David Leopold: Max Stirner and Perfectionism

§1.

Max Stirner is a fine advertisement for what is sometimes called the history of philosophy 'without the gaps'.[1] That slogan refers to a narrative which proceeds not from 'peak' to 'peak', but with due attention to all the foothills, false summits, dead ends, and plains, that surround and extend beyond them. The hope is that paying attention to the wider landscape might not only alter our identification, understanding, and evaluation of the peaks, but also lead us to discover and reappraise previously neglected topographical features which are interesting and important in their own right.

'Stirner' was the student nickname – reflecting a high forehead ('*Stirn*') and the way he parted his hair – of Johann Casper Schmidt (1806-1856). 'Max Stirner' became both a pseudonym – some cannot resist saying *nom de guerre* – and his preferred identity. The basic circumstances of Stirner's adult life are easily listed: an extensive exposure to Hegelian philosophy at university and beyond; a short period of regular employment as a teacher at a respectable private girls' school; two short and unhappy marriages; a brief burst of minor literary notoriety; followed by a longer period of social isolation, poverty, and financial precariousness (including two spells in a debtors' prison); before an unexpected and early death. However, information about his interior life and personality remains sparse, largely frustrating attempts to identify meaningful affinities between his life and work.

What survives, above all, is a single book; for one critic, 'the most revolutionary ever written'.[2] The first edition of *Der Enzige und sein Eigentum* is dated 1845, although copies circulated from the end of October the previous year.[3] The book is known in English as *The Ego and Its Own* – after the title chosen (when Steven Tracy Byington,[4] George Schumm,[5] and others, were unable to agree) by Benjamin R. Tucker[6] – but a more literal translation would be *The Unique Individual and their Property*. In comparison, Stirner's other writings are slight in both extent and content, and remain of interest primarily because, and to the extent that, they illuminate the genesis and character of *Der Einzige*.

The historical impact of Stirner's work should not be underestimated. Most immediately, it was not only an impulse to, and reflection of, the fracturing of 'left' Hegelianism as a coherent intellectual movement, but also played a crucial, and related, role in the intellectual formation of the young Karl Marx, accelerating and shaping the latter's emergence from a period of ardent Feuerbachian enthusiasm. Over a longer period, Stirner was a progenitor of individualist anarchism (in America and elsewhere), and has been seen as prefiguring the intellectual avant-garde of a variety of subsequent generations, including those with existentialist, neo-Nietzschean, and post-structuralist, sensibilities.

Claims for the intrinsic philosophical interest of Stirner's work are wide-ranging. In part this reflects the scope of *Der Einzige*, with Stirner variously providing: a

developmental account of an individual life; an outline philosophy of history; a genealogical portrait of modernity (as an asylum); a distinctive critique of morality; an attack on the state; and a positive portrayal of egoism and the kind of social relations that it requires and promotes. The critical threads of the book are perhaps the most resonant today; not least, Stirner's systematic attempt to portray a variety of ostensibly emancipatory projects as tightening, rather than loosening, tyranny over the individual. Complete converts to his constructive vision might remain few, but Stirner plays the role of provocateur with verve and conviction. In challenging progressive beliefs, he pressures even those who disagree with him to think hard about what precisely it is that they want to resist and how they might best do so.

That said, some of Stirner's views on these, and other, topics remain elusive. In part, this is due to the form of his prose, and his refusal to restrict his own modes of expression and reasoning to those licensed by conventional views of truth and language (which he sees as oppressive). In part, there remains uncertainty about the sincerity of some of his argumentation, about how literally he should be read. For instance, whether – in his 'dialectical' treatment of individual and historical development (as progressing through stages of 'realism', 'idealism', and 'egoism') – Stirner is best understood as parodying rather than endorsing certain Hegelian forms of argumentation.[7]

Given that range and uncertainty, I should perhaps stress the modesty of my own ambitions in the present chapter. I examine only a single thread in *Der Einzige*; offering an outline characterisation of, and some initial reflection on, Stirner's relation to perfectionism.

§2.

'Perfectionism' is a term of art which can mean very different things in different contexts. Accordingly, I begin with some remarks about how it will be understood here. This understanding is not idiosyncratic, but I do not wish to deny the legitimacy and utility of alternative usages. In particular, my comments in the present section are intended to clarify what follows in this chapter, and not to police the use of the term 'perfectionism' elsewhere, including elsewhere in the present volume.

I understand perfectionism as an ethical standpoint which values the development and deployment of certain human capacities apart from any happiness or pleasure that they might bring.[8] It is perhaps most familiar in the form of an ethical theory that characterises the good life in terms of the development and deployment of our essential human nature. The name of this broad standpoint is said to derive from the somewhat antiquated characterisation of such capacities, whose promotion constitutes the good, as 'perfections' of human character. The relevant human capacities here are much contested, but the capacity for intellectual reflection and the capacity for productive labour, can stand as examples of the kind of capacities whose development and deployment might be said to constitute the good life. Because the development and deployment of those capacities is valued apart from any pleasure or happiness that they might bring, perfectionism is usually said to constitute an 'objective' account of the good. Of course, perfectionists can allow that the

development and deployment of the relevant capacities brings us pleasure – and indeed welcome that fact – but they do not (qua perfectionists) hold that goodness consists in the pleasure that it brings.

