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Does religious belief necessarily mean servitude? On Max Stirner and the hardened heart

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A common view of morality and religion is that they demand self-denial. The starting point is me in isolation, to which we then ought to add a moral concern which restricts my doings, or, according to the self-professed egoist, ought not to add. The moral difficulty is hence about forcing oneself to renounce the things one wants, even parts of oneself. Religious belief means servitude, and we have to choose between it and freedom. In this chapter, the intricacies of this picture of morality and religion are critically discussed. In this discussion, Max Stirner is used as the main interlocutor. Another understanding of morality and religion is contrasted to the egoist one, a contrasting understanding in which it is egoism that is the result of self-denial: the egoist must harden his or her heart, that is, must renounce love. According to this contrasting understanding, religious belief is thus positively related to freedom.

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan says: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n."¹ And "Here at last / We shall be free".² Or as the anarchist would say: "no gods, no masters".³ According to this well-known anarchist slogan, all servitude should be rejected.⁴ That slogan suggests that anarchism does not only affect the political realm narrowly understood, but also has a religious import: all gods should be eliminated too, not only all earthly masters. Religious faith means servitude and is therefore antithetical to freedom.

Such a general rejection of religion can be easily countered by pointing out that it is only possible to claim that religious

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belief necessarily mean servitude if you have surveyed *all* religious possibilities, including all imagined, not yet actual ones. In other words, it is not enough just to point to specific historical forms of religion, many of which are no doubt incompatible with anarchism. Answering the question whether religious belief necessarily means servitude in the affirmative would hence be a strange thing to do.

However, such a criticism of the “no gods, no masters” slogan is too superficial. The mistake is not simply an undue generalization. What is imperative is, instead, to get to grips with the thinking which lies behind it: what picture holds me captive when I definitely rule out all religious possibilities as ‘servitude’?⁵ In this paper I will only discuss one such picture, and my discussion is therefore by no means exhaustive. In the anarchist tradition there have been many critics of religion, but that criticism seldom occupies centre stage. Max Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844) is in this respect very different.⁶ His book can be read as an extensive discussion of the “no gods, no masters” slogan (even though he never uses that phrase) in that it is an attempt at spelling out what it would mean to reject servitude in general. There is thus an obvious picture of the above kind at work in it. This is the picture my discussion will be centred around. What makes Stirner’s criticism of religion interesting for my purposes is that it is much more general than only restricted to religious belief: it is based on a picture of human life in its entirety. Focusing on that picture means that religious faith will not be the main focus of my discussion, but indirectly my discussion will suggest possibilities in which religious faith and anarchism are compatible, even though that is not my primary goal.

Since my starting point is a specific question – does religious belief necessarily mean servitude? – and since what my discussion will be centred around is a specific picture at work in Stirner’s text, my focus will not be Stirner’s text itself and its historical context. Scholarly exegeses of Stirner’s works can be found elsewhere.⁷ Stirner will here be used as an interlocutor in order for us to learn something as regards the main question. This could basically be done in two ways: either by turning something he says into a positive contribution to the answering of the question

or by disentangling mistakes he makes in a way which makes it possible for us to gain better insight into the principal issue. In none of these two cases is his text or his historical context something to which we have to be faithful. Instead, the philosophical aim of this paper is to turn something seemingly dead into something that is still able to speak to us. One of my tasks is therefore to establish connections between Stirner's text and what is existentially relevant, positively or negatively, that is, to discuss the picture at work in it.

1. Stirner and the rejection of religious belief

Not knowing anything about Stirner, one might suppose that his criticism of religion is the usual one: religion is unreasonable. But what characterises the Young Hegelian criticism of religion is that it is not so much a criticism as an interpretation of religious belief from a position already more or less distant to it. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* should be understood as a radicalization of that approach and thus as a criticism of the way in which it has been carried out previously, for example in Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841, 2nd edn 1843). According to Stirner it is not only the religious believer who believes in "ghosts": reason is a ghost too and the belief in it just another form of religious belief. Stirner writes: "Whether the church, the bible or reason [...] is the holy authority makes no essential difference."⁸

What is then, according to Stirner, the common problem? "Everything holy is a bond, a fetter."⁹ This could be understood as a summarizing definition of the holy. Anything that binds me in this way is religious, even if it is not normally presented in that way. "Alienness is a criterion of the 'holy'. In everything holy there is something 'uncanny' [*Unheimliches*], i.e. alien, in which we are not quite at home [*heimisch und zu Hause*]. What is holy to me, is to me *not my own*".¹⁰

The problem, as Stirner sees it, is a problem pertaining to *any* ideal, no matter whether it is expressed in religious terms or not. An ideal is something I must strive toward but cannot ever reach. Ideals thus create the alienation they, superficially considered, might seem to be the solution to.¹¹ "Atheists" are in this regard no

different than religious believers but only believe in other gods:¹² reason, truth, man, the good, justice, humanity, freedom.¹³

This is a crucial point in Stirner's line of thought but at the same time one that is hard to fathom. What, exactly, is it that Stirner criticises? What is an "ideal"? As I understand Stirner, it is not attempting to achieve something in general he finds problematic. What is it he finds problematic? The problem, if there is one, becomes especially poignant when failure to live up to the ideal is inevitable: since it is not possible to *be* reason, the good, humanity, or, for that matter, God, my life, if I made these ideals central to it, would, according to Stirner, always be a failure.¹⁴ But what makes failure so bad? What Stirner finds problematic is, as I understand him, hence rather one possible attitude to failure: when I relate to myself as to a possible object of disrespect and self-contempt.

