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Ownness and Property-All and Nothing

From The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism

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The self as egoist was present all along as the object of the most basic negations of the God of religion or the ethical person. The self was repudiated as “sinner” and “inhuman wretch.” But nothing could erase the self’s being the self—this bodily self, with its inherent I-ness, its ownness (Eigenheit). Beaten down by God, the state, society, and humanity, it nevertheless slowly began to raise its head again. It could do this because fanatics brandishing Bibles or reason or the ideals of humanity “are unconsciously and unintentionally pursuing I-ness”.

Firstly, it was revealed that “God’s” true body was “man,” which represented one step toward the selfdiscovery of the ego.

The search for the self remained unconscious as the ego lost itself in fanaticism over reason or the idea of humanity.

In humanism’s denunciations of the egoism of the ego as inhuman and selfish, the more vigorous its efforts, the clearer it became that the ego was not something to be set aside. It was only from the depths of nihility to which the ego had been

banished that it could, in a gesture of negating all negation, rise to reclaim itself.

In the first half of his work, Stirner develops this ironical dialectic; in the second half, he deals with the positive standpoint of egoism, showing how the ego claims its uniqueness and ownness, embraces within itself all other things and ideas, assimilates and appropriates them to itself as owner (Eigner), and thus reaches the awareness of the unique one (Einzig) who has appropriated everything within his own I-ness and has made the world the content of his own life.

Stirner understands the ownness of the self as the consummation of "freedom." "Freedom" is originally a Christian doctrine having to do with freeing the self from this world and renouncing all the things that weigh the self down. This teaching eventually led to the abandoning of Christianity and its morality in favor of a standpoint of the ego "without sin, without God, without morality, and so on". This "freedom," however, is merely negative and passive. The ego still had to take control of the things from which it has been released and make them its own; it must become their owner (Eigner). This is the standpoint of ownness (Eigenheit).

What a difference there is between freedom and I-ness

I am free from things that I have got rid of but I am the owner

(Eigner) of things which I have within my power (Macht) and

which I control (miichtig).

Eigenheit is the standpoint of the Eigene; in this standpoint freedom itself becomes my property for the first time. Once the ego controls everything and owns it as its property, it truly possesses freedom. In other words, when it overcomes even the

same time nullifies their "truth." It is the same ego that then makes them its own flesh and blood, owning them and "enjoying" (geniessen) the use of them. The ego inserts nihilism behind the "essence" of all things, behind the "truth" of all ideas, and behind "God" who is at their ground. Within this nihilism these sacred things which used to reign over the ego are stripped of their outer coverings to reveal their true nature. The ego takes their place and makes all things and ideas its own, becoming one with the world in the standpoint of nihilism. In other words, Stirner's egoism is based on something similar to what Kierkegaard called "the abyss of pantheistic nihilism" or to what Nietzsche called "pantheistic faith" in eternal recurrence.

This is why Stirner called this "ownness" the creator of all things, born free. From this standpoint he can claim that, for the individual, thinking itself becomes a mere "pastime" (Kurzweile) or "the equation of the thoughtless and the thoughtful I". I have already touched on the way in which the abyss of nihilism reveals the true face of life as boredom (Langweile) in connection with Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. The creative nihilism which overcame this kind of nihilism appears as "play" in Nietzsche and as "pastime" in Stirner.

We saw how Feuerbach criticized Hegel's absolute spirit as an "abstraction" and offered a posture of truly real existence in place of it. According to Stirner, this "existence" of Feuerbach's is no less of an abstraction.

But I am not merely abstraction, I am all in all, and consequently

myself am abstraction or nothing. I am all and nothing;

[I am no mere thought, but I am at the same time full of

thoughts, a world of thoughts.] Hegel condemns I-ness, what

is mine (Meinige)-that is, "opinion" (Meinung) . However, "absolute

thinking" . . . has forgotten that it is my thinking, and

that it is I who think (ich denke) , that it itself exists through

me . . . it is merely my opinion.</quote>

The same can be said of Feuerbach's emphasis on sensation [Sinnlichkeit] in opposition to Hegel:

<quote>But in order to think and also to feel, and so for the abstract

as much as for the sensible, I need above all things me myself,

and indeed me as this absolutely definite me, this unique individual.