Perfectionism can take a wide variety of forms, as suggested by the diversity of authors – from Aristotle to Nietzsche – who have been characterised as holding such a view. Disagreements amongst perfectionists often concern the precise constitution of human nature, and consequently the various ingredients of a perfected human life, but other intra-perfectionist disputes are available. They might disagree about whether perfectionism is one element, or the entirety, of a satisfactory moral theory. They might also take different views about the relation between perfection and moral pluralism. They might share an account of human nature, but disagree about the social and political conclusions that supports. They might take different, more or less 'egoistic', approaches to the relation between one's own perfection and the perfection of others. And so on.

§3.

Stirner's relation to perfectionism, so understood, might appear obvious enough. In particular, the author of *Der Einzige* is fiercely critical of characterisations of the good life in terms of the development and deployment of our essential human nature. Consequently, whatever we make of his substantive views, it seems clear that Stirner, as one recent commentator has it, 'is not at all a perfectionist'.[9] Now I intend – in the next section – to put this view under pressure, but, for the moment, acknowledge that it has much to recommend it.

One of Stirner's main critical ambitions is to demonstrate that modernity fails to escape from the very thing that it claims to have outgrown, namely religious modes of thought. His ostensible target is 'liberalism', which he sees as having played a significant role in world history, and in the emergence of modernity in particular. That looks sweeping enough, but Stirner's subsequent characterisation of its character appears a little more parochial. The various forms of 'liberalism' are said to share a perfectionist problematic, whereby individuals are separated from their human essence, and then that essence is set above them as something to be striven for. This problematic is exemplified by the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, whilst its various modern forms seemingly owe much to 'the free', the eponymous group of Berlin Hegelians which whom Stirner had associated. The latter are sub-divided into 'political', 'social', and 'humane', liberalisms, which share the perfectionist problematic, but disagree about the exact nature of our humanity, identifying the species with citizenship, labour, and critical activity, respectively.

(In this context, a passing reference may be of interest to modern readers. Marx was not a well-known, or well-published, figure in 1844, but Stirner had noticed his recent essay '*Zur Judenfrage* [On the Jewish Question]' and sought to locate it within this contemporary intellectual landscape.[10] Stirner's remarks are interesting partly because Marx is not identified with those socialists and communists who associate the human essence with productive activity, insisting that 'labour is man's "destiny [*Bestimmung*] and calling"'.[11] Instead, Marx appears later, as something closer to a

radical Feuerbachian, confirming the religious character of liberalism by advancing the demand that we should strive to become a '*wirkliches Gattungswesen*', a true species being.[12] It is a historical reminder: that his contemporaries often knew less about Marx than we now do; that the evolution of his communist commitments is complicated; and that the writings in which he most clearly identified humankind with a certain kind of productive activity were mainly unpublished at this time.)

The centrality of the critique of Feuerbach to Stirner's project is clear from this account of the former's emblematic status, exemplifying the perfectionist problematic of 'liberalism'. It is also apparent from the form of the book, which constitutes a structural parody of Feuerbach's best-known work. Where the two halves of Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* had been entitled *God* and *Man* – with the first attacked, and the second celebrated – the two corresponding parts of Stirner's opus are named *Man* and *I*.

Stirner seeks to challenge the progressive verdict on Feuerbach's achievement. He suggests that the celebration of Feuerbach for having completed the critique of religion, is not merely mistaken but nearer the opposite of the truth. Far from undermining religion, the Feuerbachian problematic is said to reproduce its central features. To anticipate Stirner's punchline, we might say that the experience of alienation – a dysfunctional relationship between self and other – remains the same, whether we strive to be more like God or more like the 'true man'.[13]

In *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Feuerbach undertakes a philosophical analysis of Christian religious experience.[14] He maintains that the proper meaning of religious experience is obscured to those who undergo it; indeed, ignorance of its real object is portrayed as a defining feature of religion. (Feuerbach often, and unhelpfully, conflates Christianity and religion, perhaps in part because he viewed the former – in its Protestant variants, of course – as the culmination of the latter.) Feuerbach seeks to excavate the hidden meaning of Christianity, although his conclusion can look disarmingly simple. In Christianity individuals worship the predicates of human nature projected onto an ideal and imaginary entity; that is, the Christian God is revealed as a collection of essential human predicates, 'purified from the limits of the individual man', and viewed as if they belonged to an objective being existing apart from humankind.[15] Such a stark summary is not inaccurate, but it misses out much that is interesting and important. Those omissions include: the extensive and detailed supporting evidence that Feuerbach provides; his account of theological reflection on religious experience so understood; and the educative and emancipatory ambitions of the project as a whole. The last of these is especially pertinent here.

Feuerbach's emancipatory ambitions become clearer once we recognise that he saw religious belief as a necessary step in the progress of humankind to self-understanding. It is through transformative criticism – recovering the correct relation of subject and predicate from its inversion in Christianity – that we first come to understand what human nature is. Moreover, confirming his perfectionist commitments, Feuerbach maintains that, once liberated from their otherworldly form, these essential human characteristics – and especially perhaps our love for others – would come to form the basis of the unalienated social and political life of the future. This emancipatory ambition also helps to clarify Feuerbach's insistence

that he should be seen as a friend, and not an enemy, of religion; in particular, he sought not to destroy Christianity, but to liberate its content from otherworldly forms. This claim is also at the heart of his distinctive – and perhaps idiosyncratic – denial that he was an atheist. Feuerbach maintains that 'true atheism' requires the rejection not only of God as subject, but also of those predicates – love, wisdom, justice, and so on – traditionally associated with divinity.[16]

