

Would the Real Max Stirner Please Stand Up?

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ABSTRACT

This paper criticizes a range of recent positions on Max Stirner's relationship to the anarchist canon. A recent rise in academic attention to Stirner offers a possibility for new analyses to clear away the misconceptions of the past, however some old mistakes are still consistently repeated, not all important insights find their way into the present discussion, and some new readings of Stirner even introduce new inadequacies. Addressing specifically the controversial definition of the anarchist canon in *Black Flame* and the debate surrounding the concept of postanarchism, I show the theoretical and argumentative problems present in different texts, both those that identify Stirner as part of the anarchist canon and those that exclude him from it. Present difficulties in situating Stirner's thought are traced back to his original canonization as an anarchist, by Marxists on the one hand and individualist anarchists on the other.

KEYWORDS

Black Flame, Friedrich Engels, Marxism, Max Stirner, post-anarchism, post-structuralism, Saul Newman

When Max Stirner published his only book, *The Ego and Its Own*, in 1844, hardly anyone called themselves an anarchist, apart from Proudhon and Moses Hess, an early German socialist (cf. Zenker 2010: 132). Despite the fact that Stirner never adopted the label,

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his work features prominently in important scholarly investigations of anarchism, from the influential study by Paul Eltzbacher first published in 1900 and still in print today, to works like Daniel Guérin's of 1965. However, the most important anarchists never dealt with Stirner in depth; Bakunin never mentioned him at all, and Kropotkin only dealt with him in passing and only after a resurgence in interest had made Stirner impossible to ignore (cf. Laska 1996: 27, 45). Even Proudhon, whom Stirner had criticized directly, never responded or commented on Stirner's work (cf. Laska 1996: 45). Stirner was first identified as an anarchist in Friedrich Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, a classification that was adopted by the earliest scholarly studies of anarchism, E.V. Zenker's of 1895, Paul Eltzbacher's of 1900, and Ettore Zoccoli's of 1907. Most anarchists who include Stirner as one of their main influences have been labelled as individualist anarchists; this is related to the fact that Stirner's work, after having been almost forgotten, experienced a kind of renaissance in the wake of Nietzsche's success since the 1890s, as many considered Stirner a forerunner of Nietzsche (cf. Laska 1996: 33–41).

In the last two decades, Stirner's thought has been brought into discussions of anarchism in connection with post-structuralism, in the context of debates around the possibility of post-anarchism, and more recently as a reaction against the very narrow definition of anarchism undertaken in *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. Throughout the history of his reception Stirner's thought has been misinterpreted and mislabelled, both consciously and accidentally, with malignant intentions or through wishful obfuscation. The recent debates afford the opportunity of clearing away the misconceptions of the past; however, some old mistakes are still consistently repeated, not all important insights find their way into the present discussion, and some new readings of Stirner even introduce new inadequacies. This paper will explain a set of different misconceptions that have played a role in contemporary debates about the relationship between Stirner and anarchism and trace their connections to the history of Stirner's canonization as an anarchist.

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Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt argue in *Black Flame*

that common conceptions of anarchism include many thinkers who were not actually anarchists, and they trace this phenomenon to Eltzbacher's seminal study of anarchism in which he identified the "seven sages": Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Tucker, and Tolstoy (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 35, 39). After briefly describing each of these thinkers and their "radically different ideas", Schmidt and van der Walt assert: "Faced with such a diverse group of thinkers . . . , Eltzbacher was in a quandary" (2009: 39). However, one could argue that Eltzbacher's position was not as dire as the authors of *Black Flame* present it: their account of Stirner is significantly different from that of Eltzbacher's with the result that his "group of thinkers" is far less "diverse" than theirs.

Schmidt and van der Walt characterize Stirner's position as a "misanthropic bourgeois individualism" (2009: 48). In contrast to this, Eltzbacher cites Stirner as saying, "I too love men, not merely individuals, but every one. But I love them with the consciousness of egoism; I love them because love makes me happy, I love because love is natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no 'commandment of love'" (2011: 97). Where Schmidt and van der Walt assert that Stirner "did not actually advocate the abolition of the state" (2009: 36), Eltzbacher cites Stirner as saying: "I am the mortal enemy of the State" (2011: 102). In fact, the very paragraph that Schmidt and van der Walt cite in order to question Stirner's anti-statism also contains strong support for it. They quote: "My object is not the overthrow of an established order but my elevation above it" (2009: 36), but they leave out what this entails for Stirner: "If I leave the existing order, it is dead and passes into decay" (qtd. in Eltzbacher 2011: 110). Quoting selectively, Schmidt and van der Walt distort the meaning of their citations: "my purpose and deed are not . . . political or social" (2009: 36) sounds very different when read in a paragraph that advocates insurrection instead of revolution: "The Revolution aimed at new arrangements: the Insurrection leads to no longer having ourselves arranged but arranging ourselves" (qtd. in Eltzbacher 2011: 110). The overall impression of Stirner's attitude towards the state, the nature of his egoism, and the role of the individual that results from Eltzbacher's account is quite different from the picture drawn by Schmidt and van der Walt's highly selective and cursory summary: The notion of a 'union of egoists' is not even mentioned in *Black Flame*. Schmidt and van der Walt's refusal to award the label 'anarchist' to "such a diverse group of thinkers" might stem from the fact that their attempt at

tracing Eltzbacher's analysis does not recreate (or apparently even register) the individual analyses of his seven sages but instead proceeds at least in the case of Stirner from a facile distortion of his thought; their different verdict is hardly surprising as it is not even based on the same preconditions (2009: 39).