The ego, which is all and nothing, which can call even absolute thinking my thinking, is the ego that expels from the self all things and ideas, reveals the nihility of the self, and at the

"form of freedom," freedom becomes its property. Stirner says that "the individual (der Eigene) is one who is born free; but the liberal is one who seeks freedom, as a dreamer and fanatic".

And again:

"Ownness has created a new freedom, insofar as it is the creator of everything". This ownness is I myself, and "my entire essence and existence." Stirner calls the essential being of this kind of ownness "unnameable," "conceptually unthinkable," and "unsayable". The ego thinks and is the controller and owner of all thinking, but it cannot itself be grasped through thought. In this sense it is even said to be "a state of thoughtlessness (Gedankenlosigkeit)". In contrast to Feuerbach, who considers "humanity" as the essence of human being and the egoist who violates humanity as "an inhuman wretch," Stirner claims that there is no way to separate the notion of a human being from its existence. If anything, Stirner's existentialism dissolves the essence of human being into its unnameable Existence .

From everything that has been said, Stirner's deep affinity with Nietzsche should be clear. His standpoint of the "power" to assimilate everything in the world into the self is reminiscent of Nietzsche's idea of will to power. In Nietzsche it is folly as the culmination of knowledge, and in Stirner it is "thoughtlessness" that makes all thinking my property. The ego in Nietzsche is also ultimately nameless, or at most symbolically called Dionysus. In Stirner's case we also find the element of "creative nothing," a creative nihilism. This latter point merits closer examination.

In a remarkable passage, Stirner confronts the "faith in truth," just as Nietzsche does, and emphasizes "faith in the self itself" as the standpoint of nihilism.

As long as you believe in truth, you do not believe in yourself

and are a servant, a religious person . You alone
are the
truth, or rather, you are more than the truth, which
is nothing
at all before you . Of course even you inquire after
the truth, of
course even you “criticize,” but you do not inquire
after a
“higher truth,” which would be higher than you,
and you do
not criticize according to the criterion of such a
truth. You engage
thoughts and ideas, as you do the appearances of
things,
only for the purpose of making them . . . your own,
you want
only to master them and become their owner, you
want to orient
yourself and be at home in them, and you find
them true
or see them in their true light . . . when they are
right for you,
when they are your property. If they should later
become
heavier again, if they should disengage themselves
again from
your power, that is then precisely their untruth-
namely, your
powerlessness . Your powerlessness [Ohnmacht]
is their power

[Macht], your humility their greatness. Their
truth, therefore,
is you, or is the nothing that you are for them, and
in which
they dissolve, their truth is their nullity
(Nichtigkeit) .

Stirner’s assertion here that the truth of thought is one’s nihilism, and the power of truth one’s powerlessness, comes to the same thing as Nietzsche’s assertion that “the will to truth” is the impotence of the will, that “truth” is an illusion with which the will deceives itself, and that behind a philosophy that seeks truth runs the current of nihilism . Further, Stirner’s idea that when thought becomes one’s property it becomes true for the first time parallels Nietzsche’s saying that illusion is reaffirmed as useful for life from the standpoint of will to power. In Stirner’s terms, nihilism as powerlessness turns into creative nothing. This “self-overcoming of nihilism” and “faith in the self” constitute his egoism .

He goes on:

“All truth in itself is dead, a corpse; it is alive only in the way that my lungs are alive—namely, in proportion to my own vitality” . Any truth established above the ego kills the ego; and as long as it kills the ego, it is itself dead, and merely appears as a “ghost” or an *idée fixe*.

<quote>Every truth of an era is the *idée fixe* of that era . . . one wanted after all to be ‘inspired’ (*begeistert*) by such an ‘idea.’ One wanted to be ruled by a thought—and possessed by it!</quote>

It is thus possible to discern a clear thread of nihilism running through the fifty years that separate Nietzsche from Stirner, each of whom recognized his nihilism as the expression of a great revolution in the history of the European world. As Stirner says: “We are standing at the borderline.” Both were truly thinkers of crisis in the most radical sense.