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A review of *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation* by John F. Welsh. Lexington Books. 293 pages.

Since its publication in 1844, Max Stirner's book *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* (entitled *The Ego and Its* (or *His*) *Own* in the currently available English editions[1]) has rarely been dealt with on its own terms. When not simply suppressed, it has been misrepresented or used as a foil to promote agendas foreign to it. Alfredo Bonanno described it well in his book *Max Stirner* when he says, "The first duty toward Stirner: incomprehension." Certainly, the few books written about Stirner and

[1] A highly unfortunate mistranslation, since Stirner never used the word "ego" in the book, and *der Einzige* most nearly translates as "the unique." When I quote from Stirner's book here, for the sake of consistency, I will use the same edition Welsh uses in his book, the Cambridge University Press edition (1995), edited by David Leopold. I will indicate these references with Stirner's name and the page number from the book. When I quote *Stirner's Critics*, I will use my own working translation, which is not yet paginated.

his ideas in English in the past century have reflect this lack of even a minimal understanding of what Stirner was doing. This is what makes John F. Welsh's book distinctive.

I consider much of the "incomprehension" in the face of Stirner's book to be a *choice* made by his various critics and commentators. It is true that Stirner's thinking is difficult, but not in the sense of being hard to understand — and in his masterwork, Stirner presents it in a clear, even blunt, language. Rather its difficulty lies in the fact that it removes every abstract ground of certainty from beneath our feet, leaving us to rely only on ourselves. This is why he begins and ends the book with the cry: "I have set my cause upon nothing."[2] And very few want to face this prospect of total self-responsibility. Welsh seems to be one of those few, and this makes his book worth reading. Unlike all of Stirner's critics whose works I have been able to read and most of his defenders as well, Welsh comes to Stirner with no obvious preconceptions about what Stirner was saying. Instead he attempts to understand what Stirner's project actually was and how it might be useful to us now. The flaws in Welsh's understanding relate to the most difficult aspects of Stirner's thinking, his attempts to use language to point to the inconceivable, the unspeakable *unique*, and to the equally non-conceptual *union of egoists*. I will go into this more later.

In the first section of his book, "Max Stirner and Dialectical Egoism," Welsh places Stirner in the context of ideas that stimulated his thinking. Welsh briefly goes into the influence of Hegel and the context of the left Hegelians, including *Die Freien* (The Free), a group in which Stirner took part, that met in Hip-

[2]Translated by Byington as "All things are nothing to me." The actual line in German is the first line of Goethe's poem, *Vanitas! Vanitatum vanitas!*: "Ich hab' Mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt." I have seen two English translations of this poem. Here are their translations of this phrase: "My trust in nothing now is placed" (Edgar Alfred Bowring, translator) and "My thoughts and oughts are nothing fixed" (Wm. Flygare, translator).

pel's wine bar in Berlin for lively discussion. The left Hegelian context did not merely reflect the cutting edge of philosophical thought at the time, but also of radical social thought. Liberalism, in its original sense, was in the forefront of social thought, and Stirner critiqued it in three forms: 1) *political liberalism* — which has as its aim the liberty of individuals *as citizens* within a state; 2) *social liberalism* — or socialism (and communism in its purely economic sense); 3) *humane liberalism* — or that form of *humanism* that Feuerbach and others promoted, the higher sort of *communism* that places the highest value in "human community" or "species being."[3] Welsh shows Stirner's critique of these ideologies — liberalism and humanism — to be a deep critique of modernity, to which Stirner opposes concrete individuals as they exist here and now in life. Contrary to the claim of some of Stirner's critics, this critique has significant historical, social and cultural dimensions, and the failure of his critics to deal with this stems from their own ideological chains. Welsh then goes on to describe Stirner's "ownness."[4] Stirner begins the second part of his book with a chapter on ownness. It is essential for understanding his thinking about insurrection and about conscious (as opposed to "involuntary" or "duped"[5]) egoism. Welsh describes ownness as the necessary mode for fighting modernity and its reifying and alienat-

[3]This latter term is a translation of the German term "Gattungswesen," used by Feuerbach and other young Hegelians. In light of the customary use of the word "Wesen" in Hegelian philosophical contexts, it would be more correct to translate this term as "species-essence," but I suspect Marxists have avoided this because it exposes the idealist and religious nature of the concept.

