Max Stirner was an eccentric German philosopher who brought Fichte down to earth and turned Schopenhauer on his head. Fichte’s statement that consciousness (ego) is everything harmonises perfectly with Stirner’s thesis, boldly defended in his infamous book of 1844, Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum, translated by Germans into English as The Unique One and His Property, but mistranslated by English speakers as The Ego and its Own. Stirner added, however, that it is not that ego is everything, but that ego destroys everything. By ego he meant the finite, personal ego, not an absolute or transcendental ego. Stirner vehemently rejected the idea that we have lying outside ourselves a destiny which enables us to lay claim to our basic humanity. This is a Christian fable. He criticised Fichte for inventing a substitute god – the absolute ego – to which all individuals are subordinated.

Fichte’s ego too is the same essence outside me, for everyone is ego; and, if only this ego has rights, then it is ‘the ego’, it is not I. But I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique. Hence my wants too are unique, and my deeds; in short, everything about me is unique. And it is only as this unique I that I take everything for my own, as I set myself to work, and develop myself, only as this. I do not develop men, nor as man, but, as I, I develop – myself. This is the meaning of the – unique one.¹

Stirner believed that Socrates, Jesus, and all other prophets and philosophers invented new ways of alienating ‘I’ from itself. Fichte’s absolute ‘I’ has to be reduced to a personal ‘I’ and words cannot name it – it is unique. His thesis: I have founded my philosophy on nothing, and
nothing is more to me than myself. A radical nominalist, Stirner set out to defend the individual (himself) against all philosophies, religions and political systems that threaten to deprive him of his uniqueness. Stirner’s concern is neither with the divine nor with other people’s truths but solely with what is his alone, for he is unique. As a nominalist he rejected such abstractions as God, humanity, mankind, liberty, equality, fraternity and progress, which are the foundation stones for religions, philosophies and other systems of thought. Humans are easily seduced and misled by these abstractions – or spooks as he calls them. People who are infatuated with spooks leave individuals out of account and in their name commit horrendous crimes. The greatest spook of all is God – a dangerous abstraction used by ruthless lunatics to control and murder millions of people. Before Nietzsche was born Stirner announced the death of God and of the Christian ideals of good and evil. Human are slaves to false moralities and Stirner was determined to free himself from them. Religious morality is slave morality and must therefore be rejected along with all other systems of belief. The only meaningful unit is not the Church, or the State, but ‘I’. For example, Stirner criticised Socrates as a fool because he conceded to the Athenians the right to kill him. Socrates was ‘deluded’ that he was a member of a close community and forgot that he was an individual. ‘Know thyself’ did not mean understand yourself as an individual but ‘know your place in the community and before the gods’. This, for Stirner, is philosophical poison which, in Socrates’ case, ended with real poison.

Stirner argued that in all absolute philosophies, especially those of Plato and Hegel, a form of spiritual tyranny condemns individuals to impotence by criticising private judgements as irrelevant.

‘Absolute thinking’ is that which forgets that it is my thinking, that I think, and that it exists only through me. But I, as I, swallow up again what is mine, am its master; it is only my opinion, which I can at any moment change, annihilate, take back to myself, and consume... Your thoughts are my thoughts, which I dispose of as I will, and which I strike down unmercifully; they are my property, which I annihilate as I wish. I do not wait for authorisation from you first, to decompose and blow away your thoughts. It does not matter to me that you call these thoughts yours too, they remain mine nevertheless, and how I will proceed with them is my affair, not a usurpation... Do you believe thoughts fly around free like birds, so that everyone may get himself some which he may then make good against me as his inviolable property? What is flying around is all – mine.