

# TOTAL ATHEISM II



The fear of God, Stirner explains, was shaken long ago, and a more or less conscious 'atheism', marked on the outside by a widespread 'unchurchliness', has involuntarily become the mode; but what was taken from God has been added to the account of Man...

"Our atheists," Stirner continues, "are a pious lot":

In coarser times than ours one cherished a particular faith, demanded devotion to a particular sacred being, and did not look kindly on those who believed otherwise. However, since 'freedom of belief' has taken the field, the 'jealous God and sole Lord' gradually melted into a fairly general 'supreme Being', and humane tolerance is satisfied so long as everyone reveres 'something sacred

This is also the core of Stirner's rejection of Feuerbach, who has provided an ersatz liberation from God, and

who "clutches desperately at the assembled substance of Christianity," to snatch it back to Earth from Heaven, retain the God-figure as an abstract figurine. Feuerbach, having humanized the divine, misses the point that "if God has tormented us, his 'Man' stands by to do so even more pressingly.

Despite grandiose claims made by Feuerbach for his new outlook (supposedly atheism, materialism, 'sensuousness', de-alienation), Stirner charges him with setting up a new Being or Essence [Wesen] to lord over humanity: an ethical and Wassergemÿtlich revision of existing religion. Feuerbach's Castalian water was spiked with the sacred essence (even Marx had fallen briefly under its spell), leaving us in a stupor in the "same old rut" of alienation.

The conflict over essences or supreme Beings, in which Stirner's fellow radicals were embroiled, struck him as futile, creating a cult [Kultus] "to which service and worship are due":

Whether the One God or the three-in-one, whether the Lutheran God or...no God at all but 'Man' instead...it makes no difference to one who negates the supreme Being itself, to one in whose eyes the servants of the latter are all together - pious folk: the most rabid atheist no less than the most believing Christian.

This is a considerable departure from a standpoint advocating "absolute atheism" as a metaphysical position. Clearly, Paterson has missed the dialectical twists that inspired Stirner to express himself as a critic of his times. Atheism was a fait accompli. Atheism was a banality. But if you are merely going to transfer the account balance of religion to humanism, then the Enlightenment, Stirner argued,

is merely a fraud. The Enlightenment was not enough:

After bloody combats this much has finally been attained, that opposing views...are no longer condemned as worthy of death. But why should I only dissent (think otherwise) about a subject? Why not push dissent to its last extremity, namely to the point of having no regard at all for the matter, thinking its nihilation, crushing it? Then the interpretation itself comes to an end, since there is nothing left to interpret. Why say that God is not Allah, not Brahman, not Yahweh, but – God? Why not say instead that God is nothing but a deception?.

There remains another dimension, the critique of 'Spirit' [Geist], a key concept of Hegelianism old and young, which Stirner set out to debunk, since the project of *Der Einzige* is to reject or eject the received language of theologians and philosophers up to that time.

The dissolution of Geist and essences [Wesen] go hand in hand because they formed a system of truth that Stirner viewed as archaic. "To know and acknowledge essences [die Wesen] and only essences, that is religion; its realm is a realm of essences, spooks and ghosts [Geiste]" (E0, p. 40). In a comprehensive study of Stirner's thought, the history of Spirit or 'spiritualizing' in German philosophical systems would have to be addressed. Here, as Stirner plays with and puns with the German language so stalinized by religions and spiritualizers, we will just sketch the basics.

In his lectures on the Philosophy of History, Hegel had called the new principle of Spirit "the axis on which the History of the World turns. This is the goal and the starting point of History" as historical materialism would announce itself later to be the goal and end of History. The phenomenology of Spirit unfolded in two distinct revolutions:

the waning of the Hellenistic period, and the Protestant Reformation. "Pre-Christian and Christian times pursue opposite goals," he claimed. "The former willed the idealization of the Real, the latter wills the realization of the Ideal.

That revaluation of all values whose generation was the demise of everything Hellenistic, worldly, patriarchal, aristocratic, based on kinship and blood, began to exalt as 'sacred' not the natural but the spiritual. The Sophists began to "recognize in mind [nous] the true weapon of man against the world," against "the power of unshaken existing things," to which they had been enslaved for so long. While the Sophists proclaimed this all-purpose weapon, they were far from the 'holiness of spirit'. Socrates countered that "It is not enough to use one's understanding in all things, but the question is what cause one exerts it for."