[4]I don't speak of Stirner's *idea* of ownness here, because Stirner himself says: "But ownness has not any alien standard either, as it is not in any sense and *idea* like freedom, morality, humanity, and the like: it is only a description of the — *owner*." (Stirner, p. 154)

[5]Stirner refers to "involuntary egoism" several times in This is the term Stirner uses in *Stirner's Critics* to describe those who see a reified, "higher" interest as being their "real" or "actual" interest.

ing processes which establish the sacred and with it the institutions that defend it. I consider the chapter on ownness to be one the more important parts of this book. I think most of my readers will be quite aware of the rhetorical use that politicians and other hucksters have made of "freedom." As Welsh points out: "Ownness differs from freedom in that it refers more to a relationship between the internal activity of the person and the external world. Ownness is not and cannot be reduced to a rhetorical tool or an external condition. It is an *active seizure* or appropriation of thoughts, values and objects as the 'property'[6] of the individual… Unlike freedom ownness is a reality, not a dream, which challenges and destroys the lack of freedom by eliminating the ways in which individuals create and contribute to their own subordination."[7] (84–85, emphasis added.) Or as Stirner himself put it: "Ownness… is my whole being and existence, it is myself. I am free of what I am rid of, owner of what I have in my power…"[8] Ownness is the destruction of the sacred… What I dare to reach out and take as my own cannot stand above me or dominate me. This aspect of Stirner's thought needs to be more deeply developed, and I am pleased that Welsh has begun this process.

In the second section of the book, "Stirner's Influence: Three Encounters with Dialectical Egoism," Welsh examines Stirner's influence on the anarchists, Benjamin Tucker and James L. Walker and the egoist fighter for women's liberation (who vehemently rejected the label feminist), Dora Marsden. From a historical standpoint, all three chapters are interesting, though I am not convinced that any of the three actually *advanced* Stirner's project except to the extent that they kept awareness of it alive.

[6]Welsh immediately points out that "Stirner does not limit his concept of 'property' to the narrow legal or economic meaning that it denotes today." (85)

[7]Welsh, pp. 84–85, emphasis added.

[8]Stirner, p. 143

ask him to accompany them to a tavern for wine; does he go along as a favor to them, or does he 'unite' with them because it promises pleasure?"[24] So just as the unique, or the unique one, is not a concept but an empty name used for me, for you, for each particular individual in the immediate moment, so the union of egoists is also not a concept but a name used to refer to each of the particular instances of individuals acting together to do something that each of them enjoys. In this sense, both terms are *empty*. Each gets its content from the particular *instance*, so that the content is never the same from moment to moment. It has no determined attributes. It cannot be *conceived*. And this is why neither the unique nor the union of egoists, as Stirner talks about them, can be reified, sanctified and turned into higher powers outside of and above us.

I have spent so much time in explaining the non-conceptual nature of Stirner's unique (or "unique one") and union of egoists, because I see it as fundamental to his critique of modernity, his demolition of the sacred and his exposure of the volition involved in enslavement to fixed ideas. Welsh is clearly aware of these central aspects of Stirner's project, and I think he could take what he has begun in this book deeper if he explored the non-conceptual aspect of Stirner's thinking and the way in which Stirner demolishes philosophy in the process. In this book, he has already offered a very useful tool for anarchists, egoists and Stirner scholars, a tool that is well worth using. And it is not difficult to use. The language is fairly simple and straightforward.[25] The content is well organized. I recommend the book for anyone interested in exploring what Stirner has to offer us in our confrontations with the ruling institutions.

[24] *Stirner's Critics*

[25] However, Lexington Books could use a better copyeditor, as there were a noticeable number of misprints of a distracting type. The book deserved much better than that.

I have never thought particularly highly of Tucker as an anarchist theorist. While I appreciate the fact that he was the motive force behind Stephen Byington's translation of Stirner's book, which made it available in the English language, Tucker clearly did not have a deep understanding of what Stirner was doing and tried to fit his ideas into a *moral* conception of social relations. Welsh's chapter on Tucker does not hide this. He exposes Tucker's moralism and the limits of his critique of modernity pretty clearly.