Against Eltzbacher's conception, Schmidt and van der Walt outline what they argue is the only correct version of the anarchist canon, accepting of his seven sages only Bakunin and Kropotkin as anarchists: "An outline of figures like Godwin, Proudhon, Stirner, Bakunin, Tucker, Kropotkin, and Tolstoy demonstrates clearly that they cannot be taken as representative of a single doctrine, unless that doctrine is defined at a general level that obscures the radical differences between these thinkers" (2009: 41). Further, they write that, "One problem with such an approach is that it fails to provide an effective definition" (2009: 41). Effective for what? "A good definition is one that highlights the distinguishing features of a given category, does so in a coherent fashion, and is able to differentiate that category from others, thereby organising knowledge as well as enabling effective analysis and research" (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 43). The problem here is that a "good definition" in this case is something that can only be applied to very specific phenomena, those with clearly defined boundaries and internal coherence:

We suggest that the apparently ahistorical and incoherent character of anarchism is an artefact of the way in which anarchism has been studied, rather than inherent in anarchism itself. Using a deductive method, but taking more care in our selection of the representatives of anarchism, we can develop a different, more accurate, and more useful understanding of anarchism. (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 44)

The problem is that an appeal to "anarchism itself" identifies anarchism as a historical phenomenon, but the idea that a more coherent and monolithic account of anarchism is also "more accurate" is a methodological *trompe l'oeil*. The crucial difference here is between a term that has a history entangled in the history of the phenomenon it denotes and an analytical category that is applied in hindsight to a certain pattern in a set of data. In demanding that anarchism have a clear definition, the coherence of the object of analysis is guaranteed simply by pruning the

object until it fits the demand. As Eltzbacher notes, “How can one take any of them as Anarchistic teachings for a starting-point, without applying that very concept of Anarchism which he has yet to determine?” (2011: 6).

The method already implies the result, because it is chosen precisely for the sake of producing this result, and previous definitions of anarchism are rejected because their results are deemed undesirable: “If the anarchists include figures as different as the seven sages, . . . then anarchism *must* seem incoherent and therefore cannot be subjected to a rigorous theoretical interrogation” (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 43). The solution to this problem is to find the biggest possible subset of these thinkers that still presents a coherent object for theoretical analysis. This is a laudable endeavour, but the problem remains: there is no analytical reason to call this subset anarchism. For the theoretical analysis of a doctrine, it matters what texts and people are included in its canon, but not whether that canon is called anarchism or, for example, class struggle anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism.

The reason for calling it anarchism is one of political identification, a matter of the language used in building a political movement and a sense of belonging. The argumentative impetus of *Black Flame* seems to be that a historical analysis of anarchism shows that it has more theoretical and historical coherence than previously attributed to it, that anarchism is, to invert the criticism of the seven sages approach, a movement with a single doctrine. However, the platformist implications of this argument are the inevitable result of the theoretical demands from which it proceeds, which one might provocatively describe as a platformist methodology. Gabriel Kuhn, in his lucid commentary on the issue, has pointed out that, “Schmidt and van der Walt have *reasons* for choosing the definition of anarchism they chose,” but he chooses not to speculate on what they might be (Kuhn 2011). To me, it seems likely that the reasons are relatively clear: a platformist organization that unites all anarchists under a commonly endorsed theoretical framework makes most sense if the common ground between different anarchist approaches is as big as possible, and this can either be achieved by convincing every anarchist to adopt a similar position—which might prove difficult since most anarchists in a historical study are already dead—or by arguing anyone who strays too far from the ideological mainline central to a platformist organization is not an anarchist. In accordance with Eltzbacher’s methodological

considerations, we can record here that *Black Flame* does not so much “develop a different . . . understanding of anarchism” but more precisely charts the history of what is considered anarchism according to a notion thereof that precedes the writing of this history (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 44).

