

# STIRNER                    CONTRA                    MARX: MORALITY, SOCIETY AND LIBERTY



In many respects, Stirner's work stands as an anticipatory attack on Marx' thought. Modern critics of Marxism have frequently pointed out inadequacies in the Marxist conception of history, especially concerning what the theory had rendered obsolete in traditional philosophy.

The Ego essentially anticipated these inadequacies. 1845 is judged to be the moment in Marx' philosophical career where he «left behind» a fundamental discourse on ethics; one that Hook argues «still occupies us today».98 Marx' new theory of historical materialism cut short a discussion about any systems of ethics or public morality.

Many have recognised this negation in Marx' work. For Marx, the crucial issue was the validity of his theory of history; he felt notions of morality and of religion had finally been eliminated from his work. However, the old assumption that «scientific socialism» was a scientific system has yielded to the notion that such a system of thought is in essence

moralistic or even religious; what Martin Buber calls a «socialist secularisation of eschatology».

If we accept this radical new perspective, as many do, then Stirner's stance in *The Ego* emerges as more modern and radical than was previously considered. Stirner would no doubt have agreed that the materialist conception of history was eschatological; a religious mode of thought. Therefore, Stirner's early, if somewhat undeveloped attack on morality, often disguised as ideology, assumes a vital position as the original critique of the young Marx.

In spite of the anti-moral nature of historical materialism and Marx' explicit repudiations of morality, his early thought was packed with moral judgements, (e.g. condemnations, directions etc). Whether or not we see Marx as moralist is beside the point. Marx did not practice moral philosophy in the traditional sense of developing any form of system of ethics, or enquiry. Whilst criticising *The Ego*, Marx was inspired to claim:

«The communists ... preach no morality, which Stirner does too much ... on the contrary, they know well that egoism as well as self-sacrifice is, in certain circumstances, a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals.»

The question of Marx' status as a clandestine moralist who openly opposed moral philosophy remains a key contradiction, especially in his early thought. It represents a temporal rip in the fabric of Marxian thought that still plagues its acolytes today. Its origins, found in young Marx' reading of

The Ego, may further unsettle his adherents. If Marx needed inspiration, or even encouragement to abandon his more explicit moral leanings, then he needed to look no further than Stirner's polemic. Stirner had refuted Left Hegelian humanism, especially targeting its innate moral content. He also attacked most forms of moral convention, challenging the absolute basis of moral edicts against polygamy, blasphemous desecration and even incest. Such acts were still able to cause a «moral shudder» in the common man, an indication for Stirner that the actual emancipation of the ego, what others might call spiritual emancipation, had yet to be realised.

For Stirner, self-possession was to be sought by the judicious organisation of desire, rather than its arbitrary suppression. Taking his cue from Charles Fourier, Stirner lauded animal appetites as more healthy and poetic than a life of abstinence. Just as Feuerbachian humanism was seen as the negation of traditional theology, Stirnerian egoism was hailed the «negation of traditional ethics». Instead of Man creating God in his own image, Stirner taught that the individual ego had created Man in his own image.

In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) Feuerbach believed he was being truly radical by having dissolved the subject (God) into all of its predicates (Man); Stirner had simply demonstrated how far such dialectical sabotage could logically go, he chose to dissolve the predicate Society, into the individual pronouns – I, me, myself. The individual ego was Stirner's «laughing heir» to the whole Hegelian project.

Stirnerian egoism was not conceived of as a new form of morality, rather it was opposed to morality. This is not to say egoism was inherently immoral; Stirner rejected the idea of absolute opposition between moral categories, «good» and

«evil», regarding them as «antediluvian».

Stirner's claims of ethical antinomianism were deeply felt and taken seriously by Marx. The Ego encouraged him to dispel any ethical ideas from the new direction of his thought. Marx already regarded the Hegelian accounts of political, judicial and moral conceptions as critically wrong, but The Ego tipped the balance. If Marx' moral or metaphysical scepticism stems from Stirner, then the potency of his criticism of the nihilism inherent in The Ego needs to be re-assessed.

Marx used Stirner's desecration of morality to justify his own thought, then proceeded to decry Stirnerian egoism as religious thought, as even «preaching» a morality. Classifying all idealistic philosophies as theodicies, a «surreptitious sort of clericalism» that must be repudiated, was a result of the dogmatic materialist positions that Marx and Engels came to adopt. All idealists were by default religious thinkers, yet the materialistic basis of their thought did little to elucidate their position on moral teaching. The mystification surrounding Marx' conception of morality finds its basis in his distortion of Stirner's moral nihilism. Rather than offering an alternative moral theory for communism Marx had disregarded all morality in the pursuit of revolution and class struggle.

In truth, evacuating the moral content of his thought was something Marx only aspired to. Ultimately, Stirner had pushed Marx to a philosophical position where the moral content of his work now had to be implicit. Sidney Hook states «Marx leaned so far backward that, soon after his death, the myth became current that he had no place for any ethics in his philosophy of social activity».