One way of explaining this is by means of an example. A good one could be one in which the ideals are ideals of etiquette. I try to become a refined person, but if those ideals of refinement I have adopted are impossible to live up to, I will always, though to different degrees, see myself as vulgar and shabby. And even if they are not impossible to live up to, and even if I succeed in living up to them, this will not be a permanent accomplishment: I will always need to keep up this refinement, against the risk of sinking into vulgarity. Here we have a case where the ideals apparently create the possibility of refinement but in fact only create alienation.

Of course, a more sophisticated form of etiquette will not make its distinctions in terms that are obviously empty and vain. On the contrary, taking clothes and superficial manners to be essential to etiquette could be seen as vulgar. So the more sophisticated form of etiquette will make its distinctions in other terms, for example moral ones. The alienation is created when I relate my distance to the moral ideal to myself. Hurting somebody is thus here understood not as something I do to her but as something I do to myself: I fail to live up to the ideal. And doing good to her is not something I do for her sake but for the sake of the good, that is for the sake of the ideal. Stirner writes:

Not τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, human beings, but τὸν ἄνθρωπον, man, the philanthropist carries in his heart. He certainly cares for each individual, but only because he wants to see his dear ideal realised everywhere. So there is no question of care for me, you, us¹⁵

Since he however does not pay much respect to what you are *privatim* – indeed, if he follows his principle strictly, attaches no value at all to that – he sees in you only what you are *generatim*. In other words: he sees in you not *you*, but the *species*, not Peter or Paul, but man, not the real one or the individual, but your essence or your concept, not the living one, but the *spirit*.¹⁶

And at bottom – this is the reason why the ideal, or any formulated principle, never touches upon what is essential – you and I are not conceptual: “neither I nor you are sayable, we are unspeakable”.¹⁷

In other words, the problem with ideals is, first, to relate what one is doing to oneself, as if what I cared about was not the one I am trying to help but at bottom only about myself or about my ideal self; second, to see others as just potential instances of something general which my helping them really concerns. And these two problems are of course connected: understanding things in terms of etiquette, that is, understanding them in terms of my potential refinement and vulgarity, means understanding what I do as concerning who *I* am, and that in relation to the ideals I try to live up to, not to the one I am, say, rude to.

This, however, goes beyond anything Stirner actually says or even could have said. By trying to picture the situation in which what he says is actually connected to something important I have made his point far less general than it is for him, even distorted it. I will come back to that; this far I have only tried to create a sense of what he is up to by showing that he is on to something when he wants to get rid of ideals. Even if I will criticise him in what follows, there are things he is right about, but to see what these are we have to depart from his general way of thinking.

So, to sum up, what Stirner criticises all previous forms of criticism of religious belief for is that they have not touched upon the fundamental problem. In fact they have even reinforced that problem although the terms used are not so obviously religious anymore:

To be sure, you could say, with Feuerbach and others, that religion has taken what is human out of man and placed it into a beyond so that it there, unattainable, has its existence as something personal for itself, as a “God”. But [...] you could certainly let fall the personality of the removed human, could transform God into the divine, and you would still remain religious. For the religious consists in being dissatisfied with *present* man, i.e. in setting up a “*perfection*” to be striven for¹⁸

The ideal, the perfection to be striven for, promises refinement, were I to live up to it. But what it does not say is that I would not understand myself in terms of vulgarity and would not be dissatisfied with myself, were it not for the ideal. So the road away from alienation and to being at home in the world does not consist in fulfilling the ideal, which I would nevertheless fail to do, but in rejecting the ideal. The first kind of life only means servitude to something alien. The second kind of life would not even be a “kind”, for this word would only suggest a new ideal.