Where Feuerbach declines to take this second step, Stirner might be said to pick up this (idiosyncratic) characterisation of 'true atheism' and run with it. Stirner maintains that religion, properly understood, is characterised by the subordination of the individual to 'spirit' in any of its guises. The rejection of God as transcendental subject consequently leaves the essential failing of religion intact. Feuerbach's perfectionist problematic, Stirner remarks, might have altered 'the tinsel' (the divine subject) but it leaves 'the main thing' (the divine predicates) unchanged.[17] The sacred is allowed to remain, if not as God, then as 'Man with a capital M' in Byington's inspired English rendering of Stirner's '*Der* Mensch'.[18]

Stirner portrays religion as some monstrous protean adversary, a 'gigantic opponent', which humankind has sought to conquer for over two thousand years, but which 'is constantly rising anew under a changed form and name'.[19] The perfectionist deification of the human essence, he insists, is simply the most recent incarnation, 'nothing more or less than a new – religion'.[20] Stirner rejects Feuerbach's self-description – as having revealed human nature as it is – and portrays him instead as having deified a prescriptive account of what being human required. In this way, the 'real kernel' of religion – the positing of an 'essence over me' – is left intact.[21]

Indeed, Stirner maintains that matters are worse than that description might suggest. The perfectionist problematic has actually increased, and not merely reproduced, religious tyranny over the individual. Feuerbach's 'Man', Stirner predicts, will prove 'capable of pinching us still more torturingly' that 'God' ever did.[22] Stirner sees the 'change of masters' here – deifying human nature in place of God – as extending and intensifying religious domination.[23] It extends domination because this new deity is no longer the preserve of the faithful, but can possess everyone, believers and unbelievers alike.[24] And it intensifies domination because divinity is now attached to us 'with indelible *immanence*'.[25] The scrutiny of my own conscience is harder to evade than that of a transcendent subject that flutters 'over our heads as a dove'.[26]

It is worth trying to identify the locus of Stirner's disapproval of the perfectionist problematic, as paradigmatically found in Feuerbach's writings, with a little more precision. There look to be four main threads here.

First, Stirner worries about the account of selfhood that perfectionism seems to assume, and its enthusiasm for *division*, and 'dualistic essences', in particular.[27] He warns the reader that Feuerbach, and his ilk, would 'cut your identity in two'.[28] I take it that the fact of plurality is less the issue here – despite a joke about the dangers of overcrowding once the divine predicates have been moved out of their 'heavenly dwelling' and taken up residence in us – than the specific character of, and relationship between, these two subjects.[29]

Second, Stirner characterises the perfectionist division here as involving a *contradiction* – in some suitably expansive sense – between a fictitious generic human essence, on the one hand, and a real particular individual, on the other. Feuerbach's love for humankind, for instance, is described as 'the love of *man*, the unreal concept, the spook', and emphatically not the love of any real individual.[30] The human nature of the perfectionists is essentially a fictitious entity, 'only an ideal, or 'only something thought of'.[31] And Stirner consequently insists that it will always remain something 'alien' and 'otherworldly' to the flesh and blood individual.[32]

Third, Stirner portrays the perfectionist problematic as *subordinating* the individual to the species. This is one source of its religious character; it is religious 'because it separates my essence from me and sets it above me, because it exalts "man" to the same extent as any other religion does its God or idol'.[33] We are told that 'we are worth nothing' when 'we are not "human"', but Stirner insists that embracing this goal makes little sense.[34] Human nature properly understood is neither universal, nor does it have any prescriptive content. As a result, it cannot ground any claim about how we *ought* to live. Indeed, Stirner concludes that: 'I am a man just as the earth is a star. As ridiculous as it would be to set the earth the task of being a "thorough star", so ridiculous it is to burden me with the call to be a "thorough" man'.[35]

Fourth, Stirner understands the perfectionist relation between human nature and individual as involving *subjection* and *frustration* for the latter. The so-called "'proper self'" – the scare quotes are in the original – is set 'to be the ruler of the paltrier remainder'.[36] And, insofar as I strive to be more human, 'I yield myself a prisoner' to that spook.[37] Moreover, when it 'sets me beneath man' the perfectionist problematic 'creates for me a "vocation"' which I can never fulfil.[38] The human essence, Stirner insists, always 'remains other-worldly to you', and the striving 'to become wholly man' will prove 'just as fruitless as the Christian's to become wholly a blessed spirit!'[39] Simply put, we cannot become what is alien to us.

In short, Stirner's hostility to the perfectionist problematic looks emphatic enough. He insists that perfectionism divides the person into two contradictory parts, a fictitious true self and the prosaic remainder, it then sets the latter the ambition of becoming more like the former, establishing a relationship which involves subjection and frustration for the individual.

§4.

The Stirnerian critique of perfectionism, sketched in the previous section, appears clear and forceful. It might easily seem that there is little to be said against it, at least as confirming Stirner's own hostility towards perfectionism, and correctly identifying his views as resolutely anti-perfectionist. However, as previously trailed, I think that matters are more complicated. Indeed, perhaps surprisingly, I want to suggest that Stirner's own standpoint is actually a perfectionist one.