Despite the fact that Schmidt and van der Walt only deal with Stirner’s thought cursorily, because they don’t consider him an anarchist, they are adamant about his opposition to anarchism. According to Schmidt and van der Walt, Stirner “invoked egoism against socialism” in a debate with Moses Hess and Wilhelm Weitling (2009: 67). The problem with this is that the socialism Stirner argued against is a very specific, and very early, form of socialism with the result that his criticism cannot immediately be assumed to apply to all possible forms of socialism (cf. Adler 2000: 27–29). Indeed, in his own reply to his critics, Stirner makes clear that he is only opposed to any fixed vision of the future that turns into an obligation and a duty for individuals, rather than a tool for realizing their interests: “Egoism, as Stirner uses it, is not opposed to love nor to thought; it is no enemy of the sweet life of love, nor of devotion and sacrifice; it is no enemy of intimate warmth, but it is also no enemy of critique, nor of socialism, nor, in short, of any *actual interest* . . . , not against socialists, but against sacred socialists” (Stirner 1845). The contrast that Schmidt and van der Walt draw when they advocate “cooperation rather than Stirnerite individualism” might be correct for specific individualist misreadings of Stirner, but only appears tenable if one completely ignores the union of egoists, Stirner’s form of voluntary association (2009: 38).

Stirner’s egoism is not an appeal for individuals to be less altruistic, but only to become aware of the fact that seemingly altruistic behaviour can be separated into that which is motivated by a personal interest in, or love for, the other, or by a sense of duty, of holy obligation. Stirner agitates only against the latter motivation for behaviour, showing that duty relates to an abstract conception of universal good, or universal interest, which exists only as a spook. Far from denying cooperation, Stirner animates the individual to associate freely in whatever constellation is capable of advancing his or her own interest. One common misconception is that Stirner’s individual is an abstraction as well (Plechanov 2001: 50). However, Stirner focuses on the individual made from flesh and blood and its interests, showing on the contrary that concepts like class or society cannot have interests because they are just concepts. However, Stirner recognizes very

well the common interests of individuals in similar economic circumstances, advocating not competition but cooperation:

Abolishing competition is not equivalent to favouring the guild. The difference is this: In the guild baking, etc., is the affair of the guild-brothers; in competition, the affair of chance competitors; in the union, of those who require baked goods, and therefore my affair, yours, the affair of neither the guildic nor the concessionary baker, but the affair of the united. (Stirner, 1907)

Plechanov, despite being critical of Stirner, actually praised his achievement in attacking bourgeois reformers and utopian socialists who thought the proletariat could be emancipated by the virtuous acts of the propertied class. In arguing that those who suffer from the current relations should abolish them in their own interest, Stirner, according to Plechanov, is “preaching class-struggle” (Plechanov, 2001: 50).

Schmidt and van der Walt do not question what Stirner means when he says “egoism,” but they also describe Stirner’s thought in terms he rejects, like “virtue” and “right” (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 36, 52). However, from their descriptions of Bakunin and Kropotkin, it seems that there might be certain points of contact between Stirner and their “broad anarchist tradition.” Stirner’s union of egoists can fittingly be described in Bakunin’s words as “the free federation of common interests, aspirations and tendencies” (qtd. in Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 48). Likewise, there is no contradiction between Stirner’s thought and Bakunin’s call for “*equality and collective labour*—obligatory not by law, but by the force of realities.” Those points where Stirner seems to differ most obviously include the relationship between individual and society and the role of morality.

According to Schmidt and van der Walt, the “basic premise of all of the anarchist arguments was a deep and fundamental commitment to individual freedom. For the anarchists, however, freedom could only exist, and be exercised, in society” (2009: 47). There is a subtle, but crucial, difference here to Ruth Kinna’s claim that “Kropotkin argues that the proper method of social inquiry is to start ‘from a free individual to reach a free society’” (1995: 267). The question of whether a free society is made by free individuals or the other way around may seem to some degree an almost irrelevant question about chicken and eggs. However, this could also be conceived as the question of which word is stressed

in libertarian socialism. For Stirner, any voluntary association entails that the individual is free at any time to leave the union, thus forfeiting any rights and obligations that might have been agreed upon in the terms of the association. This right to secession is also mentioned by Schmidt and van der Walt, but the possibility appears very marginal when compared to e.g. Guérin's account of Bakunin, and it seems less of an option because it is related to an "anarchist society" that always appears in the singular, completely omitting the possibility of joining or founding a different anarchist society (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 70; cf. Guérin 1967: 33–35).

Schmidt and van der Walt argue that "if individual freedom was defined as freedom from every restriction, anarchists were not in favour of individual freedom", which is not at odds with Stirner, who saw absolute freedom not only as a pipe dream and a physical impossibility, but also conceded that any association with others would impose certain limits on individual freedom, which would be more than made up for by the greater fulfilment of interests (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 70). However, there seems to be a theoretical problem with the emphasis that Schmidt and van der Walt place on "legitimate coercive power", which is mentioned five times, as opposed to the possibility of leaving any particular anarchist society, mentioned only once (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 33, 48, 67, 70, 204). The problem is that the moment any individual is coerced, this basically constitutes the end of "free agreement and free cooperation, without sacrificing the autonomy of the individual", as Schmidt and van der Walt cite Kropotkin (qtd. in Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 65). Of course, there needs to be a tool for preventing abusive elements from endangering the functioning of society, but the only way of doing this that does not formally end the status as a voluntary association is the expulsion of these elements from the association. If someone who infringes upon the agreements of an association accepts a certain punishment in exchange for the possibility of remaining part of that association, this would leave them with the free choice to remain part of the society or not, but it would also be distinct from coercive force applied on a member of the association. Stirner, however, would not use the term 'society' here: "the union exists for you and by you, society contrariwise claims you for itself and exists even without you; in short, society is sacred, the union is your own; society uses you up, you use up the union" (qtd. in Eltzbacher 2011: 105).