This summary leaves us with a question: how come I submit to something which only makes me dissatisfied with myself? Stirner explains this by saying that I have become “possessed” by the ideal.¹⁹ In other words, it is not mine. If it were mine, it would not alienate me and make me feel dissatisfied, for then I would be free in relation to it and would be able to live in accordance with it or not care about it, as I would see fit. But, in fact, this is not what an ideal means, for an ideal is precisely that which I cannot alter as I please. Expressed in Stirner’s terms: an ideal is real only if you are *possessed* by it. The problem begins “[p]recisely when an end ceases to be *our* end and our *property*, which we as proprietors can control at pleasure”.²⁰ But this means that what I said above, that there is a difference between doing good to someone for her sake and for the sake of the good, is something Stirner would protest against. If I do something for any other sake than for my own sake, this means that I cannot do as I please with that end. I am possessed by the ideal and if I do not live up to it, it will turn against me, judge me, and make me discontent with myself. This feeling of discontent I am not able to get rid of, for I am not able to dispose of the ideal. The end is, in short, not in my own power.²¹ So the alternative to the life of alienation and servitude, that is to the

obviously religious or merely apparently atheist life, is egoism.²² (Stirner's alternative to the life of servitude to something alien is thus nonetheless a specific kind of life, a fact which will serve as a starting point for my critical discussion in the next section.)

This conclusion could be seen as a result of a reflection on moral autonomy. Only those ends I have set myself are mine; any other end means servitude. Of course, Kant believes that autonomously set ends really do bind me – that they really form *nomous* – but it is easy to see what Stirner would say about that. Connecting to the second formulation of the categorical imperative:²³ the respect to be paid to reason, in myself and generally, only means dividing me into an essential part and an inessential part,²⁴ means alienation, and means forgetting that I, as a corporeal existing being, that is not as thought, always go beyond all determinations.²⁵ In short, “autonomy” is a contradictory concept: a duty is precisely what I cannot do as I please with.

2. The possibility of complete control

If we accept this, there are different conclusions to draw. One would be to say that that kind of independence Stirner wants is impossible and that there always will be ends set by others to which you have to adapt yourself.²⁶ As a human being you are almost totally helpless as a newborn and therefore dependent on your parents, or others, and the ends they set for your life. But this Stirner would accept: those connections of dependence become looser as we grow up, and if they do not ever vanish completely, that only means that I should take command over my own life to the extent this proves to be possible.²⁷ Another conclusion would be to say that in the choice between servitude and egoism we should choose servitude. There are after all more important things than myself and to those I should submit. This is the price I have to pay. And a third conclusion would be that Stirner is completely right.

But all these conclusions presuppose that Stirner is right concerning the relation of what we, to sum up, could call “morality” (including religious faith) and myself.²⁸ According to Stirner there is necessarily a conflict here, for the first one always means

servitude and self-denial. But is this really so? This is what the rest of this paper will, in different ways, try to question.

When questioning Stirner's point it would however be easy to misread him and take him to deny the many ways in which our lives are connected. But, as I pointed out, Stirner does not deny that. Stirner tries to show that what we often take to be a form of moral behaviour is in fact motivated egoistically: when doing something for my friend, I do something for what is mine, that is for myself.²⁹ Saying this risks making the term "egoism" meaningless, since there seems now not to be any contrast to it. But there is after all one thing that Stirner wants to combat: being possessed by something. When you are possessed, you are not doing what you are doing for egoist reasons and for your own sake, for you are not in control and able to skip doing it as you please. Stirner does not claim that morality is the only thing which gives rise to servitude and self-denial. For example, greed is according to Stirner a good example of being possessed, for I am here bound to the things I want to get in possession of in a way in which I am not able to control.³⁰ But even though he does not claim that morality is the only thing which gives rise to servitude and self-denial, love is still his paradigmatic example. Love is a kind of symbol for everything he sees as problematic.³¹ Love is what you are not able to control and dispose of as you please. Love binds me and I am not able to control it. Love means servitude and self-denial.

A real situation in which I am possessed by ideas destructive to myself shows however rather the opposite of what Stirner is saying. Think of a voice of self-contempt: here it is clear that the ideas are destructive. But that very clarity would, if Stirner was right, testify that I am still in the grips of some ideas, namely those ideas that form the basis of my realization that the contemptuous voice is destructive. If I were able to stand free in relation to those ideas, the clarity would not be there anymore. And that is after all what the voice of self-contempt could be saying. In other words, I am able to say that these ideas are clearly destructive only in so far as the applicability of the terms by means of which I say this is not possible to decide to reject. And the same goes for the distinction between my own voice and the voice which has taken possession of me. If this were not so and that distinction were one

which I could draw in any way I please – but which I? and what does “please” here mean? – I would never be able to tell which of the voices were mine and which of them were destructive.

Furthermore, trying to stand free in relation to all alternatives and have all of them in one’s power is also a kind of life, and living that life thereby means renouncing all other alternatives. The word “renouncing” is here apt, for those other kinds of life I could not have dropped by choosing their alternative in a situation in which I stand free in relation to both them and their alternative, for this would mean being already decided in favour of the latter.