In order to introduce this potentially surprising suggestion, consider a distinction that can be drawn between perfectionist approaches. In earlier remarks, I neglected to draw attention to the difference between perfectionism in the expansive sense, and

one of its narrower varieties.[40] Perfectionism in the expansive sense is an ethical standpoint which values the development and deployment of certain human characteristics apart from any happiness or pleasure that they might bring. However, we can think of that broad picture as being elaborated in two different ways. In the first, perfectionism is an ethical theory that characterises the good life, so understood, in terms of the development and deployment of our essential human nature. On this account, which might be called 'essentialist perfectionism', certain characteristics of the individual are valued *because* they realise some aspect of human nature. In the second, this element – the relating of the relevant characteristics to our essential human nature – is missing. This variant is still perfectionist in that it identifies perfections of character whose promotion constitutes ethical goodness, but neither the relevant perfections, nor their goodness, are related to any account of our essential human nature. Let us call this latter variety 'non-essentialist perfectionism'.

(I can imagine readers worrying about these labels and their use of the slippery term 'essentialism' in particular. Non-imaginary readers in the same position should note that I am not especially attached to these particular terms, and am happy for them to be replaced with something else. What I am attached to is the idea of a conceptual space for a variety of perfectionism which values certain 'excellences' of character, but does not understand those excellences as forming part of an ideal of realising our essential human nature. That conceptual space, and not any particular label for it, is what matters here. And it matters, not least, because I will maintain that Stirner can plausibly be understood as occupying it.)

In short, in the remainder of this chapter I seek to demonstrate that Stirner is plausibly understood as what is here called a 'non-essentialist perfectionist'. That is, notwithstanding his fierce attack on 'essentialist perfectionism' and its associated idea of human nature, Stirner endorses an ethical standpoint which values certain excellences of character apart from any happiness or pleasure that they might bring.

§5.

The presence of a character ideal is already trailed in Stirner's critique of 'liberalism'. If alienation is to be overcome, he maintains that the human essence of the 'liberals' has to be recognised and rejected as the enemy of selfhood rather than its true content and aspiration. However, that is already to accept that there is a kind of selfhood which not only survives, but whose existence and expression necessitates, the death of 'Man' as well as 'God'.

The name that Stirner gives to his character ideal is intended to indicate its distance from accounts of our essential human nature. It is the 'un-man [*Unmensch*]' whose existence and expression Stirner values.[41] And he is sanguine that what 'an un-man is is not particularly hard' to describe 'in blunt words'.[42] Progress can be made by distinguishing two threads in the characterisation that follows: a negative account of what the 'un-man' is not; and a positive account of what the 'un-man is'.

Stirner's (negative) account of what the 'un-man' is not, rests on the critique of 'essentialist perfectionism'. The 'un-man' is simply 'a man who does not correspond

to the *concept* man'.[43] So understood, we might say that the 'un-man' is *not*, for instance: divided into two parts; which are, in some sense, contradictory; with the prosaic remainder set to strive after a fictitious true self; in a way that involves subjection and frustration for the individual. For example, in the first person that he sometimes uses to characterise the 'un-man', Stirner notes that in order to reach that point 'I cease … to measure myself and let myself be measured by man, cease to recognise anything above me'.[44] However, we would still seem to need more in the way of positive content if the character ideal here is not to remain somewhat under-described.

Stirner's (positive) account of what the 'un-man' is, identifies this character type with the 'egoist'.[45] In this context, we might recall Stirner's injunction to give up the 'foolish mania to be something else' and become 'what you really are', 'become egoists'.[46] This identification of the 'un-man' and the 'egoist' is important, but requires some interpretative care. In particular, Stirnerian egoism is not synonymous with egoism as conventionally understood. As Stirner recognises, 'egoists in the usual sense' are 'selfish people, looking out for their advantage'.[47] However, so understood, egoism includes 'one-sided, unopened, narrow' forms that Stirner himself denounces.[48] The egoism that Stirner admires and endorses is not simply self-seeking, but is associated with the idea of individual autonomy, the elusive idea of an agent who governs herself.

On the account offered here, the 'perfection' at the heart of Stirner's character ideal is the radical notion of autonomy, or self-rule, that he calls 'ownness'. 'I am my own', Stirner writes, 'only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered … by anything else.[49] This association of egoism and autonomy appears throughout *Der Einzige*. Considering the antonym of 'egoism', for instance, Stirner reaches not for altruism, but rather identifies 'thraldom, service, self-renunciation' as paradigmatically '*not egoism*'.[50] Similarly, elucidating his provocative claim that 'God' is best understood as an egoist, Stirner explains that this is because 'He serves no higher person'.[51]

The appeal of individual autonomy is often taken for granted in modern intellectual culture, with self-rule treated as obviously desirable and unproblematic. However, it is an idea which can be developed in a variety of ways, not all of which are attractive and uncontroversial. Stirner's account of 'ownness' is a case in point. He not only ranks 'ownness' above any other consideration, but also makes it incompatible with any moral requirement to act in a particular way. As will become apparent, the impact of these moves is stark and unsettling.

In order to elucidate these concerns, the idea of 'ownness' needs a little more unpacking. We might think of Stirnerian self-rule as having both external and internal dimensions. I fail to be autonomous if I submit to an external power, whether that be an institution or another individual.[52] And my autonomy is also undermined if I allow myself to be 'mastered' by one of my own appetites or desires.[53] I will discuss both of these dimensions, but begin with the latter.