The problem of morals is intricately bound up with a general

problem of Stirner's reception: Often what appears to be an opposition to Stirner's thought is actually just a reaction against specific readings of Stirner, most of which are referred to as 'individualist,' and most of which are expounded by people who are also strongly influenced by Nietzsche. The result is that it is entirely unclear in how far Kropotkin's "misanthropic bourgeois individualism" actually contains a valid critique of Stirner (qtd. in Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 242). Schmidt and van der Walt claim "Kropotkin also found it increasingly necessary to defend anarchism against Stirnerite and Nietzschean ideas, which he believed provided a recipe for 'the slavery and oppression of the masses'" (2009: 242). The source they are citing is Ruth Kinna's article on Kropotkin's mutual aid, which however does not mention Stirner; the passage referenced deals with Nietzschean individualism and in fact quotes Kropotkin's claim: "whatever a man's actions and line of conduct may be, he does what he does in obedience to a craving of his nature Let him act as he may, the individual acts as he does because he finds a pleasure in it, or avoids . . . a pain" (qtd. in Kinna 1995: 269). Kinna explains that Kropotkin aligns this claim that "individuals are psychological egoists" with his ideas about society by arguing that "what gives pleasure to the individual is the community and what gives pain is harming it" (1995: 269).

Kropotkin and Stirner did not share the same views about what precisely gives humans pleasure and pain, but Kropotkin's position is exactly the position that Stirner occupies. The point where Stirner diverges from Kropotkin is that he rejects any statements about human nature in general because they are bound to distort the natural behaviour of the individual who is obliged to live up to some 'human potential' defined by whomever happens to be accepted as an authority on human nature. Stirner writes that even the duty of living according to one's nature is meaningless because that is what happens anyway in the absence of duties. Stirner's differentiation here is very close to the later distinction made in psychoanalysis: Stirner rejects any notions of good and evil that the individual internalizes through societal pressure—which correspond to the super-ego—because they prevent the fulfilment of desires and interests: the id. Stirner concedes that the individual can sometimes suppress particular urges and interests, but only if they endanger the fulfilment of other interests, as the result of a rational consideration—an achievement of the ego—and not because they infringe on some irrationally internalized principle such as religion or morality.

It is entirely possible that the individualist currents Kropotkin was worried about cite both Nietzsche and Stirner as their intellectual inspirations, a common combination. However, for an analysis of Stirner's thought alongside anarchism it is very important to not only recognize the often joint reception of Stirner and Nietzsche but also to tease out the differences in their actual writings. It might be argued that the fact that the revival of interest in Stirner in the 1890s coincided with the growing popularity of Nietzsche's writings contributed to an understanding that is more individualist than Stirner's work alone warrants; the possible connections between Stirner's work and non-individualist forms of anarchism get obscured by the immediate association with Nietzschean individualists. Saul Newman points towards the difference between Nietzsche and Stirner in his reply to Benjamin Franks. His argument also invalidates the idea that Stirner's thought entails a "disguised return' of 'privileged minorities'" (Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 47):

While this social dimension of egoism is perhaps insufficiently elaborated and developed—Stirner makes certain references to the possibility of a "union of egoists"—it is by no means ruled out in his account. Nor is there an implied hierarchy in Stirner's thinking, between the liberated ego and others, as Franks suggests. For Stirner, the possibilities of radical freedom offered by egoism and "ownness" can be grasped by anyone; there is no Nietzschean sentimentality here for aristocracy. (Newman 2011a: 160)

The fact that Stirner does not have a positive social vision beyond the idea of voluntary association is inextricably tied up with his entire critical position: The question of how exactly self-aware egoists will cooperate cannot be answered in advance if it is to be the result and expression of the interests of the unique individuals engaged in it. This is the case because according to Stirner any general account of human interests, or of good and evil, will prevent individuals from following their own particular interests and lead them instead to aspire to some ideal, a criticism that also includes any specific form of social organisation that is deemed optimal. If there is such a thing as a general human nature, it would also find its expression in the development of every individual's particular nature, but they would not need to

have access to any linguistic representation of it. On the contrary, any idea of human nature that the individual respects enough to sacrifice its own interest would actually prevent the fulfilment of its natural interests.