Socrates is thus the founder of ethics since as mortal man, one must obey the divine callings – divine not yet equating to monolithic or one-dimensional – and one must serve the 'good cause' morally. Socrates, says Stirner, introduced the period of 'purity of heart' in Greek thought. The general and civic good for all men goes to war with the appetites until the spirit subdues them. Thus begins a war of attrition lasting until, says Stirner, the

heretofore dominant, ancient powers" are driven from the heart, "in which they had long dwelt unmolested, to have at last no part at all in man. This war is opened by Socrates, and not till the dying day of the ancient world does it end in peace.

"So long as man is entangled in the motions of the world and embarrassed by his relations to the world, " says Stirner,

'so long is he not yet Spirit." Man is not yet delivered, for Spirit has not yet undertaken to divest itself of the body (and Socrates longs for precisely this in the Phaedo). When the heart was purged and one became unperturbed and relationless, only then could real worldlessness begin. Thus a new focus came about:

The ancients soared to the level of Spirit and strove to become spiritual... The Spirit busies itself solely about the spiritual, and seeks out 'traces of Mind' in everything; to the believing Spirit, 'everything comes from God' and interests him only to the extent that it reveals this origin to the philosophic spirit, everything appears with the stamp of Reason [Vernunft], and interests him only insofar as he can discover Reason, i.e. spiritual content, contained therein.

And so the Spirit "has to do with absolutely nothing that is not spiritual", with no thing at all, but only "with the essence which exists behind and above things, with thoughts [Gedanken]." The world familiar to the ancients was thus drained from the tub, along with the chthonic gods and all natural family and community ties.

With the world of Spirit Christianity then begins. The man who still faces the world armed is the ancient, the – heathen (to which class the Jew, as non-Christian, also belongs). The man who has come to be led only by his 'heart's desire', his sympathy, his fellow-feeling, his – spirit, is the modern, the – Christian.

As the ancients strove toward the overcoming of the world, and labored to release the heavy trusses of connection between man and that which is other they at last came also to

the dissolution of the State and precedence to everything private. Of course community, family, and so on are thus natural relations, burdensome hindrances which curtail my spiritual freedom.

Christianity, then, is not a matter of metaphysical claim- propositions, it is manifest in Stirner's time as the question of Spirit. And he is not saying so much that Spirit is nonsense, rather that Spirit is as it does: the proper "creations of Spirit make it Spirit":

As a visionary lives and has his world only the visionary images that he himself creates; as a lunatic generates for himself his own dream world, without which he could not be crazy, so the Spirit must create for itself its world, and is not spirit before it does so.

And so its creations make it into Spirit, and by its creations we recognize the Creator: in them he lives, they are his world... Now, what is der Geist? The creator of a spiritual world!

Once this notion of Spirit becomes flesh, the 'children of Spirit' run rampant, and the new world view occupies itself with self-validation, the 'doing' of Spirit building its own body:

The first creation...must come forth 'out of nothing' the Spirit has towards its realization only itself, or rather it has not yet even itself, but must create itself... Mystical as this sounds, we go through it as an everyday experience in this way: Ask yourself, are you a thinking being before you think? In creating the first thought you create yourself as one who thinks;...is not your singing what makes you a singer, your speech that makes you a speaker

Stirner's foil, who appears frequently addressed in the second person familiar 'Du', would reply here that "'I have a spirit, no doubt, but do not exist solely as spirit, rather I am a man with a body.'" We invariably feel in our natural sense of ourselves that we are something besides Spirit, as spirit contradicts immediacy except in the seizures of mystics, Christian uncanniness coexists with this and creates a conscience, a self-awareness, an operating system for a new society:

But, as thinking-I, sight and hearing are foregone in the enthusiasm of thoughts, so you also have been seized by the spirit-enthusiasm... The spirit is your ideal, the unattained, the otherworldly. Spirit is your – God, for 'God is Spirit'.

...Instead of saying, 'I am more than Spirit, you say with contrition, 'I am less than Spirit, and pure Spirit or nothing-but-Spirit I can only think of but am not; and since I am not it, so it is some Other, exists as an Other that I name as God.