I was only slightly aware of James L. Walker before reading this book. I had occasionally seen references to him among individualist anarchists, but didn't know much about his ideas. Welsh's treatment of Walker has roused my interest. It seems that Walker did more than anyone else to introduce Stirner's ideas to the American anarchist movement of the 19th century with his articles in Tucker's periodical, *Liberty*[9], and his book, *The Philosophy of Egoism*.[10] Based on Welsh's description, it seems to me that Walker had a deeper understanding of Stirner and a healthier conception of egoism and its relation to anarchism and anarchy than any other English-speaking person of the time. He understood, for example, that duty and justice were fixed ideas that rulers and their ideological lackeys used to enslave and subjugate individuals. Yet, despite this understanding, he couldn't let go of the words. He tried to construct

[9] Usually written under the name of Tak Tak.

[10] I find the title of Walker's book a bit odd since he himself says: "You, as a person of flesh and blood, will not be successfully classified in 'philosophy,' I think, if you grasp the idea and act on it. The old so-called philosophic egoism was a disquisition on the common characteristics of men, a sort of generality. The real living egoism is the fact of the untrammeled mind in this or that person and the actions resulting, the end of the tyranny of general ideas" (from *The Philosophy of Egoism*, quoted in Welsh, p. 178). And Stirner's project of demolishing the sacred also, inevitably, included the demolition of philosophy. Stirner deals with this on pages 24, 48, 65, 69, and 78–9 of his book, where he shows philosophy to be *religious* thought, the realm of fixed ideas and spooks.

egoist versions of each of these concepts. In doing so, I think he merely increased confusion. He based his "egoist" versions of duty and justice on a concept of contracts and of reciprocity. Contracts, as such, do not interest me; I have no use for them. Without a state to enforce them, they are nothing more than a game certain individuals choose to play. I understand that in the 18th and 19th century, "free contracts between individuals" appeared to be the very opposite of the imposed roles, duties and obligations of the old feudal system, and I assume this is where the interest of some individualist anarchists in contracts originates. But by continuing to adhere to this conception, such anarchists continue to base relationships on *debt*, and so, on *obligation*. And this means basing it on a form of *bondage*, i.e., on enslavement. My aim as an anarchist and an egoist is to rid my life and world of all forms of enslavement, so I relate with others under the assumption that *nobody owes anyone anything* — ever. In other words, debt and obligation are always fictions with no other basis than power of the creditor to impose this fiction. And this is the case even when the debt or obligation was "contracted." Only from this point can genuinely *anarchic* relationships of reciprocity, or as I prefer to say, *mutuality*, develop.[11] Such relationships are anarchic precisely because they are egoistic. I maintain the relationship not because I think you are giving me what you owe me, but rather because I am getting what I want from it. When that is no longer the case, I simply withdraw from the relationship, not because *you* failed in your *obligation*, but because I have ceased to get what I desire. Thus, no *duty*, no binding contract,

[11] For me, reciprocity still seems to be something measured and calculated; mutuality, instead, deals with an active, constantly moving and changing balance based on the mutual enjoyment of all involved. In relationships of mutuality, individuals recognize that they are each different from every other, and that therefore a static, measured, mathematical balance is bound to actually favor either only one or, more often, none of those involved.

a *specific* content of the unique, i.e., a conceptual content… What you are cannot be said through the word unique, just as by christening you with the name Ludwig, one doesn't intend to say what you are… With the unique, the rule of *absolute thought*, of thought with a conceptual content of its own, comes to an end, just as the concept and the conceptual world fades away when one uses the empty name: the name is the empty name to which only the view can give content."[21] Stirner goes on for several pages explaining very clearly that the unique is merely a name pointing at what cannot be said, pointing at you and I as we are here and now, in the moment.