In summary, my objection to the way *Black Flame* depicts Stirner is not that he is not considered an anarchist and consequently not dealt with in a book about anarchism, but on the contrary, that even though he is not considered an anarchist and his thought is not dealt with at any length, his exclusion from anarchism is stated emphatically, and this exclusion is based on a small number of misconceptions which are easily refuted and which appear to be at least partly second-hand. It seems that contrary to the verdict of Schmidt and van der Walt, there are potential points of contact between Stirner's work and that of the more classical anarchists— regardless of whether Stirner himself is considered an anarchist or not. These points of contact have of course only been hinted at here. Given the persistently problematic and contradictory accounts of Stirner's thought in general, it is entirely plausible not to label Stirner as an anarchist, simply because the political implications of his critique are not clear enough to compare them to the politics of anarchists. In order to create an anarchist canon that is functional as a political philosophy, *Black Flame* cannot identify Stirner as an anarchist without recourse to detailed studies showing that his work is indeed compatible with anarchism—which arguably do not exist at the moment. However, there is a wide gap between either refusing to positively identify Stirner as an anarchist because of the difficult state of his reception or definitively situating him outside the anarchist canon while re-inscribing old prejudices and misreading into the is assessment of Stirner's thought.

However, any investigation into the relationship between Max Stirner and anarchism is not only hampered by the spread of the faulty understanding that some of his opponents have of him, but also by the readings of his work that are undertaken by his most vocal advocates. Saul Newman has been writing about the potential utility of Stirner's thought for radical political philosophy for more than ten years, but the way he reads Stirner is at times problematic. The explanation lies in the overall impetus of his project: He seeks to overcome the limitations he identifies in classical anarchism by applying the theories of Stirner and assorted French post-structuralists, among which he includes Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan. The problem here is that he deals with Stirner not as an anarchist, but as a forerunner of

post-structuralism, and thus the theoretical combination of Stirner and post-structuralism he devises is neither clearly connected to any anarchist thinker, nor are they clearly anti-statist. Newman's description of Stirner has undergone a process of revision, his current view being that there are some parallels between Stirner and anarchism, notably in the treatment of anti-statism and voluntary association, but that Stirner does not fit into the "anarchist tradition". Consequently, "some kind of anarchist politics and ethics" derived from Stirner would be "a post-foundational anarchism or, . . . *postanarchism*" (Newman 2011b: 205–206). This suggests an alternative origin of the prefix 'post-', which seems to imply a move away both from the earlier emphasis on post-structuralism and from the meaning of postanarchism as 'after anarchism,' the meaning that has until now been contested the most in critical debate and is at least chronologically problematic if derived primarily from Stirner's thought.

More problematic than the general status of Newman's post-anarchism, however, are specific aspects of Stirner's reception that distort and at times contradict Stirner's writings. This is not meant to denigrate Newman's achievement in bringing Stirner back into debates about radical political philosophy, but merely to share some important critical observations. Stirner is still not very widely read, much less understood, making it especially important to point out mistakes in the views of those few who do publish their ideas about him, because most readers are unlikely to be sufficiently familiar with Stirner to recognize them unaided. In his account of Stirner's thought, Newman often uses the vocabulary of post-structuralism, which is a dangerous undertaking: Stirner's work is already a conscious rebellion against the opaque style of Hegelian philosophy and written in a much clearer language than the works of his peers, notwithstanding a number of words that he uses in an idiosyncratic fashion, such as egoism, the ego or unique one, and the inhuman or un-man. It is this last term that marks Newman's first misreading of Stirner: Newman identifies Stirner's critique of the abstract ideals at the heart of philosophical and political accounts of the subject with Althusser's theory of interpellation and the ideological determination of the subject.

By seeing themselves as just one instance of the concept of man, or of the citizen, individuals are enthralled to the ideological content of these concepts already in their conceptions of themselves. Where Newman goes wrong is when he identifies Stirner's

solution to this problem as the un-man, the opposite of the concept of man, as “an extra-ideological standpoint from which ideology may be resisted” (Newman 2001a: 309). On the contrary, Stirner clearly states that the un-man is merely that particular which is condemned while the universal essence of man is exalted. In his critique of Bruno Bauer’s philosophy, Stirner points out that since every individual is unique, and thus particular rather than universal, every human is actually an un-man, but this is only in order to show the internal inconsistency of the philosophy he is criticizing. His solution is simply to abandon the universal category of man as an ideal, and along with it the term un-man, and instead refer to the individual as the unique (also translated as “ego”). Newman still pits the concept of un-man against that of man, only reversing the hierarchy, but Stirner abolishes the entire dichotomy.