3. Love as a contrast both to control and servitude

These objections are however too clever and do not get hold of the fundamental problems. Let us instead examine some of Stirner’s examples of what it means to have one’s ends in one’s power. Love is, as I said, the typical example of being possessed. What form should our relations have instead, according to Stirner? Of course, the basis must be found in myself: I do not relieve your suffering for your sake but in order to relieve that suffering which I feel when seeing you suffer.³² Such an example is however unconvincing. If I were able to dispose of any end when I want to, it would certainly be easier to relieve my pain in that way than by helping you. So if I help you, that shows that I am possessed by you, if we use Stirner’s terminology. It would be more convincing to express this in positive terms: by means of other people I acquire things I am not able to acquire on my own. And then we come to love, or to the only kind of love Stirner accepts: “love is [...] as each of my feelings, *my property*. *Earn*, i.e. buy my property, then I let you have it.”³³ And vice versa:

A friend and a service of friendship [...] society cannot procure for you. And yet you will at all moments be in need of such a service and on the slightest occasions need someone who is helpful to you. Therefore do not rely on society but see to it that you have the means to buy the fulfilment of your wishes.³⁴

Buying and selling is here the best example of a relation where no ties are created between us and where we will consequently not be

possessed by each other. No doubt Stirner is abstracting from the contexts in which buying and selling takes place in real life – that the cashier in the grocery store says good afternoon may be company regulations, but if you meet every other day it may turn into something fairly personal – but such an abstraction is perhaps acceptable here. Since he talks about love and friendship – what society cannot do for you – he is not talking about situations like the one in the grocery store, where these abstractions are easily made. So if Stirner happens to meet the prostitute he visited the night before, who gave him all that society cannot procure for him in terms of comfort, consolation, and sex, what will be his reaction? Of course, he may see himself in the light of society's view of prostitution and react with shame if its view demands that. But if he does not, or if the society in which he lives does not support such a view, would that really mean that the abstraction is easily made? Will he not find the situation, say, awkward, and act as if he did not recognise her? In other words, if he manages to isolate the night before from the rest of his life so that their lives are not weaved together in any way, that will precisely be an accomplishment, an ideal he is trying to live up to by denying parts of himself.

This is not a sad fact about human existence, as if this were akin to the fact that as a newborn, and also later, you are dependent on others for your physical survival, that is, that you need the things society can procure for you. To society, I am just a particular instance of the general, and if society distinguishes me, it distinguishes me because of my properties, that is, because of something general, which means that I am nevertheless substitutable; what society therefore cannot do is recognize me in my singularity. This is how Stirner sees it,³⁵ but what he forgets is that this means that only to the extent that I do not believe that my friend is my friend simply because of my money, that is, because of something general, friendship is something society cannot procure for me. In other words, what society cannot procure for me is my being recognised as someone not possible to dispose of at pleasure. But if my friend is not able to dispose of me at pleasure, I may still be able to dispose of him at pleasure, that is, the threads by which our lives are weaved together only run in one direction. But is this

really so? Of course, initially he may be anybody to me, but the extent to which he remains one is the extent to which what we are talking about when we meet is not important to me, is the extent to which the consolation he affords me is not one I am in great need of, in short, is the extent to which I see his place in my life as an isolated and superficial one. The extent to which he is not able to dispose of me at pleasure is the extent to which I will not be able to dispose of him at pleasure. The life Stirner wants to live would thus be deprived of all such relations. The point is not that such a life is impossible – that would be another question³⁶ – but that it would be a life of renunciation, of trying to live up to an ideal. Stirner wants to control his feelings – himself be “able to get away from or renounce”³⁷ any feeling – but is this not a prime example of asceticism?

Since the kind of life Stirner wants to live is, in fact, a life of renunciation, of trying to live up to an ideal, he could, to use his own terminology, be said to be possessed by an idea. Stirner would of course deny this and say that this is an idea he is in control of and that he is able to dispose of it at pleasure, but saying this would prove the very opposite. Again a perhaps too clever comment: by controlling his ideal of control, he succumbs to it. That he is possessed by an idea shows in his insistence on concepts and pictures of power, control, and self-interest. These constitute the screen through which everything is seen. And here we come to something much more interesting, especially in relation to the topic of this paper: one has not rejected power if one has rejected the power of “God, men, authorities, law, state, church” to the benefit of the power of “myself”³⁸. Autarchy is not anarchy. Liberation would mean rejecting this way of thinking in its entirety, not, as Stirner, only turning up another side to it. This, however, does not mean that we should celebrate being possessed by something: when I love someone, neither do I say “here I stand, I can do otherwise”, nor “here I stand, I cannot do otherwise” – “the principal motto of all possessed”³⁹ – for both would be to relate to my love (in both senses of the word) in an external way.