Stirner's character ideal has an important 'internal' dimension. The egoist will, of course, have ideas and emotions, but they must not come to dominate or rule the individual. Stirner is concerned that 'if anything plants itself firmly in me, and becomes indissoluble, I become its prisoner and servant' and the 'anything' here would appear to include the individual's own thoughts and feelings.[54]

The Stirnerian egoist can consequently be understood as having to cultivate a kind of emotional detachment towards their own thoughts and feelings.[55] Stirner often presents the egoist as located in a conflict with various 'others', a fight for submission that they cannot afford to lose. On this account, the various 'others' include her own thoughts and feelings, in that the egoist must never allow either to 'subjugate' her, or make her 'a tool of its realisation'.[56] The appropriate strategic response involves emotional detachment, the flexibility and willingness to abandon particular ideas and emotions if the egoist finds herself getting too attached to them, if they threaten her sovereignty.

Recognising this internal dimension of egoistic self-rule can help elucidate the distance between Stirnerian and other more conventional kinds of egoism. There are forms of self-seeking which Stirner rejects precisely because they neglect or frustrate this internal condition for 'ownness' or autonomy. Consider the character and behaviour of what we can call 'the avaricious man'.[57] Since 'the avaricious man' will go to any length 'to gather treasures' he is conventionally, and not implausibly, portrayed as an egoist.[58] However, for Stirner, this is a 'one-sided, unopened, narrow' form of egoism that we should reject.[59]

For Stirner, 'the avaricious man' is an unsatisfactory character type because he is not self-governing, but rather 'wholly absorbed' by one of his own desires.[60] The conventionally egoistic desire for riches has broken loose, and come to subjugate and enslave its creator. Consequently, 'the avaricious man' exemplifies, not 'ownness' (or autonomy), but rather 'possessedness' (or heteronomy).[61] Greed 'becomes our – master' when it starts to 'inspire, enthuse, fanaticize' the individual.[62] We might say that the avaricious man, rather than being self-determining, is 'dragged along' by one of his own appetites.[63]

The case of 'the avaricious man' might also help to clarify the place of pleasure or desire satisfaction here. Stirner assumes that the egoist will typically do what she desires, or what pleases her. However, it is autonomy rather than pleasure or desire-satisfaction that gives egoistic character and behaviour its value. It might be that 'the avaricious man' gains huge pleasure from his pursuit of riches, but that clearly counts for nothing here. For Stirner, the crucial feature of his situation is the lack of autonomy; the avaricious man 'is a slave of lucre', he 'belongs to lucre, the moneybag, not to himself; he is not his own'.[64] In short, egoism and happiness might typically go together, but the former is not defined by the latter. No matter how pleased he might be with himself and his life, 'an avaricious man is not a self-owned man, but a servant' of his own appetites.[65]

Stirner's character ideal also has an important 'external' dimension. The egoist, of course, will stand in some relation to social institutions and other individuals, but these latter must never be allowed to dominate or rule. Not least, the attitude and behaviour of the egoist towards these external others must take a certain form, if her autonomy is to be preserved.

The egoist's relations with social institutions and other individuals are driven, as ever, by Stirner ranking of 'ownness' above any other consideration, and his conceptualising it as incompatible with the constraints of duty and obligation. The institutional casualties of these moves are many. However, to keep the discussion manageable, I focus on the case of the state, and the attitude that the egoist should adopt towards it.[66] Egoism emerges here as the opponent, not the ally, of statehood; as Stirner insists 'we two, the state and I, are enemies'.[67]

Stirner portrays the state as a repressive and illegitimate institution, whose 'sole purpose' is 'to limit, tame, subordinate the individual'.[68] The antipathy between the individual and the state is, on this account, a necessary one, based on the conflict between individual autonomy and the subject's obligation to obey the law. 'No one', Stirner maintains, 'has any business to command *my* actions, to say what course I shall pursue and set up a code to govern it', and yet the state is unable to forego 'the claim to determine the individual's will'.[69] The form of the state has no impact on this basic conflict. 'Every state is a despotism', he insists, 'be the despot one or many'.[70]

Note that Stirnerian egoism rules out the most familiar way of reconciling autonomy with a moral requirement to obey the law, through appeals to contract and consent. When Stirner maintains that 'no one has any business to command *my* actions, to say what course I shall pursue and set up a code to govern it', he explicitly identifies the 'no-one' here as including myself.[71] Simply put, self-binding conflicts with 'ownness'. A self-assumed obligation still involves a moral or other requirement to act, and Stirner, of course, insists that 'ownness' can be realised 'only by recognising no *duty*, not *binding* myself nor letting myself be bound'.[72] Moreover, to require obedience to a law that I 'gave myself' would be to allow my will of yesterday to restrict my will of today, as if because 'I was a fool yesterday I must remain such my life long'.[73]

However, Stirner does not suggest that the individual has a positive duty to oppose, or seek to eliminate, the state. Such a suggestion would conflict with Stirner's considered account of autonomy and his scepticism towards political movements. To endorse a positive duty of this kind would be to seek to command and limit the individual's behaviour in a way that 'ownness', of course, proscribes. And to call for the overthrow of the state would seem liable to attract the scorn that Stirner directs at 'plans for the redemption or improvement of the world'.[74] Egoism, he maintains, rejects any sense of idealistic devotion to 'a great idea, a good cause, a doctrine, a system, a lofty calling'.[75]

Instead of a frontal assault on state power, Stirner recommends a strategy combining a general withdrawing of attitudinal support, with a case-by-case evasion of constraints. He offers historical role models for both strands. First, we should adopt an 'insurrectionary', rather than 'revolutionary', posture towards the state, declining

to seek its approval or be judged by it. This attitude is said to have been exemplified by Jesus. Stirner denies that Jesus had been engaged in a political fight with the temporal power, and portrays him instead as having 'wanted to walk his own way, untroubled about, and untroubled by, these authorities'.[76] Second, in those 'cases where his advantage runs against the state's' the egoist should evade the demands of the political authorities, insofar as that is possible.[77] Here we should take our lead, not from the 'fool' Socrates, who conceded to the Athenians the right to condemn him, but rather the 'intriguer of genius' Alcibiades, who fled Athens rather than face trial.[78] To join Jesus and Alcibiades together as role models is a typically provocative Stirnerian conceit.