Martin Luther shaped the German phenomenology of Spirit by inaugurating the period of "purity of heart", just as Socrates had done for classical thought. According to Stirner Luther was

first to understand that man had to become other than he was, if he wanted to comprehend Truth – namely he must become as true as Truth herself... With Luther, accordingly, dawns the perception that Truth, because she is thought, is only for the

thinking man. And this means that man must take an utterly different stance from this point on – namely the heavenly, believing, scientific standpoint, or that of thought [des Denkens] over against its object, the –standpoint of mind in relation to mind [des Geistes gegenŸber dem Geist]. Only thus can like apprehend like.

However it was that Protestantism broke the medieval hierarchy, it “could be overlooked entirely that it was precisely a ‘Reformation’, thus a modification of the antiquated hierarchy,” not unlike a restaurant under a new name and a new menu but of the same owners.

I regard the reverse [of Bruno Bauer’s view] to be the case, and think that the dominion of spirits [Geisterherrschaft] or freedom of mind [Geistesfreiheit] – they amount to the same – was never before so omnipotent and all-embracing because now, instead of rending the religious principle from Art, State, and Science, it has raised these latter out of secularity into the ‘realm of Spirit’ and made them religious.

Secularization then was superadded to the religious realm, and was not in any way its undoing. The success of the Reformation came in a perfectly conservative Hegelian *Aufhebung*, cancelling the previous hierarchy and yet raising and preserving it under a different form. Indeed Stirner seems to parody Hegel’s exposition in the lectures on the Philosophy of History, while the analysis is grounded in it:

Luther’s simple doctrine is that the specific embodiment

of Deity – infinite subjectivity, true spirituality, Christ – is in no way present and actual in outward form, but as essentially spiritual... Truth with Lutherans is not a finished and completed thing; the subject himself must be imbued with Truth, surrendering his particular being in exchanged for the substantial Truth, and making that Truth his own...

Hegel continues advancing the ideal of Spirit:

In the proclamation of these principles is unfurled the latest standard around which the peoples rally – the banner of Free Spirit... This is the banner under which we serve and which we bear... This is the sense in which we must understand the State to be based on religion. States and laws are nothing else than religion manifesting itself in the relations of the actual world.

This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free.

Stirner, contra Hegel, is anxious to show us the door out of there, as Hegel's celebration of Lutheranism eulogizes the very specter that would make freedom free, while unfreedom still rules the lives of all its subject. Another kind of liberation is required: "Let us," he proclaims,

take up the inheritance left by the ancients, and as active workers do with it as much as can be done with it! The world lies despised at our feet, far beneath us and our Heaven, into which her mighty arms no longer are thrust, and her sense-stupefying breath does not reach.

Retrofitters of past eras of faith are clearly scavengers:

The heart, from day to day more unChristian, loses the contents which it had busied itself with, until at last nothing remains but empty warmheartedness, the quite general love of men, love of Man, consciousness of freedom, 'self-consciousness' and such.

Only this is Christianity, completed because it has become bald, withered, devoid of content... What could there be in men to love, since they are alike all 'egoists', none of them Man as such?

Christianity is dead, then by virtue of its own internal exhaustion. It is a defeat based on running out of internal resources, rather than the hostility of the external world. The death of Christianity was death from within, exactly as Nietzsche would argue thirty years later.

Love of the flesh and blood individual, according to religion across its many facelifts, is non-spiritual, worldly, sinful, sinning against Spirit. It is precisely this that cannot be love. But such an institutional viewpoint ultimately commends self-hatred and hatred of the flesh by the flesh. What this is a license for is self-torment on the one hand and perpetuation of the Inquisition in more humane forms.

The psychology of all this tends to the classic reductio of all tyrannies:

To...pure theory, men exist only to be criticized, scoffed at, and finally despised; for these perspectives they are, no

less than for the fanatical parson, mere filth [Dreck] and other such finery

Pressed to this extreme of disinterested warm-heartedness, we must finally realize that the spirit, which alone is the Christian's love, is nothing – or in other words, that the Spirit is a lie.

Hegel's optimism that "Thought ought to govern spiritual reality" is thus not just an example of the coherence theory of metaphysical truth, not just a tautology, but a dangerously skewed prescription that banishes mortality with morality, moralizes the mortality of acting beings with the idea that "Man is not free when he is not thinking." Precisely this for Stirner is the corrupt cultural fixation that has to be undone.