The close relation of egoism and ideals became in fact visible already in the beginning of our discussion. When discussing ideals of etiquette, especially that more sophisticated form of etiquette

which makes its distinctions in moral terms, it became evident that it is precisely when I relate what I am doing to myself that alienation starts. Trying to live up to ideals could, in fact, be seen as an advanced form of self-centredness: the ideal demands that I look at myself with the ideal as a mirror. What takes me out of that circle is doing something for someone else's sake. The sorrow I may feel is then not about my own failure to relieve her pain – the self-contempt I feel when not being as skilful as I ought to be – but precisely about her. In the first case an infinite striving for control and mastery starts; in the second case the affection I feel is certainly not something I control, but that is not a control I see myself as lacking, and I may certainly try to learn more about, say, first aid, but that does not mean that the meaning of what I know and do not know is its contribution to my self-admiration and self-contempt.⁴⁰

4. A contrasting understanding of morality and religion

A common picture is that morality demands self-denial. The starting point is me in isolation, to which we then ought to add a moral concern which restricts my doings, or, according to Stirner, ought not to. The moral difficulty is hence about forcing oneself to renounce the things one wants, even parts of oneself. The struggle could be seen as a struggle between servitude and freedom. And goodness is then connected to strength and control, badness to weakness. The task of philosophy and reason is here to add to that strength; in the light of its results badness is only possible in the form of stupidity or (temporary) insanity.

But the above discussion points in a very different direction. What we had there was a person who denied parts of himself, strove for control, and submitted to an ideal. But the very point of this was to achieve the egoist life, by fighting the ways in which his life is weaved together with the lives of others. In other words, if the moral difficulty according to the common picture is about forcing oneself to deny parts of oneself, the moral difficulty is here about *not* denying parts of oneself, about not making things difficult for oneself. The starting point is not me in isolation but the concern for others I feel, a concern which I then, possibly,

renounce; since badness is renunciation of that concern, the condition of possibility of the moral distinctions is not amoral. The egoist life demands that I deny parts of myself by changing myself in the direction of an ideal, and therefore it is that life which requires strength and control. Doing things for my own sake in terms of motivation – trying to live the egoist life – is precisely not to do things for my own sake in terms of outcome. The moral struggle could in this case, if one wants to, be seen as a struggle between servitude and freedom, that is, between serving oneself or letting oneself be free. And the latter does not need the help of philosophy, for there is no strength here to add anything to. If there is a task for philosophy, it is merely to disclose the attempt of the former to confuse the situation by self-deceptively describing itself as freedom and the latter as servitude and self-denial, and to show that what the former tries to deny it still presupposes and that the renunciation therefore cannot be more than by halves; trying to show the stupidity and insanity of moral badness risks on the contrary to contribute to that very badness by appealing to that sense of shamefulness which only directs one's gaze at how one appears in the light of the ideal.

When we now have two ways of understanding the relation of morality to myself – a common picture and something that points in a very different direction – it can be tempting to try to determine which of them, if any, is right, in general or by describing those cases the one is right about and those the other is right about. But this would, as I see it, be a mistake, for reasons I will come to.⁴¹ Instead we will investigate that understanding which points in a very different direction in order to understand its meaning, see what possibilities it offers, and what light it sheds.

What am I then doing, in the light of this other understanding, when trying to live the egoist life? Ostensibly I am repudiating serving, but what I really do is hardening my heart. What does this mean? It means trying not to listen to, trying not to hear, that is, trying not to understand, an address directed at me. What is that address about? That things concern me, say, sometimes in both senses of the word. But whereas I am certainly able to decide not to respond to the address, I am not able to decide not understanding it. And therefore there is always some sort of response of

understanding, however distorted it might be: for example, later on I might realise that the repugnance, even rage, I felt against someone was in fact compassion for him, compassion I did not want to acknowledge. So if understanding something is something you cannot decide not to do, that means that the origin of the address is not to be placed there, in my power of decision. If that were the place it came from there would be no need of hardening one's heart against it. But the address cannot be said to be forced upon me either. If it were, there would be no need of hardening one's heart against it, for being forced to do something means precisely that your heart is not in what you are doing. So the address is not the result of, or some form of, social pressure. On the contrary, a social pressure is one of the sources of a felt need of hardening one's heart, obviously when whom my care concerns is a member of an outcast group and strongly felt when the consequences of that address involves my confrontation with that sociality the pressure expresses. Just as the contrast between egoism and self-denial is merely apparent, the same goes for the contrast between egoism and sociality.

What all this means is that what we are left with when having repudiated servitude is not a bare self; that bare self belongs, on the contrary, to the side of servitude. "Being oneself" is not to return to some self hidden beneath that which covered it, for example that which took possession of me; it is to enter into that extending movement which I am and which the egoist life is an attempt to put an end to. For what we are left with when having repudiated servitude is that which we hardened our hearts against, those relations of care – or more positively expressed: of love – which the above address is about, which therefore cannot definitely be placed either inside or outside me, and which here is the starting point of morality and not something that should be achieved by means of it.

