of love, understood religiously, says to every man, on the contrary: you must never forget your own interest when it comes to the happiness of others, the good of the country, etc. Your private interest demands that you sacrifice yourself to the country, to humanity, etc., since you will be rewarded for it in a future life; for one must be an egoist. You cannot even not be an egoist.

I am not claiming here that there is a future life of rewards and punishments. I am simply saying that the possibility of this future life must be taken into account in reasoning, as long as its absurdity is not proven. Now, did Max Stirner provide this proof? No. Did he take into consideration the possibility of ultra-vital punishment? No more. He therefore committed a sophism.

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With faith in the ultra-vital sanction, as with the certain knowledge that it exists, society is possible, because the spirit that animates its members is that of reciprocal sacrifice, resulting from egoism relative to a future life.

But without this faith or this science, it is quite different. Let us listen in this regard to Max Stirner expounding on the social consequences of egoism exclusively relative to present life.

— "If I said at first: I love the world, I can just as well add now: I do not love it: for I annihilate it as I annihilate myself; I use it and I wear it out. I do not constrain myself to feeling for men only a single and invariable feeling. I give free rein to all those of which I am capable. Why should I not declare it crudely? Yes, I exploit the world and men! I can thus remain open to all kinds of impressions, without any of them tearing me away from myself. I can love, love

with all my soul, and let the devouring fire of passion burn in my heart, without however taking the beloved for anything other than the nourishment of my passion, a nourishment that sharpens it without ever satiating it. All the care I bestow upon them is directed only to the object of my love, to the one my love needs, to the 'beloved.' How indifferent they would be to me, were it not for my love! It is my love that I feed on in them, they serve me only for that, I *enjoy* them.

"Let us choose another example, a very current one, this one: I see men plunged into the darkness of superstition, harassed by a swarm of ghosts. If I seek, to the extent of my strength, to project the light of day onto these apparitions of the night, do you believe that I am obeying my love for you? Perhaps I write out of love for men? No! I write because I want to make a place in the world for ideas that are my ideas; if I foresaw that these ideas would rob you of peace and repose, if in these ideas that I sow I saw the seed of bloody wars and a cause of ruin for many generations, I would spread them no less. Do with them what you will, do with them what you can, that is your business and I am not worried about it...

"Not only is it not for the love of you that I express what I think, but it is not even for love of the truth. No:

"I sing like the bird sings

"Who lives in the foliage.

"The very song that my voice produces

"Is my wage, and a royal wage."

"I sing? I sing because I am a singer! If I use you for this, it is because I need ears."

"When the world is in my way (and it always is), I consume it to appease the hunger of my egoism: you are nothing but food for me; in the same way, you too consume me and make me serve your use. There is only one relationship between us, that of utility, profit, interest. We owe nothing to each other, for what I may appear to owe you, I owe at most to myself. If, to make you smile, I approach you with a cheerful face, it is because *I have an interest* in your smile and my face is at the service of my desire. To a thousand other people whom I do not wish to make smile, I will not smile." (P. 361.)

— A pretty society, really, this gathering of egoists who see nothing beyond their present existence!

— "Let us therefore stop aspiring to community,

Max Stirner continued; "rather let us have *particularity* in view. Let us not seek the largest collectivity, 'human society,' let us seek in others only means and organs to be put to use as our property. In the tree and in the animal, we do not see our fellow beings, and the hypothesis according to which others would be

our fellow beings has its source in hypocrisy. No one is my fellow being, but, like all other beings, man is for me a property. I may be told that I must behave like a man towards 'the neighbor' and that I must 'respect' my neighbor. No one is for me an object of respect; my neighbor, like all other beings, is an object for which I have or do not have sympathies, an object which interests me or does not interest me, which I can or cannot use.

"If he can be useful to me, I agree to come to an agreement with him, to join forces so that this agreement may increase my strength, so that our united powers may produce more than either of them could do in isolation. But I see in this union nothing other than an increase in my strength and I only preserve it as long as it is my strength multiplied." (P. 381.)

— Always the exploitation of others by each self. But that's not even seen in a band of brigands!

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I have just shown, as briefly as possible, what the theory taught by Max Stirner in his book *The Unique and its Property* consists of.

I have shown that all his errors stem from his lack of logic: after having noted, in fact, that man always acts out of egoism, which is undeniable, he did not recognize that there are, or to be more exact, that there can be two kinds of egoism, one having as its motto *Post mortem nihil*, the other admitting, by faith or by science, that there exists, after the present life, a future life of rewards and punishments.

Now, when a general idea can be subdivided into two secondary or specific ideas, as long as one of these is not obviously absurd, it must be taken into account in the reasoning, on pain of committing a sophism.

This is precisely the fallacy of which Max Stirner was guilty.

Something else.

Accepting exclusively earthly egoism, that is to say, relating only to existence on this earth, Max Stirner rightly concludes that the meeting or bringing together of egoists of this category can only lead to the exploitation of all by all, or to war of all against all.

But one must not imagine that this observation bothers him in the least. Whether men live in peace or in war, whether they are happy or unhappy, it matters little to him. Did he not write that he did not love the world? That if, in the ideas he spreads, he saw bloody wars and a cause of ruin for many generations, he would not spread them any less.

But let us forgive the author for this indifference to the happiness of humanity. For, according to him, liberty does not exist.

— “One cannot,” he said, “do what one does not do, just as one does not do what one cannot do.”

— One does not do what is impossible to do, that is obvious and did not need to be said. But to affirm that one could not have done what one does not do, that one could not have taken the right path instead of the left one that one followed, is to deny liberty, the possibility of choice.

Under these conditions, Max Stirner could not have written his book otherwise than he did.

AGATHON DE POTTER

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