This misreading is logically connected to Newman’s contention that “We live in a symbolic and linguistic universe, and to speculate about an original condition of authenticity and immediacy, or to imagine that an authentic presence is attainable behind the veils of the symbolic order or beyond the grasp of language, is futile. There is no getting outside language and the symbolic” (Newman 2011a: 156). This world-view makes it impossible to integrate Stirner’s radical critique of philosophy in it, which consists precisely in leaving linguistic representation. Rather than going beyond language, Stirner reduces its relation to the individual from a definition to a mere pointing at what exists prior to representation, rather than describing and thus interpellating it. In arguing that the actual individual can only be talked about by saying nothing of it, by not describing it, Stirner demonstrates how his critique of language creates what could be called zero-degrees of interpellation: “You—unique! What thought content is here, what sentence content? None!” (Stirner 1845). Like Althusser, Stirner analyzes the creation of a liberal humanist subject in the form of linguistic concepts, an analysis which anticipates the theoretical link between the linguistic and political concepts of representation and subject. In sharp distinction to Althusser, and in stark contrast to the Lacanian perspective of the subject that Newman subscribes to, Stirner believes that it is possible for the individual simply to stop relating to themselves in terms of linguistic representation. His ‘unique’ is only a reference to the individual, it points neither to a signified nor other signifiers, but to the individual as it exists independent of language, in the flesh. By being hailed as a human, or a citizen,

the individual is identified as part of an ideological system of representation. In contrast to this, Stirner invents the phrase of the unique precisely to point out that any actually existing person cannot be represented in philosophy. The unique is in the last phrase, because it does not carry any thought content which could be related to other phrases. "There is no conceptual development of the unique, one cannot build a philosophical system with it" (Stirner 1845).

Similar points can be made about Newman's later reading of Stirner which he makes alongside Foucault's work on ethics, but they would not add to our present concern: just like the individualist proponents of Stirner's thought in the 1890s, Newman is in danger of distorting Stirner at the very same time as spreading knowledge of and interest in him. John Henry Mackay did much to popularize Stirner, but his reception of Stirner's thought has been subject to criticism. Gustav Landauer regretted that Stirner became associated with Mackay so closely, because Mackay's individualism obscured Stirner's emphasis on socialization based on the individuals' interests (Wolf 2003: 4). Similarly, Bernd Laska argues that Mackay reduces Stirner's thought to a form of "ultra-liberalism," and observes that Stirner's re-discovery towards the end of the 19th century "under the patronage of Nietzsche" led to a "banalisation" of Stirner as a "radical individualist" (Laska 1996: 59, 41). Although individualist anarchists helped popularize Stirner's thought, they simultaneously also influenced readers towards a sometimes problematic Nietzschean individualist reading of Stirner, a pattern which Newman's recent popularization of Stirner might repeat with respect to post-structuralism. This is especially dangerous since Newman also gives correct summaries and assessments of some aspects of Stirner's thought, making it very hard to tell the faithful renditions from the distortions and misreadings. Like individualist anarchism before it, post-anarchism seems to have the potential to both reveal new connections between Stirner's thought and anarchism and to create new obstacles for any investigation by identifying Stirner with one particular part of anarchism, the properties of which might then distort the reception of Stirner.

The debate around post-anarchism has prompted many to criticize texts in which anarchism's supposed shortcomings are rectified by post-anarchism. In this context, the way Stirner is used to negotiate the meaning of anarchism is also at times problematic. In his criticism of the reductive account post-anarchists like Todd May and Saul Newman have given of

classical anarchism, Allan Antliff cites Emma Goldman, Kropotkin, and Bakunin in order to show that anarchism is neither limited to essentialist humanism nor to a view of power as entirely negative and separate from the subject (Antliff 2007). The main focus of his argument, however, is the thought of Stirner and his reception by some Russian anarchists from the time of the revolution of 1917, such as Lev Chernyi and the brothers Gordin. The crucial role that Stirner plays as an anarchist here is problematic for two separate reasons: Argumentatively, using Stirner as an exemplary anarchist is problematic because neither May nor Newman use him as such. May does not deal with Stirner at length, and Newman treats Stirner as separate from anarchism—one chapter each is devoted to anarchism and Stirner in *From Bakunin to Lacan*, and Stirner is used as a proto-poststructuralist, “at least as relevant to poststructuralism as Nietzsche,” in order to criticize anarchism (Newman 2001b: 9; cf. Choat, 2010: 53). Basically, Antliff’s reply to May and Newman is not very strong unless one accepts Stirner as a prototypical anarchist, but even scholars like Eltzbacher or Guérin, who call Stirner an anarchist, highlight his difference from other anarchists, which makes it problematic to use him as a stand-in for anarchism in general. Incidentally, this problem is also present to a lesser extent in Simon Choat’s criticism of a lack of postanarchist interest in Marxism: his discussion of the relation between post-structuralists and “classical anarchist thinkers” is limited to comments by Deleuze and Derrida on Stirner—disregarding the fact that Stirner is not treated as a classical anarchist by the post-anarchists he is replying to, the problem being a tendency among thinkers to be unreliable when describing their own relationship to Stirner (Choat 2010: 60–61).