Are you perhaps thinking of comparing yourselves to the ancients, who saw gods everywhere? Gods, my dear moderns, are not spirits: gods do not degrade the world to a semblance, do not spiritualize it.

But to you the whole world is spiritualized, and has become an enigmatic ghost. Therefore do not wonder if you likewise find in yourself nothing but a spook. Is not your body haunted by your spirit, and is not the latter alone the True and Real, the former only the 'transitory, null' or 'semblance'? Are we not all ghosts, uncanny beings awaiting our 'deliverance', namely 'spirits'?

The kingdom of Spirit and the rational freedom to embody it had been for the Germans a WundermŠre, but by Stirner's time had become a pious fraud. The originally rich soil of

God's death had become landfill, the offspring of Spirit had degenerated to spirits, the kind Grandma was prone to "see flitting between her limbs". Stirner's relentless punning on the connotations of Geist are not just cheap shots but a protest of the trivialization of Spirit, a magical notion that earlier in the century had so many in its grip.

The protest of Stirner here is against humanity being overrun by its own thought-constructions, validating the nightmare of Descartes, in which automata stalked about under the cloaks of passersby. The supreme 'haunting' had produced robots with loose screws [Sparren] in the head. This was the comedown of such infatuation with the metaphor of 'Spirit', which was of course invented by men, not by God. The supreme value of lofty ideals is shown as folly as they devolve into patent nonsense. In other words, it's not whether the sacred is or is not; it's that the sacred is an institution made by men, who then install themselves as the priestly class, and whether you call it enlightenment, democracy, revolution, libertarianism or whatever, freedom demands the dispossession of all priestly classes.

We had lost ourselves, suggests Stirner, in an adolescent fantasy. The idea that this is advocating pure nihilism, though, is not borne out as is clear from the following passage:

Not until one has come to love his bodily self, and takes delight in his own flesh and blood (but we are more apt to find this in a man of mature years), not till then has one a personal or egoistic interest – an interest not only of our spirit, but rather of a complete satisfaction, one of the whole fellow, a selfish interest. Compare a man with a youth, and see if he does not strike you as harder, less magnanimous, more selfish [eigennützig].... The point is, that he makes himself more the center than does the raw youth, who is

infatuated [schwärmte] more about other things such as God or the Vaterland.

He offers the child-adolescent-adult model to suggest that philosophers ought to get a live look at what's in front of them. In the adolescent stage we are likely to 'run after our thoughts' now, and do their bidding as before we had done that of our parents. Our acts are governed by our thoughts (ideas, representations, beliefs), as in childhood by the commands of elders.

Indeed we were already thinking as children, only our thoughts were not yet fleshless, abstract, absolute, i.e., nothing but thoughts, a heaven in themselves, a pure world of thoughts, logical thoughts.

Therefore the man is distinguished from the youth again in that the youth found himself as spirit but then lost himself in the general spirit... While the man finds himself as embodied Spirit.

...Christianity's magic circle would be shattered if the tension between existence and calling – i.e., between me as I am and me as I should be – were to cease... The embodied idea, of the embodied or 'completed' spirit, floats in the air before the Christian as 'the End of my Days', or as the 'goal of History'; to him it is not present time.

From the essay "Art and Religion" until his final reply to his critics in, Stirner insisted that 'Religion' was a matter of the understanding, and that "Christianity consists in the development of a world of thought. In other words, reprogramming the human brain through culture. This landscape

was barren by its one-dimensionality, so the mystery Christianity promised but can never deliver is its antithesis, the embodied Christ. Should Christ be embodied within us, the need for religion ceases. If we are each as a Christ, the colossus of Religion is toppled. Only if Religion promises what it can never deliver does it validate itself as an institution. Humanity must therefore sit by the white telephone of eternity for it to ring. And then few will be able to saunter back from the dead to demand a refund.

Stirner links Luther and Descartes in the idea that "Thoughts are the Sacred":

Luther and Descartes are fittingly placed together in their respective sayings, 'He who believes is a God', and "I think, therefore I am'. Man's heaven is thought, Geist... Particular faith, like faith in Zeus, Astarte, Jehovah, Allah, and so on can be destroyed, but faith itself is indestructible. In thought is freedom... In short, my being is living in the heaven of thinking, of a mind, a cogitare. I myself am nothing other than mind, whether thinking for Descartes or believing for Luther. My body, on the other hand, that I am not.