Stirner maintains that the institutional impact of these attitudinal and behavioural changes spreading should not be underestimated. Indeed, he suggests that they might even undermine the existence of the state. The argument here appeals to what might be called an idealist sociology, according to which the state is based on the idea of sovereignty, and held together by the deference of its citizens. Now if you hold that the state exists only because of 'the disrespect that I have for myself', then it might indeed follow that that 'with the vanishing of this undervaluation' the state itself would be 'extinguished'.[79] Alluding to Hegel's discussion of '*Herrschaft*' and '*Knechtschaft*' in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* – and seemingly promoting the moment of 'recognition' into a complete account of state power – Stirner suggests that if 'submissiveness' ceased 'it would be all over with lordship'.[80] The cumulative effect of a growing disrespect for law would be to 'scuttle [*anbohren*]' – literally, to drill holes into – 'the ship of state [*Staatsschiff*]'.[81]

I now turn to Stirner's understanding of egoistic social relations, and to the attitude and behaviour that the egoist should adopt towards other individuals. One complication here is that there exists something of a tension between what might be called – *mis*appropriating the language of Ernst Bloch – the 'warm stream' and 'cold stream' account of these matters in *Der Einzige*.

In 'warmer' mode, Stirner strives to present the egoistic future in a rosy manner, and downplay its distance from the present. In particular, he suggests that many familiar and worthwhile relationships, including 'love', might survive being reconstructed on egoistic lines, and he promotes 'the union of egoists' as an attractive, fluid, and spontaneous set of alliances, enabling individuals to unite without loss of sovereignty, without swearing allegiance to anyone else's 'flag'.[82] In his reply to critics – to Moses Hess, Ludwig Feuerbach, and 'Szeliga'[83] – Stirner imagines two heart-warming street scenes to illustrate egoistic union: in the first, children happen upon each other and spontaneously engage in the 'comradeship of play [*Spielkameradschaft*]'; and in the second, Hess himself bumps into friends before adjourning for a drink, not out of loyalty, but in the expectation of pleasure.[84]

I will be comparatively brief with this 'warmer' thread. It is a little submerged in the book, and Stirner subsequently regretted that readers had not always noticed the 'union of egoists', and rushed instead to associate the exclusivity of the egoist with 'isolation, separation, loneliness [*Isolirtheit, Vereinzelung, Vereinsamung*]'.[85] There are also many questions about its coherence and plausibility which are not easily and briefly dealt with. In this mode, Stirner sometimes recognises the benefits of

cooperation – the union can strengthen and secure – in a way that he is reluctant to do elsewhere, and without seriously asking whether that concession creates difficulties for other parts of his argument.[86] He also seems to exaggerate the likely continuity between non-egoistic and egoistic variants of worthwhile relationships; for instance, failing to appreciate the involuntary and 'disinterested' character of love, and mistakenly thinking that it might easily be transplanted into egoistic social relations. And he helps himself to assumptions that might not be readily available on the egoistic account; perhaps underestimating the complexity and fragility of co-operation, and erroneously thinking that meaningful social cooperation could survive the erosion of trust that egoism would seem likely to engender.

In 'colder' mode, Stirner seems rather to revel in the iconoclastic standing of the egoist, and even celebrate the gulf between conventional attitudes and the arguments of *Der Einzige*. The language that he uses to describe egoistic social relations varies, but typically appeals to the idea of instrumental treatment. We are to think of other persons as, for instance, property and food. Both images might mislead a modern reader. In the first case, the reader needs to forget conventional juridical, or moral, notions of property, which, after all, rest on ideas of right, and involve constraints on use and control, that Stirner rejects. In contrast, egoistic property involves 'unlimited dominion' over the world, and is a way of insisting that there are no moral constraints on how an individual might chose to relate to things and other persons.[87] In the second, the reader has to forget the possibility of animal rights, or duties to the environment. The egoist, Stirner explains, has no obligations to others, but rather treats them as 'food' to be 'fed upon and turned to use' just as she is minded.[88] These images are intended to suggest is that we can treat other person as we wish, that there are no moral constraints on what we can do to them. 'We have only one relation to each other, that is usableness, of utility, of use. We owe each other nothing.'[89]

This lack of moral constraint impacts predictably on the permissible behaviour of the egoist. At various points, Stirner condones a variety of activities which are conventionally judged morally troublesome. The list includes: incest (the man who touches 'his sister as wife also');[90] infidelity;[91] filial impiety;[92] infanticide (the dying widow who strangles her child);[93] political and religious disloyalty ('ownness permits everything, even apostasy, defection');[94] breaking one's word ('yes, even his oath');[95] and murder (the egoist does not renounce 'even the power over life and death').[96] Indeed, the egoist does not fear, nor forbid, murder as a 'wrong', and views it as permissible provided only that 'it is right for me [*ist es Mir recht*]', or – in a more colloquial translation – provided only that 'it suits me'.[97] The egoist is justified in acting in all of these ways, and more, 'in order to determine himself instead of being determined by moral considerations'.[98] And the status of other persons, on this account, seems clear. 'For me', Stirner explains, 'no one is a person to be respected', but only 'an *object* in which I take an interest or not'.[99]

