

# THE EGOISTIC NIHILIST II



In order to be thorough and get a look into more rational and respectable critique of Stirner, we might for a few pages contrast with the preceding Albert Camus' consideration of *Der Einzige* in his book, *L'Homme Revolté*, known in English as *The Rebel*.

This work also painted Stirner to be a nihilist, but I would like here to introduce a more humanistic definition of nihilist, as one who breaks with tradition and received language to create a dangerous and bold paradigm or way of expression that threatens the traditional ideas of one's contemporaries.

If we liken nihilism to innovation, we can add the realization many of our beliefs have been wrong and that scientific discovery as well as authenticity and personal integrity require a dose of nihilism to achieve anything. Since we now enjoy a tremendous variety of so-called popular nihilism established in American and European pop culture, in art, cinema, comedy, TV, literature, fashion, and perhaps not enough in our philosophy and politics – arguably Jesus Christ,

Buddha, Socrates, the Founding Fathers, all can be identified still as nihilistic in a relative sense of the term. They broke with the established paradigm, to use a cliché, and were leaders in the reevaluation or abolition of repressive institutions.

What does it mean, then, to “eradicate the idea of God, after he had destroyed God himself”? This is how Camus painted Stirner, at odds with Stirner’s own description noted above in which he did not take credit for the death of God. In a somewhat silly paraphrase, Camus adds that unlike Nietzsche, “his nihilism was gratified. Stirner laughs in his blind alley, Nietzsche beats his head against the wall.”

Camus wrote that “the only truth is the Unique, the enemy of eternity and of everything, in fact, which does not further its desire for domination.” Indeed with Stirner,

the concept of negation which inspires his rebellion irresistibly submerges every aspect of affirmation. It also sweeps away the substitutes for divinity with which the moral conscience is encumbered

Camus considered Stirner an originator of climactic individualism, but this time as before, “rebellion leads to the justification of crime”: Stirner, he says, not only attempted to justify crime (in this respect the terrorist forms of anarchy are directly descended from him) but is visibly intoxicated by the perspectives that he thus reveals

In the dialectic between total freedom, and freedom within self-imposed rational limits, Camus placed Stirner as

championing the former, of course.

Irrational crime and rational crime, in fact, both equally betray the value brought to light by the movement of rebellion. Let us first consider the former. He who denies everything and assumes the authority to kill – Sade, the homicidal dandy, the pitiless Unique One, Karamazov, the zealous supporters of the unleashed bandit – lay claim to nothing short of total freedom and the unlimited display of human pride.

In metaphysical rebellion, Camus explains, man “protests against his condition and against the whole of creation”. As in the case of the rebellious slave, “we find a value judgment in the name of which the rebel refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself.” Metaphysical rebellion is “motivated by a concept of complete unity,” then. The metaphysical rebel

is therefore not definitely an atheist, as one might think him, but he is inevitably a blasphemer... Originally, at least, he does not suppress God; he merely talks to him as an equal. But it is not a polite dialogue...; when the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God .

As a Stirnerian counterpoint, though, we can note that Stirner’s embodied rebellion and Camus’ metaphysical rebellion are different philosophies a century apart. The desire to find

sources of totalitarianism is understandable in the postwar period, but easily leads to scapegoating. It should be a simple matter to determine if Stirner was negating what existed at the time he wrote, as I have here been arguing, or rather negating for the sake of negating. This also shows the 'egoism' of philosophers in not giving credit where it is clearly due. In Stirner, I would argue, there is no evidence of the desire for the 'complete unity'. Stirner seems to need no metaphysics, and therefore is poorly read as fomenting metaphysical rebellion.

Scapegoating of thinkers like Stirner and Nietzsche has long been anachronistic, but for philosophers to try and figure out what capitalism and socialism were, why Hitler's roots were in World War One, for instance, would require them to get their minds and hands dirty in empirical disciplines, in the details of history, biography, and psychology. For many philosophers there is nothing as dreadworthy as real flesh and blood and chronology, since this knocks them out of their cloud-cover where they had hid in metaphysics and the a priori, and forces them to describe the way the world actually works.