A religious believer could here see God as not only one possible object to harden one's heart against but also what I harden my heart against as soon as I harden it against anything. According to this believer, the religious difficulty is not about denying parts of oneself in order to create a place for God, a God I consequently do not have anything to do with to begin with but have to force

myself into wanting to establish a relation to; the religious difficulty is about not denying oneself, for by doing so one destroys the already existing relations to God. For this believer, atheism would be chastity and asceticism, that is, an attempt at denying oneself dimensions, possibilities and abundances of human life.

This means that submitting to the authority of God could be understood in two very different ways. In the first one, that submission is identical to self-denial. According to the believer I have tried to give voice to here, this submission means turning one's back on God; the problem with this form of submission is then not that it is too severe but that it is too tempting, that its severity is tempting. In the second one, submitting to the authority of God is what I do when I do not submit to any authority, including my own.⁴² The slogan "no gods, no masters" would thus according to this believer be mistaken, for it is precisely by seeing God as master I do away with *all* authoritarian thinking. The believer I have tried to give voice to could talk in that way, but it is also possible that she finds this way of talking too dangerous in that it invites misunderstandings, also and above all in herself, for only if one understands that talking in this way means rejecting "submission" and "authority" completely, not only having given them a new application, has one understood it. No matter what, that believing in God for her means not submitting to any authority means that for her there is a freedom which logically precedes all political freedoms, including religious freedom, for the latter ones are granted by the state in that the state, so to speak, restricts itself. And that freedom, the most basic and original, is for her religious.

5. An example: Martin Andersen Nexø's *Pelle Erobreren*

In order to let you see how some of this shows, especially in relation to political struggle, I will in this section connect to *Pelle Erobreren* (1906–10), a novel by the Danish author Martin Andersen Nexø. The third and fourth parts of the novel, which are the ones I will discuss, depict the political awakening of the protagonist, Pelle, his marriage and having children, his commitment and work for the union, his time in prison, and the political work he is engaged in after his release. No doubt there are many problems in the novel's

perspective on the political and existential questions it deals with, but these problems will not bother me here.

After having come to Copenhagen, from an agrarian, almost feudal, environment to an industrial one, Pelle hardens his heart:

the capital was simply a battleground, where army upon army had rushed forward and miserably foundered. Everywhere were heaps of fallen, the town was built over them as on top of a cemetery; you had to tread upon them in order to be able to move – and harden your heart. This was basically the lot of life; and you closed your eyes⁴³

But this “had to” is after all an illusion. In fact, it is only with open eyes one can give this description. So Pelle’s political awakening could be described as the opening of his eyes, as the softening of his hardened heart. But this is not the result of some decision or intellectual process. It happens quite spontaneously, and his growing political commitment is a result of that, rather than what makes it happen. Pelle simply becomes involved in the life of his neighbours and it is only then, that is, for their sake, that he feels a need to change things; on his own and isolated he is passive and accepts things as they are.⁴⁴ This conflict repeats itself several times, especially in relation to his wife and children; on the one hand his new family opens up his concern, on the other hand it restricts it to a definite unit. The conflict is however not symmetrical: restricting himself to himself (and to his family) involves rationalization and self-persuasion, whereas his involvement in the life of those he encounters happens without his decision, quite spontaneously.⁴⁵

All this has an explicitly religious dimension, a religious belief born in and out of the political struggle.⁴⁶ The climax occurs in prison, where Pelle, having hardened his heart against all those whom he feels have forsaken him, has a revelation of God.⁴⁷ After his release he returns to Copenhagen, but many years have passed and much has changed. One of the first things he does is to go to a political celebration and improvising a speech:

His [Pelle’s] words became a greeting to them from a world they did not yet know, that great solitude in which you have to travel alone – without loud-voiced companions to brace one up – and listen for the way ahead, until you hear your own heart beat

inside. He sits in a cell again, as in the first original germ of life – alone and forsaken, above him a spider spins its skilful web. In the beginning he is angry with the busy animal and tears the web apart, but the animal indefatigably begins again. And this suddenly becomes a consolatory lesson about never giving up; he becomes fond of this little vigilant creature, which spins its web really skilfully, as though it had a great responsibility [...] He bitterly regrets his ravaging and would give much for a sign that the little animal is not angry with him; for no one can afford to push away another [...] And one day as he sits reading and the spider is busy with carrying a thread just past him, it comes down intimately and uses his shoulder as a temporary hold. Never before had such trust despite everything been showed him, the little animal knew how a hardened prisoner should be taken. It taught him that he had both a heart and a soul to take care of! – A greeting to the comrades from that great stillness, waiting to speak to them one by one.⁴⁸

The speech is a failure, however. The crowd meets him with indifference and they do not listen to what he is saying. Two different worlds stand against each other: on the one hand Pelle, the lone one who listens to his own heart, and his message of solidarity, on the other hand the crowd, during the last years more and more shaped by bourgeois individualism. Pelle is happy with that economical development which has made this possible, but most of all he deplores this shift of mood: the lost feeling for the miraculous and incomprehensible and that lost solidarity this gives rise to, in particular on the part of the established working class with the new groups coming to the city and becoming pauperised.⁴⁹ By listening inward you will find everyone, the whole world, and that which cannot be comprehended.⁵⁰ But by being part of the crowd you succumb to one or the other of its ideologies, for example individualism, an ideology which hence means renunciation both of oneself and of the life together, and the one by means of the other.

