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THE UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL AND HIS OTHER*

I. FROM STIRNER TO LEVINAS

The classical philosophy of ancient Greece begins with a nihilistic challenge, and at the beginning of modern philosophy, in the more narrow meaning of the word, we find the work of a man who has "staked his life on nothing." This man wrote under the name Max Stirner.

Nihilism1 is an unmistakable moment—a movimentum—in today's intellectual life. What Stirner in his brilliant work The Unique Individual and His Own ** was the first to feel, think, and express, emerges again as "will to power" in Nietzsche, as radical individualism in the philosophers of existence and as Promethean ethos in the early Sartre. Its effect on modern controversies—such as the general validity of scientific theories, the inviolability of moral standards, the legality of government decrees—is explosive. Stirner's theories live on in the heart of many a youth as a conscious, or an unconscious, anarchism. Only those who have no sensibility whatsoever know nothing of Max Stirner's importance today. Stirner continues to live among us whether we recognize it or not.

For the historian of philosophy, the problem is easy. He will say that Stirner was not a particularly profound thinker, that he did not construct a magnificent system, and that he did not discover any subtle new methods. Although Stirner drew on the enormous mental achievements of German idealism, and used the philosophy of spirit, he only made use of it in order to destroy it, to deride it, and to render it ridiculous. According to the historian, Stirner resembles an impudent sparrow that has built its nest on the splendid

* The following article is a translation from the German of a communication read at the Phenomenological Congress at Fribourg, Switzerland. Translations of quotations and titles are ours, none having been taken from already existing translations by D. Perebom, Fribourg.

** Our translation differs from the existing translation entitled The Ego and His Own (New York: Harper, 1971). "Unique individual" not only represents a close translation of the German "der Einzige" but also translates Stirner’s meaning, whereas the term "ego" has idealist and psychological connotations.

monument of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. The noise of the ridiculous bird is bothersome, the disorder it creates is irritating, and by soiling the monument, it disgraces those noble spirits; the fire department should be called upon to remove the sparrow’s nest.

But when the fire brigade comes with all its material, the unexpected happens. The firemen try to approach the nest with poles and ladders, with ropes and cords. It seems that a single thrust should be sufficient to push the wretched structure down. Surprisingly, however, in spite of strenuous efforts, the men cannot succeed in reaching the troublemaker’s nest. Indeed, the efforts of these worthy people are so obviously futile, that the observant onlooker cannot help asking whether such futility is mere coincidence.

II. Stirner’s Critique of Ideologies

Let us have a closer look at this sparrow’s nest. It is constructed artlessly enough. Stirner’s chef d’oeuvre The Unique Individual and His Own does not have a complicated logical structure, nor is it based on difficult methodological considerations. It hardly contains any philosophical jargon. Nevertheless, is simplicity proof of insignificance?

The preface of the work clearly states Stirner’s main concern: “I have staked my life on nothing.”* The frame of mind it expresses — nausea — has a modern ring. Stirner loathes the ideologies of his time which try to enlist faithful and compliant followers. He is sick of the German churches, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran, and detests the liberal Protestants as much as the emotional Pietists. He loathes political ideologies whether they be conservative or liberal, nationalistic or cosmopolitan. He is neither on the side of private ownership, nor of the communists who want to abolish it. He detests the theistic, pantheistic, atheistic, idealistic, and realistic philosophies of his time. Tame humanist theories are as disgusting to him as the dangerous doctrines of the Hegelian left.

But the rather unusual reason why Stirner rejects all ideologies is that they do not touch him and have no power over him. Stirner will never be a supporter, an advocate, or even a nominal adherent to a “worthy cause.” He

*Stirner refers to Goethe’s poem “Vanitas Vanitatum.”