It should be clear by now that Stirner rejected metaphysics and was not doing metaphysics, in fact he led the rebellion against metaphysics and its realm of spooks and the sacred. For him to be interpreted as a metaphysician is the height of cluelessness.

Rebellion always is grounded in the rebellion of the mortal individual in society. The above paragraphs from Camus have a hollow ring, and one only need ask, in how many stories of freedom in history is the rebellion not on behalf of one's

fellows, be it a tribe, a province, a colony, or even one's fellow slaves or cellmates? Where is it demonstrably in the service of an abstract noble ideal of the sort invented by intellectuals, like democracy, knowledge, progress? Ideas, in any case, are seldom ends in themselves and rather only means, and the ends are usually mortal, contingent, and egoistic. Only philosophers take the ideas for the an sich.

Still, only for religion and cults of society, utopias and Orwell's 1984, do live men and women live to perpetuate the abstraction of society. For Stirner as well as for Godard's hero Lemmy Caution in his seminal 1966 film *Alphaville*, alienated consciousness prevails and because it is the State (science, domination, unfreedom), men and women must make pacts of rebellion. The idea that rebellion is something universal and philosophical is not shown by Camus in the slightest, and does not bear the stamp of history. Rebellions occur rather in local, tribal, or decentralized frames, to negate what exists in order to change what exists, and only later can philosophers come along and universalize these ideas. Universality is just an idea that was invented at a certain point in history, with Plato, perhaps, but it is contingent like all ideas. Arguably it is never unfreedom in general, but this unfreedom and this partisan, contingent and mortal cause, that is the object of struggle. So is the "ego" about this ego, or that one but not some essence "the ego".

Stirner's motto that "I have made nothing my cause" simply reflects, besides Goethe's poem, the celebration of autonomy, mortality, independence and freedom from the bonds of 'society'. Similarly, in the above passage, there is no need to "justify" the fall of God. If God symbolizes and embodies the social spirit of unfreedom, then the fall of God signifies liberation. The justification of liberation is

freedom. One owes nothing to the fallen gods or statues of Stalin.

Camus quotes from *Der Einzige* to support the idea that the spirit of rebellion finds "one of its bitterest satisfactions in chaos":

You [the German nation] will be struck down. Soon your sister nations will follow you; when all of them have gone your way, humanity will be buried and on its tomb I, sole master of myself at last, I heir to all the human race, will shout with laughter.' And so among the ruins of the world, the desolate laughter of the individual-king illustrates the last victory of the spirit of rebellion. But at this extremity, nothing else is possible but death or resurrection. Stirner, and with him all the nihilistic rebels, rush to the utmost limits, drunk with destruction. After which, when the desert has been disclosed, the next step is to learn how to live there; Nietzsche's exhaustive search then begins.

The assertion that "the concept of negation which inspires his rebellion irresistibly submerges every aspect of affirmation" is as I have shown already quite unwarranted and the cure is to go back and read the original texts.

In fairness, even if Camus was wrong on this point he was reflecting on real events in the postwar world. The project of his book in part was to search out intellectual complicity for fascism, in the spirit of Nuremburg, "in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime.". While it is doubtful if

philosophy has contributed much to understanding recent history, Nietzsche may have been correct in holding himself "far from blaming individuals for the calamities of millenia."

Paterson's spectre is something far more flimsy, an inversion of Camus' maxim, which is to the mark, that "a nihilist is not one who believes in nothing, but who does not believe in what exists" (HR, p. 69) and my claim here is that Camus reserved this maxim for himself. Surely Camus was on the mark that "only two possible worlds can exist for the human mind: the sacred...and the world of rebellion." If Paterson has heisted Camus' analysis for his own gain, neither author tried to come to grips with Stirner's actual relevance as a philosopher of ambiguity and rebellion, and each has attempted to politicize him or tar him with tags of political correctness. Camus bypassed Stirner's discussion of revolt [Empörung] in two sentences, though it is certainly a central concept for the Stirnerian project.