Many will find this vision of a social world – in which the egoist may 'think and act' as she will, utilizing others as she chooses – a repugnant one.[100] I sympathise with that response, but will not belabour it here. Instead, I note both that Stirner anticipates it, and remains unmoved. He acknowledges that 'very few' of his readers will 'draw joy' from this vision of a world without duties or obligations towards

others, and expresses indifference at this predictable response, which reflects the emotional pull of conventional ideas that should be abandoned.[101] Insofar as his book promotes the spread of egoism, Stirner allows that 'trouble, combat, and death' might well result from its publication, and adds that these consequences are of no concern to him.[102] Indeed, if he had cared about the welfare of others, he would have kept *Der Einzige* from entering general circulation.

§8.

Stirner is widely thought of as a staunch opponent of perfectionism. He mounts a fierce attack on 'essentialist perfectionism', and its associated idea of human nature. This perfectionist problematic, exemplified by Feuerbach, stands accused of dividing the person into two parts, a fictitious true self which 'contradicts' the prosaic remainder, before setting the latter the task of striving to become more like the former, thereby establishing a relationship which involves subjection and frustration for the individual.

However, Stirner goes on to endorse an ethical standpoint which values certain excellences of character apart from any happiness or pleasure that they might bring. The character ideal that he promotes – the 'un-man' or 'egoist' – centres on the autonomous individual, whose capacity for self-determination, once developed and deployed, is objectively valuable. As a result, I have suggested that Stirner is better understood as a 'non-essentialist perfectionist'.

Stirner's evaluation and understanding of egoistic self-rule is a distinctive and surprising one. 'Internally', the egoist must cultivate an attitude of emotional detachment, and avoid becoming too attached to her own ideas and emotions. (Unlike 'the avaricious man' who, rather than being self-determining, is dragged along by one of his own appetites.) 'Externally', the egoist must recognise no constraints of duty or obligations; even self-assumed restrictions are deemed illegitimate. As a result, the state emerges as one of egoism's main institutional enemies. However, Stirner recommends that the egoist pursue, not a frontal assault on state power, but a strategy of (generally) withdrawing attitudinal support and (on a case by case basis) evading legal and political constraints. As for other individuals, Stirner recommends that they be treated as objects in which we might have an interest or not, rather than as persons who have any moral claims on us. He allows that such a view might licence a variety of activities – up to, and including, the taking of another's life – conventionally judged unacceptable. And he concedes – indeed, can seem to revel in this – that few readers will draw comfort from this result.

There is much that might be said about Stirner's discussion of these issues. However, in the remaining space I want to respond to a possible doubt about this proposed interpretation of Stirner as a ('non-essentialist') perfectionist. A reader might accept much of the account here – allowing, for example, that Stirner proffers the egoist as an ideal of character, with autonomy rather than some subjective good at its heart – but still be concerned about the status of Stirner's views. In particular, given that Stirner criticises and rejects morality, they might question whether he is rightly portrayed as occupying an ethical standpoint (as perfectionism, on the account

adopted here, requires). These are difficult issues, and my defence of this interpretation of Stirner as a ('non-essentialist') perfectionist will utilise a controversial distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality'. I should acknowledge both that Stirner does not explicitly adopt this distinction, and that there is little wider scholarly consensus about its boundaries or coherence. Nonetheless, I think that it can help make sense of, and has some broad conceptual fit with, Stirner's own position.

When Stirner rejects morality, it seems certain that he is operating with a narrow notion of its boundaries. Morality is seen as preoccupied with the idea of duties and obligations towards others, and Stirner consequently rejects it because – on his distinctive account – these demand the sacrifice of autonomy. The moral individual is required to give up her own will 'for an alien one which is set up as rule and law'.[103] Yet, despite this rejection of morality, Stirner remains preoccupied with wider ethical questions about how we should live and how we should act. In this context, he does not hesitate to celebrate and champion the attitude and behaviour of the egoist; for instance, ranking the egoist's '*enjoyment of life*' above the mere '*longing for life*' exhibited by the pious.[104]

A distinction of this kind – between broader and narrower evaluative perspectives – allows us to understand how Stirner can consistently reject morality, and yet evaluate egoism as ethically superior to other modes of existence, or types of character. Consider, for instance, his discussion of Nero. The egoist and 'the moral man' are interestingly united in their condemnation of the Roman emperor, but the grounds of their disapproval are very different. Nero is 'a "bad" man' in the eyes of morality, because he failed to respect the rights of others.[105] Whereas, for Stirner, Nero is 'a *possessed* man', to be criticised because his obsessive predilections violated his self-mastery.[106]

Stirner portrays the 'the moral man' as having an unhelpfully impoverished understanding of the conceptual landscape in this area. In particular, Stirner appears to regret that 'the moral man' allows no space for ethical behaviour outside of the moral sphere. 'The moral man' imagines that whoever is not moral must consequently be immoral, as if those two categories exhausted all the options here. This 'narrow' perspective is said to generate a mistaken verdict regarding the egoist; namely that 'the moral man … throws the egoist into the only class of men that he knows besides moral men, into that of the – immoral'.[107] Stirner not only rejects this classification, but also suggestively observes that, lacking a more sophisticated account of the normative terrain, 'the moral man can never comprehend the egoist'.[108]