Antliff’s argument only holds sway against the post-anarchist view of classical anarchism insofar as it shows that Stirner was a classical anarchist as well. This however is not explicitly argued, but rather assumed from the outset, and Stirner’s warm reception in Russian anarchist circles does not automatically make Stirner an anarchist: Paul Avrigh’s account does not connect the writings of the Gordins to Stirner; Antliff’s juxtaposition of quotes makes them seem compatible, but not necessarily genealogically related (cf. Avrigh 1967: 176–179). Avrigh and Antliff agree that Lev Chernyi’s “associational anarchism” is strongly influenced by Stirner, but unlike Antliff, Avrigh always talks of “Stirner and Nietzsche,” when referring to the individualists of 1917 (Avrigh 1967: 180, 172). This might be a sign that this specific connection

exists only between individualist anarchism and a certain individualist reading of Stirner, again raising the question of the precise relation between Stirner's and Nietzsche's thought.

Probably more problematic than the particularity of the link that is constructed between Stirner and the Russian anarchists is the way Antliff uses Marxist sources to establish Stirner as an anarchist from the outset. The paper is opened with a quotation from Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: "Finally came Stirner, the prophet of contemporary anarchism" (qtd. in Antliff 2007: 56). Later on, Antliff refers to Marx and Engels' "polemics against the anarchists of their day— notably Bakunin and Max Stirner" and a footnote further qualifies this: "The anarchist theory of the individual is critiqued at length in chapter three of . . . *The German Ideology*" (Antliff 2007: 59, 65). With these references we arrive at the beginning of Stirner's identification as an anarchist and also at the origin of a considerable portion of the misreading of Stirner that have proved especially persistent.

The citation that forms the preface to Antliff's article is taken from Engels' description of the philosophical developments of Young Hegelianism in the late 1830's and 1840's in Germany. In Engels' text, the identification of Stirner as an anarchist is directly followed with, "—Bakunin has taken a great deal from him," and this claim is repeated later: "Stirner remained a curiosity, even after Bakunin blended him with Proudhon and labelled the blend 'anarchism'" (Engels 1888). The crucial problem with citing Engels as an authority is that the entire text of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* is filled with ideological distortions that were tailored to fulfil specific propagandistic purposes (cf. Arvon 1975). A lucid analysis of this aspect of the text has been provided by Henry Arvon who points out specific inaccuracies of the time line and explains the reasons Engels had in the 1880's to use the term 'dialectical materialism' where at most a historical materialism existed, but most of these details are not pertinent here.

What is central is that Engels deliberately obscures the role Stirner played in Marx's turn away from Feuerbach's humanism (cf. Arvon 2012). Engels' first mention of Stirner in the text is followed by a paragraph that summarizes his description of the Young Hegelian movement up to Stirner with an emphasis on their idealism: "the idea, is here the primary, nature the derivative, which only exists at all by the condescension of the idea" (Engels 1888). This already stands in blatant contradiction

to Stirner's thought, but Engels goes on: "Then came Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. With one blow it pulverised the contradiction, in that without circumlocutions it placed materialism on the throne again" (Engels 1888). This is wrong. Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* appeared before Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*, in which Stirner heavily criticized Feuerbach's humanism. This is what drove Marx and Engels to turn away from Feuerbach and towards the development of their historical materialism, and this influence of Stirner is what Engels is trying to obscure by painting a completely distorted picture of the past (cf. Arvon 2012).

This knowledge about the nature of the text of course provides strong reasons to be sceptical about Engels' identification of Stirner as the "prophet of contemporary anarchism" and his claim that he exercised a strong influence on Bakunin (which has been interpreted to damn both writers by their mutual association) (Engels 1888; cf. Laska 1996: 39; cf. Arvon 2012: 196). In order to open a productive debate about Stirner and his possible relationship to anarchism, it is surely important that the sources available are assessed critically. Relying on the judgement of Engels, especially in this particular text, is problematic for anyone who is interested in such a project and not in propaganda. Engels was probably the first to identify Stirner as an anarchist, at the very least his claim was very influential in popularizing this identification. The question of whether Stirner can be considered part of the anarchist canon was thus guided by interest extraneous and even hostile both to the thought of Stirner and to anarchism when it was first discussed.

Referring to the chapter on Stirner in *The German Ideology* as a critique of "[t]he anarchist theory of the individual" is also problematic (Antliff 2007: 65). Not only is this chronologically imprecise as regards Stirner who was not yet considered an anarchist when *The German Ideology* was written, but the use of the definite article makes it sound as if Stirner's work is not just anarchist, but in fact the only anarchist theory of the individual. This, together with the reference to Marx and Engels polemizing against "the anarchists of their day—notably Bakunin and Max Stirner," creates an impression of Stirner and Bakunin as equally anarchist, with a common opposition to Marx and Engels. The result is similar to the claims made by Engels and equally devoid of an argumentative basis. Identifying Stirner as an anarchist, particularly in the context of *The German Ideology* in a misleading manner, can be observed equally in the writings of

Paul Thomas who comments on Marx' polemics against 'the anarchists' from a Marxist perspective.