But if Paterson has ripped off Camus' figurehead of Stirner as nihilist figurehead, for Camus nihilism is an aberrant form of rebellion, and the kind of rebellion affirmed in *The Rebel* is a qualitatively circumscribed one. The rebel says No, but it is an affirmation as much as a renunciation. "Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition" .

Nihilism is always one of those ideas people will associate with anarchists and bomb-throwers, and so engrained in the language is this idea that nihilism is ideologically incorrect (i.i.) that it functions in some circles like the

old accusation of witchcraft, especially where the term was never used in the original.

The dialectic Camus missed entirely was the refusal by Stirner to opt for abstract universality, in favor of contingency, thisness, mortality, and having done so truly was an innovator of existentialism a century in advance, and one could even argue that existentialism was a rip-off of certain German thinkers of the previous century! But no matter, Camus in the end had little to say about Stirner, was using him for his own ammunition, and is of course interesting in his own context. A classic Nietzschean paradox, where one necessarily misunderstands and falsifies the past, but always for one's own purposes, always from egoism.

But Camus had timidly raised the question if it were "possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and its absolute values". Stirner's answer to this echoes across centuries, where Camus' is guarded and unsure.

In review, then, no matter if Paterson has made a caricature of Camus' caricature of Stirner, neither author has adequately fathomed Stirner's actual relevance as social critic and educator, dwelling instead on his alleged 'nihilism' and metaphysics. While calling someone a nihilist is not quite as bad as calling them a nazi, the scapegoating is the same as long as one amputates the context which the author addressed when he was writing.

Though it may come as a shock to the timid, egoism can paradoxically be classed with humility instead of braggadocio,

but certainly with honesty.

If Fichte says, 'Das Ich ist Alles', this seems to harmonize perfectly with my claims. But it is not that the I is everything, rather that the I destroys everything [zerstört Alles], and only the self-dissolving, never-being I, the finite I, is really – I. Fichte speaks of the 'absolute' I, but Stirner speaks of me, the transitory I.

Certainly Stirner's gleeful anticipation of German national demise, cited by Camus, was a nihilistic parody of Götterdämmerung. Along with the passage about the 'proud crime' recklessly blossoming in the darkening sky, one may be inclined to jump with Camus to see "the somber joy of those who create an apocalypse in a garret." [9] Then again, Stirner may have been trying to share with the reader his intoxication at some genuine and joyful 'wrecking' in the wake of falling ideologies, a hope largely frustrated by events as communism was being ideologically spawned by Marx and Engels.

Omitted by Camus was a passage that we would be remiss not to place at this time. It may be silly, but it is also passionate:

O thou, my much-tormented German people – what was your agony? It was the torment of a thought that cannot create for itself a body, that of a haunting spirit that fades into nothingness at every cock-crow, yet pines for deliverance and fulfillment. In me too you have lived long, dear thought, dearest – spook...

Farewell, thou, dream of so many millions, farewell you who have tyrannized your children for a thousand years!

Tomorrow they carry you to the grave; soon your sisters, the people [die Völker] will follow you. When they have all done so, then – humanity [die Menschheit] is buried and I am my own, the laughing heir!

This is a passage philosophers have taken literally, since Marx, as they consider it mere sophistry if a rhetorical, attention-getting campaign is put forth with wit and aggressive individuality. The café society of Stirner at the time, with the proximity to the bar, requires a measure of patience and awareness of context, no less than expressionist paintings. But biography and psychology are empirical disciplines.