[1] As propounded, not least, by Peter Adamson in *Classical Philosophy* (Oxford, 2014), and elsewhere.
[2] James Huneker, *Egoists. A Book of Supermen* (New York, 1909), 350.
[3] References to Stirner's text are to two editions, divided by a forward slash: Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum,* edited by Ahlrich Meyer (Stuttgart,1972); and Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, edited and introduced by David Leopold (Cambridge, 1995).
[4] Steven T. Byington (1868-1957) was the translator of *Der Einzige*. (His other translations include *The Bible in Living English* published posthumously by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.) He was a teacher, linguist, and contributor to Tucker's anarchist journal *Liberty*.
[5] George Schumm (1856-1941) was a compositor, printer, and assistant to Tucker. In addition to helping copy edit and proofread the Byington translation, Schumm translated John Henry Mackay's *Die Anarchisten*.
[6] Benjamin R. Tucker (1854-1939) was a publisher and writer; editor of the individualist anarchist periodical *Liberty* between 1881 and 1908, and author of the wonderfully titled *Instead of a Book, By a Man Too Busy to Write One* (New York, 1893).
[7] See, for example, Widukind De Ridder, 'Max Stirner, Hegel and the Young Hegelians: A Reassessment', *History of European Ideas*, 34/3 (2007), 285-297.
[8] The account here draws on Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford, 1993).
[9] Douglas Moggach, 'Post-Kantian Perfectionism', in Douglas Moggach (edited), *Politics, Religions, and Art. Hegelian Debates* (Evanston, Illinois, 2011), 187.
[10] Marx's essay appeared in the one and only edition of the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* in February 1844.
[11] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 134/110. Proudhon is the only author mentioned by name in this section on 'social liberals', but Hess and Weitling are mentioned serially elsewhere.
[12] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 192/158.
[13] Stirner, *Der Einzige* 359/283.
[14] References to Feuerbach's text are to two editions, divided by a forward slash: Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums, Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Werner Schuffenhauer, volume 5 (Berlin, 2006); and Ludwig Feuerbach, The *Essence of Christianity*, translated George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
[15] Feuerbach, *Das Wesen,* 48/14.
[16] Feuerbach, *Das Wesen,* 58/21.
[17] Stirner, *Der Einzige,* 63/56.
[18] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 62/55.
[19] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 103/86.
[20] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 62/55.
[21] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 50/46.
[22] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 191/156.
[23] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 62/55.
[24] See Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 103/86.
[25] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 52/47.
[26] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 103/86.
[27] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 87/74.
[28] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 32/32.

[29] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 35/35.
[30] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 84/72.
[31] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 200/163.
[32] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 192/158.
[33] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 192/158.
[34] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 203/166.
[35] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 199/163.
[36] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 32/32.
[37] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 183/150.
[38] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 193/158.
[39] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 192/157.
[40] The distinction between broad and narrow perfectionism is also used by Hurka, but in a slightly different way. See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 4.
[41] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 194/159.
[42] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 194/159.
[43] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 194/159.
[44] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 162/131.
[45] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 136/112.
[46] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 181/149.
[47] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 81/70.
[48] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 82/70.
[49] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 187/153.
[50] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 182/149.
[51] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 4/6.
[52] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 187/153.
[53] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 187/153.
[54] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 157/127.
[55] Stirner's biographer, John Henry Mackay, uses a related idea in a different context; presenting Stirner's own social isolation as the authentic expression of the 'ataraxic' dimension of egoism. See John Henry Mackay, *Max Stirner. Sein Leben und sein Werk*, third edition (Berlin, 1914), 212.
[56] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 385/302
[57] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 81/70.
[58] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 82/70.
[59] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 82/70.
[60] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 81/70.
[61] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 82/70.
[62] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 66/58.
[63] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 64/56.
[64] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 335/266.
[65] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 335/266.
[66] The discussion of the state that follows draws on David Leopold, 'The State and I: Max Stirner's Anarchism', in Douglas Moggach (edited), *The New Hegelians* (Cambridge, 2006), 176-199.
[67] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 196/161.
[68] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 249/201.
[69] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 214/174.
[70] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 215/175.

[71] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 213-4/174.
[72] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 215/175.
[73] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 215/175.
[74] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 28/29.
[75] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 82/70.
[76] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 355-356/281.
[77] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 263/212.
[78] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 235-236/190-191.
[79] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 316/252.
[80] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 214/175.
[81] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 61/54.
[82] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 261/210.
[83] 'Szeliga' was the pseudonym of Franz Zychlin von Zychlinsky (1816-1900), a Prussian officer, and sometime contributor to periodicals published by Bruno Bauer in the early 1840s.
[84] *Max Stirner's Kleinere Schriften und seine Entgegnungen auf die Kritik seines Werkes "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum". Aus den Jahren 1842–1848*, edited by J.H. Mackay, second revised edition (Berlin, 1914), 395-396.
[85] *Stirner's Kleinere Schriften*, 375.
[86] See Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 287/229
[87] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 279/223.
[88] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 331/263.
[89] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 331/263.
[90] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 48/45.
[91] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 48/45.
[92] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 48/45.
[93] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 356/281.
[94] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 261/210.
[95] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 261/210.
[96] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 357/282.
[97] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 208/170.
[98] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 261/210.
[99] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 312/276.
[100] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 233/189.
[101] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 331/263.
[102] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 331/263.
[103] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 88/75.
[104] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 322/284.
[105] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 57/51.
[106] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 57/51.
[107] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 59/53.
[108] Stirner, *Der Einzige*, 59/53.