Marx' reaction was a tactical manoeuvre, allowing him to preserve the silent moral content of his work. Karl Popper saw Marx as a man for whom «principles of humanity and decency ... needed no discussion» they were «to be taken for granted».107 However, if Marx decided to adopt a personal notion of moral principles, why respond to Stirnerian egoism which was so obviously an aberration? It is difficult to believe that Marx simply avoided explicit moral theory because he disliked «preaching», as Popper assumes. Marx' real antipathy for moral philosophy was rooted in his actual thought. The very thought consolidated in *The German Ideology* as a result of reading *The Ego*.

Regardless of the problems Marx left unresolved, the crisis of 1845 had helped him finally realise the aim of his thought: to prove future world revolution. However, yet again another Marxian impossibility emerged; the problem of reconciling historical inevitability with an ethical model. Historical inevitability could hardly function as an inherent moral value for Marx.108 The determinism of the materialist conception of history had necessitated an angry confrontation with Stirner. It also illuminated a displeasing characteristic of the young Marx, his inability to recognize any opposition to his revolution. Further, it showed that Marx underestimated the role of discontent in historical events, which Stirner and Hegel did not; they had allowed contingency an important role in the historical process.

Crucially, unlike Marx, Stirner argued that the historical process had to be the work of human hands; history was never an abstraction that caused events. It was concrete, specific and human in all its forms. He also recognised that certain

thinkers had hijacked history, and divested it of its autonomy:

«History seeks for man: but he is I, you, we. Sought as a mysterious essence, as the divine, first as God, then as man (humanity, humaneness, and mankind), he is found as the individual, the finite, the unique one.»

Stirner saw that all kinds of politics wanted to educate man, to bring him to the realisation of his «essence», to give man a «destiny» to make something out of him – namely, a «true man».

This itself was a ruse, making thinkers fall for «the proper error of religion». Whether one saw destiny as divine or human was of no concern. Stirner found that both positions held that man should become this and that: this postulate, this commandment, to be something.

Incongruously, in his reading of The Ego Marx felt he could finally reject a system of morality and yet maintain moral positions. He was extremely anxious about the fact that his description of socialism could become tainted by abstract moral ideals, ideals which Stirner had shown to be transcendent. However, it was Stirner who had equipped Marx with the very tools to wage a methodological campaign against Feuerbach's quasi-religious conception of «Man», enabling him to reject an «ethics of love» or a «politics of socialism» through his analysis of the social nature of man. Such a solution would have been implausible to Stirner. To many, the religious essence of historical materialism was «superficially obscured by Marx' rejection of the traditional religions».

However, Stirner had already identified such religious essence in Marx' pre-1845 intellectual allies. His criticisms of Feuerbach were equally applicable to the young Marx who had stated: «The criticism of religion ends with the precept that the supreme being for man is man». In the same way Stirner observed the religious essence of Left Hegelian humanism and early socialism, Marx too stands accused, his atheism was still a categorically religious proposition. Thus, Stirner's original accusation of the «pious» atheism of the Left Hegelians is particularly compelling when applied to the thought of young Marx.

It is probable that Stirner would have seen the young Marx as a kind of post-theological moralist attempting to solve problem of original sin and ethical commitment through the redemptive power of human «History». The picture that Marx paints of capitalists and the bourgeois as manifestations of evil, and his dismissal of the individual's responsibility for their own misery would surely be seen as the personification of «clericalism». Stirnerian critique would no doubt pronounce Marx a vulgar moralist, subordinating the individual to the new God, «History». Now that history itself was moralised, the profound Hegelian awareness of history as amoral was lost.

Like morality, Stirner regarded society as an equally fictive notion, and saw that moral obligation was presumably derived from the social nature of man. Stirner observed that man's social dimension was merely an alternative type of religious and moral ideology. His hostility to «sacred society» abounds in *The Ego*; it was the arena in which «the most oppressive evils make themselves felt», its domination was more brutal and insensitive than any previous despotism. Not only was

Stirner's notion of state antithetical to Marxism, but by utterly rejecting the constructions of idealist philosophers he could only discover consciousness inside the mind; not in some trans-empirical ego or the Marxian «social being». For Stirner, emphasis upon the social nature of the mind, the evaluation of all ideas in relation to the social whole (or state), represented a menace to individual freedom and to the autonomy of the individual.

He considered social duties as purely self-legislated. Our relationship to society was seen as one mediated by the ego. Whilst society may pattern self-realisation and define the egoist's rebellion, its formative influence fades in favour of the individual until «society» itself is entirely displaced. For Marx, however, the «atomism» of civil society was offensive – and had to be transcended: Stirner had failed to root his ideas in the social process, hence the arbitrary nature of his ideology. However, Stirner implied that certain ideas are not merely reflections of their social environment and can remain outside the appraisal that they are socially conditioned by. For Stirner these were the figurative orderings of experiences, the result of the irreducible egocentric nature of the individual; self-reflection mediated by personal drives and private needs.