The above passage of Stirner is arguably just a delirious wake-up call from a nightmare, thus affirming liberation and rebellion in sensual reality. In the final short section of his book, Stirner indicates what sort of an affirmation he intended:

The opposition of the Real and the Ideal is an irreconcilable one, ...not to be overcome unless someone negates both. Only in this someone [man] the third party, does the opposition come to an end; otherwise idea and reality will ever fail to coincide. The idea can never actualize itself, until it dies as Idea.

This third party is Stirner's Unique One, who has laid down the conditions for embodied spirit to be achieved. This is his antidote to Hegel, actually using Hegelian dialectic against Hegel (especially the lectures on "The German World" gathered in "The Philosophy of History") and to spurious liberation à la Feuerbach:

'Man' corresponds in today's culture to what the heathen Stoics set up as the 'wise man', the former and the latter alike as fleshless beings. The unreal 'sage', this bodiless 'saint' of the Stoics, became an actual person, a bodily 'Holy One', in the God made flesh [Christ]. The unreal 'Man', the bodiless I shall become actual in the bodily I, in me.

This seems to be a very strong antiPlatonic statement, and again celebration of mortality is the core of it.

The ideal of 'Man' is realized, when the Christian intuition turns around into the proposition that 'I', this original unique [Einzige] am man. The conceptual question, 'What is Man' has been changed into the personal, 'Who is the man?' [wer ist der Mensch]. With 'what' the concept was sought after, in order to realize it; with 'who', there is no longer any question at all, but the answer is personally at hand in the asker; the question answers itself (E0, p. 366).

This clearly favors the dissolution of philosophy in that it is a refusal to be bound by the received language of philosophers. We can note the common reaction for philosophers to object that the other is 'denying objective reality' when they are wounded that someone denies their reality. The novel idea that most philosophical discussions are nonsensical had to wait for the twentieth century to even be discussed, but Stirner incisively pinpointed the locus of trouble, in artificial creations of language, the seduction of men by their own thought-constructions. Small wonder that the egoist is taken for the bull in the china shop of holy artifacts, or is even this picture a figment of the cleric living in a world

that has passed him by?

To point out mystifications is perforce to raise the hackles of the mystifiers. Was it a shock to see pious 'transcendence' identified by the Enlightenment as 'hocus-pocus'? Was it heresy, given the Enlightenment, to refuse hierarchical and retrogressive forms of thinking, or was it rather the completion of the Enlightenment just as demanding bread, land, and the dismantling of absolutism?

Was Stirner, then, not just taking the best minds of the Enlightenment and saying that we should go all the way and not turn back to philosophers and their putty colored puzzles, or then again to the royal colors overthrown in politics but enduring in the spirit? Was it an offense to recommend for Germany the kind of upheavals seen in France and America?

Little insight reveals that any adequate analysis would address these matters and raise the issue of unfreedom and alienation that impassioned the Young Hegelians in the first place. But to do so would require a fair discussion of Stirner's own criteria. So it is amusing to see Stirner accused of being a shut-in or, as we are about to see, a solipsist.

One of the reason that heretics prefer to see the Untergang of philosophy is that this discipline always reverts not to its roots but to its patrons, to authority, and again and again shrinks from active participation in the society which tolerates it. The value of philosophy is certainly knowing when to stop, and here many of the past century's great minds are unable to keep up with Stirner.

To affirm nihilism here is only to note how philosophy has shrunk from changing the world in the way of the egoist or revolutionary, rather it sticks to monkishly interpreting it, along the way managing to torture undergraduates with

excruciating texts like the Critique of Pure Reason, symbolic logic or sundry pet topics of the instructor or teaching assistant, as if philosophy could still exist as a kind of intellectual boot camp. If Stirner were speaking today, he would argue that these people need to seriously get a grip, collect a clue, rediscover the empirical world, and pour out the metaphysical malmsey. Another phrase for what Stirner was doing might be "dissolution to the ground", which is not the same as a scorched earth policy.

On the other hand to interpret Stirner as affirming irrationalism is unjustified in the texts and imposes another metaphysical overlay for the sake of intellectual pointsmanship.