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A Solitary Life

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Der Einzige und sein Eigentum is an unusual and intriguing text.¹ It is perhaps the unconventional character of both the substantive content and literary form of the book that leads so many readers to wonder about its author, Max Stirner (1806–1856), and about the kind of life that he might have lived. In this chapter, I provide some biographical information about Stirner, and, rather more tentatively, broach some questions about the relationship between his life and work – in particular, the relationship between his life and the singular book with which he is closely identified.

I will start with his life, but should preface the account that follows with an acknowledgement and an admission. First, much of the factual information reproduced here was originally unearthed by the poet and anarchist John Henry Mackay (1864–1933).² The latter’s work (discussed further in the last section of this chapter) is not without weaknesses, but the debt of any biographical account of Stirner to Mackay’s original labours deserves recognition. Second, after some agonizing, I have chosen to use the name ‘Stirner’ to refer to my subject at all stages of his life. Strictly speaking, the name ‘Stirner’ only appeared much later, initially as a student nickname, based on his ‘remarkably high forehead [Stirn]’, which was exaggerated further by the way in which he parted his thin, light hair.³ ‘Stirner’ was subsequently used as a pseudonym, a ‘nom de guerre’ in his writings, and often as his preferred name in everyday life. In addition, ‘Stirner’ is now the name by which he is usually known. As a result, I have chosen to risk anachronism here by using it even when writing about his earlier life.
The bare facts of Stirner’s life are easily told. He was born on 25 October 1806, in Bayreuth (in northern Bavaria). He was the first and only child of Albert Christian Heinrich Schmidt (1769–1807), an instrument-maker by trade (he made flutes), and Sophia Eleonora Schmidt (née Reinlein) (1778–1859). He was baptized into the Lutheran church, and named Johann Caspar Schmidt after his godfather – Johann Caspar Martin Sticht (1769–1838) – who was married to his father’s sister, Anna Marie.

Those early family circumstances were almost immediately disrupted. His father died when Stirner was barely six months old, and his mother remarried in 1809. His stepfather, Heinrich Friedrich Ludwig Ballerstedt (1761–1837), was an apothecary, and the couple eventually settled in Kulm on the Vistula. After some delay, Stirner joined them in 1810. He gained a half-sister, but she died in 1812 when she was less than three years old. In 1818, for reasons that are not certain, the twelve-year-old Stirner returned to Bayreuth, where he joined his aunt and godfather (who was a guarantor and foreman at a hosiery works). Stirner’s guardians had no children of their own, and he lived with them for the next eight years until he started university.

We know little about Stirner’s youth, but academic pursuits seem to have played a predominant role in his life at this time. At the Gymnasium and, initially at least, at university, he applied himself diligently and was rewarded with noticeable (if not outstanding) success. Bayreuth had an especially reputable Gymnasium, whose director at the time was the Hegelian Georg Andreas Gabler (1786–1853). Stirner was a very good, although not exceptional, pupil, obtaining a first class mark (‘very worthy [sehr würdig]’) on his school leaving certificate.

In 1826, Stirner enrolled in the faculty of Philosophy at the University of Berlin. At first, he studied hard, attending the lecture courses of several distinguished scholars including those of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The aspect of his education usually, and plausibly, considered to be of greatest importance to his intellectual evolution is his attendance at a number of lecture series delivered by the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), in particular, the latter’s lectures on the philosophy of religion, on the history of philosophy, and on the philosophy of ‘subjective spirit’. In addition, it should be noted that Stirner was taught by a variety of other contemporary Hegelians including, for example, the theologian Philipp Marheineke (1780–1846) and (later) the philosopher Christian Kapp (1790–1874). The extent and