Modern philosophy gave itself the task, then of completing Christianity by a transforming secularization and humanizing reformation. Modern philosophy in this sense is an offspring of Christianity and subservient to it. Philosophy invented its own immortality, mystifying itself in the process. Stirner's critique of philosophy is neatly summarized in this passage:

For this reason the name of philosopher is not to be given

to him who indeed has open eyes for the things of the world, a clear and undazzled gaze, a correct judgment about the world.. But he alone is a philosopher who sees and demonstrates or proves the presence of heaven in the world, the supernal in the earthly, the divine in the mundane

And thus in a secular sense the philosopher is the one who sees in the mundane the shadows of the other, metaphysical world – this “otherworld” had to be maintained from the rubble of the Christian otherworld in order to maintain philosophers as a priestly class. When the mystifications are stripped of their sense, they remain fossilized (institutionalized) in language. Religion stripped of its cloak technologies is reduced to, as Lenny Bruce noted about Catholicism, a real estate scam, but we have to include the human brain in the zoning plan. Metaphysics has never recovered from the death of God, or else it would have to become science and technology, and it would rather pine away the Golden Age than attempt to adjust itself to the real world.

The all-too-human origin of religion, stripped bare of its robes and hoods, is just an anthropological invention, an invention of a society, and herein lies the unity of the critique of religion and of communism found in Stirner.

All religion is a cult of society [Gesellschaft], this principle by which social (cultivated) man is dominated. Neither is any God the exclusive God of an I, but always belongs to a society or community, whether that of a ‘family’ (the Romans’ Lar and Penates), of a ‘people’ (national God), or that of ‘all men’...

Consequently the prospect exists of extirpating all religion, only when one is prepared to antiquate society and all that springs from this principle. But it is precisely in

communism – because everything is supposed to be held collectively so as to establish ‘equality’ – that the social principle plans its highest achievement and triumph so far.

Society, Christianity, Philosophy, Communism: a matter of inventing, a matter of social theory as *Dichtung*, as Greek *poiesis*, inventing worlds that did not exist before. The world-making ability of the human brain also gave rise to the slavery inherent in the worlds it created, and mystification is the principle activity of unfreedom to that end. As Jean Cocteau once wrote in *The Liar*, “Imagine an unreal world...then get people to believe in it!” We are still left with the opposition between the ghostly and the sensual, and Stirner arguably was in no way inventing this dichotomy, but merely pointing it out as a crisis in the core memory of Western thinking.

The religious interpretation must be done with, then, and dealing with symptoms or reforming logical superstructures is not enough. Here personal and social psychology, as for Nietzsche, is where to locate the crucible of religion. Denial of mortality, hatred of sensuality, fear of playfulness, repression of enjoyment, all such phenomena belong to the psychomorphology of the control freaks of history and these emotions are embodied in institutions, freedom from which was the project of the Enlightenment.

Here too we return to Stirner’s idea of egoistic self-possession, contrasted to unegoistic possession by alienated thought-projections (fixed ideas). Clearly self-possession versus possession by the Other or others (unfreedom) is how the issue should be described. As Nietzsche would argue later, socially reinforced psychology and self-torment is where you look for the roots.

I am repulsive or odious to myself; I have a horror of, or loathe myself, am an abomination, or I am never enough to satisfy myself. From such feelings spring self-dissolution or self-criticism. Religiosity begins with self-renunciation and ends with complete criticism.

I am possessed and want to be rid of the 'evil spirit'. How do I set about it? I fearlessly commit the sin that seems to the Christian the worst, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Says Mark 3.29, 'But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.' I want no forgiveness and am not afraid of the Judgment (EO, p. 184).

Indeed Protestantism had adopted/kidnapped the figure of Satan as developed in medieval Catholicism, and deployed him as 'egoism' in the realm of the bodily, the sensual.

Paterson's review of Stirner's "total atheism", then, has created a straw man, saying things Stirner did not say and ignoring what he did say, via Paterson's transparent laundry list of what Stirner "ought" to have said.