Thomas published a study on Marx's relationship to Stirner, Proudhon, and Bakunin in 1980, and an article of his about Stirner and Marx has recently been published in Newman's *Max Stirner*. Thomas identifies Stirner as an anarchist without any explicit argument, despite the fact that many of the general characteristics of anarchism that Thomas outlines do not fit Stirner at all: Thomas' description of the anarchist understanding of individual-society relations goes against Stirner's whole body of ideas. His contention that Marx wrote against the anarchists because "the emergent revolutionary movement needed to be shielded against rival revolutionary creeds" makes no sense at all with respect to Stirner (Thomas 1980: 9, 15). Not only was there no such situation when *The German Ideology* was written, but the fact that Marx never had the work published invalidates this reason for writing it and also reveals the following statement as either wishful thinking or a telling lapse:

While Marx's attack on Feuerbach in the first section of *The German Ideology* has been contrasted, quite rightly, with his earlier near adulation of Feuerbach, it has rarely been recognized that it was none other than Stirner who impelled Marx into taking this new position as publicly and dramatically as he did. (Thomas, 1980: 140)

The fact remains that Marx never publicly commented on Stirner or responded to the criticism of his work that Stirner had included in his book, a detail that does not inhibit Thomas from referring to Marx' private ranting and publicly enduring silence as "throwing down the gauntlet" (Thomas 2011: 138). Thomas defends the position adopted by Marx in *The German Ideology* even today, parroting criticisms of Stirner that the latter had refuted entirely in his reply to his critics of 1845. Thomas asserts that "the ego of Stirner's is not a 'corporeal individual' but 'a category constructed on the Hegelian method'" (Thomas 2011: 128), a charge to which Stirner had replied at length:

What Stirner says is a word, a thought, a concept; what he means is neither a word, nor a thought, nor a concept. What he says is not the meaning, and what he means cannot be said. . . . Since you are the content of the unique [this, there is no more to think about a specific content of

the unique, i.e., a conceptual content. . . . Only when nothing is said about you and you are merely named, are you recognized as you. As soon as something is said about you, you are only recognized as that thing (human, spirit, christian, etc.). But the unique doesn't say anything because it is merely a name: it says only that you are you and nothing but you, that you are a unique you, or rather your self. . . . You—unique! What thought content is here, what sentence content? None! Whoever wants to deduce a precise thought-content of the Unique as if it were a concept, whoever thinks that with “unique” one has said about you what you are, would show that they believe in phrases, because they don't recognize phrases as phrases, and would also show that they seek specific content in phrases. (Stirner 1845)

Stirner's critique of philosophy cannot be explained here in detail, but he seeks to turn language back into a tool, rather than something which prescribes goals and duties for the individual, and he does so by rejecting terms that carry a conceptual content in favour of an empty term that has only a referential function, thus pointing at the individual of flesh and blood without making any claims or statements about it. At least it seems that any investigation into the possible points of contact between Stirner and anarchism can only be fruitful if every existing verdict of Stirner is critically compared to his actual writings, and if the distinction between Stirner and his reception is at all times clear.

Schmidt and van der Walt are free to entertain their own understanding of what anarchism really means, and if they exclude Stirner from the “broad anarchist tradition” that is not unjustified (2009: 9). However, it is entirely unhelpful to refuse any engagement with Stirner's thought, but at the same time assert his incompatibility with the theory of anarchism. Any such claim is bound to be detrimental to a serious comparison of Stirner and thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin if it proceeds from a view of Stirner's thought that is both uninformed and uninterested. The persistence of prejudice and misconceptions about Stirner can at least partly be related to his appropriation by individualist since the 1890's and the mixing or conflation of Stirner's thought with Nietzsche's that seems to have gone along with this. In contrast to *Black Flame*, Saul Newman's reception of Stirner has a rather uncertain position with regard to his potential anarchism. On the one hand, of the thinkers Newman

uses to construct his post-anarchism, Stirner is the most anarchist by far; on the other, Stirner is explicitly contrasted with the supposed essentialist humanism of classical anarchism, which he is said to overcome. In addition, Stirner's thought is expressed in a structuralist world-view that directly contradicts his central criticism of political philosophy. Critics of Newman's approach, however, use Stirner as a classical anarchist without taking into account that Newman does not. Not only does this cause their argument to miss the target, but their depictions of Stirner's work as a classic in the anarchist canon are based on Marxist texts which sacrifice factual accuracy to political needs and tactical deliberations. Generally, current debates contain many different positions on Stirner's relationship to anarchism, but they are all prone to misreading Stirner or relying on dubious sources. The question of whether Stirner can be considered part of the anarchist canon, or what specific effect a definite inclusion or exclusion would have, cannot even be addressed on this basis, but will have to proceed from investigations that are yet to take place.

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