Welsh also refers to the union of egoists as a concept: "The union of egoists is Stirner's concept of a willed, voluntary, for-itself social relationship that is continuously created and renewed by all who won and support it through acts of will."[22] When Hess, in his critique of Stirner allows himself "to characterize the real *concept* of [Stirner's] union of egoists," Stirner responds, "He wants to characterize the 'concept' of this union, indeed, he does characterize it… Since the 'concept' of this union is what interests him, he also explains that he wants to see it on paper. As he sees in the unique nothing but a concept, so naturally, this union, in which the unique is the vital point, also had to become a concept for him."[23] Stirner then goes on to describe a few *actual*, as opposed to *conceptual* unions of egoists: "Perhaps at this very moment, some children have come together just outside [Hess's] window in a friendly game. If he looks at them, he will see a playful egoistic union. Perhaps Hess has a friend or a beloved; then he knows how one heart finds another, as their two hearts unite egoistically to delight (enjoy) each other, and how no one 'comes up short' in this. Perhaps he meets a few good friends on the street and they

[21] *Stirner's Critics*
[22] Welsh, p. 97
[23] *Stirner's Critics*

I already mentioned in passing some flaws I found in Welsh's understanding of Stirner. In particular, Welsh repeatedly *conceptualizes* "the unique one"[16] and the union of egoists: "Stirner derives two other *concepts* from ownness…: the unique one and the union of egoists."[17] Though he tells us that "the unique one is not a goal and has no calling and no destiny,"[18] he then goes on to say: "The unique one (a) owns his or her own life, mind, body, and self; (b) rejects any external purpose, calling or destiny; (c) refuses to be an instrument for 'higher powers' or 'supreme being'; and (d) knows and asserts self as unique."[19] By giving "the unique one" these specific, definable attributes, Welsh is making it into a concept and conflating it with the conscious egoist: "The unique one is the practicing egoist, the individual human being who owns his or her life, thoughts, and actions."[20] In this way, he contradicts himself by making "the unique one" a goal, a calling and a destiny. Stirner avoids this conflation since it would undermine his project by transforming "the unique one" into a sacred thing that stands above you and I as we are in this moment. The first critics of Stirner's book also turned the unique into a concept with attributes, and sought to attack it in this way. Stirner's response is: "Since *you* are the content of the unique, there is no more to think about

[16] This is the way that Byington usually translates "*der Einzige*," and Welsh follows this. I instead use the term "the unique" in my translation of *Stirner's Critics*. In the introduction, I explain this: "One of the central words in Stirner's thinking is '*Einzige*.' I have chosen to translate this word as the 'unique.' …For Stirner, *Einzige* is simply a name to use for something that is beyond definition, something that is unspeakable, so I decided not to translate it as 'the unique one.' Such a translation would imply that 'unique' says something *definitive* about some *one*, rather than merely being a name pointing toward something unsayable. I think that, in 'the Unique,' the fact that it is meant to be a mere name for something beyond language is made clearer."

[17] Welsh, p. 81

[18] Welsh, p. 93

[19] Welsh, p. 94

[20] Welsh, p. 247

and no blame are involved. There is no need to remain attached to the fictions of duty, justice, contracts and the obligations they entail, and Walker's continued attachment to them weakened his egoism and left room for continued enslavement to fixed ideas, which I think manifested in some of his economic ideas, but that would require an essay in itself. Nonetheless, he understood subtleties of Stirner's ideas that Tucker definitely missed and also pointed out the significant differences between Stirner and Nietzsche. Welsh's interaction with Walker's ideas shows the latter to be worth contending with.

The next chapter is devoted to Dora Marsden. She is another person of whom I had heard, but whose ideas I had never explored to any extent, so this chapter served as my introduction to her thinking. Though it is obvious that Marsden read Stirner (once the Byington translation became available in English) and made some use of his ideas, after reading Welsh's account, as well as other material I could find about her,[12] I am not convinced that she had a very clear understanding of Stirner's project. For a brief period, from about 1911 through 1914, she does appear to understand some aspects of Stirner's project and to be able to use them as theoretical tools to express her critique of the limits of the women's movement of her time, as well as critiques of culture, moralism, slave mentality and religious thinking, particularly as they appeared among anarchists. In this, there is little doubt that Marsden came into conflict with the trends of modernity, and her writings in this specific period are worth exploring. But as S. E. Parker points out: "Unfortunately, Dora Marsden later lost her way among the metaphysical puerilities of 'christian gnosticism,' about which she wrote several obscure books after the end of World War

[12] Some of her own writing can be found at i-studies.com. A critique of her version of egoism by Bernd A. Laska, entitled "Dora Marsden 'The Stirner of Feminism'?" can be found at www.lsr-projekt.de. Laska argues that the actual influence of Stirner's ideas on Marsden was superficial.