6. Concluding discussion

“But is it not, after all, better to be able to dispose of that which pains one? Perhaps you are right in that caring only for oneself means renunciation, but caring for others means that I would feel

their pain, and believing that it is possible to relieve all pain in the world is utopian. So I choose the lesser evil and care only for myself. That renunciation is after all the smaller one.”

The problem this imaginary interlocutor formulates seems to be possible to solve in two different ways: either by ceasing to care for others or by creating a heaven on earth. And the questions we then seem to have to answer are whether the one or the other is possible, which of the solutions is the easier one, and which of the two renunciations is the smaller one. And after having answered these questions we are able to choose the one or the other of the two solutions. But this is, after all, an illusion. The terms in which any comparison of that kind could be made are taken from the two solutions themselves, so it is only after having chosen the one or the other you could say which of the two renunciations is the smaller one. What content could the concept of renunciation have that is not dependent on any of these two solutions but, nevertheless, makes it possible to determine which of them is the better one? But, to be strict, they could not even be seen as two different solutions to a common problem. This is obvious from the perspective of that understanding pointing in a very different direction I described in section 4. The starting point there is not me in isolation but the concern for others I feel, a concern which I then, possibly, renounce, which means that there is no choice to be made prior to this very starting point. And furthermore, since your caring for others is here not understood as merely a part of yourself, it is not possible to renounce that part and have another part left, which means that choosing that solution will never be made more than by halves. But that they could not even be seen as two different solutions to a common problem is obvious also from the other perspective: caring for others could here not even be seen as a possibility, for seeing it is a possibility would mean that you actually do care for others. In other words, since they could not even be seen as two different solutions to a common problem – the problem being understood in different ways and the other solution not being understood as even a possibility – it would be a mistake to try to determine which of them is right. Trying to determine which of them makes it possible for me to “be myself” is for example not possible, for the terms in which I

try to evaluate this will already be biased in favour of the one or the other. This does not mean that there is not anything to be said about the issue, but what is to be said depends, as I said, on where one stands and that standpoint already involves some stance or other on the issue.

“Here at last / We shall be free [...] Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.”⁵¹ That Satan understands religious faith to mean servitude and lack of freedom is hence not surprising. The only possibility is for him one of power and the question then simply concerns who shall have it. So he is the prime example of an authoritarian figure. What he says could thus be understood as a self-deceptive attempt at confusing the situation by describing that renunciation and self-denial serving oneself means as freedom. That freedom Satan contrasts servitude to is a freedom of reigning; the concept of power is not rejected and *this* freedom is thus not won.

One way of concluding is to say that I have not showed that Stirner’s way of thinking should be rejected, only that there is no necessary conflict between religious faith and freedom. Religious faith does not necessarily mean servitude, for I have described a possibility in which it does not. But this is, in fact, both to over- and underestimate the consequences of what I have said. It is to overestimate them, for Stirner could say that he does not understand what I have said at all and that he finds it completely incomprehensible. It is to underestimate them, for if he does understand what I have said and sees it as a possibility, that means that his own possibility does not exist anymore. For seeing caring for others as a possibility means caring for others; seeing it as a possibility means that the address I talked about above is understood, although not necessarily actively responded to. So when having understood that the life Stirner wants to live is a life of self-denial, it is not possible anymore to choose it as the lesser evil, for having understood this is in fact having rejected it as a possibility. This does however not mean that the “understanding that points in a very different direction” and the understanding of the believer I tried to give voice to necessarily are the only possibilities. Whether that is another question or not, is another question.

Notes

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998), I, 263.
2. Milton, I, 258–59.
3. Coined by Blanqui, the slogan soon became so closely associated with anarchism that writers distant to anarchism often referred to it as a typical example of anarchist thinking. See e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), V, 125 (§ 202); Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Penguin, 2007), 242.
4. The conference session this book grew out of had the heading “‘No Master but God?’ Exploring the Compatibility of Anarchism and Religion” and the subsequent call for papers stated “many anarchists insist that religion is fundamentally incompatible with anarchism, recalling that anarchism calls for ‘no gods, no masters’”.
5. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 115.
6. Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, ed. by Ahlrich Meyer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981). Since the tone of the rest of Stirner’s writings (collected in *Kleinere Schriften*, ed. by John Henry Mackay, 2nd edn (Treptow bei Berlin: Bernhard Zack, 1914)) is in fact quite different and what I am interested in is not Stirner but the kind of picture mentioned above, I will only make references to those writings when they are in line with *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, not when they differ from it.
7. For some examples, with their respective strengths and weaknesses, see Karl Löwith, *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1928); Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 7th edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978); Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft: Max Stirners ›Einziger‹ und der Fortschritt des demokratischen Selbstbewußtseins vom Vormärz bis zur Bundesrepublik* (Köln: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1966); R. W. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 1971); Michael Maier, *Scheiternde Titanen: De Maistres Papst, Stirners Einziger, Jean Pauls Himmelsstürmer* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006); John F. Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); *Max Stirner*, ed. by Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Maurice Schuhmann, *Radikale Individualität: Zur Aktualität der Konzepte von Marquis de Sade, Max Stirner und Friedrich Nietzsche* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

8. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 387. All translations from works not originally written in English are mine.

9. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 237.

10. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 40.

11. This kind of criticism has its origin in the section on unhappy consciousness in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968-), IX: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. by Wolfgang Bonsiepen und Reinhard Heede (1980), esp. pp. 122–23, 125–27; see also pp. 327–28). In the end the need for sublating religion is motivated in those terms; see p. 420–21.

12. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 31–32, 40, 42, 50–52, 62, 141, 202–203, 269, 320–21, 387–88; Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 358, 362.

13. For examples of such new gods, see Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, e.g. pp. 3, 46, 79, and Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 282.

14. See Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, e.g. pp. 33–34, and Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 366–67.

15. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 84

16. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 189. See also, e.g., pp. 87, 321.

17. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 348. See also p. 201, and Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 345, 348–49. However, and as we will see, this is in the end not true as to the you; see e.g. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 381.

18. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 268–69. For examples of what Stirner criticises in Feuerbach, see Ludwig Feuerbach,

Das Wesen des Christentums (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1969), pp. 37–40, 54, 64–65, and Ludwig Feuerbach, *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, in *Werke*, ed. by Erich Thies, 5 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975–76), III (1975), 247–322 (p. 321).

19. See Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 47 and *passim*.

20. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 65–66.

21. Cf. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 66, 187.

22. See Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 4 and *passim*.

23. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Werkausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, 12 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), VII, 7–102 (pp. 60–61 (AA 4:428–29)).

24. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 34.

25. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 139; Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 346–51, 384.

26. This is basically Feuerbach's answer to Stirner's criticism. Whether I like it or not, I will always have ideals (Ludwig Feuerbach, *Über das »Wesen des Christentums« in Beziehung auf den »Einigen und sein Eigentum«*, in *Werke*, ed. by Erich Thies, 5 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975–76), IV (1975), 69–80, 454–63, (pp. 461–62)) and I will always understand myself by comparing myself with others and them by comparing them with each other (pp. 74–76).

27. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 202, 342, 344. This issue is however more complicated than as just presented. There is another strain to Stirner's text that, in the end, would deny *all* kinds of dependence, when he writes that “[o]nly *I am* not abstraction alone [...] I am no mere thought” (p. 381) and describes the I in terms by which God is described in philosophical theology: perfect, self-sufficient, creator *ex nihilo* (pp. 5, 39, 378–79, 412). But if this strain of Stirner's text were the only one you would emphasise a very one-sided picture would be the result; that I leave it out of account is however due to the fact that it is not that relevant as to the theme of this paper.

28. For examples of Stirner's “immorality”, see *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 271–72, 279–80, 293.

29. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, e.g. pp. 4, 45, 324–25.

30. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 64, 81–82, 324, 335; Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 292.
31. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, e.g. pp. 285–86, 320; Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 274–77.
32. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 324–25.
33. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 326.
34. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, pp. 304–305.
35. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 304. What he says here is of course heavily dependent on Hegel’s view of society as about the general, of the family (most obvious in the relation of brother and sister) as about the singular; see Hegel, pp. 241–44, 247–48.
36. As we will see in section 6 however, this is after all *not* another question.
37. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 330. Stirner has taken this understanding of feelings from Feuerbach (*Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 50) but comes to a very different conclusion.
38. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 187.
39. Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, p. 66.
40. For additional discussion of the issues in this section, see Hugo Strandberg, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), esp. ch. 11; Hugo Strandberg, “Is Pure Evil Possible?”, in *The Problem of Evil: New Philosophical Directions*, ed. by Benjamin W. McCraw and Robert Arp (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 23–34.
41. See section 6.
42. For more about this use of “not ... any” and “nothing”, see Gareth Moore, *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), *passim*, e.g. ch. 4.
43. Martin Andersen Nexø, *Pelle Erobreren: Bind 2*, 15th edn (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2006), p. 58.
44. Nexø, pp. 58–61.
45. See Nexø, e.g. pp. 171–72, 176, 241, 394.

46. See Nexø, e.g. pp. 187, 210, 214.
47. Nexø, pp. 342–43.
48. Nexø, p. 357.
49. Nexø, pp. 358, 383.
50. Nexø, p. 396.
51. Milton, I. 258–59, 263.

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