I."[13] But this losing of her way was apparently an outcome of the development of her own version of egoism, which, as Berndt Laska points out, evolved into a religious "mystical-cosmological 'all-egoism.'"[14] This does not discredit what is of worth in her earlier writings. As Welsh says, "Dora Marsden certainly deserves to be criticized for the shortcomings in the egoism she articulated between 1911 an 1919, but she should also be appreciated for her contributions to feminist, egoist and anarchist thought."[15] Though I think Welsh would have done well to include more criticism, he has managed to show that Marsden is someone whose ideas are worthy of looting.

In the third part of the book, "Max Stirner and the Critique of Modernity," Welsh shows the nature of Stirner's critique of modernity and how Stirner's dialectical egoism provides a theoretical framework for this critique. I appreciate that as the book comes to a close, it does not seem like a finished work, but like the opening of an exploration. And that is certainly how Welsh's book should be approached.

Welsh is able to delve into the nature of Stirner's critique of modernity by contrasting it with that of Nietzsche. The chapter devoted to this comparison and contrast is one of the strongest parts of the book. I have tended, in the past, to read Nietzsche through Stirner. In other words, I tried to interpret Nietzsche's ideas in terms of Stirner's project. Inevitably, I found Nietzsche to be full of contradictions. In time, as I read more and more of Nietzsche's work, I realized that I was not reading it correctly when I read it through Stirner, but I didn't grasp exactly where the problem lay. Welsh makes it very clear that Nietzsche was, in fact, what Stirner called a "pious atheist." Like Feuerbach, Nietzsche has no interest in *eradicating* the sacred by taking his world as his own; he merely wants to *replace* god — and the human essence — with the "overhuman" (Welsh's accurate translation of "*Übermensch*"). This is still an ideal placed above you and me, a higher value to which we are to sacrifice ourselves. Thus, despite Nietzsche's analysis of morality as a historical and social product, he remains a *moralist*, through and through. Whereas Stirner sees self-enjoyment as the most sensible activity of each of us, Nietzsche promotes "master morality" and asceticism in the name of the overhuman and the will to power. This is the basis of his warrior ideal. In Stirner's perspective, each of us, in her or his uniqueness in the moment, is complete, is perfect. For Nietzsche, we are all incomplete, mere bridges to something greater than us. Thus, he sacrifices the here and now to a future and perceives us as mere means to a higher end. This is *religious* and *moral* thinking. Nietzsche was a very pious man, and his critique of modernity remained within the framework of the values of modernity, values of progress, of collective identity, of sacrifice for a greater good. Stirner, on the other hand, recognized and opposed the values of modernity in the name of each unique being in the here and now.

[13] "The *New Freewoman*: Dora Marsden and Benjamin R. Tucker" at tmh.floonet.net.

[14] Laska, "Dora Marsden 'The Stirner of Feminism'?" (for link, see note 12).

[15] Welsh, p. 222.

In the last chapter of the book, Welsh breaks down his understanding of Stirner's dialectical egoism in such a way as to make it a useful theoretical tool, a method for confronting our worlds. His breakdown of the ideas is generally good, but he doesn't develop specific aspects of Stirner's that I think are quite important. Though earlier in the book he mentions that there are phenomenological elements to Stirner's egoism, he doesn't develop this at all, and I think this is a very important aspect of Stirner's method. In particular, it is an important tool for understanding the relationship between the unique and the creative nothing, Stirner's way of describing how each of us constantly creates and consumes his or herself and his or her world in each movement. Nonetheless, this closing chapter works well as the opening invitation to a wider exploration of Stirner's egoism as a tool for confronting and fighting the modern world and its institutions of enslavement.